“Yes, I do.” The easiest lie he’s ever told, by far. It came so naturally, he hardly thought of it as false. “She’s easy to love.”

* *

He’s been given so many names throughout his life, he hardly remembered them all.

Black Prince, they called him. Bastard, Blackfyre, wolfspawn. Skinchanger, murderer, man without honor. And he had embraced them all, having understood very early in his life that the Targaryen court of King’s Landing was not a place for the weak. That motherless little boys who felt alone and sometimes cried over it, trying their damndest to hide it afterwards, did not survive long there. He’d shaped himself into a man others might fear and far too often he dreamt of a shapeless vengeance, though he could hardly decide against whom.

But others thought they understood his resentments better, and knew that there were many reasons to be afraid, when the Black Prince and second son of the King started courting Winterfell’s Daughter.
My dark ardor, 
my dark augur. 
Love to the very open- 
mouthed end. 
We are made of 
so much hunger.

— Hadara Bar-Nadav, from “Zombie,” The New Nudity

i.

It took them a month to reach King’s Landing. Far longer than it should have, in truth. Of the Kingsguard, only Ser Arthur traveled with him, and the rest of his guard wasn’t as cumbersome as it might have been, since he’d left his men to march at their own pace. But then again, Jon was at his leisure. He was not particularly eager to go back to that shithole they called the capital, but for one reason, one person really, that he hoped waited for him there. But hope as he did and resolved as he was to do what he had to do, he and Dany had spoken little since Viserys’ death. She sent no word and his letters went unanswered.

It was hard not to be angry. Harder still not to be disappointed.

“Are you glad to go back home Jon?” Sam asked once they had stopped for a rest. He gratefully took the waterskin from Benjen’s hand and took a long sip. Jon’s snort might have been an answer, but judging by the look on Sam’s face, he expected a real one.

“I take my home with me wherever I go, Sam,” Jon said as he walked by his uncle and clapped him on the back. Benjen laughed. “He’s followed me everywhere since I was born and always complains the south is too hot.”

“Aye, because it is,” Benjen grumbled.

“If his balls aren't freezing, Ser Benjen is not comfortable,” Grenn said, causing laughter all around.

“You spend a lot of time thinking about my balls, boy?”

Jon sat down next to his uncle in the shade, took the waterskin from him gladly and took a long sip.

In truth, he had no real answer for Sam. King’s Landing was not, and had never been his home. Not because he had never wanted it to be - to his great bitterness, he had - but he had never felt welcome there. Sam might understand that some, but Sam had a mother who loved him, a sister who was sweet to him. A brother who did not hate him. Jon had had none of that in the Red Keep, though
occasionally he had had Dany. But no one could have protected him from the virulence of the stories that had always circled his existence, in King’s Landing and elsewhere.

They had so many names for him: bastard, Blackfyre, wolfspawn. Skinchanger, murderer, man without honor.

When he was a boy, he used to get in fights over all the names they called him, instead of the one name he wanted. He remembered a time he used to feel so lonely and abandoned that he used to cry over it, and try his damndest afterwards to hide it. But then he’d grown, and forgone hurt for anger. Taught himself not to care for words so much, the same way he had taught himself to smile at dinner while he stabbed a fork into his hand beneath the table. He had embraced his reputation, built on it, the way Tyrion Lannister had advised him to do. He wore black almost all the time now, adorned the pommel of his sword with a white wolf’s head and his livery with black dragons and racing wolves both, took Ghost with him everywhere he went.

Dany found it all hilarious.

No, the weak did not last long in the capital. The arms of a loving mother would not have protected him either, no more than they had protected Sam from his cunt father. It might have been unkind to remind Sam of what he left behind and how inadequate his father thought him, but he had to understand.

When Jon reiterated this sentiment, Sam blushed and nodded.

“You told me.”

“I want to make sure you remember,” Jon laughed. “If you don’t, the only difference between your untimely death in your old home and your new one will be geography.”

“I understand.”

Jon looked at Sam again, taking his measure anew. “You could have stayed at the Citadel, you know. Why didn’t you?”

Jon had an innate curiosity for breaking things apart to understand how they worked, and it drove him to seek answers wherever they lay, but he grew bored of books too after a time. Sam never had that problem.

“I can go back if life with you gets too exciting,” Sam answered with a smile. “Though I doubt you can. Lord Hightower will probably petition the king never to let you set foot in his city again.”

Jon was not worried. “He may try. He will fail.”

To his right, his uncle snorted. “I swear he would piss himself every time he caught sight of Ghost.”

He had. His fear had tasted acrid, like something that had turned. Jon laughed now, remembering it.

Sam eyed him, both confused and anxious. “How do you know you won’t be punished?”

Jon’s smile was a sharp thing. “My father loves me.”

His uncle’s silence was as telling as that of Ser Arthur, though only one of them was cracking with disapproval. Jon did not care - indeed, he could almost find a certain amount of amusement in it. In all his years, he had managed to shake his sworn shield quite a few times, but never had Ser Arthur left him completely. It was Jon’s opinion that this was the king’s way of keeping a leash on him; of
reminding Jon of the walking, talking reach of the Crown’s power. His father’s power: to control him, stop him when he needed to, derail him or corral him when he needed to. Of course, short of Ser Arthur shoving his greatsword into him, Jon knew it would never work. Not now nor a thousand years from now. Though this had not stopped him from wondering of the precise nature of Arthur Dayne’s orders; whether or not Rhaegar Targaryen had drawn a line somewhere. It had made him do a great many stupid things in the past, this curiosity, pushing the limits of what was legal, decent, allowed, searching for that line to cross, wondering if this would finally be the time Dayne unsheathed that greatsword and came at him with it.

He wondered sometimes, if Arthur hated him as much as any other man and woman from Dorne seemed to hate him. But to that, Jon did not know the answer. Unlike the others, Ser Arthur kept his thoughts to himself.

ii

There was no one waiting for him when his company rode through the gates of the Red Keep. Jon had not been not surprised, but he couldn’t say he wasn’t disappointed. Whenever he came to the capital, Dany had always been there to greet him, whether they had parted on good terms or not. She seemed to have a knack for always knowing when he would show up. It eased him a little, however, when he was told that the princess and her ladies had gone to enjoy the day by the seaside, just outside the city walls. So once he’d settled his men, Jon took a fresh horse and demanded directions.

“You should greet the king before you run off again. And your siblings,” Ser Arthur said, even as he prepared to follow him.

His siblings wouldn’t care to see him, the queen wouldn’t want to, and his father wouldn’t have time for any unexpected visits. The time when he would have waited hours just for a glimpse of either of them was long gone.

“Well, I will see them at dinner. Or not.”

Truth was, he wanted to look upon Dany’s face far more than he wanted to greet his father’s solemn one and he cared not for how this must look. And besides, if Sansa Stark was outside the city, then that was where he must go. She would need persuasion as all people did, and the sooner he learned how to best do that, the better.

It might have been odd for some people, that Jon had lived to be two-and-twenty and knew so little of his cousin; but then again, those people had not had his life. Or Sansa Stark’s, for that matter.

Before they met, she could have walked by him at any given moment and Jon would not have known her for family. She had as little of the Stark features as he had the Targaryen ones. He’d been curious about her when she’d come south to join Dany’s household as a lady in waiting, but she had proved different from what he had expected and Jon had lost interest in her about as quickly as she’d lost interest in him. Not that it had mattered: barely a month after she’d come south, Jon had been sent north, ostensibly so that he could visit his mother’s family. Privately, it was well known that the capitol could not suffer to hold both Jon and Viserys in its bosom, after Jon had caved Viserys’ skull in at the training ring, despite Viserys being seven years his senior.

It had not escaped Jon’s attention that the direction of his exile had been north, and that he had been allowed to go only once Sansa Stark had come to court.

By time Jon had come back to King’s Landing with his own direwolf in tow, five years had gone by and Jon did not know her anymore than he felt he knew the rest of his family.
The King had been wise in never keeping his son and his brother in the same city for too long, but now Jon wondered if there had been more to it. If there had been intent in keeping him away from his only Stark relative this side of the Neck. Jon wouldn't put it past his father to do it. Or maybe it was because the king thought Jon might one day decide to deal with Viserys’ follies by killing him, instead of silencing the servants. It wasn’t as if Jon had never thought of it. Or tried, for that matter.

In the end the King needn’t have worried, since it hadn’t been Jon to cause Viserys’ death. The vicious cunt had managed to kill himself while playing with his fires - something that had surprised no one, so of course no one dared speak of it above a whisper. It had been a miracle no one else had died, though plenty had come close when the flames had spread. They had almost taken the east wing before they were finally put out.

His uncle’s funeral had been the last time Jon had laid eyes on Dany and Sansa Stark both, and that had been more than a year past. Dany had held her stony grief open for all to see, but Sansa Stark and her northern ladies had hidden themselves under whisper-thin black veils that fluttered about them like smoke when they moved, the very picture of the grieving maidens. There had been rumours of a betrothal between the Stark girl and Viserys for some time, though nothing had never been made official. Still, he’d seen people throw flowers in front of Lady Stark’s horse as she rode to and from the Sept of Baelor, as if she were the prince’s grieving lady. Jon didn’t need to know anything about her to know she’d been performing a part that day. Everyone in King’s Landing did, but even so - Viserys had been a volatile all his life, and grown crueler with time. The only woman capable of loving him had died giving birth to Dany, something for which, coincidentally, Viserys held his sister responsible and had never forgiven her.

Still, Daenerys had been heartbroken. Jon had seen as much. After the funeral, she had stayed in King’s Landing only as long as it took her to pack, before she sequestered herself and a few of her closest ladies - Sansa Stark among them - to Dragonstone.

To mourn, Dany had told him.

Jon would not have believe it even if the gods had let her walk through fire to prove it.

It had not been her feelings he’d distrusted. He believed her capable of all that was both good and terrible; and Jon knew what it meant to miss someone, even though you would never wish them back into your heart again. He knew these things. But he also knew when he was being lied to.

He’d called her out on it, but Dany had not cared much for his opinion. She’d cared even less for his questions. She had been cold, angry, and secretive that last time they’d spoken. Jon would have known she had been hiding something even if she hadn’t seemed so scared, but she’d refused his help, and when he had not relented she had turned to anger.

Eventually she had returned to the capitol, however, although Jon had been very surprised to learn that though Dany had come to King’s Landing months ago, Sansa Stark had only just joined her. Daenerys had left her in Dragonstone, alone with her own ladies and only a few guards.

Rhaegar must have been furious.

Jon wondered if Sansa Stark had ever thought about escaping. If she had even a drop of Arya’s willfulness, she would have. Whether or not she had understood the truth of her situation as a child, Jon had no doubt it couldn’t escape her notice now. What kind of chance would she have though, if she tried? Would she care that she’d be causing a diplomatic incident by seeking her own freedom?

He would need answers to these questions before he set his plan in motion. Who she was and how she’d react would matter more than almost anything else.
part - ii - preview:

“I’m glad he remembered me. I would have known him anywhere of course. As i would have known you.” She added. Jon’s smile was a little crooked. He could not help it though he tried to keep the bitterness out of his words. “Everyone always tells me i have the look of the north.” She grinned. “Everyone always tells me i do not. But you do look like so like my father and Arya, it would have been impossible to mistake you for anyone else.” Her words were soaked in so much longing that Jon felt as if she’d pulled the rug from under his feet. Yes she was different from the child he remembered: she was sadder now, when she wasn’t carefully hiding it. It made her look older than she was.
I debated a lot whether I should post the second chapter without finishing the third, but then I thought, meh, whatever. Let’s go with the flow.

I am troubled and harsh and hopeless. Though I have love inside me. But I don’t know how to use love. Sometimes it scratches like barbs.

— Clarice Lispector

Just as he reached the top of the hill, he saw the picnic tents set up close to the shore of the bay, gleaming white under the warm spring sun. Nestled into the long grass of the field, a dozen ladies were wrapped in their games and dances, their servants buzzing around them or clapping along to the tune of the music. From this distance he could not make out any of their faces, but the bright waterfall of Dany’s hair shone under the sun, catching and reflecting its light as brightly as the water of the bay. She was a beacon even in the day.

“A sight for sore eyes,” Grenn said, and Jon couldn’t help but agree. But instead of urging his horse forward, he held the reins tighter, watched some more.

Some of the women were dancing, hair loose, the wide sleeves of their spring dresses pulled by the sea breeze, like wispy colourful clouds. Their laughter did not carry, but Jon could imagine it was sweet as chiming bells.

“Are we not to join them?” Pypar asked then, when Jon did not urge his horse forward.

Jon hummed. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

Ghost did not like being inside any city and he liked King’s Landing far less than any other. But he did like water just fine, and the salty taste of the air close to the sea had always held interest. The bloom of spring was sweet in his nose as he ran, the earth soft and wet beneath his paws.

Close now, very close. He could smell them already.

“Your grace!”

Jon opened his eyes.

The Sword of the Morning did not often take a chastising tone with him, not anymore. It had been
from Uncle Benjen that he’d expected chastisement, but his uncle was silent, though he wore a mighty frown.

“Oh, come on, Jon don’t scare them with that bloody beast,” Grenn complained. “They won’t even look at us after.”

“You never know,” Jon said slowly, looking back down on the clearing. “We could be the heroes, saving them.”

Ghost was visible to them now, and yes - as predicted - some of the ladies down there shrieked at the sight of him. But some did not.

His uncle huffed. “Want to make yourself look good do you? The whole Seven Kingdoms know that direwolf belongs to you.”

Jon shrugged. “Yes, they do.”

Their eyes met and Jon knew his uncle understood him, even though he did not like it.

He always managed to see more of people when he saw them through Ghost’s eyes. Uncle Benjen knew this. And he knew enough of Jon to know it wasn’t in him to enjoy people's fear. At least not those who had no reason to fear him. Perhaps that was the only reason he said nothing more on it. Benjen’s faith in him was only one of the reasons Jon loved him best out of all his family.

So he waited and watched while Ghost padded his way in Sansa Stark’s direction. He recognised her as easily as he’d recognised Dany, even without seeing her through Ghost’s eyes. The sea breeze pulled at her blue veil and beneath it, her copper curls shone of an even brighter red-and-gold than he remembered.

She stood still as stone as Ghost approached her. The curly haired woman next to her, however, was not so frozen: she lunged for a knife on the small table perched a few feet from her, just as another girl, with hair just as dark as the first and straight as an arrow down her back, tried to move in front of Lady Stark.

Sansa Stark stopped them both, and their guards as well, with one motion of her hand. “It’s alright, Jeyne. Shae, put the knife down.”

Her curly friend looked belligerent. “Lady-”

“There’s nothing to fear,” Sansa Stark said as stepped forward, putting her own body between Ghost and her friends.

“Are you blind?” the curly one asked, her fear making her lilting accent more pronounced. She wasn’t looking away from Ghost and Jon knew that if he took another step towards them, that woman would try to carve him with that cheese knife in her hand if it was the last thing she did. She was afraid, yes, but that wouldn’t stop her.

Sansa Stark’s ladies were brave women, Jon concluded, and they loved her. If he knew nothing else about her, that would be enough.\[2\]

“I can see perfectly.” Sansa Stark said, as she looked Ghost in the eyes. She was calm as still water and looked very much like her mother, though there was something about her eyes that reminded him of his uncle.

Dany walked towards the three of them and touched the curly-haired woman’s elbow as she passed.
“He won’t do us any harm, no matter how scary he looks. Will you, Ghost?”

Ghost could have sat down. He could have wiggled his tail at the sight of her and lowered his ears to make himself less threatening, but he did none of those things. Instead, he edged closer to Sansa Stark, who did not flinch.

She was not as pale as he remembered, though still fair. There was a dusting of freckles on her nose and cheeks, and her eyes were uncommonly blue. And she looked at him with an unblinking stare, as if she understood that there was something more behind the red eyes of the beast in front of her. Jon and Ghost inhaled again, deep, taking in her scent, both familiar and not. From the lavender and citrusy scent of her hair to the warm headiness of her cunt, she smelled delicious. Delicious and sweet enough to make his mouth water.

“Don’t be afraid.”

Dany’s calm voice was soothing. She was by Sansa’s side now, and smiling as she reassured her, though Jon knew she needn’t have bothered. There was not a single drop of fear in Sansa Stark as she stared at a direwolf that was almost as big as a small horse.

“I’m not.” Sansa said softly.

To prove it, she extended her ungloved hand towards Ghost, as delicately as if she was offering it to any lord for a kiss. So Ghost did. Both he and Jon nudged her fingers with the tip of their nose and then licked her hand, tasting the juice of the peaches she had been eating.

She laughed.

“If he’s here, Jon must not be far,” Dany said, but then-

“Jon.”

His uncle’s voice brought him back. The look on Benjen’s face was deadly.

“She doesn’t fear him.” Jon explained, knowing what his uncle objected to.

Benjen did not hesitate. “Not the point, boy.”

Jon knew this, of course. Benjen was fine with him honing his wolf’s instincts and trusting them. But it’s rude to spy, his uncle’s furious eyes told him. Especially on your cousin, who does not yet know you.

Jon looked away, finally urging his horse forward. Uncle Benjen grumbled something that might have been a curse, or ‘little shit’, but said nothing more on it, at least for now. Jon knew he would be paying for this in the training ring tomorrow, and maybe even for days after, but it had been worth it.

ii

When Jon dismounted, Dany did not fly into his arms the way she used to. Instead, she stood there with her hands folded together in front of her, the picture of demure grace. Her ladies, taking their cue from her, filed around her, waiting. So Jon walked forward and bowed his head, not extending a hand to her, not opening his arms for a hug.

If she wanted to keep things formal, he could do so.

“Aunt, it is good to see you again. You grow more beautiful with each new moon.”
Dany just rolled her eyes at him. So not entirely formal, are we? But she knew his distaste for courtly language, so hearing it from his lips was nothing short of farce.

“Nephew. I might have believed your regard for me more had you not set your wolf upon us and then dropped in our midst smelling of horses.”

Jon tilted his head a bit to the right. “Is it that bad?”

“Ghost smells better than you do.”

Jon laughed. “I have offended your delicate sensibilities, princess?”

“You have.”

Whatever sensibilities Dany had were not delicate in the least and they both knew it, even though she was still looking down her nose at him. She must not be so very angry with him, Jon thought, if she was willing to play this old game of theirs even now.

Jon chanced a look at Sansa Stark then, where she was standing behind Dany waiting to be introduced. She was not smiling but her eyes were warm. She wasn’t looking at him however, but somewhere over his right shoulder.

“My apologies. And Ghost frightened you?”

Dany tossed her hair over her shoulder. “He did.”

“Then it would be the first time he’s managed to do so in years. But I believe you, since he seems to have startled the manners right out of you.” He looked at Sansa Stark pointedly. “Will you not introduce me?”

Dany was openly grinning now and he knew by the fierce look on her face that had he stood closer, she would have slapped him for his cheek, and then maybe she might have kissed him, too.

Gods, he’d missed her.

“Why should I? You’ve already met and I have no wish to keep you here.”

“You were the one who stood there observing decorum as if your septa was watching. I am merely obliging your silent request, since I have no intention of leaving whatsoever.”

Dany laughed. “Now that you’re here Jon, I’m realizing I had not missed you half as much as I thought I did.”

“Still twice as much as I deserve, I’m sure.”

She walked to him then and Jon opened his arms to receive her. Once she was into his arms, he lifted her off her feet and spun her around once, to her great delight. At the sight, Dany’s ladies scattered like butterflies, free finally to speak and laugh, and ask the others of Jon’s party to join them in the shade of their tents.

“I missed you, Dany,” Jon said softly once she was on her feet in front of him.

Her lilac eyes were sombre as she regarded him. “So where were you?”

Jon sighed. “Settling some trouble in Highgarden. Lord Hightower required some persuasion.”
She frowned a little. “Is it true you took all 300 hundred of your men with you as part of your household?”

He had. And they had all settled as guests of the Hightowers’ for months on end.

“I did. After all, they are my men.”

She laughed. “Oh, you must have thoroughly gotten on his nerves.”

Yes, Jon thought. Hilariously so.

“He…did not appreciate his royal guests, no. By the time I proposed the treaty he signed it just to get me off his back.”

Dany chuckled at him and then turned to look around. Jon did the same and precisely as he had thought, found Sansa Stark speaking with their uncle and Ser Arthur, her two dark-haired friends by her side. She must have sensed him staring because she turned, settled her skirts about her and graced them with a perfect courtesy.

“You grace.”

Jon extended his hand and she put her right hand in his. He kissed her gloved fingers, and looked up at her through his lashes as he straightened. “Cousin. It’s good to see you again after so many years.”

“Likewise, your grace.”

She had a soft voice and a polite smile that seemed practiced and which did not seem to touch her sharp eyes and the way they were fixed on his own.

Jon knew what she was seeing.

“May I present my friends, Jeyne Poole and Shae Maegyr,” Sansa Stark said, and both young women stepped forward at the same time and curtsied to him. Jeyne Poole had warm brown eyes, Jon noted, but the curly one was sharper, as was her appraising look. Of the two, she would be the first to be suspicious of him and the last to shake off those suspicions.

“Ladies. A pleasure to meet you,” he said. “Miss Poole, I have a gift from your father.”

Sansa Stark barely showed her surprise, but Jeyne Poole startled visibly at his words. Jon walked back to his horse, rummaging in his saddlebags for a moment. Once he found what he was looking for, he went to the girl and handed her a small box he’d been given.

“From your parents, with their affection,” he said and took in her radiant smile.

“Thank you, your grace.”

He then turned to Sansa Stark and deliberately chose to stand perhaps a hairsbreadth closer to his cousin than was proper, to offer her the gift her family had sent her through him.

“And for you, cousin,” he said, extending what he knew were letters wrapped in aged paper. A year’s worth of unsent correspondence that the Starks had amassed.

“It has been almost eight months since my man was in White Harbour, but Robb and Bran met him there and gave him this to deliver to you. He said you were to receive it from my own hand, to make sure that it reached you safely.”
She reached for the package and Jon made sure she could not retrieve it without brushing her fingers against his. The names of her brothers and the physical proof in his hands that they thought of her, seemed to discompose Sansa Stark just enough to dislodge that lukewarm smile off her face, if only for a moment.

“Thank you, your grace.”

“Please call me Jon. After all, we are family.”

She looked up from package in her hands - the wrapping paper had suffered a little, though Jon had tried to be careful handling it - and looked at him as if she wanted to look inside his skull and rummage around there for the answer to some unspoken question.

She was a suspicious woman.

“So we are,” she said, and smiled at him with a little more heart than before.

“Good. And now that we’re done with the introductions-” Jon took a few steps away from the group and started to undo his doublet, to the delighted gasps and tittering of the ladies about them.

“Jon, what on earth are you doing?” Dany asked, as she laughed.

He threw the garment on the grass and smirked at Dany’s shocked face.

“Taking the advice of a princess, of course,” he said as he removed his tunic and this time threw it at Dany’s head. She sputtered in indignation. “I’m going for a swim.”

Sansa Stark only watched him, no longer smiling but not frowning either. Jon could not tell by the look on her face if she was surprised or amused at his antics, or both. He saw her eyes glance at his naked chest, the markings there and on his arms, and then up again, but there was no visible sign of appreciation in them, even as her cheeks were stained pink. Sansa Stark was a careful woman also, it seemed. And one who hid more often than she did not.

Jon started walking through the tall grass along the shore, toward the beach, Dany’s laughter and those of her ladies following him. He turned to look at them as he undid the laces of his breeches and saw them whispering together and laughing, but not Sansa Stark. She had eyes only for the letters her family had sent her. She was seated down under one of the tents with her dark-haired friend, already reading, one hand around her pale throat as her eyes skimmed the words. He knew he had done the right thing then, handing her those letters himself.

He was convinced of it again when, once he was in fresh clothes, curls still wet from the sea, she came to him and thanked him, this time more genuinely than before.

“You’re welcome, cousin,” he said, as Ghost paddled over to them and saddled up to her side, gentle as you like. Sansa paid him no mind at all, only raised her hand to scratch behind one of his ears as he drew close, as if they’d been companions always.

“He recognises you.”

“Does he?” She turned more towards Ghost and petted his chest. She sounded flattered that his direwolf knew her and allowed her attentions. And she should be - Ghost was quiet, but he was by no means gentle.

“He must. Had anyone else reached for him this way, he would have taken their arm off.”
The moment the words left his mouth, he regretted them. Sansa Stark did not look as if she would appreciate this kind of talk. However, if his frankness disturbed her, she did not show it. She had not taken her eyes off the red ones of his wolf the whole time.

“Yes. They were meant to protect us, weren’t they.”

She said the words almost to herself, Jon knew, because she spoke them so softly, but then she turned those clear blue eyes to him and this time they were neither distant nor opaque, but as warm as the sun beating down his back.

“I’m glad he remembered me. I would have known him anywhere of course. As I would have known you,” she added.

Jon’s smile was a little crooked. “Everyone always tells me I have the look of the north.”

She grinned. “Everyone always tells me I do not.”

There was a joke in there and they both knew it, and smiled in recognition of each other, even as the words remained unspoken.

She kept looking at his face - his eyes, his mouth - not in hunger like some did, but as if she’d missed him, as if she was looking for something on his face. Jon did not think she realized she was doing it. And of course he knew it wasn’t him she was really seeing, but nevertheless, Jon kept still and let her look.

“You used to remind me of Arya when we were younger, but now you look so like my father…” she whispered and then smiled, shaking her head as if to shake her thoughts from her. “It would have been impossible to mistake you for anyone else.”

Jon wanted to touch her then, something simple and small, maybe hold her hand a little. Something she would allow. For a moment he even thought she meant to take his hand, but then she let it fall into the pleats of her skirt again and smiled at him instead.

“At least how I remember him looking. It’s been a long time. Has Arya changed any?”

Jon cleared his throat. “How do you remember her?”

“A child who used to run around in mud-spattered skirts, hair like a nest, wanting to learn how to fight with a sword.”

“Then she has changed very little.”

Her eyes softened. “I suppose she wouldn’t.”

“She still runs around and avoids her septa, but now she wears britches whenever Lady Catelyn allows her to get away with it. And she did learn how to use a sword.”

Sansa’s eyes went round with surprise, and she took one small step closer to him, absorbed. “She did?”

“Yes. I taught her myself at first and then she pestered Ser Arthur to teach her until he finally gave in and did so.”

“Oh, Bran would have been so jealous. It was his dream to squire for the Sword of the Morning. He used to talk about it all the time.”
Jon chuckled and offered her one of the cups he had just filled with the wine he found lying on the low table.

“He was. Eventually Ser Arthur was sparring with all your siblings, even Rickon wanted a turn. I think he rather enjoyed himself actually.”

She laughed and looked up, blinking several times. In that moment Jon felt the scarcity of his knowledge of her acutely.

“Do you miss your family, cousin?”

Sansa looked surprised at his question. The openness that their previous levity had afforded seemed to flutter away as she composed herself. She did not pull the curtains closed completely, but he could tell he had just said the wrong thing.

“No more than they miss me, I’m sure,” she said, as she sipped at the wine before putting the cup down.

“They do,” Jon told her. “I could not describe to you your mother’s disappointment when she asked after you, years ago when I first visited, and I was unable to tell her anything because we had barely spent any time together.”

She looked down and Jon wished she had not. The only part of her that seemed to give anything of her thoughts away was her eyes.

“Thank you, cousin. That means more to me than you know.”

*Does it?* he wanted to ask. *Did you think they did not miss you?* Having seen how much her family wanted her home and safe made the thought strange. Ned Stark would probably go to his grave regretting having been cornered into paying for northern lives with his daughter’s future.

Did she not know?

“Is it true you always wear black?”

Her question startled him, and only then did he realize he had been staring.

“I do,” Jon answered, and spread his arms as if in showing her the tunic he was wearing then and there, he was showing her his entire wardrobe. He wanted to charm her, divert her. *Seduce* her.

“What do you think? Too on the nose?”

She snorted softly, a sound so unlike her very self-possessed appearance.

“Yes,” she said with a shrug. “And a bit inconvenient for the summer here, I would say.”

Jon opened his mouth to say something in return, something witty that might have made her laugh perhaps, but the words died in his mouth when Sansa Stark stepped towards him. She reached for him with both hands and straightened the collar of his shirt, smoothed down the fabric on his shoulders, the look on her face so affectionate it made something in him crack open right there, under the sun, leaving him stunned and breathless.

Strange that something so small could cut into him like this, and that she should smile at him after as she stepped back and linked her hands together in front of her again, unaware of any of it. Even stranger that so small a thing could make him want her with a rush so fierce it went straight to his head. The warmth unfurled from his belly and all the way to the tips of his toes.
He might have been one of her true friends in that moment for how she was looking at him. As close to her heart as her black-haired ladies were. He might have been the cousin he insisted he was; someone she’d grown up with, someone she cared for. And Jon knew with the certainty he knew his own face in the mirror that she would have loved him, as Arya and Rickon had loved him in the short time they’d known him, in a way that bordered on fierce. Or maybe she had Bran’s irresistible openness, Robb’s steadiness… Perhaps if they’d stayed in King’s Landing together, neither of them would ever have felt so lonely as they had for half their lives.

“It suits you, I think,” she said, bringing him out of his dizziness. It took a moment for Jon to puzzle out what she meant.

“Black was always my colour,” he heard himself say, just because that was what he’d always said. In this moment, the words meant nothing at all to him.

“How do you know? Have you tried any of the others?”

Jon felt slow, as if after too much wine. He just gave her the truth. “Not really. Not since I was a boy and my clothes were chosen for me.”

“Then I’ll make you something in the colours of my house. Perhaps you’ll like it.”

Her smile was brilliant, even so small as it was. Or perhaps because it was so faint and honest.

“I’m sure I will. Thank you, Sansa.”

When this time her smile reached her eyes, they were so kind they shamed him. The back of his neck felt hot in that way that told him that colour was rising in his cheeks, but he couldn’t help it. He felt small in the face of her open generosity that so reminded him of her father. Ashamed for the way he had approached her, using their shared family against her with calculated coldness. And angry at himself for having been so stupid as to ignore her all these years, just because she’d been fifteen when they first met and he hadn’t cared about the things she’d cared about, and hadn’t had the patience to pretend.

And half in love with her already, recklessly, dangerously and without any regret, because she was sweet and because her first instinct had been to touch him to help him, as if he’d been her brother.

It must have been hard indeed for someone like her in King’s Landing. Yet here she was, still able to be kind. The part of Jon that had snapped shut years ago hurt a little now in the face of such resilience, and for the first time he wondered if he was doing the right thing. If he shouldn’t just tell her outright what he planned and why. He knew it in his heart that she would not say no. That she was as unhappy here as he had ever been and that she would want to leave this cesspit and never return.

But what if she did not believe him? What if she mistrusted him? There was no shortage of terrible things he’d done throughout his life - his reputation was earned, if a little overblown, and Sansa Stark hardly knew him at all. If there was anything he’d learned about the Starks, it was that they would respect you if you earned it, trust you if you earned it, and love you if you earned it. And that once they did love you, it went deep and forever, immoveable as mountains.

No, he had to wait, Jon decided, as he offered Sansa his arm and they moved towards one of the tents. Wait and make Sansa Stark like him. Show himself to her and let her see him for who he was. Earn some of her affection.

It was a dangerous plan and a selfish one. It could easily backfire, but… Jon did not want Sansa Stark
to see him with contempt, he realized. If her unflinching eyes and careful hands were anything to go by, she knew how to spot a liar, and he didn’t want to be that to her. He wanted to be her family.

Jon sat down and watched Sansa as she spoke to Uncle Benjen and charmed his men, managing to make even Ser Arthur smile. He joked with Dany, spoke kindly to Jeyne Poole and politely to Shae Maegyr, letting them see him as he watched their lady. Because he knew now that seducing Sansa Stark would not mean engaging in that old dance that ended with him whispering filthy things at the delicate crook of her neck while he kissed his way down, though he wanted to do that, too. No, seducing Sansa Stark would be like seducing the rest of her family had been: he would love her, and let the rest follow.

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[1] I imagined the fashion of the Targaryen court to be something like that of Renaissance Italy - super elaborate, with the veils and then velvets, with similar but less elaborate, versions around the kingdom. The Kimono-style dresses Cersei wears I thought were typical of the Westerlands, and in the north, dresses are more fitted around the waist, with narrow sleeves and the day to day ones are even simpler, with front lacing for practicality. All of which is info I didn’t need to share but did so anyway lol - it doesn’t really make a lot of sense, I know I’ve taken fashions from many eras, it’s just what I see in my head.


[3] I KNOW i know, but we never had Shae’s surname and I just sort of… borrowed it.
predators far and near

Chapter Notes

note on the Jon-Sansa-Dany situation at the end. Please read at your own discretion because it does contain spoilers that are not just about plot, but also of the development of the characters, and their arcs in this story. The short version, for those who don’t want those spoilers is this:
- Dany here is a positive character (as in, I will not be villainizing her in any way)
- She and Jon love each other very much, but they are most definitely not in love.
- This is a Jon-Sansa story; theirs is the only romantic dynamic I will be exploring. This of course does not mean there are no other dynamics in the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

ii. predators far and near

*The leviathan of the seas, is it? The terrible shadow. The beast with a million eyes and a million ears. Conquest, rape, plunder. I studied your methods in your school and I do know the evil that you do because I was once part of it.*

*James Delaney, “Taboo”*

i.

As the afternoon grew late, Sansa saw her chance and excused herself. The moment she put her goblet on the table and curtsied to her uncle and some of the lords around him, however, Jon Targaryen’s eyes flitted across the hall and found her. She could not possibly say how she knew he was looking, only that she did. He had a way, her cousin, of taking up more space than he should, even in a place as grand as the Red Keep. A way of making others uncomfortably aware of him.

She remembered him from childhood, of course she did. How could she not? In her memories, he was tall and angry all the time, always turning those grey eyes towards Daenerys, following her like a shadow.

Whatever had been between them, Daenerys always tried to hide it, but Jon had never bothered. Now, with time and perspective on her side, Sansa thought perhaps he’d even delighted in exposing it. At thirteen, the thought might have struck her as romantic, but now she could see it for the power game it was. Dany treated it that way sometimes, though there was no doubt in Sansa’s mind that she cared for Jon sincerely, though perhaps just as obsessively as he cared for her.

There used to be such voracious gossip surrounding them. Him especially, even when he’d been barely more than a child. By the way he’d behaved, Sansa might have been forgiven for thinking the worst of it true at one point. Where everyone had presented such a careful image in court, the Black Prince had seemed to scorn the facade and he made no secret of it, ever. He was never rude, but he
was never kind either, nor did he ever pretend to be – and was cruelest to those who did.

Sansa had not understood. Of course she had not.

But she’d understood his anger just fine. It used to be the reason she could hardly look at him in the eye when she was a girl. He used to frighten her. Not more than Sandor used to, whose rage she could always see so clearly and which always made her flinch, but perhaps for the same reason.

Neither of them scared her now though.

Her most vivid memory of Jon was from Viserys’ funeral. It came to her just as she met his eyes in the Great Hall as she was about to leave. She didn’t know why she thought of it then and not before. It was the most recent memory she had of him, but that was not the reason it rooted her on the spot. Looking at Jon now, seeing him notice her and then start walking towards her in that sure, steady gait of his, Sansa remembered with perfect clarity - and she shivered as if she’d been doused with ice cold water.

There was an undercurrent of violence to that memory, like a dagger wrapped in silk, an unspoken threat. That was what she remembered first and foremost. And of course, everything else. Viserys, who had loomed so large in Sansa’s world while he was alive, had looked small and frail in death. Soft and pathetic, like the carcass of a chicken without feathers. Sansa had stayed in the sept to pray until almost everyone else had gone. She’d thought she was alone when she finally rose from the foot of the statue of the Stranger. That’s when she’d seen him. Jon Targaryen, Jon Blackyre, Jon Snow – Jon, standing over his uncle’s body, looking down intently, searchingly. The look on his face had given her such a terrible pause. He’d looked so utterly unaffected, unnaturally so, Sansa had thought, for someone who was looking down at the body of someone who was supposed to be family. She had not been able to tell if it had been because he hated, or because he had simply become used to seeing bodies that were no longer people and the fact of death no longer surprised him.

The not knowing, more than anything, had been what had frozen her in place. She had not even been able to breathe.

But the more she had looked, the more she had seen. How he’d leaned in, infinitesimally. Just a hairsbreadth. How there had been something simmering behind that placid expression, something that made his eyes sear. She had known it was hatred then, just as he’d leaned in: Jon Targaryen’s eyes had been as steady and dry as her own and yes, she had known, because in his eyes she had recognized the reason why she’d taken such pains with her veil that day. The reason she had not wanted to be seen the way he was being seen. She had known he hated before her cousin reached and took the painted stones from Viserys’ eyes, downturned lips curling back in a silent snarl as he’d pocketed them.

*Let him roam the seventh hell blind and deaf.*

The viciousness of the satisfaction that had ripped through her at that thought still brought chills to her even now. Especially now perhaps, as Jon crossed the hall towards her, Daenerys following close behind.

“You were leaving, cousin? The feast has barely even started.” His voice was so pleasantly soothing when he spoke. It made the contrast between him and the memory of him feel like an irreconcilable breach.

“Sansa only attends court when forced, Jon,” Dany explained, though Sansa was grateful she kept her voice low. Jon Targaryen’s smile was small, but his eyes were still and very carefully taking in
her face. She felt scrutinised.

“You seem to be far wiser than us both in this,” he said slowly.

“If you say so, cousin. I am also late for my prayers, so I will take my leave, unless you have a need of me, your grace.”

“Of course not, you’re free to do as you please, my lady,” Dany said as she waved her hand carelessly in front of her and then leaned in to kiss her cheek, unexpectedly and unabashedly affectionate.

Sansa smiled. “I will bring you roses tonight.”

She curtsied and turned to leave, but before she had taken her second step, his voice stopped her.

“And if I have a need of you? What then?”

Sansa turned her head, and then the rest of her body, towards Jon. His grey eyes were amused, even though his face looked serious. She linked her hands in front of herself and tipped her chin up, making herself smile.

“How can I be of service, your grace?”

She could not tell if she was unfair in thinking his expressions as exaggerated, but it seemed to her that he was enhancing his every emotion for her benefit, as if he were putting on a show. It was this she thought of the disappointment that flashed on his face as he spoke.

“Am I ‘your grace’ so soon? Not a few hours ago you called me by name.”

“I did, but you just requested my services in an official capacity, therefore I must oblige.”

He wanted to play, she could see it, but Sansa was tired, the letters in her pocket were heavy and felt hot as a brand against her thigh, and her hand itched beneath her glove.

“I see I have upset you.”

Sansa startled. “Of course not, I-“

“My apologies, cousin. I was just teasing,” he said warmly, and Sansa felt both foolish and wrong-footed. For a brief but intense moment, she wanted to explain to him that by this time of the day her hand started to itch and that she usually retired somewhere private where she could apply the ointments on her burns, or they would trouble her for the rest of the night. That after a day spent in company, some hours to herself in the silence of the godswood were a gift, a solace and something she badly needed. Just that one bit of the day that was her own. She opened her mouth to speak but she had no words to say all these things, appropriate words that would explain without giving so much away, so she promptly pursed her lips closed and gulped.

“I realize I may have given offense, but I promise I am not-“

“Never mind him, Sansa. You’re free to go, as always.” Dany said, pushing at Jon’s shoulder a little, looking genuinely annoyed at him. “Jon’s just being an arse.”

“And to make up for it –” Jon stepped to her side and offered his arm. “Allow me to escort you to the sept, my lady.”

“I pray in the godswood at this hour.” She took his arm as a reflex.
“Then that is where I’ll take you.”

“How shameless of you both, abandoning me like this.”

Jon laughed. “I’m sure you’ll manage.”

Dany’s expression sobered a little. “Jon, you must come back, the dinner is in your honour. The king—”

“I’ll think about it on the way,” he said curtly and started walking, taking Sansa with him.

Once they walked through the doors, Sansa saw that Shae and Jeyne were waiting for her by one of the windows in the corridor just outside the main hall. They both stopped talking when they saw the prince. She knew that he did not miss the glove and the small porcelain jar set side by side with the scissors in the flower basket Shae was carrying. He made no mention of it, however. They walked on and Shae and Jeyne fell into step behind them silently.

“I remember seeing you ride for the Great Sept often, when I was here last. It made me think you kept to the Seven.”

“I keep to both,” Sansa said, instead of reminding him that she was a daughter of Winterfell and north of the Neck, people prayed in front of the weeping faces of the weirwoods and in ways that southerners would consider unnatural. That she had gone to the sept because it reminded her of her mother, and because everyone else did.

Instead, she looked at his face. “And you?”

“Neither.”

Sansa glanced at him. “That’s not in keeping with what I’ve heard.”

To her surprise he chuckled. “And what have you heard?”

They stepped outside, where the air was cooler and already fragrant with the scents of the blooms from the gardens. Sansa took a deep breath.

“That you used to sit by the great oak tree in the godswood all night, sometimes, lighting small fires.” Sacrificing animals at its roots to make magic come for from the ground, calling the names of the dead.

“I used to but I stopped.”

His admission startled her.

“What I was searching for wasn’t there,” he said by way of explanation, once he caught her eyes on him.

What had he been looking for? What had he wanted so desperately that it had taken him at the foot of the godswood, begging for it to gods that might very well be deaf and blind down here? She had the strange notion as she looked at his face in the light of the setting sun, that if she asked, he would tell her.

“And did you manage to find it anywhere else? Whatever you were looking for?”

“No.”
She didn’t know what made her say it, in truth. He didn’t look happy or sad when he answered, but she still said “I’m sorry,” as if she was offering condolences.

“Do you like seashells?” he asked her suddenly after they’d walked a few yards in silence.

“I… suppose?”

“There is a strip of beach just outside the walls, where the cliffs meet the sea and form a natural alcove. I used to go there when I was a boy and hunt for treasures. Have you ever been there?”

Sansa smiled despite herself at the picture he painted. Did he used to go there alone? She might have asked him, but refrained. It would be sad if he said yes, though it would confirm some of her suspicions if he said no. But then she remembered how struck he’d seemed by her offer to make him a shirt; such a little thing, and he’d looked at her like he had no idea what she was made of, before the look on his face became warm and soft. How he’d looked at her throughout their outing, his eyes insistent, but not invasive or obscene, the way she knew men’s eyes could be. His curiosity had been palpable and she could not say she did not feel the same… And he had brought her letters from her family. Letters that could not have been delivered by any hand but those her father trusted. Her father had trusted him.

No, she would not ask. A kindness for a kindness.

“I don’t think I have been there, no.”

“I want to show it to you. It’s beautiful there. I think you will like it.”

His enthusiasm seemed genuine this time, but Sansa hesitated. “It sounds lovely, but I have duties to attend to.”

“Dany won’t mind,” Jon said immediately.

The godswood came into view, and just as Sansa started to dread him walking her to the heart of it, Jon stopped, right at the edge of the first trees.

“And yet, I must still ask for permission.” Her time was not her own in more ways than one.

“Then she can join us. I will tell her tonight.”

Sansa smiled. He was a practical person, wasn’t he? “Very well. Thank you for escorting me, cousin.”

“You’re welcome, Sansa.”

She’d held her hand out to and he took it, but instead of bending down to kiss her knuckles, her cousin simply held her hand as he leaned in, kissing her cheekbone. The brush of his lips was soft as a feather even as his beard tickled her cheek.

“Goodnight, Sansa.”

“Yes, goodnight,” she said softly at his back, then caught herself and turned towards the woods, Jeyne and Shae at her heels. Once they were deep inside the godswood, they sat down at the foot of the great oak and Sansa took off her glove slowly, to her great relief.

Shae uncapped the ointment jar. “That man is devious.”

“Oh, you think so?” Jeyne sounded disappointed. “I thought he was sweet.”
Shae snorted. “You think everyone is sweet. Give me your hand.”

Sansa placed her hand in Shae’s, who, despite her sharp tone, was as gentle as ever when she applied the ointment on the burned skin of her palm and carefully massaged her way up to the inside of her forearm. The cooling sensation made Sansa sigh in relief.

“You have been in pain for hours, I could tell,” Jeyne said as she sat on Sansa’s other side.

“Not pain, exactly. Discomfort.”

“It does not need to be terrible for it to be pain,” Shae reminded her.

“You should have left sooner.”

Sansa agreed with Jeyne on that, but what she should do and what she could do were very different things. “I was lucky to be allowed to leave when I did.”

“What does he want?” Shae asked, directly to the point.

Sansa thought about it.

“Who knows? To finally get to know his cousin?”

She gave Sansa a look that told her all she need to know about how much Shae believed that. It made Sansa laugh.

“I don’t know what he wants.” Yet. She did not know yet. Sooner or later, she would find out.

“Nothing, most likely,” she added softly, eyes fixed over Shae’s head as she thought back to the day she’d had.

*Nothing with me, anyway.*

“I know what he wants,” Shae muttered, just as Jeyne spoke:

“He and the princess—“

Sansa shushed her friend, putting her hand on top of Jeyne’s gently and shaking her head minutely. No, they had to watch that. Even here. Even together and alone as they were. Sansa knew better than most that in the Red Keep, no one was ever truly alone.

“He is a dangerous man,” Shae whispered, so low the sea breeze could have drowned her out. Sansa just looked at her and waited for the rest of it to come. “Half the cutthroats of Fleabottom know him by name, the other half fear him.”

“And what about the rest?”

“I say what I know!” Shae snapped, glaring at her before she looked down at her hand again, keeping up her gentle work. “I heard he sailed to Essos with a witch some years ago. That the ship sank and he alone survived.”

“That much we know it’s not true,” Sansa interrupted. “Others survived as well, my uncle Benjen among them, thank the gods.”

“That he landed on the Stepstones, and mixed his lot with pirates. That he does blood magic. That that beast of his kills by his master’s will. That he can shift skins, possess animals. That he has killed people in terrible ways—“
“And sat down with the crows to eat their flesh, yes I heard this, too,” Sansa said impatiently.

“You don’t believe it?” Jeyne asked, her voice steady but her eyes round with fright.

“There are not enough years in his life to have done half the things they say he has done,” Sansa said. And then, less certain, “I don’t know what to believe.”

Shae looked up. “Believe all of it, as you always do. I am finished. Keep your glove off until your skin dries this time,” she warned, capping the ointment jar closed again and placing it in the basket. Sansa looked at the skin of her palm, the puckered ruin, red in places and discoloured in others. It was ugly, true, but it could have been worse.

“Did you hear me?”

“I heard you,” Sansa said as she turned towards the oak tree, folding her legs beneath her carefully. The blooming dragonbreath around the oak could almost have looked like leaves of the weirwood. If she focused on the vines around the tree as she prayed, they almost did.

Almost, she thought as she dug her fingers in the dry earth of the forest. But not quite. She had thought about carving a face on the tree herself, but knew it would not have been the same. She was not one of the Children, it would not mean anything if she did it.

Shae’s words kept repeating in her mind.

He’s thrown his lot with murderers and cutthroats. He does blood magic. He’s killed people in terrible ways. He’s tasted human blood. He shifts skins and possesses animals…

Sansa shivered as she looked at the oak tree, wishing she would see the mournful face of the weirwood, the blood red eyes. Scary as they were, at least they were a witness.

If he’s a demon, what am I?

ii

It was almost dark when she finally found herself in the gardens. The last rays of the sunset were painting the sky in wondrous shades of gold and pink as Sansa picked the best blooms the gardens had to offer to adorn Daenerys’ rooms and her own. Once she was in the middle of the walkway, she ran into Petyr Baelish, who happened to be there with some Vale men. She met him by utter chance, she was sure; a chance that had probably been constructed so carefully as to appear a perfect coincidence. They all bowed to her and made small talk, offered her news of her betrothed as she charmed them, before continuing on her way, snipping a white rose here and a yellow one there.

“Lord Hardyng is expected to reach the capitol next month,” Petyr said as he followed her at a distance, picking a red rose and offering it to her.

“I shall be glad to see him,” she said placidly, as she took the rose and thanked him.

“I heard you met Prince Jon today.”

Prince Jon, she thought, and again noted that no one dared to add anything after his name. Jon Blackfyre. Jon Waters. Jon Sand. Jon Snow, he would have been, back home…the prince with so many names, he had none.

“I did. Quite unexpectedly, as well.”
“Scandalous, is he not?”

Sansa reached for a white rose and smelled its sweet scent. Lovely. She cut it down expertly and added it to her basket.

“Some say.”

“But you do not?”

She did not yet know, in truth.

“He likes to shock,” she said instead. It was true enough but something Littlefinger already knew, she was sure. Sansa could feel his eyes on the side of her face, as aware of him as she was of the dress on her skin.

“Perhaps he just wanted to shock you,” Littlefinger suggested carefully as he circled her. Sansa chuckled.

“Oh, I doubt I was his intended target,” she said, glancing at Baelish as she walked by him, not at all unperturbed by his hovering. He followed her every movement like a hawk and smiled back as if they shared a secret. And they did. They had many secrets between them, though this was one of the least precious. So many knew, it was hardly a secret, and she would bet all the roses of the world that it was about to become fresh court gossip again.

Sansa was sure whatever had been between Daenerys and Jon Targaryen that made the king insist on keeping them apart, continued. She had seen it plain as day at the picnic: the way their eyes met and held. How they picked up their intimacy as if it had never been broken by time or displacement. As natural as breathing. The way they bickered, like children. Like lovers.

She could almost feel sorry for them. A union would never be allowed. She did not need to have the King’s counsel to know that. Everyone knew that the Targaryens’ unstable nature came from their insistence on keeping their blood pure, wedding within their dwindling family. Everyone also remembered how the realm had almost been brought to its knees by the late King Aerys, the one the common people still called The Mad. And personally, Sansa knew that despite the court’s official position – one of pretending that this reputation of volatility and madness did not exist - too many pains had been taken to hide Viserys’ true nature for that official position to be true. It mattered very much indeed. She knew this better than anyone; she was walking proof of it.

No, another union of Targaryen with Targaryen would not happen in Rhaegar’s lifetime. And perhaps that was why Jon Targaryen had come back. To defy his father again, steal Daenerys away like Rhaegar had done with Lyanna.

And maybe grow wings like a dragon and fly into the east, why not? If he could turn into a wolf to eat his enemies, why not a dragon?

“The king won’t be pleased,” Littlefinger said as he stroked his beard slowly, as if he was telling her something new. Every time he stated the obvious this way, Sansa suspected a trap. No, the king definitely would not be pleased, whatever his youngest son’s reason for returning to court.

Perhaps her cousin would be sent away again. Perhaps Dany would, and Sansa would have to follow.

That could not happen. Not now. She had a plan to follow, and would not allow any distractions. Not anymore.
“But -

“Is it true that in the years he disappeared, he was in the Stepstones?” She asked, perhaps a bit too abruptly, turning towards Littlefinger.

His eyes glinted. “You sound fascinated.”

“I am rather wary, in truth,” Sansa admitted. Part truths served her just as well as whole ones. Petyr had taught her that, after all. And he liked feeling needed – or rather, making her feel as if she needed him. “Something about him makes me deeply uneasy. I have yet to meet someone who will even say his full name, let alone anything else.”

She looked at him, waiting. She knew he would step into it, she knew it; it was all over his face as he looked at her…

“No, you will be hard-pressed to find someone willing to do so. People still remember what happened to the last man who got it wrong. And the man before that.”

Sansa nodded and cut another rose. Yes, Viserys years ago, and the second son of Lord Caldwell, a year before that. Jon Targaryen had been fourteen when he’d killed a boy five years his elder. She had not been there that day; it had happened before she came to King’s Landing, but people still commented on the Black Prince’s skill with a sword, even as they shuddered at how he’d used that skill to murder his opponent in cold blood, so efficiently Caldwell never even had the chance to yield.

The duel had been fair, they said. Fair murder.

Every murder was fair murder if it was condoned by the Crown. But then again those who agreed Jon Targaryen was part of the Crown were as numerous as those who called him a Blackfyre and who did not see him as such. Maybe that was why he’d been so careful to make the arrangements so very formal and legal before he spilled blood.

“You could have him, I think,” Littlefinger said unexpectedly. But Sansa only gave him one of her smiles. A secret one, both amused and fondly exasperated, one he knew. She had grown so used to his possessiveness of her and his treacherous way of showing it, it hardly tripped her anymore.

“You say that about every man,” she said, almost rolling her eyes at him.

He reached for her hand and kissed her knuckles, lingering. The hair on the back of her neck stood up. She became acutely aware of the cold metal of the scissors in her hand.

“It is true for every man,” he said as he straightened, voice low.

Sansa looked down to her basket of flowers, fidgeted with her hands. She never looked too long at him when his eyes gleamed like that. She was afraid what he might see in her face.

“Flattery is below us at this point, is it not, my Lord?” she told him, lips arching up.

“I only speak the truth, as you know.”

Truth…

“I rather like the betrothed I have,” Sansa said then, returning to her flower picking.

“Yes, certainly Harry is handsome.”
“He certainly is.”

“And quite a bit more managable than the Black Prince, to be sure.”

“If you say so, my lord.”

“Though less intelligent, I suppose.”

“My Lord Hardyng is very bright,” Sansa said, practiced. Perfect.

“If that a word you would use about your royal cousin?”

Sansa shrugged. “It’s certainly a word.”

“I heard he’s taken quite the shine to you.”

“Has he?” She didn’t bother to hide her amusement. “Because he spoke to me once and brought me some letters?”

“I only mean to warn you, my dear Sansa. A dragon’s interest is never a good thing, especially for a Stark woman. And Jon Targaryen is a dangerous man.”

Sansa stiffened without meaning to. She did not look at Littlefinger as she made herself relax her shoulders, reach for another flower. If ever she might forget that Petyr Baelish was a cruel man, he was quick to remind her. She still did not know if he could not help it, or if he did it on purpose. She had found it was safer for her to assume he meant everything he said. Every single thing.

She turned her back to him deliberately.

“You underestimate me in every way,” she said softly, letting some hurt show in her voice. Some disappointment.

He was quick to come closer, much too close than was proper for him to. That he should do so where anyone could see him, that he could not help himself in this way, gave her a dark kind of satisfaction, even as the disgust of having her space invaded crawled on her skin on millipede legs.

“My dear girl, you are more precious to me than anyone. And I know you better than anyone. I know your mind, Sansa. Believe me when I say, I know few others as capable as you.”

“And yet you insult me.”

He put his hands on her shoulders, slid them down her arms. “I mean to put you on your guard, my lady. The things I have heard of this prince would make your skin crawl.”

She turned and he stepped back from her, as if he’d remembered himself, where they were and who he was with. It was true, they could not be seen from the palace in this alcove, but it was still in the open, and they both knew it. To remind him of this, Sansa looked about herself, and then leaned in, deliberately and only a fraction. Just enough for him to notice.

“Tell me.”

“They are, of course, only rumors.”

She had been prepared for this. For him to string her along as much as he could. She did not let her irritation so much as bubble, but rather, widened her eyes, let out a breath that fanned in Littlefinger’s face and watched as his pupils dilated.
“What kind of rumors?” she whispered.

“Aawful and unnatural, and I'm sure at least partly untrue.”

She made a movement with her hand, as if to touch him, and then let her hand fall down again, but kept her eyes pleading, subtly so. He knew her abhorrence for over the top displays. “Tell me. If I need to be on my guard as you say, I will need to prepare.”

“Of course.” He stepped a little closer, smiled. “But you can also rely on me.”

She nodded twice, licked her lips. “I know.”

When he kissed her knuckles again, eyes holding her own, she knew that whatever information she needed, she would have to find out for herself.

“I hope you hid your letters well,” he said once they started walking back towards the palace. Sansa looked around for Jeyne and Shae, and saw them turning the corner, heading her way. She was grateful they did not hurry when they saw who she was with.

“I have, my lord.”

“Be careful, dear Sansa.”

Yes, I shall be, she thought as she smiled and bid him goodnight.

She knew he had had someone search her rooms for those letters the moment he’d had the chance; knew it with the same certainty she knew her name. It was plain to see on his face, as she could see his irritation at not having found them. He was probably not even the only one to have done so in the last twelve hours.

Those were the thoughts that kept her company on her way to her room. She was not disturbed, however, thank the gods, and once she got there, she bid Shae and Jeyne to arrange the flowers, as she sat down on her desk and took the letters out from the inside of her skirt’s pocket. She laid them out in front of her and read them again, and then again. After she had read them five times, she got up, took her chamber pot and one of the candles. She steeled herself and then burned them, one by one.

Once she was done, she dried her face of tears and changed for bed. She cried some more once she was under the covers, Shae’s body warm against hers, her arm around her waist a silent reassurance and comfort. One moment she was thinking of home, the red sap of the weirwood faces and eyes painted on small stones, and the next she was asleep.

That night, she dreamt of open skies.

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[1] Taboo quote

Chapter End Notes

I’m writing this in response to some comments I got, because if there is one thing I
learned from GOT is that the worst way to fuck up as a writer is to betray your readers’ trust. So –
This story is not a Jonerys story. There is some confusion about this in the beginning because the characters do not have 100% reliable povs (as you might have noticed when Jon and Sansa give different reasons for Jon being away from the capitol, for instance). I wanted to create tension, not confusion but i dont thibk that is worth the apprehension from you guys reading, cause in the end we r all here to have fun, so I will be very clear: I won’t be writing any kind of triangle here. This story’s romantic focus - i want to underline this - is soly the one between Jon and Sansa. However, there will be of course other important relationships in it. I thought as I was writing, that having those relationships would add nuance to the narrative. I did not mean to confuse people, and I apologize if I did.
Dany and Jon have a bond (one that is complicated because I have imagined King’s Landing here as a very isolating place, a very lonely place for both of them. They were bound as children because they feared and hated the same people and because only together were they safe, and that makes for a strong relationship. ) They love each other, but they are not in love. Perhaps in the past they might have thought that bond meant that they were (others certainly did, as I tried to hint at in this chapter) and who knows, if kings landing was a less toxic place and if they hadn’t been kept apart, it might have become real love, but that is not the relationship that is going to be explored in this story. (I will explore some shades of it, from Jon’s pov, because I have to. Because he will have to develop from the point he starts in. He will notice himself ‘growing feelings’ for Sansa and little by little, the notion of love – which he tied to Dany, because she was the only one he imagined loving - is going to expand, and grow. He will hopeful learn a lot and change.) I firmly believe in tagging all the right things; the reason I did not tag for Jon and Dany was because it felt discourteous to me, to have this story show up on their tag when it's not at all about them, and tagging for friendship felt superfluous. Dany is going to be part of this story, but she is part of Sansa’s narrative, not Jon’s, not really. (Shes rather over him, in truth). Her importance is marked because she is in King’s Landing and she is the only person with some kind of power who was on Sansa’s side. In later chapters I was planning on exploring this, as well as the bond that binds the two of them together.
Another thing that I need to say is that, after the viciousness of the sexism when it came to the writing on multiple shows that have galvanized me as a fan and fanfiction writer, I have developed a policy: I don’t bash female characters in my stories, not ever. Nor do I generally pit them against each other just for the heck of it, so you don’t have to worry about any of that here in this story. Dany and Sansa here may be flawed, but I hope I do the justice as people, since I truly believe them both to be good people. I hope this clears up any questions, and that you guys still risk your faith in me a little and continue reading. Thank you.
Real magic can never be made by offering up someone else’s liver. You must tear out your own, and not expect to get it back. The true witches know that.

*The Last Unicorn, Peter S. Beagle*

The next morning, Sansa woke before Shae and Jeyne did to a rhythmic, throbbing pain low in her belly. She didn’t need to lift the light duvet to know that she’d find blood between her legs. She felt heavy as well, as if her body weighed twice as much as usual and her soft featherbed was going to swallow her, like quicksand.

Shae stirred upon hearing Sansa’s soft groan and leaned over her, a look of concern on her face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. My moonblood’s a bit early this month, that’s all.”

Shae fell back on the bed with a groan, and that woke Jeyne, who was sleeping on her other side. Sansa turned towards Shae, who mirrored her.

“You look like you did not sleep at all,” Shae said after looking at her face like she was taking a careful inventory of her every feature. Sansa snorted.

“It’s true.” Her expression sobered. “You look…troubled. Did you dream again?”

Sansa pushed Shae’s lovely dark braid over her shoulder, playing with some strands of her hair that were curling about her face. “King’s Landing looks better from the sky.”

“Everything looks better from the sky, I imagine,” Shae said as she got up and pulled the covers off Jeyne, who whined and curled into a ball in protest.

“Up!” Shae said, slapping her behind lightly, making her groan and try to kick her away in vain. Sansa smiled at their antics, but did not move as Shae called the serving girls and started ordering her staff about, having a bath prepared without needing to be asked, as Jeyne got up and went through Sansa’s closet, choosing their clothes for the day.

Sansa curled her legs towards her chest and sighed. The first day was always the worst for her, the pain sometimes so bad that it numbed her thighs and she could not move at all. She could feel it coming, spreading in waves. But that wasn’t why she could not muster the will to get out of her bed. She simply…did not wish to move at all.

The heaviness on her chest grew, like some great bird inside her spreading its dark wings, and while her ladies fluttered about her room to get her ready for the day, she simply hid her face in the pillow and staunched her tears there.
Gods…

“I have asked the princess to excuse you from your duties today, on account of you having a fever,” Shae said as she sat by her bedside.

“I don’t-”

“You do,” Shae said in that usual tone of hers, as she held out a cup of what Sansa knew was willow-bark tea and then helped her get out of her nightdress and slip into her bath. The water was just on the other side of too warm, as Sansa preferred it. She lowered herself into the big tub completely, slipping beneath the water and staying there, where it was quiet and still. She stayed beneath the surface as long as she could stand it, before she resurfaced again with a gasp. She missed the pools of Winterfell with such acuteness that it made her chest hurt, as if she was breathing through cracked ribs.

As Shae washed her hair, Sansa let her tears flow.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she said as she tried to wipe her face clean, but they kept falling.

Jeyne took her hand. “You’re upset, Sansa. That’s all it is.”

Shae touched her forehead gently. “Lean your head back.”

Sansa did, trying to stifle the sobs. Shae poured warm water over her head. It washed her tears away, but more followed.

“This is ridiculous,” she said through gritted teeth. The more she tried to stifle her crying, the more insistent the need to sob openly became. It was starting to hurt, holding back.

Jeyne took her by the shoulders. “Let it out.”

“I can’t. Fuck!”

“You can. Let it out, or it won’t stop.”

“It has to.” Who was to say it would stop if she did let it out? At the moment, she did not think it would. She felt as if she would cry forever until she withered. She slipped beneath the water, looking for the warmth and the quiet, but it didn’t help.

Sansa resurfaced and leaned back in the tub, face hidden in her hands. She had to send both Shae and Jeyne away before she could release the full storm of her grief, but once she did, she cried like a child, in a way she hadn’t since she had been one. In a way that shook her, rattling her bones with each loud, unrestrained sob, a hand over her eyes. She stayed in her bath until it cooled and she started to prune.

Once she felt the tide ebb, she pulled herself out of the water, rubbed herself dry without too much care, tied her underthings about her waist and put her robe back on, trying to look as calm as possible before she exited her washing room and stepped into her main apartments. She felt a great rush of love for both her friends when she found them empty. There was another cup of willow-bark tea on the table, but she did not take it this time, just went straight to bed and tried to think of anything but that great and heavy presence on her mind, on her heart. It was still sitting on her chest, but it had eased some. Now that the worst of her tears were spent, she felt hollowed out.

This was not an unfamiliar feeling, though the storm of tears had been new. She had days like this,
sometimes. Days when something, somewhere, managed to shake up the careful balance with which she controlled her emotions, making the whole construct tumble down like it was made of dry leaves. Every time the aftermath looked different, though it always left her exhausted. Today she seemed to have cried all her feelings out. There was nothing at all left. Not a single thing; not even the will to rectify this.

Usually she managed to ignore this state of affairs by pushing her body through the motions while her mind fled somewhere else as the storm passed. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it did not. And when it did not, all she would do was let the wave wash over her and hope that it would not pull her too deep under.

The nights were the worst. She couldn’t sleep when she was like this, and it was as if her weakened state brought all her worst thoughts and memories to the forefront. Her own mind was the beast that awakened at the mere hint of blood in the air, and Sansa had no mercy for herself. She’d lie in bed at night and listen to the castle making small noises, as if it were alive. Sometimes she thought she could still hear him, tapping that ring of his on the table, counting the seconds tick by. Sometimes she heard him all night, a shadow that lurked just outside her field of vision. Sansa would be afraid to look, for fear of really seeing him there, more than a memory and less than human, charred flesh and black blood, looking at her with those lidless eyes in the dark.

On those nights, she prayed. She’d get up, light every candle in her room and pray to her gods, to her ancestors, to the winds. Prayed for the sun to come up before the tapping of his ring against the table stopped, before the mire of her thoughts swallowed her whole.

Sometimes it worked. The sun came up.

And other times she would feel his cold breath touch the back of her neck before the rays of the dawn ever broke through her window. When that happened, the sun would not rise for Sansa for days. She’d walk in darkness, until the shadow passed.

But it did pass.

She knew it would. It would pass when she had no more fear to feed it with. It seemed impossible when she was in the middle of her haunting, but she knew enough of her own dark places to know that it would be over. That at one point or another, she would run out of terror. It happened when Viserys visited as it happened for all her other regrets and mistakes; it would happen for this wound as well. This awakening, this bleeding would stop. She would make it stop! She could not afford to walk around the Red Keep smelling of fresh blood, just waiting for someone like Jon Targaryen to poke his finger her wounds and make them bleed anew.

Not that she blamed him. It was not his fault that the corralling she’d built around the different rooms in her mind to preserve her sanity, was as frail as a house of cards. It was not his fault he took too much space and reminded her of too many things. Nor was he to blame that she had to burn every piece of home she had, just so that she could feel safe in this place.

It wasn't his fault!

She still resented him for it, a bit. She resented his freedom, his carelessness, his ability to come and go as he pleased, his ability to speak as he pleased. The fact that he’d given her something precious, and it had been a gift, yes, but it had also been one more thing she had to lose to survive.

His mere presence upset her, she realized, and if that was not frightening, what else could be? She could not allow imbalance in herself, when she survived on that tight control that allowed her to be aware of everything, always.
But she also wanted to be near him. He was strange and different, and his eyes were so clear. He could tell her about Arya, about Robb and Rickon and Bran, who she could tell he loved just by the look on his face when he spoke of them. He was a piece of home she could not very well destroy, could she? He could not be used against her, so she might as well speak to him and add more memories into those rooms inside her mind, to be locked and kept safe. The lure of the familiarity of him was powerful.

As was her unease, because she could tell Jon Targaryen was very aware of this fact. Of the effect he had on her.

The smallness of her life was causing this, Sansa thought angrily. She was lonely and unsafe, tense all the time and longing for things she should not. It was making her vulnerable. She had not allowed anyone to have this kind of power over her in a long time. There was no reason to start now.

*This changes nothing. It will change nothing. I’m just lonely, that’s not new.*

*Loneliness is the human condition,* Petyr always said. There were many things she hated in him, but this was a truth Sansa could not forget. She had to stay focused.

There was a knock at the doors. “Sansa, may I come in?”

Sansa wiped her tears away, even though she knew it was useless.

“Come in.”

She was proud that her voice did not shake, though she did sound as if she had a cold. Or as if she had been crying for a good two hours. Either. Both.

Dany poked her head into her room hesitantly and then when she saw Sansa, her lips parted in a small ‘oh’ of surprise, and she stepped in, closing the door behind her. She was quick to get into bed with her, lifting her skirts to kneel at Sansa side.

“Shae told me you were unwell.”

“It will pass.”

“I know. But still…”

They fell silent and Sansa saw Dany look her over and then carefully appraise her face. They knew each other’s moods too well for her not to understand this was more than what it seemed.

“Who upset you?”

The question was sincere, as was the cold determination in Dany’s eyes. Dany, who had a vengeful streak a mile wide, one she made sure everyone knew about. Sansa sometimes thought she was the same and just hid it better. Dany was quick to anger and quick to forgive, while Sansa’s anger was a slow simmer and once earned, implacable and forever. They were so different in so many ways. Apparent ways that had made them feel like opposites. It had taken Daenerys and Sansa a long time to understand each other, but once circumstances brought them closer, they had snapped together like a steel trap. They were bound now, with blood and fire, and though only Sansa had the scars to show for it, she knew that meant no less to Daenerys.

“No one upset me. I am just…” Sad, Jeyne had said, but it was more than that. Or less? Sansa could not tell, but she knew that in that moment, the world could have collapsed and she could not have found it in her to care.
“I burned the letters,” she whispered finally, before she could overthink it.

Dany's hand tightened around hers, eyes widening in surprise. “Oh Sansa… why?”

“I had to.”

“You could have given them to me. I would have kept them safe for you.”

Safe…

Sansa caught Dany's eye. She said nothing, they just looked at each other, and Daenerys pursed her lips and looked away. They understood each other in fundamental ways, but sometimes Dany said something like this and Sansa wondered… Perhaps the only difference between them was that Dany still believed she could protect those she loved, while Sansa knew with deathly certainty, that, for her, there was nowhere left that was safe. Not even the inside of her head could promise her that.

“Jon told me he wanted to take us in his secret cave today,” Dany said with a smile. “Do you want to go?”

Sansa groaned softly at a sharp pang low in her abdomen and curled a little into herself. “I am in no fit state to go anywhere. And I certainly can’t go swimming.”

Dany chuckled. “Wear a black dress and no one will know.”

“I don't want to, Daenerys.”

Dany sighed as she got up and walked towards Sansa's closet.

“In the gardens, then. We will feed your legion of birds! That always cheers you up.” Sansa did not respond, so Dany persisted. “You won't want to do anything while you're like this, but you know that if I leave you here to wallow, it will be worse.”

Sansa knew Daenerys was right, of course, but it was hard, convincing herself that she had to move, get dressed, talk to people, when all those things seemed to require energy she simply did not have.

“I am in pain, Dany.”

Daenerys walked out, a black silken dress in her arms, which Sansa had embroidered herself with red wolves and flowers along the hems. The look Dany gave her was unsure.

“Truly? I can ask Pycelle to make you a tonic.”

Sansa crunched her nose. “You know I don't trust that man.”

“I don't either, but some things can't be helped.”

Sansa took a deep breath, thought of Maester Luwin's kind smile and gentle touch, and felt her eyes water again.

_Fuck's sake!_

She sighed and crawled out of the bed. Dany helped her dress, and together, they went out.
His uncle was angry with him. Jon knew it because Benjen was trying his hardest to make him eat the dirt of the barracks’ training yard.

“Any particular reason why you’re out for my blood on this fine morning?” Jon panted as he avoided another blow by a hairsbreadth.

Benjen grunted. “Yes it is a fine morning. Why are you fighting like you’re still asleep?”

Jon raised his blunted sword and parried a hit that would probably have bruised the hell out of his shoulder. His uncle eyed him dispassionately.

“Use your shield or I will ring your head like a bell.”

Alright then.

They went on like that for some time, before Benjen switched with Ser Arthur, who went no easier on him. By the end of it, Jon was sure he had lost half his body’s weight in sweat and he was littered with bruises and shallow cuts. By then the sun was high in the sky and most of the other men training had already sought refuge from the heat inside the barracks.

It was only once Ser Arthur had left as well, however, that Benjen finally spoke what was on his mind.

“What exactly are you doing, Jon?”

Jon did not spare his uncle a glance as he walked to the fountain by the western wall and dipped his head in to cool down.

“What I said I would do,” he said once he emerged, shaking the water from his hair and feeling the cool drops fall down his front and back. He pumped some water into a jug and then drank straight from it, passing it to his uncle next.

“You will not lie to that girl,” Benjen said, as he wiped his face and set the jug down.

“I have no intention to.”

Benjen lost patience with his indifference. “Don’t try to pass one over my head, boy. I know what you look like when you’re playing one of your games.”

Jon kept his expression placid. His uncle was the only man alive who could speak to him this way and he only called him boy when he felt Jon was being particularly stupid. In this case, flirting with Sansa Stark seemed to fall under ‘very fucking stupid,’ in Benjen Stark’s books.

Jon could not, in all honesty, say he disagreed with him there. And yet-

“There’s nothing wrong with playing a game or two. I want her to know me.”

Almost. He wanted her to like him, but that would be harder. That would, almost certainly, involve lies, and Jon had just promised not to lie.

He hadn’t promised to tell the whole truth either, however.

“You have not acted a fool in a long time, Jon. That you are doing so now, with so much on the line, is unlike you.” Benjen leaned in, lowered his voice. “I may not know my niece well, but I know this place. She will not forgive betrayal, I am sure of it, or she would not have survived in a place like this. If you don’t tell her the truth and she catches you in a lie on her own, neither of us know what
“will happen.”

“Sansa won’t hurt me, or have me hurt.”

Benjen’s lips thinned. “Boy-”

“She’s her father’s daughter, like you said.”

Benjen did not look convinced, but did not argue that point. “It’s not just her you need to worry about. She is already betrothed. You’re short on time here, nephew.”

“To Harry the Arse?” Jon scoffed. “I am the better man, don’t you think?”

“Yet everyone I asked says she dotes on him like a maiden in love, and he on her.”

Jon laughed. “You shouldn’t trust court gossip.”

A woman with a gaze as comprehensive as Sansa Stark’s could not possibly see anything she might like in a man as pathetic as Harry Hardyng. It was ridiculous.

“It seems to me that you are taking too much for granted, Jon. It’s not just the three of you in this game; this is the Red Keep. Who knows who else is playing?” Benjen grabbed Jon by the shoulder. “The fact that I find myself telling you things you should already know worries me, nephew.”

“Your faith in me has never wavered before.” It was not an accusation, not truly. It was a statement. Benjen should know better than to question him. He should know that Jon had a plan, even though he did not always see fit to share it. “I have always kept my word, haven’t I?”

From the corner of his eye, Jon noticed one of his father’s men approaching him. One look was enough for his uncle to understand they were no longer alone.

Benjen sighed. The grip he had on Jon’s shoulder relaxed as he shook his head. “May the gods keep you, Jon.”

“I know, I know. No one else will[1].”

Benjen’s laugh was rough around the edges, as if Jon had surprised it out of him.

“You have your mother’s good sense and her devilment both[2].” Benjen smiled. “For once, I wish you’d let her good sense win, or you will send at least one of us to an early grave.”

Jon grinned. “It’s a bit late for you to go into an early grave, uncle.”

“You calling me old, boy?”

Jon shrugged. “If the shoe fits.”

Benjen pushed him away hard, making him laugh. Just then the servant dressed in Targaryen black, as his father preferred, stopped in front of them and bowed.

“Your grace. The king requires your presence in the council chamber.”

Jon brushed his hair back. “We all obey the king.”

The servant bowed again, took three steps backwards, and stood there, waiting for him. Ah, so that was how it was.
“Are you sure it’s the king and not Jon Connington that requests my presence?” Jon asked with a small smile.

“Stop tormenting the man and go make yourself fit for a royal audience,” Benjen grumbled.

Jon hummed.

“As always, you have a point, uncle,” he said and started walking, but not before he heard Benjen’s soft ‘For fucks sake’ behind him. It amused him to know that Benjen knew his pettiness almost better than anyone else.

His pettiness - and the rest of him, it seemed.

It had been years, but Jon still remembered the first time his uncle had spoken to him of his mother.

Jon didn’t even remember what he’d done that first time to earn a comparison with her. It must have been some mischief or another; he’d been a terror as a child. But he remembered his uncle’s smile, because it was particular. He only smiled that way when he thought of his sister, Jon’s mother: warm with love and infinitely sad at the same time. He’d smiled that way as he’d ruffled Jon’s hair and told him how like his mother Jon was. The words had slipped easily, as if Benjen thought people told Jon things like that all the time. It had surprised him as a boy. In many ways, it surprised him still, with that very same longing: to know this woman he compared to. The woman people sometimes said he’d killed coming into the world. The solitude and guilt had stung harder when he was a child of course, so his longing had run deeper.

He’d been sullen for days. Naturally, it had caught Benjen’s attention and he might even have guessed what his sour mood was about, because when next Jon had mentioned it, his uncle had not looked surprised when Jon had asked about his mother.

He had been rather enraged however, when Jon had told him about how sometimes he heard people say he was the worst of his mother and father both, and more unhinged than any Targaryen before him. The look of disgust he’d seen on Benjen’s face was unmatched to this day.

‘Fuck them.’

He’d spat the words out like curses, fury making his eyes shine like pale jewels. His uncle was the most mild-mannered man Jon knew, until someone said something worth killing them for.

‘Fuck them all to the seventh hell. What do they know of Lyanna?’

iii

When Jon walked into the council room, he found the king sitting at the head of the table as usual, his silver hair tied backwards in that simple style he always wore it in. He seemed as unchanged as the Red Keep itself, no matter how much time passed, though Jon knew that was not the truth. If he cared to look closer, he would see the new lines on his face, the marks of worry around his mouth. But his eyes – those were the same.

Jon had his mother’s eyes, but he saw more of himself in the cold calculation of his father’s stare than he did in any other Stark he’d ever met.

“Your grace.” He bowed as little as he could get away with. “Brother. My lords.”

Hightower and Dayne nodded at him, and Varys bowed his head, ever respectful when he wasn’t
setting mute children to spy on him. Connington, seated at his father’s right while Aegon sat to his left, looked at him up and down, eyes stopping at his sweat-stained and dusty tunic, his wet hair. Ser Arthur looked amused, but then again, he knew Jon better.

Jon did not wait for invitation: he sat down on the chair in front of his father and waited.

“You could have changed,” Aegon said, sounding as if he was holding back a laugh.

“I was made to believe the matter was of some urgency,” Jon lied.

“It is,” Connington said.

“I am listening,” Jon said, before Connington could add anything. Connington scowled.

“Perhaps if you allowed my Hand to finish a sentence, Jon,” Rhaegar said slowly, one corner of his lips curling a bit upwards. Jon leaned back against his chair and very deliberately kept his face blank.

“A decision was has been reached regarding the situation in the Riverlands,” Connington said, looking down at the papers strewn in front of him and then to Jon, eyes impassive. “A new trade agreement and taxation plan has been in the works for the last few months, whereby-”

“Yes, I am aware of the details,” Jon interrupted, irritated beyond measure but unwilling to show it. “What need does the Crown have of me?”

He already knew what his father wanted with him, of course: what he always wanted. He was the king's favorite executioner. This could very well have fucked his plan in the arse, but instead of breathless disaster, a plan was forming in the back of Jon's mind, the alternatives unfurling in front of him, inviting as lovers and just as exciting.

This could be a gift, if he played his cards right.

“You are aware?” Connington repeated carefully.

“You have spies now?” Aegon tilted his head a bit, eyes narrowed on him. Aegon, like his sister, had his mother’s eyes: intelligent, but kinder than his sister’s, though this wasn’t saying much.

“The displeasure of a third of the realm is not exactly a state secret, brother,” Jon said, trying not to smile.

Connington threw a paper down impatiently. “Very well, since you are so well informed. An agreement is close to being reached, but Lord Hoster keeps delaying. The king will need the treaty enforced. You will be his emissary.”

Jon watched the wine in his cup for a few silent moments then set it down and fixed his eyes on his father. They looked at each other silently for several moments.

Had he ever loved this man? Jon could not say, not in that moment. Did he love him now? That was an easier question. Rhaegar had a hold on him, that was certain. But it had not been love for a long time. Jon had not needed a father since he was a boy.

“When I was a boy I used to think something must be very wrong with me, since not even my father could seem to stand having me around for more than a few moments every other month.”

Ser Arthur’s eyes snapped to him, visibly shaken. The confession was true, but it was not something Jon had readily admitted to anyone. Indeed, it was a dangerous thing to say with someone like Varys
present. Everyone seemed to know it, by the way they tensed, as if this admission of vulnerability was the singing of steel as a sword was being drawn.

Something in Rhaegar’s gaze moved, but just as Jon saw the king take a breath, as if to speak, Jon cut in.

“Of course, now it just amuses me.” He straightened, flattened his tone further. “I serve at the pleasure of the king, of course. I will accept the honor of wrestling some of the most quarrelsome lords of the realm into submission. However, seeing that this is no mean feat, I will resolve this by my own devices, with no interferences beyond a general mandate.”

The tension in the room did not ease, so much as shift. Ordinarily, Jon would not have bothered with such carefulness, but now that this golden opportunity was in front of him, he was determined to make it happen.

“We are trying to resolve this peacefully,” the king said. “Your usual…harshness cannot stand here, Jon.”

“I did not mean to use any. But as I am to be the manifestation of your sword, your grace, I will also need something to sweeten the proposal with, or the strategy will not very well work, will it?”

“The terms of the deal have already been compromised upon. There is nothing more the old man will have from the Crown,” Connington snapped. Old Hoster Tully had frayed his nerves, it seemed.

Jon cut to it. “Sansa Stark comes with me.”

It shocked everyone, his father most of all. For the first time, the serene expression on his face slipped and the king frowned.


“Your grace, I advise against it.”

“On what grounds, lord Hand?” Jon asked, calm. He was trying his hardest to remain impassive.

“Sansa Stark is a guest of the king,” Varys attempted, when Connington did not immediately elaborate.

“She is a guest of the king’s sister,” Jon corrected. “And I don’t see how this is an impediment, either way. She’s here. She might as well be useful.”

“How? She’s not even that good a conversationalist,” Aegon seemed genuinely curious.

“Forgive me your grace, I do not mean to be discourteous to the lady—“ Connington started, in a clipped tone that said he would be exactly that.

“Course not,” Jon muttered, and Aegon snorted.

Very quickly, he was starting to understand that being a woman had not spared Sansa any of the contempt with which Connington had treated Jon all his life, just for being half a Stark.

“But as Prince Aegon wisely pointed out, the primary expertise of the Lady in question is in embroidering, for gods’ sake! She knows nothing of matters of the Crown, nor should she.”

“That will suit my purpose just fine,” Jon waved away. “It’s as a distraction that I need her for, not as a confidante.”
“You have any of those?” Aegon asked.

“No.”

“She cannot move from the capitol!” Connington snapped, eyes blazing as he glared at Jon. “It’s not for her charms that she was brought here. As you well know, your grace.”

Jon felt his temper rise and it reflected in his voice, in how it became even more impassive. “Do you think she will escape, be kidnapped, or killed? Because all three imply a stunning lack of faith in my abilities, especially when compared to the tasks assigned to me. Tasks that I have always completed as required, might I add.”

“No need to be arrogant, brother.”

“I was merely pointing out an inconsistency in the Lord Hand’s logic,” Jon said mildly.

“I can see Prince Jon’s point, but the Riverlands are too incensed,” Hightower said, speaking for the first time and sounding far calmer than Connington. “Lady Stark’s presence may only serve to make them more hostile to an agreement.”

Jon allowed himself a small, humorless smile as he looked them all in the eye one by one. “I did not know you were all so afraid of one girl, my lords.”

Deliberately, he met Jon Connington’s eyes.

_One Stark girl almost brought the realm to its knees before._ He would have said that, had they been alone, but in the presence of his father, Jon Connington did not dare mention his mother in any way. Nor did anyone else. They did not, because they all knew Jon would all too readily remind them _who_ had taken a fifteen year old girl from her home and then practically imprisoned her in a tower when she had demanded to be set free.

But even though no one said so much as a word, Jon still saw his father’s eyes harden.

The silence in the room was so strained, one could hear a pin drop.

“Jon.” The king said his name slowly, his voice that which people heard in the throne room. “You will address my council with respect.”

“Your council makes it difficult, your grace. I cannot respect men who treat noble ladies as if they were prisoners of war.”

The temperature in the room plunged further. Here it was, the hold his father still had on him. If Jon felt nothing, as he wished he did, he would not feel such a visceral need to antagonize him. But that need could not disappear because the reason for it never went anywhere. It was always there, unchanging, always. Lyanna Stark’s ghost was in every corner, never mind that she had never set foot in this city. She was here in this very room and every other room Jon stepped into, and she haunted with a vengeance.

“Sansa Stark is Princess Daenerys’ lady in waiting,” Connington said slowly.

“And?” Jon was unable to keep his exasperation from his voice.

“The princess might have a need of her.”

Jon’s chuckle was dry. “You know, of all your excuses, this might just be the feeblest, Lord
Connington. I will speak to Daenerys, since you obviously dare not. She may join me, for all I care.”

“Your grace-” Varys started, but Jon had had enough.

“For fuck’s sake, hear sense!” Jon snapped, feigned carelessness abandoned. “The river lords can never agree on anything, but they all agree on how much they hate the Crown. It’s been fifteen years since we had one single agreement with them that did not need to be enforced with steel. And now that you have the single greatest advantage on them, you don’t seem to know how to use it!”

“Sansa Stark is a girl, what could she-”

“Sansa fucking Stark is half a Tully and looks like a Whent. Let her come with me. Let us make this less of a show of force, and more of a show of friendship.” Jon spoke directly to his father now. “Let me go among them and persuade them, while the granddaughter of Hoster Tully and Minisa Whent charms them.”

When no one spoke, Hightower chose to do so. “And what guarantee have you that she will do as she is bid?”

“Sansa Stark is a loyal subject of the Crown, my Lord. And she will do as she is bid, because I will ask her.”

“You have a high confidence in your charms, your grace,” Connington said tightly.

Jon just smiled. “I am told I can be very persuasive.”

They all knew the nature of his persuasiveness, they’d heard enough to know. But not one of them spoke against such measures threatened against Sansa Stark. None except Ser Arthur, who looked at Jon in that moment as if he’d never laid eyes on him before. And Jon knew in that moment that whether Arthur Dayne believed him capable of what he’d threatened or not, it would not matter. If Jon were to reach for Sansa Stark in the wrong way in the foreseeable future, the Sword of the Morning would take his hand. Ser Arthur did not even need to say it aloud – it was all over the other man’s face.

Jon felt like laughing.

So this was the line?

Jon wanted more than anything to ask the knight if he’d had such reservations when his father had locked his mother in that tower in Dorne and ordered him to guard the door with his life.

“Hoster Tully is no fool, Jon,” the king said, bringing Jon’s attention back to him. “He will know you’re trying to manipulate him.”

“I hope so. I hope he understands that the king has sent me with his goodwill, extending a flower instead of the tip of my sword.”

“The Stark girl could do more damage than good with a single misplaced word,” Varys observed. He too spoke to his father, ignoring Jon.

*Or a gloveless hand, eh Varys?*

“If the alliances you have built for the Crown can be toppled by a single word from one girl, Varys, then you’ve not been very good at your job, have you?”
“That is very close to treasonous, brother,” Aegon said, though he seemed more amused than incensed.

“It’s not treasonous if it’s the truth. Not in this room, at least,” Jon added, looking at all of them in turn.

“Be that as it may, Lord Varys is right. She could prove difficult,” the king said calmly, and silence fell around the table again. “How do you plan to avoid that?”

“Sansa Stark understands her position better than most give her credit for. Though I must say, this is – again - a problem that could have been easily avoided, if she had been shown the courtesy she was due as a guest of the Iron Throne.” Jon fixed his eyes on his father and then Lord Connington, who he knew for a fact had been the one cleaning up after Viserys the most. “That way, no one would need to worry that the truth would shame them.”

“Sansa Stark has been treated with nothing but benevolence.”

Jon could not hold back his sneer. “Yes, and I have known the limits of your benevolence.” He hadn’t seen the mark that benevolence had left on Sansa – she kept that glove firmly on always, but he could imagine: he could imagine it was there for a reason. Whatever that reason was, someone better have died for it.

The room fell into silence again as the king pondered. Jon Connington was on edge of his seat, a muscle on his jaw working furiously. Jon deliberately relaxed in his seat.

“I accept your condition, Jon. Lady Stark may join you,” Rhaegar finally said.

Jon nodded. “Excellent. I will tell her myself.”

It wasn’t a question but either way, no one contradicted him. He would have to make it into an invitation though, or she might very well refuse him.

“Daenerys however may not,” the king added. Jon resisted the urge to roll his eyes.


“But not yours?” Aegon asked, one eyebrow raised.

Jon grinned, showing his teeth without a single drop of amusement. “No. I’m the bastard, as everyone knows.”

He was sure he could count Ser Arthur’s muttered curse as one of the five times he had heard the man use foul language in the king’s presence. He didn’t wait to see what became of it, however, and took his leave not a moment after that.

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[1] A Knight’s Tale quote


[3] I can’t help but feel that this scene is a bit of a filler. Let me know what you guys think on this. Maybe if it feels too superfluous, I’ll just removed it from the chapter altogether
This chapter feels a bit off to me, because it feels both too long and unfinished at the same time - probably because despite the wordcount, sansa and jon don't interact once, so it makes the whole thing feel a bit hollow lol. BUT, to make up for it, I will probably put up the next chapter soon, because its halfway written, and thought it will be shorter, it also consists only of Jon and sansa scenes lol.
I tried hard to give some character insight in this one to make up for the lack of jon and sansa together. Anyways, let me know what you guys think.
edit: can you guys believe that between posting this chapter and this edit right now [4 hours!!] I wrote 3,000 words? Next chapter will be coming very soon! I just wanted to share that cause im so happy XD
iv. wolf smile

This is what it means to be a woman in this world. Every step is a bargain with pain. Make your black deals in the black wood and decide what you’ll trade for power.

*Catherynne M. Valente, Six-Gun Snow White*

i.

“What is it that you are doing, exactly?”

Sansa looked up and then away immediately. Jon Targaryen was crouching in front of her, his shirt missing, along with his boots, seawater dripping from his hair and down his chest, his wet trousers soaking the white sand below his feet. In the distance, Sansa could hear the laughter of the rest of their company as they played in the sea.

“This is wood from a tree called Laksmi[1],” Sansa explained, as she kept grinding the flat part of the stone against it. When enough of the translucent sap had come to the surface, she gathered it on her fingers and spread it on her cheeks and forehead, and then her neck.

“It protects the skin from the sun,” she explained, finally looking at him again. She kept her eyes on his as he put his tunic back on, not letting them stray to the dark tattoos peeking around his arms or the ones curling along his ribs. She knew he had the image of a bird on his back. A bird with a wolf’s head – she had seen it when he first went into the water. She was burning to know what the symbols meant but she would not ask. He was riddled with scars as well, little slivers of pale flesh crisscrossing here and there. She had looked away from his body too fast to notice them the first time, but now they were impossible to miss[2].

He was not ashamed at all though, about any of it. He disrobed whenever he felt like swimming and took his sweet time to put his tunic back on once he was under the tent’s cover. That more than anything else, made her want to look.

“Yes, you do need that,” Jon said, as he sat down in front of her, cross-legged into the sand, forearms resting on his knees, looking far more relaxed than she’d seen him so far. “You’re perhaps one shade or two removed from milk.”

Sam, Jon’s friend and perhaps the gentlest man Sansa had ever met, squeaked at her cousin’s words. Jon himself laughed though, when he saw her rolling her eyes at him.
“You should take some of this, Sam. You’re going to burn your nose if you don’t.”

“It won’t make him look any worse than he looks now,” another one of Jon’s companions said – Pypar, if she recalled correctly, but Jon called him Pyp - making Sam blush.

“Don’t listen to him, Sam,” Sansa said with a smile. “Your friend is just jealous because he knows his ears will start to peel by tomorrow.”

This made Sam smile and Pypar touch the tips of said ears gingerly and then wince.

“Th-thank you, my Lady.”

She smiled and passed the long piece of wood to him, watched as he wiped his sweaty face and then applied the sap to his face. She tried not to laugh when Pypar and Sam started arguing about how to best get more of it, so that there would be enough for both.

She could feel him staring and sure enough, when she turned he was looking at her. She noticed when he did that, but then again, he did not exactly bother to hide it. In the last four says she had not had many chances to speak to him, but every time she had, he’d looked at her the way he was looking now: like he knew every question she wasn’t asking and he was playing a waiting game with her.

Sansa met his eyes and held them.

‘What?’ she asked him silently. She refused to fold; whatever he wanted, he would have to ask for it.

Jon reached out and brushed his thumb against her jaw. Sansa had to force herself to sit still.

“You had a bit of-“

“Oh. Thank you. You should use some of the Laksmi as well.” She felt a bit silly for saying that – she could feel her cheeks grow warm, but she squared her shoulders and stood by it.

“What, to protect my fair complexion?” Jon asked with a tilt of his head.

He had a point, she supposed. He favored her father’s and uncle’s olive skin, instead of the Targaryens’ milky white complexion, Sansa had noticed. In this as well, his mother had made her mark. And as the sun had already kissed him golden anyway, there would be no chance of him burning his nose now.

Sansa looked into her cup, at the lemon water shimmering there. She did not want to be caught staring at his face so much.

One of the servants offered him refreshment and he took it without looking away from her. Sansa thanked the man when he refilled her cup and then asked him for some oranges. Several moments passed in silence.

Silence with Jon Targaryen could not be called comfortable. Despite his stillness, she could still feel that relentless energy that seemed to define him the most, as if he was just waiting for the right time to spring forth. Here though, amidst rocks, grass and the sea, out of his rigid doublet and laced-up shirts – when he bothered to wear them - he seemed more at his ease. When she’d seen him in formal clothes the first time, Sansa had gotten the sense he wasn’t comfortable in them. He had too much control of himself to fidget, no doubt, but he never seemed relaxed.

“I don’t remember inviting half the court to this outing,” he said, as if picking up a conversation they
had just been having. He was frowning at the shore as he spoke. Sansa turned to the shore just in time to see Doreah jump from the wooden pier and straight into the sea with a joyous scream, putting all the other ladies to shame with her enthusiasm. Irri followed her almost immediately, hand in hand with Dany. On the shore, Shae grabbed Jeyne by the waist to stop her running away from the waves. They squealed when the water hit them both, before linking hands and running towards the water instead of away, skirts lifted, baring their calves.

They looked so happy, Sansa could not help her smile.

“No, you invited the king’s sister and myself,” she said, hiding her amusement at his petulance behind the rim of her cup.

Jon snorted. “Right. The king’s sister, who everyone thinks I am going to spirit away the moment Ser Barristan takes his eyes off her. And yourself, who is watched at all times by the spies of at least a half a dozen different people.”

Sansa choked on a bit on her lemon water and had to bear his pleased look as she coughed into her handkerchief, before she could gather her bearings.

“You’re very direct.”

“Saves time.”

Sansa’s smile was a subtle thing. “If you say so, cousin.”

“I do. You’re very good at charming people, as well.” He looked sideways to his friends and grinned. “Half my men swear you’re the Maiden made flesh and you’ve only met, what, five of them? Isn’t that right, Sam?”

Sansa blinked rapidly. This did not feel like he wanted to humiliate her, but it was not something benign either.

Sam did not seem to have her doubts, however. For the first time, he spoke without stumbling over his words. “That’s an indelicate thing to say to a lady, Jon.”

“It is, but Sansa doesn’t mind, do you?”

Sansa was sitting so straight her spine hurt. The tone of the conversation had changed so fast her head was spinning. Still, she could not look at him – aware as he was that he was in fact being rude – and act as if he was not. It was not what he wanted, Sansa was sure of it. Jon Targaryen was not that kind of man. He did not want her to submit. He wanted her to bite back.

A more shadowy side of herself suggested she could just tip her chin up and offer to call for Daenerys for him to converse with, since that was what he wanted, and leave her be.

“How would you know what I mind?” she asked instead, keeping her voice soft and her eyes steady.

Her cousin shrugged. “Just a feeling.”

“And you always trust your feelings?”

“Without exception.”

“And what if you’re wrong?”

His friends chuckled as her cousin passed a hand down his face, scratching his cheek just over his
scar. It looked like someone had tried to split him from mouth to ear but hadn’t quite managed. With his hair wet and plastered to his head, Sansa could see another scar peeking from under his hairline. Once she’d seen them, she could not seem to stop looking.

*Believe everything*, had been Shae’s advice. Sansa was starting to think she might have to.

“Then I usually suffer the consequences.”

Consequences. Such a novel concept for a prince, Sansa thought frostily. But then again, Jon Targaryen was not a just any prince, was he? Perhaps there were some consequences for him. Even as she thought it, Sansa did not believe it. She’d never seen consequences catch up to any Targaryen except one, and even that one had been…

Sansa shook her head, flipping her hair over her shoulder. The seawater made her hair cry in tighter curls than normal, but she hadn’t bothered to braid it.

“Do you always try to embarrass your friends in front of others, as well?” she asked, a bit more bite to her question this time, and she watched her cousin’s cheer slip a little.

“Of course not. Sam knows I mean nothing by it.”

“It means nothing to you, so it doesn’t matter?”

Jon’s face became very serious, very fast.

Yes, she realized. He had meant this light antagonizing as a game. Teasing, perhaps. Maybe something to find her limits with, and it could have been, but Sansa had not been pretending. And now as he looked at her, he seemed to see straight through her and grasp at that flickering flame of very real anger he’d been kindling in her without knowing.

She hadn’t even realized how angry it made her until she saw him realize it.

“Lady Stark is right. Intentions don’t matter much to whomever gets hurt. I apologize, Sam.”

“I- There’s – there’s no need for an apology, Jon.”

“Nevertheless.”

Sansa spent the next few moments looking at the insides of her cup and reviewing the stitching on the red linen dress she’d chosen to wear today. The twirling dragonflies embroidered in the fabric seemed to wink at her as she tried to puzzle herself out.

“Sam knows I mean no harm, you know. I wasn’t bullying him.”

He felt closer than before, but when she looked at up him again, Jon had not moved. It was just his voice that had changed; lowered and smoothed out, as if he was trying to soothe her or some such nonsense. That, and the fact that they were suddenly alone.

“This is the second time I have upset you without meaning to. How little we know each other is starting to show, I think.”

Sansa frowned. They knew each other very little indeed and yet this was the second time he had understood immediately what she’d been feeling. What she’d been hiding, behind who she was pretending to be for his benefit.

“I didn’t think I was so transparent.” The thought troubled her. Was she? Or was it that he was more
observant than most? Which was worse?

“Do you not want to be?”

She raised both her eyebrows at him and Jon rolled his eyes, nodding as if he’d only just understood he’d stated something obvious. Which of course he had. He smiled like he knew it too, and this time it reached his eyes. He had a charming smile, when he meant it. A lovely smile and the prettiest lips Sansa had ever seen on a man. She even found his chipped front tooth charming.

Ridiculous.

“You worry a lot about what people think, don’t you?”

Sansa could not help her small laughter. “I am a lady, your grace.”

“Ah, yes. Of course. And how well has that served you so far?”

“Very well, I should think.” She was alive, mostly unscathed and still belonged to herself, for the most part. She could not complain overmuch.

And she did not appreciate that note of dismissal in his tone either.

Why was he looking at her like that?

“Yes?” she coaxed.

“Play a game of cyvasse with me.”

Sansa blinked. “I beg your pardon”

“Play a game of cyvasse-” he started to repeat, perfectly patient.

“I’m not deaf. Why?”

Jon shrugged. “I want to know you, but you’re difficult to get to know.”

He kept surprising her with unexpected candor, she did not know where to look for his motives anymore. “So you want to do battle instead?”

His grin was…

“Your father told me once, you never know a man until you cross swords with him on the battlefield. Cyvasse is much the same. And on the board, we will be equals. I will only see you, if you see me.”

Jon saw Sansa raise her cup to her lips and take a slow sip. He was starting to understand that she had many tricks she used to bargain for time without being noticed, as she decided what to say. They were all subtle and ruthlessly lovely: pushing her hair behind one shoulder, sipping at her drink to draw attention to her mouth, fiddling with her necklace to distract with her long neck, the soft inside of her wrist, her elegant hands.

“I’m not sure,” she finally said. “It’s such a beautiful day, and I’m such a sore loser.”

Another lie. Half, at least. He didn’t know if she was a sore loser or not but he supposed he could
find out.

“According to Tyrion, you’re one of the best he’s played against.”

It gave her pause but for a fraction so small, he would have missed it had he not been watching for it.

“Poor praise,” she said, folding her hands in her lap. “Tyrion is drunk more often than not when we play.”

“Yes, he says he’s at his best that way. His jokes get more interesting as well.”

She bit her lip, her laughter all in her eyes. “Undoubtedly.”

She didn’t say anything more, just looked at him. Jon grinned and got up and walked to the second tent they had set up to pick up the game set, impatient to start. He placed it on the low table in front of Sansa, who moved her legs from underneath her and sat cross-legged, mirroring him. She still arranged her skirts carefully, however, ever aware of herself.

A lady indeed. Every inch of her was exactly as she should be. Still, there was very little artifice about her, aside from the one she used to protect herself. She was trained to be a lady as he had been to be a warrior, Jon thought, but they both shared innate gifts that had made them excel in their respective fields.

Jon won the first round easily. Sansa demanded a rematch and Jon obliged, following her movement as carefully the second time as he had the first. He won again, and this time, he was the one who demanded another round.

“You want to make it three out of three, cousin?”

“No, I want you to actually start playing,” Jon snapped, irritated.

She gave him that doe-eyed gaze, perfectly innocent. “Beg your pardon.”

A lie, again. He could not imagine someone as stubborn as Sansa would readily beg for anything. It was as if half the words out of her mouth were a joke only she knew the punchline to.

“You’re letting me win.”

Sansa scoffed. “Why would I do that?”

“I don’t know, cousin. Why does a lady do anything?”

She let out a peel of laughter. “Why, to please, of course.”

“Well, don’t.”

“No flattery for you, huh?”

“This doesn’t flatter me. I’m not so insecure in my intellect to need you to coddle me.”

“Good for you,” she said with a shrug. She was pulling his leg, Jon was sure.

“Oh, piss off.”

She laughed again, louder this time and Jon found himself smiling at the sight of it. She looked much younger when she was carefree, and much less like a woman pretending to be some other woman.
A moment later though, Sansa sat up straight, like she’d heard some strange noise. “I almost forgot!”

She got up and stumbled a little, her leg probably having gone to sleep sitting there with him. Jon leaned back and just admired the sight she made, the way the sun cut through the linen of her dress and highlighted her figure. Sansa Stark was slight - she ate like a bird, he had noticed. She was not what he usually preferred in women, but she was lovely nonetheless. She didn’t go far, however, and he didn’t have much time to look at her before she came back a moment later with a wrapped piece of cloth in her hands. She handed it to him without saying a word and Jon knew immediately what it was. The tunic she’d promised him.

He unfolded it, the crisp white cotton soft as a whisper in his hand. It was very simply cut, clean lines, no frills or anything. It suited him perfectly. There was subtle silver and grey embroidery along the hems and the collar. It was delicate work, he could see she’d taken her time with it. He could make out the wolf motif repeating itself in grey thread and something that looked like vines entwining with the running wolves.

“What language are the words?” He asked, after realized that the pattern around the collar was actually words he had not recognized, because he did not seem to know the language.

“Old tongue. It’s just a lullaby,” she explained. “My grandmother and Old Nan used to sing it to me all the time.”

“Old Nan?”

A worried look crossed her face. “Yes. Did you not meet her?”

Jon nodded. “I did. She had the best stories.”

Sansa chuckled, and he could see she was relieved. “Yes, she does. They were Bran’s favorite, too.”

She seemed to get lost in her own thoughts for a moment. Jon watched as her eyes became vacant, before she blinked fast and came back to herself.

“Sam helped me find how the words were spelled. He found the lullaby in one of the old books in the library. He’s very clever, isn’t he?”

“Yes he is.” And it was true, but Jon wasn’t about to let her use Sam to put any kind of distance between her and this moment, not when she had leaned into him without even noticing, elbows on the small table between them, unmoving even when he leaned in as well.

“How did you know my size?”

Her smile became playful. “Oh, I took your measure the first time we met.”

Jon leaned back, feigning surprise. “Look at that, there’s a joker in you after all.”

“Yes, I keep her hidden well. She’s meaner than I am.” And then, more candidly. “What makes you so sure I’m letting you win?”

Jon shrugged as he folded her gift carefully and wrapped it in the cloth she’d brought it in, setting it on one of the throws closest to him, to keep it off the sand.

How did he know? He didn’t of course. He knew her strategy was poor, but her decisions were not nearly random enough to be those of someone who did not have skill at the game. Rather, she played like someone who was anticipating his moves and paved the way for a sure victory for him. Her resistance was there to be sure, but it was so carefully constructed to be weak that he could not help
but feel he was fighting a strawman the whole time.

“A feeling,” Jon said, and watched her smile. “Perhaps to motivate you, we should play for something you want.”

She chuckled. “Indeed. And what is your opinion, Black Prince? What do I want?”

Jon went straight for the throat.

“Winterfell.”

The smile fell from her face and for a moment - a single, fleeting moment - he caught a glimpse of the woman that lay beneath the silks, the beauty, and the courtesies of the perfect lady. In that moment they looked at each other in perfect recognition and Jon felt his heart speed up its drumming against his ribs.

“Winterfell?” The word was half a whisper on her lips.

“Yes. Win, and next time I go north, which will be soon because I am expected, I will take you with me.”

He said it with the same certainty he would state the sky was blue. Sansa remained pale, however, her face a stone mask. She didn’t believe him, of course. Jon knew this, even as her face showed him nothing. She’d become stone. This time when she looked up from the board and into his face, her eyes were not kind. She looked at him and Jon felt as if she’d pressed the flat of a blade against his cheek.

A shiver ripped down his spine, raising the hair on the back of his neck.

But then she blinked, and her expression settled into something more placid that Jon instantly hated, almost as much as he hated the smile she gave him.

“We might as well play for the moon, your grace.” She spoke gently; would have looked softer if she’d been made of steel.

Your grace. Are you reminding yourself who I am? Did you forget?

“If I win, however, you will have to give me something I want.”

“I truly have no idea what that might be.”

“If I win, you will come with me to Riverrun when I go to negotiate the king’s new treaty with the river lords. You will help me charm them so they don’t eviscerate me before they’ve heard what I have to say.”

“Help you charm them?” Sansa asked pointedly, after a moment of silence.

“Oh, well played. Yes, I will happily leave the charming to you.”

“While you threaten them?”

“I like to reason with men before I threaten them, but seeing that the Blackwoods will be there, no doubt it will come to that.”

Sansa started arranging the pieces of her side carefully into their initial positions and Jon had to bite back his grin.
“Threats are not very conducive to peaceful negotiations, are they?” she asked as she pulled her glove up a little.

Jon shrugged. “I have found them to be effective, personally.”

“And yet you want me there, for my charm,” she murmured, as if to herself, just as she made the first move.

Jon glanced up at her. “It was my turn to open the game,” he reminded her.

Sansa was impassive. “You just did, remember?”

Jon smiled slowly, without pretense. “Yes, I did, didn’t I?” He couldn’t very well deny it.

“Perhaps if charm is required, the king should send someone else,” she suggested, just as Jon moved his own piece, properly starting the game.

“But charm and threat of violence are required.”

“As ever, I imagine.”

He chuckled. “Yes. That, and they badly want me out of the city and this was the first task that came up with that is important enough to warrant a prince doing it.”

“The king must have great faith in you,” she said softly.

Jon’s head snapped up, but she did not look away from the game. He could not say anything in return; there was nothing to say. She had not meant to rattle him, she’d just spoken the truth as she saw it. After all, they’d agreed – or as good as. Jon would have to accept it: if he wanted to see her, he would have to submit to being seen in return.

She was very sneaky, his cousin, he realized as he got back to the game. Every time he handed her one of his stark naked truths, she’d looked at him as if she did not know what to do with him, but that did not mean she did not know how to turn the tables on him. Jon for his part, did not have a problem with being candid. What he was not used to was digging for someone’s trust the way he was with her. Jon never really bothered with that: he’d never cared if people trusted him, so long as they trusted that he’d kill them if they crossed him. But this was an entirely different battleground. Sansa Stark could not be bought or threatened or charmed into giving herself up; into trusting him enough to see him for who he was. It was only patience that would win him this one victory.

Patience and being her equal – because he had understood her truth easily: if he wanted to have anything of hers, she would demand to have something from him. She did it without even realizing it – showing him true parts of herself only once he did so first.

If he wanted to look, he would have to show[5]. Blood for blood. She was a wolf, after all.

He might have known.

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[1] I made it up.

[2] I'm not gonna pretend I'm so fly that I can't acknowledge continuity errors in my story. I forgot to mention the scars Jon had before – and while the ones on his body are easier to explain (who Sansa
didn’t notice, I mean) the one on his cheek isn’t, so yeah – the reason she didn’t notice is cause I, the author, forgot *_**

[3] Yes, Lyarra Stark is alive in this story.

[4] What I was thinking about as I wrote this.

[5] Asoiaf quote, from Jon, when he is with Ygritte.
warning for rather graphic violence, blood and gore, in this chapter. at the very end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Either you have me or not at all.
Either you love me or not at all.
Either I am all yours or I am nobody’s.
I will have no half-measures with you.

- Philippa Gregory, The Other Boleyn Girl

There were very few words exchanged between them once the game truly started. Jon found he had to use the entire measure of his concentration against her, because Sansa Stark was not fucking around his time and she made him feel it. He hardly noticed that they were not even alone anymore. Dany especially seemed very amused by their competition and cheered at one point for both of them, before settling between them and silently watching their game progress.

Sansa’s play was cautious, measured. Precise in a way that told him she knew how to think three steps ahead of every move she was making, and even calculated his. She baited him quite a bit as well, to get him to show his hand, make mistakes. Opened little pits that looked like carelessness but were actually elegant traps to which he lost quite a few pieces. She had been feeling him out, he realized, in those two other games they had played. He knew this because he found he could not distract her or throw her off with his seemingly random moves. He could see it in the way she set her pieces, in the way she responded: she assumed he had a plan despite his recklessness, and her own game plan was based around figuring his out, anticipating it.

That was her weakness, however: she pressed her advantage mercilessly when she had it, she was creative and she improvised, but she favored defense.

She was good, though. As good as Tyrion had said. She managed to push him back several times, foiling formations he’d been building since the beginning of the game twice, before Jon managed to corner her. He took her last Tower and they realized she had lost at exact the same time, just as they caught each other’s eye over the board. They’d leaned into each other throughout the game, and now were so close he could smell her hair, her skin, the faint scent of her sweat beneath.
A corner of Sansa’s mouth lifted up in a smile that was not a smile at all. She did not surrender, even though it was for nothing. She kept playing until Jon finally took her last Knight and besieged her King.

Sansa took a deep breath and sat back, leaning into her hands and looking at him with shuttered eyes. Jon threw the black Knight in the air and caught it in his other hand, satisfied in a way that had nothing to do with the game itself. There was quite a bit going on beneath that red hair of hers, wasn’t there? He had already known that part, but now he wanted to know who had taught Sansa Stark strategy.

“I think this might be the longest you've played against anyone, Jon,” Sam finally said, laughing.

The others had almost all lost interest in their game, seeing that they had been both intensely concentrated and set into ignoring everyone else but each other. Sam and Dany were still there, however, and Daenerys was looking at the board with great interest.

“You have won,” Sansa said, as if he didn’t know that. But there was more to it than simply stating the obvious.

“Yes I have. You should start packing, because I will be leaving fairly soon.”

“Packing?” Dany asked, looking from Jon to Sansa, in turns. “For where?”

“Riverrun,” Jon said, and pocketed the Sansa’s black Knight. “The lady lost a bet.”

“Alas, you should have considered that the lady is not free to leave, your grace,” Sansa Stark said as she took the cup offered to her and took a generous gulp of the liquid inside it. Something about the gesture seemed almost a bit desperate to him.

“If I promise to see to it that you are free to leave, will you keep your part of the bargain?”

“My word is my bond, Jon.”

Jon stilled, and then nodded very slowly at her, willing her to understand. “So is mine.”

To anyone else, it might have sounded like a threat but there was no fear in Sansa’s eyes, no apprehension. She looked at him the way she’d looked at Ghost.

In that moment, he wanted nothing more than to touch her.

Jon rose to his feet, groaning when his legs prickled after sitting in one position for so long. He held his hand out to Sansa, who looked at it for a moment before placing her gloved hand in his. Gently, as gently as he could, he pulled her to her feet, trying not to squeeze her hand at all.

“I promised to show you the cave I found as a boy, didn’t I?”

“I.”

“Dany has seen it already.”

Jon did not miss the look Daenerys gave him as Sansa looked around, searching for her two ladies. He ignored it steadily. He knew she’d gotten the message, but he was not sure she would cooperate. There was something between her and Sansa, some understanding he was not allowed to interfere with.

Dany still hadn’t told him what had made her leave King’s Landing a year ago. She outright refused
to tell him how Sansa had injured her hand, and became angry when he pushed. He knew he would pay for this sooner or later, he could see it in Dany’s face.

Sansa was frowning. She’d noticed that her ladies were dozing in the shade.

Jon took a step closer to her. “Would you like one of the guards to join us?”

The glare she gave him was withering. “Oh, shut up.”

iv.

As Sansa watched the water reflecting the sunlight from outside into the walls of the alcove, Jon watched Sansa. The dancing light was washing her in gold and cool blues at the same time. Dressed in red as she was, she looked like some vision from a nightmare, or too good a dream.

“I don’t plan to drown you in the middle of the day, if that’s what you’re so tense about.”

He did not see her roll her eyes at him, but she could hear it in her voice.

“Of course. Drowning. My biggest worry.”

Jon wasted no time in taking off his tunic and jumping into the water, making sure to make as much a splash as he could. When he resurfaced, she was giving him a deeply unimpressed look.

“You must be so proud of yourself for annoying me in the same way my ten year old brother used to.”

“Sometimes you have to go for the tried and true methods.”

Sansa sat down on one of the rocks closest to the shore, and lifted her skirt up so that she could dip her feet into the water, up to the middle of her calves.

“It really is lovely here.”

Jon took a deep breath and dove down, catching a couple of shells and bringing them back up for her. When he dropped them in her hand, he heard the softest gasp from her.

“They’re beautiful,” she said, as she turned the pink shell from one side to another, so that the sun caught all its rainbow shades. Jon found her enough to make a necklace, and Sansa put them in her pocket of her dress.

“Will you not swim?”

“No, I don’t want to have lie in the sun for another two hours to dry. What would you have done if I’d won?”

Jon did not miss a beat. “I would have taken you to Winterfell.”

She watched him float in the water is if he’d grown a second head. “That’s treason.”

Jon frowned, pushed his hair away from his face. “It’s treason to go north of the Neck?”

“Treason is whatever the King’s Council decides. As it happens all of them would agree that misplacing a guest of the Crown all the way to her home would constitute treason.”
Jon had no doubt about that. “And you think Rhaegar would have his beloved son executed?”

Sansa Stark’s eyes were deadly serious. “Of course not. I might be, however. My family could be put at risk. Peace with the north could be jeopardized.”

“And with the situation in the Riverlands, who knows what would happen,” Jon added offhandedly, but watching Sansa Stark’s every reaction. “Not to mention you are betrothed to the heir presumptive of the Vale.”

Sansa paled considerably. “And you still would have kept your word?” Her question was a whisper, almost drowned by the sound of the waves lapping against the stones.

“Of course I would have.”

“Even if it meant war?”

An old irritation flared inside him, made him abandon his careless floating and approach her where she was sitting, her feet still in the water, hands gripping the edge of the flat rock.

“Don’t you think it’s strange? How so much of the peace these people seem to make depends on them treating people like things? It’s as if they don’t even bother to make something better. Why should they, when there are so many for them to use?”

Her breath left her in a rush. “Jon…”

“If peace can fail if one woman makes a choice, then maybe it should.”

Her expression was incredulous, but she had yet to leave. “And you want to change that?”

“Course not. I can’t change that. It’s just something I think about sometimes.”

He watched her consider him. Watched her mind turn until it settled into her conclusions.

“You are as unhinged as everyone says you are.”

Jon laughed. “Without a doubt.”

He watched her face harden. “Or maybe you just want others to think that as you play your games. Like you’re doing now. A game in which I am convenient, and the risk to me is worth the benefit to you.”

“We already met in battle. You ought to know which one it is,” Jon said instead of answering her. Not that she’d asked a question. She had not expected an answer from him. He had understood by now, Sansa Stark did not expect answers from anyone.

“It’s both.”

Jon smiled and swam close to her again. “I’m not unhinged. I’m just willing to go the distance to get what I want. And I’m not playing at anything right now. In fact I swore I would not involve you in anything.”

She looked doubtful. “Swore? To who?”

“Uncle Benjen. I’m quite sure he’d kill me if you asked.”

“He would not.”
“No, but he’d definitely maim me considerably.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Jon laughed, but Sansa did not. For a moment, he was tempted to tell her everything then and there, just to wipe that sadness away from her face. She wasn’t even looking at him. She was picking at the loose hem of her sleeve, gloved hand curled in her lap.

“I used to love games before I came to this place.”

“But you don’t anymore?”

She took a deep breath. “I hate them now.”

Jon rose to his feet on the shallow part of the alcove, so that he could stand eye to eye with her. He was close, an inch more and her knees would brush his stomach.

“Alright, let’s have it out, then. Three days ago, when I was told I’d need to go to the Riverlands, I asked the council to be able to take you with me. The king granted his approval.”

She looked at him with wide eyes and not an ounce of pretense. “Why?”

Jon shrugged. “So that you can help me persuade old Hoster to sign the fucking thing, because you are his granddaughter. Because everyone knows the Blackfish loves no one better than your mother, and you look like her. Because you know what it means to spin a room to your will, and I thought you were the best person to help me.” Jon took a deep breath. “It’s in both our interest to settle this, so that we may move on with our lives smoothly. So-”

He opened his arms as if to show her the whole of his reasons, but he could tell just from the look she gave him that she did not believe him.

“Of course, since I did deceive you, you are not bound by our wager anymore. You can refuse to come, if you really don’t want to.” If she distrusted him that much. In truth he hadn’t done anything to earn her mistrust, but he hadn’t done anything to the contrary either. At this point, it was entirely up to her instinct – and Jon wanted to see where he would fall.

“No? You giving up your advantage so quickly?”

Jon ignored that. “But I would appreciate it if you did.”

She raised one eyebrow at him. “And your appreciation means what to me?”

Jon looked around and then grinned. “The prettiest seashells in King’s Landing?”

She threw one of said seashells at his head. It missed him by half a foot.

“Your aim is pitiful, my lady,” Jon said around a laugh.

So of course she fisted five and threw them in his direction. Jon submerged himself to escape, sucking a bit of water up his nose because he was laughing as he went under. He swam towards her and jumped out of the water right in front of her. He narrowly missed being kicked in the face, but managed to grab Sansa by the waist and pull her with him into the water. Her sharp scream was cut off as she went under, skirt puffing around them both. She sputtered when he resurfaced and then immediately launched herself at him, trying to push him under.

“You bastard!” she said, as she practically jumped on his shoulder and pushed him down. Jon went
willingly and then grabbed her hands by the wrist and pulled her along as well.

Next time they resurfaced, her hair was all over her face and she was sputtering again, coughing, and smiling so big he could count all her teeth. She laughed when he launched himself towards her and swam away. He would have liked to watch her when she came to him – the weight of the wet linen pulling the collar down, exposing her shoulders, plastering the material against her breasts like paint. But he could not very well stay idle when she attacked as if she really meant to drown him. They continued to chase each other until Sansa grew breathless and started floating on her back in the water, red dress plastered to her body like a second skin and floating around her.

“You can see your grandfather, and your uncle, the Blackfish, who will also be there. You’d get to leave King’s Landing,” Jon said as he swam close to her.

Sansa brushed the tips of her fingers against his shoulder as she floated by, and hushed him. So Jon mirrored her and let himself float and be mesmerized by the shimmer of the water reflected on the ceiling of the alcove.

It might have been ten minutes later when Sansa straightened and swam for the rocks at the shore. Jon stopped her from trying to climb. He went first and then knelt, took hold of her under her shoulders and pulled her out of the water, setting her on her feet beside him. She blinked at him a couple of times – lips ever so slightly parted as she held her breath and looked at him – before she stepped away and started trying to squeeze the water from her skirt so she could walk. Jon somehow managed to hide his satisfaction, mostly because she couldn’t seem to be able to look at him in the face for several moments.

When she looked at him, she seemed determined.

“If I asked you to keep a secret, would you?”

Jon considered it. “I’d tell you to keep it to yourself. If more than one person knows something in King’s Landing, then it’s no longer a secret.”

“I know. But I’m still asking.”

It was no small thing she was doing. In this city, secrets were the real currency. She did not trust him, of course, and this would not change her mind, but she was willing test the waters.

“Whatever you tell me I will take to my grave,” Jon said then, and waited.

“Tell no one that you told me about the council, about you asking for the king’s permission before that game of cyvasse I lost.”

“Why?”

“Keeping secrets do not involve asking questions,” Sansa said, looking at him pointedly. Jon nodded and then considered her.

“Since you gave me your trust, I feel I have to give you something as well.”

“What now? All the silk in Myr?”

“The reason why it’s so difficult to get you out of this city. Do you want know it?”

He was starting to be able to tell whenever he honestly surprised her. She held her breath for a heartbeat or two, when something discomposed her.
“I already know.” Sansa said slowly.

“They’re afraid of you.”

She smiled. From the corner of his eye he saw her hand move but and for a moment he thought she would touch him, but she did not.

“It’s not me they fear. They’re afraid of consequences, Jon.” She straightened the wet skirt of her dress. “We should go.”

Jon followed. For the rest of the day Sansa interrogated him on everything he knew about the situation in the Riverlands, from the lords who would be there, to who were their wives and daughters – which Jon did not know – to how the fucking harvest had gone for each of them.

“How long will we be staying?”

Jon shrugged. “I don’t know. Could be a week. Could be three months.”

She did not look away fast enough - he caught that glint in her eye. Though Jon thought it more telling that she seemed to have completely forgotten that her so-called betrothed would be arriving soon after they left King’s Landing and she would not be there to greet him. Somehow she did not seem to worry about that for a moment.

V.

“So he told you, at last.”

Sansa felt breathless. She did not want to linger here; she felt too exposed in this hall, just on the other side of the throne room, but she could not have allowed him to corner her in a place more secluded. She would have to be careful these days and not walk alone anywhere.

“No. I lost a game of cyvasse. He made the trip part of a wager between us.”

Petyr’s doubt was palpable. “You lost at cyvasse?”

Sansa ignored his observation. “I think he is planning something. I’m rather sure I was threatened at some point, even though he was infuriatingly vague.”

“Threatened how?” Petyr sounded absolutely sober in that moment. The man did love his toys after all, and she was his favourite.

“I don’t know. He was alluding. It was nothing specific, just... just a feeling.”

Petyr’s eyes were sharp on hers. She knew she was risking quite a bit. This kind of vague expression was not at all like her. Sansa turned to him abruptly, put a hand on his arm.

“I will not be allowed to take any of my men with me, aside from Jory perhaps. Suggest to Connington that the Hound join my guard.” She tightened her fingers around his arm. “If something happens, I will need someone we can trust by my side.”

“You trust the Hound?”

With her life. “I trust the Hound to do as he’s bid if he’s paid well.”

She did not trust Jon, not truly, even though he had not in fact threatened her. But she was sure he
had his own plans, so she would need a reserve or two, just in case.

“Of course. And what should I tell your betrothed, when he asks after you and enquires why Lady Stark disappeared for a full hour with the Black Prince inside a cave?”

“Tell him that his betrothed is anxious to see him, and that her time is not always her own, but she looks forward to the day when it will be his.”

“Oh, very lovely.” But Littlefinger was mocking, not congratulating her.

“I must go, my lord.” Sansa curtsied.

“You will be missed, my lady.”

“And you, my lord. Shall I send your regards to my grandfather?”

“Please do, my lady,” he said, as he bowed to kiss her knuckles, holding her burned hand so tightly that it was all Sansa could do to hold back the tears of pain. By the time she had arrived at her rooms, the blood had already stained through the glove.

vi.

Jon walked slowly, breathing the rank air but also smelling the sea on the breeze. Out of all the places in this city, this here, along the outer walls facing the sea, was the one he used when he wanted to remember. Tonight, however, he wasn’t remembering the past. He was only here out of habit.

Most of the city was already asleep, but King’s Landing was never in complete darkness, no matter how late the night. From where he stood on the walls, Jon could see the silhouette of the newly built docks below, illuminated by the moon. He counted the ships moored in the bay out of habit. Above him a falcon called a few times, and then flew away.

He turned to look at the Red Keep in the dark as he waited. Today had been a good day, he thought. It felt like it, too. It had been a good day despite the fact that after he had escorted Dany and her ladies to the Red Keep, she wouldn’t stop looking at him with those suspicious eyes of hers. Jon had not returned her gaze. He did not need to explain himself in that moment, and since he already knew she wouldn’t answer any of his own questions, he felt no remorse in answering none of hers.

Jon peered through the night, concentrated and still, as if he could look through stone and darkness and see directly into her room, into her skull, read what was going on there beneath that red hair. She was sound asleep now, he imagined.

In a flash, her body floating in his little alcove came to the forefront of his mind, the red bleeding out of her like ink in the water.

Yes, he would have to be careful around her. The thought thrilled him a little. The best moments today had been when she had looked at him in the eye and let the wolf slip out.

Another look at the moon told him that it was time for him to move. He started walking away from the docks and immediately got lost into the narrow streets of Fleabottom. He knew where he was going and would have been able to get there blind, so the half-moon tonight was no bother to him at all. No, something else was bothering him.

He did not need Ghost’s sharper senses to tell him when he was being followed. There was someone
lurking there, in the deeper shadows of the night.

As Jon walked down the narrow street, neither the smell of human filth nor the cries of the bird flying over his head could distract him from the man following him.

He turned just in time.

Jon did not see the knife that was slashed against his side, but he grabbed his attacker by the arm before he sunk the dagger in to the hilt. He felt the searing pain though, the unmistakable feeling of being ripped open.

A fury of unfathomable depth overtook him, the world narrowing, sharpening, becoming clearer at the tip of his rage, just before it exploded outwards.

He twisted the man’s arm so hard away from him that he heard the bone snap. Before his attacker managed to reach for him again, Jon kneed him in the stomach, filled his fist with the man’s greasy hair, shoved his face into his neck with a snarl and tore out a vein. Warm blood washed over his mouth and down his front, as his attacker went to his knees screaming. Jon pulled his head down just as he shoved his knee up his face so hard he heard the skull crack, and then he did it again for good measure.

This time, there was no screaming. The body fell down and did not move again.

Jon stepped away from the dead man and spit out the blood in his mouth. He leaned against a wall, trying to catch his breath. The bird overhead was still flying unusually low, chirping loudly as if outraged by the destructive burst of violence in the otherwise empty street. A touch down his side told him he was bleeding, but it was nothing he could not survive, the cut having opened a few inches of soft tissue on his side.

He straightened and kept walking, albeit slower than before, and in a different direction this time. It didn’t take him long to reach Atticus’ boiling house. He stepped through the doors of an empty drinking saloon and walked all the way to the back door.

The large, heavy timbered space in the back was filled with bones. Mostly horses, Jon knew. Fifty yards across the bone-strewn floor there were three great fires burning and on top of them, cauldrons that were steaming and boiling intensely. Men stripped to the waist were tending to the fires and also dropping horse bones into the cauldrons, or spilling out the glutinous contents onto flat wooden boards for chopping or cooling[1].

“Jon? What are ye-” But the man halted the moment candlelight hit Jon enough so that he could see the carnage on his face.

Jon groaned. “Atticus.”

“Fucking ‘ell, mate!”

“Alright, calm down. Calm. Everything’s alright,” Jon said steadily, aware of the way the other man’s eyes followed him as he sat down. “Someone tried to kill me tonight.”

“Yea, I can sort of see that, mate. The fuck’s wrong with yer face?”

“Nothing,” Jon said as he took off his doublet and tunic, ripped it into strips and tied them around his middle to staunch the blood flow. With a groan, he straightened, and thanked Atticus when he found a large wooden cup of ale in front of him. He drank half before he spoke.
“I have something I need, Atticus.”

“Find who’s tryin’ to murder ya, not a seven days since you set foot into the Capitol. Aye, mate, way ahead of ya.”

“Something like that, yes. And remind our little friends that I like things done quietly. And that I will personally put a cleaver through the fucking skull of anyone who doesn’t understand that.”

“Aye aye, captain. I hafta say though: you are not so popular in this place, mate. This has got to be a record.”

Jon groaned. “Shut the fuck up and get me something to sew this with.”

The journey to the Riverlands would be a might uncomfortable one, that was for sure.

That was the thought in Jon’s head when, a mile or so away from where he was stitching himself up in a dinky back office of a boiler room, Sansa start shot up in her bed, choking on her breath, clawing at the covers.

“Sansa? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Sansa said breathlessly, trying to get Shae to lie back down. “Nothing, it’s just a dream.”

She remembered the smell of the street, the quietness of the night, until it broke. The bursts of violence that had been so savage she could not even stop to really understand it. The blood. The sound of bone cracking. Her mouth tasted like she’d held a coin on her tongue. She could still smell the blood in the air, as if it lingered.

Shae was already asleep. Sansa leaned her head on her hands and took a deep breath.

_Gods_...

[1] Description of a Boiling house from Taboo, cause I had no idea what that looked like, i just needed a place that would give people teh creeps.

Chapter End Notes

aaaaand that's it. i hope you guys like it. let me know what you think? im almost afraid to ask tbh
Chapter Notes

So... this is a 13,000 word chapter. I am... very weary. Let me know, you guys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Link to the Playlist that I listen (and add to) when I write this story.

v. thee and me
– i -

You can’t find intimacy—you can’t find home—when you’re always hiding behind masks. Intimacy requires a certain level of vulnerability. It requires a certain level of you exposing your fragmented, contradictory self to someone else. You running the risk of having your core self rejected and hurt and misunderstood.

... But we want the stricken pleasure of intimacy, so we risk it.

JunotDíaz & Traci Brimhall

i.

Jon caught sight of her the moment he broke through the perimeter of the encampment and when he did, he made straight for her, instead of seeing to the game that he’d just caught. She was sitting down on the soft earth by the fire, cloak discarded and sleeves pulled back, talking to Sam, Pyp, and two of his men from the Reach. They were standing a good distance from her, along with one of her ladies - the Westerling girl – who looked positively terrified. Jon could not blame her. The great eagle perched on the ground just at Sansa’s right was a very effective deterrent.

It was massive, its head coming up to Sansa’s shoulder. And it was beautiful, too, the feathers on its head as golden as its beak and talons, before deepening to a dark brown down the body. Seeing it in flight, Jon would have sworn its wingspan reached seven feet[1], perhaps even more. It had downed a deer three times its size faster than any arrow, using those massive talons to tear open its throat as if it was made of butter.

Jon approached slowly and did not go any further than where Sam was standing. When those dark eyes landed on him, he stopped moving entirely, choosing to sit instead, crossing his legs and resting
his elbows on his knees, watching. He’d never seen a white-tailed eagle from this close. They were a notoriously difficult breed to train, too fierce, too independent.

Yet here one was.

He’d been so startled when he’d seen it swoop down from the sky, taking their dinner. If Jory hadn’t been with him, he might even have tried to shoot it down. Jon hadn’t believed the man when he said it was Sansa’s bird. No one could own that kind of beast, he’d thought, before remembering that he’d had a bloody direwolf following him around since he was a boy! Maybe this eagle followed Sansa, too. If it did, then it must have flown here all the way from King’s Landing just to set a dead rabbit in Sansa Stark’s lap. And now it stood there, calm and still as you please, as Sansa skinned the offering with skill that faltered only a little – skill Jon hadn’t even expected her to have in the first place. She cut out the rabbit’s heart and then offered it to her predator on the palm of her hand. She did so without thought, like she’d done it before a thousand times.

Before Jon could do so much as take a sharp breath, the eagle stretched its neck and took the heart from Sansa’s hand with manners as pretty as her lady, before gobbling it down in a flash.

What in seven hells was he looking at?

Sansa looked at him just then. “Hello, Jon. Successful hunt?”

“Yes. We have your great bird to thank for, among others.”

Her smile was brilliant; the blood stark against her pale hand and invisible against her gloved one as she passed the carcass of the rabbit to Pyp, who neared her tentatively and chopped it into four parts with a couple of precise swings of the cleaver in his hand. She had arranged her skirts just so - carefully, prettily - so that none of the blood got on her. And then she took the raw pieces of meat in her hands and got up. Jon quickly followed her to his feet, but did not go after her, when she backed away from the fire. She was looking at her eagle, which flapped its wings and screeched.

“Ready?”

The eagle screeched again, louder this time, almost as if excited, and rose in flight.

Sansa threw the pieces of rabbit in the air one by one, trying her hardest to throw them as high as she could, and laughed when the great bird dove and caught each one in midair, gobbling them down.

This too must be a game they played often.

Sansa clapped her hands when the eagle ate the last of the rabbit.

“Wonderful. She is magnificent, is she not?”

“That’s one word for it, to be sure,” Jon murmured, but Sansa did not hear him. She extended her arm to call the eagle back to her and Jon just about lost his mind.

“Fucking hell, Sansa! Put your arm down!” She had no guard; her arm would be ripped to shreds!

“No, don’t worry, she has an extraordinary character. Watch.”

Jon couldn’t even breathe as he watched the eagle land on Sansa’s arm. The wickedly curved talons wrapped neatly around her forearm without putting a single scratch on Sansa’s skin. Sansa stumbled a little under the great predator’s weight, but held her ground.
“Gods have mercy,” the Westerling girl muttered behind him, hands still raised to cover her mouth in fright. Jon shared her feelings, but Sansa only looked happy when she turned to face them.

“See? Our trust in each other is absolute.”

She sounded so proud that Jon could only nod, both in disbelief and awe as he watched Sansa pet her eagle’s neck and ruffle her feathers.

“If it were any other bird, she would pull the skin from my arm. Even without meaning to. Master Archibald, the master Hawker of the Red Keep, has told me he’s handled 10 eagles in his lifetime and that none of them ever allowed him to put them on his bare skin. But Skye is exceptional.”

“Because she loves you?” Lady Westerling asked. The question seemed to surprise Sansa so much that it showed for a moment in her eyes, before they softened.

“Yes, because she loves me. And she knows I love her.”

“Skye?” Jon enquired. Sansa nodded as she stretched one of the eagle’s wings out, smoothing down some of the feathers that had tangled under it. The eagle cheeped happily.

“That is what I named her.” Her eyes were shining with happiness when she turned them to him. “She’s four years old, and my best and most clever friend.”

“Yes, white tailed eagles are known to be among the most intelligent apex predators,” Sam said, nodding. Jon could feel that he wanted to edge closer, but he did not dare. “She must weigh at least eight pounds.”

Sansa laughed. “She does. I am told it’s a very healthy weight for her species. Oh, I would not come any closer,” she warned, stopping both Jon and Sam in their tracks. “She is not very fond of men.”

Jon huffed. “Of course she isn’t.”

“A happy coincidence.” Sansa said with a small shrug, though her smile was more knowing. “Jeyne, you can come pet her if you want.”

“Oh, I don’t dare, my lady.”

“I promise you will be safe. If she likes you, she will be as gentle as a dove.”

“And if she does not?” Jon asked, before Lady Westerling could.

“Then she will snap her beak a little and you will have to back away, but she will not attack you unless you threaten her first.”

Sansa’s eyes were fixed on her lady’s. Jon could see a steadiness there, one that he thought betrayed some calculation, but he could be wrong. She had so many faces, his cousin, and she hardly showed any of them in its entirety.

“You can trust me, Jeyne. I would not see you hurt.”

Jeyne Westerling gulped. “If my lady wishes-”

“Only if you do,” Sansa clarified. “I would not have you terrified either, you know.”

The lady seemed to take heart in this. She straightened her shoulders and inched her way forward, until she was a foot or so away from Sansa, who kept petting her bird, whispering to it soothingly.
“Extend your hand. Slowly,” Sansa instructed. Jeyne did and Jon could see her hand was shaking. But she did not retreat.

“By touch is mainly how we communicate, she and I. But when you pet her, you mustn’t scare her. She will know when you mean to soothe her and when you mean to scold her.”

“She will?”

“Oh yes. Eagles are very perceptive, I sing to her, too, sometimes. She does not understand words, of course, but she knows when you’re being gentle. You are doing well, Jeyne,” Sansa encouraged with a smile, one that Jeyne reciprocated. “Now wait for her to come to you.”

They did not have to wait long. After a moment of what seemed like careful consideration, the eagle stretched its head and nudged Jeyne Westerling’s hand, before retreating again.

Sansa beamed. “She likes you. You can pet her chest now, if you want.”

“And she won’t beak me?”

“No, she will not. Here.” Sansa took Jeyne’s hand in hers and together, she laid them on the eagle’s chest. They shared a smile, both feeding off each other’s wonder and happiness, it seemed.

“Her feathers are so soft.”

Sansa chuckled. “Yes, they are. They were even more so when she was small. I used to hold her close to my face all the time, just so I could feel her soft feathers against my cheek when she turned in my hands.”

“You found her as an eaglet?” Jon asked. Sansa turned her eyes to him, as if she’d just remembered that he was there. There was no trace of anything but calm in them now. Perhaps he’d misunderstood, and the only thing she’d wanted was to share her joy.

“I did, yes. I found her alone in her nest, when she was small enough to fit into my hands. I waited all day but her mother did not come, so I took her with me. We’ve grown up together, in a way. Haven’t we, my love?”

The eagle turned her head to Sansa and chirped again, as if she was truly answering. It made both girls laugh.

“That would explain it. She’s probably imprinted on you,” Sam said, stretching his neck, wanting to have a better look at the bird but not daring to go closer than he was.

“Yes, that’s what Master Archibald says as well. He thinks it’s why she brings me gifts every once in a while. I used to feed her, and now she wants to do the same. She is a loyal friend,” Sansa murmured, the look on her face softer and full of love.

“Which might be why she flies across the country to find you, no doubt.”

Sansa did not look at him. Her smiles were for her bird alone. “Perhaps she missed me.”

“Don’t you keep her locked up?” Sam asked. Jon knew the answer before Sansa gave it.

“Oh, no.” The idea seemed to be to her distaste. “All my birds are free to come and go as they please. But Skye especially - I released her into the wild last year. I wanted her to enjoy her freedom, see new places. She always comes back to me however.”
“You’ve trained more of her kind?” Jon asked, taking careful consideration of her face, every
miniscule change on it.

Sansa extended her arm out again and her eagle took flight once more, disappearing into the sun with
a loud screech. Jeyne Westerling helped her wash the blood off her hands, and did not react at all
when Sansa did not remove her leather glove. Her other lady was less subtle, though Jon did not
have much patience for either of them.

“Skye is my only eagle, though I have three hawks and quite a few other, smaller birds as well.”

“Your legion of birds. Dany mentioned them once or twice. I thought she was joking.” Now Jon was
wondering just how many little feathered friends Sansa had.

“She was not. We hawk together quite often. The Crown Prince especially likes to take us with him
when he hunts. He says mine are the best hunter hawks he has ever seen.”

“Did you train them yourself?” Sam asked before Jon could. He had acquired a comfort with Sansa
that was a great testament to her skills with putting people at ease. Though it seemed to go both
ways, as Sansa smiled at him and they fell into step with each other, forcing Jon to follow.

“I did, yes. I had help of course. Especially at first. I did not know anything about birds when I found
Skye.”

“But my lady is a very dedicated learner,” Jory said, getting up from the log he’d been occupying as
soon as he spotted them approaching, so that he could vacate the place for Sansa and Jeyne
Westerling.

“Thank you, Jory.” Sansa sat down and immediately invited Jeyne to do the same.

“I should go help Anya lay out your things, my Lady.”

“Go and tell her to take the rest of the day for herself. You as well. We won’t be making camp like
this for some time, will we, Jon?”

Jon sat down next to her. “No, not until we reach the Crossroads Inn.”

Sansa turned back to Jeyne. “Take the time to rest, both of you. I know you’re both as unused to
riding for so long as I am. You must be exhausted.”

Lady Westerling was both blushing and frowning, her face set into an expression that could almost
be called stubborn. “I would not neglect my duties, my lady.”

“You will need to take care of yourselves so that you can take care of me, don’t you? Go. The day is
yours.”

Jeyne curtsied and then left to find her friend and relay her new orders. Jon watched her go before he
turned to Sansa again.

“You have a gentle touch with them.”

“Why should I not?”

There was such a genuine look on her face that for a moment Jon thought he had been wrong, and
she did not know what those girls had been sent to do. But that contradicted what he thought of her.

“You must know they were sent here to spy on you,” Jon said, lowering his voice so that it did not
travel beyond them.

“Yes, of course, but why should that matter?” She said it as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I can as easily avoid their presence with gentleness as I can with cruelty.”

Jon chuckled. Of course she would say that like he was missing some obvious point. “As you say, my lady.”

“Was it difficult to train an eagle, Lady Stark?” Sam asked as he sat down a few logs from her.

“Oh, it was. At first it was like taking care of a baby. I had to keep her warm and dry. Feed her at regular times. As she grew, Master Archibald taught me how to hunt with her, how to call her back to me and how to speak to her, how to understand her language. It was arduous at times but I enjoyed every moment.”

“You speak of that bird more warmly than you usually speak of your fellow men,” Jon noted, calling her attention back to himself. In truth, she spoke of it more freely and therefore more animatedly than she spoke of anything else.

Sansa only shrugged. “Most of the time I like my birds far better than I like my fellow men.”

Laughter rose from all around. Most if not all of those men around the fire thought a lady as gentle as Sansa Stark would jape when she said something like that, but Jon knew better.

“Are we so to your distaste, my Lady?”

“Not at all, your grace. Birds are easier to understand, that’s all.”

“And men are difficult?”

“I find men to be strange, in truth.”

“So do I,” Jon said with a grin.

Sansa raised her chin a fraction, eyes narrowing. “You mock me?”

“I wouldn’t dare.” He meant it, too. He would never mock a woman who could look at him as if she saw right through him.

Well, he might have, but he wouldn’t mock Sansa Stark for it. After seeing the kind of creature she pretended to be most of the time, he knew it was a privilege to be on the receiving end of her sincerity.

He would tease her for it though!

“I hear there are a many things most men would not dare to do, that you do all the time,” she said then. There was a challenge in her eyes. A kind of dare.

“That so?”

“Yes.”

Jon took the cups that his squire filled and passed one of them to Sansa, who took it with a small thank you. They had been travelling for a week now; Jon had not seen her actually drink once. She sipped at her cup like a bird, but she never swallowed, though she made a good show of it. She never refused, however.
He was burning to know, but he knew he couldn’t just confront her about it. She would tell him, if she wanted. Or she would not.

“What else have you heard?” Jon was genuinely curious, especially because whatever it was, she felt like teasing him for it.

“That you fear no one.”

Some of his men hid their smirks into their cups. Jon snorted. “That would have made things so much easier.”

“And your life that much shorter, I’d guess.”

To her right, Sandor Clegane didn’t even bother to hide his snort, and – much to Jon’s annoyance - neither did Uncle Benjen.

Jon shrugged. “I didn’t stay alive so long by being reckless.”

“That’s a lie, probably,” Sansa said, trying to hold back her laughter. She looked so delighted, her eyes alight as if a fire had been lit inside her skull. There was a fierceness in her that had been coming to the surface more and more ever since they left King’s Landing. Her passion mirrored his, he recognized it, but it was so restrained in her, so carefully packaged. It fascinated him; more than anything else it drew him to her. Made him want to pull and pull at the thread of her, just to see her unravel. He had no doubt it would be a marvelous sight to behold.

“It is a lie, yes. Who is this ‘they’ you keep mentioning?”

“Other men.”

“And you believe everything men say?”

“Oh yes.” No smile followed her words this time but her face was serene. “All stories hold some truth to them. It would be unwise not to believe them.”

Yes indeed. “Even the things that could not possibly be true?”

“Especially those.”

“You don’t speak sense, cousin.”

“No, sometimes I don’t.”

They were shoulder to shoulder, so Jon did not miss how she glanced at his mouth fleetingly when she turned her head to look at him. It was over before it happened, but he was so aware of her in every way, that she might as well have reached out and put her fingers to his lips, for how they tingled. It made something in him drop and roll low in his belly, the threads of desire tugging his nerve endings.

All it would have taken to kiss her round mouth was closing those scarce few inches between them.

“They say that about you as well,” Sansa said, her voice lower, softer.

“That I don’t speak sense?”

She was trying hard not to smile, but it wasn’t working very well. “That you have none.”
“And you believe that, too?”

She let out a peel of laughter. Jon was starting to feel proud of himself: taking her with him must be the best idea he’d had in quite some time.

“I think you do have some sense. But it’s not very good, is it?”

“And now you are mocking me.”

Sansa bit her lip just a little, to bite back her grin. That little freckle she had, just at the bow of her upper lip, was all Jon could look at. It took up the entirety of his concentration.

His hands itched.

He flexed his fingers, held his cup more firmly.

“I am, yes. Do you mind?”

Jon pushed his shoulder against hers gently.

“No. I do not.” He was happy to let her laugh at him, so long as she was laughing. Why shouldn’t he be: there was not a single drop of malice in her. “So, you ignore sense and believe everything. How do you ever decide on anything?”

“Same as you, of course; I make up my own mind.”

Jon couldn’t help but feel she was leading him into a maze she had built with her own hands, but he wanted to follow her into it. He wanted to tug at the string she had given him, see where it led him. Whatever game she was playing, he had surely played before, but never with her…and never quite so suspiciously and gently at the same time.

“Have you made up your mind about me yet?”

Sansa raised her cup to her lips, made a show of moving her throat. “Oh, I always keep my conclusions to myself,” she said after she lowered it.

“Always?”

“Without fail.”

Of course she would. Who else did she have but herself, anyway?

“Though I am surprised you care what I think.” She glanced at him quickly. “You don’t look like you would.”

“I do.”

She put the cup down and folded her hands in her lap. Looked at him for some long moments.

“Truthfully, I haven’t decided what I think about you yet.”

“No? Haven’t you heard enough?”

“I have heard plenty. But I feel I know you very little, still.”

“Do you?” Jon straightened. “Perhaps we should play another game of cyvasse.”
She smiled. “No, I already know what kind of tactician you are.”

“Then you already know two-thirds of me.”

“I doubt that.” Her eyes roamed his face. Settled on his forehead, then traveled back to his eyes. She already knew what she wanted: he could see it in her face.

“Where did you get that scar? The one on your forehead.”

So, Jon told her of the first stallion he’d ridden, when he’d been eight years old. How no one had dared to mount him because everyone thought him wild, but Jon had, and turned the horse toward the sun, so that his own shadow would stop scaring him. He told her of how he’d ridden that horse to the amazement of all the people in the stables that day, how happy he’d been, how proud. Then he told her how his father had gifted the beast to him, in honor of his achievement; how he got drunk that night, and slipped on the stairs on the way to his room, almost cracking his skull open in the process.

He did not tell her that his father had left the stables that day in the middle of his historic ride of that warhorse. How disappointed he’d been to find the king gone and how that, and not his happiness, had been why he’d stolen a skin of wine and gotten so piss drunk that they’d found him in a pool of his own vomit after he’d slipped and fallen.

He did not tell her those things, and that was not strange. He’d never told anyone that. But he wanted to!

He wanted to.

ii.

The woodlands south of Harrenhal were peaceful but had an untamed feel about them. Soaring old-growth elms arched over the lakeside maples along the shores of the God’s Eye. Gorgeous shafts of sunlight pierced the canopy, falling on the soft, swaying ferns that covered the ground. Jon could hear dozens of birds singing as he walked side by side with Sansa, watching how every now and then she knelted at the roots of some tree, plucking herbs and berries. Some of those she collected Jon already knew, some he did not. He knew what to avoid mostly; what was poisonous, what could kill. Sansa’s knowledge stretched onto other useful things: what to cook with, what to make tea with. What to burn for the smell, what to make ointments with. He had a feeling – irrational and without proof – that she even knew what to kill with. But that’s all it was. Just a feeling.

Perhaps it was because, with her hair pulled into a single braid down her back and her simple blue dress with detachable sleeves and front lacing, she reminded him inexplicably of their grandmother. He had followed Lyarra Stark into the godswood of Winterfell quite a few times, just like he was following Sansa now. There was no doubt in anyone who knew her that the old Lady Stark could and would kill if she had to. Perhaps that was the reason for his association.

Sansa looked little like her grandmother, in truth. They were both tall and stood as straight as spears, but that was the end of their likeness. Perhaps something around her mouth, the way they both pursed it in displeasure. But no, it was the sureness of Sansa’s hands as she chose what to pick from the earth and what to leave that most tugged at Jon’s memory. It was the way she moved in the woods: without fear or hesitation.

There was nothing to fear, of course. They were close to the camp, Jon was with her, so was Ghost.

“How did you manage to stay unmarried for so long?”
Sansa turned her head to give him a curious look. “My father had not arranged a match for me, until now.”

“I think we both know you had more to do with that than you want to let anyone know.”

She chuckled. “Do we? Then why should I let you know?”

Jon shrugged. “Because I am asking.”

“And why are you asking?” She sounded unperturbed; amused even as she added some more mushrooms in her basket before she picked it up and moved away to the base of another tree, looking for the little fungi the cook had told her to gather. She had wanted to make herself useful, she’d said, and promptly sent her ladies away to make themselves useful as well. Jon was starting to think she liked spending time alone with him almost as much as he liked it. But she still felt she had to steal such time.

She did not want to be seen being close to him, Jon had realized. She might be starting to trust him a little, but she did not trust anyone else.

Jon did not blame her.

“I’m curious. With you being beautiful, graceful, highborn and rich, the answer is bound to be ingenious.”

The look she gave him was sharp enough to cut. It gave him pause, because he knew what had put it there.

He had not forgotten the rumours about her and Viserys. They’d simply stepped to the back of his mind, pushed there by the certainty with which he had always known that a marriage between Sansa Stark and Viserys Targaryen would have been impossible and quite probably grounds for war. But no one had ever accused Viserys of having sense... and he had always loved to hurt pretty things. Jon’s eyes flickered to Sansa’s gloved hand, a growing suspicion becoming darker in his mind.

When he found her face again, Jon saw a small smile there that was so joyless, it sucked the warmth out of the woods.

“I am an incurable romantic, cousin,” she said, after a length of time that almost made Jon uncomfortable. “I swore I would only ever marry for love.”

Jon hesitated, but then decided to pursue it anyway. “That is a strange thing to say.”

She looked genuinely confused. “How so?”

Jon kneeled next to her, plucked a berry from the bush she had been stripping and set it on the palm of her hand. “I find it hard to believe no man has ever loved you all this time. Impossible really.”

“Oh, many have said they do,” she said dismissively.

“But you don’t think it true?”

“I know it to be false.”

She sounded as immovable as a rock in that. Jon felt a slow smile spreading on his face.

“Those don’t sound like the words of an incurable romantic to me.”
Sansa rolled her eyes at him, got up and left him there as she went to chase more of her green treasures.

“So a romantic you may be,” Jon continued, “but that has not hindered your sense.”

“The tone of surprise in your voice insults me, your grace.”

Jon laughed. She said his title like it was an insult, but it was so subtle, he could not call her out on it without appearing unbearably vain.

“On the contrary, I’m just proud to catch you in an inconsistency, however small it might be. I’m very pleased with myself.”

“You may stop, since there is no inconsistency for you to gloat over.” She shoved her basket at him before she started wading her way through a particularly thick part of the forest's undergrowth, making her way to the roots of a gigantic oak. “I am a romantic, therefore I will chose my husband carefully, so that he may live up to my expectations. A husband who will be capable of loving me.” She gave him a sharp look over her shoulder. “It does not speak well of your sex that one such man is so hard to find.”

She flicked a bug off the leaves of a vine climbing its way up the trunk of her chosen oak and started plucking its leaves. When Jon said nothing for long moments, she eyed him with suspicion.

“Have you finally got nothing to say?”

“I am surprised, that’s all. I would have thought you to be very easy to love.”

Sansa pursed her lips, looked away, and Jon realized he had upset her.

“Any man who has not made you feel that way is unworthy of you,” he said slowly, abandoning his teasing.

“I agree completely.”

But she was not looking at him.

“And I would hate to think my sex represented by such men.”

“Oh course not,” she said lightly as she made her way to him again. Jon extended a hand for her to hold on to on those last few steps. It gave him heart that she took it, despite the frown on her face. “Never let it be said that men are represented by the vices that are most common among them. And yet, I have yet to meet a single one that actually respects the woman he wants in his bed.”

Her step faltered and Jon could see the precise instant she remembered herself, who she was with; when she drew back. He saw it in the flutter of her hands, in how she straightened her shoulders, as if ready take flight.

When she turned to him, the expression on her face was serene.

“Of course, recent events have transformed me. I love Harry Hardyng with all my heart. He has renewed my faith in mankind as a whole.”

Jon might have believed that more, had her eyes not been stone cold as she spoke.

“And he loves you, no doubt.”
“As well as any man can love a woman,” she said, turning her attention to the underbrush again, starting to pick up berries one by one.

“Is that a hint of sarcasm I detect in your voice?”

“Not at all, your grace.”

So, yes then. After all, she was too careful with her words to misplace a single one. But she said nothing more, only kept gathering some leaves of basil she seemed happy to find.

Or maybe she was just keeping busy so that she would not have to face him.

“I don’t hold your frustrations against you, Sansa. Why should I, when they’re true? Everywhere in the world, those with power use those without, and so little power is afforded to women, simply for being born with a cunt instead of a cock between their legs. When so many of them have so much more sense than the men around them, who fumble with graces they take for granted. Who abuse them.”

Jon did not think of the words that came out of his mouth. If he had, he might not have said them. “Just in the Red Keep, you can find a hundred examples of it. Perhaps if the king had respected the queen more, he would not have shamed her at Harrenhal some twenty years ago. Perhaps if my grandfather had valued my grandmother’s life, he would not have abused her into gods know how many miscarriages. He might have stopped trying to get her with child at an age where it put her life in danger, if he’d thought her worthy of his consideration as his subject and his queen.”

"Perhaps if my father had truly loved my mother, as so many are fond of saying, he would not have gotten her with child when she was so young she was bound to die from it." He clenched his fists, knuckles turning white. "Yes, you are wise to be cautious in choosing who has power over you, since undoubtedly they will abuse it.”

When Jon looked back at her, he found Sansa wide-eyed and frozen in front of him, lips parted with shock. He was a little shocked at how much he’d said already…and how little he regretted any of it, but for the fact that it left him feeling more exposed than he’d be had he just stripped himself to his skin in front of her.

“Your mind is more extreme than mine,” Sansa murmured, her voice so gentle Jon flinched. “You should temper it, Jon. Such dark thoughts can only hurt you.”

Jon was surprised when Sansa reached out and laid her hand against his hand. He loosened his fist instinctively, and she wrapped her long fingers around his like she’d practiced it, eyes full of so much compassion, it slit him open easily, bare as he had made himself before her.

“But I think you and I have both been conditioned too much by a single place and the people that dwell there. Nothing has a fixed nature, not even power. And we are not so bound to what came before us that we cannot make different choices - nothing is inescapable. What we believe in matters, Jon.”

“And you believe in goodness?” He did not mean to mock her. It was not his fault the small vein of her bitterness had unleashed his own river of it.

“I do.” She did not miss a beat, her hand tightening around his as if she meant to physically pull him into that belief. “I have seen it. I see it in your eyes, too. You have goodness in you. You do,” she insisted when he raised his eyebrows at her. The conviction in her face was fierce, it almost transformed her. “Whatever happened to us does not define us. That is a lazy way to live.”
“Good way not to die, though.”

“Easy way not to die. There are others. But I think you already know that.” Jon made a face at her but she pressed on. “I’ve been talking to your men, learning their stories. Pyp, Gren, Satin, Edd. Some of them described themselves as without purpose before they met you. Are there many like them among your men?”

Jon shrugged. “Yes, some. Most are sons of warlord families, leaders of men that have outlived their usefulness.”

“And you welcome them in your service?”

“I welcome all those I have a use for.”

“Purely utilitarian, are you?” Though even as she said it, she seemed to doubt it. Jon shrugged.

“What use did you have for Sam? He is kind and gentle and by far one of the best men I know. But he cannot fight, he cannot lie. He cannot really serve you in the game of the capitol. He lacks that instinct.”

“The killer’s instinct, you mean?”

He’d meant to startle her but she did not as much as blink.

“Yes. And you risked much by antagonizing his father over him. Lord Tarly would have been well within his rights to petition the king for redress over you kidnapping his son. Certainly it would have benefited him more than disinheriting Sam.”

Jon could not help a scowl. “Lord Tarly is a cunt.”

She seemed to hold back her amusement. “So I have heard. I’ve also heard he is a dangerous man.”

“And?” He felt like he was being led by the hand and for the first time, he did not enjoy it.

“And you defied him to take his son from where Tarly could hurt him. Did you do that for no reason other than your own amusement?”

“Maybe I did,” Jon said, crossing his arms and leaning against the tree closest to him. “Maybe I just enjoyed his company.”

Sansa huffed. “I would not have thought a man as arrogant as you would be so bad at taking a compliment.”

A laugh escaped him without him meaning to at all. He felt lighter quite suddenly. The birds’ song could reach him again, the wind and the whispering of the trees, and Jon finally understood that Sansa hadn’t been leading him into anything, but rather out of his own sudden dark mood.

“Being raised in the Red Keep means one acquires a healthy distrust of flattery.”

She nodded at that, but did not let him distract her. “They love you.”

“You think so?”

“Don’t go fishing for compliments, now. That’s annoying too,” she said, rolling her eyes at him, and Jon smiled. Yes, he had earned his men’s loyalty. And some of them loved him, it was true. But most
had a use for him. As he had a use for them.

“Some of them scare me,” Sansa said so softly she might have been speaking to herself. Jon reached for her and they both stopped walking as she turned to face him.

“No one will touch you. You must know that.”

“I don’t feel unsafe, I just…” She stopped, as if she did not know what words to reach for, so Jon helped her.

“You recognize the potential for savagery when you see it.”

Sansa looked at him, and Jon felt seen in a way that stilled him completely. He felt like his very heart was slowing down.

“I do.”

That she did, did not surprise him, though there was a puzzle there. He had not thought she was easily frightened, especially when he thought of how at her ease she was in the company of someone like Sandor Clegane, when half his men would not even go near man. But if she could see it in some of his men and in Clegane, then she could see it in all who had it, could she not?

Jon felt at the edge of an important moment. He could feel its weight on his shoulders, in the air. “You see it in me, don’t you?”

She did not answer. She did not need to, it was in her eyes and she did not hide it from him. She barely blinked. “We don’t choose who we are, what is done to us, or what we have to become to survive.”

“I agree.”

“But that is no excuse. Neither others nor the gods can make us into something we are not. Not forever, anyway. Responsibility for what we do with what we’re given is in our hands alone.”

Jon nodded, but said nothing. This was not her indictment, he knew that. She believed in choice, his cousin, and taking responsibility for one’s actions. There was nothing wrong with that – though it was a profound burden and she didn’t seem to realize how rare it was, that one would be willing to take it on is if it was one’s duty. Of course, she was her father’s daughter and her mother’s too. There was more of Winterfell in her than anyone seemed to be aware of, yet Jon could see it in the smallest of details.

Jon could not help but wonder though, what she’d think of all the things he would have to take responsibility for. All the things he had done to get where he was, all the times he had used and abused people without a moment’s regret. He sang one tune but when it suited him; he danced to quite another.

Jon held a hand out and helped her jump over a small stream.

Of course, he knew what she’d say. She’d call him a hypocrite and a liar. More of the same, from the hordes of those that they had both known all their lives.

iii.

Jon reached for another berry from the basket she’d set between them. They were sitting by the shore
of the God’s Eye, the water lapping at the warm stones they were using as their perch. Sansa was looking ahead, eyes fixed on the Isle of Faces, the outline of which they could see in the distance. She had wanted to come to shore, to see it – the last place in the south where the northern gods still dwelled. When he’d asked her if she wanted to visit it, she had hesitated, however, her eyes losing focus for a moment before she gave him a vacant smile and told him, “Perhaps when we return.” Still, she stared. He could still see the side of her face, however, how a small smile had curled there.

“You don’t think me helpless, do you?”

Her question was sudden, but it did not surprise him. He’d understood early on that conversations with Sansa did not simply stop. They went on in her head and she might pick it up sooner or later, as if you’d never stopped talking about it.

“Because I am not. I have friends,” she added when he failed to respond.

“Yes, I met Skye already.”

She threw a berry at him, which Jon caught midair, then popped it into his mouth with a smirk.

“Human friends, your grace,” she said with narrowed eyes, and Jon had to smile. ‘Your grace’ she called him, but she looked the way Arya might have when she called him stupid.

“In the Red Keep? How did you come by such a rare gem?”

“Do you hunt often, cousin? Is it something you enjoy?”

Jon smiled. “As far as ways of changing the subject go, that was not very subtle. Quite unlike you.” Sansa made a face, pushed her braid over her shoulder. “No, I’m trying to answer your question.”

She looked annoyed at him, too.

Jon gave in. “Yes, I hunt often.” As beast and man. But he did not tell her that.

“Then you ought to know that fresh meat attracts all kinds of predators.”

Jon’s smile fell.

The things that came out of her mouth sometimes...

“And you managed to tame one such animal?”

“No, my taming skills had nothing to do with it. It was chance that brought this particular beast to my side and greed that kept him there, I suppose.” She shrugged, unaffected. In control. “Quite mundane, as far as appetites go.”

“True,” Jon said absently, as he silently went through the list of every single person he had ever seen who so much as smiled at her. “Though the Red Keep has never had a shortage of predators with unusual appetites.”

She eyed him carefully. “You don’t like the capitol at all, do you?”

“No, I don’t.” That was something he’d never hidden.

“Is there nothing there that makes you happy?”
Are you trying to lead me into some kind of trap, Sansa?

He could sense that she was, but she trusted her snares would not have spiked teeth. In fact, Jon thought her traps were rarely felt, so subtly she laid them. The rope could be around your throat, the noose tightening, and you would never know it until the fall snapped your neck. But in this one case, he knew it was not that kind of trap. The question was obvious, they both knew it; he could see it in her eyes just as he was sure she saw it in his. She wanted to ask this of him, without openly asking.

He had allowed this before, but for this – for this one piece of him, she would have to trust him enough to ask for it with open hands and straightforwardly. He had pursued her with intent where she had only curiosity for him, so it stood to reason that he led a surer course than she did in their interactions, but still. Jon was not so brave with his heart that he could give away all of its pieces, just so that she might consider opening hers.

“There is very little in the capitol to make anyone happy.”

She considered him as if he were puzzle. “You could leave.”

Jon laughed sharply. “I do, all the time. Have you not noticed?”

“You could leave and never come back. You are Prince of Summerhall, are you not? You could stay there.”

Jon did not think she realized how much urgency there was in her words. How tightly she was gripping the edge of the rock, how wide her eyes were.

“I could, yes.”

He saw her relax inch by inch, like a fist loosening. “And risk displeasing your father. If you dare.”

He leaned forward just a bit. She did not move away, nor did she look uncomfortable. “Didn’t you hear, cousin? I fear nothing and have very little sense.”

She rolled her eyes at him and laid down, black flat against the rock and arms open, as if she was embracing the sunlight.

“Yes, of course,” she said as she closed her eyes. “And you routinely sprout wings and breathe fire.”

Jon laughed so loudly, he startled a couple of birds from their perch on a branch close to them.

iv.

Sansa did not hear it, when the bells first started ringing. She was in her room – the safest room the Crossroads Inn had to offer, she was told, right at the heart of the establishment. Jon and Uncle Benjen were the only men sleeping on her floor, and they’d posted Sandor on the stairs that led to her floor. She had not had the means to object too much, especially as he had waved her words away himself. Jon had bought out all the rooms of the inn and then generously offered to pay for the meals and drinks of the other residents as a recompense for their discomfort. The travelers who’d found themselves giving up their beds for a night had seemed all too happy to oblige the Black Dragon, in exchange for a glimpse of him and the Lady of Winterfell. And those who had not been happy, Sansa had noted, had not made a sound about it.

She’d had her dinner at one of the tables with Jon and some of his men, the way she’d done every night of their journey, and then taken her leave early, more gleeful for a hot bath than she had been in
a long time. She had been gleeful about everything lately. The riding, which she’d never enjoyed; the aching of her body, the cold at night and the uncomfortable bedding, the rain, the mud – none of it had dampened her mood. The more their journey went on, the more beautiful the world seemed to her. The air felt sweeter, every sound more delightful.

Sansa knew of course none of this was real. The world was as it has always been; she was just happy to be away from the capitol. It made the whole sky into a song to her. And Jon…

Much to her surprise and undeniable fascination, Jon was different, too, when he was away from the Red Keep. His eyes were clearer. His face more dour, sure, his moods darker sometimes; his smiles slower to come, but more sincere, somehow. And he was funny! In a dark way; cutting sometimes, but there was something earnest about it out here. Something that was meant to be enjoyed, not picked apart. He seemed less deliberate as well. He didn't even bother making up reasons to be near her, for one. He just rode by her side and struck up conversations about anything under the sun, from their route and the kinds of trees and plants they passed, to what her favorite books were or how she liked to season her dishes. He was, in every way, an unpredictable conversationalist, but Sansa would be lying if she said it did not amuse her.

It was hard, not to be drawn to him, not to give in to the pull that he seemed to exert on everyone around him. Hard to resist the full force of his attention, when so often it came back to her. He hoarded her company, did not even try to hide it. There was a touch of obsession there which Sansa could not help but be wary of, but he was so…

She remembered his face that day in the woods of Harrenhal. All that she had seen there; the acute pain and the anger he had used to take control of it. Her heart had hurt for him then. It had been impossible not to comfort him. There were moments when they spoke and he made himself so exposed, so open, all she wanted was to lean in further and find out… find out… Sansa wasn’t even sure what! But the lure of it was powerful. And troublesome.

So many of her feelings intertwined all over him, creating a net that he was only one element of, but he was still the one who could pull at all the wrong strings at once: her homesickness, her curiosity, her wariness, her compassion, the sheer fun it was to be around him. She hadn’t wanted to be near anyone the way she wanted to be near him.

It was…disturbing, in many ways. Mostly because she had started to feel quite at her ease in his company, and Sansa knew from experience that was not a good sign. Usually the moment she felt safe was when she lost sight of how to protect herself. Besides, she could not forget that this was just one interlude, and not her life. And this, too, was not without its pitfalls and dangers, beyond the fascination she may or may not have for one man.

Like the fact that, though away from court, a part of it had come with her in the form of Jeyne Westerling and Mariah Flowers. Jeyne and Shae had not been allowed to come, their duties arranging her household for the arrival of Harry and his retinue having been cited as too important to abandon. Sansa had warned them not to protest about it too much. She'd seen it coming, after all. She had not quite figured out in whose pocket the Red Keep's castellan was, but whoever he belonged to was no friend of hers. For the most part this did not bother her – unless she thought about how Shae and Jeyne had been kept behind not only so that the two maids from Princess Rhaenys’ household could spy on her, but also as hostages to ensure Sansa's own good behavior.

There was only one person really who knew she loved her friends enough to risk quite a bit for them… so perhaps it was to Littlefinger that her two new ladies in waiting reported to. Or perhaps not. After all, Petyr knew better than to think she’d try to run away. Though Lord Connington had not seemed as sure when he bid them farewell, frowning something fierce as they rode out of the
gates of the Red Keep.

Seeing Jon gleefully antagonize the king’s Hand had been a strange experience. Sansa could not deny it gave a dark sort of satisfaction to see the Hand’s face turn that particular shade of red, but it also made her a bit envious, an emotion she thought was ugly and did not want to indulge in.

All in all, it wasn’t as bad as it could have been. Mariah was very obviously there only to learn her, but Sansa liked Jeyne Westerling well enough. Jon made it difficult sometimes, with how little he cared for hiding his intention of spending as much of his time around her, but the difficulties of being followed everywhere by curious ears and eyes were such that Sansa was used to. Her manner was so perfected that by now she could live a whole life under scrutiny and not reveal a single thing she did not mean to. But she didn’t need to, most of the time: Jon seemed to have picked up on her stiffness and continuously relegated the two young women to a different part of the caravan, keeping Sansa in the middle of it, with him riding beside her more often than not.

All things considered, straining a bit to apply her ointment to the burns on her back and her ribs was a minor inconvenience.

That’s what she’d been doing, crossed-legged on her bed and stripped to the waist, when she heard thundering steps getting ever closer to her door. She’d barely had time to turn her back to the door when it burst open, slamming against the wall.

“We need to leave!”

“Jon!” Sansa shrieked, trying to pull her night wrap back up her shoulders, her back to him.

“Ah, fuck!” The anger in his voice did not abate, even as she saw him look away from her, eyes on the floor. “Get dressed. Now. We need to leave.”

Sansa tied the sash of her night-wrap tightly around her waist and pulled her cloak around her shoulders with steady hands, just as Jon threw her boots at her feet.

“Are we under attack?” Her heart was starting to speed up in her breast, the flutter of fear making her voice harden. He was not in full armor, but his sword was on his belt and his dagger as well. This told her little however: he was hardly ever without either.

Jon thrust a small satchel into her hand, telling her to keep it with her and to leave everything else. He reached for her hand then, and Sansa took it without a second thought. Together they moved through the corridor, Jon keeping his body in front of hers, and down the stairs.

Sandor was waiting for them there, looking murderous, face pulled into a scowl.

“Anything?” Jon asked as Sandor stepped to her other side. They walked out of the inn through the back entrance that led into the woods.

“Scouts haven’t been back yet,” Sandor answered, voice even lower and more gravelly than usual. “No fire in the sky either, nothing fucking wrong except for the fucking bells.”

Sansa did not need to ask what they meant – she heard them as soon as she stepped outside, despite the hammering of her blood in her ears. There were bells ringing, the sound of their repetitive gongs fluttering in the night. They walked into the stables, where Sansa was pushed to mount her palfrey. She did not object overmuch – her mind was turning. There were only three reasons Sansa knew for bells to ring like this: the death of a King, a city under siege, or the surrender of one. They were too far from any cities, so if there was an attack, someone must be raiding one of the villages they
had passed on the way to the inn. And if a raiding party was this close…

It was probably raiders that Jon was preparing for, she thought, as she looked around, trying to keep her horse calm. Most of his men seemed to already be there in the courtyard, armed and mounted already. The moment she got on her horse, they moved to surround her like they had practiced it a thousand times.

There were some people missing, however. Her anxiety spiked.

“Where are my ladies? Jory, where-” But Jory had already moved away from her to speak to some of his riders, and he could not hear her. “Jon!”

He turned his head in her direction and stepped towards her then. He wrapped his hand around her ankle, his hold so tight she could feel it through the leather of her boots, eyes fierce as he stared up at her face.

“I will keep you safe. I promise.”

“I'm not frightened,” she dismissed, even if it wasn't the whole truth; she was afraid always, but never had that stopped her from being brave. “Where are my ladies? I don't see them.”

He let go of her ankle. “They were sent ahead with another party.”

Sansa frowned. “Why- What is happening?”

His squire, Satin, brought him his own horse and Jon mounted it fluidly, as if his newly donned armor weighed not a thing.

“I don't know yet. But I will find out.” He turned on his horse to look at her. “Stay close to Ghost. I will find you when it's over.”

She couldn’t help it. “But-”

“I will find you.” He’d brought his horse so close to hers that the side of his leg almost brushed hers. “Trust me.”

He didn't wait for her to answer. He rode away with only half his men, leaving the other half with her. Was that not reckless? What if he needed them? No one gave her the time to ask those questions, however. The moment Ghost started running, their line followed, and Sansa had to devote all her concentration to staying on her horse and staying alert.

The night would be long.

V.

They rode through the woods for what felt like hours. Sansa did not know where they were going, could not have been able to tell if it had been the middle of the day, let alone at night. There was a half-moon out, but in the woods, its rays could not penetrate that deep. The darkness and the need for stealth made them move slowly along their path. Or what Sansa thought was a path. Sometimes she got glimpses of Ghost, leading them like a pale shade through the darkness. Uncle Benjen followed him without hesitation, like they both knew where they were going. Like he trusted Ghost to know, Sansa corrected.

At one point, she felt as if she was climbing up, perhaps a hill of some kind. Despite Sandor and Jory
trying to clear a path for her, she felt the branches of the trees pull at her hair, her cloak. More than once she was too late to turn her head away and felt her face sting. Sandor stayed by her side the whole time, though he hardly spoke a word. They were as silent as they could be, trying to blend their breathing with the sounds of the rest of the woods of the Riverlands.

When they finally stopped, Sansa was so tired she was about ready to fall asleep on the saddle. Her thighs burned, her back ached, her hand hurt and her neck felt stiff. When she got down from her horse her knees buckled a little. Immediately, Sandor's hand was on her arm, keeping her steady.

“You're about to fall over, little bird.”

“I just might. Are we stopping for the night?” She did not mean to complain, had made a point of it, but Sansa was not sure she'd be able to get back in the saddle without whimpering this time. She'd been so tense riding that her whole body ached twice more than usual.

“Fucked if I know. The beast has stopped and it's him we've been following.”

Sansa looked towards the beginning of the line, tried to make out Ghost through the darkness. She could see him, pale like silver under the rays of moonlight that managed to filter through the trees.

A branch snapped close by her side. Before she could so much as turn, she felt Sandor set himself in front of her like a living wall, the sound of his sword leaving its scabbard slicing the night in two.

“At ease, Clegane.”

At the sound of her uncle's voice, Sansa let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding, and reached half-blindly for Sandor's back, to stay him.

“Uncle Benjen. Have we stopped?”

“Yes, we rest here until dawn.”

“What happened? Were we attacked?”

Once her uncle was close enough to touch, she could almost make out the line of his face in the darkness. He might have been frowning, or she might have been imagining things.

“No. We heard the bells and thought better to move. If there was a raid in any of the villages close by, that inn is not a defensible position.”

“And these woods are?”

“Yes.”

There was no doubt in his voice, and even though Sansa could not see his eyes, she knew they were as steady as ever, and on her. On her as they had been for days, and on Sandor too, who her uncle regarded with suspicion and perhaps even a little disdain.

“Rest, Sansa. You are well guarded.”

Yes, Sansa was starting to understand just how well guarded she was.

Sending her handmaids in what was probably two different directions with their own escorts, to confuse whoever might be after them, was part of it. It was an ugly deception, one that Sansa had not seen until it presented itself to her fully formed into her hands, right in that moment. Sansa felt her anger rising: a slow, steady bloom in her veins burning outwards from her chest, adding to her
exhaustion, sharpening its edge like whetstone against steel. Her eyes stung with the effort of restraint.

She had realized, of course, that Jon’s men took turns guarding her, even if they did so subtly, with a casual attitude that had almost flown over her head. Almost, but not quite. They were better than the guards in the Red Keep because they did not act like guards, but Sansa had learned to recognize how men moved when they meant to circle you. Whether for protection or encroachment, it did not matter; it always felt the same to her. She’s seen it so many times, she could spot it now just by the direction they chose to step in.

She noticed it Jon, too, sometimes, though instead of at her back, he moved the same way Sandor did, placing his body between her and whatever noise he heard that he had not liked. But Jon was less obvious than Sandor, who of course never bothered to hide his intention. Jon moved like he didn’t think about it, even though by the way his eyes seemed to be alight out here, corners tight with tension, he was always thinking about it. Always ready for a fight. Sometimes she thought he walked on the tips of his toes, ever ready to sprint into action. Which was strange, considering Sansa had seen him training these past two weeks they’d been travelling. He fought like a man possessed, so quick that sometimes his sword was hard to see, and immovable as a wall.

She’d seen him fight and remembered how he played cyvasse; remembered how strange and difficult it had been, at first, to anticipate the moves of a player who seemed to base a good part of his strategy around appearing unpredictable and senseless. She supposed she should have seen this move coming, too, Sansa thought, as she settled down at the roots of a tree. He was a born tactician and she’d known he thought nothing of sacrificing a few set pieces if it got him what he wanted.

So why was she so angry?

She adjusted her cloak and remembered the satchel Jon had shoved in her arms just as they left the inn. It was around her arm still. She pulled it in front of her, opened the flap to feel what was inside.

Cloth, she realized, and something beneath them that felt very much like a bag of coins.

Truly, no one could accuse Jon Targaryen of not being a man prepared.

Sansa pulled the clothes out and it turned out to be britches and a long doublet, not unlike the riding clothes that Dany was fond of. At this point however, Sansa would not be surprised at all to see that these fit her perfectly.

She took off her boots angrily, wincing at her body’s protest of the movement, and shoved her feet into the britches, pulling them on under her nightgown. She resented Jon and in that moment she wanted to slap his face, but she would not ride a single second more with her thighs bare on that saddle, or she would not be able to ride again for days. She left the doublet in the satchel for the night, huddled into her cloak instead as she settled her bedroll on a soft patch of moss at the roots of a tree and laid on it, Sandor sitting down just at the other side of her. When Ghost came and laid down beside her, Sandor cursed, but did not try to persuade her to send him away. His huge body curled around hers, soft and warm, as if he liked being near her as much as she liked being near him.

Sansa leaned her head against his massive shoulder and listened to the beatings of his heart. It drummed faster than a human’s, and she thought if she counted the rhythm, perhaps she might forget her turmoil and fall asleep. She timed her breaths with his, the way she used to do with Lady. Petted him gently, pressed her weight more fully onto him, when he showed it did not bother him. Slowly, the noises of the men around her began to fade and so did her own turmoil, as Sansa concentrated on the feel of Ghost’s fur between her fingers, his heart beneath her ear, his chest expanding and moving her with every breath he took. The steady beat followed her into the darkness behind her
eyelids, expanding in her head like a sunrise over water. Until it took over everything else; until it was the only thing she heard, as steady as the sound of the waves breaking upon the shore.

She felt stronger whenever Ghost was near, in some strange, unexplainable way. The way she always felt bolder when she confronted Jon. They were both such tangible parts of the North that they both soothed and pressed against an ache inside her she had long tried to bury.

The thought of it now made her eyes sting a little.

Ghost brought her no pain, however. Whenever he was near, the thought of Lady did not pulse like a fresh wound that had just been cut. Lady, who used to lay with Sansa just like this. She’d let Sansa lean on her as if she were a pillow; let herself be petted and brushed until her coat was soft as Skye’s feathers. Skye, who was hunting tonight, perhaps in these very woods. Sansa sunk her hands into the fur at Ghost’s neck. The part of it that was closest to his skin, the warmest part, was also his softest part, and even that could not compare to the feel of Skye’s feathers. Nothing compared to that. Nor to how precise she was in flight, how the night air felt under her wings when she rose and rose and followed the stars, riding on the back of the wind.

She could almost see it: the black expanse dotted with stars, the moon shining over dark woods, turning the rivers silver. There was a village further north, she could see the lights of the fires but that was not what she was searching for. Riders in the dark was who she needed to find. Riders, fire, screams, blood. But she found none of that. Only a village, and people in the square, around a tall building with a star on top of its thatched roof.

She flapped her wings and rose again into the air, high with the wind, until everything below her was as small and insignificant as the stars above. There was no north wind tonight, and she was hungry still.

The earth moved and Sansa was wrenched from her thoughts. She startled awake, breathing heavily, looking around frantically, trying to pierce the darkness. Ghost turned and nudged her cheek with his snout and she understood that she had not fallen from some great height. Ghost had simply moved.

Sansa curled further into her cloak, realized someone had actually covered her with something, but fell asleep before she could wonder more about it. When next she opened her eyes, the sky was lightening with the first rays of the dawn, and everyone was already on their feet.

Sansa moved, then groaned softly at the stiffness of her body. Gods, she felt as if she’d been beaten, only her body was hurting in places she did not even know she could hurt. She sat up slowly, rubbed the sleep from her eyes and then combed her fingers through her tangled hair; undid her braid and then did it up again, trying not to yawn for the third time. She’d had a bath just last night but there was little she would not give now for a hot steaming one, if only so soak her sores in.

She chewed on some leaves of basil as she stretched her feet in front of her, trying for some relief.

“Good morning, cousin. Sleep well?”

She didn’t even have to look up. He’d crouched as he spoke, just at the foot of her bedding so that he could see her in the eye. He looked as if nothing at all strange had happened. His curls were a bit tousled, his clothes a bit dusty, but he looked wide awake despite the dark circles under his eyes, and the smile on his face was so pleased, it soured her mood further.

“I slept wonderfully, thank you, your grace.”

That made his smile fall a little. She noticed his eyes go from her face to her hand, to her booted feet
and he frowned. “I am sorry for your discomfort, but I assure you, it was for your protection.”

“Of course.”

Sansa tried to rise to her feet in as dignified a manner as she could, which was hard considering she was ruffled and had slept in her clothes. She felt discomposed, the threads of her self-possession slow to come together.

“What were you protecting me from, if I may ask?”

Her coolness made him frown harder but he answered her all the same.

“Nothing, as it turns out.” There was an edge to his voice as he said it. “The High Septon has died, apparently, and in the Riverlands that is cause for ringing the bells from dusk till dawn, to let the people know of his passing.”

Sansa nodded. She had not known that. She looked around searching through the trees for her two companions.

“I don’t see my ladies. They did not return with you?”

“No. Their orders were to ride ahead on the Kingsroad until further instruction.”

“As a diversion.”

His eyes zeroed in on her. “Yes, exactly so.”

There was a stillness to him in that moment, as if he was bracing for something. Perhaps her voice had a different quality when men could not be soothed by a smile on her face.

Perhaps she was just angry.

“I see. And I suppose you saw fit to tell them that had someone really been after them and they’d been caught impersonating me, they would have been killed for their trouble?”

“No, there was no time to share details with servants, my lady.”

“Indeed,” Sansa said through gritted teeth.

Jon’s eyes looked unusually bright in the pale light of the dawn, his frown something fierce. For a moment, it seemed like he might say something, but then his teeth gritted around whatever words he chose not to speak and he bowed his head to her, as if he meant to leave. Sansa was almost disappointed in some strange, insane way, but it did not last long. Jon didn’t take two steps away from her, before he changed his mind and came back, stopping so close to her that Sansa almost had to take a step back not to run into his chest.

“You realize that their lives are worth less to me than your safety, don’t you?”

“You do not get to decide the worth of their lives! They are in my service, as long as I am their lady. If they have to risk their heads for me, their lives will not be thrown away like they don’t matter. I will speak to them, they will hear it from my lips and they will know why and what they’re doing. And they will have the choice to say no.”

Jon passed a hand down his face, letting out a harsh breath. She could see his frustration with her growing, just as she could see the iron bands with which he controlled it. She observed it all with an almost detached fascination.
“They are not Jeyne or your Shae. They do not serve you or love you, Sansa. They’re here to spy on you, betray your secrets to someone who will undoubtedly use them to hurt you! Do you really want to fight with me because I used them to do what they are meant to do?!”

“They did not come here, they were sent here! There’s a difference.”

His eyes narrowed on her. “You advocate choice and responsibility for yourself but won’t allow it in others? They had a chance to say no, but here they are.”

She felt as if she would explode out of her skin and into a thousand birds, so strong was her ire. Her hands shook. She fisted them into her skirts.

“Choice? Jeyne is the second daughter of an impoverished minor house, and Mariah is a bastard born girl of some lord I never heard of. Do you think someone like that can say no in the Red Keep? To Connington, or worse?”

Jon snorted.

Sansa wanted to push him.

“Oh yes, Black Prince. There are worse in that place than someone who frustrates your pride. People who no one can refuse without getting hurt.”

“You mean like you could not.”

Her breath froze in her lungs; she could not let it in or out. He could have slapped her and she’d have been less startled.

Until that moment Sansa had not understood why she’d been so incensed, but then he said it, and all the pieces fell into place, the picture complete and so thoroughly humiliating, she had to turn away from him, her hand going to her mouth as she absorbed her own shock.

A moment ago she’d thought she was ready to rip him open but now all that animosity was just… gone. Dany had always said that Jon had a way of using the truth as if it was a weapon and Sansa had never understood how that was possible. In her experience, the truth had only ever a blade turned towards her, not one she could yield. But now she did understand. It did not feel like he was using something against her, exactly; but neither did he allow anything to go unsaid, even when he knew it would hurt her, and that was merciless in its own way.

“Yes,” she said slowly, her voice full of emotion she could not hide. “Exactly like me.”

She felt his hand at the small of her back, just as his chest pressed against her shoulder as he stepped closer. The way he said her name then, softly, almost like he was pleading for something, closed her eyes and made a shiver rattle up her spine. Suddenly Sansa felt like she could not take a full breath. She could not stand to have him so near.

She took a step back and then turned to face him just in time to see his hand fall back against his side.

“I would have told you, if it ever came up,” he said, before she could open her mouth to speak. "I would have left the choice to you, if there had been time. I wasn’t trying to hide anything. And I wasn’t punishing those girls for anything either.”

Sansa nodded slowly. She knew that. She did.

“I know. I…my anger has little to do with you, in truth.”
It might have been a shameful thing to admit, but it was nothing he did not already know, wasn’t it? What gave her the most pause, what made her feel as if she could not breathe around him all of a sudden, was how she’d thought nothing of letting it loose with him. She’d never done that, ever, or not in years. It scared her stiff. She didn’t quite know what to do with herself now.

Sansa licked her lips, dared look him in the face again. The look she found there was so soft she wanted to cry. Of course, she blinked back the urge, settling down her racing heart one breath at a time.

“I have been surrounded by people who think they know what’s best for me all my life. So many of them never saw fit to tell me even things that concerned my person. I suppose this is what I’m angry about, and you were just…a target.” This time she did meet his eyes, because she was certain hers were dry and finally steady. “I’m sorry I lost my temper. You didn’t deserve it, not really.”

Jon shook his head. He moved, as if he meant to come closer to her again but then thought better of it.

“That’s alright, I can take it. I’m sorry I put your ladies in danger.”

“Are you, really?”

“No,” he admitted, something in his shrug that was almost resigned. “But I am sorry it upset you.”

Sansa nodded. She knew that was the best she would get out of him. But then he did something that surprised her: he offered her his hand, palm up.

“Shall we part as friends?”

She looked from his palm, unable not to notice the scar there along the inside of his thumb, to the open expression on his face, something in his eyes that was almost like hope.

“We are not parting yet,” she said, picking apart his words if only to have something to stall over. She didn’t want to touch him in that moment. Just the thought of it made her shake a little.

His smile turned playful at her words, his hand still between them, open and waiting. “No, we’re not. Let us reconcile, then.”

Sansa lifted her chin a fraction. “We will reconcile when Jeyne and Mariah are by my side again. Is that acceptable to you?”

Jon nodded, that small, knowing smile never leaving his face. “That is fair. And acceptable to me.”

It was only then that Sansa noticed the silence that surrounded them. When she looked around, she saw they were alone amongst the trees, the closest man so far away she could see them, but not hear them, as they made ready to start riding again.

She blinked, stunned. She could feel the heat crawling up her neck and cheeks and resisted the urge to hide her face in her hands.

“We made a scene, didn’t we?”

His chuckle was warm and still much too close. “Don’t worry about that.”

Sansa groaned. “I’m embarrassed.”

“You shouldn’t be. I think you might have impressed them even more than you already have.”
She snorted softly and shook out the cloak that she’d been covered with, a small smile coming on her face when she realized it was Sandor’s. She might have pointed out that she had no need to impress anyone, but that would not have strictly been true. She had liked getting to know some of Jon’s men, and she very much wanted to impress them. She had wanted them to like her, because when men did, there was no predicting what they might tell her.

“Really?” she said instead. “By acting like a shrew?”

“By withstanding my anger. *None of them* would dare speak back to me when I’m in a temper.”

“None of them have the advantage of being highborn ladies,” Sansa retorted, as she rolled up her bedding and stood up. Jon took it from her and Sansa thanked him, before trying to go around him then, thinking they would join the others and continue on. But before she could, she felt his hand wrap around her arm, just over her elbow. She turned and though her heart started hammering against her ribs when he pulled her closer, she did not pull away.

Jon leaned in so close to the side of her face that his curls touched her temple. Sansa could only stare at him, though she did not dare turn her head fully. From this close, she could see every shade of grey in his eyes, count his dark eyelashes one by one.

She could not breathe.

“Don’t make yourself smaller for me. There’s no need. I can see you for who you are, Sansa.” He touched his forehead to the side of her temple then, and Sansa’s eyes closed of their own accord.

She opened her them slowly, feeling sluggish, her limbs heavy. “That sounds like a threat.”

Jon laughed, the sound tickling the back of her neck and then diving down her spine all the way to the tips of her toes.

“I promised you protection, remember. You have no more cause to be wary of me than you have to be of your eagle friend.”

Sansa straightened and immediately he let her go, though his hand brushed against her forearm as she put some distance between them.

“We shall see, your grace.”

He nodded. “We shall.”

[1] Apparently this is within the standard measuring for a White Tailed Eagle, which is the species I’m talking about here

[2] I know this sounds super fantastical, but this is something I took from an actual documentary, where an Eagle Hunter of Mongolia did this exact same thing with his eagle. He said it was extraordinary, and that this was his favorite eagle and the only one he could do this trick without losing bits of his arm, but it is real. (Admittedly, the eagle did not LAND on his arm, but then again, that man wasn’t a skinchanger either so… )

[3] at this particular point, I am indeed, bullshitting my way through this XD

[51] Borgia quote, from a bit of dialogue between Micheletto and Cesare.

[61] am literally lying through my teeth here. I don’t know whose decision it would be, to do this. I’m not even sure that anyone could do this to her, since both Shae and Jeyne are part of Sansa’s household so she decides for them. Anyway… ignore me.

[71] Yes, i am referencing The Stupidity Never To Be Named. It gave me this idea, so I guess its not totally useless.

Chapter End Notes

The reason I’m nervous is because I know myself. I have habit of dragging my stories sometimes, for what feels like endless stretches. One one hand, I feel as if ever dialogue moment as a purpose. But then again, i also feel i should move the plot along BUT THEN AGAIN i want to SHOW them growing into each other, and this is how i can do it. Also the point is that you guys sgould get to know these characters as they grt to know each other. You have a bit more knowlege than they do, but not by much - and that seems to have dictated a slower pace. Idk
It is what it is, and honestly i like the way it is now. But who kmows i might feel differently a year from now. And I dont want to lose momentum and make the tension fall into the dreaded ‘just get on with it’ category. Im trusting you guys to let me know if that happens.
I hope you enjoyed the update, and that it was worth it.
this chapter was not going to be a 'part ii' of anything, initially, but then i got to the end of it and i realized that it was a continuation - or rather a culmination of the one before it. so yeah, it became a part ii, and i thought i might as well just post it, since these two chapters go together.

Next chapter: 'blood of Winterfell'

Note: the last part of the story (vi) is written from the pov of both sansa and jon. i know it must be confusing to read so i tried to orient the shifting of the povs with the lines of dialogue. it felt so important for me to include them both, so i risked it a little.

v. thee and me

"You wanted me to sit beside you in the dark. Didn’t I feel it – didn’t I know? There’s something between us – a sort of pull. Something you always do to me and I to you."

"My soul and yours are the same. 
   You appear in me. 
   I in you. 
   We hide in each other."

S. Fitzgerald; Rumi

vi.

No one needed to have known Sansa for long to know that she was a gracious lady, but Jon had noticed that she reserved her most sincere warmth for those she felt were left out. Those who were helpless or friendless, or just lonely. She had an uncanny ability for sniffing that out in particular. It explained why she had immediately taken to Sam with kindness; how fond she was of Satin, who had grown to adore her from the very first day and was always ready to show it. All of his guard fell over themselves to win her favor, because she was everything they thought a highborn lady should be, and because she had been so happy and excited when they set off, and so generous with that joy, that it had been difficult to deny her anything.

So it was a wonder no one missed it when, for the last stretch of their journey, she got quiet.
It wasn’t anything outward at all. She was still just as considerate, just as polite as always, and once or twice she even sung them a song when Edd or Satin grew enough balls to ask her. But she spoke little when not spoken to and smiled even less; gritted her teeth through her discomfort and refused to ask for help. Unless it was from Clegane - who did not even have to be told when she needed help getting up and down from her horse and when not - and whose fierce scowl stopped most anyone from getting too close to her.

The second night after they had to hastily leave the inn, she sat down by her tent and started mixing together some herbs in a mortar. Jon watched her work from the other side of the camp. He watched the way she kept the mortar still with the tips of her gloved hand, and used the pestle with the other. Jon would have offered to do it for her, but he knew he would have been refused. Politely, with a smile, but the answer would still have been ‘no thank you’. His cousin had a very low tolerance for being helpless; and an even lower one, it seemed, for looking it.

The clothes he’d gotten made for her did not fit her perfectly. The britches were fine, but the long doublet with the slashed sleeves that Dany so favored was a bit loose on her. He hadn’t taken as good a measurement of her as she had of him, apparently. And though he had not told her, she might very well know that the shirt she was wearing beneath it was his own - it was as black as the rest of the ones he owned - but she had not said anything. Indeed, she had said very little to him since that morning in the woods.

Jon knew why her mood had so darkened, of course: every day Jeyne and Mariah did not return, Sansa grew more worried, more taciturn, more drawn into herself; like a house with its windows boarded up. And though she did not seem to openly blame him, Jon could not help but feel that she was punishing him by keeping so silent and solitary. Which was a vain thought, he was at least aware of himself enough to know that. She wasn’t punishing him; it wasn’t even about him. He just felt it that way, because he wanted to be with her and she wanted to be alone.

It was Sam who finally got to her, doing his best to ease her out of her mood the only way he knew how: by talking about whatever he knew anything about – which was a lot - trying to pull Sansa into a conversation that had seem to divert her so before. That’s what Jon walked in on him doing one night, when they were two day’s ride away from Riverrun.

“It’s amazing actually. Nothing else is done quite like this in the whole Seven Kingdoms,” Sam was saying

“What is he on about now?” Jon asked as he sat down at uncle Benjen’s side.

“How the High Septon is chosen,” Benjen answered without looking up from his bowl of stew.

“Once the High Septon is dead, the Most Devout are locked in the Great Sept of Baelor. The City Watch surrounds the sept and allows no one in or out except for those who bring food. And inside, the septons vote.”

“Fascinating,” Edd mumbled around a mouthful of bread. Sam did not catch his tone at all, his enthusiasm growing.

“It is! Each vote stands for one man or woman. They are all equals and they decide together. Unanimously!”

Edd made a face. “U-What?”

“They all have to agree,” Sam explained, making Pyp laugh.
“I wonder how elections don’t last years,” he asked between one mouthful and another, then he glanced at Sansa, who eating from her bowl with a care that made them all look beastly, and cleared his throat, looking away.

“They do sometimes last a long time,” Sam said immediately. “Once it took the Most Devout three months to elect the new High Septon.”

“They choose their leaders in the Night’s Watch as well,” Uncle Benjen said, so out of the blue that it surprised Jon, who admittedly had not been paying much attention to him. “Everyone votes and the candidate one with the most votes wins.”

“Much more sensible,” Sansa said, and then seemed to immediately regret speaking, once she felt eyes on her. “It seems more reasonable than having to need the agreement of all members.”

“But the ways of the faith perhaps demand that kind of agreement,” Sam said, looking very satisfied and much calmer than he had been before, now that he’d managed to engage Sansa. Jon could not have loved Sam better than he did in that moment. “It’s not a commander they choose, but someone who will lead people’s souls. According to Maester Elwit, this solution was made to ensure that the choice was up to the gods.”

“Since only an act of the gods could make more than three people agree on anything,” Jon said, raising laughter all around.

“It makes sense!” Sam protested, but Jon just shrugged, happy to let his friend have his way.

“It also misses the point a bit, Sam,” Sansa said gently, immediately snagging Sam’s attention. “Unanimity or not, the choice is not in the gods’ hands, but in those of Most Devout.” Her smile was small, but there was the edge of a tease on her face. “Not quite the same thing.”

“You don’t think much of their practice?”

Sansa met her uncle’s eyes without faltering. “Not at all. I find it noble and sound. In theory. The practice of it is a different matter. They lock the Most Devout in the Great Sept, yes, and the City Watch guards all entrances. But at different points, the Goldcloaks have served the master who paid them best.” She turned to Sam then. “And beneath every voting round, there is another game going on. Estates are pledged, benefices. Documents transferred in the innards of roasted meats. It’s not really a choice for the voice of the gods on earth; it’s a negotiation like any other.”

Silence followed her words, and Sansa seemed to grow uncomfortable the longer it went on.

“But… why?” Sam asked and beside him, Edd shook his head and just kept eating.

“Interest,” Jon immediately said. “Power, prestige, income. There’s a lot to be gained if one has sway with the faith. By the septons themselves, the family they come from, or the one that supported him.”

“Interfering with the matters of the faith is against the law, though. You could get stoned to death for that.”

“Yes. If found guilty,” Jon said and watched Sam frown.

“Are you upset, Sam?” Sansa asked him gently, touching his shoulder as if to soothe him. Sam shrugged. “Just disappointed, I guess. Seems unfair.”

“It is. But it doesn’t happen always. Since King Rhaegar came to the throne, the City Watch has been
much more disciplined and therefore the things that unsavory people could get away with have become far fewer. Especially concerning matters of the faith. Five years ago, the queen petitioned the council of the Most Devout to reinstate the rule that their members had to be chosen from septs all across Westeros, and she had her way. Even White Harbour sends someone now!”

“Truly?” Uncle Benjen seemed as surprised as everyone else. Sansa nodded, and turned to Sam again.

“Yes. Since then it’s been much harder to interfere with the High Septon’s election.” She smiled at him. “No one person can possibly bribe people who come from so many faraway places.”

“Well, that’s good.”

Sansa chuckled. “Yes, it is. The queen is wise in her choices.”

Yes, Jon thought to himself. The queen often was.

“Of course, the wisest course is not to have a need for any of this at all,” Uncle Benjen said then. “There are no septons in the North and we’re all the better for it. There is nothing between you and the gods, you pray in silence, in the privacy of your own thoughts and that’s the end of it.”

“Didn’t northerners use to make blood sacrifices to their gods?” Satin asked in a rush, and then blushed furiously when Jon, Sansa and Benjen looked at him at the same time. But whatever tension there was, Sansa’s laughter defused it immediately.

“Oh yes, we did. Everyone knows that,” Sansa said, smiling for what felt like the first time in days. “The Starks of old would drag their enemies to the foot of the heart tree and offer them to the old gods. Some say the Skagosi still hang the entrails of the condemned on weirwood branches as part of their punishment.”

Uncle Benjen smirked into his cup, and so did some of the men around the fire, but Satin paled considerably, and so did Sam.

“Truly, my lady?” Satin murmured, eyes fixed on Sansa.

“Oh yes. But human sacrifice is an old practice. One that has not been observed in a thousand years or more.” She turned to Satin, eyes dancing with the laughter she was containing. “If it was, I might have dragged one or two of you to the Isle of Faces when we passed it.”

Everyone laughed, even Jon snorted a bit in his drink. But Uncle Benjen did not. He was giving Sansa a strange, fixed look.

She did not notice it, however; she was looking at Satin.

“I don’t mean to offend, my lady. I just don’t understand how one can worship trees.”

“Come sit with me Satin,” she said, patting the space to her right. Satin obeyed.

“It’s not the trees we worship,” Sansa told him once he was seated. “Weirwoods are held sacred to the followers of the old gods because the Children of the Forest believed they were the gods. The faces they carved on the heart trees were put there so that the gods could see and hear us, witness our lives. So that we wouldn’t be alone. Religion in the North has no book of stories and rules, no septons, because it’s not about what happens after death, like with the Seven, or even what happens in life. It’s about memory and how it lives on.”
Sansa nodded. She was so focused on Satin that she didn't seem to notice how everyone else was listening with morbid fascination. Some of Jon’s men were from the North, and you could always tell who they were just by the way they responded to this tale, or any other from their country. But none was paying more close attention than Uncle Benjen, who had stopped eating entirely and seemed not to so much as blink as he listened.

“Yes, memory. The glory of life does not simply melt away in death, to be judged and then set aside. Life closes in death, but it does not end there. It’s not forgotten or lost. It becomes memory and lives on through the gods who dwell in the weirwoods. The heart trees are the bearers of that memory and serve as connections to the land’s power and its past. Our past. They’re alive with it.”

Satin shivered. “Alive?”

Sansa shrugged. “Some say. It seems to be what my ancestors believed, anyway. It’s why they made blood sacrifices: maybe they thought they need to be fed blood to be appeased and since they are tied to the land and the trees, that’s where the sacrifice was to be made. It says something about the kinds of gods they are, doesn’t it?” She leaned into Satin a bit, smiled at him softly, probably to ease the distress that was quite visible on his face.

“But you’d have to see the weeping face of a heart tree to understand what that means, Satin. All their faces look a bit frightened, like they’re in distress. They do look alive, sometimes, the sap coming out of the carved eyes makes them look like they’re weeping blood. It used to scare me witless as a child.”

Satin huffed a breath. “It’s scaring me now, and I am not child.”

Sansa laughed.

“Holding all the history of the world must be distressing,” Sam murmured. “No wonder they’re weeping.”

“I remember as a boy we used to gather in the godswood for feasts. Some called them rituals,” Uncle Benjen said, without looking away from the fire. Some of the northerners around them nodded, smiling. “One is much the same as the other, I suppose. Harvest feasts, common prayers to shorten winters, to celebrate the coming of summer or stave away sickness in spring[1]. My mother headed each and every one of them. The ladies of the house usually do, in the North.”

His grin was wolfish when he looked at Sansa. “They say Stark women of old used to pray to the gods in rituals that would have branded them witches south of the Neck. That if you married one, you might have seven healthy children, but you’d live in fear of her calling lighting down on you, if you displeased her.”

Sansa grinned. “They sound like fearsome creatures to behold.”

Uncle Benjen was still smiling, but it was different now. He nodded, without looking away from Sansa. “They are.”

“Were they witches? Really?” Satin asked, though he asked that of Sansa, not Benjen - he was smart enough to know who of the two would indulge him. And quick, too, as he dodged a slap at the back of the neck from Edd, who was sitting just behind him.

Their antics amused Sansa however, who chuckled.
“Well, I am a Stark and I am a woman. What do you think, Satin?” she asked in a mock whisper. “Am I a witch?”

The tips of Satin’s ears turned red. “No, my Lady. You’re beautiful.”

vii

The closer they got to Riverrun, the more people recognized Sansa Stark. Jon only took them through the Riverroad on the very last day of their journey, yet even so, every merchant, traveler or peasant that caught sight of her on her horse, stopped to stare and then whisper to the people around them. She heard her mother’s name so many times during that one morning, that she felt as if she was fifteen again, newly arrived in the Red Keep, being subjected to the curiosity of a thousand eyes.

The sight of Riverrun, its great walls rising up surrounded by the waters of the Trident, was both a relief and a stone dropping in her stomach. When they finally crossed the bridge and entered the courtyard, and saw who was waiting for them beyond the gates, Sansa almost fell off her horse.

She had not seen her uncle Edmure in years, but immediately she knew who he was. He looked so like Robb, her heart almost jumped out of her throat and right into her hands. The memory came to her unbidden and unstoppable: Robb in the courtyard of Winterfell, smiling as he hugged her goodbye, with snow melting in his hair.

Sansa felt her throat constrict.

However, it wasn’t Uncle Edmure who came forward to greet her first, but a man far older. A man she had seen before in the Red Keep, not even a year ago.

She greeted him with the same smile he was giving her. “Uncle Brynden.”

“My dear girl.”

As the rest of the people in the courtyard straightened from their bows for the prince of the Iron Throne, Brynden Tully helped Sansa from her horse and hugged her close.

Sansa laughed. “It’s so good to see you,” she murmured, face pressed to his chest.

“Aye, it’s good to see you too.” He held her at arm’s length and looked her over. “Though you look much changed.”

“You do not.”

“Ah, you lie prettily.”

“I am most sincere, as you well know.”

She knew Jon had come up behind her, because Brynden’s smile dimmed and he nodded at the prince before greeting him formally. Her uncle Edmure came to them then, and greeted Jon too before he kissed Sansa’s cheeks.

“My father extends his apologies, your grace, niece,” Edmure said, looking at them both by turns, “—for not greeting you himself, but his illness has confined him to his chair these days.”

“No need for apologies,” Jon said quickly. “We ask your hospitality, my lord.”

“It is given,” her uncle Edmure said.
He was more serious greeting Jon than when he had seen her. But then he really took the time to look at her and the affection showed all over his face.

“By the gods, you look so like Cat, I almost thought you were her as I saw you.” He laughed, his blue eyes so full of warmth. “Though of course, despite being all the rage among riding ladies now, Cat would never be caught dead wearing britches and a coat.”

Sansa touched her throat, at the laces of her shirt that showed under her borrowed doublet. “Circumstances dictated it, I’m afraid.”

“Aye, we heard,” the Blackfish said as he looked from Jon to her. “Your ladies and your belongings made it here before you ever did.”

Sansa froze. “Oh, did they? Were they well?”

Ser Brynden shrugged. “As well as can be expected. Certainly looking better than you. Forgive me, niece, but you look exhausted.” He glanced at Jon with a small frown. “I would have thought the prince would keep an easier pace in consideration of you.”

“The prince did, which is why we are so late,” Sansa said immediately, before Jon could so much as open his mouth. She turned a small smile to him. “I’m afraid I slowed us down quite a bit.”

“Not at all,” Jon said dismissively. “We stayed away from the main roads for a great part of the journey for safety, that’s all.”

“It must not have been easy, riding through moors and accommodating a lady,” Ser Brynden said, surprising Sansa a bit. It was unlike her uncle to say something like that.

“I must disagree, Ser,” Jon looked amused at the thought. “I have never seen my men so polite, orderly, or so clean. It has made me think I should always take a highborn lady with me when I travel.”

Sansa rolled her eyes at him, though she saw how Uncle Benjen chuckled under his breath, just before he came over to greet both her uncles.

They were shown inside the moment the order was given for Jon’s men to be accommodated. As Edmure walked beside Jon in front of her, Sansa took Ser Brynden’s arm, who walked slowly for her benefit and chatted her up the entire time.

“The news of your coming was the best we have had in some time, niece. It cheered my brother up considerably,” Ser Brynden smiled at her, patting her arm. “He is very much looking forward to meeting you. But I think you would all benefit from a bit of rest, before you’re fit for company.”

“Is that your generous way of saying we look scandalously unpresentable?” Sansa asked, smiling as she looked at him from the corner of her eye.

“Of course, I would never say such a thing of a lady.”

In front of them, Benjen snorted.

“But you would say it of a prince?” Sansa dared, looking from the Blackfish to the back of Jon’s head.

“I did not,” Brynden reminded her carefully, and Sansa had to bite back her smile.
They were just about to be escorted at two different wings of the castle, so at the mouth of the corridor, Jon turned to look at her, hands behind his back and his face unsmiling, though his eyes were.

“You both know that I can still hear you.”

“Of course, your grace,” Sansa told him, feeling far less guilty at this little game they played, now that there was no one’s life on the line because of her carelessness. “If we are to speak of you behind your back, the least we could do is stay within earshot.”

“Very generous of you.”

“Thank you, I thought so.”

Jon smirked in that way he did, with only one corner of his mouth, before he bowed his head to her and her uncle and turned to the left, Edmure leading him and Uncle Benjen into the guest quarters. Sansa on the other hand turned right, entering the family wing.

“Your grandfather had your mother’s old room prepared for you. It overlooks the river. You will have a wonderful view of the sunrise in the morning.”

“Thank you, uncle.”

“Are you very tired, my dear? You need not attend the feast tonight, if you are.”

“I am not,” Sansa said, and found that she meant it. Jon had been lying when he said that they had not slowed down for her on the last stretch of their journey. She had noticed it, though nobody had mentioned it; they stopped more often, stopped sooner at dusk and started later in the morning. Of course, no one had made her feel like a burden, and for some reason that had made her feel even worse.

“But I so long for a bath, however,” Sansa added, under her breath. “The worst part of traveling like a man, I have found, is that after some time one starts to smell like one.”

Ser Brynden laughed loudly, the sound echoing.

“One should already be waiting for you in your room.”

She turned her head to look at him. “Should I not meet grandfather first? At least just to greet him.”

Her uncle patted her arm soothingly. “Don’t worry. He sleeps this time of the day. Besides – his orders were clear. ‘Greet the prince, settle his men. And give Sansa Stark whatever she wishes for’.”

Sansa looked at him with fond skepticism. “And had I asked for the moon?”

“Difficult,” Brynden decided after a moment. “But not impossible.”

iii.

It took some careful maneuvering to get to have that bath alone. Her ladies were anxious to tend to her – almost as anxious as Sansa was to be away from them. But she did manage by claiming shyness and after they put her clothes out on the bed, they closed the door behind themselves and left.

Sansa stripped of her clothes carefully, put them on the back of a chair so they could be washed and slipped into the hot water with a sigh. For the first long moments, she just submerged herself and
enjoyed the feel of the heat seeping into her body and loosening the knots put there by tension and exertion. Then she took up the white cloth placed by her bath and took meticulous care at cleaning herself. She lathered her hair twice, scrubbed under her nails, her feet, armpits, and between her thighs, and as she emerged from the tub smelling of lemon-flowers, she felt like herself again.

Among her things, carefully stored so that the jars would not spill, she found her ointments and could almost cry from relief. It wasn’t that her old wounds pained her, not really. They had already healed and scarred, but if they were not seen to, the skin chafed and itched horribly, pulling in that unpleasant way that reminded Sansa they were there. And she did not want a reminder.

Afterwards, she lay in bed, trying to rest for a few hours before she had to face the nobility of the Riverlands. Without her meaning to, her eyes kept going to the shirt she had been wearing for the last three days. The lapels, the embroidering on the cuff she could see that she knew matched the one she could not. That mended tear just around her fourth rib to the right, done gracelessly, but efficiently.

She’d meant to ask him for days who had taught him to sew.

Sansa turned her head the other way and closed her eyes. She needed to sleep.

viii.

She met her grandfather in his solar just before the start of the feast. She had chosen a pale blue dress for the night of a satin so fine it shimmered, with white embroidering along the cuffs of the sleeves that resembled a fish’s scales. With her red hair down in waves and the white fine shift peeking beneath the satin as was fashionable, she looked as Tully as she ever had. Her grandfather’s face crumbled a little when he saw her, and Sansa rushed to him, took his hands in hers and kneeled, so that he might look at her face better.

The questions he asked her were all normal and all seemed to fly by, until he got to the one that stunned her.

“And may I ask how you came to be here?”

Sansa blinked but did not let herself show more than that. Pushing the urge to respond with ‘by horse’, she answered. “The prince was kind enough to invite me.”

Ser Brynden, standing by the window closest to them, didn’t bother to hide the disbelief in his tone. “Kind enough?” He turned to face them. “So it was a random invitation?”

“Oh, I doubt that,” Sansa said with a smile. Jon had brought her here with a purpose, and she was sure both her grandfather and her grand-uncle were smart enough to figure that out for themselves.

“No, indeed. And you didn’t say no, when he asked you?”

Sansa tilted her head, considered her grandfather carefully. “Should I have?”

“No, of course not,” her grandfather said quickly. “I’m glad to see you, my dear. You were but a child last I laid eyes on you and look at you now.” His eyes shined as he did just that, the backs of his fingers caressing down her cheek so gently she hardly felt it.

“But you don’t want me here.” She did not need to have this confirmed. They would not have brought it up if it were not so.

“That is not true, niece.”
“You have walked into a complicated situation, Sansa,” Brynden said as he came to sit on the chair next to her.

Sansa set her cup down. “Is it really so bad? From what I understood, the negotiations on the treaty are all but over.”

Brynden snorted. “The Black Prince’s presence is what’s fucking it all up. Begging your pardon, Sansa.”

“I… don’t understand.”

“He’s is the manifestation of the king’s willingness to bend us to his pleasure,” her grandfather said slowly, passing a hand through his white beard, watery blue eyes staring into the distance.

Sansa thought about that a long moment. “Would you rather the king had sent someone else?”

“Hmm, not exactly. He was expected, after all,” her grandfather said slowly.

“He was?” What on earth?

“But he has a reputation for ruthlessness. If Aegon is his heir, Jon is his sword. Expected or not, him being here is as clear a threat as any.”

Sansa did not need to understand all they were saying, to know what they wanted from her.

“When he informed me of the situation, he did not show any inclination to do anything more than persuade all sides to agree with each other,” she told them, looking from one man to the other, waiting.

“His intention to make people agree has never been the problem,” Brynden said. “Rather, the means he employs to get them there.”

Her grandfather hummed.

“Indeed. Yes we shall see, we shall see.” Then he smiled at her, emerging from his thoughts “But for now, we have a feast to get to. And I mean to be the envy of all the men there, with the most beautiful lady in attendance at my side.”

ix.

The feast was exactly as Sansa had expected it would be. She sat by her grandfather’s side in his hall and for the first part of it, she ate her food and carefully listened to her uncle and her grand-uncle as they told her who the lords were, who were their wives and what families they came from. Who had a quarrel with whom; who was allied with whom, and for what gain. Disputed lands, connected families. It was all so familiar; Sansa could already feel the net building in her imagination, one string at a time, connecting them all.

Her grandfather laughed and pointed at the sons, too, inviting the ones who could not stop staring to present themselves to his niece, if they dared. Some did. One by one, she greeted them all, smiled to them all and heard their stories. Commended their wit and bantered with them when she thought she should. Made them all laugh with gentle teasing and harmless stories.

When the time came to dance, Sansa opened the floor with her uncle Edmure, and then did not sit back down for what felt like hours. When she was not dancing, she was being taken by the hand by giggling ladies and being introduced to the daughters and wives of the lords there, answering their
questions, talking of the newest fashions and delighting them with tales of the queen’s wit, the king’s wisdom, the Crown Prince’s kindness and Princess Daenerys’ intrepid riding. It was all such a practiced dance, whose steps she knew so well and thoroughly she did not even think of them anymore. She went from lord to lady all night, until she was convinced she had spoken to everyone, and none of them would leave this hall feeling offended for having been left out of her attention.

They told her things as well, though Sansa knew most of her information would be gathered in the days to come, as she sat down with these women to drink tea and embroider away, or when she went riding with them, invited them to sleep in her rooms and gather flowers with her for her grandfather’s solar like the good lady she was. Already she had enough pastimes planned to fill a week, when she remembered herself and her whole being screeched to a halt.

What was she doing, exactly? She could have forgiven herself for slipping into this creature out of habit, because this was how she’d survived her life for years and years and now it was part of who she was, a part she had accepted. But that was not why she was doing this. She would not lie to herself on that: already she was wondering who would help Jon and who would not, and what they might want in return for changing their mind. And all the while, she did not even know what Jon wanted, not really. She only knew what he had told her. There was a difference.

Sansa neared one of the tables set with drinks and filled a cup with water. Sipped at it slowly.

She knew that if she turned her head to the left just a fraction, she would see him. He had moved from his high table to talk to the lords and ladies in the room just as she had done, but it did not matter how much he moved. Sansa felt like she could find where in the hall he was at any given time. He was like a dark cloud, tugging at the strings of her attention and she knew without a doubt that if she turned now, she would find him staring at her. She could feel his gaze pressing against the side of her face like a touch. He could have been standing an inch from her, his forehead pressed against her temple like that morning, for how keenly she felt him.

It did not disturb her, exactly; though when she allowed herself to really think about it, it thoroughly discomposed her. She knew what it meant, what it felt like, when someone looked at her like they wanted to take something from her, whether she’d allow it or not.

Jon did not look at her like that. Nothing about him was like that, in truth. The way he looked was not about what he wanted from her; it was part of a game he wanted her to join in. Everything he did was like an invitation, a hand stretched palm up, waiting for her to take it.

Sansa turned her head a little, not quite to the side, but enough that she could see him from the corner of her eye. Immediately she looked away, breath caught in her throat, feeling strangely embarrassed that he caught her glance.

Why should she be? she asked herself as she squared her shoulders. If he saw her, it meant he had been looking at her first!

“You look beautiful, cousin.”

Sansa turned to face him. “Thank you, Jon.”

“Blue suits you.”

“Brings out my eyes.”

“I’ve been watching you work. Seeing you turn a room around is truly a thing of beauty.”

She raised her eyebrows at him. “I suppose I should not have expected a remark on the weather or
the décor of the hall from you.”

He tilted his head a bit, the smile on his face faint and crooked, the way she knew it was at his most sincere. “We’re a bit past idle chatting, are we not? I’ve never been fond of it anyway.”

Sansa could not answer. She could only look at him, at his eyes and how startling the grey of them seemed, framed by his dark lashes. How he’d trimmed his beard and tried to tame his hair; how fine a figure he cut standing there and how she could see the whiteness of his shirt peaking beneath his dark maroon doublet. She recognized those stitches.

“I haven’t seen you dance once tonight,” she said, blurt out the first thing that came to mind. “You don’t like to?”

She could tell just by the look on his face, by the way he bit his lip and shook his head, that he wanted to say something, but thought better of it. The part of her that had always demanded lemoncakes as dessert from her parents, was desperate to know what it was.

“I would have, but it would have been a waste of my time,” Jon finally said, looking up. “I could admire you much better from here.”

“Oh, practiced charm,” Sansa drawled, trying hard not to laugh at his face when there were so many people around. “My favorite kind.”

He pursed his lips, hiding his grin. “I’m telling the truth.”

“Perhaps you’re just an awful dancer and you don’t want anyone to know.”

Jon sighed. “I suppose we will never find out.”

Sansa chuckled, disbelieving and, for some reason, wanting to grab and shake him. “Do you really mean to make me ask you?”

“Well, I might say yes if you did.” He inclined his head towards her. “But you will have to ask me nicely.”

She snorted softly and placed her cup on the table again. “I think I’d rather go and find a more willing partner.”

She took a single step away from him when Jon stepped to her left and took her hand, leading her to the group of dancers in the middle of the hall, and Sansa knew – she knew – that he’d done that just so that he wouldn’t have to take her injured hand.

In that moment, she might have loved him.

x.

The very next morning, they broke their fast together in her grandfather’s solar. If Jon had had it his way, they would have been alone. But he could not have it his way, so they were joined by some ladies that had added themselves to Sansa’s company, her grandfather and his son, the Blackfish and Uncle Benjen. Jon did not feel at all guilty for not paying the most attention to the conversation going on around him, since it seemed to range from the boring to the uninteresting.

Instead he thought back to the night before; how he had seen Sansa Stark finally in her element, immersed in the dance of a court that was not hostile to her, but rather thrived at her attention. How she was a master at controlling a hall full of people with difficult tempers and interests and made it
look effortless.

Jon could not help but admire her for it. He always found watching the best at their work a fascinating endeavor. And Sansa was nothing short of a master at her craft. A lady indeed.

She was most herself, however, when she danced, he thought, as he watched her butter her bread and take a small bite, turning to listen with rapt attention at the young girl sitting next to her. Jon might have seen more graceful dancers, but none who seemed to enjoy it quite so much, or who made a more striking sight in their joy.

And nothing compared to the stricken look on her face when he had lifted her by the waist and then set her down on her feet again slowly.

They hardly shared more than five words together, but Jon did not see her again until that night, when he declined the invitation of the river lords to join them for an excursion in the closest town, no doubt to get drunk and visit the closest whorehouse. Instead, he snuck to Sansa’s solar, where he knew she would be.

Jeyne Westerling had been right: she was there and alone, perched on the window seat, sewing. She has not been expecting him, because though she called for him to enter after she knocked, she did not look up from her work until Jon cleared his throat. She did look up then, and promptly winced.

Jon reached her in three strides. “Did you poke yourself?”

“It’s nothing,” Sansa said immediately, sucking at the tip of her finger then looking at him expectantly.

Jon just shrugged. “A little bird told me you’d be having your supper alone. I decided to invite myself to keep you company.”

Sansa rolled her eyes, and continued her sewing as Jon sat himself across from her.

“Jeyne should be more careful.”

“How did you know it was her who told me?”

“You like her better than you like Mariah, so you would ask her first.” She looked at him over her lashes. “That, and Mariah is in the village.”

“I would ask whoever I came across first, actually,” Jon said.

She put down the cloth she had been embroidering and looked him in the eye. “Would you?”

“No,” Jon admitted with a smile. “I like Jeyne Westerling better because she likes you better. She’s more likely not to betray you.”

“That’s right,” Sansa pulled her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, setting her chin on top of her knees to watch him. “So, why are you here Jon?”

“I just told you.”

“You told me what you were doing. Not why.”

“Such a careful lady, aren’t you? Very well. I missed you and did not like to think of you alone.” She laughed at that, but her eyes were kind. “Though if you prefer your solitude, I will leave.”
“No. Stay.”

Jon’s heart lurched a bit in his chest.

Sansa uncurled from her perch on the windowsill and walked to the table in the middle of the room. Poured two glasses of wine. “Tell me of this septon I keep hearing so much about. The one that calls himself the Sparrow.”

So he did.

They had finished their meal hours ago but had not moved from the table. Jon watched her shred the orange peel in her hands into tiny little pieces as she thought over all that he had told her.

“So - half the lords in attendance last night used the Sparrow to oust the merchants from the Westerlands who had settled in the Riverlands,” she said, concise. “And now they find themselves with a fanatic of their own making on their hands.”

“That would be the short of it, yes.”

“I wonder…” but she did not explain what it was she wondered, eyes staring into the void for long moments before they came back to his. “This man would not be so sure in his foothold, had he not been backed by these same men and used to do their dirty work. What they did should be illegal. Mass displacement of a population is punishable by the king’s law.”

“It would have been, had the river lords done it themselves.” Jon nodded. “But they didn’t, did they?”

“And now they want you to rid them of their trouble? In exchange for signing the treaty?”

Jon sighed and leaned back on his chair. “I doubt that will be the end of it. It’s bound to be part of the negotiation, however.”

“Part of it. What is the other part?”

“Don’t know. We meet tomorrow, immediately after we break our fast.” Jon sat up, folded his arms on the table. “I would like you to be there.”

He watched a small smile stretch on her lips. In the candlelight, half her face was in the shadow, the other half looked like it was made of milk and flames.

“My grandfather wanted the same thing,” she told him. “I think he expects me to negotiate on his side.”

“He is a wise man.”

She chuckled. Leaned her cheek on her hand as she looked at him with heavy-lidded eyes that glinted in the low light. The way she considered him tightened the already tense chord curled inside him.

Jon moved a bit in his seat, trying to find his comfort again.

“I find myself conflicted.”

“My interest and his are not in conflict,” Jon said then, reaching for his wine even though he knew
he should not. He needed to be sharp around her, if only because she looked so good like this, relaxed and calm, that all he wanted was to cross the distance around them and bury his head between her thighs for an hour.

“My grandfather doesn’t think so. They are very suspicious of you, though I did assure them that you are nothing but a gentleman.”

“Thank you.”

“So my question is, why I should help you at all?”

“I would be in your debt,” Jon said immediately. Anyone who had ever known him would never have believed the words had slipped past his lips so easily, but they did.

“Would you? What a fascinating perspective.”

“I know men who would kill for the opportunity.”

She chuckled. “Of having you owe them something?”

“Yes. All those people that you asked about me, they had nothing to say about my efficiency?”

“Some. But I also know that the only way to make someone pay their debt is to be able to hold such a thing over them. It requires reciprocity; an equal standing. I have neither, therefore you being in my debt is a promise I cannot force you to keep.”

“You would have my word.”

“Yes, I would, wouldn’t I? I admit I am tempted,” she said as she straightened her head and put her chin on her hand instead, without looking away from him. She said she was tempted but Jon knew it was a lie. This whole thing was a game – whatever Sansa was going to do, she had already decided. This was not about her making up her mind. Though Jon had to admit, whatever her reasons, he was enjoying her attention. She was looking at him so intently, hardly blinking at all, though there was a laziness to her manner that made the whole thing appear more than just careful. Being the center of her undivided attention like this, like she wanted to eat him whole, was more intoxicating than the wine.

Jon, for his part, remained calm as ever. As if not having her fold for him immediately did not bother him at all. As if it did not matter that she was practically going back on her own word, the one she had given when they had made their bet that day on the shores of the Blackwater.

“You did not tell me the truth of why you brought me here, however,” she said, expecting him to remember. To know what she was talking about.

For the first time, Jon frowned. “I did not lie to you.”

“No, but it wasn’t the whole truth either: You don’t want me to just smile and charm my way through my grandfather’s bannermen. You want me to spy on them through their wives and daughters.”

Jon took a deep breath. “I just want to understand them, that’s all.”

“Understand what they want, you mean. To better manipulate them.”

Jon thought this over a moment then shrugged, as if she’d just guessed a game and nothing more. He
said nothing, nor did he look like he was going to. So Sansa rose to her feet, surprising him, and closed the distance between them. She stopped when she was standing just over him, and leaned against the edge of the table, hands folded in front of her, looking at him as if she wanted nothing better than to look inside his skull for answers instead of having to extract them from his lips one by one. Jon for his part hadn’t moved at all but to tilt his head up a bit to better see her.

“Why are you silent?”

She almost looked angry at him. Jon was stunned. “What would you have me say?”

“You could demand I do your bidding. You could threaten me.”

“Why the fuck would I do that?” He said it around a small laugh, as if the prospect was the height of stupidity.

“Because you can! Because you need something done and I am vexing your patience.

“You obviously don’t know the depth of my patience.”

No, but she was starting to get an idea. “Because I am in the palm of your hand!”

Jon tilted his head to the side a bit, smiled at her in that gentle way of his that she had not seen but directed at her own self.

“Then it would be quite cruel to force you, would it not?”

Sansa scoffed. “What, you’ve never forced anyone to do as you commanded before?”

“I have, when I’ve needed to. It has never been my opening move, despite what anyone says.” Jon straightened on his chair then, ending up much closer to her than she had anticipated he’d be. She glanced down at his lips and then back into his eyes, startled.

“And if you were in the palm of my hand,” he whispered, smile never faltering, “then I would hold you gently.”

Sansa rose to her feet. She felt too restless to stand still so she crossed the room to stand in front of the unlit fireplace.

“You seem unhappy with my answer.”

“Young answer does you credit, but you must understand helplessness very little, if you expect me to be grateful for the mercy of not being crushed.”

“Yes.” The word was spoken so close to her, she felt it crawl up the back of her neck, as present and real as a touch. She had not even heard him move. “And words whispered through prison bars lose their charm, don’t they?”

Sansa did not answer. She was starting to feel that she was losing her footing with him again.

“Though I would remind you that I did not ask for your gratitude. You were the one who demanded my reasons. It wasn’t something I was going to hold over you.” She could hear the smile in his words. “You’re just angry because you can’t immediately figure out why.”

Sansa turned to face him.

“I am, yeah.” She admitted it freely. Angrily. Openly. “And what would the king have to say about
“your conduct in this matter?”

Jon shrugged. “What the king doesn’t know can’t hurt him. And since the king and his council did not see your value, then I feel no guilt in not having them benefit from it.”

“They don’t see my value. But you do?”

“I see it better than they do, I think.”

“And you like what you see.”

Jon smiled at her. He looked her over from the hem of her skirt, so artfully chosen to mirror the simple style of the Riverlands, to the tip of her nose, her eyes, her round mouth and that freckle at the bow of her lips.

“I like you very much. And I think you like me, as well.”

Her eyes narrowed on him.

“You’re very presumptuous.” But she did not sound any particular way about it. She was stating fact.

“I can be. But not in this, am I?”

“I don’t know,” she finally said as she sat down on the double seat by the fire, though she was smiling as she spoke. “I’ll have to think about it.”

Sansa said nothing for long moments, just looked at him. Jon waited, hands linked behind his back so that she could not see the tension in his curled fist. Especially when her composure looked so easy, so natural, as if there was little beneath that could ever be disturbed.

“You haven’t asked,” she said without preamble, so softly it was almost a whisper.

Jon frowned, not understanding.

“Everyone asks, sooner or later.” She licked her lips, uncomfortable but pressing on regardless. “About my hand. And you’ve seen more than most. But you haven’t asked.”

Jon fought the urge to scowl. “You will tell me when you want to tell me. Or you won’t.” He shrugged. “I certainly won’t force my morbid curiosity on you.”

Of course not, Sansa thought. He was proving to be, in every way, an unopened box. Every time she thought she had figured him out, he found a way to surprise her again.

“Thank you, Jon.”

“No need for that.”

“Right. Of course not. Well, I have decided that I will help you.”

“Wonderful.”

“But I want to read the treaty first. And I want you to promise to answer any questions I have truthfully.”

“I agree, and I accept.” He held out his hand so they could shake on it. Sansa put her hand in his
with a small smile.

“Shall we part as friends, then?”

Jon laughed. “We’re not parting.”

Her smile became a grin. “Right.”

“But we are reconciled?”

“Yes.” Though the more Sansa thought about it, the less it felt true, simply because she did not feel like she had truly been at odds with him. Her quarrel had been with herself more than anyone else.

Jon nodded slowly, and then gently pulled her hand towards him, until the back of her hand pressed against this chest. He held her so loosely, she could have withdrawn whenever she wanted, but she did not. She only looked, and waited.

“You should not be ashamed of your scars. They are proof that someone hurt you, and you survived. There is no shame in that.”

Sansa lifted her chin a fraction.

“I know.” One corner of her lips, that place that usually gave away her feelings when she wanted to hide them, curved up a little. “I am not ashamed. I’d just…rather not have to deal with the attention.”

She’d rather not deal with the questions that everyone felt so entitled to ask, she found it strange when one person did not. The thought made him angry, but that was not the point at the moment. It was something else that he needed to tell her. That he had needed to even since he saw the smooth expanse of her back and the scars dotted across it cruelly.

“It’s dangerous to let people forget who you are, Sansa.”

“For you, maybe. Not for me. I am happy to let them forget.”

Jon shook his head. “Underestimation only goes so far. It is safer for your enemies to fear you; they will dare less.”

“I would have thought it would be better not to have any enemies.”

They chuckled together at that.

“Do tell, if you ever manage that.”

Sansa lowered her voice, as if she was confessing a secret. “And it is better for one’s enemies to dare more, and more recklessly, less prepared for what they’re facing. It makes them far easier to deal with. I think you of all people would agree with that.”

Jon had to rein in the urge to take her face in his hands. He might have explained it away a thousand ways but the simple truth was that he just wanted to touch her. She was so close he felt her breaths fanning across his face, the warm scent of flowers coming from her hair and her skin overwhelming him, heady, going straight to his head. Still, he wanted her closer.

He wanted to laugh.

“What?”
“Nothing,” Jon answered. “I was thinking how wrong I have been.”

“About what?”

“I thought we were so different, you and I.” He pressed his forehead against hers for a moment before straightening again, and grinned when she did not even blink at the closeness, like she didn’t notice at all. Like it was normal enough that it did not even crack her calm, let alone break it. “But we’re the same. We’ve just had to survive the world in different ways, that’s all.”

Her smile fell a little. He could see her mind turning, working on his words, dismantling them. The elation left him as he watched her grow serious.

“Does that upset you?”

“No.” She said it without hesitation. “I was just thinking of what that meant.”

She took a deep breath and Jon felt her hand slip from his. “Goodnight, Jon. Thank you for your company.”

Jon leaned down, kissed her cheek lightly. Felt her breath hitch and lingered as he took a deep breath of her. “Goodnight, Sansa.”

Jon didn’t even remember how exactly he made his way to his room, only that he did. He stripped and fell into his bed, knowing sleep would be difficult. How would she like to be kissed? It was an obsessive thought, one that had not left him alone all evening, drumming against his forehead, demanding to be acknowledged. Now that he let it loose, others followed, one more obscene than the next, banging loudly against the inside of his skull, making the muscles low on his belly twitch.

What would she sound like?

He could almost imagine it, she was so close to the surface of his imagination.

She had a wonderful mouth and he wanted to kiss her so badly it had turned into a physical ache, one that had nothing to do with his cock and everything to do with the fact that he knew – he could feel it – that Sansa Stark would like to be kissed for hours. And he would.

He’d bet his life her cunt tasted delicious.

Jon groaned, laughing at himself as he shoved his face against a pillow, telling himself to get a fucking grip. He was no boy of thirteen anymore and he had no intention of having a wank at the thought of Sansa Stark for fuck’s sake.

He fell asleep that way, with his face shoved in a pillow and a straining cock pressing against the featherbed. So it was no wonder that she entered his dreams too, red hair like a cloud around him, her arms and her thighs around him, and kissed him there as well.

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[1] **THIS** is what I imagine her wearing. Not period appropriate either lol, but it was the only photo I could think of, of a woman dressed in men’s clothes. (by the way, that’s my tumblr – you can talk to me there at any time.)

Inspired generally, and this bit specifically, by this post, which inspired a great deal of one particular plot point.

The title of this chapter is from this moment right. I was going to call this chapter something else, but then I came to this part and I realized that I couldn’t – that it had to be this and the culmination of their realization: that they’re different and the same, at the same time ;
Chapter Notes

Note: I know these notes go in the end of a story usually, but whatever. I just really want to thank you guys who have continually given me such encouragement and praise, and just a lot of love. Your wonderful feedback has really helped me move this story forward at a pace that has really been strange and unusual for me. I haven’t written like this in years and I honestly think that 50% of that is due to the support you guys have constantly give me. Thank you so much.

Also, an apology: I edit this myself, and because I’m not patient enough to like, wait a week and then go back to the new chapter and edit once I have some distance, this story has a lot of annoying typos and the like. Once im done, I will go back and polish, but for now, im trying to avoid feeding my perfectionism that way because I know it will inevitably make me get stuck.

vi. blood of Winterfell

"I sleep. I dream. I make things up that I would never say. I say them very quietly."

Richard Silken

i.

When Jon walked into the hall in which the lords were to gather that morning, he had expected to be the only one there, but he was greeted by the sight of the Lord of Riverrun and his son, speaking in low voices to each other. They had already taken their seats, Hoster Tully at the head of the table and Edmure to his right. The snow white hair and beard made Hoster Tully’s lined face look leathery, and though old age had made his deep-set eyes look watery, they were still a startling blue, and they glinted with sharp intelligence.

Jon walked forward and bowed his head to father and son both. “My lords.”

“Young Prince. Please, take a seat. As our guest of honor, I have reserved the seat to my left for you.”
Edmure rose. “I will bring them in.”

“Yes.” The old man hummed, following his son’s retreating back until the door closed. Then he turned to Jon. “I hope my hospitality has been to your satisfaction, your grace.”

“Unfailingly so, my lord.”

“I hear you have struck a friendship with my granddaughter.”

Jon knew better than to show any reaction. “I have.”

“And what is your interest?”

Jon raised his eyebrows just a little. “Sansa is my cousin. We are family.”

“Hmm. Is that why the King sent you to settle this dispute? Because you are her family and therefore I should consider you as good as my family?”

Jon contained his snort, but let his disbelief reflect on his face. “I do not think, Lord Hoster, that that was the king’s intent.”

“And what of your intent?” Hoster Tully leaned his head against the back of his high chair and looked at Jon, raising his bushy eyebrows as he did so. “Your intent in bringing my granddaughter here with you.”

Jon looked at his host with subtle surprise.

“She spoke fondly of Riverrun. I thought it only courteous to invite her along, since I was coming here.”

Lord Tully chuckled, wheezing a little. “Yes, courteous. That is what you’re known for.” And then immediately, and quite reminiscently of his granddaughter: “Is it true you killed a man for thinking you were named Blackfyre, years ago?”

“No.” Jon kept calm deliberately. “I killed him because he thought to speak of my mother in a way no man should ever speak of a lady.”

Jon sat down; set the documents he had been carrying on the table, before he carefully poured himself some tea, instead of wine. The old man wanted to provoke him, but this would not be the hill Jon chose to die on, out of spite if nothing else. If Hoster Tully wanted to test his boundaries, he would have to try a bit harder.

“Of course, of course. Ungallant. So it was not because he called you a bastard?”

“Not at all. I’ve never cared what people called me,” Jon said with a shrug. He met Lord Tully’s eyes squarely. “Though everyone else always seems to.”

“Cannot blame them. The last time someone with your judicial status was as close as you are to the Iron Throne, there was war in this country that lasted a generation.”

Jon allowed one corner of his lips to curl upwards. Judicial status! The old fart had jokes.

“So everyone tells me. Though I’ve never been good at knowing whether the people speaking thus are issuing a threat to my life, or speaking treason to me.”

Lord Hoster’s laugh was a dry, scratchy thing. “Very well, very well. So the king has not sent you
here to test your mettle after all.”

Jon smiled thinly. “I wouldn’t say that: I learn something new every day. It’s the beauty of living. But I have come here to see how I can be of assistance.”

Hoster Tully chuckled. “Ah, assistance. The world keeps changing but some things remain ever constant. It is a comfort,” he spoke as if he was giving Jon advice, but his eyes were ice cold. “When it is not a terror.”

The double doors opened, and Edmure came through, followed by the Blackfish and other lords, with Sansa among them, who seemed to be deep in discussion with the Blackwood heir and his father.

Jon sat up.

“My lords!” Hoster Tully called, scratchy voice surprisingly strong. “Let us all be seated and begin this dull affair.”

Sansa glanced at her grandfather but gave no more sign of her surprise than that. She walked to her uncle’s side, who pulled out the chair immediately to his right and offered it to her as the Blackfish sat down at her other side. Just as she took her seat the other twelve or so lords took their own, in far less graceful a fashion. And then, the negotiations started.

ii

It was past their second meal of the day, which they all took at the same table they had been sitting since morning, that Jon realized two very important things.

The first was that he would have to negotiate himself with at least six of these quarrelsome lords, who understood he was there only to get them to sign the treaty and wanted to exploit this unexpected need to the best of their ability. They were delicate but not quite unreadable in their willingness to even engage him in singlehanded negotiations without bringing their Lord Paramount into it, even though Hoster Tully was sitting there with them. And for his part, Lord Tully seemed all too happy to let Jon wrestle with his lords and left this part of the unpleasantness to him with a satisfied look on his face that meant he knew exactly what he was doing.

The second – and most important - was that the real reason why he had been brought here was not the treaty at all, but this septon that called himself the Sparrow, whose zealous preaching had incensed the people in the south and north of the Riverlands to the point where the lords around the table were dreading an uprising.

“Now they have taken over Fairmarket and north of the Green Fork. They spread like a disease, burning books and clothes and whatever else of value they find, calling them ‘vanities’ that partake in the corruption of the soul,” one of the Freys said scornfully.

What he did not mention, but everyone around that table understood, was that if these people so chose, controlling the Green Fork could mean choking the river of trade. By the few of his sermons that they had read and passed around the table, was easy to discern that this Sparrow was not a man of half-measures who failed to understand that he was putting people in danger by provoking the lords with his extremism.

“This leech speaks of the Riverlands as if the very land was born inside of him,” Lord Lothson scoffed. “But he was born a stone’s throw away from Old Oak! A reachman! And has been in
residence in the Riverlands for a mere twelve years. Compared to centuries of my family.”

“And mine.” Another voice came from down the table, to the cheering of most there.

“Yet you supported him, initially. All of you, did you not?” Jon said flatly. The silence that followed his words was tense. Jon did not react at all to the looks of surprise he got, but rather took note of those that seemed nonplussed that he had that information.

“Allow me to be clear, my lords,” Jon continued. “You are in a tariff war with the Westerlands and the king has decreed that merchandise from the Riverlands will be banned from the Crownlands and anywhere south of them until this matter is settled and the treaty with the Crown is signed.”

The response was a riotous as Jon expected.

“That will ruin us!”

“Every nobleman and merchant and pauper must share responsibility. And as for this Sparrow - he remains in power by your support,” Jon said firmly, looking at them one by one.

“Your grace, we simply wished to rid ourselves of overbearing influence of the westerlanders. That cause was no less desperate.”

Jon nodded, mouth set in a firm line. “Yes. And hindsight is a great thing, isn’t it? Wonderful thing. Unfortunately it usually comes far too fucking late. Begging your pardon, my lady,” he added absentmindedly.

Sansa merely waved his words away, her eyes sharp as she took in the conversation.

“We would gladly have them back now,” one of the men said.

The Blackfish snorted. “Much good may that do you.”

“I am also starting to understand, my lords, that the real reason I am here is to deal with a problem that none of you seems to want to touch.”

“Matters of the faith fall under the jurisdiction of the Crown, do they not?” Hoster Tully asked. “Since the Crown is the protector of the faith.”

“We would be violating the king’s law by ridding ourselves of this septon, who could then hold us accountable in front of the king and the High Septon for encroaching on his rights,” Edmure added, looking from his father to Jon, who shook his head.

And if that Sparrow did that, the people of the Riverlands, devoted as they were, might string one lord or two up by their feet for their trouble, Jon thought.

“So a representative of the king should then deal with the man. I understand,” Jon finished their reasoning for them, leaning back on his seat. In truth, he rather liked the open-handed way that they presented themselves. He rather liked a straightforward deal.

“I’m glad that you do, your grace, since the situation is more dire that it appears,” Lord Vance said, his black eyes steady on Jon’s. His lands were just south of the Oldstones, so Jon could understand his intensity. “The Sparrow has his followers, who are organized. And I have met with the man on many occasions: he will not be moved unless a mountain falls upon him, and he incites violence at every turn.”
“The High Septon must have him excommunicated,” Lord Mooton proposed.

The Frey man banged his fist on the table. “I second that.”

“I do not!” Jon and Ser Brynden said within the same breath. They shared a look, both surprised to find each other in agreement despite their mutual dislike.

“Why ever not?” Stefron Frey asked, looking from one to the other. But before either could speak, Hoster Tully did.

“There is no High Septon yet, for one. And the king’s first act upon the choosing of one cannot be to ask for the excommunication of one of his brothers,” Jon explained. But that was not even the half of it.

"And what is your opinion, Lady Stark?” Lord Hoster asked, turning to look at his granddaughter.

There were papers spread out in front of Sansa. As the discussion went on, she had read the copies of the septon’s sermons that the lords had supplied; and not just one or two as they were passed around the table, but all of them. She seemed to have divided into three separate piles now that she was done and glanced at them before she answered.

“I stand with Ser Brynden and Prince Jon, my lord,” she said, her voice calm and composed.

Hoster Tully leaned forward, both hands folded on top of his cane. “Tell me why, granddaughter.”

"From his sermons and how you all speak of him, he sounds like a man who would happily die a martyr," Sansa said carefully.

Jon nodded. "Yes. He’s practically been begging for it.'

"It would prove right what he has been saying about the corruption in the faith and the capitol’s interference," Brynden grunted.

“And thus catapult him into greater glory,” Sansa added, as the Blackfish nodded.

"Not to mention that it wouldn’t even shut him up. He’d just move his sermons in the town squares,” Jon said and Sansa nodded just as he did.

“And build a bigger bonfire[1],” she added.

Someone down the table chuckled. “Can the lady now predict the future?”

The looks Edmure, Brynden and Jon threw down the table would have curdled milk, but before any of them could so much as open their mouths, Hoster Tully slammed his cane on the table with surprising strength and so suddenly, that it startled even Jon, whose hand immediately went to his belt, grasping the hilt of his dagger. The beautifully carved fish handle of Lord Hoster’s cane broke in two. One half fell to the floor, the other slid down the mahogany surface of the table all the way to the middle of it.

In the silence that followed you could have heard a butterfly flap its wings.

“Young Master Frey,” Hoster Tully said calmly, as if nothing at all had just happened. “You will address Lady Stark with the respect that is due to her, or you will be escorted from my hall and never
“I mean no offence to the lady, who is a charming creature. But she is not of the Riverlands. One might be pressed to ask oneself why her voice should be heard in such an internal matter.”

“So not only do you insult my granddaughter and guest, in my own hall, but you also question my judgment?” Hoster asked quietly, and Jon had to admire the threat that lay just beneath that calm.

“No, my Lord, I-”

“Lady Stark is my sister’s daughter,” Edmure said, interrupting Stefron Frey curtly. “And until such a time as I marry and have sons and daughters of my own, she is my heir. Therefore her voice shall be heard.”

“You have two brothers; do you not, my Lady?” Roger Piper asked after a moment, looking genuinely confused.

“Three, my lord, but the North follows absolute primogeniture in all matters of inheritance.” Sansa’s smile was faint, and did not reach her eyes. “I know it is not the same in the Riverlands, but what my grandfather meant, I think, is that in the highly unlikely case where my uncle does not marry and have his own heirs, it might insult my father to claim one of his children and snub another, insulting the custom that of his people have followed since the days of the Dawn Age[4].”

“And do we not get a say in the matter, since the northern custom is now being observed in the south?”

“You obviously only use that hole on your face to shove food in and spout shit out, Frey,” the Blackfish growled.

Stefron Frey rose to his feet. “I will not be spoken to in that manner, Ser!”

“You will be spoken to however I fucking please, after you’ve insulted my blood twice under my own roof!”

Sansa rose to her feet slowly. “My lords!”

She had not raised her voice exactly, but the firmness of her tone was so unexpected to the men there that it got their attention. The moment it did, she softened it with a smile.

“It is plain to see that our tempers are frayed. I am certain that Lord Frey, being a courteous lord, only meant to sincerely expand his own understanding of the matter.”

She paused, waited, eyes fixed and unblinking on Stefron Frey, who rose and bowed. His little ferret face twitched into a smile that was anything but sincere. Jon’s hand itched for his dagger. He might cut that little smirk a bit wider into his face, if the Frey was so fond of keeping it there.

“As my lady says. I meant no offence and I sincerely apologize, if I have given any.”

“Not at all, my lord,” Sansa said after a moment.

“Ignorance is certainly something that cannot be held against you, Stefron,” Lord Vance said, raising a few chuckles up and down the table, diffusing the tension and making the Frey’s ears redden.

“We are all tired it seems, and would benefit from a reprieve,” Sansa added gently.
Hoster Whent rose to his feet. He was a massive man, tall with wide shoulders and a black beard that had not given way to age even though his hair had started to grey. “My lady, your gentle touch commands obedience.”

The rest of the men rose to their feet and bowed to their lord, before leaving the room.

Sansa sat back down on her seat heavily, once the last of them left the hall and a servant closed the doors behind them.

“Well, at least it only fell apart at the end,” she said with a sigh.

Hoster chuckled. “My dear, no one was punched in the face and there were raised voices only five times. It was a stunning success.”

“Stefron Frey needs a lesson in manners.” Jon said, teeth gritted tightly around the words.

The Blackfish seemed unimpressed, as he took a gulp of his wine. “Good luck with that.”

“I don’t need luck.” Jon said darkly, making Sansa look at him.

He looked away quickly. “So. I rid you of the fanatic. You sign the treaty? That about it?”

Hoster Tully nodded, as if it had been obvious the whole time. “In a nutshell, yes.”

iii

He had found her on the battlements of the western tower, watching the sun go down over the Trident. Jon knew she was aware he was there. Sansa was always aware of who came and went around her – she hated it especially when people moved where she could not see them. He noticed it every time she straightened, shoulders tense, every time someone stepped behind her back. It was an instinct he was far too familiar with not to recognize it in someone else.

She was quiet and very still, leaning against the parapet with her chin resting on her folded arms. The sunlight reflected on the river as if it was made of jewels and washed the forest in gold and reds. She watched the sun dip beneath the horizon and Jon watched her, as the last of the daylight kissed her golden.

“I think you need to meet him yourself,” Sansa said without looking at him. “See what kind of a man he is.”

“The Sparrow.”

Sansa nodded, a small line appearing between her brows the way it did when she was thinking hard about something. “There is something there in his sermons.”

“What?”

She turned to look at him. “Something true.”

Jon felt his eyebrows go up. “What do you mean?”

She reached into her pockets and pulled out a piece of paper Jon recognized, and started reading.

“Do you believe the gods would deceive us? No, and neither do I. Their light shines true. But you do wonder what their light illuminates. And I answer to you: King’s Landing! This city’s winding
streets and dark recesses, in which shadows are cast, not by buildings but by people. A city where
there are more whores than there are septons in the whole of Westeros and where a woman may
adorn her vanity with a year’s worth of a seamstress’ work, and then throw it away. King’s Landing
where the culture of sin extends all the way to the great Sept of Baelor, where High Septons do their
masters’ will instead of the gods, and bring the whole faith into their level of debauchery, watching
as the people’s souls wither, and they starve of justice and protection.”

Sansa looked up; folding the letter and putting it back into her pocket. “This is a far more dangerous
man than the river lords are letting on. They know it too – that’s why they’re so willing to pass it to
my grandfather to deal with, who was happy enough to pass it to you.”

“He’s a fanatic.”

“A fanatic who denounces the corruption of the faith, the interference of others in its matters. Who
cries out for justice, as if the faith is supposed to give it to them.”

It dawned on him quickly, what she meant. “You think he wants to bring back the Faith Militant?”

Sansa shrugged. “Lord Vance said that his followers are organized. Still, my personal views on this
aside, both the High Sparrow and King’s Landing are too far away to be the real reasons why he
makes these kinds of speeches, Jon. The real one must be closer to home. Why is he speaking about
lack of justice and why are people are following him, if they don’t think it’s true?”

“Whatever point he might have does not give him the right to incite people to violence.” Jon stepped
closer to her and lowered his voice. “The river lords are happy to leave this to me because they
would benefit either way: if I succeed, they are safe. If I fail, they can point people’s scorn to the
Crown and the Black Dragon. But if there is an uprising and people with steel clash with people
without, what do you think will happen, Sansa?”

“But don’t you think this deserves some attention?” Sansa insisted. “People who have these kinds of
words risk their lives. I do not believe they ever do that lightly.”

Jon sighed and leaned against the parapet, crossing his arms. “No, you’re right. I need to see this man
for myself.”

The last of the day died around them as they stood there keeping each other company in silence.
Slowly, the night came and one by one, stars started appearing into the sky. Jon knew they would
have to go down to join the others in the Great Hall soon, but the truth was, he had little patience left
for people. He’d rather just stay up here in silence with Sansa than risk stabbing a fork into Stefron
Frey’s hand for whatever horseshit was bound to come out of his mouth.

“What are your personal views?”

Sansa seemed puzzled. “On what?”

“Do you think the king’s justice had failed in the Riverlands?”

Sansa looked away from him, choosing to stare at the horizon instead. “I don’t know enough about
the Riverlands to answer you that. Though I am learning.”

“And what have you learned so far?”

“Very little, in truth.”

Jon laughed. “Stop avoiding my question.”
“I’m not. I don’t understand your question, it’s too vague.” She looked at him. “What you mean by the king’s justice? Define justice, even. What does it look like to you, when it fails? Narrow down the Riverlands, as well, and maybe then I will be able to answer.”

Jon watched her profile, how her brows were furrowed, her downturned mouth. He should not be speaking of justice to Sansa Stark. She might suggest he should bring her his father’s head - who should he be loyal to then?

“Do you know Maege Mormont?”

“I do.” He’d met her once but she’d made an impression, and so had her eldest daughter, who had almost knocked him into the dirt in the training yard of Winterfell.

“She had a nephew once, who was lord of Bear Island before her. Jorah Mormont. He fought with my father at the Trident. He was one of the first men through the breach at the Siege of Pyke. He was knighted by the king himself for his bravery. A war hero. Renowned warrior. Respected man. Beloved lord.” She wasn’t looking at him still, but the words came smoothly out of her mouth, if only with a slight bite of anger. “Nearly six years ago, my father learned he had been selling poachers to a Tyroshi slaver.”

Jon straightened, hands balling into fists unconsciously before he forced himself to relax again. No, he had not known that.

“The trial was held in the great hall at Winterfell, just days before I was to leave for the capitol. The people testifying against Jorah Mormont were peasants. I remember I thought they looked dirty, and smelled bad. And I was sullen, because I was leaving and my father had to divide his attentions between me and these people who had no manners, rough speech, and who looked like they’d been wearing the same rags for a year.”

She bit her lip, shook her head.

“The accusations were confirmed by secondary witnesses, so my father condemned Jorah Mormont to death. He went to Bear Island to execute him himself, but Lord Mormont had chosen exile. Should he ever return, what do you think will happen to him?”

Jon didn’t even need to think about it. “Ned Stark will have his head.”

“Or Robb Stark. Or whoever comes after him.” Sansa finally turned her head to meet his eyes. She was not quite scowling, she was too careful for that, but the intensity of her feelings almost made her eyes glint in the half light.

Yes, Jon understood her perfectly. He understood what it meant, when a peasant could go in front of the Lord of Winterfell, accuse another head of a house of a capital crime, and when that accusation be proven true, what it meant for a people that consequences should follow. But Sansa was wrong in one respect. It was not the king’s justice that Eddard Stark followed, but Stark justice, or he would not have traveled all the way to Bear Island to take that man’s head himself. And Starks’ idea of justice was inescapable. As implacable as the winter they had been warning about since the beginning of time.

“If that is your idea of justice, then undoubtedly, it has failed in the Riverlands,” Jon told her, and then felt foolish for stating the obvious. “But then again, justice fails because people fail. There is something monstrous in all of us, and you can see it best when we tread around those we think as lesser.”
Sansa pursed her lips, but said nothing.

“You don’t agree.”

“No, I don’t. Justice fails because more often than not, those whose hands have to guard it are the ones who benefit the most when it fails. It’s not about the people. It’s about the structure.” She sighed then, and rolled her eyes as if she was telling herself to stop taking herself so seriously. “What do I know anyway? Half the time I don’t think understand people or how we live at all.”

“Not your fault. So many of us don’t understand ourselves.”

“Or maybe I understand them just fine, but don’t like them very much. So I pretend.” She may have been smiling then but it was sad. Sad and lonely. “We fear what we do not know, instead of being curious. We hate what is not like us. And we hate ourselves most of all, don’t we? The scorn that it’s acceptable to show for the weak, for the old, for those in need, is unlike anything I have ever seen. It’s as if we hate the most that which in us is most human.”

Her eyes were wide with both passion and incredulity when she looked at him. “How does that make any sense?”

Jon had no answer for her, except for the obvious. “It doesn’t.”

But that did not satisfy or impress her. “You were right: there is something monstrous in all of us.”

“In some more than others.”

“Is that what you think of yourself?” She asked him then, after looking at him for so long he thought she took his words and turned them in her head until she’d considered them from all angles.

Jon did not answer her immediately. He thought about it, pondering whether or not he wanted to tell her the truth.

“Sometimes.” He finally admitted.

“Then it will be true, as long as you think it[7].”

There was not an ounce of pity in her. Only a fact.

Jon licked his lips, trying to order his thoughts into a coherent explanation for her as he turned to face her fully. An explanation he had never tried to find, for something he had never felt compelled to share with anyone. Until now.

“I know you think nothing is inescapable but some things are just… part of who we are. It’s like getting a scar: you may heal but the flesh will never be the same. Even if it’s harder, it will still be different. All the things that mark us - they pile up inside us and they keep, like a candle resting over in a pot wildfire; just waiting to ignite the flames.”

Her eyes had gone wide, with shock or fear, he could not tell.

“And when they do?” she asked in a whisper.

“Then we are most ourselves, aren’t we? Free.”

iv
“Free?” Sansa repeated the word as if she did not understand it.

“You don’t think so?”

She shook her head. “No.” No, she did not. “The true path to freedom cannot be to giving in to our every worst impulse. It cannot be at the expense of everyone else around us.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” Jon said with a small frown, as if he was surprised that her mind went there, instead of into some place less extreme. “But neither can those impulses be repressed forever. We have to be honest with ourselves about who we are.”

Sansa fiddled with the ring on her forefinger. “I don’t want to give in to my worst impulses and call it coherence. It feels self-indulgent. It doesn’t feel like a place you can walk into, and then be able to walk back as you were.”

Something about that touched him the wrong way. Sansa knew it did because he looked away from her.

“No you’re right. No one walks back the same. Is it fear of that, that is holding you back?”

This time she did look up. Resolute. This she knew.

“No.” It had never been fear. That was not the word for it. “If it were, I would have already walked past it. It’s common sense: freedom without rules is chaos.”

Jon laughed a little, as if he had expected the answer and did not like it.

“But how do you know that those rules are just, if they were given to you by a world that – you said it yourself – makes no sense? Do you know another way to freedom than to throw them all out, and make your own?”

She did: open any vein.

Sansa flinched, startled by the clear-cut ring of her thoughts.

He had a way of bringing to the fore a darkness in her that had been long overcome. One that should scare her more than it did, perhaps. She had not thought this way in a long time, because she had found another way to freedom. One that did not require death; only courage and single-mindedness. And a willingness to leave everything else behind. One that was quite like the one Jon was describing, after all. And quite like death too, she supposed. A kind of it.

How many people had she been, through her life? All lined up inside, each one killing the last[8]. She’d changed so much, so many times, it was true, as true as murder, but she had never forgotten herself. The truth of her was so small; one small inch was all it was. But she’d only stayed sane by never giving it up, Sansa was convinced of it. By never giving it away. She’d hidden it, deep down where she locked all her secrets, masked it with other things the way she clothed herself in different dresses, but it was always there. Her beating heart, her coarse wolf pelt, buried under soft warm earth. Safe.

But there were other things buried with it, too.

Violent things. Things that hurt. Things that could never be good.

She knew exactly what Jon meant when he spoke of monsters caged in corners, waiting to be let loose, because she had them, too. There was something hungry and terrible in her, she knew it.
Sometimes at night, she could see it grinning at her. And yes, perhaps she was afraid, too, of what would happen to her if she ever smiled back.

But Jon, he perceived it all with such inevitability, that it was terrifying to listen to.

“Forgive me, cousin. I forgot you think it’s possible to meet cruelty with kindness.”

Sansa felt herself withdraw even though she had not moved a single inch.

“That’s the first time you’ve made me sound foolish,” she said coolly. “You lasted longer than most.”

Jon looked down. “That is not my intent at all. I admire your stubbornness to make the world as you want it. But I also wonder if you’ve ever met anyone who actually deserved your compassion.”

Sansa clenched her jaw around a groan of frustration.

“I don’t know who gave you this notion that everything has to be a transaction, but I would like to meet that person! I would like to have words with them!” She bit the words out but her anger was fleeting. “It’s not about what people deserve, Jon! It’s about what I believe.”

“The world is a cruel place. If there are any gods, they certainly don’t care and we are all hurtling towards inevitable death. All of this is true. You keep telling me how people are meant for little and worth less, but what else is there? Where else are we to find help when we are in need of it?” The ridiculousness of it all, of this moment, this conversation, overcame her and she started laughing. “Saying nothing is worth anything is just another way of giving up.”

“So you think I’m cowardly then, for giving up?”

“Yes.” Sansa did not spare him an ounce of her glare. “And I would have cruelty met with justice.”

“How many men have you killed?”

She had not meant to startle him, but was still surprised when Jon didn’t even breathe differently. He remained relaxed, leaning against the parapet, and only turned his head to look at her.

“As many as tried to kill me.”

“What is it like for you?” Alone with him so high in the sky and shrouded in the deepening shadows of the dusk, she dared more than she might have under the harsh light of day.

“To kill?”

“To survive them.”

It wasn’t hesitation when he paused. He simply seemed to take the time to think about her question before he answered it.

“It’s…first time I killed a man, I was angry. I felt like I wanted him dead more than I wanted my next breath. That was all I could see. But later on I cried a bit. Second time was easier. Third time, I barely remember it. Everything just…blurs together.” His voice got lower just as the look in his eyes got more distant, as if he was looking inside himself instead of straight ahead, and losing himself to
whatever he found there.

He’d crossed his hand over his chest, so Sansa touched reached out and brushed her fingers against what backs of his, curling around his own arm.

Instantly his eyes were on hers again.

“After that it’s almost like repetition,” he said, sounding like himself again. Dismissive, almost.

Wherever he had gone had affected him and he was trying very hard to hide it.

“I’m alive, they’re dead, and that’s all there is to it.”

_All men are killers_, Sandor’s gravelly voice whispered in her ear. He was laughing at her.

“I did not cry,” Sansa heard herself whisper, and all the breath in her lungs seemed to leave as those words slipped out of her mouth.

What was she doing? This was foolish. The most foolish thing she had done in years. And _dangerous_!

_What was she doing?_

But the words had been spoken now. She could not pluck them out of the air and shove them back into her mouth. Nor did she want to, amazingly. She just watched as Jon went still in that strange, animal-like way of his that was different from not moving.

“What?”

Sansa met his eyes, though now that the night was almost here, she could not tell their color. They just looked black. She was sure hers looked the same.

“I did not cry,” she repeated, still stunned but unrelenting, as if someone else had taken over her body. “I was…I think I might have killed him again, if he’d risen and come forward.”

Jon turned his body to face her fully. His face seemed willfully blank to her then, but the arms he’d let fall to his sides were tense and she could see he had balled his hands into fists.

“He hurt you, this man.”

“Yes.”

Jon nodded. “Then he deserved to die.”

“Did he?” His resolute certainty both frightened and soothed her. “Do I get to decide that?”

“Who else would know better?” Jon tilted his head to the side, trying to catch her eye. “Sometimes we have to make our own justice. That’s not wrong.”

“It may not be wrong, but it’s not justice.” Sansa looked at him. “That’s vengeance.”

“Sometimes they are the same.”

No, they were not. She remembered that much. Her father always said that the man who passed the sentence should swing the sword, but that you should not take pleasure in such an act. In ending someone’s life. It should be a duty and nothing more. It should be swift, relentless, and in front of
witnesses to see it done.

Sansa’s justice had been none of those things. It hadn’t even been vengeance, really.

“My father…”

“Your father would have slaughtered any man or god who’d dare lay a single finger on you.”

Sansa’s smile was faint. He sounded as sure as the foundations of the earth. There was even anger there, too - a hint of it only, so tightly he was trying to control it. She’d known Jon respected her father of course. It showed every time he spoke of him, but this was proof that he loved him as well.

She nodded and smiled at him as she straightened and smoothed out her skirts.

“I need to go change for dinner. And so do you.”

He wanted to press the argument further and for a moment, Sansa thought he might. But he decided against it, and just as he did, the tension left him and his shoulders relaxed. It was so dark now that she could only vague planes of his face and the outline of him under the starry sky.

“I think I might take my dinner in my rooms,” Jon said as he walked beside her, holding the door of the tower open and then closing it behind himself. “It could be safer for all parties involved.”

Sansa chuckled and turned to look back at him, as they descended the stairs. “Afraid you might forget your manners?”

“Afraid isn’t the word I’d use. Someone might lose a few teeth, but they’ll be wiser for it, so I will consider it a service.”

Sansa laughed and the sound of it echoed around them as if they were in a cave.

“I think you’ll do just fine. Your patience, as you said, can be infinite.”

Jon snorted. “Not for Stefron fucking Frey, it can’t.”

They parted at the foot of the tower, and once she was in her room, Sansa decided that that night, she would wear a particular dress the queen had gifted her, of a violet so vibrant, it made her skin look like it glowed and her hair like it had caught fire.

Tonight, she wanted to be seen.

vi.

The knock at her door was soft, but she heard it as if a glass and slipped and shattered right against her ear. Sansa sat up in her bed, alarmed. She listened in the dark, held her breath.

The knock came again.

“If Sansa, it’s me.”

How…

She got up from her bed hastily, shoved her hands into the sleeves of her night wrap and went to unlatch her door.
“Is something wrong?” The words were out of her mouth before the door had fully opened. Had she waited, she might not have spoken them, after seeing the look on his face.

He was smiling and looked calm. Mischievous.

“No, nothing is wrong,” he whispered. “Did I startle you?”

Sansa rolled her eyes. “No, _your grace_, I am perfectly used to receiving visits in the dead of night.”

“I leave tomorrow.”

“I know that,” she said irritably. It just made him smile wider. “Should you not be resting?”

“I wanted to show you something, my lady. Something beautiful.”

“Jon what are you on about?”

“I promise it will be worth your time.”

“Jon I can’t just-“

“Yes, you can. No one is stopping you. Just put on your cloak, keep your hood up, and follow me.”

He looked so happy, so excited about whatever it was he wanted to show her, that not only did Sansa not have the heart to tell him no, but she was now starting to get curious herself. And it was true, was it not? She could do whatever she wanted. It wasn’t as if there was anyone there to stop her.

Jon saw it on her face when he’d won. He grinned. Sansa huffed as she went back to put on her boots and her glove.

“You are such a bad influence,” she said as she wrapped the cloak around her shoulders and pulled its hood up, hiding her braid beneath its long folds. “And I am worse than you, for giving in.”

“Lies, you are delightful.”

“Shut up.”

He laughed low in his throat as he offered her his hand. Sansa took it, only glancing at him when he laced his fingers through hers and began pulling her silently through the silent corridors of Riverrun. She stopped when he did and walked fast when he did, and it felt exactly as delightful as Jon had said it would. It felt like an adventure! A harmless one.

When they found themselves in front of a door after walking a long narrow corridor on what Sansa imagined was the ground floor, Jon stopped and stood in front of her.

“Alright, you have to close your eyes now.”

“What? But I-”

“I will carry you so you won’t trip. But if you see it now, the surprise will be ruined.”

“Jon!”

“You trusted me this far didn’t you?”
She had. And she still hadn’t let go of his hand either. “Well, I did but you shouldn’t take advantage.”

“I’m not, that’s why I’m asking.”

Sansa sighed, as if put upon, and then closed her eyes. She heard the door open.

“No peeking.”

“Promise,” she said, biting her lip when his tone, so serious for such a game, reminded her of other games she used to play in Winterfell with Bran and Arya. They had chased Bran all around the castle once, playing hide and seek, until they both grew so tired they fell asleep in the great hall and Bran woke them up by dousing them in water.

Sansa had shrieked at him for something close to ten minutes, and Arya chased him around the great hall. All three of them were sent to bed without dessert that night.

She startled when she felt Jon wrap his arm around her middle and the back of her legs. When he did pick her up, her body froze before she reached out with one hand and caught hold of one of the lapels of his doublet.

“Put your arms around me,” he said close to her ear. Sansa gritted her teeth, trying hard to keep still. She still wrapped her arms around his shoulders though, because it was quite disconcerting to be carried around when you could see nothing.

She felt it when they stepped into the night. The air was chilly, but pleasant and there was no wind. The scent of magnolias from the other side of the river was strong and sweet, and it made Sansa think of winter roses. She touched the back of his neck with her ungloved hand, catching the ends of his curls in her fingers, startled by how soft they were-

And then immediately pulled her hand back the moment she realized what she was doing.

“I’m starting to think you did all this just so you could carry me around,” she said, trying to sound sullen.

“So what if I did?”

She could hear the smile in his voice. Sansa flicked his ear and he laughed, pulled her even closer to his body.

“I’m going to set you down now.”

Sansa was relieved to hear it. She felt uncomfortably aware of her body, her skin buzzing and hot all over. She needed some space from him. Jon set her down gently, but she still reached out on instinct as she straightened, pressing her hand against his chest as she found her footing on the grass-covered earth.

“Can I open my eyes now?”

“Yes,” he whispered, and she felt him so close to her she could have taken a deep breath and felt his chest brush against hers.

The first thing Sansa saw when she did open her eyes was his face, washed silver in moonlight. His smile and his eyes looking black, and that little dip at the base of his throat that was so irrationally alluring, and the lights glinting in the air the stars had fallen down and were floating about them.
Sansa gasped, turning to look.

“Oh…”

There were thousands of them. There had to be. Thousands of fireflies lighting up the shore of the river, floating among the foliage and the trees and close to the water. Floating in waves, as if they were all connected, lighting up at once and then plunging back into darkness, only to glow again.

She felt overcome with the beauty of it. The wonder…

Sansa stretched out her hands, giggling when one landed at the tip of her finger, its little light pulsing, before it took flight again.

“I used to think fireflies were fairies when I was little. Maester Luwin did not correct me until I was ten years old, and neither did anyone else.” Her eyes stung a little. “I was very spoiled.”

“You were loved.”

Sansa chuckled. “Yes, that too.” When she turned to look at Jon again she was smiling so wide her cheeks hurt. “You were right, it’s beautiful.”

vii

“Who taught you all those stories of the northern gods?”

They were both sitting cross-legged on the grass, close enough that his knees brushed hers, looking at the lightshow in silence, until he broke it.

“Grandmother. Old Nan. Father sometimes.” Sansa looked from the river to Jon’s face. He seemed pensive, as if he was recalling something not altogether pleasant.

“It was Uncle Benjen who usually answered my questions. The first stories of the North I heard were from him.”

But he sounded so sad as he said it, that Sansa reached out and brushed her fingers down his cheek, following the line of that scar his beard only half hid.

“He heard them from the same people I heard them, so I imagine they must sound alike.”

Jon looked up at her, eyes intent. “They don’t.”

“The ones he told you were different?”

Jon shook his head. “The ones you tell are different. Or they feel different.”

Sansa did not know what to say. Her heart was beating fast beneath her ribs again.

“He doesn’t believe like you believe,” Jon added quietly.

“Do you? Believe?” She sounded breathless, but she could not help it.

Jon shook his head, looked down to where he was plucking out leaves of grass one by one.

“I must have been seven? Eight perhaps - when I found my first book on the religions and customs of the Seven Kingdoms. I opened it straight to the part about the North.” He chuckled. “Dullest read
of my life that far, but I read all of it. I used to believe, yes. And I used to try to pray in the godswood of the Red Keep, but…”

“But the godswood there is empty,” Sansa whispered. There was a kind of understanding in Jon’s eyes when he nodded that made her palms sweat. Sansa leaned forward, expectant. “And when you got to Winterfell?”

“It was different. And overwhelming. Uncle Ned said he found peace there, but I never…” He pursed his lips, as if he was struggling to find the words. “I could always feel there was something there waiting for me, but always just out of my reach.”

“You could feel it?”

Jon nodded. “Bran said that whenever he slept beneath the heart tree he had strange dreams. Of people and places he had never been in before. Grandmother thinks he has the sight.”

Sansa’s breath left her in a rush. She touched her hand to her mouth as she absorbed the shock. “That— that’s dangerous. People are afraid of greenseers, even in the North.”

“Yes. It’s not an open secret or anything. Only your family knows, none other.”

And you, she wanted to say. But obviously, since he knew he was already in their confidence.

“Did you ever ask grandmother about what you…what you felt?” Sansa asked then. Jon smiled at her as if he’d been waiting for this question all night.

“I did.”

She leaned in. “And? What did she tell you?”

Jon mirrored her, until they were a breath from touching forehead to forehead. “She told me to ask you.”

The laugh that escaped her sounded strangled even to her own ears. She straightened. “I don’t have answers for you, Jon. I haven’t even stepped into a real godswood in years.”

Jon reached out and lowered her hood. It had started slipping and was almost about to fall off her head. He caught the end of her braid between his fingers, curled a piece of her hair around his thumb, before he let it go.

“How do you pray, Sansa?”

She shrugged. “On my knees, in silence.”

“In an empty godswood,” he added. He sounded like he doubted it.

“Or to the wind, or in the sea, or in front of a fire. It doesn’t really matter where I am. I’m always just speaking to myself really,” Sansa confessed. “But it’s become such a habit that it calms me down now. Gives me time to gather my thoughts.”

Jon nodded. “Perhaps you’ll show me how to do that, some time.”

He got up and extended a hand for her. She took it and got to her feet as well. Together, they went back into the castle.
Jon was gone the next day, and he remained gone for a week. He wrote to her, though, and his letters came often, seeing that he was but two days ride away from Riverrun, where the Sparrow had traveled with his guard of followers to spread his teachings. She received more transcripts of his sermons as well, and that too touched her. He did not just think of her; he understood her. He knew she would want to read them.

And since Jon visited her thoughts so often during the day, she found that he visited her dreams at night as well. Or perhaps she sought him out.

By the day, Sansa spent her time speaking to her grandfather, riding and fishing with her uncle and her grand-uncle, and entertaining the lords and ladies that were sojourning in Riverrun. She made friends of some of the women, ladies who were delightful and cutting, like Lady Minisa Mooton and Alys Vance. She got to know the lords better too - separating each of them into their own category, as if she was organizing her closet and vanity. Each object in its own place. Each lord in its own pile, divided by what they wanted, who they wanted it from; who it hurt, whom it benefited, and how far they were prepared to go to get it.

She spent time with Uncle Benjen as well, who Jon had been adamant to leave behind, so Sansa had been adamant about him taking Sandor with him. Sometimes he asked her to sing, and she gave him all the songs from the North she remembered, and then some others she had learned when she had been to Dragonstone and the Reach. Every time, he closed his eyes to listen, and Sansa thought he went away someplace else. Where he really wanted to be. Those times, after she was done and her uncle had come back with her again, she asked him for stories of his travels.

It was only coincidence that most of those stories had Jon in them, one way or another.

She gave herself away one day, however, when, sitting on a blanket laid out close to the shore of the Trident, under the shade of some oaks, Sansa spoke without thinking.

“What was he like, as a child?”

Uncle Benjen smiled. He did not need to be told who she meant, and that more than anything made Sansa’s cheeks heat up.

“He was a quiet boy. Serious, but quick to laugh one he knew you, easy to love. More comfortable observing the world than taking part in it. And with a smile so lovely it would break your heart.”

Sansa looked down to the flower crown she had been weaving.

Jon’s smiles were lovely still - when it was just she and he in a room. Sometimes there was something almost shy in him, when she caught him unprepared, when she made him laugh and it surprised him. But most of the time he wore his own face like it was a mask and when he did, his smiles were many things, but never true, not really. He showed his teeth, but he did it the way Ghost did it: as if to remind people those teeth could and would tear out throats. We are the same, he’d said.

Sansa thought back to her dreams. To how she knew even now, exactly where each of her grandfather’s guests were in the castle, and if she tried very, very hard, she might even hear their whispering. How she sometimes felt like a person made up of the fragments of all the people she had been before, each more mutilated than the last. Each with its own pair of eyes with which they saw
the world. One pair of eyes that could feel compassion for a man, as another pair of them collected his flaws, and another still that was capable of exploiting them. How her skin had shed time and again and then turned, transformed, from porcelain, to ivory, to steel[14].

_How alike are we, really? How many people are trapped inside you, Jon? How many eyes do you see with?_

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[3] Again, these few lines of dialogue are lifted from the Borgias.

[4] In this universe, the North is like Dorne: first kid to be born gets the thing, no matter then gender. And I don’t know if in real life it works out like that, but what Hoster is doing here, is assuming that, if Edmure were never to have kids, he couldn’t just ask the Starks to pass over a girl for a boy when adopting an heir from Cat’s kids, since in their judicial system such a thing is not done – which would make Sansa his heir, and not Bran. That, or he’s just fucking around with the Frey asshole. Who knows XD


[6] Savonarola’s sermon in Borgia ‘Faith and Fear, second season. After whom I did model this septon by the way, seeing that I don’t even remember the high sparrow from the show and honestly, I am not about to rewatch the fifth season

[7] Inspired by the dialogue in Penny Dreadful between Vanessa and the Cut Wife/Joan Clayton that really did me in, when I first heard it.

[8] ‘The woman the boy became’, a stunning, breathtaking poem by Kate Tempest. I heartily recommend reading it – it hits me like a punch every time.


[11] The color and the cut ;) bc I find shoulders a lot more interesting than boobs (and bc Sansa is deff trying to flirt, but you know, her way XD)

[12] Probably my favorite piece of clothing from the show was Milisandre’s wrap-cloak in the first seasons, and every time I imagine what cloaks might look like for Targaryen-fashion, I think of that – of that fashion of cloak I mean, since it seems to be more inspired by the eastern fashion than westerosi one. And cause its prettier and I want Sansa to wear one.

[13] Insp by the poem with the same theme.

[14] We all know where this is from.
I wanted to say something about the Sparrow and the ideas that he puts forward. I didn’t exactly make historical analysis here, or really build an ideology for this character. He is loosely based around some of Savonarola’s ideas, in how he treats salvation and the material world, the denunciation of the corruption of the ‘faith’ etc. The fact that Jon and Sansa are working against him here, does not make them in the right however. Since the system they live in is fucked up, and though all the six main characters of asoiaf are very revolutionary in their way of thinking in relation to that system (which I tried to mirror here with Jon agreeing with the Sparrows political points and Sansa immediately identifying the systemic failure that gave birth to him), they are still nobility that profit from the labor and ruthless exploitation of a class of people who, as of now, have no rights of protections whatsoever. They try to help, and they do give people some protection – but they also eliminate the element of change, the Sparrow, who – however backwards – is saying something true about the failings of this whole setup.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Tell me how all this, and love too, will ruin us. Tell me we’ll never get used to it.”

Richard Silken.

Sansa startled when she heard the horns announcing riders were heading towards the castle. She set her embroidering down and ran to the window, eyes frantically searching. She smiled when she saw them. She could not recognize Jon from that far, of course. He was just a black dot riding at the head of the group, but Ghost was far more discernible. He was running full tilt beside what could be only Jon’s horse, white as snow and immediately visible against the green and earthy tones of the Riverlands forest.

She hastened out of her solar and into the main part of the castle. Just as she was about to walk into the courtyard, the gates opened and the party rode through.

Jon was off his horse before it had even fully stopped. He looked irritated, his long face shuttered, his lips thin with what could only be anger.
“Welcome back, your grace.”

Jon turned abruptly, as if he hadn’t expected to hear her, but when he did see her, he smiled.

“Cousin.” As if he did this always, he walked to her and kissed her cheek. “I hope I find you well.”

“You do,” Sansa said as she blinked her surprise away and linked her hands in front of her. “Though you look like you’ve traveled all night.”

“We have,” Edd grumbled as he passed his horse’s reins to a stable boy.

“I will have rooms prepare for you all of course,” Sansa said immediately. “In the meantime, we are close enough to lunch that a hot meal should be ready in a moment.”

“Appreciated, m’lady.”

“Walk me in, cousin?”

Sansa nodded and they both headed for the main hall.

“A courier arrived for you yesterday,” Sansa told him. “The letters bear the sigil of the King.”

Jon gave her a fleeting smile. “And you can’t wait to read what it says, I bet.”

“I am curious, yes.”

Jon took off his gloves as he walked, shoved them under his belt. “So am I.”

“We also got news that a new High Septon has finally been chosen.” She did not miss how this only deepened his frown. “I’ll take it that the meeting with the Sparrow did not go well.”

Jon shook his head.

Sansa sighed. “Never mind that, for now. Sit, Jon. Eat something.”

“And where are you going?” He seemed both surprised and annoyed that she was leaving him to his own devices.

“To keep a previous engagement.” Tea with the Lady of Harrenhal could not be neglected, especially since the lady had hinted at some gossip that Sansa would most definitely like to hear.

“Does not the arrival of your royal cousin override any engagements you might have made before?”

She held back her laugh. “No, I’m afraid it does not. I will, however, tell the courier that you have arrived so he may give you the letters himself, as he so insisted.”

She was about to go when she felt his hand wrap around her wrist, stopping her. This time, when he looked at her, he actually saw her.

“Hello.”

Sansa couldn’t help the small smile. “Hello, Jon.”

His smile turned into a smirk. “Did you miss me?”

She rolled her eyes and slapped his hand away, much to his amusement. “Don’t choke on your stew, your grace.”
She found him in his solar not an hour later, with Uncle Brynden and one of the royal legates that had brought his father’s missive. The look on his face was thunderous.

Her arrival seemed to have interrupted an intense discussion.

“Sansa, come in. Ser Lewin, you were telling me of how the king’s faith in his son lessened.”

The royal legate blinked, surprised. “No, your grace, I simply-“

“His doubts in me are expressed with your presence,” Jon interrupted, glaring at him.

“I am here merely to advise you, your grace. The High Septon demands that this heretic be silent or excommunicated. If the wrath of Seven’s highest voice on earth doesn’t change the septon’s mind, my orders were clear.”

“He must die,” Jon said for him. The courier seemed visibly distressed by the plainness with which Jon spoke it, but he steeled himself and nodded nonetheless.

“Very well. You have fulfilled your purpose, Ser. You may leave us,” Jon said curtly.

“Your grace, I have been instructed to be with you throughout these proceedings, as an advisor of the dogma of the Seven.”

“And when I have a need of you, I will call you. For now, I wish to speak freely with my cousin.”

The man straightened. “I will take your majesty’s word with the highest confidence. King Rhaegar has commanded me so himself.”

Jon lost his patience. “Yes, and you’re my father’s spy before you’re anything to me. Get out. Go on, fuck off.”

The man bristled visibly, but did not say anything more. He could not have, not with the look Jon was giving him. He bowed and then walked to the door, closing it behind himself.

“You black mood seems not to have lightened,” Sansa said as she neared him. He was pacing in front of the fireplace, his restlessness making him look like a trapped wild animal.

“No. It has not. The negotiations with the Sparrow proved fruitless.” Jon neared the table, put his hands on both sides of the letters spread out in front of him. “The man is obstinacy personified. As someone who grew up with Daenerys and Viserys - that should mean a lot.”

Sansa nodded slowly. “Indeed.

“He is practically begging for the full force of the king’s wrath to fall on him.” He met her eyes and Sansa could see that he was conflicted. He pushed the letters towards her.

“The High Septon proposes excommunicating the Sparrow and all his followers. And he invites the river lords to move their troops through their order and raze them. The king said nothing to suggest he had more to add to this plan.” He got up and started pacing again. “I warned him this would happen, but he would not listen.”

“Warned him? You mean the Sparrow?” Brynden asked as he came to sit in front of Sansa, taking the royal missive and reading after she was done.
“I can’t reconcile how a man who preaches so passionately about morality and the rights of the people, could endanger their lives so recklessly,” Jon continued, as if speaking to himself.

“He is someone who believes his reward waits him in the great fields of the beyond, Jon. But he is still a man and no man is incorruptible. What did you learn of him?”

“That he believes the world is ending and we all need to return to the teachings of the holy books to save our souls. He says that solely through misery can one serve the gods as they intended. That we should deny ourselves the joys of the world, or we fail our redemption and are bound for hellfire.” His face serious, dour even. “He is a man of spiritual extremes.”

That did not answer Sansa’s question, however. She did not want to know what the Sparrow preached. She wanted to know what he wanted that he did not have. More importantly, what the people following him wanted that they did not have.

“Why do you hesitate?” Brynden asked without preamble.

That got Jon’s attention. “What?”

“I don’t like you and you don’t like me, but I have found you to be a resolute man, in thinking and in action. If this man were anyone else, he’d be dead already, of that I have no doubt. All you need to do is hand those royal papers to Lord Frey, whose lands the Sparrow is preaching on now, and your work will be done. But you hesitate. Why?”

Jon seemed to think about it. Sansa already knew what the answer was, however.

“You agree with him?” She was surprised, and it showed in her voice.

“Not exactly,” Jon admitted. “I admit there is some sense in what he preaches. The High Septon is a mere puppet, or has been for near three decades. The nobility is most characterized by vice and excess, and so often justice for the smallfolk fails because its pursuit is not worth it to those charged with such a duty. All these things are true.” He looked at her, and their whole discussion a week ago came back to her in full, clear as a bell. “Is it not tyrannical, then, to kill a man for speaking the truth to power?”

Sansa straightened. “There is sense in the demands he makes for his people and those are the words we should be listening to. But in all else, he is more of the same. Worse than most, in what he intends the purpose of life on earth to be. We were not born to be servants of the gods and suffer our way through life. And though I have no quarrel with those who choose to do so, I would not have such a life chosen for me. The Sparrow allows for no such freedom, Jon. He demands submission to his vision by all. In that, he is just as tyrannical as those he denounces.”

Jon pulled out the chair next to hers and turned it to face her before he sat on it. “Very well! To silence him I need to discredit him.”

“By making him confess,” Brynden said, turning both their heads.

“To what?"

“Fraud!” the Blackfish said immediately. “Get him to admit that he has lied and doesn’t bask in the sunshine of the gods or know their hidden truth and the Riverlands will hang him as a heretic.”

“A man of conviction like him would never confess to such a thing,” Sansa said immediately.

Jon passed a hand over his face with a heavy sigh. He leaned back against his chair, suddenly
Sansa’s eyes widened. “Torture him, you mean?” she whispered.

“Yes, that’s what he means.” Her uncle’s face was stone. “Have you ever been tortured, your grace?”

Jon’s eyes were fixed on the letters, but they were empty, as if he wasn’t there at all. “I have, yes. It’s not a decision I’m ever going to take lightly.”

“There is no need to be so barbaric. Or criminal, for that matter.” She said, looking at them both by turns. “Torture of a man who is unlawfully arrested is against the law.”

“Persuasion to gain a confession is not,” her grand-uncle reminded her.

Sansa rose to her feet. “You cannot persuade a man you arrest on charges that do not exist!”

“You can. Once he admits his guilt, the means to get him there are lawful. Which is the stupidest part of our judicial system, and, by the gods, that is saying something. Never has hurting a man led to anything but his breaking. The truth is the first thing to die.” Jon laughed. “What a fucking mess.”

The way Brynden looked at him was unreadable.

“I never thought I’d see the day. A Targaryen with a conscience.” He shrugged. “You laugh at it, but at least you have it.”

“No, I laugh at fantasies. As for the world, I have always been able to see it very clearly. This kingdom of ours is an eternal bloody massacre, and so often being barbaric in return is the only way to maintain order.”

“Being barbaric and maintaining order do not go together. If you have to do one to achieve the other, what you are maintaining is subjugation.”

“Sansa—” her uncle warned, but she did not stop.

“I do not scoff at morality, and I do know that sometimes knowing the ways of evil and, when compelled, having the mettle to employ them is something that we cannot avoid, but it’s also true that justice is neither of these things. Jon, look at me.”

Sansa leaned forward, intent and focused. “You don’t need to kill this Sparrow, nor do you need to arrest him. Either will only prove him right. This man is a symbol; symbols are given power by people. He is strong now because so many follow him, but alone, he is meaningless.”

“And how do you propose I take his following from him?” Jon asked slowly, almost as if he did not care enough to engage in a proper discussion. Sansa did not let his tone get to her: she could see in his eyes that he was wide awake.

“By rendering him useless,” Sansa said immediately. “Give the people who follow him what they want. What they need. According to Lady Mooton, all news of this Sparrow started from a village just miles south of the Twins. That’s where he first started preaching; that’s where his oldest followers are from. That town now is all but deserted. Why is that? Out of all the lords at the gathering last week, the Freys were loudest in their hatred for the man.” Sansa looked at them both with narrowed eyes. “Don’t you think that ought to add up to something?”

“You think the Freys provoked the anger of the townspeople first?” Jon asked and Sansa resisted the
impulse to throw her hands up.

“I don’t know! But something must have happened to drive those people into the arms of a man whose preaching would incite the anger of so many who could so easily hurt them. These are the questions that matter. You don’t have to deal with the Sparrow. The Sparrow is not the problem. The issues that gave birth to him are the problem; he is just a distraction.”

“What makes you so certain of this?” her uncle asked her, “What have you learned?”

“I just told you all I know. Besides, no one needs to tell me that there was a reason this Sparrow came along now and not before. Nothing comes from nothing, and at heart this septon’s preaching is as political as it is spiritual.” She glanced at Jon. “I know you know this.”

He didn’t even try to deny it. Though his prone pose on that chair made him look relaxed, he was looking at her without blinking.

“I think Lady Stark might just be right again,” he said slowly, after long moments. The look on his face was satisfied. “It seems to be her way.”

xi.

“I will be leaving.”

The lords of the Riverlands did not take that well, but Jon had expected that. He stood straight at the head of the table, hands linked behind his back and gave them a moment to let their frustrations out before he raised a hand and waited for them to settle.

“I must consult with my father on this matter. And then I will return.”

“By then it will be too late.”

“You might very well find these Sparrows at the gates of your own city, if you tarry, prince.”

“There is no need for veiled threats, my lord. I am a man of my word and I said I will return. Lord Tully still has the treaty, which has not yet been signed. And I will not make you, until I have fulfilled my end of the bargain. That would be enough, surely, for you to keep confidence in me.”

Whether it did or didn’t, Jon didn’t care. In one thing, Brynden Tully had been right: he was resolute by nature, and now that he had decided, all he wanted was to see his plan through and be done with it.

He could have left Sansa in Riverrun as he saw his little game through, but that might have giving him away. Besides, he did not want to be too far away from her again.

He’d missed her.

He could admit that to himself, though in the beginning, he had not known what it had been, that fist tightening around his chest when he saw her again in her grandfather’s courtyard. The realization had been strange and sudden, and for a moment when she had greeted him, Jon had had to stand still and just…absorb it.

In and of itself, the notion was ridiculous. It had been seven days, give or take a morning. But that did not change the fact that the first thing he wanted to do when he saw her again was walk right up to her and kiss her. And though he knew he wanted her, that was not all, because he’d missed her!
He really fucking missed her, and the way she spoke, and the way she teased him and how she crunched up her nose when she laughed and all the things about her that were strange and singular. How she could look at you as if she could see everything you’d done up to that moment, and all you planned to do. How cold she could be and how she never gave into it the way you’d expect. How she was lonely and he could see it, and lovely, and lethal[1]. How her mind moved in trails he had never seen anyone move through before and it was fascinating.

How, after she said her goodbyes and they were out of Riverrun early in the morning, she sidled her horse up close to his and asked him, point blank, what it was that he was planning.

“When we make camp to Rushing Falls, half my men will take our fastest horses and head north, to the Twins.”

He watched her mind turn, that small nod she gave him as she understood. “Scouts.”

Jon grinned. “Exactly. Let’s find out who really fucked up and started this mess.”

It must have been something in his tone when he said it, because she immediately looked at him.

“You already suspect something.”

“So do you,” he countered.

Sansa shrugged. “The Freys don’t have a reputation as generous lords.”

Jon could have laughed. “No, they don’t.”

“I’m sure the Lord of Harrenhal would give you a detachment of his men, were you to need it, later.”

“The Lord of Harrenhal or his lady?” Jon asked.

“Either. Both.”

“You mean you made friends of them both?”

“I made many friends these past few weeks.”

Yes, he was sure she had. There was something almost shocking in the ease with which all her smiles and graces could transform into a net of connections to be pulled together when needed. A terrible kind of beauty.

“And received no less than four proposals of marriage, I was told,” Jon said around a laugh. He’d been livid when he’d heard, but he could see the sense of it. Nor could he blame any man for wanting to be Sansa’s husband.

“That I know of,” Sansa said, looking ahead of her again. “I’m sure my grandfather had to hear many more. No lord there was very shy about pushing their sons at me, when they had them.”

“Bold men.”

“Silly men. I am betrothed.”

“A betrothal is not a marriage. And the contract between his father and yours has not been signed yet,” Jon countered, trying to sound more nonchalant than he felt. “You cannot blame a man for trying.”
“Of course not. I was very gentle in my every refusal.”

Jon stared ahead, too. “I’m sure you were.”

xii.

It took them five days to reach the God’s Eye. When they made camp near Rushing Falls, it was just past the lunch hour and the village close to the holdfast in full celebration of the latest harvest. It looked like no one was left inside their houses, all the people out in the fields, dancing around bonfires and eating on communal long tables, or from blankets they had laid down in the grass.

Sansa’s eyes had lit up so visibly at the merriment, that Jon was pushed to let his men join. And as the day went on and the dancing and drinking distracted everyone, he took fifteen of his sharpest men aside, got them on fresh horses and told them to make for the lands surrounding the Twins. To travel light and off the main roads. To pretend they were returning home from the sea, and in the meantime find out what had happened around those lands that everyone was so adamant he not know anything about.

When he returned to his table, he found Uncle Benjen had joined Sansa and Sam and they were having an intense debate about something. He sat down next to her, but stayed silent, watching her smile and laugh with his uncle and thank Satin for the drinks he kept pouring her, drinks she found a careful way to spill when no one was looking.

“My mother always said I was a lady at three,” Sansa told Sam, who grinned. “Arya would run around in the mud, or bring my father crushed flowers and he’d just smile at her. But there were different expectations of me.”

“No running in the mud for you?” Uncle Benjen asked, the look on his face as soft as Jon had ever seen it.

“Oh, I played in the mud plenty of times. It was strange, being raised with this very rigid set of rules detailing everything I had to be, but also spoiled rotten at the same time. I didn’t even feel the weight of my education for what it was, not really.” She chuckled. “I liked imagining myself a great lady. I liked the pretty dresses and pretty manners. Everyone indulged me in almost all things. They all knew, of course.”

“Knew?”

“They knew I’d leave them for the capitol eventually. The treaty at the Trident was signed before I was even born.”

“Right. It was signed when I was born,” Jon said flatly.

“And I suppose you’re thinking now that if you hadn’t been, none of this would have happened?”

Jon was a bit surprised at her words, but did not deny the truth of them. “It’s a fact.”

“Oh, is it? Did you ask to be born, your grace? Do you have that kind of power?”

He rolled his eyes at her, but a corner of his lips twitched a little, even as he held back his smile.

“Besides,” Sansa continued. “if you hadn’t been born, I wouldn’t have been born. So it wouldn’t be very beneficial for me, would it?”
Jon crossed his arms over the table and leaned on them, getting close to her. “No, I’m very happy you were born.”

She laughed in his face. “Such a charmer.”

“A true prince,” his uncle added, merciless, as he smirked in his cup.

“I wonder why I like you both so much, sometimes,” Jon muttered, looking unimpressed.

“Because we are delightful, nephew,” Uncle Benjen said, as he got up. Sansa laughed. Jon ignored them both in favour of taking a long sip of his dark ale. He watched her watch him as he did, her eyes following his hand, his throat, and lingering on his mouth as he licked his lips.

It was truly hard not to smile.

Sansa, however, did not seem concerned at all. She kept looking at him as if nothing was amiss, and when he put the horn down, she extended her hand towards him, eyeing it meaningfully. Jon raised one eyebrow, surprised, but not about to deny her. He handed her the horn and watched her take a gulp - too generous of one, Jon thought, before he watched her sputter like a child and prove him right.

“Oh gods, I think I inhaled some,” she choked out between coughing fits. Her eyes were watering and she looked almost angrily at the horn as she passed it back to him before she spilled it all over her dress. “What is that?”

“Dark ale.” His voice shook with suppressed laughter.

“How is that different from usual ale?” she asked, her voice only a little bit hoarse after she’d taken a few deep breaths. “Aside from tasting rancid, that is.”

Jon grinned. “Not a big drinker, are you?”

Sansa gasped in feigned shock. “Oh, you have found me out.”

But within that same breath she reached out for his drink again. Jon surrendered it, again, and this time, when Sansa drank she bore the taste and burn of it with more dignity. Though her face did scrunch up as if she’d just sucked on a lemon.

“Oh, that’s still horrible, I don’t know why I’m doing this.”

“Has it gone to your head yet?”

She thought about it a moment. “No, but I definitely feel warmer than before.”

Jon shook his head. “A true lightweight.”

“Yes, I suppose one must be, when one does not customarily get truly drunk in a Dornish tavern and almost level the place in a brawl once causes oneself that one time.”

Jon was sure he contained his surprise well but she still laughed at him when she saw his face.

“Oh yes, I heard about that. Quite legendary. Is it true Obara Sand knocked you off your feet?”

“No, it is not,” Jon said hastily, as she laughed herself silly. “Tyrion made that up.”

“I think you’re lying to me.”
“Not very ladylike, to accuse a prince of dishonesty.”

“I suppose I will have to ask Obara myself. I am told she laughs long and hard every time she tells the story.”

Jon reached for the horn still in her hand. “I think you’ve had quite enough of my drink, my lady.”

“I do not!” She leaned back, protecting it. “And a courteous lord shares.”

Jon raised his hands, giving way to her and all too happy to do it. She was lovely when she was like this. Free and happy. Careless. There was not much about Sansa that was ever careless – these were rare sights indeed.

“Why don’t you drink ever?”

“Ever?” She looked at him as if he’d said something funny, but Jon did not give in to her distraction. He wanted her to know he’d noticed.

“Drinking is not a good idea, I suppose, when you’re constantly on your guard?” Jon hazarded, looking at her face carefully for some reaction.

Sansa shrugged. “Sure, why not.”

No? What was it then?

“You’re afraid someone would try to poison you?” It was not exactly realistic, as far as ways to kill her went, but not impossible either. Stupid people had never been scarce in any corner of the world. Sansa did not strike him as that paranoid however.

The idea was struck out of his mind, however, when she snorted, as if the thought hadn’t even occurred to her.

“It’s not poison I was wary of.”

Jon froze. His smile melted off his face quicker than snow in the seventh hell, as he looked at her like he hadn’t seen her before ever.

Sansa did not notice however, concentrated as she was on trying to gulp down the ale while also remaining poised. It was like watching a different woman practice at being herself. She straightened, took a sip, made a face; took another, this time kept her face smooth, until even the little line between her brows was gone. Resisted the urge to purse her lips. Fiddled with the end of her braid and then put her hand back in her lap. Took another sip, and this time remained perfectly composed, like a picture.

“There!” she said then, giving him his horn back half empty. “I have now mastered not cringing at the horrid taste.”

“Fascinating to watch you do so, my lady,” Jon heard himself say.

He might have said more, if her ladies and some of the young women from the village had not approached Sansa and whisked her away among giggles and laughter, to join them in their dances. They considered it good luck, they said, that a high lady would call for a long summer around their fires.

Jon was watching her link hands with the two girls at her side and start dancing around the largest
bonfire, laughing all the while, when Uncle Benjen sat down beside him.

“You need to have a care, Jon,” he said as he set a two plates in front of him, one piled with bread and cheese and the other with seasonal roasted vegetables.

“A care of what?”

“I’m glad you’re taken with each other, but you are hardly aware of anything or anyone else when you’re together. People notice.”

“Let them.”

“It not just about you. A woman’s reputation is far more fragile than a man’s. It can be ruined with a few well-placed words.”

His irritation spiked. “We haven’t been alone together for a moment. What is the problem?”

“The problem, is that every man here knows you want her.”

“Let them,” Jon repeated. “And let them repeat it, so that everyone knows it. Soon enough it won’t matter. As soon as we get back to King’s Landing, I’ll ask her to marry me.”

His uncle seemed surprised, and for a moment the anger bled out of him. “So you told her?”

“No, not yet.”

“By the gods, boy, you-”

Sansa’s approaching laughter cut Benjen’s cursing short. Someone had loosened her hair and braided small sections of it, weaving flowers and long sticks of wheat in her curls.

“Will you dance with me, uncle?”

Benjen only hesitated a fraction before he smiled. “I certainly shall.”

xiii

She danced most of the day away, or played the games with the girls of the village, chasing one another with their eyes covered, trying to snatch ribbons from each other’s hair.

She only stopped when she sat down to eat something, and despite the joy that was so alive in her, Jon could see she was exhausted. She had leaned her head against the palm of her hand as she watched some of the boys of the village play with a ball made of tightly wrapped cloth, her eyes were slipping closed.

Jon rubbed a hand down her back. “I think it’s time for you to retire, Sansa.”

“No.”

She sounded so petulant, but her eyes were practically closed already.

“You’re going to fall asleep on your plate.”

She snorted. “No, I will not.”

“You will. The great lady of Winterfell, asleep in her food.”
“Don’t even joke about that!” she warned, but it was weak and mumbled, it only made it sound funny to him. She opened her eyes with a sigh, pushed her plate away from her and folded her arms on the table, setting her head on top of them and then looking at him as if she had just gotten the better of him somehow.

“Ingenious,” Jon deadpanned. Sansa kicked him under the table.

“Shut up.”

But she did not fall asleep immediately. To Jon’s amazement, she started singing.

“I have a deadly nightshade, so twisted does it grow. With berries black as midnight and a skull as white as snow.”

Jon bit his lip to contain his smile. It seemed to divert her though because she opened her eyes and grinned.

“The prince’s cocky son came to drink my tea. He touched me without asking. Now he’s buried ’neath a tree.”

Jon snorted. “Good for you.”

She burst out laughing and then straightened, coming face to face with him. She was so lovely, slow and warm like this, as if she was just about to fall asleep, or just waking up.

“How are you like this?”

She might have been smiling but her eyes were serious.

“Like what?”

“Like this!” She looked at him up and down. “So strange and unusual.”

“Those two mean the same thing.”

“And annoying!”

“Oh, I had to practice that for years.”

Sansa sobered, and she reached out, setting her hand right over his heart, gently at first.

“So different,” she whispered, her fingers digging at him a little, as if she wanted to reach inside.

Jon wrapped his hand around hers, flattened her palm against his chest. She let him, and there was a moment when she leaned forward a bit, that Jon truly thought she might kiss him. His heart dropped to his knees before he realized she was just getting up, hand slipping away from his.

“Goodnight, Jon.”

He didn’t even try to speak, just nodded.

xiv.

Sansa woke with a violent start, scream choked in her throat. For a moment she thought she was still there, with her face pressed down on the soft earth of the forest, smelling the dirt and the grass, blood
still fresh in her mouth. Her sheets were tangled around her legs, she was breathing as if she’d been running and she was so drenched in sweat that her nightgown was sticking to her back.

She pushed some strands of hair away from her face, wiping away the sweat and what was probably tears. She did not pay it any mind. It did not matter.

The urgency that made her move was both foreign and familiar. She knew it, she had felt it before, but she also knew it came from outside of her, as much as it came from within. The thread tied around her rib was tugging and she needed to follow. She needed to.

She knew what she had to do, finally. The relief was immense, as if a weight that had been chained to her ankles had suddenly snapped free.

Slowly, so as not to disturb her ladies, she got up and put her boots on, her cloak. She did not even bother with anything else, just shoved what she knew she’d need in the satchel Jon had given her weeks ago, and walked out of her tent. It was dark still, deep night. There were stars in the sky and the moon was high too, but the quiet was so deep and still that she thought her heartbeat would wake the whole camp.

Sandor was sitting down just by the entrance of her tent, looking as if for all intents and purposes he was sleeping, but the moment she looked at him, his eyes snapped open. Sansa startled. Raised a shaking hand to her lips, signaling him to be quiet.

He frowned.

“I will be back,” she whispered and didn’t even wait for his assent. She just walked on.

_Ghost, Ghost, Ghost_…

His name was a mantra in her head, on her lips, a whisper hardly louder than a flap of a bird’s wings.

She did not even know if this would work. Perhaps she just had to go wake him herself. But the trees kept calling across the water; she could no longer ignore them.

Beyond the fires, she saw a white shadow move and then come closer, and she almost fell to her knees with relief. Once Ghost was close enough that she could touch him, Sansa shoved her face in his neck.

“Bring him out here. Bring him to me, Ghost,” she whispered in his fur. Then she leaned back and looked him in those unnatural red eyes. “Bring him to me.”

He left as if he’d understood and Sansa let him go. Either he would come or he would not. She would wait for him if she had to, but if he did not listen, she would go alone.

But in her heart, in that chamber of her where whispers echoed loudest and most senselessly, she knew he would come. No one told her. No one could have. But she _knew_. The same way she had known how to reach the pier, even though she had never been on this side of the lake before. The same way she knew what waited her across the vast expanse of the God’s Eye, which looked like a sheet of beaten black steel under the moon, boundless, with no hint of a far shore. And in the middle of it, a black silhouette.

Sansa closed her eyes and listened. Let the feeling wash over her, with no fear this time. No apprehension.

She could almost hear her name whispered in the wind.
She stood there under the moonlight and waited. And when she felt steps fall into the wooden walk of the pier, she did not startle but turned quickly, knowing who was behind her. The same way she always knew when it was him at her back and no one else.

She’d always known.

It made such perfect sense now, Sansa could laugh.

“What are you doing?” Jon asked. It was a mere whisper but it carried like a shout. It was obvious that he’d just gotten out of bed. He’d barely bothered with proper clothes, same as her. A cloak thrown hastily over his shoulders, shirt unlaced at the throat, curls askew in all directions. She could almost see the crease of his pillow etched on his cheek, and the moment she did, she reached to touch it.

Jon took hold of her wrist, and it was as if she remembered her own body then, when his fingers wrapped around her, shocking her with how warm he was.

“Sansa…”

She was shaking with excitement, she felt like she could hardly contain herself. Her skin felt stretched too thin over her bones.

“What were you dreaming of?” she asked him, breathless. Feverish with it.

“What?”

“What were you dreaming of, just now?”

He went still in that way of his, fingers tightening around her wrist.

“A forest filled with white trees. And birds.”

“Everywhere.” Sansa said nodding, laughing under her breath. “Birds everywhere. Me too.”

He took a deep breath. He always looked bigger to her in the dark; taller. His shoulders wider. But it didn’t matter. She could have been blind and known he was Jon.

“I have to cross. Get to the island. Come with me.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now. Come with me, Jon.”

“It’s the middle of the night,” he pointed out, as if it wasn’t obvious. But he’d gotten closer still, and had not let go of her wrist, keeping their hands between their bodies. “You could not think of a better time than the hour of the wolf?”

She laughed. It was so ridiculous that he should say it.

It fell in place with the perfect click of a lock and key sliding shut. Sliding open.

She did not know.

She did not know! But she would find out.

“When else would you have me come to you?” she asked him as she bit her lip, leaning into their
hands until they were trapped between their bodies.

“Sansa…are you alright?”

No.

Yes.

It did not matter; she was alive.

“You asked me how I prayed. Do you remember?”

Jon tilted his head to the side. His eyes were almost closed. He was looking at her lips. “I remember.”

“I mean to show you.” She smiled.

“Now?”

“Yes! Don’t-” she hesitated, her excitement giving way to anxiety that was just as sharp. “Don’t you feel it?”

She saw him gulp, look over the lake, and she knew that he was as aware as she was of that island in the middle of it, and the cluster of trees that waited them there. Waiting to greet them. To see them.

She was shaking, but she was not cold.

“I feel it. But you’re…you’re not well.”

“Don’t worry about that. It’s just the feeling of the dream that hasn’t left me yet. It will ebb.”

“Jon.”

She said his name so softly. It was the softest thing she’d ever held in her mouth until that moment and he felt it too. His whole body curled towards her. “You gave me a gift. Now I will give you one.”

She backed away, let her wrist slide between his fingers until they were palm to palm, and then laced her fingers through his, pulling him with her. He came so easily it surprised her and made her grin.

“Why now?”

“I dreamt it. Like you did.”

But he walked as she spoke. Together they got into the ferry, and once Ghost jumped in and was still enough that the boat stopped shaking, they started rowing. The surface of the water was so calm, she thought she could see the stars reflected in it. It was like a black mirror.

The closer they got to the Isle of Faces, the calmer Sansa felt. When the small ferry arrived at the pier set up on the island’s shore, she was the first one on her feet, but Ghost was the one to get off the boat first. Jon went second and then helped her out, too. He’d had his hand wrapped around the hilt of his sword ever since he got on his feet. She put her own over it.

“There will be no need for that. There’s no one here but us.”

The trees grew sparse close to the shore, but she could see the darkness was thicker inland. It
reminded her of the godswood of Winterfell with an acuteness that took her breath away.

It even smelled the same.

“There are men here. Priests of the old gods.”

“They don’t mean us any harm,” Sansa told him in a whisper. “They invited us here.”

She took his hand and took the first step, into the darkness of the weirwood forest. Into a space so thick with power it felt like another world. In here, even the shadow of Harrenhal waned and weakened. It held no sway here, Sansa could sense it. She felt it in the air as she breathed. In the tingles that went up her arm when she touched the trunks of the trees as she passed.

This was another world. It was her own.

She was the blood of Winterfell.

How silly to think, she had been afraid.

[1] Borgia ‘Faith and Fear’ quote, season2

[2] I keep using words that are applicable to the Christian faith because i don know their counterpart in ASOIAF.


Chapter End Notes

im imagining magic in this au as a bit more *present* than in canon. not a lot, its still very subtle, but some people - who are already magical in the books - are more sensitive to it here. just because i rly like that aspect of the story and i wanted to magnify it a little bit, just for fun.

also - to the user daspeedforce: i lost my shit on you and that was pretty graceless and hot-headed of me. i dont even think we understood one what we were disagreeing on, and in the end it doesnt matter. i should have taken the time to cool it before i responded, but i was in a volatile mood yesterday, and something that started from nothing, escalated way more than it should have. im a freaking grown up, i can admit i could have conducted myself better.

anyway, all the best to you

to everyone else: im not some fragile flower, i promise: i have always welcome criticism and anything that helped me get better. and i still do. the reason i lost my patience was mood related but also because of my own prejudice (its a fandom bias and also my own
experience with assault perhaps but when someone calls sansa a bolton i just... see red for a bit there.) i dont like bowing to this idea that we always have to be nice no matter what, but that does not mean i think its ok to be an asshole.

okay, im done now. i really really hope you enjoyed the chapter. Next will be the last, and i believe shortest part of "blood of Winterfell".

And then i will move to the second act of the story where i pull together all the plot threads that i laid out.
Chapter Notes

i am going to update this chapter soon - this version is without the notes, but i couldn't post them from the computer i was working with at the time (and i couldn't postpone posting the chapter cayse i was to exited to be done with it). they're mostly to credit quotes i borrow from other sources, tho.
also warning - its very subtle but there is a hint of someone trying to hurt themselves here, for the purpose of terminating a pregnancy. its SERIOUSLY a blink and you miss it thing, but just in case.
Also, as im sure you can tell, im not very kindly inclined towards rheagar, and you can feel that here, so be warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Note:** I have made a serious miscalculation in my story. I thought that the only weirwoods in the south were the ones in the Isle of Faces, that the godwoods south of the Neck did not have any left, after the invasion of the Andals, because I read they cut them all. BUT this is apparently not true. Lots of godwoods south of the neck have weirwoods in them, even Riverrun. This affects my story quite a bit. Obviously if they could have gone to the godwood in Riverrun, they would have. It's closer, its easier. But I didn’t know, so… so I’m not going to reton it, I’m just gonna go ahead and go with my version, but this was just to let you guys know that I know I made a mistake.

Also, since I’m going to talk a lot about magic here: Some of what happens in this chapter, is going to make you guys wonder whether Sansa is like Bran or Jojen and the answer to that is no. There is some evidence in the books that all the Starks have very strange dreams, with Jon dreaming of the crypts and, some say, his own death, Robb’s death (the grey ghastly wolf staring at him with sad eyes), Bran and Rickon dreaming that their father was dead (in the show they both do), etc. Even Theon dreamt of the Red Wedding - which might make his dream only a nightmare but there was also Lyanna there among the dead Starks, which is weird.

It’s not that Sansa is more magical than her siblings here; it’s that magic itself is closer to the surface of the world in this au and certain people – like the Starks, who in the books are magical after all - can feel it more keenly. (Obviously this means that Bran, who is already very powerful in the books, is even more sensitive to it here, even before he gets hurt, and Jojen as well). It doesn’t mean Sansa is the three-eyed-crow or anything. I don’t plan to have her take over the narratives of other characters – I’m just borrowing certain elements. G.R.R. Martin is famous for his love of subtle magic –I’m reading between the lines and turning up the volume.

Also, a most sincere thank you to reader1030, for editing the first part of this story! (she edited all of it, actually, in record time tha blew my mind, but i stabbed her in the back and went and rewrote chunks of the second part, so i could not use her very excellent and very polished edited version for that part. IM SORRY!)

ps: Some references, if you want to see what Lyanna looks like (brunette version of this ofc) to me. Charlize Theron is older here than Lyanna’s 16 years, but every time i hear ‘a woman child of surpassing loveliness’ i think of her, because C.T. matches the description lol
this is the end, isn't it?
and you are here with me again, listening with me: the sea
no longer torments me; the self
i wished to be is the self i am

Louise Glück, “Otis,” Meadowlands

Close to the shore, dead leaves cartwheeled around their feet, lifted by the breeze, but then the further they walked into the woods, the darker and more still it grew.

Sansa was not shaking anymore, though she still felt unnaturally aware of everything around her. She could hear her own breathing echoing in her ears, and Jon’s too, who walked so close by her side that his arm brushed hers. She heard his boots crunching the twigs and dry leaves, her cloak dragging them along, Ghost’s panting, her blood rushing. She thought she could hear his heartbeat, but that was probably just her own, drumming in time with his.

She didn’t know where she was going. Only knew where her feet were taking her.

As she walked, Sansa looked around hungrily, taking in the shadows, trying to peer in their midst. To also see what she could feel.

She remembered Winterfell’s godswood. The tall sentinels armored in their grey-green needles, the great oaks, the hawthorn, the ash, the soldier pines - and at the center, the heartree standing like some pale giant frozen in time[[1]]. A dark and silent place even by day. It was dark here, too, and not just because of the night. And the weirdwoods were everywhere, their bone-white trunks standing apart from the other trees, their paleness overcoming the dark, the night, making them look like ghosts haunting through the trees. She could almost see the outline of faces carved in them, misshapen, open mouths screaming silently, looking more alive than Sansa ever remembered them looking. She could feel the gaze of their blood-dark eyes crawling along her skin; hear the whispering of the treetop-leaves as they were lulled and pulled by the wind; that a song spoken in that old language she had never understood, but always been able to hear.

Everything felt alive here, everything. A thousand unseen eyes bearing witness.

Watching.

Sometimes she thought she could sense the enormity of what lay behind those faces, into the wood, into leaf and limb and root; feel the timeless vastness of all that they remembered. It crushed her heart to think of it. Of all the songs and spells, the histories and prayers, everything everyone knew about this world, and the one that came before it, when the sun was new and just dawning. Sometimes… sometimes she thought she had been able to feel what lay beyond. Deep in the dark earth, where it all led. Something ancient and knowing and terrible and red. She’d dreamt it once: a pale body with a skeletal face, branches growing through him, through an empty eye socket.
A fever dream.

Sansa tightened her hold on Jon’s hand and he pulled her closer, arms touching as they walked side by side, in the same step. She wanted to tell him she just wanted him close; that she was not afraid, but no sound made it past her lips.

Here was not the place for words. Not yet.

Soon.

She took a deep breath and she could almost taste the air. Its earthy scent was brooding and dense, but not as much as it should be in a wood so dark.

It was the smell of centuries. The scent of home. Where home always would be. It was a memory that could never be erased. Not in a year, or ten, or fifty.

Sansa bit her lip so that she wouldn’t laugh. No, she was not afraid.

There was nothing to fear.

If she closed her eyes, she might be home. The wood might be Winterfell. It might be the North. She might hear Bran’s laughter as he climbed the walls of the guest house, Robb daring Theon to jump from its second story window into the hot pools below.

For a moment, as she stopped abruptly and closed her eyes, she almost did.

“Sansa?”

“Here. We have to walk just past that line of trees over there.” She pointed to their right, away from where the trail they had been following turned. It was not so silent here. She could hear birds, insects, their sounds of life breaking the night into something softer.

Life.

She was in the right place. So she took a step, and then another. Jon considered only for a moment, enough that their joined hands stretched between them, before he followed. They walked into a wide grove, the only place where, if they looked up they could see the sky. Five weirwoods grew in a circle, their distressed faces all turned towards the middle of the grove, their branches reaching up in the sky and twining together as if they were one. There were stones planted in the grass, making strange circular shapes. They looked dark enough to be obsidian, the moonlight making them shine like glass.

“Nature’s perfect shape,” Sansa whispered.

“What?” Jon asked, but Sansa did not hear him. She let go of his hand and walked between the stones to the middle of the open space, and looked around.

“Can you tell which way is north?”

Jon reached her and looked up at the stars, through the gap left by the weirwood branches. He then pointed to her left.

“That way.”

She walked to the weirwood in the direction he had pointed, and kneeled, finding the perfect spot as
if she’d done this a thousand times.

In her dreams, she had.

xvi.

Jon was no stranger to the woods, or to how a godswood felt, which was always different. There was a heavi ness in a wood where trees with faces lived. A presence, a wildness, which could not be found anywhere else. Jon had always felt it. Even in the heart of the Red Keep at the heart of King’s Landing, in a godswood with no weirwood, the weight of the old gods had been with him.

He had been drawn to it as a child, when his dreams led him there every night, until one time he just left his bed and headed there when he was awake, scared and half wild with frustration, to see what was calling him. In the dark, even the godsdow nd in the capitol had seemed alive with some unspeakable presence, but that was nothing compared to what Jon had found later, in Winterfell.

And here.

He kept looking at the world through Ghost’s eyes, smelling the air, trying to feel out the world with senses sharper than a human’s. Trying to be sure they were really as alone as they seemed to be, even as the place felt overrun with others watching. It was almost hard to breathe for the heaviness of the power that he felt around him. It charged the air, it changed it. It made him feel as if the lightning strike was any moment coming.

“Come sit with me, Jon,” Sansa said as she folded her skirts beneath her gracefully and set her satchel down. “That’s something grandmother always said: the circle is nature’s perfect form,” she explained as if nothing at all was the matter. “Maybe the Green Men agree.”

“Right.” He didn’t know what else to say, really.

She smiled at him. Jon felt like someone had punched him in the back of the head and his wits had not yet returned. And Sansa seemed so calm, so serene that it should have been disturbing. A calmness that was at odds with how wild she looked in that moment.

When he had seen her at the foot of the pier, Jon had not been sure if he’d still been dreaming or not. Her curls had been a riot around her – and were still - crushed flowers and wheat still caught in them. She looked more like her sister than Jon had ever seen her, but also, more like herself than he had ever seen her. There was nothing contained about her anymore, she buzzed with an energy that seemed to come out of her in waves. And with her pale forearms peeking from the folds of her cloak, with her blazing eyes and that feverish intensity, she’d looked terrifying when he’d first laid eyes on her. Then she’d looked drugged.

But she had been neither, and the pull she had had over him in that moment had been dream-like.

The pull she still had.

He could not say why he had followed her. He had wanted to, of course, but it had been more than that. He had seen her in his dream and known as he woke that she was waiting for him. And that something else was waiting, too. It had been the same as the dreams he used to have as a child, when he’d tried to find out how to reach the old gods, how to answer their call. He’d failed back then and it had made him feel rejected, out of place, even as he heard their calling.

He had felt that pull in two different directions all his life, not just in the godswood. There it was merely clearer. Louder. There was no other place in Winterfell that had been able to set his teeth on
edge more, aside from perhaps the dark crypts beneath the castle. It had made him feel like he did not belong there, but at the same time, Jon had known there was something there waiting for him, something he would never be able to find anywhere else but there, kneeling in front of that grotesque face with its weeping eyes.

Never had he been able to reach that which he wanted.

Now though…now, he watched Sansa take out small pouches from the satchel he had given her and line them all up in front of her with the precision of a maester counting his instruments before he cut into someone’s flesh. He watched the shade of her hair in moonlight and how it seemed lighter than the foliage of the weirwoods, but just as red.

There had been a few times in his life when Jon had had moments of absolute clarity. Moments when for a few brief seconds, the silence drowned out the noise and he could feel rather than think; feel when inevitable press of something truly terrifying was coming. When things seemed so sharp and the world so fresh, as though it had all just come into existence[^6]. He could never make these moments last, but they happened, and in those moments he was certain that everything was exactly the way it was meant to be[^7].

Jon sat down beside Sansa just as she pulled out two small white bowls and a pestle which she set down on the ground. He let Ghost wander off and watched his cousin instead.

“What are we doing here, Sansa?”

He was whispering, but they might have been the only two people alive in the world in that moment, for how isolated and alone they felt. Even his breathing seemed too loud.

“Did you know my mother and grandmother used to clash over near everything, in the first years?”

Jon had given up on searching for sense. He exhaled slowly, let himself relax and shook his head. No, he had not known that. His grandmother and Lady Stark seemed civil enough to him.

“They did. My mother was a southerner to her and grandmother had already lost so much to the south.” Sansa inched a bit closer to him until her knees touched his. He brushed her hair back from her face, tucked it around her ear, but stubbornly, it came loose again. “When my father brought your mother’s body back to Winterfell, grandmother refused to leave the crypts for ten days, they say. Have you ever been down there?”

Jon nodded.

“How did it feel?”

Jon didn’t even think about it. What was the point of hiding now? “Unwelcome. Sometimes.”

“But not frightening?”

“No. Just dark.”

Sansa smiled. She inclined her head to the side, watching him. “And you are not afraid of the dark?”

No, he had not been, not ever. Nor for what might have waited for him there. Though many who knew him, and sometimes Jon, too, thought it might have better for him if he had been[^8].

“Grandmother wasn’t either. Or perhaps her pain was bigger than her fear. She would sleep down
there. Said she could not stand the thought of her only daughter alone in the dark. She almost clawed
my father’s eyes out when he made her leave.”

Jon felt his throat close up. “I did not know that. She never told me.”

“No, she wouldn’t have. She’s told me all manner of tales of the North and our house, but she never
mentions your mother. Neither does my father.”

No. No one ever did.

“Uncle Benjen talked about her sometimes. He used to, when I was a boy, because he knew I felt
alone in the Red Keep,” Jon confessed. “But I could see it made him sad, so eventually I stopped
asking.”

“Yes. Father gets sad, too. And no one in Winterfell would mention her either, for fear of upsetting
their lord and his mother. For fear of bringing back their grief.”

“So how do you know the things you know?” Though perhaps he should not have wondered. It was
a gift she had, or had honed: pulling secrets out of people. She did not even need to pull, you gave
them to her, as if for safekeeping. Naturally, the way you might whisper in the night and squint in the
sun, you told Sansa Stark things, so that she might know you.

But wait.

No. That was just him.

“When I was leaving, people in Winterfell started mentioning it. Fearing old Lady Stark would go
back to that sadness where no one could reach her. But by then she had my mother to keep her
company.”

Jon could almost smile at the look on her face. The irony of that statement amused her more than she
thought it should.

“Everyone always said it was my birth that healed the rift between them.” She said it, but she smiled
as she did.

“Does that amuse you?”

Sansa shrugged. “A bit. One could hardly call theirs a peaceful union.”

In the moonlight of this godswood, Sansa looked paler than she was, one of her eyes seeming like
glass, the other black, glinting inside her socket. She rose to her feet in one uninterrupted movement,
her hand brushing along his cheek before she moved away, a gesture so sudden and soft Jon could
not help but turn his face into it, following. She started picking up some dry leaves from the ground,
stacking them in her hand after she made sure they were weirwood leaves.

Jon tried to avoid looking at the face carved on the tree behind her, but it was so massive, its open
mouth seemingly trying to swallow Sansa whole as she stood there in front of it, that he could not
ignore it for long. Jon may not fear the dark, but it did make him fanciful. It was true, though, he had
never liked the wide, long-suffering eyes carved in the weirwoods, the mouth open in a silent
scream. Some looked angry, and Jon preferred those. Others – like the one they’d sat in front of,
looked as if they had been shouting their silent pain since the world was young. Sansa said
weirwoods held memory of all that happened about them. It was a measure of the kind of world they
lived in then, if these sentient trees looked suffering or full of rage because of all the memory they
contained.
For one strange moment, the darkness tricked him and between one blink and the next, it seemed as if he recognized that face carved into the pale trunk, staring down at him with eyes red and wise and sad. As if he’d seen it before.

But that was madness.

“My mother and grandmother disagreed on everything, and on my education especially. Things I should know, things I should never have to hear.” She came back, sat down where she had been. Put the red leaves in one of the bowls and started crushing them with the pestle expertly.

“Mother had no qualms about me knowing the stories of the North. That was part of my lessons with Maester Luwin, actually. I can name the known Lords and Ladies of Winterfell, from Brandon the Builder and his sister Sareah to my father. But she took issue with some of grandmother’s…

stranger teachings.”

She met his eyes then, and Jon knew immediately what she meant.

“My mother thought the old practice of painting one’s face and praying in the dark was…indecent for a young lady of my standing.” Sansa grinned as she said this, and Jon could not help but smile back. “She did not mind the harvest rituals or maids dancing in as little as their shifts around the heartree to celebrate summer. But the thought of me hearing of blood sacrifices, of the power of the earth being harnessed with the right words, and the weirwoods gifting visions to those that prayed for them…that scared her, I think. She probably thought it archaic, though she never said, of course. She would never insult my father that way.”

Sansa laughed low, “Of course, grandmother did not need to be told. And she rejoiced in it. In how different she was, how much she enjoyed everything my mother found frightening and strange. And she wanted me to know all of it. She held the very distinct opinion that I would need every bit of knowledge they could give me, be it courtly or savage.”

“Lady Catelyn disagreed?”

If she had, she certainly had misunderstood the nature of the Targaryen court. And Lady Cat had never seemed to Jon like a woman who misunderstood much of anything.

“I was…very naïve when I first came down here,” Sansa said, as she pushed the pestle from side to side with a finger, avoiding his eyes. “Always so eager to please. I think my mother was afraid of what it might mean, if I let slip out some of the things grandmother told me. What they might do to me if anyone ever found out that I-”

She stopped abruptly and looked up, meeting his eyes. Jon could not read her face.

“That you what?” he pressed, reaching for her, brushing the outside of her wrist with his thumb. He had an inkling of what she’d meant to say, but he wanted her to say it.

Sansa smiled. “Do you know people still talk about how you used to sacrifice animals in the godswood of the Red Keep, chanting under your breath, trying to throw curses? There are septons in the Sept of Baelor whose job is still to light a candle to the Mother and the Father for you, and pray for your soul.”

Jon scoffed.

“I did do that,” he admitted then, uncaring. “The animal sacrifices. I would trap pigeons, and then chop off their heads at the foot of the heartree, like I read the northerners used to do for their gods,
but nothing ever happened.”

Sansa looked incredulous, which surprised him. He had not thought such a thing would shock her.

“Because it doesn’t work that way. You have to give something of you. Something dear to you, that you would miss. You have to give it, and never expect it back, otherwise it wouldn’t be much of a sacrifice, would it? But we’re not doing blood magic here. That’s not what this is.”

“What is it, then?”

“We are trying to listen. It will be up to them whether they choose to speak. What they choose to tell us.”

Jon’s mind was wheeling, even as Sansa set down the white bowl where she had ground the weirwood leaves into a fine power, and picked up the other one. She poured something that looked like white seeds into it and started over again, grinding them down.

“Tell us. You mean visions? Like Bran?”

“No, I think Bran is different.” She looked at him. “People like you and I need a bit of help to be as close to the truth of the world as he seems to be.”

“Help?” He didn’t understand, but then Sansa raised the bowl a little, and it caught the moonlight so clearly that he could see it was as bone-white as the weirwoods around them, and it had small laughing weirwood faces carved all over. Finally, Jon understood. “You mean drugs?”

She chuckled at the doubt in his voice. “Yes. These are weirwood seeds. They’re rare, quite hard to get. They were a gift to me, from the Flints of the Mountains, before I left Winterfell.”

Jon rolled his eyes, shook his head. “I’m starting to like grandmother’s version of prayer. Though I can understand why southerners think it’s magic.”

Sansa laughed. It resounded around them, brought all other sounds around the forest closer to him, made them louder.

“Grandmother thinks magic and the gods are the same thing. One fuels the other and she doesn’t much care which does which. She told me their power here used to be like a world built on top of this world, and long ago they were so closely linked together that the Children of the Forest roamed Westeros, giants walked the mountain trails and dragons flew in the east. Countless wonders roamed the earth.

“But something terrible happened and made that second world collapse, break apart from ours. And the gods left behind only small remnants of themselves; what we call magic now. She thinks we are living amongst the magical ruins of ancient wonders, the glimmer of which is far away and faint. That to see the true beauty, the true wonder, we have to find ingenious ways to open our minds again, let the gods pass through and give something back.”

Jon was paying very close attention to her words, to what they meant, but he could not help himself. “You liked her telling stories to you, didn’t you?”

She told them beautifully, too. Her voice was always a touch deeper when she was at ease and with a lilting note to it that spoke of the soft remnants of an accent, making her speech into something almost hypnotizing. And what she spoke of was beautiful, too.
Sansa smiled. “I liked it very much. When I was a child they sounded like fairy tales. I realized later she thought it was all true.”

“She thought they were true. But you didn’t?”

Sansa shrugged. “Not at first. Then when I was around nine years old, the Karstarks came to Winterfell and I sneaked out to sleep in Alys Karstark’s bed, so that we could waste all night away chatting. She was sleeping in the guest house, and her window overlooked the godswood. I had always liked that window.”

She was about to pour something from a vial into the bowl where she had crushed the weirwood leaves, but she hesitated a moment.

“I…the heart tree scared me as a child but I loved listening to the sounds of the woods. I always found it calming.” She bit her lip and Jon knew there was more she wanted to say, but she dismissed it with a shake of her head and continued with her story. She went ahead and uncapped the vial and the sweet scent of lavender hit Jon’s nose before she even poured some drops of oil into the powder and mixed it until it formed a paste.

“That night, when Alys and I looked out the window, we saw a woman bathing in the pools below. I recognized her right away - she was one of the cook’s daughters. She was in the ninth month of her pregnancy; everyone expected her to give birth any day. When she rose from the waters, she was naked as the day she was born. She didn’t bother to cover up at all, even though there had been a summer snow not two days before. She knelt in front of the heart tree and started singing. And then she started screaming.”

“Was she hurt?”

“I certainly thought so!” Sansa said around a laugh. “By that time both Arya and Bran had already been born, but I had never been allowed close enough to the birthing room to hear my mother scream. I thought she was dying.

“Alys was too afraid to stay with her, so I did, and she went to get help. Lena, the woman, she gave birth right there in the godswood, with half of Winterfell’s women attending her. And when Maester Luwin asked her what madness had possessed her to come there when the pains of her birth had already started, she said she wanted her husband to see his son be born.” The smile on Sansa’s face was small, secret. “Her husband, who had been dead three months. But she took my grandmother’s hand and told her how she’d seen her wedding day as her son came into the world. She was laughing the whole time.”

“She frightened you.” Jon did not need her to tell him. It was in her voice as she told what she remembered. But there was something else there, too. Something beyond fear that touched awe.

“Yes. And no. I was surprised, to see how much she believed. That it wasn’t just stories to her. It made me see some things in a different way. Have you never had strange dreams, Jon?” She asked abruptly. “Dreams that felt more than yours. More than dreams.”

He’d never told this to anyone. Not a soul. Not even when Dany told him of her own strange dreams had he confessed this. It had been one of the few things that belonged to him only and he’d held it closer to his breast than his own heartbeat.

Now all he wanted was for her to have it. She would know what to do with it, he was sure.

“I have.”
Sansa stopped grinding the seeds and watched him closely. “What did you see?”

Jon felt like he could not breathe. His hands were sweating. He wiped them on his britches, gripped his knees to keep them still.

“My mother, sometimes.” He’d never seen Lyanna Stark’s likeness before he got to the crypts of Winterfell and laid roses at her feet, lighting a candle and putting it on her outstretched hand. But he’d known her face before then. “Other people too. Things that made no sense.”

He’d dreamt of Sansa, too. Just the once. But something stopped that confession from spilling from his lips.

Sansa nodded slowly. A tangled curl fell forward, getting in front of her eyes, so Jon pushed it over her shoulder again. He gently gathered her hair to the side as she worked, parted it in three sections and started braiding it, picking off the dried flowers as he went. She looked at him for a while as he did, and when he met her eyes, she just smiled.

“Thank you.”

“Of course. What about you?” He asked as he reached the end of her braid and pushed it over her shoulder. “Did you ever dream strange dreams?”

“Sometimes. I had one tonight, though I have been dreaming about this place ever since I came south. The old gods are loud here. Their call is strong and they’ve been calling to me for years.” Her smile was brilliant. The suddenness of it shocked him, her rows of perfect teeth in the dark reminding him of an animal’s snarl for no reason at all. “Do you feel it?”

Jon had no idea what he felt, but whatever it was, it had drunkened his senses. “I feel like I can’t breathe.”

Her chuckle made him sit straighter. Made him want to inch closer.

“Yes. If the presence of the old gods were wildfire, it would be so thick here that one spark would ignite this whole forest in a moment. Grandmother calls places like this ‘hinges of the world’. As if they’re pillars the whole of creation stands on.”

Jon let out a gust of air. “She called the Wall that as well.”

Sansa nodded enthusiastically. “Yes. She wanted me to go there before I came south and I would have, but then Jorah Mormont’s trial happened and there was no time for detours.” She took a deep breath. Jon caught her hand shaking before she set pestle down and linked her fingers together between her crossed legs. “She said I should come here, too. Jojen said I would.”

Jon frowned. “Who?”

“Jojen Reed. Howland Reed’s son, Lord of Greywater Watch and an old friend of my father. Jojen and his sister showed up in Winterfell when I was ten years old, to be fostered. Father was genuinely happy to receive them.”

Sansa moved with a sharpness that startled him a bit, and even more so when he saw that she was pulling her glove off. Under the colorless light of the moon, the skin of her hand looked as pale as the rest of her, but Jon could see the damage of it. The puckered raised flesh of her palm, the scarred skin of her wrist and forearm.

Jon imagined her standing over a fire, trying to reach for a coal at the heart of it. The image was
sharp and immediate. He had to shake his head to shake it away.

“Jojen became fast friends with Bran, and Arya and Meera became inseparable. Meera taught me how to use a bow, and her brother did help me understand some of my dreams. He said he’d seen me here in this very forest, in front of this weirwood.”

“He is a greenseer?” Crannogmen had always been strange, everyone said so. It was said they married with the Children of the Forest and inherited their powers. Perhaps it was true. Why not?

Sansa shrugged. “He says he is just a boy who dreams. That true greenseers were more than that. Give me your knife.”

Jon was surprised but obliged. Then, when he watched her unsheathe it, he smiled at her. “Are you going to offer me to the old gods, Lady Stark?”

Sansa looked at him from beneath her lashes. “We already spoke of how it did not work that way.”

“Does that mean you would not miss me if I were gone?”

Sansa snorted. “You have no reverence, your grace.”

“The gods have no need for false piety; they already know my heart. And if they do not, then they are not gods, and I need not worry,” Jon told her carelessly.

She gripped the blade with her left hand and in a moment, Jon understood what she meant to do and took hold of her wrist. Gently, but swiftly, and his grip was implacable.

“What are you doing?” he asked. In the stillness of the night air, his alarmed voice rang almost angry.

“I am going to cut my palm,” she explained calmly, as if he was a child.

“Of your burned hand?”

“Yes.”

“Why!?”

“I have seen myself do it like this. There must be a reason for that.”

When he did not let go of her wrist, Sansa leaned in, her face so close the tip of her nose would brush his if he so much as tipped his chin forward.

“There are those who would say that the gods drew a circle for us in this place a long time ago. That we were never not coming here. That this was always meant to happen. You would have me doubt that now?”

Jon shook his head. He had never believed in prophecies or destiny. He would listen to the gods because he’d always felt they had something to tell him, but he loathed the idea of someone guiding him along a predestined path. Like some puppet.

“No. I don’t believe in predestination. I make my own choices.”

“Then make it, your grace. I made mine an hour ago.” It sounded almost like she was laughing at him. “Let go of my wrist, Jon.”
His fingers loosened one by one. He had to do it slowly, and convince himself, or he might not have done it. Sansa waited for him to put his hand away, before she neared that blade to her palm and cut the skin just under her thumb with an ease that spoke of practice and which truly put a chill in him for the first time that night. She let a few drops of her blood drip among the weirwood seeds and then passed the dagger to him.

Jon copied her actions, already feeling the weight of a strange disappointment washing over him, pulling him closer to the ground where before he had almost felt like he had been hovering two inches above it.

Sansa started grounding the seeds again, adding a few drops of water, until they resembled a pale paste, their mingling blood running through it like veins.

“Now what?”

“Don’t be upset, your grace. It’s just a small cut,” she said, reading him exactly. There was laughter in her voice. Jon watched her dip two fingers of both hands in the bowl with the crushed leaves, and bring them up to his face.

“Close your eyes,” she whispered. When she touched her hands to his forehead, he did, leaning in to her touch.

“What was it like?”

“Disconcerting.”

She then dipped her fingers again and traced a single line down his cheek, from his eye to his jaw, and repeated it on his other one, following down his neck, tracing his collarbones where they were visible beneath the lacings of his shirt.

Everywhere she touched his skin ignited. It was as if he had been so taken by what she had been telling him that he had forgotten how close she was, how she smelled of crushed flowers and a whiff of ale and how the scent of the earth around them and the humid air of the forest only seemed to make her take more space in his mind.

“Don’t open your eyes yet.”

He felt the words almost brushing against his lips and tilted his head to the side, leaning forward. He brushed skin, and stayed there. When Sansa smiled, Jon realized he’d landed somewhere along her cheek.

He bit down lightly, and she laughed, loud and surprised.

“You’ve been spending far too much time in the company of your wolf.”

“Perhaps.” It might have been true, too, considering how much he wanted to take another bite of her. It was as if he was truly resisting the urge to eat her whole, and never had that urge felt closer to the surface than now, when she was so close, so alive and so uncaring of anything beyond the two of
“You can open your eyes now.”

Jon did, and found her smiling face an inch from his.

“Is it my turn?” he asked, looking at the bowl and then her face, looking forward to using any reason to touch her.

“No. I won’t be joining you.”

His face must have fallen visibly.

“The after-effects of the weirwood seed paste are not strong, but you will feel it for an hour or more. We can’t both be out of our minds, and I think…I think this is supposed to be me showing you how.”

“Like grandmother said.”

Sansa smiled and nodded. Took the weirwood paste bowl in her hands, but hesitated before she offered it to him.

“Jon…why do you want to do this?” she asked him then, as if it had only just occurred to her to ask.

“I’ve been waiting to do this my whole life.”

“Yes, but… when you’re asking for the gods to speak to you, they chose what they show you. But it’s also true that pain calls to pain. Sadness to sadness. There are terrible things they could show you.”

Jon took a deep breath. He was not about to turn back. He never would have. But he did try to empty his mind.

“I feel neither of those now. And even if I did, I’d rather know than wonder.”

Sansa sighed. “Everyone thinks that, before they know.”

She lowered her head a little, and a shadow fell over her eyes, hollowed out her cheeks, making her face look like a skull. Jon reached for it with both hands, making her look at him and she was Sansa again. He pressed their foreheads together.

“I’ll be fine. I have you to watch over me.”

She could have laughed at him. She could have dismissed him with a roll of her eyes as she always did, but she only fixed him with an unflinching stare. So close they were that she was almost going cross-eyed but she did not waver.

“Yes, you do have me.” Her voice sounded different. Deeper. She straightened, handed him the bowl. “You have to eat all of it. It will taste foul at first, but then it gets better.”

“Alright.”

Jon took some of the paste with his fingers and put it in his mouth. It tasted bitter, then better, just like Sansa said it would. His second mouthful was almost sweet, tasting of honey, new-fallen snow, pepper and cinnamon, the last hug Elia ever gave him, Robb’s smile, Sansa pressing her cheek to his, his mother’s first kiss. He could almost feel it now, where his hairline met his brow, soft as a
whisper.

It stopped his breath, brought tears to his eyes.

When Jon swallowed, paste seemed to come to life within him. He could feel tendrils of heat spreading through his chest, like fingers of fire coiling around his heart. He looked down to see if Sansa was touching him, but her hands were folded in her lap and she was watching him with wide eyes, tense and coiled, ready to spring.

Once he was done, she took the bowl from him, and then took his hand. Jon looked at their fingers, how they linked, followed her arm to her shoulder, her neck. She pulled him up and he went with her.

His legs felt watery, and his head too big for his body, but he moved.

They did not go far. She brought him close to the tree, to the anguished face carved into it. They knelt in front of it. Jon took hold of the folds at the front of Sansa’s cloak and pulled her to him, until he could press his nose against her neck, just below her ear.

Her hand against his cheek was soft. She took his other hand, pressed it against cold wood.

Jon felt like someone had kicked him in the ribs. He tried to catch his breath as he ran through thick woods, ran until he hit water. He could smell men through the trees, but he was not sure they were men hiding amongst the trees. Women too. Strange men and women. Too much of the earth and trees was in their scent for them to be what he had always known men to be.

He threw his head backwards and howled to the moon.

Ghost kept running through the woods, but Jon was left behind. He floated out of his companion, as if someone had taken his hand gently, to guide him someplace else. He felt strange. As if he’d been planted in one spot for too long, his legs stiff, his hands caught in an unnatural stillness. And at the same time, he was floating. Floating in sunlight, in warm water or laying in a field of soft grass, he did not know, except that he was held gently. This flow curled around him, caressing him and not moving him as they passed, lulling him into something like sleep. 

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He knows already what his mind is searching for, yearning for. She calls to him and he to her, in a longing that has spanned years, and countless nightmares. A nameless missing that has never not been part of him.

When he opens his eyes again, Jon is back in the weirwood groove as the sun shines down on it. The red leaves of the are a blaze of flame among all the different kinds of green. The sun warms the stones on the ground and Jon watches them glint in its light, shining like beaten copper. He can smell them; the earth, the sweetness in the wind. It is spring. Jon knows, though he doesn’t know how he knows. But he feels lit. That life is sweet and blossoming, though winter is not fully shaken yet. Its chill lingers walks side by side with the bloom of spring and the woman kneeling in front of the weirwood tree has cloaked herself in fur, to keep it out. Her dark hair curls down her back.

There is a crown of winter roses on her head.

*My mother…*
He knows, and his heart lurches.

He wants to jump out of the tree and in front of her.

“Mother!”

She looks up, startled, pale grey eyes matching his so exactly he could be looking in a mirror.

She and Arya could have been sisters.

‘Did you hear that?’

It is his father beside her. Looking leaner, younger. So much happier than Jon has ever seen him, that it’s startling to witness. ‘Hear what, my love?’

She is frowning directly at Jon, her pale eyes matching the crisp blue of the roses on her head strangely, making them look like steel. She shakes her head, her face smooths out. When she looks to his father, love shines on her face so clear that it slices Jon’s heart clean through. He feels her love as if it were crawling up his own throat, sticky sweet and heady.

She reaches for Rheagar and he kissed her hand as they rise, her lips once they are on their feet.

Jon feels dizzy.

His mother laughs and throws her arms around his father’s shoulders. They start dancing, weaving through the stones. She looks radiant under the sun. Her smile blinds him, and the colors start to melt together. The white of the dress beneath her cloak fades.

He tastes snow, ash, as everything disappears from view.

He’s on a boat, the lulling up and down of the water the first thing he recognises. The second are the sounds of steel against steel. She is dressed as a boy, her hair in a braid, curls stuck on her sweaty face, a smile so fierce curling her lips, and she has never looked more beautiful or alive.

Alive! In front of him.

It overwhelms.

She is sparring with Ser Arthur as the other two knights in white watch on in different degrees of amusement. At one point Arthur knocks Lyanna off her feet. She hits the floor of the boat with a thud, her sword skitters away. But she laughs! She laughs as she climbs to her feet again, scrambling after her dull blade.

‘Again!’

‘No more, lady. Already you are bruised.’

Jon can hear the smile in Arthur’s face, the warmth in his voice, even without looking at him. He doesn’t look at him. His eyes are for Lyanna Stark. He doesn’t want to miss a single breath

‘Bruises are lessons.’ She is grinning. Looking like she wants to dole out some lessons of her own. Jon knows that look and he smiles to see it on her. Is this the devilment they shared, the one uncle Benjen always mentions?

It must be.
I have your smile.

He’d been told, but it was different to see it.

‘Your brother Brandon tell you that?’ one of the kingsguard asks in a deep voice. Jon doesn't know him, but he knows the insignia on his chest. The white bull.

‘He did. Come now, Sword of the Morning! Are you scared of one girl?’

Arthur Dayne smirks as he grips his sword. He is about to give in, and his mother sees it because she takes up her guard again, a good stance, though she needs to turn in her left heel a little bit. But then Arthur straightens, face going blank.

‘Your grace.’

For a moment, Jon thinks he’s been seen, but then he and his mother both turn at the same time, to see his father approaching.

‘Rheagar! Come and see me beat your favorite knight!’

She sounds delighted, but Jon knows that look on his father's face. Can read the thinness of his lips as well as his mother cannot. He is displeased.

His mother's frown disappears from view, as if a strong wind had blown the memory away like sand. But the next moment Jon is standing on the deck of the same ship again, moonlight shining down on his mother's face, whose frown seems so fierce she looks as if she will never smile again. She is dueling Arthur again, but this time, she is concentrating with all her might. She is breathing hard, sweating, gripping her sword with both hands. Her movements are easier now, she has corrected her stance, and when she next jabs at Arthur with her sword, it is a practiced move.

It is no longer a game.

Or perhaps it is but she, like Jon, takes everything she does seriously as death.

Everyone always says he fights like his father, but Jon can see his mother’s talent is nothing to scoff at either. She is tall and lean and most of all, determined.

But for all that, Arthur knocks her down again, and this time, she is not so quick to rise on her feet.

Jon watches her with growing concern as she lays there, catching her breath. looking as if she is swallowing down tears. Instinctively, without thought or a fraction of hesitation, Jon reaches forward with both hands - but she slips through them.

This is memory. History. She is not here. She’s been in her tomb for over 2 decades.

How soon he had forgotten.

Jon has enough anger in him in that moment that he thinks he might set the whole world on fire by will alone.

He watches her blink her tears away, and his own fall down his face.

‘Again.’ She sounds as angry as he feels, at least.

‘No.’
'Yes.'

'You are tired and upset.' There is gentleness in Ser Arthur’s voice, which seems to only fuel his mother’s temper.

'Yes and what of it?'

'Perhaps instead of trying to beat me, you might think of speaking of whatever has upset you with the prince. I am sure he would listen to you.'

Lyanna turns away from him. She looks pensive as she examines the silver ring on her middle finger. He’s seen that ring before, with its two masterfully delicate wolf heads chasing one another in a circle, a pale stone set between them that would catch the light and sparkled like a star, colors. His grandmother wore it when he came to Winterfell, and the day he left, she’d given it to him.

'I don't know what to tell him. I don’t understand why i feel this way.' Lyanna murmurs.

'What way, lady?'

Lyanna sighs, closes her eyes and turns her head skywards. ‘Sad, Ser.’

She turns to Arthur, and Jon can only see half her face now, the upturned nose, the bow of her lips. She had left so much of herself in him.

'I have done something reckless and I keep waiting for the consequences, but nothing is coming. It is making me feel… strange.’

'You have the protection of the Prince of the seven kingdoms, lady. All will be well.’

'All will be well.’ She repeats, smiling at Arthur Dayne but its not real. ‘You sound like Rheagar. He talks of the future as if it's already happened. It angers me.’

She turns to face Arthur and her movement is so razor sharp is startles Jon a bit. ‘Has he spoken to you of this prophecy he keeps mentioning? Do you know of it?’

'Yes.’

'Well what is it?’

'I know that it exists, lady. No more.’

Lyanna tightens her lips. ‘I don't like it when he speaks of it. Makes me feel… i don't know.’

She looks down, something like shame fleeting across her face, before she shakes it off with a shake of her head.

'The prince believes in giving people hope, lady. That is his his life's purpose.’

'Hope. I suppose we can call it that. But he doesn’t know my father’s stubbornness. My mother’s fierceness. What does he know of Brandon, of Ned? He’s never even met Benjen. He speaks of them as if none of that matters but he knows nothing of their hearts.’ Her lip shakes. ‘Why do i have to lose my brothers to keep myself? It's not fair.’

'I don’t know your brothers well, lady, but I do know the way i love my own sister. I might berate her sometimes, but there is nothing she could ever do to lose me, and even less that I could never forgive her for.’
‘Truly?’

‘Oh yes.’

She looks desperately young like that, eyes pleading, washed in moonlight. It hurt to see her make herself so vulnerable.

*You should have run away alone, mother. You should have never accepted his help. Nothing dragons ever do is for nothing.*

‘Where is she now?’

Arthur Dayne looks away from his mother for the very first time that night. ‘In the Red Keep, with the rest of Princess Elia’s ladies.’

His mother too looks away and neither of them speaks again.

Jon reaches for her, and before his fingers near her shoulder, heat blasts him from all sides. That is the first thing Jon feels before he ever sees the sand or the white rocks or the tower from which one girl runs out. He follows her, not knowing or caring where she was taking him or about the footsteps of multiple men he could hear coming behind them.

She mounts a horse as if her pregnant belly was never in the way and rides that horse hard. Recklessly. Thoughtlessly.

Men run after her, then ride after her, chasing her across the plain between the mountains.

Jon knows where he is. He has been to this place before. A small tower, by the standards of King’s Landing or Sunspear. Surrounded by the mountains of Dorne, isolated from villages and roads. A hidden place. Hard to find.

Hard to escape.

Impossible, for a pregnant woman with no map and who did not know her way around the mountain passes.

Yes, he has been here.

In his fifteenth year, he demanded to see the place he’d been born in. The place her mother had died to birth him. He’d been here, stood in the ruin of that room where she had taken her last breath, and felt his heart empty at the thought he was then older than his mother had ever managed to become.

And now he is here again. Again, because she was here.

Jon can see his mother’s crying face as clearly as if he was riding beside her. But perhaps it’s just his imagination that swells the sounds of her sobs in his ears, coming and going like the sound of the tide, until they pulse around him like a second heartbeat. He sees her crying as her horse gallops, sees her push it too hard when she should have known better. Sees his father riding after her, dressed more informally than Jon has never seen him, mouth tight in what may be anger or may be grief.

She stops at some point. Her horse will not go further. Like the body, animals too will show you your limits. Here, and no further. You walk if you can’t run, you crawl if you can’t walk, and then it all just falls apart. If you’re lucky, you have someone to carry you. But his mother has no one.
He watches her dismount and start walking on her own. Walking and crying.

Not stopping.

There is only one reason for her to be this close to the deep edge of grief. Somehow, even here where she was brought to stay hidden, she leaned of her family's fate.

Here it was, the truth, slicing through him with the clarity of a scream. Against all those that always said she had lived her last days in ignorance, and bliss.

‘Lyanna stop.’

‘Do *not* speak my name!’ Her voice is rough with tears. It scrapes against her throat as if she’s been screaming for hours. Perhaps she has. Jon hurries to keep up with her. ‘Never again will any of your wretched lizard family be allowed to hold a Stark’s name you your mouths.’

She was shouting, face red, teeth bared.

‘Lyanna please!’

She keeps walking, kicking up the earth as she went. Pushing herself to walk faster, panting, not stopping. His father dismounted, started following her on foot.

‘My love-’

She turns on him too fast, trips on the edge of her dress. Jon and Rheagar reach forward at the same time but its her father that catches her. He moves faster than Jon has ever seen him and she’s in his arms before she even knows what’s happening. But his father had underestimated her strength and the white hot burn of her anger, it seems. SHE shakes him off so hard, so savagely that he almost loses his footing too, and she falls down all the same.

Falls and turned to her hands and knees to get up again, but cannot seem to manage it. Its as if the ground has taken hold of her and her strength finally gives way to sobs that wrack her frame. It’s all Jon can do not to back away from the terrible sounds she makes. Desperate, animal sounds.

He falls to his knees in front of her, watching her grief-stricken face, as the wind kicks the dust up. Watching as she digs her fingers like claws into the dry earth and pulls, her nails marking lines in the dirt as if she is being dragged. She gathers the dust in her hands and rubs it over her tearstained face as she cries, nails scoring her cheeks. And then she does it again, and again, rocking back and forth. Beyond words or consolation.

Jon sees his father reach out for her.

The instinct to snap his teeth around his wrist and tear it off is so strong Jon growls with it.

The moment Rheagar touches her shoulder, his mother lets out a scream so loud, from so deep within her it seemed to come from the bowls of the earth itself. It startles both Jon and Rheagar back from her, as if she’d just burst into a pile of snakes.

Rheagar backs away, but Jon cannot. he can feel his body take root there, knee to knee with her, strength and will to move leaving him. It's important, Sansa had said, to bear witness, so he does not look away, no matter how much he wants to. No matter how unbearable her grief feels; like watching someone die, like scroting his own flesh. He dares not blink even though Lyanna does not stop screaming or crying, until her voice was raw and she is left sobbing, forehead touching the
ground, hands digging into the earth for need of something to hold on to.

She’d been all alone here, with no one to share this heartbreak with.

She’d been alone…

I’m sorry.

The sun wanes but Lyanna Stark does not move. The others have already gone, only one of the knights is there. He is on his feet watching her, as as sobs ebb, her tears run out until she is silent and motionless, staring at the red mountains stretching in front of her from horizon to horizon, face covered in a mask of dirt that had turned to mud in places, where it had mingled with her tears. Eyes rimmed red and swollen pitifully, mouth tight with anger that had solidified and was now transforming her face, making her look as if she was no longer made of flesh alone.

She turns those eyes and that set jaw to the knight standing in front of her.

‘Were you tasked to wait out my grief, Arthur.’ Her voice is so low it crawls on the ground. A branch of her grief has already gone cold and taken the shape of disdain. It is there in her voice, slow and implacable as a glacier.

It is strange, to see his own fears made manifest this way. It makes him wonder how many other forms her pain will take. Makes him wonder if it is true what he’d heard sometimes. That she must have hated him… that she…

‘I was tasked to bring you back safe, when you were ready.’

Lyanna just looks at him. She does not seem to breathe or blink, her face stone, her eyes steel.

That stare pierces Jon clean through.

He has seen that look before. His grandmother had stared him with those same eyes. That same set jaw.

‘Don’t look at me in that way, lady.’

Jon has never heard Arthur Dayne sound like this. For the first time he turns, and sees the dark shadows beneath the knight’s eyes, like bruises; sees that muscle jumping in his jaw. Understands there is quite a bit of shame and anger that tints his voice, aside from the plea in it.

‘What way would that be, ser?’

His mother’s voice is flat, but the truth of her rage is incendiary, and to be found in her eyes.

‘Like you expect me to - to help you’. [21]

‘And should i not expect such a thing from the finest knight of the realm?’

Arthur Dayne passes a had over his face. ‘I am sworn to obey the crown.’

She moves with the speed of a snake, grabs the nearest stone and throws it at him. Arthur does not even try to protect himself and does not flinch when the small stone hits him in the chest.

‘Fuck the crown! And fuck your king!’ she spits out the words like arrows, like curses, her hatred twisting her face like a mask. She growls her hatred pitilessly. ‘I would eat his heart out in the
'I will never repeat that.' Arthur tells her softly, and it sounds like a surrender, almost.

Jon feels almost incensed by his words, but his mother - the rage leaves her and she crumbles in grief again. Fresh tears flowing when he’d thought she had none left. ‘He lied to me. He said he would write to my brother but he never did. I know he never did.’

Arthur seems stricken by this for a moment but recovers quickly. ‘Messages get lost all the time-’

‘He never did, are you not listening! Why do I always have to repeat myself?’ she raises her voice and then looks away as if she regrets it. Shakes her head. She is perhaps starting to understand, Jon thinks, how alone she truly is here, in this solitary place. Jon can see it taking shape in her eyes. That awareness of the isolation - of the danger she has walked herself into. He catches the flicker of fear in her face.

How well he knows her face, by only seeing it so few times.

He knows her by heart.

‘I need to go home.’ She says then, and that fear is there, in her voice too, shaking the pretence of maturity off like the charade it is. If there had been any part of Jon’s heart left unbruised, this would have remedied it.

Arthur comes to her then, kneels beside her and he he puts a hand on her shoulder, Jon half expects Lyanna to bite it. But she does not.

‘There is a war between you and Wintefell, lady. And a child that is waiting to be born.’

‘Yes, a child.’ She stares ahead still. Her voice sounds dead, so void of feeling it is. Jon feels himself grow smaller as the shame in him wells up. ‘My father was burned alive. My brother strangled himself to death trying to save him . And i carry the child of their murderer in my belly.’

‘The prince did not-’

She shakes his hand off then. ‘The prince, the king. They are one and the same now.’

Arthur says something else but Jon does not hear it. It slips between his fingers and this time Jon does not even try to linger. He does not want to.

He glimpses his mother standing on top of her bed in the tower she had been kept in. Looking at the floor with eyes that were as stony as her face. There are streaks of dirt along her face, she is in the same clothes as before.

She jumps, just as the door opens and someone screams her name.

Everything shifts again, quicker this time.

He is in the interior of her tower, sitting at the table in front of his father, straight-backed and hands linked in front of her. Two of his kingsguard stand behind Rheagar’s chair, while Arthur sits close to the window, at his mother’s back, watching the road.

It all feels almost formal. But especially so because of how tense the line of Lyanna’s shoulders is.

‘He broke the law!’
‘I understand that, but—’

‘Anything that comes before ‘but’ is horseshit, husband. Depose him in the name of justice and the rebellion will end! By the gods if this were the north, his head would already have rolled already.’

‘But it’s not the North, Lyanna. And if i put him on trial, it will sent a precedent.’

Her sneer is a study in contempt. ‘Oh aye. How awful it would be if the dragons actually answered to gods and men.’

For a moment Jon thinks his father will react harshly, but he contains it.

‘It is more complicated than that, my love.’

‘No, it isn’t. Men always say that when they don’t want to explain the reasoning behind their actions! It is simple enough that even I can understand it: if you do nothing to stop him, then you are choosing to defend the king’s right to burn nobles alive. If you do nothing and you win, my brothers will die at your king’s order. Do you think me so thick-witted that something so obvious would escape me even now?’

‘They will not—’

‘You will kill them on the field of battle, or kill them by your mad father’s order after, it does not matter.’

‘My father is ill, but he is still king, my Lady.’

She shows him her teeth, a parody of a grin for all the violence coiled in her in that moment.

‘He is mad!’ She hisses. ‘Fucking unhinged! Say it! Say it! Show some grit!’

‘Please, be at ease. This cannot be good for the child.’

She sucks in a sharp breath between her teeth. Jon can see her visibly trying to pull the threads of her anger back, see her struggling with it. See her eye the knife set by her place - as clearly as his father and his knights behind him see it, though none of them reacts.

How many times did you looked at your knife for a moment too long? At your fork, at the vase, at a fuckign chicken bone? How many?

‘How dare you patronise me now?’ she says, each word landing like a stone for how much weight she puts on them. ‘I plead for my family’s lives, your grace. Show me the respect a prince owes his subject.’

‘Then perhaps the Lady might consider showing the prince the respect he is owed as a ruler.’ one the knights says, drawing to himself his mother’s attention, and with it, her anger.

‘I will not give away my respect to someone who hides behind duty for fear of having to act for justice!’

‘You go too far, lady. As always.’ Ser Arthur says slowly, without looking away from the window.

‘I will not take lessons on measure and propriety from any of you, Sers. None of you has anything to teach me, lest you want me to add hypocrisy to the list of reasons why you have failed as knights.’

His father straightens a little in his seat, his face smoothes out. ‘It hurts me to see how very little you
think of me, Lyanna. I already promised, I would not take more of your family from you.’

‘How good to hear. Were that I could hold you to your word, if you had the ability to disobey a king, for the sake of doing the right thing.’

‘What else would my Lady have of me then, that is more than a prince’s word?’ Rheagar asks through tightly pursed lips. But where he is the image of tightly coiled temper, Lyanna is the epitome of its unleashing. She slams both hands on the table.

‘Do something! You swore, yes. You said some words. To keep me calm, for this child who you wanted so much you spent more time inside me than not, that first month. What are words to me but wind at this point?’

Rheagar rises to his feet. His chair slips backwards, skittering on the floor.

‘I never forced you into anything, my Lady. I courted you, because your courage and nerve impressed me. I offered to help you out of a situation you found intolerable, and invited you here. And invitation which you accepted. I never touched you without your permission. Nor have I ever touched you with anything but love. Do not blame me because your actions have consequences.’

He hurls the words at her, but she looks at him as if all of them do not touch her at all. With each word, her face becomes more set, as if it were slowly turning to stone, to steel.

‘Yes it’s true.’ She whispers after the silence has hung so long it has become uncomfortable. ‘All that you said is true. You found me when I knew nothing and when I knew nothing, I did love you. But there is no love left in my heart for you now. None at all.’ Her voice shakes, but she does not cry. ‘You have ruined it.’

His father’s face softens in a way Jon has never seen it before. He tries to kneel at his mother’s side, but she gets up as abruptly as he did before.

‘I do not need your words, dragon prince, to remember my mistakes. They will haunt me till i die. But out of the two of us, you are the only one with the power to do something about your own. And know this.’ She steps close to him so that her round belly touches his. She stands straight as a spear even now and so tall that the top of her head reaches his father’s nose. Jon watches her take a breath. Watches how she controls her body this way, the intensity of it. Her voice is quiet when she speaks, but the words land in perfect silence. ‘If my brothers die at you hand, or any others for that matter, I will set fire to this wretched place before I throw myself and your child of prophecy from its walls. Do you hear me, Rheagar?’

She looks so brave, Jon could have watched her forever.

‘Either all of the remaining Starks survive, or none of us do.’

‘Lady Stark.’ one of the knights sighs. Jon does not look at the one who spoke however, but at the one who has not. Arthur is silent, and staring out the window. ‘Please dont threaten the prince’s life in the presence of the kingsguard.’

His mother snorts. ‘How good to finally see you so concerned for the lives of the innocent and the weak, ser.’

‘I hope only to help.’

His mother’s glare is venomous. ‘And I hope someone puts an arrow through you eye, Hightower.’
Jon could almost laugh. He would never again allow anyone to tell him he’d gotten his temper from his father, and his family.

The sight changes.

Jon sees her in her bed, laying on her side, touching her belly over her shift as she sings. The tune is soft and shaky, because she is crying.

Would she had been able to go free, if he had not been inside her? Would her suffering had been spared?

He sees her again, screaming now, and flinches back from the shock of it. Two women flutter around her, carrying bloody linens, water. She is soaked in sweat, her shift clinging to her. The bed is drowning in her blood.

Jon cannot stand the sight of it, the smell of it.

It’s death.

His mother screams again and Jon flinches.

He can’t breathe. Her voice rattles in his head, the sharpness of it penetrating through his ears like the aftershock of a gong.

When next he looks, she is quiet. She is still. A child is crying somewhere in the room, but Jon cannot look away from his mother, her glassy eyes fixed on the ceiling. She looks pale as death and he would think she was dead, with how much blood there is around her. But he can see her chest going up and down, he can hear her shaky breaths she takes, as clearly as if she was taking them close to his ear. They fill the room. He can almost hear her heartbeat.

‘Give him to me.’ she whispers then. The women do not react. The knight posted at the door shakes his head.

‘The prince-’

‘Give me my son. Give him to me!’ She starts to rise but pain breaks across her face and she falls back on the bed with a groan and a sobb. Her fingers curl in the sheets like claws. ‘There are no curses in the tongue of gods or men that will tell you of how ruthlessly I will haunt you, if you do not give me my child now!’

‘Lady, please.’ And he sounds as desperate as he would have her believe, but Jon is already wishing Gerold Hightower was alive, so that he could kill him himself. ‘I have orders.’

Just then Arthur walks in, with a bundle in his arms. ‘Your orders will bend, Gerold.’

The other man groans. ‘Fucks sake, Arthur.’

He stalks out just as Arthur puts Jon in his mother's arms, who falls back on the bed as if her strength had left her. She looks too weak to hold him, so she lays him down to her side, and turns to face him. Her thighs are slick with blood and they slip against each other as she turns, but she does not feel it. Does not act as if she is even aware of the bloodbath she lies in, as she brushes her finger down the baby’s red face, his hand.

Jon goes to the side of the bed, watches her from there. Watches her slow blinking, the stilled movements. He would think she was dying now, if he did not know it will take the fever some time.
to finish her.

The smell of blood is overwhelming, but he cannot move.

‘The king has been arrested.’ Arthur says. ‘The prince is regent now, until Aerys’ passing.’

His mother doesn’t even seem to hear him. She is crying, the tears falling from her unblinking eyes down her nose, and to the baby’s face. They wake him. He starts to fuss.

Jon doesn't even have time to take her in, the look on her face, before the image changes again. It's happening faster now. Now that he most wants to linger.

He hears her singing softly, her voice weak. She is sitting up, four or five pillows behind her enthroaning her on the bed that no longer looks soaked through in her blood. Her cheeks are pale, her lips bloodless. She is shaking from a chill that only she can feel and looks weaker than before, eyes shining with what Jon knows is fever.

She must be days away from death now. He knows it's coming.

He is not ready.

She turns her head to the man sitting beside her. ‘If I’m the dragon’s whore-’

‘Don’t call yourself that.’

‘- what will he be?’

Arthur sighs. ‘The king’s son, lady.’

She shakes her head. Her tears do not shred Jon less, just because now they are silent. ‘They will hate him.’

‘He will be strong, like his mother.’

‘They will kill him, Arthur.’

The knight moves faster than Jon expects, daring more than Jon thought he ever would. He takes his mother's hand in both of his and holds it tight, a desperation there that Jon can’t understand - until he does.

‘No one will hurt your son so long as I live. And your brother has sworn himself as his protector.’

Her eyes glint, come alive if only for a moment. ‘Ned?’

‘Benjen. Both asked after you.’

She sniffs a little, rubs her face down her cheek to wipe away a tear.

When next he sees her, Jon knows it’s the end.

Her face looks sallow, her hair is sticking to her skin. Her breath rattles. She is curled around her son, he has one hand wrapped around her finger and she’s singing to him. A song the words of which he does not know, but that pass through him, wrap around him, pulling to her side even as he shakes with a slow moving terror that is turning his veins to ice.

She is not crying anymore, but her face is sad and though her voice is steady, she looks frightened.
She looks frightened and alone and young.

It may not be true that he ripped his way out of her and she bled to death, like he’d heart once or twice, but he’d still killed her. As surely as she was dead, he was the reason for her being so.

Jon kneels by the bed, watches her eyes, that unchanging grey. He’d always dreamt his mother had kind eyes… and she does.

She did.

She leans down, puts her lips on his forehead. He grabs a lock of her hair and pulls.

‘My son… My son.’ She repeats the words deliberately, posessively. ‘I would have take you beyond the Wall. Where we could have lived as wildlings, who call themselves free folk and kneel to no one. We belong in the north, you and I.’

She winces, gritting her teeth around a groan. But it passes and she can breathe again.

She takes deep breaths to ease her own pain, and when she can breathe again, she comes close as she was before. Close to him and breathes him in.

Jon watches, mesmerized.

‘At night, my son, listen for my. I will call to you through the trees and you will feel it; you will know you are not alone. I will be with you. And one day, a day many many years from now, when you are old and gray, in your bend, surrounded by your children and their children, you will close your eyes. And when you open them, you will see me there, my love.’ She leans in further, until she is whispering the words against Jon’s small head, gently, her lips moving against his skin. Jon leans in too, to listen. Her words creep into his heart as she whispers them, filling a void that has always had the shape of her, always. Taking root there so completely, Jon knows in that moment they will never be out. ‘I will walk out of the heartree for you, leave the roots and stones behind, for you; become whole again for you.’

Her voice shakes, through her eyes are dry. Her hands shake too. She is frightened, Jon thinks, and he feels his own eyes start to burn. The tears slip free, as he watches her brush the tips of her fingers down his small arm. Gently. So softly.

‘I will take your hand and we will walk the woods together, you and i, for a century or more. You will know me, then. And you will know that you were loved, my son. And you will know… you will know, i have loved you. That I have been with you.’

He feels the colors melting together and panicked, he reaches for the bed, for her hand, anything.

“Waint! No wait! Please!”

Someone walks to the door, says her name. Jon sees steel armor, dark hair. Lyanna turns, cries out. She starts crying and so does Jon, but neither his tears nor hers can keep him there.

xviii

The darkness and complete, and through it, he thought he could see the stars, and bursts of color too, the way he had once or twice, when he’d hit his head far too hard. Someone was calling his name, but that might be his mother, it might be no one. Beneath him, mossy grass brushed his cheek. He
was lying flat on his back on the ground. A rock was digging at his hip, he was soaked through in sweat and shaking and his heart was trying to beat its way out of his chest.

He gulped down air as if he’d been underwater. His chest hurt.

The song his mother had sung him echoed in his ears.

“Jon!”

The sound of her voice, the panic in it which sounded so much like the one trapped in his own throat, was like a slap to the face.

Jon pulled himself out of the fog as if he was waking himself up from a nightmare and everything, everything about his surroundings came to him at once, as if he’d just now entered his body and not before. The darkness, the cold, Sansa saying his name over and over, the taste of blood in his mouth, the grass beneath his hands as he sat up, Sansa gripping his shirt so tightly he thought she might rip it at any moment.

Everything, everything.

She was crying, her sobs like ice cracking. Jon’s focus narrowed on that as the avalanche of emotions hit him, and then rolled him under. He reached for her half blindly, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders in the same motion and they were locked together like that, like a trap snapping shut.

They held onto each other as if their lives depended on it. Jon certainly felt as if his did.

The world was spinning and she was the only still point he felt sure of.

He could feel her fingers digging into his shoulder hard enough to hurt and it comforted him, that she needed the foothold as much as he did. She pressed her face against the side of his neck and he buried his in her hair.

He could not tell which one of them was shaking.

Both.

It didn’t matter. It didn’t. They had each other.

But-

“What is it?” He said against her neck, only realizing once he heard his voice, how gravelly it sounded, that he’d been crying too. “Are you hurt?”

He felt her nails bite his skin as she tightened her hold. Another shiver ripped up her spine and Jon held her closer. A single breath could not have slipped between them.

“You weren’t breathing!” She told him, almost accusatory. “I thought I’d killed you.”

Jon closed his eyes, wrapped his hand around the back of Sansa’s neck to pull her closer. Keep her there. He pulled her with him as he laid back down on the grass. The weight of her on his chest was like an anchor, of everything that was present here and now. And Jon felt certain that, having Sansa there meant he would all be alright, even as the pit of grief opened up inside him, each sob shaking him further from the world. The was no blood to this wounding, only agony, but Jon knew with a newfound, unshakable certainty that he would never go too far from where she was, so he let every
feeling wash over him, gave into their pull, terrified but helpless to resist. It was a necessary surrender to that gigantic absence inside him that hurt as it was filled. The bitterness of loss, the intolerable grief, the strange joy of knowing that came hand in hand with a howling sandness - it all passed through him. Tore at him. And as all these waves scorched their way through, Jon felt new spaces opening up inside him, like a palace full of rooms he had never explored. He could suddenly see his own life so clearly, stretching out around him, like a lake with no past or future. All his choices, all his mistakes, everything he had done right and every time he’d lost his way, it had all brought him here. Here where he had been able to access memory beyond time, here in these woods, with Sansa Stark. There was a certainty in him, newborn and fire-hot, like a chain link that had just been forged. And he knew, just as he felt love overflow where before there had been only absence, he knew that he loved the one who had opened this door for him.

She had done it.

No one else had come close.

He was bound to her now - he felt the link being made and sliding shut, a connection as real to him as her weight on his chest, as the hand she had woven in his hair at the nape of his neck. She was in him and he knew she would never be out. Knew it with the same certainty he knew he was going to die one day, that the sun would rise tomorrow, that he would never forget this night or how she’d led him here by the hand, with a smile. How she’d made something impossible happen for him, out of love alone. And he knew it had been out of love. Nothing short of that could have made this possible. Nothing short of love could make him feel the way he did now. If this wasn’t love, nothing could ever earn the name. Sansa had opened the door, and now it was out, stronger than anything he had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else. It was impossible to close again. But then, he wondered as he took a deep breath, why would he want to?

[1] Lifted verbatim from the books, though I don’t know which one. It’s from Tyrion’s pov, found through Wikipedia.

[2] G R R Martin Quote


[4] Adapted from a GRR Martin quote that says “That wood was Winterfell. It was the north.” When describing the godswood.

[5] Inspired by a similar passage from Sansa’s pov. “There was something wild about a godswood; even here, in the heart of the castle at the heart of the city, you could feel the old gods watching with a thousand unseen eyes”


[7] ‘A single man’ quote

[8] Adapted from the same quote from a Black Widow comic.

[9] Quote from the books, Theon’s chapters when he recognizes Bran’s face in the weirwood.
Yup, I just made that up.

Yes, I am hinting at Lyanna’s painted shield that she had during the tourney of Harrenhall, with the implicit understanding that she first saw that symbol in these same bowls that her mother taught her about the old gods with.

Arya Flint was Lyarra’s mother.

I do realize that my version of these gods is far less cruel and violent than the ASOIAF. Brushing up with the gods there will bring you back as a zombie, or make you lose parts of yourself, or do monstrous things and encourage you to possess your friends, or turn you into Patchface.

That’s an actual name used for some of the magical places in Westeros. The Wall is called that, and other constructions like it, in the far east of Essos, which some fans have speculated serve the same purpose as that in Westeros. The Isle of Faces is actually called a Place of power, and Harrenhall a thin place - contrasting each other. A place of power is somewhere where reality is thinner and you’re close to another dimension/magical dimension, because there is power concentrated there, of whatever kind. While a thin place is one where reality has become thinner, because a horrible thing has happened there, a massive catastrophe of some kind, and the energy it concentrates is negative (aka the reason why all Lords of Harrenhall end up dead, bc the curse is very much real.)

Kingdom of Heaven quote. And also one of my favorite movie quotes ever.

Rumi quote

G.R.R. Martin quote, Bran tasting the weirwood paste and then later down the paragraph Dany tasting Shade of the Evening. They’re combined.

Based around the idea of time that G.M. talks about, how it feels different to men and trees. men are moved by the river of time, while trees grow roots and live and die in one place. Time does not move them.

I am shifting into the present tense for the visions, to signify a kind of break from reality, to give them a sense of immediacy, and also divide the past - which is being told in the present tense, and the present, which i am narrating using the past tense XD

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from THIS EDIT which shattered my heart

Master Shakespeare, of course, Much ado about nothing.

This here is a bit of an inconsistency with how i described Rickard and Brandon’s deaths before this point, in one of the earliest chapters but i honest to god dont remember what I said happened, or why i even thought i needed to change it. Anyway, i’ll go back and fix it later.

Colette movie quote.

Cersei quote, from the show.

Edna St. Vincent Millay quote
no, you did not imagine it. I am hinting at a certain side-pairing here.
Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

“Dover Beach”, Matthew Arnold

“I always thought she’d hated me.”

They were lying side by side on the forest floor, close enough that they could see each other’s eyes in the dark, but not touching except for the clasped hands between their bodies. Sansa had undone the fastenings of her cloak and thrown it over them both, even though she knew it wasn’t the cold that made him tremble like that.

Sometimes he’d move, touch her face, her neck, stopping as if to feel her pulse, then take her hand again. He looked strange with the red paint of the weirwood leaves smeared over his face still. Patchy, where his tears had smeared it away.

He’d cried with great heaving sobs, and held her so tightly, she’d felt her bones bend with the force of it. She’d been grateful for it though, scared out of her mind as she had been after seeing him lying there, eyes gone white as if they had rolled in the back of his head, and not taking a single breath while she’d taken four. And then, when she realized he’d been crying, she’d held him gently and sang to him softly, and herself too, to soothe her own nerves.
She had not dared ask him, later, what he’d seen that had broken his heart that way. But he’d told her. After he’d been silent for so long, she’d thought he’d fallen asleep there, his forehead pressed against the base of her neck, he told her the truth of it. He’d see his mother. Seen her give birth to him, seen her die. Seen her live. The way he spoke of it made Sansa’s heart ache with the echo of his grief, which she felt so closely, it might have been her own.

“Sometimes I doubted it, when I was younger; but the more I grew up and learned pieces of what happened, the more it felt like a child’s wish. How could she not have?” He chuckled, and she saw a tear slip free and slid down his temple, getting lost in his hair. “I used to think I was the reason she was dead.”

His voice was so flat, emotionless. Sansa curled her fingers at the hair on the nape of his neck, pulling at it hair a little, as if that alone would disabuse him of such a notion, before she realized what she was doing and let go.

“There was no shortage of people who’d say so. Viserys used to call Dany and I the Stranger’s children, because we’d killed our mothers to come into the world.”

“That’s a cruel thing to say to a child,” Sansa whispered. So of course, Viserys had said it. He had not lacked intuition, Viserys, and he’d used it in the foulest of way, always. To hurt, always. He was never happy unless someone feared him.

“And a lie,” Sansa added then.

“Of course it was. The Seven are not real.”

Her eyes burned but she blinked the tears away. “Jon-”

“I know, I know.” His voice was still rough with tears but he was coming back. The effect of the paste was not out of him yet either, though she did not think that was why he pressed his forehead on hers and smiled. Or why he pressed his hand against her shoulder blades and his face against her neck, taking a deep breath.

He was so…so exceptionally gentle. It made something inside her bloom alive and try its hardest to crawl up her throat. A protectiveness that made it hard to let go of him. Feelings she could scarcely find words for.

“What are you doing?” she asked instead, curling her shoulders inward, almost like she was making a place for him to stay there.

He chuckled so close to her skin she could feel his smile like a brand. Feel the words his spoke against the skin of her neck. “How do you always smell like flowers?”

“I had the luxury of a bath and fresh clothes, your grace,” Sansa told him with a laugh. “And I press roses and jasmine between sheets of thin paper and use them to separate my dresses when I pack them. The scent lingers.”

“That’s lovely. Everything about you always sounds lovely. And lonely.” He leaned back then. Looked at her. “Are you lonely, Sansa?”

“Sometimes,” she admitted and tugged at a lock his hair just over his forehead, curling it around her finger. “We all are a little bit, are we not? All of us, except those who are twins, come into this world alone. We are completely, inexorably sealed in our bodies our whole lives; we all know the world and each other through our own slanted perception, never truly knowing anyone. Loneliness is a natural state of being and a part of life.”
Jon shook his head. She could not see exactly the look on his face, but she knew it was warm. Warm like the hand he kept between her shoulder blades, his thumb tracing little circles there.

“Perhaps for others. But not us.”

He whispered it, like it was some secret, and she wanted to throw her arms around his neck and hold him again for a while. Feel him hold her, too, in that too-tight way of his, as if he thought she’d never been held properly before and this was his chance to show her how.

“How do you feel now?” Sansa asked him, pressing her hand against his chest to feel his heart. His skin was hot to the touch, but his heartbeat had slowed now.

He brushed his fingers against the back of her neck. “I’m better than I’ve ever been.”

“You will feel strange for an hour or two. I told you.”

He grinned. “I feel wonderful.”

“Yes, that is the strangeness, don’t you think?”

Jon laughed, held her tighter, kissed the skin just at the base of her neck and when she shivered, he bit her there and then kissed her again. He leaned back again, and when Sansa shifted just a little bit closer to him, his smile became so soft she could hardly stand it.

He was so relaxed, his head tilted to the side, exposing his neck, smiling. The memory of his grief made all of this that much more extraordinary, that much more alarming. That he could hold so much at the same time. That despite all of it, he could still be like this: soft and playful, as if he was just waiting to be given a chance to show how much affection he was capable of giving. Giving away…

It seemed so strange to her now, that she’d ever doubted his heart. And it softened her to him unbearably, knowing that so often he had been made to be ashamed of having one and tried to hide it. The wave of tenderness she felt for him that moment was so sudden and overwhelming that it squeezed her heart as if between two hands, so much that she could hardly catch her breath.

Her hand was in his, so he noticed it quite quickly.

“Sansa?”

“Yes.”

Her voice shook maybe a bit but otherwise she sounded the same as always.

“Are you alright? Your heart is beating fast.”

He heard her breath leave her in a rush, as if he’d caught her doing something she should not have been doing. He cupped her cheek, traced the line of her cheekbone with the pad of his thumb gently.

“Hey…what is it?”

It was the way she said his name that did it, really.

That on top of everything else, but also his name in her mouth, that softly, just a whisper. One that knocked him over for good.
How she could speak that way!

How she could touch as if …

And that was how it happened. Incomplete thoughts and too much need. He saw it happening in his
own mind, saw himself lean in and kiss her.

And then it happened. One moment he was still.

The next he was close enough to share a breath with her.

Close with intent, the tip of his nose brushing hers as he heard her suck in a sharp breath of surprise
and then hold it, her chest brushing his as he smoothed his open palm down until it was pressed
between her shoulder blades, asking… asking…

*Please…*

He wanted her in that moment in such a way that it almost felt like starvation, like something bigger
than his body. It had been too long since he’d been with anyone like this, and longer still since he’d
felt as close to anyone as he felt to Sansa. He curled his fingers at her back, gathering her shift into
his fist and pressing her to his chest, feeling the shape of her there. He could feel her frantic heartbeat
against his fist at her back, against his chest perhaps, but that might have also been his.

Her next breath brushed against his lips. He felt it to the tips of his fingers and toes, felt this pulse
picking up the pace, the rush of blood in his ears that reminded him of the sea.

He brushed his lips over hers. Not a kiss, not really, but it closed his eyes and tightened his hold on
her and made Sansa let out a small sigh that cracked the night in two for him and just then - she
angled her head and closed the distance.

Jon groaned.

Nothing had ever prepared him for the feel of this. Of her. For how the reality of her washed over his
sense as inexorably as the tide. As irresistible. For the desperation he felt that bled into everything,
heightened everything. He had obsessed over the shape of her, the taste of her, so much that he
hadn't even given a single thought to how it would make him feel.

How the scent of her this close was heady, tasting of something sweet and warm that made him
desperate to put his mouth on her cunt. How feeling the heat of her skin burning against his made his
hands shake with the need to devour; how he couldn't stop touching her - her neck, her face, her
waist - and how at the same time, he could do nothing without reading her body, her every breath,
and only go where she wanted him to go, following - mirroring - *her hands, her want*. The ache of
being trapped between trying to think and wanting to drown, not knowing which was sweeter,
wanting to taste both. How his skin pricked with painful awareness wherever she touched him. He
was trembling like a leaf for the want it. Of more of it, *everything*.

He bit down on her lip just a little before he sucked it into his mouth. He almost laughed when he felt
that she was shaking as much as he was. Laughed, out sheer joy that was too big for him, that had to
be let out. Laughed against her lips as he took her hand and linked their fingers together over her
head, holding on to her as he kissed her again, gently, opening her lips to touch the tip of his tongue
to hers.

He felt that touch from the tip of his fingers all the way to his cock, a sudden shiver ripping down his
spine, raising every hair on his body.
His fingers tightened around hers; he felt her nails biting the back of his hand.

“Gods,” he gasped, “you're fun to kiss* [1].”

Sansa’s laughter was breathless as he kissed a path down her neck, and when she fisted her hand in his hair and pulled him up so that she could kiss him again, Jon thought he could see every link of the chain that had brought him here, to this moment, just so that he could be kissed like this - like this, and no other way ever again - and he thought he might not hate what came before, if this was where he got to stay forever.

He felt a month of tension loosening along the seams of his skin as he melted into her. Nothing beyond her existed when she pulled at him until he was between her legs.

And he knew, he knew this was not how it was supposed to go, but he didn’t care. He couldn’t. He wouldn’t have cared for any god or man as she kissed a line up his neck to just his below his ear and bit him there.

His arms were shaking.

He couldn't get enough air into his lungs as he bent her leg, pressed her knee to his hip, her lips to his cheek, his hand to her thigh, feeling her skin there, the smoothness of it. His fingers twitching to slide up and take hold of her ass, press himself where she was hottest.

Jon hung his head, forehead pressing on the soft grass by her temple, trying to breathe. He felt drunk as he drew his hand up from her thigh to her hip and ribcage, thumb brushing against the outside of her breast, feeling its soft give, how she felt soft as sin wherever he touched. He let out a slow breath, feeling too heavy, too slow, like a rope of honey being pulled from a jar. Sansa wrapped her arms around his ribcage and pulled him closer, an eagerness to her that felt so good it hurt. He sucked at the pulse of her neck hard enough to make her dig her nails into his skin before he kissed her again.

They were trembling together, kissing slowly, learning. She stopped for a moment, as if to catch her breath, pressed her mouth to his cheek and in that shaky breath she let out, Jon read all of her need and her want, and how it matched his own. He held her face gently as he kissed her again, saw her eyes slip shut before she opened her mouth to him, slipped her arm around his neck, pulled him closer with a sigh.

When Sansa bent her knee a little, he grasped it and pressed it against his hip, circled her thigh and pressed himself between her legs just as she pushed her hips up, searching - and finding - a finding deliciously sharp; an acute prick of reality that made both their eyes snap open.

They were panting against each other’s mouths, pressed and tangled together so close that he could feel her every breath, every heartbeat as surely as she must feel his.

He rocked against her again, eyes locked together, hand tightening against her thigh. Pressed his mouth to the side of hers, groaning, eyes fluttering shut as she bit her lip so hard, Jon could see a drop of blood welling there.

He touched his lips to hers the way he did the first time. Gentle. Barely a kiss.

Her blood tasted just as red as the rest of her.

“Sansa…”
He hardly recognized his own voice.

She turned her face into his hand, breathing heavily. Jon tried to kiss her again, but she pressed a hand against his chest.

He froze.

“I can’t think,” she whispered, sounding alarmed.

Jon could have laughed, but he did not. He straightened his arms, pushed away from her a little - until her hand fisted in his shirt to keep him still. She almost looked panicked. He sighed then, his relief turning his bones to water. He leaned his forehead against her, pressed his hand to the top of her head. “What is it?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing.”

The words rushed out of her all at once, but he could see in her eyes, how wide they were, that she was genuinely startled.

“Well,” Jon decided to try for levity, “that is called kissing, my lady.”

It worked. She rolled her eyes at him. “That is called being reckless.”

He hummed. “You must be keeping bad company.”

“Indeed, I must,” she said, eyes narrowing on him. She flicked his ear and he laughed.

“Gods…that was so thoughtless,” she whispered then, serious this time. He could see guilt flicker on her face when she glanced at him and then away. “I shouldn’t have.”

He rubbed circles against the skin high on her thigh, from where she still had not pushed him away.

“Why not?”

She pressed a hand gently on his cheek. “You’re not yourself, Jon.”

This time he did laugh, and pressed that laughter into her neck, and then her collarbones and between her breasts where her shift had dipped low and her skin shone like a pearl in the moonlight.

“It’s not funny!”

“No, it wouldn’t be. Is that all you object to?”

“I can’t think of anything else at the moment!”

“That is rather the point of kissing, my lady.”

“Jon, be serious. I told you, the weirwood paste-”

“I’ll still want to kiss you tomorrow. And the day after.” He brushed the whisper-soft words along her cheek, the corner of her mouth, her lips. “And the one after that.”

Sansa gathered a fistful of his curls and tightened her hold until she’d pulled his head back.

“We will have to see the truth of that tomorrow, then.”

The tug of his hair went straight between his legs, but he still chuckled. “That a promise?”
“Sure.”

She pushed against his chest again and Jon wrapped his hand around hers, pressed it there over his drumming heart, hung his head over her breastbone.

“Alright. Just…can we stay like this for a little while longer?” he asked as he looked up, and met her worried eyes. “Stay close to me.”

Her free hand came up to his face, the tips of her fingers brushing down his cheek, tracing his lips.

“I will.”

iii

“Jon.”

“Yes.”

They were side by side again, this time her head resting on his arm, which he had curled around her shoulders, his other hand clasped in both of hers, between their bodies.

“Are you asleep?”

His lips curved up in a slow smile. “Yes

Sansa bit her lip. She pulled the edge of his shirt back at the collar, just a little, to reveal a bit more of one of his tattoos, traced a line with a finger.

“Do your tattoos mean anything?”

“Some do. The bands on my arms signify friendship.” Jon snorted. “Or that’s what Old Hull said, but he might have been lying. The one on my chest is for the symbol of a tribe of Freefolk north of the Antler.”

Sansa frowned. “Freefolk?”

Jon remained unperturbed. “The people north of the Wall call themselves that. I sailed with some of them for the better part of three years. They became my brothers.”

She took a deep breath. Exhaled it slowly.

“They’re…wildlings.”

“They’re men and women, same as you and me. The only real difference between us is that they’re on the other side of a wall and that we’ve been taught to hate them because they won’t submit.”

Sansa laughed, incredulously. “That is…that is a light way of speaking of a people that the North has considered its enemies for thousands of years.”

Jon shook his head. “Considering them enemies was never the problem. You can make peace with an enemy. Break bread with him, discuss terms with him. Work so that he may be an enemy no longer. But Westeros sees the Freefolk as something other than them, something fundamentally different.”

“And they’re not?”
“No. They’re not.”

He felt passionately about this, she could tell just by how he spoke of it. He was calm, to be sure, but there was a certainty, and immovable quality to his voice. He believed every word he was speaking.

“They’re no wilder than people south of the Wall, nor crueler or more savage than they have to be. More disorganised perhaps, but men all the same. But if they were being slaughtered in droves, no one would care down here. They’re not our people, so they’re not people and it doesn’t matter.”

“But you do.”

Jon nodded. “Yes, I do.”

She was struggling to understand it. “That’s…wouldn’t it be an infringement on their rights, if we started interfering in their conflicts? They don’t see themselves as part of the Seven Kingdoms. There is no reason why they would welcome the king’s help, or my father’s for that matter.”

She saw him raise his eyebrows at her. “Perhaps. But do you really think that is the reason why no one would try?”

Sansa sighed. “No, I don’t suppose it would be.”

“I had a friend who repeatedly told me I knew nothing, and neither did any other kneeler. More often than not, people prove she had the right of it.” He smiled at her, but it was sad. “But not always.”

Sansa shook her head. “I’m as much of a fool as anyone. But I am willing to learn [2].”

She could feel him watching her. Feel his hesitation, vacillating from one foot to the other.

“The ship I took from White Harbour when I left Winterfell was shipwrecked on the Stepstones, just like people say,” he told her, voice low and heavy; with the memory of it perhaps, the gravity of it.

Sansa did not need to be told that it was a secret he was giving her. No one knew the truth of what had happened to him those three years he had been missing, but all the stories were terrifying.

“I was alone there at first. Uncle Benjen had ended up on the other side of the island, and we did not meet for more than a year. I was a prisoner, for a time. To no longer be that, I joined the crew of one of the ships there.” He showed her his right arm, where just at the middle of his forearm, there was a thick black band tattooed on his skin and a thinner one just under it. “Beneath this wide one here, I used to have the insignia of the ship I sailed on.”

She wanted to ask him if that was when he’d been tortured like he said, but it seemed too unkind, too cruel a question to be stand between them now, so instead she asked something else. “Did they just…take you?”

“No. There was a kind of tourney. Fighting pits, they called them. Last man left standing won his freedom. So I did.”

He said it so simply. Some words strung together on a sentence, in that careless way of his that always hid more than it gave away.

Sansa could almost see all the blood he did not mention. The violence that he did not give voice to.

“The first few weeks there was nothing out of the ordinary except that we sailed further north than I have ever been. It was so cold, Sansa. I genuinely thought I would never be warm again. And when
we got there, we started raiding the coast, taking prisoners. They were held below deck, roped in like animals and treated little better. And I learned that we were bound for Lys. To make good on our bounty.”

She didn’t understand that deep scorn in his voice at first, but then the realization came to her with slow horror.

“Slavers.” She gasped “Jon…”

She could see his jaw tightening, even though his hand around hers was as gentle as ever.

“Yes. Slavers. And I was one of them.” He sounded so far away all of a sudden. “One night, I managed to get some of the crew drunk of some liquor we took from one of the captives. And then I set the prisoners free.”

As he spoke, he took her hand in his, brushed his thumb ever so softly against the scarred part of her palm, where the damage was worst. His gentleness belied the violence of the events he spoke of, but he spoke of them in such a detached manner. It was almost as if it had all happened to someone else.

“We took our time with the crew. Chopped off their heads and sent them to the slavers in Lys. The hands we put in baskets and sent them as a gift to the Lord of Widow’s Watch[3], who had allowed the ship to dock there for a bag of silver, though he knew what cargo it carried. Mounted what was left of the bodies on pikes along the northern shore of Hardhome, so every other slaver who sailed there would know what awaited them. And we kept doing it. Attacking pirate ships in the night, killing everyone on board and setting free the captured so they could fight with us the next time. We built quite a small fleet that way. Sailed it up and down the northern coast.”

“That’s horrible.” Her whisper barely made it past her lips.

Jon nodded slowly. “It was.”

“It’s horrible that it happened to you, Jon. You and all those poor people who were with you.”

“Those who were with me were the lucky ones, by some accounts. They were alive and they were free still. Many more had it far worse than death.”

Sansa did not know what to say. What to think. She gulped, mouth dry. She’d grabbed a fistful of his shirt and was gripping it so tight, as if trying to keep hold of him here, when he sounded as if he was not here at all.

“Did they know who you were? The pirates, the wil- the Freefolk?”

“The pirates didn’t. The Freefolk crew did, later.” He chuckled but it rang hollow. “Tormund never missed a chance to fuck about with me on it either. He thought it was hilarious.”

Sansa could not deny it either. Something about it was most definitely absurd. “The son of a king, sailing with people from north of the Wall, on a pirate ship… it does sound like something from a story. How did you find your way home?”

He hesitated before answering.

“When we docked in White Harbour for supplies, I heard Viserys was dying. So I boarded a ship for King’s Landing.”

“Why not before?”
Jon sighed. “At first there was nothing I wanted more than to go home. And then, the more time passed, the further away from that person I felt, until I didn’t know myself anymore, didn’t know where home was or if I wanted to go back there. So I didn’t.”

“Or maybe you were afraid that your family wouldn't know you. Or want you back, because you were so changed.”

His laughter was a brittle. “Yes, that too.”

“And did that happen?”

Jon smiled. “I don’t yet know. Sometimes I think it did, other times that it didn’t.”

“What about the bird? The one on your back, with the wolf’s head.”

Jon bit his lip, holding back a smile. “Have you ever met Thoros of Myr at court?”

Sansa thought about it. “The Red Priest?”

“Yes, him.”

She hesitated. “I know who he is, but-”

“You stay away from him because he drinks as often as most men breathe?”

“Yes.”

“On one such occasion, he grabbed me by the arm and told me that my death was a great dark bird at my back with the head a snarling wolf, just waiting to tear into me.”

Sansa gasped and Jon laughed.

“I was five years old and Thoros was so roaring drunk he wasn’t even speaking our tongue. I doubt he even felt the punch Ser Arthur landed on him, though it did knock him out cold.”

“I should hope so.”

Jon laughed. “He woke up missing a few teeth, and no wiser for it either, since he didn’t remember a thing.”

“So... he told you of your death and you got its likeness forever on your skin?” That was morbid, but a thing she could picture him doing, if only out of sheer defiance.

“No. I forgot about it until I was at sea. I kept dreaming about it, so Ygritte sat me down and told one of the tattooists of her tribe there to trap the fucker in my skin so that I’d be rid of him.”

“And did it work?”

“For a time.”

“So, this Ygritte had the right of it then.”

“She often did.” He caught a lock of her hair, twirled it around his finger. “She was kissed by fire, like you.”

Sansa froze. She felt her heart drop to her toes. “What?”
“Freefolk call people with red hair ‘kissed by fire’. They say it’s lucky.” He’d noticed her reaction. His voice had softened. “Though perhaps that was in poor taste.” He laughed, though it sounded breathy to her, and shook his head as if in disbelief. “Wouldn’t be the first thing I didn’t think through tonight. I didn’t plan to tell you any of that, either. Whatever kind of story mine is, that’s not its good part.”

“Sometimes you have to share the bad parts too.” Perhaps especially those. They had a way of transforming, after a time, like all dark secrets; becoming wounds, becoming ghosts. She knew that. “Besides, you needn’t worry. I can keep a secret.”

That amused him. “I’m sure you can. I’m sure you have many.”

He brushed his thumb against the center of her palm again and this time, it was as if his touch dragged the memory forward in all its vicious detail, and she flinched from it.

“Sansa?”

“Where is Ghost?” she asked quickly. Too urgently for him not to notice it as strange.

Jon seemed to think about it for a moment. “Somewhere not far from here. Hunting rabbits, by the smell of them.”

Sansa took a deep breath. She had made up her mind but her heart needed to catch up. “How do you know that?” she asked in a whisper.

“We are bound, he and I. He is part of me and I am part of him.”

Of course they were.

Sansa knew what that meant. What it meant to lose it. She still felt the ache of something missing, where Lady used to be. Like a phantom limb she had lost, and still tried to reach things with, even though it was gone.

Such a strange ache.

It pulsed with awareness now, here in this place. Not quite painful, but unmistakable.

“I had a wolf too, did you know?”

Jon nodded. “I did know, yes. Your Lady.” He chuckled. “I should have known everything there was to know about you right then.”

That distracted her. “How do you mean?”

“You had a direwolf, a near-mythical killing machine, and you named her Lady.” His chuckle was warm, close. “Only someone like you could have done that.”

Sansa rolled her eyes at him, but slowly her smile fell.

“Viserys used to make fun of me for that, too. I know that’s not what you meant,” she said quickly, before he could so much as open his mouth to say so. “He…he hated Lady in a strange, irrational way. I didn’t understand it for what it was because I just couldn’t fathom it. Lady was so sweet. Not even children were afraid of her.”

It seemed so obvious now, but back then…
“I wonder now if he was jealous. The sigil of his house had been long gone, but the symbol of mine walked beside me every day.” She shook her head, dismissing it as strange fancy. Viserys’ mind had been a dark field. She would never again waste her time trying to wade through it. “I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.”

“A couple of months after I arrived south, there was a hunt. Viserys invited me. He was adamant that I should come. I was very flattered of course. Very stupid. He…asked to walk with me.” She laughed, appalled at who she used to be. How little she’d known and how dearly it had cost her. There was much of the absurd in this tale, too, though hers was far more pathetic than Jon’s.

“He wanted to play a game, he said. A game that involved a secret. I was…I wanted to leave but I didn’t know how to say it. And when I tried to leave, he grabbed my forearm so hard, I thought he would break it.”

When she realized she had curled her arm to her chest, rubbing where she could sometimes still feel the mark of his fingers, she immediately let go, annoyed with herself.

“And Lady attacked him, didn’t she,” Jon asked in a whisper, pulling her out of her memory. For a moment she had forgotten that Jon was there. That she was so close to him she could hardly feel the cold from the ground.

Sansa focused on his presence, the feel of his arm around her shoulders, the line of his face she could see in the moonlight.

“Yes. She bit his arm, pulled him off me.” She could almost be detached as she recalled his screaming. His pathetic crying. Gods, she’d been blind. “I think she might have ripped his throat out, but I stopped her.”

She’d had plenty of time to regret that decision later, but to this day she was not sure what would have happened to her, if her direwolf really had murdered the king’s brother. Would she have been killed?

Would that have been better?

Sansa did not think so. She rather liked living, thought she did not like her life always.

Would there have been a war?

This was a fool’s game.

“Afterwards, Viserys demanded her life in payment for the transgression.”

“To whom?”

Sansa blinked, confused.

“To whom did he make that demand?” Jon repeated, voice gone flat and low.

“The Hand of the King was with us, and some men of the council.”

“And the king?”

There was such anger in him - it vibrated, she could feel it. But he kept his voice so smooth, stayed so still. Purposefully so.
He knew how to listen, her cousin.

Sansa pressed a hand to his chest, feeling the wiry hair there, tracing the lining of his shirt. “No. There was no one else from the royal family but Daenerys.”

“And she did nothing?”

Sansa looked down. Away from his face, to his throat. Tugged at the laces of his shirt just to have something to do.

She was so ashamed now.

“She tried to speak for me. Tried to get me to tell the truth about what happened. Why Lady had attacked Viserys. She knew what he was, but I…I didn’t know what to do. What would happen if I said he’d hurt me. Petyr—” Sansa snapped her mouth shut so fast her teeth clicked together. “Everyone told me I was meant to keep the peace. That if I said anything wrong, my family would suffer for it. That nobody would care anyway, and Viserys would just say something terrible about me and ruin my reputation. Shame me and my family, the North.”

“That sounds very much like someone was manipulating you.”

Sansa might have laughed. “Yes.”

She felt Jon touch her face and startled. She hadn’t realized she’d started crying, and once she did, she wiped the tears away angrily, annoyed that they were there. They were not tears of pain this time, but anger.

She took one deep breath after another, trying to get her body back under control, trying to calm down.

“After he’d killed her, he brought her to me. Made me look at her as they skinned her.” The shiver that went down her spine was a strange sensation, so detached she felt from herself, from the memory of it all. As if she was floating one inch or two over her own body. “He wore her pelt for some time, but then claimed it smelled, like I did, and put it in his rooms instead. Sometimes he would drag me there and make me look at it again.”

It was so strange to recall of that now, looking at her past self with the eyes of terrible experience. How she could not recognize most of that girl. How little of her was left under Sansa’s skin now.

Whatever remained of that girl had not changed, however. She had lost part of her herself violently and in those empty spaces new parts of her had grown, but they had not devoured the old parts—not entirely anyway.

“Sansa?”

“I did set her free, eventually,” Sansa said, speaking quickly, as if she couldn’t get the words out fast enough. “I couldn’t save her when it mattered, of course, but later…I stole her pelt from his rooms and hid her in a place he would never find her. Not ever.”

She grinned, though she felt no joy at all. Only a dark kind of satisfaction, one that she would never deny and for which she felt no guilt or shame.

“At first I had Eleina, one of my maids, helping me. I…I still don’t know what happened to her. She just disappeared. So I learned I had to do it myself. He knew I was going to try, too. Caught me once. He’d been waiting for me. That’s when the burns you saw on my back happened.”
She heard the breath he took through his teeth as if from a great distance.

“We were in Dragonstone at the time. He waited days…” She’d known something would happen to her, that he would punish her in some way and he had known she was aware. It had terrified her and he’d been able to see it. How he’d enjoyed prolonging her fear.

And how afraid she had been.

How large he used to loom over her.

But he had not been that large or even that threatening. Her world had simply been made small and she had been alone in it, so he could cast a large shadow.

At his core, he had been indeed a pathetic man, with just enough in him to hurt a girl - but not the woman she became.

“I was invited to dine with him and Daenerys. After some time, I found myself feeling strange, so I excused myself.” Strange was a word for it. She’d almost lost consciousness in the hall outside her rooms, and when she’d regained it, she hadn’t even known where she was. “I don’t really remember what happened, but I do remember the pain. I suppose he put something in my cup and then just… waited.”

She turned to her stomach, leaned up on her elbows and dared to look at Jon in the face. His expression was blank, but his eyes shone in the dark, his lips had thinned with the effort of being still. She might have spared him the details but now that she had started speaking, the words poured out, both relief and horror following them, hand in hand like sisters.

“He wanted to know what I’d done with it, wanted her back. When I told him I’d burnt it, he took this…” She tried to recall but it was difficult and even as she did her hands started sweating. “…I don’t know what it was,” she finally said, angrily almost. Dismissive. “It was made of metal and so hot from the fire it glowed red. He pressed it on my back and the side of my ribs a couple of times because he couldn’t keep me still.”

She frowned, trying to recall.

There was so many things she remembered with piercing clarity: the smell of her burned hair, the red canopy of his bed, the scent of his covers when he’d shoved her into them so hard she couldn’t breathe. She still could not smell mint without her stomach turning. How he’d bent her arm to keep her still to the point where he almost dislocated her shoulder.

But then other things escaped her. Even now the memory came to her as if she was looking at herself from the ceiling.

“I don’t even recall if I screamed. I must have. I did not tell him a thing, though. Not a word.”

She was proud of herself for that. That after being put into situations where she could not avoid pain, she had at least learned how to withstand it. Better at least than those who would hurt her. She was proud of herself for not betraying Lady again, too. For being brave enough, even when it didn’t matter as much.

And she knew she was a thousand times braver than Viserys, who had never been above the shadow of a snake. She knew that now.

“Did no one come to help you?”
“I don’t know. Probably. The next morning I woke in my bed, and Dany was telling me we would be leaving for King’s Landing as soon as I felt ready for a voyage.”

“May I ask you something?” he finally said after long moments of silence.

“Yes.”

“Do you know who covered for him?”

Sansa took a deep breath. How could she explain the nature of Viserys’ hold over her, when she could barely understand it herself?

“It wasn’t…he was very rarely inappropriate in public. He was cruel in court and he made fun of me, belittled me, and though he dared more when we were not in King’s Landing, he was never violent where others could see him. With most people he was charming, and perfectly amusing, if not always liked.”

“No, his behavior must have been known, to the right people anyway. He is not just anyone and neither are you, and for all that I despise them, King’s Landing is not entirely full of fools. They knew,” he insisted, and his tone left no room for doubt. He was almost growling. “Viserys always had a Kingsguard on him ever since he was born, and a hundred and one eyes on him at any time ever since he tried to fuel a whisper or two about his right to the throne.”

Sansa shrugged. “Then you have your answer.”

If Varys knew, the King’s Council knew. And though some might say the Hand might not trouble the king for everything, Sansa was sure that even had Rhaegar known, he would probably not value her health and safety over the security of his family’s position.

“Hardly matters now, anyway,” Sansa said as she laid back down, setting her head against his arm again. “He’s dead. This though,” She said as she passed her fingers gently over the skin of her burned palm. “This was a punishment, though not as thought out as the first.”

She couldn’t feel anything at the center of her hand at all. The flesh was ruined, the Maester had told her. She had been lucky indeed that she’d gotten to keep her hand at all.

“I slapped him. He snapped my wrist, shoved hand into a brazier. I slammed the back of my head against his face and…broke about half of it,” she said with a snort. She could laugh about it now. And it was not a lie. Not really.

It just…was not the whole truth.

But the whole truth was as dangerous for him to know as it was for her. And it did not belong only to her, anyway. To this day, she did not know who had lied to her that night to get her to go to Dany’s rooms, where he had been waiting. If she wanted to tell the whole truth someday, Sansa thought darkly, she needed to find that out.

Jon made a strange, choked sound, passed a hand over his face.

“That is a good way to escape a hold,” he said then, and cleared his throat so that the words did not sound so gravelly. “I can teach you a few others, if you want.”

“Sandor already has. He is a good teacher.”
“He loves you, you know.”

Sansa was so surprised by the words she thought - hoped - she might have heard them wrong. “Who?”

“Sandor Clegane.”

Her heart fell back down in relief. “Oh. Yes, he does. But not the way you think.”

Jon smiled, though she could see it was forced. It did not reach his eyes and he still did not dare touch her. He was trying very hard to move on from what she’d told him, as she so clearly wanted, but his mind hammered there. She could see it.

He said they were the same, so she surmised he was vengeful too, in his own ways. Perhaps more straightforward ways. And perhaps without caring so much for the precision of where to lay the blame. Sansa was sure that were she to ask him now, who he would punish for what happened to her, had it happened to him - he would tell her he would hold accountable everyone who knew and did nothing about it, with no consideration for their role or their circumstances.

She pressed her fingers to her lips, smiled into them.

People thought Jon was out of his mind, or needlessly violent, but it was not true. He simply had a very precise definition of justice. An unforgiving, uncompromising one that followed more along the lines of action and consequences.

“Not the way I think? How many ways to love do you know, cousin?”

Sansa shrugged. “As many as there are people, I suppose.” She tilted her head. “You don’t think so?”

“No. Though I do believe there is more than one kind of love. Though in some way they all demand some form of submission, and in that they are the same.”

Sansa scoffed. So he wanted to play.

But no, she thought, as she felt him take her hand, press it against his heart. He wanted to distract her.

She didn’t want to play with this, however.

“Have you ever been in love, Jon?”

The question visibly surprised him. She saw it in his face, felt it in the twitch of his fingers around her hand. “Yes. Thrice, so far. Have you?”

Sansa had to think about it. “Perhaps. I don’t know.”

“If you don’t know, then you haven’t. There is no madness quite like it.”

Sansa’s face fell.

“Then I don’t want it.” She didn’t want to be mad in love. She wanted to be sane in it. Was such a thing so impossible?

“That is a hasty declaration.”
“It’s a certain one,” she insisted. “Did you ever find a use for such a love, since you advocate for it?”

Jon shrugged. “It certainly found a use for me.”

She did not know how to wade these waters with him. She felt so close to his heart, and usually understood him so well, but this was neither his heart nor his mind. It was his history she did not know. She wanted to speak her mind, but she didn’t want to hurt him and didn’t know what would.

“Then perhaps it wasn’t love,” she said tentatively.

“It was. Just not the kind you read about in stories.”

Sansa sighed, closed her eyes. “Don’t mock me.”

He seemed surprised she’d ask that of him. “I’m not.”

“Not now.”

“I swear I’m not. It’s just…sometimes love isn’t gentle or kind, Sansa. That doesn’t mean it’s not love.”

She shook her head. Here they walked alone, it seemed. “Love is not supposed to hurt.”

She saw him gulp. “I’ve always thought loving is the only way of knowing you can be hurt.”

“My mother loved my father and he loved her. They didn’t hurt each other.”

“How would you know? You were a child…what could you possibly know of their secrets? Their quarrels?”

“No.” So many people had told her they loved her and all they’d done was hurt her. No, she would never agree with him on this. “When people love you, they show you. They make you feel safe, and cared for. And strong. Everything else is just…words. If there are bad parts in it, so be it, but if there are more bad parts than good parts, then you cannot call it love. And you have to let it out of your heart, even if there is love there.”

“And how do we do that? Let love out?”

“I don’t love you anymore. Goodbye.”

Jon’s smile was so sad, she wanted to kiss him. She rubbed her thumb in circles on his palm instead. “Just like that, huh?”

“Yes, exactly like that. A clean cut. No looking back.”

“Like they never existed.”

“No, they did. You must remember that. You’re not erasing anyone from the world, you’re just…putting a wall between you and that person.”

“A wall? Would that be enough to keep you away?”

“A city, a country, the moon. Whatever it takes.” She looked away from him again, but only for a moment this time.

“Though there is one hard love you must find space for, in your heart.”
He grinned. “And who would that be? You?”

“No.” It was so obvious but he refused to see it. “Yourself.”

She saw his face slacken in surprise, and then something like sadness. He hesitated a moment, then moved the arm she’d been using as a pillow, curled it around her waist and slowly, slowly enough that she had time, if she’d wanted it, to refuse him - he pulled her to himself.

“Isn’t your arm numb by now?”

“Right you are, my lady.” And immediately, he turned, pulling her with him, causing her to yelp and then laugh loudly as he rolled to his other side and took her with him, so that it was his other arm she was laying on.

“How practical.”

“It’s what I’m known for. And apparently, not loving myself.”

“Hardly known of you. You like yourself quite a lot, or pretend to very well. It confuses people.”

“But you see me.”

His arm was heavy around her waist, but she felt so safe, it never even occurred to move.

“I do see you.” She grinned, used his own words against him. “I see you as you are, too.”

He chortled. “What a misfortune.”

She could have laughed with him. It was what he wanted, but he should have known better.

“Let me say this in a way that you might understand better. When living in a hostile place, around people that may very well want you dead, caring for yourself is the real act of warfare.”

“And did you learn to?”

“I had to. It was either that or die, so I had little choice in the matter.”

“How did you manage it?”

Sansa smiled, caught her lower lip between her teeth like she did when she remembered something particularly funny. “I did it how Arya used to practice her swordsmanship. I tried and failed. Then tried again and failed again, and tried another time and if I failed that time-”

“You’d try again the next.”

They were both smiling. “Yes. That way.”

“Arya could cut me in half in a couple of years, if she kept practicing the way she was when I left her.”

Sansa tapped his chest. “Then let’s hope we can both be as tenacious as she is.”

“What do you think it is like, to lose your mind?”

“I really don’t want to find out,” Jon mumbled. He’d closed his eyes some time ago, as Sansa kept
jumping from one song to another as her fancy moved, without finishing any of them.

They were all beautiful and so was she, and there was no better way to sleep than lulled there by her voice.

“But if you had to wonder,” she insisted.

He sighed, then turned on his back, mirroring her. “I don’t know. My darkest fear made manifest, probably.”

“Do you think it was like that for Viserys?”

That jerked him into awakedness quickly. “Viserys wasn’t mad, Sansa. He was just a cunt.”

She huffed. “I never understood why men use that as an insult. Cunts are nice. Most men like them more than anything in the world.”

Jon’s laughed. He turned his body towards her then, folding one arm under his head as he looked at her. She turned to face him when she felt his stare.

“You’re right though,” she said after a moment. “He wasn’t mad. He was just cruel, and liked other people’s pain. Liked to control them and hurt them.”

“He wanted to be king. Actually tried to overthrow my father once.”

Viserys’ envy and hunger for power had never been a secret, but she seemed shocked to hear he’d actually dared take that beyond grumbles of discontent. Jon would have been inclined to agree. Viserys had the courage of a lizard.

“Viserys was not smart enough to organise a coup,” she said to him, no doubt at all in her voice. “Someone must have used him.”

Jon snorted. “Elia’s words exactly. And yes, someone probably did. Either way, he failed. Father isolated him from court but never let him out of his sight unless it was under armed guard to Dragonstone.”

“Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, yes?”

“Close enough to kiss,” Jon said, and she smiled. “But that was the queen’s idea, not the king’s, who wanted to permanently exile him to dragonstone.”

There was more she wanted to say, Jon could see it in her face. Sense it in the very way she held her body: a little curled inward, not quite relaxed.

And he was proved right in a moment’s patience.

“…He’s still with me sometimes.”

Out of all the things she might have told him with that tone, as if she dreaded what he might say, this would have been the last of them. But he was a fool to be so surprised.

How many of those who’d hurt him still were with him? How many of those he’d hurt?

“No, Sansa, he isn’t. He’s dead.”

She closed her eyes. “I know that.”
“You know. But you can’t let him go?”

Sansa shook her head. “That’s not- I can’t make him go. Before he was just a man, but he’s everywhere now. Not even my dreams are safe.”

Jon extended his arm, and she scooted close. He pulled her in, pushed her hair, touched her arm, her throat, down to her hand where he linked their fingers.

Yes, he understood. She didn’t want a solution. Just someone to tell a fear to.

“Are you scared?”

“No.” She sighed. “I’m tired.”

She was tired and he had no cure for her pain, no rest to offer her. Only the truth.

“I could tell you that it will get better, but I don’t know. I don’t know if the ghosts ever go away. That has not been my life. But I can promise you something else.”

Sansa tipped her chin up, waited. Jon leaned in and touched the tip of his nose to hers, gently.

It made her smile, just like he wanted.

“Wherever we walk, we can walk together.”

“Really?” Her smile was tremulous. She brushed the tips of her fingers on his cheek, just along the scar he knew had there, that his beard could never quite grow to cover. “Will you be my friend then, Jon?”

Friend?

“I’ll be anything you want me to be.”

“I’d like a friend. I have so very few of them.”

Jon knew better than to be disappointed. “Then that’s what I’ll be.”

He saw exactly when her eyes turned sad. She wasn’t hiding anymore; she was as present as he was.

“I used to wish you were my brother. Did I tell you?”

“Wha- Why?”

He didn’t want to show her the depth of how much that provoked him, but neither did he try very hard to hide it. There was nothing between them anymore; taking the trouble to hide meant little to him now. His feelings were packed so densely, anyway, and so close to the surface, that it only took only a small jostle to have them spill out.

“Why did you wish that?”

“We would have grown up together, if you’d been my brother. In Winterfell.”

How much would that have changed, he wondered, stepping into her fantasy without even realizing it. There was nowhere else in this whole world he loved better than Winterfell and the people that lived within it. He would have had a different life, had he grown up there. He would have been a different man. He might have even been a better man.
He would most certainly have been powerless to help her, though, if he’d been her brother.

“You wouldn’t have been so alone, and maybe you might have come down south with me, so that I wouldn’t have been so alone.”

It would not have been so simple as she painted it. Had he been her brother and with her when she was in King’s Landing, he would have found the way to kill Viserys without so much as a whisper of regret, and then who knows what would have happened. Hells, that probably would have happened regardless had he not been stranded thousands of miles away.

“But since we cannot be brother and sister, we must settle for being the best of friends,” she told him then, just as she uncurled from his arms and got to her feet slowly. She held a hand out for him and thought Jon did not need it, he took it.

“It’s almost dawn,” she told him by way of explanation. Jon knew. They had to go.

He did not want to, though. He did not want to leave this place, its strange embrace, half stifling, half protection. Didn’t want to lose what he’d found here.

But she was moving already, gathering her things, placing her satchel over her arm and trying to shake out the earth and leaves from the folds of her cloak. He helped her then, and fastened it around her shoulders. Pulled her hood up to cover her hair.

The sky was lightening. The night was over and Jon felt, irrationally, as if something bigger than that was slipping from his fingers, even though his were firmly entwined with hers as they got back to their small boat. As if by falling asleep in their respective beds, they would forget any of this ever happened. As if parting at all would undo all of it.

But it didn’t.

When she left him at the pier and walked to her tent with Ghost by her side, just as the rest of the camp was waking, Jon watched her go, wrapped in her blue cloak, and thought about how everything still felt the same, only how he wanted to go after her.

The pulse of his feelings was still achingly alive inside him, he was aware of it all the time, *all the time*, from the moment he went to sleep until he woke up some hours later.

None of it had been something he’d imagined: not the terrible parts nor the wonderful ones. And it would not change. The world could be made anew tomorrow or just fall into darkness the day after, but Jon knew this would say the same. He knew Sansa was still sleeping in her tent, both hands curled to her chest, knees pulled up. She hadn’t even bothered to take off her cloak.

Ghost took a deep breath and Jon’s lungs expanded.

He was still lingering on her skin, as the scent of her lingered on his. The memory of it vivid.

Nothing was gone.

He stared at the canopy of his tent and thought about how different he felt. How many more things he knew now, and what that meant. How many people he had met in his life, and loved, who had only ever known fractions of him. Because he had not been able to give more, because he had not been willing, or because there had not been anything there left to give. But now there was someone just a few feet from him that knew more of him than anyone did. That could see all of him and not even blink and -
The very best of friends, she’d said.

Yes.

He washed the red paint from his face, considered the longing rolling in his chest like a second hunger. Guilt was starting to raise its ugly head, confusing him, making him doubt himself.

Sansa thought love was meant to heal, that made us strong, but in Jon’s experience that had never been all of it. It did those things, too - in this moment he felt strong enough to fight the sun - but that was never all of it. Love was awful. It was...horrible and frightening. It made you doubt yourself, judge yourself, turned you selfish, obsessed, cruel. So many times it had been all Jon had wanted and hell once he got there - but never, not once, had he ever wished he could go back. It’s how he knew love was different from any other hurt: it had always left him in a wound he’d never wanted to replace.

It took strength to bear it. To take responsibility for all that he’d done to bring himself here, take stock of his actions and then continue on further despite the doubt, despite the world turning over. Because Jon knew that for all its flaws and terrible pitfalls, love was the closest he had ever come to hope.

She waited for her in the stables, and when Ghost brought her along, Jon could have kissed him.

Good boy.

“Ghost where are you- Jon! Is something the matter?”

She was blinking fast, squinting at him. The sun was bright outside and her eyes must not have yet adjusted to the shade. She walked deeper into the wooden structure, towards him. Towards an alcove he’d chosen because it could not be seen from on door or the other, if one hid oneself carefully behind the beam over there, just at the corner.

“No, nothing.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Did you order Ghost to bring me here?”

She’d washed her neck, her cheeks and between her breasts, there was no trace of the red paint there anymore, but Jon could still see it, like a map of where he’d kissed her. He’d been surprised by how much that had affected him.

“I did.”

She seemed annoyed, adjusted the silk shawl around her shoulders again. She was wearing red today, and against all odds, she looked even more striking. “And why is that, your grace?”

Jon came close, shrugged. “No reason.”

She rolled her eyes at him, but still she was smiling. Before she had a chance to turn around and leave him there, however, Jon took hold of her arm and turn her back to face him.

“It’s tomorrow,” He whispered around a grin.

It took her just a moment to remember, and when she did she laughed and pushed at his shoulder. Jon let her go just so he could sneak an arm around her waist and pull her up against him. She yelped...
in surprise when her feet left the ground and then laughed.

He made good on his promise then.

vi.

When the gatekeeper announced that riders were making their way to the gate, Sansa could hardly contain herself, though of course she had to, being in the presence of the Lady of Harrenhal and her husband both. If her hand shook a little as she put her cup of tea back on its saucer with a clink, she did not think anyone noticed. She did not truly think it was Jon returning so soon. He’d only been gone a few days and he probably had not even reached the Twins by now, but still, she could not help her excitement. And nor could her disappointment be put into words, when she learned who it was, though she hoped - dearly, she hoped - that it did not show on her face.

Sansa curtsied. “Lord Baelish. How good to see you.”

She was spared having to speak to him too much during the immediate introduction since the lord and lady of the house were there with her. But she knew he’d search her out eventually. He had taken the time to come out here, when he never wanted to be further away from King’s Landing than a stone’s throw if it did not serve him.

He was here for a purpose. So she might as well find out what that was sooner rather than later.

That evening Sansa prepared herself more carefully than she had in a month. She slipped into her clothes with care, having chosen them to suit his taste and preference, and with each button fastened, the inside of her head grew calmer, stiller. She felt as if she was putting herself away in drawers and locking them, shuttering the door and barring the windows, preparing for a storm.

A short month was all it had taken, to get unused to such a way of putting herself on herself.

The sadness that crept in her heart emptied her, rather than weighing her down.

That evening she sang for her hosts and his guest a Riverland song. And waited, until Petyr finally approached her, when she was seated by the fire, reading in candlelight. One glance in the reflective surface of her cup, told Sansa that the lord and lady of the house were engaged with their other guests and were not paying too close attention to her.

“My dear lady, you look radiant.”

Sansa put the book down gently. Folded her hands in her lap. She was acutely aware of how she looked in candlelight, how the ivory of her satin gown made her look, how her hair pinned back from her face afforded the best view of her features, the off the shoulder style of her dress complemented her shoulders, collarbones, the tops of her breasts. She knew all this, had seen it all in the mirror with a detachment that almost separated her from her body.

“Thank you, my lord.” She dared widen her smile a little. “It is good to see you, Petyr.”

His eyes were fixed on her lips.

“It’s been far too long,” he said slowly, and then met her eyes. “King’s Landing has grown dim indeed without you.”

“I think I should be returning shortly. But tell me, what brings you here?”

“King’s business, I’m afraid. With the lord of the castle.”
It wasn’t until an hour later and until he’d made her work for it for quite a bit, that he finally allowed her the real reason, in the form of a letter which she read with her back to the drawing room, facing a window.

She would soon be glad for such a choice, because though she could not help how pale she grew, she did compose her face before she turned to Littlefinger again.

“How certain is this?” She asked him, her voice far from the girlishly-pitched sound from before.

“Very certain. The king is thinking of getting involved. Against the advice of his Hand.”

Of course.

“When did the conflict first arise?”

“More than half a year ago, it seems, though word was slow to travel,” Petyr told her, his face placid. Pleasant almost. “Apparently the willingness of Lord Stark to hear out these wildling envoys was not taken well by some of his bannermen. But the open disagreement only happened two months ago or so, when the Boltons led the hardline against your father.”

“Freefolk,” she heard herself say. She felt numb with shock, with worry.

“Beg your pardon?”

“People north of the Wall call themselves Freefolk.” She looked at him. “If my father is negotiating with them, it means he recognises them and therefore how they call themselves. I must do the same.”

Petyr’s smile was genuinely pleased. “Certainly.”

“How many houses have the Boltons swayed?”

“I do not have that information yet, my lady.”

Sansa folded the letter carefully. “But a conflict is imminent.”

“Nothing is certain. But yes, all elements being as they are, with neither side changing their minds, a conflict may very well emerge. And with the situation in the Riverlands being as it is, the Crown might not be able to intervene.”

Sansa willed herself to focus on Littlefinger, who was too careful a man to miss it when someone in front of him made a mistake.

One enemy at a time.

“The situation in the Riverlands is about to be resolved,” she told him, glad to have kept her voice steady. She was already thinking of all she would have to do, the words she would have to choose, the people she would need to speak to. Dany would be on her side, and of course so would Jon…

Jon… she could see his hand in this, almost. But how?

No.

One problem at a time, one puzzle at a time.

“It is? Was the situation much exaggerated, then?”
“No. Prince Jon has simply lived up to his reputation. How firm is Connington in not wanting to interfere?”

Petyr’s eyes glinted. It almost made Sansa regret her words. “Has he? How commendable of him. And to win the admiration of a lady as notoriously difficult to please as you.”

“Ser. The hand of the King?” Sansa insisted.

“Unshakeable. The king I have understood to be less certain, but in private, things are more than they appear.”

“When are they not?”

Petyr smiled. “I would caution you, my lady, to be careful of those around you at this very delicate hour.”

He’d been cautioning her against those around her for years. It had only served to isolate her, for he would have her only dependent on him, and none other.

“Of course, I am always a grateful listener,” Sansa said instead, tilting her head a bit so that the diamond drop of her earring brushed her throat.

His eyes lingered there.

“There is a whisper going around that the king intends for this war between Starks and Boltons to start. You know how he used to think of tying the North to the crown through Daenerys and your brother. But now the winds have changed. The Vale has remained out of his design, and he is thinking perhaps his sister might serve a better purpose there.”

Sansa’s fingers clenched, wrinkling the paper in her hand. “What?”

“Already Harry has been invited to dine with the royal family twice, and he and Daenerys have been spotted together in the gardens several times.”

“But she cannot stand him!”

The words were out of her mouth before she could think better on them. Once they were, she wished she could take them back. She sounded like a child.

“We all obey the king, my lady,” Petyr said by way of explanation.

Sansa felt cold. She needed to sit. She needed… How easily it all fell into place in her mind. Of course she could see it.

“They never meant to let me go, did they?”

Petyr took her hand and raised it to his lips, kissing her gloved knuckles lightly.

She did not feel it.

“All is not lost, Sansa. Do not despair.”

“This is not despair, Petyr,” she said slowly. And it was not. This was rage. “What does this have to do with-”

And this time, she did stop herself. Her mind caught up to her mouth and shut it with a click of her
It made such perfect sense: the King’s sister for the Vale. The King’s second son for Winterfell’s daughter, who was already in their grasp. And there she would remain.


Successful, even.

Sansa could feel her cheeks heat with the shame of it. The anger squeezed her heart, made it small.

Yes, successful indeed, least for Jon’s part, whatever that may be. For as surely as he had held a sincere thought in his head, he had also played a part for her, and played it with dedication, relentlessly.

She could not unsee it now. She could not unthink it. The dark seed of this doubt had already entered her head and it hooked there, took root, and grew into a large-looming shadow in her mind. Its vines wrapping around the frail reality she had built for herself, shattering it into a thousand pieces. Exposing her to the truth she had been hiding from, even though it had almost been pressed against her nose the entire time.

It wrapped itself around the tapestry that made up last five weeks of her life, tighter and tighter until all the threads came apart. Until she could catch every single one and follow it to its dark heart. See the intent there. Until she could reassemble it from the start and watch, helplessly, as a whole different beast took shape before her eyes.

Sansa looked up, met Petyr’s gaze.

She saw his mouth tilt up in the ghost of a smile.

His little nod of assent.

That little pleased look that washed over him, every time he felt a trap snap shut. She could almost hear the jaws of it clench around her.

“Why not help the Starks,” Sansa asked in a whisper, “if he means to marry his son to one of them?”

Petyr tilted his head. “There is great benefit to marrying the sister of the future Lord of Winterfell. But an even greater one to marrying its lady. And a war can be very…expedient.”

Of course.

Of course. Nothing in life formed a complete picture unless a touch of horror was involved. Something truly vile was always waiting in the fringes of every game, every plan born in a place like King’s Landing. If you did not find it, it meant you just hadn’t looked hard enough, or in the right places. Or that it wasn’t falling on you.

But it was.

Sansa’s head was spinning.

She curtsied, and almost stumbled. “Please excuse me.”

She didn’t even wait for a response.
It didn’t take Sansa long to arrange her own travel party. Her uncle did not doubt her when she told him she’d received word from Jon telling her to go back to King’s Landing before him, though he did seem concerned. She’d insisted however, giving him details of Jon’s location and his dealings, to fill the spaces left from the lie and make it more credible.

She lied. Brazenly. Gracelessly. She would be found out the moment Jon returned, but she did not care. She wanted him to know she knew.

Had it been anyone else in Uncle Benjen’s stead, they might have asked to see the letter Jon had sent, but he did not. Not when Sansa implied that the letter was rather personal and she would rather not share it. His quick understanding had not seemed to erase his doubt, and had only served to heighten hers.

What did he know that he was not sharing?

Had he been aware of whatever game Jon had been playing? Had he been complicit? How could that be?

Whatever the answer was did not matter to Sansa. She simply struck a line through her uncle and moved on. Though now, as she walked through the woods of Briarwhite, waiting for the boat that would take her south to King’s Landing, she was not sure of anything anymore. And a nameless grief was eating all that she’d let it.

She looked up, at the sun shining down through the trees. If she kept walking with her head up like this, it almost seemed like she was floating. She and Arya used to play this game all the time. First one to trip lost the game.

She wanted to slice herself down to the marrow and pull the meat off of whatever she had let grow there, like some idiot child. Like she was still some fifteen year old girl who knew nothing, understood nothing. Blind to all that moved, just because she’d been starved…starved for affection, for kindness, for love. And it worked! Still, still, like someone who was too stupid to learn, she forgot all else the moment she got a taste of either. She lost sight of everything. Couldn’t even see what was in front of her.

It was vile now, thinking about it. His hands, his face, were smeared across her mind, and the memory of it all and every action, the calculation of it, behind it… It felt as if someone else was recalling it. Every shade a little off. A little darker, a little colder.

It was true, she was as stupid as everyone said she was. Viserys had been right on that, at least.

She had to stop, lean forward, hands on her knees until she caught her breath. She wanted to scream the world down, but instead she bit her lip to keep herself silent.

This was needed though. This hurt, the sadness - it was necessary. It was useful. Even as it hurt. This pain, she would not forget it.

Which was another lie she told herself, she realized with a laugh. Every time she thought so: that this time would be the time she learned, that she would get better, that it would be different next time.

And it wasn’t.

Always the same trap. Always…
Sansa wiped her tears on her sleeve, breathing in harsh bursts of air. She knelt at the foot of an elk, let her fingers dig in the dirt. Let the rage, the pain, the humiliation rake her. Tusks, claws fangs, jaws, all of it. She let it pass through her. She wanted herself shredded to ribbons. She wanted to disappear. To let this feeling tear through her, and scatter her here, in these woods. Let her sink in the mud and become nothing. Until trees and flowers began to grow from her and she felt clean again.

She pressed her face down on the soft earth of the forest, smelled the dirt and the grass, tasted blood in her mouth from the cut on her lip that was still flowing…

And with a sharp inhale she realized this had been her dream all along.

This, here, feeling half a person, shaking pathetically with suppressed sobs. *This* is what she’d seen.

Sansa pulled herself up.

Straightened her shoulders, wiped her face of tears. She looked at the shafts of sunlight kissing the ground below, the softness of the earth, the noises of the forest. She took off her gloves, looked at her hands, the paleness of them, the veins in her wrist. The green of the grass against them.

It had not been togetherness that her dreams had shown her, nor friendship, or anything remotely like it. They had been a warning and she had not listened. And it was so disappointing - the wasted beauty, the lies all the stories were made of, over and over forever - that it made her want to cry again.

But she could not.

Already she could hear people moving through the trees.

No, the time for this indulgence was over. She had shed the tears that had been clogging her throat for the last two days and making her voice sound strange. Spent the feelings she had been trying to suppress, let them rip through her, so that they might be easier to lock away this time. And they were.

Experience was good for something after all.

Carefully, Sansa stood up. Shook her cloak free of any dirt, put her gloves back on. Dried her face with a kerchief, which she then folded carefully and put back in her pocket.

There. That was better. After all, where she was going was no place for tears. And no place for little girls who wanted to be loved either. Let the skin of that girl stay here.

This was how it was: all the girls inside her, each one killing the last.

She didn’t like to scatter her pieces, but this time she wanted to.

One girl rose to her feet.

What was left of the other stayed in the forest.

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[Fitzgerald](1) Fitzgerald

[2] A callback to a quote from Jon, when he is trying to convince the night’s watch to let the freefolk through, and they refuse. he things ‘they are fools Ygritte. and worse, they will not learn.’
The part about the Lord of Widow’s Watch I made up, but the rest actually happened in *A dance of Dragons*. (slavers taking free folk as slaves, i mean)

I just want to be clear that Jon isn’t defending abusive love. This is a comparison of their worldviews - of Jon and the love he’s known with Dany and Ygritte - love in a hostile isolated place when he was too young to know how to defending himself properly. Love in a time of war. Both were real and good to him, but Sansa doesn't have the language for it - the difficulties of a real loving relationship, because her experience with ‘hard love’ is actually abuse. HOWEVER, its given her a very clear idea of what are ‘red flags’ so to speak.

*Fleabag* - a masterpiece

I don’t know who the author is but i read a version of this somewhere.

Chapter End Notes

I know this chapter goes through A Lot. I really hope you guys enjoyed it though. Let me know your thoughts.

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR TAKING THIS STORY OVER 1000 KUDOS. this has never happened to me before. I do not , in fact, know how to react. I am overwhelmed.

note regarding the story:

I have decided to change the ages of the characters here, because the more I wrote, the more they seemed to me like babies. So - Sansa came south when she was 15. Jon is older than her by 2 years, so he was 17. I will count the years by his story since he was the one that moved around more and we need to keep track for plo reasons:

- He lived in winterfell for 1 year
- Spent the better part of the next 3 being a rogue/pirate/killing people.
- After those 3 years where he was missing and no one knows many details of, he showed up in King’s Landing just in time for Viserys’ funeral.
- It’s been one year since that day to the present moment when the story is happening.

SO, Jon is 22 and Sansa 20, which are reasonable ages.

(three guesses who/what the fierce beast is here XD. I’d love to hear your guesses)
Hey there. I'm back. This chapter turned out to be plot heavy, and very political. I *wanted* to have another Sansa scene in there, but in the end I was just too tired, and the chapter got far too long. I hope I remembered all the plot threads and hopefully answered some of the questions that have been posed since the first chapter. I dearly hope it makes as much sense to you as it does to me. If I did however leave stuff unclear, or you didn't understand something, please tell me. It might be that the info is vague on purpose - characters are not stating stuff fully, but it might also be that I simply forgot stuff. Anyway, enjoy. I hope you like it.

viii. and they were enemies - i -

Someone has to leave first.
This is an old story.
There is no other version of this story.

This wasn't a war story.
It was a love story.
It was a ghost story.

Every love story is a ghost story.

richardsiken // timo’brien // david foster wallace

i

Jon ran up to the crest of the wooded hill, keeping a steady pace. Maples and willows formed a canopy over moss-covered mounds. A cacophony of birds and insects masked their approaching as soundly as they marched their prey’s, but no other man among those Jon was hunting had Ghost to help him sense them. And Jon could hear them breathing. He slowed as he climb became steeper and then stopped where the foliage was thickest, just before he reached the top of the hill. Behind him, he could hardly hear his men and felt a flicker of pride at their precision, their dedication to orders. They had to be as silent as shadows, to sneak up to an enemy that would be using surprise as
their own weapon. He knew as well as they did that they were only a few scarce feet from their target.

Jon’s eyes darted about, scouting the terrain all over again. He knew where his advantage was even though the curtain of dusk was starting to obscure the deeper parts of the woodland around them. There was a path that ran through the glen about fifty feet below, he could see it clearly in his mind’s eye even now. It was there that the merchant caravan would pass through, slowly and with great care to appear as inviting of looting as it could. He saw through Ghost that Glen and Pyp, and two score of his archers following each of them, had already taken up their positions, waiting to swarm the hillside at his signal.

They did not like that they would fight this close to dark, and though they could appreciate the tactics of fucking an enemy in their asses, they didn't want to push as close as Jon was sending them. But they knew to trust him. Knew that he would push them just close enough, to do the job right, and they had learned to follow Ghost almost as faithfully as they followed him. It was Ghost leading them now and Jon with him. In truth, Jon did not like the distance or the timing either, but he knew it could not be helped. By all accounts, the men they were hunting fell upon caravans just like this one, at this time of the day exactly, using the setting sun to give themselves the advantage of the possibility of the cover of darkness, if they needed it to hide in the forest, after.

This time though, it would not work. Jon would hunt and kill each and every one of them if he had to. His patience was at an end.

He tensed, hearing the caravan approach their position before anyone else did. Down the line, hidden in the thick undergrowth, Ghost crouched just as his master did. He bared his teeth in a silent growl. Jon felt his lips pull back in a snarl.

On the hillside, through the noise of the wind moving the leaves, Jon heard the bows of his archers knocking their arrows, ready to be loosened. And further up the hillside, just at the top, he could hear his prey also tensing for an attack.

The first man of the caravan entered the glen.

Jon waited, looking at him, biding his time.

He had warned the merchants to be careful, wear mail under their clothes, take cover as soon as the first arrow was loosened. But they had to be there. They had to endure the attack. For this to work, Jon had to catch these men red handed. So he bid his time, waited, listened.

Just as the caravan reached the deepest part of the glen, Jon heard the men hiding in the trees come out of them with loud shouts. And just as they came out of hiding and Jon heard the first sounds of combat, he let out a loud screech, like a bird. It was something they’d done a hundred times and one, and it worked. He ran up the hill as silently as he could. Ghost did the same, leading the flank, and together, they reached the edge of the brush at the same time.

Jon loosened the first arrow, silent as he’d come, and after his, dozens more followed. Almost all finding their targets.

Whether these looters were Frey men or other men, he did not care. They fell all the same. The questions would be asked alter.

It took them some moments to realize they were being attacked from behind. Jon could sense their confusion. The merchants and the peasants in the caravan kneeled, hiding away from sight, inside the wagons or under them.
Jon heard a voice, the commander or whoever passed for it.

“Form a line. Back to back lines, now!”

Jon hit the man screaming with an arrow to the shoulder, dropping him to his knees. Before he hit the forest dirt, another arrow hit him in the arm.

“Arrows! Knock your arrows, aim for the hillside.”

Jon loosened his own arrow, hitting the man giving the orders in the leg, close to his knee. He knew from the confusion that ensued after, that he one was the last man of rank. Still the onslaught did not stop.

Jon ducked to the side as a volley of arrows tore into the spot marked where Jon’s arrow had flown from.

He did not run. He strode in their direction instead, unrelenting, never stopping his movements, keeping just inside the brush. Just like him, his men did the same, offering only glimpses of themselves, fast as ghosts and just as silent. They’d practiced this a thousand times, but when it was true, when it was for the kill like now, it was different. With the coppery scent of blood in the air, the screaming, his harsh breathing in his ears and his heart pounding - and all of it under control still - it was different. Because this was not about death. Though there was battle, the carnage had not yet started.

Jon changed his pace and direction, repeatedly ducking and weaving, firing his arrows and knocking another as he moved. He saw one of his men stop dead in his tracks and reverse direction, several arrows missing him by a hair’s breadth. Never give your opponents a stationary target. It was a tactic the freefolk had used to their advantage for years and years, in the thick woodlands beyond the wall. And it worked here as well as anywhere else.

There were only six men left standing. Deeper in the woods, Jon could hear some trying to escape and being brought down by their second line, just further inside the woods.

Ghost was spilling some blood somewhere down there.

Jon felt the coppery taste in his own mouth. He saw the man in front of him aiming.

Jon dropped to the ground and fired his arrow first. He did not mean to kill the man but his arrow ground his throat nonetheless.

Jon ground his teeth.

An enemy archer down the line aimed at Jon, but before he could draw back his bow he was knocked down by one of his own men, who bulled into him and then punched him so hard the other man went still. Jon rushed the man standing closest to him, grabbing his bow and shoving it aside before it could be fired, slamming his elbow into the other man’s face, and then again until he heard the bone crunch, until the man dropped and did not move again.

Jon was breathing hard. Fighting while trying not to kill was harder, somehow. It took everything in him not to let his control slip. But even then did not work, could not, because you might happen, as Jon did, upon someone who knew how to use a sword. Just like before, Jon did not really account for how he moved. How when he parried the man’s hit with the flat of his sword and shoved him away, he did so instinctively, and so was swinging his blade around and shoving it up his opponent’s belly on its movement upwards.
Jon pulled the sword out of the man’s body and kicked him down. Charged at the remaining two who had not yet fled.

One of them had a bow. Jon did not, but with the hand that was not holding his sword he drew his hatchet from his belt and threw it.

It bit deep above his opponent’s knee, just as the loosened arrow glanced off Jon’s arm.

He ignored the sting, gripped his sword with both hands, eyes on the last man in front of him.

The noise had died down now. Just by the sound of it, Jon knew that it was over. The skirmish was won.

“Lay down your weapon and I will spare you.”

The man in front of him was shaking. He seemed young, with a sharp-boned face and a long nose. He was sweating and his lips were pressed together so hard, they did not seem to take any space on his face, his mouth only a thin line.

Jon breathed through his nose, trying to quieten the rush in his ears.

“I am prince Jon Targaryen and I swear in the name of the King - lay down your weapon and you will be spared.”

The man seemed uncertain, and Jon allowed it because he could see that there were no more threats to him left: there was not one of the looters left standing.

Finally, the one in front of him he dropped his weapon and then to his knees.

Jon lowered his sword, looked around again, unable not to look at every shadow as a threat until he was sure that he was safe.

“Gather the wounded, put them in the cart.” He ordered, voice rough. “Bind their worse wounds and call a maester. I want them alive.”

“Yes, your grace.”

Jon walked towards the man he’d seen leading the looters.

“On your feet.”

When he did not respond, the man guarding him grabbed the looter by the hair and pulled him to his feet. He was as tall as Jon but less well built. Thin almost, with a long face and a hooked nose.

Jon knew who he was. Still -

“Your name and your orders.” He ground out. When the man did not immediately respond, Jon walked towards the fallen man just to his right, put his boot on the man’s thigh to hold him still as he pulled his axe from his chest with a squelching, wet sound, ignoring the screaming. He put his weapon on his belt again, looking directly at the man in front of him.

“I don’t like repeating myself.”

“Aemon, your grace. Aemon Rivers.”

“Rivers, are you?” Jon repeated slowly. “And tell me, Aemon Rivers, if i were to start chopping up
your fingers and toes, would your family name change, by chance?"

“No, your grace.” His voice only shook a little, but he’d blanched considerably. It made the blood on
him stand out enve more. “I have but one.”

Jon nodded. “Very well.”

He turned to Grenn, who was sweaty and breathing hard still, but unharmed. Beyond him, perhaps at
a 20 pace sof distance, Jon thought he saw his uncle Benjen, half his face blurred by the blood
oozing from a cut somewhere along his hairline.

He turned back to his prisoners.

“You are all arrested, in the name of the King.”

Their apparent leader struggled when he was seized. “On what charges?”

Jon looked back, not believing his ears, and then overtaken by a sharp anger. He backhanded the
man across the mouth hard enough that he then had to watch him spit out a couple of his yellow teeth
with the blood.

“Looting, sir. Something which I caught you doing just now and to which the men you have attacked
before will testify. I will also be adding theft and rape to your charges, which I also have witnesses
for, so I will have your hands and your cock. You will be stripped and caged and I will drag you
from town to town so that all of Westeros may have their fill of your disgrace, until we reach the Red
Keep. Whereupon your cages will be hung from its walls and wait out your last days there, so that all
the world may witness what happens to men thick enough to break the king’s peace.” Jon
grinned. “You and your men, Aemon Rivers, will be the king’s new gargoyles.”

Aemon Rivers struggled even on his knees but his men’s hold did not relend, nor the shackles they
put him in. “No! No, mercy, my lord, mercy.”

Jon deliberately relented a bit.

“On the other hand, if your proved willing to disclose your orders and who gave them to you, I
would have to deal with them, and as a sworn man bound to obey, your sentence might be softened.”
Jon leaned in, lowered his voice even further. “And were I put in a deeply merciful mood by your
cooperation, I would allow you and all your men the chance to escape mutilation and slow death, by
taking the black so that you might redeem yourself, regain your honor, and not burn in whichever of
the seven hells for eternity.”

Aemon Rivers hung his head. All around him, his surviving men were hanging on his every breath
and Jon already knew that were he not to reveal himself, any one of them would, if only to win his
favor.

“Very well. My name is Aemon, of house Frey.”

Jon allowed himself a small smile. “Yes, I know.”

He saw realization turn into hopelessness on Aemon Frey’s face. At least he was not stupid.

Well, not entirely so.

“We had no orders.”
Jon felt his hand close tighter around the hilt of his sword. “And you were doing so well, Aemon of house Frey.”

“But we were made to understand that we would not be stopped, should we wish to… partake.”

Around them, his men were done loading the wounded into the empty carts of the merchants. The ones who could stills stand had been bound and made to stand in a line to the right of the carts. The merchants and peasants that had supplied jon with their testimonies were looking on at his interrogation of Aemon Frey as if they would like nothing better than to see the man’s blood flow. Jon sympathized, but would not be granting that wish just yet.

“Loot, you mean?”

“Aye, your grace. Loot.”

Jon nodded. “Good.”

He straightened then, and looked around. Raised his voice so that all his captives could hear him when he spoke.

“You will all confess your crimes to the King’s magistrate. Every raid, every caravan, every house in every village. Have a care not to leave anything out, for I already have testimonies from the people you robbed, and I deeply dislike liars. Once I have your confessions, the magistrate will determine your punishments. And once you have heard them, you will be given the choice to go through with them, or take the black and atone for your crimes.”

He turned his back to the prisoners and made for the beginning of the line immediately as he was done speaking.

“The wounded have been loaded in the carts, your grace.” Satin told him as he reached Jon and handed him his canteen, taking his sword as he did so, so that he could clean it. Jon drang a few gulps and gave it back to him.

“Good.”

“What do we do with the dead?”

Jon shrugged. “Leave them where they are.”

“My lord. Please my lord.”

Jon turned. Looked at one of the would-be looters.

“It is a sin to leave their bodies out for the beasts. Let us give them a proper burial.”

Jon felt his hands curl into fists. “You break the king’s peace, attack undefended men, rob them blind, leave their families to the mercy of starvation and now you want what from me?” Jon took a step towards him. The man flinched when Jon grabbed him by the throat, fingers curling until he heard him choke. “Do you think you still breathe because I care for your worthless lives? No, there will be no burial. The cur are to remain where they lay, until they are eaten by other curs.”

Jon looked around, found the youngest of the survivors who looked in good shape and motioned for the boy to be brought in front of him.

“What is your name?” His arm ached a little, where the arrow had grazed him.
“Willem, lord.”

“And your family name, Willem?”

The boy flinched. “I have none, Lord. I am a bastard of the riverlands.”

Jon looked at him. He didn't look older than fourteen. “Whose bastard are you then, Willem?”

Willem hung his head. “Willem Frey’s your grace.”

“Alright. Listen to me carefully, Willem. I will need you to deliver a message.” He took the parchment from Satin’s hand, and presented it to the boy. “I will need you to ride to the Twins, Willem. I will need you to give this to Walter Frey alone. None but him, do you understand?”

The boy nodded, wide eyed and frightened. Jon however, was as calm as Willem was not.

“I want Walter Frey to read the names and descriptions of the men in that letter. I want him to gather those men and bring them to me at Seagard, where I expect to meet him a week from today.” Jon leaned into the boy, who, to his credit, seemed too stunned to flinch at his action. “Walter Frey, Willem. Not his son, or second son, or ugliest nephew. The Lord himself.

“Tell him, that if he does not come, I will go to him - with the full strength of the Iron Throne. That I have forty of his family in chains in my camp and that if he does not show, I will skin them alive and sow the earth from here to the Twins with their parts. That I will slaughter every man woman and child bearing his name until I get to him. And when I do, I will root him out of his keep and drag him in chains to King’s Landing, where he will be tried as a man of blood for the atrocities he allowed his people to suffer. Can you remember that, Willem?”

Willem’s eyes had grown so huge Jon could see the whites around water-pale irises. “I… I …”

Jon put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Stay calm, lad. Breathe.”

“I don’t know, your grace.” The boy finally choked out.

Jon smiled. “I like boys who are honest much better than those who lie. You don’t have to remember all of it, Willem - three of my men will come with you and relay my words to your Lord. But you do have to remember what you saw here and some at least, of what I told you.” Jon took the boy by the jaw, but not hard. “Remember it, and tell it often, understand.”

“Yes, your grace.”

“Go. ”

Jon left Willem to the care of his officers, who already had their orders. As he went to his horse, Ghost and uncle Benjen fell into step with him. Jon petted Ghost’s head with a tight smile, and chuckled when his uncle put an arm around his shoulders.

“Had you ridden any slower you would have missed the raid entirely.”

Uncle Benjen snorted. “I don’t mind missing the beginning of any kind of violence, as long as I’m there at its end.”

Jon laughed, eyeing the cut on his uncle’s forehead. “Yet still you manage to lose a pint of blood.”

“Most of it remains where it should be.”
They’d reached Jon’s guard. Satin passed him the reins of his horse and Jon mounted easily, the wound in his arm stinging, but not enough to hinder him.

“We make for Seaguard. Make sure the prisoners are guarded well. And send two fast riders ahead; I want all the men to be ready for marching when I get there. And those from Harrenhal too.”

Satin nodded, beautiful face serious, and walked away to relay his orders.

Benjen looked at him, puzzled. “Marching to where?”

“No, I rode away from there.”

Jon could not help the pursing of his lips anymore than he could help the pinching of fear in his breast.

“I should have left Ghost with her.” He muttered, trying to keep at bay the bad feeling weighting over him. He did not need distractions, but he could not help it. She’d written him almost every day before and now, for three days, nothing. Once or twice he even thought he saw Skye flying overhead but he might have been wrong because she never landed.

“Perhaps you should have. Whatever skirmishes she has to fight in King’s Landing are surer to be more challenge-“

Jon reacted abruptly, jerking the reins so hard that his horse protested. “What do you mean, King’s Landing?”

His uncle looked back at him with confusion writ plain on his familiar face. “She left Harrenhal the same day I rode away from there.”

“ What!”

He was not at all prepared for the words, therefore his reaction was unbridled. It startled his uncle quite a bit.

“She told me…” Benjen started but the words died as he took in the look on Jon’s face, which must be as wrecked and thunderous as he felt.

Jon watched as his uncle’s face went blank, and then flooded with disbelief, before he groaned. “Oh, bugger it to fucking hell.” Benjen muttered through gritted teeth.

“Did something happen?” Jon asked. “Was she alright?”

“She seemed well enough. And she must have lied to me.” Benjen said, almost laughing, though it was plain to see he was stunned at the words coming out of his mouth. “She told me she’d grown impatient and longed to go back and finally see her intended again.”

“She what?” The feeling that gripped him was red hot and went straight to his head from his chest. Fuck but he had not missed being jealous.

Benjen flinched but did not relent. “No need to roar at me.”

He’d do more than that!
Jon rode his horse in front of his uncle’s and stopped them both. “Why did you let her leave?”

“She said she’d received a letter from you, in which you gave her permission to the capitol without you, if she so wished.”

Jon pressed his fingers against his eyelids, gritted his teeth against the scream that was building up in his throat. He did not want to shout at his uncle within hearing of his officers.

“Why- why the fuck would I do that?”

Benjen’s eyes hardened. “Because it was what she wanted, apparently, and so far I, as well as everyone with working eyeballs, have been under the distinct impression that anyone standing between Sansa Stark and what she wants would meet your wrath.”

Jon winced. “I would have denied her that!”

But even as the words left his mouth he knew them to be a lie. Had she truly wished to leave him, he would have let her go… and then he would have followed her. He would have never allowed Sansa to leave him without putting up a fight. Not in a thousand years. Not after feeling as if he’d known her for exactly that long. He’d been starving for her his whole life without even knowing it; it was not bloody likely that he’d let go the one person in whose presence he did not feel lonely, was it?

But then again, Benjen could not know that. It’s not as if Jon had told him anything lately. It had felt impossible to do so.

“Whatever her reasons, you would have been wrong to keep her here, if she wished to go, Jon.” His uncle insisted, steel in his voice. “She is not our prisoner.”

Jon laughed joylessly. He could not help it. He could practically hear Sansa’s voice echo in those words, see her planting them in his uncle’s head same as she’d planted them in Jon’s.

Manipulation was a subtle art in his cousin’s hands; a gentle one. He could only see it for what it was, because he’d already seen her eyes shining in the dark with the truth of her nature.

But he did not resent her for it. We become what we need to, in order to survive, don’t we? But why had she felt like she needed to survive him?

Why like this?

The depth with which he felt this as a rejection was astounding. He could not seem to stop reeling from it.

Why would she leave him like this?

They had made no promises, it was true, but she must have known. She must have. He’d practically put his beating heart in her hand. They’d been closer to each other than Jon had ever felt to his own skin. She must have known! She could not have kissed him the way she had and not known that he wanted her for his own, always. That he wanted to be hers the same way.

Doubt gnawed at him now, and things he had ignored before came to the surface.

They’d shared breathless intimacy, but Sansa had never even hinted at anything beyond, nor had she ever seemed to catch on when he did, once or twice. She’d touched him without reserve or
hesitation, but she never…

But…

No.

Words! What need had there been for words? They had been too close for her not to understand. Every bit and jagged piece of himself that he still possessed - he’d offered her all of them. All of them had reached for her, longing for her affection and she had taken him and all his pieces! She had accepted him and she had let him into her mind as he had let her into his heart.

There was no doubt in Jon’s mind that she loved him. None. She loved him just as he loved her. There was desperation in her the likes Jon had hardly ever felt, and that had matched him perfectly in that forest floor. He knew she was as starved as he was. She loved him.

The fact that she hadn’t told him meant nothing. Jon knew Sansa well enough by now to know better than to tell her what he felt or to expect to just confess to her own heart when she felt it. She wouldn’t have welcomed it. It would have scared her senseless to hear him say he loved her. But that didn’t matter a lick and they’d both known it. They’d both seen it in each other. It had been in everything she did, in every word. It had been there, in the very way she touched him. A blind man would have known, and he was not blind and neither was Sansa.

She had to have known!

But she still left.

A clearer refusal could not have been had, if she’d screamed it to his face in full view of the whole world.

But this had not been for the world, Jon knew this. It was not so difficult to understand after all. She’d left without a word and she’d lied brazenly about it too, knowing she would be found out the moment Benjen reached him.

That too was meant for him. Because of him.

Had it been otherwise, she would have confided in him.

The understanding she’d wanted to slash into him, ripped clean through. The feeling it left in its wake so real he thought it a wonder Jon was not bleeding. She could not have made it hurt more if she’d plunged her hand right through his chest and squeezed his heart with her own fingers.

Could she possibly have found out before he could tell her?

How could she have found out?

Desperation was familiar, darkening his world as surely as the night covered the sky. And the hopelessness that overcame him was, in that moment, total and inescapable.

He’d had her.

He’d had her, warm and soft in his arms. She’d been closer to the truth of him than anything or anyone ever had before.

And then he’d let her slip through his careless fingers.

Jon had never felt the loss of something so keenly as he did then. The shame of it, of having
submitted to the excruciating ordeal of being known\(^2\), despite all trepidation... and having been found wanting like this. It was a fear he'd always carried so close to his heart, he'd never dared confess it to anyone. ... But she had known. No doubt she had known his darkest fear, just as he could name her own as easily. And she'd used it.

By the gods she did know how to hurt, didn’t she?

She hadn’t even needed to touch him to wound him. It did hurt, and inasmuch as it surprised him, it hurt even more. And the part of him that was not surprised at being rejected snarled in a rage that had yet to catch up to him fully.

“Jon?”

Jon opened his mouth but no words came out. He cleared his throat, tried again.

“She tells you about a letter and send her and you just, what? Believed her?” Jon asked, his voice thick with the storm still raging in his head, in his chest.

“I had no reason not to. She knew exactly where you were and who you were with. What you were doing. It matched with the missive you send me. I had no reason to doubt her words.”

“Did she now…” He murmured, thinking back, wondering.

“Though now I am far more alarmed. How could she have known all those things, if you did not tell her?”

Jon was so shocked, anyone could have knocked him down with a feather.

He’d suspected of course, but this was... Ghost looked up at him the moment Jon turned to look at his blood red eyes. It seemed to him then as if his wolf knew, and had just been waiting for Jon to wake up to it. It seemed so fucking obvious now, he wondered how he’d ever doubted it.

Jon could not help but chuckle, though it sounded broken even to his own ears.

He was astonished. And irrationally happy, even as his chest tightened so much he wanted to rub his hand over it to soothe the ache.

“And you didn’t ask to see the letter.”

“I did.” His uncle's smile was a mirthless thing. “She said your words were rather private and out for respect the trust you showed her, she would rather not share it.”

Jon did laugh this time. He laughed so long some of his officers started looking at him strangely.

*Lady Stark!* The northern witch of the Red Keep. The gentlest fucking predator he’d ever loved. If only those people she kept company with knew half the things she was capable of. Perhaps he could illuminate them somewhat, Jon thought then, though the impulse was gone almost as soon as it came.

“If she left abruptly with such a bad lie, something must have happened.” Benjen reasoned. He eyed Jon carefully, and Jon knew what he meant to ask.

“Unless you told her, she cannot have found out.” Jon said.

“Have you received any news from the capitol? Anything that might upset her?” Benjen asked.
“No, nothing. Though I have not exactly been easy to find these past few days.”

“She met with one of the King’s envoy to Harrenhal.” Benjen added then. Jon narrowed his eyes at his uncle.

“Start from the beginning.” Jon said as he saw his encampment come into view. “Tell me everything.”

Though her step was slow and she was seemingly lost in thought, Sansa knew where she was headed. Jeyne had told her that the princess and Harry would be taking their afternoon tea under the rose arches on the east gardens, but that was not where Sansa was going. She would skirt the periphery of their alcove, and head for the olive tree further out, close to the surrounding walls of the Red Keep.

The afternoon was clear, the sky a luminous almost fragile-looking blue, not a single cloud in sight. So Sansa had let her hair fall down her back in perfectly tamed waves, only two of the most forefront locks pulled back, forming a small circled around her head in the fashion that was more suited to children and which made Sansa look more like a girl than a you woman. She was wearing the silver moon pendant Harry had gifted her, dabbed her lips in berry juice to redden them a touch. She’d stopped crying two days ago, well before reaching the Red Keep, but as she studied her face in the mirror before she left her room, she decided to bring some of that grief forward. Carefully, she had smoothed away the stone expression that had settled on her features and allowed feeling to take shape there. A softer look about the eye, a trembling lip, shiny eyes. It would do to beckon him, but she would not cry.

She’d chosen one of her ivory dresses for that particular occasion. It’s cut mimicked the style of the West, with their almost casual fastenings that did not seem to betray the corsets beneath. She wanted to look soft for him, inviting of touch. Bared. The wide sleeves almost reached the ground and they fluttered with the smallest breeze, drawing the eye to what might be a glimpse of her wrist. And the silk - it was finely made and caught the light in such a way that she would shine like a beacon under the afternoon sun.

She wanted to rob Harry Hardying of breath completely and she would! No one would stand in her way in this. Not anyone.

So she walked slowly down the pathway, hands folded in front of her around a small copy of the seven pointed star, looking lost in thought. The sea breeze made her skirts flutter and catch the light and once she stepped into the sun completely, the silk might as well have been a mirror.

It did not take long. Perhaps ten minutes or so.

“Apologies, my lady.”

Sansa turned. Irri stood in front of her, smiling.

“Hello, Irri. What have you don’t that you need to apologize for?”

“Oh many things.” The other girl said, dark eyes dancing with mirth. “But luckily for me, not anyone knows.”

Sansa allowed herself a small chuckle.
“Lady, I bring compliments from the Princess Daenerys. And may I say how beautiful you look.”

“Thank you. You look very well too. I was told you were feeling poorly.”

Irri grinned. “I was, unfortunately. But the princess would not leave my side and under her diligent care, I improved to my full strength, though rather slowly.”

Irri’s eyes were steady, and even as she spoke, those wide lovely eyes, as dark as a doe’s, were telling Sansa something else.

“The princess is generous.”

“Indeed, my lady. And she never forgets a friend.”

Sansa took a deep breath and blinked fast. Her chest felt like it would not expand to let the air in.

“No, one would do her wrong to think she would.” Sansa said softly. Guilt sunk its teeth into her, a stinging bite like a bee and that would not stop. How ill it seemed now, that Sansa could not say the same for herself. That she had forgotten Dany entirely, in her rush to feel something good. Dany and herself and everyone else, and wasn’t that the heart of the problem?

The distance between who she wanted to be and who she feared she was had never seemed to her so insurmountable.

“She send me here, in fact, to invite you to join her and the Vale Lord. You seemed so solitary here, they could not stand to leave you alone.”

Sansa turned to look at Irri again. This time, her smile was softer, smaller but genuine.

“I shall accept gladly. Walk with me, Irri. Tell me of your days.”

The girl grinned and did exactly that. And as she told her of her own tasks that to anyone else listening might have seemed menial and boring, she also told another take, under the first. Irri, Doreah and Jhiqui had been with Daenerys since she had been a girl of ten. They knew how to do her mistress's bidding with subtlety to rival anyone in King’s Landing.

They walked slowly, Irri telling her of the Red Keep and Sansa telling her of the beauty of the Riverlands, until the reached that sam alcove under the rose arches where a table was set, and where Daenerys and harry Hardying were waiting for them.

Harry was just as she remembered him. Tall and golden like a dream, with wide shoulders and dressed impeccably in the colors of the house Arryn. Once upon a time, when her heart had still been full of songs, he would have been exactly the kind of man she would have been happy to lose her heart to. And in his carelessness he would have shredded it of course, but no matter about that now. Her eyes were open. And yes, Harry was beautiful, with his chiseled features and blue eyes, and she thanked her stars that he was so different from Jon she could not see a single trace of her cousin in him. It made everything that much easier.

Upon walking on them, Sansa curtsied deeply, letting her hair fall over her shoulder like a red curtain, catching the light.

“You grace. My Lord.” She said slowly, smiling faintly and hopefully, with eyes sad enough to crack Harry Hardying down in two, had he any sort of heart or honor. “Thank you for inviting me to join you.”
Dany walked forward, took her hands and kissed both her cheeks.

“Sansa, my darling. How good to have you back.”

“It is good to see you, your grace. You were missed.”

Dany smiled, but it did not reach her eyes. She looked so lovely it hurt to look at her. Her beautiful silver-gold hair was pulled back from her face in several small braids that met at the back of her head into a five strand braid, which fell over her shoulder like a thick rope. Sansa could almost laugh at how different a picture they made. Dany with her bold outfit, red from head to toe complete with britches and coat, a horse whip in her hand even though it was far too early to go riding. And Sansa with her demure white silk that invited touch, her full skirts and the book of the gods in her hand. They might have come up with their personas together, so similar an idea they presented, though at the opposite sides of the rope.

She saw Dany make the same realization and for a moment they might have laughed, but Dany’s eyes remained serious as death.

When Sansa turned and offered her hand to Harry, he stumbled a little before he took it and lightly kissed her gloved fingers. His eyes were wide and they kept roaming over her.

Good.

“My Lady. It’s… it’s wonderful to see you again.”

“Sit with us, Sansa.” Dany cut in. “Tell us of your travels.”

She pulled out a chair herself instead of waiting for a servant to do it. When she sat down, she crossed her legs instead of her ankles.

Sansa held back a smile. This might not be so hard after all.

“Thank you, your grace.” Sansa said gently, as she sat. She carefully put the book on the table and noticed when Harry glanced at it quickly, before his eyes flew to her face.

He smiled at her.

She did not return it, choosing to look down instead.

“How was your journey, my Lady?” Harry asked then, voice tentative, as if he was not sure what to say to engage her. “How did you find the riverlands?”

“Yes indeed tell us. I keep hearing the most dreadful news coming from there. Is it true that part of the populace is ready for an uprising?” She sounded truly interested too. Dany’s voice changed when she was telling the truth, Sansa had warned her of this once or twice, but she could not seem to help it. Still, she would not be receiving any answers from Sansa at that moment.

Sansa folded her hands in her lap. “I would not know, your grace. I thought it not my place to bother my uncle or grandfather with curiosity on such matters.”

“Of course.” Dany said, the shadow of a smile in her eyes.

“I do have full confidence that my grandfather and prince Jon will reach an agreement, of course. They are both capable men.”

She saw Harry’s lower his hand to his lap, so that it wouldn’t give him away, but it was too late.
She’d already noticed him clenching his fist.

“How is Jon?” Dany asked, as if suddenly remembering. “He has a nasty habit of ignoring everyone and everything until the problem at hand is solved. I should hope he did not make the journey terrifying for you.”

“Not at all your grace. The prince was as gallant as the most honorable of knights.”

This time Dany did smile, but she hid it from Harry by turning her head, looking at the horizon to her left. Sansa saw her bite her lip to keep her laughter in.

Yes, as gallant as a knight indeed. Both Dany and Sansa knew enough about most knights to know why Dany was laughing.

But Sansa did not laugh. She did not so much as smile.

Dany reached for the teapot, but Sansa stopped her. “Please your grace. Allow me.”

Sansa took hold of the teapot with her left hand and, as she delicately held her sleeve back with her other hand just far enough to expose her white wrist, she poured them all another cup, before setting it down.

“Was it difficult for you, lady, to travel so far?” Harry asked quietly. He was looking at her hands.

“Not at all, my lord. And seeing my uncle and grandfather was such a joy, I have not the words to tell you.”

Harry nodded. “Of course.”

It was Dany however, that truly understood what she meant. “How is your grandfather, my dear friend? Did you meet with him?”

“I did. He looked strong, though he required much rest during the day. Old age has ravaged his body, it’s true, but his mind is still as sharp as ever. He has the most delightful humour.”

Dany leaned forward. “I heard your uncle came back with you. The one they call the Blackfish.”

“He did your grace.” Sansa smiled faintly, heart swelling with affection for her uncle, and how he’d caught them in the middle of the road. How he’d made Petyr flinch, and keep away from her by merely being there. “He wanted to make sure I was properly escorted, so he did it himself.”

“He must love you very much.” Dany said softly.

Sansa smiled and looked into her lap instead of answering. “He is a good man.”

Dany pushed her braid over her shoulder, letting it fall down her back. “Of course, one can count on so few men these days, to be as devoted to those they profess to love. More and more I find myself disappointed in that regard.”

Sansa raised her teacup to her lips daintily, barely taking a sip.

“There is hope yet for all men, your grace, if ladies such as yourselves grace them with their company.” Harry said then, but he was looking at Sansa all the while. Sansa tilted her head to the side just a little. Smiled faintly and then let it fall, looking away.

If she did not blink for long enough, she knew her eyes would start watering.
They did, and then she blinked furiously, as if to keep tears at bay.

She cleared her throat carefully.

“I don’t know, ser.” Dany continued, setting her teacup down. “But perhaps my standards are too high. One would expect men to hold their own selves accountable for their actions, instead of trying to find their goodness in their women.”

“That is not what I-”

“But then again I cannot blame you.” Dany interrupted and she leaned back on her seat. “Most men will take the easiest wait to anything.”

Sansa bit her lip.

“What do you think, Sansa? Should we give these brutes that surround us a second chance at our company, when they fail us once?”

Sansa blinked. Dany was as bold as always.

“I’m afraid I do not follow, princess.”

“It was what the lord and I were vigorously discussing, before you blessed us both with your soothing presence. The value of second chances and whether or not they are wasted on men who claim to love us.”

Sansa met Dany’s eye for one moment, then looked down, returning to the Sansa Harry Hardying wanted to see.

“The holy book teaches us that there is always freedom to be found in forgiveness. That our soul grows stronger in doing so.”

Harry opened his mouth, but Dany spoke over him yet again. “Lord Hardying was of a mind with you, though I am not so convinced. I myself find it very hard to forgive those who hurt me. Certainly I would never give such a person the ability to do it twice. But then again,” Dany added with a soft smile. “You are my better in that regard.”

A lie of course. A brazen one, for the truth was far closer to the opposite of that. Dany had always been quick to anger and quick to forgive. It was Sansa whose temper moved at a glacial pace, and her forgiveness and trust moved slower still.

But Harry Hardying did not need to know.

“People are fallible beings, your grace.” Sansa said softly. “They make mistakes. Sometimes the better way to grow is for them to be allowed an excuse from those mistakes, and continue on on their journey towards goodness.”

Dany nodded. “Yes, but alas, the soul also grows weary of having to bear those mistakes. Better to do away with the person.”

“But do you truly think that is what you should do, your grace? To do away with people as if they did not matter?” Harry asked, his frown pronounced on his face.

Dany shrugged his question away.
“I am a woman, ser. It is my prerogative to protect myself as best as I can, and such a thing often is done in ways that are for more skillful than those a man would employ, seeing how any one of you could ruin our reputation with so much as a carefully placed word.”

Harry did not catch on, of course. How she was, by virtue of the argument they were having, her forceful presence, her very tone, proving everything she’d just said false. When it came to her, at least. He did not understand Daenerys and never would, but that was not the weapon Dany was using today. She was a princess of the Iron Throne! She was Daenerys Targaryen, the tamer of horses, the apple of the king’s eye and the Jewel of King’s Landing, a woman most beloved by the whole city and today her weapon of choice was her own self.

Dany grinned, a fierce and beautiful thing on her face that only made harry more uneasy.

“And I shall always succeed, because I have known since I came into this world that I was born to dominate your sex and avenge my own.”

Harry might have said something to that. Sansa could tell that he wanted to even. But he was smart enough to know that he could not. Just as Dany had been.

Daenerys rose abruptly, so both Sansa and Harry rose with her.

“I am growing bored sitting here. I shall go riding.”

“I shall accompany you, of course.” Sansa said but Dany stopped her with a raised hand.

“No need, you’re not dressed for it, and I can see that you’re not in the mood for it either. Perhaps my lord Hardying will oblige and keep you company?”

“Of course.” Harry did not hesitate. Sansa could tell that he was trying to catch her eye, but she kept her gaze firmly averted.

He would have to work hard for this. He did not need help, in this. He needed hinderance. So that when he climbed over enough of them and she finally made way, he would feel as accomplished about himself as he liked to. As needed as he needed to.

“Forgive me your grace but I would be remiss if I let you go alone. At least let me call an aid for you.”

“I find myself not in the mood to be around anyone today. I am being most unpleasant even to you, who I so dearly love.”

“Not at all-”

Dany slapped her horse-stick against her palm once and then again. “And besides, Lord Harrington was meant to be my companion today, but I dismissed him. His company has proved a disappointment.”

This was news. “How so?”

Dany shrugged. “Like most men who think highly of their intellect, he is intensely stupid. Good day to you both. Lord Hardying, I am trusting a dear friend in your care. See that she is entertained out of this gloomy mood i can tell hands about her.”

Harry bowed. “I shall do my very best, your grace.”
Dany took her leave with a wave, walking down the garden path swiftly, both Dorea and Irri at her side. Sansa watched her go, and felt Harry watching the side of her own face in turn.

She could feel the rays of the sun eating down on her profile. She knew what she must look like to him then.

“Sansa-”

“My lord, I find myself in need of movement. I shall not impose on you.”

She reached for her book, and he reached for her hand, catching her fingers in a light enough hold.

She did not look up.

“Ser?”

“Sansa… you believe me- surely you must believe me when I say I had no idea this would happen.”

She raised her eyebrows slightly, keeping her composure. “I must believe you? Well then if I must, then I surely i do, and you need not sound so worried.”

“My love-”

She took her hand out of his, folded her hands in front of her, under the wide sleeves that covered her fingers entirely and made her look like a doll.

“Ser!” She said firmly, and then paused just for a moment to take a breath. “I beseech you to kindly refrain from such intimacies. We are once more… strangers. It does not do.”

She let her voice quiver a little. Blinked fast and looked away from him before giving him a small, hurried courtesy ands taking her leave.

He followed her.

“I only speak the truth of my heart and my heart belongs to you!”

He sounded so certain, Sansa had to wonder what had happened that had landed them in their current situation. It was such a closely guarded secret - even Jayne could not tell her anything on it. She would find out, in time. That she did not doubt. She needed to know who had lied.

But enough of that.

“And yet I am not the one you shall marry, therefore keep your heart, ser. Your wife may soon have a need of it.”

“She will never be my wife!” Harry said vehemently as he took hold of her arm and turned her to face him. Sansa widened her eyes, lips parted in shock.

“Do not say such things. Not ever.” She whispered.

It sounded too calm, perhaps she should have spoken more hastily, but no matter now.

“I have no love for anyone but you, and I will fight for us. This will not go through.”

It better not. Out of the two of them, he was the only one who could refuse. Dany had already done her part. Anything more might alienate her brother the king forever. Sansa knew she would not risk
Nor should she. Sansa certainly did not plan on just watching this go by and do nothing about it.

She thought of how reckless she’d been. How stupid she’d felt, a feeling that lingered with her like a bad scent. Of that ball of hurt that was still shoved somewhere under some truck, in a dark room or other of her heart. She peeked inside it once more and there it was - the tear she needed slipped free.

She brushed it away, turned her face from him. “Unhand me, Harry.”

He did not, but then again she did not struggle that hard. And if she felt anxious about his continued hold on her arm, she pushed the feeling away because she had wanted him close so that her scent may get to him. So that he may remember that no other woman would ever make him feel the way she made him feel. Remember the reasons why he had lost his head so thoroughly for her.

“Sansa, please don’t cry.”

“I cannot help it.” She said thickly, and this too was the most sincere she had been today. “I feel betrayed and alone.”

That was true, at least. Truth was always more effective.

“I did not betray you, and I never will. I love you.”

Sansa pulled herself away from his hold. Straightened her shoulders and looked at him square in the face.

“Love, my Lord, is sweet. But it cannot change the future. And your future will never be part of mine. The decision has been made for us, it seems.” She did not need to try to make her smile bitter.

She had liked Harry well enough before. He seemed a kind man, and had always been extremely thoughtful of her and -perhaps most importantly - of everyone else she had ever cared about. But in this, he had proven weak.

Her words however hit him where they were supposed to.

“No one decides for me. My future is my own and I will have no one by my side but you.”

“Then I shall dream of that day, my lord. And rejoice if it comes.”

“It will. I have an audience with the King tomorrow. I will refuse his proposal. I swear to you I will.”

Sansa took a deep breath. Closed her eyes against the breeze.

“I missed you, Harry.”

“And I missed you.” He told her, and he sounded so earnest she almost believed him.

But that was not his fault. She had trouble believing anyone most of the time, and like an illness, her latest adventure had only exacerbated her condition.

“It’s so strange, is it not? I wanted to slong to see you again, and now that you’re here, I cannot even take your hand.”

“Of course you can!”
He seemed to want to reach for her but she stopped him with a look.

“Please do not make this harder than it must be.” She pleaded. “If the king hears you tomorrow, come find me. But until then, I am just a Lady of the court, and we are, my dear Harry, quite unchaperoned.”

Harry seemed annoyed, but he linked his hands behind his back. “And in the Red Keep even the shrubbery has ears.”

Sansa smiled at him, a real genuine smile this time.

“I shall send for my ladies. And perhaps you might tell me of the tourneys you wrote to me about?”

“Anything to see you smile, my lady.”

Sansa dearly hoped so.

iii

Jon was not surprised when the Lord of the Twins did show at Seaguard, though he did in fact do so with five days tardiness. The old man had perhaps thought that he would relent, or not bring to completion what Jon had promised, but Jon had seen to it that there were no doubts in that regard.

He had set up his own camp outside the small city walls, so that he would not disturb the populace and so that he would not make the ruling lord of the small city part of this. Something which Lord Mallister had very much appreciated.

Jon did not rise when Walder Frey entered the tent. He was asked to take Ghost out, in deference to his guests’ unease with his beast, but Jon refused that as well. Curtly. None dared ask him again.

The Frey men took their seats in silence, while Jon’s were already seated, waiting. Walder Frey was as old as everyone said he was, looking thin, and with skin so loose even his bald scalp seemed wrinkly. But his black eyes were very much alive, and they glinted in the tent’s muted light.

“Greetings, Black Prince. You have made an old man come a very long way.” Walder Frey said as he sat himself down, making a great show if his frailty.

Jon just looked at him.

“Circumstances forced you to come, my Lord. I am merely an executioner.”

Walder Frey snorted, held out his cup for refreshment, which he received. “Executioner indeed. I was told you left the men you killed unburied in the woods. And your latest victims still hang from the city walls.”

“I did leave the looters for the crows, yes. They were pig shit, and to that they will return.” Jon said, completely unaffected.

They were lucky he had not sent them back to the Twins in fucking baskets. Jon had been angry enough to do it, and would have, had his uncle not discouraged it.

He was angry still though for reasons that had nothing to do with Lord Frey or his ilk. Angry and colder than he’d ever felt.

“And the men you saw on the walls were your kill, not mine.” Jon smiled. “I’d hate to take credit for
another man’s good work.”

“How so, your grace?” The man at Frey’s right hand asked. His son, probably. His heir.

“Your tarrying killed them. One Frey man for every day you made me wait.”

“And my messenger too, apparently.” The square jawed Frey at Lord Walder’s side said, as he eyed Jon warily. He was trying not to show his fear but all the efforts in the world would not matter. Jon could smell it.

Jon’s mocking smile melted off his face. “Indeed, when the circumstance is right, I do believe in killing the messenger.”

“It does send a message.” His uncle said as he filled his own cup with watered down wine. Benjen never drank - he only gave the appearance of doing so.

“One that I am glad to see you received, seeing as you are here.” Jon said as he leaned forward on the table. “Shall we begin.”

Jon picked up the small plate of bread and salt in front of him and offered it to Satin, who took it to Lord Frey.

“My Lord, I offer you refreshment.” He said. At his words, the boys lined along the edge of the tent stepped forward with pitchers of wine and filled the guests cups.

Walder Frey ate the bread and salt, smacking his lips as he did so.

“We accept your refreshment and claim guest rights.”

Jon allowed himself a small smile. “Yes, that was the intended idea, my lord.”

“I would like to some things to be made explicit.” Lord Frey parried.

“Very well.”

And it was well indeed. He wanted them to be afraid.

“I would like to start,” The man to the right of Lord Frey began. “By asking why in such a savage manner have I been summoned here, like some common servant.”

“You are a servant.” Jon immediately said and watched the unease ripple through all the men at the table. “All the Lords of Westeros, great and small, serve at the pleasure of the king. Is that not so?”

Lord Walder’s face soured. “So it is.”

“Then that solves your first quarry. Allow me to adress mine.” He opened the leather binder in front of him, and pulled from it documents which he handed to Satin. In turn, his squire took them to Lord Frey, sitting at the other end of the table. “I have written and signed confessions of more than fifty men, wherein they testify that, with your knowledge and consent, they raided villages south and north to your holdings. That these raids looted the people’s granaries and robbed them of their winter stores, their goods and badly damaged their property.”

Jon reached for more letters, which he handed out to his uncle, who in turn passed them down the line.

“There are more testimonies, given in front of a king’s magistrate, that anyone who dared raise their
voices against these savageries was whipped for their trouble. That your men, under your allowance, raped and pillaged their way through the north of the riverlands, and even daring to get close to Greywater Watch, where, I have read, you had apparently given order to have any men of the Neck killed on sight. How do you answer these charges, my Lord?”

Walder Frey threw the letters down. They scattered on the table.

“Lies and calumny. Is this really why I’ve had to leave my sickbed? To have my name blackened by a boy so green he pisses grass?”

Benjen straightened, his officers too, but it was Ghost who rose to his feet. On his full height, Ghost loomed over Jon’s seated form and the whole table. Those closest to him were Jon’s own officers and they did not frighten, though one or two flinched when Ghost started growling. He was so silent always but Jon wanted the intent to be clear to even the most thickheaded of those men seated across from him.

One of the Freys fell off his seat. Lord Frey paled considerably.

“You swore us guest rights.” He proteste roughly.

“I did. But my direwolf made no promises. And you just insulted his brother." Jon raised his hand, patted Ghost’s flank. “At ease boy. Sit.”

Ghost hesitated before obeying. He wanted to get out, Jon knew it. He did not like the way the Freys smelled, and though some of them might be tolerable, the Lord of them smelled dead. There was a rot to him that went bone deep.

“Lord Frey, perhaps I did not communicate clearly.” Jon said again, this time feeling much calmer than he had in the beginning. It was the calm he felt before a battle. The locking of the muscles, the evacuation of the distractions from the mind. Eyes trained on the kill.

“Lord Frey, perhaps I did not communicate clearly.” Jon said again, this time feeling much calmer than he had in the beginning. It was the calm he felt before a battle. The locking of the muscles, the evacuation of the distractions from the mind. Eyes trained on the kill. “There are multiple accounts of you having given orders that led to the looting and the raids. I have testimonies according to which you took a share of the goods. Actions which, in turn, led to the smallfolk banding around a religious fanatic that is now organising them and urging them to rise up. This all is beyond dispute.”

“So the trial has been had then? Are you to judge me?”

“No, as I said, I am the king’s executioner.” Jon told him calmly. “King Rheagar will judge you. So you either make the trek to Kings Landing and explain yourself to him. Or make an effort to explain yourself to me, saving yourself the trouble of an even longer journey.”

Walder Frey snorted. “The trouble, aye. I wonder if you do not want me to die on the way.”

“Whether you live or die is of no interest to me, Lord.”

“Those men that gave you those accounts were lying to save their skins, your grace.” One of the men said. He looked younger than the rest, small and skinny looking, with a face sharp as a fox. “It was not looting parties they headed, but tax collection.”

Jon leaned back in his seat. “Tax collection? Since when is attacking merchant caravans part of such a duty?”

“Since when they stopped paying the fief to their lord.” Walder Frey said, and then hacked a cough into his handkerchief.

The discussion lasted quite a bit. After a certain point, Jon could see that even the magistrate’s ink
was running dry, the stack of paper around him growing high.

It was an hour into it that Jon had finally had enough.

“...And on top of the bog-devils disloyalty, the raids from the ironmen had thrown us into despair.” Lord Walder’s heir continued. “It’s a great pain of the our house, one which out liege lord the Tullys ignore, as so much shit. We ask that a solution is found, as this is the most important issue right now.”

Jon let the words hang in the air between them for some time.

“Do i look like a whore to you, Frey?”

The other man blinked at him, as did his relatives.

“Beg your pardon?”

“Do i look like a whore to you?” Jon repeated, slower this time. The truth of it was there in his voice, the tone of it, the hard steel of his eye: this was a question that expected an answer, or the answer would be violence.

“No, your grace.”

“Then why do you keep trying to fuck my like a whore, Frey?” No one the men present knew what to say to that, so wisely, they said nothing. “What are you talking about? The most important issue right now? Great pain? I’m embarrassed just listening to you.”

“No, your grace.”

“Then why do you keep trying to fuck my like a whore, Frey?” No one the men present knew what to say to that, so wisely, they said nothing. “What are you talking about? The most important issue right now? Great pain? I’m embarrassed just listening to you.”

“No, I have heard enough.” Jon leaned forward, linked his fingers over the table. “You will gather your minor lords and your knights, all the septons in the villages surrounding your fief, and proclaim your stance on the beatings of the smallfolk. You will stop trying to arrest the Sparrow - among all of you, he is the only one that is doing what he is supposed to do.”

“He defies his lord at every turn!” Walder Frey snapped. “Yet again our need is denied by the crown, though you pose no such restrictions on telling us how to rule our own homes and people.”

“The way you rule your people is criminal, and as Protector of the realm - of all those who live in this realm, Lord Frey - it is well within the King’s rights to prosecute you for it.” Jon took a breath, reigning his temper. “Why do you think your people were so ready to brave the iron fist of an uprising with nothing but pitchforks in their hands, rather than submit to your rule again? You stripped them of their honor and stole their possessions, then required obedience as further humiliation? Do you think people will defend the whip and their sadistic masters? Jon stared at each and every one of them in the face. “Do you think I would?”

“I never would have taken you for a hero f the downtrodden, your grace.” Walder Frey said with a sneer. “That is not you reputation.”

“Course not. My reputation is another, it’s true. In the words of the poet Catullus: ‘I will fuck you in the ass and you will suck my dick’.”

“Your grace?”

Jon’s smile melted off his face as if it had never been. “Do not think for a moment I do not see how your sloppy attempts to apprehend the Sparrow were just thinly veiled provocations of the man and
his followers to violence, so that you may crush them and with them, they truth of your dealings.”

“And does his grace have any proof of that? Or would you rather we all sit here and trade gosip like some fishwives.”

“I have no interest in proving anything to you. The matter has already been handled. As for you, my Lord - I have a letter from my father condoning my decision to arrest the your second son, as ringleader of the the raiders. He will be imprisoned for life, without the right to chose taking the black.”

Some of them rose from their seats.

“This is outrageous!”

“This is common sense!” Jon snarled, silencing the room. “Whatever your reasons for it, the raids were unlawful, the methods brutal and, as it turns out, the result unsatisfactory.”

“We have every right to collect tax on our own property, from our own smallfolk.”

“You did, and then you fucked it up by overstepping your right. In doing so, you lost that right. The list of men whose names I gave you will surrender themselves to my garrison and they will be sentenced as the king’s magistrate sees fit. Upon sentencing, they will be allowed to take the black. And if they so much as think of escaping.” Jon warned, voice low. “Please remind them that I hunt with a direwolf, and I have never let a prey run away from me and live.”

From the ground where he was coiled came Ghost’s rumbling growl.

“Finally, everything that was confiscated will be distributed back to the people it was taken from, as restitution of unlawfully seized goods. The food especially, so that the smallfolk can live through the winter. Wherever there was murder, the person will be paid according to the law for their loss. This is the decision of the crown, and the king’s magistrate has declared it in accordance to the law.”

The commotion that followed was rather muted because they feared him, but still - there was protest.

“If you accept these terms, it all ends here. If not, then I will still seize your provisions, and empty house Frey’s stores, and you can appeal to the King while I take administration of the Twins in the king’s name.”

“This is an act of war.”

Jon leaned back against his seat. “Maybe so. What is your answer, my Lord.”

Lord Frey did not answer him for a long time.

“If blood is your desire, blood may still flow. But I wonder how long you would last in the Riverlands, if it be thought that the King can simply strip away one’s birthright, because a Lord was too firm with his people.”

Jon snorted. “Firm. I suppose that’s how you’d call your moronic way of ruling. Without the balls to kill the best of your people and submit the rest, and without the heart to be kind to all of them either. Even your violence stinks of mediocrity.”

Somewhere down the line, a few of his men chuckled, but it was low. They knew Jon’s mood was black as tar, despite teh lightness of his voice.
“They are my people, your grace.” Walder Frey said slowly. Far more intently than he had said anything so far. “And I know them better than you ever will, as I know the riverlords.”

“True, you do. But do remember, Lord Frey, that while you robbed their granaries and terrorised their daughters, I shared my stores with the very same people, protected them, sought justice for them. Even now, supply lines are making their way north from Summerhall. Who do you think your people will love best? The one who shared his own food with them, or the one who took it away?” Jon lowered his voice, and though he was still calm, he wanted to hear Walder Frey’s heart skip a beat or two at his next words. “Who do you think they will drive out? Hunt to kill, as you make your way to King’s Landing.” Jon shrugged. “Or back home, for that matter. As you said, it is a long way back.”

Lord Walder’s breath was loud in the silent room. “You threaten me?”

“Not at all.” Jon sighed. “Frankly, I tire of you. Hand me the men accused of violence, sign the declaration I have just given you, follow its letter, and we shall both go about our business. What say you. And make it brief, I am losing patience.”

iv

They did sign. As the moment they did, Jon’s mind moved away from that place and that problem. He was already in King’s Landing, already planning ahead.

But how could he plan when he did not know the terrain, the conditions, the obstacles. He was blind.

Benjen entered his tent. Put the papers on the small table by Jon’s bed.

“I will will travel with our troops with the magistrate. Oversee the restitution of the goods and the arrests.”

“Was the sparrow found?”

“Yes. He has agreed to take up preaching into Sept again, on the condition that he does not incite violence any longer.” Though even as he said it, Benjen looked skeptical. “Do you think he will keep to it?”

“If he doesn’t, the Riverlords have leave to imprison him for whatever reason suits them best. I have already send Hoster Tully the letters of permission.”

“You did not receive missives today.” Benjen said then. Jon turned to him, puzzled.

“I did not.”

“Then did you know your father would sanction your arrest of Frey’s second son?”

“I do not. But my father loves me.”

Benjen snorted. “Gods keep you Jon.”

That did manage to get a smile out of him, but it was fleeting. “Satin!”

The boy poked his head in. It was strange how he never seemed to be farther away than the sound of Jon’s voice. “Get my horse ready, and a small guard of men. I make for Riverrun in an hour.”

“Yes your grace.”
“So, you have succeeded.” Hoster Tully said just after he signed the treaty, and passed the pen to his son, who dipped it in ink and signed his own name as well.

“It seems that I have.”

Hoster Tully snorted. “Yes, and you seem in rather a hurry to leave, as well. Lost something, Black Prince?”

Jon fixed his eyes on the old bastard, did not blink. “Why, do you happen to know if anything of mine has gone missing?”

“No. Nothing of yours anyway.”

Jon scowled.

“Have you heard of the trouble in the North?”

“I have.” Jon admitted. His legs were itching with the need to move on. This was over now, and he had no interest in looking inside the head of Hoster Tully. Not at the moment.

“Shame. It’s looking more and more like a conflict is going to grow out of it.”

“Nothing will come of it.” Jon said impatiently. “The Boltons are not stupid enough to start a war for the north, when all outside support is for the Starks.”

“You would think so, would you not. Alas, men are prone to stupidity.”

Jon sighed. He made his way to the chair just to the left of Hoster Tully, pulled it out noisily and sat himself down.

“I am listening then, old man. Speak.”

The old man in question laughed.

“I see dealing with the Freys has damaged your calm.”

“To say the least.” Jon growled.

“Yes, that I understand. Is it true you hanged a man a day for every day he was late, and then hung his messenger when he tried to plead illness?”

“I did. I was made to understand lord Frey has heirs to spare.”

The Lord of Riverrun looked at him with those unblinking, watery eyes.

“Yes father.”

“Leave us, my son.”

Edmure Tully, who looked so much like Robb it was sometimes hard to look at him, hesitated, but then did as he was bid. When the door closed behind him, Hoster Tully stretched as far as he could in his seat, and then sighed.
“I have found it harder and harder to breathe in my old age.” He started. “I feel as there is a noose around my throat.”

Jon frowned. Just what the fuck was the old bastard talking about now?

“My Lord?”

“Yes, of course, there is no rope choking me, but I love my land keenly, you see. I love it dearly and I can see the rope tightening around its future as surely as if it was around my own neck.”

“No one plans to choke the Riverlands, my Lord. The King wants nothing but to see them prosper.”

“That so? Then how do you explain my worries, young prince?”

“I am sure I cannot but if you tell me, my lord.”

“Then I will tell you. The king has a great game in mind, for this Westerosi kingdom of ours.”

“Westerosi?” Jon could not help himself. “Is there such an entity?”

Hoster Tully’s deep-set blue eyes glinted. “Oh yes. And the Riverlands fall right in the middle of it. Did you ever wonder about the matches he has made for his children?”

“I have never concerned myself much with matchmaking.” Jon said through his teeth.

“That’s because you’re still a boy. Allow an old man to explain. The King married his daughter to the Tyrell heir years ago. His son, I have heard, is to marry the oldest Lannister girl soon.” The old man laughed throatily. “Appeasing the lion while keeping the rose close. Carrot and a stick indeed. A stick with thorns.”

“Myrcella is a Baratheon, my Lord.” Jon corrected, almost without thought. Hoster waved his words away as if they were a bothersome fly.

“She is Tywin Lannister’s niece therefore, his property. Anyone who knows the old shit could tell you as much.”

Jon shrugged. He had not come so far to argue with the old man over Tywin Lannister’s progenies. And it wasn’t as if the old man was wrong.

“He might even have tried to marry Sansa to that mad brother of his, had the fool not gone and gotten himself killed before anything could happen.”

Jon could not help the stiffening of his shoulders, and he watched Hoster Tully notice it and give him a toothless smile.

“But of course, Rheagar Targaryen had more sense than to propose that to Ned Stark. He rather hoped, I think, that things would take their natural course. But natural courses become strange when Stark women are involved, do they not?”

Jon said nothing. Only stared at the man intently, trying to bite back the scream he knew would surely come out if he so much as opened his mouth.

“Oh. Stone to the end, are you? I had heard you were irrational and violent; you cannot imagine my disappointment at being denied the entertainment.”

“I am both. When it suits me.”
Hoster Tully snorted. “Fat surprise there. Well, as it stands, only the Eyrie and Winterfell remain, and all know the Starks have rarely married further south than the Neck, and never into the Iron Throne. But perhaps the king will try to send his sister to North regardless.” He leaned in a bit, looked at Jon as if the old fart could see his whole eyes in his grey eyes and smiled as if it amused him. “Or perhaps he will send her to the Eyrie and send you north instead. What say to that?”

Jon tried not to even breathe differently. “It sounds like a plan.”

“No interest to you then? Very well. However it happens, when all the pieces fall into place there will be a Westeros, oh yes. Link by link the chain is forged and the noose of it will be tight around the Riverlands’ throat. Do you understand my meaning now, Prince?”

Jon leaned forward, placed his elbows on the table and linked his fingers together.

“This was never about the new tax plan at all, is it? You have been resisting because wanted a representative of the crown here, for this.”

The old man laughed, and then coughed into his handkerchief.

“It is true that I didn’t want Edmure’s first act as Lord of Riverrun to be dirtying his hands with the matter of the Sparrow and the Freys. I never expected one such as you to come knock on my door, however. But it was you who came. And after having seen you work, I am starting to believe it was a strange coincidence that you should have come.”

“You should rejoice at your good luck. Out of all the men the king could have sent, I am known for giving people what they want.” One way or another. “So what do you want, Lord Hoster?”

Hoster Tully gave him a gapped-toothed smile.

“Straight to the point. I like that about you, prince.”

Jon ignored that. “Do you dispute a strong and united Westeros?”

“I do not. But what should happen if your father’s careful scheme falls apart?”

“Do you know of any reason it should?”

Hoster Frey made an impatient gesture. “All schemes might, young prince. History would be able to tell you that many times over. Usually, war follows.”

Jon could hardly believe his ears. The man was one breath away from talking treason to him. “Do we have a reason to dread another war, so soon after the last one?”

“There is always reason to dread war. Peace itself is but an interlude between battles.”

Jon pressed the fingertips of his right hand against his temple, where a headache was blooming. “Yes I have read Maester Chivance’s tomes on the art of war. I did not come here for a lecture.”

“No? Very well. Should there be a war and the realm stated to shit corpses, it will be my Riverlands that will have to find places to pile up the bodies.”

Jon chuckled in disbelief. “How can I assure you against something that has not even manifested its shadow yet? I am no prophet. I cannot see into the future, my lord.”

“Oh, but the shadow looms large, young prince.” The old man croaked, leaning forward so much that Jon could smell his acrid breath. “Besides, the assurance I seek does not come from your word
but in law."

“In law?”

Though he was confused, the shadow of an idea was building in Jon’s mind.

Hoster Tully no longer looked like he was fucking about. He sat straight on his chair, hands folded on top of his cane and he glared with those blue eyes, as if trying to break a hole through Jon’s skull.

“The law is already written, and has been waiting to be signed by his majesty since the day the bill was crafted on the blood-soaked waters of the Trident. He promised this twenty years ago, and failed to deliver.” Tully’s voice was trembling with his anger. “My grave won’t take me and linger in this shitstained wasteland of a world, because Rheagar Targaryen won’t keep his word.”

“The Charter.” Jon finally realized. Of course this would be it. Of course.

“Yes indeed. A Charter of rights of the gentry, which the king should give his solemn oath to uphold. And a Great Council, to be convened and unstated *in perpetuity.*”

Jon could have laughed.

“You should have wished for Daenerys.” Jon said slowly. The old man had gone out of his way to speak things to him that might very well be called treason if they fell on the wrong ears. He could do this much for him. “She has been pushing the idea of a great council for years now.”

Hoster Tully frowned, gripped his cane tighter. “I had heard that. Never believed it, but i had heard it.”

“So now you want me to petition my father into limiting his own rule and that of his son, and putting power of taxation and war into the hands of the lords of Westeros.”

“Who would stop bickering among themselves and finally unite, under one solid law, which they could depend upon for justice more than on any king, and to which they would swear to obey, because it protects them. It is a better way of uniting the kingdom, *making it one kingdom,* than marriage alliances that can all too often prove vacillating. If your father wants this with such a burning desire, than he should consider sacrificing something for it.” the Lord of Riverrun straightened in his seat. Took a deep breath and then continued, calmer than before. “But I know I don’t need to convince you in this, since you are already working towards this goal”

“I most certainly am not.” And he wasn’t… strictly speaking.

“But you are.” There was laughter in the old man’s eyes, and for the first time, Jon felt dread. There was more in those eyes too. “It might feel different to you, doing this for the Starks, but it is the same goal.”

“The Starks have no interest in the Iron Throne.” They only had scorn for it.

“Too true. No *primary* interest at least. Ned Stark lines his priorities differently from most men, to his credit, one should say. But you’re a fool to think they will ever forget or forgive what they suffered at the hands of a tyrant. The North remembers, boy. If you don’t know that by now, then the Starks chose the wrong champion.”

“I would dare you to say that to Lady Catlyn’s and my grandmother’s face.” Jon said quietly, watching Hoster Tully very carefully for a reaction.
The old Lord just laughed. Sincerely this time. “Aye. The old she wolf would scratch my eyes out, she would. And lick my blood off her fingers. She has never absolved me from responsibility over what happened to her son… nor will she ever.” He added quietly. “Is it true she never visits her husband’s grave?”

“So they say.”

“They really do give new meaning to the word stubborn. Unyielding beyond death.” Hoster grumbled. “And my daughter is as much a wolf as she’s a fish these days.”

Jon did not contradict him. If it hasn’t been for Catelyn Stark, he did not think he’d be here, doing what he was doing. The north remembered, it was true, but one of the reasons it did was because Lady Cat would not forget, and would not let anyone else do so either. As much as his grandmother did not.

There was no doubt in Jon’s mind now.

“You know.” he whispered, breathless almost. This was not some flicker of a thought in the back of his mind or he would never have spoken it. This was a certainty.

He saw it reflected in Tully’s blue eyes as well.

He did know.

“Aye, I know.”

“How?”

Word like this could not have passed out of anyone's mouth but the Starks, and none of them had made their way south in the last few months. It had been decided. It would have been far too dangerous.

“A little bird told me.”

“A bird is it?” Jon said then, gathering his bearings slowly.

“A little crow, more like.” Hoster Tully puffed a laugh. “Strangest thing I have seen. Well, perhaps not the strangest, but among them. A crow that needed no master. A crow with the eyes of a boy.”

Hoster Tully’s sight turned inward, remembering. “Aye, strange indeed. But fortuitous.”

“Why do you know?”

The threat of it was so enormous that Jon could not imagine why he would have been told, unless it was life or death. His success depended so thoroughly on secrecy, as well as his own reputation, that Jon could not imagine any of the Starks jeopardising it for any reason.

“My daughter was worried of what I might do, once a representative to the crown arrived here, to finalize the treaty. She expressly forbid me to make any talk of charters or councils, until her daughter was safely away from King’s Landing. In fact, she threatened me.”

Jon was glad he was seated. “She would.”

“Yes, it seems so. Of course it was quite a surprise to hear such language from one’s own daughter. But then again… nothing compares to the fierceness of a mother.”

Jon involuntarily thought back to his own mother, and how hard she had fought for so long.
“No, nothing would.” He looked back at Hoster Tully then. “But you broke your promise.”

“I did. To you. I am not sure that it counts as breaking a secret, when one speaks to someone who is inside the secret.”

“Lady Cat might be one to appreciate the fine distinction of it, but my grandmother will not, I promise you that.” Jon said slowly. “And pushing for kingdom wide reform is not my main objective, therefore not my problem.”

“And you cannot divide your focus, can you?”

“No in this. I refuse to.” He was not about to half-ass one of the most important things in his life.

“That’s noble of you.”

Noble was not the word, and they both knew it. “You said it, my lord. Unyielding beyond death.”

Hoster Tully looked at him unflinchingly for a long moment, but just when Jon expected more resistance, the old man sighed and leaned back on his seat.

“Very well. But you have given me your time and your ear, so now I feel obliged to give you something.”

Jon wondered what it could be, since the one thing he wanted, no one could give him but one person, and that person was all the way to King’s Landing. Run away from him without word or explanation, left him guessing what he did wrong.

“Some months ago, four to be precise, a certain man came to see me. A man who was very interested in northern affairs, and the tensions that had just started to rise between the Starks and the Boltons.”

Jon felt a cold feeling run down his spine. “And what did this man want.”

“Oh, nothing.”

Jon gritted his teeth. “Lord. Speak plainly.”

“I just did. He asked for nothing. Or rather, for Riverrun to do nothing.”

Jon thought on that, let it turn in his mind. The riverlands were the crossroads of the kingdom…

“For Riverrun to do nothing… in the event of a great something.” Jon said slowly, then looked at Hoster Tully in the face. “And who was this idiot who thought you would let your daughter and her sons suffer without sending help their way?”

“Without sending help, or facilitating help to pass through. The Riverlands are a tricky place when all is well among the lords. And all is well so rarely.”

“Who was he?” Jon insisted, fingers tightening around the arms of his chair so hard that he might snap them.

“A man who knows my deepest desire of course. Who knew what to promise.” Hoster Tully sighed and leaned his head against the back of his chair, closed his eyes, looking tired for the first time that day. “Why Connington still thinks I have any sort of faith in him is beyond me. He failed me the first time, I know he will fail me again.”

Jon’s blood ran cold, and then boiled over a minute later.
He would find a way to kill that bastard. Sooner or later, he would die.

“Connington.”

“So you see, help might not be soon to come to the Starks. And I can only think of a reason such as this, for my nieces so sudden flight from Harrenhal.”

“To petition the king on her family’s behalf.” Jon said. And it might work too. In private, the king could tarry all he wanted, whether he was of one mind with Connington or not. But if Sansa Stark kneeled before the Iron Throne in front of all the court, and asked for aid in her family’s name, to refuse her would be bastardy.

Had she not been their captive precisely for this reason, on these terms? And now that the time came to honor their part of the agreement, they hesitate? Jon was sure she would shame them beautifully too. She would know how. How to ask in such a way that to refuse her would be to name themselves without honor.

A small part of him wanted to see it. The part that did not burn with indignation for his mother’s family. The part of him that was not confused and enraged still that Sansa had left him. It made sense! It made sense and yet it missed something. Sansa would have told him, if this were it. She would have said something.

And how did the old bastard know she’d lied to him?

“But how might it look, I wonder.” Hoster Tully continued. “Her family is about to step into war with a millennia-old foe and the king… bides his time. All the while, dynastic marriages are being forged and a Targaryen is wooing her.”

Hoster angled his head to the side, and looked at Jon from beneath hooded eyes. “I would be such a stroke of luck, would it not - if you married the heir of Winterfell and her brother were to die in this war.”

Jon rose to his feet so fast, the chair behind him fell backwards with a loud crash. His heart was hammering against his ribs, his hands balled into fists.

“She would never believe that.”

She might though, a voice whispered. She might, as others might. Immediately the small part of him that was always ready to take whatever chance offered, whether good or bad, seized this one too. This was also something he could use to facilitate his own plan, because this was something many would believe of him.

They would believe him that cruel and cold.

But Sansa could never. She would never-

She knew better!

“No? Does she know you so well that she would overlook all you’re known for?”

“She does!”

“Well,” Hoster said slowly, a small smile stretching on his lips. “If you say so, then it must be so. Facts of course, seem to contradict you, but who am I to argue with your conviction when it has proved so useful to you thus far.”
“I will take my leave.” Jon gritted out. He bowed stiffly before turning his back and striding away.

“Have a care not to give into anger, prince.” Hoster called behind him.

Jon ignored him.

Anger.

Anger was a fucking feeble word. He had not felt rage like this in so long it was almost driving him out of his own body. He could not keep still.

The moment he chanced on Satin in the corridor outside lord Hoster’s solar, he took the boy by the shoulder. He must have grabbed him harder than he meant to because Satin was startled.

“Go tell the men they have two hours to rest and then we ride out. We make for King’s Landing immediately and we do not stop unless its to rest the horses.”

“Yes your grace.”

“Come find me in my rooms after. I have letters I will need you to carry.”

“Yes your grace.”

Jon let him go and then thought back on it.

“Satin.”

The boy rushed back to him, and this time, the hand Jon put on his shoulder was gentle. “Forgive me for startling you.”

The boy blinked his beautiful brown eyes at him. “It’s nothing your grace.”

“It is something. Do you accept my apology?”

“I do, your grace.”

He let his squire go and sequestered himself to his rooms, to write his orders for Benjen. Twenty boys and girls, he wrote. Small ones, young enough to work in the kitchens and not be noticed. Young enough that they could play all around the Twins and no one would look at them twice.

He wanted every nook and cranny of that place explored, found out, drawn on a map.

And men and women. Fewer than the children this time, but at least five of them. Warriors, people who knew how to kill and when to do so. Jon wrote out the names of a few that he knew would fit, from his elite units.

They had to infiltrate the Twins, live there as stable hands, kitchen wenches.

And when the time came, he would need that bridge, one way or another. He would need to have it open, whether Lord Frey wanted to or not.

When the time came…

The time for what, Jon did not yet know. He would need to head north sooner or later, but it might be with a force to aid the Starks, and it might not. And it might be that Hoster Tully was right and the shadow of war loomed large. That his father might refuse to give in to the proposals that would be
sure to pile on. That his lords would threaten civil war. That there would be a war.

Which way would he open the gates then?

When the time came, Jon thought, he would decide. For now - he had other matters to worry about.


[2] This is a quote - to be loved you have to submit to the excruciating ordeal of being known

[3] I know I haven't talked about this inside the story, but here there is no Sweetrobin. Lysa and John Arryn did have a kid, and he was Robin but he died some time before the start of the story.


[5] Listen… this Dany quote was ICONIC okay. I can still hear the exact inflection of her voice and I am in love with it to this day.


[8] Catherine the Great quote
A note of warning: quite a bit of this chapter is from Dany's pov, because she has such a special place in the narrative. She has the privilege of knowing Jon and Sansa as they were as kids, as they were as adults and she's close enough to both to recognise how they affect each other even when they try to hide or mask it. So I will be exploiting that fully.

What I would later call living
Was nothing special
Now I've grown up
Into a full-fledged liar
And loneliness says
Let us go through this
Again together
You and I

Mary Ruefle, “At the Nipple,” The Adamant

Ten miles before he reached King’s Landing, Jon was intercepted by Ser Barristan and three score of royal guards, who had ridden out with the express mission of warning him. So, to his great annoyance, he washed his face, changed into clean and much finer clothes that Dany had ever so graciously provided for him, and made ready to be welcomed into the capitol.

When the standard bearer, flying the black and red emblem of the Targaryens, entered the gates of the city, the noise was distant, but as more and more of Jon’s guard entered, it rose, like the rumble of the sea. Jon rode at the center of the line, flanked by his men, all wearing the muted black that were the colors of his guard’s uniform. The march of the column should not have been very impressive. Apart from Jon, none of his men were dressed in their finery, but it did not seem to matter. There was no doubt in his mind that the spectacle was organized, but it was still breathtaking to behold. People cheered for them from the sides of the streets, from the windows and balconies, throwing flowers in front of him, calling his name from the Gate of the Gods to the steps of the Red Keep.

Jon beamed to the crowds, threw fistfuls of coppers and silver into their hands as he passed. Barefoot children in Cobbler’s Square chased after the stallions, laughing all the while, and this time, Jon’s smile was far more genuine than it had been in five days.
He rode all the way inside the castle, only dismounting his horse at the very foot of the steps that would lead him into the great hall, and then the throne room of the Red Keep. As he climbed them, Sam fell into step with him.

“Sam!”

“Welcome back, Jon.”

Jon embraced his friend, and they climbed the stairs of the Keep together.

“Whose idea was this grand welcoming, do you know?”

“Princess Daenerys and the Crown Prince insisted on it, two days ago. The princess said you deserved to be honored for what you achieved, and had men waiting around the city walls to sight you.”

Jon shook his head. Of course she had.

“Why, are you not pleased?”

“Of course I am,” Jon answered immediately. He did not stop for anyone, though there were plenty of nobles who bowed for him as he passed, because he knew that she was not there among them, even though he kept looking for her.

Sam leaned in a little, lowered his voice. “Isn’t it grand though, Jon? The walls of the capitol echoing your name! Did you ever imagine it?” Sam asked, giving Jon a big smile that made him look almost like a boy.


“Yes,” Sam said slowly. Jon could feel his friend’s eyes roaming over his face carefully. “Does this hero’s welcome not live up to your dreams?”

“No dream can ever live up to reality.”

They entered the main hall, as full of nobles and courtiers as always, the way street markets were full of people. His father must be holding court. Everyone turned to Jon and bowed and curtsied almost as if they were moved by the same hand, creating an almost wave-like effect as Jon passed.

Jon walked straight past them and into the small antechamber that led to the throne room. It was much quieter there.

“Why so dour, Jon?”

“Dour?” Jon laughed, surprised. He put a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “Do I smile so rarely that you’ve forgotten what one looks like on my face?”

“You shine brightly, yes. And for show[1].” Sam added in a whisper.

Jon paused, his smile changing into something that looked a bit truer on his face. He shook his head then and stopped trying to convince Sam of a lie he was only keeping up halfheartedly.

“The people of King’s Landing cheer for me because the continued disagreement in the Riverlands was hurting trade, but my primary goal was not their welfare, nor doing my father’s bidding.”

Sam put a hand on his arm, making him turn. “Whatever your goal, you acted to their benefit. Should
people brush that aside, when so few of those who rule them even consider such a thing?” he asked, whispering the last words as if they were a secret.

But Jon hardly heard him at all. He felt tense, coiled like a spring trying to hold his temper in check.

“You look upset, Jon.”

So he did. Jon smoothed his face, painted a grin on it. Not that it seemed to please Sam any better, who continued to frown.

“Let us go, Sam. Court awaits us.”

Sam shook his head. “No. Court awaits you.”

“Ah. Not swimming with the sharks with me then.”

“Oh, I will be entering. From a side door,” Sam added, making Jon chuckle. “I enjoy watching sharks feed as much as anyone but I fancy being their meal rather less.”

Jon let his friend go, and nodded at the two porters to open the gates for him. He stepped through intrepidly. Sam was right to dread. One way or another, today there would be blood.

vii

The moment the oaken double doors started to open, Dany stepped forward to greet her nephew. He had changed into the garments she had sent him and he looked very fine in them indeed, tall and dark as he was. The fiery red dragons curling over the shoulders of his black doublet was a particularly lovely touch. Even with his curls still drying messily on top of his head, he was still the most handsome man in the room, she thought as she put her hand in his.

“Welcome home, nephew,” she announced as he kissed her hand.

“Thank you, princess, for the grand welcome,” he said for all to hear, and then leaned in and kissed her cheek too… so that he could whisper the words in her ear. “You thought to make me attend a victor’s march by catching me unawares with one, didn’t you?”

Dany smiled as he leaned back to look at her face.

“One learns to be ingenious.” She told him.

Jon offered her his arm. “None more so than you.”

Dany took it, and together they started walking towards the Iron Throne. His words, however, did dampen her excitement a bit. He kept smiling brightly and carried himself proudly, but there was a strange note to his tone. That glint in his eye that had seemed joyous to her at first, now looked almost feverish. But she could not read his face or understand the fixed expression there. It was opaque; like the rest of him so often was, even to her, ever since he returned to them. It was as if painted glass stood between them, obstructing her view of him. The painted glass of time, Dany thought, her breast constricting with a sudden sadness. Between Jon and the memory of Jon, a whole new person had grown, and she did not know him much better than anyone else.

Dany let go of Jon’s arm and curtsied deeply before the Iron Throne, before moving to stand on Elia’s other side. The King was in his best finery today and even wore his black crown with red rubies. The queen too was resplendent in a dress of the same gold and red colors of her house, her
veil so fine it seemed to be made of sunlight. Dany’s brother had already come down the steps of the throne and she watched as he greeted his son solemnly, kissing him on both cheeks.

“My son, I congratulate you on your success,” Rhaegar said softly, before raising his voice so that the whole of the throne room could hear him. “The gods have blessed me with children who so well hold my image unto the world, and they have blessed this realm with princes who know how to serve it well.” He looked then on the gathered nobles around the hall, his voice raising even further, booming almost.

It was on occasions like these that Dany could almost see the man he had been once, years ago, on the banks of the River Trident.

“To commemorate this occasion, and my joy, I appoint you, Jon Targaryen, as gonfalonier of King’s Landing and the Crownlands, and the ninth member of the Council of Justice. It will be your solemn duty from now on to counsel the Master of Laws in all matters, and wherever there is a need of it, continue to enforce the King’s justice.”

Ser Arthur came forward carrying the crimson half-length cloak that would mark Jon’s new office and put it over his shoulders. Its pleated fullness reached Jon’s knees, as was the fashion, and the pin that held the lapels together was marked with the three headed dragon. The cloak itself was decorated with the most finely-embroidered stars and a turned back collar lined with ermine, both marking his new office and setting him apart from the other councilors.

The High Septon passed the King a laurel made of solid gold. Jon bowed his head and the King carefully put it on top of his curls.

A perfect fit, Dany thought happily. She did still remember some things, after all.

Jon straightened and for a moment the look on his face was so… it was as if his face was carved in stone. He looked furious and in that moment, the fact that he might have forgotten his words was the least of Dany’s worries. Gods… perhaps she should not have sprung this on him. But if she had not, it all would have devolved into another argument between him and his father, whom Jon could not ever help antagonizing at every turn!

But it was only a moment, one that perhaps only Dany was aware of. It lasted a blink, and then Jon was there in mind as well as body again.

He looked his father in the eye as he spoke.

“I, Jon Targaryen, swear that I will faithfully submit to the will of Iron Throne and to you, your grace. I will do my duty to the crown and to the people, whom I vow to serve and honor to the full extent of the law.”

Dany was surprised, and she could see that many other courtiers were too, by Jon’s changing of the second part of the vow. There was no mention usually, of serving the people, but she could see the side of her brother’s lips curving up ever so slightly, into that secretive smile of his that usually meant he was proud of his sons.

The High Septon stepped forward.

“Wherever you travel,” he announced in a raspy voice that hardly carried. “May the gods go with you.”

Jon bowed again, and when he rose the wall thundered with the applause of almost five hundred
people gathered there. Dany beamed at Jon as she clapped, and she hoped as she looked at him, that
she had finally managed to grant him at least one of the wishes they used to whisper about when they
were children.

viii

The throne room was alight with music and laughter, the scents of food and a dozen different
perfumes every square foot. It was overpowering, like a too tight embrace, but one you could not
bear to part with. The feast had barely even begun but already people were dancing, unusually
informal because the king and queen had already retired and the crown prince himself had opened
the dances far earlier than usual, brushing aside protocol to give way to festivities.

Not all the courtiers were partaking, in truth. Dany could see some still seated at their tables, looking
on. They did not dare sneer so openly that they should be seen, but the simple action of not joining
the festivities was disapproval enough. Those that thought themselves in possession of the best
breeding usually liked to show it by looking down on others, even when there was fun to be had. Of
course, that did not mean that all those who were in fact dancing and feasting were to be trusted.
Either way, today Dany had chosen not to care, as she left her seat to find Jon.

She caught him in the middle of a discussion. Or rather, trying to escape one, if the look on his face
was any indication.

“-But do you not think that such a dealing could potentially overstep your mandate?”

“I do not,” Jon said firmly. And he did not look in a fit mood to be arguing with anyone either. “If a
lord passes a law which he then violates, claiming to do so to calm an angry populace, he is to blame,
if that anger is one that he himself created. Daenerys! A word.”

Jon did not even apologize; he just strode in her direction the moment he caught sight of her, leaving
his interlocutors behind.

“Jon, congratulations”

“Thank you. Where is Lady Stark?”

Dany blinked at his abruptness. “I certainly have no idea. Why?”

“Well, why is she not here?” He looked so thunderous it was a wonder anyone had spoken to him so
far without getting cut. “Half of King’s Landing seems to be.”

“I told you, Sansa doesn’t like to attend court-”

“Unless she has to, I remember.” But even as he spoke he’d already looked away from her and
seemed to be searching for someone else. He caught one of the serving girls as she passed him by.

“See that woman there, with the dark hair and the pink gown?” he said before even giving the
startled girl the time to curtesy.

“Lady Shae, your grace?”

“Yes. Tell her to come to me.”

“Yes, your grace.”

She hurried away and Jon’s eyes followed her with intense concentration.
“Jon, what on earth is the matter with you?”

“Nothing at all. Lady Shae, so good to see you. I don’t see my cousin. Is she not here?”

Shae had just risen from her usual awkward curtsey that no amount of lessons would set to rights. Dany knew her well enough to know that she could do a perfectly good one when she felt like it, but there was a particular brand of insolence that ran strong in this girl, and she showed it in subtle - and not so subtle ways.

Like the flat look she was giving Jon in that moment, for instance. There was nothing subtle about that.

“My lady is at prayer,” Shae said curtly. It did nothing for Jon though, who kept staring at her like she was the source of all his troubles. His grey eyes glinted with supressed emotion. That restless energy that Dany had sensed in him so far was now all but muted. Jon stood still as stone now, and just as unyielding. Anger had frozen his features into something that almost looked like a mask.

“Call for her,” he said softly. It was all Dany could do not to flinch at the familiar pitch of his voice. “I would like your lady to honor me by joining the celebrations.”

Shae did not give in an inch.

“Lady Stark instructed me to tell you that she is indisposed.”

“Indisposed…” It was as if the word left a bad taste in his mouth. Yet he still showed Shae his teeth. “Well that's a shame isn't it? She will have to change her disposition into one that is more favorable. Tell her that her cousin requires her presence,” Jon added. The smile on his face could cut glass. “And if she refuses again, tell her I will come and get her myself.”

Shae did not know Jon enough to know that he only spoke this softly when he was well and truly furious, but she was smart enough to recognize a threat when she heard one. Dany saw her tighten her jaw as if she was biting back the insult that lit up her eyes, but she still curtsied curtly and hurried away.

The moment she did, Dany caught Jon by the arm, forced him to face her.

“Jon, what are you doing?”

“Inviting my cousin to my celebration, of course.” He looked at her as if she was the strange one. “Why, what does it look like I am doing?”

Dany could not believe what she was seeing. “Have you lost your mind?”

“Well yes, though I plan to reclaim her shortly.”

“Jon!”

But he pulled away from her and walked towards the balconies. He stopped to speak with one of his men, no doubt to tell him to watch for Sansa’s arrival and tell him when it happened. Which would be never, of course. Sansa was not one to succumb to a threat, not anymore. She would not come… which would be bad, Dany thought, as she hastily racked her brains for a solution, because Jon was not one to issue idle threats. If he said he would go get her, than the idiot truly would follow through, and then what?

What the fuck was the matter with him anyway?
Sansa had not said anything to indicate they had quarreled. Indeed she had not said anything to hint they had so much as shared more words than politely necessary, which was how Sansa was with everyone. Dany had simply assumed she would be that way with Jon too, and had not thought to ask more about it.

The music came to a climax and there was loud and enthusiastic applause from everyone. In the midst of it, Dany hurried down the hall to where she spotted Deoreah.

“Princess.”

Dany took her hand and leaned in to whisper in her ear.

“Doreah, go stand by the main doors and the moment Sansa arrives, bring her to me.”

Doreah’s fingers tightened around Dany’s hand before she bobbed in a quick curtsey and went, silken blue dress trailing behind as she disappeared among the crowd.

But for all of Doreah’s watchful eye, she did not manage to bring Sansa to Dany in time. They had been walking towards the center of the hall when Dany caught sight of them. It was impossible to miss Sansa, dressed as she was in white, her hair unbound and half hidden by the whisper-thin veil that trailed behind her like a cloud as she walked. She stood out because she was dressed for prayer, not a feast, and it showed, though the luminous dove-grey dress was exquisite all the same. Dany knew had been Elia’s gift for Sansa’s name day just last year. Sansa favoured the cut of the neckline, which ran like a straight line across the top of the dress and exposed her collarbones and the tops of her shoulders, but she would not have embroidered the jaws of the snarling direwolf of her house on half the bodice. She usually wanted to look like a flower, and flowers did not have teeth. But the dress itself was so lovely and showed off her lithe silhouette so well that Sansa wore it despite the small break in theme.

Today, Dany knew Sansa had worn it because she had wanted to look heavenly in Harry’s eyes. Heavenly and very much a Stark, appealing both to his imagination and his pride.

But it wasn’t Harry’s eye she drew now.

Jon reached Sansa faster than Dany did. It was as if he had materialized in front of her, so sudden was his appearance. Dany’s dread heightened even more but she couldn’t very well run through the hall and draw even more eyes than were already on them. She saw Jon grin at Sansa, but it did not soften his face one bit. On the contrary, it rather made him look more like Ghost than a man.

“-to which gods were you praying to this time, cousin?” Dany heard him say just as she reached them.

“The Seven, your grace.”

Sansa’s voice was so cool Dany expected the air to feel cold around the two of them, but it was the opposite. Whatever tension hardened Jon’s face had put a mask of equal impenetrability over Sansa’s. She stood so straight and tense that Dany was afraid she might snap if asked to bend even a little.

Jon took a small step closer to her, leaned over her so infinitesimally that Dany did not think he was even aware he was doing it.

“And what does my lady pray for?”

“Wisdom, your grace. So that I wont fear the shadows in the night. And courage to face them, when
the day of danger truly dawns."

Jon’s lips curled upwards.

“Wise indeed,” Jon said through his smile. “The wisdom to know what questions to ask is the most important one of all, is it not?”

Sansa inclined her head. “As you say, your grace.”

It was strange, listening to them. Jon seemed as incensed by some blistering feeling as Sansa was glacial in her calm and impenetrability.

“In fact,” Jon said then, raising his voice and drawing the attention of everyone around them. “Were it not for your wisdom in asking the right questions, I might have never thought to look into what was truly happening in the Northern Riverlands. Perhaps I might had found out by other means why the Freys did there. Or perhaps not. Therefore, I would like to share this day with you, cousin.”

He lifted the golden wreath from his head.

Dany knew the moment when Sansa realized what he meant to do. Everyone must have realized, since they could practically see the blood draining from her face and her eyes widening with incredulity. Her freckles and reddish-tinted lips stood out even more against her suddenly pale skin.

“I am glad to share the honor and the glory with so bright and wise a lady, who I was lucky to have by my side,” Jon added, his voice traveling and shushing almost all the hall, once people realized what was happening.

Even the music had stopped.

Dany could not breathe. He might as well have just declared his intention to have her, right there for all to hear, for how unmistakable his actions were.

*What was he doing?*

But then a thought occurred her, and gave Dany a terrible pause.

Could it possibly be true, what she’d heard… that he…

No, he would never! Dany *refused* to believe it. Jon was many things, but he would… he wouldn’t ever be *that*!

Would he?

Jon stepped close to Sansa, who looked as if she was frozen into marble, did not even seem to be breathing. He unpinned her veil with one hand, letting it flutter to the floor, and settled the wreath on her head carefully. It was a touch too big for her, but Sansa’s curls kept it from falling to her ears.

Jon stepped back from Sansa lazily, as if he didn’t want to. It was a mere hairsbreadth away from a provocation.

Dany’s palm itched to slap him. The insolent bastard!

“Forgive me, your grace. Any words I know are too feeble to express my feelings in this moment,” Sansa said softly.

She was shaking, Dany could see she her chest heaving short, fast breaths, as if all the air in the great
hall had suddenly vanished. Nerves, most would think. Overcome with emotion. Of course, Dany knew better.

She knew this part of Sansa well. The part of her that could be cold, and sharp, and unkind.

“I can only hope you know the depth of my gratitude for this...immeasurable honor. You are gracious, my lord, and noble in all ways.” Sansa’s lip trembled only a little before she smiled brightly enough to light up the entire hall. “Worthy of standing by the side of our great and most beloved King. Truly, you are your father’s son.”

Jon laughed, a breathless, choked sound that might not have sounded out of place if someone had kicked him in the chest. Had Dany not known better, she would have sworn it was tears that made Jon’s eyes shine that way, but she did not even remember the last time she’d seen Jon cry. As it was, she was afraid of what he would do and by the silence in the hall, she was not the only one.

But Jon only took Sansa’s hand in his, bowed to kiss it far more fervently than he should have.

“All that I am,” Jon said softly; so softly that even Dany who was standing closest to them barely heard it. “All that I will be, I dedicate to you.”

Sansa gulped and then, as if remembering, inclined her head, accepting the words for the compliment they seemed to be. Dany did not know if it was as obvious to anyone else as it was to her, that they were insulting each other in their own, private language.

Jon straightened and just as he did, someone started clapping. It took barely a breath before everyone else joined, a thundering applause filling the hall. It was as if its noise snapped Sansa awake. She curtsied deeply, bowing her head, and the noise of the applause rose even further. Her lips were barely curved upwards, into something that was almost a mockery of smile but that was convincing enough. Most of the people here who were smiling for Sansa now, had laughed when Viserys had mocked her in front of them. Yet here they stood, celebrating her. Everyone loved a good show almost as much as they loved a good humiliation, Dany thought grimly.

The music started again, and the crowd around them almost dispersed. Jon held out his hand in such an abrupt movement, Dany almost flinched.

Sansa did not.

“Dance with me.”

His tone left no room for a refusal. And yet-

“I would beg to be excused, your grace,” Sansa said as she folded her hands in front of her once more, knuckles white. “I do not feel well enough to dance.”

Jon did not react. He had expected to be refused.

“You would beg?” He seemed to be teasing her, but his eyes were far too serious for that smile to be real. “Is that how?”

The look on Sansa’s face did not change, but she lifted her chin just a fraction. A small fraction, not even noticeable to those who did not know how to read fury on Lady Stark’s face.

“How would the prince like me to beg?”

“I wouldn’t,” Jon immediately said. “Therefore it follows that we must dance.”
Sansa gave him a thin smile. “If it please your grace.”

The words were hardly out of her mouth before Jon spoke. “It does.”

She put her gloved hand in his, but he spun her effortlessly to his other side and took her left hand instead, guiding her to the dance floor, right in the middle of the other dancers.

“What on earth is going on?”

Dany startled to hear Aegon’s voice so close behind her. She let go of a breath she had not realized she’d been holding.

“I have no idea,” she breathed out. Only now that they had moved away did Dany how on edge she had been the whole time. Whatever it was between Sansa and Jon, it thickened the air and made it hard to breathe around them, so contagious was their tension.

“Is he trying to get under her skirts or something?”

Dany rolled her eyes. “Well if he is, he chose the wrong target and the wrong tactic.”

“I’ll say.” Aegon huffed. “Who would have thought…”

Dany followed Aegon’s eyes. Jon and Sansa had started to dance and soon enough, the other guests drew back to watch. As if following a silent command a circle formed around them.

They attracted attention effortlessly, so strange a pair as they were with him so dark and her so bright, like opposite sides of the same coin. They were one of the most handsome couples in the hall, but where everyone else might have seen the elegance of their clothes, their poise, and the way they moved together as if they’d danced with each other a thousand times and one, Dany noticed the way they looked at each other.

She knew enough of them both to recognize how anger shaped their features, how it affected their actions.

How it made both of them reckless; stupid.

Jon’s reasons might be anyone’s guess, but there was only one reason for Sansa to act like this.

The rumors must be true then: Jon had courted her in the Riverlands. Or his version of courting, anyway. Seeing that Sansa and Harry had renewed their promise to each other not even a day ago, it was not hard to guess at least part of the reason for Jon’s mood now, but Sansa’s cold courtesies and her outrage could only be explained if the second part of those rumors were also true… and Sansa had caught wind of it somehow. Dany wished with all her heart that she could say she would never believe Jon capable a plan such as what he’d been rumored of, but the only thing she could say for certain about Jon now was that he was capable of a great many things, so long as it got him what he wanted.

Aegon came up behind her again and put a cup in her hand. It almost slipped through Dany’s fingers.

“I don’t know if they’d like to tear out each other’s throats, or shag right there on the marble floor,” he whispered in her ear with a chuckle.

Dany jutted her arm backwards, causing Aegon to grunt.
“Gods you have sharp elbows,” he said softly.

“Mind your tongue,” Dany warned, but her beautiful nephew just chuckled.

“I’m just speaking of what I see.”

“Mind it anyway,” Dany said again, looking at him askance.

“Do you think it’s true?” Aegon asked instead. “That my brother has finally fallen in love again and forgotten you?”

Dany snorted. “Jon is not in love!”

Aegon raised an eyebrow at her and Dany caught herself. Her tone. And blushed.

She was being ridiculous…and the little light flickering inside her was jealousy, not incredulity. She did not want either to be there, but neither was asking much permission, was it?

Dany looked at Sansa and Jon again. Thought about it calmly.

She might have believed Jon was in love… if this was eight years ago, and his smiles were not rarer now than snow was in Dorne. If this were the Jon before he went missing, Dany might have believed it. He had been slow to trust back then too, but never slow to love. Indeed, once, when he was still a boy, love had come so easily to him it still broke her heart to remember it. He used to give armfuls of it to anyone who showed him the smallest kindness.

They’d both been such sad children, once.

But they were children no longer, Dany reminded herself sternly. And much had changed since then. Jon had too. And changed again, when he came back. The Jon Dany knew now could never fall in love in a month, with a woman he’d hardly met before. The Jon she knew now planned things. He seemed to have forgotten all about love.

Dany took a sip of her honeyed wine and watched Jon carefully as he drew a stone-faced Sansa closer to him than he should and they spun around each other, before separating and taking a bow, as the music of the dance hit its last notes.

Dany handed Aegon her cup and made straight for them.

“You will dance another reel with me.”

“I will not.”

Jon almost stepped in front of her. “I must insist.”

“Insist away; my answer stands. Princess, good evening.”

“Lady Stark.” Dany offered her hand and Sansa took it, and held it so tight that Dany found it hard not to wince.

“And where is your betrothed on this fine night, my lady?” Jon asked as he fell into step to Sansa’s other side.

“Hunting, your grace.”

“Hunting for what? His greatest prize is here.”
Sansa’s eyes flashed. “As you say, your grace,” she said with a gentleness that set off the directness of her gaze even more.

The look on Jon’s face soured, but before he could open his mouth again, Dany spoke.

“Sansa, take a turn around the hall with me. Jon, be a dear and give us our privacy.” Dany said the words with a smile, but her tone was unmistakably a warning. Jon inclined his head, and took a step back. Leaving them.

The moment he was out of earshot, Sansa turned to her and though the expression on her face seemed placid enough, her eyes were frantic.

“Help me leave.”

“I could but I think we both know he’d just come after you.” Dany knew he would. He was not in a mood to care what it looked like. “Sansa… what is happening?”

“I… we have had a disagreement,” Sansa told her.

“A disagreement?” If this was a disagreement, what the fuck would a fight between them look like?! "Over what?"

“Truth.”

Dany licked her lips, bit her tongue.

So… it was true.

“And do your truth and his differ this much?” She asked, pulling Sansa behind the dragon skulls, so that they could walk the length of the great hall undisturbed.

“It seems they do.”

Dany sighed. “Let’s walk out again. People will start to wonder.”

As they did, they saw that the center of the hall had cleared out and the singers took it, stringing their instruments carefully. The harpist paused, long fingers holding still a breath away from the strings of the harp, until everyone quieted.

Then the singing started.

Even Dany stopped to listen, forgetting what she had been so worried about. The lead singer had a beautiful voice, warm and smooth as velvet and strong enough to fill the whole hall.

He sang The Dance of Dragons, and Alyssanne, Flowers of Spring and Fair Maids of Summer. And when he was done and the applause had quieted, Jon’s voice rang, just as the singer was about to start another, startling the master out of his concentration.

“Ser! You sang us the most beautiful songs I know, but I do wonder, do you know any northern songs?”

“I do, your grace. I can sing you of The Burning Ships and the Black Pines. Of The Night that Ended and Brave Danny Flint.”

Jon tilted his head to the side. “I have not heard Danny Flint’s song before.”
“It is a sad song, your grace,” the singer warned.

“Then you must sing it, and we will judge your talent by the number of ladies who have tears in their eyes when it’s done.”

The singer inclined his head, and then begun. And as it turned out, Jon would have to pay the singer in gold, because even Dany found herself blinking back tears. At the end of it, she could swear that there was no single soul in the hall that was left untouched by the song.

Jon approached the man and helped him up, shook his hand and then handed him a substantial purse. For services rendered, he said, before he headed straight for them.

Dany felt Sansa stiffen next to her.

“Don’t leave,” she whispered, just before Jon was on them.

“Every lady in the hall shed at least one tear, and yet Lady Stark’s eyes are dry,” Jon said as he linked his hands behind his back. “Did you not enjoy the song?”

Dany did not know if it was the song, or if his anger had abated, but he looked calmer somehow.

The same could not be said for Sansa, however.

“The song was lovely, your grace.”

“You did not find it sad?”

“I did, your grace.”

His smile fell and for the first time since Dany had seen him today, he looked like himself. And his eyes were so sad that Dany was startled to see it.

“Are you really not going to speak to me at all?”

“I do not understand, your grace.” But she did and Dany knew it. Courtesy, Sansa always said, was a lady’s armor. Or weapon, as it so happened. “We are speaking.”

Jon scoffed softly. “Right. Then tell me one true thing then.”

“I have not lied to you, your grace.”

Jon met her eyes and in that moment, Dany might as well not have been there at all.

“Yes, you have.”

Sansa smiled to him. “As you say. Few can claim to possess an equal frankness to your lordship.”

“Nor can anyone claim a better mastery of this game than you, it seems.”

Sansa inclined her head, as if receiving a compliment. “I am a lady, your grace.”

Jon laughed quite suddenly, the sound so joyless Dany wanted to reach for him, get him to stop whatever this game was between them. It was upsetting her exceedingly for so many reasons, and only the simplest of them was that she loathed to see two people she so loved, at such odds with each other. But neither of them seemed like they would do such a thing, even if she asked.
“Yes, I can see. And what have you learned from being a lady of court, Sansa?”

“The same thing brave Danny Flint learned, your grace.”

Jon seemed to wait for her to elaborate, but it soon became clear that she would offer nothing unless it was demanded of her.

She was practiced indeed.

“Well? What do you and Danny Flint know? Illuminate us.”

“Men are loyal to violence above all,” Sansa said softly, and curtsied, ready to take her leave.

She walked by him when Jon spoke again. “I have not dismissed you, Lady Stark.”

“Jon, stop this,” Dany whispered fervently.

But Sansa did stop and turn.

“Forgive me, your grace. Have you further need of me?”

“Yes,” Jon said immediately. “I want you to sit with me a while.”

Sansa took a step towards him. “If it please your grace.”

“It does,” Jon said through gritted teeth and it was obvious that there was not an ounce of satisfaction in him, but it did not seem to matter. He looked at her, as if he expected her to say something. “Is that it? Is this where your resistance ends?”

“I do not understand, my lord.”

Jon snorted. “Of course not.” But for a moment, doubt flickered in his eyes. “So you will stay then?”

“Of course. We all serve at the pleasure of your grace,” Sansa said, making it sound as if she was stating something obvious. It sounded obscene from her lips.

“Yes we do, don’t we.” And his tone was almost mocking, but no one dared even let him know they were within hearing distance, let alone laugh at some perceived jape at Lady Stark’s expense.

Nothing in Jon’s manner suggested he would have allowed it.

Sansa weaved through the guests in the hall, knowing he followed her every step, circling her at a distance. Didn’t let her hide from his line of sight. They both knew what he was doing, stalking her like a wolf stalked its prey. She had not danced again, but she had moved through the hall, speaking to people, trying not to look too much like she was trying to hide. Trying to act normal. As someone in her position would act. At every step, she could feel him, like a physical presence almost. He could very well be on the other side of the hall but his eyes on her felt like the sun at her back in the middle of the summer. It made her whole body feel hot. The golden wreath on her head felt twice as heavy as it had any right to feel. It was as if she had his hand on her head always. Pulling at her.

How she hated him!

She looked up into one of the mirrors in the hall that were used to reflect the candlelight, lighting up
the immense space. She saw him immediately, the little hairs on the back of her neck raising when he met her eyes just as quickly. As if he’d been waiting.

Sansa just stood there, hands folded in front of herself, head tilted a little to the right, looking at him. Watching him look back even as he took a sip from his cup and set it down again. There was no false smile on his face anymore. No challenge there. Nothing that told her he would come and draw attention to her again. Put on a show and try to humiliate her.

His steady, unblinking gaze did not discompose her anymore. Nor was it an invitation.

She knew what he wanted.

And though she was loath to give him what he dared demand of her, as if he was owed, she would rather have it out now, than have him hounding her every step for a single moment longer.

And besides, she so wanted to scratch that look from his face. How dare he look at her like she had done him wrong!

Sansa met his eyes squarely in the mirror, without blinking. Then she looked north, towards the corridor that would lead into the gardens. She kept her eyes there, then turned her body in that direction as well, and started walking.

She knew he would follow.

X.

She walked the lit garden paths and then the dark ones. There was no difficulty for her in this; she knew the way to the godswood so well, she could have found her way there blindfolded. She did not hear anyone behind her at all, nor did she see anyone, but she did not need to. She knew he was following with the same certainty she knew the sun would rise tomorrow. When she got in front of the heartree, Jon was there waiting for her. Leaning against its trunk, arms folded over his chest, watching her as if he’d seen the direction she would come from before she ever took the first step.

He straightened as she came into view. “I did not think you would come.”

Sansa did not dignify that with an answer.

“I thought you would only pretend to come here, and the moment I was out of sight, you would turn to your rooms.”

“I could have. Then you would have found me the next morning in front of as many people as possible and continued to make loud declarations.”

Jon stopped in front of her. He was so close she could smell the jasmine and woodsmoke from his clothes. She wished to move away but would not give him the satisfaction.

“I would, yes.” He tilted his face towards her. “Is it my loudness that bothers you?”

“Among other things, your grace.”

Jon moved suddenly - before Sansa so much as noticed him take a step, she felt his hands wrap around her arms, pulling her to him so hard she tittered on the tips of her toes. She gasped out of sheer surprise, though she would not have been remiss to gasp for pain, his hold like iron bands.

“Enough!” he roared in her face, the tension she had seen tightening his features all night finally
snaping. “Enough with the games!”

Sansa tilted her chin up to meet his fury with her own unmoving conviction. “You demand all the privileges of your station, but you’re unwilling to pay the price. What else can I call you, when you wear your true name so well, prince?”

Jon let her go abruptly. Sansa stumbled before she regained her footing. Watched him as he paced a foot or two away from her.

“Why did you leave?”

The words, how he demanded of her an explanation, or anything really, grated at her nerves, which he’d already frayed beyond any point of return. In one thing he was right; they were beyond games now.

“What can I say; I find it hard to continue being in the presence of those that would see my family dead.”

Jon rounded on her. “Yes, attempted murder would complicate a relationship. But then again so does betrayal.”

Sansa was stunned. “Betrayal!”

He took his dagger out of its sheath, the sound of metal being drawn loud in the night. It made Sansa stiffen, but then he took her right hand and set the hilt of the dagger on her palm, closed her fingers around it.

“If you honestly believe I would ever harm Robb or your father, then just do it now.”

Her lips curled with distaste.

“Such a grand gesture; it suits you. Grand and empty,” she seethed as she threw the dagger away, hating that he’d put it in her hand when she could not use it. “As if you don’t know I could no more kill the son of a king here than I could spout wings and fly away.”

He seemed startled and for a moment Sansa didn’t know what to do with him, if she wanted to touch his face or slap it. It was as if it never even occurred to him in his passion that his life wasn’t as expendable as he so foolishly thought it was. As if it never occurred to him that she could not do as she pleased, as he so often could. Yes, she thought, her mind made up: she wanted to slap him so hard the skin would come off his cheek.

She turned away from him, faced the heartree with no eyes. There are no gods here…

“Why did you leave?” she heard him ask again, his voice so low in the dark, it crawled on the ground with the leaves and stones of the earth and up her thighs, up her spine.

She felt sick with how much she loathed him.

“Why did you take me with you to the Riverlands?” Sansa countered.

“I told you why.”

“And was it also because, by chance, it had the added benefit of getting me out of the capitol, so that Dany and Harry’s engagement could go through without me here to cause trouble?”

“What?” His surprise was as dry as the snap of a twig. “I don’t give a bloody fuck about Dany’s
would be engagement! I told you, I brought you with me because I thought—"

“You thought you might need me,” Sansa said, nodding. “And all your questions... dining with me, bringing me into your confidence, showing me those fireflies in the middle of the night...” she turned abruptly to face him, hands balled into fists at her sides so that she would not be tempted to hit him. Days ago, the burning humiliation she felt thinking back on those weeks with him made her feel small enough to fit into anyone’s pocket. But that was past. “Why did you do all of that?”

Before, she had been unable to help her focus on him: he’d been always so overwhelming that it had been hard to see anything beyond him. Now, her focus was deliberate. She took in everything: how he was frozen on the spot. The look on his face. The way his thumb and forefinger kept rubbing against one another in that familiar way she’d seen before, which exposed his strain.

Jon took a deep breath and met her eyes, and she knew this would be it. Whatever he had to tell, he would tell it now. He’d steeled herself.

“Because I wanted to.”

“And why was that?” Her voice shook, but before she could compose herself, Jon closed the distance between them in two strides.

“Sansa, whatever you’ve been told, whatever you heard, I promise you it’s not true.”

She scoffed. “Truly? Whatever I heard? You want me to believe only you, do you?”

His exasperation was palpable. “Your family is my family. I love them all more than my own life!”

Jon snarled, so close to her face his breath fanned across it. “I would never hurt any of them, nor would I ever allow Winterfell to remain undefended and friendless. Whoever told you otherwise is lying to you!”

“You think I don’t know that!?” she hissed. She could not think with him so close but she could not get away. And it was almost offensive how little he thought she understood. “You think after living here for so long, I cannot tell when someone is trying to manipulate me?”

The stricken look on his face gave her only a brief satisfaction.

“So you... you don’t believe it?”

Sansa did not answer him. When she tried to turn away however, Jon caught her arm and brought her so close to him she almost fell on his chest.

“The why did you leave the way you did?” he growled in her face.

She pushed him off her then. Jon released her arm, took a step back, immediately giving her the space she’d demanded.

“I realized what a fool I’d been with you, allowing myself to forget that which I already knew.” She almost laughed at herself now. Her tears were right at the heels of that chuckle, but she would give them no opportunity to make an appearance tonight. She’d been enough of a fool in front of him, she would not add to it. “I left because you were no better than anyone who came before you. Not even that! You are worse. With your promises and your empty gestures. You swore me friendship and not only did I believe it, I even...”

Sansa closed her mouth with a click, choking on her breath.
“It’s pathetic, honestly, how I keep making the same mistakes,” she murmured, not looking at him at all. “So I left, because it hurts to be reminded of one’s stupidity.”

When she turned it was to glare at him, but she found him looking at her in such a way that made her take a step back. He’d looked at her that way when they were on the Isle of Faces, and she never wanted to go back there. Not to the place, not to the memory.

She didn’t want to see it.

“I love you,” Jon said then.

Said it as if he was stating the colour of the sky. For a moment, Sansa could not believe her ears. She just stared at him, speechless, heart in her throat, stunned. She was standing still but she felt as if her head was floating away from her body.

“I know you know it,” he insisted as he came close. Close enough that there was barely any distance between them, but he did not touch her. “None of what happened was a lie, Sansa. I love you, as you love me.”

Sansa laughed. She could not help it, though the only joy she felt was in how it made him flinch.

“Love! Love?” White hot anger was coiling inside her like a beast, making her want to howl. Her ribs hurt with how much it wanted to burst out through her flesh and tear at him. “You… you weak, foul, vainglorious man! How dare you presume to speak to me of love?”

Jon didn’t even blink. “I love you. I dare everything.”

“Where? Where is this love you speak of?” The careful hold she’d kept on herself cracked open like an egg on stone and she was overcome with all the feelings she had been so carefully trying to suppress for hours. Days… “You threaten to have me dragged into your presence! Mock me in front of half the nobles of kingdoms! You-”

“No, I did not mea-”

She pushed at his chest, furious. “Yes you did mean! You berated and insulted me not even an hour ago!”

“I did not insult you!” Jon snapped, as if that alone caused him outrage.

“You didn’t?! She could have scratched his eyes out. “You practically propositioned me in front of five hundred people, you bastard!”

“I expressed my admiration,” Jon insisted, though his conviction was fading bit by bit. ”Why should they not know you are loved?”

This time she did slap him. So hard that her hand stung. And when he only blinked at her, utterly unaffected but for how surprised he seemed that she’d actually do such a thing, Sansa balled her hands into fists the way Arya would have, and hit him in the chest. It felt like striking at a wall, for how little she moved him. It only served to make her angrier.

She had no chance to hurt him no matter how hard she could hit him. And it didn’t matter what he might feel, why his eyes had gone so wide. She didn’t want to feel sorry for him!

“You baited me!” Sansa continued, uninterrupted. “Deliberately used your power over me! Lied to me!” Jon reached for her and she slapped his hands away and then tried to shove him back,
overcome and overflowing with anger, with fear and a whole maelstrom of emotions that made the
hair on her arms stand on end. “Where is this love you speak of? Where is your honour? Where is the
friendship you swore to me, you liar!”

Jon reached for her again and this time managed to avoid her clawing fingers. He caught her face in
his hands, palms fitting almost her whole head between them and pulled her close, held her there. So
close that she had to shove her hands between them to get at him. So close that he whispered the
words against her lips.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry, Sansa. Please.”

She hadn’t realized she’d been crying, and now wished she could stop but the harder she tried the
more her chest hurt.

“You hurt me and I wanted to make you feel as you made me feel. It was mean and petty and I am
sorry for it. I’m sorry I betrayed your trust, but none of what happened between us before was ever
meant to hurt you,” he sounded as wretched as she felt. “I only wanted to make you love me.”

She gasped and instead of her next breath, what came out of her was a sob. It burst from her full of
barbed grief that scratched its way out of her.

Sansa untangled herself from his hold, turned away from him. Tried to breathe deeply and calm
down, bring her body back into her own power. The night air made her shiver, and it was only then
she realized she was covered in a thin layer of sweat. Her hands were shaking. She wrapped her
arms around herself. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jon wipe his hand down his face and
looked away, not ready to face all of his feelings as well as her own.

If she could just... stop for a moment. Just a moment.

Sansa sighed. She walked to the base of one of the closest trees around the groove surrounding the
heartree and sat at its roots, pulled her knees up, leaned her forehead against them. The silence
between them was so deep, she thought she could hear the faint music coming from the great hall.

“I left like I did because I knew it would hurt you,” Sansa whispered after long moments of stillness,
looking at the dead leaves below her feet.

Jon’s small huff was faint. Exhausted. “I know.”

Of course he did. After all, that’s why she’d done it. So that he’d know.

“I knew from that very first day that you wanted something from me. I knew it, but you still managed
to make me believe you didn’t.”

He did not deny it, so Sansa looked up, to make him face the confession that was his silence. She
found him about a foot away from her, seated on the ground, legs crossed. She was no longer
surprised that he was always trying to get as close to her as he could manage, without inciting her
rejection. It seemed to be his way.

The night was not as dark as it might have been; there was a full moon shining over them. Just up the
trail, in the palace - a world away and this moment between them, in truth - there were dozens of
people celebrating him. People who would have loved nothing more than to have him speak to them,
of only to get the measure of him now that he seemed to have fully returned into the bosom of his
family and his father’s affection. But he was here in the dark with her.

He was in the dark with her and he’d wanted to make her love him. Perhaps because he’d been so
isolated for so long, that now that he’d found the nerve to share a piece of himself with her, he thought he was in love. Perhaps because some other reason that had been there before that. Either way...

Sansa took a deep breath. “What do you want with me Jon?”

“I just want you. I want you to choose me, as I have chosen you. In every way.”

Sansa closed her eyes. Leaned her forehead back on her knees. “What did you want from me before. Before you thought...” She couldn’t not even say it. “Before that.”

“The same. But-”

He stopped and that made her look up.

“But not for the same reason.” He admitted.

Right. Sansa crossed her legs the way he had and they might have been back at the Isle of Faces. It did not feel or sound the same. There was no blanket of whispering woods around her, but even an empty godswood with no heartree had a strangeness that could be felt, if you tried. And she was trying. Trying hard to go back to a moment when she could look beyond her doubts and believe him.

“That first day, at the beach… why did you come to me?” she asked him quietly.

“Can you not believe I did so just because I wanted to know you?” Jon said as he pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes. He looked so tired suddenly, worn thin, but Sansa had no mercy more for him than she had for herself.

“No. You approached me for a purpose.” She told him firmly. “What was it?”

He hesitated, and that was her breaking point. Not his arrogance, or his half-truths, or even him trying to declare her his in front of the nobles of all the land, but his hesitation to disclose the truth, even now.

“Tell me!” She roared, not caring if everyone from Blackwater Rush to the God’s Eye heard her.

Jon flinched. She did not care about that either.

“Your mother and father trusted me to get you out of King’s Landing. So I vowed that I would.” He finally admitted. “Any way I could.”

There was a deliberate look to him then, that rooted her on the spot. She could not have moved if she’d tried. Her breathing sounded loud in her ears, her heartbeat like a drum against her breastbone.

“Any way you could…” Sansa repeated and thought back to all the time she’d spent with him. How hard he’d tried to… to… She started laughing and put a hand over her mouth to stop it. She sounded like a lunatic. “Is that why? Why you wanted me to-”

“No.” He denied it with a singular vehemence. Deliberately interrupting her before she could put a much uglier and perhaps much more honest spin to what had happened. But he didn’t want that, did he? He was convinced he was in love.

“I just...” Jon trailed off, and even in the dark she saw him gulp. Sansa sized him up, realized the truth in about as much time as it took for Jon to speak it. “To my mind the best solution was to marry you.”
“Marry me,” she repeated as if in a daze. “Of course. Of course you did. And then you swooped in here with gifts. Showered me with attention. Affection. Because you knew I’d be desperate for even a little of it.”

Sansa sprung to her feet so fast her head spun a little. It was a weakness she was admitting to, but what was the point in denying it? It was a weakness he’d already exploited.

“That’s not what- Why do you keep twisting things around like this?” Jon asked following her. His distress was so obvious it practically crawled over her, but Sansa could hardly focus on it. She was thinking back to all the things she’d felt that had rung true, but had had no reason why.

Now she had it.

He’d been so singularly focused on her, it had felt overwhelming; even then she’d known it wasn’t normal. That people did not act that way without reason. But she’d ignored it because she’d liked his attention. He’d offered to take her away from a place that made her miserable. Made her part of his council, made her feel like she could do things, make decisions. Made her feel like she had never felt before… so that she’d always think she felt that way because of him, no doubt. It wasn’t as if nobody had done this to her before! She recognised the tactics of it; whether it was love, terror or dependency, they looked the same.

“I concealed the reasons behind my actions at first, but none of what I did after was part of some ploy. I wouldn’t pretend to be what I am not, not for anyone.” Jon said, the look on his face almost mutinous. “Everything I did and said was sincere.”

Sansa scoffed. “So seducing me and making me love you wasn’t just some tactic you chose?”

“He scowled. “Of course not. Why would I? It was never meant to be a real marriage; I only had to get out of the capitol.” When that seemingly quelled her agitation, Jon seemed to take heart and continue. “I would have taken you to Winterfell and left you there. Or Summerhall, or wherever you chose to be. And I would have fucked off somewhere else, never bothered you again.”

Sansa was gaping at him, stunned and perfectly disbelieving. “Why in the name of all the gods would you ever agree to such a thing?”

“I didn’t agree to it.” Jon corrected. “It was my idea. And why not? It was what your family wanted and what you needed. It made no difference to me.”

He said it as if it made perfect sense to him, but Sansa could not see it at all. She’d been right all along: he was unhinged.

“But that changed.” Jon continued, a bit more softly. Trying to persuade her, perhaps. The gentleness in his voice offset the quiet around them and she realized how close they were standing once again. “I wasn’t planning on anything that happened after. It just happened.”

Sansa pursed her lips. “I don’t believe that. I don’t believe you allow things to just happen.”

He scowled. “What do you want me to say? That I saw you and wanted you in the same breath? Would that make you feel better?” he raised his voice a little but then immediately clenched his teeth around his temper. Closed his eyes and if the look on his face was anything to go by, this was almost painful for him. “Why are you trying so hard to find something wrong in everything I did?”

“I’m not. I’m trying to find the truth in what you did[2].” she told him, much calmer now than she had been a moment ago.
Jon passed a hand through his hair, tousling the curls into disarray again.

“Why does it matter why it started!? What difference does it make?” He looked like he was about to scream one moment, and then ready to howl in pain the next. “There is no scheme here anymore, I am not trying to use you! I love you.” He hammered the words in like he meant to brand them on her. "You own me! I am yours. My every feeling is controlled by the look on your face[3]! How many more ways can I say it to make this plain to you?”

There was nothing she could say to that. It felt too cruel, in the face of his distress, to tell him that her heart went out to him as much as it could, but that she did not for a moment believe him. She believed that he believed it, but that was about as far as Sansa could go.

It was sad really. The whole thing, the two of them and everything in between... she felt a little like crying but nothing came out this time. She was a sadness that was completely devoid of hope, and she knew, she could not feel anything worse than this.

“And my parents… my mother and father – they approved of this plan of yours?”

Jon deflated visibly.

“They want you safe,” he told her, sounding exhausted.

“Do they? That’s good of them.” Sansa lifted her chin a fraction. “But, alas, too late. There is no need to worry about that now; I have seen to my own safety”

Jon was watching her from under the shadow of the heartree. She could see his eyes glinting in the dark.

“Your father thinks Jon Arryn was murdered and doesn’t know yet who did it. He thinks Harry is a weak fool who is too close to the wrong people in the capitol for you to be safe by his side.”

“Liar,” Sansa said flatly. “My father doesn’t even know Harry but for what I told him. You think he is a weak fool.”

“A weak fool with dangerous friends, yes. That is what I think, thoughts that I relayed to your parents and grandmother when I met them more than a year ago in White Harbour.” He leaned into her, as if to press the words more firmly against her. “The Eyrie is not safe for you, Sansa. No one knows who actually has power in that place or what would happen to you there. If you would ever even be allowed to leave here, once you are married.”

“And I suppose you will tell me what is safe for me?”

“I am safer for you than anyone else alive,” Jon said fiercely. “I would sooner die than let anything happen to you.”

He did not have the slightest idea. He was the most dangerous thing that could possibly have happened to her!

“Then you can surely bear to hear this: I will sooner die marry a Dragon.”

Jon flinched back as if she’d slapped him again. Sansa did not regret it. She had already moved past it, thinking-

“If my father had such elaborate plans for me, why did he…” It dawned on her before she even finished the question. “A year ago you said. More than a year ago – that’s when you all hatched this
plan.” That had been before she ever wrote to her father about Harry Hardyng and his proposal. “He
could not deny me when I asked him to consider Harry, because he’s too good a match to refuse
without strong reason; it would have been suspicious. Is that not so?”

Jon held her gaze for a moment, before he nodded. Sansa tried to wrap her mind around it, she really
did. But though she hear the words and understood them, the whole picture seemed fleeting, like
smoke. No sooner did she have her hands around it than it changed, vanished, and she had to do the
same thing all over again.

Details kept cropping up. Little things…

“You could have told me what you wanted from the beginning. Why didn't you?”

“Told you what? I had no idea how you would react!”

But he kept tracing circles on his palm with one thumb. Why was he nervous?

“How well I could keep a secret, you mean? How far into whose hand I was.” She could throw the
truth in his face. “If my father has so little faith in my loyalty I wonder why he took the trouble of
involving himself in treason for my sake.”

“It wasn’t your father that bid me to be cautious.”

“No, I’m sure that was your own idea.”

“The capitol is poisonous.”

She scoffed. “You would know I suppose.”

“I didn’t know you,” Jon continued over her through gritted teeth. “I couldn’t place the lives of
people I love into the hands of someone I did not know. Perhaps this would be easier for you to
understand, were not your pride—”

“My pride!”

“-so hurt by my admitting as many scruples about you as I’m sure you had about me!” Jon
continued, unheeding of her outraged interruption.

Sansa glared, but could not deny his words without lying. “So you didn’t trust me ever, then,
because you never told me.”

“I did, I just…” He closed his eyes, took a breath.

“Perhaps you knew the truth would put a severe stop to your plans.” She hazarded and was proven
right when he looked away from her. It was as good of an admission as she was going to get, she
supposed.

“I know I’ve said and done so many things that hurt you.” He said, voice whisper soft. “That I have
made you doubt yourself. I have been deceitful and unjust – especially tonight; I have earned your
wrath, I know it. But I promise the only thing I wanted from the beginning was to help you. It’s why
I came back. The only reason I’m here, is you. And yes, yes!” He said just as she started frowning,
opening her mouth to speak. “At first it was because you were Ned Stark’s daughter, Robb’s sister.
But that changed and you know it.”

“I do know it,” Sansa admitted, voice shaking a bit. “And I am impressed at how well you managed
to use the truth to do dishonest work.”

She couldn’t leave it unsaid. She did not want anything unsaid between them ever again, even though it tasted bitter to see the way his shoulders curled in a little. It was so strange to see she still have power to hurt him, even though by any and all account, she should not. And she didn’t want it, either. She wanted this over, forever. Even being here was starting to feel like too much. Every word he wrenched from her, ever time she simply could not ignore him, was another tug at the frail threat with which she’d stitched herself together all these years.

Sansa straightened her shoulders, planted her feet. Linked her hands in front of her. “Is that all?”

Jon caught her tone, the change in it. Looked almost alarmed by it.

“It’s all I know.”

Sansa nodded. “Thank you, ser, for finally explaining yourself fully. You can tell my parents that I thank them for their pains but their concern is no longer necessary.”

Jon shook his head at her. “This is not about what they bid me anymore. It hasn’t been for a while now.”

He sounded remarkably calm, even though she could see he knew what was coming.

“Be that as it may, my lord father has already given me leave to choose my own husband and I have chosen,” She was glad her voice sounded so steady. There was nothing inside her to mirror it. “I am flattered by your admiration and I apologize for any harm caused. I would be lying if I said it was unconsciously done, so I will not say it.”

Jon frowned. “Are you mocking me?”

“I don’t see how I could.”

“Are you rejecting me?” It was a wonder he could speak at all, in Sansa’s opinion, so tightly were his lips pursed.

“I am.”

His lips fell open in surprise. “Why?”

“Because I choose to!” Sansa snapped. The fact that he seemed so stunned by her rejection, as if it had never occurred to him that it might happen, made her even angrier. “I built my own path. Stone by stone, I built it. And I intend to follow through to the very end. My fate will not be in anyone’s hands but my own ever again. Not my fathers, or my brothers. Or yours.” She gulped. “You more than anyone should appreciate why.”

Jon took a step towards her. “Didn’t you hear me when I said you could marry Harry tomorrow and still be stuck here for all days to come? There is something happening here that is bigger than just the two of you, or even you and me.”

“Then give my father my good wishes, and advise him to use his other daughter’s cunt for whatever it is he deems so important. He gave me up years ago.” She didn’t think about it much; the words left her must as those before, from a place of hurt and little else that was not as ugly. “I have always wondered if Arya was as expendable as I turned out to be. I suppose we’ll find out.”

He scoffed softly. “You don’t love yourself anymore more than I do, do you?”
“On the contrary I love myself dearly.” But more importantly, she’d stopped believing that her existence was erased when anyone else did not, and it had been that, and not love, that had set her free.

“And in your stubbornness, you would lose a friend and ally, just so that you can get your way?”

“Of course not. I may accept your affection and your help, if it’s freely given, but in my experience that has never been the case.” She did not flinch for the judgment she saw in his eyes. “No one gives something for nothing.”

“You clearly find me repellent and that is fine, but what is it that makes you think trusting Harry Hardying instead, is a good idea?” he asked between gritted teeth. His voice shook. Whether with anger or hurt, she did not know. But she could tell that whatever it was he was holding back, it was fierce. It made him shake. “Whatever placid exterior he may present to your face, the truth of him is uglier, Sansa. He is a weak man who will never be worthy of you.”

Sansa tipped her head up. “You’re wrong about him.”

Whatever else may or may not be true, Sansa did trust Harry far more than she trusted Jon. Not only because in so many things Harry was perfectly dependable and predictable, but because she liked him far less, and excused nothing in him the way she was prone to do with Jon. Nor was Harry as embroiled with the Iron Throne as Jon was, so much that it seemed to go against his every instinct, even that of self-preservation, to either deny or defy them by turns.

“I am not wrong.” Jon insisted. “I’ve known men like him all my life. He will come to resent you for all the gifts you have that surpass his own. And he will punish you for them, as all weak men do, who cannot stand to be close to their betters, for fear of others seeing them for what they are.”

Sansa shook her head. “The Vale has different ideas about what the value of a Lady is and how she shows it. Whatever they are is a reflection of their family, their fathers and brothers and husbands. The better the ornament, the more pleased the owner. There would be no reason to punish me for such thing.”

“Because you have no will or aims of your own?” His face was awash in disbelief. “You are not a woman to pretend to be such a creature all your life.”

Sansa turned from him, as if to walk away, but she kept her eyes on his face. “Then perhaps widowhood will suit me better.”

Jon only blinked, but that was the extent of his surprise. And he did not say anything either. He just looked at her.

“You have nothing to say?” She asked then.

Jon shrugged. “Any man you deem worthy of death, I would have killed a hundred times already.”

_unpredictable, in every way._

Sansa straightened. “You have a great deal of faith in my mercy.”

“I have faith in your sense of justice.”

And it could have been one of their usual debates, if everything else had not been so wrong. As it was, it felt a little like walking sideways, tilted against the wind like a ship’s sail.
“And you would want such a wife?” Sansa asked of him then. “You think you’d be safer than Harry from my wrath.”

“I wouldn’t want to be.”

She sighed. Pressed a hand to her face and then against her closed lids, to stave off the headache that was growing behind them.

“Enough.” She said with a sigh. “I’m tired. This conversation has run in circles long enough.”

Jon did not say anything. He wasn’t even looking at her.

“Goodnight, Jon.”

“I won’t give up.”

It stopped her in her tracks, because it almost sounded like a warning. Sansa turned to look at him, a flicker of her initial anger rising again.

“No? Does your affection and offer of help come with the condition of marriage after all?”

He swatted the words away like they were a bothersome fly. “Of course not. I don’t want to marry because of whatever plan hatched twenty thousand miles from here. I want to marry you because I love you.”

She so wished he’d stop saying that.

But instead of telling him so, Sansa walked up to him, so that she could be sure that he was looking at her in the eye. So that he could know that she was not fucking around in the slightest in that moment.

“I need us to be perfectly clear with each other now.” Sansa said as she straightened her skirts and folded her hands in front of herself. “We want different things and no kind of compromise can be made to satisfy either one of us, without the other losing. Which means that in every way that counts, on this field, we are now enemies.”

He reached up, took hold of lock of her hair and let it slide between his fingers, looking at it wistfully.

“I’m not your enemy, Sansa.” Jon said softly.

Sansa gulped. Cleared her throat. “Opposition then. It doesn’t matter what you call it. But, for the sake of whatever honour remains between us, I now warn you: If you as much as think of trying to do something to ruin my reputation or otherwise get Harry to break our betrothal, you will find out exactly how cruel I can be[7].”

For a moment, he looked so heartbroken, she wanted to take the words back.

But it only lasted a moment.

“I wouldn’t hurt you that way.” He told her, his voice so raspy that, in the dark, it made him feel closer than he actually was. Close enough that her skin prickled with awareness. The bitterness of his smile however, reminded her he was not as close as he felt. “I don’t want you to be with me because you have no other option. I want you to choose me. As I chose you.”

Sansa took a step back. She knew she wouldn’t be able to change his mind, just as he wouldn’t
change hers. They were stuck. “Goodnight, Jon. Don’t follow me.”

Sansa turned her back on him and walked the rest of the trail back to the castle alone.

[1] So, in renascence Italy, the gonfaloniere was a magistrate, something that later on in Italy became substituted with the Mayoral post. He who was elected (or a hereditary position in some cases) and was one of the nine of the Signory (in Florence, and sometimes other provinces as well) that formed the government, elected every two months. Here, the Master of Laws has a council of nine members who help him fulfil his duties, the Gonfalonier being the first among them, and more of a military position - in Jon’s case, anyway, because he’s just like that.

[2] This was apparently a thing for the actual Gonfalonieres, though not on a cloak, but on a coat.

[3] “Just as the ancient Greeks and the Etruscans before them, the ancient Romans associated the laurel wreath with victory and success. They saw it as a badge of honor and was only given to a select few who had achieved something extraordinary.”


[6] The inspiration for this line, and the ‘you took me for a purpose. What was it.’ Is from that scene in the first Thro, the confrontation between Loki and Odin. The delivery of those two lines – all that exchange really, but those two especially, is always so heartbreaking to me, so full of pain and rage. That’s how I imagined Sansa delivering those lines here.

[1] This exchange is inspired by a similar scene in The Borgias.


[3] Scandal quote


[6] Inspired by the same exchange in pride and Prejudice.

and they were enemies - iii -

Chapter Notes

Note: Again, lots of Daenerys in this chapter. Dany and Jon, their history – its all gonna come up and be hashed out, so warning for that.

The first scene of this chapter was actually meant to be part of the last one, but it didn’t feel like it fit anymore after I was done with Sansa’s part, so I just moved it. The discussion between Jon and Dany will seem a bit disorienting, because of how they vacillate from one topic to the next, but that is on purpose – because Jon is a bit drunk but also because they know each other so well and usually people who do tend to speak less coherently, yet still understand each other. I just wanted to show, through their ability to follow each other’s line of thought even when it gets messy, that they were familiar with each other. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

viii. and they were enemies - iii -

I love you but I don’t know what to do.

I am tired,
can’t think of anything and want only to lay my face in your lap,
feel your hand on my head and remain like that through all eternity.

I want to be inside your darkest everything

Charles Bukowski // Franz Kafka // Frida Kahlo

xi.

Irri poked her head inside her rooms and nodded and immediately Dany was off her feet and strode through the hallway. Ser Barristan was so surprised by her brisk pace that he struggled for a moment to keep up.

“Princess, this is unwise.” He whispered.

“It’s necessary.” Dany ground out, not stopping. She would face him tonight or the world would fucking fall, that was for certain.

When she came in front of Jon’s door, she was met with the unyielding face of Arthur Dayne.

“Step aside, Ser.” Dany ordered. Ser Arthur did not.
“I cannot, Princess.”

Dany felt her temper flare, like the lick of a bonfire reaching thirty feet high. She did not have time for this shit!

“Do not worry Ser Arthur, Jon as likely to get shagged tonight as the sky is likely to turn red now let me through!”

Ser Arthur had scarcely moved when Dany pushed her way passed him and threw the door of Jon’s room open, not caring if they closed it or not.

She smelt the alcohol the moment she walked and she knew that wherever he sat, a bottle of something fowl would be open in his vicinity. His cavernous room had not changed at all since he disappeared, nor since he came back.

It was dark in there, with barely a few candles to illuminate it. There was not even a fire lit in the hearth. But Dany knew exactly where to look for him. There, at the foot of the bed, as always, half hidden by shadows. That at least had not changed and looking at him for a moment, it might have been years ago, when he was upset and she used to come and find him just like this, inconsolable in the dark and forced solitude. He was sitting on the ground now too, legs akimbo like a boy, staring at the empty hearth.

The door closed behind her almost all the way, but not quite, and it was only then that Jon turned his head, as if the noise startled him. He was on his feet so fast she barely followed the movement.

“Sansa?”

Dany gritted her teeth. “Not quite.”

Before he could say a single thing she threw herself at him and tried to slap him across the face, but he caught her hand and restrained her so quickly, she felt her shoulder strain.

“Daenerys… what have I told you about moving unexpectedly around me?”

He’d told her not to.

“Unhand me this instant before I scream the fucking walls down.” Dany growled.

His hand tightened around her wrist. “Promise not to hit me and I will.”

She tried to elbow him in the gut. “I will make no such promise.” Dany hissed between gritted teeth.

“Then I will not let you go.”

“You smell like a distillery.” She spit out.

“Well, I did swallow half of one.”

Dany felt her lips contort into a sneer. “You fucking idiot.”

She heard his chuckle rumble in his chest. “Yes, that is shaping up to be the prevailing opinion tonight.”

Dany stopped struggling and once her limbs lost their tension, Jon let her go. Still, he took a couple of steps back from her. He was remarkably steady on his feet for someone who smelted as if he’d taken a bath in hard liquor. Not that she cared a lick in this moment, if he choked on his own vomit.
“Jon, how could you?”

His ridiculous sneer fell away, leaving his face more serious and worn than she remembered him. It had been like this ever since he came back, but now it was even more marked. Gods he looked so unhappy…

“I’ll be happy to explain the how as soon as I know the ‘what’.” Jon told her, sitting back down on the cold floor.

Dany hardened. “I expected these kinds of games from the likes of Viserys, not from you.”

Jon’s head snapped up. Even in the half light, she could see his expression shift with anger. “You know better than to compare me to that.”

“I thought so too, but apparently I was wrong.”

The only sign that she was starting to damage his calm was a twitch of his eye. “What are you talking about?”

“Sansa, stupid! I’m talking about Sansa Stark.” At the mention of the name, Dany’s outrage came back, fierce as before. “What were you thinking?”

Jon groaned, putting an arm over his eyes. “I wasn’t.”

She sat down on the ground, close by his side. “You were cruel.”

“What?”

She kicked out with her leg, catching him in the thigh. “Do not take me for some bumbling fool - or worse, someone who does not know your mind. You know what you were doing and you were doing it on purpose. You know she cannot refuse you in court!”

“Yes she can!” Jon said suddenly and quite loudly, dropping his arm to glare at her. “She chooses not to, because she has chosen an image and she lives by it.”

Dany waved his words away as if they were a bothersome fly. “Yes, yes, she is a liar like everyone else. Are you so upset that your illusion was broken that you wanted to punish her for it?”

She never would have believed him of something so small-hearted. Jon never was the kind.

He grimaced. “Don’t be ridiculous. I already knew.”

“Right. You knew that’s how she protects herself so you took that tactic and used it against her in the most loathsome way.”

“So what if I did.” He said dropping his head back against the foot of the bed, staring up at the dark ceiling with no expression. Not even a muscle on his face moved. For a moment Dany wanted to put some distance between them.

They had been cruel to one another so often in the past, but theirs had been the games of children. And childhood was long past.

This was something else.

“How could you do it?” Dany asked in a stunned whisper.
He shrugged. She would have thought him careless if not for the look on his face.

“Perhaps I wanted to show her how it felt.”

Dany scowled. “Gods men are dull.”

Jon rolled his eyes. “Yes, in the name of my sex, forgiv-”

“Shut up! Sansa Stark does not need lessons in cruelty! She could offer some even to loathsome creatures like you.”

Jon chuckled darkly. “Could she ever.”

“Oh poor baby, she hurt your feelings, so you try to make her teh talk of all King’s Landing? Were you asleep when the Maesters taught us of the proportionality of a punishment, or are have you grown thick-witted?”

Jon said nothing for quite a while, before he let his head fall forward into his hands with a small groan. “Why is she so stubborn?”

Dany scoffed. “Why are you?”

“And proud!”

“Of course she is proud! What else does she have but pride?”

“I would give her anything she wanted.” Jon murmured, as if to himself and Dany felt herself go unnaturally still with surprise.

xii

Jon honestly thought there was nothing at all he could deny her. Except for maybe leaving her be. That he could not do. He would give her everything but that.

But she wouldn’t have him, would she?

“This is a dangerous game you’ve started, Jon.” He heard Dany say in a whisper. “You cannot have Winterfell.”

That startled him out of his stupor. He straightened and blinked at her, as if he was just now waking up to the fact that she was really there still.

“I don’t-”

But Dany carried on over him. “Sansa has a brother who is strong and healthy and not likely to die anytime soon, no matter what is happening in the North. And if you think you can somehow-”

“I don’t want Winterfell.” Jon repeated through tightly gritted teeth. The thought of Robb dead made whatever was left of his conscience curdle inwards like a wounded animal.

“Well, everyone thinks you do!” Dany snapped.

“Do they now?” A strange calm came over him, even as he felt his throat tighten and his eyes burn. “Is that so easy to believe?”
He didn’t mean to ask it aloud. It just slipped out.

“Anything is easy to believe if you present it the right way.”

No, not anything. Not to everyone.

“Rumors about you and Sansa started going around just a week after you left, and when Rheagar tried to get Harry to agree to an engagement—”

“Brilliant move, that.” Jon drawled.

“It got worse. The details of what’s happening in the north are not public yet, but those who know think for sure the King is trying to make a move to secure the North now that the Starks are weak.”

Jon snorted.

“I have loved Robb since first I met him. Everyone knows I love the Starks. But somehow, me wanting to marry Sansa and kill her brother, a man I love as if he were my brother, is easy to believe.”

“Your reputation precedes you.” Dany said with a sigh.

A wave of anger so strong came over him he felt the edges of his vision go dark.

His reputation, she said, but all Jon could think about was Sansa’s smile and her sad eyes when she told him he should learn to love himself. How obvious it had been to her that he did not and how that had felt. Being exposed like that. How she’d touched him with nothing but kindness. He could feel her even now, the memory of her so alive it felt like a ghost at his side, her chin on his shoulder as she stared at the side of his face.

How different it had been, from the scorn on her face just hours ago…

Jon got up, started pacing in front of the hearth. He hadn’t realized all the shades of his grand romantic gesture, until it was over and her eyes were alight with blistering rage. He’d wanted to show her and everyone else what he meant to do, what she was to him. He’d wanted to lay claim to her for all to see, it was true. He was man enough to admit that; no matter how he felt about it now, he would not deny it. He had wanted all to know and he had wanted her to know that he would not be denied. He hadn’t really thought about… he hadn’t really thought. Not beyond the line of his anger.

And yes, he had wanted to share the glory, because it was hers in the first place, why the fuck should he not have!

A thousand reasons, as it turns out. And he had not had the presence of mind to care about a single one of them, while Sansa had found the one that would hurt him the most and shoved it right between his ribs without hesitation. Jon could not resent her for it either: he’d earned it. Crowning a Stark woman without her knowledge in front of most of the nobles of the land.

His father’s son indeed.

Jon grabbed the first thing within his reach, and threw it at the wall. The sound of glass smashing did not give him a single drop of satisfaction.

“Yes, passing an isolated girl from the hands of the Mad Prince to the claws of the Black Bastard.” Jon sneered. “Our reputation does precede us.”
Dany looked at her hands, folded as they were in her lap.

“It’s all for nothing, you must know that.” She said without looking at him. There was almost a note of pleasing in her voice. “Ned Stark will write his daughter out of the line of succession before he lets Winterfell fall into the hands of a Targaryen.”

The words were out of his lips before he really thought about them. “I’m his nephew.”

That more than anything was a reminder that, despite his dark mood and the desperation he felt had swallowed him whole, one that even the strongest mead could not dull, Jon had not given up.

Slowly, his alcohol-slow brain turned on Dany’s words and he almost smiled. She knew what she was doing, bringing his uncle Ned into this.

“You are Rheagar’s son.” She said harshly. “You think just because he’s quiet about it, Ned Stark doesn't hate us for what our family did to his?”

Yes, she knew what she was doing.

But so did Jon.

“I am his family. He doesn’t hate me.”

Dany stood up and came closer to him. In the candlelight, her ever expression seemed to be heightened and hidden by the play of light and shadow on her face. He could see plainly both anger and fear there, as she neared him.

“Your father killed Ned Stark’s father and his brother. He killed his best friend, kidnapped his sister!”

Jon’s anger rose to the surface of his skin like a fever and instinctively, he repeated old words. “My mother was not-”

“Would it make a difference to you whether I went willingly or not, if I disappeared from my home one day and the man who helped me do this, impregnated me and I died giving birth to his child, while barely more than a child myself?”

Jon’s blood boiled even as his head swam with all the images she conjured. She knew each and every one of his wounds and she’d just stuck her fingers into all of them.

“Would you forgive such a man?” Dany asked thickly.

Would he? Jon did not even know what he felt for Rheagar himself and he was the man’s son. If he’d been in Ned Starks’ place…

No. He was enough of Rhaegar’s son to know that he would never forgive. And enough of Lyanna’s son to admit that he would never forget either.

“I would have killed him and all those who so much as smiled at him.”

Dany released a long breath.

“And if all that wasn't enough, my brother had the gall to take both Lyanna’s son and Ned Stark’s second-born as conditions for peace and a treaty he’s never even signed. Make no mistake, Jon.” Danny stepped close to him, took hold of his sleeve, as if she was physically taking hold of his attention. “Ned Stark hates Rheagar and if he could kill him, my brother’s blood would flow a
thousand times.” Dany touched his cheek, urging him to look at her. Her eyes were wide and pleading. “I know you want to place to belong, but Winterfell can never be that place.”

Jon flinched away from her. “Fuck’s sake! This is not about that!”

“Oh, and you fell in love with Sansa Stark in the month you’ve known her?” Dany asked, gentleness forgotten now that she saw that it wouldn’t get through to him.

Jon laughed, a choked, pathetic sound.

_Fuck!_

“Yes, I did.” Even had it not been true, it would have been the simplest lie he ever told. “She’s easy to love.”

“I know she is. Just like I know you’re a liar.”

Jon let himself fall into the nearest chair. “Never said I wasn’t.” He felt drained, like his own limbs couldn’t hold his body up. It might be his exhaustion, it might be the drink. It might be that he wanted to crawl into the ground and never come up again until he felt a modicum of respect for himself, instead of all this shame and anger.

Dany snorted. “Spare me, I know you don’t love her.”

Jon felt his lips curl upwards. Not into a smile, not really. All he felt was scorn. “You don’t believe I can love, do you?”

“Oh, I know you can.” Dany responded, and she sounded so sincere, it drove him even further into his own darkness for doubting her. “But you don’t love Sansa Stark. You _want_ something.”

“Yes. I want Sansa Stark to be my wife.”

“Strange, since you never gave a single witch’s teat about her before.” Dany spat out and Jon could taste the resentment.

He couldn't look at her in that moment, because he knew she had reason to resent him. Just like Sansa had reason to resent her own family. For all their weakness and ineptitude, they both had reason. He would hate the whole world if he’d been in their place.

He very nearly did.

“No I didn't.” Jon admitted slowly. “That was wrong. I am a better man than I was.”

“You’re the same man, playing a dangerous game.”

Jon looked at her again, taking careful stock of her posture, her balled fists, the downward curve of her mouth, her tense shoulders.

“Are you threatening me, Dany?”

Her smile was sad. “No. I love you.”

And he loved her. When she was cruel and when she was kind, he loved her still, in some kind of way. He just couldn’t find it in him to feel it, in that moment.

“Mine is just a warning, Jon. I will leave the threats to Lady Stark.”
Jon could have laughed. “So you won’t help me.” he asked her then.

“No. I may love you but in this I trust you as little as you trust me, it seems.”

“I do trust you.”

“Not with your plans, whatever those may be.”

Jon did not look away from her, but he did not say anything either.

“No it seems not.” Dany repeated. “And I love Sansa too, you know.”

“Do you?” He tilted her head, looked at her. He didn’t mean his smile to look mocking but the words out of his mouth made it so. “You love her more than you love me?”

Dany tensed. “She seems to need my love more than you do.”

Jon laughed. Ygritte used to tell him he loved like a starving man. Greedy, she’d call him. A harsh lover, no matter how gently he touched her, because his harshness was in how he loved like he wanted to devour. There was no room for gentleness in that. Not when his loving was ravenous; a slide down the razor’s edge between fear and wanting. He was never happy with love as it came to him unless he was gnawing it to the bone, chasing it to the very end, obsessively, relentlessly, without anything left in his heart.

He loved, she’d told him one night, when she’d been half drunk and laughing, like he never doubted he would lose it. And that had made sense to her, because that was how she lived. But it never made sense to anyone else, not even to Jon, not really. All he knew was that when he really thought about it, and when he did not, he could remember every loss he’d ever had and every one he would have. And whenever he managed to love something, they all happened at the same time, over and over again, like a wheel turning at the back of his mind, snapping at his heels. Never leaving him be. Never letting him rest in love. Never full. Always starving.

He’d never really thought he’d meet anyone who needed it more. But he had.

It should rightly terrify him, to meet a person that was as so like him and so different at the same time. Who needed what he needed, but from opposite sides. Whose qualities on anyone else would have been petrifying.

It should have scared him, but Jon was not afraid. Even in his desperation over how everything had so gone to shit, this was his comfort: he loved her. No one could take that from him, not even she could.

Jon rested his head back on the sofa and let himself feel it. How it hurt his heart to think of her, almost as if it was shedding old calluses. He was in love and he was loved, he knew in his heart that he was - and no man, no king, and no earthly fear - whether hers or his - would keep him from her. Even if it hurt, even if it felt like a knife he kept turning inside himself; it was love. Like this, like hunger, to the very open-mouthed end.

Yes, it was a comfort, because it was there.

“I had this thought tonight.” Jon said slowly, having ignored her completely. “When I was asking her about the song. ‘Men are loyal to violence above all.’ That’s what she said.”
She’d told him she would not help him. Told him Sansa needed her more and that she would be on her side in this, and she had expected some kind of reaction. But none came.

“The way she was looking at me… it reminded me of the last time i went hunting beyond the wall. A strange working of memory. It was a few years ago. The pelt of shadowcat I brought you, i got on that hunt.”

“I remember,” Dany said softly, almost afraid to remind him she was there. He never spoke of his time away.

“You're moving through the snow, getting a glimpse of the prey, the shoulders mostly. You prepare your bow, you're quiet. And then there's a moment. The wind changes, the snow stops falling. There is this stillness in the air. The shadowcat turns, looks at you.” He looked at her quite suddenly and Dany realized that he hadn’t been so far into his memory as he’d seemed. “That’s when you know you’re no longer the hunter.”

And he was smiling at her like he was telling some joke, though the look on his face was forlorn and he’d just told her of how he’d almost died.

“Sansa won’t *hunt* you unless you provoke her.”

Jon let his head fall against the back of the stuffed chair he sat on. “I’m not prey in this scenario, Daenerys. I’m meeting my destiny.”

Dany rolled her eyes. “You’re drunk.”

He chuckled. “Happens to the best of us. What happened the night Viserys died?”

She was so startled that she almost took a step back. Daenerys had never had difficulties following his random turns of thought. That was not why she was so still she was barely breathing now.

She found him looking at her with eyes that were far more alert than any drunk man would have been capable of.

“Nothing happened,” Dany responded, trying to relax her shoulders. “He passed in the night.”

“No.” Jon said again, irritated. She knew of course what he was asking, she was just avoiding the question. “The night he got his wounds. What happened?”

“I don’t know.”

“Daenerys.”

Her name sounded like a warning. She bristled to hear it.

“Jon.” She matched his tone exactly.

He sighed. “Why do you lie to me when you know that I will know it?”

“I don’t know. Why does a bear shit in the woods?”

He scowled. “For fucks sake.”

“No, not even for that.”

But Jon was not amused. Or distracted. “She told me.” He said slowly.
Dany levelled a sharp look at him. “If she told you then what are you asking me for?”

“She told me what happened to her hand.” Jon repeated deliberately. “And I saw her back too.”

“You what?”

Her vehemence startled Jon a bit. “What?”

Dany could not help herself however. It was simply too outrageous a lie. Had it been anyone else, Dany might have believed Jon had managed to charm his way into their bed, but not Sansa. Charm hardly ever worked with her; she was suspicious of it, in fact. Patience might, but where Jon had plenty of the one, he mostly went without the other. Not to mention how aware Sansa was of the precarious nature of a woman’s reputation! She would never allow a man that much power over her, let alone someone she’d only just met. And she would never show her injuries to anyone either: she was acutely ashamed of them in a way that was not entirely rational. If Dany hadn’t been there when she had her hand treated, not even she would have known the extent of Sansa’s injuries.

It simply made no sense.

“Forgive me for finding it hard to believe that a notoriously guarded lady like Sansa would just disrobe in front of you and show you her scars!” She told Jon scathingly.

“Of course she didn’t! What are you on about?”

“You just said-“

“It was an accident!”

“I still don’t believe you.”

She saw him narrow his eyes on her. “He did her back to punish her for taking back Lady’s pelt. And her hand because… because she was no longer afraid of him.”

Dany sat down, speechless. “Gods…” the words came out in a whisper. “Why did she tell you?”

“Why shouldn’t she?”

She was acutely aware in that moment, that for all that they were alone in this room, no one was ever really alone in the Rd Keep. Hells, just outside the door there were two men of the kingsguard probably listening in. Here she was, loath to mention Sansa’s and Viserys’ names in the same sentence and Jon had the gall to ask why?!

“Because she could be killed, idiot!” Dany hissed, voice pitched so low a fly would have drowned it. “You and I both know how Rheagar feels about any hints of anything but perfect conduct when it comes to our reputation. And how Connington enforces my brother’s wishes.”

“I won’t betray her confidence.”

“Obviously she believes you.” Dany said then. That, more than anything was what she struggled to accept.

“And that surprises you?”

“Yes!”

Jon closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the couch. “Yes, it surprised me too. But I
know she trusts me.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that, after that stunt you pulled tonight.” Though now that she knew the extent of Jon’s knowledge, Sansa’s acquiescence made better sense. But why would she ever -

Jon shook his head slowly. “No. She’s angry, but she does trust me still. I know it.”

It sounded more like he was trying to convince himself. “And you know that how?”

His smile was undecipherable. “She slapped me.” He said softly, as if to himself.

Dany was just about ready to lose her patience completely. “Mother’s cunny Jon, make sense!”

Jon pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes and groaned. “Gods, that stupid fuck. I should have killed him when I had the chance.”

Oh…

He meant Viserys of course. Who else.

“Yes, perhaps you should have.” Dany murmured, looking at her nephew without daring to blink. She might have been ashamed for that sentiment once. Viserys had been her big brother, and she had known him better, as a girl, than she ever knew Rheagar, who had been at best a distinct presence in her life. She had loved him once, when he had not been quite so bitter and cruel. She had adored him.

“Her hand- when did that happen?”

The question startled Dany out of her reverie. “What?”

“When was it? How long ago?”

Dany frowned. “Why does it matter?”

“It matters!” Jon hissed.

She could see plainly that it did. “A year ago, more or less.”

“More of less… Were you there?”

“What?” She couldn’t even speak above a whisper. What could possibly possess him to ask her that?

“Were you with her, when Vi-”

Dany rose from her seat, pressed her hand against his mouth to silence him, heart beating so fast she thought it might crawl up her throat and straight out of her mouth.

“Don’t talk about it like that.” She whispered fiercely. *Do not say their names together ever,* she wanted to say, but could not. Her voice was shaking, but her hand was steady. “Not here, or anywhere. Not ever. Not *ever,* Jon.”

Jon nodded slowly, and Dany let herself fall to the seat next to his, hands on her face, breathing as if she’d been running. Gods, secrets were exhausting, and she kept collecting more and more each year. Sansa was right - you had to forget you ever knew some of them. You had to bury them deep, or they would bury you. And Sansa should know. She was full of secrets and one could not even tell, unless you knew her well. And nobody did, not really.
But Jon had managed to come closer than most. As close as Dany, almost.

Obviously, Dany thought, she had not told him all of it. She’d unmistakably given herself away now, but had Jon known from the beginning that she had been involved, he would have just said so. Slammed it in her face, in that brazen way of his. But he did not know. Sansa had only shared with him the parts of the story that were hers to share. She was good like that, Lady Stark. She expected to be betrayed, but did not betray anyone unless she had cause.

But that wasn’t always true, was it. Dany had given her cause enough, many times. And she had not been betrayed so far. They had kept each other’s secrets without keeping tally. Though apparently, she did part with her secrets every once in a while. And with Jon, of all people…

daenerys was starting to understand that Lady Stark had been wrong after all: her truth and Jon’s did not differ that much, after all.

“She was abed for days, you know. After the… accident.”

Jon scoffed. “Accident, was it?”

“I stayed with her.” Dany’s voice shook, tears gathering at the corner of her eyes. “My brother was dying on the other side of the castle, but I could not leave her. I couldn’t”

She shook her head, gulped down her feelings.

“Rheagar was stricken with grief about Viserys, you know how he is. But I think I saw Connington actually shit his britches when five of the eight Maesters taking care of Sansa told him they thought she’d die too.”

“Not a good look for us is it? Killing two Stark women in as many generations.”

There was such scorn in Jon’s voice but she was so deep in her memory, she hardly noticed. Only nodded.

“They were right to worry. Her wound was grave and she caught a fever. Was delirious with it some nights. Spoke in her sleep. I think she must have dreamt of her family.” The memory was so vivid and still so frightening, that the words slipped out of her as if she was confessing something. “Sansa doesn’t remember at all, she was drugged out of her mind… but she’d wake sometimes, in the night. She’d sit up and stare into the dark. Call out to them as if they were there in the shadows with her.”

Jon groaned softly. “Yes, I know, we heard her calling.”

Dany turned her heard towards him abruptly. “What?”

His hands was still pressing against his temples, as if he had a headache, his voice rough, slow, the words sticking together - but she’d heard him.

Dany waited for an answer but none came, so she and took his wrists, lowered his hands so that she might see his face. So that he might see hers. She wiped away the one tear that had managed to slip free, heart aching for him, but determined to make him understand her. It was important that he understood, because whatever happened after tonight, whether he became prey or met his destiny, Dany knew one thing for certain: there would be no quarter for either of him or Sansa.

“I know why you want her.” She said carefully. “She looks sweet and chaste - and fierce too, which fascinates you, because it’s something you don’t fully understand, but Sansa is not the way she seems.”
His smile was bitter. Mocking. “I wonder why everyone keeps saying that like they're the first ones to say it. I wonder how many people you know, who are exactly as they seem.”

Dany let go of him. “You will tire of her and break her heart, and I will hate you, Jon.”

Jon watched her from beneath his lashes for a long moment, then shrugged. “Perhaps in hate, we shall be happier. Gods know we never got much joy from love.”

Dany clenched her jaw. Stood up so that she was looking down at him. The days she got hurt were long past; she got even now. But Jon… Jon still had the ability to make her flinch.

“Know this. If I find out that you have been cause for her pain, I will have you killed.”

He smiled, lazily almost. “Ah, there you are.” he leaned forward then, elbows on his knees, but even though he was looking up at her and his movements were slow with drink and exhaustion, he still managed to seem as if he was looking down his nose at her. “Are you sure you’re not jealous?”

The suggestion, or rather that he would make it so openly, left her unable to respond, but only for a moment. “So what if I am?”

“Then you should stop pretending that you care about Sansa Stark. It doesn't seem to suit you.”

Her eyes narrowed on him. “You know little about me anymore, let alone what suits me. And I can be jealous and worry about a friend at the same time.”

Jon leaned back on his seat again, spreading his thighs open as he got comfortable as if on a throne, digging one heel on the carpet below. “Seems a bit of a contradiction to me, love.”

“I don’t care how it seems to you!”

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She paced in front of him, and Jon waited. He knew her temper. He only had to give her time, to have her blast in his hands like a fireball.

But that was who she had been. Dany too had changed in his absence.

“The thought of another woman having you is ridiculous. And horrific.” She finally admitted, stopping in front of him. “I can admit that. But the thought of you stringing Sansa along on some merciless plan, using her and lying to her… She is not like us, but trust me when I tell you that she will be no safe harbour for you if you hurt her.”

No, she would not be, would she, Jon thought as he chuckled to himself. Shed fucking slit his throat. Well – no. that’s what Jon would do. Or Dany even. Sansa… He sighed and thought about it from her point of view.

No, Sansa would be much more sophisticated about it. She was more careful than anyone he’d ever met. It would be some accident or other, with her. Something subtle, that took a long time perhaps. Something that would never tie back to her. Death at her hands would be masterfully planned, meticulously executed.

*That* was her style. The trap would snap closed and you would never feel it, with her.

What did it matter anyway - the end would be the same.
Jon held out his hand, and when Dany took it after a suspicious look and a sigh, he pulled her gently between his legs.

“You were right you know. That last time we spoke. We did love each other.” Jon said and saw the look on her face change as she remembered. “But we were possessive of each other. We still are. And we resented each other and tried to control each other.”

Sometimes love in a dark place became other things too. Things that had twisted them into ugly shapes. It was no less love. But did it have to be that way always?

“We needed each other to survive this place. Maybe the love couldn’t survive the need.”

Dany’s lip shook. She bit down on it to make it stop. “No? You have no love for me then?”

He could hear the tears in her voice.

“I have a great deal of love for you.” The part of him that was grateful he still recognized himself, would always belong to Dany; just like a part of her would always belong to Jon for the same reason.

“When we needed it the most, we kept each other safe and sane.” Jon smiled. “Well, as sane as possible. That will always be true.”

But they way they’d loved each other had not been good. There had been little to it that had been kind, both of them too fiery, surrounded by too much venom, too powerless to do anything about it, too angry about it and too fucking young, to preserve that little softness they'd found in each other.

It was what it was, and then it was – not gone, but changed. It might even be for the better.

Sansa would certainly think so. She’d think you could not love someone, if you needed them that much just to survive.

His hand tightened around Dany’s wrist. “You need to leave this place.” He finally said, looking at her again. “While you still can.”

“The way you did?”

“Yes. The way I did.” The way he still planned to do. “Leave, and stay away, Dany.”

“This is my home.”

“Make a new home. Somewhere else. Somewhere safe, where you won’t need to be terrible just to survive.”

She scoffed. Took her hand away from his. “And where is that?”

“Fucked if I know. I'm willing to look for it though.”

Dany took her hand from him gently. He let it slip through his fingers.

“Is that what you’re doing now? Looking for a place where you can be a better man?”

Jon took a moment to answer that. “Would that be so bad?”

“What happens if she can’t give you what you need? If she can't be the solution to all your problems?”
Jon shook his head. “That’s not what I want.”

“No? Well if not that, then what? Everyone wants something.” Dany told him, gentleness gone from her voice as she put the distraction that was their history behind her. “Viserys wanted something from Sansa too. And from me. Power, love, respect. He wanted to be our god, and when he did not get what he wanted, he would hurt us both.”

“I am not Viserys.” Jon growled, feeling cornered by her angle this time.

“You may not want the same things but you both went looking for them in the same place.” Dany said curtly. “You’ve always wanted to be loved, to be seen, to belong and you don’t seem to understand that no one can give you that. No one should ever be made to try. She can’t make you better, Jon.”

“No?” He sneered, standing abruptly, making her stumble back. “Am I that irredeemable to your eyes?”

“Enough with the self-pity, and listen to what I say! No one has that power but you. Sansa has her own demons to deal with.”

“Maybe so. I’ll help with hers as she helps me with mine.”

Dany made an incredulous sound. “Is that the bases of her appeal?”

Jon tensed, and then she saw him just… change. He straightened and his face went cold. “Every time I get close to thinking you might still know me for who I am, you remind me of how long it’s been, since we have had a proper talk.

Dany turned on her heel. “Don’t lie to yourself Jon. I may not know you as well as I did once, but there are parts of you that will never change, and I know them all.” She paused close to the door and turned to look at him. “There will not be a repeat of what happened tonight, with there?”

Jon walked towards his bed, took off his boots and then fell on it.

“No.”

“Good. Because if there is, I will not be just a witness.”

And that, Jon knew, was a threat.


Chapter End Notes

I have been writing so fast cause I’m at the beach and I only have a limited amount of access to internet, which I have been using to post the chapters - but that also means
that, for a bit (perhaps a week or so), I won’t be able to answer comments extensively like I usually do, but once I get back home I definitely will.
AN: so... took me a while, didn’t it? XD I got a bit sidetracked by my own insecurity there for a hot minute.

I wanted to thank everyone who commented on last chapter (I know I haven’t responded yet but I will - I just wanted to make sure I was writing again before I answered). In moments when the story faces readers with something they don’t like, or a conflict that seems rushed (and therefore lacks believability), all those inconsistencies and weak points of the story that were easy to ignore before, are not that easy to ignore anymore, and I suppose that’s what happened. So many of you brought up a lot of very valid points, things that needed to be figured out (by me), before I could go on writing. The comments that impacted me most were the ones concerning characterization and character arcs. Some things that were pointed out were intentional on my part (like Jon’s obsessive nature; his insecurity regarding affection, which causes that possessiveness; his tendency to be a bit self-centred when he feels bad. Sansa’s abandonment issues, the irrationalities deriving from that, the effect of her trauma which includes but is not limited to her inability to give into love or accept it while also feeling safe). Other things however were definitely not my intention. So I spiralled a bit in self doubt regarding that, bc I don’t really know how to fix it to my satisfaction yet.

Truth is, I have come face to face with the fact that I can’t really write yet at the level I *want* to write. I try to do things within the story, hint or infer things with sometimes little success and in doing that, I only manage to create confusion. I am trying my hardest, but it is what it is, you know. And I’d rather finish this story in a flawed way, then get caught up in details I don’t yet know how to fix and never finish it at all.

I really hope to be able to continue with coherence and bring this story to a satisfying closure. I have a nagging fear that – like so many stories I have read and written, this one too is starting to lag behind, its momentum slowing by now; but I trust that if that happens, you guys will let me know, so that I can at least try to fix it.

Ps: THIS IS IMPORTANT so I wanted to reiterate: its nobodys fault I stopped writing for a while (I also had 2 exams and uni has started full freaking force, btw, ao thats gonna play on my schedule going forward, unfortunately). I have always taken feedback very seriously in the sense that it has honest to god helped me write better in the long run. You can genuinely see this if you go back to my old stories: there is a noticeable difference and more than half of it is because I learned thru ppl’s feedback, how to better achieve what I wanted in a story. I value you guys pointing out things that feel weird to u, or that feel disjointed or not developed, or even random questions and observations (I learn what sticks, what doesn’t, the importance of using the right vocabulary for that, of wording things right. This is a learning process for me) because that forces me to answer those questions better, either in the course of writing or the next story. But sometimes the jump in quality I WANT to make takes time. And that is in no way shape or form a bad thing. I might pick it up as I write now, or use the lessons I learned in this story to my next one. The bummer I got was at myself, as in, I was frustrated with my own slowness at learning, writing out this story like its supposed to be in my head. Which is a negligible side effect, and I got over it. I honestly think it will serve me well in the long run, so please, nobody apologise. The note was meant to tell you guys that while I see and hear the rightness of what you pointed out, I might not be able to fix it to my and your satisfaction yet. Aka im not ignoring good, thoughtful feedback - just growing into it
Editing note: I have done some editing – nothing big really, a phrase here or there, adding insights about the characters that at the time i didn’t have, but reached later on. However in xiii. ‘and they were enemies - ii - , part x (the chapter where Jon and Sansa fight in the godswood of the Red Keep) there was some heavy editing done. I decided to add a resolution to their argument, one that it initially did not have. Jon and Sansa were meant to end their fight without resolving anything (like in the original version posted). That would happen later, when they’d both had a chance to cool off and think more clearly. But that scene was upsetting the whole construct of this chapter; i didn’t know where to put it, where it would make sense, considering what else needed to happen. So I just changed the ending of the previous chapter, to make the resolution fit there instead (there was the build-up, the explosion, the grief and then the exhaustion – and the ‘resolvement’ of their fight came at this stage. It’s more like an acknowledged stalemate, in truth, from both of them. A subtle declaration that they are now standing at two different sides of a river.

Anyway – onwards.

ix. the center will not hold - i -

"i’ve spent the last half year digging
through flesh, nails caked with marrow
bruised knuckles squeezing
through too-tight ribs

whispers grow louder with panic,
prayers ascend, it has to be here
somewhere—but there is
no exit wound"

In this love
you are
a knife
with which I
explore myself

exit wound, saltwaterskies // Letters to Milena, Kafka

i.

When Jon showed up in front of the double oaken doors of the Queen’s apartments, without invitation or permission, he knew that he might very well have been turned away. He thought he would be, in fact, and was rather surprised when the guard at the door stood aside to let him pass.

But then again, perhaps it was to be expected. Since as far back into his childhood as he could
remember, Elia had always left standing orders with her guards that her children were always
allowed to pass through into whatever room she was, whether she was having lunch or holding
court. In this generosity, as she did in many other ways, she stood apart from her husband.

Jon took a breath and passed through the archway, into the queen’s private solar. Upon entering he
found the inner circle of Elia’s entourage was gathered there. Her ladies were scattered in clusters
around the brightly lit space of the solar. Three were sitting close by the unlit hearth, embroidering
and chatting with one another. He thought he could spy turell colors on one of them, but with the
way the Queen’s ladies exchanged clothes, you’d never know. Tyene was playing the harp, looking
as angelic as ever in her simple white dress and long honey-gold hair free around her shoulders. A
few women were gathered along the windows sipping at their tea. Jon saw Nymeria passing a letter
to the woman next to her, glancing quickly look down the front of her dress at her chest, before she
sipped at her tea again to hide her smile. Myrcella Baratheon was there as well, playing cyvasse with
another lady in a red dress, whose face Jon could not see and whose hair were as dark as
Myrcella’s[1] though not as curly.

The queen was seated at the mahogany table at the corner of the room, probably answering official
petitions that she must have received in this morning’s session of court. The tapestry behind her was
not the one Jon remembered. This one had the first Daenerys depicted on it in – he knew
immediately. The white-haired woman was side by side with her husband, Maron Martell in the
Water Gardens, surrounded by greenery and blood oranges, the sun of Dorne behind her and
children playing around them.

Jon smiled. Everyone thought Elia wielded soft power, but Jon knew it was always wise to fear
someone who knew exactly who they were. And the queen never allowed anyone to forget.

Obara was at her side, as she ever had been, clad in the white and gold armour of the kingsguard and
leaning into the high back of the queen’s chair. Every now and then Elia seemed to hold back a
smile, at what were probably some of Obara’s more outrageous suggestions on how to answer the
Queen’s correspondence.

It seemed that Jon had been right: in her habits, the Queen was as reliable as she was in all else. Little
had changed about her. Even her face did not seem to show time as much as all the others he had
come across, though the strands of grey and white through her hair told another story. It should have
been reassuring, but in truth, it only served to louder reminder of how they had parted last.

The room fell into silence when, one by one, the Queen’s guests caught sight of Jon standing there
like a great big shadow. It was as if his mere presence was taking the lightness out of the room; as if
they could feel his bad temper.

He bowed stiffly, as he met Elia’s wide, dark eyes, saw the surprise flicker there.

“Your grace.”

Elia did not acknowledge him for moments that seemed endless. It was rarely that Elia was so tense
and showed it, so everyone paid very careful attention – Jon as well. It was as if every person there
held their breath, eyes trained on the Queen to see which way the coin would fall. Elia set the pen in
her hand aside at last, and with one move of her hand, bid her ladies to leave her.

As if in one motion, they rose and left the rooms, far more quietly than they did anything else, Jon
knew. Oberyn’s daughters eyed him with different scales of distrust as they passed. Tyene still had a
smiled for him, though that was one chalice he did not intend to drink from again.

Obara lingered deliberately.
“You too, Obara.” Elia told her gently.

“If your grace so wishes.” Obara said through gritted teeth.

“I do. Inform anyone that wishes for an audience that the queen is occupied.”

“Yes your grace.” She moved from behind the desk and as she passed, she slammed her shoulder into Jon, met his eyes as well as if he did not already know that it had been on purpose.

Jon kept his peace.

He waited until the door closed behind the last of them before he spoke.

“A cold welcome, is it not?”

Elia rose from her seat, walked towards him, her elegant hands folded in front of her beneath the cascading sleeves of her silk dress.

“An overdue visit.” She countered calmly.

Jon sighed. He was not quick to feel remorse; he did not see the point of it. He made a decision and then lived with the consequences, for good or ill. Wondering about what he could have done differently seemed a waste of time and effort to him, when he could be fixing whatever he’d done wrong. But be that as it may, Elia Martell, Queen of the seven kingdoms and mother of his siblings, had always had a way of making him feel ashamed of his mistakes, and not just sorry for them. So Jon straightened his shoulders now and linked his hands behind his back. He knew he’d made a mistake so he’d come to make amends; but he would have to admit to the truth before he could do so.

“I have kept away out of shame.” He said frankly. “For the words I hurled at you the last time we spoke. They were cruel and unjust. You did not provoke nor did you ever deserve my anger. I come now to ask for your forgiveness, if you can give it.”

She was looking at him with what Jon thought was sadness, but he might be wrong. Elia was not one to be read half as easily as anyone else. After all, she’d had more practice in concealing her true self than most people Jon knew. Whenever in his life he’d found himself in need of showing poise, it was Elia, and not his father that he always thought of.

“It is given.”

She said it simply, as if she’d only been waiting for him to ask, and then sat down at one of the small tables set for tea.

Jon hesitated.

“Come Jon, sit with me.” Elia invited then, but there was a weariness in her voice, as if she thought he would not.

He could not blame her. Ever since he’d come back he’d avoided her. He had not felt it possible to just go to her. Hadn’t had the balls to do it, until now. He could not just take a seat now, as if nothing had happened; but neither could he stand there, denying her.

It was an impossible choice! Just like the one he was facing with Sansa, that filled him with doubt and indecision and that had finally brought him to Elia’s door, because there was no one else he could talk to who would be wiser in what to do.
He did as he was bid, and in recompense received a smile.

“You forgive too easily.” Jon said as he took the cup Elia offered him, the familiar strong scent of dornish tea helping him relax. “I have done nothing yet to deserve it.”

“Forbearance should be earned, it’s true; but sometimes it must be given, simply because it is needed.” She smiled at him then, in that way of hers that made her seem impish almost, and reminded him that she was the sister of the Red Viper, where so many forgot it. “I thought I had taught you as much.”

“You did. But I’m a poor student.”

“Of what you don’t wish to learn, perhaps.”

Jon set the cup down without tasting its content, the clink of it settling on the saucer resounding loudly in his ears.

It had been almost a year since they had spoken; he simply could not stand to go on talking to her over tea as if nothing had happened.

“I know it wasn’t your fault. That there wasn’t anything you could have done, that you had not already taken pains to do. I was angry and self-righteous, and thought far too highly of myself.” He resisted the urge to look away from her knowing eyes. “Perhaps it was easier to let my resentment loose on you, because I knew you love me enough to forgive my stupidity.”

Elia chuckled. “I doubt very much you thought it through that minutely.”

Jon shrugged. He hadn’t thought so either, before, but the last few weeks had taught him that he was far more deliberate in some choices, even in anger when he thought he wasn’t thinking, than he gave himself credit for.

“And you were disappointed in me.” Elia added, tilting her head to the side a bit. “Because I failed at protecting your cousin. Just like I failed to protect you.”

Jon blinked, surprised but trying not to show it. “I never held you responsible for anything.”

Sansa had not been Elia’s responsibility and Jon had not been either. But she had still done much from him – more than anyone had ever expected her to. She’d always been a calm presence in his life and he’d always loved her for it.

“No, you didn’t. In fact, you held me apart from everyone else.” She set her linked hands on the table.

Jon eyed her long fingers, her wrists that seemed to him perhaps just a little bit thinner than he remembered. She had decorated the backs of her hands with red, dotted designs, the figures as mesmerising as Jon remembered. He knew that if he were to turn her hands and see her palms, he’d find the sun of Dorne at the centre of each one.

“How disappointing it must have been to find out that I was just like the rest.”

“You’re not.” Jon said, a bit more vehemently than he meant to. But he couldn’t stand to see hear Elia speak of herself as if she was at everyone’s level, when so many people he knew would never even be fit to wash her feet. “You are one of the best people I know.”

“Ah. But still, just a person. We all fail in little ways, my dear.” Elia said gently, and Jon was
compelled to look at her then. “Unfortunately, when in my position, my failures – even the unknowing ones – have a compounded effect upon others.” She sighed and he could see the weariness in her.

Jon shook his head. “It does is not fair to expect that much from you, just because I love you.”

Elia chuckled. “Oh, Jon. To expect nothing from anyone is far sadder.” She shook a lock of her hair off her face. Took hold of her braid and pulled it over her shoulder, a pensive look in her eyes. “Besides, it is normal to grow up and find out that our elders are not quite as infallible as they would have us believe. Now enough with this dreariness.” She told him, dark eyes soft and warm as velvet as she looked at him. “Let’s speak of other, lighter things.”

“Yes, let’s. How is the court functioning these days?”

Elia’s laughter was like a burst of light. Jon could not help but feel better at the sound of it.

“I have missed your mischief, Jon.”

“I missed you as well.” Jon added softly. It was an understatement really. There had been days when he’d been at sea, or especially when he had been a prisoner in the islands, that he would have given his right arm just to be by the fireside of her rooms again, with his brother and even Rhaenys, hearing Elia read one of her stories to them. Every time he’d thought of home, it had been that hearth and the great hall of Winterfell that had come to mind.

Elia grinned. “Tell me something of yourself, of your travels. These rumours that surround you are most tiresome; especially so when one does not know even a hint of the truth.”

“That’s bound to make you sad again.”

Elias lips tilted a bit upwards, knowing. She’d probably heard. Of course she had. It had only been a couple of days but by now news must have reached all the way to Essos: the Black Prince favoured Winterfell’s daughter.

“Tell me anything else, then.” Elia invited.

“I saw the Titan of Bravos.” Jon said, truly the first harmless thing that he could think of.

“Was it as you imagined it?”

“Taller. And far deadlier.”

ii

Elia listened to Jon recounting his travels, knowing that he was not sharing the bloodier details. She could understand his reservation. After all, it would not do to tell the queen of the seven kingdoms of the filth he must have found himself into at one time or another. There were also moments where he almost seemed to wince away from some memory that would sneak up on him, as if he could not even bear to even think of the fuzzy lines of it, let alone the details. That worried her more.

Of the five children she had raised, Jon had always been the quietest. He had a good heart to him, her Stark child. It was overshadowed sometimes by his temper, or that coldness that had grown in him like a reed and that seemed to have calcified into something unyielding with time, but it was still there.
She could hardly remember now, those first few years when having him around had still been hard on her. The ever-present reminder of a disgrace she had suffered, of a looming insecurity for her children, for the kingdom. It would have been easy to send him away, but even then Elia had known that Arthur and Rheagar had been right: anywhere else where they would have no control over his circumstances, Jon would either have been used against them, or killed.

Anywhere else but in Winterfell, perhaps - but Rheagar had firmly refused to let Jon go. Even though back then - and for a long time after - he could barely stand to touch his own son, but he’d still wanted him close. Elia still could not understand how he had done it. How he managed to show so little affection to a child she knew he loved. Rheagar was remote by nature, but everyone had always been able to see this was different when it came to his youngest child. She remembered when Jon had been a babe, how quiet he’d been, so unlike Rhaenys and Aegon who used to scream their little lungs out half the night more often than not. Perhaps that was why sometimes she’d catch her husband looking over Jon’s crib, counting the child’s breaths as if he was afraid they would cease with no reason. He had been haunted by the fear of his passing, going so far as fearing that any sign of affection could be taken as favouritism and put Jon’s life in danger, as well as Rhaenys’ and Aegon’s by turn. So he had shown none.

Though Elia had never fully believe this was all there was to it. Not when even Benjen Stark used to find it difficult to look at his sister’s son without getting dewy-eyed sometimes, especially when Jon was younger.

She had tried to explain this to Jon once or twice, but it would not take. Children did not understand palace politics, they only suffered because of them. And though as an adult he might understand, Jon was not likely to forgive any time soon.

In all honesty, Elia could not blame him. Even as an adult, finding oneself isolated in a hostile place that did not want you, was difficult. Aerys had never made a secret of his scorn for her and her children, and he – just as Rheagar – had led a full court by example. She wondered sometimes, if Rheagar still thought safety was still worth the sacrifice of love. He might have believed it twenty years ago, but more and more she had felt a change in him that he did not seem to know how to reconcile.

“I know my father loves you.” Jon said suddenly, no preamble, drawing her away from her reverie. “Did you love him?”

His abruptness did not surprise her as much as the question itself, but Elia allowed herself a smile nonetheless. Though he might look a man now, there was still so much about Jon that remained boyish.

“Fool that I am, perhaps I love him still.”

He frowned. “How?”

Elia set her teacup on its plate without a sound and placed it on the table again, allowing herself to absorb the weight of this moment.

She knew he been in love before. Everyone knew – or thought they did, anyway. But he’d never come to her with his worries about it before. Not once had he confided in her, or anyone as far as she knew, about Daenerys. Perhaps he used to think that she’d take his father’s side and condemn them – and he would have been right. Perhaps, in his youthful passion, he had not thought she would understand his heart. In that, he would have been wrong.

But here he was now.
Yes, many things had changed.

“We have shared much, your father and me,” Elia said after some consideration. “King’s Landing is the peak of this great kingdom and we are at its pinnacle. We are constantly surrounded by people who, at best, want things from us and who at worst, mean us harm. We have no safe harbour but each other. That has a way of bringing people together. And we share three beautiful children between us.”

Jon looked down and Elia smiled. She touched the tips of her fingers down his cheek, a gentle caress that, to her surprise, he leaned into.

“It is much that has to be forgotten out of love, my darling. Much, that must be forgiven. Even love.”

There was such a wretched look on his face, it really made her worry. But she knew better than to prod him for answers. Jon only ever shared what he wanted to share. The rest, he could very well take to his grave. He’d been like this ever since he was a boy.

“Can one be cured of it?” he finally asked, looking at her again with those luminous grey eyes. She hadn’t seen his face so open in years. It caught her unprepared.

There had been rumours fluttering around. She had heard them of course. How his attention had been taken with the Sansa Stark. Elia had not paid them much mind, in truth. Jon was not one to be taken by a passing fancy. But the whispers had practically risen to a fever pitch after what she’d heard had been a quite obvious display of favour a few nights ago, at the feast in his honour. And then, even she had to stop and pay attention.

But it wasn’t just cold ambition moving there in his eyes. She could see it, plain as day.

“Cured of love?”

“Yes.”

Elia shook her head. “No, I do not think so. Love can be endured, embraced or suffered. Sometimes all three together. But it cannot be cured. Love is not an illness, Jon.”

He leaned back against his seat, something defeated in his pose. “Close enough.”

Elia put all she knew together and reached a conclusion that would have baffled half who knew Jon, and made a disbeliever of the rest.

“Would you really want to rid yourself of it, if such a thing was possible?” she asked him softly.

He took his time to think about it, and that more than anything confirmed Elia’s suspicions.

“No.” He finally said, eyes trained somewhere above her shoulder. “No, I wouldn’t to rid myself of any of it.”

Elia took a deep breath.

Jon met her appraising gaze without blinking.

“It could be a sensible match. For both of you.” She finally said. “That is, if Sansa Stark were not already engaged.”

That got his attention so fast, it was a bit funny. But she refrained from laughing.
“She is not. Yet.”

He did not even pretend to be coy about Sansa’s name coming from her completely unprompted. But then again, he seemed to be beyond it. All morning she had sensed his low mood, an exhaustion of spirit that she’d seen in him before, though rarely enough that it always worried her whenever she caught wind of it. The dark circles under his eyes took a whole new meaning now.

Had he slept at all?

“Small difference, Jon.” Elia warned.

“All the difference that matters.”

So he wanted to hang on to technicalities, did he?

He was lucky indeed that Ned Stark had not yet signed any official betrothal contract nor announced any promises, or this would have been a diplomatic bloody nightmare. One that might not have been worth it, perhaps. The shadow of the past loomed large enough that people would be easily made nervous by a Stark girl breaking a betrothal for a Targaryen prince. Even half of one.

And he was growing more closed-lipped by the moment. She had inkling as to why; perhaps Lady Stark was not as enthusiastic about technicalities as Jon seemed to be.

“Well, by all accounts Ned Stark loves you; I’m sure he wouldn’t find it too hard to exchange the lord of the Vale for a Prince of the Iron Throne who is also his nephew.” She watched his face carefully. He did not like even the allusion of Harry Hardying. It did not bode well for the Vale Lord. “Though, as it rarely happens, his is not the love that matters. I assume you know Sansa Stark has expressed permission from her father—”

“To choose her own husband, yes. I know.”

Jon’s exasperation gave way to Elia’s suspicion. He might have learned that a thousand ways, but she was certain, instinctively, that it had been Sansa who’d told him. Mostly because so annoyed by it.

Had he already proposed?

“Well. If you have not earned her loathing then I’m sure you can earn her love. I must say,” she added then, a genuine grin overtaking her. “You two would make very handsome children.”

Jon grunted, but said nothing, not giving in to her attempt at lightness.

Rheagar could be made to see the sense of such a union, Elia thought as she appraised Jon’s face. Connington might be more difficult, with his endless suspicion of anyone but himself or connected to his person. Elia put the man out of her mind. On this, he would be made to yield. Especially as it occurred to her that her husband might see more than just the sense of Jon and Sansa marrying. His son could be the one to do what he had so fervently wished Viserys would do, to the point of wilful blindness all the way into the catastrophic end: finally heal the rift with the Starks, bring them to the fold.

Jon of course did not toe the family line quite as sincerely or fiercely as Viserys had. The boy was as liable to take Sansa Stark to Winterfell as he was to settle in Summerhall, Elia thought with a smile. It was precisely this quality of his that Rheagar and Connington least liked. Jon could not be predicted and could hardly be made to obey. A wife might change that. Or might not.
It would give Rheagar some room to manoeuvre with the Eyrie again though...

Far too neat, now that she thought about it. Things in nature never happened this cleanly unless someone was pushing them that way. And Rheagar had already tried more than once to get a foothold on the Vale.

“You might have a bit of convincing to look forward to. Your father never mentioned Sansa Stark for you.” Elia observed, keeping her tone careful.

Jon shrugged. “Why would he? He’s never much cared for my future while it seemed I had one - and then I disappeared.”

He was calm. Elia loved him dearly but she knew that this alone would not have been any indication Jon was not lying. But he would never have accepted any match his father made for him with this much placidity, however.

So not Rheagar’s idea, then.

“And after you returned, you refused to even hear of any matches being made for you, on the grounds of your so-called bastardy.” Elia could hardly say the worlds without infusing them with annoyance. She could allow Jon his animosity towards his father but only to the point where it was based on facts.

Her admonishment did not touch him at all.

“It’s used against me often enough.” He leaned back, looking not so much relaxed as he did exhausted. “It’s only fair I used it to my advantage sometimes.”

Elia tilted her head to the side, fiddled with her braid as she brought together all she knew of Sansa Stark. She combed every memory she could recall, but there was little of Sansa’s character apparent in them, apart from the fact that she had a good heart and a sweet wit and it seemed strange all of a sudden, that the child had grown under her own roof, but she knew so little of her. Of her nature, her tastes, her thoughts.

“How do you know it won’t offend Sansa? She is a proud girl.” And then, upon more careful thought: “Is that the impediment?”

“No.”

Elia pondered that. “You know her mind, then?”

Jon’s sigh did not bode well. Nor did the way he winced and pressed a hand on his face.

“Ah. You do know her mind. And it does not favour you.”

“She loves me.” Jon said immediately.

Elia arched one brow up eloquently. “You sound awfully defensive of that, for someone who wants to sound so certain.”

Jon fixed her with a flat look. “I’m here for your help, not your wit, your grace.”

“One cannot come without the other. Something you already know.” But which he was in no mood to appreciate, so she decided to get the obvious out of the way. “Do you want me to speak to your father on the match?”
“No.”

She startled a little. His tone did not allow room for negotiation; it was harsh – a bit more perhaps than he intended it to be.

“Forgive me.” Jon said more softly. “No, thank you. I will do it myself.”

“I see.” He already had a plan in mind. It was his way, after all. “Then what is the reason for your foul mood? Does Sansa Stark prefer her valeman after all and has already refused you?”

Jon’s head snapped up. “Gods! Stop doing that!” but he seemed disturbed, not annoyed.

“Well, forgive me my boy, but I cannot think of anything else that could possibly have put that look on your face.”

Jon’s foot was bouncing up and down at speed. He was looking at the wall in front of him, avoiding her eyes. He huffed, curving a bit into himself in that way that reminded her of when he was barely out of his fourteenth and did not know how to quite handle the foot of height that he had gained in too short a time.

“She might have... said something to that effect.” He finally conceded.

“Oh, Jon. Im sorry.”

“I made a bit of a mess of things.” Jon admitted without looking at her.

Elia sighed. “Family trait, I'm afraid.”

“Gods.” He groaned head in his hands and then looked up, a fierce expression on his face that was a bit undercut by the fact that he was also laughing. “If you tell me not to kidnap and marry her in secret, I swear on all the gods I will jump off that fucking window.”

“Language.”

“Westerosi.” Jon said flatly, and Elia had to hold back a laugh.

“Hm. That is objectively funny, but I refuse to laugh on principle.”

“Yes, your grace.”

“Besides, I don’t have to tell you any such thing.” Elia said then. “You’re smarted than that.”

“Thank you.”

“No need.” She liked her fingers together and rested her chin on them. “It’s a testament to my education of you, rather than your natural inclinations.”

Jon chuckled. “Thank you.”

They looked at each other for long moments. She was waiting for him to speak, and they both knew it. From this close, she could see the red rimming his eyes, read every line of his sadness.

Elia reached out, pushed his curls away from his forehead. “Well?”

“I don't want to love her to her detriment.” Jon finally said. He let it out like a confession. Like it was a secret he was ashamed of. “I want to be selfless, but I need to do things that contradict that. How
can I reconcile what I want with what she wants, if they’re opposite?”

“Being selfless does not mean cancelling one’s self.” She could not see how he would even think it was so. She knew ruthlessness was a trait all her children had had to learn living in this place, but she had hoped to have taught them better than this. “And what could you possibly do in wooing her that would be to her detriment?”

“She's already told me not to.” Jon admitted. “Isn't it selfish to do it anyway? She’ll think so... and she’ll hate me.” He added in a murmur.

“Fighting for what you want is not selfish. As long as you don't force her hand into anything, I don't see how wooing her is proof of selfish love. Jon, where is this coming from?”

He shrugged but did not meet her eye. “I don't know if I can always make the right choice, when what I want and what someone else needs are on opposite ends. I don’t know if I can tell the difference.”

Elia’s face fell.

“I am glad you can see that, Jon.” She said slowly. “But you don’t have such a bad record though.”

He certainly had never given it that much thought before. But then again, he'd been so young, and all he'd really wanted had been to be loved.

The look on his face when he met her eye was severe. Angry almost.

“In this family, we take what we want, without much thought for consequence. It ruins people. I don’t.” he pressed his lips together, took a breath. “I don’t want to love like that. But what if I can't help it?”

And she knew it then, where this was coming from. From the same place all his other uncertainties and anger came from. It seemed so easy now, she wondered why she'd doubted it. All his life, if his father had gone left, Jon would have to turn right.

“Then set boundaries. Keep by them. And make the terms of engagement clear with Sansa Stark.” Elia told him. “She seems to be a woman who likes knowing what she is stepping into. Be honest with her about all you intend to do that she might object to.”

“Fair warning?”

Elia smiled. Of course he would put it in battle-terms. “Yes.”

“I already did that. It didn't make her like me any better.”

Elia shrugged. “It won’t make her think any worse of you either.”

[1] Myrcella s actually a Baratheon here, so she has dark hair, but he mother’s eyes.

[2] I just want to specify that this is not some indictment on Cat, as a person (although I do hold with the belief that, since Jon exhibits, in the books, behaviors that are congruent with those of an abused child, the way she was with him does qualify as emotional abuse, imo). I’m not making comparisons here, so that I can put on of these women down to prop up the other. The reason I think Elia would be different is because she comes from a different culture and lives in different circumstances - in this story, I mean.
Coming from a place where there is no huge moral stigma on being a bastard, and where the class system is not quite so rigid (I get this from that whole passage where in the Water gardens, Doran says that all children are the same, and you cannot tell the nobles apart from those who are not. The lives of the ‘smallfolk’ are not expendable to him, like we see them being in so many other characters, who could not give less of a shit.) – all these elements would have added up to an Elia that behaved differently to Jon than Cat did. And I really don’t think Elia would treat Jon like he wasn’t wanted, when for a good part of her life in the Red Keep, when Aerys was king, she was made to feel like she did not belong and was lesser. And since most people have good things to say about her, I just assumed that, having known what it is to be an outsider, she would not add to making a child feel that way.

… also… Elia was done dirty, and this is a middle finger to canon, sooo *shrug*


[4] Borgia quote

[5] Borgia quote


[7] I realized as I was ending this scene, that meeting Elia doesn’t really serve any plot, doesn’t really move the story forward (apart from maybe showing that Jon is more self-aware than he let on before and that what he saw of Lyanna hasn’t simply been forgotten and won’t be, anytime soon), and it could be cut and lose little from the story itself. But its Elia, and I wanted to write her, show how Jon is with her, how she is with Jon. I guess its self-indulgent, but then again, this is ff lol

Chapter End Notes

I know this feels like its not going anywhere, and you’d be right because there was more to the chapter to make it feel complete, but I wanted to post *something* as soon as it was ready, just because it's been so long since i uploaded.
AN: You will notice in some moments in this chapter, particularly on Jon’s pov, the narrative will take a more omniscient tone. There was just so much that had to be noticed in some scenes, that I couldn’t just stay on Jon the whole time. I had to move a little bit further than his gaze allowed.

Also, a warning: Jon is having a bit of a flashback here, so there will be some scenes that get pretty descriptive in terms of gore. I mean, they’re suggestive, more than outright descriptive, but it’s still the same tbh. So warning for that.

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ix. the center will not hold – ii -

iii

“Fear was the ghost of an experience: we fear the recurrence of a pain we once felt, and in this way fear is like a hangover. The memory of our pain is a pain unto itself, and thus feeds our fear like a foyer with mirrors on both sides.”

“And ghosts must do again
What gives them pain.”

Mary Ruffle // H. W. Auden

“The horses are ready,” Jeyne said as she walked in, but Sansa did not seem to hear her. Indeed, she did not seem to be aware that Jeyne had even stepped into the room, nor did she reach to take the gloves that Jeyne was holding out.

Jeyne frowned. “My lady?”

Sansa startled, turning her head to look at her friend. “Yes.”

“Did you not hear me?”

Sansa blinked, but gathered herself quickly, reached to take the riding gloves from Jeyne as she rose from her seat beside the latticed windows of her room. “Forgive me Jeyne, I was distracted.”

“You have been all morning.” Jeyne murmured as she helped Sansa put on light her cloak and straightened the folds, so that it hung on her perfectly.

“Yes, I have been.”

“Something has upset you.”

Sansa shook her head. “It’s nothing.”

Nothing she could not deal with, anyway, although it was causing her severe annoyance.
She could not get him out of her head!

Since she’d opened her eyes in the morning, he’d been there. Awareness of him and awareness of the sunlight on her face came at the same time; awakening and remembering, at the same time. As she broke her fast, he was there, as she bathed, as she dressed. The thought of him persistent as a headache that would simply not relent.

Sansa walked from her room and out to the courtyard, Jeyne following close behind.

“Shae is waiting for us downstairs?”

“Yes.” Jeyne confirmed reluctantly. When Sansa turned a questioning look to her friend, Jeyne seemed apologetic. “I already told you some moments ago.” She admitted hesitantly.

Sansa sighed. “Forgive me, Jeyne.”

“Nothing to forgive, my lady.” And then, a bit more hesitantly, she asked in a whisper. “Perhaps it could help you to speak of whatever is bothering you. You always say it helps you order your thoughts.”

It might. But she could not. “It’s nothing, really.”

But it was not. It was not nothing.

It was disgusting how she could not be free of it. How she did not seem to know how. The memory of him putting that golden wreath on her head was so alive she had to resist the need to pat her head and see if it was still there. It wasn’t of course. The only thing on her head now was a glue-green veil she had carefully chosen that morning. But the sensation persisted.

She remembered how he’d looked in the godswood, swearing he loved her. Telling her about her family. It hurt her heart to remember.

She’d felt forgotten for so long. It seemed absurd now that, completely arbitrarily, without any obvious rhyme or reason, they should try go to such lengths – treasonous lengths - to get her out of King’s Landing. They had never paid any heed to her pleading before, so what had changed? Why now? What was happening that she needed to leave the capitol so fast?

There was something more happening, Jon had said so, but he’d claimed not to know what it was. In her heart of hearts, Sansa could think of only one reason why it would be imperative for her to leave King’s Landing: so that in the event of some conflict, she would not be used as a bargaining chip against her family. So that she would not be used like the hostage of good behaviour she was supposed to be.

What were they planning?

Of course, she thought as she climbed on her horse and adjusted to her side saddle, smoothing her skirts around her and taking hold of the reins - there was always the possibility that they only wanted her removed from a bad situation. It could be that simple. It was not probable, but it was possible.

And in that case.... in that case she had been betrayed far more profoundly than she ever thought.

That too, was possible. Why wouldn’t it be? Indeed, more and more it was starting to sound plausible.

As she rode through the streets of Kings Landing towards the Great Sept, Sansa allowed herself to think it for the first time in years. Really picture it. Going home…
It had been so long since she had even considered it a possibility. Wanted it. Home was such a far away idea now; more a longing to go back in time to when things had been simple and she had been happy and safe, than a wish to go to a real place.

Going home would mean seeing her parents again, her siblings. It would mean living under their eye. She remembered Arya, Robb. Her father’s stern face. Her mother’s fussy ways, her grandmothers rigidity.

She would meet none of their hopes. She knew this.

They would not know her. They would not understand her. And how could she blame them when she did not really know how to explain herself. How could she tell them that so much of who she was, she had become against her will, without her consent. That so much of it, she simply endured.

_They might not even want me_, she thought desperately, and in her mind that voice sounded younger than she was, and more scared than she allowed herself to get. Arya would despise her weakness. Her parents would be disappointed to see what a liar she had become.

Robb might not care, though. Maybe. Rickon and Bran…

She could become a new person for them of course. She had before. But just the thought of it made her so sad and tired. So exhausted. And angry.

She did not want to live like this anymore! Not for anyone. And she didn’t have to.

Her thoughts kept crossing into one another, derailing each other. Even though she was calmer now than she had been that night in the godswood, she felt as incapable of method as she had then. As if the careful cupboards inside her head had gone smash and now her thoughts were banging around her mind like marbles on a billiard table. Slamming against the edges of her head and then back again, the forefront of her consciousness, only to roll aside. She’d stepped into a new reality, the way grandmother used to say: into a world that had existed over her own the whole time, while she was unawares. And now they had merged and she could not ignore either.

Slowly, almost as if afraid of it, she took the possibility in her hands from the shelf where she hid it, and considered it the way she would examine a gown or a piece of jewelry. As if there was no more to it than a plan of action. She would not be herself if she did not consider it in a dethatched manner, for what it could offer her, how it might improve her condition. And more than anything else at the moment, Sansa wanted to show fidelity to herself. Was there any sense in simply marrying Jon and getting it over with?

_‘I wanted to make you love me’_ he’d said, like it was supposed to mean something.

Beyond all doubts and all the things she did not know, this was certain: marrying Jon would not be anything like marrying Harry. Being with Jon meant making herself vulnerable to him, to all the ways he had of destabilizing her. Already it was working. He had turned into a scab she kept picking at, even though it hurt. Bleeding all over her thoughts, staining them red.

He’d lied to her, and would again, if it got him what he wanted. He would have kept lying to her, had she not found him out, confronted him. Ten days ago she would not have thought him capable of that, but then again, that was not Jon’s fault. He hadn’t given her enough to make up her mind one way or the other. She had simply filled the empty spaces with what she wished to see in him. As she had always done.
But that was not the problem, nor was his lying. The real issues was that despite of all of it, she wanted to believe him. It felt like a tug at her breast, pulling her in his direction; like breathing with a crackled rib, like the sensation of pressing on a bruise: something that hurt and satisfied in a perverse way. Because she knew that thought she may like him, she could not trust him. Indeed, she liked him and for that alone she could not trust him.

Because she wanted to. She could admit that much. It was imperative in fact, that she admitted it.

She had liked him almost immediately, even though she had been suspicious of him. Liked him in spite of it. He had been like a walking reminder of all the things that used to hurt her, things she had buried. Just looking at him at hurt and satisfied. And he’d been so strange and fascinating. So different... So much of her obsession with him had probably been because she’d seen herself in him. Seen all those parts of herself she painstakingly hid, writ large in him and with bigger teeth. She was not capable of his kind of violence, but the only reason why was body mass and societal permission. If she’d been born a man, they might have been indistinguishable, and this appealed and terrified her at the same time. Attracted her. Still did. Everything about him invited her. Invited her fantasy, her daydreaming.

And he was here for her. Just like in the stories. Was it not terribly lovely? Did it not fit perfectly?

It was repellent, how easily persuaded she could be, how ridiculous it made her feel, even as she knew that the deeper part of herself, that part that she hid and protected and had refused to give away — it wanted to give in. The part of her that still wanted to believe, despite being terrified to do so, wanted to let it all happen again, let herself be swept away, be rescued, be saved, taken from here. Let the current take her, onto a shore someone else chose, again. Set her there, in the unknown.

And was this not the saddest thing? It hollowed her out to think it, made her hopeless. Because after five years in this place; after being hurt and abused, after all the disappointments and losing every layer of safety she had ever had, the only thing she could boast was that she had grown wiser. That she had learned, that she had become a woman who would always want to make her own decisions. Someone who would never again wait for someone else to make things better, but learn to do so herself. A woman who would never allow herself to get lost in her own illusions just because it was easier to live there.

But she had not, had she. She wanted the same thing now that she had at six and ten. It had all been for nothing.

Even now, this could bring tears to her eyes all over again. Was she not capable of change? Must she live always as a silly girl who never learned?

No. She might want the same things, but she knew better now: she’d rather have the unknown she chose, than the one she did not, with a man she could not trust and whose lies would be easy to believe. She could see it so clearly, it might as well have already happened: she’d think it was love, while he dined on her heart, and maybe it would be. But he’d eat her all in one sitting, and when she would be in his belly[1] and he would be picking at her bones - what would she do then?

“Lady Stark!”

Sansa looked up and saw that one of the Devout was waiting for her at the steps of the Sept of Baelor. As she reached the top, she curtsied, one hand holding on to her veil so that it would not be swept by the wind into the septon’s face.

“Eminence[2].”
Septon Warrik linked his hands together, his wrinkly face stretching with his smile. His teeth were poor, yellowed with age, but he still had most of them, and his smile was not unpleasant.

“I keep waiting for the day you will forget, or have something more important to do than come here for your prayers; and every time, you disappoint.”

“I cannot say that I am sorry to do so, Eminence.”

“Of course not.” He extended an arm swathed in white robes. “Allow me the honour of escorting you inside.”

“Certainly.” Sansa stepped to his side and took his arm.

“Perhaps after you have concluded your prayers, you might consider joining me and some of my brothers for tea. I will not have time to linger long however. The queen’s ladies will come for the report on how the orphanages under royal patronage are doing.”

“I would be honoured.” Sansa said automatically, though she was a bit surprised when the septon stopped them just before they entered the great doors of the sept.

“I have also met with the scouts of the Night’s Watch.” He added, and it gave Sansa pause, but the old man did not seem to notice at all.

“They brought me piles of letters from my old parish,” he told her with a smile that was almost sad. “The children especially. I miss them, though many of them are no longer children at all.”

“You taught them to read and write?”

“I did.” He declared proudly. “So that they could write to me, and I wouldn’t not be bored or homesick.”

“It seems to have worked.” Sansa said, trying to smiled back and at least give the impression that his good cheer was lightening her mood.

“Most wonderfully.” Warrik said, nodding. “The Night’s Watch couriers stopped in Winterfell too on their way south, I am told.”

Sansa felt a chill run through her. “You were?”

“Oh yes. They wouldn’t stop talking about it. The great court of Winterfell having gathered before winter comes is quite a novelty.”

“I’m sure it is.” She did not know where this was going but she could see in his eyes, he meant to go somewhere. So she waited him out.

“It certainly is rare enough. Hasn’t happened before in my lifetime. Even when the banners were called for Robert’s rebellion, they gathered south, at Moat Cailin. Not that that was the only thing they talked about.” The septon explained, and then chuckled, giving Sansa a conspiratorial look. “Get a little wine in any man, and he will start spinning enough rumours to appal any self-respecting woman. I will be sure to relay such a fact to the Queen’s ladies, so that never again may they allow it to be said, that women gossip more than men.”

He said so cheerfully, but his eyes were serious enough to make her steps stutter.

Sansa froze. She hoped the look on her face was not as alarmed as she felt. She understood now,
why they had stopped outside the gates of the sept. Within them, the smallest whisper echoed. But out here, in the wind, in the open, they could speak and be sure to be alone, for there was no one who could come close within a hundred feet, without being seen.

“Did he refuse?” Sansa asked in a whisper.

“Not at all. The letter will reach you, as you intended.” The septon grinned as if he was telling her some hilarious jape. “But in hastily put-together circumstances like this, it never hurts to have a bit of an extra padding of safety, don’t you think?”

“I cannot.” Sansa said immediately. “Please understand me. I cannot expose you like this, knowing I cannot protect you from any potential consequences.”

Septon Warrik sobered then. He looked at her for a long moment. Sansa kept still and calm under his dark eyes. This was not even close to the most intimidating appraisal she had ever been subjected to, and she wanted to be firm in this.

“Did you know I too am of the north?” he asked suddenly, his usual cheer having returned as if his mood was at his back and call, and nothing outside of him could ever touch it.

“Yes, I was at the welcoming ceremony the queen arranged for you and your companions.”

He nodded.

“When we arrived in the capitol from all corners of Westeros, yes. I remember you. I served the people of White Harbour for many years before I was called to be part of the council of the most Devout. I celebrated the Yule twice at the small sept your father had built for Lady Catelyn in Winterfell. Did you know that?”

“No, I did not.” He’d never said.

His eyes sparkled. He seemed almost too amused, considering how uncertain and nervous Sansa felt. “I knew who you were as soon as I set eyes on you. You have your mother’s likeness. And your father’s demeanour.”

Sansa gulped. The words touched her in a place where she usually felt small and inadequate. Out of all his children, Sansa had been the one that had always resembled her father teh least, in every possible way. It felt good that someone could see however, that it was not always so, especially because there was so much in which she wished she were more like her father too. So much she had always admired in him, and failed to live up to.

“And I was the one who, at your birth, travelled north so that I could anoint you with the sacred waters of the seven, as per your mother’s wishes. You were but a babe then, such a quiet child. And how loudly you started crying when the water startled you.” He added with a chuckle.

Sansa could feel her eyes starting to sting. “I remember you coming to Winterfell for Bran and Rickon. I suppose I always knew you must have done so for me at some point.”

He nodded. “Yes. Few people know of that here. Even fewer still know of my first name. We are supposed to forget it you see. But some things cannot be unlearned. One can shed a name, but I can no more unlearn the ideas that raised me, than I can forget the devotion to the gods which they inspired.

“Before I was a septon of the seven, I was born a as Warrik of house Manderly, you see. Fourth son of Lord Wylan Manderly and youngest brother of the departed lord of White Harbour.” He grinned
conspiratorially. “My nephew after him now.”

Sansa could not hide her surprise. She had not realized how hard she had clenched his hand until he put his other on top of hers and smiled.

“Do you know the words of house Manderly, Lady Stark?”

“‘Steadfast Through the Tides’.” Sansa answered automatically.

Septon Warrik’s eyes sparkled, his smile soft but no less brilliant for it. “Indeed we are. Luwin always said you were the best at your lessons.”

Sansa gasped, trying to hold back her tears and failing. Septon Warrick brushed one away with a rough pad of his thumb, clucking at her as if in disapproval.

“Come, now. No need for that.” He told her as he patted the hand that was still clasped in his. “We will walk inside, I will leave you to your prayers. And then, we will have ourselves a bit of a chat and if I correct my tea with some rum, who’s to say it’s strange? I do it all the time! And if I speak a little too much about the affairs of White Harbour... well, no drunk man was ever apt at holding his tongue.”

iv

The Great Hall was crowded that morning, but more than just bodies, it was the competing factions that made the cavernous space of the throne room feel so airless.

The month of royal petitions and audiences had started and the whole city felt overpopulated.

The king, as he always did during this period of the year, had had a smaller – though no less impressive – throne built. One made of iron and wood, which was flanked by two smaller, mirroring seats for his queen and his heir at either side of him. Every six months Rheagar would climb down the steps of the monstrous Iron Throne and stand at its feet, crowned and in all his glory, lowering himself among his subjects.

It was a good idea, Jon had to admit as much. His uncle always said that for men to follow you, you have to let them look you in the eye when you give your orders. Uncle Ned himself did this too – every night at the great hall, someone different dined with him, at his left – the place of honor, and he heard his people’s troubles.

Of course, an audition with the King was a far grander affair – as one could plainly see if only from the way everyone was adorned din their best robes and dresses. It was a show, as much as it served a practical function; a show of the King among the people.

And they swarmed around him now. An architect waited to present details of a building project. The heads of the trading guilds, shipping guilds and so on and so forth. Petitioners from all over the kingdom were gathered, in the hope of catching the King’s eye. The trail went on till outside the doors of the hall, which for this occasion had both been opened, five guards standing at each side, keeping the peace and the order while the Lord Chamberlain decided who should go in and in what order. Mace Tyrell and his pack were in attendance, as well as envoys from almost all the notable houses of the south. Elia was not yet by the King’s side, probably still busy with her own audiences this morning, but Aegon was there to their father’s left, Connington not too far from them. Every once in a while they spoke in hushed whispers meant for their ears only.

Strangely, Dany was nowhere to be seen. Which was a shame since from time to time, a courtier
approached with some portrait in their hands, and presented it to the king. A suitor’s parade, Jon imagined, for Dany undoubtedly, since she was the only one of them that was still unmarried.

From where he stood, leaning against one of the Dragon skulls close to the throne, Jon could spot a group of golden-haired men in Lannister revelry, standing under one of the archways near the southern entrance, watching the proceedings with a disdain only a Lannister could muster. He tried, but he could not see Tyrion among them. Then again, perhaps he should look in the nearest brothel.

Or Lady Shae’s chambers.

Not that Jon faulted him for it. He too, would rather be elsewhere and rather envied Tyrion for being able to fuck off, while Jon could not. He had to be here; or rather, had to show himself as being here, even though it was the last place he wanted to be. He had no patience for these audiences, despite knowing they were important. He could hardly listen to a word being spoken, though he knew he should be paying attention. But it was simply impossible; his mind refused to bend to his will.

The last time Jon had been in a crowd so big, outside a feast, was for Viserys’ funeral, and he remembered the occasion acutely. Dany had been standing beside him, renouncing her place at the steps of the throne where the rest of their family was, so that she could be close to him. He had not wanted to go up there – still did not. He would have felt like a freak, like an animal in a cage, being stared at. Even among the crowd, he had felt it, though most were obliged to keep their eyes forward to where their king sat.

Dany had kept pointing out this or that person, commenting on everything: the weather, a dress, some ridiculously ornate lord, the arrangement of the flowers. She must have been so scared, he realized now, and felt badly for not noticing it then, but how could he have? He’d been terrified himself. Because as she’d kept remarking on one thing or another, commenting on the beauty of some lady or a flower and nudging him so that he might see it too, Jon had realized he could not. That whatever beauty there was, whatever loveliness and life, was to him as if behind a pane of glass. Even tastes, smells had no real meaning to him. He’d looked at all those people then – just people, going about their lives. They’d seemed happy to him: whispering of their own matters, smiling, squabbling over nothing. But he’d felt apart from it all; could not taste, he could not feel. In the great hall fo the Red Keep, among the chattering and the petitions, the appalling fear had come over him—he could not feel[5].

And he had known it then, with the certainty that he knew his own name, that he must have been killed some long way back and just… forgotten to die.

Now though – it was different.

He was very much alive, now. And not for the first time, he wondered if love was just a way of letting you know the truth of this simple fact, by reminding you that you could still feel pain.

Jon resisted the impulse to look around for her. He knew she was not there.

He startled when he felt a hand on his arm. He turned his head only to see Dany there by his side, clad in a silver and pink gown that made her seem luminous, bright hair unbound and straight as an arrow down her back. Jon looked behind her immediately, only to be disappointed yet again.

“She’s not here yet.” Dany said wryly as she lifted two cups from a passing servant and held one out to him.

He took it. “You’re late.”
“I was occupied,” she said airily as she turned to look at the proceedings. “There is going to be quite the commotion here soon.”

Jon frowned. “Why?”

“You’ll see.” She grinned at him then. “Remember when we used to watch these things and try to guess when a new rumor was making the rounds? How you could always tell by the way the crowd moved and I could tell by the look on people’s faces.”

He remembered. “Is there a new rumor making the rounds.”

“I should think so.”

Slowly, Dany’s ladies started surrounding her, though they kept their whispers to a low pitch. He could still hear the king conversing with whoever was presented to him, if Jon had bothered to. Instead, he glanced at the crowd again.

Until a man in a burgundy doublet approached, took off his cap, exposing a mop of golden brown curls, and bowed in front of day the fashion of the Reach.

“Ser Horas Redwyne,” he said as he rose. “Son and heir of Lord Paxter Redwyne. At your service, your grace.” He bowed again, less formally – rather less prettily, which Jon could understand – to Jon, before addressing Dany again. “I hope you remember me.”

Jon had to congratulate the man for remaining calm under Dany’s unimpressed scrutiny.

“I do.” Dany responded as she set her cup down. “We danced together at the crown prince nameday celebration.”

Horas Redwyne smiled. He had nice dark eyes, and Jon noticed Dany noticing. “We did.”

“I am surprised to see you managed to make your way through the antechamber, Ser. I was convinced the Lord Chamberlain looked so hassled he would let no one else through.”

Redwyne smiled. “Indeed. I’ve had an easier time boarding Ironborn ships than entering this hall.”

Dany shrugged. “I suppose everything is easier when you can kill people.”

A brazen think to say – the looks on the people around them certainly seemed to suggest so, Jon thought absently - but Horas Redwyne did not seem bothered at all. If anything, he looked amused.

“What brings you back to the capitol?”

“You, Princess. I seek your hand in marriage.”

There were some gasps and even Jon admitted to slight surprise. He had not expected this kind of straightforwardness.

“Right to the point. Already I like you, ser.” Dany said without even a trace of a smile that would have validated such a statement. “You treat marriage like a business acquisition. Which is of course what it is.”

Ah. This was an old game, Jon thought as he glanced at the crowd again, though Dany certainly played it more ferociously now.

Horas of course did not know this. He blinked several times, having expected Dany’s compliment
about as much as he expected her insult.

“I did not intend to be crass.”

“Indeed, you were not. You were honest, a quality which I admire. Are you often honest?”

“With others, if not always with myself.”

“But then you are foolish.”

Horas frowned. “You insult me?”

“Yes, in fact I am trying to deter you.” The look on her face however was calm. “See, I must also be honest, since I see before me a man of quality. Ser, I have no desire to marry.”

“If I may, why not?” Horas asked, and Jon had to admire the way he was rolling with Dany’s bluntness rather than reprimanding her for it or demanding an address that was more becoming of a lady. “I could make you happy. Shower you in-

“My would-be husbands are unlucky, ser. One of them has died, soon after starting to court me, the other fell off his horse at a melee almost breaking his neck and two brothers fought each other, one gravely injuring the other, starting a blood-feud which still has not healed. Do you wish to meet an end resembling any of those?”

Jon was actually interested in the response, especially since Horas Redwyne did not seem at all intimidated by this parade of misfortunes. His smile was calm indeed, for a man that might have been just threatened with death or grave injury, if one knew how to look through the lines carefully.

“You will have little success in cowering me, Princess[6].”

“And you will have no success in making me your wife. I appreciate your proposal, but for your sake and that of my already overburdened conscience, I must remain alone until such a time as I can counter this bad fortune.”

“That is too sad a fate for a beauty such as yours, your grace.”

“Alone, ser.” Dany repeated more firmly, but then she softened her look and dared a small smile. “Though I would be remiss to repudiate the friendship of a man who is brave enough to be honest in King’s Landing, in front of so many people, no less.” She added more softly.

There were chuckles all around, but not derogatory. All gathered there knew better than to mock a man Dany favored.

There was a moment, just one, during which Redwyne’s frown did not ease and Jon thought he would perhaps tell the sister of the King that a woman’s friendship was as useful to him as nipples on a breastplate, or some such nonsense. But Hoster Redwyne seemed to be wiser than that.

“It will be my honor to count myself among your friends, your grace.”

Dany curtsied. “The honor is mine. Join me for tea in the gardens today. I would very much like to hear of Arbor and the trade there. I hear you are very involved.”

Redwyne smiled a little crookedly. “Yes, to the endless frustration of my father. He would rather have a steward see to it.”

“Yet you persist.”
Redwyne chuckled. “I love the sea.”

Dany’s smile was the first honest one that had graced her face since the conversation had started. “So do I. Is it true you can find people from all over Essos trading in your city?”

“Very true. Our market is the biggest in Westeros. You would see wonders there you could never behold at any other part of our great kingdom.”

“Then you shall tell me of them.” Dany decided and then curtsied to him – as clear a dismissal as any though coming from Dany it was almost warm. Redwyne bowed and took his leave.

When he was sure the knight was far enough not to hear, Jon made his remark.

“He seems like a fine man.”

“Less ridiculous than most, to be sure.” Dany added distractedly. She was listening to the petitions again. Looking at her so concentrated on the affairs of state, while he wanted nothing better than to leave, steeped him so deep in the past it almost took his breath away for a moment.

“Yet you were cold to him.”

“Was I?”

“Are you deliberately trying to be repellant?” Jon asked her idly.

“Perhaps.” She glanced at him. “It is true what I told him: I have no wish to marry.”

“You might have told that to your brother.” Jon tipped his chin towards the throne. “He has been considering husbands for you all morning, one after the other.”

“He is playing his game, and I mine.” Dany whispered distractedly.

“How long do you think you can play it?”

“Oh I don’t know. Virginity is an asset that holds its value well.”

Jon smiled. “Diplomatically speaking, at least.”

Dany snorted, and covered it up with a delicate cough. He looked at her, carefully taking in the lines of her face.

“He will make you marry, Dany. Eventually.”

“And I will of course obey my king.” She countered, looking at him straight in the eye. “Eventually.”

“When it suits you.”

Dany shrugged. “When the chosen husband suits me.”

None of the greatest would be Lords of Westeros had so far suited her. But then again, they would take her away to be their lady.

“You’ve made your decision then?”

“What decision?”
“You mean to stay.”

“Jon…” She turned her head to look at him. There was something almost like compassion in her eyes. “I never wanted to leave.”

Jon looked back towards the throne. Yes, that had always been her mind. He should not be as surprised as he was that it remained unchanged.

Just then, the northern gates of the hall opened and Elia walked through, her cortege of ladies following close behind. A deep silence fell into the hall as, almost in waves, everyone stopped whatever they were saying to look at her.

She was dressed in the rhoynish fashion that was so predominant in Dorne. Her dress was white, its long sleeves unconnected at the top and held in place with golden clasps along her arms. Her veil – the piece of fashion she had made so popular almost every lady at court wore one – was clasped in place with a golden laurel and was so whisper-thin and bright, she looked like she carried a halo of sunlight around her as she walked. An orange-gold silken wrap was swathed around her shoulders, draping over her arms like a cloak[7]. She looked magnificent and terrifying and everyone bowed as she walked towards the throne, parting to make a path for her as if an invisible hand were pushing them.

The King stood and offered his hand.

“Late, my queen?” His father asked, though there was a small smile on his face. The hall was so silent, his voice carried and was heard, probably over the whole crowd.

“My apologies, majesty.” Elia said simply, bowing her head to him a little without looking the least bit contrite.

Rheagar kissed her hand delicately. “Given, my love.”

Together they sat down at the same time.

But though everyone else had been looking at Elia, Jon had been following Sansa’s steps, who walked behind the queen’s ladies, clad in deep blue. Even beneath the shimmering veil she was wearing, Jon had spotted the brightness of her red hair the moment the doors parted enough for him to be able to see her.

“Continue.” Rheagar said with a small gesture of his hand. The noise resumed again, like a beehive had suddenly come alive.

Elia’s ladies, Sansa among them, settled on the small seats that had been provided for them around the king and queen’s thrones, settling in one by one like colorful birds.

Jon pushed off the bone of the dragon skull that had supported his weight until that moment, straightening. Immediately, he felt Dan’s hand on his arm.

“Do not go to her.” She warned, barely moving her lips.

Jon looked down at his aunt. “I did not mean to.”

Dany raise one eyebrow. Jon’s look became thunderous but he resisted the urge to deny it again. He had nothing to prove to her.

The audiences continued. Dany did not move from her spot, intent on listening to each one and the
verdicts passed by her brother and his wife. Jon lingered out of habit – and because every once in a while he could not help but glance at Sansa, taking note of everything about her from the shade of her gloves to the downturned arch of her mouth and the circles under her eyes.

She looked tired. And sad.

But perhaps he should have left, made himself scarce somehow; or paid attention to his surroundings more. He might have noticed then the glances of several courtiers turned his way, and he might have done something to avoid being surrounded by them. But when he finally became aware of his predicament it was too late to do anything about him. Nymeria Sand - who was wearing black and gold for the occasion, two colors that complimented her so well it seemed impossible they had ever looked so good on anyone else - sidled up to him, startling Jon out of his reverie.

“The famous pirate returns to court.” She whispered so close to his ear, it was a miracle Jon did not react by grabbing her by the throat out of sheer surprise. As it was, he went rigid with tension.

“Nym.” He turned his head to look at her. She was smiling at him, delighted to have caught him unawares. “You should know better.”

“Yes, but it’s always so amusing to watch you squirm.”

Jon rolled his eyes, looked away from her. The queen was welcoming forward the next petitioner who bowed before his rulers with a flourish.

“Harrion Blackmont, Warden of the royal prisons, at your service, your grace.”

“Ser Blackmont. Welcome.” Elia announced, her voice ringing clear in the hall.

“In the ongoing effort to improve the administration of King’s Landing, I asked the Queen and Princess Daenerys to thoroughly examine our royal prisons. You have been quite successful, old friend.” The king said coolly. “If success could be measured in profit.”

“Profit is one of the goals, Holiness.”

“So tell me Jon,” Nymeria whispered as she stepped closer to him. “What was it like, living as a criminal and a dead man?”

“Liberating.” Jon said dully. His father’s face was a closed book but Jon could read Elia’s better. She looked stern. Typically when in public, Elia took pains to be unreadable, but not unfeeling. That was something she left to her husband. Yet this time, her thoughts might be too dark to contain, of her face was a genuine reflection of them.

“Ser Blackont, why do we imprison men?” The King asked.

“To deprive miscreants of liberty as punishment for wrongdoing.”

“Excellent.” But the King was not done. “So, then why do you allow murderers and thieves to leave the Tower at night?”

The question seemed to confuse the other man. “Because they have purchased passes. and must return at dawn.”

“How do you sink an enemy ship?” Nymeria asked again.

“You don’t.” Jon said curtly. Harrion Blackmont was becoming nervous.
“Leave him Lady Nym. Can’t you see is absorbed?” someone else said, a new voice Jon did not know and paid no mind to. Because he was in fact absorbed. He had not known that Elia and Dany were trying to reform the prisons of King’s Landing. That had been a task that he’d heard his father speculating on for years, even since before he left King’s Landing the first time. It must have shocked a great many people that such a thing had fallen in the hands of the Queen herself. Almost as if the King did not trust anyone else to do it.

But it did explain the gravity that had followed the queen’s entrance in the Great Hall. Though not why Dany was still in the crowd instead of standing on the podium, where she usually liked to be.

“You let them go, and in between they commit more crimes.” Elia said then.

“Privileges have always been allowed for those who can afford them, my queen. It is permitted by law.”

“So it is. As of this day, the sale of passes and privileges is permitted no more.” The queen announced firmly. “Prisoners must fear time spent in the Tower, and not be able to buy their way out of it.”

Harrion Blackmont seemed shaken. “But… your grace.”

Elia tilted her head a mere fraction. “Yes?”

Blackmont hesitated, because even he could tell that Elia’s acquiescence was out of manners and not in fact permission to question her.

“Perhaps the lord means to say, your grace,” Mace Tyrell started, drawing the attention of the Queen, who looked at him with a cool, appraising look. “That there will be a significant loss of income for many, with this new provision that you, in your wisdom, have sought to provide.”

“The loss of income may yet be compensated, my lord, by the lowering of crimes that such a measure would surely inspire.” Aegon said then, smiling at his sister’s father in law.

“Of course, your grace, but-“

“But why not whine to the Queen of the seven kingdoms about the petty insignificant needs of a few, when she speaks to you of justice.” Obara thundered, but remembered to say so with a smile, so that the courtiers surrounding her could soften the blow with some laughter. “Is that perhaps what my Lord meant?”

Mace Tyrell reddened in the face, but bowed nonetheless. “I meant no offence to my queen, whose radiant beauty is the boast and glory of the all Westerosi people.”

Jon sneered. Radiant beauty, was it? As if a pretty face had helped Elia or Dany organize and balance all the work that must have gone into coming up with such a measure. As if there was one soul in that hall that did not know the baggage and weight of such a word when used in connection to Elia Martell.

Jon felt his temper rising. It was an insult, and that pig wrapped in silk should be made to answer for it!

“Smooth out your face, Jon. You look like you’re about to draw your sword.” Nym said then, this time sounding deadly serious.

“I might.”
“And end up in one of those cells?”

Rheagar raised a hand, quieting the whispering of the hall.

“And whose wise decisions will be made into law, effective immediately.” His frown told all there was to say of his displeasure. “Ser Blackmont, I expect a report within the month. If I am not satisfied of your implementation of the new law, I will find someone more suited to the task. You are dismissed.”

The man bowed again, and walked backwards, without turning his back on the king.

“So. You do not sink ships?”

Jon finally turned to whoever it was that had been standing next to him. Immediately, he wished he were elsewhere.

It wasn’t that being surrounded by ladies of court bothered him. He’d had his own share of fun with them, when he’d wanted such a thing. But he was in no mood to entertain anyone, and extricating himself from such a situation would require more patience than he had at hand at the moment.

And Nym knew it, so undoubtedly she would use it against him.

“No, my lady. A sunk ship is of no value. The object is to capture and command.”

One of them smile and came close. She was Margery Tyrelly – he’d heard her described far too many times not to know her when she stood before him, even though the last time he’d seen her, they had both been children.

“And how does one do that.” She asked, sweetly almost.

“Surprise. Speed.” Jon glanced to his right, hoping Dany was still there. “Irresistible violence.”

Nymeria rolled her eyes.

As he turned his head, Jon caught sight of Sansa again – he could not help it – and was startled to see her looking back at him intently, the look on her face indecipherable. She looked away the moment their eyes met, choosing to stare at the hands folded in her lap instead. But she’d been staring.

He felt like his heart was trying to jump into his hands.

“I think the prince is quite distracted, ladies.” Nym said around a laugh. “None of our charms seems to be able to hold his attention.”

They all chuckled low. Jon turned to look at them. Smiled.

“Forgive my rudeness. I have not been in the company of a Lady in quite some time. My manners are rusted.”

“Yes, you were at the Stepstones, were you not?” Margery Tyrell said, eyes bright with curiosity. “Are they as terrible as everyone says?”

“Did you really meet pirates?”

“Were you one, perhaps?” Nym added, delighting in how uncomfortable she knew this was making him.
And Jon knew, he knew that there was nothing wrong with what they were asking. They were just curious and far too used to getting their way, and – in Nym’s case, far too used to dueling him in every chance she got – to really have earned from him an honest answer, with all the horrifying details such a won would entail.

But once – just once – he wished he could give it. How would you like to hear about killing, he might have said with a smile full of teeth. Not really to scare them… or maybe just a little bit. Would you like to know what it feels like to gut a man, even though his knife is already in you. With death so close its cold breath is perceptible down your neck and you’re afraid, so you don’t stop; you look into your enemy’s eyes - and maybe find some kid that isn’t old enough to have dipped his wick, and how even then, it makes no matter. You don’t even see him – or worse you do and you twist the knife until you see his soul leave him. And then on to the next. And the next. Until it doesn’t matter. He could go on and tell them about the real business of killing. About the stink of it, the filth. All the shit of it all.

On that subject, he could instruct them well. He knew shit even better than the people who lived in Flea Bottom. It was his specialty. The smell, in particular, but also the numerous varieties of texture and taste. He was as qualified to give a lecture on the topic. Put on his best robes and stand up in front of the King’s court, and tell the fuckers about all the wonderful shit he knew. Pass out samples, maybe. He chuckled, feeling cold sweat starting to bubble down his spine.

He could tell them of what happened after. The witnessing of the carnage. The silence. Of the white bone of an arm. The pieces of skin and something wet and yellow that must’ve been the intestines. Of how the gore was horrible, and it stayed with you, but what would wake you up in a cold sweat years later was singing with Tormund ‘Under the pine trees’ as they threw the parts into the sea. “The answers, Ladies are as follows; yes, sometimes and no.” Jon said finally, and before any one of them could say anything more, he bowed and extricated himself from their little group, making for the doors that would lead him outside in the sun. Gods he was tired.

And so lonely his whole body ached with it. These people exhausted him. Made him feel like he had a hole right in the middle of him. They did not have what he needed and wouldn’t even know how to give it…

And he hated them all, because they stole his solitude without ever offering true company in return. The only person he wanted – the only reason he was still here, in truth, was there with him, and a world apart from him and he couldn’t fucking stand it. It should have been a comfort to see her after almost six days since he’d last laid eyes on her, but it was not. It felt fucking excruciating.

He could just turn around right then and catch sight of her again. Fuck, he could walk right up those steps and sit beside her. It was his right, he could do it. He belonged up there. But if he did that, then she would be close. He might catch the scent of her in the air, something floral and sweet – flowers pressed between her dresses, probably, the way she’d told him that night. Just thinking about it made him want to howl. He could not go on. He could not fucking go on just
standing there, because of that fucking feeling in his chest, an awful physical thing, a terrible ache. She might as well have her hand shoved up his chest, squeezing at his heart, it was so real. And he could not believe that what she provoked in him – without a word, without so much as a touch, just by looking at him - was so violent that he had to catch his breath, while she could sit over there, not a hair out of place, and feel nothing.

Did she really feel nothing?

Jon stepped into sunlight and had to blink rapidly to adjust to its brightness.

“Ah, the Black Prince. Did court bore you so soon?”

Jon turned at the familiar voice, and when they saw Tyrion approaching him, he smiled.

“Tyrion Lannister. Would you believe how glad I am to see you?”

Tyrion grinned as they shook hands and embraced each other. “I would. After all you were in there for a whole hour. I would believe it if you told me you wanted to kiss me right now.”

“Not quite, but very fucking close.”

This delighted him. “Oh, anything interesting happen?”

Jon sighed. “Just bored out of my skull.”

“Ah. Well then. First rule of boring gatherings.” He said as he reached for the nearest one of the tables set up in the courtyard for refreshments, and grabbed the biggest wine bottle he could find. “Form a fun sub-gathering[10].”

And it was right then that Jon could indeed have kissed him.

v.

Jon did not immediately notice when the royal audiences broke for midday, not even when the nobles that had been inside the hall started pouring out into the gardens, looking for refreshment and entertainment. He had stripped of his doublet an hour past, and dueling three of his guard. They were weary of doing so with live steel, until Jon started properly hammering on them. One swing of a sword almost sliced his arm – but luckily only tore his shirt, before he could counter it and disarm his opponent.

Grenn raised his hands.

“I yield.” he said, panting. When Jon nodded, he rested his hands on his knees and hung his head. “Bloody hell, Jon you almost broke my wrist.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, I’ll say.” Grenn laughed. Shook his head.

Jon straightened, planting his sword on the soft earth and heading for the table under the gauzy tent where Tyrion was watching him. he dared a glance to his left, and then looked away, anger starting to bubble up again.

“She doesn’t even look at me.” He complained.
“Who?”

Jon only glared at his friend as he took a long gulp of water and washed it down with some wine.

“Ah. Sansa Stark. Of course. No, she did not look at you once.” Tyrion said then and Jon’s glare grew fiercer. “She is making a very obvious point of not even glancing this way, in fact. Which is strange, methinks.”

When Tyrion did not elaborate, Jon cursed and asked between gritted teeth. “And why is that strange, lord Lannister?”

“Well, first of all, I am her friend and she has not said a word to me, though she has seen plainly that I am here. I might be inclined to take that personally, but I think it’s the presence of your royal person and – as it so rarely happens – not my own, might be the deterrent there.”

“Cut through the bullshit, would you.”

“Very well. You make a rather impressive sight, all considered. Which you know.”

Jon did not interrupt, knowing that sooner or later Tyrion would get to the point.

“Everyone has looked at least once. Most still are. You might have gathered quite the crowd, if you were not so violently unpleasant.” Tyrion said with a smile. Jon rolled his eyes. “But she is the only one who is not. Deliberately so.”

That did not help him, nor cheer him, not please him.

“Shae doesn’t like you either.” Tyrion said then.

Jon huffed. “I suspected she didn’t”

“She thinks you’re a conniving shit. My words, not hers.” Tyrion added with a crooked grin.

“I very much doubt that.”

Tyrion shrugged. “My love is a free spirit.”

“She is an insolent.” Jon smiled. “Like you.”

Tyrion raised his glass at Shae, who was staring at him from the other end of the garden. She smiled. “I have met my match then. A very bad start, not winning your love’s friends to your side.”

Jon scowled. “Who did you win to your side?”

Tyrion laughed heartedly. “Why Sansa, of course. And speaking of Harry Hardying.”

Jon looked at Tyrion askance. Were they speaking of Harry Hardying? “What of the cunt?”

“He doesn’t like you either.” Tyrion warned.

Jon scoffed. “Imagine my surprise.”

“He has been staring at you.”

Oh, has he? “Perhaps he finds me as handsome as you do.”

“Perhaps.” Tyrion said absentmindedly, both hands around his cup. Jon knew that look on his face.
He was considering something deeply. “He is a strange character. I have looked for some substance in him but there is nothing much there.” He finally said.

“Nothing but a man whose throat I would joyfully slit.” Jon grumbled, making Tyrion choke a bit on his wine.

“Somehow I don’t think Lady Stark would appreciate that.” Tyrion said wryly.

“Which is why he still lives.”

“Brother!”

Jon turned to see Aegon approaching with Dany.


“You are being most selfish.” Aegon declared as he helped himself to some wine.

Jon had to wonder how, this time. “I am?”

“There I was, trying to charm our ladies into a dance or, hopefully a kiss, and here you are, showing off and stealing all of their attention.”

“Or perhaps I was looking out for your grace, seeing that you do have a betrothed who is among those ladies today.” Jon said offhandedly. “And whose family is not likely to forgive straying eyes.”

Aegon grinned. “Your magnanimous spirit shows itself again.”

“I live to serve.” Jon sneered and Aegon laughed even harder.

“There is one person whose attention you have not yet stolen.” Dany noticed all too quickly as she kissed Tyrion on both cheeks and sat down beside him, taking the cup he offered with a smile and a soft thank you.

Aegon caught on almost as quickly, looking from Sansa to Jon and then rolling his eyes.

“I don’t understand your fixation.”

“My fixation, as you call it, does not require you to.”

“Perhaps you only want her because you want to belong to her family.” Dany said as she tossed her hair over her shoulder and took a sip of her wine.

Aegon seemed to find the notion hilarious, and did not notice at all the way Jon’s face darkened considerably and how head-on Dany met that threatening look.

“Her family might be impressive but she is not. She is poised to be sure but dull to speak to and not in possession of enough beauty to make up for it.”

Daenerys looked at him askance. “You should not be so careless with your opinions, crown prince.”

Aegon shrugged. “It is nowhere to my disadvantage to say a silly girl is silly.”

“You don’t know enough about Sansa Stark to say that.” Dany reminded him.

“Sansa is under pressure,” Jon said irritably. “Ever since Jon Arryn died, there have been tensions
between the Vale and the North, and now more than ever, her family needs allies.” He looked at her in the middle of roses and greenery, dancing hand in hand with Harry and gifting shy smiles to him. “She coddles the weak, to keep her family strong.”

“Is that what you’re doign?” Aegon asked then, and smiled when Jon refused to answer.

“I genuinely love Sansa Stark.”

“For reasons no one understands.”

Jon had no patience for this. “No one needs to but me.”

“But that’s not an answer thought, is it.” Aegon said then, looking at Jon’s face carefully, like he was looking for the answer there. “There have been rumors going around.”

“Aren’t there always?”

“Nasty ones, this time.”

Jon smiled slowly. “Aren’t there always?”

Aegon sighed. “It’s not like it matters much anymore. It’s all gone tits up.”

When Jon frowned, he seemed perplexed.

“Didn’t you hear? The news of the northern troubles is all over court. Connington is furious.”

“When isn’t he?” Jon said reflexively, churning his brain to think of how it could have gotten out. He resisted the impulse to look at Sansa, not wanting to give her away. Everyone must be thinking it after all. That she had learned it somehow and then set the rumor loose to embarrass the king.

“He thinks she did it, to pressure the crown in acting for her family.”

Tyrion snorted, though taking care to keep her voice low. “The Night’s Watch has been in the city for three days. Every whorehouse from the Neck to Blackwater Rush probably knows that the North is about to implode. It’s really no surprise that the news finally reached the court.”

Dany smiled at him. “And you have visited every whorehouse from the Neck to Blackwater Rush?”

“My dear princess, I have not. Lately.”

Dany laughed.

Jon glanced to his right again and caught Sansa mid-smile, as she looked down to hide her eyes. She glanced at Harry Hardying, who was speaking without looking at her, addressing the people around them. Looked at the smile on her face, the sharp look in her eyes as she took in the faces around them. Jon felt like he could set the whole fucking palace on fire.

He hated Hardying’s hand on her arm, his eyes on her, glancing at her then away. The way he spoke to her as if she was like everyone else. It was offensive to him on levels he could not even begin to explain. He, who had known Sansa among the primal powers that had built this world, was incandescent with rage to see her being spoken as if she was ordinary. What she was, she hid, but he could see it still. How she was terrifying and strange and beautiful. A woman not everyone would know how to love – a woman he felt she had been made for.

Didn’t she know? How he wanted to kiss her without ever having to stop. How he wanted to be as
close and familiar to her as skin. How he would break bones to be with her. Bleed rivers if it brought them closer together.

“Lady Cersei, good day.”

Jon turned and was met with the sight of Cersei Lannister – for Jon had always had difficulties thinking of her as anything other than the lion she was born as – garbed in the red of gold of her house, hair pinned up in the complicated fashion of the westerlands. Myrcella was with her as well, her own dark hair unbound under her veil, the way the queen and the rest of the royal court wore it. Aegon’s face softened as he took her hand and kissed it gently.

He did the same for Cersei, who smiled at him very slightly. She curtsied for Daenerys but did not bow her head or lower her eyes, as she should have in the presence of a princess. It was a wonder to Jon that such a fowl woman could look so sweet when she wanted.

Myrcella greeted her uncle too, under the very watchful eyes of her mother.

“My compliments on your work, princess.” Myrcella said softly, making Daenerys smile.

“Thank you, my lady.”

“Did you really inspect the prisons yourself?” Myrcella then asked, with a genuine interest that made her mother’s eye twitch.

“Myrcella, it is unseemly to ask the princess that.”

“Not at all. I am glad to answer.” Dany laughed. “And the answer is no. I left that to the kingsguard. However we did meet with some of the people that had been incarcerated, and spoke some who were now out as well.”

Myrcella seemed amazed. Her mother less so.

“I must say, I was very surprised to hear the king had trusted such a … distasteful matter to the queen and his sister.”

Dany glanced at Cersei. “The King trusts our judgment.”

“I am sure he does, but there are those that might ask if it is proper for one as young as yourself to be occupied with such matters. Would it not have been better to delegate to those more… suited to the work?”

Dany raised her chin. “On the contrary, I oversaw every step of the process side by side with the Queen, learning from her all I could.”

“Of course.” Cersei conceded with a nettle nod. “It is valiant of you to do your duty so faithfully.”

“I do anything and everything the Iron Throne requires, Lady Cersei,” Dany said decisively and then grinned. “Including sometimes, trampling cockroaches[11].”

Tyrion snorted in his cup softly.

“How very dedicated of you.”

It wasn’t Cersei that spoke this, and the voice made all of them turn to see Rhaenys standing behind them. She looked like a Targaryen icon come to life in her black silk. The bodice of her dress was adorned with countless red rubies that immediately reminded Jon of their father’s battle armor. Her
hair was loose and she was wearing no veil, only an onyx circlet around her forehead. The inside of her loose sleeves was red silk, and the further down her skirt, the black of dress faded into a deep red that looked almost like licking flames.

She looked as imposing as Jon was sure she had meant to.

“Rhaenys!”

Aegon was the first to go to her, not caring at all for protocol and hugging his sister as if they were alone. She welcomed it however, smiling at him softly.

“Brother. You look well.”

“I am even better now that you are here.”

Rhaenys chuckled at his enthusiasm. There had always been something irresistibly charming about Aegon and how candit he could be with people, when he felt like it. But more than anyone, his sister loved him for it. Rhaenys had all of his charm, but very little indeed of his good will and patience. She greeted her family warmly however, and even Jon, offering him her hand, which he kissed lightly.

“Welcome home Jon.”

“Thank you, princess.”

“Lady Tyrell. What a lovely surprise to see you at court.” Cersei said as they curtsied to one another. The smile on Rhaeny’s face was sweet, but her eyes could cut glass. “A surprise? Surely by now you must know, Lady Baratheon - out of all the women in King’s Landing, my mother and I have the greatest durability.”

Something fierce flickered in the Lannister woman’s gaze, something that might have been anger perhaps, but it was subdued before it could make a real impression. “Indeed, my Lady.”

Rhaenys frowned, her confusion so clearly feigned that it was hilarious. “Tell me, do customs differ so much in the westerlands and stormlands that a princess would seize to be one, once she married?”

“No, your grace.”

“Ah, you just forgot then. Understandable.” Rhaenys conceded sweetly. “Your age is advancing.”

“Some wine, anyone?” Dany interceded, to Jon’s great relief.

“No thank you. I do not partake.” Cersei said through tight lips. “If you’ll excuse me. Myrcella, come.”

Myrcella hastily curtsied and followed her mother, glancing back towards them one last time before she went.

“She does not partake.” Rhaenys said and smiled as she watched her go. “That’s certainly a surprise. And not at all what I have heard.”

Tyrion chose that moment to laugh. “My, my. Have the Tyrells helped you sharpen your claws or were you just bored by the road?”

“I have never needed help with one or the other.”
“I can see it.” Tyrion said.

“I hear some talk as I came in.” Rhaenys said as she set her cup down.

Aegon sighed. “Rhaenys, must you.”

“Talk of war.” His sister continued as if she had not heard at all.

Jon frowned. “What war?”

“A northern one.” Rhaenys said succinctly. “If the Starks implode, there are those foolish enough to push for us to be involved as well.”

“Would such a thing be foolish?” Dany asked before Jon could. “The king has a duty to protect the Lords that rule in his name.”

“A region’s inner conflicts are not grounds for the crown to interfere. We did not interfere in Castamere.”

Tyrion smiled. “No. But then again, and with all due respect, your grace, while Aerys did not send a single man in Castamere, he did declare for my father.”

“Yes. It strange is it not, lord Lannister. However many honors the crown bestows on your family, you consider us the enemy.”

But Tyrion knew better than to rise to the bait. “The King’s hesitance on declaring a rebellion against the Starks as unlawful, has made the tensions north worse, leaving room for the Boltons to think the crown might back them after all.” He paused and looked at Rhaenys over the rim of his cup. “This alone surely puts some measure of responsibility on his feet, if a war is to follow. For the people who will die, the orphaned children and the raped women who will surely follow.”

Rhaenys shrugged. “Well, northerners have always been adamant that northern women are there only for northern men to rape, so I see no issue.”

Jon’s hand tightened against the pommel of the dagger at his belt. Aegon glanced to him, a bit alarmed.

“Rhaenys!” Dany gasped, her outrage plain on her face.

“Forgive me Dany. Was that too bold?”

Dany was clenching her jaw so hard her teeth must be hurting. “It was uncalled for and cruel.”

“My apologies.” Rhaenys said smoothly.

“Ah my Lord Hardying! How good of you to join us.”

Jon turned so fast he almost cracked his neck, and saw that Aegon was stretching the truth to the breaking point there, saying that Harry Hardying was coming to them, when he was simply walking by on his own way. But once summoned, and looked on by half the royal family, he could not very well turn away.

Harry bowed and Sansa, who had been walking with him, curtsied deeply for all of them.

“I was posed a question before and I find myself in need of your help. I was debating with some knights over whose athletes are superior, out of all the regions of Westeros.” Aegon continued. “I
personally think the greatest are the men of Dorne. No one could possibly beat Ser Arthur at lance or sword. I doubt they can at anything else.”

“I disagree,” Dany added. “The Kingsguard are the greatest warriors of Westeros, it’s true, but they are sworn to the king so therefore represent King’s Landing.”

“Ah, but they were not trained in King’s Landing, were they? Their military education came from the places that birthed them.” Tyrion pointed out. “And my brother might have something to say on the topic of Ser Arthur being his better.”

“If you knew your brother better, you might know he would never say such a thing about the man who knighted him.” Rhaenys pointed out and Tyrion grinned.

“To his face, perhaps.”

Rhaenys scoffed. “Lannisters. And what on earth are you all on about with this anyway?”

“An ongoing debate, sister, as I said.” Aegon said before looking to Jon. “My brother holds with King’s Landing, of course, since he was raised here and he thinks of himself as the best.”

“As you say, your grace,” Jon said dully. He was looking at Sansa, who kept staring ahead, completely unperturbed or even aware that he was there.

“Lord Lannister here holds up his brother.” Aegon continued. “Ser Benjen says no one would ever be able to best the half-giants of House Umber at any sport.”

Jon was surprised Aegon remembered that.

“And I am sure that If Margery were here, she would speak highly indeed of her brothers. So now we are dependent on you my Lord, since you are after all one of the few of the Eyrie. What say you?”

Harry considered it.

“I could not say for sure. Winterfell certainly seems to have the greater beauty.” He said with a smile towards Sansa, taking her hand in his and kissing her knuckles lightly.

The way she smiled - the way she hadn’t even glanced in Jon’s direction - made him clench his teeth.

“I will say it then.” Jon said. “King’s Landing has better athletes.”

“And where were they when armies marched on this city and men from other regions had to defend it more than once.”

“Oh, I don’t mean armies, but single men.” Jon said carefully. “Like you and me.”

Harry’s face was clear of expression but in his eyes, Jon found the truth. He knew exactly why they were having this conversation.

“You are posing a challenge?” Harry asked.

“Yes. A competition of the men in this court, each representing his birthplace.” Jon said, as he looked around to the crowd they had gathered, the smiles on their faces. “The choice of the sport we will delegate to a neutral party.”
“I offer myself as such a one, as my talents in this field are limited.” Tyrion said, his wicked grin directly contradicting his humble words.

“I accept. I will be proud to represent the Eyrie and the Vale. You may choose the sport, Lannister.”

Tyrion did not hesitate for a single blink of an eye. “Bullfight.”

This seemed to have caught Harry unawares. “Bullfight?”

“A very popular sport in Dorne. We’ve held several in the capitol as well, many times in honor of my mother’s namedays.” Aegon grinned. “Are you afraid, ser?”

Harry tipped his chin up. “Of course not.”

“No, but if the dornish do, how difficult could the effort be?” Harry looked back towards Jon and Aegon. “I am ready when you are.”

“Good. We will organize the competition for the end of the week. My secretary will set the time, place and terms, and organize the competitors.” Aegon said.

If Jon had been a wolf, this would be the moment when his jaws would have clenched around Harry Hardying’s throat. He glanced to Sansa, who for the first time was looking right at him, and he knew just from the look in her eyes, that she had heard the trap snap shut as clearly as Jon had.

He smiled. Sansa did not return it.

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[1] Deathless quote

[2] I didn’t know how to address them, so I went for how Cardinals are addressed in real life, since they are after all the ones who chose the “Pope” of this world.

[3] Again, for lack of better word, I had to use this one, which I know is not the right one anyway, but it does give you guys the idea of what im trying to say.

[4] Winterfell is further north than White Harbor, so it makes sense, geographically, for the Night’s Watch recruiters to have ridden to Winterfell, then taken a boat on the White Knife, to White Harbor, and then another boat to King’s Landing, cause I assume that sailing south is faster than riding there.

[5] Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway. The whole paragraph is a reproduction of one of hers – famous for its depiction of PTSD/shellshock.

[6] Exhange inspired by a similar one in The Borgias, Faith and Fear

[7] I am trying to describe the dress Lucilla from Gladiator wears on her return to Rome, which you can see here, here, here and here. I have decided that the Rhoynish fashion (aka ancient roman fashion) is very popular in Dorne, and Elia purposefully wears it to set herself apart, but also because it’s the fashion of where she comes from and she is proud of it.

[8] Elisabeth, the Golden Age quote
This one and the next paragraph are two pieces of writing that I found googling PTSD – copid on a doc I have full of quotes and then LOST THE SOURCE like an idiot. I haven’t been able to find it again, but if you recognize anything please let me know.

Anyone who ever watched Gilmore Girls, will recognize this one lol

Very much inspired by the line like this one that Pepper Potts says in Iron Man I
INCONSISTENCY: a very important one: when I was writing the first chapters, I wrote that The White Bull, Gerold Hightower, was alive and Commander of the Kingsguard…. And then when I got to ‘blood of Winterfell’ I thought I had written that he was dead… Can you see me facepalming rn??? Because I did.

So anyway, I’m going to keep that – the White Bull is dead; Barristan is the Commander of the Kingsguard (mostly because if he were alive, Jon would probably assassinate him and I don’t have time to write that rn).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

vi

love
for us

is no paradise of arbours
to us
love
tells us, humming,

that the stalled motor
of the heart

has started to work
again

Vladimir Mayakovski, ‘Letter to comrade Kostrov from Paris about the nature of love’

If Connington could have stormed down the corridor, he would have but of course, he could not because he, as well as others close to his council, were keeping pace with the king, who had only just retired from the Great Hall and the queen, who was walking beside him.

“Of course it was Sansa Stark. Who else could it have been?” He whispered fervently, thought at this point he might as well shout it. “We don’t have northern factions at court.”

Connington’s words were almost a sneer. He would not have welcomed them in the slightest if they did come, but neither did he approve of the blatant disdain northerners showed for everything south of the neck. Including their king.

He turned to his secretary. “I want to know who the fuck thought it was a good idea to share with that girl the secrets of the crown!”
Baelish bowed his head. “Yes, my lord.”

Then Connington winced and turned to the King. “Begging your pardon, your grace.”

Elia waved his words away.

“It could not be a secret forever.” Rheagar said calmly as he walked through the doors of the small council. He held out his wife’s seat first, to his right, before he sat down at the head of the table. “I’m quite surprised that we managed to keep this quiet as long as we did in the first place.”

Connington immediately took his seat to the king’s left. He seemed to consider Rheagar’s words before he turned to Baelish again. “I want all her post seized.”

“Her post already goes through Maester Pycelle.” Elia’s said then. “There is no reason to punish the girl for something that we all know was inevitable.”

Connington turned to the king. “If she has any wit at all, she will appeal to you in public before the day’s end.”

But he did not seem at all happy with such a thing. Elia on the other hand, appeared highly amused by it.

“How else could she do it?” she asked with a glance to her husband, who smiled. “Are you suggesting, Lord Hand, that lady Stark should appeal to the King in private?”

Connington scoffed. “Please, your grace.” He said with obvious effort. “This is not at all a matter of amusement.”

“And yet, I find a certain hilarity to it. Because you see, I have the answer to your questions on this matter.”

Connington stilled.

Elia linked her hands together. “I would have thought your spies in my quarters would have reached you by now. They’re losing their touch.”

Connington pressed his lips together. Did not deny it.

Rheagar inclined his head towards his wife. “My dear”?

“During my usual audience with the Night’s Watch emissaries, their recruiter informed Lady Stark that he had passed through Winterfell on his way south. He gave her their good wishes, and told her that her family had entrusted him with post for her.”

Rheagar raised one eyebrow.

“I encouraged her to read it.”

“I beg your pardon?” Connington asked softly.

“Would you have had me seize her post in front of half my court and the Night’s Watch? Within the hour everyone from God’s Gate to the Wall would hear about how the spurned dornish Queen won’t allow Lady Stark to read letters from her family. Or worse.”

“You could have told her to read it in private.” Connington suggested, though his tone was not as calm as a moment ago.
“It would be better, my lord, if she read it in my presence and felt obliged to let me know the contents, then to have her read it in private and burn it, before anyone could ever find out what was in it. Don’t you think?”

Connington sighed. He could say nothing to that. “And what did these letters contain?”

“News of her family, their health. Vague mentions of Winterfell’s court.” Elia grinned. “Her sister’s penmanship is terrible, but her letter was entertaining. She insulted just about every Lord of the North in some form. She is a funny girl; I think I’d like her. Lady Catelyn spoke of possible brides for her brother. Lady Lyarra…” Elia smiled, but it did not reach her eyes. “Well, let us say she did not mince words about Bolton’s perceived treachery. The Starks don’t seem to want or need the interference of the crown however, but they have definitely noticed our silence on the matter.”

Connington chuckled darkly. “Even if we offered to send our armies today, they would rebuff such an offer as an insult to their ability to command their own men.”

Elia nodded. “Most probably, yes. Does that matter, you find?”

Connington grimaced. “Now that news is out, the court will start pushing for action or inaction by turns.” He looked at Elia and then Rheagar, lowered his voice. “We all know that Stannis will demand to do the lawful thing: he has no love for Ned Stark but he will push for holding a clear and firm line against whoever breaks the king’s peace.”

“As he should.” Elia said slowly.

“It is not as clearly lined as that.” Connington argued. “The matter is worthy of some debate. Wildlings have been enemies of Westeros since the wall was built. Allying oneself with them is not just a northern matter.”

“The wall was built by a Stark.” Rheagar said slowly. “They understand the lands they govern better than any of us. If Ned Stark decides its worthy of merit to sit down with the people beyond the wall, then he has good reason.”

“Still-”

“We cannot forbid him negotiation on the grounds of the kingdom’s integrity, not when he is negotiation with a neighbor that the Starks alone have kept at bay for thousands of years.” Elia looked at her husband and Connington by turns. “What does the Iron throne know of wildlings, apart that they exist?”

“And yet, decisions pertaining the kingdom’s integrity are not to be made by any lord alone.” Connington insisted. “It is the king’s prerogative to deal with forces outside of the kingdom that might compromise its entirety.”

“That sounds as rehearsed as you probably feared it would.” Elia said then, dispensing patience in favour of fact. “It would never be the kingdom’s entirety under threat but that of the north – and rest assured, the northerners know this. We must support the Starks. The law demands it, the kings peace demands it, and other lords paramount will certainly demand it.”

“Yes, yes, but hear me. This is an opportunity,” Connington leaned forward, looking Rheagar in the eye. “An opportunity to set clear lines on what the Lords Paramount can and cannot do. Matters of taxation, matters of war and peace, engagements with entities outside the kingdom – these should be the sole prerogatives of the King. Here, we can start establishing this.”

Elia’s eyes widened. “The words wouldn’t’ have time to make it out of your mouth before there was
a rebellion. You think the great lords of westeros would take such a corralling in silence?”

Rheagar smiled but it did not touch his eyes. “It would spark a civil war.”

“No… necessarily. I propose we support the Starks and take control of the negotiations with the wildlings. This way, it will be under the throne’s authority that an agreement will be reached. Setting a precedent.”

Rheagar tilted his head up, considering.

Elia was faster. “They will never allow it.”

“I am not proposing anything that is not lawful.” Connington countered.

“You are proposing extending a hand to them while stabbing them in the back with the other.” Elia said, not managing to contain her outrage if only for the fact that Connington was presenting something so dangerous as if it was the best catch of the last hundred years.

Connington was affronted by her frankness. “I certainly am not.”

“It is how they will see it, my Lord. As the Crown yet again taking advantage of a moment of weakness, in order to get something that we want, leaving them to deal with the mess. And that is not even counting the practical impossibilities of it all.” Elia turned to Rheagar. “No northerner will take a southerner’s word over that of Eddard Stark’s, and I am sure the wildlings are no different. No one’s legitimacy holds greater sway up there than the Starks. Not even the King’s.”

“The fact that we are speaking of war in the North means that that is patently untrue, my queen.” Rheagar said but his eyes were staring in the distance. He was only half listening.

“The fact that said war has not yet happened, though tensions have been accumulating for months, supports my argument however.” Elia countered evenly. “And if I were a wildling, I would pay more heed to the word of the Lord I will have to contend daily, than that of some emissary from somewhere I have never heard of, who brings word of a king who is thousands of miles away. A king who has little chance of enforcing his rule in a region such as a North, if its Lord paramount is hostile to him.”

“Then I will go.” Connington said. “I am Hand of the King. Short of his highness, I am the highest representative of the crown.”

“You would be killed within a fortnight.” Elia said flatly. That drew her husband’s focused attention.

“You think they think so little of my authority that they would dare kill my Hand with little thought of consequence?” Rheagar asked, evenly as ever, but his dark eyes sharp on her.

“I think, your grace, that your Hand is a man of talent and strong will, but making friends out of people he notoriously distains is not among his many gifts. He’s made no secret of his hatred for Ned Stark, his disdain for his daughter and even his nephew.” Elia said as she fixed her eyes on Connington’s, whose face was as still as if set in stone. “Sending him would only add insult to injury.”

“Might even unite the north against the one man they hate more than they hate each other.” Baelish said slowly over Connington’s shoulder, drawing the Queen’s attention who could not help a smile.

Connington turned to his secretary. “You’re supposed to help my case, Lord Baelish.”
Baelish bowed. “Helping preserve your life is helping your case, my lord.”

Connington rolled his eyes. “Just as well.”

Rheagar took a deep breath. “The kingdom has had peace for almost two decades. I don’t want a war, especially not with the north. I do not want it.” He said slowly. “And I might not win it. There are more important things at hand. We cannot afford a conflict that would bleed us dry before the real war comes.” He said softly, almost as if to himself.

It always set people on edge when the king spoke of this real war that was yet to come, though admittedly he did so rarely enough. And all of them, especially his Hand and his wife, knew better than to ask what he meant. More than twenty years on the throne and he had never answered that question no matter who asked it.

“Your grace-” Connington started but stopped as soon as Rheagar raised his hand.

“But I do concede that Lord Connington has a point. Dealing with foreign entities should be the King’s prerogative.”

Elia’s lips tightened into a thin line, but she waited. One did not need to know her well to know that she did not agree with the very idea of such an extension of the crown’s power, and not just its impossible practicalities. The queen was dornish to the bone; she valued independence over control and had different ideas from her husband and his Hand, on what could breed unity in a kingdom. But Elia Martell been a queen for twenty years now: she knew how to choose her battlefields.

“A southern courtier will not succeed in the north. Cannot. That much is a fact.” Rheagar said then, touching the tips of his fingers to his mouth. “But someone of their own might.”

Connington understood immediately. Elia on the other hand, was shocked.

“You want to send *Jon* to stand between a wall and sharp place?” She asked in a whisper, eyes wide with unrelenting surprise.

“He is a Gonfalonier and the member of the Council of Justice. And the King’s son.” Connington listed, as if Elia did not already know all these things. “He has the authority to go there to preserve the King’s peace; and he would be an unmistakable symbol of the crown supporting the Starks.”

Elia refrained from biting at Connington and instead turned to Rheagar. “They’ll devour him.”

“He’s survived them before.” Connington immediately countered. “Both sides, if his boasts are true.”

“The Starks would never harm him.” Rheagar sounded as sure as that as he was of the sun rising on the morrow.

“They might when they understand he’s there to enact your will to try and encroach on rights they have had for millennia.” Elia said immediately. “You place far too much trust on their love for one another outweighing their interests. It’s a courtesy you allow no one else, your grace.”

Connington pursed his lips but did not contradict her.

Elia fixed her husband with an intense look. “Have you ever considered that it might be a blindspot?”

“I have.” Rheagar admitted. “I will think more on this.” He said as he took her hand, perhaps more for his own benefit than hers. “There are other pressing issues to consider, in the meantime. We need
to declare for the Starks, but the lion and the rose can make things more difficult than they need to be.” Rheagar reminded his Hand.

Elia took a deep breath, trying to settle.

“We must counter their effect we but also need them both on our side. Now more than ever.” Connington sighed. “Both families want to name the head of the City Watch.”

Elia chuckled. “Tywin Lannister is preparing to take over the capitol before his niece ever marries my son.”

Connington nodded with a sigh. Elia and Rheagar shared a look. Both of them would rest easier if Arthur could command the City Watch permanently, but that could not be. Even like this, they had stretched the limits of legality to its breaking point.

“It is of course, impossible.” Rheagar’s voice was calm, his tone unmoving. The decision had already been made: he knew the answer was no, and so did Connington.

“We need their good will, your grace.” Connington reminded him halfheartedly.

“We cannot not cede one of the most important institutions of this city to another family.” Elia said firmly. “The last time the crown did not control the City watch, my children were almost murdered. A mistake like that can never happen again.”

“If I may, your grace, My lord.” Baelish said softly. Once he had their attention – and permission to speak, he did.

“Jason Mallister.” He suggested. “He is a neutral candidate, admired by both families and actually worthy of the position.”

“He was Hoster Tully’s unsubtle suggestion.” Connington said.

“Yes.” Rheagar nodded. “So he also has the added benefit of appeasing the Riverlands.”

“It is rare is it not, that the political decision turns out to also be the correct one[1].” Elia said then.

“It will anger Tywin Lannister… yet again.” Connington warned.

“Surely the Lord of the Westerlands cannot complain of a man that has proven his valor and leadership in two wars and countless smaller incursions.” Petyr Baelish said, and his argument was solid, but it missed the point, in Connington’s opinion.

“He will not complain, of course. But he will hold it against us.” Rheagar said, having understood his Hand’s reasoning immediately, for it was a problem he’d had to live with ever since he made himself Prince Regent. The shame of not having chosen a side in the Rebellion had kept Tywin Lannister quiet for some time, but it had not kept him from advancing his granddaughter as a prospect for the Crown Prince.

“Unless you make him Hand, he will hold every move you make against you, as you well know, my king.” Elia reminded him. “It is useless to try to win the favor of a man that wants everything.”

“Very well.” Connington made a notation on the papers before him and passed it to the king, who signed it, and then gave it to Baelish.

“Also, while we still have some modicum of privacy,” Connington started. “I want to formally
present my recommendation of Lord Baelish’s for the position of Master of Coin.” Connington turned to look at his man. “He served well under Lord Arryn as his steward in the Vale. Proof of which is in the Eyrie’s coffers. He was an excellent aide when Jon Arryn was Master of Coin, covering the position himself in the last months of Lord Arryn’s ailing. And he has been invaluable these past few years as my secretary. I cannot think of a better man, your grace.”

Baelish bowed deeply. “I am honored.”

“A deserved honor, I hear.” Rheagar said with a nod. “I will announce the appointment today. I presume there will be no resistance from the rest of the council.”

“None.” Connington said and Rheagar nodded.

“Good.”

Connington turned to Petyr Baelish. “I will be loath to lose your services, my friend, but it seems your gifts are far too valuable to squander.”

“I will never be too far if you have need of me, my Lord.” Bealish said to that, smiling and bowing his head again.

“I will write to Tywin Lannister as well.” Rheagar added then, grabbing the undivided attention of everyone in the room. “I intend to make him an offer.”

“Of what?” Elia asked.

“Master of War.”

“Is that wise?” Elia asked, her voice having lowered with worry.

“It is wiser than waiting and dreading what he is planning from afar.” Rheagar explained. Elia was not convinced by her husband’s reasoning, but she had no chance to object because just then, the doors of the council room opened and Arthur Dayne walked in. He bowed to the king and queen, who greeted him warmly.

“The council awaits to be summoned, your grace.” He said as he straightened.

Rheagar nodded and Connington got up, his secretary following him, heading for the doors to sign the protocol in the antechamber and bring everyone in.

As they waited for the rest of the council to show, Rheagar leaned to his side and asked Elia in a whisper. “What did you think of Dany’s suitors?”

Elia smiled, though she was already tired and the meeting had not even started. “Does it matter? I am not the one who has to marry them.”

Rheagar made an impatient gesture. “Elia, this must stop. She must marry.”

“And she will. When you make up your mind.” Elia leaned into him with a lopsided smile. “Do not think it escapes me how you hesitate. You can’t bear to be parted from her either, Rheagar.”

The king sighed deeply, reached up to take off his crown and set it beside his papers. Rubbed his forehead where the onyx had dented his skin. “My affection for her may make me more tolerant to her antics, but we both know it won’t last forever. I’m afraid however that Dany thinks it might.”

“She refused Horas Redwyne today.”
Both Elia and Rheagar looked at Arthur with startled eyes.

“Today?” Rheagar repeated while Elia laughed.

“My, the boy is relentless.” She said, still smiling.

Arthur shrugged. “Dany seemed to like him.”

“But she still refused him.” Rheagar confirmed, a frown darkening his face. He was starting to anger. “This is your doing.” He told Elia accusingly, who did not so much as blink under his anger.

“I’m afraid I do not follow.”

“You encourage her willfulness.”

“I do no such thing.” Elia said calmly. “I merely told your sister that while she would one day have to marry to please you, that does not preclude her from loving to please herself. That ought to make her more compliant.”

Rheagar gestured helplessly. “What it did was make her accept one brother’s courtship, while flirting with the other!”

“Rheagar, she will love who she chooses, she is a Targaryen.” Elia said firmly. “That does not mean she will not obey, when the time comes.”

Rheagar got up, an impatient gesture that was unfamiliar to most and very known to Elia.

“I know what you’re thinking now.” She said calmly, as she leaned against one of the

“There is not much you cannot do, my lady.” Rheagar responded archly, making Arthur and Elia share an amused glance.

“You’re thinking ‘war was easier than women’.”

He had his back to her, but she heard his chuckle just fine.

vii

“Would that be all, my lords?”

Connington nodded. “For now, your grace.”

“Very well. Let us adjourn for the day.” Rheagar turned towards one of his menservants standing by the table close to the wall. “Tell my children their parents invite them to luncheon.”

As everyone was about to rise, Pycelle coughed, drawing attention. Rheagar linked his hands, projecting a patience he did not feel.

“Maester.”

“There was a small matter that I feel obliged to bring to your attention, your grace, now that official business is concluded.”

“Of course.”

“Regarding your son’s appointment as Gonfalonier.”
Rheagar’s face smoothed clean of any expression. “You have an objection.”

“Since I was not consulted on the matter, I am forced to raise one now, if your grace permits me.”

Elia sighed. If they allowed Pycelle to proceed at his own pace, they would be held another hour. “To the point, Grand Maester.”

Pycelle bristled, but continued. “The duties of a Gonfalonier require a little more than trickery or marshal skills.” He cleared his voice with a dry cough. “A steady mettle, a clear understanding of the law, an ability to supervise. A gift at training new recruits and, above all, a soft heart. Your grace, your younger son is many things, but a calming guide is not one of them.”

“His personal guard would beg to differ, as would the men he’s sailed with.” Arthur said slowly, drawing the king’s attention. “The prince is a very apt teacher, when he puts his mind to it. And he has more patience than many give him credit for.”

“The prince is reckless.” Lord Tyrell said with a sigh.

“Why?” Rheagar asked, as if he was curious to hear it. “Because he restores the king’s peace to its rightful balance?”

“I have been receiving ravens from the Twins ceaselessly. Lord Frey is howling for his innocence. The magistrates of the citadel.”

“Were given proof of Lord Frey’s unlawful acts, and once I speak with my son, they will have the Prince’s testimony as well.”

“Lord Tyrell’s argument is valid, your grace.” Varys interceded gently, with a small tilt of his head. “It would not do for the prince’s actions to be perceived as outside your control.”

“With due respect, Lord Varys, I disagree.” Arthur said. “Although he lied about his true plans to subdue the Freys instead of coming home as he said, there remains a great disparity between acting against King’s will and acting without his knowledge.”

“Is there? The prince is unpredictable and therefore unreliable in the eyes of the Lords of Westeros.” Tyrell continued. “He sends no missives, dismisses the king’s advisors, but keeps someone like Lady Stark far too close for comfort. Even showing greater preference to the advice of Brynden Tully to his father’s.”

“It is a mark of his wisdom that Jon listened to a man of the quality and experience of Ser Brynden.” Elia interceded, the moment Mace Tyrell took a breath. “And he took Lady Stark with him precisely so that she could exercise her influence over the lords of the Riverlands.”

“Undoubtedly, my queen. But he should not have sent the royal aid away, while sharing his thoughts with the daughter of a rebel and her uncle.” Tyrell said then. “One cannot deny how unreliable it makes him look.”

“The prince ignores the King. The son, his father.” Pycelle said softly from the other end of the table, voice shaking in that way of his.

Elia smiled. “And those without sons always know how best to raise them[4].”

Pycelle startled for a moment, mumbled something but bowed his head to the queen, saying nothing more.
Then Tyrell chuckled. “Perhaps he would seem differently were he settled with a wife.”

“Are you discussing my son’s conduct, or his prospects, my Lord?” Rheagar asked politely, and so smoothly that one could not read anything at all of his feelings on said discussion. As if he would welcome either turn it took.

“Both, I think. I see a problem, and I also see a solution.”

“Marriage.”

“You’ve seen that solution for some time, Lord Tyrell.” Elia said carefully, her voice as neutral as her husband’s.

“My real concern, your grace,” Mace Tyrell began again. “Is that the prince often says one thing and then does another, wading dangerously close to oathbreaking. That is something does not inspire faith in one who is meant to execute the king’s justice.”

“I have chastised Jon for being so elusive.” The king said then, with something that almost resembled a sigh. “Yet his success supports his methods. Lord Baratheon. What say on the legal grounds of Lord Frey’s sentencing?”

Stannis tipped his chin up. “The royal magistrate in the Riverlands assures me that the evidence against Lord Frey was irrefutable and absolute. That alone does not exclude coercion or manipulation.” Stannis warned. “But by all accounts, the prince caught the Freys red-handed, as they were assaulting a caravan. I cannot fault his tactics, if it won him the day.” Stannis added stiffly. “Besides, it provides unquestionable proof of wrongdoing. More than fifty people saw it happen. There are just as many accounts of it, all coinciding. The magistrate overseeing the proceedings has gathered testimonies under oath of the raids from the participants and victims. As far as I can see, the legal grounds are without reproach.”

Rheagar nodded. “Good. Then the matter is closed. My Lords, you are dismissed. Arthur, Jon. A moment, please.”

Once the room had been vacated, the king looked to two of his closes advisors who had become in time, his friends.

“Do you think Jon is reckless?”

Jon Connington sighed. “If Stannis Baratheon sees no wrong in his behavior, I cannot disagree, nor can any man that holds his reputation dear.”

Rheagar nodded slowly, his mind turning along familiar paths. “Do you think Tyrell thinks it?”

“Tyrell thinks you ought to accept his offer and engage your son to his daughter.” Connington said then, plainly enough and not hiding his vexation with the man. “And that veiled threats of undermine Jon’s reputation will make you more likely to agree to such a thing.”

“One son with a Lannister bride. The other with a Tyrell.” Rheagar’s smile was an unpleasant thing, so falsely it sat on his face. “How long do you think, before one of them dies?”

Elia shivered.

“Tyrell must think we are all stupid enough to court civil war.” Arthur added then. “Or that Jon is as easy to manipulate as he once was.”
Connington huffed. “Clearly he’s never had a full conversation with the prince.”

“He might think that,” Elia warned. “But I assure you his mother does not. There’s more to this.”

Rheagar looked at them in turn and then fixed an intense stare on his Lord Hand. “Make an informed guess, my friend.”

Connington nodded. “I shall.”

“In the mean time, I shall dine with my children. Rhaenys has come, I heard.” Elia nodded. Rheagar was visibly pleased by the news. “It’s been too long since we have all been in one room together.”

Elia sighed deeply. “Indeed. And yet somehow life has not gotten any quieter.”

Despite himself, Rheagar chuckled.

Both Arthur and Jon bowed as the king and queen took their leave. And as he watched them go, Connington privately added this new source of conflict to the list of why it would be to everyone’s best interest to send Jon far away from Court for a while. And the benefits he might make Mace Tyrell see, in sending someone he deemed so unstable, to a place further away from the Reach than say, Summerhall.

viii

It was long past mid-day and yet the sun was beating down hotly still, its heat perceptible even in the shaded corner of the gardens that Sansa had taken her little entourage to. Beyond the formal lawns of the Red keep, at the bottom of the gardens, there was an old grotto. The vegetation circling it had not been so carefully planned or kept. It had an air of careful wildness to it that was different from the symmetrical beauty of the rest of the gardens. The fountain in the middle of it seemed so much part of the surrounding earth and stone that one would not be blamed overmuch for thinking it had grow out of the ground just as it was, pentagonal and huge, with its chipped steps and arching lilies from which jets of cool water flowed.

But that was just the fanciful side of her mind taking over sometimes. As it was won’t to do, when she would rather think of fountains growing out of the earth like flowers, than anything else.

The silence it provided and the solitude it could simulate was one of the reasons why Sansa liked it best of all. The other was that here, she used to be able to pretend she was somewhere that was not King’s Landing. She used to come here so often, that everyone knew now to come here first, if they she was ever wanted and not found.

Nowadays, she came here to tend to her birds, who flocked here as if they knew Lady Stark’s habit about as well as her closest friends. It was something akin to that which she was doing now, seated as she was on the grass, her skirts about her, trying not to even breathe too loudly. She had commanded everyone to silence and as for herself, she wanted to be as still as the stones that built the fountain in front of her. If it had not been for the breeze that moved her hair she might even have succeeded in appearing painted marble. She was thinking of nothing as well, in her great concentration. Only looking at the small yellow bird that had landed on the round plate she had placed on the grass. She had propped a small mirror against it, and the bird was as taken by the light playing on the polished glass as Sansa was taken by the sight of its yellow feathers. It bounced up and down in front of the mirror, and Sansa reached for the net by her side. Slowly, without disturbing so much as the air around her.

She waited until the bird was perfectly still, eyes on the mirror, stunned, distracted. And then, with a
move so fast the bird did not have time so much as to fan its wings, she trapped him with the net.

The little bird started flapping its wings in a panic, chirping as it did. Sansa sneaked her hand under the flat plate that the mirror had been propped against, and flipped it, using the plate as a lid for the net. The gold-feathered little thing fell into the netting, flapping its wings erratically. Sansa could imagine its fast-pace heartbeat, as she looked at it. The panic it must be feeling. The cold terror of not knowing what would happen next.

“You caught him! How ingenious.” Harry said as he watched the bird struggling.

“She was detracted by the reflection of the sunlight on the mirror.” Sansa explained without taking her eyes off the small creature she’d trapped.

“You can add it to your collection.” Harry told her with a grin, trying to touch the bird’s feather as it struggled to find freedom again and failed.

“I’m not sure.” Sansa said murmured.

Harry laughed. “Do you mean to have it for dinner then? A small thing like him?”

“Her. And no.” She said, having made up her mind almost immediately after catching her prize. She always thought she might just keep one, one day, and always changed her mind in the end. It was almost a game she played with herself: like riding a pendulum, pretending she did not know which side she was going to fall.

Sansa looked at her would-be husband and gave him a smile. And as she did, she removed the plate that was trapping the bird inside the net, and let it fly away.

Harry gasped, as did his friends around them. Shae and Jeyne on the other hand did not even look surprised.

“But… you worked so hard to trap it!” Harry said then, almost a reprimand.

“Lady Stark has a soft heart, my Lord.”

Sansa turned to see Littlefinger approaching them, hands folded over the ledger that he was holding in front of him, its dark leather smooth and shiny.

Sansa curtsied. “Lord Baelish.”

“Lady Stark.” He nodded at her, and then at Harry. “Ser Hardying.”

“Do you approve then, ser? Of my Sansa’s frivolity?”

Petyr smiled. “I would not disapprove of something Lady Stark has decided to do. My trust in her sound sense is unfailing.”

Harry chuckled. “I have never known you to make such an allowance for any other man.”

Baelish bowed his head. “Few men possess Lady Stark’s good judgment.”

Harry shrugged. “As both my tutor and hers, I suppose I must concede to your superior knowledge, my Lord. Though perhaps you are complimenting yourself, in complimenting her.”

Petyr grinned. “My Lord may yet allow me small vanities.” Then he turned to Sansa, who smiled amiably. “And what of you, my lady? Have you done your reading?”
Sansa reached forward for the book that Jeyne had brought her, as punctual in their habits together as if they could hear each other thinking. But then again, they had been doing this a long time.

“I have, of course.”

“Then let us start.” Littlefinger indicated one of the stone benches and Sansa took a seat. Harry sat down by her side before Petyr could, which startled a genuine smile out of Sansa. He was always his most charming when he did not mean to be.

“Are you to have a lesson with me, Harry?”

He smiled back at her, bright and perfect. “If you wish.” His dimpled smile was lovely to look at. “It will be like we were when we were younger.”

Sansa chuckled and he kissed her hand. “What is today’s topic? Not arithmetic, I hope.”

Sansa chuckled. “Philosophy.”

Lothor Brune chuckled quietly as he neared them and sat down on the border of the fountain. “Philosophy? Are you sure the lady ahs need of it?”

“There are those in the citadel that argue education is waste on a woman,” Myranda Royce said as she neared them, her fan in her hand and her smile at the ready.

“My father has always disagreed with that notion.” Sansa said softly. “I took my lessons with my brothers, as did my sister.”

“And you excelled, I am told.”

Sansa did not reply to Harry – it would be impolite to boast – but she smiled at him, because it was true after all.

“My Maester thought virtue and obedience were all of learning a woman ever would need.” Myranda said as she closed her fan with a snappish move as she circled them slowly. “Unfortunately for him, I stole the key to my father’s library from him when I was but seven.”

Sansa chuckled and Lady Royce winked at her.

“Ah – so you are the reason why Maesters insist that women’s education must always be supervised?” Lyn Corbray asked cheerfully, having neared them as well.

Myranda spanked him lightly on his arm with her fan.

“Cheeky, ser.”

“I would never disagree with a Master, of coruse.” Littlefinger began carefully. “For many women that might be true, but for those lucky few who are daughters of the Lord Paramount of the North and bound to marry the Lord Paramount of the Vale and raise his heir - well, the matter differs.” Littlefinger say with the most courteous of smiles.

“For a grand lady, education is necessary, you say.” Lothor Brune asked, following Myranda with his eyes.

“Station demands it. As keeping the gates of the Moon for my Lord father has taught me.”

“And what is your curriculum, my Lady?” Corbrey asked, looking at her in that irritating way of his,
as if she was a child of five for whom one needed to speak slowly.

“Lady Stark is well learned in languages, literature, history, ethics, the keeping of accounts and of course, religion and the Seven Pointed Star. As per the orders of her esteemed mother, who knows all too well the duties such a lady must prepare herself to face.” Littlefinger said, barely turning to look at Lyn Cobray thought it was he who asked the question.

Myranda Royce laughed.

“We will have a very accomplished lady of the Vale, it seems.” She said as she found herself a seat.

“As it should be.” Harry said softly and raised Sansa’s hand to his lips. But before he could linger overmuch, Petyr interrupted.

“Then let us begin today’s lesson. How did you find the writings of Maester Chivaltes, Lady Stark?”

“Sobering, my Lord.”

Littlefinger’s lips turned upwards at the corners very slightly and Sansa felt that feeling coming about her yet again, like a corset tightening around her ribs. And she was struck with the thought that never did she feel more constrained than when she was around him. Always when he was near, she had to be precise to the millimeter – which was not what bothered her, because it was a natural inclination at this point. No. what he demanded was to be pleased at every turn, and it pleased him that she should not open her mouth before considering the damage she might do with it.

“Explain, my Lady.” Harry urged, and Sansa turned her eyes to him, and then, holding her smile, towards her tutor, who looked appropriately severe.

“It seems our lessons today are to be a debate then. Very well.” He gestured magnanimously and sat on the opposing stone bench, carefully lowering himself on it and folding his hands in his lap.

“Well, I found his emphasis on reason, the rational mind and an enquiring spirit hard to disagree with. I was fascinated by the way he described the trial and error methodology, but his resistance to any kind of feeling is alarming in certain parts.” Sansa thought about it a moment. “It rather seems like a flaw of the man, than a feature of his overall body of thought.”

“Ah, it no longer surprises me that your tutor suggest such reading to you, Lady Stark.” Myranda said as she eyed the back of Petyr’s head with narrowed eyes. “Are you planning of discouraging our young friend from any emotion whatsoever?”

“I certainly hope you don’t ser!” Harry protested jovially.

“I cannot fathom your meaning, my lady.” Petyr said instead of answering.

“Lord Baelish here,” Myranda explained as she came forward and shooed Harry from his seat by Sansa’s side, so that she could take it herself. “Is notorious in court, and in the Vale as well, for his distrust of emotion in general and love especially.”

“Hardly, madam.” Petyr protested. “I merely think it is not conducive to good judgment.

“Certainly not a ringing endorsement of something as natural as breathing sir!” Myranda countered immediately.

“And I do hope, ser, that you are not trying to dissuade my dear Sansa from loving me!” Harry said then, though he was taking it all in good cheer.
Little did he know, she supposed.

“Not at all. Only not to indulge in it too much.”

Myranda laughed. “How preposterous.”

“I speak only what I know.” Petyr said calmly, glancing at Sansa and then at Myranda, so that he could answer. “I am a councilor by inclination and desire, and time and time again I have had to contend with the irrationalities of desire and love, in the men I vowed to council faithfully. In matters of the heart, I am afraid all advice is useless and therefore I am also rendered useless. It is a frustrating state to find oneself in.”

“I think you should change tutors for your bride to be immediately, Harry.” Corbray advised and both he and Lothor Brune laughed. “And keep him away from all ladies at court, if we are to get any happiness from King’s Landing.”

Myranda narrowed her eyes at them. “Perhaps lord Baelish has a point.”

“I am glad you see my way of thinking, dear Lady. And especially because you are a Lady.”

“How so?” Sansa asked softly.

“Indeed, do explain.” Myranda urged.

“For men, these things may come and go more easily and without much damage, but I have never known a woman worthy of love, who was made happy by it.” the look on Petyr’s face was almost sorrowful, so somber it was.

This startled Myranda out of her good cheer. “What an extraordinary thing to say.”

Sansa had not once taken her eyes off Littlefinger, and he knew it. She could see that he knew it just by the way he was speaking. And he might have told him then, that she had known several, first among them her mother. But of course she would never confess such a thing to such a man.

“And why should that be?” Sansa asked, both anticipating and dreading what would come out of his mouth, because as it so rarely happened, she was in complete agreement with him.

Petyr smiled at her and had she not known him, she would have thought him kind then.

“Lady Stark is fair and just. She does us all the favor of thinking men are women’s equals, and they love the same as women love.”

“But it is not so?” Myranda enquired, not laughing anymore; as taken by the topic at hand as Sansa was.

“No, I do not think it is.” Petyr said gravely. “Women, I have found, enjoy the happiness they give. Men only the happiness they feel. We seem incapable of devoting ourselves to one person. So for a woman to hope to be made happy by love is a certain cause of grief.”

Sansa felt struck in place as if she had truly become part of the stone of the bench. Her hands were shaking. She wrapped them around the book in her lap to hide them.

“Why so severe on your sex, lord baelish?” Harry asked, sounding more curious than genuinely concerned.

“I am a realist my Lord. And a practical man.”
“What you are is notorious for denouncing love in all its forms.” Corbray accused, to the amusement of his friends.

Littlefinger scoffed, a rare gesture for him, who always too such pains to never do or say anything that made him appear less than composed. He was a master at simulating sincerity, Sansa thought, feeling cold to the bone.

“Love? Such an imprecise notion.”

He almost sounded like he was complaining… and sounded so much like the voice in her head Sansa wanted to tear at her own skin somehow, open her mind and throw all its contents out and see perhaps if she could tell, what was hers in there and what was not.

“Would you strike the very word from all vocabulary?” Myranda teased

“Perhaps I should. And we might come up with a more fitting one. One that describes its relationship to reality better.”

“I must say my Lord,” Myranda continued. "you are making it hard not to believe lord Corbray’s accusation.”

“I do not denounce love, my Lady. I merely advise caution. Love, in all its imprecision and like all illusions, is sweet. It slows the mind, dulls thoughts and makes us vulnerable to all manner of mischief. Why, Lord Corbray himself wanted me away, lest my urging you to caution ruins his fun.” He fixed his eyes on the two men. “But what is his fun may be a trusting lady’s ruin and that is hardly fair.”

“So your thoughts step from an urge to protect us poor females is that it?” Myranda enquired, both teasing and not.

Petyr nodded, and this time kept his eyes downcast as he spoke. “Most men I know are very aware of exactly how far they can push themselves and guarantees their own security. Usually its by tormenting the safest kind of victim: women.”

“You speak of cowards and spineless scoundrels, Lord Baelish.” Harry said then, incensed almost at this attack towards his sex. “Those are not real men.”

Something else was said but Sansa could not hear it. Because he was right, was he not? And it was what she had done.

Slowly, methodically, she had learned to distrust her heart, just as Petyr was describing. Advising. Even now she was locked in a dilemma, frozen almost, without knowing what to do, because she could not trust any part of her own self to know. Because for so long now she had thought that she was prone to doing foolish and trusting wrongly. Because she did not use her head, but her heart. Because her feelings obscured her thinking and she had feel stupid enough to trust them. Because it was her nature, and she had to control it. She had to depend sometimes on others to know…

Gods…

The horrifying taste of it was like bile in her mouth. It burned at the back of her throat.

There was such a part of her that wanted all that was soft and lovely. That part of her still existed but it was overshadowed by the rest of her that believed love that was a token, a scented handkerchief. A payment that came due.
She did believe that. And was afraid of it.

The ghost of the pain that had planted this seed would never leave her. She carried her own history on her body; she would always. Indelible. Inescapable. And that seed had grown into something dark and twisted she did not know how to find her way out of and now... now, she wondered

She wondered if her fear had been the only one to feed that dark seed.

She raised her eyes and met Petyr’s knowing eyes.

Yes, the best lies were the ones that aim at wounds that are already there. She knew this. She’d practiced it. She’d just never noticed that she’d been bleeding out of this particular one for years.

She could laugh, just then. Predators with unusual appetites indeed.

Perhaps she might cry.

“What say you, Lady Stark?”

Sansa blinked and then focused her eyes again on Harry’s.

“Forgive me, my lord.” She said, her voice whispery. “I was quite distracted.”

Harry’s face softened. He came and sat beside her. “I can see that Lord Baelish has shocked you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Harry.” Myranda said loftily, but Sansa decided to press her advantage.

“No, not at all. But I do agree with you, my Lord. Men, real men worthy of the name, would never lower themselves to such things. And if they did, I feel certain that men of your character outnumber them.”

“Your faith in your kind is restoring, my Lady.” Lothor Brune said magnanimously. Sansa gave him a smile and then turned her eyes towards Littlefinger.

“Though of course I think my tutor’s advice is sound. Caution is always a Lady’s best friend, as curtsey is her armor.”

Petyr inclined his head to her. “Well said, my Lady.”

She turned her eyes towards Harry and gave him a shaky smile. “It is frightening is it not? Knowing now that one lives among such people, one is compelled almost, to face their evil if only to keep it from touching other people.”

“You will never have to do any such thing so long as I live.”

And how much better, Sansa thought, she and Harry might have gotten along, if he were not so determined to say things that sounded like something out of a book of stories.

“Then I will fear for you, since the only way to rid the world of evil is to put oneself in its path. And that is indeed frightening.” She took Harry’s hand. “But those who don’t know fear, my father always said, do not know courage.”

“Does the lady mean to save the world?” Corbray asked, his unpleasant smile making it hard to look at him without scowling back.

“Not at all.” Sansa said as she took a breath. “But I cannot think of love without thinking of
compassion, which according to the seven pointed star is the purest form of love,” she added with a glance at Littlefinger, who was watching her turn the conversation around with a glint in his eye that was almost a threat. “And compassion is what you surely spoke of, Ser Corbray, when you denounced villainy unworthy of a man.”

“And it is compassion that pushes us to stand between such a thing, and those that need protection. As Lord Baelish is doing. As I am sure you would do.”

Corbray did not speak, only shook his head at what he, perhaps perceived as her naiveté. But he did not understand that he was very much not the point.

“Why if you saw someone in need, would you not go to them?” Sansa asked looking at him, and then turning her eyes to Harry. “Would you do nothing[5]?”

“We are knights, my Lady.” Harry said then, serious as he rarely was. “And even if I were not, I would always stand between you and whatever means you harm.”

Sansa smiled faintly. “I believe that, ser.”

And he would yet have the chance to prove it.

ix

“Why the first son and the first born?” Tyrion posed as he took the cup Podric had just filled for him. “For that matter, why the first-born and not the best fitted!”

Rhaenys startled as the young squire filled her cup as well. “Gods boy not so much, we’re not in a tavern[6]!

“Thank you Pod.” Tyrion said taking his own glass. “Clearly the princess does not appreciate your generosity.

“Yes forgive me, Pod.” Rhaenys said facetiously. “I am sure you are not used to serving those who are not drunkards.”

Tyrion turned to his squire. “The princess is in an acerbic mood today.”

Pod hid his smile well but could not help the snort that passed his lips when a piece of fruit flew at him from said princess’ hand and smacked him right in the cheek. Pod’s chuckle however was lost under Dany and Aegon’s laughter. Even Jon cracked a smile.

“Excellent aim, your grace.” Tyrion said and then threw the fruit back, making Rhaenys screech and lift the nearest pillow as a shield.

“This dress is silk, you madman!” She berated, but her dark eyes were shining with suppressed laughter.

“This doublet.” Tyrion said calmly, smoothing his hand down his chest.

“Let me intervene before this devolves any further.” Dany said grabbing the fruit plate and handing it to Pod, who set it down on another table, far enough that it would not be immediately reachable by any of the people involved.

“Very wise. And you pose a worthy question, Lannister,” Aegon said turning to Tyrion. “Not the right one however.”
Rhaenys laughed. “Of course you would argue against it.”

“It’s not just a matter of me benefitting!” Aegon immediately countered. “It’s a question of logic. Who would get to decide who is the best fitted? How? For some men, riches are the worthiest of causes. Some place honor and justice above everything else. Others value strength and military prowess and others still, knowledge and wisdom. Do you really think that in a world where men have such different minds of what makes a one worthy, we could ever agree on one single individual? Does the man that embodies all those traits even exist?” Aegon chuckled. “My guess is that there would be more wars to decide who is worthy, than there have been wars of succession so far. And the only result would be instability.”

“So male primogeniture is what? A stable precedent whereby power can be handed down from one ruler to the next without bloodshed - most of the time.” Rhaenys summarized as she took a miniscule sip of wine. “Is that your point?”

“Yes.” He turned to look at his sister. “Do you dispute it?”

“Not at all. Merely your intellectually diminished approach: absolute primogeniture can achieve that end just as well as male one can.” Rhaenys said then, smiling at her little brother, who smiled charmingly back at her.

“Very true, but the men of Westeros have yet to realize that women’s genius is not to be feared but harnessed.”

Rhaenys and Daenerys snorted.

“How exceptionally tolerant of you to say so.” Dany said drily.

“That is a powerful case you make, but I wonder if you realize that you are arguing Visery’s old point.” Jon said then, drawing their attention. “By your reasoning, our father would be a usurper, because he imprisoned his father and took the throne, committing high treason and therefore omitting himself from the line of succession. By this logic, the throne would rightfully have belonged to our dear departed uncle.”

“On the contrary, I think Aegon is arguing fully on behalf of our king.” Dany immediately said, not appearing ruffled in the least. “When Aegon the Conqueror first declared himself king of all Westeros, he proclaimed himself ‘Shield of his People’. It was only later that it changed to fit the words of Westerosi houses, to what we know today. And even then, he recognized himself as Protector of the Realm he was trying to build. This is not accidental. A just rule was what he intended, from the beginning. It was to that ancient promise that my brother kept faith with, when he imprisoned our father.”

“A people can endure a cruel king.” Dany continued. “They can survive a tyrannical one, even an incompetent one. But a King that breaks faith with his people in every possible way, destroys the very fabric of the society he is trying to rule over. There is in fact nothing for him left to rule, since he has annihilated it himself.”

"So, father was championing the rights of his people, was he?"

Dany smiled, knowing the implicit trap hidden in those words. “More or less, yes.”

"That is a dangerous line of thought, Daenerys.” Tyrion said, having considered her words carefully. “It means that anyone anywhere can decided that the king is no longer worthy of being king and should therefore be replaced."
"I disagree: both with your phrasing of my thoughts and with what you're implying." Dany leaned forward on the table with both her elbows. "I am not encouraging rebellion. Nor should anyone. I am simply acknowledging that limits exist – even unwritten limits."

"Limits? For a King?" Rhaenys asked, stunned.

"History proves my point: I know no one likes to think of this, let alone say it."

"So I take it what’s about to follow is fault of no errant Maester, but your own thoughts?" Rhaenys enquired.

"Yes, occasionally I have them." Dany answered acerbically. "My father had burned men alive before. He was hated and feared and thoroughly despised, yet he ruled for thirty years, and men and women throughout the realm endured him, because he was their king, and it was their duty. And because his son seemed a better man."

"And then the prince kidnapped a Stark woman and the realm imploded." Rhaenys said with a toss of her hair.

"You never did pay much attention to history." Dany said flatly, meeting Rhaenys’ glare with one of her own. "It wasn’t when Lyanna Stark disappeared that the rebellion started. It was when my father, in his wisdom, chose to start killing high lords. Nobody gives much thought to general cruelty towards people who don’t matter much in the eyes of the nobility and that’s a fact. But gods forbid anything happen to the lord of Winterfell and his firstborn, to lord of the Stormlands or the heir of the Eyrie. If men like that are not safe, then who is, is that not so?"

Something about this irritated her – and Jon knew exactly what: Dany had never taken well to the fact that some lives were simply more important, in the eyes of some, than others. But she still used it to support her argument.

"The people rebelled because there is only so much that a people can take." Dany said firmly. "Endurance is not an infinite virtue."

"And you think that is fair?" Tyrion asked her softly.

"Yes I do," Dany said hotly. "I do. Who disagrees with this? Bring them to me right now!" She turned to Rhaenys, pinning her with a passionate look. "Do you? You, who know better than any of us here what it was like?"

Rhaenys pursed her lips, but did not deny it.

"What then is the point of having a king at all, if things like this can just happen and no one can do anything about it?" Dany continued, a bit more subdued. "Just so they can grow rich and fat on some throne in a pretty castle? Don’t kings have duties to the realm?"

"They do, but that does not mean they have limits." Aegon said then. "A King can fulfill his duty to the real as best as he sees fit."

"Whether he is successful or not is a different matter." Rhaenys interjected, to Aegon’s annoyance.

"Kings exists because people can only have order by submission." Aegon continued, speaking far more seriously than he wont to do. "In order to establish a rule, a people gives up part of its freedom, in exchange for safety. The king ensures that safety. And he is the only one who can ensure it. There can be no limits in that."
“Maester Lothard was wrong about that! No one is born to submit to anyone.” Dany said, and this time her tone was harsh, reflecting the steel of her conviction. “And I might also point out that in exchange for part of the freedom being given away, a people also expects justice, which is integral to the notion of safety.”

“But that means that if a people decide their king has failed to provide justice, then they can rise up in lawful rebellion, and what? Find themselves another king?” Tyrion asked then, following Dany’s logic rather than interrupting it with his own opinion, which he surely held but was always slower than any of his Targaryen peers to share.

Dany hesitated. “No, I… I am not thinking of such a thing as a lawful rebellion, so much as a way of securing accountability, so that a rebellion never becomes necessary or possible in the first place.”

“And again, I ask: accountability for a king? To whom? How?” Rhaenys shook her head. “You realize that the words themselves negate each other?”

“It’s unnatural.” Aegon laughed. “A king is king because he is above all others. He cannot be king and be accountable to another man. That man would then be King – and again, accountable to none.”

“A King can be accountable to the law.” Jon suggested, speaking for the first time in a while.

Rhaenys made an irritated face. "Laws are not absolute. The king is the one that makes and unmakes the laws."

"I am sure Jon did not speak of the laws written down in some piece of paper that sanction this tribute of that piece of land to someone.” Dany said, growing more passionate by the moment. “But rather ancient laws that have governed men longer than kings have drawn breath. Laws that a king cannot violate without becoming a tyrant and hated through the very realm he seeks to command.”

"Dany, we keep rehashing an old argument.” Rhaenys insisted.

"Laws are not made to bind a ruler, aunt.” Aegon said then, continuing what he knew was his sister’s position. “Or any new king would be forever bound to the will of his predecessors and nothing would ever change."

"Laws also exist to protect the people that the Kings serve and command. The rule of the king is absolute, but his power is not.” Daenerys pointed out, with an edge of impatience in her tone.

"But that makes no sense. Who would make these laws that would bind a King and how would we ensure that the king is still effectively a King, if he is so bound by the will of others? Others who would surely seek to make him a puppet. A king must be bound by nothing, otherwise he is not King." 

"We both know that in reality that is not true.” Dany said, leaning forward. “Rheagar takes everything into consideration when making a decision.”

“Because he wants a just rule but-“

“Because he knows that a king who does not protect his people is no king.”

“That may be so but do you really think that is all that occupies our king’s mind, when he decides something?” Tyrion enquired, speaking far more quietly and calmly than both any and Aegon and bringing the tone of the conversation down by quite a bit, as consequence.
Dany seemed confused by the question. “What else is there?”

Jon looked away, took a gulp of his drink.

“Power.” Tyrion stated simply. “Power after all, is like gold.”

“Such a predictable similitude from you, Lannister.” Aegon said languidly. His drink was getting to him.

“If it works.” Tyrion waved him off simply. “You can accumulate power, spend it, lose it.”

“Spend power?” Dany asked, sounding doubtful.

Tyrion grinned. “Yes. Do you think our king does not take his family and their position into consideration when he makes his decisions?”

“Yes, but—”

“Especially for a king, power means safety, longevity. Even the ability to do good, which is so dear to you, is conditioned by power. You know this.” Tyrion said looked at Dany straight in the eye. “Even if it’s all you want to do, you can only help people from a position of power.”

Dany seemed to consider this carefully, picking at the sleeve of her dress with enough insistence that it was bound to pick apart threads. “So you are saying that by wanting limits to the power of a king I am actually arguing against my own safety, is that it?”

Tyrion grinned. “More or less.”

“So what is your solution then?” Dany asked irritably, as if Tyrion was personally responsible for her hesitation in her own beliefs now.

“First accumulate enough power that no one can threaten you.” Tyrion laid out.

“So that not all others, together, cannot threaten you.” Rhaenys added, sharpening the definition.

“And then consider limiting it, by setting boundaries.”

Jon laughed. “Show me the man who is willing to do that, and I promise to fall on my sword the moment after.”

Dany pursed her lips. “Then perhaps men should not rule.” She said stiffly. “If they are unwilling to protect the defenseless even when they have nothing to lose in doing so.”

Tyrion and Aegon were immeasurably amused by her words, and Dany’s frown only got more fierce.

Rhaenys smiled at her. “How is it possible that every time we meet, your arguments against the natural order get more and more fierce.”

Jon stretched his legs out. “I would argue that calling the established order ‘natural’ only done to justify why some people have power and why some don’t.”

“Of course you would argue that.” Rhaenys said flatly.

“I agree with him.” Dany said immediately.
Rhaenys rolled her eyes. “Of course you do.”

“It’s true! Of course those born into both wealth and power would want to maintain both by maintaining the conditions that made them that way. That is not natural. It’s simply beneficial, and we disguise it as part of nature, to make it more legitimate.”

“Dany,” Aegon said her name as if he was calling on patience. “That borders on the blasphemous.”

“So be it!”

“My children always have the most fascinating discussions.”

Instantly, Elia’s voice had them in motion as if she had pulled their strings by simply speaking. They all rose to their feet and bowed and curtsied to her by turns. Rhaenys went to her mother and kissed both her cheeks.

“Mother.”

Elia took her daughters face between both her hands and looked at her. “My darling. I have missed you.”

Rhaenys expression was the warmest Jon had seen on her today.

“And I you.”

Elia looked at the others as if she was amused to find them like this, though she should not be. No matter how turbulent their relationship with each other got, she had always encouraged debate. She used to say it was a safe way for them all to great their frustrations out at each other. Though of course, she – like Dany – would take everything sharp away from them, in such occasions.

“You all seem to forget, in your haste, something rather important.” Elia said then, as she looked at them. She turned her eyes to Aegon, who instantly sobered. “What are the words we speak upon the death of a king?”

“I don’t understand.” He asked, trying to grasp her meaning.

“A king is dead.” Elia said, looking at her son. “Long live the king. Always the same words. Why is that, you think?”

“A king is a man. A king is the throne. A king is his kingdom.” Aegon repeated, as if it was the thousandth time he was saying it. Perhaps it was.

Elia nodded. “It is not any one person that guarantees safety, or freedom, or makes people submit. A kingdom, and everything that follows,” She added looking to Dany. “Is an idea. A kingdom is a vision[7]. All those within it are part of that vision. Try to remember, my darlings, that you are disagreeing on are the components of said vision, and not each other.”

“More like the overall shape of it.” Dany murmured.

Elia grinned. “No matter now. You can continue this lively discussion at supper. Lord Lannister.”

Tyrion bowed to kiss Elia’s hand. “Your grace. Congratulations of your reform.”

“Thank you.” Elia’s smile reached her eyes and softened her face into something beautiful and sweet. “I was glad to see you in court today. You have been missed.”
“You’re kind to say so, your grace.”

“I see my children have wasted no time in drawing you into their debates.” She said as she glanced around to her family with a smile.

“It’s an exercise for the mind, your grace.”

“So it is.”

Tyrion bowed and took his leave, knowing when his time to retire had come. He winked at Jon as he went.

Rhaenys liked her arm with her mother as Tyrion made his way out of their secluded spot and into the Red Keep. “Are you to join us, mother?”

“I am.”

“Good. I need a break from all this debating.”

“Oh you’re not likely to have it my love.” Elia said, eyes sparkling with familiar mischief. “The king wants the company of his children.”

She then waited patiently as her daughter took a fortifying breath and her son downed the rest of his drink in one breath. Jon was not surprised. This would be as good an occasion as any to lay his cards on the table.

“Only his children?” Dany asked then, brows pulled into a small frown.

Elia met her confusion with a firm gaze. “So he said.”

Dany lifted her chin. Pursed her lips. “Is that so?”

“He is displeased, Dany. You can imagine why.”

“I can. Well, am I not family anymore because I have displeased him?”

“I suppose you will have to find out.”

Dany lifted up her chin. “Then I shall.” And she marched away first, followed closely by Aegon, whose duty, unofficially speaking, had always been to put himself between his father and his aunt, whenever clashes between them got too heated.

“Dinner and entertainment? Mother, you shouldn’t have.”

Elia huffed. “Of with you. Make sure they don’t throttle each other on the way.”

Jon set the cup down and made to follow, but the look that Elia gave him as his siblings left stopped him in his tracks.

“Yes?”

“Insist on Sansa Stark.” Elia said in a whisper so low he barely heard her.

Jon tensed. “What?”

“Her or no one.” She said smoothing the intensity out of her face and then took his arm. “Escort me,
“Of course, your grace.” Jon said numbly, and started walking.

[1] Quoted from a similar scene in ‘The Borgia’

[2] Borgia quote, Vanozza Catanei

[3] For clarity’s sake alone, the members of the King’s Small Council are as follows:

1. Connington as Hand of the king,
2. Barristan as Captain of the Kingsguard,
3. Arthur as a personal advisor to the king and temporary head of the City Watch,
4. Varys as Master of Whispers
5. Tyrell as Master of ships (seeing that the Fleet of the Arbor is the greatest of the south)
6. Pycelle as Grand Maester
7. Baelish as Master of Coin (now)
8. Stanis as Master of Justice.


[6] Hehehehehe Olena quote, as we all know.


Chapter End Notes

i hoped you liked this. let me know your thoughts.
Elia turned to her daughter, surprised but also amused by the sheer nerve of it. “You told her you her your father had banished you from court?”

“I did.” Rhaenys said simply. Everyone said her daughter had her eyes but Elia had always known better. Rhaenys had her grandmother’s eyes. Eyes she shared with Oberyn. And apparently she shared the same audacity as well.

Elia laughed. “My dear girl, how could that be true?”

“I hadn’t been back for years, it might as well have been.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s not something the second daughter of a second son would know details about, mother.”

“And it worked?”

“It did. The fool saw sense and gave up the child to be raised by some cousin or other. She married some months later.”

Elia sighed. “Sometimes I think I will never get used to the customs of these people.” She said softly.

“They are strange, but you are their queen.” Rhaenys neared her face to her mothers and grinned as she whispered conspiratorially. “And they love you like a god.”

Elia smiled and looked at her firstborn askance. “Ah. But you lie so easily, I don’t know if I believe you.”

Rhaenys rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. As if you don’t know all my tells.” They shared a knowing look and Elia chuckled. “Besides - I lied to win an argument with a silly girl. Hardly the same thing, mama.”

Elia stopped just before they walked through the doors of her private apartments, turning to her daughter and brushing her cheek with the tips of her fingers.

“You have not changed, my little sun.” She said smiling. Rhaenys took her mother’s hand and kissed her knuckles lightly.
“Nor will I.” Her little smile was conspiratorial. “I may have married a rose but I am, at heart, still a Targaryen. When it suits me.”

Elia chuckled and led them in… and knew immediately when Rhaenys noticed the presence of Jon Connington in the room, because her joy seemed to seep from her.

“I thought it was supposed to be only family.” She said flatly.

Arthur walked into her line of sight then, smiling. “Would the princess do away with me too, then?”

Rhaenys gasped, visibly delighted. “Uncle!”

She practically flew into his arms and Arthur Dayne caught her happily. He’d never made a secret of his love for Rhaenys and she in turn favored him like no other, calling him uncle for all to hear, to the great amusement of Oberyn and Doran both.

Arthur held Rhaenys at arm’s length and looked at her, before he took her hands. “You look well. And happy.”

“I suppose I am.”

Arthur’s smile widened. He was delighted to hear it. “How was your journey?”

“Long. Boring. However I barely complained all the way here. You should be proud of me.”

“I am.” Arthur said with a grin, before he turned to the queen and kissed her hand. “Your grace.”

“My friend.” Then she turned to her daughter. “Well, what is your verdict, daughter?”

Rhaenys rolled her eyes. “I supposed I can make an effort towards tolerance, if it means you get to stay.”

“You have grown magnanimous, in your absence, princess.” Arthur’s smile was imperceptible, but true. “Must be the calming influence of the Tyrells.”

Rhaenys turned wide eyes to her favorite kingsguard. “By the gods, your sense of humor seems to have found you. Send it back, please.”

Just then Dany and Aegon walked in. He had managed to distract her for only a little bit, but not enough. Not that Elia had hoped she would not come. Indeed, she wanted her here. Rheagar was being unreasonable. So when Daenerys walked straight past them, Jon and Aegon following at a more sedate pace, only stopping in front of Rheagar’s table desk, Elia did not bat an eye.

The king was working, his Connington handing him one paper after another that awaited his signature and seal. Neither seemed to notice Daenerys standing in front of them. Or rather, they were both ignoring her. Until Rheagar looked up and feigned smooth surprise at seeing her there. He did not need to feign his displeasure, however.

“Who let this woman in?” Rheagar demanded, startling his aids, who looked at each other perplexed and a little fearful, before turning her eyes to the Queen. They calmed once she put a hand up to quell their fears.

Bickers like this were usual enough that they know when to be truly alarmed and when not to.

“Why do you punish me, your grace?” Daenerys asked, just as Aegon settled himself on his usual spot.
“This is not punishment, Daenerys. You were simply not summoned.” Rheagar said smoothly without looking up. “Do not let your vanity cloud your judgment.”

Jon had not yet sat down, but rather waited until Elia had walked to the head of the table. He dismissed the servant and instead pulled out her chair for her himself, and then the other chair at the Queen’s side, for Rhaenys at her mother’s right. His half-sister did not thank him. Jon had not expected her to.

He was about to take his own seat, but Elia held out a hand to him. He took it and she smiled at him.

“I am very happy to see that you have learned patience, my son.” She said as she looked at him intensely. “It always serves one well.”

Jon nodded slowly, eyes intent on hers before he moved away.

“As for myself, I am glad to see you’ve learned manners.” Rhaenys said as she held out her glass to be filled.

“You might show some, then,” Jon countered immediately, taking a seat just in front of her. “Since you know enough of them to notice.”

“Peace,” Elia said firmly before her daughter could answer with a jab of her own.

At the other end of the room, Rheagar straightened in his seat, looking at his sister with disapproval as he sealed one of the letters with the royal ring at his finger.

“And since you were not summoned, you shall not join us.” He said to Daenerys, who did not move even though he had spoken in his King’s voice, one that always felt distant from the brother she knew.

“You asked for your family.” Dany stated. “Am I not your family?”

Rheagar set his pen down, looked at Daenerys square in the face, into those eyes that were the exact mirror of their mothers.

“Are you? An obedient sister would heed her brother’s wishes. But you rebuff mine at every turn.”

“I have obeyed you in all things.”


“He did not like me. I cannot help that.” Daenerys protested.

Rhaenys scoffed, earning a quelling look from her mother.

“I doubt there is any man in this kingdom who could resist you, if you meant to have him.” Rheagar said then.

“Would you have me be insipid? For that is what Harrold Hardyign would have of me.”

“I would have you obey me!” Rheagar said, raising his voice but a fraction, but so suddenly that Dany flinched. Her courage faltered for a moment.

“You grace… I have sought to serve you.”
But Rheagar did not relent in front of her sad eyes.

“I am told that you have refused the Redwyne heir as well. Quite publicly. Would you have us be at odds with the family that controls the biggest fleet of Westeros?”

“No, your grace. I received Horas Redwyne for tea this afternoon. He was thoroughly charmed. I believe I have made us a friend.”

Rheagar sighed and let himself fall back on his seat, looking at Dany not as a king would his subject, but as a brother would his sister, who he could not understand and who frustrated his efforts at every turn.

“You are making a fool of me, Daenerys.” He said, and as it so rarely happened, his voice did not sound so much soft as it did tired.

Dany pressed her lips together so that he would not see them shake. “Your grace, I have done nothing wrong. But if you deem that I have, then I am yours to punish.”

“Oh, Daenerys.” Rheagar pressed a hand to his forehead, massaging his temples. “You take advantage of how much I love you.”

She did not hesitate. “Do you not do the same?”

Rheagar seemed startled by the question.

“You see my refusal to marry as proof I do not love you, even though you know that I do. You want all of my devotion and as my king you have it.” She took a breath. “But you also want all of my love, even though so often your own affection seems to depended on my obedience.”

For long moments, Rheagar said nothing at all, merely looking at her.

“Why do you hurt me, Dany?” Rheagar asked softly. “What have you ever wished for, that I have not given you?”

“Your understanding, if only once.” Dany said sternly, wiping the sorrowful look off Rheagar’s face. “Have you never stopped to wonder perhaps there is a reason I have refused to marry any of the men you have chosen?”

Rheagar rose, pushing his chair aside and walking t the table. “Daenerys, this family cannot depend on the whims of your heart.”

Dany followed him.

“It is not my heart that objects but my head.” She told him even as Rheagar took a seat at the other end of the table, in front of Elia. “I have told you, I don’t want to be some Lord’s wife. I want to be here, working beside you, beside Aegon. I want to help rule the seven Kingdoms as I have done all my life.”

“You can do that by bringing others to the fold and extending your family’s influence, pushing their interests.” Rheagar said without looking at her.

Dany took her customary seat to his left, just as Aegon sat to his father’s right, leaving the place between him and Jon for Connington.

She and leaned forward so that it would be impossible for Rheagar not to look at her. “You know
very well it is not the same thing!”

Rheagar looked at her with eyes as cold as glass. “As you know that your destiny as a princess of the Throne is to marry and procreate.”

Dany gasped. “So I am to have no voice in the matter whatsoever?! I am to lie on my back and wait to be ravaged by a beast of your choosi-”

“Enough! Enough! This language… does not become you.” He said raising a hand and then, quite suddenly turned to Jon. “And you, save your salt. Say nothing.”

Jon straightened in his seat. “I haven’t uttered a word.”

“No, but I can hear you thinking.” Rheagar faced Daenerys again. “This will come to pass Dany. I have no wish to force you but you are mistaken if you think you can resist forever.”

Dany opened her mouth again but Rheagar put his hand up in a gesture so familiar that she immediately bit her tongue, pursing her lips in annoyance but not daring to contradict him further.

“I will not discuss this any further. You wanted to choose, so choose. I have presented you the options. I expect an answer within the month. I will hear no more of it, Daenerys.” He repeated firmly, when it looked like she was about to speak again.

“As the king commands.” She said, tightlipped.

“Good. Now, if you wish, you may stay for dinner.”

“I have lost my appetite.” Dany said stiffly.

“Then you have my permission to leave.”

“I thank you, but I shall not need it. I will not partake but I have no intention of going anywhere.”

Rheagar took a fortifying breath. “As you wish, sister.” He turned his eyes to the table then, and looked at Rhaenys. “Daughter.”

She smiled and raised her cup to him. “Father. I find you tired.”

“You find me well.” Rheagar countered.

He invited Jon Connington to sit before he turned to Rhaenys again. “How is your son?”

A soft smile came over Rhaenys’ face. “He is healthy and strong. Loves riding more than anything else, like his father.”

She looked to her mother who seemed happy to hear it. “Why did you not bring him.”

Rhaenys tilted her head to the side. “His father?”

“Your son.” Rheagar repeated.

“Oh, I don’t want him anywhere near this place until he is strong enough to handle its poisons.”

Rheagar gave her a sharp look but said nothing. “And how is Willas Tyrell?” he asked instead.

“Very well satisfied with his wife I hear.” Aegon teased, making Rhaenys’ smile turn lopsided.
“He is a reasonable man. Pleasant company.” Rhaenys allowed. “His brothers are tolerable, though the rest of his family decidedly less so.”

“It is precisely his family that concerns us, of late.” Connington said then, looking from the king to his daughter.

Elia waited until all the plates of food had been sat on the table before and the servants had vacated the quarters, before she leaned forward and looked into her daughter’s eyes.

“How is Lady Olena fearing these days?” she asked, almost casually.

“Surprisingly, she endures.” Rhaenys said, reaching for some of the smoked ham. “Sometimes I think she’s kept alive by sheer spite.”

Jon smiled and when Rhaenys caught his eye, he raised one single eyebrow at her. If someone could survive out of spite alone, then Rhaenys would certainly be able to recognize it. It took one to know one after all.

She narrowed her eyes at him as if she could read the thought on his face plain as if he’d spoke it aloud. Though Jon could not fathom why – out of all her gifts, her talent for survival was one he admired in her the most.

“One of my ladies in waiting has taken up a tryst with her secretary.” Rhaenys answered plainly.

“It’s all rather tedious, especially since the stubborn woman has not yet agreed to give up any of the old bat’s letters.”

“How delightfully sordid.” Aegon commented with a laugh. Daenerys sipped at her drink and rolled her eyes.

“It’s perfectly boring, I assure you.”

“Yet you’ve had no results.” Rheagar commented.

“Father, you wound me.”

Though she did not sound wounded at all. And neither did Rhaenys sound angry. She had a habit of becoming almost saccharine every time she was truly furious. It was when she went quiet and polite that Jon had learned was wisest to be afraid of her. This placidity was surprising; distance from what her father wished for had alwasy been hard to achieve for all of them. But then again, Jon thought, distance helped.

“As you well know,” Rhaenys continued. "It is easy enough to make women do what they want to do; but try making them do what you want them to do.”

“I hope you are being more careful than you sound, princess.” Arthur said as he looked at her, frowning.

“I plan on walking in on them one of these days,” was Raenys’ answer, causing Arthur and Elia to sigh. “Should be enough to get me what I want.”

“How?” Dany asked, confused.

“Olena’s secretary is from a rather conservative branch of the family. Her father is notorious for it. If her… preference for female company would be made public, she would be made to either marry or would be disowned.” Rheanys pursed her lips. “I am not entirely sure which one would be worse for
“Have a care, Rhaenys.” Elia warned, a note of steel in her voice.

“Oh mother, please. I wouldn’t ruin her.”

“No, you will just make her think you would.” Dany said, making Rhaenys turn a glare to her.

“As suppose to what?” Rhaenys’ voice cut, as did her eyes. “Make a friend of her and then agonize about it, when I have to lie to her face?”

Dany blushed.

“I am sure Daenerys is not disputing your methods.” Jon said, taking careful note of Daenerys’ reaction.

“Of course not. Merely my integrity.”

“I wouldn’t doubt that, so much as deny its existence.” Dany bit back.

Rhaenys laughed and looked at Daenerys gleefully. “Oh my darling look at you! Have been growing out your claws have you.”

“Try to exercise some modicum of self-restraint, both of you.”

“Oh father, we are merely teasing.” Rhaenys said offhandedly. “This is practice.”

“Off-putting practice, sis.” Aegon complained. “I’m trying to work up an appetite.”

It was like this every time. It had always been like this. Their petty fights finding an arena when they were alone like this, away from court, with Elia trying to mediate Rheagar in the middle, sometimes trying putting a stop to it. Sometimes acerbating their competitiveness against each other.

Jon used to feel sometimes that it please them. Listening to them cut at each other creatively, as if it really was practice. When all it really was, was striving for some of his attention.

Rhaenys for her part did not sound impressed. “You will need to strengthen your stomach, brother, if you want to hear what else I have to say.”

“Then share it.” Daenerys said impatiently as she set her cup down.

“I heard some good news pertaining you, brother.” She said with a grin, looking at Jon.

“Gods preserve us.” Jon muttered, trying very hard to keep from downing his cup.

“Indeed. Apparently people’s hearts don’t stop anymore at the thought of our dear Jon procreating.”

“What do you mean?” Aegon asked immediately. “What have you heard?” He sounded amused.

Jon was interested in this too, although he tried very hard not to show it.

“Only that Margery Tyrell seemed a great deal interested in our half-brother’s daily habits.” She looked from her mother to her father and grinned. “And since nothing in that family happens without the great Bat knowing, I presume that is why you are asking about Olena. Which means Mace Tyrell really was stupid enough to make an offer.”
Jon rolled his eyes. He did not like the way she said it, but he could not find a single fault in Rhaenys’ reasoning.

Dany however was stunned. “He didn’t!”

“Does the man think we have turds for brains?” Aegon asked with a frown.

“The Tyrells have a habit of presuming they are in fact smarter than most people.” Connington said offhandedly.

Rhaenys smirked at him from across the table. “Who would have thought we would ever have something in common, Lord Hand.”

“I doubt very much Olena Tyrell thinks that.” Elia said softly and a look with her daughter confirmed it.

“I doubt it’s Olena’s idea in the first place.” Rheagar said slowly, meeting his wife’s eye from the other end of the table.

“She would hardly want to throw away her prized rose to someone half the realm still considers a bastard.” Connington reasoned. “No offence to you, your grace.”

Jon grinned and cheered with his cup, relaxing in his seat even more. With the corner of his eye he saw his brother fill himself another cup. Aegon always drank too much when in close quarters with their father. Jon could not say he blamed him.

“Hardly matters.” Elia countered, setting her hand over Jon’s for a moment. “Whatever her son’s plan is, Olena will see it through. And she will know more of its details than Mace.”

“Then you better be prepared to engage Jon to someone soon, before Margery Tyrell trips him and he falls between her legs.” Aegon said with a laugh.

“There was an idea quite like that, circulating in the small council today.” Rheagar admitted, almost absentmindedly.

Dany’s look was almost worried. Jon hoped he was calmer on the outside than he felt on the inside. His fucking skin was itching.

Was this what Elia had meant?

“Why is everyone suddenly so interested in my marital status?” He enquired irritably.

“Suddenly?” Elia seemed perplexed by the word. “Jon, for someone so bright, you have the awful habit of ignoring the obvious.”

“Well, we can’t all be perfect.” Jon said offhandedly.

Truth was he knew very well what Elia meant. There had always been a dark cloud hanging over the mere thought of his marrying and having children. A bastard – especially a legitimized one – procreating always struck fear in the hearts of people. It had sowed terror when everyone – including Jon – had thought that they only woman he’d ever want to marry was the King’s sister. Viserys had already tried to question Rheagar’s legitimacy. No one was slow to think Jon might question his brother in the same way, if he had enough grounds, if he got enough power.

And where that had made fear grow in the minds of some, it had cultivated ambition in the minds of
others. Jon had dissuaded the one by cutting down those who thought they could use him to cultivate the other. But the shadows lingered on him, as ever.

“Indeed, selective memory is your only fault.” Elia countered.

Jon held back his smile. “Perhaps it’s an affliction that is spreading. It can only be that which is making me so desirable of late.”

Elia rolled her dark eyes shamelessly, and Jon could not help but laugh. “Then marry and end the hassle of being so desired.”

“I am planning to.” Jon said and immediately got the attention of the whole table. “I intend to ask Sansa Stark to marry me.”

The silence that followed his words was deafening. His father’s eyes were fixed on his.

Aegon broke the tension with his good cheer. “Will you? It seemed as if you kept vacillating between that and wanting to throttle her.”

Jon’s face was a study in contempt. “I’d never lay a hand on her.”

Aegon snorted. “You don’t seem to understand marriage very well.”

Jon made a rude gesture at his brother, who grinned.

“Are you mad?” Rhaenys asked, in all seriousness.

“No, that is not my affliction.”

“You can’t marry Sansa Stark. She is a hostage of the crown!”

“If Maester Pycelle were here, he would remind you, princess, that Sansa Stark is a guest of the crown.” Arthur said gently. Rhaenys gave him one of her looks that would have rooted lesser men to the spot.

“I would beg you to allow me more grit than a man whose balls brush his knees, ser.” Rhaenys countered. “She is a hostage, and for good reason.”

“She cannot remain a hostage forever.” Jon reminded his half sister. “It’s better that she is married to me than to the future Lord Paramount of the Vale, whom – correct me if I am mistaken, but is not exactly partial to our family.”

“Relationships with the Vale have been friendly and cooperative for some time.” Connington reminded him. “And the king rewards those who show him loyalty.”

“Good luck keeping those relationship when Harry Hardying sees the burns on half her body.” Jon said. On the other end of the table, Dany gasped. Connington looked away. “I don’t think even he is enough of a lizard not to have some kind of reaction to that.”

Rhaenys narrowed her eyes at him. “Oh so we’re to trust you with her, are we?”

“Rhaenys.” Elia spoke firmly, and immediately it drew her daughters attention. “You will show decorum or you will be excused.”

“But mother-”
“Whatever objection you may have can certainly be expressed in a more civil manner.” Elia interrupted. Rhaenys gritted her teeth.

“You cannot be serious, Jon.” Dany whispered.

“I always am.” And she knew that very well. Jon wondered if he would have to contend with her as well as Rhaenys’ objections. Not to mention Connington’s who would be sure to follow. Rhaenys and Connington may hate each other but in their distrust of him, they were about as united as all the children of Elia Martell were united in hating the King’s Hand.

“You are a prince of the Iron Throne.” Connington promptly said. “You are not free to marry as you will.”

“I would hope, Lord Connington, that you would have the acumen to understand that this is fact, my asking the King for his permission.”

Connington smile was as sharp as the edge of a blade. “Forgive me your grace. It did not sound like you were asking.”

“If acumen is not to be had, I wonder if consistency might be.” Jon continued. “Am I a prince or a bastard? Am I son of the king, bound to do his duty to the crown; or am I the by-blow no one would miss if I died in the next alley.”

“Jon.” Elia called.

“If only for clarity’s sake.”

“You are my son.” Rheagar finally said, gravely.

Jon turned his attention to his father. “And yet, never once have you mentioned any matches for me.”

“The need for suitable matches to be made has not arisen.”

“I disagree.”

“You are not in a position to disagree.” Daenerys cut in none too gently. “As it was so thoroughly reminded to me not even moments ago. Did you not hear?”

The way she was looking at him made her seem so like Rheagar, there was no doubt in his mind they had come from the same womb.

Jon looked away from her. “When was the last time you were north of the neck, father?”

The air became so thick with tension, Jon could have cut it with a butter knife. They all knew when that had been

“Twenty three years ago, my son.” The king said slowly.

“In those twenty three years, the iron throne has managed to kill one on Lord of Winterfell and his heir, and steal two stark women from where they belonged.”

“How dare -” Connington growled.

“They hate us.”

Rhaenys scoffed. “It’s us now, is it?”
Jon barreled through as if their words did not matter. “They may not say it, but they do. And they have a right to.”

“You say ‘us’ but you defend their rights.” Aegon noted, light as ever, as if they were not discussing the kingdom he would one day rule. “One would be hard-pressed to pin down where you fall, brother.”

Jon looked at Aegon then. So many mistook his cheer for foolishness but Jon was not among them. “Like or not, brother, the king is ruler of all seven kingdoms. You might find it difficult to rule when half the people in the realm what to slit your throat.”

“The north is not even a geographical half.” Aegon pointed out. “They don't have the strength to be a threat.”

Jon shook his head. “Wrong again, and also to the point. Why tread lightly with an enemy, when you can make a friend? Rhaenys has secured the Tyrells, you will marry the Lannister girl, Dany only needs to make up her mind and I—”

“And you think you can make a friend with the northmen, by wedding the firstborn daughter of Eddard Stark with a Targaryen?” Rheagar asked, liking his hands together on top of the table carefully.

“Yes.” Jon was decisive on this point. “Most of them think you keep Sansa Stark as a hostage here, no matter what Pycelle calls it. Whatever life she’s having in this place is nothing to what they think is happening. The riverlands fare no better. And we all better pray that the rumors regarding Viserys do not spread beyond the walls of this palace.”

“That’s slander, Jon.”

“Spare me, Aegon. We all know it’s the truth.” Jon drawled. “I will wed her, we will spend our first months travelling, showing every lord with access to a rookery that she is happy, healthy and married to a prince. Maybe even stop in Riverrun, while we’re at it.”

“Why not just take her north, to her father, while you’re at it?” Rhaenys suggested, clearly mocking him. “And then when the first snows fall and the winter wolves fall south again, we can all just shrug and shake our heads.”

Jon’s gaze on Rhaenys was unflinching. “The winter wolves will fall south whether Sansa Stark is in King’s Landing or not.” He was trying very hard to sound calm. In truth, he felt as if he’d had this conversation before, so many times had he rehearsed every angle of it in his head.

“Will Eddard Stark not be insulted that so many still doubt your legitimization?” Elia asked him. Jon turned to look at her. He was surprised no one had brought this up already.

“I am not a bastard in the north. The King married my mother in front of their gods. Few of them take issue with that.” Jon smiled genuinely for the first time since Elia had called him out from the garden. “If anything, Sansa Stark is the safest woman I could possibly marry.” Such a thing was so far from true it was hilarious and Jon allowed himself a smile, biting his lip to contain it lest he become ridiculous. He looked at his brother then his father. “A great deal safer than the likes of Margery Tyrell, for instance. The Starks want nothing to do with the Iron Throne, and their connection will surely discourage anyone’s reaching higher than they should, since no one capable of such ambition wants them near it either.”

“You do have a point there.” Aegon conceded. And then after a careful look at his brother, he
admitted to another thought. “And you also sound like you have been thinking of this for a while.”

“I spent quite some time in the north, sharing the Stark’s tables and their hall. I know what northerners love, and I know what they hate. They’re are not a complicated people.” This was not true either, but at least it approached reality more than what he’d said before.

“And you’re prepared to marry a girl you barely know, to ensure stability.” Aegon pressed.

“Why not?”

“Such a dutiful prince.” Rhaenys sneered, not believing him for a moment.

“When have I ever not been?” Jon said. “Besides, I have to marry at some point. Sansa Stark is beautiful and charming, marrying her is not exactly hardship.”

Aegon chortled. “Gods save us, man. Do you love her?”

Jon shrugged. “I want her, sure.”

Aegon’s eyes fixed upon his. Unflinching. Knowing. Ah, his offhandedness was not believed there. Had Dany spoken to him?

“Her father might have something to say about that, don’t you think.” Aegon reminded him.

“Her father has given her leave to marry whomever she wishes.”

“How do you know?” Rheagar asked him softly. Jon dreaded his father when he got quiet like this, but he would not turn back. There was nowhere to go but forward.

“She told me.”

“As she explained that she has already made her choice?” Arthur asked him, speaking for the first time.

Jon shrugged. “A woman's mind is cleaner than a man's; she changes it more often.”

“Sansa may disagree with that.” Daenerys reminded him. “As it is, I know for a fact that she will.”

She had. “Then I shall persuade her.”

“You will not force her.” Rheagar said. It was an order, not from his father but from the king of the seven kingdoms. “I will not have any more damage brought down on this family because of that girl.”

Jon gripped the arm of his chair tight and said nothing at all. Nothing, even though he wanted to point out his father's hypocrisy. But he also needed the king’s agreement, this could not happen any other way.

“I wouldn’t.” Jon said with a small smile meant only for his father.

“And all this has nothing to do with the fact that there has been tension between the Starks and the Boltons.” Rhaenys said as she set her cup down. “That there is a war coming as sure as the sun is rising tomorrow, and that Sansa Stark stands to inherit Winterfell, should her brother die.”

“Rhaenys, you know better than to believe King’s Landing’s rumors.” Elia reminded her daughter.
“Why not?” the princess asked, disbelieving. “It’s one of the more flattering ones about him.”

“Her brother and father are both hale and healthy.” Jon said stiffly. He knew this that whole tale served to make his move more attractive to the likes of Connington, if nothing else; but he was loathe to use it. He was… but he did not dispel it either.

“Yet brothers and fathers have a way of dying when they get in your way.”

Jon could not help his small laughter. “Every time you chastise me, lord Hand, you do so for things my father has done before me.”

Jon Connington sprung to his feet so fast he nearly knocked his chair back.

“My friend, please sit.” Rheagar urged. Connington did not. “Jon, apologize.”

Jon looked at his father. “My apologies.”

“To lord Connington,” Rheagar said stiffly.

“It is no matter, your grace.” Connington said through tightly pursed lips. If he ground his jaws together any harder, his teeth would snap. “If you’d excuse me, your grace. I have matters to attend to.”

Rheagar sighed. “Of course.”

Connington left the room at a pace that was a breath shorter than a run. Once the doors closed behind it, Rheagar turned to his children.

“I realize that asking my children to respect my friend may be too much.” Rheagar said slowly, eyes hard as he moved them from one to the other, stopping on Jon.

“The man has three decades on me, and yet never manages to keep his composure when he loses the games he himself starts.” Jon pointed out. “That is no fault of mine, your grace.”

“You can be an ass, half-brother.” Rhaenys conceded.

“Then he should leave me alone, shouldn’t he?”

Aegon shrugged. “He is not the only ass in the kingdoms.”

“Hardly a dying breed.” Dany said. “Though some seem to find the urges more irresistible than others.”

“Enough, all three of you.” Rheagar snapped. Then, more calmly. “I find it peculiar that one of the few things that can unite you all, is your shared loathing for my main councilman.”

“Perhaps your lord Hand should try to hide his disdain for my mother better.” Rhaenys suggested. “Then I might like him more.”

“Rhaenys.” Elia warned.

Rheagar leaned forward with a sigh. “Jon, I will think on your proposal.”

Jon resisted the urge to insist. “Very well, your grace.”

“Now. Tell me of the Riverlands.”
“And what of the Sparrow.”

“I dealt with him.”

“You dealt with him but he is still alive.” Rhaenys enquired as Aegon walked back into the rooms and took his seat, barely stumbling. Jon too was starting to approach his limits.

“Whether he lives or dies is a non-issue.” Jon answered. “His influence is ended.”

She tilted her head to the side. “You need lessons in killing, brother?”

“From you?” Jon asked, his smile snide, the same sentiment perfectly reflected on Rhaenys’ face as well. He knew however that the wine was getting to her: she had forgotten to call him half-brother that time.

“Peace, both of you.” Rheagar said firmly. He then turned to Jon. “And Hoster Tully?”

“He signed the treaty, as you know.”

“Will he stand by your testimony.”

Jon nodded. “He will if he wants his son to have a peaceful lordship.”

“Good.” Rheagar nodded and linked his hands together. “We believe the court will be settled for now. However, there is still the need to make the Boltons feel the wind of our displeasure.”

“So you’ve decided then? You will side with the Starks.”

“Hardly anything else is possible.” Aegon said.

“Though I am still against sending an army to them father.”

“I noted your objection, Rhaenys.”

“Noted and ignored,” the princess murmured, but Rheagar was not paying attention. He was deep in his own thoughts.

“The rest of the northern houses must be forced to submit to the King’s peace, but the Boltons – their betrayal will demand vengeance.” He said low.

Jon wondered if his father too had not perhaps indulged on his drink something more than the usual.

“That’s not how the North works,” Jon said. “The Boltons will either die in the field or Ned Stark will have their heads and that will be the end of it.”

Rheagar fixed his eyes on his son’s. “Then we will have negotiate a more stirring punishment with Eddard Stark.”

Jon wished his father a great good luck with that. He would be sure to be disappointed, but that would not be Jon’s concern. But he was not inclined to make the king aware of that fact – nor could he, because just then Rheagar excused himself.

“I propose a toast.” Aegon called then as he looked up and down the table. “Here we are, all of us together after years. It really is a special occasion.”
“Of course we should. Look at us!” Rhaenys said raising her cup as if to toast. “The perfect family.”

“I do wish you would stop bickering the whole while.” Elia said then, far more irritated than Jon had thought her. “You do not sound like family.”

“Nonsense mother. All know celebrations call for remembering the past. This is how we do it.”

Yes. Like dogs over scraps, Jon thought.

“And I would like to propose a toast to each and every one of us.” Aegon got up and started circling the table. “To our father the king. To you mother, who are perfect in every way and who I love more than my own life.” Aegon leaned down and kissed Elia’s cheek.

“To uncle Arthur, who is, unsurprisingly, the best of us. To my aunt. The silver princess, and famous beauty.” He leaned down to kiss Dany too, but she pushed his face away.

“You smell of wine.”

“Yes, there is a good reason for that.” He mocked and turned to Jon. “To my brother, the sailor!” Aegon neared him and took him by the shoulders. “You might be a bit of a murderer, but we forgive that in this family.” He said laughing.

Jon pushed him away but smiled none the less.

“And to Viserys Targaryen, who the gods blessed us by taking and who will not be missed.”

The room chilled considerably, all eyes going to Rheagar’s empty chair.

“Some respect for the dead would not be untoward, prince.” Arthur said and in his deep voice, so calm and clear, it most certainly sounded like a chastisement. It was a tone Jon was very familiar with.

Aegon however was just as unaffected as Jon had learned to be.

“Ser Arthur, don’t look so alarmed. This is the beauty of family, Lord hand. We can say or do anything to each other, without fear of recrimination.”

“I would not say that.” Jon said slowly.

“Of course you would not.” Aegon dismissed. “But then again, there is nothing more you can do to Viserys now that he is dead.”

Jon opened his mouth but from the corner of his eye, he could see Elia staring at him intently. See how she shook her head minutely.

He closed his mouth with a snap. Very well. Very well he would shut his shithole and just grit his teeth until this was over. He could do it.

“Ah come Jon don’t be shy.” Rhaenys teased. “We all know you hated him.”

“I never hid it. He was a cunt.”

“That he was.” Aegon said and raised his cup as if to toast to it. “And yet he was our uncle.” Aegon tilted his head a bit to the side, considering Jon carefully. “Is it really different to kill one’s family than it is to kill anyone else?”
Jon felt his heart slip into his belly. He did not want to have this fucking conversation right now.

“I wouldn’t know.” Jon said simply.

Aegon laughed.

“Come Jon, it’s just us. You can admit to it. None of us here loved him.”

Jon looked at his brother in the eye. Did not even hint at a smile. “Then perhaps you killed him.”

“He died in an accident, I don’t understand why you all won’t just let him lie.” Dany snapped.

Rhaenys shrugged. “I suppose I just want to know who had the balls to finally rid us of him. And I know it can not have been anyone but someone in this room, or they would have been shouted down the four corners of the kingdom that there was justice for the poor prince.”

“And your guess is me?” Jon scoffed. “I was thousands of miles away.”

Rhaenys shrugged. “Which is indication of where you were; not where you orders were being carried out.”

“You think very highly of my organizational skills.” Jon scowled. “I never knew.”

“We all know how single minded you can get. Don’t we?” She looked at Dany a moment too long for it to be casual.

“Gods, were you so bored in the Reach?” Dany snapped, glaring at Rhaenys eve as she filled her glass again. “Is that it?”

“A bit.”

“Viserys earned his death.” Jon said coldly. “But I did not kill him. If you do not believe this, then you and I are strangers.”

It did not touch Rhaenys in the slightest. “Well, we’ve never been anything different.”

“And if I had, either this whole fucking place would have burned to the ground,” Jon said tightly, his scowl carved on his face so deeply it might remain there forever. “Or none of it would have. I don’t half-ass my assassinations.”

Dany turned to look at him so quickly, it was a wonder she did not give herself whiplash. Her eyes were wide as saucers, he could see the whites around her lilac irises.

“Jon…”

“Right. Of course. You are always thorough.”

“That I am.”

There was a loud banging sound. Something – probably a vase – toppled and fell. Everyone turned towards the entrance of the dining room.

“Will you stop this discord!” Rheagar shouted. He strode towards the table, looming over them. “We are a family!” He bit out, looking at his children one by one and his sister too. “We are one! And we will only triumph as one.” He was breathing hard. Jon could not say he had see his father so discomposed outside of the training grounds.
“How will we ever be able to achieve anything, if we do not work together? Our greatness – your birthright – can only be brought to life if we work as a family.”

Rhaenys stood. The look on her face was grave but her eyes were shining like dark dragonglass.

“You are right father. We are one, though sometimes we don’t show it. And after all, you have sacrificed much, to bring us into the world. We should honour that sacrifice.”

Rheagar straightened and fixed his eyes on his daughter. “If joys in life were only brought by one’s children, I would have only grief.”

He turned and left the room. His children watched him go.

“Why do you persist in being this way?” Elia asked her daughter. Jon could see now that Rhaenys was crying, though she wiped her tears away so quickly, they might have never been there.

“I don’t know.” Rhaenys said with a cheerless laugh. “I love him, i swear I do. But I also hate him.” She laughed, the absurdity of the notion doing nothing to dill its sharp sting. "Excuse me.”

Elia sighed and followed her daughter. Dany left soon after and when Arthur also took his leave of them, Jon and Aegon were left on their own. When the silente became unberable, Aegon topped his glass off the table. The sound of it smashing in the pavement was louder than it should have been.

“Do you think it’s true, Jon?”

“What is?”

“That we love each other?”

Jon took a deep breath. “I don’t know.”

Aegon’s smile was sad. Still, when he got up, he looked to Jon before he left.

“Will you not join me?”

“Join you in what?”

Aegon smiled wide. “Hunting.”

Jon shook his head. “No.”

“Right. You do not partake in carnal pleasures anymore.” Aegon chuckled. “I remember a time when it was different.”

Jon looked at his brother from under hooded eyes. “Do you?”

It seemed strange to Jon that Aegon would. Those days seemed to him so long gone, he could hardly remember them. And the existence of them felt hollow to him now. He knew what he wanted – who he wanted – with perfect, sharp clarity. Everything else that was not that, seemed pointless now. Inadequate. Somehow made his loneliness feel darker.

He missed fucking. Of course he did. But fucking was not what he missed about fucking.

“Some used to say every whore in king’s landing used to know your name once.”

“Hardly.” Jon raised his cup at him. “Though you are making good progress.”
“They scream it.”

Jon resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Aegon’s life had been both defined and derailed by his being the crown prince. He was Jon’s elder and in so many ways, it showed: not least among them in his ability to shut the fuck up when he was supposed to. And yet in others, Aegon had yet to catch up to his younger brother. He had yet to fully rebel to their father’s hold, for instance, so he still took pleasure in doing things that were forbidden to him.

“Be careful brother.” Jon warned. “With all those bells jiggling on your cloak, your enemies will know that you are coming before ever they see your face.”

“Oh, is that a threat?” The prospect almost seemed to delight him.

“No.” Jon said stiffly. “Take someone with you. You are the heir to the throne and your habits are too regular. You’ll get your throat slit.”

Aegon considered it. “Is that how you would do it?”

Jon eyed his silver-haired brother carefully. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Despite what so many think, I haven’t given much thought to how I’d kill you.” Jon said irritably. “It’s neither my interest to do it, not my job to keep it from happening.”

Aegon laughed loudly. “Is it strange that I trust you with my life? Everyone seems to think me stupid for it. Rhaenys most of all.”

“We both know you’re not stupid.” Jon said, stunned to hear that Rhaenys apparently really believed some of her worst impulses.

That seemed to give his brother pause. His deep blue eyes were smiling, but there was something sharper in them now. “You’ve always thought that. Always. I have managed to fool almost everyone – but not you.”

Jon shrugged. “I know who your mother is.”

Aegon laughed loudly. “So does everyone else. It means nothing to them though.”

Jon looked out the window, to the darkening sky. “Does Rhaenys really think I want you dead?”

“No.” Aegon sobered. Saddened. Like this, under the glow of the candlelight and sad like this, he looked remarkably like their father. “But she has been alive longer than us both. Remembers things that we will never even know.” He shook his head minutely. “She wants to, but cannot forgive.”

Jon nodded. He could understand that. Rhaenys, like them all, could not do anything about the person she really resented, so she distributed her anger and bitterness among those that she could actually get to. And more than any of them, Rhaenys had reason to doubt everyone, always. She had seen her world end more times than they had.

“And you know how she is,” Aegon added. “Always fighting every battle everywhere, in her mind.”

“Everyone is the enemy.” Jon murmured.

“It is a bit strange. But convenient.”
“Makes her a fearsome enemy to be sure,” Jon should know this better than anyone else. Whether anyone believed her or not, she had already guessed at what he meant to do with Sansa. And his father had not yet given him an answer.

“Goodnight brother.”
Jon sincerely doubted it.

xii.

“She loves you,” Rheagar said as he paced in front of the fire. “It’s why she delights in tormenting me.”

“Rheagar. She does not delight in your pain anymore than you delight in hers.”
Rheagar’s eyes looked black. “No?”

“No.” Elia said firmly, looking at the fire. “Our daughter has hurts of her own. you must allow for them.”

“I must allow for nothing.” He said harshly. "I am her father and her king."

“And she knows it.” Elia said as she turned to look at him. After a moment, she smiled. “You could try to understand my love. You cannot demand obbediente in all things, submission, and also love at the same time. One hinders the other.”

“So I must allow for her insolence?”

“You must do nothing. You are king.” Elia said then, her voice resounding in the wide room. “But what does your heart tell you?”

Rheagar took a deep breath. “That we have raised ungrateful children.” he murmured unhappily.

“Other than that?”

Rheagar fell into his seat. Passed a hand through his thinning hair. “That I am tired.”

Elia watched the firelight dance against Rheagar’s profile. “What do you intend to tell Jon?”

“I will send him north.”

Elia closed her eyes. Took a deep breath. “And about the Stark girl?”

Rheagar sighed. “Connington advises me –“

“To vacillate, yes.” She turned to look at him. “But we both know that when it comes to Jon, Connington is suspicious at best and irrational at worst. If I did not know how dear he holds your vision, I would not think twice in accusing him of wanting to send Jon north only to get him murdered.”

“It was not his idea.” Rheagar reminded her.

“Yet he is shameless in how little he considers your sons safety.”

Rheagar’s eyes softened. He took Elia’s hand and kissed her knuckles softly. “I have always been very grateful for how you have loved our children.
“I do love them all. So hear me when I tell you, being married to a Stark could very well be the difference between victory and death for Jon in the north.”

“Yes. And she would know it.” Rheagar said. “That would hardly work to Jon’s advantage.” Rheagar passed a hand over his face. “We cannot trust in a girl who our family has so hurt. She does not show it, but if she does not hate us, then she has no heart, and I am not sure which is worse.”

Elia was privately surprised that he could say such a thing. It was the first time she ever had heard Rheagar admit to any kind of wrongdoing concerning Sansa Stark.

“Leave that to Jon. I would rather he had the advantage, than not. And as for Connington, there is simply no reason other than bad faith for him not wanting to give Jon what is his due, my darling.”

That caught Rheagar’s attention. “His due?”

Elia nodded. “He has served faithfully in many an occasion and proved his worth over and over again. Before you wanted him to go north, you wanted to make him commander of the royal navy. He deserves a reward. And finally he is asking for one.”

Rheagar rested his chin on his hand. Stared ahead unfocused. “If I allow them to marry, we will alienate the Vale.”

“You have spent a decade and a half trying to regain the Vale. A few years more won’t make much of a difference. Rheagar.”

He looked at her in the eye.

“You have already chosen a path. Now you must embrace the journey. Why do you hesitate?”

Rheagar straightened in his seat, set his arms on the armrests and considered his wife. “Is it true? Does he love her?”

Elia thought on it for a moment. Thought on whether the truth or a lie would serve Jon better.

“If he does not, he soon will.”

Rheagar sighed. “I have to admit this brings me great indecision.”

“Why?”

“If he loves her and she loves him, he will want to get away and stay away. He will turn from us.” Rheagar said slowly, turning his face to the fire again. “And never come back.”

Elia got up and closed the distance between them. “That may be so. Or it may not. But if it be true than he will leave, then certainly as he turns, he will be happy.”

xiii.

Jon knew his father better than the king gave him credit for. The king liked to make everyone wait for him. So when there was a knock on his door a few hours past sundown, Jon was not surprised. He did not bother pressing formal or taking a torch. He could find the way with his eyes closed.

When he walked into the Small Council room, his father was already there, flanked by Connington and Varys. Jon sat himself down in one of the empty chairs.

"Forgive me for disturbing your sleep, son."
"You did not."

"The marriage to Sansa Stark," His father began. "Is it something you want?"

"It’s not something I hate." Jon said with a shrug.

"And you like the girl."

"I do." Jon admitted sincerely. "She’s lovely."

"You cannot cause trouble in the north." Connington warned. "Trouble of the kind that almost happened with the Yorwoods."

"I am hardly looking to get killed." Jon said drily. "I know what I have done and who I am, but I had hoped you at least did not think me stupid."

"No, I have the highest regard for your intelligence." Rheagar admitted. "Sansa Stark does not seem like the kind of woman you could love."

*What do you know of my heart, father?*

"Love has little to do with it." Jon said then.

Varys cleared his throat. "I feel compelled to advise the prince that dishonoring Lady Stark would be-"

Jon stood up, pushing his chair back roughly, letting is scrap against the pavement. He linked his hands behind his back, and stood straight.

"You grace, I can see you have already decided." he said. "I would have your answer."

"I will give you my answer, but first you must listen to my condition." Rheagar warned. Jon was not rattled. He had expected many.

"In return for releasing Sansa Stark from the crown’s tutelage, you will do a service for me."

"For you, or for my king?"

His father smiled at him then. "Are we not one and the same?"

"No."

Rheagar nodded. "Very well. You may ask Sansa Stark’s hand in marriage, *if* in turn you agree to go north and act as the Crown’s representative in the negotiations with the Starks and the wildlings."

It took a moment for Jon to fully understand what his father meant.

"To support Ned Stark, you mean?"

"No. I want the crown to have an active part in the negotiations with the people beyond the wall."

"Active?" Jon repeated, trying to understand.

"Active, as in, as decisive as that of Eddard Stark." Connington supplied.

It did not provide Jon with any insight whatsoever. "To what end?"
“The end does not concern you, prince.”

“I disagree, Lord Hand. If you want me to have results, you must share with me your goal, not part of it, or I will only be able to achieve part of it.”

Rheagar pursed his lips, but then reluctantly nodded. “Very well. Sit. Let us be clear.”

xiv.

In the end, the whole thing was rather easy to understand. Jon had simply missed it because in what was perhaps his naiveté, he had thought that ambition had certain limits. Or rather, that his father had more sense than this.

As he stared at his father’s face, that of Connington and Varys, he knew that what they wanted was impossible as clearly as he knew that he could not refuse them.

What really angered him was that they were asking him to do what he had set out to do from the beginning. But now he had to do it for someone he despised, on the orders of someone he did not respect.

And it hurt even more that he thought of it. For one moment, one heartbeat that he could not banish, he wanted to please his father. Give him what he wanted. Jon’s instinct, as that of his brother and sister and even Dany, would maybe always be that: earn this man’s love.

They might as well die trying. Even if he felt it, he did not know how to give it.

“I accept the charge.” He said as he stood. “But I have conditions. Things that I will need, to be able to fulfill my purpose.” Things that he had thought he would have to do in secret, and now he could just... gallivant around the Red Keep and ask for them.

Fate was not without a sense of irony.

Connington leaned forward. “What might they be?”

Jon stood. “I will let you know once I have a strategy.” He said as he bowed. “With your permission your grace.”

His father nodded and Jon made for the door.

Just as he was about to step through it, he remembered.

“One last thing.” Jon turned, looked at Varys first and then Connington and then gifting them a smile that was everything but cheerful. “I don’t know who the redhead that has been sneaking into my rooms belongs to, but if I see her around my apartments again, or one of your little birds scurrying about, Varys – I guarantee you will personally be pulling a cleaver out of their fucking skulls.”

Chapter End Notes
jesus be praised, i am done with this part of the story AND NOW JON AND SANSA CAN START HAVING CONTACT ONCE AGAIN AMEN ALLELUIA.

this was my attempt at writing a dysfunctional family, but honestly i feel like i've written the caricature of one. i didn't do as much research as i usually do, that's why, but being short for time - this is the product
we are hard on each other - i -

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

x. we are hard on each other - i -

_and call it honesty,_
_choosing our jagged truths_
_with care and aiming them across_
_the neutral table._

_Margaret Atwood_

i.

“Mother almost had my head this morning.” Aegon said as he circled Jon’s desk, throwing the small ball up in the air with one hand and catching it with the other.

“On account of what?” Jon enquired distractedly, though Aegon could tell it was disinterested at best. “Did she find some noble maiden in your bed again?”

Argon snorted. “No. On account of the bullfight.”

“Ah.”

“Apparently it makes her doubt whether she raised princess or donkeys.”

Jon snorted. “She might have a point.”

Aegon threw the ball in his hand at his brother’s head. It caught Jon in the shoulder.

Jon looked up slowly.

“Are you in need of a distraction?” He asked in a manner that anyone who did not know him might have described as belligerent, but which Aegon knew was only mildly annoyed.

“Stop being such a bore.” Aegon told his brother.

Jon got back to his book. “I will not.”

“Gods you’re dull.” Aegon groaned.

“Then get out.” Jon bit back as he reached for a trinket on his table almost causally. But Aegon knew better and immediately ducked, anticipating the flying projectile – a very correct assumption on his part and which saved him from being hit in the chest with a paperweight by a every merciful inch.

“And go where?” Aegon continued as he straightened again, as if nothing at all had happened. “We have a competition to organize.”
“Your secretary is organizing it, brother.”

“Mother wants us to call it off.” Aegon said as he plopped himself on a chair, stretching his legs in front of him.

Jon turned the page. “On account of?”

“The apparently very probable chance that we might accidentally-on-purpose kill Harold Hardying, and thus set our relationship with the Vale back of a solid twenty years.”

“The queen is wise.”

“The queen knows your temper.” Aegon said with a grin. Though he did not share with Jon how well his mother knew his own mind too: she had gleaned immediately for example, that these games had been Aegon’s idea and not Jon’s – who was prone to more… direct approaches at his problems, to put it mildly. Though the queen was hardly the only one prone to such insights. Indeed, anyone who was the least bit acquainted with Jon knew this about him. After all, it had been why Aegon had proposed the games.

At Jon’s prolonged silence, Aegon got up and neared the table his brother was sitting at. “What are you reading that is so interesting anyway?”

“A History of the Great Houses of Westeros.” Jon answered without looking up. “Gods, this Maester can’t write for shit. It’s genuinely hard to make battles this important sound so fucking boring.”

Aegon crossed the table, coming to stand over Jon’s shoulder. He did not sit on the table over Jon’s papers as he might have done once, because he knew as surely as he knew his own face, that had he done it, Jon would have shoved him unceremoniously off the table and probably made it so that he landed on his royal arse.

Or perhaps not, Aegon considered. His brother was so distracted that he was tempted to try it, if only to break him out of his concentration.

“I half expected it to be another book on the Children of the Forest.” Aegon noted as he tilted his head to the side to read the page.

“I have some of those as well.” He pointed behind himself. “They’re on the shelf there.”

“If only the Grand Maester could see you now.”

“If only.”

Aegon considered his brother. “Why are you reading the history of House Bolton?”

Jon did not answer immediately and Aegon did not know whether he would have eventually, because not a moment later, a knock on the door interrupted them.

Jon tensed. “Who?”

Ser Aerys’ voice came back muffled through the wood between them. “Sansa Stark, your grace.”

Aegon resisted the urge to laugh. He’d never seen his brother rise to his feet so readily.

“The lady looks for you in your chambers.” He whispered with a wicked grin.

Jon reached out and caught him by the front of his doublet. “Not another word from you!” He
Aegon put his hands up, still smiling and waited for his brother to let him go. Which Jon readily did, and then straightened his hold where his hands had ruffled it.

“Come in.” Jon called then.

The door opened, but Sansa Stark did not cross the doorway. Her eyes took them both in quickly, before she curtsied.

“My apologies. I did not mean to disturb your leisure.”

“Lady Stark,” Aegon greeted. “Are you talking to me or to him?”

“Both, your grace.”

Aegon’s smile grew as he stepped forward, taking Lady’s Starks hand and kissing her gloved knuckles lightly, if only because he knew it would set Jon’s teeth on edge.

“Then in the name of us both, allow me to say you interrupt nothing my lady, have no fear.” He said as he straightened.

“Please come in, Sansa.” Jon invited, then gave his brother a firm look. “Aegon, didn’t you say you had to speak to the queen shortly?”

Aegon bit the inside of his cheek to hold back his amusement. “Brother, you used to be more subtle.”

Jon’s face was a threat made manifest. “When I want to, sure.”

“Alright, alright. I’m leaving.” He looked at Sansa though, before he went. “Unless of course Lady Stark prefers me to stay.”

He could practically feel Jon’s annoyance washing over his back, like the waves of the sea.

“I would not keep you, your grace.” Sansa Stark told him. Aegon nodded then and stepped outside. Before he went, he turned on his heel and met Jon’s eye, winking at him. And he knew that it was only because Sansa Stark was there, that Jon did not send something else – this time perhaps something of a more substantial mass, for more substantial damage - flying towards his head again.

ii.

Jon waited until he was sure he was sure his brother was out of earshot to speak again.

“You’re neither in nor out, cousin. Come in. Sit.”

His nerves did not betray his voice, but he still felt them crawling on his skin on millipede legs. He felt and awkward and on edge. And acutely aware of their last conversation and how it had ended.

Sansa however did not move from the threshold. She kept her hands linked together in front of her in that way he recognized, to stop herself from fidgeting.

“I… think not. Perhaps a walk in the gardens?” She invited with only a fraction of hesitance in her voice.

She didn’t want to be alone with him, Jon realized. She hadn’t allowed it since that night in the
godsdwoood, and he’d never thought that it might have been out of fear. But the doubt started to grow in his mind now, and he could not help the frown.

“Alright.” Jon agreed. “But you should know, there are more ears in the gardens than there are in my rooms.”

Sansa did not seem perturbed. “Yes, I know.”

Ah. So he would be walking with Lady Stark today. He might have known.

“Very well.”

She turned and started up the corridor before he’d closed the door behind himself. It didn’t take Jon much to catch up with her however. They descended the stairs together, Sir Aerys keeping a very respectable distance behind them, completing the illusion of privacy.

“I have to say, I am surprised you came to call on me.” He looked at her sideways. Her face was the picture of calm. “You haven’t come to my apartments once. Not even when Dany invited you.”

“I heard you now have your father’s permission to ask for my hand.”

Jon smiled. Despite her stiff posture, her perfectly impenetrable expression and her need to keep up all appearances of formality, she was not even trying to feign subtlety.

“News travels fast in the Red Keep.”

“Spreading it is the main business of all its occupants.” She said offhandedly. “Though lies have a way of circling the whole castle twice, I have found, before the truth has even tied its laces.”

His smile became wry. “No, it’s the truth. I asked for his permission to court you. It’s… strategy.” Jon found himself explaining. “So that if you change your mind and accept my offer, there will be no doubts about its legality.”

“How considerate of you.” Jon heard her say, so frostily that it was a wonder the temperature around them did not drop of several degrees. “Not at all scandalous to make me an object of contention between yourself and another man.”

In the distance, Jon saw the corridor opening into the gardens. They found a shaded path and walked among the curated trees and flowerbeds in silence for quite some time.

“Would you have me give up all hope?” Jon asked softly.

“Hope.” The word was almost a sneer in her mouth. “Am I to expect marching orders to the Sept of Bealor any time soon?”

Jon felt the accusation in her tone keenly. He opened and closed his hands, trying to stave of the heaviness setting into him, as if his veins had filled with led.

“You know nothing like that will ever happen.”

“Do I?”

He stopped and caught her arm, so that she might stop as well, so that he could look at her in the eye. When he touched her, Sansa did not flinch – on the contrary. She met his look with a mutinous one of her own and it was a wonder to him then, how she could seem every inch the delicate flower, in her pale blue dress and pink lips. And how much more beautiful a picture she made in his eyes
simply for knowing beyond the shadow of a doubt that all that could see was just skin-deep horseshit. Sansa Stark was a fist wrapped in silk – the truth of it in her icy eyes, in the set of her stubborn jaw.

It made his chest feel sore, just there over his breastbone, just to look at her like this.

“You're angry with me.”

“Not at all.” The obvious lie made her words almost into a taunt.

Jon sighed. “You’re angry with me, so I think it would be wise, if we set some limits to this from the start.”

“Limits?” she repeated, as if the word made no sense to her.

“Yes. On how we hurt each other.”

Her smile was cold and did not touch her eyes. “Well, I defer to your superior experience in the matter. How does one set limits to such a thing?”

“Do us both the courtesy of not lying.” Jon said simply, and watched the words shock the haughtiness off her face, if only for a moment. “To me or yourself. I’m sure there is enough damage to be done with truth alone.”

She pulled her arm from his hold easily. He hadn’t been keeping her in place at all.

“Fine.” She conceded and kept walking.

“While we are on the subject of truth,” Jon began. He looked around, then lowered his voice to a whisper. Leaned down a bit so that the words were for her ears alone “Were the letters you received from the north a forgery?”

Sansa stopped in her tracks, looking at him wide-eyed. “What could possibly compel you to say such a thing?” she asked in a whisper.

Jon shrugged. “Just a feeling.” But the shock on her face did not relent. In fact she tensed even more.

“You must know by now – surely you must know that I will not betray you confidence.”

She looked away. Started walking again. She stopped at the edge of the wall surrounding the garden and rested her hands there on the warm stones. It was an open space, no bushes no roses or trees. Nowhere for anyone to hide, who might want to listen in to their conversation.

“They were materially forged yes,” She said stiffly, looking at the horizon where the sky met the sea. “But the content of them was true.”

Jon chuckled. “A bit brazen, no?”

“Was it?” She looked at him askance. “What do you suppose Arya or Lady Lyarra would say to anyone who question their post?”

Jon chuckled. Yes well, she had a point there.

“They served their purpose.”

That drew her attention fast. “How?”
“The king will publicly declare for the Starks before the week is out.” he said, and watched relief flood her face. “I am to go North as a representative of the crown.”

Her smile was small and knowing. “How convenient for you.”

Jon sighed. It was. “They have certain conditions I will have to meet.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Am I part of those conditions?”

“No, you’re part of mine.”

She laughed in his face. “How wonderful it feels, to be passed around by strangers.”

“No, it’s… it’s not like that. The King agreed to allow me to press my suit to you, on the condition I do his will in the North.”

Jon watched her, as she dissected that sentence. Took the time to look, really look at her face, this time. He could see the mark of tiredness on her, and a thin veil of sadness in her eyes that she couldn’t mask all the time.

It turned his stomach a little to think that he might be the cause of it.

“And what is the king’s will for the North?” Sansa asked carefully.

He told her in as few words he could, in as low a voice as possible. And just like it had come, her relief disappeared. She was stunned. And then disgust made its way into her face, before she could turn it away.

“And will you do it?” she finally asked.

Jon crossed his arms over his chest and leaned his weight against the low garden wall. “I will go north. It does not have to follow that I will succeed there.”

“You have succeeded elsewhere every time.” Sansa pointed out, barely moving her lips.

They were so close, he could smell the scent of her hair: something sweet, but not quite flowery enough.

“It would be a bit suspicious if you failed this one time.”

He just shrugged.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “And my purpose would have been what? Legitimizing Targaryen interference in Northern affairs?”

“I’m sure it has crossed my father’s mind, but that’s not how I presented it.”

She pursed her lips in distaste. “He must think me very stupid.”

Jon nodded. “In that you have succeeded fully.” He said with a smile. “They don’t know you at all.”

Jon saw her hesitate. And then saw her give in. “How did you present it?”

Jon looked down to hide his smile. Then looked at her a bit through his lashes. “In the way that most assured me success. Is that what you came to ask me?”
Sansa seemed to catch herself. She straightened, took a step back and Jon knew that she hadn’t realized at all how close they’d gotten in their whispering. She allowed herself only one moment to glare at him before smoothing out her feelings from her face like one might smooth out creases from cloth. She took hold of her skirts again and continued her way down the stairs.

“No. I have come to ask for a favor.”

Jon smiled unhappily. “Of course.”

“You already know what I mean to ask.”

It was not a question. Jon supposed she could read his tone as well as he could hers, at this point. Because yes, he knew what she wanted. She’d avoided him for days, but not one sunset had passed since her betrothed entered a challenge with him out of his own stupidity, and here she was. Facing him, despite not wanting to. For the sake of a man who was not worthy of such attention.

Jealousy bit him deep, the sting almost enough to make him flinch. But he ignored it. He was far too glad to see her to make qualms about why she was there.

“I won’t withdraw,” Jon said firmly. “If you are afraid for Lord Hardying’s life, then ask him to withdraw.”

“But he won’t!” the words burst out with all her exasperation. “No matter how many times I ask him to. His stubbornness is surprising me.”

It sounded like it too. Perhaps she’d never met with Harry’s full temperament before.

The part of him that Kings Landing had cultivated, teaching him to use even the grimmest circumstances in his favor, knew that he could use this in his favor. He would be lying if he said this had been his intention upon trapping Harry in a challenge the Vale arseling was sure to lose, but Jon was not above taking advantage of whatever circumstances to the fullest. He was sure he knew Sansa’s betrothed far better than she did, and he was determined to make Harry Hardying show his full colors. If only so that she would not have the excuse of him to hide behind.

“And you thought I would prove less stubborn?” Jon ventured as they reached the ground floor and turned right, towards the hall that would lead them outside into the east gardens.

Sansa met his eyes briefly just then, and he saw her – her real face, beneath the placidity of her courteous mask – looking back at him for a brief moment before she looked away.

“No, I know better than to think that.”

Sansa stopped and, after taking a deep breath, turned to face him.

Jon mirrored her. Waited.

“And you thought I would prove less stubborn?”

“I did not.” Jon reminded her. “The competition was not my idea.”

“Spare me, your grace. I have spent enough time among your family to know how you corner your enemies.” She told him curtly.

“And Harry and I are hardly the only ones taking part.” Jon added.

“And yet you both keep treating it as if you were.” She pointed out, and Jon knew it was the truth.
He could not very well deny the obvious. “What could you possibly have to gain from this, aside from an easy victory?”

How could he explain that the truth of it was, he’d already gained all he’d hoped to? It didn’t make much sense, or any for that matter, and it embarrassed him a little, how he’d only wanted her attention yesterday, and some of her time today, and that was it. That was the extent of the satisfaction that this whole stupid circus could grant him.

“I want to see what he is made of. This man that has earned such devotion from you.”

“Why?” She insisted again, stepping towards him and, to his delight, abandoning politeness again, this time in favor of fierce displeasure. Jon didn’t mind at all: even displeasure was better than indifference.

“Because – there must be something remarkable about him, if he has won you over so completely that you refuse to even consider me as a possible rival.”

She turned away from him, but not before he could see the her rolling her eyes at him.

“And you will find this mysterious quality of Harry’s by trying to humiliate him in public?”

Jon’s smiled was slow, and very satisfied. “I have to say, Sansa, it pleases me to see you have such faith in my abilities.”

She ignored his bait, went on with her own.

“Everyone in the capitol knows you have been taking part in bullfights since you were a boy. I have seen you in one.” She glanced at him then looked away immediately.

“When?”

“A month after I came south, in the games organized to honor of Prince Oberyn’s visit to the capitol.”

Jon shook his head in wonder. “I don’t remember that at all.”

“You are the superior one at this sport, that much even I can say.” Sansa said plainly, meeting his eye for only a moment. Jon felt a rush of pleasure at her praise; he could not help it, even though he knew she was targeting her words with as much precision as he used his sword. “I would have thought someone of your skill would find it degrading to match against a man who is so clearly not your equal. It would be humiliating if you fail and commonplace if you win.”

Jon grinned at her words. The careful aim of them. They’d said no lies, and she was dead center in her truth. He would not however, tell her so. That would end their conversation, which was most definitely not what he wanted.

Jon looked down and shook his head, recognizing his own senselessness: he liked her so much he even enjoyed her subtle manipulations. They seemed elegant to him.

“It would be embarrassing for me to withdraw now, don’t you think?” Jon contemplated. “It would be seen as cowardice.”

Her eyes flashed at him.

Jon would have been happy to be told to stop being so fucking coy. They were both aware she knew
his nature better than that, but he was speaking to Lady Stark, and she kept on as if she was having a royal audience, and not talking to someone who would gladly fall to his knees right then and there, if it would please her.

“A withdrawal may cause you some embarrassment, yes.” Sansa admitted, not without visible effort. “But a man who has reason to be proud, knows the truth of himself within himself.” Sansa stopped and turned to face him. “Do you really have a reason to care what people believe, when we both know they will believe what they chose about you anyway?”

Jon could not help his smile. Taunting did not help so she was now trying out compliments. And she was so very fucking earnest with them too. It did help her case that she was right: Jon did not give a single fuck what anyone thought of him. It was a skill he had not learned painlessly and she knew it; just as she knew that appealing to the pride he took in this indifference was the best way to get him to agree to her request.

And it would have worked too, but for a very important detail Sansa continued to ignore: it wasn’t anyone else’s attention he wanted.

“Sansa… If I did withdraw, Harry would insult me over it, try to make me look the fool,” Jon explained calmly, this time without any attempt to preserve the distance she had wanted to put between them through stiff politeness. In this, Jon was fully sincere. “What I would have to do to him then, would be worse than a bit of bruising to his pride.”

He saw trepidation on her face then, but he didn’t have time to regret putting it there before it was gone.

“He would never be so stupid.” She whispered.

Jon reached out to brush a strand of her hair away from her face, but she inched away from him. He dropped his hand back to his side.

“He would. Because he knows how I feel about you.” She turned her back on him, but Jon continued. “And would want me humiliated in your eyes because he knows the truth: that he is not worthy of you.”

Sansa turned so fast that for a moment, her loose curls were caught in the breeze like a fire-banner.

“You are wasting your breath with this argument.” She hissed between gritted teeth then took a deep breath to wrestle her feelings back under control. “My feelings on the matter haven’t changed.”

“Neither have mine.” Jon admitted and if he sounded helpless in doing so, well, it was not something he could change. But Sansa’s face only hardened further at his words. He’d lost quite a bit of ground with her… quite a lot in truth. She was not just distrustful towards him now. She was outright hostile. And it hurt.

She took a smalls step towards him, looking up into his face as if she was searching for something. “Is this punishment?”

The question stunned him. “What? Of course not. I’m…”

“I refused you, so now you are going to try to kill Harry because I chose him over you?”

Jon felt his own anger rise. “If I’d wanted to kill him, he’d be dead by now.” He said harshly. Then took a deep breath and got his temper under control. “I am not trying to punish you. What kind of man do you think I am?”
“I think you are a man.”

Jon linked his hand behind his back, falling back to his training the way he always did when he felt a situation getting away from him. And right in that moment, he felt as he he’d just been punched in the chest. It felt almost obscene how much he depended on her good opinion, when all his life he’d worked never to allow anyone that kind of power over him. It was obscene because even so, he did not wish for freedom.

“There is one truth to what you said.” He admitted then. “I do want to humiliate Hardying.”

“Why?”

Jon laugh was breathless. Why, she asked.

“He is less than the shadow of a snake.” He could not say it without scorn. “Why should I not hate him, when he has everything I want?”

“Humiliating him will bring you nothing.” She told him. “No one’s opinion on him signifies but my own, and I love him.”

Jon softened. “You are a liar. You despise him, perhaps even more than you despise me right now.”

She got such a look on her face then… Jon saw her hand curling into a fist, right there by her side and he knew that had her manners allowed her, she would have slapped him again.

“I would thank you not to tell me what I do and do not feel, your grace.” Sansa bit out quickly, and Jon found consolation in knowing that if his composure was slipping, at least so was hers.

“Forgive me, my Lady, but it’s hard not to hate a man whose attentions you accept so easily even though he has never loved anything or anyone better than he loves his own reflection. Mean while you flinch every time I tell you I love you.”

“Because at least Harry is honest!” She bit back. “It is his shallowness that makes him true.”

“And I am false how?”

“You don’t love me Jon! No, don’t contradict me, hear me!” She insisted fiercely, and Jon closed his mouth with great effort, choosing to listen.

“You like me very much, it’s true.” She said then, patiently almost. “And you have an affection for me, I believe that. I can feel it. Because I was the first person in so long to break through your loneliness, just as you did for me and that connected us. And you are grateful to me because I took you to a place where you saw something precious, but I did not give that to you. I didn’t! I just showed you where to look, that’s all.” She took a breath, set her hands on her waist as if to collect herself. “That is a lot that happened in a very short time. It was intense and you feel awake now because of it and you think that is love, but it’s not.”

She was almost imploring him to agree with her, and had she been anyone else, anyone at all, Jon would have thought they were trying to make a real enemy of him, by treating him like a fool.

But it was Sansa, so he took her hand in his and kissed the back of her knuckles gently.

“You were right, you are a bit of a hypocrite, my lady.”

She startled. “Jon-”
“You rightly throw my own presumptions about your heart in my face,” He said softly. “But you have no qualms whatsoever about making presumptions of your own.”

She tried to pull her hand from his but he did not let go.

“And it so hard for you to believe that you really are that easy to love?” Jon asked, honest this time in his enquiry. Sansa’s hand went slack in his for a moment and he saw her eyes fill with tears. They did not fall, but it was answer enough.

When next she took back her hand, he let her.

She paced a little in front of him, and he could almost see the wheels in her mind turning, trying to find a new angle from which to attack again. He knew she had found it when she stopped in front of him again.

“Let’s say that I believe you. That you do care for me.”

“I do.”

“Then you should know why I as what I ask. If you cared for me, you would not harm those I love.”

‘If’ she said. “…Do you care for me at all?”

His voice exposed him a little more than he might have been comfortable with, but perhaps that was a good thing. Sansa only ever reacted to truth. He had known from the beginning that he would never have her soul without losing his own.

She fixed her eyes on him then, serious and unsmiling.

"I do. I care for you very much.” Sansa admitted without so much as a blink. Jon felt his hear give a lurch. “Is that a fact or a weapon to you?”

Jon allowed himself a small smile. “It’s hope to me.”

Her turned her face away from him.

“And I think you know that. Or you wouldn’t have come.” Jon asked her then, eyeing the way her hair curled down her back and how the light turned it from red to gold. “Is that why you thought I would be an easier target than your would-be betrothed?”

“I was counting on your ego not being as fragile, actually.” She corrected. “And I had also hoped you I might still have your respect, but I can see that this is not the case.”

“You never lost my respect. Does Harry have yours?” Jon took a step towards her. “Can you really respect someone who would not part with a single inch of their vainglory, for the sake of your comfort?”

The way her face went stone cold should have made him back away from her but he could not move.

“No, I don’t think I can.” Sansa said softly, her whisper going down his spine like cold water. When she smiled, Jon had to resist the urge to flinch. “You speak of love, but you don’t understand what it is at all, do you?” She curtsied abruptly. “Forgive me, your grace, for taking up so much of your time.”
Jon caught her arm before she could slip past him and pulled her close.

She hissed at him like a snake. “Let go of me.”

“I will withdraw if you want me to.” Jon told her, abandoning all pretence of calm. “I would lose, if you wanted me to. Do anything else you wanted me to.” He heard his face to hers until he could count every single one of her freckles. “It wasn’t at myself I was speaking of.”

“Let go of me, your grace.” She repeated flatly.

“Why are you so determined to think the worst of me?”

“Jon. Unhand me this instant.”

He released her immediately, looked at her arm and then his hand. Tried to catch his breath as he took a step away from her.

“Forgive me. I…” He glanced at her face but could not hold her eyes. “Forgive me.”

She did not say anything. Only stood there. He could feel her eyes but he could not meet them. Instead he chose to look at the stones making up the wall that surrounded the gardens.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No.”

Jon shook his head. “I seem to drop quite a bit in intelligence around you. Not that that is any excuse. My apologies.” He repeated.

“I accept your apology.” Though she said it so stiffly, he wondered if she meant it.

“Thank you.”

She took a step towards him and it was all Jon could do not to take one backwards. But there was no anger on her face, as he saw when he finally dared look up.

“You need to understand that it’s impossible.”

“I fail to see how.” He’d committed treason once and was well on his way to doing it again, just to make it possible. Jon shifted on his feet, and let his real doubt out. “You think me so unworthy of you?”

He watched her look away, distressed and mute with it, if only for a moment. From the corner of his eye he saw her raise a hand, as if to touch him, but then thought better of it.

“This has nothing to do with your worth.” Sansa finally said, her voice raw with feeling. “It’s not about you as a person, it’s… I have been living in this city since I was a child! And I have watched your family line the halls of this palace with blood, and cruelty!”

“You think I don’t know that?” Jon countered, incensed. “I want to leave them behind as much as you do.”

“You will never be able to leave them, Jon.” She countered. “However much wish to be free of this place, its games, you never could be, because they are your family.”

“How little you know us.” Jon murmured.
“They’re your blood.” Sansa said firmly. “By virtue of that alone you will always be part of the game of thrones, one way or another. There is no distance you can cross that will make that safe.”

Jon considered her.

“I have no choice in what happens to me, then? What I believe doesn’t matter? What I want means nothing?” Jon smiled but he knew it was a bitter thing. “I thought you of all people would allow me more than that.”

Sansa shook her head, pressed a hand to her throat and then wrapped them around her as if she was protecting her soft underbelly.

“Yes, and it’s easy to make that choice now, but what if their lives are at stake? Their safety? The safety of their children? Perhaps it is natural, because they rule these seven kingdoms but understand this: ambition rules your family.” She spoke with conviction, stripping all the pretence mercilessly, calling his family’s worst sin by its name. “Your father’s, your brother’s, your sister’s. Even Dany’s. Even if you want nothing to do with any of it, you will have to add to it your own, or risk being trampled beneath them, as I have had to do!”

“Why do you think your Harry is so different? What has he done to earn your faith?” He dared a bitter smile. “Maybe I can emulate him.”

"Harry has no deep ambition beyond being Lord and being admired.” She said tiredly. “He is not spiteful or unjust. He is prideful and boastful, yes, but he has no cruelty. And he can see the good in everyone. Even you.”

Jon could not help himself. He laughed. Passed a hand over his face. It was astounding to him that a woman who could mercilessly strip away all pretence from reality and look at its ugly face without flinching, was also so adamant to hold on to her fantasies sometimes.

"You project your own goodness onto him,” he told her. “Because those are all things you want him to be."

He was very much surprised when she shoved at his chest.

“Stop- Stop that! Stop telling me what I think, stop telling me what I know!”

Jon could say nothing, so shocked he was at her uncharacteristic outburst. Something that Sansa too noticed, since he saw contrition came over her almost before the sound of her voice had faded from the air.

“Sansa.” Jon called tentatively, reaching to touch her then withdrawing his hand immediately.

“What’s the matter?”

“This was a mistake. I was a fool for ever thinking you’d listen to me.” She said breathlessly, one hand pressed against her middle as if it hurt. “Excuse me.”

She walked past him and Jon followed.

“Something’s happened.” Jon pressed. It wasn’t a question. He could see it plain as day on her face. This kind of agitation was not like her at all.

But she ignored him in favor of her own enquiry. “Will you withdraw then? Do I have your word?”

“You have my word.” Jon repeated, looking at her face, her features on by one, hoping something in
her would hint at what was wrong. What had happened between today and yesterday to rattle her so. “I will have Satin sent a note to Harry when I return to my rooms.”

Sansa nodded. Linked her hand in front of her and straightened. She curtsied and Jon knew then that she would wish him good day and brush past him, now that her business was concluded.

“Sansa.”

She stopped. Faced him.

“Shall we part as friends?”

The request, simple as it was, seemed to shock her a moment. A strange look passed over her then, something that was almost vulnerable, before she blinked it away and met his eyes again.

“And if I refuse?”

Jon didn’t know what to say to her at first. “I will be disappointed, but I will live.”

She tipped her chin up, regarded him with suspicion. “You will not rethink your withdrawal from the bullfight.”

Jon’s face fell. He looked at her, frustrated and sad and confused; aware that there was a hurt she was holding back that was causing her such suspicion, and aware too of how much it fucking hurt to have her see him with something that inched so close to distain.

“I have done much to fall from your graces, but I don’t think I deserve that.” He finally told her, and was rooted on the spot when he saw her face pinch as if she was holding back tears. She looked away from him, looked up blinking fast, biting her lip.

“You’re right, that was unfair.” She said, as she pulled at her glove and closed the distance between them. She extended her burned hand without smiling, just looking at him in the eye, her gaze appraising and sad.

Jon took her hand in his and then folded his other one over it, drawing her close. Her had was warm and soft as he remembered.

“But nothing has really changed, Jon.” She said with a sigh. “You must know by now that no longer be friends.”

“Do enemies speak so freely with one another, you think?” He asked her, leaning down a bit, just a hair. She looked at his lips and then his eyes and if possible, turned sadder still. “Share secrets, hold hands?”

“No.” She admitted. “Maybe enemies is too strong a word. Maybe we’re just… standing on opposite sides of a river.”

“I’m an excellent swimmer.”

But he could not get even the hint of a smile from her. Jon pressed the back of her hand against his chest. He could feel against his palm the uneven skin of her burn and wanted nothing more than to hold her. She hadn’t touched him like this – with care – since they said goodbye in the Riverlands. It felt like forever ago since that day, and even longer still since the Isle of Faces, but Jon remembered how it had felt to be with her that way with an acuteness that defied any kind of common explanation.
“Tell me what’s wrong.”

The corner of her lips ticked up in a smile that was anything but happy. “I don’t think we have that kind of time, your grace.”

“Let me help you, Sansa.” He implored, leaning over her.

The resigned look on her face pierced him straight through. “You can’t help me.”

“Let me try!”

She slipped her hand from his and he let her go, tracing her fingers until she pulled away completely. Put her glove back on with practiced ease.

“Good day, Jon.”

iii.

Jon kept his word. The moment he returned to his rooms, he penned a note to Harrold fucking Hardying and another to Aegon, telling them both that he was withdrawing from the games and that King’s Landing needed another champion.

He handed them to Satin with specific instructions.

“After you deliver those, I want you to take some white roses to our mutual friend in the lower levels.”

Satin looked up, meeting Jon’s eyes for one long moment. Then, understanding, he nodded.

“Yes, your grace.”

“They must be white, and tell her to put them at the windowsill, like we agreed.”

“Yes your grace. I will not forget.”

“I know you won’t.” Jon said with a smile. “Go on.”

Satin bowed and hurried out.

Jon changed his clothes, picked up his sword and took himself to the training grounds. The whole time he was there, he kept thinking that he would very much liked to have had eyes on Sansa, the way so many seemed to. Perhaps then he would have known what had happened that had upset her so.

Barring of course that what had happened was not himself.

But Jon knew that not spying on her was not only the right thing to do but also the smart thing to do. Because as surely as night followed day, she would know. And she would hate him. Her awareness of people was on par with his. Indeed, many of her reactions were. And the more he thought about it, the more it seemed to Jon that he had failed to understand her fully, or in the right context.

Perhaps because being back in the Red Keep was proving to be like immersing himself into the heaping pile of shit that that were his memories of this place, but more and more Jon was becoming aware of these little things in her, ticks, behaviors that Jon had noticed, but had not understood fully, it seemed. Things she did, that reminded Jon of himself.
Her ever present awareness for instance. It was starting to resembled more his own paranoia - which at times made Jon’s hand go to his dagger faster than his mind could tell him not to - than the awareness Dany or Elia had of where everyone was in a room at all times, like pieces on a cysasse table. Or how the first thing she’d look for when walking into any room would be a way to get out of it. The proof that she was successful was in the facts: The Red Keep was a fucking maze – he’d lived there the better part of his life, and still, she managed to slip away faster than Jon ever could!

How she could be so quiet that people seemed to forget she was there entirely. And how strange it was to him, that she could manage such a thing at all. Nowadays the first thing Jon looked when he walked into a room was the bright shade of her hair; but no one else seemed as acutely attuned to her as he was. For most, she could slip away as easy as water though ones hands.

When he was beyond the Wall, he remembered noticing that, aside from experienced warriors, the ones who responded to danger fastest were the children that they had managed to pluck out of warzones, or slave ships. It had been a strange thing to witness - a dissonance of reality. Jon had trained as a warrior all his life. He had that: his body remembered the motions even when his mind would stop, freeze. He had been trained to react in the face of horror. But those children had been faster than him sometimes.

Jon had learned then, that you can be trained for war and by it, and it did not really matter if you were a man or a child. It worked the same. You get exposed to enough danger, and your mind organizes itself for war always.

It was how you learned to keep your eyes peeled for it always. Nowhere was safe. Warning signs became like a second language. You might even be more fluent in that, than any other form of communication: the tension in the air becoming like a breeze you feel. The twitch of a hand alerted you to a possible dagger, the shiftiness of the eyes – all things you could read. Even silence had its own meaning.

Maybe that was why Sansa could follow people’s faces like they were their own conversation. How even the slightest frown could tell her what she needed.

Someone had threatened her, he was sure. She hadn’t been scared, she had been on edge. And he doubted very much it was because of him: when he pushed too hard, she still bit back. That had not changed.

Jon stopped the sparring, signaling his partner for a break. Gods, he wished he could talk to Benjen.

“Ah, we’ve got company.”

Jon turned, giving Jory a questioning look. As an answer, Jory pointed to his left, at the tree line surrounding the training fields. When Jon turned he grinned: Skye had perched herself on the highest branch on one of the pines that grew closest to them, and Jon could swear she was staring at him.

He ducked inside one of the barracks and snagged the first protective glove he found, glad to see that when he came out, Skye was still there. So Jon extended his arm and waited for her to decide to come.

Jory, who’d had been watching him, chuckled. “You’ll want to be careful, your grace. Gods know she’s as gentle as a dove with Lady Stark, but that one has a taste for blood.”

That did not surprise Jon in the least. “Does she now.”

“I’ve seen her scratch a man’s eyes out, once.” Clegane said as he tightened the laces of his gauntlet
with one hand. “She was just a baby bird then.”

Jon for his part stayed still as stone, waiting. Skye eyed him with disinterest, and when he did not retreat his hand, she opened her great wings and screeched at him menacingly before she flew away.

Jon sighed.

She was still cross with him, then.

“She does not seem to like you, your grace.”

Jon turned abruptly at the sound of that voice. When he saw the smirk on Hardying’s face, he mirrored it.

“Lord Hardying.”

“I got your message.”

Jon started loosening the laces that fastened the glove to his forearm and took it off. Tucked it beneath his belt.

“It is a shame you will not be participating.”

“If you say so.” Jon said offhandedly. He knew what Harry wanted: he had seen that look on the face of too many fuckers with a death wish, not to know.

He’d come spoiling and Jon would be damned if he gave him a chance.

“You realize that by withdrawing, I win by default.”

“Was I the only participant in the games?” Jon asked with feigned surprise.

Harry smiled. “Ah but all the others didn’t count to me. This was about the two of us.”

“If you say so, my lord.” Jon said with a shrug. But he couldn’t help himself. “Winning by default.” Jon repeated with a small smile as he grasped his training sword again. “That should be your motto.”

There were some chuckles, as Harry’s face fell. Ah, he was too easily riled.

“I suppose my Lady Sansa persuaded you to withdraw.”

For a moment, Jon was not sure how to answer. He did not know what she would want, in this situation, what could cause her trouble. He had a very clear feeling that Sansa’s relationship with Harry followed very clear lines. Things between them did not mix and become messy or shaded. He did not want to open his mouth and do any more damage to her.

“You so easily fall to the requests of a woman?” Harry pressed.

“What can I say, my lord. I am soft hearted.” Jon conceded as he stepped into the ring. One of the younger recruits, who was to spar with him next and had been close enough to hear him, muffled a laugh as he put his shield up.

“Come on.” Jon invited. The boy came at him in a flurry of quick blows that Jon parried.

“Yes, that is your reputation.” He heard Harry say.
“But then again my lady is a rare one.” Harry added. “Charm, beauty, intelligence. One can hardly trust a woman with so many weapons at her disposal.”

If Jon had been a friend to Harry Hardying, he would have cautioned the fool to mind his tongue, in a place where so many northern men part of the household of that same lady, could hear him.

But then again, Jon was no friend of his, so he did not see the need.

He shoved his recruit away from him and watched him stumble to regain his footing.

“Don’t lock you knees.” He told the boy calmly, before he turned to Hardying. “Perhaps her gifts would bother you less,” he said instead. “If you had more of your own to match her.”

“Is that an insult, your grace?”

Jon shrugged. “That you should find the truth to be insulting is something you should take up with your gods, not with me. Again!”

He parried a second set of attacks, but he could tell his opponent was tiring. Jon slammed his shield into the boy’s shield to push him away and then made a low cut, towards his legs. The boy winced.

“Not every sword stuck is a kill.” Jon told him as they started circling each other once more. “A kill is something you must fashion. Anything below the knee is as vulnerable as anything above. A stab in the ankle, like the one I just gave you, won’t kill you. But it will open the door. And death himself will step through that door. Again, come.”

They started again, and again Jon beat the boy back but this time, he was more careful of his legs. For which Jon complimented him with a laugh.

Harry clapped slowly. “Now that is more like your reputation.”

Jon turned to him. “Are you lost, ser?”

“No, I think I am in exactly the right place.” Harry countered and stepped into the ring, picking up one of the training swords propped close by as he did so. “I think i would like the chance to match up against the Black Prince, if you would be so inclined.”

Jon was itching to accept.

“You should find your way back to the castle halls, Lord Hardying.” He said instead. “We wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.”

Harry laughed. “This is the second time you refused to face me! If i did not know any better, i would say you were afraid.”

Those that heard the words, stopped to look, eyes shifting from harry to Jon who had stilled completely.

There are some men in this world, Benjen had told him once, that demand to be killed. They argue when they lose at cards. They jump out and shout if someone so much as brushes by them. They wonder through the streets calling out ‘kill me, kill me.’

Harold Hardying was not one of those men. He was not unafraid of death, nor was he inviting it now. He was simply too fucking self-assured to realize that it was staring at him in the face.

“Come then. Fight me.” Harry said again, taking up a stance.
He had a good posture. Looked very pretty.

Jon imagined himself smashing his nose up into his skull.

“No.”

“Pick up the sword, prince.”

“Are you deaf?”

Harry put down his arms. Relaxed. Laughed. “I would not have taken you for a coward or a spoilsport, prince. You disappoint. But then again I imagine that you are used to that reaction. It is the way of bastardy.”

Jon started walking towards Harry abruptly. Harry realized the situation had turned and immediately put his sword up, swung it when Jon was close enough to hit, because he was under the impression that this would be a spar.

It would not.

Jon parried the blow of the dull blade with his arm, gritted his teeth against the pain that he felt all the wait to his spine. He caught Harry’s wrist with his other hand, twisted it back in one swift movement until he heard the bone snap. Harry screamed and to his credit, tried to swing the sword at him with one hand but Jon gabbed his other wrist to stop him and then slammed his forehead into Harry’s face.

Harry stumbled.

Jon twisted his sword arm behind his back and buried a sharp-knuckled punch into Harry’s ribs, making him grunt. Harry struggles, so Jon punches him again.

“Brace yourself,” Jon warned. “Next one cracks your ribs.”

Before Harry could so much as grunt, Jon punched him again, and then let him fall down on the ground.

As Jon watched him there, curled and gasping, he wondered how it was possible that a vermin so straightforward about how vile he was, could ever be so different in the presence of someone else. It did not track that all those things that Sansa said, existed in him.

Jon crouched down, looked at Harry’s face some more. “Whoever let you come here spoiling for a fight, does not like you very much, Lord Hardying.”

Harry pulled himself up to a sitting position. His nose was broken and bloodying his face. His eye was already bruising.

“No. But now perhaps, whoever is looking will see you for who you really are.”

Jon tensed. And then smiled. “She already knows me for who I really am.”

Harry opened his mouth, but before he could say anything else, Jon punched him so hard his head snapped back and he fell into the dirt. This time he did not move again.

“Well that was pitiful.” Grenn said as he neared him. Jon was still looking at Hardying’s profile.

“Take him back to the castle.” Jon said in a low voice as he got up. He looked to Pyp, who was the
quicker of the two and far more adept at spying. “Stay close to him, but don’t be seen. Anyone goes to see him that is not Sansa Stark, you mark their face carefully, and then you tell me.”

Pyp nodded. Then together with Gren, they grabbed Hardyign by the armpits and his legs and shoved him none too gently on the stretcher that one of the boys had brought along.

Jon did not wait to see it done. His mind was already turning; he was miles away from this moment.

He would need Ghost tonight.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter is the first of the last part of this story, this is the last act and i think things are going to start happening really fast from here to the end. (i hope lol)
I was also thinking that I need to take the last 4 chapters out of the story. Leave only the esencial parts that will make up maybe one chapter. The reason for this is that every time i select that section of the story, it count as 40,000 words and that just freaks me out because its esencially 40,000 where fucking nothing happens. blows my mind.)
we are hard on each other - ii -

x. we are hard on each other - ii -

[iv.]

We are HARD on each other
and call it honesty,
choosing our jagged TRUTHS
with care and aiming them ACROSS
THE neutral TABLE.

"I've spent the last half year DIGGING
THROUGH FLESH, NAILS CAKED WITH MARROW
BRUISED KNUCKLES squeezing
through TOO-TIGHT RIBS

WHISPERS grow louder with PANIC,
PRAYERS ASCEND, it has to be here
somewhere BUT THERE IS
NO exit wound"

in this LOVE;

YOU ARE A KNIFE
WITH WHICH I
EXPLORE MYSELF

Margaret Atwood // exit wound, saltwaterskies // Letters to Milena, Kafka

“Why?”

“Because this is how the all of it started,” Jon explained. “It was the raids on coastal villages beyond
the Wall that made the Freefolk reach out to Eddard Stark. It is because those raiderd were
kidnapping people and selling them as slaves that Eddard Stark agreed to sit with them. This is the
heart of everything.” Jon looked from his father to his Hand, knowing that he was showing his hand
too much but unable to do anything different. It would either be this or nothing. “By giving me leave
to operate a fleet in the north, I will be able to be part of enforcing whatever conclusion the
northerners come to. The promise of that, will grant me their ear, at least.”

“It will grant you quite a bit more than that.” Connington said without looking up from the document
that Jon had presented both him and his father: the foundational document of the company that he
wanted to start operating.

Jon pressed his hands on the table and took a deep breath.

“I will need real leverage up there, your grace.” Jon said. “Real leverage, that will make the
northerners want me at the table, as much as you want me there.”
“As more than just the representative of the crown?” Rheagar enquired.

“Yes.” Jon said decisively. “A piece of paper will not give me any kind of authority in the north, not over the northerners and even less over the Freefolk. They respect strength. I need to be able to give them something, if you want the crown’s interference to be more than a words in the wind.”

“You mean you want to create the circumstances that will make your presence there necessary.” Rheagar surmised and Jon winced.

“In a manner of speaking, yes.” He admitted.

If Sansa knew that she had been the one to give him the idea on how to present this, she might just have his hide on principle alone.

“Necessary and permanent.” Connington added, looking at Jon with a frown.

Jon met Connington’s look with skepticism of his own. “And this displeases you how? I thought this was precisely what you wanted.”

“It is.” Connington said without hesitation. He and Rheagar shared a look. “More than what I was hoping for, in truth.”

Jon leaned back on his chair, exhausted and unwilling to show it. “Then pray tell, my Lord, what is the source of your hesitation.”

“Surprise, your grace.” Connington admitted with a smile. “It has been rare the occasion when you have not show at least some disdain over your father’s plans.”

Jon resisted the urge to scowl. “And yet, I have always obeyed, haven’t I.”

“Jon.” Rheagar said his name the way he always did, gravely, as if it was costing him something just to name his son. Jon grit his teeth. “What you’re asking is for me to legitimize what will in reality amount to raiding the fleets of the Free Cities, by my own son.”

“These are not traders, your grace,” Jon reminded him. “They are pirates who are paid a great deal by slavers to do one thing and one thing only in Westeros: prey on your people.”

“Freefolk are not our people.” Connington reminded him, though his eyes kept going to the charter that Jon had presented him.

“And yet, they remain men and women all the same.” Jon said forcefully. “As remains the fact that if a foreign entity attacks the borders of our kingdom, then they better expect fierce retribution. Is that not so?”

Rheagar nodded. “It is.”

“The only reason the slavers of the Essos have been able to avoid being caught or made responsible for this, is because they have confined themselves to Freefolk. Most of the time. Besides,” Jon added, trying to bring his tone down, collecting himself. “There will be no talk of raiding. By granting me the Royal Charter[1] to build this company, I will then be well within my rights, by law, to seize any ships and cargo being transported without a license issued by the company.”

“And those responsible are to be ‘imprisonment at the royal pleasure’.” Connington said, reading from the document that Jon had presented him and then looking up. “What should this mean, precisely?”
“I will arrest them, they will face trial and then they will be executed.” Jon explained succinctly.

He could swear he almost saw his father smile. “Hardly a fair trial if you already have decided how it will end.”

“Selling people into slavery is a capital offence in the North, your grace. The only punishment is death.”

“The problem with your plan is not about what the king can grant you,” Connington countered. “What you are asking amounts to, to put it bluntly, a monopoly on trade with northern Essos.”

“You know there will be little trade involved in this endeavor.” Jon said, voice gone low. “These will be warships.”

“Yes, but the charter is one of trade.” Connington countered.

“Because it would be impossible to make this an explicitly military charter, without causing diplomatic trouble with the free cities over the previous trading agreements you have signed!” Jon passed a hand over his face. “The contents of which Maester Pycelle was all too happy to discuss with me for the longest three hours of my life.”

“Jon, understand me: The letter of the charter would still put us at odds with the Redwynes.” Rhaegar explained calmly, looking at Jon over the papers his son had given him.

Yes, Jon had thought of that. “However much this may displease them, I promise you the Redwynes will never make common cause with the Lannisters, if that is what worries you.”

“And yet is worth worrying about,” Connington reminded him. “Since that would very well put us at the mercy of Lanisport.”

Jon sighed. “I understand that. I am not pretending that this is not a risk, nor am I trying to make the decision for you. You asked me to do something. This is how I can see it done.” Jon pushed his chair back and stood up. “The rest I leave to your judgment.”

He felt dread even as he let the words out of his mouth. He knew there would be conditions, but as long as the more important points were met, Jon would be able to live with the impositions.

“One more thing, son.”

Jon stopped. “Your grace.”

“I was told, that you had an… altercation with the heir of the Vale.”

Jon raised his eyebrows at the king. “Altercation, your grace?”

“You bloodied his face, broke his nose, two fingers and almost broke two of his ribs. Without counting the bruising, which was extensive.” Connington summarized. Jon pursed his lips. huh. He’d been sure he’d at least twisted the fuckers wrist. No matter.

“Those sound like probable injuries Lord Hardying might have sustained, yes.”

“Sustained by your hand?” Rheagar sounded more curious than worried.

“It is so, your grace.”

“How do you explain yourself?”
Jon frowned. “I was not aware that a spar in the barracks’ training yard would need an explanation, your grace. Harry Hardying challenged me. Knowing my own temper and our relationship with the Vale, I refused. He goaded me. I still refused. Then he made a ham-fisted attempt to offend me. I assure you,” Jon said then, trying very hard not to smile and knowing his amusement was not at all hidden from either the King or his Hand. “My response was both controlled and mild.”

“That would not be the assessment of the master that looked after his wounds.”

Jon considered his father. “Would you have had me do nothing?”

“No.” Rheagar said simply.

Connington sighed, pressed his fingers over his temple with a deep sigh. “We cannot afford to alienate the Vale, your grace.”

“Then perhaps the Vale lords should get themselves a leader who does not have a turd for a mind. He was practically begging me to kill him; indeed he should thank the Mother he still breathes. Nevertheless,” Jon added before Connington could respond. “I was on my way now to make peace with the man.”

“Very well.” Rheagar nodded, something almost like surprise in his eyes. “I am glad to see you have grown so conscientious, Jon.” He added. “It is all I’ve ever wanted for you.”

Jon’s face fell as he heard this. This time he did not let his feelings show; he simply bowed his head slightly. “I can only endeavor to live up to all that you’ve taught me to be, father.”

v.

Sansa had sat in the corner of the room as the Grand Maester - who the King himself had sent, according to Littlefinger - wrapped Harry’s wrist, applied balm on his face and ribs before wrapping his torso in bandages. Harry was wincing and moaning all the while. His handsome face, usually so lovely to look upon, had been a bloody mess when she’d first seen it. His right eye swollen, his lip spit and his nose bleeding still.

The blood had stained his tunic, she had seen that when he had come in, but that was not what had caught Sansa’s eye. It was the way it had spread a little to his neck that made her gaze fix there, until the sticky red was all but leaned. It had almost looked like someone had tried to cut his throat.

“I tell you my Lord, I will leave this place as soon as I am able.”

“And yet again, my lord, and please forgive my insistence, but I must urge you otherwise.” Baelish said, as calm now as when this discussion had begun. “The Maester said that you must rest for at least a week before you are able to go anywhere-”

Harry almost growled. “I cannot rest so long as I am under the same roof with that beast!”

“And in as many days princess Daenerys will celebrate her nameday.” Baelish continued smoothly. “Leaving now on the eve of such an occasion would be a great offence.”

“Her bastard nephew almost beat me to death!” Harry shouted and then groaned at the pressure it put on his ribs. Sansa wondered in how much pain he was truly in, if he could raise his voice that way and make such a fuss. “How am I the one giving offence?!?”

Baelish neared Harry’s bed of one step, lips pursed in the performance of displeasure. “I warned you, explicitly warned you, against provoking him. Frankly, my Lord, I am only happy to see you have
Sansa looked at her hands, folded as they were in her lap. With one thumb she traced the pattern of her silken gloves. Stitch by careful stitch she had put them together herself. She had always known where she had been going, what her goal was, with every thread of her needle. She had been careful too – embroidery mistakes on silken cloth were not so easy to undo. You could of course, but the fabric would always show the mark. So she had taken special care with them. One stitch after another, following her design. The pattern she had wanted to achieve.

There had been a small defect in the fabric however, one she had not noticed when she cut it. Just a small one, right at the center of her palm. It would have ruined the perfection of her creation, had she let it be, but she had found a way to stitch it inside the design so well that if hardly even showed now.

Thread by thread, like a little spider, she thought as she looked up. But Baelish was not looking at her. He was staring at Harry patiently, who had not yet given up his scowl.

“He is a demon.” He grunted out as he pulled himself up to sit on the bed, leaning his weight on the pillows behind him. “When he dies, the man will be banned from all seven hells[2].”

Would he be?

Sansa very much doubted it. By all accounts, if Jon was all everyone thought him to be, Harry most definitely would not be breathing still. Apparently, he had not only challenged Jon first but deliberately provoked him, when Jon had refused to face him. She knew for a fact better men had died by his hand for less.

Jon…

It was strange, the persistence of him in her head. She had so much to worry about, things that demanded her attention, her concentration. Especially now. And yet, especially now, the thought of him lingered. Everything – everyone – served as some reminder of him, one way or another, somehow. Most of the time he seemed to be only a turn or two away from the forefront of her mind. Him at one end, and all her other fears at the other. Two sides of the same coin, she thought, as she looked from Petyr to Harry, and then to her own hands again.

She felt awakened into the world again and unprepared for what she had to face with her new eyes. New eyes to see the world with, again. Anew. How many times was this now? Sansa could hardly keep count.

Perhaps this was why she was so otherworldly calm even now. Dethatched from herself, almost. From the wreckage. And why should she not be calm. The world had ended many times for her, and begun again in the morning[3].

But she was awake now. And all those rooms inside her mind where before she had not dared go, all those doors she had kept closed for years, lest they ruin the careful construction that allowed her to get from one day into the next – nothing remained of that now. Not a single wall left standing. She had felt so safe behind those walls once. Lonely too, but safe.

And that too had been a lie.

Sansa dared another look at Littlefinger. He was still speaking to Harry.

The truth of it seemed to be that anyone who was alone was easy prey.
Truth…

If Jon with all his truths and his passions blinded her, till she could not see anything around him clearly, there was nothing confusing about Petyr, nor the webs he had spun around her. Now that the world had turned for Sansa again, the truth might be too bright for her to stare in the face, but falsehood was easy. Like a beautiful twilight, it enhanced every object it fell on. And Sansa saw her enemy clear.

And how ashamed she was of the fool she’d been. But how angry she was too. It blistered beneath her skin.

Sansa felt her fingernails digging into the back of her hands so she relented her grip. She did not dare look up, for fear that her feelings would be too fierce on her face and give her away.

And she felt her isolation so acutely in that moment, that it was a wonder to her how she could possibly bear it. Her alone had grown big enough to swallow this city whole; a solitude ten thousand fathoms deep[4].

It must be unnatural to feel so apart from everyone, even one’s self, and not show it outwardly at all. How was it possible that she did not grow as small as she felt with it? Small enough to fit into anyone’s pocket. Small enough to slip through the cracks between the stones of the floor and disappear forever. She wondered if she would even feel it, if anyone touched her now; or if their hand would go straight through her. She wondered if she would ever feel anything ever again.

And as she wondered that, she also remembered that there had been a moment – one single bright moment in recent memory, where she had not needed to wonder that, because there had been no solitude, no pain or fear and she had been happy and overflowing. It seemed so far away now and she was all the more miserable for remembering, now that it was gone forever.

“Lady Stark?”

Sansa looked up, blinking her bleary eyes and meeting Littlefinger’s shrewd gaze. “My lord.”

He seemed confused only for a moment, before he recovered. “My Lady, you are not well.”

“Forgive me, my Lord. Harry, I—”

“I’m alright Sansa. This is nothing, it truly isn’t.” he assured her.

Sansa gave him a small smile. “You are brave, my Lord.”

“We were discussing the timing of your union, my Lady.” Petyr explained. “And how it might be anticipated.”

She might have thought him kind once, a long time ago, for not remarking too much on how she had not been paying attention. Now she only thought him vile. That dark thing in her that had allowed Sansa a modicum of self respect while also indulging him from time to time, rebelled now, at the thought of continuing that game.

She did not want to play him at his own game. She’d had enough of that. She wanted to rip him limb from limb.

“In what manner, my Lord?”

“We get married the day after the princess’ nameday and we leave this place the day after.” Harry
said with a wince. “We will have a proper wedding in the Vale my Lady, I promise you.” He added then. “Perhaps, away from the capitol even your family might join us.”

My family are preparing to fight a war, she wanted to tell him. But she also realized then, the reason why Harry had been warned so explicitly against provoking Jon that the thought had been planted in his head.

Something had happened. Something that meant Littlefinger wanted to speed up their plans. What had driven him to such a hurry? He was more careless than usual in all things concerning her, but Sansa was not fool enough to think there was not always a reason behind even his most impulsive actions.

“My father has not yet send us the contract, Harry.” Sansa observed instead.

“It could be done.” Littlefinger said, looking at her so intently she felt stripped under his gaze. “If you wish it.”

“I have long wished to part from this city.” Sansa murmured, looking at the fire. What difference would it make, in the end?

“Then let us go.” Harry insisted. “Can you really find a way, Baelish?”

She felt suddenly as if the collar of her dress was around her throat and tightening.

Yes, there was a difference. The difference that there was between truth and a lie. Between a path she had chosen and one she was being pushed into. The difference between the safety you build for yourself and a trap someone else builds around you and calls it protection.

Had not the world been made anew? All the girls she had been, each one holding hands with the last, had they not awakened? Continuing to be afraid of the things she had been taught to fear was senseless. It was like holding on to the bars of her own prison. It was dancing to someone else’s tune.

She would not!

So she tapped her fear on the shoulder now, and waited for it to turn, because that too, made a difference.

And no, could not give it a name. Put it in a box with the hope of containing it, controlling it. She was too scared to even look at it in the face. Oh yes, she was scared still. She hardly knew anything about this thing staring at her intently, except that it was there and that she was frightened of it, even though she shouldn’t be. Frightened of this want that resisted itself.

And between wanting and resisting, the tenderness persisted. She could not escape it.

She was just about to say how perhaps she was more affected by this whole incident than she had thought she’d been, and use that to make a quick exit, when the doors to Harry’s room opened and Jon stepped through.

Sansa gripped the armrests of her chair.

She felt petrified, heart jumping into her throat. It was as if he’d come fully formed from her mind.

“Lord Hardying, Lord Baelish.” He looked at her then, and smiled. It did not touch his eyes at all, and Sansa felt cold to the marrow. “Lady Stark.”
“Your grace.”

“Get out.” Harry ordered. Jon did not seem affected at all.

“I understand you are feeling better, my Lord.” He continued. “I was glad to hear that there was no permanent damage done to your person.”

Before Harry could do more damage with his mouth or Petyr could open his, Sansa rose to her feet and walked towards him, planting herself between Harry and Jon. She felt so shaky she might have been made of water, but she would not move.

“Your grace, how may we help you?” She tried to speak as pleasantly as possible, but where she knew she had to smile for Petyr and Harry, there was no need for such foolishness with Jon.

“I have simply come to wish Lord Hardying a speedy recovery.” Jon answered in a manner so candid, cheerful almost, that anyone who did not know him would have thought him true. As if it had not been his fist driving into Harry’s face and ribs.

But Sansa did know better than to take that cheerfulness for true lightness. She could sense the energy beneath his charm, the same nervous sound that the fluttering of a thousand bees would make.

Jon looked over her shoulder at Harry.

“Given the history between my father’s house and yours, I did not wish for this altercation between us to be perceived as anything more than the friendly spar it was.” Jon said. He spoke so pleasantly, almost as if he was addressing a friend. “But since the damage to your person is considerable, I felt compelled to come and make peace with you, Ser. And make sure that we part amiably.”

“That is very gracious of you, prince Jon.” Petyr said carefully, giving Harry a meaningful look.

“Wonderful.” Jon declared before he turned his back to them and made his way towards the table that had been set almost at the opposite corner of the room. Sansa saw him pick up the decanter and fill two cups with wine. He hesitated a moment, and she saw him touch his ring – the one he always wore on his smallest finger, before he picked up both cups and headed towards Harry’s bed.

Sansa felt the action drop through her like a dark stone, landing heavily in her stomach.

He could not possibly be so mad!

Jon gave Harry a fierce smile. “Let us drink to peace and new bonds.”

“I am not thirsty.” Harry ground out, wincing.

Jon seemed not rattled in the slightest. “I insist. I want to heal wounds.”

“You have done enough, I think, your grace. You won the fight, now leave me be.”

Sansa knew it precisely when the invitation became a threat. It was so obvious she doubted even harry missed it. Jon’s smile fell and the silence in the room thickened with palpable tension.

“Are you certain,” Jon asked quietly. “That you want to turn down an offer of reconciliation, my lord?”

Sansa turned her back to Harry and Petyr, deliberately so, and faced Jon directly, taking a step towards him.
"I will drink it."

“Lady Stark.”

"No.” Jon said firmly. “This is a drink among men."

"I remember you declared me your equal in all things.” She gave him a small smile. “But perhaps you did not mean it."

He considered her, and it might have been fond, had he not looked so stern in that moment.

"I meant it."

"Then I will share in your offer of reconciliation, as your mother’s niece and as Lord Hardying’s betrothed. And since you are my family and I am his betrothed,” Sansa continued smoothly. “Then soon you shall also be his family. So let us all be friends once more."

Jon was holding back a smile, she could tell. It wasn’t on his mouth that she could see it, but in his eyes. In the look on his face. He never seemed quite capable of completely cloaking the fierceness of his emotions, no matter how impassive he kept his face.

In that moment, with Jon’s eyes on her and Petyr and Harry’s at her back, Sansa felt her isolation so keenly she might have cried. Or screamed.

And also that need, the almost desperate urge to reach out, to touch… She could not control herself, it seemed, when he came close. Whatever it was that was trapped inside her came to life when Jon was near, and she thought she was as likely to throw herself at him with enough force to overwhelm them both, as she was to scream at him[5].

She did not understand anything anymore. Not anything and not herself.

“Well?” She urged.

"So be it.” He handed her the cup. Her hand was steady as she took it.

“Sansa, do not.” Harry tried, and then quelled when Jon looked at him from over her shoulder.

"To mended bridges.” Sansa said, drawing his gaze back to her and raising her cup.

Jon clicked his cup with hers. "To the bravest of women."

Jon’s words were hardly out of his mouth before Sansa downed the whole of the cup’s contents in one breath. She could tolerate wine in small quantities, but too much and it turned her stomach. And it should have been strange how she was never afraid that she would die of poison. It should have been, when a moment ago she was sure that had she allowed Jon to had that cup to Harry, he would die of it.

But then he handed it to her, and she was afraid no longer.

Sansa finished her drink and stared at him, into his eyes and at his unsmiling mouth; how he seemed so calm.

Had he come here to make a point?

The way he was looking at her – she might have said yes. But then again she was less inclined to trust her instincts, these days.
"You betrothed looks at you as if he expects you to drop any moment, Lady Stark." Jon finally said, sounding amused.

Sansa was not. "Perhaps I shall."

Jon’s face was the picture of disbelief, before he looked behind her, to Harry. "Do you think so, Lord Hardying?"

Harry remained stubbornly silent.

Jon persisted. "Why did you not accept my offer of peace?"

"It is a false peace." Harry spit out. Sansa did not turn but it did not matter: she could hear Harry’s scowl.

Jon’s face slackened with over the top surprise. "How so, my Lord? Do you distrust me?"

"I do."

"You see no good in me then?"

"None."

Jon took a step towards him and Sansa immediately moved to put herself between them again, blocking his path and facing Jon with all the stubbornness she could without screaming in his face directly. The only way he would be able to get any closer to Harry was to push her out of the way.

He did not try that, however. And this time Jon was deadly serious. "You think I’m wicked, don’t you, my lord?"

"Incarnate, your grace[6]."

Jon nodded. "Then it is good you did not accept my peace. You are not worthy of my consideration."

_Enough_, she wanted to tell him as she felt her eyes sting. _You made your point. Enough_. And just as the thought crossed her mind, he looked at her. And she could see it all clearly written in his face, as clearly as she was sure he could see it in hers: they had promised each other the truth and as she had not allowed him a single inch of fantasy to comfort himself with, so he would not allow her to cling to her own.

He might not have bothered. Her eyes were wide open.

"It is only a shadow and a thought that you love.” Jon said, whisper soft. His eyes were familiar to her then, gentle with feeling and still unrelenting. “He is all that you fear me to be.”

_Yes, and I am a fool._

Her chin trembled a little but she stubbornly subdued it. More than ever, she was aware of how many eyes there were on her.

"You have not swayed me." She said, but her voice was thick with emotion.

Jon’s smile was small and joyless. He bowed to her and then walked out without so much as another word.
Sansa took a deep breath and put a hand over her chest, as if she was afraid her heart would jump out at any moment, so hard was it drumming against her ribs.

“Sansa, how could you be so foolish?”

She closed her eyes. Took a breath, set her shoulders, smoothed her face. And turned.

“My Lord?”

Harry looked pale and appalled. Littlefinger was silent. Far too silent.

“He could have killed you! I thought for certain he put something in my drink.”

“He would not have killed me.” Sansa rebuked quietly. There was not even the shadow of a doubt in her mind about that. “Or you.”

“You don’t know that! The man is unhinged!”

“Not unhinged enough to cause civil strife, my lord.” Sansa tried to remain calm but she was at the last threads of it and it was fast slipping away.

“And if he had?”

Sansa sighed. “Then at my funeral, I pray you would have wept.”

“My Lady!”

Yes, she should be chided. The words slipped out before she could really think them through. She resisted the urge to bite her lip. Smiled instead.

“Forgive me, my Lord. I am tired and… this day has been difficult.” Harry was still frowning, but Sansa did not have the patience tonight to coddle him a second longer. “If you will excuse me, I will retire.”

“Of course, my Lady.” Petyr said softly.

Sansa resisted the urge to look back at him when a shiver made its way down her spine when she heard that tone of voice. Yes, she had spent the last two days doubting everything about herself and what she believed, shaking everything she knew to the ground. But she still thought she could recognize a threat when she read one. Even now, she could recognize as much.

vi.

The first thing Jon saw when he stepped into the back room of Atticus’ boiling house, was Val’s hair and Tormund’s grin.

There was something deliberately feral in the way Tormund smiled, showing all his teeth the way he did, like a shark. But Jon knew him well enough to know that small difference between a threat and simple joy on Tormund’s face.

“Jon Snow.” He greeted, voice rumbling with laughter in such a way that made him sound like a growling beast. That was what Tormund called him – because it was the name Jon had given to the first crew he’d been part of, and he’d never changed it.

Jon stepped into Tormund’s embrace and let himself be hugged. One had to brace oneself for
Tormund’s embraces. It was the closest Jon had come to being suffocated by a bear in his life.

“You managed to arrive without being gutted.” Tormud said as he pushed Jon off and then, with obvious pleasure, slapped him on the arm for good measure.

“Though not for lack of trying.” Val added as she stepped forward from the corner of the room. She was smiling too at sight of him. Her honey-blonde hair was the brightest thing in the barely-lit room and even dressed in a plain dress in the style of most women of King’s Landing, she still was as striking now as when Jon had first seen her in the North, amongst the snow and ice.

Jon pulled a chair out for himself and sat down. “Does that surprise you?”

“That someone tried to poke some daylight into you?” Val snorted. “No.”

“That it happened before your first week in this stinking city was out. Aye, that was a surprise.” Tormund laughed.

“Doesn’t matter now. They failed.” Jon looked to Angus. “Did you find out anything about who he was?”

Angus shook his head. “The way you left him drew the eye alright.”

“Opened him up like a bull, I hear.” Tormund said as he helped himself to a generous gulp of ale.

“But on one knew ‘im. He wasn’t from ‘round ‘ere.” Angus continued.

“Maybe you should have asked some questions before gutting him like that.” Val noted carefully.

“There wasn’t that much time for a polite conversation.” Jon snapped.

Val rolled her eyes at him. “No need to get prissy, your grace.”

Jon glared at her for a moment, before getting back to the business at hand. “What did you find?”

“A big fat wad of nothin’ is what we found out.” Tormund declared then, putting the tankard down on the table. “You southerners can’t brew a drink to save yer lives, by the by.”

Jon turned to Val.

“There has been a takeover of sorts in the last few years.” She explained. “Someone has taken control of the biggest brothels in the city, that’s for sure.”

“Bookies, gold lenders – everyone says the old guard died out but no one would name who is in charge now.”

Power shift, Jon thought. Someone killed the competition then moved in in their place.

“How does the gold get past the dock checkpoints?” Jon asked looking from one to the other.

“See, there is no one mediating that.” Tormund sad as he leaned forward. And this time, his eyes were clear and piercing. “Nothin gets trapped, or hidden away. No gold passes hands. It’s all good and properly done.” He said with distain.

Tormund didn’t appreciate southern rules of doing things, but that did not mean he did not understand them.
Jon felt a weight settling into the pit of his stomach.

“And the ships that traded with the slavers?”

“Shut chests that could probably be filled with bloody dirt for all we know, are traded for chests of gold and silver and what not. And then they keep on sailing all the way up to your Blackwater Bay, and into the city like nothing is the matter.”

“Whoever is smuggling in the profits of the slave trade, controls the docs.” Val said succinctly.

“The King’s men control the docs.” Jon murmured, staring at the stain on the table just to the left of the one candle between the three of them. “It’s impossible for anyone to bribe every single guard on the Blackwater bay.”

“Not impossible.” Angus said as he scratched his neck. “You just have to know where your ship is gonna make port. Then you don’t have to buy the whole bay. Just the one spot you go into.”

“That’s not what’ve I’ve found.” Tormund said decisively. “I was on one of those ships. No gold changed hands[7].”

“And once the gold was inside the city?”

“The gold never made it inside the city.” Val said, drawing a stern look from Jon. “It never left the docs.”

“That’s impossible.”

“They must be smuglin’ it out by some other means.” Angus suggested. “At night-”

“No.” Val immediately denied. “I took the night shifts myself. No one came in or out.”

“Or by some tunnel.” Angus said with a shrug. “Did you look inside?”

“There were guards at every door and no windows.” Val said with a scowl. “No, fat man, we did not look inside.”

“Alright missy-“

“I will carve your face off your skull, turd.”

Had Jon been paying attention, he would have put a stop to their bickering, but he was thinking of the innards of the Red Keep and how it was such a maze that even a ghost haunting would lose its way in its bows. And he thought of Varys’ little birds navigating scratching between the walls.

“If it’s true that there was no bribing and that none of the shipments were even searched, it means that its someone from the palace that is controlling this.” Jon said slowly, putting an end to the chatter as the others turned to look at him.

“Disappointed you don’t have someone to blame, yer grace?” There was a grim look on Tormund’s face. He had warned Jon about this, but Jon had refused to listen.

But Jon was not disappointed. He was fucking furious. “I know exactly who to blame.”

And if he was right, and the king or his hand knew that this had been happening all alone and they were getting a cut of the profit, then he had just wasted half his day for nothing.
“Then we should leave.” Val said, looking from Jon to Tormund. “If the King and his elk are in on this, we will get no help here.”

“I asked him today.” Jon said.

“And?”

“I don’t have an answer yet.”

“He will not give you what you want.” There was no doubt in Val’s voice.

“He might.”

Tormund sighed. “He will not grant you the right to kill the people that are apparently bringing profit in his pocket, Jon.”

“He might. If he is pushed the right way.” Jon deliberated. If, Jon thought, he wanted something else more. If, in the end, he valued something else more. And Jon knew for a fact that there were many things his father valued more than gold ad riches. Their family’s reputation, for instance.

“And if he does not?”

Jon grinned. “Then we keep doing what we have been doing.” He said simply. The lack of royal permission to rob their attackers had never stopped them before. “Did you bring what I asked?”

Val sighed and reached behind her, grabbing the satchel from where it had been hanging from the side of her chair and setting it on the table. Jon opened it, unwrapped the oilcloth and scrutinized the documents inside carefully.

They were perfect.

“Good.” He said as he rolled it over again and put them back into the satchel. As he did, his hand brushed against a warm stone surface. He took one of the eggs out and looked at it under the candlelight. It was cream white and about as big as his head, and shone in the candlelight like it was a huge crystal.

“What do you mean to do with them?”

“They’re a gift.” Jon said as he put the egg back into the satchel.

“Not much of a gift.” Val noted, skeptical. “They’re stone. Pretty stone, but stone all the same.”

Jon shrugged. “My aunt will like them. Keep watching the docs.” He said then. “Choose one of the loading barracks from which the gold does not leave. On one night that it is empty, send the flowers back to me. Ghost and I will go have a look. See where it leads us.”

vii.

She had not been able to sleep. She had known she would not be able to sleep. So she waited until the castle was asleep and her ladies had left her – Shae more reluctantly than Jeyne, knowing that something was the matter just by the look on Sansa’s face probably. But even Shae could not have argued with the certainty in Sansa’s dismissal. Then she slipped from under her covers and gone into her closet. She chose her plainest, darkest dress and pulled it on over her head. Wrapped a dark cloak around her shoulders and slipped out of her room trying not to make a sound.
She was no hiding from anyone exactly. But she did not want to be seen either. She wanted to be alone, for once. Alone with her gods, with herself. She chose the most remote corridors and the most silent pathways through the outer rim of the palace, until she was inside the godswood, and a silence fell that had little to do with the night or the dark.

Sansa took a deep breath and ventured deeper, her soft-soled boots crunching the dried leaves beneath her feet. It was as if she kept stepping on twigs that would alarm any living creature in the vicinity that she too, was near. But Sansa was not afraid. Not because she knew this place better than the back of her own hands by now, which she did, but because she knew that there was not one single person around for a mile or two.

She knew, because Skye knew, who was flying over her head in circles. Sansa could not see or hear her, but she could feel her in the back of her own mind, the way she sometimes felt it when someone was watching her even though she could not see them do so. Skye’s presence was a comfort, but she was not what made Sansa not fear the night or the dark. She felt more at home here in the forest, than she did in the halls of the Red Keep. And she had not been afraid of the dark since that night in the Isle of Faces.

The Isle of Faces… and Jon.

He’d seemed so concerned just this morning, when he’d asked her if something had happened. She’d wanted to tell him. She so desperately needed to tell someone… but Jon was not her friend.

And even if he had been, how could she? She had nowhere to begin. How would she even phrase it? How to tell that something that did happen; it did. She could feel the change in her now: horror so deep that nothing could ever hope to contain it.

But also, nothing was changed. Nothing. It had happened a long time ago.

Sansa did not know how to explain that. She was ashamed to even try. It only seemed to highlight how stupid she’d been not to see it.

She sat in front of the heart tree with no face, pulling her skirts up and letting her knees sink into the dirt. She was so tired. She could feel her body wanting to fold into itself, shoulders curling in, arms heavy. She wanted to close her eyes and empty her mind but she could not. There was no stillness in her. No peace to be had. Not even here.

Especially not here, perhaps; even if she were to crawl inside the wet earth with her own two hands. No depth would be able to separate her from the memory of the last time she was here, who she was with and what passed between them. It was so vivid in her mind she could hear the echo of their voices even now.

Memory lived in the godswood, that she had always known. Not for the first time, it was less than a comfort.

Sansa felt her throat closing up, her eyes starting to sting. She wanted to cry so badly, her chest hurt with it, the pressure of something that needed to explode, but could only fold into itself and cause more pain. She could not let go. She knew in her heart: if she loosened this last thread, she’d fall apart completely. And then what would become of her?

Skye landed softly beside her, flapping her wings once or twice before she hooted low and came closer still. Sansa started to pet her chest, combing her fingers gently through the soft feathers of Skye’s wing, and felt the pressure on her chest ease a bit.
Until that is, she felt familiar footsteps behind her. This time, she really did believe she managed to summon him by the strength of her thoughts alone. And as always, she felt the dark of sudden feeling bloom in her, confounding her. And this time, there was only resignation.

*Let's have it out then, you and I.*

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[1] In this case, this means basically ‘permission from the crown to do this thing’, a permission that makes this fleet/company Jon wants to institute, a royal (public) institution.

[2] Borgia quote. For some reason I always fond this phrase ridiculously hilarious.

[3] This is clearly not mine, though I don’t know where its from. I’ve seen it mostly on tumblr edits, linking back to other edits.


[5] Deliberately adapted from this Sarah Dessen quote: “What did it feel like, I wondered, to love someone that much? So much that you couldn’t even control yourself when they came close, as if you might just break free of whatever was holding you and throw yourself at them with enough force to easily overwhelm you both.” (im trying every which way to write sansa in love without writing that she’s IN LOVE XD)

[6] Inspired by a similar scene in ‘Borgia’. This scene I am referencing, and the one that inspired Sansa going to Jon’s room and asking him to take a walk with her in the garden, were the inception of this story. I was watching the Faith and Fear show, and that storyline between Cesare and Carlotta gave me the inspiration for Jon and Sansa here, so in a way, though the story is not yet over I have come full circle.

[7] This is me trying to be a smartass and alluding at organized crime and its ties to established power but, you know, really really badly.
"In the immediate aftermath of the trauma, rebuilding of some minimal form of trust is the primary task. Assurances of safety and protection are of the greatest importance. The survivor who is often in terror of being left alone craves the simple presence of a sympathetic person. Having once experienced the sense of total isolation, the survivor is intensely aware of the fragility of all human connections in the face of danger. She needs clear and explicit assurances that she will not be abandoned once again."

Trauma and Recovery, Judith Herman

If Jon had known what he would have found in the godswood when he chose to hide there until the guard changed shifts, perhaps he might have preferred getting caught sneaking into the Red Keep in the dead of night. It might have been better than to come upon Sansa Stark looking like a ghost. And it certainly would have been better than all that followed.

Just a short few months ago, Jon might have agreed with all of that. But then again, a short few months ago was before he ever met her.

“I know you’re there.” She said without turning. Her eagle was with her and she was looking at Jon in the face – so of course Sansa knew he was there. She thought he was trying to hide by being so still but the truth was, Jon had simply frozen at the sight of her.

“Are you following me?”

“No.”

“What are you doing here then?”

There was something wrong. He could hear it in her voice.

“Hiding.” Jon said simply. “What are you doing here?”

“Hiding.” Her voice was so soft he barely caught her answer, and did not know if it was an answer or merely her repeating his own words back to him.

Jon took a step towards her. “May I join you?”

“I can’t stop you.”

Jon sighed. Looked at the back of her head some more, that slip of her nape he could see, exposed as it was by her braid falling forward.

“Of course you can. I’ll leave you to your prayers.”

But before he could take so much as a single step away from her, Sansa scoffed.

“Prayers? I can’t think of a single one.” She turned her body halfway towards him, looked at him. Her face was drawn with exhaustion but her eyes were blazing. “The only thing I find here is you.”
She spoke softly but that was no matter and made no difference: Her words slipped between his ribs like knives. Because it was not anything good or soft that she meant and he could see it on her face plain as day.

“Are you angry with me?”

“I am furious with you.” Her lips had gone thin with that very same feeling. “That little game you played with Harry. How very clever of you.”

Jon straightened his shoulders, linked his hands behind his back. “And was I wrong?”

“No, indeed you were not.” Her smile was bitter. With her shoulders curled in like that and her arms about her middle, she had never looked smaller and she had never looked more angry. The quiet seething of that rage was so visible it was a wonder, Jon thought, that she was not glowing in the dark.

“How happy you must have been to show me the extent of my foolishness.” She continued. “Tell me, did you enjoy deliberately destroying my peace of mind?”

Her words opened him up like a knife.

“No.” His voice broke a little. She had a way of reflecting his own actions back at him in such a way that it made him ashamed of ever having moved a single finger. “Would you rather have continued to believe in a lie?”

Sansa looked away from him, whether because she could not stand to see his face or would rather he did not see hers, Jon did not know. She was breathing fast, her chest heaving. She leaned forward on her hands, head bowed, fingers sunk into the dirt. Distress comes off from her in waves so strong they almost knock him back. Certainly, they knock hi off his immobility: Jon moves before he can think about it, kneeling at her side, hand on her back.

“Sansa—”

She flinched from his touch. “No, I don’t want to live in lies anymore. You’re right about that.”

She laughed, or he thought she did because it sounded more like a sob.

“There’s nowhere left to hide. Nowhere left that’s safe. Not even here!” She looked up then, face tearstained and almost feral with anger. “This godswood was supposed to be the one place that was my own! You have robbed me of my sole comfort in this wretched place!”

Jon fell back, stunned. She had not shouted but in the dark, she might as well have screamed.

He opened his mouth to say something, anything, but Sansa looked away from him before he could, as if she couldn’t stand the sight of him. She hung her head forward. He could see her gritting her teeth against it but the tears were already making their way down the bridge of her nose.

“I don’t know what to do anymore. I don’t know.” It was almost a whimper and laced with so much anguish, it made his hands shake.

She turned her face to the tree in front of them, but her eyes were unseeing. Her face wet with tears she was still trying to hold back. “How could I have been so ignorant about myself? So stupid. A trap of my own making.”

“Sansa…”
“How did I not see it?” She asked then, looking at him but not really seeing him[1].

Jon didn’t know what to say. “See what?”

She grimaced and looked away. Wiped at her face furiously. “I’m as stupid as everyone says I am.”

“You’re not.” Even in his shock he knew that much.

But she didn’t hear him. She sobbed and Jon felt it wash over him like icy water. It ripped out of her as if against her will and once she started she could not seem to stop. Her sobs shook her frame and seemed to fold into herself, becoming small with grief she could not longer contain.

It drew his knuckles white just to see it.

“I don’t feel prepared for anything anymore. I don’t know what to do. I can’t think!” Sansa groaned softly and put her head in her hands, but it did not help.

Jon reached out with both hands, took hold of her arm to turn her towards him and grasped the back of her neck. “Sansa, looked at me.”

She didn’t. Jon felt himself grow more desperate by the moment. He gently got a hold of her shoulders, tried to make her look at him. He could feel his breath leaving him in shaky puffs.

“When was the last time you slept?” he asked her softly, afraid that if he were to raise his voice even a fraction she might crack.

Sansa just shook her head.

“I’m so lonely.” She confessed then in a whisper so frail it broke halfway. “I miss Lady.”

He was sweating, his heart beating fast. He couldn’t reach her. She did not even seem to hear him. To his great alarm, she just hid her face in her hands and cried harder. And with each sob, Jon felt every certainty he’d ever held leave him, until he felt as helpless as a newborn in front of her grief.

He’d done this.

He’d been so sure of himself. Of the lengths he would go for her. He’d hadn’t been able to picture any price he wouldn’t pay in order to belong to her. He would have done anything. But not this. Anything at all would be better than this. Nothing would be better than this… deliberate destruction, she’d called it.

Guilt wrapped its hand around his throat until he was gasping. As always, he had not known when to stop and pushed things to their breaking. Her breaking.

It wasn’t worth it. None of it was worth this.

Daenerys had been right: he strangled and thought it an embrace[2].

Jon gritted his teeth. Made up his mind in a moment, without any hesitation or second thought.

He could very well bear his own misery but not hers.

“Sansa, look at me.”

He tried to grasp her arm but she pulled away, so Jon took hold of both her arms and made her face him.
“Let go.”

“Listen to me, please.” He said, gasping the words out, trying to grasp her face and wipe the tears away, just for a moment, just so that she might hear. “Whatever it is, I can help you. I will. Whatever you need to do, I’ll help you do it. Alright?”

She was looking at him as if she could not understand a word he was saying.

Jon looked around, frantic and out of ideas, heart beating in his throat.

“Remember when you said you wished I could be your brother? I can be. I will.” He insisted. “I’ll be whatever you need me to be. Tell me what you need, and I will devote everything I am to getting it for you. And no more. I swear it.” Jon took a deep breath to stave off the tears he could feel clogging his throat. “No more games. No more pain. I swear it.”

She shook her head. Jon wiped his thumbs across her we cheeks and nodded, insisting. “Yes. I will. And if you want to go to the Vale, or to Essos or the moon, I will help get you there, alright? I promise, alright? I will swear it in blood, if you want me to.”

Another sob shook her shoulders, fracturing her breath. She hung her head until her forehead was on his chest. Her tears hadn’t stopped, so Jon pulled her towards him, settling her against his chest and wrapping his arms around her.

He kept talking to her without the smallest idea what he was saying. Her cried became muffled but they did not stop, and Jon did not stop petting her head and her arms, holding her tight so that at least he could feel like she wouldn’t fall apart. And so that maybe he wouldn’t be able to tell which one of the two of them was shaking harder.

Everything had changed. Everything remained the same. There was very little to chose between the two.

Something had to give.

Between the two of them, it really might as well be him. After all he knew better than she did that you could not really make someone want you.

ix.

They were sitting side by side, backs against one of the oaks surrounding the groove of the heart tree. Sansa had been shivering at one point, so Jon had thrown his cloak around her shoulders, over her own. She had stopped crying some time ago, but she had not moved her head from his shoulder. Jon had pressed his lips to her head and hadn’t moved. If he closed his eyes he could see her smell; it glowed against the backs of his eyelids, like endless circles of gold.

"You were right about what you said to me.” She said in apropos of nothing at all. Jon opened his eyes. “I had scruples about you all along. I cannot very well demand from you what I am not willing to give myself."

Jon reached and took her hand, laced his fingers between hers.

"You were right too. I could have told you what I’d been send to do when we were in the Riverlands.” He admitted. “I didn't."

He saw her turn her head to look at him and immediately, Jon did too, just to be able to look at her in the face.
“Why didn’t you?” She asked him then, so quietly a breeze could have carried her words away.

Jon looked away. "You said you’d put whole cities between you and someone who hurt you. I didn’t want that. I desperately did not want that." he took a breath. "I didn't want you to despise me."

"And you felt so certain that I would?"

He met her eye again, a small sorry smile on his lips. "Was I wrong to?"

He could recognize the flash of anger on her face. "No. You cannot do that. You cannot use my reaction to you deception as a reason for your deception."

"No, I…” Jon stared at the leaves in front of him, trying to find the words to describe to her what he'd never put into words before. He wasn't even sure he knew.

"You ask me to have faith in you, but you didn't show much of it in me, did you?"

"It wasn't that.” Jon said tersely. It had not been. “I just… could not imagine it happening any other way, somehow. It seemed to me that it started wrong and no matter what I did, there was just no way that you'd ever forgive me.”

"Why?"

"I don’t know.” And it was the absolute truth. It was all he could give: his own confusion at himself. "Why would you?"

"Can't you think of a single reason?"

He shrugged. Didn't answer. He couldn't, in truth.

He heard her take a deep breath and release it slowly. "You sound so sure when you say how you know I love you. But you don't think I would part with a single bit of my understanding for the sake of that love, apparently."

She was just looking at him. If he turned his face, she’d be close enough to kiss. But that was useless to think about now.

She was waiting for him to answer and as she waited, Jon could feel his own insecurity growing.

"You can love someone and hate them." He told her then, as if he was seeking an answer. Surrendering a secret. "You can love and not forgive.” he continued. “You can love someone and hurt them."

“Has that been your experience?"

And now it had been hers, too. “Yes.”

Sansa looked away from him again. “That’s sad, Jon.”

Jon sighed. Yes it was.

After some moments of silence, Jon heard her take a breath and release it, in that way she did when she was preparing to say something that she was afraid of admitting aloud.

He turned his face towards her before she spoke, and waited.
“I don’t think I know how to trust anymore.”

Jon nodded. “You can learn again.”

“Can you?”

“I did.” He said simply. “So can you. When you feel safe again, it will happen.”

She looked down, to somewhere along his throat perhaps. Didn’t want to meet his eyes. Whatever it was that she was thinking about, it took her a while to get there, but when she did, he felt it because she leaned further into him, pressing her torso against his arm and resting her chin on his shoulder.

“I forgive you.” Sansa whispered, her breath feathering on his neck.

Jon’s heart lurched, fingers tightening around hers instinctively.

“For which part?”

“All of it.”

Jon leaned his head back against the bark of the tree, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Thank you, Sansa.”

“I’m sorry I slapped you.” She added then.

Jon smiled then, turned his head and kissed her hair, just over her forehead. “I deserved it.”

“Still.”

He couldn’t help the smile. It may be without hope and without anything left in his heart, and it might not even be very good, but it was still love, and it was to the very end. “Very well. You’re forgiven.”

“Will you help me?”

“Yes.” He didn’t hesitate. He’d already promised, hadn’t he? “Help you with what?”

When Sansa did not answer, Jon opened his eyes to look at her. She seemed lost in thought. Her eyes were still red-rimmed and her face pale, but she did not look the way she had before. She seemed exhausted now, but also determined.

“I need to leave this place.”

“For the Vale?” There was some damage control to be done if that was what she wanted still, but Jon was sure he could manage. He could sacrifice his pride to get her what she wanted. It was not as if it mattered to him.

“I have to deal with someone first.” Sansa said and this time, her voice came out stronger. “I can’t go anywhere and leave him alive here, or free to follow me.”

Jon frowned. Looked at her as if he could read her thoughts on her face. “Who are you talking about?”

She hesitated, and when she met his eyes he could see the sliver of fear in them, even now.

“Tell me. Just tell me, and we’ll deal with it together.”
“I don’t…” She licked her lips, nervous. “I can’t.”

“You can.”

“He’s dangerous.” Sansa insisted, a little frantic.

Jon’s huffing laugh was incredulous. “So am I, wouldn’t you agree?”

Sansa looked away from his face, to their hands, still linked together. “I don’t know if you’ll believe me.”

He wouldn’t believe the gods themselves over her, but he did not say that. He just kept looking at her, and waited for her to remember on her own. And she must have, because she looked at him again. Her eyes were shiny again and Jon leaned his head down, touched his forehead to hers lightly. Sansa closed her eyes.

“You’ll think I’m an idiot.”

Jon chuckled. “Hardly one to point fingers now, am I?”

He felt such pride when that managed to draw a smile from her.

“Sansa.” He wanted until she looked at him before continuing. "Whatever it is you need to do, it will be more easily done if we do it together. You don’t have to be alone anymore.”

She looked away, conflicted, and then back at him. Finally, she nodded infinitesimally.

“Yes?”

This time, she was sure when she let his eyes. “Yes.”

The relief he felt was almost like happiness. But even that was cut short. He heard the twig snap just when she did, but Sansa startled violently, nerves still raw.

“Easy.” Jon said, voice soothing. Though it didn’t not need to be because just then Ghost stepped out of the treeline and slowly neared them.

Sansa gasped.

She let go of his hand and hugged Ghost when he came close. Then she turned to him. Her smile was faint but it was there.

“You called him back, didn’t you.”

Jon shrugged.

He got to his feet then and extended a hand to Sansa. She took it and he pulled her up.

“You need to get back to the castle.” He told her as he straightened the cloak around her shoulders. “And rest. You look like you’re about to fall over, Lady Stark.”

She rolled her eyes at him, shooed his hands away.

“Ghost will go ahead to make sure the way is clear, and then come back for you.”

“He can do that?”
Jon grinned. “He is my best scout.”

Sansa nodded. “What will you do?”

“I’ll wait here a bit longer and then do the same. Tomorrow morning,” Jon added. “Tell Dany that you feel like going for a swim. I’ll meet you there. And we’ll talk some more.”

Sansa was looking at him so intently, he felt she was trying to memorize every detail of his face. “Alright.”

Jon smiled then, cheek and lopsided, just because he knew she did not expect it. “Shall we part as friends then, lady Stark.”

She blinked once, surprised, and then rolled her eyes at him. “You are so annoying.”

But then she stepped into him and linked her arms around his middle and Jon was so surprised that for a moment he didn’t know what to do, before his mind caught up with his body and he wrapped his arms around her.

“I missed you, you know.” She murmured into his chest and Jon had to really hold himself back from lifting her off her feet with how much closer he needed her.

“So did I.”

Sansa stepped back. “Goodnight Jon.”

He watched her go, until she disappeared in the shadows of the night and the trees. Then he headed in the opposite direction. He was not even going to try to hide. If possible, he wanted to divert the attention of every guard on the ground floor. But before he did that, he needed to get himself a drink, or he would not sleep a wink tonight.

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[1] this might be totally useless because you guys might have probably already figure this out yourselves, but if you get frustrated at sansa or jon in this chapter, please remember that they are reacting to different events. Sansa has been reacting to what she realized Littlefinger had done to her ever since this set of chapters started. It’s why when she was talking to Jon in the gardens she snapped so easily and even seemed to overreact – she was not over-reacting. She was simply not reacting only to Jon. Which is how he figures out that something is wrong. Because he can tell she’s not herself. But jon doesn’t know, in the beginning, what she’s talking about ( what brought her to the breaking point) and will think it was him. Ofc it wasnt - the breaking point simply came as a combination of circumstances (jon had his part but it wasnt only his doing) and he was there to help her. I don’t meant to needlessly create conflict – on the contrary, im trying to resolve it.


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