At the Lion's Cry

by OUATLovr

Summary

"Margaery stood in a pool of her husband's blood, and screamed."

Joffrey is dead. Cersei plans to champion Tommen's claim to the throne, while the Tyrells cling to power through the child in Margaery's womb. Sansa dreams of Winterfell. To the East, a Targaryen approaches.

Notes

Okay, sorry in advance for the long note.

I was going to wait until I had finished the Mummer's Tale to start this one, or maybe until the end of the summer, at the very least. And then, I lost all of my notes/drafts for my Braavos fic and for the next two fics in this series, and lost a bit of motivation in that fic with this last season. I will come back to the Braavos fic eventually, for those of you who are
interested, to clear in a few plot holes, but for now, hopefully this tides you over. *Winks*

But anyway, you guys have been amazing and I didn't want to leave you with such a giant cliffhanger for too long.

Just a note on this fic: It's not going to make a lot of sense unless you've already read RFWT. Long story short, Sansa and Margaery have been in a secret relationship since Joffrey survived the Purple wedding, and now Margaery's pregnant with a child whom she's claiming belongs to Joffrey.

It begins a few months after the end of RFWT, and will deal with things that happened in between that time in flashbacks. The first few chapters are done, and I've got a shit ton of notes for where this story is going. The chapters are going to be quite a bit longer, and titled by their location instead of a specific character's POV, which means that updates will be slower. The overall fic is not going to be nearly as long as RFWT was, I promise.

Anyway, welcome back to this wild ride, for those of you still reading!
Prologue: The North Sea

His name was no longer Young Griff, as he had gotten so used to people calling him. He was Aegon Targaryen, First of His Name, Lord of the Andals and of the First Men, and the rightful king of the Seven Kingdoms, the only one with a true claim to the Iron Throne left.

That was all something it was going to take some time to get used to, he thought, lips quirking in self-deprecating amusement, as the ship rocked around him.

He’d known, of course, for most of his life, who he truly was, even if he had gone by Griff, the name of the man who claimed to be his father to all strangers, but never to him, for most of that life.

But it was something very different, indeed, to find himself finally embracing that identity, where he had always been in hiding, before this.

Aegon Targaryen, son of Elia Martell and Rhaegar Targaryen, the last of the Targaryens save for an aunt who had made it clear that she wanted nothing to do with him, returning at last to his homeland.

The titles, the names, they fit like an ill shaped glove.

Griff-Jon, as he had had to get used to referring to the other man as, now, said that it would take little time before he began to see himself as he was, as a king. He was his father’s son, his mother’s son in every way, Jon had told him, before they had started out on this voyage.

But it had been some weeks since they had first set out with their Golden Company towards Westeros, and still, it felt strange, to give orders and speeches to a group of mercenaries set to fight and die in his name. And to see them listen to him, to see them bow before him as the rightful king of the Seven Kingdoms, even if they themselves likely did not care at all who ended up sitting on the Iron Throne, so long as they got what was owed to them, in the end.

But, he supposed, that was what it meant to be a king. One day, if things went as they wanted them to, he would have sworn lords giving their lives for him, not just mercenaries, revered as the Golden Company were.

He still wasn’t certain what to make of the mercenary group that Jon Connington had managed to acquire for their...return to the Seven Kingdoms. He had, of course, learned of them as a child, but seeing them in person, and then watching them, one by one, swear themselves to his service until his contract with them was finished, was truly something else entirely.

They were rough men, for all of the stories of them being the only true knights to become mercenaries. Rough men who craved bloodshed and who had once betrayed Westeros during the Blackfyre Rebellion, but who honored their word. Well, usually. That was a record that Aegon himself had broken, in asking for their assistance while they still served Myr. Lord Harry had sworn their Company to Aegon, but he had looked at Aegon as if he knew that Aegon was a boy who had never fought in battle before, clicking his golden rings against each other where they rested three to a finger.

The sailors who drove these ships towards Westeros feared the Golden Company, as well. Aegon did not spend much time with the sailors because he spent so much of it being sick in his chambers, but he had noticed that they all had stories about the Golden Company, the sort of stories that peasants told.

The Golden Company kept at least a portion of the wealth from the cities that they sacked, every
single time, and that wealth they carried with them. That they carried the skulls of their fiercest enemies in battle. That they swore allegiance to their general which they never broke, not even in death, even if they had done exactly that, in breaking their contract with Myr in order to follow him.

He supposed he ought to be honored, to be the first and only lord to convince them to do so.

Aegon had started to find himself believing some of those stories that the sailors whispered of, as his time at sea with the Golden Company continued.

He licked his lips as the ship rocked with a particular roughness, and he was nearly thrown from the chair that he was sitting in, in the cabin that he shared with G-Jon.

Lord Jon Connington, his father’s closest friend, before the Dragon Prince’s death, and not Griff, the man who had always insisted that Young Griff never think of him as his father, for all that it was the story they told everyone around them. That was yet another title that it was going to take some time for Aegon to get used to.

He grimaced, swallowing hard as he stared down at the notes on the table down in front of him, the letters swimming before his eyes. He reached up, brushing dyed blue hair behind an ear so that he could better see the words.

Jon had insisted that he learn all that he could about the current noble Houses of Westeros since he was a boy, even when Young Griff had not fully known who he was. He would need to know who his enemies were as well as his allies, after all, and Aegon found the knowledge fascinating, on a normal day. He loved studying, learning, the way some men loved drinking themselves into a stupor.

Today, he was having a hard time getting through the information that their informant in the Keep had sent them at all, for all the scandal that it promised.

It was concerning, the number of scandals that had cropped up in Westeros, of late, more and more their number seeming to grow.

It made him worry about what he was going to have to do to unite Westeros under his own claim, when he did take the throne. The noble Houses of Westeros were cruel to one another, none of them afraid to get their hands dirty as they grasped for a throne that not a single one of them had a legitimate claim to, anymore.

Aegon had heard the stories, since he was a child, though Jon had tried to shield him from the most grisly aspects of him then, about what had happened to his own family, for their part in Westerosi politics.

His grandfather had been a madman, and had burned subjects alive for minor offenses, and sometimes, for no offense at all, Aegon knew. He had been a cruel man, whose madness had only been exacerbated by his advisors, and the nearly unlimited power that the Iron Throne had given him.

And because of it, Aegon’s father, his mother, his sister, they had all paid the price, so Aegon could not be blind to the Mad King's faults, not when he had lost so much as a result of them.

Aegon did not want to be the sort of king known for his grasping at power, for his cruelty, for the madness of being a Targaryen.

They said that every time the Targaryens were born, the gods flipped a coin, to determine whether or not they would be mad. That was not the legacy that Aegon wanted to be remembered by.
And Aegon knew that he was an interloper, that he was coming into this fight long after it began, and he did not fool himself into believing that the noble Houses would lay down their fights and accept him, the moment he arrived.

That was why they had hired the Golden Company, after all.

But he read these horrible things before him, missives from their spy in King’s Landing, about Joffrey the Illborn, and he did not want to one day read about himself, and the cruelties he had committed to become king, not after he had finally learned the truth about what had happened to his mother.

About what the Lannisters had done to his beautiful mother, as they stormed King’s Landing, a fate that Aegon himself had only barely managed to escape.

Sometimes, if Aegon closed his eyes and concentrated hard enough, he thought he could still smell his mother’s perfume, as she kissed his forehead for the last time, even if that shouldn’t have been possible, because he had been so young when she was taken from him.

After all, he had been nothing more than a babe when his mother had been butchered by Lannister soldiers alongside his sister. It was just his imagination, and yet the feeling was so strong.

And his imagination, or rather his nightmares, supplied him with other, less clear images, as well, images of what his mother must have looked like, in her final moments, after the Mountain had ripped her open and raped her, repeatedly, after butchering her daughter in front of her, after she had thought she had lost her son, as well.

Sometimes, in those nightmares, Elia Martell opened her eyes and stared right at Aegon. Usually, he awoke, then.

He knew that Jon felt guilty, for telling him the truth at all, even after Aegon had plagued him for it, especially after those nightmares had started, but Aegon was glad that he had. It gave him a sense of purpose, a higher calling, in returning to Westeros, than simply claiming a throne that others now laid claim to.

His mother had died, in the most horrible way that Aegon could imagine, for that throne, so that the Lannisters could prop up a usurper, the one who had killed his father, on that throne.

He owed it to her to take it back. He would do his mother proud, he vowed to himself, by taking back what had been stolen from them, all of them. Would avenge her memory by not becoming the sort of king who threatened children and courted madness.

Even if he was not yet quite certain how he was to achieve that.

But that was why he had Jon to help guide him, as his Lord Hand. He could not ask for a better counselor.

Jon Connington, his father’s friend and a Targaryen supporter exiled from Westeros for his loyalty to Aegon’s father. The only person Aegon knew for certain that he could trust, who had practically raised Aegon as a son, from such a young age.

Jon knew the lords of Westeros better than anything that Aegon could ever read in a book, and he trusted the man to make sure that Aegon was the sort of king that would make his mother and father proud.

As if thinking of the man had summoned him, the door to Aegon’s cabin opened then, and Aegon
tensed at the thought of having to deal with a member of their mercenary army before a shock of red hair had him relaxing, once more.

The years had not been kind to Lord Connington, since he had fled Westeros, though Aegon had no memory of a time when he had been a softer, kinder man. He was hardened now, willing to die to see Aegon on the throne, the Targaryen dynasty restored as a last service to the dead man he had once loved.

But Aegon knew nothing of this, as he smiled wanly at the other man, as Jon stepped inside the cabin and shut the door behind himself.

“Are you all right, Sire?” Jon asked, and Aegon almost didn’t respond to the question, because the last word, that title, threw him.

Sire.

Because he was a king now, Jon’s king, and that was perhaps stranger to him than being referred to as Aegon, now.

He shook his head, forcing himself to clear it.

“Fine,” he said, and grimaced at the way Jon kept staring at him, knowingly. He sighed, yawning, wondering if Jon could read him so well because he’d known him so long, or whether Aegon was simply that easy to read. It was a disturbing thought. “A bit queasy.”

When his aunt was born, she had been born on the rocky sea in the dead of night, during one of the worst storms in history. It had earned her the name Stormborn, and Aegon had assumed that, like his aunt, he would be able to brave the open seas.

But instead, he found himself getting sick the night after he set foot on the head of their fleet, and had felt queasy ever since, despite all of the ginger that Jon was forcing him to chew on at any given moment.

It was an embarrassing weakness, especially when he knew that this Golden Company was still skeptical of this king they were going to follow, for all of the fortune that they had been promised for doing so.

Jon did not bother to respond, coming forward and sitting on one of the two beds, across from him.

“How are your studies going?” Jon asked, and there was a gentleness in his tone that made Aegon feel a bit guilty for not trying to study harder.

He looked at the floor instead of Jon as he answered. “Not as well as I would like.”

Jon hummed. “Well,” he said, “Why don’t we go over what you’ve read so far.”

A part of Aegon would much rather ask who the informant was, the one who kept sending them all of this information, but the last time he had asked, Jon had refused to tell him, saying that it was for the informant’s protection. That it was for the best that as few people knew as possible.

As if there was anyone Aegon would tell, and he had been slightly hurt by Jon’s refusal, even if he had understood the pragmatism of it. The less people he knew, the better.

But he couldn’t help but wonder what sort of person had lived so long in King’s Landing, and could still declare their loyalty to a far away prince.
“Joffrey the Illborn is dead,” Aegon reported, still feeling slightly numb about the news. Not because he cared much for a boy whom it was rumored like to rape serving girls and butcher peasants, best known for killing an entire Sept full of people, but because it seemed to him that kings died even more easily than anyone else.

And because the Seven Kingdoms that he would now inherit from Joffrey the Illborn had erupted into chaos, with his death. At least when Joffrey lived, he would have been facing one army.

Now, all of the kingdoms had splintered off, happy to fight for their own causes, and Aegon would have to contend with all of them.

Jon nodded for him to continue.

“Cersei Lannister, to the West, has yet to announce whether or not she will abide by Queen Margaery Tyrell’s Regency, until her child is born and it is determined whether the throne belongs to that child, or Tommen Baratheon.” Aegon grimaced, fully aware that it ‘belonged’ to neither of them. Jon nodded, and he went on, “Dorne has been silent, as has most of the North, and the Riverlands are still too busy fighting the Lannisters and amongst themselves to declare for anyone, though the Blackfish will likely declare for anyone against the Lannisters.”

That confused him, the new Queen Regent’s stance on the succession, for he didn’t think there had ever been a time in history when a Queen had done similarly, ruling in the name of a child who had not even been born yet, even if it was rumored that said Queen could have her child at any moment. But then, he supposed, most kings did not leave behind only a child in the womb for an heir.

“But these Tyrells,” Aegon said slowly, “if the child is born, and it’s a girl, then Tommen has the rightful claim to the throne, and the Lannisters will surely not allow Margaery Tyrell to be Regent, in that case. Why would they announce the Regency so quickly? And why wouldn't Kevan Lannister, Hand of the King, be Regent, in this case?”

It certainly made more sense. If Tommen turned out to be the heir to the Iron Throne, Kevan could better help the transition, and if the Queen did have a son, then she had still chosen him to be the Hand of the King, so she clearly trusted him.

Instead, a young woman who was barely older than Aegon sat on the Iron Throne, ruling on her own whims.

Jon grimaced. “Even in your father’s time, the Tyrells were always reaching above their station,” he explained, which wasn’t much of an explanation at all, not really. “At that time, they were loyal to House Targaryen. And not too long ago, if you remember, the Tyrells were claiming that Joffrey was a bastard born of incest. If they want to validate the claim of the child in the Queen Regent’s belly whether it is a boy or not, they will likely claim again that Tommen is a bastard, as well. And given the tensions between House Lannister and House Tyrell, I believe that this is the only choice before them that results in their hanging onto power.”

Aegon’s brow furrowed. “But wouldn’t that make the Queen’s child a bastard, as well, if they claim that Tommen is one?” he asked, a bit nervously, confused, now.

He had once thought he had a good grasp of Westerosi politics, that he knew these people, for all that he had never been here himself. Now, he was getting something of a migraine.

Jon smiled wanly. “I’m sure that they’ll find a way around it, Sire. But you see, it is yet another example of how there is no one left in the Seven Kingdoms who has a legitimate claim to the throne. Tommen is a bastard, and the Queen’s child, whether it is a boy or a girl, is the son of another
bastard, whether they admit to that or not. The Tyrells simply have a large army to back up whatever claim they’d like to make at the moment, and the Queen Mother is out of favor, after her own son exiled her from King’s Landing.”

Aegon grimaced. He could never imagine doing such a thing, to his mother. “Is it as large as the Golden Company?” he asked, nervously. “The Tyrell army.”

The ship rocked again, and Aegon was thrown back in his seat. Jon moved forward instinctively, to steady him, and then, realizing that Aegon was fine, stilled. Aegon wondered if his own face was green, yet.

Jon pursed his lips. “I will not lie to you, Your Grace,” he warned him, darkly. “The numbers are close. But as I said, the Tyrells barely have a claim to the throne, and you need not be afraid. We have many friends left in the Seven Kingdoms.”

Aegon licked his lips, thinking of what he knew of their allies in the Seven Kingdoms. He was not certain that he would describe them as ‘many,’ but Jon seemed convinced that now was the perfect time to return to the Seven Kingdoms, and Aegon trusted his judgment. “In Dorne,” he said, “my mother’s home.”

He tried to picture what Dorne might look like, in his mind, from what he knew of it. He knew from Jon, and from his studies, that it was a desert, a hot land filled with hot blooded people. That the Dornish had supported his father and mother during the war, despite the grievance that his father had committed against them, in dishonoring Elia Martell by running off with the Stark wench, and that they would likely support him, as well. That they had kept quiet, through much of the Usurper’s reign, for that very reason.

He wondered if Dorne was as beautiful as he thought his mother must have been. If it truly had suited her, as King’s Landing never had. He would like to go there, someday soon, now that he finally had the opportunity to do just that.

Jon’s eyes softened. “Yes,” he said. “Doran Martell is your mother’s brother, and has, in the past, reached out to us to form an alliance.”

Aegon’s lip curled as he remembered the circumstances of that proposed alliance, the price that his mother’s brother wanted in return for that allegiance. “If I marry his daughter.”

Jon sighed. “Yes.”

They had been over that, after all, quite a few times.

Aegon understood the reasons behind agreeing to such a match. With a marriage to the Dornish Princess, he would have Dorne fully on his side, a solid, unshaking ally against the other Houses. But he had no interest in marrying his cousin. Not for any distaste for her particularly, as he did not know her, but he thought it would be a far smarter move, in the end, to marry his aunt.

Daenerys Targaryen also had a claim to the Iron Throne, and he could not forget that, not when she had rebuffed any attempts to make contact with her, while she ruled in Mereen with an army roughly the size of his own, now.

He did not know if she would respect his claim to the throne when they did finally meet, face to face, and he thought it would be a far smarter plan to unite with her rather than fight against her.

“And Lord Stannis?” he asked, because privately, he thought that Stannis was the greatest threat to his taking the Iron Throne, at this point. Not because his other opponents were both women, but
because they both had even weaker claims than the Usurper’s brother.

After all, Stannis Baratheon was at the very least the trueborn son of his mother and father, while neither the Tyrells nor the Lannisters had a convincing claim to that.

The only problem was, Lord Stannis seemed to have squandered that advantage, ever since he had started this war. That was, indeed, the only way that Aegon could understand his repeated losses against the Lannisters, when a boy of Aegon’s own age had been able to defeat Tywin Lannister in battle so many times, before being taken out by duplicity.

Stannis had won almost every fight he had chosen since his defeat at the Battle of Blackwater, their informant had told them, and Aegon did not want to worry about defeating the Lannisters and Tyrells only to turn around and find himself facing both his aunt and Stannis Baratheon’s army.

Jon hummed. “We know he has taken Winterfell and was about to take more than half of the West. The Lannisters might have been able to defeat him, but if they had, we would have heard about it.”

Aegon groaned in frustration. As grateful as he was for the information coming out of King’s Landing, it was frustrating not to know what was truly happening in the rest of the Seven Kingdoms.

“But the last anyone has heard, he had vanished, somewhere up in the North, alongside Ser Jaime Lannister, and Lady Cersei had taken the Rock for herself, without a fight, even with many of Stannis’ forces still there,” Jon said, not bothering to hide how much this news had disturbed him, and still did. He said the name 'Jaime Lannister' as if he wanted to spit it, but wasn't entirely certain how.

Aegon shuddered, wondering what could have taken out Stannis Baratheon at this late stage in his war. Wondered how a man who had been moderately successful in this war of succession could just...disappear, like that, without anyone knowing where he had gone, or why.

“He did not understand the North, despite any readings he had done about the kingdom. They seemed a savage, wild people, compared to the other kingdoms of Westeros, like the people of Further East, beyond the civilized edges of Essos. They answered to no one save themselves, and almost all of their House monikers seemed to speak of death and killing. And while the other noble Houses did not seem innocent, either, they at least had governments that Aegon could easily understand.

He worried that they would be the hardest kingdom to convince to bend the knee, in the end, especially after what his grandfather had done to the Starks. Aegon did not want to be hated by them for anything near the same level of violence.

He did not want to be a bad king. Did not want to be a king known for forcing his people to fear him, rather than love him.

Jon licked his lips. “I will not lie to you,” he repeated. “We are taking great advantage from his absence, but that is only because we are not first going to King’s Landing.”

Aegon blinked at him, confused, because he had thought that was exactly where they would strike first, with all of the studying Jon had made him do on House Tyrell, of late.

“Instead, we are going somewhere that will be an easy victory for Your Grace, and will declare to all of Westeros your intentions,” Jon continued. Aegon thought he heard the sound of thunder cracking, outside of the cabin, and shivered.
The climate was a little chillier here, than what he was used to.

Aegon’s brows furrowed. “And where is that?” he asked, heart starting to beat a little faster at the prospect of finally going home, of knowing that there was at least one victory in sight, before they had even begun this war.

Jon smiled at him, the smile taking years off the face of a man whom Aegon had always seen as haunted by his past. “My home, Your Grace.”
“What are we going to do?” Tyene asked, scooping up the letter from where Arianne had just discarded it on the table between them, out in the gardens of Sunspear, which were not as magnificent as the Water Gardens, but she had not been able to bring herself to return there since she had imprisoned her own father.

Arianne barely noticed Tyene mouthing the words as she read them, the shock of what she had just read still settling over her shoulders. She reached, absently, for the chilled wine she had been casually drinking before the raven had arrived, and disrupted her whole world.

The missive was short, and to the point.

Joffrey the Illborn was dead, attacked in his own bedchambers by remnants of the religious fanatics who had followed the High Sparrow, wanting revenge for their martyr. His wife had been attacked as well, but had survived long enough to call a member of the Kingsguard, who should have been there far earlier, to save them.

The man had given his life in service of rescuing the Queen’s, and, thank the gods, her child was deemed still healthy by the maesters.

“This smells like bullshit,” Obara said, scrunching up her nose and reading the words over Tyene’s shoulder.

Tyene snorted. Arianne envied them their amusement, but could not deny the truth to their words.

“Looks like the Rose Queen really does have thorns, like she promised us,” Tyene said, and then smirked. “Do you think she killed the King herself, or had that Kingsguard do it, and then had him killed for his trouble?”

Arianne pursed her lips.

Either was a disturbing thought. The young woman she had met in Dorne, though fierce in her hatred of the Lannisters, had not been a killer, Arianne had seen that. Angry, yes, bent on revenge, yes, but not a killer, at the very least, not with her own hands.

It was the reason, in the end, that Arianne had agreed to go along with her plan. Because the Rose Queen, for all the insanity of the alliance she had offered, had been sane as she offered it, a woman as sick of the Lannisters as every lord or peasant in Dorne.

“It doesn’t matter what I think. The King is dead,” she said, finally, and ignored the slump in Tyene’s shoulders. She knew that her cousins were angling for war, knew that they had been wishing for it ever since they had been imprisoned, ever since they had learned about Qwentyn, marching with an army in the East.

Myrcella was a suitable replacement to her brother, but Margaery was an interesting enough one to keep them on their toes. Or so Arianne hoped.

In truth, she was not entirely certain if she would still be able to sell Margaery Tyrell to the lords of Dorne, for all that she had made such promises to the other woman. It was what Arianne wanted; the future that the Rose, eyes shining, had laid out before her was one that Arianne could not deny she found more appealing than putting a vulnerable child on the throne, protected only by Dorne and not by her own family, in order to bring said family down, or…
Or the future that her father had offered her, clearly thinking that she could ever want such a thing. Arianne wondered if he had ever known her at all, to offer her such a thing.

Obara let out a long sigh. “Myrcella is pregnant,” she said, and exchanged another look with Tyene that, dare Arianne think it, looked hopeful. “It might be more useful, to name her Queen, rather than support one belonging to a House which has hated us for some time.”

Myrcella was more than just pregnant. She had missed her moon’s blood for some time now, and her belly was ready to pop.

At least one of Arianne’s brothers was still of some good use, in doing his duty to his wife, though Arianne had to admit that it was causing more trouble than it was solutions for her, just now.

The news of Myrcella’s pregnancy was one that, despite its advancement, Arianne was trying to keep contained within Sunspear. She knew that the moment Margaery Tyrell learned of it, she would consider their alliance terminated, would consider Myrcella to a be a threat to everything they had planned together.

A part of Arianne almost wondered if Margaery herself had suspected what Myrcella had believed, about her ability to have children, for all the plans she had made around the other girl. It would be another hint that the Queen had no intention of honoring their alliance past the ceasefire that wiping out the Lannisters together brought them.

Arianne picked at her teeth. “House Tyrell no longer hates us,” she pointed out. “In fact, we have a common enemy.”

Obara rolled her eyes. “Yes, this is the story you’ve spun time and time again, but that enemy is dead now, or will be soon. House Lannister cannot survive while House Tyrell holds the Iron Throne. And what will we have gotten for our troubles, for our...patience?” she sneered the word. “You promised us that you would not be your father.”

Arianne stood to her feet then, towering over Obara. “And I have not been,” she snapped, genuinely hurt by the accusation. “Have I not given you war?”

“The Tyrells’ war,” Obara sneered out. “And no, not especially. Just the promise of it.”

Arianne felt something like fear shudder deep within her, and forced it down. It would not do to show weakness, now. Would not do to show that even that promise was an illusion.

Smoke and mirrors, the same game that her own father had been playing for many years, now.

Gods, she hated him. She hated that she was becoming like him by any measure of the word.

When she was a girl, she used to dream about her aunt Elia, killed by Lannister bannermen, the nightmares not helped by the anger she saw so constantly in her uncle Oberyn’s face, no matter how much he tried to hide it for the sake of the children.

It haunted him, and so it haunted her.

Now, when she dreamed at night, the nightmares were of herself, bent over with gout, forced to spend the rest of her days in a chair, wheeled around by those who pitied her for one who could have acted, but didn’t.

But that was not how her story was going to end.
She ought to be pleased that the bastard was finally dead. It meant that their plans could finally move forward.

With Joffrey dead, the only one who stood in their way, as she had tried time and again to explain to her cousins, was Cersei Lannister and her army, and the imagined threat of Quentyn Martell.

Arianne smiled slightly, at the thought.

Then, the Tyrells, and Obara and Tyene could have this war they were clamoring so hard for, because there would be none to declare that they couldn’t. They just needed to be patient for a little while longer.

When she had made this deal with Margaery Tyrell, she thought that both of them knew it was not in good faith, on either side. The moment Margaery returned to King’s Landing, she would begin plotting her ascension to the throne, her way of breaking arms with the Martells, and Arianne would do the same. Margaery did not even have the assurance that she could get pregnant, a loophole if Arianne had ever seen one.

She just had not anticipated how far things would go. That Margaery would get pregnant so quickly, that the imagined army of her brother across the sea was in fact two very different armies, belonging to two very different people, that Arianne had a chance to see the Tyrells and the Lannisters gone from this world for good, for all that she had rather liked Margaery.

After all, what was one woman compared to the fate of having two Targaryens owe you their lives, and their winnings?

Not that Arianne intended to play quite the long game with them that her father had wished for, but she could not deny that they could offer her more than a House which her own mistrusted so dearly.

“Then let me promise you,” Arianne said, over the rim of her cup, “That we will have war soon enough. Do you think I helped you depose my own father just to sit on my arse in Sunspear? Do you think that Cersei Lannister, sitting alone in the Rock, is just going to meekly accept what happened to her son? No, there will be war.”

Tyene and Obara exchanged glances again. She knew what they thought of her. They thought that she had grown soft with her arse on such a fine cushion.

They would rue such thoughts, one day.

A throat cleared, and Arianne glanced up, to find that Myrcella had joined them, was standing in front of their little table out in the gardens nervously.

She had been like that, lately, ever since she had found out that she was pregnant upon returning to Dorne, without her husband. The child was undoubtedly Trystane’s; she would be more nervous if it were not, and Arianne had seen the way the two of them looked at one another.

It was the sort of love that Arianne herself knew she would never find.

The nervousness was no doubt at the prospect of her own future, here in Dorne. After all, she had been kidnapped and brought here through a collaboration between the Martells and Margaery Tyrell, and she knew they wouldn’t have her family’s best interests at heart.

And while she had made it rather abundantly clear that she cared little for the concerns of her own family, besides Tommen and Jaime Lannister, two people whom she had once been content to leave behind as well, that having changed during her annoyingly long visit to King’s Landing, Myrcella
had to wonder what it meant for her, that Dorne and Joffrey’s Queen found her so important.

Arianne sometimes amused herself with trying to guess when Myrcella would figure out the extent of the plans made around her. The girl was no fool, after all, and something of that analytical mind had emerged all the more, since her time in King’s Landing.

She forced herself to smile sympathetically at the girl, though the prospect of Joffrey’s death was not one that Arianne could find it within herself to pretend much grief over. It was not as if that mattered, however.

She only needed to be convincing enough.

“Myrcella,” she said, gesturing for Myrcella to take the empty chair at their table, the one that had been meant for her husband, should he deign to meet with them for the noon meal, this morning. “Sit, please.”

Myrcella did so, her legs shaking a bit from the weight of carrying her pregnant belly.

She must have been a little ways along, when she first left King’s Landing, and her husband, and not even known it.

Though, from the things she had admitted to Arianne about what her brother had done to her as a child, Arianne supposed it made sense, for her to doubt her ability to have children at all.

Arianne wondered if Myrcella would have allowed it, had she known she did have that ability.

There was a peculiar darkness about the girl, ever since her return from King’s Landing, as if something that had always been sitting just below the surface had finally been freed, by her visit there.

She was no longer the sweet girl that Arianne had known, innocent or otherwise. Now, she looked into Arianne’s eyes and Arianne found that she could not read Myrcella’s expression at all, did not know her thoughts.

Myrcella spent most of her days at the Sept in the city, praying for her beloved husband’s return, something which was now far more likely, with her brother dead. Arianne suspected this was to keep from letting anything of the carefully constructed mask she wore slip around those who knew her well.

No, she had changed, and Arianne found herself missing the girl that Myrcella had been, even as she found some appreciation for the woman before her.

“It’s your brother,” Arianne heard herself saying, as if from a long ways off, her eyes never leaving Myrcella’s carefully blank face. “We’ve received this message from King’s Landing.”

She handed the note over to the other girl without a word.

She couldn’t imagine what Myrcella must be feeling, just now. She knew that Myrcella and her brother had little love lost between the two of them; he had been cruel to her, and she had loathed him in turn.

But Arianne had believed her own brother capable of murdering her to take her claim to Dorne, and she still could not imagine the grief she would feel, at the knowledge that he had been killed.

And in such a horrible fashion, by peasants with delusions above their station.
Myrcella pursed her lips as she read the news, and then lifted her head, face carefully devoid of any emotion. If Arianne had not been expecting it, considering the things that Myrcella had confided in her, she might have been disturbed by the sight.

As it was, she thought she heard the sharp intake of Obara’s breath, behind her. Obara, for all her faults, had never gotten to know Myrcella personally as more than a piece in their game of cyvasse against the other Houses, not as Tyene and Arianne had.

For that matter, neither had Nym.

“Does my brother’s son survive? The Queen?” Myrcella asked, surprising Arianne when that was her first question. Still, Arianne hummed in answer, nodding her head, and Myrcella bit her lip.

Perhaps Myrcella did know more than she let on, to ask after the Queen and the Queen’s child of Arianne.

Obara and Tyene exchanged glances.

Arianne knew what they were thinking, for they had just explained such thoughts to her. The survival of the Queen and her son was an unwelcome thorn in their side, especially when they had Myrcella here and now, pregnant in front of them.

Arianne had a feeling Margaery Tyrell had a habit of being such to everyone around her. And if it were not for the alliance that she had made with Margaery in secret, she might have actually considered their ideas of crowning Myrcella.

But she wasn’t that much of a fool.

Margaery Tyrell had survived Cersei Lannister and her madman of a son, Joffrey. She had survived all of this time with one hand on the Iron Throne, and Arianne knew better than to underestimate her, as her cousins seemed to be doing.

Just as she knew better than to underestimate Myrcella.

She looked, for a moment, conflicted about speaking again at all, but that didn’t stop her from finally doing so.

“What’s going to happen, now?” Myrcella asked, and her voice was very small, in a way that Arianne didn’t believe at all.

Arianne forced a smile, getting to her feet and taking Myrcella’s hands into her own. She looked into the girl’s eyes, and was disturbed when she couldn’t read them as she had once been so good at doing.

“You will be safe here, Myrcella, always,” Arianne promised her. “You are my goodsister, and the mother of my nephew.”

“Or niece,” Myrcella said, in a very soft voice, so soft that Arianne had to struggle to hear her.

Arianne hummed. “Indeed,” she said. “Or niece.” She licked her lips, wondering if perhaps she shouldn’t have broken this news to Myrcella in some other way. “Myrcella…”

Myrcella blinked up at her, eyes very wide, and Arianne wondered if she truly didn’t know that most sisters would have at least feigned a few tears, for a dead brother.
“Am I to be allowed to go to the funeral?” Myrcella asked, and there was something calculating in her tone, something that had nothing to do with wanting to show her respects for her brother, Arianne knew, feeling cold despite the chiliness of the day. Arianne tried to tell herself that Myrcella was just desperate to see Trystane again, still locked away in King’s Landing as he was.

She resisted the urge to glance helplessly back at Obara and Tyene.

Tyene had once been so good at manipulating Myrcella.

Now, the other woman didn’t seem capable of looking at her for more than a few seconds. She had noticed the change, too.

“I will...consider it,” Arianne said, slowly. “But you have to understand why we believe it to be a risk, after the things you told us about your most recent stay in King’s Landing.”

Myrcella scoffed. “Those things happened because of my brother,” she said, slowly, as if speaking to a small child. “He’s dead, now.”

She needn’t sound so damn pleased, Arianne thought.

But she did, she realized, a moment later.

She sounded...very pleased by the news, far more pleased than she ought to, than she surely knew that she ought to, even if she had confided the truth about how horrible he had always been to her to all three of these women.

There were still guards listening to them, after all.

Obara narrowed her eyes at Myrcella, and the girl dropped her head, looking shamefaced. “Sorry,” she said. “I just...It's such a shock. My brother...He was King. I never thought he would die.”

The words, Arianne had no doubt, had the advantage of being true.

Doublespeak, and Myrcella had always been good at that, but there was a sharpness to her words now which disturbed Arianne, which made her wonder if perhaps she hadn’t taught the girl rather too well through her own example.

Myrcella bit her lip, for a moment looking sad, but the look vanished soon enough, as if Myrcella herself wasn’t quite certain how long she had to hold it for so that it remained believable.

“May I go, now?” she asked, cocking her head at Arianne. “I should go to the Sept, and pray for his immortal soul. He was my brother, and my king.”

Arianne pulled back, startled into wondering whether the mask that Myrcella wore now had not been her true face all along, the melancholy girl Arianne had fallen in love with so fully the mask.

“My lordship is not yet out of bed,” the guard informed her, when Obara Sand came to a stop outside of Gerold Dayne’s chambers in the palace of Sunspear, the chambers that he no longer shared with his wife, despite the recentness of their marriage.

Arianne had tired of him, as she seemed to of most of her bed companions after they had outlived their usefulness to her. Marrying Gerold Dayne had kept him from marching to war, had waylaid the warmongering in Dorne for a few more months.

But Gerold Dayne had not outlived his usefulness to Obara Sand, for all that he might have done to
her cousin. Oh, Obara had many things planned for his future, and she intended to ensure that they came to pass, rather than sitting meekly by the way that her uncle had, the way that her cousin did.

Obara was a woman of action; it was what she understood, and what's more, it was what Dorne understood.

And who was a better example of Dornish blood, than Gerold Dayne?

She snorted slightly, at the thought, and gave the guard another harsh look. He was used to her, especially, coming to visit Arianne's husband at all hours of the day, and she did not know why the man still put up a fuss about allowing her to pass.

For a moment, she allowed herself the amusement of wondering if he thought she was sleeping with Gerold, and disapproved. That would make the most sense, considering how often she came to visit him and the noise the two of them always seemed to end up making together.

Her gaze hardened.

Obara rolled her eyes. “It’s past the noon hour, though I’m well aware,” she said. “And he’s missed a great deal. Let me pass.”

The guard hesitated for a moment, but Obara knew well the orders he was under, and he quickly yielded, opening the door for her and announcing her to the uneasy occupant within.

Obara Sand sighed as she stepped into these chambers, shutting the door behind her with another nod at the guard, and words to not disturb them, not for anyone.

“If the Princess…” the guard began, but Obara held up a hand, cutting him off.

“Lord Gerold is your Prince Consort,” she said, “and these are his orders, not mine.”

And Obara was the daughter of Oberyn Martell, she wanted to add, but she did not. The guard seemed to get the hint, easily enough.

The guard ducked his head, and then, “Yes, my lady,” he said, with the same snide voice they all had started out using, when Arianne announced that her cousins were to be legitimized, by order of King Joffrey, weeks ago.

Obara had no idea if those orders had actually come from Gerold, or not, but a part of her could appreciate the gesture. Bastards may be treated far more kindly in Dorne than any other kingdom in Westeros, but they were still bastards.

They could not hold the same sort of authority that legitimate children could, where it mattered.

They could not hold the throne of Dorne.

The guard let her inside, and Obara walked primly past him, chin held high because even if she was a bastard, she was still Oberyn Martell's daughter, and that meant something, to her.

She found Gerold laying in his bed, looking to all the world like a sad lump of a man who had married the wrong woman and was now paying the price for it with too much drinking.

Good.

“You’re up late,” she observed, to the man just rolling out of the bed that he shared with her cousin, these days. She pulled his sheets off the rest of the way, and the man shot her an annoyed glare.
He groaned, reaching up to rub at his eyes with one hand while another reached for a shirt. It was almost disappointing when he was covered, once more. Obara forced herself not to react; she had seen him shirtless often enough, after all.

He may be her cousin’s husband now, or, as some of the nobles had taken to calling him behind his back, her cousin’s wife, but that didn’t mean Obara had to feel guilty for appreciating him.

It was not as if her cousin seemed to appreciate the man at all, these days. Arianne had always been...short sighted, in that way, where she had so many plans to keep her afloat, but a terrible understanding of the people she needed in order to enact those plans.

Oh, she had been perfectly attentive, in the beginning of her marriage, because she had needed Gerold and his armies on her side.

But as time went on, and Quentyn did not emerge out of the desert with his fabled mercenary army, and the Tyrells continued sucking Joffrey's cock until the boy was dead by a mere chance, a fluke, Arianne had started to distance herself from her husband and his warmongering, had started to go on and on about the importance of their alliance with the Tyrells, who were hardly better than Lannisters, in the eyes of most of the people of Dorne.

Hells, to many of the Dornish people, they were worse. The Lannisters had committed two great offenses against them, in the murders of Elia Martell and Oberyn, and that pain still smarted, every time Obara gave herself a moment to think about it.

But the Tyrells had been the classic enemies of the Dornish for decades, and for all that Arianne seemed to have forgotten that, very few others in Dorne had.

She discouraged, with every chance she had, her husband attempts at rallying the noble Houses of Dorne into war against whoever stood in their way, of at least not sitting on their arses and waiting for House Tyrell to hand them a victory.

And she was smart about it, Obara knew; she knew that her cousin didn’t intend to remain friends with Margaery Tyrell forever. She had explained that to her people, the moment the Rose was gone from Sunspear with Nym.

Only so long as it suited Dorne.

But Dorne was beginning to get restless, and Arianne seemed purposely blind to that knowledge. Willfully so, Obara could not help but think, for she herself heard the complaints of their people off of every rooftop, from every mouth that she passed, in the eyes of every noble who came to bow before Arianne and wondered why they weren’t bowing before Doran, anymore, when he had been much the same.

And now, with this newest piece of news…The Dornish people would want to act. Now.

And, well, Obara worried for her cousin’s very safety.

And that was exactly how she would spin this to Gerold, a man who would be happy enough to convince himself of her lies if it meant he got what he wanted out of the situation, in the end. She knew his type well.

“If you hadn’t spent so long drinking last night,” Obara commented, as Gerold got to his feet and ran a hand through his hair, giving him a dark look, “You’d know that a rather important piece of news has just reached us.”
Gerold hummed. “What is it, now?” he asked, darkly, and it seemed that his poor mood from the night before had spread into the morning, no doubt with the help of his current hangover. “Have the Tyrells finally subdued the Lannisters, and left us with nothing of our pride?”

Obara rolled her eyes.

Men.

Always so fucking dramatic.

If they spent less time wondering on the length of their dicks and more time plotting, the Iron Throne would have belonged to Dorne ages ago.

Pride. Honestly.

As if Dorne could afford pride, at a time like this, with Elia and her father's blood screaming in the sand and the Lannisters finally weakened for the first time since her aunt's death, many years ago.

“Joffrey the Illborn is dead,” Obara said bluntly, and got the satisfaction of watching Gerold spin around to face her, eyes wide.

“How?” he asked finally, sounding a bit too pleased about the news. She found herself suddenly glad that he had not been sitting at tea with them earlier this afternoon, when they had given the news to Myrcella.

She didn’t think he would have been able to contain his glee, and that would have been a rather poor thing to do to the girl.

Especially when they needed her amity, just now.

Well, for now.

Needed it until Obara could watch that amity drive a spike through Cersei Lannister’s heart, and that of her twin brother’s.

Obara shrugged. “Don’t know, don’t care,” she admitted. “The letter they sent is awfully suspicious, but it claims they were killed by...fanatics. For all we know, that Tyrell bitch killed him herself when she finally got tired of stringing him along.”

Gerold snorted. “Doesn’t have it in her,” he said, shaking his head.

Obara pressed her lips together. For all they had known, Gerold Dayne didn’t have it in him to become nothing more than a drunk, either, and he had promised her war.

But that facade of drunkenness which he had dutifully and worryingly put on since the wedding, no doubt just like the letter that Margaery Tyrell had sent informing them of the King’s death at the hands of traitors, was just a sham.

The Gerold Dayne she had known before Arianne's marriage could hold his liquor just fine.

“Doesn’t matter, if she can hire someone to do the deed,” she said, shrugging. “And you didn’t really know her, for the short time that she was here. Girl was mad as they say her husband was.”

Not that that was a bad thing, of course. In fact, Obara hoped that it would become quite useful, to the future that she planned.
Gerold snorted. “What do they say about me?” he asked, sounding genuinely interested as he shoved on his shoes, and glanced towards the closed door, where the guard stood outside, there to warn them if Arianne, or, gods forbid, anyone else, came along and found them together here.

Obara gave him an unamused look. “They say your wife took your balls the day she took your hand in marriage. That she wears them around her neck now,” she said, and was gratified by the way Gerold grimaced, at her words.

She had found, over the course of time that she’d come to know him, since he’d come to live in the palace, consort of their Princess, that he was rather motivated when she insulted him. It was a useful skill to have, this ability to influence him through bullying.

And Obara had never been particularly good at honeyed words, either.

“They won’t say that forever,” he said darkly, and when he breathed on her, as he passed her to grab up his scabbard from where it hung over the door frame, she smelled nothing of alcohol, on his breath.

He turned back to her as he fastened his scabbard, a careful performance in slothliness.

Obara smiled.

“Come on,” Obara said, coldly, tone not matching the look on her face, for there were guards outside the door who answered only to Arianne, “We have work to do.”

The grin slowly spread across Gerold’s face. "Finally."
“If I leave these here,” she whispered, careful to keep her voice as gentle as possible, though she wasn’t sure why, as she placed the bundle of nightclothes on the bed, “Will you wear them?”

Perhaps she spoke as if to a frightened animal because she was afraid of seeing how Margaery might react, if she were even a little bit louder, harsher sounding.

She looked like a porcelain doll, sitting on Sansa’s bed in the Maidenvault, a bed which had once belonged to Margaery herself. Like she might genuinely break into a thousand pieces at any moment, and Sansa could not be the one to cause that.

She felt bad enough, for what she had just been unable to stop. What she had just walked in on, too damn late to do anything about it.

Margaery glanced up at her, from where she sat too straight backed on the bed, her eyes very wide, as if she had forgotten Sansa was there at all.

Sansa felt a small pang of fear, at the look in those eyes. As if they belonged to a frightened animal, one without conscious thought, rather than the woman that she loved.

It was strange; in all of those months after Ser Osmund had attacked Margaery, Sansa had never seen a hint of what he had done to her, not on her face, not in her words, nor her actions. She had been the same beautiful, ruthless woman that Sansa was slowly finding herself falling for, and when she had finally told Sansa the truth of what had happened to her, Sansa had been genuinely shocked.

Sansa was no stranger to the threat of rape herself, though she thanked the gods that she had never been forced by a man. She hadn’t then quite known what to say in response to Margaery’s halting admission about what Ser Osmund had done to her on Cersei’s orders, but she had been there for the other woman, and somehow had felt like that was enough, in the moment.

And while of course she knew that she could have no idea what Margaery had just faced, that all women reacted to this thing, this horrible, awful thing, differently, she couldn’t help but wonder, at that.

Wonder what had been so different, this time, from what had happened with Ser Osmund, when Margaery had moments later marched into the throne room and demanded that her husband kill that man.

That woman had worn skin made of hard steel.

But this...this woman made of glass, sitting too straightly on Sansa’s bed, fingers digging into the flesh of her elbows so harshly Sansa could see the white spots there, still covered in Joffrey’s blood as well as her own bruises, she was someone that Sansa didn’t entirely recognize.
What Joffrey had just done to her, what he had made her do to him, it was awful, and much as Sansa wanted to offer some sort of paltry words of comfort, she found that she had no idea what to say, to comfort Margaery, just now.

Had no idea how to help her, beyond the hurried plots that Baelish had formed, as they all stood over Joffrey’s bleeding, broken, unrecognizable form on the floor of his own bedchambers.

Unrecognizable in the way that Margaery seemed unrecognizable now, because something had changed them both utterly, tonight.

Joffrey had not survived it. Sansa could only hope that Margaery could.

Margaery blinked at her, looking very tired indeed. Her fingers were still digging into the smooth flesh of her already bruised arms, laying across her pregnant belly, and Sansa grimaced a little at the reminder that all of this had happened while Margaery was only a few months pregnant with another man’s child.

She hadn’t asked Margaery, of course, if that was what had sparked this...episode. It had only been an hour since Joffrey’s death; the servants were still cleaning up the mess, though Sansa suspected it would take some time to scrub the floor of all that blood.

And Margaery had explained, in halting, stuttering sentences, what had happened. Had not explained it fully, but explained enough, and been forced to sit on the bed her husband had just raped her in as Baelish was brought in, as Sansa explained all of it to him all over again, his cold, assessing gaze taking in more than Sansa ever could.

She could only hope that the child was fine, now. If it wasn’t, if something was wrong because of what Joffrey had done to Margaery tonight, then all of this suffering that Margaery had undergone tonight...all of it would have been for nothing.

The thought was a terrifying one. After everything they had endured, everything that they had sacrificed to get to this point, to find out that it was for nothing.

The child had to be fine. It had to be.

In the morning, Baelish would arrange for a maester with tighter lips than Pycelle to come and examine Margaery, to make sure that everything was fine. He did not dare risk it tonight, because he needed to make sure their story was perfect, and Sansa had agreed with that, much as she hated the thought of leaving Margaery in any sort of pain for the rest of the night, however many few hours remained of it.

Gods, Sansa thought, reaching up and running a shaky hand through her hair. If Baelish had not agreed to help them, if she had not sold her soul to him in response, she didn’t know that either of them would have survived this night.

She still was uncertain that they would, but she was certain enough, even in her current panicked state, that Baelish was obsessed with her enough to make sure that she didn’t die. Which meant that he had to help Margaery tonight, as well.

Margaery reached out, soundlessly, and took the nightgown from where Sansa had set it down in front of her. Slowly, agonizingly, she got to her feet.

That had been difficult, as well, sneaking her here, despite Baelish’s knowledge of the secret ways of the castle, the ways that no one would happen upon them, not even the servants, when Margaery was hardly in a fit state to walk.
Margaery didn’t seem at all bothered by Sansa’s presence as she stripped off the ripped gown she had been wearing when Joffrey had...

When he had...

Dear gods, how had everything gone so wrong? Two hours ago, three, they had been about to kill the little monster. Had been about to see him dead for all of the things he had done against them. He had finally been slotted by fate to be put down tonight, like the wild animal that he was.

And fate, it seemed, had still wanted his life, on this night.

But how the fuck had it happened like this? They’d had a plan, perhaps not the best one, but a plan nonetheless. And now, Joffrey was dead in a way that could so easily be traced back to the wife who had been the last person to see him, and Margaery...

She wasn’t even sure the woman stripping off her clothes was still Margaery, after what had happened to her.

Sansa flinched as the gown fell to Margaery’s feet, as she saw the physical evidence of the way that Joffrey had abused his wife, in his final moments, too gruesome to ignore. The bruises covering her body, the scratches, the blood that had dried against her thighs, her knees. The slight protruding of her pregnant belly, the only part of her that wasn’t covered in bruises, Sansa noticed, and tried not to feel too relieved about that.

Margaery swallowed hard, not looking at Sansa at all as she pulled on the fresh gown that Sansa had found for her, and slipped it over her head.

She still wouldn’t look at Sansa as she sank down onto the bed again.

Sansa licked her lips, folding her hands aimlessly in front of her now that she had nothing to hold onto, uncertain what to do, what to say, to salvage this. To see some glimpse of the woman she loved beneath this one’s exterior, once more.

Margaery let out a full body shudder, then, sinking down from her straight back to hunch into herself, pulling her legs up to her chest.

She didn’t cry, Sansa noticed, her face completely dry as it had been when Sansa had walked into the room alongside a Kingsguard who was now dead to find her standing over her husband, the two of them covered in blood. But the shuddering overtook her body all the same, and Sansa, for all that she didn’t know how to comfort the other woman, knew that she couldn’t just stand there any longer.

She moved forward, with slow, gentle movements, sinking down onto the bed beside Margaery, reaching out to take the other woman’s hands into her own.

She was just glad that the other woman was not still clinging to that golden lion statue that she had been holding, when Sansa entered her chambers, the top of it still covered in Joffrey’s blood and brains.

It had been a trial, pulling it out of the other woman’s hands, to give it to Baelish to be disposed of. Sansa had felt cruel, taking it away from her, even if it was the one thing which could truly damn Margaery if it was found.

Margaery flinched hard at the sudden contact of Sansa’s fingers against her own, snatching her hands away, and Sansa tried not to feel hurt as she felt something within her break in two in a way that the shock of seeing Margaery like this had not allowed her to, earlier.
She bit her lip, lest she herself start crying in front of the other woman. She couldn’t do that to Margaery, just now. She had to be strong, for Margaery’s sake, she knew that, if nothing else.

“Do you...” she realized even as she made the offer that it had been rather foolish, to have Margaery dress before she thought of this, “Do you want to bathe?”

She was still covered in blood, and while Sansa would not for a moment begrudge her sleeping in her current state in Sansa’s bed, she thought it might make Margaery feel a bit better, to at least be clean.

Dear gods, what was she thinking? She had no idea how Margaery was feeling now, nor how to make her feel better, she knew that.

Margaery swallowed hard, and then glanced up at her listlessly. “I had to do it,” she whispered, and her voice was hoarse.

From screaming, Sansa realized, and felt another pang of guilt-sorrow-fear rush through her.

Margaery had only spoken a few times, since Sansa had found her like this, to tell Sansa what had happened and to ask her for help, to ask her what to do.

Sansa hadn’t known what to do. She had just sent away the one man who might actually be able to help them, and she had never been more aware of it than she was in that moment, of what a mistake it had been to lose Tyrion Lannister as an ally.

And so she had sent for the next best thing.

“I had to do it.” Margaery repeated, now, her eyes looking slightly frantic when Sansa only stared at her, and didn’t respond. “I had to do it.”

Sansa closed her eyes, dragging in a deep breath before she opened them once more.

She was terrified. Everything had gone wrong, Margaery herself might be as dead as her husband now was, and in the morning, unless Baelish pulled off a miracle, this plan of his was going to get them all killed.

But she didn’t dare let any of this show on her face as she reached for Margaery again, as she ignored the way the other woman flinched when she touched her, to take Margaery’s hands in her own and squeeze them almost to the point of pain.

She didn’t quite know why she did it, even. Perhaps she wanted to ground Margaery. Perhaps she simply, selfishly, wanted someone else’s comforting hands in her own, after what she had just seen Margaery to be capable of.

“Yes, you did,” Sansa said, her voice breathless as Margaery finally met her gaze, and she thought she saw something of the woman she knew so well in those eyes. “Yes, you did. You had to do this, Margaery. You had no choice.”

Margaery licked very dry lips, still staring at Sansa. Sansa wasn’t even entirely certain that the other woman was hearing her, and her heart sank at the discouraging thought.

She vowed to herself that this wouldn’t last forever. That she would find the woman she loved in those eyes again, so help her gods, and drag her back to the surface, if need be.

Baelish would save their lives, and Sansa would save Margaery. She would not let Joffrey’s last act
be to damn Margaery for good.

She would not allow it.

The strength with which the thought hit her startled Sansa, and she dropped Margaery’s hand almost without thinking.

Margaery, however, seemed grateful that she had done so, hunching further in on herself and her while body beginning to shake again, the moment that Sansa let go of her, and Sansa sagged a little, seeing her.

She was just about to suggest tea when she realized, just as the door itself was thrown open, that she had not latched it securely behind her, and Sansa jumped up from the bed and spun around as the door flew open, heart hammering in her chest.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

They were fucked, and the vow she had just made to Margaery, even if she had not made it allowed, felt like ash in her mouth, for being proven wrong so quickly.

“What in the seven hells happened here?” Garlan Tyrell demanded, from the doorway, and Sansa felt her heart plummet down into her stomach as he glanced between them. Sansa, almost too afraid to reach out and touch the woman she had never been afraid to touch in the past, and Margaery, shaking like a leaf, covered in bruises.

And Sansa realized, in that moment, that she had no idea how to salvage this moment. For all the pleasant lies Baelish had just filled her head with, all of his suggestions, as she stood there, the evidence of what had just occurred clear enough just from looking at Margaery, Sansa realized she didn’t know how she would make Garlan believe any of it.

Garlan’s eyes darkened as he took in the sight of Margaery fully. And then he was moving, turning his back on them without a word and stalking from the room, and that fear in Sansa’s gut turned into a full panic.

She glanced back at Margaery, terrified at the thought of leaving her like this, in her current state, but knowing that if Garlan walked out that door, by morning, despite Baelish’s best efforts, all of King’s Landing would know the truth of what had happened tonight.

“Wait!” she cried, without a backward glance at Margaery, and pretended she didn’t notice the way that Margaery’s whole body flinched, at the loud noise, before Sansa left the room.

Elinor screamed, her back arching as the world seemed to go hazy around her, eyesight darkening around the edges. For a moment, she thought that the gods might grant her mercy of finally letting unconsciousness take her, but then another searing pain in her groin shocked her back to wakefulness once more.

“My lady, you have to push,” the woman assisting the maester snapped at her, sounding impatient for all that Elinor knew that a ploy to force this child out of her. The woman’s hand was deep within her already, waiting for the child to crown, and she could see the strain on the other woman’s features, as she felt it pulling at her own.

She wanted to snap at the other woman that she was pushing, damnit, as hard as she could, and that
if she pushed any harder she thought she might push out her stomach, as well. She wanted to snap that it hurt, and dear gods, weren’t the maesters supposed to give her something to make this pain hurt a little less?

Out of the corners of her vision, she saw her husband standing in the corner of the room, haphazardly leaned against a cane, and biting on his nails. She wanted to scream at him, too, that this was his fault, surely, for doing this to her in the first place.

But she thought this might been more terrifying, this whole experience, if her husband was not here with her now. If he had died, as the lesson that Olenna had tried to impart would have allowed for.

The thought had her following those instructions, pushing with all of her might even as she felt that her body might break apart from the strain. She had been at this for what felt like hours, was uncertain how much longer she could do this at all.

But she would not lose her child, just as she had not lost her husband. The gods had granted her one miracle, and by the Seven, she would demand another from them as well, if she had to.

She screamed again, as another terrible contraction hit her, as she heard one of the women shouting that she could see the head of Elinor’s child, spurring her to push again, harder than she had at any point in the past.

She felt one of the servants brush up against her, and mourned the loss when the woman kept moving, not bothering to stop and offer Elinor some paltry comfort for all of her hard work.

Normally, that would be the duty of one of the companions Elinor had chosen to sit through the birthing with her, something reserved for her closest friends.

It was unusual, for a woman of Elinor’s status to be alone in her birthing, accompanied solely by the maester and his assistants, and by her husband, which in itself was unusual that he be here at all.

But there were no other ladies huddled around Elinor, as she had always expected as a child, and seen the few times her mother had allowed her to witness a birthing, as she brought her own child into this world.

She felt alone, as her fingers grasped at the sheets beneath her rather than at the hands of girls she had once believed to be her closest friends.

Not even her mother was here.

It was a strange time to feel so alone, but Elinor knew damn well why she was so, just now.

“My lady, push, or this child will die within you!” a woman’s voice was shouting, authoritative for all that she might never dare to speak to Elinor like that in public, no doubt trying to scare Elinor into action, but it worked, and Elinor let out another pained scream as her body raised into the air, and she felt something give way within her, finally.

“Yes!” the servant shouted. “Yes, well done, girl!”

Elinor panted, the words barely registering, flopping back against the bed as her adrenaline gave way easily to exhaustion, as moments later, her ears picked up the sound of a child’s cry, filling the room, and then her husband’s startled, relieved laughter.

“It’s a boy, my lord. The Mother has blessed you,” she heard someone saying, and Elinor’s body sagged with relief further against the pillows beneath her. Her husband was not a rich man, and
giving him a boy was the greatest gift that a wife could give her husband, especially with the first child.

A boy.

All of these long months of pain and struggle, and she had finally been rewarded for her efforts.

And not just with the struggle of carrying this child, either, but the struggles that had accompanied that, of dealing with Olenna and Margaery and their wicked games, of dealing with Sansa, of learning that Alyn was still alive, of doing her damndest to make sure that their family survived the war despite all of Margaery’s best attempts to the contrary.

She panted, flopping back onto the bed she was using for the birthing with no small amount of relief.

Dear gods.

Elinor had known that it would hurt, of course. Had known that bringing a child into this world was one of the hardest things she might ever have to do, but it hadn’t quite been that.

No, the hardest thing she had ever had to do had come months ago.

This...well, this felt like something of a relief, in comparison.

She glanced over at her husband, where he sat on the edge of her bed, after one of the servants had helped him walk over to it, and placed the child into his arms, as the child let out another loud cry, no doubt confused by the world that he had been brought into.

She glanced over at the two of them, at her child, swaddled in the towels that the servants had insisted on bringing in, when her water had broken in, his tiny fists batting at the air, her husband cooing rather adorably over him.

Her husband had been terrified, when she had first told him that she was pregnant, something of a wild surprise for him, since it had been some months since the last that they had seen of each other, and she had thought he would be dead.

Another miracle.

She swallowed hard, the sight of her husband, alive and mostly recovered before her, though he would never walk normally again, holding their child, bringing her nearly to tears.

Dear gods, she didn’t understand what she had done to deserve this, to deserve having her life given back to her, to be granted happiness when she was partially responsible for one of her closest friends losing it.

No, she told herself. No, she would not think about that today.

Today, she had brought a child, a son, into the world, and her husband was alive to see it. That was all that mattered, even if none of her friends had come to see her bring that child into this world.

“Elinor,” Alyn said, and then choked up, his eyes filled with unshed tears as he looked down at her, where he sat beside her on the bed. “Gods, I’m so proud of you. He’s…” he stared down at the child in her arms. Her husband had never been a particularly verbose man, but she could tell that the sight of their child, whole and hale before them, pleased him greatly. “He’s beautiful.”

Elinor sent her husband a hesitant smile, trying to ignore the pain in her loins from what she had just
done. Women had been surviving births for years; she would get over it, as soon as that damned maester came back with something to take the edge off.

She glanced down instead at the bundle in her arms, unable to keep from smiling at the sight of the child, her child.

The child that she’d had with the man she loved.

She did not think many women could boast of that, these days.

“Yes,” she whispered, softly. “Yes, he is.” She bit her lip. “He looks just like his father.”

Alyn bent forward, kissing her forehead before reaching out a gentle hand to brush against their child’s forehead, as he looked down at the child between them. “Do you still want to call him Willas?” he asked.

Elinor swallowed hard. A part of her knew that it might be a mistake to go through with the plans that they had made months ago, before everything had turned to shit around them. Before Elinor had thought her husband dead, and Margaery had turned against the grandmother she never would have dared to go against, in the past.

But a part of her welcomed the confrontation that might cause as something, at the very least, to happen to disrupt the uneasiness that had been settling in Elinor’s gut ever since that fateful night when the King had died. At least then, she might know where she stood, in King’s Landing.

“Yes,” she whispered, smiling down at the child in her husband’s arms in lieu of seeing the worry on her husband’s face. “Yes, we should call him Willas. Lady Alerie gave me permission, before I came back to King’s Landing, to do so.”

Alyn smiled at her; they both knew it was not Alerie they might be worried about, if anyone objected to Willas’ name being given to their son.

“And, you’re dead,” Lady Nym said, with a cold sense of detachment, as Sansa sagged back against the wall, Nym’s spear raised level against her chest, panting hard.

She sighed, waving a hand for Nym to lower the weapon, which the other woman seemed to do only reluctantly. Sansa had a feeling that she would much rather run Sansa through, though Sansa hoped that at this point, after everything they’d been through today, she might at least hesitate.

Nym flashed her a sickly smile, and then pulled back, eying Sansa up and down. “You’re shit at this,” she said. “Should have stuck to embroidery.”

Sansa gritted her teeth, climbing to her feet once more, and holding her sword out again, the sword that Lady Nym insisted she learn how to use, if she was truly going to go through with this, even if she so often mocked Sansa’s ability to use it.

But Nym had had half a lifetime to learn how to use weapons that weren’t made of something as fragile as words, Sansa thought, bitterly, as she raised her sword.

They were in an abandoned courtyard, so that Sansa’s humiliation - or rather, her practice - could not be seen by anyone else, gods forbid someone amongst the Kingsguard, which would be humiliating, more so than Nym’s pointed jabs, Sansa knew.

But this was the courtyard that Margaery had used for her own private use, just outside the
Maidenvault, Sansa knew. It was a beautiful place, for, while Margaery had still given a damn about it, she had ensured that so many rose bushes were planted here that it was nearly overflowing.

Now, the rose bushes were an effective shield against Nym, when the other woman sparred with her.

Nym raised her spear again, smirking. “Another round?” she asked, and Sansa bit back a sigh, reaching up to wipe at the sweat on her forehead.

They’d been practicing for the better part of an hour, and Sansa suspected that Nym had needed the chance to release her pent up energy just as much as Sansa did, today.

Neither one of them had spoken of what was to happen in...not so very long now, Sansa realized, brows furrowing together as she glanced up at the sun, shining brightly in the sky. Sansa suspected Nym was just as tight lipped as she was about it for the same reasons, though surely Nym did not know the truth of what had happened that night, the night Joffrey had died, even if she did suspect that there was more to the story than the Crown had admitted.

She licked her lips. “Fine,” she said, because she didn’t want to attend today’s event anymore than Nym did, even if she knew that she would have to be there, while Nym might make some excuse.

Nym grinned, and lunged. Sansa just barely managed to pull herself out of the way of the incoming spear, swearing softly under her breath.

“Not very ladylike,” Nym teased, but she too was sweating. Sansa glanced down at her leg, grimacing in sympathy, but she knew better, after the past few weeks of sparring with this woman, than to ask her if she needed a respite because of her injuries at the hands of Ser Robert Strong.

Nym might actually run her through for asking, rather than just threatening to do so.

And even with her injuries, injuries that, when she had first awoken from her deep sleep, the maesters had told her would prevent her from having quite the same range in fighting that she had once had, Nym was a fierce fighter, far more fierce than Sansa herself.

Sansa supposed that was the difference, in being trained from such a young age by the Viper.

But Sansa did not want to become a fierce fighter. She only wanted, in her new position, to know that she could protect herself.

The way that she hadn’t been able to, when Joffrey was the King. The way that she had not been able to protect Margaery, either.

The thought made her flinch, and Nym took advantage of the moment’s distraction, her spear clipping Sansa’s side and shoving her against the nearest wall. Sansa let out a pained cry, glaring at the other woman.

For once, she was glad that Brienne finally trusted Nym enough to let them spar alone, now. She remembered the beginning of their sparring, when Brienne had come running every time Sansa had cried out, or fallen.

It was part of the reason that Nym was training Sansa now, rather than Brienne. The other being that Nym was just injured enough to put them on nearly equal footing.

Nym did not go easy on her, either, the way that Brienne might have done. She pushed and she pushed, and Sansa let her, wondering how she had ever survived in King’s Landing without this outlet for her frustrations, in the first place.
She was glad that Nym had ever suggested it to her.

And then Nym’s spear was knocking the sword out of Sansa’s hands, pushing her up against the wall, her breaths heavy. Sansa glanced down at the other woman’s leg, and saw how she had twisted it, saw the way it spasmed.

She wondered if Nym had purposely put an end to the fight because of it.

“And you’re dead, again,” Nym said, surprising her by sounding disappointed.

Sansa gave her a small smile, putting her hands up in surrender. “You’re right,” she said. “My head isn’t in it, today.”

Nym gave her another little push against the wall, before she let go of her for good, and Sansa remembered to breathe again, only realizing in that moment that she hadn’t been. Nym let out a little grunt.

“Thinking about the executions we’re already late for, or about Margaery?”

Sansa grimaced. “Does it matter?”

Both were painful thoughts, after all.

They both sagged to the ground, then, Nym leaning back against the courtyard wall and eying Sansa suspiciously, as she squatted on the ground, panting hard.

The sun was beating down on them in earnest, now. They were most certainly late.

Sansa didn’t feel any great hurry to get to her feet, however.

“How is she?” Lady Nym asked, and Sansa furrowed her brows and tried to pretend she didn’t know exactly whom Lady Nym was referring to.

It was not as if there was anyone else lately who had been so...unbalanced.

Sansa grimaced, feeling instantly ashamed for the thought, even if a part of her still whispered that it was true. That, even if she could hardly blame Margaery for it if she were, it was the only explanation for the way she appeared to sleep with her eyes open through Small Council meetings, seemed to spend every moment that she did not have to be elsewhere locked up in her chambers, the ones that had once belonged to Cersei Lannister because they were the only ones Margaery had never been raped in, refusing any and all visitors, the way she seemed to see enemies where before there had been none. The way she didn’t seem to give a single fuck about the goings on of her own kingdom, only of her belly.

And Sansa couldn’t blame her for any of it, not after what had happened.

Not after the way that Sansa had failed to protect her.

And yes, no matter what Brienne had tried to tell her in the days after the King’s death, it had been a failure.

Sansa should never have listened to Margaery when the other woman told her that they ought to just go after Joffrey themselves. Olenna’s plan might have been flawed, and the old woman might have terrified Sansa, but she had known what she was doing, and if they had gone by her plan, none of this would have happened.
Sansa would not have had to push past the Kingsguard standing outside of Joffrey’s door and find…

All that blood. Blood that would forever be on Sansa’s hands, because Sansa hadn’t gotten there early enough. Sansa had been too caught up in saving the life of a boy who wasn’t even alive any longer, because the moment she had brought Lord Baelish into all of this, she had known that he wouldn’t be.

Sansa shut her eyes shut tightly, and when she opened them again, she thought Lady Nym was looking at her in something like sympathy, which was infuriating.

Sansa didn’t want her sympathy.

“She’s…” Sansa knew that whatever had happened in Dorne, beyond Margaery promising the Martells her soul, practically, in exchange for returning to King’s Landing, returning to Sansa, only to pay the ultimate price for it, Lady Nym and Margaery seemed to have formed some sort of bond.

Or, they had, at least, before Lady Nym had nearly gotten herself killed fighting the Mountain, and Margaery had withdrawn so deeply within herself that Sansa now sometimes wondered whether there was anything of the woman Sansa had loved so still within her.

Sansa didn’t know whether Margaery and Nym even spoke anymore, these days, just as Margaery hardly ever spoke to Sansa, save for when she needed to.

That worried Sansa, too, because she didn’t think the other girl was speaking to anyone, if she wasn’t speaking to the two of them.

“She’s pulling through,” Sansa said, which was almost the truth, and the only thing that she could offer Nym about Margaery, at the moment, when she herself didn’t know the answer to that question. “The maesters say that the child is healthy, within her, and that she should have it in the coming months with ease.”

Nym snorted, rolling her eyes. “They also say that the stars tell them it will be a son,” she said, spitting to the side. “Bullshit, if you ask me.”

Sansa shrugged, swallowing hard. She wasn’t as certain of that as the maesters seemed to be, but so far, she had not shared her concerns with anyone. They needed this to be a son, or they were all damned.

By now, Cersei had most certainly learned that her son the King was dead, and if she had not convinced half of the Lords of the Westerlands to crown Tommen already, she was a fool, even with the Tyrell army growing in size every day, even with Kevan Lannister still sitting on the Small Council as the Hand of the King.

Perhaps he knew even more about that than he had claimed, as well, for all that he had happily sworn his fealty to the Regent, until the child was born and its gender could be determined, once and for all.

Sansa just hoped the child didn’t come out a girl, with all of Olyvar and Margaery’s features, obvious to the world.

“That’s not what I meant, though,” Nym said, and Sansa blinked over at her, saw the sweat glistening on Nym’s skin, the tiredness in her features, as she stared out at the rose bushes, rather than Sansa.

The rose bushes were beginning to show the signs of not being tended to, but Sansa loathed the idea
of bringing any of the servants here, to this place that had become she and Nym’s secret. Of exposing herself even more to the world.

“I came to see her, the first time after I awoke from the fight with the Mountain?” Nym shrugged, as Sansa’s eyes shot to her face, this time. She still wouldn’t look at Sansa. “She was standing on the ledge in her rooms. I thought she was going to jump.”

Sansa shuddered, her heart beating a little faster, at the thought.

Nym didn’t know the details of what had happened that night; only a few people did, and Sansa may have learned much from sparring and plotting with Nym, but she didn’t quite trust the other woman with that information, yet.

But she was certain that Nym must have suspected, seeing Margaery standing on a ledge like that. She had awoken not long after…

After Joffrey had died, after all. Margaery had still been...fragile, then. Like a teacup that Sansa was still piecing back together.

Spending a few moments alone with the girl not wearing the mask of Regent would be enough for anyone to know what must have happened to her.

“She has a guard with her at all times, now,” Sansa confessed, and didn’t know why her voice was just barely above a whisper. “She sent away her ladies, at first, but I told them never to let her out of their sight, no matter how she screamed at them.” Sansa shrugged, uncomfortably. “I don’t think she’s forgiven me, that.”

And Sansa couldn’t even blame her for it, because Margaery had a much better reason to be angry with her, even if this was the one she had chosen to claim.

Nym licked her lips. “Do you think she’s...a danger to herself?” she asked, and Sansa squeezed her eyes shut.

She didn’t want to think about that. Didn’t want to think about the way that Margaery had closed in on herself, in the days after Joffrey’s death, as if the very touch of another human might kill her. Didn’t want to think about the fact that they had not shared a bed or a stolen conversation since that night that did not pertain to the Crown, and Sansa missed her lover.

Didn’t want to think about the way Margaery had looked, when Sansa had walked in on her, standing over Joffrey’s mutilated corpse.

“Not anymore,’ Sansa said, softly.

Nym’s eyes widened. Then, “I’m taking a great risk here, Sansa, in taking her side over that of my own family. Bringing the Martell fleet here to protect her,” she reminded Sansa, who certainly hadn’t forgotten that, still didn’t know if Nym was even worthy of her trust. “Make sure she’s worth it.”

Sansa sighed, reaching up and rubbing at her temples. “She’s pregnant with the Heir to the Iron Throne,” she reminded Nym, as if it needed to be repeated. As if Sansa didn’t think about it every minute of every day. “You don’t need to worry about her hurting herself.”

Nym grunted. “I’d better not,” she said, harshly, but Sansa thought she saw something like pity in Nym’s eyes, anyway.

Sansa chewed on her lower lip, before adding, “She’s stronger than you think.”
Stronger than any of them had thought, Sansa thought, albeit nervously, thinking of the way that Margaery had managed to pull herself together, the morning after she’d butchered her own husband, and led them to this moment.

It had been brave, had been something that Sansa wasn’t entirely certain she could manage, after seeing the way she had reacted to Joffrey’s death, to what Joffrey had done to her.

But here they were.

There was a knock on the door leading from the Keep out into the courtyard, and both girls looked up as Megga Tyrell stuck her head out, squinting at them for a moment before rolling her eyes fondly, and calling over her shoulder, “Never mind, I found them.”

Sansa bit back another sigh, shielding her eyes as she glanced up at the sky again.

“It’s time,” Megga said, glancing between the two of them.

Yes, Sansa supposed it was.

Nym got to her feet with some strain then, sending Megga a smirk that had Sansa raising her eyebrows.

She had no idea when that had happened, only that the two of them seemed almost inseparable, these days. Rumor had it...Well, Alla said, Megga had been by Nym’s bedside every day while she had been in danger of never waking again, after fighting the Mountain.

Clearly, that had not changed even after Nym had awoken, even if Nym sometimes seemed annoyed by her constant shadow.

Sansa thought it might be good for them.

Her heart ached a little at the small pang of jealousy she felt, when she saw the smirk Megga returned to Nym.

Sansa huffed, exchanging her own glance with Nym. She thought that she saw the same level of reluctance in Nym’s eyes as she herself felt, but it lasted only a moment, before the other woman got to her feet and held a hand out to Sansa.

Sansa clenched her jaw, taking the hand and allowing Nym to pull her to her feet.

“Are you ready?” Nym asked, cocking her head at Sansa.

Sansa shrugged. Whether she was ready or not, this had to be done, after all.

Megga shot Sansa a look that was far more sympathetic and less wolfish than the one she had sent Nym. “Margaery’s already there,” she told Sansa, and Sansa flinched, before nodding.

Once upon a time, she might have known that even before Megga.

Nym shot her another concerned look, one which Sansa pretended not to see as she passed the two of them and walked through the door, back into the Keep. She could hear their quiet footfalls behind her, but did not bother to turn around and wait for them.
execution, to all but put it together, in the first place.

There were few in King’s Landing who seemed to realize the power that Sansa Stark had over such things these days, though Rosamund suspected that was exactly how the other woman wanted it.

It seemed that she was learning much from the rather unholy alliance she had begun with a man who might as well be the Stranger himself, for all of the stories Rosamund had ever heard about him.

After all, it was far easier to underestimate someone when one didn’t know the power they had at all, and very few in King’s Landing seemed to understand the reach of Sansa’s power, to their own folly.

Still, Rosamund sighed a little at her lady’s tardiness, at the disapproving looks she received from the other members of the Small Council, as she joined them high up on the steps outside of the Keep, hovering above the crowd of angry smallfolk beneath them, all of them muttering to themselves, a loud, large crowd to watch the proceedings.

Even having this execution was a dangerous risk, Rosamund knew. The smallfolk had made it more than clear that they sympathized with the High Sparrow, when he had first spoken out against the King, and Rosamund did not think much had changed, with his death. The Slaughter of the Sept of Baelor was still fresh in their minds, another reminder that they were Other than the Crown.

One of the first things Margaery - well, Sansa - had done after Joffrey’s death was to remove the High Sparrow’s head from the gates and bury it with the rest of his remains, lest the people throw another fit, because of it, though Rosamund did not think that had been enough, even without another High Septon having yet been appointed.

And now, they were executing even more Sparrows.

Nym moved to her place within the Kingsguard, silently, and her tardiness was not nearly as noted as that of a member of the Small Council, and such a young one, at that. It might have been, though, if Margaery had not so recently named Nym as one of the Kingsguard, over the objections of well, everyone.

Lady Sansa took her place almost directly beside where the Queen stood, on the top step, surrounded by the Kingsguard, without a word, dipping her head to Margaery as she did so, and Rosamund did not fail to notice the way that her eyes caught Baelish’s, as she moved.

The Queen stood tall amongst her Kingsguard, her head held high, and her hair pulled up tightly around her head, in an elaborate set of braids that reminded Rosamund of the way she’d had them on her wedding day.

She wore a flowing black gown, with long sleeves and a hem that swept past her ankles, despite the heat of the noon day, a symbol of her mourning for her husband, though it had been some months since then, she was loathe to wear any other color, Rosamund thought.

The gown was slightly offset by the protrusion of her pregnant belly, and the golden armor glinting around her breasts and shoulders, literally protecting her from any attackers.

That reminded Rosamund rather of Cersei, though the gown, for all that it covered every inch of Margaery, from chin to ankles, was all Reach styles.

Below the Queen, her Small Council and guard, on the bottom steps of the Keep, were the traitors slated for execution, today.
Rosamund grimaced.

Rosamund knew well enough to keep her head down, with everything that she knew and saw in King’s Landing, for all that the knowledge plagued her. Her mistress had made it clear what would be done to her, should she have loose lips ever again, after the way that she had testified against Oberyn Martell, and she did not intend to suffer such a fate.

Sansa Stark would not allow her a quick, peaceful death, but she could make things much worse for Rosamund, as well. Rosamund had learned that well enough in the dungeons at Cersei’s command, the plaything of her pet maester.

But even if she knew not to notice the things around her too closely, Rosamund couldn’t help but notice the...particular closeness that had developed between her lady Sansa and Lord Baelish, since the event of the King’s death. Sansa had forbidden Rosamund from asking after it, but after the amount of times that she had seen Baelish coming and going from Sansa’s chambers in the Maidenvault, she had been able to intuit rather much, to her own misfortune.

She remembered one night, not so very long ago, when she had entered Sansa’s chambers just as Baelish was pressing a gentle, possessive kiss to Sansa’s temple, and Sansa had screamed at her to get out.

Later, when Baelish was gone, she had been summoned to Sansa’s chambers, and Sansa told her in no uncertain terms that this was not one of the things she wanted Rosamund writing to Cersei about, back at the Rock.

Rosamund hadn’t been planning on it.

She hadn’t bothered guessing about their strange relationship since the King’s death, beyond that.

It was not the only perk of the King’s death that Lord Baelish seemed to have profited from, Rosamund thought, and wondered where her bitterness at the thought came from, when it was not as if she cared overmuch for Sansa Stark, the girl who wouldn’t let her die.

Maybe it was just the thought of a man having that much power over a woman, after the amount of power men had had over her, in the Black Cells.

Baelish sent Lady Sansa a secretive smile, and Rosamund grimaced again, looking down at her hands because it was better than watching that.

Petyr Baelish. Now there was a man who seemed to have profited above any other, from the death of King Joffrey. By gods that Rosamund no longer believed in, he was practically Hand of the King now, even if that title still officially belonged to Kevan Lannister.

Of course, that was merely because divesting him of the title would merely send the Lannisters packing, and her lady seemed...uncertain, in how she wanted to deal with them, especially when there was no telling how Cersei might be reacting to all of this, back in King’s Landing.

There had been no official response, when they had sent ravens to the Westerlands, letting them know of King Joffrey’s death, though Sansa had confessed to Rosamund that she hadn’t expected one.

There had been no response to Rosamund’smissive to Cersei, either, as she sent her letter informing the other woman that Tyrion Lannister had fled King’s Landing at the same time of Joffrey’s death.

Arianne Martell had sent her condolences, for all that Sansa seemed to believe them halfhearted at
best, but there had been nothing from the Rock.

The Westerlands was waiting, with bated breath, to see how Cersei Lannister would respond, before any of them promised to bend the knee to this newest king.

Because they all feared how Cersei might react to such betrayal. What she might do, in response, and the longer she stayed quiet, the more concerned they seemed to grow.

Rosamund may not be astute at politics, something that she had never disputed, not when she had testified against Oberyn Martell and certainly not before that, but she understood that as much.

She understood a healthy fear of Cersei Lannister.

The herald standing before the prisoners called for quiet, then, and the smallfolk seemed to still, at those words.

The Kingsguard around Margaery shifted.

Rosamund understood that there had been some concern about her attending this execution at all, with the way that the smallfolk seemed to have rallied behind the Sparrows up until this point, with the flimsiness of the Crown’s excuse in killing them, but in the end, it had been decided that she had to attend.

After all, if she did not attend, she risked the smallfolk wondering if she disapproved of the execution, and the Crown could not have that.

The herald started to speak, then, and Rosamund cleared her head as she pretended she was nothing more than the vapid serving girl of her lady, that she didn’t very much suspect the innocence of the men before her, as he shouted out to the crowd.

“These men, the last remnants of that fanatical, traitorous cult known as the Sparrows, have been tried in accordance with the law, and found guilty of treason, and the murder of King Joffrey of House Baratheon, First of His Name, after being let into the Red Keep by Tyrion of the House Lannister, a known collaborator against the King. They have confessed, and shall be sentenced to death by hanging.”

The herald turned then to the Queen, and Rosamund bit back a grimace as the whole crowd seemed to turn to her then, with bated breath.

Perhaps most of them, Rosamund thought, were too far away to see the paleness of her features, the way that her hand shook, at her side, before Sansa reached out and snatched it in her own, holding it tightly.

Rosamund swallowed hard.

She wondered if the rest of King’s Landing was truly so blind as to not see what she did, every time that she looked at them. Every time they looked at each other. It was so damn obvious to Rosamund, after all.

Margaery stepped forward, then, head held high as she dropped Sansa’s hand and placed her hand on her heavy stomach.

“In the name of the King,” Margaery said, and her voice was shaking a little too much for a queen. The people shifted restlessly below the steps of the Keep, and Margaery cleared her throat. “For treason, the Father’s judgment is clear; you are to be hung by the neck until dead, on the outer walls
of the city, so that all may know your judgment. I, Margaery of House Tyrell, Regent of the Seven Kingdoms, in the name of the Heir, sentence you to death.”

Someone in the crowd let out a scream of horror, at the Queen’s words, and then someone still, a woman, no doubt a mother or wife to one of the men on the stairs, cried out, “Mercy, Your Grace!”

Rosamund doubted any of them would have dared or bothered to do so, had any of the men on the steps been members of the nobility.

But these were men of the people, smallfolk who had been rounded up by the Kingsguard and arrested for their treason in sneaking into the Keep of dead night, some months ago, and butchering the King in front of his queen.

It had taken this long to round all of them up, and even the woman screaming for it must have realized that there would be no mercy for these men, today.

Margaery stepped back, again, and Rosamund was certain she couldn’t have been the only person to notice the way that Margaery reached out of her own volition to snatch up Sansa’s hand, this time, and squeeze it until Rosamund could see Sansa’s hand turning white.

The nooses, hanging from a hastily constructed wooden structure at the bottom of the steps, this one surrounded by Green Cloaks meant to keep the smallfolk from interfering, were tied around the necks of the traitors, one at a time.

They were only smallfolk, and so they were not given last words, only the tired voice of a septon giving them last rites in the silence of their deaths, as the smallfolk waited without a word to watch each man lose his life to the noose.

Margaery and Sansa’s hands parted, with the last gurgling breath of the final man in the line of ten who had been executed this day, and Rosamund glanced away, somehow uncomfortable by the intimacy in that touch, for all that their fingers had only touched for a few moments.

Margaery was the first to turn away, her eyes hooded and downcast as she all but fled the steps of the Keep without actually doing so, her Kingsguard following hesitantly behind her.

Sansa stared after her, and a part of Rosamund wanted to scream at the both of them, wanted to scream at them that they were being too damn obvious, that they were being foolish, doing this, but she held her tongue, didn’t dare speak up. Anyone could look at them, as, indeed, Rosamund was doing right now, and know exactly what they were to each other.

Know exactly what they had done together, when they were staring at each other just like that, after killing those supposedly responsible for Margaery’s husband’s death.

Oh, Rosamund had no proof, of course, that the official story was not the truth of what had happened that night. She could not go to anyone with her suspicions, not even Cersei, even if she had wanted to. Tyrion Lannister had damned himself enough by fleeing on the night of the King’s death; the Queen Mother might be mad, but Rosamund did not think that even she would believe her, not when she loathed her brother so.

But Rosamund had spent every day in the company of Sansa Stark, since the King’s death. Had spent everyday brushing her hair while Sansa Stark stared at herself in the mirror and didn’t recognize the woman staring back. Had spent every day watching her sigh over Margaery Tyrell from afar, because the other woman kept pushing her away, save for those days when she clung to her with all of the vigor of a drowning woman.
Rosamund knew what she saw, and she could say nothing about it, because Sansa Stark had dragged her into this life, now, just as assuredly as she had dragged the rest of King’s Landing into it.

And Rosamund worried about what might finally drag them out, when the rest of King’s Landing realized what those longing looks between those two young women actually meant, as she had.

She glanced up; Petyr Baelish, who had enjoyed far too much prestige since the King’s death, was staring directly at her, and Rosamund quickly ducked her head, not wanting to meet that probing gaze as she turned and followed after her mistress.

But then she paused, seeing the way that Sansa had stopped just inside the doorway of the Keep, despite the way that the smallfolk were beginning to mutter a bit too loudly amongst themselves, even as many of them dispersed.

Garlan Tyrell, wearing the thin green cloak of House Tyrell, stepped up to Sansa, placing a far too proprietary hand on her shoulder and leaning down to whisper something into her ear. Margaery had already disappeared within the Keep, but Sansa’s face went rather pale when Garlan whispered whatever it was he was saying to her.

Rosamund chewed the inside of her cheek, trying not to react, trying to hang behind without looking like she was waiting for her mistress.

And she tried very much to pretend that she did not notice the way that Petyr Baelish was watching Garlan and Sansa, his face pulling down into a disapproving scowl that he didn’t seem to realize anyone could see.
“Lady Sansa, of House Stark,” Margaery said, and her voice was light and musical as it filled the Great Hall, from where she sat atop the Iron Throne.

Sansa pretended nervousness, as she stepped forward, until she came to a stop in the middle of the throne room and dropped into a deep curtsey before the Iron Throne.

“Young Grace,” she said, and tried not to focus on how many eyes were on her, at the moment.

So many of them nobles who had witnessed, time and time again, Sansa’s humiliation at the hands of the Lannisters, at the hands of the one who had sat on the Iron Throne before Margaery.

None of them had said anything then, and none of them were saying anything as she was brought before the Iron Throne now.

She licked her lips, glancing up at Margaery.

Margaery, who looked fierce where she sat on the throne, her stomach finally protruding with the signs of her pregnancy, signs that twelve maesters a day told her were going well, that the child was as healthy as could possibly be expected, at this stage. Her face, harsh and lined in a way that it had not been when Margaery had first met Sansa, seemed to stand out against the bright lighting of the throne room.

She wore the gown of a warrior, not a queen, dark, Lannister colors today, with harsh metal armor plating her breasts and her shoulders, where her clothes had always been silk and left so little to the imagination, in the past.

The outfit today reminded Sansa of one that Cersei had taken to wearing after they had been attacked in Flea Bottom, one of the few outward symbols the other woman had let show of her vulnerability.

Sansa wondered if Margaery was realizing that same vulnerability, now.

She did not smile, as she took in the sight of Sansa, curtseying before her. As she gestured for Sansa to stand once more.

“Lady Sansa,” she said, and her eyes were hard; Sansa could read nothing in them, but that was the point. No matter what Margaery felt outside of this throne room, she could not allow it to be guessed on her face the moment she walked through these doors.

The moment she walked through these doors, she was a queen.

That was the arrangement, and it was as much as Margaery could do, Sansa knew that, but godsdamnit, at least she was doing it.

So long as she put on the show, they could survive this, Sansa knew.

“You have continuously shown your loyalty to the Crown throughout these many years that you have spent in King’s Landing,” Margaery told her, voice ringing out through the Great Hall. “Even
in the face of your own family’s treasons.”

Sansa flinched.

“For this exemplary loyalty, it is the opinion of the Crown that you ought to be rewarded,”
Margaery continued. “As such, you will be honored with the title of advisor to the Small Council.”

Shocked whispers rang through the crowd, but then, they had been expecting this, Sansa knew.

Sansa’s heart was hammering in her chest, for all that this appointment had hardly come as a
surprise. Hells, it had been her idea. But still, there was something about reaching for a power that
had long been denied to her, and finding it so easily within her grasp, that made Sansa nervous.

Still, Sansa glanced nervously over at Baelish, where he stood in the crowd. He sent her a subtle
nod, one that she was sure only Lord Varys noticed, from where he was watching the other man like
a hawk.

They had to take care of that, as well. Varys had been watching Baelish ever more since the King’s
death; if he began to suspect anything...if he knew something certain...

“This does not come with a title,” Margaery continued calmly, over the whispers, “But is an honor,
nonetheless, for a woman, as it has not been given to a woman who was not Queen Mother in many
years, if at all.”

Yes, as they had discussed.

Margaery was...Margaery was putting on a good show right now, sitting tall on the Iron Throne
with one hand on her pregnant belly, but the moment she walked out of these doors and knew that
she was no longer being watched, Sansa knew, the truth would out, as it inevitably did.

Baelish had already been sending Sansa alarming warnings, about Margaery’s behavior during the
Small Council meetings. She was hardly paying attention to a word said around her, signing
whatever was placed before her, as long as it first went before Baelish, and acting generally listless.

They needed a Regent right now that they could trust to act in their best interest; the Small Council
were subjects just as much as the smallfolk, after all. The moment they realized how little Margaery
was actually governing at the moment, they would panic.

This appointment was meant to help alleviate some of that panic. To, at the very least, make
Margaery seem a bit more in control of her actions.

To make sure that Sansa had access to as much of the information that she could get, in valuable
time. They were finding that to be the biggest hiccup so far, after all. The Small Council might learn
of something hours before Sansa did, and even with Baelish and Garlan on the Small Council, that
was hours they would never get back.

Pycelle, then, stepped forward, clearing his throat. “And with...good reason, Your Grace,” he said,
and Sansa found herself grinding her teeth, for she had not even been allowed to thank the Queen
for granting her this position and already, someone was trying to take it away from her.

Typical.

“Lady Sansa is little more than a girl, and besides that, the daughter of traitors, the sister of
traitors,” Pycelle lumbered on, and Sansa found herself trying hard not to roll her eyes. “To allow
her a seat on the Small Council, any seat, is to court danger, Your Grace.”
Margaery glanced down, examining her nails, and ti took everything within Sansa, then, not to clear her throat loudly in reminder to the other girl.

It was all well and good that she made it known her...grief, on the Small Council, but to show it before so many people now...

Pycelle cleared his throat, clearly trying to regain the Queen’s attention, though Sansa pitied the man for trying to do so as well, where Kevan Lannister was not only not trying to object to the position, but was not even present in the Great Hall for the announcement, one that had already been discussed with both he and Lord Baelish, of course.

Sansa sometimes wondered what a man like Grandmaester Pycelle gained from all of this. It was clear what Kevan Lannister gained; his niece was no doubt clamoring for a war, back in Casterly Rock while her son was not even yet buried. That was a foregone conclusion, and one that they were even now preparing for, though they had yet to announce anything, and neither had Cersei.

But Kevan had to know it was a possibility, and so he remained as the Hand of the King, at Margaery’s invitation after the news of her husband’s death got out, because he knew the value in keeping an alliance, especially with a child supposed to be Joffrey’s, when Tommen was also only supposed to be Robert’s.

But Pycelle… Pycelle, Sansa remembered from her time with Tyrion, had always been Cersei’s creature, and her father’s before her. He had no reason to stand alongside House Tyrell when Cersei would be declaring war at any moment, on any grounds she could find, and they all knew it.

The calm before the storm.

She wondered how the Tyrells had gotten to him, as well, for him to appear so...comfortable here. Sansa knew that he had been moved into even better rooms, since the King’s death, to honor his position as Grandmaester.

Still, he was questioning the Queen, and if he were anyone else, Sansa would have been less concerned about it.

“Yes, I am well aware,” Margaery said, coldly, as she looked up at Pycelle and the old man seemed to shrink in on himself. “But as I have just explained, I believe the Lady Sansa to have demonstrated her remarkable loyalty to the Crown in spite of her family’s...loyalties, or lack thereof, in the past. She was well trusted by my lord husband, for her valuable insight into his enemies, as well as her insight in other matters, pertaining to the North, and I would share that insight than remain blinded to it. Are you questioning my judgment, now?”

A dangerous silence fell over the room.

They all, everyone in this room, knew what it had meant to question Joffrey’s judgment, if one’s name was not Tywin Lannister.

Margaery was not her husband, but the hushed scare that fell over the crowd at the question made it clear that many in the room had not forgotten that instant fear, at the thought of what their king might do if provoked in the least, nor indeed that up until his dying breath, Margaery had remained at her husband’s side throughout such tyranny.

“Of course not, Your Grace,” Pycelle said, clearing his throat even as he continued to dig his own grave. “But this has not been discussed amongst the members of your Small Council. Perhaps if Your Grace had more information…”
“My lord husband, may he rest eternally in peace,” Margaery said, a shadow falling over her features, “Hardly, if ever, consulted his Small Council before his marriage to me, and afterwards, only because of my own intervention. I know well their uses; I did not think it prudent to utilize them in this case. Sansa of House Stark shall be a member of the Small Council, because I trust her not to bow and scrape before me, as she did not before my husband, while still offering her loyalty.”

Silence.

Pycelle dipped his head again. “As Your Grace commands,” he said, and Margaery sent him a far too bright smile.

If that smile had belonged to Joffrey, the room would have been right to be afraid.

And then Margaery was dismissing them all, like they were nothing but her servants, which, in a way, Sansa supposed they were.

But she also knew that they couldn't afford to make any of these nobles feel that they were being used, that they were not respected by their Regent, when she was clinging to the throne by such a thin thread.

A throat cleared behind her, and Sansa jumped a little as she turned around, eyes blown wide as she looked up into the dark eyes of Lord Baelish, because of course he was right there, behind her, the moment she could be alone again.

He was always there, ready and waiting for her. Waiting for her to fulfill the promise that she had made to him.

“Congratulations, Lady Sansa,” Petyr said then, reaching out to take her hand in his, and kissing it with all of the gentleness and intimacy of a lover.

It was all Sansa could do not to pull away at the touch, blushing as she realized how many people were watching them, just now.

“Lord Baelish,” she dipped her head to him. “It...It is an honor I am uncertain that I have earned.”

Baelish scoffed, at that. “You have earned it more than many of us, my lady,” he told her.

She wondered if he meant that because of the many things that she had suffered since her time at court had begun, or because she had killed the previous king and was sleeping with - well, had been sleeping with - the current one.

She forced a smile, all the same. “My thanks, Lord Baelish.”

He moved forward, then, the better to whisper in her ear, “We need to speak, later,” and Sansa bit back a sigh.

Of course they did, because the Realm could never sleep, it seemed.

“Of course,” she told him, forcing another smile.

Trystane didn’t know why they were still bothering to invite him to Small Council meetings. His seat, the seat that he had inherited from his uncle, who had inherited it from his father, had been given to his cousin, Lady Nym, even if she was now an honorary member of the Kingsguard.

But the Small Council still included him, apparently, as a new seat had been created for Dorne, the
Queen Regent insistent that Dorne be better represented, here. The one time that he had refused to come to these meetings, in the wake of Joffrey’s death, his cousin had arrived at his door, all but ready to drag him there herself.

Which would have been quite a feat, considering her recent injuries, but Trystane had felt just guilty enough to go, at the thought. And had gone every time, since, for the little good his presence offered.

The old men of the Small Council didn’t seem like they knew why he was there, either, especially after the way that he had outright challenged the King, just before his death.

And hadn’t that been fun, being led down to the Black Cells which he had been forced to live in for some time just because Joffrey disliked his marriage to Myrcella, and rather politely interrogated on whether or not he knew of any of the secret passageways that the traitors might have used to enter the Keep.

Trystane wasn’t a fool; he knew of them, because Myrcella had shown them to him, when the two of them were trying to pretend that their lives didn’t belong to her mad brother, while she was still here to keep him company, but he hadn’t said as much.

He’d claimed that he had no idea about such passageways, and asked yet again that he might be permitted to write to his sister and beg her help for him here, for all the good he might have thought it would do him.

She had not responded to his past three attempts, after all, though she had allowed Myrcella to write him in turn, letting him know that she was safe, and that she missed him.

Trystane’s heart ached a bit, at the reminder. He did not blame Myrcella for leaving him here, either because she had truly believed her uncle was taking her to the Rock or because his cousins had absconded back to the Dorne with her. He would not have wanted her to remain here with Joffrey, either, in the worsening moods he’d had near the end of his life, but still, it pained Trystane, to be stuck here while Myrcella was back home, in Dorne.

Gods, how he missed her.

That was not to say that his current captors were cruel. On the contrary; they were strangely kind to him, allowing him free reign throughout the place after their first interrogation, because, they’d explained, or rather, some faceless guard had done so, he had challenged the King to single combat just weeks before.

He was just not allowed to leave the Keep, not allowed to go out to the harbor where the Martell fleet might actually pick him up and take him back to Dorne, his sister be damned for leaving him here in the first place.

He sighed, flicking at a fly that had landed on the table in front of him, and earning the Grandmaester’s sharp look of disapproval.

Gods, it was damnably hot in here, and Trystane hated the feeling of being cooped up, these days, even if the Black Cells had been cold, not hot.

In the days after his questioning, it had been determined by the Crown that a conveniently absent Tyrion Lannister must have been the one to let the traitors into the Keep.

He sighed, leaning back into his chair at the Small Council table. No one glanced his way; sometimes, he thought the old men here were trying to pretend that he did not exist at all. He certainly never abusd them of the notion by bothering to speak up during these meetings.
He knew better than to think his opinion might be wanted, for all that the Regent and Lady Nym insisted on his presence.

Trystane sometimes amused himself, at these incredibly boring meetings during which old men argued about the things that didn’t matter, such as whether the fanatics who had killed their king ought to be beheaded or hanged, rather than worrying about what Stannis Baratheon or his sister might be up to, with wondering whether the fragile truce that the Regent insisted on with Dorne was because she had fucked his sister.

He glanced over at her, where Margaery Tyrell sat at the head of the Small Council table, looking just as bored as he felt but hiding it far less, slouched in her chair and picking at the dirt the servants had not been able to remove from her nails.

She was more Lady Nym’s type than Arianne’s, he thought finally, wondering how the dirt had gotten there in the first place.

He wondered if that armor she was wearing over her dark black gown, which covered far too much of her for the weather today, hurt, after so many hours.

He wondered if her apathy, since her husband’s death, was just as put on as his own. After all, he was beginning to wonder if he would ever leave this place, and while he knew better than to speak up at these meetings, listening to what he could was important, he knew.

Learning how to survive here, if his sister really had abandoned him to this place and his cousin didn’t care to liberate him from it, would be important.

“Well,” Lord Kevan, current Hand of the King in a rather thankless job, considering the Regent’s apathy towards the Crown these days, cleared his throat finally, breaking the silence. They’d been sitting in silence for far too long, for Trystane’s comfort. “Perhaps we should begin without the Lady Sansa.”

There was a chorus of agreement around the table, and, when heads turned her way, Margaery Tyrell at least appeared aware enough to nod her approval.

Lady Sansa. Now there, Trystane thought, was another example of a placeholder created on the Small Council, a way of keeping seats out of the hands of the Lannisters. Trystane might not be totally adept at politics, but he had figured out that as much about his own appointment.

Sansa Stark was perhaps the last person either the Tyrells or the Lannisters would have wanted on the Small Council, and yet, she came every time there was a meeting, granted an official seat because the Regent had demanded as much, it was rumored.

She did not speak, during any of these meetings, merely sat beside the Queen and made everyone wonder why she was there, face grave, listening intently to those around her.

Today, seeing the Queen’s apparent apathy toward her Small Council at all - Trystane had the pleasure of watching his cousin all but drag her to this meeting, after the execution - Trystane wondered if Sansa Stark wasn’t, perhaps, the Queen’s ears.

Now there was a frightening thought, that the girl who had once looked to his uncle as a savior had so easily managed to befriend Joffrey Baratheon’s wife.

Kevan began to list off the most pressing issues facing the Crown, and Trystane listened with half a care, because he knew that his father would have been angry to see him paying so little attention to the world around him, but Trystane could not bring himself to care about anything overmuch that did
not concern Dorne.

And, specifically, his returning to it.

“The most pressing matter of state is, of course, the funeral ceremony,” Kevan said, and Margaery blinked almost owlishly at him.

“What about it?” she asked, darkly. “Now that those who murdered our king have been apprehended and punished, I intend to go ahead with it.”

Kevan grimaced. “Your Grace,” he said, in a patient, almost condescending tone, “There remains some...confusion, about how to go ahead with the funeral.”

Margaery raised an eyebrow, looking...more alert, now, as she glanced over to where Baelish sat beside her, Sansa Stark’s empty chair between them. “Go on,” she said, calmly enough.

Kevan pressed his lips together. “It has been the tradition to inter the King in the Sept of Baelor at the time of their death,” he said. “Given the circumstances, King Joffrey’s body was left in his own chambers for seven days while it was prepared for burial, but the funeral never took place while we waited for those who had murdered the King to be apprehended.”

If Kevan Lannister disbelieved a word of the official story surrounding the King’s death, it did not show on his face.

Trystane eyed him. He didn’t seem torn about the King’s death, either, and even if Trystane couldn’t imagine anyone was, it seemed...strange that he would not be, even a little. That he was so levelheaded.

“And his body was placed in the Tower of the Hand,” Margaery pointed out. “Yes, I am aware.”

Kevan looked slightly frustrated, glancing over at the other members of the Small Council before saying, “But now that your vow to apprehend his murderers has been upheld, his body must either be returned to the Stormlands, or buried here, in the Sept. There will be questions, otherwise.”

Margaery raised a brow. “Returned to the Stormlands?” she asked, and Trystane sucked in a breath. Baelish shot her a furious glance. She shrugged. “It...My husband’s body should be interred in the Sept. It is what he would want. He was always...so intrigued, by the Targaryen remains there. I think he would appreciate joining them.”

Baelish was grinding his teeth so loudly that Trystane could hear it from across the table.

Kevan eyed the Queen. “Your Grace, considering the King’s most recent actions against the Sept, many of us feel that it would be...unwise, to place him there, lest the people riot while the funeral procession takes him there, or his body be mutilated.”

Margaery did snort, at that.

This time, Trystane thought he saw his cousin kick her under the table.

He didn’t look at his cousin, though. Didn’t want to meet her eyes and see the confusing lack of answers, there. Didn’t want to ask her why she had insisted on getting him a seat on the Small Council if he was meant to keep silent, why she couldn’t intercede with his sister for him to go home.

He no longer knew if he could trust her.
The only reason he knew she was not pocketing his letters to Arianne and Myrcella, when he asked her to send them for him, as he could not do so himself, was because Myrcella responded, as infrequent as those missives were.

He resisted a smirk, himself, wondering how the Regent was going to save herself from this one.

He had gone to see the King, in the seven days that his body was being prepared for burial, before his Queen had visited him on that last day and insisted that she would not see her husband buried until those who had killed him were brought to justice.

Looking back, he wondered if his visit was the reason anyone had remembered the way he had threatened the King in the first place.

But it was because of that visit that he understood the Queen’s humor. After those seven days had ended, the King’s body had been placed somewhere secret and guarded by a member of the Kingsguard at every hour, but Trystane had seen it, then.

What was left of it was not a pretty sight

Finally, Trystane had thought vindictively, as he looked down on it, Myrcella’s brother looked as ugly on the outside as he truly was on the inside.

“I’m sorry,” Margaery said then, sucking in air. She had grown very pale. “But those...traitorous fanatics brutalized my husband, before his death. There is not much more of him to mutilate, and so I find your choice of the word...surprising.”

There was an awkward silence from the men around the table. They did not seem to know what to do with a woman’s grief.

Kevan dipped his head. “My apologies, Your Grace.”

The men around the table repeated this, as well.

Margaery sighed, reaching up and running a hand through her hair. It had been short, Trystane remembered, when she had first arrived here.

It looked better, then.

“Ensure that there are one hundred soldiers following the funeral procession,” she decreed, “So that the smallfolk do not get any ideas. And see to it that a guard remains with the King’s body, if necessary, but he will be buried in the Sept as Kings were before him, and shall be after. If the septons object, remind them why it would be in their best interests not to.”

Trystane saw Varys and Baelish exchanging glances.

Then, surprising the whole table, Margaery continued, “Lord Baelish, you will see to these arrangements?”

Every eye in the room turned to Baelish.

Then, slowly, the Grandmaester wheezed, “Your Grace, as Hand of the King, surely Lord Kevan ought to be placed in charge of…”

Margaery raised a hand, cutting him off. “I have asked this burden of Lord Baelish. Do you question your Regent?”
Trystane sucked in a silent breath, interested despite himself, now.

The Queen may have been outwardly dignified for all her silence, in every Small Council meeting since her husband’s death, but this had been the first Small Council meeting where he actually found her interesting.

Before this moment, he had thought her sharp enough to have plotted...something, with his sister, for Arianne to have sent her back here, but still something of a vapid creature, content to allow the larger politics of everything into the hands of her counselors.

She’d never put so much interest into anything they’d brought before her until now, besides rounding up the men who had murdered her husband, a husband Trystane didn’t think she’d cared for anymore than he had, for all that she might have been able to hide it better.

And, incidentally, this was also the first Small Council meeting Sansa Stark had not attended.

The Grandmaester cleared his throat. “I...No, Your Grace.”

Margaery turned sharp eyes over to Baelish. He dipped his head in acceptance.

“Your Grace honors me with a weighty charge. I will see to it that your faith is not misplaced,” he told her, and Trystane had to resist the urge to roll his eyes, not entirely certain why giving this particular charge to Baelish, rather than the Hand of the King, was so important.

Baelish did not look at all surprised by the Queen’s appointment, after all.

He supposed it had something to do with the fact that besides being Hand of the King, Kevan Lannister was actually Joffrey’s family, while Baelish was not.

But the Queen had been affording more and more honors to Baelish, of late, sometimes with a purpose, sometimes seemingly randomly.

Trystane had not wondered before today if there was some pattern to the randomness, all the same.

But Baelish was, without a doubt, the one man who had benefited the most from the King’s death, Trystane knew. While Randyl Tarly and half a dozen other Houses loyal to the Tyrells had suddenly found themselves with seats on the Small Council, Baelish had found himself with all of the titles and honors that belonged to a man who had not yet been named Hand of the King.

Trystane would not be surprised if it came soon, though, especially when House Tyrell shared such little love with House Lannister, and House Lannister would be stupid not to fight a babe in the womb’s claim to the throne.

Margaery nodded to him. “You will have my thanks and more if you can make my husband’s ceremony...memorable,” she told him.

Trystane privately thought that they ought to have just buried Joffrey when they executed all those men. It would have been the sort of ceremony he might have liked, after all.

“Very well,” Kevan said, and Trystane wondered why, if it mattered so much to the others on the Small Council, he had not tried to contest the Queen’s decision. “As for the Westerlands...”

Margaery yawned and sat back in her seat again, displaying her usual amount of boredom at the reminder of the Westerlands. Now, though, Trystane wondered if it was because she was truly uncaring, or she only wanted her Small Council to believe so.
He didn’t know what sort of game she was playing, but he almost wanted to lean across the table and let her know that it wasn’t having its intended effect; Trystane might not be included amongst their inner circles, but he knew damn well that the Small Council found its new Regent borderline incompetent, at best.

If Sansa Stark was not present at these Small Council meetings, of course.

“There has still been no word from Stannis Baratheon, since he and my nephew, the Lord Commander, traveled North after they made their truce at the Rock,” Kevan continued, undaunted by the Queen’s apparent lack of interest.

Trystane raised an eyebrow, because while the Queen seemed to find this new vein of discussion boring, he found it rather fascinating.

Joffrey had sent his uncle (ha!) to the Westerlands to wrest them out of the hands of Stannis Baratheon, if it came to that, once House Lefford had allowed the Baratheon army through their gates. Trystane only truly cared about that because Myrcella had gone with Jaime, at first, before his wretched cousins had conspired to get her back to Dorne.

But Jaime had not been gone long before word came back from the Rock, in the form of Cersei, pleading with a son she didn’t already know was dead, letting them know that Jaime and Stannis had both abandoned the Rock by the time that she had arrived, traveling North to fight...fairytales, as she had called them.

The Others.

The subject of Trystane’s nightmares, as a child, because his cousins had been rather amused by his reactions when they told him stories of those fabled beings who lived beyond the Wall, waiting to kill and eat the whole of Westeros.

And now, Jaime Lannister and Stannis Baratheon, two men who loathed each other and stood on opposite sides of a war, had banded together to go and fight them themselves, deeming this so important that they had both agreed to leave their fighting over Casterly Rock until it was done.

Of course, Cersei had not been happy with this arrangement anymore than the Small Council was; when she had arrived at the Rock, she claimed, it was half overtaken by the Baratheon soldiers who had refused to follow Stannis North, and Selyse Baratheon was sitting in the seat Cersei had wanted to take for herself.

What had followed was a rather uneasy truce; the Crown had decided that they could not spare the troops to go to the Westerlands and liberate it from soldiers who seemed happy enough to allow Cersei and the rather large army that had refused to follow Ser Jaime North to live there without a fight, largely because the Small Council was as yet undecided about whether or not this had been another trick from the Lannister woman.

After all, Stannis Baratheon was not the sort of man any of them knew to give up on a fight, halfway through, only to fight another one.

But it was indisputable that Cersei was at the Rock since her exile, with her son, and that no one else had heard of Stannis Baratheon, in that time.

Trystane didn’t know what it all meant, but he could see the men around him, thinking hard about how they wanted to handle this situation.

The Queen did not appear to be among them. “Against the orders of his King, Ser Jaime left with
half of Stannis Baratheon’s army behind him, after making crude, vague threats to the King’s life and demanding that Myrcella and Tommen Baratheon be handed over to him when he did leave,” she said, coldly. “I think it wise to consider the fact that Ser Jaime is no longer acting in the interests of the Crown.”

This time, for all the times Lord Kevan had been passive in the past, he leaned forward, giving the Regent a sharp look, and Trystane was reminded that she only held onto her power by a thread, just now.

Had the baby been born before her husband’s untimely death, perhaps things would be different, but he wondered if she truly didn’t understand how thin that thread was, just now.

“Ser Jaime held Stannis Baratheon off from taking Casterly Rock, at great personal risk to himself and to our army, for the Crown,” Kevan reminded her, through gritted teeth, and an unnatural silence fell over the table.

And then Baelish, as he always did, rose to the Queen’s defense. “I would say that rather, he handed Casterly Rock over to Stannis on a silver platter, to avoid a fight with him,” he argued.

Kevan shot Baelish a disapproving look, now, as the Queen crossed her arms over her pregnant belly.

“He was doing what he believed to be in the best interests of the Westerlands,” he corrected. “As he was uncertain whether the Lannister forces would be able to take on Stannis.”

“Forgive me,” Margaery interrupted then, flashing a cold smile at Lord Kevan, and Trystane wondered how much longer either of them would be in power. “The subtleties of war are so often lost on a woman such as myself, but doesn’t handing half of the Rock over to the enemy in a truce which two armies have attested to rather defeat the purpose of keeping Stannis’ hands off the Westerlands?”

Silence.

The Grandmaester cleared his throat. “Perhaps Ser Jaime had a good reason…”

Baelish scoffed. “Your Grace, this debate is pointless. The fact of the matter is, Ser Jaime handed half of the Rock over to Stannis Baratheon to avoid another fight with the man, and then absconded with him to the North. For all we know, they’re both already dead.”

“Fighting believed fairytales, as Cersei called them,” Margaery repeated.

Trystane closed his eyes.

“In any case, something should be done,” Kevan gritted out. “We cannot allow this temporary truce with Stannis to stand, so long as my niece the Queen Mother, and Tommen remain in the Rock.”

Margaery closed her eyes, and then breathed out through her nose.

“I am open to suggestions,” she told Lord Kevan, and the man bristled slightly; Trystane figured the whole reason he had brought this up in the first place was to offer some. “So long as they do not include endangering the Crown by sending half of our army to deal with half of Stannis’.”

“The disbelieving half,” Baelish muttered, under his breath.

Margaery shot him a slightly amused glance.
Trystane’s cousin leaned forward in her chair then, for the first time, her eyes lighting up. “Your Grace,” she reminded Margaery, “The Martell fleet stands in your harbor, willing to defend Your Grace and Your Grace’s son to the death, if necessary. If you were to send forces to the Rock, you could count on their protection.”

Trystane raised an eyebrow, wondering what sort of game his cousin was playing, now. He still didn’t know whether or not he could trust her, and it was infuriating him. She’d been nice enough, after she had nearly died for him, but she, like Arianne, was content to leave him here.

Margaery sent Lady Nym a thin smile, one that Trystane almost admired.

Perhaps she didn’t need Sansa Stark here, after all.

“The offer is kind, but…” she turned back to Kevan, now. “Has the Rock pledged to bend the knee yet? We have heard from all of the Houses within the Reach, as well as many within the Westerlands, and even the Vale, but nothing from your dear niece, my exiled goodmother.”

Kevan gritted his teeth. “Your Grace, I have heard nothing.”

Margaery hummed. “Well then, I don’t understand why we’re having this conversation. Hopefully, Lord Stannis will get himself killed, traveling North of the Wall, and we won’t have to worry about him at all. Perhaps that is why Ser Jaime has gone with him.”

Another uncomfortable silence, save for the scratching of quills against ink.

Trystane drummed his fingers on the table, and ignored the annoyed look that Lady Nym sent him.

“There is another concern that I hesitate to bring before Your Grace,” Varys said, when it seemed as if Trystane might finally be freed to leave this confined space, and he bit back a groan, slumping down in his chair in much the same way that the Regent was doing, now.

He wondered if it was true boredom, or if the weight of her child caused the slump.

Margaery turned her sharp eyes on Lord Varys. No, it had to be boredom. “I begin to see why my husband so loathed these meetings. What is it now?”

Varys grimaced. “It is something so slight that I hesitate to bring it before Your Grace,” he said, “But there are...rumors, to the East.”

Margaery rolled her eyes. “I hope you are not wasting my time with rumors, Spy Master,” she told him, sharply. “I understand there are others at this table who feed me more secrets than you.”

Baelish sat up a little higher in his seat.

Trystane rolled his eyes.

Varys did not seem at all concerned by the Queen’s posturing. “Exactly why I hesitate, but I thought that Your Grace should know. There are rumors that the Golden Company has left their contract with Myr.”

Margaery raised an eyebrow. “And? Myr is a thousand leagues from here.”

Varys’ jaw ticked. Baelish looked amused by his embarrassment. “Yes, Your Grace, but these same little birds inform me that the Golden Company has been...commissioned, by one traveling West.”

Margaery sat up a little straighter, now. “Daenerys?” she asked.
Trystane perked up a little, at the mention of the Targaryens, glancing over at his cousin, across the table.

She seemed suddenly very uninterested in the conversation, but Trystane knew his cousin, knew that she was very much listening.

Varys shook his head. “Another, Your Grace, claiming Targaryen blood,” he said.

Margaery shook her head, muttering something under her breath which sounded suspiciously like, “Where the fuck do they all come from?” and Trystane bit back a snort, even as he was wondering the same thing.

Margaery lifted her head. “Is that a possibility?” she demanded.

Baelish leaned forward, then. “Not one that has a claim to the throne, Your Grace,” he told her. “The Targaryens died with their Mad King. The Dragon Queen is the last of them to cling to her ambitions, and she seems content in Slaver’s Bay, these days.”

Margaery didn’t look at him, though. “Is that a possibility, Lord Varys? You knew the Targaryens as well as anyone at this table.”

The words were not quite a threat.

Varys pressed his lips together. “I am...uncertain, Your Grace. But I think it would be wise not to underestimate such a threat. The Golden Company has yet to loose any battles they have fought.”

The Queen stared at him a second longer, and then slumped. “Then find out whether there is any truth to these rumors, Spy Master,” she told him, sharply. Then, she grimaced. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, this child demands that I rest.”

The men around the table all stood as she did, dipping their heads into bows, wishing the Queen well.

Trystane slumped in relief the moment the door shut behind her.

But he did not fail to notice the concerned look that Lord Varys sent after the Queen, as if he was truly worried for her.

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“Your absence was...noted from the Small Council, my lady,” Baelish said, as he stepped into her chambers, the ones in the Maidenvault now, because that was where Sansa felt the safest these days.

After all, the Tower of the Hand would seem be a place she could not easily escape, if she wished, for all the comfort that it had offered her in the few days after Joffrey’s death, while Margaery hid away in Sansa’s old chambers so that she did not have to face her own.

Sansa did not often try to examine why the rooms she had once shared with her husband felt more comforting to her than Margaery’s old rooms, these days.

She supposed it was because she did not sleep in them, any longer.

He had known that he could find her here, of course. She knew that his spies, whether whores or not, were plentiful within the Keep these days, and would have known that this was where she had retired.

What she did not know was whether or not they had seen who she had retired with, when she had
arrived here.

It was a constant game of cat and mouse, with Petyr Baelish, and Sansa loathed every moment of the migraines playing this particular game gave her.

But Baelish was here, now, and her absence could not be helped, at the Small Council meeting, even if she felt guilty for missing it. For not being there, an anchor for Margaery, after what had just happened.

She had known that it would be difficult for her, to witness the executions in the first place, and then for someone to beg the Queen’s mercy from the crowd…

It had been a difficult decision, in the first place, to have Margaery attend the executions. Sansa may love her with her last breath, but Margaery was...not well, since the King’s death, had not fully recovered from what had happened, and Sansa had not honestly been able to say that she knew how Margaery would react, to an execution for those who had killed the King.

Had not known if she would even allow it, in the end.

And beyond that, Sansa had not known how the smallfolk would react. They were still bitter, many of them, about what had happened at the Sept of Baelor, far more bitter than they had been when Joffrey had cut off her father’s head at that place, because Joffrey had done more than just spill one man’s blood, this time. They would not act on it, yet, but Sansa knew from Baelish’s spies that many of them were annoyed the Queen had reacted so harshly to the King’s murder, at all.

Were annoyed at the months she had spent tracking down every last man who had supposedly been involved in the King’s butchering, annoyed that she had been the one to call for their confessions and executions.

It was not as if Margaery could pardon the men who had killed her husband, but Sansa doubted that such things mattered to a mob.

It was a terrible risk, to place Margaery before them, to have her call for the deaths of men who had killed Joffrey, that they might lose the last of the love they felt for their queen, and just now, the Crown could not afford to lose anymore appreciation from the smallfolk.

She pressed her lips together, forcing herself to turn around and offer Baelish an apologetic smile. It was what he would expect, after all.

She gestured to Brienne, who waited impatiently in the doorway, hand on the hilt of her sword, looking happy enough to remove Baelish himself if Sansa asked it of her, that all was fine, that she could go.

Brienne all but sighed as she walked out of the room and closed the doors behind herself.

Baelish didn’t move until the door had shut behind Brienne, and then he latched it. Sansa stood very still, as Baelish turned back to her for an explanation, his eyes hard, demanding.

Gods, she did not want to deal with this right now.

“I...the execution,” she said, and hated the vulnerability, the hesitation in her voice, as if she craved his approval.

As if she wanted it.
“I didn’t think that I would be able to stomach going and speaking of politics, after that,’ she whispered, and she remembered what Margaery had told her once, what she thought Cersei might have taught her, as well.

It was far easier to lie about something if it was encased in half-truths.

Baelish moved forward then, his long robes sweeping along the floor before he stood before her, and Sansa glanced over his shoulder, saw that he had tightly latched the door to her chambers before stepping inside.

He reached up at the same time, running a hand through her hair, pushing it gently behind an ear.

He did that often, when they were alone. Sansa thought it was because he enjoyed the thought of controlling even that small part of her, of keeping her in line here when he could not exactly do so outside of these chambers.

She leaned into the touch, all the same.

“And do you feel better now?” he asked her, and she thought there might have been something like genuine concern in his tone, for which she shuddered a little, leaning further into the touch to disguise her action.

It was better, not looking him in the eyes as he talked to her, as she lied to him. He was the sort of man who had mastered this game long before she was born, she knew, and Sansa could never tell if he was believing her lies, or if he was lying to her, in turn.

It was unsettling, looking into a mask of a face, one that did not betray a single shred of emotion.

“Yes,” she said, softly. “I...was sick, for a little while, which is why I did not bother to come late.”

And she knew that she had burned yet more bridges, with her absence. The men of the Small Council all disapproved of her appointment, anyway, just as they had disapproved of Lady Nym’s appointment, but she thought that they had even more cause to be concerned with her own. And now, she was not even showing up to Small Council meetings pertaining to the King’s death.

She sighed. It could not have been helped, of course.

Sansa cleared her throat then, moving away from Baelish and putting the table that had been set up in the outer chambers of her room in the Maidenvault - Margaery’s old chambers, because Margaery now lived in Cersei’s chambers and even now, for some unholy reason, plotted to sleep in Joffrey’s - between them.

And Sansa...did not understand that. Did not understand why Margaery had told Lady Nym she wanted to sleep in her dead husband's rooms, rather than Cersei’s, because of course both were haunting, but Sansa would have thought the one worse than the other. Would have thought that Margaery would never want to step into her husband's rooms, again.

The table for their war council, she had heard Rosamund call it once, and Sansa privately thought the name fitting, though she would never admit to such around the other girl, who was far more obvious these days in her disdain for Sansa, and the tasks she demanded of her.

Sansa knew that something was going to have to be done about that, and soon.

“We need to appoint a new High Septon,” Sansa told him, raising an eyebrow, expectant, for she knew that Baelish would have noticed this particular hiccup in their plans long before she had.
Baelish, without blinking, responded, “Only the septons appoint a new High Septon, my lady, and they seem to be in...short supply, these days.”

Sansa snorted. “My husband appointed the last High Septon,” she pointed out. “Because he liked the depth of the man’s pockets. The septons themselves appointed that fanatic, and it did not do the Crown any good.”

To say the least.

She forced a smile, reaching out and placing a hand on Baelish’s arm, across the table. She might not have been brave enough, had he been standing directly next to her.

“Besides, the people will never accept our union if a High Septon does not annul my first marriage,” she pointed out.

Baelish pressed his lips together. He knew he was being manipulated, and also knew that it was working, Sansa thought, triumphantly.

Yes, it helped, she thought darkly, to know what it was that he wanted from her so badly. To know how to exploit that. She supposed that was something else he had taught her, in their few short months together.

She hated the thought of even using that promise, one that she had made to him in the heat of the moment, desperate because she did not know who else to turn to, for this. Hated the thought of reminding him what gaining a new High Septon might gain him, when in fact it was important, just now, to find a High Septon that might appease the people.

Because she knew that Baelish would remember this conversation, as soon as that High Septon was appointed.

“I’ll look into it,” he promised, which was as good as a guarantee.

And then, because she knew that leaving this conversation with the upper hand would not do her any favors, and because she knew there had to be another reason Baelish had come asking why she had not been at the Small Council, Sansa dropped her arm and looked down at her hands, forced her voice to sound small, like that of a child’s.

“Who were they?” she asked, and hated the tremor in her voice.

Baelish eyed her carefully, before lowering his hand. “My lady…” he began, looking uncomfortable, but Sansa wasn’t about to let him get away with not answering her. She had to know.

She had just watched a dozen men killed, knowing that they had been tortured for their confessions before their deaths, and that they were innocent of the thing for which they had all been hanged.

She needed to know.

Baelish shrugged. “No one,” he said, and Sansa’s gut twisted, the way it had when she had watched the men kicking against thin air, as their necks snapped.

“Just men that I found off the streets, those without families to miss them, those whom it could not be proven were not members of the Sparrows,” Baelish continued, in his annoyingly soothing voice, and Sansa squeezed her eyes, shut remembering the woman who had screamed for the Queen’s mercy.
Remembering that all of the Sparrows - or, at least, any of them who had truly cared about their High Sparrow - had died in the Slaughter of the Sept.

“But there was someone who missed them, who believed their innocence enough to beg for mercy, or perhaps thought the Queen might spare them, anyway. The Queen should not have been exposed to that doubt,” Sansa snapped, peevish.

Baelish raised an eyebrow. “There were few amongst the smallfolk who adored the King, my lady,” and his words were more stiff now, almost amused. “Would you protect your queen from all of them?”

Your queen.

She closed her eyes. “What did she do now?” she asked, dread filling her.

Gods, just for once, Sansa thought, she would appreciate getting some good news.

Baelish sighed. There was not an ounce of sympathy in his features, as she looked over at him. “Her Grace generally can keep her composure amongst her Small Council,” he told Sansa. “Especially with you present. It...unsettles them when she therefore loses that composure.”

Sansa sighed. “I’ll talk to her,” she promised, even if she had no idea whether it might do a bit of good, and Baelish just nodded.

“There is...something else that we need to discuss,” Baelish said, slowly. “Something, incidentally, that no one at the Small Council dared bring up before the Regent.”

Sansa closed her eyes. Yes, she knew exactly what it was that Baelish wanted to discuss, the same worry which had been plaguing her mind, since the day after Joffrey’s death, when she realized that a king’s death was inevitably followed by a funeral.

If she had been worried about how Margaery might react to the deaths of those innocent men in place of her, Sansa was absolutely terrified about how Margaery might react to this.

“He exiled her, the last time he saw her,” Sansa pointed out, desperately, though she knew that Baelish would have a thousand counterpoints to that.

Baelish gave her a knowing look. “And Tommen Baratheon is currently in the Rock, with his mother whispering in his ear that perhaps he ought to have been crowned king, rather than a child still in his goodsister’s womb. After all, they have the Westerlands behind them,” he said, darkly, bluntly, and Sansa flinched at the reminder.

Tommen was a sweet boy, and Sansa had never gotten the impression that he wanted to be king, for all that she had once fantasized about what being his queen might have meant for her, rather than being Joffrey’s, and she wished that she had been able to spare him this earlier, that she had been able to convince Joffrey to bring Tommen to King’s Landing before Margaery had bashed his head in.

It would have saved her this particular headache, as well.

“Half the Westerlands, if that,” Sansa pointed out, because things had certainly changed in the Westerlands since Joffrey’s death.

Cersei may be seated at the Rock, but she was not truly its lady.
At the moment, she shared that title with Selyse Baratheon, strange as it sounded.

Baelish shrugged. “A strong half,” he allowed.

“Kevan Lannister is still the Hand of the King, and as long as he remains Hand of the King, Cersei does not have the Westerlands behind Tommen,” Sansa pointed out, but she could hear the doubt in her own words, which meant that Baelish would pick them apart easily. “He knows the danger of handing power back over to her. What do you think the first thing she’ll order will be?”

Kevan Lannister was the sort of pragmatic man who knew better than to trust his niece with an iota of power, Sansa was certain of that much about him. He had bent the knee the day Margaery had sat herself on the Iron Throne and declared her intention to be Regent for her child, so long as it was a boy. Margaery had named him Hand of the King for her Regency seconds later.

And Sansa had seen him with Cersei, when she was still here. He was no more fond of his niece than Tywin Lannister had been of her, which meant that they could count him as an ally...for now.

Baelish raised an eyebrow. “Kevan Lannister is a bright mind, my lady,” he reminded her. “He knows, as you do, that it is not necessary to name a mother as Regent for her son, even if it is customary. If he liked, he could have Tommen brought here and named King, and preside as Regent himself, with Cersei stuck at the Rock throughout her second son’s reign, as well.”

Sansa sighed. “You’re telling me that there is no other solution but war?” she asked, because a part of her had long feared that, even while she’d known it to be the case.

The moment she’d walked in on Margaery, standing bloodied over Joffrey’s mutilated corpse, Sansa had known there would be war. Had known that while Cersei might hate her brother enough to believe their story, it would unravel, some day.

Even day they lived since then had been on borrowed time.

Baelish did not bother to answer her. At least, not directly. He glanced down at the map nailed down to the table between them, considering. “What do you think will happen if the Queen bears a daughter?”

Sansa closed her eyes.

“The Tyrells may be able to summon great forces, but it will take them some time, while the Lannisters have soldiers aplenty to fight for them, now,” Baelish pointed out. “And the Tyrells are weakened by the fact that they must protect two strongholds, and the Lannisters need protect only one.”

Sansa shook her head. She knew all of this, of course, and didn’t like the reminder of it, but she understood the importance of listening to Baelish, just now, because, after all, there was half a chance that the child Margaery was carrying would be a girl.

And they would hardly have the strength of the realms behind them, then.

“And you think that bringing Cersei here will help that in any way? That she won’t arrive at King’s Landing at the head of an army?” Sansa finally asked, glancing up at Baelish, because no, she didn’t have any other arguments, but she hated the thought of this, all the same.

Baelish shrugged, looking far too unconcerned for Sansa’s liking. “Perhaps, perhaps not,” he allowed. “But if we do not invite her, we will seem cold, cruel, keeping a mother from her child’s funeral. If we do and she does arrive at the head of an army, we will look like the aggrieved party, if
she does when we have extended the hand of friendship to her.”

Sansa sighed, reaching up to pinch the bridge of her nose, as she had once seen her husband do often. She didn’t bother to ask Baelish who was even keeping track of such things, anymore.

“Well,” she muttered, “Fuck.”

Perhaps she was picking up too many of Tyrion Lannister’s bad habits.

She only hoped she didn’t pick up his strange affinity for being accused of murders, once Cersei did arrive here.

Baelish let out an inelegant snort. “I will see to it that she does not arrive in King’s Landing at the head of an army, my lady,” he promised her, and Sansa nodded, shakily.

“I...Thank you, Petyr,” she whispered, and Petyr eyed her a moment longer, before giving her something like a hesitant smile.

“I don’t want Margaery having to interact with her anymore than absolutely necessary,” Sansa said, a moment later, and that hesitant smile shuttered.

“Of course not, my lady,” Baelish told her, in that same informal tone that he used with her when they were not alone behind closed doors, and Sansa closed her eyes.

As he always did, when their conversations inevitably returned to Margaery.

Someday, Sansa was going to have to deal with that.

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“Your Grace, I wonder if I might have a word,” Lord Varys said behind her, and Margaery closed her eyes and gritted her teeth, because the excuse about being tired had been just that, an excuse, but that didn’t mean she wanted to find herself trapped in yet another conversation with Lord Varys about her irresponsibility so far in guiding the Realm.

If she had wanted his opinion, she would have asked for it.

They were in the corridor outside of the Small Council chambers which Margaery had just left, a meeting which had been absolutely disastrous without Sansa there, she knew that, even if she hadn’t been paying attention for at least half of it.

She wanted nothing more than to escape back to her chambers - the King’s chambers, not Cersei’s, though she doubted those were ready for her yet, if Lady Nym had even listened to her about preparing them at all - and collapse on the bed, close her eyes and close out the rest of the world for as long as she could manage.

She shuddered a little, at the thought.

Perhaps she could ask one of the servants who stood around all day, waiting for her to order them to do something she could easily do herself, and did, these days, to bring her something a little stronger than wine.

She sighed.

The last thing she wanted to do, just now, was reveal more of the incompetence she could feel crawling up her throat, to Lord Varys again.
Slowly, Margaery turned around, forcing a cold smile in Lord Varys’ direction. They were alone now, save for the Kingsguard surrounding her, who would never dare to repeat what they heard.

Margaery had made sure of that when she had herself surrounded by Reach-loyal soldiers, rather than the Old Guard who had been so loyal to Joffrey and Cersei that they had been more than happy to beat a hapless girl on Joffrey’s orders.

To be silent, as Joffrey raped her.

She gritted her teeth, rubbing her wrists awkwardly together, more than aware that Lord Varys no doubt noticed the movement, though he was kind enough not to comment on it.

No, the Kingsguard who were allowed to guard her now were only those who had been carefully chosen by her brother, in the weeks after Joffrey’s death, all carefully appointed because they knew better than to go against House Tyrell, but were not so loyal that they would suck her grandmother’s teat, rather than listen to an order that Margaery gave them, herself.

She tried hard not to think at all of Ser Meryn Trant.

Her four guards shifted restlessly, and Margaery bit back a smile, wiping at her fully clothed arms.

She would never feel safe under the protection of a man again, but it was nice to know that these men would gladly kill for her. She’d never had the same assurance under the men who had served as Joffrey’s Kingsguard.

“What is it, Lord Varys?” She asked, coldly. “I thought that I had made it clear that I had no interest in continuing to speak of politics, just now. I am…very tired.”

She probably looked tired, she knew. She had looked tired this morning, as well, when she had awoken and looked at herself in the mirror, as she dressed herself despite her servants constantly hinting that they would be happy to dress her themselves, as they had always done in the past.

If she wanted them to dress her, if she wanted them to come into the sanctuary of her bedchambers - Joffrey’s mother’s old bedchambers - she would damn well ask it of them, after all.

“I will, endeavor to make it as quick as possible, Your Grace,” he told her, and Margaery closed her eyes and breathed out slowly through her nose.

When she opened her eyes again, Varys was bent over, looking a bit more servile, but she was no longer fooled by the other man.

“Yes?” She asked.

He squinted at her. “Perhaps it would be better to have this conversation somewhere a little more…” he glanced at the open hallway, out of which were still trickling members of the Small Council, Lord Baelish eyeing them suspiciously as he passed. “Private.”

Margaery lifted her chin. “You have less than a minute left, Lord Varys. My lord husband, may he rest in peace, always used to joke that at some point, it should become treason to waste a monarch’s time. I am not entirely certain that should be a joke.”

Varys swallowed. “Of course, Your Grace,” He said. “Well…” he waited a moment, and Margaery tapped her foot impatiently. Then, when the other members of the Small Council were gone, “I merely wish to warn Your Grace that I think it is a mistake, to bestow such power on Lord Baelish, who does not have anyone’s best interests but his own at heart, and to take away duties meant for the
Lord Hand from Lord Kevan Lannister.”

Margaery raised a brow. “I thought we’d covered this during our meeting of the Small Council,” she told him, coldly. “I am the Regent, and Lord Baelish is a trusted servant of the Crown.”

She tried not to grit her teeth too hard as she said the words, because even if Lord Baelish had rounded the corner and was gone from their sight now, she knew that he had his spies everywhere, these days, just as Lord Varys had.

Neither of them could be trusted.

But she trusted Baelish just a little bit more, these days. Well, she trusted his ambitions, his desires, to get her exactly what she wanted.

He wouldn’t fail her so long as he thought he was still getting the thing that they had promised him, on the night of Joffrey’s death, out of all of this.

Varys eyed her. “Your Grace…” he said carefully, and there was something like concern in his expression, “Surely you don’t believe that.”

Margaery closed her eyes again, breathed deeply.

It was a calming technique that Megga had taught her, after the…after Joffrey’s death. It had helped Megga, apparently, during her time in the Black Cells.

Margaery did not find that it did very much for her.

“You have made your position on Lord Baelish very clear, in recent weeks,” Margaery reminded the other man, coldly, because even if he was right, even if it was more than true that Baelish was nothing more than an ambitious, untrustworthy snake, she could not allow there to be any doubt about her loyalty to the man.

Certainly not to Lord Varys.

Still, the thought of lying to him well enough to make him believe she trusted Baelish made her stomach twist; she didn’t think she was so accomplished of a liar anymore, these days.

“And,” she lifted a hand, when Lord Varys opened his mouth to speak, “I think you’ll find that I don’t care to hear any more of it.”

He closed his mouth.

Margaery smiled at him. “There, now,” she said. “Was that so hard?”

Varys squinted at her; for a moment, she found herself wondering if he was studying her every expression, trying so hard to find the lie in her gaze.

She forced her face to remain neutral, the way that she had somehow managed to do the day after Joffrey’s…after his death, when she’d been forced to announce what had happened to him in the throne room, in front of every noble in King’s Landing, and pretend like she believed every word.

Pretend like she hadn’t been the one to…

She cleared her throat. “Is that all, Lord Varys?”

He stared at her for a moment longer, before letting out a sigh. “That is all, Your Grace,” he said, and
there was something like disappointment in his gaze, and his voice.

Margaery beamed at him, before turning and stalking away from the Small Council chambers, which reminded her rather to much of Joffrey, of all the time that he had spent there, clutching her thigh instead of listening to his advisors.

It was so hard to think, in those rooms.

She walked away from Lord Varys with the strange, distinct feeling that she had somehow failed a test, but as she did not know what he had been looking for, she determined not to let it bother her.

And then Lady Nym was there, quite suddenly by her side, reaching out to place a hand on Margaery’s elbow, and Margaery flinched at the contact. The other members of the Kingsguard went still, clearly unsure if they were meant to defend against this one, or not.

Lady Nym, who would likely never fight with the same grace and skill she’d had in the past, had been named an honorary member of the Kingsguard; partially to appease Arianne, who had been furious, Margaery was told, in learning what had happened to both her cousin and her brother, and partially because Margaery wanted an excuse to keep the other woman close.

She’d seen the loyalty with which the other woman had faced Ser Robert Strong. Margaery wanted nothing more than that loyalty for herself.

“Your Grace,” Lady Nym acknowledged, seeming to only notice her discomfort then, as she dropped her elbow.

Margaery remembered to breathe again, as she remembered what Lady Nym might perhaps be here to talk about, and she glanced sharply over at the other woman, raising an expectant eyebrow.

“Were you serious, with what you demanded of me the other day?” Nym asked, and Margaery went still.

She tried to think back to what she could possibly have asked of Lady Nym; to be honest, most days blurred together, for her.

And then she remembered, and her eyes unconsciously sought out her husband’s chambers, not so very far from the ones she’d been sleeping in, of late.

Oh gods, Nym had really listened to her. She’d really done it, and Margaery could not be more grateful for the thought, as soon as it arrived.

“Are they ready?” She asked, and wondered why she should be so excited at the thought of sleeping in the rooms her husband had died in. Wondered if that meant that there was something wrong with her, if she’d wanted to keep this from Sansa because she truly was going mad, to want to sleep in the rooms where her husband had...

But still. She could not sleep in Cersei’s chambers, and she was not cruel enough to demand that Sansa give her back her old rooms in the Maidenvault; at least in the chambers her husband had raped her in, she might have some excuse for not sleeping at all.

And she had endured the worst things she could possibly imagine still happening to her, in those rooms. At least she would be safe from facing them there again. She could not say the same of bedchambers that Cersei Lannister, still living and breathing, knew better than she.

And it would have the added benefit of scaring her ladies and servants away, all afraid already that
those rooms were haunted, especially with the months that they had spent housing her husband's corpse, kept nice only by the maesters' preservatives.

Nym pressed her lips together. She was not happy with this arrangement, Margaery could tell, but Margaery thought that she had scared her enough, the last time they’d had this particular conversation, that she was clearly willing to do as Margaery wished, in this one regard. “There was a…particular stain that we could not get out, Your Grace, but you insisted that this happen as quickly as possible, so if that doesn’t bother you…”

The guards behind her shifted restlessly. It was odd enough that she would be taking over her husband’s chambers; as the Regent, she would be displaying that she thought herself as powerful as a King, to do so, but to speak of the stains still there since the day his brains had been bashed into the flooring...

Margaery was already moving down the short corridor to her husband’s chambers, at those words.

Nym trailed behind her, hesitant. “Though I have to say, again, I don’t really understand why you would want to sleep in these rooms, and why Lady Sansa wasn’t supposed to know…”

A carefully worded phrase; clearly, this secret had not been kept from Sansa, who would no doubt think her mad for wanting this, but Margaery could not bring herself to care, overmuch.

When she made it to her husband’s old chambers, which had stood empty since his death, Margaery stood very still, outside of them, licking her lips and not bothering to open the door. "Is..." she started, the thought honestly just occurring to her, "The King’s body..."

She’d ordered it placed there, until his funeral could actually take place in the Sept of Baelor, once those who had murdered him had all been found.

Nym dipped her head. "It has been returned to the Black Cells, Your Grace, where the maesters keep it until it is time for the burial," she said, and her voice had an odd, tinny sound to it, Margaery thought, though she didn't stop to examine why.

Margaery had of course not expected to find that she was to be sharing these rooms with her dead husband, but then again, that was almost exactly what she had expected to find. It was what would be happening, after all, either way.

One of her Kingsguard stepped forward then, a Florent, she thought, even if one of them was married to Stannis. He cleared his throat. “Is something wrong, Your Grace?” He asked her, no doubt wondering why the fuck she was standing in front of a closed door.

Margaery closed her eyes, breathed out deeply again. Turned a smile on the young man.

Another convenient thing about replacing as many of the Kingsguard with accomplished knights from the Reach was that they did not know what had happened, had no way of guessing.

Hells, they knew little of anything that had gone on in Kings’ Landing in recent months, and so they still looked at her with respect.

Margaery forced a smile. “Everything is fine,” she assured the man. “I just...remembered something.”

Blood, staining the floor of the King’s chambers so deeply that it was still visible there, beside the bed that she slept in every night because she couldn’t bear the thought of sleeping anywhere else, and she knew that there was something inherently wrong with that, she shouldn’t want to sleep in the
bed her husband had raped her in.

She grimaced. “It’s nothing,” she assured the man. Then, because she could, “Stand outside these
doors and make sure that no one comes inside. Including the Lady Sansa. Is that understood?”

The guards exchanged glances, but then, they were still new, so they nodded agreeably.

“As you wish, Your Grace.”

Margaery bit back a hysterical laugh.

Lady Nym gave Margaery a short nod. “I hope you find a…peaceful rest here, Your Grace,” she
said, in a voice that implied that she, too, thought Margaery quite mad for wanting these rooms at
all. But she was not arguing with her, the way that Sansa would have, if Margaery had gone to her
about this, for which Margaery was rather grateful to the other woman.

She did not want to have to argue about this. A part of her did not even know why she was insisting
on this, knew only that this had to happen, for her own peace of mind, if she was ever to achieve
such a state again.

When she stepped inside, the rooms still smelled of death.

Chapter End Notes

Please don't forget to comment!
Cersei swallowed hard, sagging down against the wall the moment she stepped into her own chambers and slammed the door behind her, screaming at the servants to get out. The women fled, looking frightened, in a way that none of her servants ever had in King’s Landing.

Cersei’s eyes swam, and she reached up, covering them like a small child might, like doing so might hide her from the knowledge that the messenger had just brought her.

In one hand, she still clung to the crumpled up missive that she had been sent by the Crown, sent by a raven, of all things, as if they did not believe that the Mother of the King deserved to know in person, rather than in some servant’s handwriting, that her son had been killed.

More than that, butchered, Cersei thought darkly, as she reread the missive. He had been murdered in the dead of night, killed in his own bed, and killed by more than ten men, she knew.

Butchered.

She closed her eyes, dragging in one shaky breath, and then another, difficult as they seemed to come. She could no longer read the missive in her hands, for it swam before her eyes, and frustrated, Cersei tossed it aside and ran her fingers through her hair, letting out another horrified scream.

Her son, her darling boy, was dead.

She had never even gotten the chance to make amends with him, after he had sent her away from King’s Landing on the word of that shrew, and now, she never would, because she had lost him for good.

He was dead, and she would never be able to hold him in her arms again, to beg his forgiveness for doing what she had thought she had to, to protect him.

Would never be able to convince him that she had been right to do so. Would never know her son’s thoughts, again, as he wondered how to take control of the Realm, as he sought her advice as he had once done, as a child.

Her darling boy was dead, and the world felt a little grayer, for it.

Her next scream choked off into something like a whimper, and Cersei’s hands fell uselessly, into her lap as she slammed her head back against the wall of her chambers.

She had known that something like this was going to happen, the moment she left her son behind in King’s Landing. She hadn’t been there to protect him, and now, he was dead.

He was dead, and there was no bringing him back from death. Qyburn might have brought back the Mountain, but he had been nothing more than a shell of his former self, without the emotions and the
Lannister fire that had made her love her Joffrey so.

She gritted her teeth as the tears slipped freely down her face, now.

Her son was gone, and Jaime was gone from this place, and Tyrion had likely been responsible for her son’s death, for all that the Crown claimed it had been members of the Sparrows to kill him, in the end.

She had never felt more alone in her entire life, than she did just now.

Gods, if only Jaime were here, she thought she might be able to bear it.

But Jaime had abandoned her, too, and he might as well be dead, for all the hope she held out that he might one day return to her. Chasing fairytales beyond the Wall, indeed, while their son lay dead in the crypts of King’s Landing, at the hands of a brother he should have listened to her and killed, years ago, when they were still children and not even their father would have protested the Imp’s death.

Gods, he would pay for this. She would see more than just the joy turn to ash in his throat, as he had once promised her, as she had tried to return on to him, by having Shae murdered.

She had known all of her life how her brother had hated her, because he was a hateful little creature who seemed to need no reason to turn on his own family. He had killed their mother as he left her body, and he would be happy enough to see the rest of them dead, too.

She imagined that when Jaime had left for the Kingsguard, there had been tears in her younger brother’s eyes because he was so ecstatic at the thought that he now stood to inherit the Rock.

As if their father would ever willingly hand it over to him alone.

But she had never imagined that the Imp might turn his hatred upon her own children.

She would not lie; she knew Joffrey’s faults, just as any who met him did, but he had been her firstborn son, her darling boy, and her own brother had seen fit to let monsters into the Keep to butcher him where he slept.

He’d killed her son. Killed him, like a pig. Like something less than human, and worse than that, he’d gotten away with it. Had left King’s Landing unscathed.

If Cersei had been there, she would have seen him ripped limb from limb, rather than escaping fate.

She wondered what empty platitudes Jaime would have left to defend his brother, when he returned to the Rock. If there were any left, after the Imp had seen her son butchered like that, their son.

Jaime may not have loved Joffrey the way that he had so clearly come to love Myrcella and Tommen, but he had distanced himself from them when they were smaller, as well. Cersei had hoped that there might come a day when he would come to love Joffrey for all his faults, as she had.

And now, that day would never come, because Tyrion had stolen it from them.

Had stolen Joffrey from them, while Cersei could not even hold her son in her final moments.

She let out another pained scream.

No mother should ever have to outlive their child.
Cersei did not think that she had ever felt a pain quite like this one. Every part of her wanted to die with it.

She thought of Joffrey, of his smiles in the rare moments when he was truly innocent, truly happy. Of the way he had confided in her so often, the things he would never dare to tell another soul.

Of the way he had cried, like a child far more prone to emotions than he was when he was older, when Robert had hit him, or sent him away.

A part of her had wanted to kill Robert for that reason alone, the first time that her husband had raised a hand to her son.

Cersei closed her eyes.

Perhaps the only consolation that she might have, in all of this, was the knowledge that Joffrey was not totally gone. After all, his child, whom she knew he had longed for, lived on in Margaery Tyrell’s womb. A part of her son still lived within that child, even if she could hardly stand the mother who would bring it into this world.

But that was hardly a good consolation. She knew that the moment that child, boy or girl, entered this world, it would be a threat to her, to her own two living children. The Tyrells would wrap their claws around that child the same way that they had done with Joffrey.

He would never be her grandchild, only a tool of that far too ambitious House, as they reached for the throne, her throne.

If only she could have the child at her side the moment it was born, could know that it would not become some pawn of the Tyrells’, then, perhaps, she might have learned to love it.

But she could not have that, and Cersei knew that child would be raised to loathe his father, as the Tyrells had. Would be raised to adore that bitch of a mother of his, while Cersei lost everything.

Her son, her throne.

She let out another silent scream, and was surprised by the tentative knock of one of the servants, outside.

“Your Grace? Is all well?”

A Lannister servant, then, not one loyal to Stannis, and that alone made Cersei not want to bite their head off.

Cersei sniffed, wiping at her eyes as she crawled to her feet, deciding what she had to do, in this moment.

The rest of the Rock would learn, in time, what had become of her son. Would learn that he was dead, and would see two choices set before them.

To either bend the knee to Stannis in total, as many of them had already threatened, with his invasion of the Westerlands, as the Leffords had done, or wait and bend the knee to a child still in the womb, once it came into this world.

And neither one of those options suited Cersei. Neither one of them would allow her to hold onto enough power to protect her two remaining children, her son, here, all but a hostage of the Baratheon forces that remained here, or her daughter, a hostage to the Martells.
She had to protect them, and so, Cersei knew what she had to do.

Joffrey would understand, if he still lived. He would understand, if only he knew what Margaery truly was, and forgive her for this.

But Joffrey was dead. He was dead, and it was Margaery’s fault that Cersei had not been there with him, in his final moments, and his child would never truly belong to Cersei.

Cersei threw open the door to her chambers, and the servant standing outside with a bundle of clothes started, nearly falling into her.

Cersei ignored the woman, pushing past her. “Is my son in his chambers?” she demanded to know, but Cersei suspected she already knew the answer to that.

Since her arrival, her son had barely left his chambers. She did not know if that was a result of her brother Jaime’s poison, or his fear of Stannis Baratheon.

It would probably be for the best to keep him there, until she could name him King and know that he was protected when she did so.

But still, she should go and tell him. He deserved to learn what had happened to his brother from her, at the very least, rather than from some passing servant.

He was Tommen’s brother. She would not abide him learning of Joffrey’s death from anyone else.

And then...and then, she would decide what the fuck she was meant to do, in this situation, because she truly didn’t know.

She had lost her son, and she was suddenly terrified that the rest of if was going to come crumbling down around her.

Margaery was pregnant with her son’s child, but that child would never be hers. And Olenna Tyrell would come after her other son, if Cersei dared to give her the chance.

Cersei could not loose another child, she thought suddenly, fiercely, as she stalked down the short hall to her own son’s chambers, because she had insisted on them not being far from her own, when she had arrived to find half an army of Baratheon soldiers holding her poor boy hostage here.

There was a Lannister guard and a Baratheon guard standing outside her son’s chambers, a living embodiment of the fragile truce that her fool of a brother had created with Stannis before they had fucked off to who knew where, leaving her child behind to be killed by an errant sword, for all that Jaime had claimed to be bringing Tommen her for his protection.

Cersei scoffed at the thought. She had not quite forgiven Jaime for that, either, but she did not have the willpower to be furious with him, today.

Not when she felt suddenly drained of everything, everything but the pain she felt as she thought of Joffrey’s smile, permanently torn away from this world.

She gave the two guards a scorching look. “I need to speak with my son,” she said, reaching up to wipe at her eyes when she saw how wide their own had grown.

The Lannister solder - Tylund, she thought his name was - leaned forward. “Is...all well, Your Grace?” he asked her.
The Baratheon soldier did not seem as concerned, only disturbed by the sight of such a highborn lady, in tears.

She thought of the way that she had railed against every single one of these Baratheon soldiers, when she had arrived here to find them drinking her father’s wine and eating at her father’s table, and thought the man ought to be used to the sight of a highborn woman in tears.

Sometimes, when she was particularly worried, she dreamt that Jaime never returned for them, and these Baratheon soldiers ate her and her son upon that feasting table.

She shut her eyes tightly.

She had lost Joffrey. She’d be damned before she lost Tommen, as well, even if she didn’t know how she was going to find herself out of this situation.

“I need to speak with my son,” she repeated, hoarsely. “Are you keeping me from him?”

The Lannister guard cleared his throat. “Of course not, Your Grace,” he assured her, throwing the door open for her, and Cersei sniffed, before walking past him and into her son’s chambers, Jaime’s old chambers, in the Rock, before he had ever gone to the Kingsguard and they had ever entered this mess.

Sometimes, when she brought her son here to escape Robert for a few weeks at a time, he had slept in these rooms. Looking around, Cersei saw images of him everywhere, and she squeezed her eyes shut again.

When she opened them, Tommen was sitting up in the bed, not Joffrey, and Cersei felt a pang of sadness, that that was so.

Gods, this didn’t feel real, not at all. None of this had felt real, not since her own son had banished her from court.

Tommen looked more at home in these chambers, though, as he blinked up at his mother in surprise at her entrance.

He looked like he was going to jump up out of the bed, then, but Cersei held up a hand, stilling him.

She wanted him sitting down, as she explained this to him.

“Tommen,” she said, forcing a watery smile, telling herself that it was not Tommen’s fault that he looked more at home in her brother’s chambers than Joffrey ever had. “Did I wake you?”

The boy shook his head, fiddling nervously with his blankets where he sat on the bed that her brother had once slept in. These had been Jaime’s chambers when they were children, after all, and Cersei smiled bitterly at the thought.

It had been Jaime who had left Tommen in these chambers, surrounded by armed guards whom she hoped it had been Stannis to order them not to let her in to see her own son, at first.

But then, Jaime had not known that Cersei was coming here, and she took hope, in that thought. When he had ordered that no one but Gemma and Dorna be allowed to see his son, besides the Lannister servants, he had not known that she was coming here.

Her brother had much to explain about his actions of late, but he did not have to explain a desire to protect their son, especially just now, to Cersei’s mind, when he was the only one they had left.
She was going to fix this. She had to.

She still didn’t know how she was going to fix this, didn’t know how she was going to bring them all together as a family again…

A family.

Joffrey was dead, and Myrcella was in Dorne, which meant, to Cersei’s suddenly petrified mind, that she might as well be dead.

Cersei did not know how the Martells had managed to convince Myrcella, her poor, darling, sweet girl, that they were a family to her, but she did know that Myrcella would be their pawn, now that Joffrey was dead, just as the child within Margaery Tyrell’s belly was a pawn of the Tyrells, now.

Cersei felt like the world was slipping through her fingers, and she didn’t know how to get it back.

Tommen shook his head, weakly, and Cersei bit back a sigh.

Despite not wanting the servants to be the ones to break this news to Tommen, Cersei did not particularly relish telling him his brother was dead, herself.

Despite the paranoid plan formulating in her head, she almost couldn’t see it taking root, couldn’t see the boy before her sitting on the Iron Throne like Joffrey had, like he was born into it.

“Our brother…” Cersei licked her lips, having not realized how hard this would be. She resolved not to cry in front of her son. He needed her to be strong now, to protect him, the way that she had failed to protect Joffrey. “Your brother has been killed. He...barely a week ago, now.”

A week, and she hadn’t known until today.

Tommen blinked at her, the blanket falling from his twitching fingers. He didn’t move, as Cersei moved forward to the bed and sat on the edge of it, taking one of her hands in his.

“Oh,” her son said, the word absolutely expressionless, and Cersei felt her gut twist at what she thought she saw in his eyes. The apathy there made her ground her teeth.

Still, she told herself that it was just shock, the same shock she had felt the first two times she had read the words on the missive from King’s Landing, before the words made any sense to her.

Tommen stared up at her with wide eyes. She wondered if the shock of his brother’s death was too much for him, if she ought to have tried harder to be kind, with the way that she informed him of it.

But she was grief stricken herself, and too concerned with the fear that someone might tell him first, and poison his mind against what was truly his destiny.

“What does that mean?” he said, sounding very young, and Cersei’s heart pinged in sympathy for him.

Joffrey had been too young for the throne, and Tommen? Tommen was just a child. He didn’t deserve the sudden responsibility that this would bring upon him.

But she knew what it would mean to do otherwise, to fall back and bend the knee to Margaery Tyrell and her child.

Even if he was Joffrey’s child, something that Margaery seemed to have taken far too much aggression with trying to prove while Cersei still lived in King’s Landing to be taken at face value,
recognizing him as Joffrey’s heir would only mean handing over the Iron Throne to the Tyrells. And Cersei would not abide that. She would not allow it, not when she knew that the moment they had unlimited power in the Seven Kingdoms, they would turn on her, and her children. Would remove any threats to their rule.

“It means that you are going to be the King, my love,” Cersei whispered, brushing the hair out of her son’s eyes and trying not to feel a smidgen of guilt, at the way that his eyes widened with her words.

No doubt, he was terrified, after just learning that his brother, who had been King before him, had just died. Perhaps she should not have sprung this new existence on him so quickly.

“But…” Tommen chewed on his lower lip, reaching out with a shaking hand to cling to the blanket over his hips, a nervous gesture that Cersei would have to cure him of, if he was truly to sit on the Iron Thorne, one day.

Was truly to keep the Crown in her possession, where it belonged.

Oh, she would not make the same mistakes that she had with Joffrey, once Tommen sat on the Iron Throne. She would ensure that he was safe there, protected, and that he couldn’t make the sort of foolish decisions which had resulted in Joffrey exiling his own mother, spurred into fear of the one person who could protect him by a woman batting her eyelashes.

This way, her son would sit on the Iron Throne, where he belonged, where Cersei belonged.

I waited, she thought, And so he can he. I waited half my life. She had played the dutiful daughter, the blushing bride, the pliant wife. She had suffered Robert’s drunken groping, Jaime’s jealousy, Renly’s mockery, Varys with his titters, Stannis endlessly grinding his teeth. She had contended with Jon Arryn, Ned Stark, and her vile, treacherous, murderous dwarf brother, all the while promising herself that one day, it would be her turn.

If Margaery Tyrell thought to cheat her in her hour in the sun, all on the hopes that her own child might be a boy rather than a girl when it finally entered this world, then she had bloody well better think again, Cersei thought, her lips twisting into something like a sneer.

But this all meant that Cersei was going to have to work fast.

Tommen swallowed. “I don’t understand. Has Joffrey’s son been born yet?”

Cersei ground her teeth together. These were exactly the same sort of questions she would have to work through in order to gain supporters, but she didn’t appreciate her son being so docile as to not even want the throne, his throne. Her throne.

“Heir,” she said, perhaps more harshly than she had intended, if the way that Tommen flinched was any indication. “And no, it has not. But when it is, it could easily be a girl, or a bastard, and then you would be king.”

If it came out with dark hair, or with hair that looked like anything but Joffrey’s golden locks, they would know.

And in the mean time, a child in the womb had no rights to the Iron Throne, at all.

“Then...how am I to be King?” Tommen asked.
Yes, that was a difficulty that Cersei would have to work through, to gain supporters, but she thought she could easily manage it. After all, Stannis had done the same thing, and Tommen was older than an unborn child.

She leaned forward then, kissing Tommen gently on the forehead, and trying not to feel anything when he flinched back from her.

“We will wait until then, of course,” she promised him, something she had no intention of doing, “But I simply want you to be open to the possibility.”

Tommen blinked up at her. “I...But I don’t want to be King,” he whispered, and Cersei would say later, when she apologized to her son through gritted teeth, that the emotion of the moment had caused her to do as she did next, nothing else.

But it felt good to slap someone when she was hurting so, all the same.

Tommen looked down at the kitten in his arms as he ran a hand over its fur, listening to it purr where it lay in his lap.

It was not Ser Pounce; in the haste of their leaving King’s Landing, his uncle had not let him stop and bring along Ser Pounce, or Balerion, though his uncle had seemed more concerned with leaving that cat behind than he had Ser Pounce.

When he was younger, Joffrey had told him that Balerion had belonged to the little Targaryen princess, before she had been butchered by the Mountain, the same way that Joffrey threatened to have Tommen butchered by his own Hound if he ever did anything that made Joffrey angry, once he was king.

The threat had terrified Tommen, before he had ever known what Joffrey was truly capable of.

And his uncle seemed more disturbed by the cat than he had ever been by Joffrey, as he knelt down in front of Tommen, just outside the Great Hall, and told him as patiently as Tommen thought Uncle Jaime could manage that no, they could not bring the kittens along, and there were kittens aplenty in the Rock, surely.

Tommen knew of no less than three cats who roamed the halls of the Rock, finding food from the more particularly kind cooks, the ones who were more inclined to slip Tommen some sweets before he went to bed, as well, but that hadn’t mattered.

Ser Pounce was the cat that Joffrey had threatened to gut in front of him, once, and Tommen had hated the thought of leaving any of his cats behind with Joffrey, but especially not Ser Pounce, and especially not when Joffrey looked so angry at their departure.

But Joffrey was dead now.

Joffrey was dead, and Tommen didn’t know how to feel about his brother’s death at all, because he knew that Joffrey had never loved him, just as Myrcella had never loved Joffrey, and Joffrey had been cruel, and had thought it funny when Tommen cried at his tormenting.

But he’d been Tommen’s brother, and when his mother had come to tell him that Joffrey was dead, she had been upset that Tommen didn’t seem more saddened, by his brother’s death.

Perhaps she was right.
Perhaps there was something wrong with Tommen, that he didn’t feel much of anything - beyond a terrible, honest sense of relief - that his brother was dead. Perhaps he was just as bad as Joffrey, because of that.

He didn’t know.

He didn’t think many people had loved his brother - he had been killed by a bunch of peasants, at the bidding of their uncle, after all - but he’d still been family.

Perhaps Tommen ought to want to mourn him just because of that.

Myrcella had told him, on the road to the Rock, that of course Joffrey would never dare to harm Ser Pounce, something dark and twisted in her eyes as she had said it, and Tommen had believed her.

But he had also believed her when she’d held him close and told him that they were never going to be away from each other again, not if she could help it, and she had turned around and disappeared with the Martells, the moment that they were all out of King’s Landing, when Tommen had thought she was coming to the Rock with them.

Uncle Jaime had been furious. He’d paced in the hastily erected encampment, back and forth, back and forth, and Tommen had felt something like hot tears at the back of his eyes, but he hadn’t let them fall, because Joffrey had told him that it was a sign of weakness, for a boy of his age to cry, and Tommen didn’t want his uncle to think him weak.

Jaime had already looked so hurt, by the fact that Myrcella had abandoned them like this. Like he didn’t know what to do at all, now.

Tommen gave the cat in his arms another reassuring pat, before she leapt out of the room and marched unhappily across the bed, down the small futon Tommen had insisted on placing in front of it for her, and over to the little pail of milk in the corner.

Jaime had smiled at the request when they had arrived at the Rock and Tommen had found the kitten rooting through the trash of the kitchens two days later, though it had been the same sort of sad smile that he had ever since Myrcella had left them, that smile of sadness that reeked of betrayal, and let Tommen know, no matter what else it was that he knew, that Myrcella had left them willingly.

If she hadn’t, his uncle wouldn’t look so betrayed by her absence, and Tommen didn’t know what to think with that knowledge, that secret knowledge that he had never sought the answer to from his uncle.

He thought that if he had, it would have broken Jaime, to admit the truth. To admit that Myrcella had left them, after the way that the servants said his uncle had put himself on the line, to get them out of King’s Landing, and away from his brother.

Of course, they’d said that while they were unpacking Tommen’s things and while they had thought he wasn’t listening.

He learned quite a bit that he wasn’t supposed to know like that, listening in at doorways to servants’ conversations. They knew quite a bit, for the ones that his family seemed to overlook the most.

He let out a sigh, settling deeper into his blankets, because, for as far up within the Rock as these rooms were, these rooms were terribly cold, sometimes.

He wanted to sleep, because he knew that the servants would not be back for a little while to bring him food, and it was not as if he had much else to do up here.
Now that his uncle Jaime was gone and his mother had returned, she had forbidden him from playing at sword again, as she had called it, and he was not allowed to go riding, either, not with so many Baratheon soldiers nearby.

She had prohibited him from doing much of anything outside of these rooms, because she was afraid that Stannis’ shaky truce with his uncle had just been for show, or that the men who had refused to follow their king North would just as happily turn around and butcher Tommen, the moment they had the chance.

And Tommen did not even know if she was wrong to think that.

A Lannister guard stood outside of his chambers at all times, but so did a Baratheon loyal soldier. It made it rather difficult to sleep, these days.

But there was not much else to do in these rooms. A maester came to help him with his studies every day, and the servants were kind enough, but Tommen had been less bored in King’s Landing, he had to admit.

And less likely to be killed, even if his brother was a monster.

It was broad daylight, but the rooms that Tommen slept in were nearly pitch black, for not having a window and being so deep within Casterly Rock. It felt like night, because of that.

Sometimes, Tommen was not even certain what time of day it was, because he spent so much time within these four walls. Jaime had not wanted him to leave because he was afraid that Tommen would be captured by one of Stannis’ spies, or by a stray arrow, later, when Stannis’ forces had marched here to take the Rock from Jaime.

Even if a part of Tommen wondered if his uncle had not wanted him to leave these rooms because he was terrified that Tommen was going to leave, the way that Myrcella had.

Tommen could have happily disabused him of the notion, if he thought it was worth it, if he thought that bringing it up at all wouldn’t cause another headache, because he didn’t know any more than Jaime how he felt about Myrcella’s leaving them.

It was not as if Tommen had anywhere else to go, like his sister did.

Leaving King’s Landing had not felt like the freeing experience that Tommen had thought it was going to be.

He shook his head, glancing around his rooms for something else to do, because he knew that he was not going to be able to sleep, just now, and that was when he saw it.

A knife, glinting dangerously in the candlelight of the darkened room.

“Don’t make a sound,” the man told him, putting a finger to his lips that seemed almost comical, here in the dark, and Tommen swallowed hard.

The man took a step forward, his knife shining now, and Tommen didn’t know how he had gotten into his rooms, when Tommen’s bed faced the door, and he’d been dozing earlier, but he would have seen that, surely.

Tommen let out a scream.

The man with the knife let out a sound of annoyance, and then lunged forward, taking across the
room in two large steps, and Tommen screamed again, because he had guards outside who should have been able to hear that, and because he wasn’t sure that he would be able to scream again.

The knife came down, hurtling towards the bed, and Tommen gritted his teeth and wondered if his brother had been this scared, in his final moments. If death had terrified him as much as it did Tommen.

It was the first time Tommen had ever imagined himself having the same exact thoughts as his brother.

And then the knife never hit him, a clatter resounded through the air, a grunt of pain, and Tommen slowly opened his eyes, to find the Baratheon guard who had stood outside his doors for many days now standing over him, the man with the knife lying at his feet, a sword through his neck.

Tommens flinched, and quickly looked away.

The Lannister guard cleared his throat then, stepping forward. He had been several feet behind the Baratheon guard, and Tommen didn’t know what to make of that, to realize that he had been rescued by someone his mother had thought might be sent to kill him.

Had been rescued from someone trying to kill him, no less.

Tommens shivered, looking down at the man on the ground, his blood pooling in a rather large, wet circle.

Tommens wondered if that stain would ever come out.

It didn’t look like it, and the thought that he would have to sleep in these rooms again, after a man had been killed in them, even if that man had meant to kill him, made him want to vomit.

His two guards were staring at him in something like concern, now, as the Baratheon guard leaned down to check on the man with the knife.

He didn’t need to, Tommen thought, with a strange sort of conviction. The man was dead, he knew it.

The Lannister guard moved forward. Tommen felt bad that he didn’t remember the man’s name, when he had been guarding Tommen every third day since he had arrived at the Rock.

“Are you all right, Your Grace?” The man asked.

Tommens blinked owlishly at him.

“Your Grace. Are you hurt?” The man repeated.

Tommens hugged himself.

He’d seen dead bodies before, of course. He’d seen his father, just before the man had died, and then later, when his body was displayed for seven days after his death, as the Faith commanded, before it was returned to Storm’s End, his father’s ancestral home, rather than the Sept of Baelor, at Cersei’s command.

He’d seen the bodies of those whom Joffrey thought it was amusing to abuse, at his will.

He’d never seen his brother’s body, after he died, though.
In a way, that made it feel like Joffrey was more alive than the man bleeding out in front of his bed.

His kitten, where she stood by her milk pail in the corner of the room, let out a loud hiss as one of the guards moved towards her, but she hadn’t seemed bothered at all by the sight of the assassin.

Traitor, Tommen thought, and shuddered again.

That had been one of his brother’s favorite words, once he had become king.

“I’m fine,” he whispered, and realized, for the first time since his brother’s death, that it might be a lie.

The guard looked uncertain, then, as he stepped forward and checked Tommen over or injuries. Tommen let him, soundless.

The doors to his chambers burst open again as the guard had just gotten Tommen to his feet, and Tommen jumped at the same time as his kitten, whom he still needed to find a name for.

“Tommen,” his mother cried, rushing forward.

Her hair was windblown, her eyes wild, and two servants were rushing after her; clearly, she was not meant to be here, and had come running the moment she had heard what happened to Tommen, though how she had gotten here so quickly, he couldn’t say.

She was there, though, kneeling down in front of him, all but pushing aside the two guards and ignoring the sight of the dead man on the floor altogether. Her hands clasped at Tommen’s cheeks, then his shoulders.

“Tommen, are you all right?” She whispered, and her voice was panicked, needy. Her eyes were still wild, and growing wet.

He forced himself to nod.

He couldn’t remember the last time his mother had hugged him like this, he thought a moment later, as her arms wrapped around him and pulled him devastatingly close, squeezing the air from his lungs.

“Oh, my dear boy,” she whispered, and he remembered the way that she had slapped him, when he hadn’t seemed bothered enough by Joffrey’s death, the day she came to tell him about it.

“My darling,” she whispered, and he could feel the wetness from her eyes on his sleeve, before she pulled back. “Are you all right?”

He nodded, again, his lips parting finally. “I’m fine, Mother,” he said, and Cersei looked pained for a moment, as her eyes searched his.

For the first time in his life, Tommen thought his mother looked truly concerned about hi, the way that she had always seemed so concerned about Joffrey, only ever Joffrey, before.

But Joffrey was dead, now.

It felt…nice, to have her worrying over him like this, even with the body of a dead man at their feet, with the guards clearing it away soundlessly.

And he immediately felt guilty, about the thought. After all, he had almost…he had just almost…
Of course his mother was worried about him. Joffrey had been her firstborn, and so she loved him the most, but she loved all of her children, he knew that.

He did.

And then Cersei, satisfied that her son was all right, got to her feet and rounded on the two guards.

“And where the fuck were you, while a man crept into my son’s chambers and tried to kill him?” She asked, glaring down at the glinting knife on the floor by the assassin’s feet.

The guards exchanged glances.

“I swear, by all the gods,” Cersei said then, taking a step closer to the man wearing Baratheon colors, and Tommen shivered at the intensity in her tone, because it reminded her of Joffrey’s voice, “If I find that your master had something to do with this, if he broke the peace by ordering my son’s death, you will wish you had gone to the North to freeze with him.”

The man lifted his chin. “My master gave me strict orders to see to it that the boy did not come to harm, Your Grace,” he told her. “And we honor our oaths.”

Cersei glared at the man a moment longer, before snorting and turning back to Tommen, giving him another long look before she forced a smile, and held out her hand to him.

“Tommen, darling, you’re shaking,” she said, and her own voice was shaking in turn, nothing like it had been a moment ago, when she had been screaming at the guard. “Come. Let’s get you some warm milk from the kitchens, yes?”

Tommen reached out, and took her hand, allowing her to lead him out of his rooms and down the hall.

Her servants settled in behind them, silent as the grave, and Cersei gave Tommen’s hand a gentle squeeze.

“Are you sure you’re fine?” She asked, glancing down at him, and Tommen forced himself to look up and meet her gaze.

She looked so very pained, at the thought of what might have happened to him, and he didn’t know if it was because she loved him, or because she was terrified at the thought of losing another son so soon after the last.

She smiled at him, and it was a sad, confused smile.

Tommen bit his lip, and glanced away. “What’s going to happen, now?” He whispered, and hated how needy, how terrified, his voice sounded.

He didn’t look at his mother, so that he didn’t have to see the disappointment in her gaze, that he was not her other son, the one who gave orders rather than the one who followed them.

He remembered what she had told him, on the night that Joffrey had died. That he was going to be a king, now that his brother was dead, even though the Queen was pregnant with his brother’s son.

He didn’t want to be the king.

Kings died, like his brother had died, like his father had died.

And his mother had said nothing more on the matter after she had slapped him, not that night, nor
any day since. She had seemed content with Tommen’s honest disinterest in his brother’s title, and Tommen had hoped that nothing more would come of it, even though he had known that was likely not to be the case.

That his mother was always plotting something, even if she smelled of chilled wine and berries.

But she hadn’t said anything about it, and Tommen had hoped that he could live out the rest of his days at the Rock, not having to worry about the things his mother had wanted for him, and that he didn’t want.

It had been some time since then, and the fragile peace between the troops following Stannis and those following the Lannisters had remained, and his mother had remained, a constant fixture in his life.

No one else had even indicated that Tommen was to be king, the way his mother had that first night. It seemed clear to everyone else, as Tommen had originally thought, that they were to wait for the Queen’s child to be born, to determine whether or not it was a boy or a girl, before a true king was named. In the mean time, the Queen was acting as Regent for the Crown, under the direction of Uncle Kevan.

Cersei had not been happy with that, either, the moment she had learned of it. Tommen had not asked why.

He knew, though he didn’t understand why, that his mother didn’t like his brother’s wife. But she had not acted against it, for which Tommen was rather relieved. She was merely waiting, with the rest of the Rock.

The world seemed to be holding its breath.

Tommen hadn’t known what it was waiting for, until he saw that knife in his darkened room, and now, his breath hitched.

Cersei glanced at him in concern.

And still, he didn’t know the truth of it. Didn’t know what the world waited so impatiently for, that it sometimes felt like he couldn’t draw in enough air because of it.

But something about the way that man had gotten into his rooms, without his guards finding out, something about the way his blood glinted on the floor…

It made Tommen shiver.

He felt like something was very, very wrong. Like something had just happened, with that man trying to kill him, which could not be undone.

Cersei forced a smile. He could tell it was forced because when she was nervous, she only smelled of wine.

“Everything is going to be fine, my love,” she promised him. “The way it should be.”

He wondered if they had the same ideas about the way things should be.

He wondered if he was going to die now, too, because his mother wanted him to be a king, and kings always seemed to die from anything but old age.
But Tommen smiled, because his mother was smiling, and when she ordered the cooks to give him some warm milk once they reached the kitchens, Tommen felt his stomach beginning to settle, a little.

“What’s she done now?” Genna asked, with a sigh, as she saw the look on her servant’s face when the girl entered her chambers.

She glanced down at her embroidery, realizing that at this rate, in between suspected attacks from Stannis Baratheon and her niece, it was never going to be finished, and she ought to just give it up.

She was getting damned tired of putting out Cersei’s fires, these days.

The serving girl glanced down at her hands, and Genna’s hackles rose, at the other girl’s hesitation. She stepped forward, lifting her chin and crossing her arms over her chest, leaving her embroidery aside.

The serving girl gulped. “She…in the Great Hall. She’s just…The Tyrells attempted to kill the little prince, and the Queen Mother, she…”

“Oh, for gods’ sake,” Genna snapped, pushing past her. It seemed that, these days, she had to do everything herself.

She supposed she could understand the uselessness of the servants, with so many soldiers here in the Rock, but she would have thought that her own girls would be able to get around such impediments.

They had always been able to get around anything Tywin had thrown at them, in the past.

But it seemed that Stannis Baratheon had finally brought the Rock to its knees, without ever even having to order a single strike.

Genna did not know whether to be impressed or disgusted by that knowledge.

She knew that Jaime had not had another choice, for all that orders kept raining down from King’s Landing to see Stannis Baratheon destroyed for daring to attack the West.

Her nephew had done what he thought was best for the Westerlands, as well as for Tommen, when he had agreed to meet Stannis on the field of battle, a rather odd request from the other man, when, for all of Jaime’s victories so far, he still had the upper hand in this war against them, at the moment, stretched out though his armies were.

And then the request that Stannis had made, once Jaime had reached his tent for treating, had been even stranger.

But Jaime wasn’t here now, and neither was Stannis, and so Genna was left with nothing but a massive headache that lasted through the nights, induced by her fucking niece.

And now, it seemed, she had done something. Again.

Genna had that thought just as she stepped into the Great Hall, and her breath caught in her throat the sight that greeted her, because Cersei had done quite a few stupid things throughout her lifetime, but this…

This had to be the dumbest thing the girl had ever done.

Genna remembered the first time she had walked in on Cersei and Jaime, kissing in the abandoned
gardens that had always been Joanna’s domain, while she lived. Tywin had ordered that they not be disturbed, after her death, and obviously the children had thought they would not be found there.

Genna had had to send their guard to the Wall, to avoid the rumors spreading about them, and even then, that had not stopped rumor. Nor Jaime and Cersei, from letting half the world know about their feelings for each other.

But this…this was by far, worse than that.

Because when she walked into the Great Hall, Cersei was standing just behind the chair that Genna’s father had once ruled so foolishly from, that her brother had taken over, in his death, and ruled with a firmer hand from.

The Seat of House Lannister, at the Rock.

But she was not the one sitting in it.

No, Tommen, who looked incredibly dwarfed and terrified within it, was sitting in that seat, and it was so very obvious that it was not because he was ruling the Rock.

Especially when he wore a golden crown upon his head, its golden needles jutting out into the air, the crown looking much too big for the child’s head.

Genna remembered to breathe again, as she stalked forward, horrified.

She saw that half of the court which still remained at the Rock was all gathered there, that she had been conspicuously left out.

Dorna, where she stood with what remained of Kevan’s children, now that both Lancel and Willem were dead, and Jaime had insisted Dorna bring them to the Rock for their own protection, turned wide, horrified eyes to meet Genna’s, the moment she stepped through the doorway of the Great Hall.

In those eyes, Genna saw the fears that she herself had been trying to force down, ever since Cersei had returned to the Rock, the terror she had felt ever since the news of Joffrey’s death had reached them.

Behind her son’s chair (throne, a nasty voice whispered in Genna’s ear, a voice which reminded her of Walder Frey), Cersei was smiling, as if she did not realize at all that she had just damned them all.

And, most especially, her son, who sat on that throne like he did not know how to sit at all, fingers fidgeting against each other, that crown too big for his head.

He should never have been burdened with it.

“All hail King Tommen of the House Baratheon, First of His Name, King of the Andals and of the First Men,” the herald said, sounding slightly uncertain, but with the particularly fearsome glare that Cersei was sending his way, he didn’t hesitate.

Genna wondered if he would have been so impressed by Cersei’s glares if he had been subject to them when she was a child, wanting her way and not understanding why the world would not therefore bend around her.

Genna reached up, pinching the bridge of her nose.
Gods.

Tommen, where he sat in what had been her brother’s chair, and now belonged to…Jaime? Cersei? Gods knew, at this point. What was clear was that it did not belong to Tyrion, after he had all but signed it away with the murder of his nephew.

The murder of his nephew.

Genna still didn’t believe that particular rumor. Her nephew may have hated Joffrey, but Tyrion was the smartest of her brother’s children, and he had to know what killing Joffrey would have done to the realm, the chaos that it would throw them all into it.

No, she did not believe that he had killed his nephew, but she had not dared to share such suspicions with Cersei, who had seemed happy to damn him for it the moment she learned what it was that he had done.

She licked her lips, staring up at Tommen, in her brother’s Seat at the front of the Great Hall, and wondered how much longer either she or Cersei would be alive, before the two of them tried to stab one another in the throat.

She could feel the sudden urge coming on, after all, and Cersei had been no more sympathetic towards her since her own arrival here. Genna was rather sure that Cersei blamed her for much of what had gone on while she had been gone.

Tommen, where he sat on the throne, dwarfed and lost, looked too much like Jaime had, as a child, the day he’d sat outside his mother’s chambers and listened to her die.

There was a hesitation within the crowd, and then someone, some fool who also did not know what suicide meant, shouted, “Long live the King!” And the cry was hesitantly taken up by the rest of the crowd.

Genna wondered how they did not all see it, especially when this child was not Joffrey. How they did not all see Jaime, sitting on that throne, his sister’s lion’s claws sinking into his shoulder.

“What is the meaning of this?” Genna demanded, storming into Tywin’s old study, the one that Cersei was using, now, because her father was dead alongside her son.

She pursed her lips, setting down her quill, trying to pretend like she hadn’t just been writing letters to every major House in the Westerlands, thanking them for their support.

Well, every House save for the Leffords.

She had known this confrontation with Genna was coming, of course; it did not shock her that once again, Genna Lannister was questioning her every move, just as she had always questioned Tywin’s.

The difference being that Tywin had sometimes listened to her, and Cersei did not intend to listen to a woman who could not even stand by the side of the husband who had been chosen for her, while Cersei had been forced to be Robert’s loyal wife throughout the years of their marriage.

And at this point, with her brother dead and Cersei the rightful heir to Casterly Rock, now that Jaime too had left them, she had no choice but to sit by and let Cersei do as she willed, as head of their family.
Of course, Jaime would not be gone forever, she would see to that. Was, already, seeing to that, in
the only way that she knew how.

One day soon, they would be together again, and then she would worry about getting Myrcella here,
because at least in that one thing, she and Jaime could agree.

And they could be a family again, just as she had always wanted.

A family, save for Joffrey, and the pain of his loss still plagued at her, but in some ways, she
wondered if perhaps this wouldn’t be easier. Jaime and Myrcella would be easier to bring back into
the fold without Joffrey, loathe as she was to have the thought at all.

“I should think that would be self-evident,” Cersei said primly, and took a quiet pleasure in the way
that Genna’s lips tightened, with her words.

It was all that she had anymore.

Joffrey was dead, and now, she must do everything that she could to protect Tommen, the true heir
to the throne.

Surely even Genna could understand the reasoning behind her actions.

Genna pursed her lips. “If by that you mean you’re trying to get all of us killed, and that boy first of
all, then yes, I know what you’re doing,” she snapped, and Cersei looked up at her sharply from the
behind the safety of her desk.

“I am protecting him,” she gritted out, because the words made her feel oddly uncomfortable, in a
way that she did not want to closely examine.

Genna snorted. “How, Cersei? By inciting a war with House Tyrell over a thing as vulnerable as the
succession? That is the exact same thing that the man whom you hate so, who has taken half of the
Westerlands for himself, said when he started the War of the Five Kings.”

Cersei felt her heart skip a beat. She felt the same way that she had on that horrible day, when she
had learned through a letter delivered by ravens, of all things, that her beloved son was dead.

That horrible, terrifying feeling of helplessness, something that Cersei intended never to feel again.

Genna looked helpless, before her. That was how she knew not to listen to the other woman’s
words.

“This is exactly why I didn’t ask for your counsel, Aunt Genna, and I would request that you keep
said counsel to yourself, in the future. You bring nothing but doubts.”

Genna surged forward. “You do not want me to speak again because I am right, and you know it,”
she hissed out, slamming her fist down on the table. “You still have time to turn this around, Cersei.
Retract the coronation. Tell the world that you were wrong, that you had panicked. That Tommen is
not yet claiming the Crown.”

Cersei closed her eyes. “It is done,” she whispered, and she heard rather than saw Genna moving
away from her. She opened her eyes, forcing herself to face the other woman.

When she did, Genna took another step back from her, and Cersei stood to her feet, behind the desk.

She thought of how that knife had looked, sitting on the floor of Tommen’s chambers, pooling in an
assassin’s blood, and her heart skipped another beat.

That same helplessness that she had felt when she had learned, after the fact, that Joffrey was dead, plagued her, at the sight of that assassin on the ground before her son.

This one hadn’t succeeded, but how long before her son, trapped in the Rock and surrounded by Stannis’ men, a direct threat to the child in Margaery Tyrell’s belly, was targeted again?

She was just doing what she had to do. What she had to do to protect her son from those who would only ever see him as a pawn until she forced them to see otherwise.

“Come now, Aunt. Who do you think ordered my son to be killed? Who do you think brought that man into the Rock to kill him? Who has the most to gain from the one other heir to the throne’s death?” Cersei demanded, coldly, because truly, it was the only thing that made sense, out of all of this.

Stannis, after all, was more obsessed with fairytales, these days, than ruling the realm, or he would never have abandoned half of his men at the Rock to go North of the Wall, a fool’s errand and a death sentence, never would have dragged Jaime with him rather than killing the man outright.

And the Martells, even with Myrcella in their grasp, another viable heir to the throne, for all that she was a girl, did not have the reach to come this far, to get a man within Casterly Rock, the way the Tyrells could have, with the green cloaks that Jaime had brought to the Rock to fight Stannis, before he had left them here.

Genna shuddered. She looked absolutely horrified by Cersei’s words. “Well,” she whispered hoarsely, “How are we to know, when that Baratheon guard killed the assassin before he could be interrogated?”

“What else was I supposed to do, but let House Tyrell know that they cannot continue taking and taking, until I have nothing left?” Cersei said, and she hadn’t noticed the way that her voice kept raising until she felt those last words leave her in something like a raw scream.

Genna took a half step back from her. “You want a war,” she whispered, the words half breathed, like some terrible prayer.

Yes.

Finally, she understood.

Cersei did not know why her father had ever valued Genna Lannister’s words, at all, up until the moment that she had turned against Cersei and Jaime. The woman had taken far too long to come to the only logical conclusion.

Cersei lifted her chin. “I want to strike first, before they strike out again at us. I want House Tyrell to know that they cannot bully us into submission, or take another son from me, just because it is what they want,” she gritted out.

Genna gritted her teeth. “Cersei, you don’t think it far more reasonable to assume that the Baratheon forces remaining in the Rock had something to do with this, rather than the Tyrells?” Gemma asked, incredulously.

Cersei snorted, wondering when Genna Lannister had lost full leave of her senses.

Yes, of course she had considered that, first and foremost, because that had been her heaviest
concern, ever since she had come to the Rock to find that Jaime had abandoned her son with a bunch of men loyal to Stannis Baratheon, who seemed to think nothing of seeing her children dead in order to claim the throne for herself.

But it had been a Baratheon soldier who had rescued Tommen, and there were far too many green cloaks in the West, these days, as well.

“Stannis is a man of his word,” Cersei gritted out the words, hating the admission as she made it. “I have seen the Tyrells flit from one loyalty to the next, as has always suited them, since we first formed an alliance with them at all. And now, the Queen is pregnant with Joffrey’s…with his…”

“You do realize,” Genna drawled, the irony of your statement. “If the Queen is, indeed, pregnant with the King’s child, then your crowning Tommen is rather…premature.”

Cersei glowered at her, annoyed. “Of course I do, but what else am I to do to let them know that I am serious? I am doing what I think is best to protect Tommen. I don’t expect you to understand.”

Genna snorted. “You don’t expect me to understand, girl?” She echoed. “I, who have been protecting him ever since your darling, stupid brother left him in my charge? I, who kept him from the hands of the Baratheon soldiers with my own, when they would gladly have killed him in the night and feasted on him the way that they feast at your father’s table each night? Tell me again how I don’t understand, Cersei.”

Cersei looked away.

Genna harrumphed, turning on her heel and stalking towards the door, but Cersei could not let the other woman have the last word, not in something as important as this.

Not when Genna was walking away from this conversation looking assured of her own significance, her own rightness, when Cersei was the one who had won, here. Tommen was the King, now, because she had made him that way, for all that Genna claimed to be protecting him by leaving him vulnerable.

“I have been considering Dorna’s…situation, since that assassin tried to attack Tommen,” Cersei said, and took a quiet pleasure in the way that Genna froze, in the doorway.

She turned back around, slowly, and Cersei relished in the look of panic on the other woman’s face before she buried it. “Cersei…” she began, but Cersei smirked at her, while her eyes dripped with sympathy.

“I know well what it is to lose a child,” she said, softly, and Genna’s eyes hardened.

It took Cersei a moment to understand why; she had been speaking about Willem, of course, dead at the hands of Robb Stark, even if he had not been the one to kill the boy, in his sleep, like an animal.

Genna, of course, was thinking of Lancel, a boy that had ceased to be a member of House Lannister the moment he had turned against them to join the Sparrows.

Cersei pressed her lips together, looking down at the letters on her desk instead of at Genna.

“Joffrey’s passing has…made me realize how fragile life really is. That is why I have crowned Tommen as King, before the Tyrells can choke the life from him for standing in their way. And that is why I think that we need to better keep an eye on Martyn and Janei. They are Kevan’s only children left in this world, at all. I know that I would be…absolutely devastated were something to happen to Myrcella, just as Dorna would be if anything happened to either of them. So. I have been thinking. Martyn should serve as a member of Tommen’s Kingsguard. He has experience fighting in
battles, after all. And Janei...she should be one of my ladies. I would like to keep her...close, for her own protection.”

The same way that she had made sure to keep Sansa close, though Cersei could freely admit that she had made a mistake, with the other girl, by letting her think that she had the autonomy to side against her, to hate either Cersei or Joffrey.

If she had kept Sansa too close to turn against her, the girl would have one day been forced to love her, rather than hate her. Cersei had no doubt Sansa Stark’s hatred had helped push Tyrion into killing her own son.

She would not make the same mistake with Janei, and she would be sure that Genna and Kevan damn well knew it.

Besides, if she could take the girl and mould her into the sort of girl that Cersei had wanted Sansa to be, she would make a lovely wife for Tommen, one day. Far more easily controlled than one belonging to a separate House.

And putting Martyn in the Kingsguard would force the Tyrells to pick up the scraps of what little left they could find, once Cersei won this war.

Someone would need to inherit the Rock from Cersei, after all, and Joffrey’s son could easily become the Lord of Casterly Rock. The Tyrells would just have to be content with that. And they would, the power hungry, grasping fools, the moment that they realized they would not easily gain the Crown.

She lifted her head then, to meet Genna’s gaze.

Genna swallowed. “Kevan is still in King’s Landing, serving as Hand of the King for the Regent until the child is born,” she gritted out, and yes, that was hatred in her eyes.

Cersei licked her lips. “Yes,” she said, “And he shall always have a place here, at the Rock, should he deem it important enough to return and serve as Hand to the true King of the Seven Kingdoms.”

Genna went very still. “Janei and Martyn are your cousins, Cersei,” she gritted out.

Cersei shrugged. “Tommen is Margaery Tyrell’s goodbrother,” she said, shortly. “That does not seem to have stopped them.”

Genna let out something like a strangled scream, turning back and leaning over the table. Cersei had sat down again, and she didn’t like the power imbalance this left the two of them at, not when Cersei was winning.

“I hope you cherish how this feels to you, just now,” Genna whispered, the words breathy, but somehow more threatening than Cersei had expected from the other woman. “For it won’t last.”

Cersei lifted her chin. She no longer felt the power imbalance; Genna was posturing. Terrified.

She smiled. “Genna, I am the Lady of House Lannister, with my father’s death,” she said, coldly. “I know that you wish it were Jaime, so that you might manipulate him to your own pleasure, but that is not the case. I am. And I am doing only what I believe to be best for this House.”

Genna’s lips pulled into a thin line. “Kevan will not appreciate being manipulated any more than you would, dear,” she said, calmly. “Not when you have already taken one of his children from him.”
Cersei didn’t flinch. “Then he’d better hurry home to the rest of them,” she said, calmly, and relished in the way that Genna stormed from the room, no doubt to write directly to Kevan and let him know of Cersei’s threats, the door slamming behind her.

Not that Cersei had any intention of harming Kevan’s children, so long as he did not keep pandering to those who would hurt her son.

There, Cersei thought, a contented sigh leaving her as the door slammed back open, Genna had thrown it so hard.

Her son was the King, as was only right, after his brother’s death. He was a child still, yes, but Joffrey’s child had not even left the womb yet, and Cersei was only doing what she had to do, to protect the children that she had left.

Myrcella was still lost to her, still stuck in Dorne, surrounded by enemies, as was Jaime, to the North, riding alongside Stannis Baratheon, but she would get them back. That was all that remained for her to feel victorious, until she brought the Tyrells down to their knees, reminded them to whom the Crown truly belonged.

She glanced down at the letters in her hands once more.

*The Crown thanks you for your support for King Tommen of House Baratheon, and in exchange for said generous support, offers to you…*

She smiled. Promises, promises.
Elinor swallowed hard, where she stared down at the child in her arms.

It had only been a few days since her baby was born, but it still felt like a dream, something not exactly real that she was never quite going to be able to accept.

And not in a bad way, Elinor thought, a small smile pulling at her lips as she stared down at the child.

Willas.

He was beautiful. Perfect, the masters all said, and Elinor had laughed in relief when the third maester had declared him so.

Perfect, and so small, in her arms, like he didn’t quite belong there. Like she could drop him so easily, or he could disappear when she blinked.

She was trying very hard not to blink.

Willas let out a little cooing sound, squirming in her arms, and Elinor laughed, bearing her breast for the child to suckle.

“You’re a greedy little thing, aren’t you?” She asked, as the babe latched onto her breast without a second’s hesitation.

She ran her fingers over the child’s bald little head, and wondered if he would have darker hair, like Willas, or would more like Alyn, when it finally grew in.

She grimaced a little, as her son pulled rather hard on her teat, and then she jumped a little, when she heard a knock at her bedchamber door.

Alyn should not be up yet, and it was not as if Elinor found herself with many other visitors, these days.

Sansa had, in the days after the King’s death, made it clear to the rest of Margaery’s ladies how they were to consider Elinor, and while there were dozens of Tyrells plaguing King’s Landing now, seeking the opportunity to gain favor now that Margaery was the Regent, Elinor’s fall from favor was rather well known, even if most did not know what it was that she had done, exactly.

And then the door opened, and Elinor’s breath caught in her throat as she found Margaery standing before her, looking hesitant and wide eyed.

“I…” she licked her lips. “I didn’t mean to disturb you. Can I come in?”

She asked as if she didn’t already know the answer.

Elinor nodded her head. “I…” She thought about getting to her feet and greeting Margaery properly, but she realized she wasn’t quite sure she was able to, with the way that her son was latching onto her.

Margaery looked amused by that, more than annoyed that Elinor had not bothered to greet her properly. She’d never been like that, after all.
“Sorry,” Elinor said, attempting to cover herself up a little more, though she supposed it didn’t matter, not with Margaery. “You don’t mind if I…?”

She gestured from herself to the child clinging to her. The boy was only a few days old, and already, Elinor felt quite used to the child’s demands.

Margaery’s eyes widened slightly, before she shook her head. “No, of course not,” she murmured. “Go ahead.”

She moved closer, and then hesitated, seeming to realize only then that there were no other chairs in the room, save for sitting on the edge of Elinor’s bed.

Elinor smiled; the Margaery she had once known would never have hesitated, or asked for permission. She nodded for her to do so, and Margaery sat down, albeit hesitantly, and on the very edge of the bed.

But then, that Margaery was long gone, Elinor thought, sadly, and wondered if she was the only one of Margaery’s ladies who had come to that conclusion.

This one, this hesitant, quiet woman before her, was someone entirely different, and whenever Elinor was around her, in the few short times that she had been, she felt like she was dealing with broken glass.

Or, perhaps, glass that was about to break. Elinor was never entirely sure, on that.

Not that she had spent much time in Margaery’s presence since the night of Joffrey’s death.

Elinor didn’t blame Margaery for a moment of that, of course. Sansa had made it…very clear, what had happened to her that night, in a fit of rage which she had later apologized for, explaining that the things she had said had been in the heat of anger, and she never should have said them at all.

And Elinor would not have blamed Margaery even if she hadn’t endured such a thing. Elinor had betrayed her, by turning to Olenna, and she would not have been surprised if Margaery wanted nothing to do with her again.

But surprisingly, unlike the rest of her ladies, Margaery seemed the most willing to embrace Elinor, after the way that she had gone with Olenna’s plans, when Margaery had warned her ladies of the consequences of doing so.

The other ladies saw her actions as a betrayal. Margaery saw it for what it was; there were few who could stand up in the presence of Olenna Tyrell’s considerable brand of stubbornness.

Not that Elinor was still considered one of Margaery’s ladies; she had kept her promise in that regard, at the least, considering the fact that she had not told them about the boy’s planned death a personal betrayal, just as Sansa seemed to believe it so.

Elinor had been allowed to remain in King’s Landing until she gave birth to her child, considering how close she was to childbirth, and her husband’s continued need for healing from the maesters.

Olenna may want her here, but she was uncertain how much longer she would be allowed to remain here, by the Regent.

And at the moment, Margaery was the more powerful of the two of them.

“He’s beautiful,” Margaery whispered, reaching out to gently trail a finger down the baby’s cheek.
She glanced up at Elinor. “You must be so happy.”

Elinor beamed, despite herself. “I am,” she admitted, smiling down at her child now, in lieu of Margaery.

For all that she had always been Margaery’s woman, willing to do whatever it took to help her succeed, this was what she had always wanted. A family. A child to call her own.

And she loved Alyn, in her own way.

But this child, in her arms…he was beautiful. Elinor knew already that she would do anything for this child, would do anything to see him happy, in the future.

She glanced up at Margaery, then, and her eyes went soft as she saw the thing that looked something like despair, in Margaery’s own.

She wondered if, when the time came for Margaery to have her own child, she too would want to do anything to make that child happy, as well.

But still, Elinor could not stand the sadness in her eyes, the doubt. She swallowed hard, wanting to do anything to alleviate some of that pain, of the reminder of why that child had been so necessary.

“I…I named him Willas,” Elinor said, and Margaery stilled.

For a moment, Elinor thought it was because she was angry. Then, Margaery looked up at her, and her eyes were shining.

Then, “I know.”

Elinor pressed her lips together. “I know that…that I was supposed to ask for your permission, as the Queen, when he was your brother, but I…”

Margaery’s smile looked forced, but her words were not, when she did speak again. “I don’t mind at all,” she said, gently. “He would have been happy to know that you named your child after him.”

Elinor swallowed. “He was always kind to me,” she allowed.

Margaery hummed. “He was kind to everyone,” she murmured. “He cared for you, though.”

Elinor looked away, nodding. “When we were younger, I wondered what it would be like to marry him,” she admitted, and Margaery’s eyes widened. “Of course, I knew it was never going to happen, because your brother was destined for a wife with higher status than I. But…I imagined it. We would have been sisters, then.”

She smiled a little, at the thought.

When she was younger, before she had realized that her feelings were more for Margaery than they were for her brother, the idea of marrying Willas and becoming Margaery’s sister had been more than appealing, for her.

But Willas, where his sister was wild and impulsive, capable of plotting sedition, had always been sweet to her, always kind.

The first time that Margaery had been married, to Renly, even before Elinor had known the truth about Loras and Renly, she had cried for an entire night in Willas’ arms, and he had never once judged her for it.
Of course, she had made her peace with the fact that, even if she had never fallen for Sansa, Margaery would never have been hers, but Willas’ kindness to Elinor had never gone forgotten, both then and throughout their childhoods, for their particular branches of the family had always been close.

“I would have liked that,” Margaery admitted, her face pulled into a sad smile.

Elinor looked away first. She thought that Margaery might feel more comfortable, that way.

“I…” Elinor waited, waited until she felt that enough time had passed before Margaery looked at her again. “I hope that our children will be siblings, as well.”

Margaery’s head did jerk up, then. Then, she placed an errant hand on her protruding belly. Elinor knew that she had been only a few months behind Elinor, as far as the progression of her pregnancy.

“You are the first person to suggest to me that this child might not be a boy,” Margaery said then, though she didn’t sound surprised.

Elinor stared at her for a moment, before laughing, because she didn’t quite know how to else to cut the sudden tension in the room, and because she thought it was perhaps the only reaction that Margaery might be comfortable with.

“Well, in all likelihood, that stubborn Tyrell blood will win out, and you’ll find yourself with a very stubborn girl,” Elinor said, and then trailed off, and Margaery let out a tired laugh.

“I suppose that is something that I should have foreseen,” she murmured, leaning back against the bedpost with a tired smile.

Elinor grinned for a moment, too, before the smile faded, and she finally thought she recognized what was in Margaery’s eyes.

“Margaery, your child,” Elinor pressed her lips together, forcing a smile when she saw Margaery shift uncomfortably at just those words.

Margaery glanced up at her sharply, looking like something…hunted. Like she wanted nothing more than to turn and run, the moment she had the chance.

She didn’t, for which Elinor was grateful. She didn’t think she would be able to chase the other girl down, so soon after giving birth.

“This child doesn’t have to be Joffrey’s child, Margaery,” she told the other girl, gently, and found no pleasure in the way that Margaery squirmed before her. “You can love him.”

Margaery jumped to her feet, then, as if Elinor’s bed were scalding her, and Elinor pressed her lips together.

“I…” Margaery closed her eyes. Then, “I should go, Elinor. I…thank you, for letting me come to visit you. I know that you’re still recovering.”

Elinor’s heart sank as the other girl skittered away from the bed. Then, “Margaery, wait, please.”

Margaery waited, but her back was still to the other woman.

Elinor took it as a relief that she did not entirely pull away, however. That she didn’t try to leave.

“When I was in Highgarden, with your grandmother whispering in my ear,” she hesitated again,
because she knew how special the relationship between Margaery and her grandmother was, even if it was…rather strained, at the moment. “I found that it made things easier, to find some sort of…distraction from everything going on around me.”

Margaery turned her head, eyes flitting back towards Elinor, and then away. “My last distraction became everything going on around me,” she said, and her voice was hard, accompanied with the words she said…

Elinor flinched.

“I thought she was more than just a distraction, that you loved her,” she said, voice lightly accusing, and Margaery’s whole body flinched.

“I…shouldn’t have said that. It’s not…it might have been true, at first, but it’s not true now,” she said, slowly, before turning around to face Elinor. “You’re right. What sort of distraction did you have, in Highgarden?”

She lowered her voice with those last words, as she realized, no doubt, that Alyn was sleeping in the next room over.

Elinor smiled, despite herself. “Religion.”

Margaery stared at her.

Were this any other situation, Elinor might have laughed, at the look on her face. Instead, she just smiled with idle amusement.

“I know,” she said, as her son let out a quiet wine and she gently pulled him away from her breast, tucking him back into his blankets in her arms. “Strange, coming from me.”

Margaery snorted. “Not how I was going to put it,” she said, slowly, but Elinor just laughed, this time.

“It helped,” she admitted. “There weren’t that many other ladies in Highgarden willing to speak with me, at the time, because they knew what I was, at that point.”

They both looked away from each other, then.

Elinor cleared her throat. “But it helped. To just…have something to talk to, something to think about, that wasn’t connected to any of this. That could listen, without providing a judgment.”

Margaery licked her lips. She still hadn’t turned around. “Religion hasn’t done much else for me, save to judge me,” she whispered.

Elinor hummed. “Fanatics did that,” she said. “But the Faith…I don’t think that it is meant to be used, that way.”

Even standing facing away from her, Elinor could see the way that Margaery swallowed, at her words.

And Elinor knew that she wasn’t going to accept what she had just told her, wasn’t going to accept that she was in denial about the love that she would feel for her child one day, but Elinor refused to let that bother her.

“Here,” Elinor said, getting up from her bed and placing her child back in his crib. “Let me walk you
Margaery hesitated, looking like she wanted to object that Elinor should have to set her child down, but then she shrugged.

Elinor smiled, moving over to the door with her, out of her own bedchambers and into the small parlor that she shared with her husband.

He would be sleeping just now; the maesters wanted him to sleep as much as possible, these days, so as to help him regain his strength, but Elinor found herself rather relieved that he was forced to rest, so much.

Some part of her wanted to have the child as much to herself as she could, in these early days, as if she sensed that she would not have that luxury quite so much, when he was older.

Her branch of the family was not so distinguished that it might have been strange, for her to keep her son with her rather than fostering him out, when he was older, but a part of Elinor feared it, all the same.

Feared what Olenna might do to punish her, if she failed the woman now, as she had already done more than once.

“Elinor,” Margaery said, turning around and reaching out to grasp Elinor’s hands in hers, before her hands paused, midair, and fell back to her sides.

Elinor felt a distinct pang of loss at the realization.

“You’ve been a good friend to me,” Margaery assured her. “I know that…that the things you did for Olenna, you did them to help me. And I’m sorry that I couldn’t see that, before.”

Elinor pursed her lips. “Margaery…”

She wanted to say a dozen things. Wanted to tell Margaery that it was all right, that of course she had forgiven her, that she still knew Margaery cared for her, as well, in her own way, that pushing Sansa away was the wrong thing to do, here, that it wasn’t Margaery’s fault, this awful thing that had happened to her. It hadn’t happened to her because she had sped things along, because she had defied her grandmother.

She wanted to tell her that it would have happened either way, eventually, with a husband like Joffrey.

She didn’t say any of that.

She didn’t think Margaery was ready to hear it.

Instead, she just smiled, and said a thousand words with that smile, and thought that Margaery understood at least part of it, if the way her eyes widened was any indication.

And then she turned around, and walked away, and Elinor tried not to mourn the loss, a little, as the door shut behind her while she left the parlor that Elinor shared with her husband.

Instead, she sighed, and walked back into her own rooms, intent on taking another long nap before her child started to cry again.

And that was when she saw him, standing in the middle of her chambers, appeared out of thin air.
“Lady Elinor,” Lord Varys said, in his soft, considering voice, and Elinor grimaced, turning around to face the other man, and then her breath caught in her throat.

Lord Varys was standing in front of the small nursery that she’d had created for her son, in the months before his birth once she had decided that she was remaining in King’s Landing, and in his arms, he was holding her son.

Something about the sight sent a thrill of fear through Elinor, and she froze, her lips parting soundlessly.

“L-Lord Varys,” she stammered out, trying to remind herself that, for all of Lord Varys’ tricks, his games with those around him, he would never harm her child.

He would never want to be seen as responsible for such a level of power, that he could get away with killing a noblewoman’s child without a single reprimand for it.

After all, that would give away his game.

But logic hardly made her feel better about the sight of Lord Varys holding her child in his arms.

“I…What are you doing here?” She asked, torn between not showing weakness before this man, letting him know how much he was getting to her, and running forward to pull her baby out of his arms.

“You named him Willas,” Lord Varys said, rather than answering her question, and perhaps she might have been more disturbed by how easily he held a child in his arms, as if he had experience with children, were she not so disturbed by the sight of him here, in her rooms, at all.

“I…Yes, my lord,” she murmured. “I did get permission from Her Grace, the Regent, and before that, in fact, from Lady Olenna, who was more than happy for me to honor her grandson in such a way.”

That had been such a point of controversy, in the last few days, after her child had been born. Margaery had not reacted at all to the news of who she had named her child after, even if, technically, Elinor should have asked her for said permission long before she had held her child in her arms.

But the rest of Margaery’s ladies, all girls whom Elinor had once considered friends, had all had opinions about the name, about the imposition of Elinor not asking for the Queen’s permission.

Varys did not seem entirely concerned with that. He simply nodded. “He is a beautiful child.”

Elinor’s heart skipped a beat. “He is,” she agreed.

“You are brave indeed, to bring him into this world in King’s Landing, of all places,” Varys went on, and Elinor swallowed, wondering if the words were a warning or a threat.

Varys’ eyes were always unreadable, to her.

“King’s Landing has become…a different place, since King Joffrey’s death,” she said, tartly, as she moved forward and pulled her son out of Varys’ arms while trying not to look as desperate to get her son away as she felt.

Varys let the child go without a protest, watching her with that knowing gaze as she cradled Willas close, checking the child for injuries despite her earlier assurances to herself that he would not hurt
her child.

Thank the gods, she thought, the moment she had ascertained that her child was, in fact, safe.

Varys was still watching her as she put some distance between the two of them.

“What are you doing here, Lord Varys?” She demanded.

“I came here to talk about someone we are all three of us concerned with, Lady Elinor. You, myself, Lady Olenna.” Varys told her, eyes glinting, and Elinor’s stomach sank. “I believe the one thing we can all say that we have in common is our mutual concern for the new Regent.”

“Where are we on the High Septon?” Sansa asked, turning back to face Lord Baelish, and grimaced at the look he sent her.

A look far too full of longing for her comfort, though she had grown rather too familiar with Baelish looking at her like that, of late.

In his defense, he covered it quickly. Baelish seemed more than aware that, for all the kisses that she placated him with, she did not truly love him, not in the way that she loved Margaery, something he found it very difficult to let go, she knew.

And besides, he never let those kisses linger long, when they were dealing with politics. It was distasteful to him, Sansa thought.

He loved this side of Sansa, but wanted the side of her that smiled and kissed him back to be wholly separate from the politics of the land.

Because he wanted her to associate Margaery with those politics, wanted himself to be the reprieve from them.

She could have told him it was the other way around, if she had any sort of pity for him, but she could not forget the heavy price that he had extracted from her, in return for his help with the King’s death.

“The High Septon,” he repeated, nodding. “It took some…cajoling, but the Septons remaining within the Sept of Baelor have finally come to a consensus that the Crown should find…acceptable.”

Sansa pressed her lips together. “They chose the last Septon,” she pointed out.

Baelish’s smile was thin. “This one has deeper pockets, my dear,” he told her, and Sansa bit her lower lip, until she noticed the way that Baelish was staring at the action.

“Do the people know that?” She asked, because, as much as the Crown needed a new High Septon whom they could control far better than the last, if the people believed him to just be a mouthpiece of the Crown, they would likely never follow him, or accept him.

Baelish smiled. “He has been a faithful member of the Sept for many years. Rumor has it this one has never even touched a woman.” A pause. “Only boys, and ones that are not missed by the smallfolk.”

Sansa closed her eyes, feeling sick. “I see,” she said, because she very much did, and yet, this served their purpose well enough, sickening as it was to learn of the man’s weaknesses so…intimately.

“But…” Baelish paused, then, and she turned to face him. “At the moment, the High Septon is not our biggest concern.”
Sansa chewed on the inside of her cheek. “The funeral, I know. Now that there is a High Septon, we can go through with the ceremony without…”

“Sansa,” Baelish interrupted her, and Sansa went still, turning about to face him. She saw the seriousness of his face, then.

Gods, what now?

Baelish seemed to read some of the frustration in her eyes, for he sat down on the corner of the map table with a sigh.

“Cersei has crowned Tommen as King,” Baelish said, and Sansa felt her whole world going still, at those words.

“W…What?” She breathed, because truthfully, at first, the words meant nothing to her, sounding so foreign that she didn’t have a prayer of understanding them.

Baelish gave her a long, knowing look, before sighing again. “She claims that someone, acting on behalf of House Tyrell, snuck into the boy’s chambers in the middle of the day and tried to murder him. That she is crowning him because she believes it to be the only way to protect her son from the Tyrells.”

Sansa’s heart skipped a beat. “She’s courting a war,” she whispered.

Baelish shrugged. “There was always going to be a war, Sansa,” he told her, gently, but firmly. “What did you think was going to happen, when Margaery killed the King?”

Sansa closed her eyes, her breaths coming in ragged gasps. “No,” she breathed. “Not like this. I didn’t…I didn’t think this would happen.”

“Margaery’s child is not yet born, and as long as it is not, Cersei can claim that her own child is the heir,” Baelish continued, mercilessly, and Sansa’s eyes snapped back open. “And even that child had been born when Joffrey had died, she likely would have had her son crowned, anyway.”

Sansa knew that, of course she did, but she had been dreading everything about this, had been hoping that for once in her life, Cersei would stand by and do nothing.

Dear gods, there was going to be a war.

There had to be, with Cersei doing something like this. The Tyrells could not let this stand, for, even if the child in margaery’s womb turned out to be a girl, the very fact that Cersei had crowned Tommen meant that she was openly questioning the legitimacy of the child in Margaery’s womb.

And Margaery’s child, who was not even born into this world yet, and Tommen, who was still a child himself, were about to be dragged into the middle of that war.

“Why is this the first I’m hearing of this?” Sansa demanded, rounding on Baelish, then. Yesterday, the Small Council had been debating whether they should have Lannister colors at the King’s funeral, when clearly this was the far more important concern.

Baelish met her eyes. “Because I have spies within the Rock, my lady, while no one else does. It has not left the Rock yet, this news that Tommen is their king. The rest of the realm will no doubt find out in the coming days, but I thought that you should know.”

Sansa’s breaths were coming with even more difficulty, now.
Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, she thought, thinking of Tommen’s sad eyes as he told her how lonely he was within the Keep, because not even his own mother spent much time with him.

His own mother, who was just now using him as a pawn, if indeed the Tyrells had even attacked him in the first place. A stepping stone on her way back to the Iron Throne.

“We have a little time,” Baelish told her, “To decide what we’re going to do about this.”

Sansa scoffed. “What can we do about this?” She whispered. “The Tyrells may be capable of summoning the largest armies in the Seven Kingdoms, but the Lannisters already have that, and what’s worse, Jaime Lannister took Tyrell forces to the Rock, with him.”

A horrible thought struck her.

“Are they still alive?” She glanced up sharply at Baelish.

He looked away.

Shit, she thought harshly.

“Then we’re even more doomed,” she whispered.

Baelish didn’t bother to respond; it was not as if he needed to. They both knew that she was right.

“Does anyone else know?” She said, and didn’t like the way that Baelish was gravitating towards her vulnerability, looking very much like he wanted nothing more in the world than to comfort her.

“Just us, for now,” Baelish told her. “And the Houses of the Westerlands. It will not be long, if they do not already know, before the forces Stannis Baratheon left at the West knows, and at Winterfell.”

Sansa’s heart was hammering in her chest. “And Stannis is not there to tell them to stop her,” she whispered.

Of course he wasn’t. Because somehow, no matter how many times her husband hit her or her son reviled her, Cersei Lannister clawed her way back to the top, every single time.

Sansa shut her eyes tightly, and so she was shocked when Baelish reached out and touched her, her eyes snapping open.

He didn’t pull away, and neither did Sansa.

Even if his very touch so often repulsed her, Sansa found herself leaning into it, needing some sort of comfort in all of this.

Gods, she was so tired.

Petyr reached out, running a hand gently through her hair, and then down her cheek, his fingers trailing slowly, and Sansa closed her eyes, because otherwise she didn’t think she would be able to hide the revulsion in them at his touch.

“Do not worry. I’ll protect you, Sansa,” he vowed to her. “No matter what happens.”

Sansa grimaced.
She didn’t want that, because she knew that that promise did not extend to Margaery, the same way that it extended to her. Baelish could not give less of a damn about Margaery; she was not the reason that he had helped cover up Joffrey’s death.

He had done that because he believed Sansa when she told him that she was…more directly involved in it than she might have been.

But Sansa had to protect Margaery, and that meant keeping Baelish at arm’s length while manipulating him into doing what she willed.

“Is there any way to fix this?” Sansa whispered hoarsely, against his chest.

She could feel Baelish’s smile against her skin. Because of course there was; his mind was always a dozen steps ahead of those around him, even Cersei’s.

She didn’t even know what she was doing, trying to manipulate him like this. She had no doubt that he already knew exactly what she was up to, and had plotted away around it that still ended with her in his arms.

“I will take care of everything, Sansa,” he promised her. “You needn’t worry about that.”

She nodded, shakily. She pulled back, then, forcing a tremulous smile, because two could play this game, and Margaery had taught her to always cake a lie in truth. “I know, Petyr,” she whispered.

She didn’t pull away, this time, when Baelish pressed a gentle kiss to her lips, gentle and somehow possessing, at the same time. His fingers ran through her Tully red hair, and she imagined, for a moment, that instead he was running his fingers through blood.

“I don’t want Tommen hurt, either,” she whispered, because even if Cersei had just made him their greatest enemy, she could not forget the boy’s sad smile as he admitted to her that he knew his own family cared little for him.

Baelish raised an eyebrow. “You don’t want much, do you?” He asked, but he sounded rather amused by her words, rather than annoyed.

She reached out, placing a hand on his arm. “Please, Petyr,” she said, and he eyed her for a moment, before nodding.

“I shall see what I can do,” he told her, which was not exactly an answer, but she supposed she would have to take it, for now.

And then, he was gone, moving out of her rooms, and away.

She remembered how to breathe again only after he was gone.

Fuck, Sansa thought, her heart hammering in her chest. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

She had to find Margaery.

She knew that Margaery wanted her space, knew that she was uncomfortable with the way that Sansa kept reaching out to her, even if Sansa couldn’t help herself in doing so, but this was more important than that.

They had to deal with this, now.

Margaery may not be in the best place to deal with any of this, just now, but Sansa needed her to be.
Needed her to be here with Sansa, in this moment, because Sansa had been doing her best to appear strong to everyone around her, since Joffrey had died, but this...this was too much, even for her.

She sucked in a ragged breath, and then another, and left her chambers, latching the door tightly behind her, as she marched back to Margaery’s own chambers, the ones that had belonged to Joffrey, of all people.

Margaery had insisted on moving into them, after his death. Sansa still felt something sick twist in her stomach, every time she came to these rooms, and remembered what had happened in them.

She couldn’t imagine how Margaery could sleep peacefully in these chambers, after that night. Sansa could barely stomach looking at them.

She didn’t know how she could ever make love to Margaery, in these rooms, if that was even something Margaery would ever ask of her again, not after what Joffrey had done to her here.

The Kingsguard outside the door let her pass without a protest; they knew better, by now.

Sansa stepped inside Joffrey’s old chambers, shivering a little, though it was hardly cold, even with Joffrey’s windows thrown open, as they were.

She looked down at the floor, and for a moment, if she stared hard enough, she could still see Joffrey’s blood pooling on that floor. Could still see the outline of the man whom she had killed, beside his body.

She forced herself to look up, look around.

Margaery was not here, she realized a moment later, which, for all that it felt like relief flooding through her at the realization, was a surprise.

Whenever Margaery was not acting as the Regent, she seemed to be hiding in these chambers.

But she wasn’t here, and she had no announcements to make, no meetings of the Small Council to see to.

Sansa felt something like panic bubbling up within her in the next moment, at the thought that Margaery wasn’t where she always was, not when Margaery had been acting so strangely lately, not when they had promised each other that they would never leave one another-

“Sansa?” Alla’s bright voice cut through her panic like a knife, and Sansa spun around, eyes blown wide.

Alla forced a smile. Her voice sounded unnaturally loud, and wrong, in the room, when she spoke again. “Are you all right? I said your name four times.”

Sansa licked her lips. “Where is the Queen?” She demanded, and immediately regretted her shortness with the other girl.

For she had been right; the rooms were empty of anyone save for Alla, for all that there had been Kingsguard standing outside them. Margaery was still gone, and that panic was still welling up inside of Sansa, waiting for its moment to erupt.

Alla wouldn’t meet her eyes. She looked terribly guilty.

Sansa spun on her. “Alla,” she said, some of the panic she felt bleeding into her voice, and making
Alla’s eyes widen. “Where is she?”

Alla bit her lip. “She-She went to the Sept of Baelor, to pray.”

Dear gods.

Sansa felt like her entire world was imploding around her.

First, Cersei had crowned Tommen, had doomed him, for all that she had asked Baelish to find a way to spare the boy. She knew, as he did, that she had far too many favors owed to Baelish to ask for him to spare another life alongside Margaery’s.

And now, Margaery had gone to the Sept.

“Was she alone?” Sansa asked, her heart hammering in her chest. Logically, she knew that the Queen would never have been allowed to go to the Sept alone, not after what had happened the last time she had been there, but the fact that Margaery had gone to the Sept at all seemed to defy logic, in this moment.

The Sept of Baelor where, the last time Margaery had been there, Joffrey had slaughtered everyone inside of it.

Alla shook her head.

Sansa felt her insides grow cold, as she stalked towards the door, throwing over her shoulder, “Why the fuck did you let her go?”

Margaery had never been a particularly religious woman, in the strict sense of the word. Oh, she had understood the use of it, when she was older, and she had believed in the Seven from a young age, taught well by her Septa and by her devout mother, had attended the Sept whenever she felt the need for a guidance that her grandmother could not provide, or to show her devoutness to those around her.

Most commonly, the common people. They tended to trust her charity, she found, more after she had just gone to pray. And her husband had tended to trust that she was truly trying for a child, when she prayed to the gods for one.

Today, she had not come here as a show to the smallfolk, which was something of a strange sensation, for her.

They did not even know she was here, from the way she had snuck here with only Nym for company, not telling a soul within the Keep, save for Alla where she was going, wearing a hood that could have belonged to any rich lady, not just a Regent.

She hoped.

But she was here, now, and they had not encountered any trouble along the way, from the smallfolk whom they had passed, after sneaking out of the Keep through the tunnels that the fanatics were rumored to have used to kill the King, and Margaery had thought she had some purpose, in coming here, all the way until the moment when she stood within a quiet part of the Sept and stared up at the Mother’s fresco, on the wall.

The Septon who had let them in here, and then told them how to lock the door after themselves, had seemed shocked to see her, something she understood.
She had flinched hard, when Nym had locked the door for Margaery on her way out, reminded of all of the times when that damned High Sparrow or that ugly Septa had come into her cell, within the Sept, and demanded her confession, and then locked the door after themselves as they left, heedless of Margaery’s threats or pleading.

She had been nothing more than their hapless prisoner, their victim, and Margaery had vowed that she never wanted to be anyone’s victim again, as she watched Joffrey’s men bathe in their blood.

She let out a dry laugh; more fool, she, for thinking that siding with Joffrey in anything might have saved her from becoming his victim.

She looked up at the Mother, where she hung above her, and thought of the way that blood had felt, as she waded through it that day, at the Slaughter of the Sept, as the smallfolk called it, now.

The feeling of blood, squishing between her toes, was something she would never forget. She could feel it, even now.

Margaery shut her eyes, tightly, suddenly uncertain.

She shouldn’t have come here, she realized, with a sickening sense of clarity. She should not have come back to this place, because even if she could find some comfort from the darkness encircling her mind in the Faith, surely she would not find it here.

The Mother had no mercy for one who had shed blood in the House of the Faith.

If Joffrey’s beheading of Ned Stark was enough to offend the Faith once, surely, what Margaery had induced him to do was far worse.

And yet.

And yet, the child within her belly was still kicking, and Margaery was terrified, and she would take comfort where she would get it, at this point.

She looked up at the Mother, eyes very wide, now.

She did not utter her prayers aloud, because something about that seemed obscene, after the things that she had caused to happen here, once, and because all of the prayers Margaery knew were recited, and none of them seemed to encompass the particular kind of guilt for which she wanted mercy.

And yet, she prayed, her lips moving soundlessly as she begged the Mother for mercy, even wondering whether or not mercy was something that the Seven could offer one such as her, after the things she had done.

Mercy, for her child, she amended, at the very least.

She might have caused the slaughter that had happened here, might have killed her own husband, but her child was an innocent, for all that he was born of wedlock.

Mother, please, she whispered soundlessly, grant my child your mercy. Grant him the mercy of being born a son, so that he does not spend his entire life in thrall to those who would hurt him simply for living. Grant him a life unspoiled. I-

And then the words came, more and more panicked, because the longer she spent kneeling before the Mother, the more her toes dripped of a blood, today unseen.
For a moment, that blood belonged to the dead of the Sept.

In the next moment, it was mixed with the blood that had dripped between her thighs, from where Joffrey had hurt her, over and over again, before she bashed his head in, killing her own husband.

But the words of her prayers poured over themselves in her mind, despite her mind seeming to drip with the blood of those around her. Hers, the smallfolk’s, Joffrey’s.

She had endured Joffrey, in those final moments, in all of the moments before then, so that she could have this child, the one kicking against her womb, reminding her that it had been a grand total of only a few moments since the last time that she had used the privy.

All for this child, and now, the child within her womb was the only thing that could matter, because otherwise, what had it all been for?

And there was no earthly power which could grant her that reassurance, now.

*Grant me your Mercy, Mother, for I have sinned most grievously against you. I do not ask for mercy for myself, but for the child within me. Do not use the sins of the parents against my child, I beg of you-*

“You shouldn’t be here, Your Grace,” a woman’s voice interrupted her, and Margaery closed her eyes, because she may not have recognized the scarred woman, at first, but she recognized that damn voice.

Confess.

She squeezed her eyes tighter, gasping.

Of all of the people to find her here, she supposed she should not be surprised that this one had.

She wondered if this was the Mother’s way of answering her prayers.

Or rather, denying them, for nothing good could come from that woman’s voice, not after the way it had plagued Margaery’s waking hours, while she was kept prisoner here, and her nightmares, after she had escaped this place.

She turned around, and found herself staring into the hardened eyes of the Septa who had once demanded that she confess, over and over and over.

“Get away from her,” Lady Nym snapped, barging into the small prayer room and stepping forward, then, but Margaery lifted a hand, from where she still sat on the floor, on her knees. Nym hesitated, looking bemused.

Margaery didn’t know why she did it. Perhaps out of a desire to keep more blood from being shed within this particular sept. Perhaps because she was curious as to why this particular septa had not hit her over the head, for daring to be here at all.

“It’s fine, Lady Nym,” she told the other woman. “The Septa could not hurt me if she wanted to.”

Margaery wasn’t certain that anything could, anymore. She’d hurt enough for a lifetime.

Nym didn’t move.

The Septa stared at her, clearly surprised that Margaery had stopped her Kingsguard from coming after her.
She was right to wonder; it wasn’t as if Margaery had ever tried to stop such things in the past, after all. She deserved all of the woman’s confusion.

Nym looked confused, glancing sharply between the two of them, not looking like she believed that Margaery would be fine.

Margaery didn’t like that hesitation.

“You may wait out in the hall,” Margaery gritted out, annoyance flooding her. “I’ll…” she shrugged. “I’ll scream, if I need you.”

Nym gave her an unimpressed look, before doing as she had bid, leaving Margaery alone in a room with the septa.

The moment she was gone, Margaery wished that she could summon her back without looking like a cowardly fool.

The Septa stared at her, wide eyed, for a moment, before taking a step closer, and then another. Despite her earlier words, Margaery felt herself tense, where she knelt on the ground, below the other woman.

She felt just as she had in that prison cell, with the septa towering over her as she read prayers.

“If the smallfolk were to find you here…” the septa tsked, like a mother reprimanding an errant child. “I don’t think they could forgive it, given what happened when you were last here.”

Margaery licked her lips, opening her eyes again. She knew that. She did not need this woman, who thought herself so above Margaery for her faith, to remind her of it.

The moment she had the thought, Margaery felt guilt for doing so, because after all, that was why she was here.

Forgiveness.

She reached out, placing a hand on her bulging stomach.

“Do you think forgiveness impossible then, Septa? Or are you here to kill me?”

“Those that kill belong with the Stranger, if they do not kill for the Seven,” the Septa parroted words Margaery had only heard a few times, when this woman had read them to her out of the Seven Pointed Star.

Margaery closed her eyes again. “Do you think that killing me would be righteous, then?” she asked.

When she opened her eyes again, the septa seemed to be hard at work, contemplating the question. “Do you?” She asked.

Margaery stared at her, lips falling open soundlessly.

Because she didn’t have an answer to that question, as she honestly didn’t know what the answer should be.

She had killed her husband. She had willingly let so many people die within this Sept, knowing what her husband was, so that she could protect Sansa.

Nym had suffered at the hands of the one who had murdered her own father, because Margaery had
needed a child and had to wait to kill her husband.

Margaery did not know if there was a word for the things she had done, anymore.

Finally, the Septa sighed. “No, Your Grace. I do not.”

Margaery blinked at her, genuinely surprised by the answer.

“What was your name again?” Margaery asked.

The septa smiled at her. “You truly don’t remember.” She truly didn’t sound surprised. Margaery wondered what nobles had hurt her, in a past life, for her to hate them so.

“No,” Margaery said, and there might have been something of an apology, in those words. “I have tried hard to block certain memories from my mind.”

“Traumatic ones, I imagine,” the Septa said.

Margaery pressed her lips together. “You have no idea,” she whispered, and hated herself a little for the way that her voice shook as she said those words. She did not deserve this woman’s pity.

They sat in a silence that almost felt amiable, for some time after that, before Margaery dared to speak again.

Her forehead wrinkled. “Is there...is there any way, do you really think, for one with so much blood on their hands to attain the gods’ forgiveness?”

The Septa stared at her, and then she sank down to her knees beside Margaery, startling the other woman. “Do you think I wished you to confess, so demandingly, for fun, Your Grace? That I took some enjoyment out of your humiliation?”

Margaery eyed her.

Yes.

The word hung in the air, a silent indictment between the two of them.

The Septa was the first to look away, but that did not stop her from saying, “I did it because confession is good for the soul. It is the only way to find true forgiveness, from the Seven, by admitting that you have wronged them, and gaining penance. Washing yourself anew. I did it because I believed in what you could become, if you only set aside your worldly, selfish ways.”

Margaery swallowed, but her throat suddenly felt very dry.

“I...I am haunted,” Margaery admitted, and the words felt like as much of an admittance as she could allow, “by my wrongs. And I...I fear what they will make me become. The things I’ve done...I am afraid that there is no coming back from them. That they’ve turned me into something...Other.”

The Septa, for the first time since margaery had met her, looked almost sympathetic. “Then you must confess,” she murmured.

Margaery shut her eyes tightly. “The things that I have done...I do not know that penance might forgive them,” she admitted, and the words in and of themselves felt like an indictment.

When she opened her eyes again, the Septa was looking at her with a sympathy she had never possessed, while Margaery was her victim.
“There is never something too evil for the gods to forgive, if you approach with an open heart and a willingness to atone, Your Grace,” she said, and Margaery felt a tear slip down her cheek.

She reached up, wiped at it. The Septa looked disturbed, by the sight of her tears. “I…Do you really think so?”

Septa Unella reached out then, taking her hand in her own and squeezing it. “It will not be easy, Your Grace, but yes, I have to believe that.”

Margaery swallowed hard. Nothing came easily, anymore; she had long ago accepted that.

She felt the septa’s hands on her own, a touch that burned as every touch did, these days, but she did not pull away.

“How…This time, could you…Would you help me find the true path?” She whispered, and the septa smiled at her.

But Margaery was already shaking her head then, pulling away. “No. I cannot ask that of you. Not after the things that I…What would you have to gain from that?”

The Septa knelt, then, so that they were level with one another. “Your Grace,” she said, very slowly, and Margaery shivered at the reminder of that title, that it belonged to her, still.

And not in a good way.

“I am not sure if you will ever truly wipe away the stain of the Slaughter of the Sept,” the septa told her, coolly, “not in my mind, even if you manage it before the eyes of the Seven. But I am a septa, and it is my duty to guide you, if that is what you wish. Especially when you are the Regent of the Crown, and I see this to be a duty brought before me at the hands of the Seven themselves, seeing you here.”

Margaery licked her lips.

“I do not believe it coincidence, that we found each other today,” Septa Unella continued. “You are the Crown, and if I can bring you back to the Faith, I will have done more than my share of penance.”

Margaery blinked at her. “What do you atone for, Septa Unella?” She asked the other woman.

Septa Unella met her eyes. “I held a dead man’s hand in my own, and felt life return to it before my very eyes,” she murmured. “And then, I let him die again. I think that our sins are near equal, Your Grace.”

Margaery stared at her for a moment, and then nodded, slowly, before turning her gaze back to the Mother.

“If we try hard enough, we might just wipe ourselves clean before the eyes of the Seven,” she whispered.

Margaery could still feel that blood, on her toes.

“It is not us, Your Grace,” the septa told her, softly. “But their power, their mercy, which absolves us, once we show that we have a true heart, before them.”

Margaery licked her lips, turning back to the septa, then. “Then it seems that I have much to learn,
much that I did not learn, during my time here. Will…will you help me?”

She still had not received an answer. Septa Unella had told her she believed it to be her calling, but she had not answered.

And then, Septa Unella smiled. It looked strange, on the face of a woman whom Margaery had never seen smile before.

“I will, Your Grace, before the eyes of the Seven.”

And, for the first time since she had bashed in her husband’s brains with a small golden statue, Margaery felt a bit of the burden she carried wane.
Margaery stood atop the balcony outside Cersei Lannister’s old chambers, staring down at the harbor below, the street below that.

For a moment, she allowed herself to wonder what it might be like, to simply...step off the edge of the balcony, throw herself down into the streets below.

It would certainly solve so many of her current problems, Margaery thought, idly.

It would certainly stop the nightmares.

She was dreaming of Loras, most nights.

Every night, the same dreams, over and over. Loras, standing in the corner of her chambers as she slept, pulling her from sleep that wasn’t really sleep.

Dripping wet, just as he had been in Dorne, as he stared at her with unseeing eyes, and whispered, “Why, Margaery? Why did you let this happen to me, only to let this happen to you?’

And he would gesture around to Margaery’s chambers, chambers that she would realize only then were her husband’s bedchambers, the bedchambers that he had raped her in, and Margaery would shudder.

“I…” of course, she never had a good answer for him. He was right. It was her fault that he was dead now, and her fault that Joffrey had finally seen her for what she truly was, and punished her for it.

If she’d just been a bit more patient, he might never have known. Might have gone to a peaceful death, poisoned in his sleep, still believing that Margaery loved him, days before her child was to be born, rather than months before.

But last night, she hadn’t dreamt of Loras’ accusing gaze, of the water dripping from his fingers, his clothes, never-ending throughout every iteration of the dream.

Instead, she dreamt of the child in her belly, brought into this world in blood, screaming. He was grown into a man within moments, a strong, agile man, standing in the corner of Margaery’s chambers, and she hadn’t needed to guess who he was, just looking at him.

He was Joffrey’s son, with Joffrey’s piercing green eyes and Joffrey’s cold smile which promised pain.

It was impossible, of course, because the child in her belly had belonged to Olyvar, but the child standing before her in her dream terrified her because he was, every inch of him, her husband’s son.

He smiled at her, a smile which didn’t match the tone of his voice as he asked her, where she lay sweating in her bed, “Why did you kill my father?”

And she, backing up until her back was against the headboard, “He wasn’t your father.”

“Wasn’t he?” the boy with Joffrey’s smile asked, cocking his head at her. “Isn’t that what you’ve told everyone since you bought a whore to make me? So you could sit me on his throne, and rule through me?”
Margaery was panting, suddenly, even if a part of her was aware that this was only a dream. “He was, and he wasn’t.”

The boy scoffed. “I don’t know what that means.”

“Neither do I.” Margaery hadn’t meant to say those words out loud. But they were first thing she’d said to this boy who was impossible that she’d meant.

Her son stared at her. “You killed him, and then you took everything from him,” he said. “His chance at a true heir, his throne, his belief that you loved him.”

Margaery shifted, uncomfortably.

Suddenly, they were no longer in her bedchambers, but standing before the empty throne.

Her son moved towards it, reaching out to trace a gentle finger over one arm of the uncomfortable chair. Then, he turned back to her.

He hadn’t stopped smiling since he’d first opened his mouth.

“So why can’t I take it from you?” he asked her. “I’ve seen what you’ve done. You don’t deserve this throne. You used me to get it, but you never loved me. So why shouldn’t I take what you love?”

Margaery blinked at him. “I…”

She didn’t understand what he meant, not until he moved forward and sat down on it.

And that was when she realized that it was too late. Too late to tell him that she’d never loved this throne, that she hadn’t wanted a child because she loved this throne. It had been because she had thought she needed it, to protect those she did love.

But then she saw into his eyes, and saw that he already knew all of that.

“I don’t like you, Mother,” he told her, with the same cruel smile that Joffrey had used when he told her to hit Sansa, that first night, a lifetime ago, when all of this had begun. “What’s to be done about that?”

Margaery took a step backward, and found herself tripping down the steps before the Iron Throne, landing in a heap at the bottom of them.

She looked up at her son, the boy wearing Joffrey’s face and sitting on Joffrey’s throne. He was full on grinning now, leaning forward in that chair as if he couldn’t bear the thought of missing a moment of her suffering.

“And that was when she realized that it was too late. Too late to tell him that she’d never loved this throne, that she hadn’t wanted a child because she loved this throne. It had been because she had thought she needed it, to protect those she did love.

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“Do you know, that’s what Cersei Lannister’s children have all been to her,” her son continued, still grinning. “Oh, she may have convinced her brother that she loved them for being his, but we both know the truth, don’t we? She wanted the Iron Throne all along, loathed her husband for having it instead of her. Killed him, too. And it was only her child who finally was able to stop her, as I’m going to stop you.”

“No,” Margaery said, shaking her head, desperately.

“He banished her,” the boy continued, “As I could so easily banish you. He loved his father, as you’re going to teach me to love mine, because if you do otherwise, you know you’ll lose the throne. Someone, somewhere along the line will wonder why you taught your son that his father was a
monster, that he was born of a monster, if you don’t.”

Margaery swallowed hard.

“And I’ll grow up loving a man that you hated,” her son whispered, and then laughed. “Hells, a man you killed.”

Margaery shook her head. “No,” she insisted. “No, that is not the son I will raise.”

“But I’m my father’s son, Mother,” he said, smirking. “You just said as much. Or are you going to tell me, one day, that you butchered my father like an animal? Made me complicit by doing it while I was still within your belly?”

Margaery flinched. “Forgive me,” she breathed.

Her son shook his head, laughing. “Why? You didn’t forgive Joffrey, and he was your husband. You’re my mother. You’re sleeping in Cersei Lannister’s chambers, and you’re going the route she did. Fucking someone who isn’t your husband, having a child and passing it off as your husband’s, claiming the Iron Throne for yourself.”

Margaery shook her head. “I…” she swallowed. “She was married to Robert Baratheon. I was married to a creature made by the Stranger himself. I was just trying to protect myself. My family.”

The boy leaned forward, grinning at her. “You think that isn’t the exact argument she used, when she had her husband killed? And you did worse. You killed him with your own hands. Over-killed him, actually.”

Margaery awoke in her bed, sitting upright, gasping, sweat pouring over her.

She glanced to the corner of her rooms, Cersei’s old rooms, where Loras usually stood dripping saltwater and glowering at her, to see if this was still a dream.

Her rooms were gloriously empty.

Margaery threw the bedding off of her, stumbling out of her bed as if it were burning her, and stalking towards the open balcony, finding herself in desperate need of fresh air.

She wondered how many times Cersei and Jaime Lannister had fucked in the bed she kept having nightmares in. Wondered if the nightmares were a sign from the gods, not only that she had done something wrong, but that she slept in a bed made for the unholy.

And then she reminded herself that she had sinned quite enough, without having to worry about paying for the sins of others.

And that was how she found herself climbing up onto the bannister, because just standing on the balcony was still making it difficult to breathe, and she couldn’t breathe, not entirely, until she stood atop that bannister, the fresh air beating against her like the wind.

The servant found her there, too.

“Your Grace!” the serving girl called, rushing forward, but Margaery held up a hand, and she instantly stilled. Margaery knew that without even turning around.

That was what it meant to be the Queen Regent for a child who was not even born yet, after all.

“I need you to send for Lady Nym,” she ordered, sharply.
“Your Grace,” the serving girl acknowledged, then, “Perhaps Your Grace would like to get down, before I do so?”

Margaery rolled her eyes, and she turned her head, forced herself to look at the girl now, annoyed that she was here and trying to save Margaery now, when she had not been there to do so before.

She knew that the servant was only asking because she was terrified that Margaery was going to jump, the moment that she left her alone, and Margaery almost told her that she didn’t have to worry about that anymore, that Margaery wasn’t ever going to jump, because she had far too much ambition - and dear gods, that had always been the problem - to lay waste to her own life.

But then, she had done that, in a way, already, hadn’t she?

“No, I don’t think I would,” Margaery said, with a perfect lack of inflection in her tone. “Now are you going to do as told, or do I need to find another maidservant?”

The girl bit her lip, clearly hesitant, but then hurried to do as she was bid, the door all but slamming behind her.

Margaery was just glad that she didn’t call for the Kingsguard outside Cersei’s old chambers to throw open the door and demand that she come back inside.

It was several minutes longer than Margaery had expected for Lady Nym to appear - a part of her had thought that perhaps Sansa would be the one to come, not Lady Nym, and she couldn’t stand the thought of Sansa, looking at her and seeing again what a mess she was, couldn’t stand the thought of seeing the pain in the other girl’s eyes.

Lady Nym had never felt sorry for her, not even after the other woman had figured out what had happened to her, and Margaery was grateful for that. It was why she had sent for the other woman, instead of Sansa, when truthfully this was the sort of thing that Sansa would usually handle, these days.

Considering that Sansa was handling so much, these days, because Margaery was unable to.

Because, perhaps, she was going mad…

“Fucking hell,” Lady Nym breathed, as she stepped into Margaery’s chambers. Well, Cersei’s. Margaery heard the faint sound of the walking stick that Nym was forced to carry with her now scraping against the floor. She turned, shoving the door closed in the face of the serving girl who had frantically been following her. Margaery smiled wanly. “What are you doing?”

“I was thinking about the first time we bonded,” Margaery said, not turning around, not bothering to get down from the ledge. “Of that night in Sunspear, when an assassin snuck into my chambers on Arianne’s orders, to scare me into going to the Water Gardens.”

Silence. Then, “If you knew it was on Arianne’s orders, why did you go along with her plans?”

Margaery hummed. “They were my plans, first of all,” she said. “Secondly, that’s not what I want to talk about.”

Another pause.

“All right,” Lady Nym said, advancing closer, hands raised in the air to show that she wasn’t a threat. Margaery wanted to roll her eyes. “How about you get down from there, and we can talk about whatever you like?”
Margaery ignored her. The wind whipped at her nightclothes, and she heard Nym’s sharp intake of breath.

“He had his hands around my throat, choking the life out of me, and then you were there,” Margaery went on. “You were there, and you saved me, and for the first time, I thought you might be a true ally.”

A shifting; no doubt, Nym was sitting to keep herself from running forward and grabbing Margaery down from the bannister. She wasn’t meant to be up and about for too long at a time, after all, these days, still recovering from her injuries.

Margaery felt another spike of guilt, that she had sent for the woman when she was still injured. Perhaps she really should have sent for Sansa, and simply bore the other girl’s concern in silence.

“I thought I was a true ally,” she said finally, her voice dangerously closed off.

Margaery turned her head then, forcing a smile in Nym’s direction. Her foot slipped a little on the bannister, and Nym cried out, jumping to her feet once more.

She thought of her son, laughing at her from where he sat on the Iron Throne, truly Joffrey’s son, now, as he ordered her head brought to him.

“You are,” Margaery promised her. “That’s why I’ve sent for you, not anyone else. Because I’ve always thought that we could talk to each other with fair ease.”

Nym swallowed hard. “We usually can, Your Grace,” she said. “I find it a bit more difficult when you’re courting death.”

Margaery shrugged, sinking down to one knee and then sitting hard on the bannister. Nym didn’t look any more relieved, by the sight, no doubt uneasy at the sight of Margaery’s back to open space, behind her.

She climbed down from the bannister then, but still leaned hard against it.

She didn’t know how to explain to Lady Nym that she hadn’t climbed up on the bannister because she was hoping that a good gust of wind would throw her to her death.

She was just hoping to feel the wind in her hair, against her clothes, and remember that she was still alive. She didn’t think that there was anything wrong with that, after all.

Sometimes, the rooms that had once belonged to Cersei Lannister felt stifling, like she couldn’t quite catch air into her lungs inside of them, and she didn’t know if it was because she feared who they had once belonged to, or because of the nightmares that she awoke from, every single night since Joff…since the King had died.

“We’re always courting death, Lady Nym,” she said, softly, hugging herself.

Nym raised an eyebrow. “And am I courting death, just now?” She asked, sounding more curious than disturbed at the prospect.

Margaery rolled her eyes. “I’m not mad, Lady Nym. I’m…grieving,” she said, slowly.

“For a husband you hated,” Nym pointed out, looking skeptical. She sat again, and crossed her legs.
Margaery shrugged, and admitted, “I think that if you spend enough time with a person, you find that you can’t hate them fully.”

Nym scoffed. “I don’t think that’s true,” she argued.

Margaery shrugged again. “Well, agree to disagree.”

They sat in relative silence for the next few moments. Then, quietly, Margaery uttered, “I’ve been having nightmares, in these rooms.”

Nym was silent. Then, with a candor that Margaery had not expected from the other woman, “I’ve been having nightmares, too,” she admitted.

It was the first sign of weakness Nym had ever freely confessed to her, and Margaery forced herself not to react, to treasure it as such.

“About Ser Robert?” She asked, softly.

Lady Nym swallowed hard, and nodded. “Yours are about Joffrey?” She asked.

Margaery shook her head, looking around the chambers again. “Not always,” she whispered, and the words felt like some sort of betrayal, though she could not imagine who she was betraying, by uttering them. Then, “I want to move out of these chambers.”

Nym cocked a brow. “The Keep is large, but there are not many suitable chambers left open for the Queen Regent. You gave your old rooms in the Maidenvault to Sansa, if you remember.”

Yes, and it would look strange for her to ask for them back especially after that.

Margaery hummed. “I was thinking,” she said, slowly, because she knew how her words would be received, knew how Lady Nym was going to look at her after she said them, “The King’s chambers.”

Nym went very still, at those words, and Margaery shrugged, forcing herself to backtrack, to explain herself.

“I am the Queen Regent. Or, I will be. It is only fitting, until I have brought my son into this world, that I occupy rooms befitting of my station, and not a Queen Consort’s.”

She didn’t know how much Nym knew, about what had happened that night. Nym had been unconscious, after all, and no one dared speak much of those events.

But she had to have guessed at least a little bit. She was one of the few people Margaery saw outside of the court or the Small Council, these days, so she had to know.

And besides that, Margaery’s husband had been a madman. It sounded mad that Margaery would want to sleep in his rooms after his death, rather than her own.

But Nym still stared at her. “I...Don’t know if that’s a good idea, Your Grace,” she said finally, carefully. “Perhaps it’s something you ought to speak with Lady Sansa about, not me.”

That was perhaps the one thing Nym could say that would convince Margaery of what she was doing, not bring doubts against it, Margaery thought, but it was not as if the other girl could have known that.

Margaery hummed. “Neither do I,” she admitted. “But I really am going to go mad if I have to
sleep in these rooms for one more night. And Sansa...Sansa will think I am mad, if I take this to her."

Sansa already thought that, Margaery knew. Or, at the very least, she feared an oncoming madness, one that Margaery could not entirely assure her wouldn’t one day arrive. There was no reason to add fuel to the fire.

Nym hesitated. Then, “Okay. All right, if that’s what you wish, Your Grace.”

“This is Septa Unella,” Margaery said, to the ladies whom she had gathered together in her chambers. Joffrey’s chambers. She couldn’t actually remember the last time she had seen all of them together in these chambers. It felt strange, to see all of them here, in Joffrey’s chambers, where none of them should belong.

Elinor was the only one, save for Septa Nysterica, who was not present, but then, that was to be expected. She had just had a child, after all.

And all of them staring at her. Margaery could feel their eyes on her skin, branding into her skin. And then, staring at Septa Unella, beside her, who looked so terribly out of place in this room, as well, far more, even, than Margaery’s ladies.

“She will be taking Septa Nysterica’s place amongst my companions.”

The words came out a little more hesitant than Margaery had intended them to.

Margaery’s ladies exchanged uneasy glances, looking concerned by the announcement, all of them.

“And will hopefully return us to the path of the Seven,” Margaery continued, swallowing, and wondered how much she herself even believed those words.

Confess, Septa Unella had told her, over and over again.

Confession was the only thing that would cleanse her soul, and the one thing that Margaery felt the most guilty for was the one thing that she knew she could never confess to.

And yet, she had asked for Septa Unella’s help, anyway.

“Are there any questions?” She asked, because she knew that there would be, but her ladies were silent.

Septa Unella, at Margaery’s side, cleared her throat. It was the first time that Margaery had ever seen her uncomfortable, though, to be fair, she had only ever seen the other woman when she was in her element.

Tormenting Margaery in the hopes of a confession.

“You are all faithful ladies of the Queen,” she said, and Margaery stared at her, for she hadn’t expected the other woman to speak, now. “I will show you my unwavering support to the Crown’s return to the Faith, in return.”

Another batch of sideways glances.

Then, “Your Grace,” Megga said, slowly, “Are you sure that this is...wise?” She glanced again at Septa Unella. “Septa Nysterica was sent away because you could not stand the sight of her, for the... issues that happened to you. And this woman...the two of you have a history, I understand.”
Margaery licked her lips, unhappy at the reminder from the other woman. She had enough reminders of that, after all.

Septa Unella, beside her, looked somewhat discomfited, at how obvious Megga’s disapproval had been, despite her supposed faith to her lady.

It wasn’t like that, Margaery could have told her. Her ladies had all once been her friends; their loyalty to her was based off of that, not obedience.

Margaery wanted Septa Unella’s loyalty to her to be based out of something different. A mutual sense that they were doing something that mattered, because Margaery was sick of running around in circles and finding out that nothing she did had ever really mattered at all.

She didn’t want the Septa’s blind obedience; that wasn’t why she had invited her here. She only wanted to know if she could genuinely help, the way that she had promised Margaery she could, in the Sept.

But still, Megga’s questioning rankled at Margaery. She was being questioned at every side, these days, and she was so damned tired of it.

“This is not up for discussion,” Margaery informed her, harshly, and Megga looked like she wanted to argue the point, but didn’t quite think it would be a good idea, otherwise.

Instead, she was silent, as Margaery shot her a hard look, and then turned and walked into her bedchambers, Joffrey’s old bedchambers, shutting the door behind herself because she didn’t want any of her ladies following her.

She reached up, rubbing at her temples as she felt something terribly like a migraine coming on, now that she was finally alone.

And then she heard the sound of the door slamming open behind her.

She already got enough sideways looks from the ladies, about living in Joffrey’s rooms in the first place. She couldn’t imagine how they would look at her in her husband’s old bedchambers.

She was already far too aware of their pity, of the way that they looked at her when they thought that she wasn’t looking, that she somehow couldn’t see how much they pitied her at all times, because of what had been done to her.

Because of what she had done.

Septa Unella did not look at her as if she pitied her. When Margaery had asked the other woman for her help, she knew that Septa Unella had not given it because she felt anything like sympathy for Margaery.

She was doing it for her own, selfish reasons, and that was something that Margaery could understand.

The door banged open behind her, and Margaery started, because she was always a little jumpy, in these rooms particularly, and then her eyes narrowed.

“I thought that I was not to be disturbed in these rooms, unless I had specifically-”

She turned, then, blinking in surprise at Megga, standing before her. Megga, who was looking at her as if she didn’t recognize her at all, now, rather than as if she pitied her.
Margaery found that she didn’t like that look any better than she had the pity.

“Megga,” she breathed. “I…”

She wanted to tell the other girl that she needed to leave, that she needed to leave Margaery alone and stop questioning her every order, but she was so…tired.

Megga was staring at her.

Margaery felt uncomfortable, under that gaze. “I came in here because I wanted to be alone,” she informed the other girl.

Megga snorted. “Most queens don’t end up banishing their ladies from their bedchambers, Margaery,” she said. “In fact, most of the time, their ladies are there more than they are.”

Margaery gritted her teeth. “What do you want, Megga? I am aware that you don’t approve of my new choice of septa, and I thought that I made it aware that I don’t care.”

Megga pursed her lips, stepping further into the room.

“Might I have a word?” Megga asked, stepping into her bedchambers, and Margaery grimaced as she turned around to face the other woman.

She couldn’t remember the last time that she had let anyone besides Sansa into the bedchambers of Joffrey’s rooms, rather than the outside parlor. Sansa, perhaps, but even then, Sansa always acted so uncomfortable, in these rooms.

Not that Margaery could particularly blame her.

She sighed, lifting a hand into the air. “Fine,” she muttered. “What is it.”

She feigned disinterest as she moved over to the divan, sinking down into it and trying not to think about how this very couch was the first place that she and Joffrey had ever bonded, when she had walked into that room with a crossbow pointed at her, and had left it after pointing a crossbow at her husband, in the mirror.

The divan didn’t feel particularly soft, after that realization.

Still, even that was a welcome distraction from Megga, and her piercing gaze, the look she was sending Margaery’s way as she wondered if perhaps she didn’t know this woman well at all.

Perhaps she was right. A part of Margaery would always wonder if she had died that night, in truth, and only thought that she had managed to survive.

“You Grace. What are you doing?” Megga demanded, staring at her.

Margaery looked away. “Appointing a new septa.” And then, because she was still wondering if the girl who had been Margaery Tyrell had died, she muttered, “You wouldn’t understand,” she said, and got up from the divan, not entirely sure where she was going.

At her back, Megga snapped, “You’re right. I don’t. I know that woman. I know what she did, for the High Sparrow. To you.” Margaery did turn back, then. “I don’t know that she’s your friend, Margaery.”

Margaery forced a smile. “I don’t intend for her to be,” she admitted. “But I’d like to be hers.”
Megga blinked, clearly confused. “I…”

“Megga,” she said, reaching out and taking the other girl’s hands into her own. “The High Sparrow was right about one thing. The Crown and the Faith are the two pillars of our society, and we cannot afford to lose anymore of the Faith than we already have. If the people see their Queen truly taking the Faith seriously, as Joffrey always failed to do, if they see me trying to atone for the things that I have done, I feel certain that we will not lose them.”

Megga dropped her hands, taking a step back. “Margaery,” she said, slowly, “Joffrey did those things, not you.”

Margaery, for all that Megga had been the one to pull away, eyed her own hands as if Megga had bruised them.

“I…” she licked her lips, feeling suddenly exposed in a way that she had never been.

She glanced down at her arms, covered all of the way up to the wrists with black cloth, even though today was a particularly hot day.

She’d gotten rid of all of her old clothes, all of the clothes that had made her still feel like Margaery Tyrell, rather than Margaery, Wife of Joffrey Baratheon, in the first few days after his death.

Margaery Tyrell had been reckless.

Margaery no longer intended to be.

But the clothes itched, the longer Megga spoke, today.

Megga gave her a long look, as if she understood what Margaery was thinking, and Margaery glanced away, uncomfortable at the silence that followed.

After a moment, Margaery turned back towards the door.

“Sansa was looking for you, earlier,” Megga said, and Margaery paused, turning back around. “Alla said she seemed shocked to realize that you had gone to the Sept on your own.” She paused, just long enough, before saying, “After you had told us you had informed her first of all.”

A lie, of course.

Margaery had known damn well that if Sansa knew where she was going, she would have locked her in her chambers, the way she had done for several days after Joffrey’s death, when Margaery had been…near the end of her rope.

Margaery had been furious, at the time, that Sansa had dared, but now, she merely found the other woman’s meddling…strangely sweet, as well as annoying.

But of course, that was also the reason why she hadn’t told her. Because she had known how Sansa would react, even if the alternative, not telling her, would only cause her to worry more.

Still, she had known that her ladies would not let her go at all, if they knew she had not told Sansa.

Sometimes, she wondered which of them was actually Queen Regent, at this point, because most of the time, it certainly didn’t feel like Margaery was.

“Megga,” Margaery said finally, slowly, facing the other girl once more, ignoring the hurt, confused look on the other girl’s face, “I was wrong to tell you to keep an eye on Sansa. She is…she has
served me faithfully, in these months after my husband’s death. You are…relieved of that charge.”

Margaery herself did not even know if she believed there to be any truth in her words; she only knew that she did not want to think about Sansa, and feel anything more of the guilt that she already felt when she thought of the other woman.

But Megga was undeterred, of course.

She had faced Cersei and her creatures, and come out stronger, somehow. Changed from the happy girl Margaery had once known, hardened, but knowing what had to be done.

Margaery had faced her demons, and come away empty-handed.

Megga swallowed hard. “I could tell you how many times she has met with Baelish, that snake, since you took the throne. You should know about those meetings. Whatever happened at the last one, she seemed panicked enough to come find you about it.”

Margaery flinched at the gentle accusation in those words, that Margaery was not to be bothered with politics, these days, because she was too busy running away to the Sept.

She closed her eyes.

“I should go and find her,” she admitted, even as everything within her screamed out against the idea.

Because the moment she would find Sansa, she knew, she would see the knowledge of what had happened to her in Sansa’s eyes, the constant reminder that someone else knew of her greatest weakness, even if she trusted that other woman with her life.

That was why she found it so hard to face the other girl, these days, but damned if she didn’t find herself facing that often enough with her ladies, as well, for all that they truly didn’t know the truth of what had hapenpd, that night.

Megga gave her a long look. “She’s looking for you,” she agreed, the voice perfectly toneless.

Margaery eyed her. Then, “I’d like you to personally make sure that Septa Unella is comfortable here,” she said, as close to an indictment as she could come, these days. “Do you understand?”

It would have the added benefit of keeping Megga from spying on Sansa, if the other girl decided she was going to continue to do so, against Margaery’s direct orders.

Megga gave her another long look, before dipping her head into a nod. “As you wish, Your Grace,” she agreed.

“How ironic, that.” Lady Rosamund greeted her, her eyes very wide at the sight of the other woman, and Margaery lifted her chin, because she might have fallen from grace rather quickly, in the past few days, but she damn well wasn’t going to be judged for her actions by Rosamund Tyrell.

“Is Lady Sansa within?” She asked, glancing around these rooms that she didn’t particular like, these rooms which had once been hers.

How ironic, that.

Rosamund hesitated, glancing over her shoulder, which was answer enough.
Margaery sighed. “Can you tell her that the Queen wishes to speak with her?” She asked, forcing patience that she didn’t feel into her tone.

By the look Rosamund gave her, she wasn’t entirely certain that she had succeeded.

Rosamund disappeared, for a moment, and Margaery blinked at the realization that the door had just been shut in her face. A year ago, no lady would have dared.

And then, Rosamund was returning, throwing the door open wide and bowing before her. “She’s within, Your Grace,” she said, keeping her head lowered; no doubt, Margaery imagined, so that she did not have to accidentally meet Margaery’s eyes.

Two days after Joffrey’s…Two days after Joffrey, Margaery had sent a note to Sansa, letting her know that if she did not want to keep Rosamund as a serving girl, she didn’t have to.

She herself wasn’t even certain where the sudden burst of clarity had come from, in the midst of the haze that had filled her since she had first lifted that golden statue, but she had known with certainty that she did not want Sansa to have to keep the other girl for a servant, Cersei’s pathetic attempts to spite her, if she didn’t want her.

Margaery was tired of seeing either of them bend for things that other people wanted for them.

She swallowed, reaching up to itch at her thick black sleeves. Sansa’s chambers, over here in the Maidenvault, were rather hot, after all.

And then she was standing in the parlor that had once been hers, Sansa looking up sharply from the table she’d had set up in the middle of the room, for her plotting with Baelish.

Rosamund disappeared, behind them; Margaery wasn’t certain if she had left the room, or if Margaery simply stopped noticing her presence.

And then, she and Sansa were alone.

Margaery gulped, feeling suddenly nervous, like she was wearing too many clothes, and they were exposing her more than any nakedness might have.

She cleared her throat awkwardly.

“Margaery,” Sansa breathed, no doubt shocked when she realized that Margaery had come to find her. She could not remember the last time that Margaery had done so, of her own volition.

Even before Joffrey, they had been steadily pushing one another away, and now, Sansa was generally too frightened to go to her.

But now, Margaery was here, standing before her, and it gave Sansa a wicked thing like hope, Margaery could see it on her face, the idea that perhaps they truly could find their way back to each other, after everything that had happened.

Margaery felt a deep pang of guilt, for that look. For the sight of Sansa looking so damn hopeful at the sight of her, when once, Sansa had learned to take her for granted.

Margaery missed that Sansa, but she had a feeling that she was as lost to Margaery as Margaery was now was to Sansa.

And then Sansa was rushing forward, looking for all the world like she was about to throw her arms
around Margaery, before she went very still, her eyes widening, no doubt remembering the way that
Margaery had reacted to any and all attempts to touch her in the past.

Her hands lowered to her sides, hanging there awkwardly.

Sansa cleared her throat.

Margaery fixe her eyes on a spot on the wall behind Sansa’s head, rather than meeting her eyes.

“I…I heard that you went to the Sept, today,” Sansa said, and the tension that accompanied the
words made it suddenly very difficult for Margaery to breathe.

Her eyes twisted sharply back to Sansa’s.

The other girl was trying, she knew, not to place the blame. She had been doing that since the night
The Incident had happened, treating Margaery like she was nothing more than a fragile doll, and like
if she actually confronted Margaery about anything, she might break.

She’d done that before the Incident, too, when she’d found out that Margaery was pregnant and
thought that it was her duty to protect her from the outside world, because of it.

That was how Margaery recognized the reaction.

“Yes,” Margaery said, tiredly, because she knew that they needed to have this conversation no matter
how much she very much didn’t want to. “Someone said that it would…might help, and I thought
I’d give it a try.”

“You thought you’d give it a try,” Sansa repeated, her voice dry, like sandpaper.

Margaery looked away again.

“And you only took Lady Nym with you, for protection,” Sansa went on, the frustration bleeding
into her voice, now. “What would have happened if anyone had recognized you?”

Margaery thought of what Megga had said, and replied belligerently, feeling far too much like an
errant child being taken to task in this moment, “Joffrey was the one who killed all of those people,
not me.”

Sansa sent her an exasperated look. She had aged, Margaery realized, what looked like years, in the
past few months. “You just had a bunch of religious fanatics executed,” Sansa reminded her.

“Young.”

This time, the heat flowing up Margaery’s neck did feel like guilt, and not annoyance. She
swallowed hard.

“I had to go,” she whispered, looking down at her shaking hands now, instead of Sansa, because that
was easier. It was easier to talk to someone who didn’t have a face, these days.

She thought she saw Sansa’s outline soften, in front of her.

“I don’t…I don’t understand why you would risk your life to go there in the first place, much less
bring a woman who helped in your torture back with you,” Sansa said, and Margaery could hear the
frustration in her voice, the way it bled out across her face.

Frustration that she could not condone or understand so many of Margaery’s actions of late,
frustration that Margaery seemed happy enough not to explain them to her. That she kept having to
clean up Margaery’s messes, something Margaery was truly sorry for, in all of this.

She felt a stab of pity for the other girl, and wished she could explain her actions away easily.

She couldn’t.

She barely understood them, herself.

“Septa Unella has only ever wanted me to find peace with the Seven,” Margaery said, shortly, because she had just endured all of this questioning with all of her ladies, and she didn’t want to hear all of the reasons she was being foolish from Sansa, as well.

Sansa pressed her lips together. “She tried to torture you into giving her a confession,” she said.

Margaery shook her head. “It…it wasn’t torture,” she whispered, and tried to pretend like she meant those words.

Sansa let out a long sigh, sitting down on the divan and not offering Margaery the chance to do so, as well.

Margaery felt more comfortable standing, anyway.

“I just…I worry,” Sansa said, running her hands through her hair, and Margaery felt a stab of guilt again, as her eyes lifted to meet Margaery’s.

As she wondered why she had to be like this, every time she was around Sansa, when she could see how much the worry over her was eating away at Sansa.

Margaery licked her lips, wanting to tell the other girl that she didn’t have to worry so much. That things had…improved, a little, since It had happened. That she wasn’t the pathetic thing she had been in the days after her husband’s death, and she was fine, now.

Mostly.

Sansa seemed to read the opposite in her eyes, if her next words were any indication. “I worry that spending so much time around a woman who wishes nothing more than for you to confess your sins to the Seven will…that she will take advantage of your…current state. That you will let something slip that you…don’t mean to.”

She said it like she thought it would be entirely not Margaery’s fault, if she did so.

But Margaery felt the annoyance swelling up in her again, that Sansa thought her so weak she would spill all to the first sympathetic, listening ear that she came across.

And Septa Unella would only be one of those things, after all.

“I’m hardly going to do something as stupid as try to jump out of my window again, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Margaery snapped. “I’ve regained my sanity, after all. I know better than to tell a religious fanatic who would want my head for it that I killed my husband.”

Sansa flinched, and Margaery knew that it had been cruel to bring that incident up at all, especially when that hadn’t been what she was doing at the time, but she couldn’t help it.

She wondered if it was their destiny to just keep hurting each other, over and over again.

“The way things stand with the Faith just now…they are intolerable,” Margaery reminded her, in a
gentler voice, this time. “They don’t trust us, and the people don’t trust us because of that. I was just trying to…repair things.”

Sansa sighed. “I don’t know what to say,” she whispered. “Just…tell me you won’t go again.”

Margaery lifted her chin. “I hardly think that I’m going to impress Septa Unella with my devotion if I never go again,” she reminded Sansa, just to see the way Sansa’s features twisted and she closed her eyes again.

“Do you want them to hate you?” Sansa asked, softly. “Does it make you feel better to know that you came so close to being killed, today?”

Margaery went very still, her neck stretching the way she had seen happen to those fanatics. She didn’t answer.

Sansa nodded, looking tired. She stood to her feet, but did not advance. “Don’t tell me that you’re all right if it’s a lie, Margaery.”

Margaery flinched.

And then, the words came pouring out, the moment they left her lips, becoming uncontrollable, because Sansa was right.

She was better than she had been, but Margaery didn’t know if she would ever be all right again.

“I’m afraid,” Margaery whispered, looking down and hugging herself, because she was afraid that if she did not, Sansa would try to hug her herself, and if she did that, Margaery would only flinch away, as she always did when anyone tried to touch her, these days.

Sansa stilled.

“I’m afraid that he’s going to turn out just like Joffrey,” she whispered, saying it to the floor because that was easier than saying it to Sansa. “That when he comes out of me, he’s going to be...he’s going to be Joffrey’s son, not mine. That...that he’ll be like his father, and all of this would have been for nothing, all over again.”

“Margaery...” Sansa’s voice was soft, pained. “Joffrey is dead, and this child? Your child? Joffrey is not even the father.”

Margaery let out a pained sound. Gods, she knew that, but it didn’t matter, not when the dreams came in the middle of the night and awoke her, left her shaking and sweating through the rest of the night.

The only times she didn’t dream about the child in her womb reaching out to choke the life out of her, it was when she was in Joffrey’s bed, and then, that was because she was dreaming that he did so, instead. That he’d made good on the threat he’d made to her that night, and killed her before she could kill him.

And I only ever wanted you for your crown, my love.

Divine punishment, she thought, these dreams. That was why she had taken up Elinor’s suggestion of going to the Sept in the first place.

“It doesn’t matter. He’ll never know that,” she whispered. “He’ll grow up believing otherwise. Believing his father was a madman. And if I tell him that he wasn’t Joffrey’s, he’ll grow up knowing
he’s nothing more than an imposter.”

Gods, this had all been a terrible idea. She should have just let her grandmother marry her to whomever she willed, next, and let the child die in her womb, after the Mountain had attacked Lady Nym, rather than fighting so hard to hold onto it.

Sansa licked her lips. She looked horrified, as if she knew exactly what Margaery had just thought, and not said aloud.

“Not if you don’t tell him,” she said. “Not if you just tell him that he is your own son, no one else’s.”

Margaery swallowed hard, turning slightly away from Sansa, now. She felt like a small child trying not to be caught, abused again. “I’ve been having these...dreams.”

Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw Sansa go still. Then, “What sort of dreams?”

Horrible dreams, Margaery wanted to say. Night after night, such that she only got a few hours of sleep each night, they were so awful, and once she awoke from them, she found that she could not get back to sleep.

Sometimes, she didn’t sleep at all, that entire night, because the thought of being awake but tired was more preferable than succumbing to those nightmares.

“Dreams about...him,” Margaery whispered, and Sansa blinked at her, reached out, hesitated, hand hanging uselessly in the air.

Margaery eyed it like it belonged to a viper.

“Joffrey?” she asked.

Margaery shook her head. “About my son,” she whispered. She looked up at Sansa then, concern bleeding across her features. “He hates me. He knows what I did, that I’m no better than Joffrey, in every single one of them.”

Her voice was wobbling.

Sansa stared at her, and then her face softened.

Margaery let out a strained laugh. “He’s not even born yet, and he already hates me,” she repeated.

“No,” Sansa said, reaching for her, then, pulling Margaery into her arms, despite the way Margaery fought against her, for a moment. “He’s going to be nothing more than a baby, when he’s born.” Sansa assured her, and Margaery clung to her and couldn’t bring herself to speak, to argue, as she knew she must. “Do you remember what you told me, a lifetime ago? You told me that sons listened to their mothers, and that you intended to teach him, not let anyone else influence him.”

Margaery swallowed hard.

She did remember saying that, but that had been so long ago, when she had thought that Joffrey would never leave scars on her.

Sansa reached out, hesitantly, then, lifting Margaery’s chin until she met her eyes. “This child will be good, Margaery. Good, and kind, and I know that because he’s going to be yours. Not Olyvar’s, not Joffrey’s.”

Margaery was shaking.
Sansa forced a smile, placing her hand on Margaery’s protruding stomach. Margaery flinched, but didn’t pull away.

For the first time, Sansa’s hand on her stomach almost felt...comforting. Like it belonged there, reaching through to touch her child’s head, where it dug into Margaery.

Margaery felt something like tears pricking at her eyes.

“Ours,” Sansa corrected herself, gently.

And Margaery...Margaery wished that those words provided her with some sort of comfort, that hearing them made her think that everything was going to be all right, the moment this child was born, but she couldn’t say that for certain, any more than Sansa could.

Because perhaps she was right, that Joffrey would never hold influence over this child, but he’d had an influence over Margaery.

And Margaery feared how that would translate to her child. Feared fucking him up, the way she had fucked up so many things around herself already.

But Sansa…

That was some relief, to know that Sansa did not see this child as a monster to be, as only Margaery’s child.

Because Sansa was still the girl she’d fallen for, even if her skin had turned hard and leathery, in recent months.

And she thought that if Sansa was by her side, this child might survive.

Still…

“I...I should go,” Margaery whispered, hoarsely. “I...Need to rest, the maesters say.”

Sansa’s face fell. “I...Of course,” she said, a little stiffly, and Margaery felt a pang of guilt, in seeing it. “Do you want me to walk you?”

Margaery bit back a sigh, forcing a smile. “I…that would be nice,” she lied, because these days, nothing was nicer than the silence that came with being alone.

She knew better than to tell Sansa that, however. She knew it would only cause her to see the other woman’s face fall, to see the sadness on her features as she nodded and pretended that she wasn’t hurt by Margaery’s admission.

So she let Sansa walk her back out of the Maidenvault, the Kingsguard she had left outside of Sansa’s rooms following closely in silence behind them, until they made it all of the way back to Joffrey’s rooms.

Margaery may sleep in them, may find the most comfort in them, these days, of any bedchambers in the Keep, but they weren’t her rooms, not really.

Sansa froze, outside of them, looking a bit green, and Margaery pretend not to see it. That seemed to be how their relationship went, these days. The two of reacting, and then pretending not to notice when the other did so.

Margaery grimaced, remembering the way that Ser Meryn had looked, when Sansa had-
“Well, I suppose this is it,” Margaery said, and tried to pretend like it did feel good, to say goodbye to Sansa, even if she knew they were going to see each other on the morrow, anyways.

She turned her back on Sansa, so that this situation couldn’t become even more awkward than it already was, and then hesitated, outside of Joffrey’s rooms.

She did this every time. Her Kingsguard still asked her about it, every time.

“Margaery,” Sansa said gently, and Margaery turned around, then. “Why Joffrey’s rooms?”

Margaery blinked at her. “I already…I’ve already endured the worst, here,” she whispered, hoarsely, and Sansa glanced away, at the rawness in her eyes. “I don’t…I don’t know if I can quite explain it, but that makes me feel safe. Nothing else could hurt me, here.”

Sansa closed her eyes. “Can I…Would you mind if I hugged you?” she asked, very softly.

When she opened her eyes again, Margaery was staring at her.

And then she moved forward, hesitant, and Sansa stood as still as she could possibly do so, Margaery thought, appreciating the gesture even if a part of her felt guilty for making the other woman feel that her touch was so unwelcome.

Touching Sansa, her hands gently pressed to Sansa’s waist, made her feel like a shock had run through her body.

And then it felt…almost nice.

Margaery sucked in a breath, and clung to the other woman. And Sansa…Sansa slowly reached up and held her, gentle enough that Margaery knew she could pull away, if she wished, and it was…nice.

The Kingsguard were silent as they clung to each other. Margaery pretended that it didn’t bother her, to know that they were so close.

It didn’t matter, she told herself. The Kingsguard were loyal to her family, now, Garlan had made sure of that. Margaery had just nodded along and knighted every single soldier that he placed in front of her, pretending that she cared.

None of them were going to make something of this, and if they did, they would keep their damn mouths shut about it.

“Cersei Lannister, with this single act, has declared war upon the Crown,” Mace Tyrell blustered, from his seat on the Small Council, and Sansa bit back a sigh.

Of course she had; that was the point of bringing it up at the Small Council, after all.

Kevan Lannister, where he sat at the head of the table, stiffened a little in his chair. His eyes were dark; Sansa imagined that he must be very tired, lately. That was why he seemed so…behind everyone else, these days.

Either that, or he was up to something, and that meant that she was going to have to keep a closer eye on him.
“I’ve heard…nothing of this,” Kevan said, “From the lords of the Westerlands. Where did you hear this, Lord Baelish?”

Petyr, where he sat beside Sansa, smirked slightly. “One wonders how the only Lannister lord at the table has heard nothing of this,” he said. “When my little creatures were able to find it out so easily.”

Lord Varys cleared his throat, then, clearly realizing that antagonizing Kevan wasn’t going to do them any favors. “It seems that the Queen Mother paid off quite a few of the lords of the Westerlands to keep their mouths shut, if they weren’t going to actively join her cause,” he said, and relief spread through Sansa, that what Petyr had said was happening truly was, in the Westerlands, for Varys to know about it, as well.

She knew that Petyr was going to help her, for the time being, for his own selfish reasons, but she wouldn’t put it past him to make something like this up, to ensure that they went into battle against Cersei in the hopes that Margaery might die.

And none of it would have been his fault.

She scowled at the very thought.

“And…” Varys continued, now looking even more uncomfortable, “It seems that she has…placed your children specifically under her protection, Lord Kevan, to ensure that the Lannisters of Lannisport don’t try to question her decision.”

Sansa grimaced; she didn’t think the man ought to have found out about that this way, even if she was surprised that he hadn’t already found the truth out, on his own.

Kevan went very pale; Sansa remembered only then that Lancel Lannister, who had never been a friend to her but who had, after all, been Kevan’s oldest son, had died because of Cersei.

And now, Cersei was holding the fates of his remaining children in her hands.

She tried not to think about how her own brother had captured his other son, and his bannermen had killed the boy. She hoped that Kevan Lannister wasn’t thinking the same.

Kevan got to his feet then, the chair he was sitting in scraping back loudly, and he turned, marching from the room.

“Well,” Petyr said, the moment he was gone, “Unfortunate that the Hand of the King doesn’t see fit to help us see through this issue, but I believe that it would be a good idea to continue, Your Grace.”

Margaery, where she had been sitting pale and drawn and silent, at the other head of the table, glanced up sharply, at those words.

Sansa…hadn’t had the heart to tell her what she had learned, when she had gone to speak with the other girl, earlier, had worried that in her current state, Margaery hadn’t been able to handle it.

But she wished that Margaery hadn’t been blindsided by the information now, alongside Lord Kevan. They needed to see a way out of this, and once upon a time, Margaery had been a marvelous strategist.

And right now, Sansa needed that Margaery.

“How serious is the threat she poses, Lord Baelish?” Margaery asked, finally, and Sansa realized that the reason she was so pale was fear.
She had moved out of Cersei’s chambers, not so very long ago. Sansa wondered if it was because, while Joffrey was dead, Cersei very much wasn’t.

She hadn’t thought of it that way, when she had first learned that Margaery was moving into the chambers of the man who had raped her on that very bed.

Baelish grimaced, shifting in his chair. “Lord Kevan would be able to answer that question better than I, Your Grace, but I would say that the threat is at the very least...significant enough to pay attention to. The armies of the Lannisters are quite strong, still, and since they declared a truce with Stannis, the usurper, untested, in recent weeks. But the men provided to us by the Reach are strong, and will provide a serious enough threat, I believe.”

Margaery’s brows furrowed. “You said that she has bribed these lords,” she said, slowly, and Baelish nodded, “I thought the Lannister mines were almost dried up.”

Varys cleared his throat. “She may have resorted to other methods than money, Your Grace. One of my little birds heard a man in a tavern in Lannisport bragging that one day soon, he would be Lord of the Golden Tooth.”

Sansa grimaced. The Golden Tooth belonged to House Lefford, who had thrown in with Stannis when he had attacked the Westerlands because of what Joffrey had done to Leona. Of course Cersei would feel free to offer someone loyal to her that seat.

Margaery let out a long sigh.

“The Crown needs to deal with this with a heavy hand,” Mace blustered, then, leaning forward in his chair. “If we do not, what’s to stop the Greyjoys, and then the Martells from rising up against us when they see that others can do so with impunity?”

Sansa’s heart beat a little faster, in her chest. She glanced sharply at Baelish, who merely shrugged.

Tommen. They were talking about declaring war on Tommen and his mother, evil woman though Cersei might be, to protect a claim to the throne that they weren’t even certain had substance yet, with Margaery’s child not yet born.

And while Cersei had done this because she craved power, Sansa knew, Tommen was just a child, dragged into this by a mother who had neglected him for so much of his life.

She didn’t like the idea of declaring war on him.

“Surely there is some other way to handle this,” Sansa spoke up then, wilting a little under all of the gazes that abruptly turned her way. “Without resorting to bloodshed, just yet. Perhaps Cersei did this because she thinks she can gain back her influence from us, by pressuring us.”

She knew, with the looks they were all sending her, that they were about to write her off as nothing more than a woman, going weak at the thought of war.

She wanted to snort. Cersei was a woman, after all, and she had just declared war on them. Idiots.

“My brother was quite successful in his campaign against the Crown until the Freys executed him,” she said, watching as the men around the table shifted uncomfortably and hating herself a little for sounding so callous when she spoke of her brother, “And to send the Crown into a costly war against kin at a time when we are most vulnerable, when the Crown was at the peak of its power then, seems to me...a bad idea.”
She could see the way their faces changed, as her words went on; could see that they were actually listening to her, now, which was rare enough, for all the time she had been on the Small Council.

And she did have the advantage of believing what she said. Her brother had managed to fight Tywin Lannister for quite some time, winning every battle he fought until Tywin sliced his throat at the Red Wedding, or at least, until his orders had done so.

Cersei may be spiraling for whatever control she could manage, but she had the ability to drag this war on for a long time, and it was a war that Sansa was not entirely certain House Tyrell could win, with such equal numbers, and such a weak claim.

And then, Randyl Tarly spoke again. “If the exiled Lady Cersei thinks that she can bully the Crown into submission with such an act, surely, we ought to let her know that just because our Regent is young, and a woman, we will not be pressured into giving into her demands, just as her son was not.” His gaze turned to Margaery, then. “House Tarly pledges our swords to the Regent, to do with as she commands.”

Margaery stared between Randyl and Sansa, and then sent the man a demur smile.

“The Queen Mother, for all of her faults, is my goodmother,” she reminded the man. “And Tommen, dear boy, is just a pawn in all of this, I am certain of it, and also my goodbrother. I find myself…not wanting to declare war on them for what amounts to, I'm sure, a misunderstanding. Cersei no longer knows her place in the Seven Kingdoms, after Joffrey exiled her, and, may my husband rest in peace, after his death. She is…lashing out, the only way she knows how.”

Randyl cleared his throat. “Your Grace is merciful, as always, but as you just pointed out, your husband, may he rest in peace, exiled Cersei for a reason. And she has, lest we forget, declared war on the Crown. We cannot overlook that. It is treason, and very much a punishable offense, family or no.”

Sansa remembered that Lord Randyl had sent his own son to the Wall because he wasn’t the first born son he’d always wanted, and her jaw ticked in irritation.

Margaery sighed, reaching up to brush at some of the hair tied up atop her head. “I…You raise a good point, Lord Randyl,” she told him, and then glanced around the table. “Does everyone else feel the same?”

They stared at her, unused to a monarch asking them to put something to a vote, Sansa thought idly, even if she felt almost proud of Margaery for doing so.

The men, slowly, all nodded. Sansa shot Baelish an annoyed glance when he, too, nodded along with them.

Margaery sighed again. “Very well,” she said. “Then I propose a truce, of differing viewpoints.” She glanced sideways at Sansa. “I see the merit in both arguments, so I will send delegates to invite Cersei to her son’s funeral, here in King’s Landing, where we might discuss this treason she has declared. If she is serious in her treason, we will go to war, but I will not throw the Seven Kingdoms into another war until I am certain that there is no other option. Is that understood?”

They all stared at her, even Sansa, because while Sansa felt proud that the Margaery Tyrell she had fallen in love with seemed to have returned, at least for this moment, she was terrified at the thought of Cersei Lannister returning to King’s Landing.

Of Margaery having to face Cersei, in her current state, after killing her son.
Varys cleared his throat. “I need not remind Your Grace that one of the King’s last actions was to exile his mother,” he pointed out. “Do you think it a good idea, to invite her to his funeral?”

Margaery lifted her chin. “I am the Regent, now, or I will be, when my son is born,” she reminded him. “And I will not be known as a cruel tyrant, Lord Varys. Cersei Lannister is my goodmother, and, regardless of her faults and the fallout of her relationship with my husband in his later days, they were devoted to one another. I would have invited her to the funeral even if we didn’t need desperately to speak with her.”

Sansa swallowed hard, closing her eyes.

And then the Grandmaester was speaking, and her eyes snapped open again. “That is all well, Your Grace, but there is something else that I think it prudent for the Crown to consider,” he said, nodding toward Kevan’s empty seat. “Do you think that the Hand can still be trusted, with his children under the Queen Mother’s protection? I would not put it past her to try and control him, with such an action.”

Baelish sneered at him. “Interesting that one who used to lick at the teat of the Lannisters might point out such a thing,” he muttered.

The Grandmaester blustered, his face turning very red.

Sansa knew that Olenna had come to some sort of agreement with him, while Joffrey still lived, to make the man change his mind about the family that he served, even if it was rumored that he had once been a Lannister himself. What bothered her was that she didn’t know what it was he had been offered to change his mind so fully, but the Tyrell loyalists around the table didn’t seem bothered at all by the man, these days.

Mace raised a hand. “The Grandmaester is right,” he said, and Pycelle sat up a little in his chair, nodding at the other man. “Lord Kevan has been a valuable tool to the Crown since my goodson’s death, but if Cersei is keeping his family captive, we cannot trust his actions, these days.”

Sansa closed her eyes, wondering if Mace was saying this because he thought it to be the truth, or because he wanted so badly to be named Hand of the King.

They had decided, with input from Baelish, to leave Kevan as Hand of the King to better keep an eye on the Lannisters, in anticipation of this very day, or to keep the Lannisters from declaring war on them altogether, in the hopes that seeing him stand so strongly beside the Crown would divide them, at the least.

But it seemed that, perhaps, Lord Kevan had outlived his usefulness.

Margaery lifted her chin. “Perhaps the idea has some merit,” she said, and then glanced at Baelish. “See to it that Lord Kevan’s letters to the Westerlands are monitored, Lord Baelish,” she said, and Sansa did not bother pointing out that such was something Lord Varys would usually handle. “And, if he starts acting suspiciously, confine him to the Tower.”

Baelish dipped his head. “As Your Grace commands,” he agreed.

And then they were all dismissed, and Sansa did not fail to notice the way that Trystane sagged in obvious relief when he was told that he could leave.

She forced herself not to roll her eyes. He was only a boy, after all, and seemed to realize that his place on the Small Council was not to speak, but to be seen.
Still, she had Lady Nym monitoring the letters that he was sending back home, all of them to Myrcella, and none of them to Princess Arianne, or to his father, these days, an interesting development.

And then they were alone, just she and Margaery, standing in the middle of the Small Council chambers with the rest of the lords gone, and Sansa glanced over at the other woman, feeling the sudden need to be impulsive, after the way that Margaery had taken charge of the meeting for the first time that Sansa had seen with obvious skill, even if it was buried deep, these days.

Sansa rushed forward, pushing Margaery up against the wall and kissing her, ignoring the way the other girl stiffened under her touch, for a moment, before melting into her touch.

“What was that for?” Margaery finally, asked, breathless, when Sansa pulled away.

Sansa smiled at her, licking her lips. “I’m proud of you,” she said. “What you did in there. It was good.”

Margaery stared at her for a moment, and then smirked, and for a moment, Sansa could pretend that the last few months hadn’t happened at all.

It was hard, with Margaery’s very pregnant belly sitting between them, but for a moment, she seemed like the old Margaery.

“Well,” she said, “I got a compromise, which was as much as I could give you, after your impassioned plea to keep from war,” she shrugged, “Which I don’t want, either.”

Sansa smiled at her, moving forward again, but this time, Margaery pulled back.

“Let’s just hope that it was the right decision,” Margaery said. “I don’t much fancy the idea of being faced with Cersei Lannister again, any time soon.”

Sansa hummed. “It was,” she promised the other girl, thinking of Tommen, sitting alone in his rooms in the Keep. “It was.”
This chapter will contain spoilers for "The Mummer's Tale," unfortunately, but here we are. Also, I am incredibly drunk, so any mistakes are my own.

Tyrion awoke with a splitting headache that, for once, was not brought on by drink, but instead by the blunt end of Brienne of Tarth’s sword.

He wondered if she’d ever hit Jaime like that. He wondered if he’d liked it.

And then he grimaced, because that was not a thought he wanted to have, at the moment, and besides, he had far more pressing concerns, as the circumstances as that hit him.

He groaned, reaching up to rub at the goose egg on the back of his head, still feeling slightly drunk. Or perhaps that was the feeling of the small dinghy he was in rocking back and forth on the waves.

He cracked his eyes open, peering around suspiciously, and found himself staring into the eyes of Bronn. The other man was rowing silently, but he smirked when he noticed that Tyrion was awake, now, lying on the hard wooden floor of the dinghy without so much as a blanket beneath his head.

Tyrion imagined that Bronn hadn’t given it a thought.

He groaned again, sitting up and eying Bronn, and then glancing over his shoulder. Over his shoulder, at the endless horizon behind him, at the sea that stretched on as far as the eye could see, King’s Landing nowhere to be found in that horizon.

He cursed, rapidly and softly, under his breath, before swinging back to face Bronn. By then, the other man was holding out a water jug, and Tyrion considered his options before gulping it down greedily.

“What…” he said finally, when he could speak again, his lips not quite so parched. “What the fuck was that?”

Bронn grimaced, the only sign that he was uncomfortable with the little treachery he had just committed against Tyrion without a second thought. “That,” he said, coolly, and Tyrion was reminded of the way that they had parted, last, “was me saving your ungrateful life, along with your wife.”

Tyrion blinked at him, lost.

The sun was shining down too brightly, it’s sharp heat making him sweat already. He took another sip from the water jug.

Bronn looked suddenly quite tired. “Mind you, she lied about her intentions, when she sent me that letter I had to get a whore to read to me to understand.”

Tyrion rolled his eyes, feeling a migraine that had nothing to do with being hungover hitting him, then.
“What are you talking about?” he demanded, reaching up to pinch at the bridge of his nose to alleviate the migraine, and finding that it did absolutely nothing.

Bronn smirked at him, but the smirk quickly faded, the awkwardness of their last conversation hanging between them, once more.

“Joffrey is dead,” he said, finally, spitting into the water over his shoulder. “By now, anyway.”

And Tyrion...

Tyrion had always considered himself a master of the game. One of the smartest people in the room.

But this...Bronn had said that Sansa had done this, and that made sense, when Brienne had been the one to bring him out to the harbor, claiming that Jaime was in trouble and needed him, because of course that was the one thing they all knew he would come for. But this had nothing to do with Jaime.

Sansa had done this. Sansa had sent him away from King’s Landing when she knew that Joffrey was going to die, and knew what it would look like if he fled in the dead of night, at the same time.

It seemed that he had badly misjudged his little wife. Somehow, during all of this time when he had seen her close off, as Joffrey took more and more interest in her, as she plotted something but surely not that, Sansa had been plotting the death of a king, something that Tyrion had never thought her capable of.

He let out a harsh laugh, the news that his nephew was dead feeling terribly secondary in comparison to how badly he’d fucked up this situation, in not seeing what was right in front of him. Perhaps his hubris had finally fucked him.

Joffrey, the little shit, had been courting death for a long time, Tyrion knew that, and he could barely summon up much remorse that Sansa had managed the feat, even if the boy was his brother’s son.

Perhaps he felt more remorse at the thought that, in killing Joffrey, Sansa had damned her own husband, because he had fled that same night, and the moment Cersei learned that, she would surely see it as a sign of her brother’s guilt.

After all, she’d had him locked up after their father’s death on far more circumstantial evidence.

He grimaced, closing his eyes.

Well, fuck.

And Jaime...Jaime might not love their son the way that Cersei had, might have seen him for the monster that he truly was, but if he learned that Tyrion had killed the boy, Tyrion knew that Jaime would never forgive him, even if he had left Cersei for good.

And with Cersei returned to the Rock where Jaime was now, he had no doubt that she would be able to wrap her claws around him once more, and again turn him against Tyrion.

He felt far more regret for that thought than at the thought of Joffrey’s death.

He swallowed hard, a part of him annoyed that Sansa hadn’t even bothered to share her plans with him, before she enacted them. Yes, he understood that she had never quite trusted him, because he was a Lannister, and her whole plan must have consisted of murdering a Lannister, but surely if she had asked for his help, he wouldn’t be quite this fucked, and he could have helped her.
Even if a part of him wasn’t certain that he would have.

He took another sip of the jug of water in his hands, wishing that it was something stronger. But it didn’t look like Bronn had brought much with them at all.

Which begged the question…

“Where are you taking me?” Tyrion asked, dully.

Bronn squinted at him, seeming surprised by the way that Tyrion had reacted to this news. Perhaps he had thought that Tyrion might cheer his nephew’s death. Or that he might actually feel bad about it.

A part of him wanted to ask Bronn if, instead of going wherever it was that they were going, he might instead take him to the Westerlands. He might as well face Jaime and Cersei’s retribution now.

After all, there was nothing for Tyrion to the East, not anymore, not after what had happened to Shae, and he hated the thought of remembering her with every step he took in a life spent fleeing as a fugitive.

He grimaced. That was what he was now, a fugitive, because his little wife had framed him for kingslaying and kinslaying, all at once. Next time he saw her, he’d have to let her know what he thought of her machinations.

Not that he imagined they were all hers. After all, his little wife had never been the scheming little bitch that she’d become, in doing this, until she had been dragged into bed with Margaery Tyrell. He had no doubt that this had been a Tyrell plot as much as it had been Sansa’s, after the way that Joffrey had continued to treat his wife even when she was pregnant with his child.

Not that he could entirely blame Margaery for wanting her mad husband gone. He could almost forgive her more for that than he could Sansa; after all, Margaery Tyrell owed him nothing.

But Sansa had been his wife. Had been someone that he cared for, greatly, partially because Shae had cared for her so much, and this was how she had treated that affection.

He grimaced, disgusted with himself for not keeping her further at arm’s length from the beginning. Perhaps if he had, he wouldn’t feel so shocked by this betrayal, after so many betrayals from so many fucking women throughout his life, he shouldn’t be so surprised by yet another one.

But he knew that if he did go to the Rock now, Cersei wouldn’t give him the time to make excuses, not that he knew that he would even sell out Sansa in this way, if he did. She would kill him, and she would make sure that his death was painful for killing her own son.

No, he could not go to the Rock.

He wondered how Sansa had killed Joffrey. Wondered if it had been painful.

He wondered if she knew just how much she had fucked him over, with this. If she had known how Cersei would react, when she sent him away from King’s Landing on the night of her son’s death, or if she had merely done this to throw off suspicion on her. If she knew that Cersei would never stop until she knew that the one who had killed her son had paid dearly for it. If Sansa was content to send him to his death, for her own gains.

Yes, he had misjudged her.
“Your little lady wife wanted me to take you to Braavos,” Bronn said, and Tyrion flinched. Bronn looked away. “Paid me a pretty penny for it, too. But I’m not going to do that.”

Tyrion’s head jerked up. He stared up at the other man. Bronn looked strangely uncomfortable.

“I’ll take you wherever you like, so long as it’s not in Westeros, so I can keep my damn castle,” Bronn offered, and Tyrion let out a dry chuckle, not feeling terribly amused.

He appreciated the gesture, but didn’t know where it was that he wanted to go. Braavos seemed as good a place as any, even with all of the bridges that he had burned there. After all, they had fairly good ale, and fairly good brothels.

At the moment, that was all that Tyrion was particularly interested in.

He shrugged, and Bronn eyed him for several more moments, before letting out a sigh.

“Tyrion…” he began, but didn’t seem to know what to say.

Tyrion understood that sentiment rather too well, after the way the two of them had parted. After Shae.

He grimaced, even thinking about it. He was embarrassed, now, with the way that he had reacted to Shae’s death, old wounds ripped open both by the terrible secrets that she had told him the night before she had died, and furious with what Arya Stark had done to the one woman he thought he might be able to love.

And he had lashed out because of it, at everyone else around him, and at Shae herself. He regretted that. He regretted telling Bronn that he was returning to King’s Landing to kill his sister, after the Seaford had admitted to him that she had been in contact with him, that she had planned Shae’s death herself.

He didn’t regret killing Shae’s father after he found her body in the same tavern the bastard was also sleeping in, though, the one thing that he knew Bronn could not forgive him for, besides his cruel words as Shae’s body was buried, after she and her father had...finally spoken to one another again.

Tyrion could not quite say that they had made up, nor that he would have wanted them to, if Shae had asked him, though she had not.

He wiped at his face, feeling suddenly very drained.

“Just take me to Essos,” he said, tiredly. “I’ll figure it out from there.”

I, not we, because Tyrion didn’t think he could stand the thought of Bronn watching him drink himself to death, as he very much planned to do at the moment.

Bronn looked pained, at the words, but didn’t protest them, for which Tyrion was glad.

He knew that the other man had been trying to be sympathetic, by saying he wouldn’t take him back to the place that haunted him so much, but Shae deserved better than the funeral that Tyrion had given her, he thought.

His words at her final resting place had been cruel, and he intended to say goodbye to her in a way that truly honored what they had had together, now, before he threw himself into a bottle.
“I’m looking for the blond one, weird scar on his face,” Bronn told the girl standing at the front of
the pillow house, as the Lyseni referred to them, and she blinked at him, her eyes scanning down his
figure slowly, before twirling a finger through her hair.

This was one of the shittier of the pillow houses, as they were called, and Bronn could smell the
stench of piss and sex in the air, though the young woman before him more than made up for it.

This was the third pleasure house he had visited today, looking for Tyrion, because he could admit
that he had no idea what sort of places Tyrion frequented.

If he couldn’t find him after this one, Bronn was strongly considering giving up, but for now, he
might as well enjoy the view.

The darkly lit room only seemed to accentuate her curves, as she leaned forward across the table to
refill his mug of ale with her other hand.

Bonn smirked. Then, he tried to remind himself that historically, he did not have the best record with
the women of Lys.

She smirked, too. “I don’t know who you’re talking about, honey. We’ve had a…lot of men through
here, tonight. Of course, if you’re looking for a woman…”

Bonn squinted at her. “The imp,” he told her finally, sighing. “I know that he’s here; this is the
brothel he’s been using, lately.”

She stared at him for a moment, and then straightened up. “Oh,” she said, and the flirtatious tone she
had been using a moment before was gone, now. “Him.”

Bonn frowned at her. That was not usually the response that he got from girls who had accepted the
Imp’s advances. “I take it you’ve seen him?”

She rolled her eyes, turning and jutting a finger behind her back. “He’s over there, first room on the
left. With the dark girl.”

Bonn raised an eyebrow, slamming back the rest of the ale in his mug and following where she had
pointed.

Gods, he wished she’d taken a bit longer, let him down a bit more alcohol before he had to do this.
He didn’t really feel up to having this particular conversation with Tyrion, after they had spent so
long living in the same city and steadfastly avoiding one another, without a few more mugs of ale
inside of him.

The last time that they had spoken to each other had been months ago, Bronn thought, and he didn’t
relish the thought of rehashing that particular conversation.

He grimaced, walking to the room the girl had pointed out to him, and giving the door exactly one
knock before he shoved it open with his shoulder.

There was the sound of a scream, and the girl that Tyrion was fucking, standing over her where she
knelt on the straw mattress, pulled up abruptly, her eyes very wide.

Tyrion swore under his breath. “I paid for this fucking room, you-” he began, and then he turned
around, pulling his trousers back up, and his eyes went wide as they met Bronn’s, where he stood in the doorway.

Then he swore again.

Bronn rolled his eyes, eyes sweeping the room again, and he grimaced again, at the state of the place.

This was hardly one of Lys’ finer pleasure houses, after all.

The girl pulled a shock of red hair up into a tight bun and reached for her dress, throwing it on as quickly as she could.

Bronn’s eyes narrowed.

The girl didn’t look much older than Sansa, and it made something in Bronn’s insides go cold, an uncomfortable sensation rushing through him.

“If you’ll excuse us, sweetheart, we need the room,” Bronn told the girl pleasantly, and she blinked up at him, wiping at her eyes before she pulled on the threadbare gown the rest of the way and all but ran from the room.

Bronn glanced over at Tyrion; he didn’t think he’d ever seen the man make a whore cry before, but then, it had been some time since they had seen each other.

Months, in fact, though they lived only a few blocks away from one another.

Tyrion glared at him, as he reached down to adjust himself in his trousers. “What could possibly be so important that you had to interrupt me?” He asked, reaching up to wipe at his hair in the next moment.

Bronn gritted his teeth. “It didn’t look very pleasurable for either of you, so I don’t think I was interrupting much,” he said, and Tyrion sighed, standing now.

“What is it, Bronn?” He asked, and there was a bone deep exhaustion in his voice that had never been there before Shae’s death, not even when he had first told Bronn and Shae what had happened to Tysha.

Bronn almost felt guilty with what he was bringing to the other man, but then, this was the one thing that they had agreed they would reunite for, if it came to it.

And Bronn might not be a proper knight, but he still gave half of a fuck about what happened to Westeros.

He waited until Tyrion was fully dressed and reaching for the half empty bottle of wine that the whore had left behind her.

“Jon Connington and the Golden Company have set sail for the Seven Kingdoms,” Bronn informed him. “You were right about that. They follow someone they call Aegon Targaryen.”


Bronn shrugged. “They have the entire Golden Company, Tyrion,” he told the other man, “and, rumor has it, the support of Dorne.”

Tyrion squinted at him. “Dorne?” He repeated. “No, you must have that wrong.”
Bronn shook his head. “I don’t,” he said, which was the truth.

He’d spent these last few months gathering as much information as a sellsword who had never been trained as a spy and was not a very good one possibly could, about the world around him, and that was one of the things he was certain of.

Doran Martell had pledged allegiance to the boy claiming to be his sister-son, and that was the push that Jon Connington had needed, to convince the Golden Company to follow the boy he claimed was the rightful heir to the Seven Kingdoms.

Gods, Bronn hated politics. And he especially hated the look on Tyrion’s face right now, as if Bronn was more interested in politics than he was.

“Did you know that after she fled the Seven Kingdoms because she didn’t want to be a septa, Princess Saera Targaryen owned one of the most famous pleasure gardens here,” Tyrion said the words almost idly, taking another long gulp of his wine. “Obviously not this one.”

He spat to the side.

Bronn’s jaw clenched. “I couldn’t give two shits what some dead Targaryen did centuries ago,” he informed Tyrion. “I’m more concerned with the living ones.”

Tyrion let out a harsh laugh. “And that’s the difference between the two of us, my friend,” he informed him.

Bronn squinted at him. “This was the charge you gave me,” he said, because it made him distinctly uncomfortable, this feeling that he was being the responsible one of the two of them.

Tyrion eyed him, then lifted his wine bottle like a king might when bestowing a title on a knight. “And I now take it away, my friend. I was wrong to give it to you in the first place.”

Bronn rolled his eyes.

“Besides, I hear that you got a job as one of the sell swords protecting this city,” Tyrion drawled, finally, which was not at all what Bronn had thought he might say.

“I…yes,” he said, because such jobs were aplenty, in a city which depended on the protection of sellswords and high walls, filled with too many poets and merchants who had never touched a sword in their lives, nor directed a man to use one.

He liked this Lys; it was beautiful, and the climate agreed with him more than the stench of King’s Landing ever had, but they were certainly chancing an attack at any moment, he couldn't help but think.

“So,” Tyrion drawled, “Why the fuck are you worrying about King’s Landing?”

Bronn cocked his head at the other man. “How many bottles of that shit have you had?” He demanded, finally.

Tyrion squinted at him, and then held up three fingers as he answered, “Probably four.”

Bronn rolled his eyes, moving forward then and grabbing Tyrion by his armpits, lifting the other man to his feet.

“No,” Tyrion muttered, fighting against him as Bronn dragged him towards the doorway the girl had
just escaped through. “No, I’ve…I’ve paid for this room, and we’re not leaving while I’ve paid for this room.”

Bronn rolled his eyes. “I’ll pay you back in drinks,” he muttered, and Tyrion, the jackass, perked up immediately.

“Well, you should have said,” he muttered, and then swaggered to his feet, just barely managing to speak coherently despite the fact that he was walking just fine.

Bronn rolled his eyes again, and followed the other man out of the room, ignoring the looks that the whores were sending them as they left the fine establishment.

Bronn slapped down some coins on his way out.

He reached out a hand when Tyrion wobbled, and then grimaced and let go of him again, feeling strangely uncomfortable to touch the other man.

Tyrion wobbled back onto his feet again, and started walking again.

Bronn rolled his eyes, pushing his shoulders in the other direction.

“That way,” he muttered, and Tyrion grunted and kept walking through the busy streets, Tyrion squinting in the harsh sunlight.

“Where exactly are we going?” Tyrion muttered tiredly, after they had been walking for some minutes.

Bronn hummed, thinking about it. He supposed that there wasn’t any harm in saying it. “My place.”

They came to a stop not long after; the sell swords of Lys made quite a bit more money than they did in Westeros, so he did quite well for himself, but he wasn’t as far away from the worse brothels of the place as he might like.

After all, there was nothing quite like the pleasure houses of Lys, and once he’d been to one, he found that brothels just weren’t quite the same.

“This is where you live?” Tyrion asked, raising an eyebrow when Bronn finally pulled him to a stop in front of one of the smaller buildings on the street. Then, “You’re doing nice for yourself, as a sell sword.”

Bronn shrugged, because he was right; the pay in Lys for sell swords was nice, compared to what it had been in the Seven Kingdoms. He ought to have come here years ago, when he didn’t give such a fuck about King’s Landing, and the rest of it.

He’d been to Tyrion’s house, as well, earlier today, as he had started his search for the other man. He’d been informed - none too kindly - by the serving woman cleaning it that the master hardly ever slept there, frequenting pleasure houses that he inevitably passed out drunk at, and a part of Bronn had felt guilty for actually leaving the man, even if it had been what Tyrion had demanded.

But Bronn ignored the thought as he grabbed Tyrion by the scruff of the neck, like a mother with her kittens, and doused him in the nearby bucket of now cold water that he had been intending to wash in, this morning, before one of his little spies had brought the news.

Street urchins were useful, in that they never slept, and their ears were large.
Tyrion sputtered as Bronn held him under the water for a few seconds too long, and then allowed him to come back up again, feeling vindictively pleased with himself as Tyrion choked and spit out the stuff, and then shot him a glare.

Bonn didn’t give him the chance to speak, though, before pushing his head under the water of the bucket again, and watching him struggle for air.

When he came up again, his eyes looked slightly more sober.

He was squinting at Bronn like he was imagining more sober.

And, because perhaps he was hoping for a confrontation and because he didn’t know how to deal with this side of Tyrion, Bronn blurted out, “This isn’t what Shae would have wanted, you know.”

Tyrion’s face darkened. “Don’t you fucking talk about her,” he snapped, his hair still dripping from the water, and Bronn raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, is that how you feel, now?” He asked. “Months ago, she was nothing more than a dead whore who deceived you, and now, no one can speak her name. Is that because you love her, or because you’re ashamed that you loved her?”

Tyrion slammed his fist down on the wine table.

Bonn didn’t flinch.

“She was right, you know,” he told Tyrion, mercilessly, because Tyrion may have vowed never to speak of Shae again, but she had been his friend, too.

In a way, he though they had known each other better than Tyrion could ever know her, for all that he loved her, because he was a noble and she was a servant, like Bronn.

He gritted his teeth. “To do what she did. She felt that it was the right thing to do, and you should never have berated her for it.”

Tyrion snorted. “Which part? The abortion or killing my father?”

Bonn went very still, turning back around to face him. “W…What?” He asked, blinking at the other man.

Tyrion smirked. “Oh, she didn’t tell you that part, too?” He asked, and took a step forward.

And Bronn, for all that he had spent his life as a sell sword who gave no fucks about anything, took a half step back at the sight of the fury on Tyrion’s features.

He looked like a different man than the one Bronn had always known, and he suddenly felt strange, about inviting him into his home.

“She killed him,” Tyrion said, and then let out a tired laugh. “Well, she was one of the people who killed him. And then she let Sansa stand trial for his murder, for all the times she acted like she cared for that girl, because she didn’t want to get in trouble for doing it, herself. I still haven’t ruled out the Tyrells, or Oberyn Martell, as the others, but then, I suppose, it could have been all three of them. After all, he was riddled with poison.”

Bonn gulped. “…”

“She didn’t tell you,” Tyrion murmured, a cold smile wrapping over his lips. “Well, I suppose that’s
one thing too intimate to share with someone else, besides me.”

Bronn opened and closed his mouth. “That’s why you’re angry with her,” he said, slowly. “Because she didn’t tell you that she killed your father.”

Tyrion slammed his hand down on the bucket of water, and some of it sloshed out of the bucket and onto the floor. Bronn grimaced.

“I’m angry with her because she killed my father, and then had the audacity to keep it from me for so long,” he gritted out. “Had the audacity to let me rot in the Black Cells for a murder that I didn’t commit, against my own father, no less, and then let Sansa do so, when the Small Council could see that I wasn’t stupid enough to kill my father.”

Bronn squinted at him, reeling from this new revelation because…dear gods, it put things into perspective.

Tyrion’s fury, after he had awoken to find his dead lover beside him, rather than the sorrow that Bronn might have expected. The way that he had blown up, while her body burned before them, about how she was nothing more than a whore in the end, making Pod cry.

“She killed him,” Bronn repeated.

He had to admit, it made a strange amount of sense. Shae had started to distance herself, from the rest of them, after Joffrey’s wedding, spending more and more time “out,” as she had told Bronn, whenever he had asked her about it, and attaching herself to Sansa like a limpet, looking fearful whenever anyone told her the other girl was alone.

Which Bronn had thought was…strange, then, but then, if Tywin Lannister had known the truth about Tyrion’s marriage, or lack of one, no doubt she had thought that Sansa was in some sort of danger, herself.

She’d been going off to meet Tywin, Bronn thought, the idea clicking into place and then refusing to leave. To spy for him, or whatever it was that she was doing.

And then, she’d killed him.

Fuck me, he thought. He’d read that situation wrong.

Tyrion rolled his eyes, wiping at his dripping face. “Yes, I believe I mentioned that.”

“Little Shae,” Bronn repeated, and Tyrion snorted.

“Surprise to you too, huh?”

And now…

Bronn thought about what Tyrion had just said, that she had let him rot in prison, had let Sansa rot in the Black Cells, so that she would not be caught for her own crimes. How she had pretended to care about Sansa, and only let her be imprisoned because of it.

“And now you don’t know if she ever really loved you,” Bronn breathed, a dull sense of horror rushing through him, and Tyrion clenched his eyes shut tightly.

Bronn had never loved anyone. He found life easier that way, because he’d seen enough fools torn apart by their love for a woman, and he’d never wanted that, even if he did enjoy a good fuck.
But Shae and Tyrion…they had been something different. Something real, that Bronn, after years of believing Shae would be better off on her own, had actually started to believe in, towards the end.

“I don’t want to talk about this,” Tyrion muttered.

“Idiot,” Bronn said, real anger rushing through him in that moment, because dear gods, Shae didn’t deserve to be remembered like this, and Tyrion’s eyes snapped open. “Of course she fucking loved you. Why the fuck do you think she would have killed your father, if not for you?”

Tyrion gave an incredulous laugh, at the words. “You think she killed my father and allowed me to investigated for my own father’s murder because…she loved me?” He echoed.

And yes, it was a working theory, Bronn thought with some irritation, but it made sense.

Tyrion was already shaking his head. “She killed my father because he knew about the two of us, and she panicked,” he said. “She’d been working for him for months, did you know that? He wanted her to bring him information about me, and she did it, so that he wouldn’t hurt her for loving me. She wasn’t doing it to protect me from my wicked father, so get that thought out of your mind.”

Bonn squinted at him, and wondered how long the shorter man was going to keep his head up his now arse.

“And,” Tyrion went on, because it seemed that Bronn had opened a dam, now, “She did it because he had found out about my darling little wife and her…wife, the Queen. He would never have let that humiliation stand, and so Shae killed him because she was tired of being his spy, and she didn’t want him to act against Sansa. It had nothing to do with me.”

He sounded almost jealous, by the end of that spiel, and so Bronn didn’t feel a bit of guilt when he slapped the man across the face.

Tyrion jerked back, staring up at him in shock.

“I’ve been patient,” Bronn snapped out. “I kept my distance, like you asked me to, so that you could find a new life here, a life where you wouldn’t be judged by your last name, and I wouldn’t be a reminder of it. But I’m sick of standing by and watching you kill yourself out self-pity.”

Tyrion blinked at him. “I didn’t ask for your help, Bronn. In fact, I thought I was pretty clear when I told you to go fuck yourself,” he breathed out.

Bonn shook his head. “Shae’s dead, Tyrion. She’s dead, and you want to be angry with her for killing your shit stain of a father? Fine. Don’t forget that you killed hers, when you found him.”

Tyrion closed his eyes.

Bonn wondered if he was remembering the stench of the other man’s house, when they had walked into it, after Shae’s funeral, and Tyrion had slit the drunk man’s throat. Wondered if he realized that it had smelled much like Tyrion did, now.

Rotting.

“I…” Tyrion looked tired now, as he sank down onto the bed beside the bucket, and Bronn tried not to grimace as he thought about how long it was going to take to wash the stench from those sheets. He scrubbed at his face. “Fuck.”
Bronn eyed him warily.

“You say the Golden Company is following a boy claiming to be a Targaryen,” he echoed, and Bronn felt relief spread through him, as he nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m not sure how much King’s Landing knows about him, but he has an army of ten thousand strong, and they’ve never lost a battle.”

Tyrion raised a brow. “I don’t care about King’s Landing, anymore,” he said, and Bronn flinched a little, as the heat returned to the other man’s voice. “What about the Rock?”

Bronn blinked at him. “You haven’t heard?” He asked, and Tyrion sighed, impatient.

“I was trying rather hard not to hear anything about the Seven Kingdoms,” he admitted.

Bronn eyed him a moment longer, before shrugging. “Stannis and your brother made some sort of deal,” he told the smaller man. “To keep either of them from the Rock. They fucked off to who the fuck knows where, and your dear sister and Selyse Baratheon are the Ladies of the Rock, at the moment.”

Tyrion’s jaw fell open. “My sister hasn’t killed her, yet?” He asked, sounding genuinely surprised, but Bronn was not in the mood for jokes.

Not after what he had just heard.

“Wait, Jaime’s left the Rock with Stannis Baratheon?” Something like fear flashed across the other man’s face.

There.

Bronn had him, now.

Bronn nodded. “No one know where they all went, but Stannis and your fool of a brother took half their armies and disappeared into the snow,” he informed Tyrion. “Those that remained thought they were mad, and didn’t put up much of a fight when Cersei showed up and took back the Rock for herself. Well, half of the right to it.”

Tyrion closed his eyes, reaching up to pinch at his nose. “Fuck,” he breathed, sounding very tired.

Bronn eyed him carefully.

“He just…left?” Tyrion repeated. “No, that…that doesn’t sound like Jaime.”

Bronn shrugged. In his experience, much as he’d ended up liking the other man, Jaime had been nothing if not an impulsive asshole. It sounded rather much like Jaime, to him.

“And Tommen?”

Bronn shrugged. “I don’t get everything, this far East,” he informed the other man, and Tyrion sighed.

He knew that would be enough, that Tyrion, for all that he may profess to hate his family at the moment, would never leave Tommen to his sister’s clutches, alone in the world now that Jaime was gone.

And he knew that, even if Tyrion seemed content to let the world, and his sister, think that he had
killed her son, he wouldn’t want to be responsible for the deaths of the other two, who had been, all in all, sweet kids.

Jaime would never forgive him, after all.

“Fuck,” he breathed. “What was he thinking?”

Bronn didn’t bother to respond to that at all.

He knew that he had the other man, that Tyrion was going to have to return to the Seven Kingdoms now, driven by his need to help what remained of his family, cunts though half of them were.

Which suited Bronn just fine.

Lys was…fine, but he was paid handsomely in gold to be something that the Lyseni never needed.

He yearned for a fight, and it sounded damn well like one was coming to Westeros.

Tyrion blinked at Bronn. “Cersei will never forgive me for what she believes was my murder of her son.” He let out a dry laugh. “Funny that, how I’m always being accused of killing family members I hated but never touched.” He sighed.

Bronn waited.

“Take me to Dorne,” he said, finally.

Bronn smirked; it felt flat. He didn’t quite understand what he had said to change Tyrion’s mind, nor why Tyrion had ultimately decided to go to Dorne, rather than the Rock, after asking so many questions about it.

But in this moment, he didn’t give a single fuck.

“Glad to be of service, my lord,” he said, finally, and Tyrion did his level best to ignore the man.

“Seriously though,” Bronn said, as they started walking out of the house and into the busy streets of Lys, “Your tiny little wife really was fucking the Queen?”

Tyrion shot him an unimpressed look, and Bronn smirked.

“Damn.”
“Janei,” Cersei said, calmly, from where she lay in the bath in her chambers, “Will you grab my dress for me?”

Janei grimaced, and then forced it into a smile rather well, Cersei thought idly, as she marched over to the chair beside Cersei’s bath and then marched it back to her, holding it out.

Cersei stood up in the bath, and waited.

Janei stared at her.

Cersei rolled her eyes.

Gods, she didn’t have time for this.

She had to deal with her son, who still acted as if he couldn’t fit a crown on his small head, Stannis Baratheon’s soldiers, who would be happy to kick her and her son out of the Rock, out of her own home, if she didn’t do something about them, and soon, as well, and with Genna, who was being even more of a cunt than usual, seeming to forget that she still sucked from the teat of House Lannister, for all that she professed to be more in charge of it than Cersei was.

The girl was going to have to learn, Cersei thought, as Janei helped her into the robe and she stepped out of the bath, to hide her feelings better, if she was going to survive as Cersei’s ladies maid. Cersei could read almost every expression on the girl’s face, and it was infuriating.

After all, she was here to serve Cersei, not to burden Cersei with her own feelings.

“You know, I remember a time, not so long ago, when you asked me if you might serve as my lady, in King’s Landing, or perhaps as a lady to the Queen, rather than marrying here,” Cersei said, idly, as the girl helped her slip the robe on. “You should realize that this is the sort of thing you would be doing for me.”

Janei sniffed, and Cersei rolled her eyes as she readjusted her robe. “You should be honored, to serve me now, as my son’s Regent.”

Janei swallowed hard. “Yes, Your Grace,” she whispered, eyes downcast, and Cersei struggled not to roll her own, again.

She would learn, Cersei thought, as she marched away from the other girl, tying her robe and slipping on a pair of shoes, though it might take some time, and Cersei would be lying if she said she didn’t know what the cause of Janei’s distress was, at the moment.

Her mother, the irritating woman, had spent the last week or so since Cersei had crowned Tommen, and then taken Janei and Martyn into her service, roaming the halls and weeping. Every time that Cersei had passed her, the other woman had fallen to her knees and begged for Cersei to be merciful
to her children.

It had gotten to the point where Cersei had decided she would be better off at the Crag, where she could spend some time in solitude, and, perhaps, away from her children, who she clearly had an unhealthy level of attachment to.

Besides, Cersei didn’t need the woman turning Janei and Martyn against her, when she had such plans for them.

As if Cersei had any intentions of seeing her uncle’s remaining two children killed.

There were few enough Lannisters left in the world these days, as there was, and Janei and Martyn were nothing like their traitorous brother, who had seen fit to turn himself into a barefoot, fanatic peasant rather than uphold the family.

Janei and Martyn, for all Janei’s frowns, knew what it meant to do their duty towards their family, Cersei could tell that as much, and she had not received a single complaint from either of them, since they had entered their service to the Crown.

In fact, Cersei thought, eying the young girl as she stood in the corner, head lowered, perhaps Janei was cut out for a future better than that.

The last time she had married off one of her sons for the good of the realm, it had gone disastrously, in the form of Margaery Tyrell, who had been happy to poison Joffrey against his own family.

For that reason, Cersei thought it would be a good idea to keep Tommen’s marriage, when it did happen, though she would not allow it to happen for some years, even when Janei might be a better wife to him than anyone outside of their family.

Leona had been a good enough wife for Joffrey, if only he hadn’t thought her better dead, and her own family hadn’t turned traitor.

But Janei was a Lannister, and that meant, Cersei knew, that she could be trusted. Eventually.

The thought of Tommen marrying anyone, at the moment, was abhorrent to her. It would be some time before he was old enough to be wed, anyway, but if she had to choose a bride, she supposed that Janei would do better than a girl from another family.

Cersei pressed her lips together.

In that spirit, there was still much for Janei to learn.

And, speaking of that, Cersei thought she might have just thought up the solution to at least two of her problems.

“I need you to make sure that these rooms are spotless for me, by the time that I return,” she said, calmly. “And, Janei?”

Janei lifted her head, still looking fearful, and Cersei gritted her teeth, doing her best to look motherly rather than annoyed with the girl.

She’d gotten enough practice with Sansa; it seemed like this should have been easier, she thought.

“There is something else that I need you to do for me, as well.” Cersei moved forward, then, placing a hand under Janei’s chin and lifting it. “If you wish to see your mother again, soon.”
Cersei hadn’t seen her son since the day before, and she knew that she needed to spend some time with the boy so that he didn’t feel lonely.

It could be incredibly lonely, being king, after all. She was convinced, now, that she hadn’t been there enough for Joffrey, and that was the reason Margaery was able to manipulate him so easily.

If she had just had a stronger relationship with him, he would never have sent her away, and she would never have allowed her own brother to kill him.

She glanced at Janei, where she stood in the corner; she hadn’t spoken since Cersei’s ultimatum, earlier, and Cersei hadn’t failed to notice the way the girl was shaking.

And then she glanced back down at the letters in her hands.

She knew what Stannis’ men whispered about her, in the night, while they drank her family’s wine and ate her family’s food. That their lord should have had his war, should have taken Casterly Rock rather than bending down for something as trivial as a truce with a family who never kept their promises. An ironic thing, when Stannis had once sworn his loyalty to Robert, and Cersei never had.

Her servants told her other things, as well, about what the Baratheon men thought about her, without her ever having to leave her rooms at night.

That she was a cunt, a bitch who had scratched her way to the Iron Throne the same way that she had done, here, by persuading Stannis to let her stay.

She would have laughed at the thought, if they ever dared say it to her face; if Cersei had known that Stannis was here, when she had departed from King’s Landing, she would have arrived here with an army.

Jaime had been the one to convince Stannis not to go into the war that the remainder of the Baratheon soldiers seemed to want so desperately, not that men ever seemed to remember that, when there was a woman they could blame for their problems, instead.

She grimaced, finishing off the final touches on the letters she was working on.

The next time she saw Jaime, she’d be sure to thank him for being stupid enough to leave half of a Baratheon army with his child, here.

She figured that they would be just about even, then. That he would damn well owe her, actually, for endangering both of their sons. Leaving Joffrey open to their brother, even if Cersei knew that Jaime would never have believed anything against Tyrion before it was too late, and then leaving Tommen with Stannis’ men.

But there was nothing that she could do about that, now. She was just going to have to figure out how to clean up Jaime’s mess, and hope that it was enough.

And if the Baratheon men thought of her as nothing more than a cunt who didn’t believe that a man’s word was his bond, then that was exactly what Cersei was going to give them.

All of them, if she damn well had to.

Her scratchings became a bit more serious, as she continued. Janei looked a little disturbed, in the
corner, but she didn’t dare speak up, not until Cersei was done finishing off the letters and sealing them.

“I need you to deliver these letters,” Cersei informed her, holding them out, already sealed. “If you try to unseal them and read them, I’ll have you horsewhipped, you understand.”

Janei swallowed. “Of course,” she whispered, lowering her gaze again.

Cersei smiled at her. “Good girl. Now, run along. If anyone needs me, I plan to be eating the noon meal with my son.”

She’d already had the servants prepare them something and find her son; she had no doubt that Tommen was hiding away in Jaime’s old rooms again, because the boy was frightfully shy, something else that she was going to have to sort out, if he was ever going to make a decent king.

And Cersei didn’t want to lose her boy the way that she had lost Joffrey, to the crown, but she needed to protect him, as well.

And part of that meant that he needed to learn how to protect himself, as well.

She sighed, reaching up to press a hand against her forehead.

Gods, she was so tired.

But it was a good sort of tired; before she had crowned Tommen herself, because no one else would help her, Cersei hadn’t been able to sleep because her mind was too preoccupied with what might happen to him, at any moment, because he was nothing more than a target.

She had been terrified at the prospect of, for once, being the only one able to protect her son.

And what she had feared had happened; she had nearly lost her son, because she had stood by for too long and done nothing, and Cersei was not going to make the same mistake again.

Now, when she fell into bed at night, she fell into exhausted sleep, contented that she had done everything she fucking could to keep the remainder of her family safe, even if Jaime had not, and no one else would.

That was how it had always been, after all.

Her father hadn’t lifted a finger to help her keep her children safe, before she’d made sure that Robert Baratheon never would.

She took a deep breath, and got to her feet, walking out the door and down the hall, because the thought of her son in any more danger at the moment made her want to do nothing more than see him, to make sure that he was all right.

But the moment she shut the door behind her, as she walked out into the hall, she went still, blinking at the sight of Selyse Baratheon, standing before her.

“Cersei,” Selyse said, and Cersei ground her teeth together. This was the last woman she wanted to deal with today.

Selyse, who was wandering the halls like a ghost, these days, at least not weeping, the way that Dorna had been, but she was still an eyesore, and one that Cersei was going to make sure that she dealt with, as well.
So long as she remained such an important figure here, a reminder to the Baratheon men of who their king was, Cersei would never be able to keep her son safe.

And it should have been ‘Your Grace,’ but Cersei knew this to be Selyse’s quiet way of mocking her, even if it was an unspoken truce that they had both agreed upon, to not use titles with one another when neither of them could agree on the proper titles, for all that she had always thought the woman nothing more than a timid flower, in the past.

It had come as no surprise to her when Cersei had found out Stannis was sleeping with some red priestess, rather than his own wife.

But then again, Selyse was holding up fairly well, after Cersei’s most recent betrayal, and the sight of the other woman, seemingly fine after many of her own men had seen the sense in declaring for Tommen rather than her husband, grated on Cersei’s nerves, for she herself didn’t feel like she was holding up well at all.

“I heard about the attempt on your son,” Selyse said, and for once, she actually sounded sympathetic. “I am glad that he is all right. It is a terrible thing, to lose a child.”

Cersei remembered being told by one of the Lannister soldiers that Stannis had been a hair’s breadth away from burning his own daughter at the stake, before he’d abandoned the girl with his smuggling knight in Winterfell.

But she had not lost her child, while Cersei had lost Joffrey. She knew nothing of the pain of losing a child, even if Shireen still resided in Winterfell and she could not leave the Rock anymore than Cersei could, at the moment.

She thought that this was Selyse’s way of punishing her, for what she had done, in crowning the boy, by reminding her of how she had almost lost him.

Cersei lifted her chin. “Well,” she said, coldly, “That was some time ago. And he is fine, I assure you. If I were you, I would be far more worried for my own daughter.”

Selyse stared at her, looking slightly paler. It was hard to tell; Cersei wondered when the last time the woman had left these halls had been.

But she wasn’t lying; if she were Selyse, she would be horrified for the fate of her own daughter, stuck away in Winterfell, surrounded by Stannis’ men, and very much alone without her mother there to guide her.

Stannis had left her there, Cersei understood, just in case he didn’t manage to take the Rock for himself, and it didn’t sound as if his sudden journey Beyond the Wall had been planned; no doubt, he’d forgotten about the little chit when he’d decided to go North with barely half of his own army, the half who still believed in him blindly.

And Jaime, of course.

But the fact remained that Shireen was still in Winterfell, and she doubted that Selyse was comfortable with the fact. But nor had the other woman declared that Shireen should be brought here.

Cersei allowed herself a moment to consider the thought.

Like Janei, Shireen could become her ward, forced to remain by her side at all times, so that she couldn’t plot against her, the way that Sansa Stark eventually had learned how to do.
She was near Tommen’s own age, Cersei thought, and the boy was so shy that most likely, he would prefer to make friends with another girl, even if the thought of him spending much time around a creature touched by grayscale repulsed her.

And keeping her close was a good idea, now that Stannis had no doubt gone off and gotten himself killed in the snow.

“I fear that she shares a similar worry as your own daughter, Cersei,” Selyse said, eyes hard and not a bit of sympathy in her voice, despite her words, “Surrounded by snakes, in Dorne.”

Cersei felt her face grow hot.

Not for long, if Cersei could help it.

No, Myrcella would not remain in Dorne, where she was nothing more than the manipulated puppet of those whorish Martells, she was certain, who had so easily managed to turn Myrcella against her with a few pretty words, for long, if Cersei could help it.

She already had something of a plan in motion, to see Myrcella returned to her side, and the moment that happened, she would send a letter to Jaime again, would appeal to his manhood by begging him to return to their little family, happy and perfect now that Joffrey was not there to cause such a divide between them.

It was perhaps the one good thing to come of Joffrey’s death, she thought, idly, that it meant that they could come together as a family, once more, and she could purge Myrcella and Jaime of the lies that they had started to believe about her, for whatever reason.

“Yes, I suppose that must be amusing for you,” Cersei muttered, “to know that I feel some of the pain you wish I did.”

Selyse’s brows furrowed. “Cersei…”

“It’s ‘Your Grace,’” Cersei corrected her, coldly. “As you well know.”

Selyse lifted her chin, gaining back something more of a spine, which Cersei couldn’t help but be annoyed with, even if the woman’s earlier attitude had been worse.

“No, I don’t know,” she said, and her eyes no longer held the sympathy they had before. Cersei was almost glad for that; it felt more honest. “Because my king is Stannis Baratheon, my husband, not your bastard son.”

Cersei slapped her.

The sound reverberated through the hallway, and Cersei took a step back, then, strangely startled by the sound.

Selyse stared at her.

Cersei stiffened a little. “Lady Selyse,” she said, calmly, “Your husband disappeared Beyond the Wall, a place where no one comes back from, on a whim with my brother. You are a guest in this place, even if you don’t see yourself as such, and I don’t think you want to put that to the test, considering how many Lannister soldiers there are here, compared to how many of your husband’s soldiers are.”

Selyse grimaced, but she did stand down, Cersei noticed, with a little thrill, confirming a theory she’d
already had.

“Now,” Cersei said, calmly, “If you’ll excuse me…”

She walked around the woman and kept walking, ignoring the little grunt of annoyance that Selyse made, after she was gone.

She found her son in the dining room that they had planned to eat in…with Genna.

Cersei bit back a groan. Gods, what was it with today?

Something about the sight of Genna, sitting so close and whispering in Tommen’s ear, after she had just left Selyse and her poisonous words, made Cersei’s blood feel like it was on fire.

“If you will excuse us, dear aunt, my son and I need to speak,” Cersei said, loudly, and Genna lifted her eyes to Cersei, looked supremely annoyed.

Cersei felt rather gratified, at the sight.

“We need to speak, actually,” Genna said, harshly, and Cersei closed her eyes, breathing in deeply before letting it out in a sigh, and gesturing for Genna to lead the way out into the hallway.

Genna slapped her, the moment the door shut behind them and blocked them off from Tommen, and Cersei reeled back, shocked at the other woman’s behavior.

“What are you doing to your queen?” Cersei demanded, the moment that she had gotten control of herself once more.

Genna snorted. “Get a hold of yourself, Cersei,” she muttered. “You’re hardly a queen just because you decide to name yourself so.”

Cersei’s eyes narrowed at her. “That child in Margaery’s belly isn’t even born yet,” she said, “And my son is. He has a better claim right now than an unborn babe.”

Genna stared at her. Then, “Your son is terrified, Cersei, terrified that he’s going to be killed just like his brother was, and you did that to him by naming him king, when no one else was thinking about it. You could have waited, seen if the child was a girl, and done this right, and instead, you’ve painted a target on his back, or have you forgotten that we’re surrounded by Baratheons?”

Cersei lifted her chin. “Tommen is a Baratheon,” she reminded the other woman, and Genna raised her hand as if to slap her again.

And then, slowly, surprisingly, she lowered it.

Cersei stared.

“Why did you send Dorna away?” She demanded.

Cersei crossed her arms over her chest. “She was always weeping,” she said, not feeling a bit of guilt over it. “It was grating on my nerves. I thought she might be happier with her own family.”

“Her family is here,” Genna reminded her, looking exasperated, and Cersei hated that, just because she was Cersei’s aunt, she thought that she could get away with lecturing her like a child, “And you’re keeping them captive. No wonder she was weeping.”

Cersei shifted, feeling strangely uncomfortable. “Well, perhaps I’ll send Selyse to keep her company.
That woman is just as irritating, and far more of a threat to Tommen.”

Genna threw her hands up in the air. “Does everything I say just go in one ear and out the other, with you?” She asked, looking annoyed. “For fuck’s sake, Cersei. There are almost as many Baratheon soldiers here as there are Lannisters, and Stannis’ men are fanatical towards him.”

Cersei cocked her head, considering the other woman’s words.

Almost as many…

She bit back a smile. “Then why didn’t they follow him, when he called for his men to set aside,” she thought for a moment, trying to remember how it had first been explained to her, when she arrived at the Rock and found Jaime gone, “Petty grievances over a throne that won’t matter to fight fairy tales? The way you told me the story, it sounded as if the men that stayed behind were the ones who had lost their faith in Stannis, and believed he’d finally gone mad. And you’re right; there are quite a few of them, here. Waiting for someone to come along and offer them something better.”

Genna stared at her, looking disgusted, but she didn’t dare refute the words, Cersei knew, because she knew them to be the truth.

That was why the Baratheon soldiers standing throughout the Keep had remained silent, in the days after Cersei had crowned her son as the rightful king; that was why they seemed to respect Selyse as a lady, but not as their Queen.

And Cersei knew damn well how to manipulate men who needed something to fight for.

In that way, all men were the same, after all.

No, she wasn’t as worried about this as Genna seemed to think she should be.

“You can’t have everything, Cersei,” Genna warned her, after a few beats of silence, and Cersei lifted her chin.

“Watch me,” she said, and then turned, starting to go back to her son.

Genna called after her, “You’re going to get that boy killed, you know, trying to ‘protect’ him. And if you’re not careful, you’re going to get the rest of us killed, as well.”

Cersei spun back around, eyes narrowing. “I want Myrcella back from Dorne,” she said, and ignored Genna’s scoff. “The Martells have made it clear that they have no intention of honoring any sort of alliance with us, and the way that they took Myrcella back to Dorne was nothing short of an abduction.” She eyed Genna, saw the way the other woman’s expression softened.

There. She had her.

“I know that we’ve had our differences,” Cersei continued, voice soft, “But I…” she reached up, running a hand through her blonde hair, trying to figure out how she was going to play this.

After all, there was only so much that Genna would believe, from her.

“I need our family back together,” Cersei whispered, hoarsely. “I need…I know that you think I’m endangering Tommen, but the moment Tommen was nearly killed, this was what I had to do. If I hadn’t done something, perhaps they would have tried again.”

She sucked in a harsh breath, and then another, eying Genna carefully out of the corner of her eyes.
Genna seemed to be eying her just as warily.

Cersei swallowed; she had to sell this better, she knew.

“I panicked with Tommen, I know that,” Cersei went on. “I saw him there, nearly killed by some unknown assassin, and I didn’t know what else to do. But this situation, here, with all of these soldiers there…something was going to happen, either way. And I don’t want something to happen in Dorne, where Myrcella is surrounded by so many snakes. The only reason that Joffrey didn’t send for her to come back was because he…because he was angry with me.”

Genna blinked, and then her eyes softened.

“And if something were to happen to her because of me…” Cersei sighed, trailing off, knowing that she wouldn’t have to say anything more, now.

Genna let out a long sigh. “I happen to agree with you, about Myrcella,” she said, sounding somewhat defeated, and Cersei’s head shot up. “I don’t think that Myrcella is safe, with the Lannisters. But I’m not sure what we can do about it, from here.”

Cersei swallowed. “I…” she took a deep breath. “I think there might be something we can do.”

Genna pursed her lips. “All right,” she said, finally. “I will help you, with this. But Cersei, you have to stop. You have to stop acting on your own, without consulting me, doing mad things that you’ve only half thought through.”

Cersei closed her eyes, shoving down her humiliation. “I…will consult you,” Cersei said, slowly. “With as much as I can.”

Genna gave her a long look. “Not good enough. I need more than that.”

Cersei sighed. “I’ll tell you, if I’m planning anything else.”

Genna crossed her arms over her chest. “Are you planning anything else?”

Cersei tossed her hair and walked into the dining room to have a meal with her son, one which Genna had not been invited to.

The boy was sitting at the table, bent over, looking rather dejected, and not at all like the king he would one day be, Cersei thought, annoyance filling her a little.

He was just a boy now, but one day, he was going to be the leader of the Seven Kingdoms, and it wouldn’t do for the rest of Westeros to see him as one of the kittens he was so enamored with.

Cersei forced her thoughts about Genna, about her attempts to manipulate the other woman and whether or not Genna had believed her, from her mind, for the moment.

For now, she didn’t want to think about the fate of the Seven Kingdoms, of House Lannister. She just wanted to have a nice meal with her son.

Her son was still sitting at the table, idly drumming his fingers on the surface of it, when Cersei entered. He looked up, eyes wide, and Cersei forced a smile.

“How are you feeling?” Cersei asked, as she sat down on the edge of the table Tommen was sitting at.

She gestured for the two servants in the corner of the room to bring forward their meal, and they
disappeared, leaving the two of them alone for a few moments.

The boy blinked up at her, wide eyed, once they were alone. “I…” he swallowed hard. “Do you think…Do you think Joffrey enjoyed it?” He asked, very quietly, and she blinked at him. “Do you think he liked being King?”

Cersei paused, the question surprising her.

She knew the answer immediately, of course.

Joffrey had loved being King, had enjoyed the power it had given him, to hold the lives of his victims in his hands, and have a choice over their life and death. Had enjoyed being able to give orders and have them be followed without a second thought, after the way he had been ignored for so long by his father, and by everyone else around him.

Tommen wouldn’t be like that. He wouldn’t enjoy the power that came with being king, he wouldn’t enjoy having the power of life and death over others, he wouldn’t like having to make the hard decisions.

In a way, Cersei’s decision that she would be his regent for as long as she needed to was something of a gift, for him, she supposed.

She would be protecting his heart along with his life, and she intended to do her best, with that.

“I don’t like it,” Tommen admitted, quietly, and Cersei blinked at him. “Being king,” he went on, when she was silent. “Everyone wants me to…Well, everyone expects something of me.” He lowered his gaze. “No one expected anything of me when I was just Joffrey’s brother.”

Cersei felt annoyance bubbling up inside of her, at the boy’s words. She leaned forward, placing her hands on Tommen’s shoulders, and the boy stared up at her.

“You are my son,” Cersei told him, calmly, and Tommen’s eyes widened a little more, “And this is your birthright.”

Tommen blinked at her. “It was Joffrey’s birthright,” he whispered, and Cersei’s fingers tightened on his shoulders before she let go of him.

“And now, it is yours,” she said. “You are just as much your father’s son as Joffrey ever was. I…I understand that this might be difficult for you, Tommen, but you are the King now. I need you to step up and be a king.”

Tommen swallowed. “But I don’t understand why I have to be the king,” he said, shrugging his thin shoulders. “Margaery already is going to have a baby, and it could be a boy, and I think that she wants it-”

Cersei stared at him, aghast, not even comprehending the rest of his words as he went on.

The slap that she had delivered, the first time she’d told him that he was to be the king, should have sent the message, she thought. He ought to have understood that he was going to be king, whether Margaery Tyrell wanted it or not.

She didn’t understand why he was fighting this so hard.

And she didn’t understand why the servants were taking so long to deliver the damn food, she thought, something like irritation filling him.
Tommen seemed to sense her ire, for he swallowed hard. “Not that…I don’t, that is,” he was all but tripping over his words, clearly nervous, and Cersei closed her eyes as she thought about how this would sound to his Small Council, once it was finished being created, to hear their king stutter his way through his words, “I just…I don’t want anyone to die over me, like this. I don’t think there should be a war, not if Margaery thinks that my…my nephew has a better claim to the throne.”

Cersei finally managed to find her words again. “Tommen,” she said, slowly, “I don’t think you understand…”

“Mother,” Tommen interrupted her, and Cersei blinked at him, “I think…I think we made a mistake.”

Cersei looked at him.

For a moment, she allowed herself to imagine a life where no one would want to kill him, where the Tyrells would stand down so long as she promised to accept Margaery’s child as the future king or queen, regardless of its gender.

Tommen would be a happy child, growing up somewhere far from court, where he would be protected and wouldn’t have to worry about making another decision in his life. He would have his cats, and he would live his quiet life, and Cersei wouldn’t have to lose him.

And Cersei would live with him, would be able to raise him as her son, without the worry of the throne, without the power that accompanied it.

Perhaps then, Jaime would even agree to come back to them without a fight. Perhaps, too, Myrcella…

No.

No, all of that was a dream, a dream that she would never have.

If she had stood by, declared for House Tyrell, the way that they wanted, the Martells would crown Myrcella, eventually. Their loyalty was to no one but themselves.

And even if she had agreed to the Tyrells, they would make sure that she never raised her son, would declare her unfit as a mother, would have her live a thousand leagues away from wherever they eventually placed Tommen, surrounded by Tyrell guards. Would make sure that he grew up never once wanting to lift a finger against House Tyrell, that he never wanted for anything.

That he never had a choice in anything, because the moment they saw him as a threat, they’d be rid of him, and even if he learned to love his captors, he would know that, somewhere deep inside.

Eventually, they might marry him off to some pretty, lower class girl who would ensure he never had a chance of becoming king, or, he would die of some inane sickness, while Cersei never got the chance to hold him in her arms again.

Just as she had never gotten to hold Joffrey in her arms again, before he’d died.

And that was something else the Tyrells had caused, when they allowed Margaery Tyrell to get her claws into them, proving they were fully capable of everything that Cersei feared they might do to Tommen.

She closed her eyes, and shuddered.
When she opened them again, looking at her son, her beautiful boy, Cersei knew that she had made the right choice. The only choice that she could have made.

For the only son she had left.

Cersei pursed her lips. “I think that you spend too much time with those cats, Tommen,” she told him, coldly. “It isn’t good for you. You need to spend more time around your subjects, to better understand them.”

Tommen swallowed, opening his mouth, but Cersei cut him off.

“So,” she said, reaching out to run a hand through his hair, and pretending that she didn’t notice the way he flinched away, “I’ll just have Janei taking care of the cats for you, until you can become the king I know you are.”

Tommen’s jaw ticked, but he didn’t dare object.

Cersei bit the inside of her cheek. “Understood?”

He nodded, after another moment’s hesitation, but the sight was wholly unsatisfying, Cersei thought.

“Good,” she said, finally. “Well, I think you should get back to studying about the realm. Another good way for you to understand your people.”

And something that she had neglected, with Joffrey, who had been far more interested in learning about the long gone Targaryens, Cersei thought, more annoyance bubbling up as Tommen left without a word, then.

When he was gone, she leaned back in her chair and let out a long sigh.

She knew what she had to do, now. It was something that she’d been hoping to avoid, something that she didn’t quite want to commit to, but Lannisters could be stubborn, and she couldn’t do this if she had to fight Tommen’s passivity, all the while.

So, she was just going to have to convince him that his becoming King was in everyone’s best interest.

She would make him the good, unchallenged king that Joffrey had never become.

Even if it meant fucking them all just a little more.

After all, they already had Stannis’ army here. It wasn’t as if things could get much worse.

“His Grace the King Tommen has declared that, as his first act as King, all those who wear Stannis Baratheon’s colors and bend the knee to him have this chance to bend the knee to the true King, Tommen of House Baratheon,” Cersei said, loudly, her words echoing throughout the courtyard.

She had summoned the leaders of Stannis’ army here, or as many of them as she could, along with many of the Lannister lords and knights. She wanted to make sure as many people as possible heard her offer, wanted to make sure that it was well known.

It needed to make its way back to Tommen, after all, without the boy being here himself, when she thought it was too dangerous for him to be here, if things did go wrong.

But she was doing this for Tommen, all of it.
The men in the courtyard shifted in shock, at her words, and she bit back a smile; oh yes, Cersei Lannister, the woman who never kept her promises, who didn’t believe that a man’s word was his bond.

Who had fucked her own brother and had his children.

Cersei folded her hands together, trying to meet as many eyes as she could. Her gown grated around her neck, where she wore the neckline high.

She wouldn’t want to give these men the wrong impression, today, about the Queen she was about to ask them to follow.

No, that was Margaery’s job, she thought, a flash of memory, of Margaery fucking her son in front of her, rushing through her mind.

“Those who do will be pardoned for their treason, and offered positions that bring great prestige, within the King’s armies. They have until the end of the day, and if they do not, they will be met with the King’s wrath, rather than his mercy.”

Silence met her words.

Of course, Cersei had not expected the men to jump forward at the opportunity; after all, these were all the sort of men content with the thought of seeing her own children dead for Stannis Baratheon to climb over their cold corpses on the way to the throne.

Still, it was a bit disheartening, that no one was reacting at all.

She had known this would be a long shot, of course, that it would be difficult to convince any of them to follow her, considering who she was, but she had hoped for a little more…encouragement.

She glanced at Genna, where the woman stood in the crowd, and bit back a sigh, just then remembering that she had promised the other woman she would run anything else by her.

Ah, well.

That was a long shot, anyway.

Cersei would just have to find another way to get Myrcella back, and perhaps Genna could join Dorna and Selyse, in the Crag.

They could have a little gathering, of women whom Cersei loathed for living in this place, and all of whom loathed her.

And then she could send someone to make sure that they didn’t threaten her again.

Or perhaps she’d send Genna back to her fucking disgrace of a husband, make him actually put a leash on his wife, this time.

Her eyes left her aunt, and scanned the crowd. “And do not doubt that the King’s wrath will be great, for those who have been sampling his wine, and his women, for the past few months, and without even a lord to guide them.”

Genna stalked forward, then, and Cersei resisted the urge to roll her eyes, knowing that this would come, but still annoyed that the other woman would dare it, in front of so many.

She should have at least had the sense to do this behind closed doors, after all, when this little
demonstration was over.

“Your Grace,” Genna said, and her voice was cold, “Perhaps you haven’t thought this through.”

Cersei narrowed her eyes at the other woman. “Are you questioning the King’s own command?” She asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

Genna lifted her chin. “I am wondering if the King is the one who gave it,” she muttered, knowingly.

Cersei shrugged, tossing her hair behind her shoulder. “My son is not yet of age,” she reminded Genna, “And as he as yet has no Hand, I act as his Regent.”

Even when he did get a Hand; when Kevan returned, bowing and scraping before the throne, having learned his lesson for underestimating Cersei, she would remain as Tommen’s Regent, she didn’t bother to say, but she thought she could see the truth in Genna’s eyes, all the same.

She was the one who had propped him up, when no one else seemed to believe in him; it was only fair.

Genna pressed her lips together for a moment longer, glaring at Cersei, but she stayed silent, this time, finally seeming to realize that there was little that she could do, in order to stop this from happening.

Cersei sent her a smirk, and then turned back to the crowd of men, shifting uncomfortably, now.

“I’m sure that you think that my son’s wrath cannot be great,” she continued. “He is just a child, and he is not his brother, Joffrey, who would have seen you all pay for what you have done. You must especially have doubts because he has offered you this chance at mercy. Perhaps you think that exposes a weakness.”

The men shifted again.

Cersei lifted her chin, raised her voice. “But let me remind you that my son is a Lannister, or so your king says. And whether you believe that or you simply prefer my goodbrother, let me remind you that my son is the grandson of Tywin Lannister, the man who destroyed the Reynes for their treason, the man who destroyed the Starks for theirs. The man who humiliated your king at the Battle of Blackwater. And I am his daughter.”

She glanced over at Genna; the other woman shook her head, and then turned, walking from the courtyard in silence, her ladies accompanying her.

Cersei bit back a grimace; the other woman would pay for showing such dissension among their ranks, before all of these people, she would see to that.

“And if you wish to risk our wrath, then I welcome it,” Cersei said, and her own men started to shift, reaching for their weapons.

The Baratheon knights reached for theirs.

Cersei lifted her hands. “Please, sers,” she said. “This need not come to bloodshed. Your lord has abandoned you here to fight fairytales in the North, and at a moment when he could have turned around and won this war for you. Instead, he left you here, surrounded by Lannister soldiers, in the Westerlands.”

She could see the conflict on their faces now, and she remembered what she had nearly forgotten
before; the soldiers who had remained behind here, at the Rock, were the ones who had refused to go North with Stannis and Jaime.

For too long, Cersei had been thinking of them as the enemy, as the people darkening her door, ready to kill her at any moment. Who would come into her rooms in the middle of the night and rape the Lannister whore, and then kill her son in front of her.

She had been thinking about this whole situation wrong. Thinking of them as the monsters.

But what she had just said? That was the truth.

She could live out her life in fear, could have her son stolen away from her and raised to think that he didn’t deserve to be king, just because Margaery Tyrell wanted it more.

Or, she could do something about it. She could become the thing that those around her feared, instead.

That…meant something, that seed of doubt.

Cersei intended to ensure that it did.

“So you can keep pledging your loyalty to a man who may never return to the Seven Kingdoms, or who might, if he’s a very fortunate man indeed, who return from that journey, only for you to have lost your chance at taking back what belongs to you, what you’ve fought for so long.”

The soldiers shifted again.

Cersei lifted her hands. “Or, you can choose a new king. A king who is still alive, who will give you what you wanted so desperately when you chose who you thought the winning king would be. You can choose my son.”

Silence.

And then, one of the Baratheon soldiers moved forward, and the soldiers around him started to murmur amongst themselves.

He reached up, ripping off his cloak, and Cersei smirked.

“You fucking traitor!” One of the men from the crowd shouted, and Cersei supposed that he had good reason for that.

After all, she had told the truth. Stannis had been winning this war. And if, in some small chance in the hells that he did return, with her brother in tow, he probably would continue to win this war.

But that was as unlikely as Jaime returning, she could admit that, now.

And they needed to, too.

The soldier who had torn off his cloak glared at the others. “The bitch is right,” he snapped, and she might have something to say about them referring to her as a bitch, but she supposed it was progress, nonetheless.

It was better than the Lannister Whore, after all.

“Stannis isn’t coming back, and we all knew that, when we refused to go North with him. This truce is only standing because the Lannisters have agreed to uphold it. We’re living on borrowed time, and
for what? Months ago, we took Winterfell. We had victory in our hands.”

He held his hand out into a fist, with those words.

Cersei grimaced as one of the Baratheon soldiers walked forward.

“And we’d be better off throwing our lot in with the Tyrells, not with…” he eyed Cersei, “Her.”

Cersei tried not to be offended.

After all, she was desperate. If she had any other options, she would have made sure that they all paid, for ever endangering her child by siding with Stannis Baratheon, in the first place.

The first soldier shook his head. “I’m taking the best offer in front of me,” he muttered, and Cersei smirked again. How like a man. “And right now? The Tyrells aren’t offering.”

The second man reached for his sword, then, and the Lannister soldiers did, as well.

But they didn’t quite make it quick enough, not before this man who clearly wasn’t happy to die for Stannis North of the Wall decided he could still die for him, here.

He didn’t, though.

Not before he cut down the first man to contemplate turning traitor, who cut him cleanly through, like butter. Or something just a little stiffer than butter, perhaps.

Cersei flinched, taking a step back so that the spray of blood wouldn’t reach her.

The soldier turned back to face her, then, sword raised, and her own men stepped forward. They may not love her, of course, but they would defend their lady to the end, if they had to.

And when the blood cleared, Cersei was still standing.

And so were half a dozen of the Baratheon knights whom she had summoned here.

The rest lay at her feet, where they belonged, she thought. A sacrifice, to appease her anger at these men for ever turning to Stannis Baratheon over her son.

If they hadn’t betrayed their king for a usurper, Joffrey might still be alive, and the rest of these men, and the thousands following them…

She just had to be content with their bending the knee in the hopes of glory.

“Now,” Cersei said, coldly, as she crossed her arms over her chest, “For my first act as your Regent, I don’t think my orders will be that difficult for you. Deploy a group to go to Winterfell, and bring Shireen Baratheon here to the Rock at once, that she might be kept safe under the protection of the Crown, before she, too, is used by these grasping Tyrells.”

Selyse, where she stood in the crowd, silent until this moment, for all that she was watching her own men turn against her, shifted on her feet, looking suddenly more pale faced and horrified by the words, far more so than she had seemed at the sight of the majority of her men deserting her.

Cersei bit back a smirk; of course she did. She was a Florent, after all, and basically a Tyrell, so she would believe that even if Cersei turned Stannis’ men against him, she would be safe from Cersei’s wrath.
No doubt she thought that she would be traded to the Reach.

Cersei’s eyes narrowed in her direction, and then moved away.

Perhaps she might trade Selyse to the Tyrells, eventually, Cersei thought, suddenly finding the notion amusing.

But she would be keeping Shireen, the moment she got her hands on the girl. It might just be the thing that turned the tide of the war in her favor.
“Tell me exactly what you saw,” Kevan told the boy, again, emotions warring between shock and annoyance, that the boy was such a blubbering mess.

The boy licked his lips, staring up at Kevan with wide eyes. He was a small thing, capable of fitting into nicks and crannies, which made him a convenient little spy, Kevan supposed, though he had never had much use for spies, himself.

But Varys’ little birds were famous, throughout the city. Little creatures, most of whom could not speak because Varys had their tongues ripped out, the cruel spymaster, so that they answered only to him, in their own ways.

But this one, it seemed, he had been content to leave alone, so that the boy could share his story.

Kevan didn’t know whether to be grateful for the boy, or disgusted on behalf of the dozens of other children whom Varys used for his own purposes.

“I…” the boy licked his lips, looking nervously at Varys.

Varys lifted his chin. “Tell him what you told me,” he told the boy, in those whispery, nonthreatening tones that he always used, and this was the first time that Kevan had found them disturbing.

The boy swallowed hard, still looking nervous, and Kevan sighed.

“Take your time, boy,” he said, calmly. “You have nothing to fear, here.”

The boy shook his head, took a deep breath, and then another. “I saw Lady Sansa, m’lord, goin’ into the King’s chambers, after he and Queen Margaery went in there, together. And I saw Ser Meryn go in with her. He didn’t go in, before that,” he said, eyes downcast. “And then she sent a serving boy off to do something, and Lord Baelish came by, not long after.” He looked uncomfortable, and Kevan wondered if it was because he was worried about what he was about to say, or about crossing Baelish.

Kevan supposed it was a legitimate worry. The man seemed to have amassed quite a bit of power over the course of a single evening, and that was why Kevan was inclined to hear the boy’s tale, in the first place.

He wondered what it was, then, that Varys had over his little birds, to keep them so in line, that they feared him more than they did a man like Baelish.

“The Lady Sansa and the Queen left, not that long after that,” the boy said. “And Lord Baelish, he…” the boy paused again. “Uh…”

He glanced at Varys again.
Kevan sighed, kneeling down in front of the boy and tilting his chin up. “Look at me, boy, not him.”

Not the least because he didn’t want to think that Varys was telling the boy what to say, not if what he thought the boy was about to say was the case.

Kevan grimaced.

The boy stared at him for a moment, and then glanced up at Varys, and then back at him. His lower lip wobbled.

He reminded Kevan a little of Tommen.

“He had a little, golden statue in his hands,” the boy continued. “And…and, it was covered in blood.”

Kevan closed his eyes.

It didn’t confirm everything, of course; if he confronted them, he was sure they could find some way around this, could claim that they had found Margaery and Joffrey like that, could talk their way out of this because they were surrounded by Tyrells who would believe them, but Kevan didn’t need more confirmation than that.

Well, not from a boy who worked for the Spider.

He got to his feet, and the boy all but vanished by the time that he had blinked again, not that Kevan was surprised.

He turned back to the Spider, pressing his lips together as the door shut behind the vanishing boy.

“Do you believe me, now?” Varys asked, and Kevan closed his eyes.

Fuck.

“Cersei will tear the Tyrells down to the ground, if she ever finds out about this,” Kevan warned the other man, and Varys stared at him for a moment longer, before a slow smile pulled over his lips.

Fuck.

Margaery Tyrell was out there sitting on the Iron Throne, something she was not meant to do, as only the Regent, and claiming that his favorite nephew had been the one to let those men into the Keep, to kill her dear, beloved, monster of a husband.

But she had chosen well, in the one she had decided to pin her husband’s murder on.

She was out there claiming that if she ever saw Tyrion again, she would have his head, and she was doing it because she wanted to sic Cersei on him.

She wanted to keep the blame from ever falling on herself, by coming down hard on a convenient scapegoat.

Because, at the moment, Tyrion was a convenient scapegoat. Kevan’d had his men searching for the other man all morning, and hadn’t been able to find him, and he didn’t know if it was because Tyrion had known what was going to happen, somehow, or because he was off fucking some whore, and was about to return to the Keep for the surprise of his life.

The not knowing, in all of this, was almost as bad the knowing.
It was making his hair turn grey, he thought, grimacing.

“If?” Varys echoed, raising a single eyebrow.

Kevan nodded, feeling tired.

He had felt tired ever since he had learned what Cersei had allowed to happen to his oldest son, his Lancel, just because she was angry that the boy had found religion at the expense of his family.

And yes, what Lancel had done was stupid, and cruel, and if Kevan had gotten his hands on the boy he might have given him a good thrashing for forgetting who his family truly was.

But he would never forgive Cersei for allowing the boy to die, an afterthought in her vengeance against the High Sparrow.

She hadn’t even cared if Lancel lived or died; Kevan had seen that in her eyes, when he had confronted her over it, and that had been the last straw, for Kevan.

Kinslayer.

The title his niece had taken on might have felt obscene, if he didn’t daily have the thought of wrapping his hands around her throat and choking the life from her, himself.

No.

He could not forgive her for what she had done to Lancel, what she would likely happily do to Tyrion, without stopping for a moment to listen to him, the moment she found him.

And...worse than that, he could not even blame Margaery Tyrell for killing her tyrant of a husband, even if she had blamed it on Tyrion. He loathed her for it, but he couldn’t blame her for it, not the way that he had blamed Cersei for killing Lancel, and, dear gods, before that, for killing her own husband, who had hardly been as horrible a king, and perhaps even husband, as Joffrey had been.

He was not a fool.

Especially after learning this, he knew that the Tyrells had only kept him as Hand of the King because they wanted to keep a Lannister close, because they thought that if they had his endorsement, they could avoid a war.

A war that would most certainly come, if Cersei ever learned that the new Regent of a child yet to be born had killed her beloved firstborn son.

Kevan opened his eyes, meeting the other man’s gaze. “I am not blind to my niece’s faults, Lord Varys,” he said. “But neither am I blind to the fact that you are hardly loyal to House Lannister alone, and you brought this to me for a reason. What is it?”

Varys’ smile was thin. “I needed to know where you might stand,” he said. “Believe it or not, there are many rather invested in the answer.”

Kevan closed his eyes again.

Gods, he was tired of all of this.

“The Tyrells won’t see trouble for me so long as they leave Tyrion alone, wherever it is he might have gone,” Kevan said finally, opening his eyes. “Clear enough?”
Varys smiled.

Kevan wondered what it was the Tyrells offered, that he seemed so invested in their future on the Iron Throne. He had never seen the man much invested in anyone’s future on the Iron Throne, Kevan thought.

And he didn’t think that Varys had much interest in the Tyrells, over all.

Perhaps just in their queen, which was confusing enough, since Varys had never, to the best of Kevan’s knowledge, shown interest in a single cunt before.

“You must have loved your boy very much,” Varys said, into the silence, and Kevan turned and glared at the other man.

“How dare you bring him up,” he gritted out, because Lancel might have run off with a bunch of fanatics, but the memory of him still stung, and Varys was hardly one of the people whom Kevan wished to have bring up the boy’s name at all, but Varys merely shrugged.

“It makes one wonder,” Varys continued, sounding equal parts amused and truly curious, and Kevan loathed him for it, “Exactly what you might do avenge him.”

Kevan swallowed. “I already told you, they’ll have my silence in exchange for Tyrion’s life.”

“And if Cersei finds Tyrion before the Tyrells do?” Varys asked, amused.

Kevan glowered at him. “Then I’ll have one more reason to hate my niece, I suppose. That ought to make you all happy. Now leave in peace, by the gods.”

“You’re here to depose me of my title as Hand of the King,” Kevan supposed, sitting in the middle of the room on the divan with a bottle of wine in his hands, pouring himself out a glass, and then two more, for the two of them, the moment Sansa and Baelish walked into the outer parlor of the Tower, a place which Sansa had once known well.

Very little about Lord Kevan reminded Sansa of her husband; this did, however, and she felt another small ache of guilt, especially considering what they were coming here to do.

These chambers didn’t look any different, under Lord Kevan’s stewardship. She found herself wondering if that was because he knew that he would not be holding onto it for much longer, the moment he had taken the position.

She grimaced, glancing sideways at Baelish.

Baelish crossed his arms over his chest. “Surely you understand why,” he said. “While the Crown sympathizes with what you have suffered at the hands of that madwoman, we can no longer trust you to…remain objective, about all of this.”

Kevan took another sip of his wine. “Because my niece is holding my children hostage,” he surmised.

He said it the way that one might comment on the weather.

Baelish nodded. “A misfortune, of course, but as I said…”

“You can’t trust me to remain objective,” Kevin continued for him, and Baelish, playing the penitent fool, Sansa thought, nodded gratefully.
She shifted on her feet, the tension in the room not leaving, with Kevan’s words.

She eyed him again, eyed the two glasses that he had poured for them, and rather wished that Baelish would sit so that she could as well, and have an excuse for taking a sip.

She had a feeling that she was about to need the fortification.

Kevan eyed them both a moment longer. “Exactly how long do you think that will work for you?” He asked them both, and Sansa felt her heart thump in her chest, because the way he’d said that, it sounded very much as if he…

Dear gods, he knew.

She could see it in his eyes, now.

And suddenly, things made a bit more sense. The passive way that he seemed to accept the Tyrells taking more and more control of the Crown, the way that he didn’t object when their words became increasingly more scornful of the Westerlands.

Because he had the best chip in this game, by far, just by knowing and being able to hold it against them, for a rainy day.

Fuck.

A day just like today.

Baelish seemed to read the answer on him, as well, taking a seat at the divan Kevan had pointed out earlier, and Sansa, after a moment’s hesitation, followed suit.

She glanced at Petyr, desperation swirling inside of her.

He seemed to see just what she did, however, if the way he moved forward, taking a half step protectively in front of her, as if he were shielding her from Kevan.

“I’m afraid we don’t know what you mean,” He said, and though his voice was calm, there was a certain level of danger in it.

Kevan glanced between the two of them, and then snorted. “Oh?” He asked. “Funny; I was speaking about the way you covered up the murder of my nephew, the King, but if there’s something else that you’ve done recently…”

Sansa sucked in a breath, and then closed her eyes, biting back a curse.

For all she knew, he’d just been bluffing, and now, he damn well knew the truth.

Baelish reached out, placing a hand on her wrist. “That’s a serious accusation for someone who is only just bringing it to us now…” he said, slowly.

Kevan lifted his head. “Do you want to know why I didn’t say anything earlier? Because the other option here is to let my niece become the Regent for the Seven Kingdoms, whether for her own son or Margaery Tyrell’s,” he said, and Sansa bit back another sigh.

“And my niece is many things, but competent is not one of them.”

If the situation weren’t so horrifying, Sansa might have laughed, at the words. At the simple way that Kevan Lannister admitted them.
Because dear gods, this was impossible. Kevan Lannister knew that they had covered up the truth about Joffrey’s death, and he…wasn’t doing anything, because he thought that Margaery would make a better regent than Cersei.

Baelish hummed. “The Regency would be open to yourself, as well, if you reached out and took it,” he pointed out. “I find it difficult to believe that a Lannister would sit back and let a girl take it over, in that case.”

Kevan grimaced. “My brother was one of the most powerful people to ever live in the Seven Kingdoms,” he said, and Baelish let out a quiet snort, “And it was because he could see the bigger picture. That is something that Cersei has always lacked, as she’s proven, with this most recent fiasco.” His eyes darkened. “I would like to avoid a war as much as you do.”

Baelish raised an eyebrow. “I find that even more difficult to believe.”

“How’d you find out?” Sansa interrupted, and flushed a little when the two men turned to look at her. It was all but an admission, after all, but she thought they were rather past that, by now.

Kevan eyed her. “Do you do it because you hate the Lannisters so much?” He asked her. “Otherwise, I can’t imagine why you’ve moved so far up in the world, lately.”

Sansa forced a smile. Now that the truth was out, she didn’t see the reason to pretend to remain civil. She reached out, taking a sip of the wine Kevan had offered, earlier.

He smirked.

Sansa reached up, brushing a hand through her hair. “After you left the Small Council meeting the other day, I was the only who suggested that declaring immediate war on your niece and her son wasn’t a wonderful idea. I am the reason Cersei is being invited to her own son’s funeral at all.”

This time, Kevan leaned forward, jabbing a finger at her. “And that is why I said nothing, about what I saw. But I did not remain on your Small Council, at great risk to my own family, to follow an incompetent girl who seems more interested in spilling her secrets to peasant septas and running these kingdoms into the ground as badly as my niece would have done, than ruling.”

Baelish grimaced, eying Sansa. “We’re dealing with that,” he promised, and Kevan snorted.

“That’s not what I’ve seen,” he said, still looking at Sansa.

Sansa set down the glass of wine and crossed her arms over her chest.

Baelish cleared his throat. “And if we can…guarantee that the Regent will be…brought under control, in a way that will satisfy House Tyrell and House Lannister?”

Kevan raised an eyebrow. “Instead of just killing me?”

“I think there’s been rather enough deaths, of late,” Baelish said, calmly, and Sansa felt like she was watching some sort of game, looking between the two of them.

It wasn’t necessarily the promises that they were making, lies that she knew neither of them would plan to uphold, the moment the conversation was over.

No, what was fascinating to her was the absolute look of shock that had crossed Baelish’s features, the moment Kevan insinuated that they had covered up the death of the King, until he buried it deep.
It was one of the only times that Sansa had ever seen the man flinch, and she was determined to study every moment of it.

Even if the impending doom of knowing that a Lannister somehow fucking knew about what they had done, when they had thought they’d almost gotten away with it, was still bubbling up inside of her.

Gods, she wished it was acceptable to down the rest of that glass of wine, and then finish off Kevan’s and the one he had poured for Baelish.

Because…fuck.

It was impossible. There had been no one around that night, and yes, there were some flaws to the things they had done since that night to keep Joffrey’s death covered up, but Sansa had thought that they were doing a pretty good job of it.

After all, that was the whole reason she had gone to Petyr Fucking Baelish in the first place. The reason she had entrusted him with information it had felt like she was killing Margaery to admit, the reason she had agreed to-

“I want more than just your promise that a war will not happen, if I agree to help you keep this from Cersei, now,” Kevan said. “My niece is insane and would drive these kingdoms into the ground if she were the Regent, but my brother always saw the Tyrells as grasping opportunists, and given where we are, I’d say he was right.”

Sansa snorted despite herself. She wondered if it was because of the hysteria curdling her stomach. “The Tyrells fought alongside the Mad King, during the war. The Lannisters didn’t even choose a side until you knew Cersei would be able to marry Robert.”

Kevan eyed her. “I find that rather ironic coming from-”

“You’re children will be protected, if the Tyrells manage to subdue Cersei,” Baelish interrupted, coolly. “Tyrion will not face…retribution, from House Tyrell, assuming that he is ever found. And you will remain as the Hand of the King, ensuring that House Lannister…remains at the top, something more than generous, I’m sure the Queen would agree.” He eyed Sansa. “And, we will see to it that the septa is gone from the Keep, within the week.”

Kevan took a sip of his wine. “Then we have a deal,” he told them, and it was the only time that Kevan Lannister had reminded Sansa of his brother.

She swallowed, and wondered how long she’d been underestimating Lord Kevan.

They walked out into the hallway, and Sansa opened her mouth, only for Baelish to give her a long look and motion for her to walk ahead of him.

She didn’t like the thought of him walking along behind her; it made her feel uneasy, but she didn’t allow herself to turn around and look at him, as they walked back to her chambers in the Maidenvault.

“How the fuck did he find out?” Sansa snapped, the moment they were alone in her rooms once more.

Baelish gritted his teeth as she threw her hands up in the air.

“I’ll handle it,” Baelish promised her. “You won’t have to worry about him for much longer.”
Sansa scoffed, reaching up and running a hand through her hair. “Oh, sure,” she muttered. “Everything will just be fine if I trust you. That’s what you’ve been saying all of this time, isn’t it?”

Baelish pulled back from her, looking perturbed at the accusation, and Sansa scoffed again, relishing in this simple chance to tell him how she really felt about their…relationship without looking like she was reneging on their deal for doing so.

“You told me that when the King died, and somehow, half of King’s Landing knows about it!” She hissed at him, and Baelish sighed, reaching forward and placing his hands on her shoulder.

“Breathe, Sansa,” he told her, and she wanted to spit at him, wanted to let him know exactly how she felt about him, that his comfort didn’t mean a damn thing to him, but she couldn’t.

Because then, the game would be up.

Angry and frightened as she felt, in this moment, she couldn’t afford to lose him, just yet.

“This is something, I confess, I didn’t foresee,” Baelish told her, gently, and Sansa blew out her breath slowly, swallowing hard, “But I promise you, I will make sure that Kevan Lannister does not become a threat.”

Sansa licked her lips, sniffing. “All right,” she said, pulling back from him. Then, again, “All right. Thank you.”

He bent down, kissing her forehead, and Sansa bit back a grimace.

“I will always protect you, Sansa,” he told her. “You know that.”

She swallowed hard.

She had to find Garlan, now.

But she took a deep breath. “I…” a grimace. “Do you think he was telling the truth?”

He was a Lannister, so she knew that at least part of it had to be a lie, because there was no way that he would so calmly accept the death of his nephew, even if it had been Joffrey.

“I could deal with him, of course. But this is better than I was expecting,” Baelish admitted. “Cersei was a fool to threaten his niece and nephew. But…” he closed his eyes, let out a breath slowly.

Sansa bit her lip, not liking the look on his face at all.

She pressed her lips together. ”How did he find out?”

Baelish glanced down at her. Grimaced. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “But I’m going to find out, and make sure that he didn’t happen to mention it to anyone else.”

Sansa reminded herself to breathe again.

“But he did raise a good point,” Baelish pointed out, rubbing a finger over his lower lip. “Something needs to be done about that septa.”

Sansa sighed. “I know.”

“We pray to the Mother, to grant us Mercy, and to the Father, to grant us Wisdom…” Septa Unella
said, her eyes closed, hands clasped together tightly in supplication, and Margaery cleared her throat when her ladies did not follow suit.

Alla and Alysanne exchanged glances, and then grimaced, doing as they were bid, and Margaery released a breath that she hadn’t even realized she’d been holding, closing her eyes once more.

They were meant to be kneeling on the floor, technically, but Margaery had only been able to do so for a few moments before her knees began to ache, the child within her crying out in supreme displeasure at being abused in such a way, and Margaery would have been amused at what a tyrant her unborn child turned out to be if she weren’t already terrified of that very possibility, and so they were sitting on the divans in her husband’s parlor, something the Septa clearly already disapproved of.

But Margaery was a slave, these days, to her child’s whims, and he was not even born yet. She couldn’t sit on the floor, nor could she sit for long periods of time before the child protested, nor could she stand for very long before exhaustion filled her.

Her ankles swelled up every night, and she was forced to ask Alla to rub them, outside of her husband’s chambers because she didn’t like bringing any of the girls in there.

Her breasts ached, all the time, regardless of whether she was lying down and staring at the giant bump in her stomach and wondering whether it would be the son she needed or not, and she had found herself, to the horror of all of her ladies, pouring salt into her water, the other day.

It had been the only thing she wanted to drink, besides wine, which the maesters told her she couldn’t have at all, now.

The morning sickness, thank the gods, had finally passed, but the maesters said it had been later than usual in a pregnant woman, and Margaery wanted everything about this pregnancy to be absolutely normal.

She was pinning her life on it, after all.

She was pinning a lot of lives on it, now that Cersei had crowned Tommen as King.

Margaery bit back a sigh; she knew that the septa would disapprove if she sounded the least bit bored, and the other woman would be able to tell if she was or not, after all of the…quality time the two of them had spent together, in the Sept.

Septa Unella’s calm words continued regardless of the little scene going on around her, and Margaery wondered if it was because she was blind to it, or because she was trying to set a good example.

It was impossible to tell, with that woman.

She had these sorts of…tests, Margaery supposed they could be called, to ensure that Margaery was actually on the path of the righteous. Margaery knew that she did not entirely believe in Margaery’s wish to change, no matter how much Margaery tried to convince her, after all.

And Margaery was doing just about everything that she could, to convince the other woman. She had even suggested that they all go to the Sept to pray, to remind the people that their Queen truly did follow the Seven, and it had surprised her when Septa Unella had been the one to refuse the idea, telling her that it was too dangerous and that, in special cases, the Faith did allow for prayer in the home, if it was done in the appropriate manner.
Margaery had given serious thought to having a sept built, within the Keep, for the Crown’s private use, but she thought that would look even worse, to the smallfolk.

She hadn’t shared the idea with Septa Unella because she wasn’t certain that the other woman would tell her not to do it.

Wasn’t certain that Septa Unella had her best interests at heart, as everyone, from Megga to Lady Nym, had tried to warn her.

Oh, she trusted her to some extent, to the extent that she believed what the other woman told her, but she had lived at court long enough to realize

“Margaery,” Megga said, staring, and Margaery hadn’t realized that her eyes were open again until that moment, when she found herself blinking up at Megga, where the other girl stood in the doorway.

Margaery felt suddenly naked under the other girl’s gaze, and she lowered her head, pretending that she didn’t notice the relieved looks of Alysanne and Alla, where they sat with heads bowed beside Margaery.

“Sit, Megga,” she said, though clenched teeth, “We’re in prayers, and it’s rude to interrupt.”

Beside her, Septa Unella grunted, clearly noting that Margaery was interrupting, as well, but Margaery ignored the woman.

Megga let out a long sigh, and took a seat with the other girls in Joffrey’s parlor, looking uncomfortable, and Margaery didn’t know if it was because of the venue or because of Septa Unella.

She had told Margaery that she recognized the septa, from her time with the fanatics when Tyrion had, for some inexplicable reason, sent her to become a Silent Sister, that she had been one of the most fanatical of all of them, and Margaery knew that Megga was…disappointed, to say the least, with Margaery’s lack of a reaction, but Margaery had already known that.

Had known that the moment this woman had walked into her cell, in the Sept, and not looked at all disturbed about the thought of preaching to the Queen, demanding a confession from her.

And she had brought Septa Unella back to the Keep, anyway.

She knew that she had not been…acting entirely herself, lately, but she wished that her ladies could just trust her about this one thing.

“We come before you to ask for your guidance,” the septa finished the prayer, “for the Queen Regent, as she prepares to bring what we pray will be her husband’s son into this world…”

Unfortunate phrasing, Margaery thought, struggling not to flinch because she had her eyes open and therefore didn’t know who didn’t, when she had brought the septa here so that she could atone for some her sins.

Now, she felt like she was lying to the gods, as well, and that hardly made her feel like she was atoning for anything that she had done, of late.

Margaery kept her eyes closed, though. Told herself that it didn’t matter; Septa Unella was not one of the Seven, after all, for all that she worshipped them so strongly, and it was not to the Sept that Margaery owed her confessions, if she decided that she owed them to anyone at all.
She still could not bring herself to even think the words again, since that one day in the Sept when she had gone and whispered her fevered prayers to the Mother, in blind hopes for forgiveness.

Had found them rattling around inside of her head ever since, taunting her, and a part of her did want to go back to the Sept despite everyone’s warnings to the contrary, in the blind hope that she might be able to give life to those words, there.

But she couldn’t bring herself to do that, either, because while she had been at the Sept, she had felt terribly selfish, kneeling there praying for her prayers to be met, for her child to be a son, on a floor that wasn’t still stained with the blood of those Joffrey had had slaughtered that day, only on account of it being on the other side of the Sept.

She was squeezing her hands together so tightly that they were starting to ache, and Margaery’s eyes opened just as Septa Unella was finishing the last heartfelt prayer.

It was the only reason she managed to force on a smile bright enough to fool the other woman, remembering that she had never smiled over prayers the other woman had uttered in the Sept, after all.

“Thank you, Septa Unella,” she said, softly. Then, to her ladies as they stood, “On that note, the septa and I have been discussing a great deal, and we feel that it would be…prudent, to make a few changes.”

The girls looked suddenly more green than they had when Margaery had suggested prayers.

She bit back a sigh, glancing at Septa Unella, who nodded for her to go on, for the first time looking almost…pleased.

“I have neglected, during my time as Regent, may my husband rest in peace, the smallfolk,” Margaery continued. “The septa and I think that it would be prudent to return out among them, and remind them that the Crown values them, and the Faith, despite my late husband’s actions.”

Her ladies exchanged rather nervous glances, and Margaery sighed.

“Adding to that,” she said, “Septa Unella has devised something of a…code, for all of the ladies serving me.”

Their heads jerked up, at those words.

“She believes that our true hears will seem more clear to the smallfolk if we are seen to act and live according to the tenants of the Faith,” Margaery continued, fully aware of how her ladies would feel about this as she continued, “And as such, she has much to discuss with you.” She folded her hands together. “So I shall leave you now.”

She didn’t miss the way her ladies glared after her, as she took her leave of them. She knew that Septa Unella was leading them out of her chambers, though, much to her relief, as she disappeared into her own bedchambers.

Well, almost all of them.

Margaery startled a little as she turned around and found herself staring at Megga, who had somehow managed so silently to find her way into Margaery’s bedchambers, as well.

“You’re giving her power over your ladies?” Megga asked, as the door shut behind her.
Margaery lifted her chin. “I am not,” she argued. “I’m just trying to find some common ground with the Faith.”

Megga scoffed. “The Faith which imprisoned and abused you? Is that the Faith you’re speaking of?”

Margaery bit the inside of her cheek. “If you’re just going to sit here and argue with me, Megga, I’ve heard enough,” she said, gesturing towards the door.

And she had. She didn’t know where she was going with this, entirely, didn’t know if she would even find the peace that she sought in the Faith, nor the peace that she sought with the smallfolk in Septa Unella, but she was determined to try, at the very least, for a little longer than this. And Megga’s constant doubts were annoying her; worse than that, eating away at her.

Megga crossed her arms over her chest, eying Margaery speculatively for several moments before she spoke again, and Margaery very much did not like that wary look.

“We can bring back Septa Nysterica, if you…” Megga pressed her lips together, clearly uncomfortable with the idea of what she was about to suggest, “Really feel that you…need it, just now.”

Margaery swallowed, rubbing at her arms. “I…”

Something about the idea just…didn’t appeal to her, even if she knew that it should have. Nysterica had been her friend, after all, and a septa, though she hadn’t been a very good one, Margaery would admit.

Had only been a septa in the first place because she was a second daughter, and not a very pretty one, according to her own father. She hadn’t cared overmuch for the rules that came along with being a septa, anymore than Margaery had for the rules of the Faith, at the time.

And, like her or not, Septa Unella did care, very much so.

“I don’t think that would help,” Margaery admitted, taking a step back from Megga.

Megga blinked at her. “Is this some sort of punishment?” She asked, and Margaery flinched a little. “Bringing her here, into your life. A punishment for yourself?”

Margaery licked her lips; they felt suddenly dry. “Megga, please,” she said. “I just want to be alone, now. And why is it so hard for you to understand that I might find solace, in the Faith, now, after everything that’s happened?”

Megga’s eyes slid over to the bed, and Margaery felt distinctly uncomfortable at the pity in those eyes, when they finally returned to Margaery again.

“All right,” she said, finally, and Margaery’s head jerked up. “I don’t understand it, really, but I’ll stop fighting you on it, if it means so much to you. Because you’re my friend, and it hurts, seeing you like this all of the time. So if you think there really is a chance that this will help…”

Margaery swallowed hard, biting back a smile. “Thank you,” she said, knowing full well that the other girls followed Megga’s lead now, without Elinor around to be the one to lead them.

Megga lifted her chin. “But this septa can go fuck herself if she thinks I’m going to stop stringing along my lovers, around here,” she said, and Margery let out a startled laugh at the words, even as she struggled not to point out that she didn’t think Megga had had any lovers, since…
Since Cersei had thrown her in the Black Cells.

Megga had emerged differently, from there, but perhaps there was still enough of the old Megga left to surprise even Margaery.

“As long as you’re discreet about it,” she said, and Megga snorted, before turning and shutting the door behind her.

Margaery took a deep breath, secretly relieved and a little surprised that it had been that easy to get Megga to stop hounding her about this, and moved over to the bed, laying herself down on it.

It still felt strange, laying in this bed, after what had happened here, and yet, the bed was much more comfortable than Cersei’s had ever been. Nor than the one she had slept in, in the Maidenvault, Margaery mused, laying back and closing her eyes.

She hated it.

Hated how comfortable the bed was, hated how comfortable she felt, lying in it, hated that the nightmares she had in this bed were more comforting to her than the ones she had in Cersei’s.

She wondered when the prayers would make some of those nightmares recede, or if that was not the point of the Faith, at all.

If she would just come to terms with what she had done, but the nightmares would never leave her.

The thought was a strangely unbearable one.

Her child kicked against her stomach, letting her know that he didn’t appreciate the way that she was lying, even if she had taken great care to get comfortable, and Margaery groaned.

She opened her eyes, beginning to shift, and then froze, at the sight of a shadow in the corner of the room.

Her breath left her in a quiet gasp, and she reached up above her head for the golden statue that she had once seen there, that she had once used to bash Joffrey’s brains in, only to remember that it wasn’t there, because it would look rather suspicious, for the thing to remain there, covered in her husband’s blood.

No, not again. She wasn’t going to suffer another attack in this bed, Margaery thought, shivering a little.

She gulped.

And then the man in the shadows stepped into the light, hands up in the air, placating, and Margaery recognized him.

Olyvar.

Margaery stared.

“We need to talk,” he said, and Margaery felt her stomach drop out, underneath her, which was quite a feat indeed, considering how heavy her child felt, most days.

The letter, written in simple scrawl embossed on a large, thorny rose, read simply:
Get your House in order.

Sansa closed her eyes, folding up the letter again and tucking it into one of the pockets of her gown, fully intent on burning it the moment she got the chance, later.

“Has the Queen seen this?” She asked numbly, because really, that was the only thing she could ask, at this point.

There was no doubt about who had sent the letter, after all, and that the letter was, annoyingly, right.

She glanced towards the door to her bedchambers, where Megga stood in the doorway, lips pressed together, leaning against it.

The other girl looked a bit pale, but she had remained strong when Sansa had asked her where the letter had come from, who had brought it into King’s Landing, refusing to tell her.

Not that it mattered; Sansa knew the letter was from Elinor. There was no one else it could be from, after all.

Mace liked the power he had at court too much, these days, to sacrifice it by openly standing beside the mother his daughter had banished from court, and even if he hadn’t, he would not have brought this letter to Sansa. Perhaps to Garlan, and then to Margaery, but not Sansa.

She didn’t think he even knew how far she had moved up in the world, since Joffrey’s death, beyond that Margaery had placed her on the Small Council because the two of them were friends.

And Garlan would have told Sansa before Megga had, if he had been the one to get this letter first.

It was irritating, because right now, she should be dealing with Garlan, should be telling him about Kevan, and instead, she was stuck here, dealing with a letter that Olenna was still using to mess with her life, even from as far away as the Reach.

So, it had to be Elinor, and Sansa found herself once again annoyed by the other girl’s meddling. By the fanatical way that she had stitched herself to Olenna’s side, even when they had given her the chance to change her mind, about that.

But Sansa was still glad that Megga had brought it to her, rather than Margaery, so she didn’t call the other girl out on her silence.

Megga eyed her. “No,” she said, and didn’t elaborate. Sansa squinted at her. Megga shrugged. “I don’t know that I trust her not to do something colossally stupid, if she knows her dear Grandmama is angry with her. Again.”

Sansa bit the inside of her cheek until she tasted blood, annoyed. Because she knew that the other girl was right; if this did make it into Margaery’s hands, it would only give Sansa even more cause to worry.

But she didn’t like the thought that she herself wasn’t the only one worried about Margaery doing something foolish, these days. It was hardly reassuring.

And then Sansa found herself wondering, as she read over the simple message again, whether Olenna had intended this letter be delivered to Margaery at all.

She wasn’t privy to everything going on in King’s Landing; that was the trouble, with not being here herself, but she had to know that Margaery was not handling things well, to send this letter, and if
she knew that, then perhaps she knew who was trying to handle Margaery, these days.

It said ‘get your house in order,’ and she and Margaery were of the same House, but if she had meant for this letter to reach Sansa, then that meant that she knew far more than she should, about Margaery’s current state of mind, to think that it ever would.

Sansa gave it only a moment’s thought more, and was rather certain that she knew why.

Megga sighed. “She’s my dear friend,” she elaborated, “but I’m worried about her. I’m worried about this septa who’s convinced her that the only way she can repent for the things she’s done is to eventually confess her sins, who’s got us ladies wearing gowns that cover us up to the neck and not even letting boys kiss our hands, with Margaery’s approval.”

Sansa sniffed.

She was worried about Margaery, too.

“But I was worried about her before that,” Megga admitted.

Sansa knew she was. Megga had been all but spying on Margaery for Sansa, these past few months, for which she was rather grateful, knowing that it was only due to Megga’s worry for Margaery and not something more sinister.

If she hadn’t had Megga so closely in her corner, these past few months, she might not have been able to handle Margaery at all, these days, with the way that the other girl seemed to avoid her like the plague.

And things had gotten a little better, recently, but there was still a good deal of improvement that could stand to be made, Sansa reflected. There was still a good deal she wouldn't know about the way that Margaery was feeling, was reacting to everything going on around her, if it weren’t for Megga.

She reached up, brushing the hair out of her eyes. “Fine,” she agreed, trying not to react to the way that Megga’s face fell, a bit, with her lack of a response. “Make sure that she doesn’t find out about it from anyone else. I think you’re right about that. And Megga?”

Megga waited.

“This…Septa she has with her now…” Sansa bit her lower lip, not quite sure how she wanted to phrase this.

Megga had been the one to reach out to her, after all; Sansa wanted the other girl to know that she appreciated it, that she was glad that Megga had thought to come to her, instead of continuing to try to talk to Margaery, even if it was disheartening to know that someone else no longer trusted Margaery’s ability to make decisions. She certainly didn’t want Megga to change her mind about seeing Sansa as an ally.

But she supposed, in a way, she had already answered her own question.

Megga pursed her lips. “Septa Unella was…one of the strongest of the Sparrow’s fanatics, Sansa,” she warned the other girl. “She stayed by his body, night and day, after it was thought that he…after he…”

She paused, clearly uncertain how to put the man’s seemingly impossible resurrection into words.
Sansa could sympathize.

Megga cleared her throat. “I wouldn’t trust her at all.”

Sansa nodded. “I need you to find out everything you can about her,” she informed the other woman. “Where she came from, before she started serving the High Sparrow, who her family is, why she’s so…bent on getting Margaery to confess, without her noticing. Yes? We are…not the only ones, concerned about her sudden influence over Margaery.”

Megga hesitated, and then nodded.

Sansa licked her lips. “All right,” she said, slowly. “All right.” She reached up, pressing the heel of her hand to her forehead. “And if Margaery…if we got her away from the septa’s influence, how do you think she would react?”

Megga blinked at her. “You mean kill her?” She asked, and her eyes had darkened a little.

Sansa grimaced. She didn’t want to kill the other woman, of course, knew that Margaery wouldn’t forgive her for it, but she knew that if Margaery did end up confessing, to the other woman, then she would only use it to her own advantage, just as she had used the fanatics to her own advantage, to move up in the world.

No doubt, she’d enjoyed trying to convince a queen to confess, just as she was trying to do, now.

Sansa pressed her lips together.

She knew that was to be avoided at all costs, of course.

Ser Meryn was the last person that she wanted to be responsible for killing, Sansa thought.

“No,” she said, finally. “Just…keep an eye on her, let me know what you find?”

Megga eyed her, and then smiled. “All right,” she said, and Sansa walked to the door, stepped around her to get to it, then. Megga blinked. “Where are you going?”

Sansa didn’t meet her eyes. “There’s someone I need to talk to.”

“Elinor,” Sansa said, stepping into the other woman’s chambers.

Elinor glanced up sharply, and her eyes widened, at the sight of Sansa, standing there before her.

Sansa could well imagine why. After all, they had not exactly parted on the best of terms, the last time they had spoken, and when they had done so, it had seemed rather…final.

But it unsettled her, seeing Elinor looking at her like that, even with all that they had been through. It made her feel like the one in the wrong, here, and she didn’t like that anymore, either.

Elinor cleared her throat, getting to her feet from where she had sat on the divan, reading some sort of book that looked rather…colorful.

“Do you…” she eyed Sansa, clearly trying to figure out what Sansa was doing here. “Do you want to sit down?”

Sansa licked her lips, taking a seat on the couch across from her. “Uhm, thanks,” she said, and Elinor nodded, not meeting her eyes as she sat down again, as well.
“How are you…” Sansa began, “after the child?”

Elinor let out a little laugh, leaning back in her chair. “It’s…I thought I’d be a little more comfortable in my body, after the baby was born, but it doesn’t quite feel like I’m there yet, I have to say.”

Sansa grimaced. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Elinor shrugged. “The maesters say it’s normal,” she said, never one to complain, and Sansa bit the inside of her cheek, because she hated that about Elinor.

Hated how she never fought back, hated how calm and accepting she was, about the things that Olenna had done to punish her, about the things that Sansa had done to punish her, first for sleeping with Margaery, and then for the boy.

“Why didn’t you leave, after the King died?” Sansa asked, harshly, into the silence that followed, and Elinor’s eyes shot up.

She knew she should be asking about the letter, knew that, in part, was the answer for the fact that she was still here at all, but it annoyed her, all the same.

“We were hardly welcoming to you, at the time, and you and your husband could have made pretty happy lives for yourselves, back in Highgarden, as opposed to here.”

Sansa did not point out that she herself had been instrumental in the fact that Elinor’s life here had been less than ideal. She wouldn’t deny it, if Elinor pointed it out, but the other woman had had ample opportunities to go back to Highgarden, and she’d stayed here.

And Sansa had punished her for it, because Elinor had almost been the reason that Sansa had killed a young boy, a boy who had just wanted to escape an abusive master, and she hadn’t even bothered to tell Sansa that she would be doing it.

She had just…run off to a husband whom she had claimed had been sick, but who had seemed fine, the next morning, when he came to the throne room to hear Margaery announce that her own husband was dead.

And Sansa…could not forgive her for that, even if the boy had ended up dead, either way.

So really, there was only one reason that Elinor would have remained, after Sansa had all but cut her off from her former friends, and given her chambers at the other end of the Keep, where very few would venture to go on their own.

Elinor lifted her chin, meeting Sansa’s eyes. “Why didn’t you?”

Sansa stared at her. “W-what?” She asked, flustered by the question.

Elinor pressed her lips together, and then asked it again. “You’ve only been in King’s Landing this long because you were a prisoner of the Lannisters, Sansa, not because you liked it here,” she reminded her, as if Sansa needed any reminder of that, she thought, annoyance filling her at the other girl’s condescending tone. “The moment Joffrey was dead, there were no Lannisters to keep you here. Do you fear Kevan Lannister so much? You could have left, and no one would have stopped you. So why didn’t you?”

Sansa stared at her.

She could have left, after Joffrey’s death, but she hadn’t.
And the simple truth to Elinor’s question was that she hadn’t even thought about leaving, after Joffrey had died. The only thing she had been capable of thinking of was helping Margaery cover up what had happened.

And since then, that seemed like all that Sansa had been doing. Covering up what had happened that night, no matter how convoluted the lie seemed to become, the more time passed.

And she had never once thought about the fact that she could probably walk out of those doors and go home, if she so wanted.

Because…she hadn’t wanted to.

She wondered whether that said more about her, or Elinor, that Elinor would compare her own situation to Sansa’s in such a way.

Sansa lifted an eyebrow. “And, what, you’re saying that you remained here because you do feel like a prisoner?” She asked, not bothering to answer the other girl’s question, because she didn’t think that it deserved an answer, really.

Elinor licked her lips, looking away.

“Are you still in contact with Olenna?” Sansa asked, quietly, because she had to know, once and for all.

Sansa had thought she knew the answer to that; she had Rosamund scouring every letter that Elinor sent out of this place, and she hadn’t seen a single one addressed to Olenna, since that fateful day.

So either Rosamund was lying to her, for what purpose, after the Tyrells had betrayed her, and specifically Olenna had done so, Sansa couldn’t say, or…

Or someone was helping Elinor smuggle letters out of the city, a thought which made Sansa’s heart beat faster.

She did not think of Olenna as an enemy, of course. On the contrary, the other woman had been so helpful, in everything that she had done before Margaery had sent her away for keeping secrets from her, and Sansa regretted the distance that had followed.

But she didn’t know where Olenna stood, anymore, and she had far too many “allies” around her, whose truly loyalties she didn’t know with absolute certainty.

Kevan Lannister was just another example of that.

Elinor lifted her chin. “You know I’m not going to answer that, Sansa,” she said, coolly, which was answer enough, Sansa thought, “Just like you know that, no matter how angry you might be with me, Margaery is never going to send me back to Highgarden like she did her grandmother. She feels that she’s lost far too many people, lately, to lose another friend, and she isn’t angry with me, as you are.”

Sansa hummed. “She would be, if I told her why I was angry with you,” she whispered, and Elinor harrumphed.

“Would she?” She asked. “I didn’t notice that boy walking around serving anyone else, after Joffrey died.”

Sansa flinched, and Elinor let out a scoff.
“Oh, so you’re angry with me for nearly killing him, when he died anyway?”

Sansa closed her eyes, letting out a deep breath. When she opened her eyes again, they were hard. “You didn’t nearly kill him, Elinor,” she gritted out. “You lied to me about it, lied to him about it, not to mention Margaery, so that we would go along with Olenna’s plan, and then, at the last moment, you told me you couldn’t do it, and were content to let me go forward with that child’s blood on my hands, unknowingly!”

Elinor flinched. Her mouth opened and closed. “I…”

“Is that what you want to talk about?” Sansa asked. “Come on. Why’d you do it, if you didn’t feel guilty?”

Elinor pressed her lips together.

The sound of a child’s cry, in the room over, interrupted them.

Sansa grimaced, reaching up to rub at her temples. “I know you’re still here for Olenna,” she said, quietly.

Elinor glowered at her, getting up and walking out of the room. Sansa bit back a sigh, wondering if she had just been dismissed, but moments later, Elinor returned, the child in her arms.

Sansa swallowed. She’d heard from Megga that Elinor had named the child after Willas.

“Yes,” Elinor said, into the silence, as she gently shushed the child in her arms. “Because she told me not to come back if I wasn’t going to make myself useful. And I have a husband and a child to take care of, now.”

Sansa sighed. She understood that, understood the pull that Olenna had over those it felt like she could control, those who she helped but demanded much of, at the same time.

“What does she want you to do, here?” She asked.

Elinor gave her a startled look, and Sansa lifted a hand.

“I need to know. I’m trying to protect Margaery here, and I need to be able to do that,” she muttered. “Please.”

Willas let out a little cry, and Elinor hushed him again, rocking him back and forth.

“She wants a lot of things,” Elinor muttered, sounding slightly bitter. “But mostly, she wants Margaery to get married again. To strengthen their hold on the throne. And she’s not going to stop pushing until she gets what she wants.”

Margaery gritted her teeth, reaching out to grab Olyvar by his collar and drag him up against the wall of her bedchambers, reflecting that this would hardly help, if anyone ever found out the truth about the two of them, about what they had done.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” She demanded, the moment the door slammed behind the two of them, and she shoved him away from herself.

Olyvar looked rather the worse for wear, she noticed, since she had last seen him, as he reached up and rearranged his collar, sweeping a hand through his already messy hair. She had not been responsible for that, but she was still going to make him take the servants’ exit, out of here.
He was pale, in a way that he had never been before, because he was, after all, a rather sought out whore, she had learned, and thinner than she remembered, thinner than she thought...the lords of King’s Landing could possibly find appealing, if they went in for that sort of thing.

There were dark circles under his eyes, as well. So dark they looked like bruises.

That should have been her first clue.

“I told you, Olyvar, you will get everything that you told me you wanted, if you just give me a little more time,” Margaery said, trying to quell the rising panic within her, suddenly wishing that she and Sansa had been spending more time together lately, so that it would have been more likely that the other girl would be here, when Olyvar ambushed her like this.

He lifted his chin. “You promised me a great deal, Your Grace, and you’ve yet to deliver. I’ve had to spend the last few months walking around Baelish, praying that he didn’t know something more than I thought, and now, I have to wonder why he doesn’t act to be rid of me,” he said, and Margaery thought she might be sweating, but wasn’t certain.

She reached out, placing a hand on her stomach. “Because I still need Baelish.”

“And that’s what concerns me,” he interrupted her, and Margaery stared at him, annoyed by his impudence.

She was fully aware of the risk that he had taken, in sleeping with her, and while she also knew that he had no interest in women, she had also offered him something that few whores got the chance to say; that they had slept with a queen.

And, more than that, she’d offered him a great deal to keep his mouth shut about it.

And here he was, acting as if she had slighted him, in some way. As if she hadn’t given him a piece of paper that proved everything she had promised him, everything they had done together, in case he wanted to use it for insurance against her, something that she would never have offered anyone else.

But her stupid brother had loved this boy, and so she had.

And here he was, questioning her over it.

He sighed, reaching up to run a hand over his face, half turning away from her, and the annoyance bled away to be replaced by...

By an unsettling feeling, spreading over Margaery, making her feel that the child within her was pushing up against her stomach, forcing its contents up her throat, because Olyvar looked far too distressed to be upset that he had yet to get his trinkets and his title.

“He knows,” Olyvar said, finally, and Margaery forgot how to breathe, for several long, horrifying moments.

And then she slapped him.

He didn’t move, let her hit him without protest, his head swinging back in a way that was supremely unsatisfying, Margaery thought, as she took a step back from him, reaching up to clutch at her throat, because dear gods, she still couldn’t breathe-

“Your Grace?” He sounded worried now, and Margaery closed her eyes and waved him off, because this was everything that she had hoped to avoid, if she had a prayer of avoiding one thing-
Queens who killed their husbands, historically, didn’t last long, but queens who passed their sons off as their husband’s and then got caught lasted even shorter amounts of time, and Margaery knew that if He knew, they were fucked.

She, Olyvar, Sa…

“You told him?” She demanded, and she hated the tears pricking at her eyes, told herself they were just the emotions that came along with bearing a child. “How…how could you do that?”

The child within her was kicking on her bladder, now, and Margaery began to pace, feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

She knew that Baelish had some sort of…some sort of inhuman control over his whores, but this… She had thought tat at the very least, Olyvar’s self-preservation would win out over whatever fear he had of Baelish, because he had to know, he had to, that Baelish did not have their best interests at heart.

He didn’t have anyone’s best interests at heart.

The only reason she wasn’t currently dead for treason was because she’d agreed to hand Sansa over to him, like some piece of meat-

“Of course not,” Olyvar snapped, looking angry now, himself.

But Margaery didn’t quite care, because…Margaery was furious.

“How long has he known?” She said, spinning back to face him again, and Olyvar flinched. Her eyes narrowed. “How long?”

“How long has it been since you wrote me that agreement?” Olyvar asked her, and Margaery stared at him.

The agreement that they had made, when she had first summoned him to her and he had agreed to have her child. The agreement that she’d written down, like a damned fool, and then handed over to him for safekeeping, knowing full well the danger that courted, because she needed to gain his trust, and soon, because otherwise she might as well have never returned to King’s Landing, and-

“W-What?” She breathed, and let out a breathy laugh of relief, the child sitting so hard on her bladder no longer feeling quite so unbearable, now. “Is that all?”

He stared at her.

But Margaery had to be sure, because the panic she’d felt moments ago, there was no easily getting over it. “He didn’t approach you about it? You didn’t tell him, yourself?”

Olyvar stared at her. Then, he shifted on his feet. “You…What does the letter actually say?” he asked, finally.

Dear gods.

Dear gods, she’d been terrified, for a moment there, that Baelish had somehow forced the information out of Olyvar, that he’d gotten to the bottom of it and had known, all of this time, while she’d been fucking herself by giving him more and more power, in King’s Landing-

Margaery lifted her chin, not feeling a shred of guilt after the way he had just scared her.
“It thanks you for services to the Queen, in that you warned me ahead of time of the dangers of traveling on board that ship to Dorne, and I, fully knowing the risks, paid you for it and went ahead anyway. My brother and I were…” her voice choked up. “Confident that we could escape, and pay off the rest of the crew, if we knew ahead of time, so that the boat never…blew up.”

He stared at her as if he were looking at some new, horrible being. Something worse than Baelish.

She crossed her arms over her chest, not much liking the comparison.

Yes, it had been rather a cruel thing to do, but Margaery would have done it again in a heartbeat. Her brother had trusted this man, and it had gotten him killed. She wasn’t fool enough to make the same mistake, not totally, not when Baelish financed Olyvar’s home and had every motivation to see her ruined.

Olyvar pressed his lips together. “How could you…How could even write that?” He asked her. “What if Baelish ever did ask you about it? You’d be admitting that you let…that…”

Margaery shrugged her shoulders, weakly. “It was a risk I had to take,” she said. “I didn’t know how many words you might be able to parse out on your own, after all, besides the names. And if anyone ever did find it, they could hardly accuse me of doing the wrong thing, could they? My brother and I were determined to go to our family, thought we could survive the encounter, and didn’t want to turn a son against his own mother. In the end, Joffrey’s falling out with his mother had nothing to do with me.” She leaned forward, then. “And of the two of us, I was not at fault for what happened to my brother.”

Olyvar flinched. “I…I…”

She lifted her nose. “Besides, you still get everything I promised you, in the note,” she said. “The Tyrells are famous for their generosity, so how could I not reward you? The only question is why you haven’t received your reward yet, which I’m sure Baelish is wondering just now. But I’m sure that can be explained away by the fact that my brother still…”

She couldn’t quite finish the thought, as relieved as she currently felt.

It was cruel, what she had decided to write down, both to Olyvar and to herself, but she’d not had other ideas, at the time, and she’d been looking at Olyvar, as she wrote it.

Had been looking at him, and thinking about her brother, who might have been alive if he knew how to strike better deals with a whore.

And she didn’t blame Olyvar for that, not really; she was smart enough to know at whose feet to lay that blame, but it had made her feel cautious, all the same.

Well, as cautious as a woman fucking a whore so that she could pass his child off as her husband’s could really be.

He stared at her, dully. “And what if I’d gone to someone who could actually read, and asked them what it said?”

Margaery smiled at him, sadly. “You have just as much skin in this game as I do,” she told him. “You would never have done that. You needed it to be real as much as I did, for a little bit. We couldn’t afford to lie to each other, so you didn’t question me.”

For what it was worth, she regretted that. Regretted that he was involved in this, regretted that she had needed a man to put a child in her that she could easily pass off as her husband’s, but it was
done, now.

She had her child, and soon enough, he would have his riches and titles.

He just needed to be patient for a little while longer.

Until Baelish was dealt with.

And then, she rather hoped he enjoyed taking on at least some of Baelish’s responsibilities, alongside the riches that came with them.

He swallowed, still looking annoyed, which she supposed she couldn’t blame him for. Quite frankly, she was surprised that he had bothered to come and warn her at all, before he skipped town while he still had the chance.

She had heard what Baelish had done to the last whore who’d betrayed him out of this one’s lips, after all. She wouldn’t have even wanted to blame him for it, though doubtless, she still would have.

“And I suppose you’re rather pleased with yourself,” he muttered.

She shook her head, licking her lips. “A moment ago, I was planning how to escape King’s Landing by nightfall with my…With Sansa,” she said. “Because I shudder to think what Baelish would do with this information, especially with his interest in her.”

Olyvar shook his head, and then bit back a smile that didn’t look at all amused. “So you just…let me carry that letter around with me all these months, terrified that he was going to find it, especially after you turned to him for help in killing the King?”

She glared at him, and he subsided.

“I knew that you’d do a good job of hiding it,” she told him, coldly. “And I knew that Baelish had to suspect…something, with the number of times that you came to see me.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you still angry with me? I won’t write you another letter, but I could make you a page boy to some wealthy lord, if that will make you feel better. There are quite a few of them now, in King’s Landing.”

He lifted his chin. “And I still get…everything you offered me?”

Margaery smiled. “Eventually,” she promised. “And more, if I can make it happen. But you have to be patient.”

He licked his lips. “I want to be your brother’s pageboy,” he said, and Margaery scoffed. “He’s practically Lord Commander, now, even though he’s not in the Kingsguard, since Jaime Lannister hasn’t bothered to come back and no one in the Kingsguard will challenge your family on anything, anymore, because they’re all Roses.”

Margaery pressed her lips together. “I’m not making you my brother’s pageboy,” she told him, coldly. “It would…dredge up some unpleasant memories for me, and I doubt my brother would go along with it without an explanation.”

An explanation that she wasn’t going to give him, by the gods, because that would be a…disturbing conversation.

Olyvar stared at her. “Is that all you think of me as, Your Grace?” He asked her, and Margaery started. “The upstart whore who just looks out for himself?”
She bit the inside of her cheek, subsiding.

No.

No, it wasn’t all she thought of him. She’d actually been rather impressed that he had managed to capture her brother’s heart, even if it was some sort of game, after Renly, because her brother had been a mess after her first husband had died, and when he was with Olyvar, he was a little bit less of one, even if Olyvar hadn’t loved him in quite the same way.

She’d been more impressed when Olyvar told her that he would give her the child that she wanted, because of whatever guilt he felt over what had happened to Loras. That…that had meant something, to her.

It was the reason she had promised him as much as she had, after all.

Olyvar swallowed. “I want to be your brother’s pageboy because I hear things, in my job,” he said. “I hear that Garlan Tyrell is more powerful than your father now, behind the scenes. Not just as the Lord Commander that he hasn’t quite been named yet, but because he’s taken on quite a few duties that Lord Baelish hasn’t. And…” his eyes were shadowed, suddenly; Margaery didn’t let herself look away, wanting to remember this moment, later.

She’d made plenty of terrible judgments, lately, and she wanted to be sure, when Sansa or Garlan questioned her about it, that this wasn’t one of them.

“If I’m pageboy to your brother, there’s nothing strange about me being near the King, when he’s born,” Olyvar said finally, the words all coming out in a whoosh of air; Margaery was quite certain that he didn’t drag a breath, while he said them.

She stared at him, some of the shock she’d felt earlier returning, with those words. “I…No,” she said, and Olyvar let the air out all at once, looking distraught that she hadn’t even given it much thought.

She sighed. “Jaime Lannister was closer to the Queen Mother than any man ever was, including her own husband, most nights,” she said tiredly, reaching up to brush the hair out of her eyes. “That was why most of the Seven Kingdoms weren’t surprised when Stannis declared that her children belonged to him. I’m not going to make the same mistake.”

Olyvar’s face twisted. “It’s hardly the same mistake,” he told her. “I wouldn’t even have much reason to be near you, but I’d be…” he swallowed, words choking off for a moment, and Margaery blinked at him. “I’d be near my son, and that would be enough for me. You could keep all the finery, all those titles you promised me, so long as I got to be away from Baelish and near my son.”

She blinked.

Margaery wondered, with those words, what sort of life he’d led, to actually make that offer.

Most of the smallfolk would have gladly signed away whatever they had to, to move up in the world, to get out of the shit-filled streets and Baelish’s brothels, in particular.

Olyvar had wanted that, originally.

And now, he just wanted what amounted to a somewhat comfortable life, serving a man who would be going to war, eventually, and perhaps even sooner than that, on the off chance that it meant he would be able to look at his son grow up from across the room.

She closed her eyes.
The old Margaery, the one who had married Joffrey, the one who had hated this boy for his role in her brother’s death…would have still said no, she knew that. Hells, the very old Margaery, the one who had first gotten her into this mess, would have killed him after she got pregnant.

But…she had gone to that sept, truly, to find some sort of peace, some sort of absolution for all of the wicked things that she had done there, and even if she had left the sept with the clear impression that manipulating Septa Unella might have some use in bringing the smallfolk back under the fold of the Crown as much as she might find some peace in the Faith, she had meant it, going there.

And perhaps this? Was just the real part of her penance, the part that wasn’t scraping her knees with prayers and reciting words she wasn’t certain that she meant, reaching out to people she didn’t quite understand but who found such solace in the Faith that she found herself jealous of them, for all their rags.

And she found that she couldn’t deny him, after those words.

And…the look in his eyes, the fiery intensity there? She had a horrible feeling that if she did deny him, and let him live afterwards, things would only get very much worse for her.

Baelish would likely be far kinder to a whore who had told him the truth, a truth that would give him advantage, than one he had to dig the information out of.

And he was right. Serving as Garlan’s pageboy was quite a bit different than serving as Lord Commander to the Queen.

“Just to be clear,” Margaery said, holding up a hand, and his eyes widened, “If you served as my brother’s pageboy for long enough for that to even matter, you wouldn’t be looking at the finery and the titles I originally promised you.”

Olyvar stared at her. “No,” he said, cocking his head at her. “I’d be looking at something that lasts longer than that.”

Margaery sighed. “Fine,” she said, and his eyes grew wider still, “but I still need to convince my brother. That might…take some doing.”

He smiled at her. “I can be patient,” he said, the words almost playful.

Margaery rolled her eyes. “And if you ever scare me like that again,” she said, “about Baelish? The deal is off.”

He met her eyes. “That sounds fair,” he said, and Margaery let out a startled laugh, at those words.

It had taken more time than she would like to get Garlan alone, but then, she supposed that was to be expected when he had been placed in charge of Margaery’s armies in King’s Landing, above even his own father, something that Mace had not taken sitting down.

He was also dealing with pirates who had been raiding the Southern coasts of the Reach, apparently, which, annoyingly, had been news to Sansa.

When she did finally get the chance to speak with him alone, Sansa was practically vibrating with unease, and as she laid out the situation for him, or, as much as she could, she saw the same unease reflected on Garlan’s features.

He was a good person to compare ideas with, Sansa reflected, when she didn’t know who else to
turn to, because his thoughts aligned so similarly with her own. They both cared for Margaery.

And they both wanted to make sure that she got out of this alive, something that Sansa was not certain she did have in common with Baelish.

“We have Tyrell loyal seats in almost every seat on the Small Council,” Garlan informed her, as she stepped into the room that they had found to be the most useful, for having secret meetings, for all that it gave Sansa the creeps, to be in this room at all. A room that had once been hers, when she was little more than a prisoner in this place. “With four noticeable exceptions.”

Sansa ticked them off with her fingers. “Baelish, Varys, Kevan Lannister, and Grandmaester Pycelle.”

All dangerous choices for removal, for they were all rather vocal members of the Small Council.”

Garlan dipped his head. “Yes,” he said. “I would suggest removing Grandmaester Pycelle next, but I worry at the backlash that might have, among the maesters of Oldtown, when he has been appointed such by their own.”

Sansa hummed, swallowing hard. She was not as concerned about the Grandmaester; for all she knew, he might still be Cersei’s creature, but he was old and infirm. The others posed a rather more serious threat, especially when Kevan knew. “And Lord Kevan?”

“We named him Hand of the King, after Tyrion’s disappearance,” Garlan said, shaking his head. “We cannot take that away without risking losing the Lannisters, and at this point, he’s perhaps the only thing keeping them from rallying behind Tommen Baratheon.”


Garlan shrugged.

It had never really mattered to the Tyrells one way or another, unless they had something to gain from believing one thing or another, after all, about the legitimacy of Cersei’s children.

She pressed her lips together. “He knows,” she said, softly, and Garlan’s eyes darted to hers.

“What?” He breathed, looking horrified, and Sansa found herself looking down at her hands.

“He told Baelish and I, just the other day,” she admitted. “He knows.”

Garlan closed his eyes, and then swore viciously under his breath. “How many other fucking people know, Sansa?” He demanded, and she flinched a little at the heat in his words, but didn’t bother to answer.

Because dear gods, the truth was, she herself didn’t have the answer to that question.

“We cannot remove him, then,” Garlan finally said. “If we do, there will be nothing keeping him from telling the world exactly what he knows, and if we kill him, the Lannisters who haven’t flocked behind Cersei will want to know why he died, however innocuous we try to make it, so soon after Joffrey’s death.”

Sansa sighed. “I know,” she whispered, hating it. Hating the thought of having to trust another man that she didn’t trust to keep his mouth shut, in order to protect the Crown, when he had every reason not to, despite his strong words to the contrary.
“And if we remove Baelish too soon, we risk making a dangerous enemy,” Garlan continued. “One who knows all of our worst secrets.”

Sansa hummed. “Varys,” she said, turning around to face him. “Tell me what we can do with him.”

If she could not be rid of Baelish yet, Varys was becoming a dangerous thorn in her side, one she was tired of dealing with on her own, because he would never allow Baelish to rise higher, and, like it or not, the longer she kept him around, the higher Sansa needed Baelish to rise.

Sansa sighed, reaching up and pinching the bridge of her nose at Garlan’s continued silence, because the truth was, neither one of them knew what to make of the Spider. He was a tricky man, who had held his position for ages, and proved his worth in doing so.

It would not be easy, to be rid of him, just as it was not easy to plot against Petyr Baelish while holding him above every other lord in King’s Landing.

“At least tell me we have some good news,” she spat out, and Garlan hesitated, for a moment longer.

Sansa grimaced, leaning up from where she’d been against the table and sighing. “I see.”

And then Garlan spoke. “Actually,” he said, “We do.”

She blinked at him expectantly, and Garlan sent her another unreadable look.

“The North has been silent, since the death of Joffrey,” he said, and Sansa’s heart skipped a beat, anticipating what he was about to say. “But House Bolton, under the son, Ramsay Bolton, has finally bent the knee to House Tyrell.”

Sansa lifted a brow, even as she felt relief course through her, found herself wondering if there was some slim chance that the North had bent the knee to House Tyrell because Sansa was here, and not with Cersei in Casterly Rock.

She knew that the Boltons had retaken Winterfell, since the time that Stannis Baratheon had left it to go to the Westerlands, and then promptly disappeared off of the face of the earth. Truth be told, Sansa might have been more concerned about it if she hadn’t found herself suddenly facing far more pressing matters closer to home, and she couldn’t say how she felt about the knowledge that the Boltons had retaken her home, again, not for her, just as Stannis had taken it for himself rather than making illusions of gestures to House Stark. House Bolton had declared for Joffrey in the past, as well, which Sansa knew meant she would have to watch them carefully if she ever did return home.

That was a strange thought, for Sansa was no longer certain that she would ever see Winterfell again, for all that the prophecy of a woman likely dead now had told her that she would.

And even if she did, she knew it would be some years from now.

But at least the Boltons were a Northern House. Winterfell belonged to the North again, and try as she might to feel uneasy about the thought of it being back in the hands of those who had once bent the knee to the Lannisters, she could not help but feel relieved, at the thought.

The Tyrells were in no position to force House Bolton to bend the knee. They could have easily held out longer. The realm was in a shaky place, after all, and under her brother, the North had wanted its own independence from all of them, and their fighting over an iron throne that the North cared little for.

But her home had not disappointed, and if there was any time for the North to choose a side, this was
This could...truly shift the balance into their favor, Sansa thought, smiling slightly.

Then, “Ramsay Bolton?” she asked. “Lord Roose’s bastard?”

She was not entirely certain why it mattered. From what she understood, the Boltons were licking their wounds in the forests beyond Winterfell, having lost it so badly to Stannis when he retook Sansa’s ancestral home. Their declaring for anyone was superfluous, at this point.

She remembered, vaguely, that in exchange for his loyalty, Joffrey, a bastard, had named Ramsay Bolton, another bastard, a legitimate son of his father. It was understood that Roose Bolton had another heir, from a Frey wife whom it would behoove him not to set aside, if he wished to keep the peace with the Lannisters, but Ramsay was to be the heir, now.

Garlan grimaced. “When Stannis expelled the Boltons from Winterfell, Roose Bolton died of his wounds some days later in the woods outside of Winterfell, as the Boltons were fleeing. They did not make many friends, amongst the Northern lords, it seems, while they were in power the first time. Ramsay is his father’s natural heir, and it seems that he...has managed to retake Winterfell, with Stannis not there to guard it, and only a handful of soldiers there to do so, with the way that he took his armies to the North and the West.”

Sansa pressed her lips together. “And Stannis going to the West left it open for the taking, rather conveniently,” she pointed out.

It lacked honor, that they had stolen Winterfell out from under Stannis' nose when he was busy fighting other battles, but then again, she supposed, these were the Boltons they were speaking of. She was quite sure that they had been at the Red Wedding, and while she didn't like the thought of Stannis holding Winterfell for himself, she hated the thought that the Boltons had managed to get their hands on it yet again.

And then, they had bent the knee to House Tyrell, it seemed.

Garlan didn’t bother to deny it.

“Yes,” he said, “But now that they have bent the knee in our favor and let Cersei know their position when they didn’t have to, we’ve gained a rather impressive ally in Ramsay Bolton. With him, comes...much of the North. There are those who still refuse to rally behind him, but being the Lord of Winterfell has its advantages.”

Bolton, who was an impressive ally because he possessed her home, Sansa thought, annoyance flooding through her. Garlan didn't need to tell her that being the Lord of Winterfell came with certain advantages, after all.

She was interested, however, in knowing how much of the North refused to rally behind the Boltons. The Boltons, who had taken Jeyne Poole and dressed her up as Arya Stark, to strengthen their claim to something that didn't belong to them anymore than it did Stannis.

“And,” Garlan went on, when she was silent, “The Boltons have offered us a gift, along with their bent knees.”

Not a few minutes later, Sansa left her bedchambers minutes after Garlan had done so, lest they be seen together by anyone who might answer to Baelish over it.

She was smiling.
Oh ye of little faith...
You think I would drag us all back into that dumpster fire?

“I’m sure it’s hard,” Arianne said, as she braided Myrcella’s golden locks, and imagined herself choking the younger girl with them. “To be separated from a mother you’ve known your whole life.”

Myrcella, the little brat sitting on the bench beneath her, sniffed, reaching up to wipe at her eyes. “What do you know about it?” She muttered, resentful, and Arianne sighed.

Her father had insisted, from the safety of the Water Gardens, that Arianne spend as much time as possible with Myrcella Baratheon, once he had learned that the other girls were being cruel and dismissive to her, never mind that she was much younger than Arianne, and that every time Arianne looked at her, all she saw was the Mountain, killing an aunt she’d never gotten to know.

Myrcella was not an easy little girl to get along with, either.

She was spoiled, used to getting her own way in all things that had to do with her own care, save, perhaps, for when it came to her brother, for she seemed frightened of Trystane and of every man they had come across since her arrival here; Arianne was not blind to that, nor did she have too many guesses about why that was, considering all of the horrible things she had heard about Joffrey Baratheon, so far.

Never, of course, from his own sister’s lips, who spoke of lemon cakes and how the tea in King’s Landing was far superior to the iced tea here, and how her septa was a far more disciplined septa than the shrew raising Uncle Oberyn’s children, and how she didn’t like the way that Trystane thought he could get away with pulling her hair, and Arianne ought to do something about it, personally.

Arianne bit back another sigh.

Today had been yet another attempt, on Arianne’s part, to bond with the girl who would be her brother’s wife, one day, if her father had his way.

A Lannister, married into their family and treated as if she belonged there, after it had been the Lannisters who had, through their negligence, let their brute rape and murder a Martell.

A Princess with far more claim to the title than the girl who’s hair Arianne found it so difficult to braid, just now.

Myrcella’s Septa, a stern, unfriendly woman who didn’t like it when Myrcella tried to play with the Sand Snakes any more than the young girls liked being forced to spend time with Myrcella, because they were, in the septa’s own words to Arianne, “terrible influences,” had shaken her head, when Arianne informed her that she and Myrcella would be experimenting with some more Dornish styles, for Myrcella’s hair.
Arianne had a feeling she would have objected if she could find a good reason to, but Arianne, as boring as she thought the afternoon would prove to be, had thought of the one activity which the septa could not refuse to Myrcella.

After all, they would be indoors, in the blistering heat, doing very ladylike things. Arianne was just trying to help Myrcella acclimate to Dorne a bit better, as well, which the septa could not object to.

It wasn’t as if Arianne was going to strip her naked and dress her like a whore, as she was sure the septa had feared, when she had turned of her nose and left them here, in Myrcella’s rooms.

These rooms, which Arianne had specifically chosen because they were as far from Trystane’s rooms in Sunspear as one could get. She’d made that decision before Myrcella had ever stepped foot on Dornish soil, because she didn’t know what sort of harpy Cersei Lannister had raised, after all.

She didn’t want the girl breaking her brother’s heart.

But Myrcella…had not turned out to be the little tart Arianne had worried she would be. Spoiled, annoying, rather boring, in Arianne’s mind, and disappointingly uninterested in finding something to entertain herself with alone, but not a tart.

She did not, however, seem to care much for Arianne, despite her father’s best intentions. Arianne could have easily told her father this.

She understood why he did not order one of the Sand Snakes to spend more time with her; the girls were all terrible little ruffians, and none of them could quite conceal their distaste for her, something that they felt happy to express after they had seen the cold way Oberyn Martell had greeted her, even after he had lectured them himself not to judge Myrcella for who her family was.

Children were terribly good at reading adults like that, after all.

But Trystane was a boy, and so the damned septa never let the two of them have any time alone together, and therefore, the only other person available to spend time with the girl was Arianne, many years her elder and therefore, uninteresting.

Arianne also had a feeling that Cersei Lannister had petrified her daughter with tales of the Martells’ indecency and cruelty, if the way she flinched every single time one of them entered a room was any indication, before she started in on her demands for the day.

And perhaps it was the flippant way that Myrcella had uttered those words, reminding Arianne of the other day, when she had demanded to know why someone was going through the letters she sent home to her mother and brother, that caused Arianne to speak again, her hands pulling a little too harshly at the braids she was making of Myrcella’s hair.

Myrcella flinched.

“My mother left me, when I was a child,” she said, and Myrcella was suddenly very still.

She had to know that, of course; it had been the scandal of the Seven Kingdoms, when Doran’s wife had returned to Norvos and left behind a husband in a still very real marriage, and three children.

Myrcella would have heard the story from her mother, if nowhere else, when she was sent here.

Or perhaps Cersei Lannister was the sort of woman who might cover up such a tale by telling her daughter that Mellario was dead, and hoping that her name was never mentioned, in Dorne.
In truth, Arianne did not know how a woman like Cersei Lannister might think.

Myrcella finally licked her lips. “Did she love you?” She asked, and Arianne started, staring down at her perfectly golden head and wondering if Myrcella Baratheon ever had doubts, about being loved.

“I…” Arianne opened and closed her mouth. She stopped braiding Myrcella’s hair without quite realizing that she was doing so.

“What a strange question, she thought.

Of course her mother had loved them. She had left them because the idea of having all of her children fostered away, as was the Westerosi custom, was too horrifying for her, and she feared that if she let them go, she would never see them again.

Arianne remembered well the last time she had seen her mother. She had been crying, her dark skin glistening in the afternoon sun, as she kissed Arianne’s forehead, and told her to make sure that her father never separated her and Trystane, because they were brother and sister, and they belonged together, as a family.

And then she’d left their little family behind, and Doran had locked himself up in the Water Gardens.

Arianne pressed her lips together, the thought of her mother, even after all of these years, more painful than she could say, but she couldn’t bring herself to resent Myrcella for asking after her.

Mellario of Norvos had left a hole in Dorne that even Myrcella, even after all of these years, must have noticed.

“She loved my brothers and I too much,” Arianne said, softly. “That was why she had to leave us.”

Myrcella swallowed. “I don’t understand,” she admitted, after several more moments, and Arianne bit back a sigh, not particularly wanting to have this conversation with the other girl.

“Your uncle sent you here to marry my brother,” she finally offered, “Because he wants to keep your legacy, the Crown, safe. Because he loves you.”

Myrcella twisted in her chair, squinting up at Arianne. “So your mother left you because she wanted to keep you safe?” She asked.

Arianne’s lips quirked. “She left us because she loved us too much, and felt that she had been burned for it,” she said. “She wanted us to be happy, here, and she feared that if she stayed here, with such different customs than the Dornish have, it would only make things worse for us.”

Myrcella’s brows furrowed; she seemed to be giving the words serious thought. Finally, she whispered, “I can understand that. Sometimes, I think we would have been better off if…”

She trailed off, then, seeming to realize that whatever she had been about to say, it was nothing she should be sharing with Arianne.

Even if Arianne suddenly wanted to know what she had been about to say.

“There,” she said finally, finishing the girl’s braids and holding them up before the mirror. “Just like Obara’s. What do you think?”

Myrcella looked at herself in the mirror, cocking her head.
Her face was expressionless.

It was a disturbing look, on such a young girl.

“It’s nice,” she said, in a perfectly bland tone, and Arianne didn’t know if that was because she hated it, or not. “How did your mother wear hers?”

Arianne pursed her lips. “The Norvosi way. Very different from anything worn in Westeros. I’ll show you, sometime, though you won’t like it.”

Myrcella’s pretty red lips pulled down into a pout. “How do you know I won’t like it?”

Arianne blinked down at her. Perhaps she had judged this girl too harshly, too early, she thought. After all, Myrcella was a spoiled little thing, but Arianne thought she knew something of the loneliness with which Arianne herself had grown up.

And that could be...useful.

Myrcella sighed, reaching up to pull her hair out of the saggy braid that it had been in, and allowing her golden locks to fall down over her shoulders.

She knew that it was the pregnancy, that pregnancies could cause women to become irritable and uncomfortable in their own skin, but she suddenly hated having to deal with her hair.

When she was a princess, she didn’t think she should have to worry about doing her own hair herself.

When she was a little girl, there had always been a servant available for that, though Myrcella had enjoyed the freedom that she’d acquired since coming to Dorne; she’d never known if the servants surrounding her at all times were spying on her for her brother, or for her mother, growing up, and the thought that they might be, and might be reporting anything unladylike that she said about her brother, had terrified her through much of her younger years.

When she had come to Dorne, Arianne had made it very clear that she would not allow Myrcella to be coddled, to the absolute horror of her septa.

Myrcella understood now that it had been so Myrcella would be forced to reach out to Trystane, at the very least; in her own way, Arianne had genuinely been trying to help her by making her get used to her new situation.

At the time, it had only made Myrcella feel lonely. And, beyond that, annoyed with Arianne.

Arianne, who had situated herself to become something like a mother to Myrcella, because of that loneliness. Or, at the very least, an older sister.

Myrcella sighed, glancing down at her stomach.

The child was barely that; she knew that the round mass at her belly meant that she was to have one, eventually, in a few months’ time, no less, and that that child would be the living proof of her love for her husband, even if that was not how the rest of Dorne saw it.

No, they saw it as an heir.

The other day, when she had insisted on going to the Sept, surrounded by Martell guards, to pray for her husband’s swift return, under the guise that she was mourning her dear brother, she’d heard the
shouts of the smallfolk.

They didn’t love her, of course; she was a Lannister, and they wanted all Lannisters to die, and were hardly shy about that. But they liked her well enough, as their little golden haired princess, loved that she loved her dear husband so much, and they shouted that her child was the Prince that was Promised.

That one day, that child would destroy her family.

Myrcella grimaced at the reminder, shaking her head, determined not to think like that.

She had left that family behind, after all, when she had taken Tyene’s hand, and let the other girl lead her away from her father and brother. She had abandoned them without a second thought, because the allure of being back here, in this place, was too much for her to resist, and after all, Tommen would always be safe with Jaime.

Or at least, that was what she had told herself until she reached the banks of Dorne, and knew the truth.

Arianne had greeted her at the harbor, arms spread wide, pulling Myrcella into her arms and wrapping them tightly around the other girl, and then she had pulled back, and introduced Myrcella to her husband, Ser Gerold Dayne.

Myrcella had known who Ser Gerold Dayne was, of course. The very first night that she had come to Dorne, there had been a feast held in her name. Ser Gerold was conspicuous in his refusal to attend.

Myrcella had known with a stone cold clarity, the moment Ser Gerold Dayne reached out and took her hand, bringing it to his lips with a gentle kiss, that she made the wrong choice, in taking Obara’s hand.

That she should have gone with her father to the Rock, because whatever she had known of Dorne Before, something had changed.

But she had lifted her chin and smiled at Gerold, blushing a little as if the feel of another man’s kiss might make her blush, and thanked Arianne for bringing her home.

And she had been right; things had changed. Doran no longer ruled Dorne; he was trapped in a tower, like the princesses of her uncle Tyrion’s tales, when she was a child, with Ellaria Sand, who too hadn’t liked this coup against the prince. And Trystane, who had made a life amongst those she didn’t know that she could trust, bearable, wasn’t there, either.

But what struck Myrcella, in the days after she had returned to Dorne, was how much everything had remained the same, despite all of that change.

Of course, Obara and Tyene were back to their plotting ways. Myrcella knew that they were up to something, though the question remained as to whether or not they were working together. Before, Myrcella might have said she knew they were working together, but after what had happened with Lady Nym, she didn’t think she could honestly say.

But Arianne seemed almost blind to her cousins’ plots, whatever they were. She spent her days thinking about how to better Dorne, without doing the one thing that everyone, even Myrcella, awkward as it was, knew would be accepted by the kingdom: war.

Myrcella didn’t even understand why. The entire time that she had known the other woman, Arianne
had not made secret the fact that she loathed the Lannisters just as much as her uncle and her cousins ever had, even if she was kind enough to pretend otherwise, when she first began befriending Myrcella.

She supposed that besides that, Arianne was actually doing a fairly good job of leading Dorne. Unlike her father, she actually spent her time in Sunspear, and Myrcella supposed there was something to that. She had also been in charge of the court at Sunspear for almost the entire time her father had been in the Water Gardens, and so Myrcella knew she had some experience with doing what needed to be done.

But she didn’t seem to want a war, and Myrcella couldn’t understand why.

It wasn’t as if she cared about Myrcella’s feelings, in particular, on the matter. She had made that clear with the way she refused to even see Myrcella, every time Myrcella asked for an audience with her, but dragged Myrcella before her every time she wanted to study her reactions.

Myrcella grimaced, not wanting to think about the dark looks that she got from every noble who came to Sunspear to bend the knee to Arianne, pledging themselves to her in the event that she should declare war on the other Seven Kingdoms.

None of them had wanted to look at her at all, but they all had. They had all stared at her like they were hoping, now that Arianne was in charge, that she would order Myrcella’s immediate execution.

She hadn’t, of course, but it was the sort of thing that Myrcella might expect from Ser Gerold Dayne.

And she couldn’t afford to make him angry enough to try, she thought, grimacing.

Myrcella’s eyes, where they watched herself in the mirror, trailed down to her protruding stomach; she swallowed hard, still a little in awe of what she saw there, every time she looked into the mirror.

Her child.

Myrcella still couldn’t believe that she was pregnant, with a child. A child, who was hers, and her husband’s, and not Joffrey’s, as a part of her had always been terrified might one day occur.

But Joffrey hadn’t touched her like that, while she had been in King’s Landing, and this child was Trystane’s.

And he wasn’t even here to see it.

It killed Myrcella, a little more each time, to have to write to her husband, carefully censored words that she knew would still be read over by Arianne, without ever mentioning the child in her womb, for the fear that someone in King’s Landing was no doubt reading her husband’s letters, as well, both the ones received and sent.

She wanted nothing more than to tell him the wonderful truth, that he was going to be a father, that they were finally, truly, going to be a family, just the three of them.

All the ones who mattered.

She hoped that the child had Trystane’s curls.

She was terrified, and excited, but mostly terrified, especially with the way that everyone seemed to look at this child.
The Prince that was Promised.

But Myrcella was determined to love this child, not for who he might represent to the Martells and Dorne, but whom her mother would never allow to become that, but because he was hers.

All her life, she’d been forced to share everything with her brother, and now this? Her husband, her child, they were hers, and hers alone. And she wanted nothing but to be to him or her, whatever this child ended up being, the mother that she’d never had. To make sure that this child knew, always, that it was loved.

And to get its damn father back before it left her body for good.

She smiled a little, as she reached her hand down to rub at her belly, again.

They said that her goodsister, Margaery Tyrell, was pregnant as well, but with her brother’s child.

Myrcella pitied the other woman. She could not think of a greater curse, for she had spent much of her life expecting that exact scenario, than to carry a living reminder of Joffrey within her, and then to be forced to bring that child into the world and raise it as though she had loved the man who had created it.

She also knew that the moment that child was born, the child within her belly would become nothing more than a pawn, the same way that Myrcella’s was about to become.

Myrcella didn’t want that for her child, but she knew that it was going to happen, regardless of Arianne’s current plans, whatever they happened to be.

A knock at the door made her jump, and she swallowed hard, clearing her throat.

“Ah, come in,” she muttered, and a moment later Tyene was sticking her head through the door. She smiled, and Myrcella forced herself to smile back.

“Ravens brought a letter for you, Myrcella,” Tyene said, as she stepped into the room. She blinked at the sight of Myrcella’s hands tearing at her hair, but walked forward without comment, anyway.

Myrcella lifted her chin, holding her hand out expectantly, and Myrcella knew, the moment the letter touched her fingers, who it was from. Her mother hadn’t sent her anything since she had absconded with a Martell, and she would no doubt not allow Tommen to do so either, now that she had him again.

She looked at the seal on it, anyway.

“It’s a letter,” Myrcella said, in a dull voice, eyes downcast so that she didn’t have to see the knowing in Tyene’s eyes; she had been the one to bring it, after all, and Myrcella knew that she had done it on purpose. No doubt, she had insisted on being the one to bring it to Myrcella.

Myrcella supposed that there was a strange sort of mercy in that, in a friend bringing the letter to her rather than someone she hated. “From Trystane.”

She didn’t want to open it in front of Tyene, Myrcella realized suddenly. Even if that meant she knew the other woman would wonder if she trusted her, and Myrcella couldn’t afford the other girl’s doubts at the moment, the thought of opening it in front of her made her feel…vulnerable. Raw.

She licked her lips.
She didn’t want anyone to see her like that, anymore.

She tuck it into the pocket of her gown, determining that she would read it later, much as she wanted to throw Tyene out and read it for herself, now, to pour over the words that Trystane had sent her, the only words that she still had left from him, since she couldn’t have him in person, these days.

Tyene raised an eyebrow, leaning against the wall. “You’re not going to read it?” She asked.

Myrcella shrugged. “I’d much rather get to talk to him, in person,” she whispered, hoarsely, and Tyene’s cheek twitched.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and Myrcella...believed her.

“I don’t understand why Arianne won’t do anything,” Myrcella said, mournfully. “He’s her brother. You’d think she would care.”

“Arianne is a very busy woman, these days,” Tyene comforted her, or at least, Myrcella thought that she was trying to be reassuring. She wasn’t really certain.

Arianne was a busy woman; she’d usurped her father, as the Head of House Martell, as the Princess of Dorne, Myrcella knew that.

She also knew that Arianne had some sort of unspoken deal with Margaery Tyrell, and that if she wanted to, she could get Trystane back here, but she didn’t. Her own brother, and she’d left him with the thorns and lions.

She said it like she didn’t know exactly what Arianne was doing; whatever that deal was, Trystane was being used as collateral. Arianne had made a choice between Myrcella and Trystane, and she had chosen Myrcella.

The piece in the game who would have greater worth to her, when the time came.

And here, Myrcella had thought that Arianne truly loved her, the way that she had always said she did, before Myrcella was sent back to King’s Landing and Myrcella realized that Arianne Martell was just another Cersei Lannister with a younger face and a better ability to pretend she sympathized with Myrcella’s plight.

It had been horrifying, that stinging sense of betrayal she felt as she saw Gerold Dayne standing beside Arianne, and she knew, even without being able to tell how she knew, that she had lost the other woman for good.

That she had never been anything more than a piece in Arianne Martell’s game, and that soon, Arianne would damn well collect.

A part of Myrcella wondered every minute of every day if Trystane wasn’t already dead, and the letters she was being sent were being sent by someone in King’s Landing, or, worse still, someone in Dorne, pretending to be him.

But the letters meant that he lived, still, he had to; they knew things that no one else but her husband could have known, and she clung to that knowledge with every fiber of her being.

Every letter that her husband sent to her, she kept in the vanity by her bed, wanting to make sure that they were near her always, even if he could not be.
Besides, she was worried that Arianne would order one of the servants to burn them, eventually, and Myrcella would damn well put up a fight, if that ever happened.

“Come on. I think you could use a distraction,” Tyene said suddenly, her eyes sympathetic, and Myrcella forced her shoulders to hunch a bit, lowering her eyelashes, and got to her feet.

Tyene reached out, taking Myrcella’s hand into her own and giving it a gentle squeeze before she turned and led Myrcella from the room.

Myrcella smiled.

Myrcella knew that Tyene came up here, most times, to get away from everyone else. This was an activity that she had shared with her father, when Oberyn Martell still lived, and one that she had continued with his death.

Myrcella had only been up here a handful of times, all after Oberyn had gone to King’s Landing, because he hadn’t liked the idea of the Lannister daughter learning poisons, even if he had grudgingly admitted that she was a “sweet girl” at one point.

It still disturbed her, every time she came up here, and saw the elaborate mixtures spread precariously throughout the room, and stuffed in cupboards.

The birds, hanging in their cage from the ceiling of the little tower, which was nothing as big as the Tower of the Hand, in King’s Landing, where she had only been a handful of times, all after Lord Arryn had died, for he had not allowed her in there at all.

They hung, the little yellow creatures, dumb to the knowledge of their use, the fact that they were only there for Tyene to test her poisons on them, and for them to die, if it was what she wished.

Though usually, death did not come quick, not for the birds.

Myrcella cleared her throat, moving to the other side of Tyene’s work table as the other girl set herself up, reaching for a few ingredients without a word, because Myrcella knew what to expect from her, at this point.

They stood in silence for a while, Myrcella idly counting the number of poisons sitting in jars in this room which she could identify, as she tried to think of how she wanted to word this.

For all that she found this place unsettling, it almost felt…nice, to be here. Myrcella supposed she could understand why the other girl always came here to get away from everyone else; it wasn’t like there were many places in Dorne where she could, after all, and too many people were unsettled by this place to come and bother her.

But it was Tyene, as she mixed a poison that looked strangely…purple, in front of her.

“My father was a master of poisons,” Tyene informed her, and Myrcella gulped, feeling her face grow rather hot. She took a step closer to the other girl, when everything within her wanted to move away.

Tyene’s gaze softened. “He was going to get his maester’s chain, you know,” she said, and her voice was purely informative now, an important distinction that she had no doubt the other girl had made on purpose, to comfort Myrcella.

Myrcella smirked inwardly, and made herself a little smaller, knowing that it would work.
When Tommen had been younger, before Myrcella had been sent to Dorne but after Joffrey’s coronation, her older brother had wanted to send her younger brother to Oldtown, to become a maester.

Joffrey.

Myrcella grimaced at the thought of her dead brother.

She remembered when Arianne had told her that her brother was dead, the way the other girls had reacted, not knowing how to feel when Myrcella didn’t, to her own brother’s death.

In truth, Myrcella hadn’t known how to react to the news that her brother was dead, and she suspected that the other girls knew that. That, if they hadn’t known before, they knew now, or suspected, what he had done to her, to make her feel that way about his death.

Her brother was dead.

Her brother, who had been her nightmare for so long, who had tormented and abused her, who had laughed every time she cried, whether it had been at his hand or not, had died.

Her brother, who had told her once that he wanted to continue the dear old tradition of the Targaryens, not knowing or not caring that it was also a tradition of the Lannisters, of putting a child in his sister’s belly.

Her brother, who had tried to have her husband, the one man she had ever truly loved outside of her family, and perhaps even in it, killed, after imprisoning him in the Black Cells to begin with.

She closed her eyes.

In that moment, before she remembered that she had an act to put on, Myrcella had wanted to laugh with glee, at the news that her brother was dead.

In the next moment, as Arianne kept talking and she realized that would be seen as very strange indeed, she had been annoyed that she herself wasn’t there to see him go, the one thing that she had wanted for so very long.

Something that she had been imagining for far longer than she ever wanted to admit, the sight of her wrapping her fingers around his cock and yanking until it tore free-

Myrcella had excused herself from the three of them as quickly as she could, running back to her chambers without trying to make it look like she was fleeing, because she didn’t want the whole of Dorne thinking that she was mourning the boy, and laughed into her pillow until her laughter turned to sobs and she ended up vomiting in her chamber pot.

Her septa, when the woman came later, had seen the vomit and tried to comfort her, as if she thought that would make Myrcella feel better, after growing up alongside the other girl.

As if she didn’t know exactly what Joffrey was capable of. As if she hadn’t, more times than Myrcella could count, come into Myrcella’s rooms and found her gown in rags, seen the bruises on her body, and cleaned her up without a word to anyone, because after all, Cersei could hardly be brought to care-

Perhaps Myrcella wasn’t handling her brother’s death as well as she had hoped she might, but he was her brother. She thought that she had a right, after living with Joffrey alive for so long, to be confused about how she felt, now that he was dead, and she could not even see the body for herself,
for proof that it was the case.

That this wasn’t some elaborate, horrible trick on her brother’s end, to punish her once he returned from the dead, the way that his wife had, and tormented her with his life once again.

She grimaced again; Tyene glanced at her.

“Are you all right, Myrce?” She asked.

Myrcella shrugged. “The sun,” she said, pointing through the open window of the tower, where the sun was streaming in.

Tyene didn’t look like she believed her, but, after a moment, merely shrugged. Myrcella liked Tyene; in fact, she was Myrcella’s favorite of the Sand Snakes, even before everything that had happened with Lady Nym, according to Obara and Tyene, while she was gone, but she didn’t know Myrcella, not really.

No one here did, not even Arianne, though the other woman thought that she did.

But they didn’t know why Myrcella felt so…fine, with the knowledge that Joffrey was dead, or she didn’t think that any of them would be looking at her in quite the same way, now.

Myrcella knew that Joffrey had wanted to send Tommen to Oldtown because he was so that he would never one day become a threat to Joffrey, but Cersei had put an end to those plans, quickly enough, not wanting any of her children parted from her.

And then Myrcella had been sent to Dorne, of course.

She’d told Tyene that, once, and obviously, it was something that the other girl remembered. She had a terribly good memory; in all honestly, that concerned Myrcella more than Arianne’s sudden indifference to her.

“But then he decided that wouldn’t be the life for him, and went to the East, and had something of a wild experience, there,” Tyene said, and then winked at her. “It wasn’t all Dorne, what made Oberyn Martell who he was.”

Myrcella gave her a faint smile; she knew how much it still hurt the other girl, to talk about her father, after what had happened to him.

Tyene cleared her throat. “There, he learned the art of poison, and in the Free Cities, it truly is an art.”

Myrcella hummed. “And then he killed my grandfather,” she said, without a bit of emotion in her voice, which was a bit harder to feign than the emotion she was pretending to feel for her dead brother.

Tyene paused, the mixture in her hands slipping through her fingers as her lips parted, and Myrcella grimaced, reaching out as fast as she could to grab it before it fell to the ground and shattered.

Tyene blinked, looking surprised that Myrcella had managed to catch it, and then a little disturbed, at the sight of the bottle in Myrcella’s hands.

She sent Myrcella a tight smile as she plucked it from her fingers, murmuring a soft, “Thank you.”

Myrcella shrugged, and Tyene, still looking unsettled, went back to her work.
Myrcella wanted to ask her who this was for, who was to be killed with this poison.

When they had first come up here, Myrcella had been terrified, for one horrible moment, that she had done something wrong, that this was it; that Tyene had finally seen through her, and intended to use the stuff on her, now.

She was slowly relaxing, ever since then; the way that Tyene hovered over her, the gentle looks that she kept sending Myrcella, her discomfort as Myrcella made herself smaller before the other woman, they all indicated that she didn’t see Myrcella as anything like a threat, anymore.

Good.

Still, the poison was for someone, and Myrcella still wasn’t certain where Tyene stood, in the battle lines being drawn across Dorne, these days.

“It used to be my favorite thing to do, as a little girl,” Tyene admitted, smirking at Myrcella. “I would come up and watch him here for hours. Not talking, of course; he said that talking would distract him, and so I had to sit very still. Really, I think he was afraid that I would try to reach out and touch something if he gave me a moment’s hesitation.”

Despite herself, Myrcella smiled. “You must have been a curious child, to want to watch him mix poisons, all day,” she said. Then, a thought occurred to her. “Did he tell you that they were poisons?”

Tyene snorted. “The very first day that I snuck away from Ellaria to come up here,” she admitted, shrugging. “He wasn’t the sort of man who tried to hide the truths of the world from his child. I… loved that about him.”

Myrcella shifted; now she was the one who felt uncomfortable, and it was not something that she tried to feign, either.

“This is called Dragon’s Breath,” Tyene said, giving the mixture a flick with her wrist.

Myrcella let out a breathy little laugh. “Did a Targaryen create it?” She asked.

Tyene shrugged. “No idea,” she said. “Could have been, the Valyrians of old,” she said, and winked a little at Myrcella.

Myrcella smiled.

“But I doubt it,” Tyene said. “This sort of thing…It’s an absolutely awful sort of poison.”

Myrcella raised an eyebrow, leaning over the table that Tyene was working at, even though the other woman always warned her to avoid exactly that, lest she jostle the ingredients sitting out on it.

“What does it do?” She asked, and thought of her brother, and wondered if this was how Margaery Tyrell had felt, to convince the boy that she actually loved him, actually cared about his perverse pleasures.

She was a better actress than Myrcella had ever been, Myrcella supposed.

Tyene smirked at her, flicking it again before pouring it into a jar, all but a few drops, which she then carried over to the little yellow birds in their cage.

“It burns you,” Tyene told her, with a smile, as the birds sucked at the flask greedily. “From the
inside out. No one else can see that anything is wrong, of course; you can’t scream because your body is paralyzed, from the inside, the moment the stuff makes it down your throat. And then, it’s only minutes before…”

She glanced down at the birds, who had gone very still. Flicked a beak, and nodded in satisfaction when the bird’s eye twitched.

“Before anyone notices,” Myrcella finished for her. Tyene, not looking up from her birds, nodded.

Myrcella thought of Joffrey, letting himself be seduced by a wife who was either as wicked as he, and therefore likely had never loved him because she was just as incapable of it as Joffrey, or who was just trying to survive beside a husband who enjoyed torturing people.

She wondered if he had ever realized that his wife didn’t love him, before the end.

Myrcella eyed Tyene, and then hunched her shoulders in a little more. She had confided in Tyene, days ago, that she no longer felt safe, in Dorne. That she thought someone was going to want to hurt her, now that her brother was dead and proved that the Lannisters could be brought low.

Tyene had kissed her forehead. It was the first time that the other girl had done so, though Arianne did so often enough, when she wanted some sort of reaction from Myrcella.

“Myrcella, do you think…” She hesitated, knowing how the other girl might take the request. “Would you teach me? On the birds, I mean.”

Tyene hummed. Then, in a voice that implied she was doing Myrcella quite a favor, “If you promise to only test it on the birds.”

That was something Myrcella could easily do.

Once upon a time, she had promised her brother that if it was what he wanted, she would be his bride, one day, and where was Uncle Jaime, anyway?

Joffrey had laughed, and kissed her.

Tyene laughed, and handed Myrcella a flask of poison.

Myrcella hid her grin.

The day that Gerold had dragged all of those nobles before the throne and demanded that they pledge their allegiance to the throne, if Dorne ever declared a war, Arianne had wanted to murder him in her sleep.

Had seriously considered it.

More than that, she had wanted to take a knife to his gut and cut until there was nothing left of his intestines, right there in front of the entire court.

Instead, she’d been forced to sit there on her father’s throne and watch as lords who had once pledged to her father promised her their loyalty - and their men’s swords, while Gerold smiled as if he were being nothing more than a supporting husband who had pulled all of this together out of love for his wife’s cause.

It had been a humiliating defeat, and what was worse, no one else seemed to know that it was a defeat. After all, Arianne had ascended the throne while her father still lived with the express purpose
of giving the Dornish people the war that they had wanted since Elia Martell’s death.

And so Arianne hadn’t been able to object; not when a lord whom her father had once offended by promising to send her to their family as a cupbearer, and then changed his mind at the last moment, came before her and told her he was happy to know her as his princess.

As Myrcella stood in the corner of the throne room, hand on her pregnant belly, watching with a face that grew paler and paler the longer she continued.

Arianne hadn’t known how she was going to protect her, as Gerold gathered the lords of Dorne for war, and she wondered if she was going to be able to.

She had just promised them their war, and she meant to give it to them, if she wanted to keep her father’s throne.

But she had to protect Myrcella, because, much as the girl was infuriatingly quiet, these days, Arianne still cared for her, and Quentyn and his army that posed her such a threat once was nowhere to be found, these days.

She had promised herself that she would, had insisted to Margaery Tyrell that she, in fact, bring Myrcella back here for that purpose, and now here she was, nearly losing Dorne again, which would only mean bad things for Myrcella.

But she had managed to hold them back for this long, and Arianne knew that she needed to throw them a bone, soon.

But here Gerold was now, asking Myrcella to dance, and Arianne didn’t like it one bit.

She leaned back a little in her chair, a part of her wanting to get up and ask Gerold to dance herself, but another part of her was worried that he would reject her, in front of all of these nobles.

She couldn’t afford that defeat in front of so many of them, either. They needed their war, soon, and she needed to figure out a way to give it to them without going back too far on the pact she’d made with Margaery, without endangering Myrcella.

Gods, Arianne had something of a migraine.

She’d woken up this morning vomiting onto the floor beside her bed, the bed that she hadn’t shared with her husband for some time, and Arianne knew that she was coming down with something. Just another thing to worry about.

“Ser Gerold,” Myrcella said, crisply, as she took the other man’s hand, and allowed him to lead her out to dance floor. Then, as the music began again, a bit more hesitant this time on behalf of the harpists, she asked dully, “What are you doing?”

Gerold squinted at her. “I’m sorry, Princess?” He sounded distracted, and she followed his eyes, found that he was staring at Arianne, where she sat at the head of the room, rather than looking at Myrcella at all.

Because she knew he wasn’t looking, Myrcella rolled her eyes.

Arianne, however, caught the movement, raising an eyebrow at Myrcella in surprise, for the other girl had been strangely shy every time she was within Gerold’s sight. Or, perhaps, not strangely; Gerold had made no secret his feelings about the Lannisters, nor about Myrcella’s position in Dorne.
Arianne could see him saying something else, something that made Myrcella smile, though Arianne could no longer tell if that was because she found it amusing or she was just pretending to, and then they were gone, off on the dance floor.

Andrey Dalt scowled, at the sight of Gerold twirling Myrcella around on the dance floor, rather than his wife.

She had slept with Andrey a few times, in their youth, as had Tyene, who was always interested in a new conquest, but he was not the jealous type, even if he was fiercely protective of her.

So she knew that something was wrong, seeing the way that he was scowling at Gerold.

And it made Arianne’s stomach twist with nausea.

She watched the two of them dance for several more moments, before she gestured over to Garin, where he stood by the food tables, helping himself.

He met her gaze and grinned, wading through the crowd before he made his way to her, giving her a little bow and hurrying to stand behind her throne, leaning an arm against it as he too, pretended to watch the dance.

“Your Highness,” he greeted, and Arianne sent him a small smile before turning her attention back to the crowd.

This was not the same night when her husband had promised her lords a war, but Arianne could feel all of their eyes on her still, all of them waiting for her to make some sort of announcement.

And Arianne…didn’t have one to give to them, at the moment.

“Garin,” Arianne said, as the other man came closer, bending down to hear her whisper, “I need a favor.”

Garin dipped his head. “Anything for my sister,” he said, and Arianne sent him a small smile.

His mother had been her wet-nurse, as a babe, and Garin had been one of her closest friends ever since.

She knew that he, at least, would never betray her.

“My husband is up to something,” she said, and Garin’s eyes widened a little, as they found their way almost unintentionally over to where Gerold and Myrcella had just stopped dancing, Myrcella pulling away from him and making her way with some purpose back to the feasting tables, where quite a bit of food was still set out.

Pregnancy had made Myrcella ravenous, these days. She’d put on some weight, something that Arianne was happy to see after she had returned from King’s Landing. As much as arianne could tell, it looked like the other girl had avoided eating quite a bit, while she was in King’s Landing, and Arianne didn’t know if it was from the stress, or something else.

She grimaced a little at the thought that Myrcella was so afraid of her true family that she’d stopped eating, in King’s Landing, and wondered if Trystane was experiencing the same issue, now.

But no, she told herself. The Tyrells were in control of King’s Landing, these days; he was far safer there than he would be with the Lannisters, and they would see to it that he came to know harm.
Trystane was safe; she knew that everyone else in her family thought her a heartless bitch, to have sent him off alone like that, but she had only done it because she knew that he would be safe, with Margaery and Lady Nym watching over him; after all, they both knew her wrath would be great if anything happened to him.

And her brother could use a little growing up, if she was being honest.

And, if she were being even more so, the thought of explaining all of this to him, how she had arrested their father, how she thought their brother was coming here to take everything she had ever worked towards away from her…terrified her, because she knew that Trystane wouldn’t understand, wouldn’t think that her excuses were good enough.

She swallowed hard, and thought about how Tyrion Lannister had sent Myrcella here thinking that she would not come to harm over it, eyes still on the girl as she shoved another lemon cake into her mouth.

“I need you to figure out what, exactly, he’s planning,” Arianne continued in a whisper, still watching Myrcella, because it wouldn’t do to tip off the game this early. “And if my cousins have anything to do with it.”

Garin glanced at her sharply; she could see him out of the corner of her eye. “You think they’re…plotting with him?” He asked, sounding disgusted.

Arianne could well imagine why. It sickened her, as well, to think that her cousins had turned against her the way that Lady Nym had turned against them, and with Gerold Dayne, of all people.

But Garin had grown up with Tyene and Obara as well as he had Arianne, she remembered, and the thought that girls she had regarded more as sisters than as cousins would betray her in such a way felt abhorrent, to her.

She had promised them a war, had promised it to them as recently as the other day, and it was infuriating that they didn’t have the patience to trust her, their own family, of all people.

Her lips quirked in something like amusement as she wondered if this was how her father felt, locked away in the Water Gardens, even though that was a completely different situation. After all, her father had promised no one a war, and had very much delivered on that promise.

“Myrcella has been acting strangely lately,” Arianne whispered to him, nodding to the girl. Myrcella, as if she could feel their eyes on her, glanced up sharply. When she noticed that it was Arianne looking, she sent her a small smile, which Arianne forced herself to return.

When Gerold spun her around again, Arianne continued, “Too perfect. She is furious with me, and yet, she doesn’t once raise her voice. Acts like she is content here.”

Garin raised an eyebrow. “And…you think that means they are plotting against you? Because Myrcella does not weep and carry on so?”

Arianne pressed her lips together. “Myrcella is a spirited child. Her silence is…concerning.”

Garin hummed; clearly, he was rather skeptical, but he had believed her at first, about Gerold, and Arianne was just going to have to trust him.

She was running out of those she found truly trustworthy, these days.
Then, after a calculated silence, “I don’t know what to think,” she whispered to him, as Gerold’s eyes sought out hers in the crowd, darkened when he saw how close she was with Garin. “That’s what I want you to find out.”

He gave her a little salute, and Arianne forced herself to smile.

“What?” she hissed, as he stepped away from her and disappeared into the crowd.

Arianne turned her attention back to the dancers, and that was when the doors to the hall opened, and a herald banged down his spear, three times, in announcement of a royal member of the family.

Arianne froze, because the royal members of her family who weren’t locked away in a tower in the Water Gardens were all in this room, and so was Myrcella, so there was no reason for them to be making that announcement, not unless Quentyn had returned, and if he had, it would have been at the front of an army, surely.

She felt a little bit sick, at the thought.

She was not blind to the threat that he still presented, the threat that could bring Dorne into the war that they were all so excited about, though she feared that not all of Dorne would stand behind her in that case.

Truthfully, that was what she was really afraid of.

And then she saw the person whom the herald was announcing, and Arianne’s world fell apart a little bit more, then.

The dancing, as Arianne barely noticed, had come to a pause, then.

If Garin were still there, Arianne would have demanded to know why the fuck no one had bothered to tell her that…

That…

Surely, someone must have known, someone must have been aware that she was coming. It was not as if she could just land in the harbor without anyone fucking noticing.

Still, Arianne saw the looks of shock on every other face around her, as Mellario of Norvos sauntered into the dancing hall as if she belonged there, as if it wasn’t completely strange to see her there again after so many years without her presence in Dorne, and what a gap that had caused.

“Mother,” Arianne breathed, staring up at the tall, darkly tan woman before her, a veil covering half of her face, her body quite covered for one living in Dorne, something that Arianne belatedly remembered her being modest about when she had still resided in Dorne.

Which she didn’t, anymore.

Arianne licked her lips, lifting her chin at her mother, as her mother took in the sight of her, sitting on her father’s throne, and tried not to feel chastised, under that particular gaze, as Lady Mellario of Norvos took in everything in the throne room.

Her husband promptly dropped Myrcella’s hand and stalked up to the throne, and if Arianne had been more aware of her faculties, she might have been able to answer him when he hissed at her, “What the fuck is she doing here?”
But she didn’t, because she couldn’t quite bring herself to think properly at all. Couldn’t bring herself to even stand to her feet, as she stared down at her mother, as the woman walked further into the room, as the crowd parted like water, before her.

The woman looked older, but then, Arianne supposed that was to be expected. Arianne had not seen her mother since she was a child, after all, and that had been some time ago.

But still, she was beautiful as the day she had been when she got in her ship and left Dorne and her family behind for good. Beautiful, and cruel, to have returned here after so long without even a warring.

And Arianne couldn’t help but wonder why she had, after all of this time.

For a moment, she allowed herself to thrill in the small hope that it was because her mother had learned that she had taken the Dornish throne, but she let the hope fade rather quickly.

After all, she much doubted that news of it had already reached Norvos. She was not even certain that news of it had reached most of Westeros.

And Arianne wondered what it was that her mother saw, looking at all of them.

Arianne, sitting on the throne, her husband, standing tall and proud beside her, Obara and Tyene, at either side of him. Doran and Mellario’s faithful bodyguard, Areo Hotah, nowhere in sight.

Her father had a way of making his disappointment seem lesser, by not paying much attention at all to Arianne, when she was a child, and he had made his disappointment clear, with each husband that she had refused over the years.

But her mother...Before she had left, her mother had made her disappointment a known, potent thing. A loud one, that had set all of the castle tense, whichever castle she happened to be in, at the time.

Oberyn used to joke that her father had eventually sent the woman away because he lived in such fear of her, though Arianne knew that wasn’t the case.

She didn’t think that her father feared much, besides the Lannisters, much to her chagrin.

But, Arianne didn’t think her father had ever recovered from her mother’s abandonment, her return to Norvos.

Arianne was going to have to deal with her mother’s disappointment, though, if that look in her eyes did not fade.

Mellario took several steps further into the room, before pausing again, glancing at Gerold before her eyes ever even swept towards Arianne, and Arianne could not deny the sudden, painful feeling of rejection that welled up within her, at the sight.

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure,” her mother said into the silence that had descended over the hall, without even glancing in Arianne’s direction, and Arianne flinched.

“He is my husband, Mother,” she introduced him. “And I do believe that you’ve met at some point. Ser Gerold of House Dayne.”

Mellario’s eyes swept over to her, next. “Arianne, darling,” she said, and there was a warmth there, alongside the coldness, that Arianne found herself clinging to, all the same. “You look wonderful.
And sitting in your father’s chair.”

Arianne flushed a little, mouth parting.

“Well, someone had to do it,” her husband joked, at her side, and Arianne closed her eyes, irritation welling up inside of her.

Mellario shot Gerold a scathing look, and then returned her attention to Arianne, opened her mouth as if to say something, but Arianne, despite her shock that the woman had come back here at all, beat her to it.

“Why have you come, Mother?” She asked.

Mellario stared at her for a moment, her eyes searching, and Arianne hoped desperately that she found whatever it was she was searching for, before she spoke again.

“I…heard about some of the things that have been happening of late, in Dorne,” Mellario said, coldly, and Arianne swallowed hard. “I thought now would be as good a time as ever, to invite myself here to see my daughter’s new husband, if she would not even invite me to the wedding.”

Arianne closed her eyes.

Obara, at her side, spoke up rather primly, “It was a rather quick affair. We didn’t think you would have time to make it.”

“I wasn’t talking to you, Obara Sand,” Mellario said, sharply, and Obara swallowed hard, looking almost ashamed, which was not an expression that Arianne often saw on the other woman’s face.

Myrcella’s eyebrows shot up, where she stood in the crowd, and then something like a grin crossed her features before she remembered that she was in public and it vanished from her face.

Her mother…this was her mother, Arianne recognized her immediately, and at the same time, she didn’t, because her mother had obviously changed much since the last time Arianne had seen her.

She found herself missing the woman of old, the one who had engaged in shouting matches with Doran across castles, not caring who she woke up in the dead of night, over this cold, accusing woman.

“Well,” Arianne said, clapping her hands together, “Whatever reason you’re here, Dorne is happy to see you again, Mother. I’m sure you’ll understand it will take a little time to get some rooms prepared for you…”

“No matter,” Mellario said, raising a hand. “I will just take the rooms I had when I was a Princess consort, here.”

Arianne grimaced, and didn’t bother to point out that those were the rooms she slept in, most nights, now that her husband had taken up possession of hers.

She glanced over at Gerold. He shrugged.

She supposed that the rooms were already made up, at the very least, and if she didn’t share a bed with her husband, her mother would only want to dig deeper.

And Arianne didn’t know which side she would pick, once she found out the truth, and couldn’t afford to deal with yet another headache, even if a part of her was secretly thrilled at the sight of her
mother, again.

Even if a part of her wanted to see her mother’s return as a sign, that she was at least doing something right, even with the woman’s disapproval.

Because her mother had done something that she had once vowed never to do; she had come home, and that, surely, meant something.

The rest of the ball seemed…strained, after that, with nobles uncertain whether to suck up to Arianne’s husband, or her mother, tonight, all of them looking as confused as Arianne felt, about the woman’s return.

“Find out why she’s here,” Arianne hissed at Tyene, where the girl stood at her side still, as her mother made her way towards them, through a crowd of pandering nobles. “Now.”

Tyene dipped into a little curtsey, and disappeared.

Obara eyed her sharply. “What are you planning to do about it if she’s here because Quentyn found her?” She hissed, and Arianne raised an eyebrow at her.

“You think it a possibility?” She asked, fear thrumming through her that her mother had somehow already chosen a side, between the two of them.

Obara shrugged. “He’s been gone a long time, Arianne,” she pointed out. “It could be, he went crying to Mother about what he believes is his.”

Arianne swallowed, trying not to think about it. Trying not to think about the possibility that both of her parents had already been turned against her.

That wasn’t the sign that she wanted.

“Tyene will find out,” she forced herself to say, even if she didn’t quite believe the statement, herself.

It only mattered that Obara did.

Mellario, where she had walked up to Myrcella on her way to coming to Arianne, sought out Arianne’s gaze in the crowd, and Arianne squirmed a little, under that look.

She had done the right thing, she reminded herself. She had done the only thing to keep Dorne from falling into a civil war, in order to fight another one, which was what the Dornish wanted, after all.

She had done the right thing.

Her mother didn’t get to just walk in here, after all of these years of silence, and make her feel like a foolish child, when she hadn’t been here, and she didn’t know what Arianne was up against.

She didn’t.

Sharing rooms again with her husband was…strange. The two of them had found out, in the early days of their marriage that, despite their feelings for each other, which were strong enough in the bedroom, they drove each other mad.

They were both creatures of habit, and neither liked the other intruding on that habit. It was the sort of thing that didn’t come up in bed, but did come up when they both wanted to use the privy at the same time.
It was maddening.

Her husband.

She had never wanted to marry Gerold. He made for a good lover, someone to bounce ideas off of, and he was passionate in everything that he did, but Arianne had wanted to marry someone who would agree with her, not fight with her at every moment.

And they didn’t fight because they loved each other so much, the way that her mother and father had always fought. They fought because they had fundamentally different ideas about the wars to come.

Gerold was swiftly becoming a danger to her and the more time she spent with him, the more guilt she felt about what she knew in her heart she would have to do, to keep her father’s throne.

She had put distance between them because she had thought it would make things easier, in the end, and now, here he was again, sharing a bed with her, because her mother had returned from Dorne and somehow felt entitled to what was once hers, and now wasn’t.

“Why is your mother here?” Gerold demanded, spinning on her as he left the privy room, then.

Arianne glanced up sharply from where she had been changing into her nightgown and unbraiding her hair, at the same time, dancing on one foot because yet again, she’d been forced to put her husband’s wants before her own.

Gods, Arianne did not want to have this conversation. Not with her husband, who had undermined her at every turn since their marriage, who didn’t seem at all interested in honoring an alliance with the Tyrells or keeping Myrcella alive past her due date, if he didn’t have to.

Because she didn’t know the answer, and she hated speculating with someone she no longer thought that she could trust.

Her mother was back, after so many years of silence, and Arianne would have appreciated a little time to come to terms with the news alone, before being bombarded by her husband, who had all of the subtlety of a brick.

Arianne pressed a hand to her mouth. “I don’t know,” she gritted out. “Couldn’t you tell that it was just as much a surprise to me as it was to you, to see her here tonight?”

Gerold eyed her. “Was it? All of the court knows how you adored her. Perhaps you invited her here the moment you took the throne.”

Arianne reached for her brush, sitting on her bedside table, and ran it through her hair, tiring of this conversation yet again. “For what purpose?”

“Arienne snorted, setting the brush aside and turning to eye her husband speculatively. She knew already that they would never have the relationship that her mother and father had had; when she was a little girl, she had dreamed of a lover who would show her the passion her father and mother had shown each other, even if it had ended in pain, because it had been one of the few relationships Arianne had seen which she was convinced was real, save perhaps for Ellaria and Oberyn’s.

Everyone else, they played these games, marrying off to one another for the politics of the matter, so that they could get something out of it themselves, or for the sake of a child and not for a political marriage at all, and Arianne thought those marriages turned out even worse, most times.
And she had gone and gotten herself married for the sake of politics, as well.

She knew that it would not be forever; she and Gerold were both too stubborn for that, and one day, she intended to make sure he knew that she was Princess of Dorne, and he only a consort by her will.

“If you knew my mother well, you would know that it is impossible to bring her to do anything. That is why she and my father are no longer one.”

Gerold stared at her for a moment longer, and then ran a hand through his hair and let out a sigh. “Do you think that she…disapproves of you taking the throne?”

Arianne hummed. “Obviously,” she muttered. “Didn’t you see her in there?”

Oh, Mellario of old would not have been silent about the fact that she disapproved of Arianne sitting on her father’s throne; even if Arianne had just been a girl when her mother had left them, she knew that much.

But her mother’s scathing look when Gerold had joked about it, the way the nobles had shifted around her as if they could sense an incoming storm…

Oh, Arianne knew she was in trouble. She felt like a child again, about to be reprimanded for jumping into the deep end of one of the pools in the Water Gardens, when she had been told over and over again that she wasn’t supposed to.

It was an unsettling feeling.

Even when her father reprimanded her, she didn’t feel that way.

Gerold stared at her for a moment longer, speculatively, and for a moment he looked like he might say something comforting, before he shrugged. “Let’s fuck, Wife. We haven’t done it in so long.”

Arianne rolled her eyes and reached for the ties of her nightgown. “I have to use the privy,” she said, coldly. “After, though.”

Gerold grinned.
Winterfell

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains the semi-graphic death of a child.

Also, as far as I remember, Arya and Shireen never met, but if that’s not the case…oh well.

Anyways, please comment!

The Onion Knight kept telling her that it would be all right.

“It’s going to be okay, Princess,” he would remind her. “It will be all right.”

He would say it over and over, and she thought that it was because eventually, he wanted her to believe it. He wanted her to say it back to him.

But she couldn’t; every time she tried, at least to bring a little peace to his sad eyes, the words would get clogged in her throat and she couldn’t say anything, at all.

She thought that he knew that, though. It was why he kept saying it, over and over.

She knew that he loved her, and yet, she couldn’t help but wonder if he saw her as a much smaller child than she was, now. He had never treated her like she was made of broken glass prone to splintering further, in the past.

But so much had changed, in recent days, that she supposed she couldn’t blame him for that, even if, for all the times that he told her it would be all right, she believed him a little less.

But she trusted the Onion Knight to protect her, whatever happened.

The Bolton usurper, the one who had snuck into Winterfell in the dead of night after her father had left her here to go to the Rock, he had let the Onion Knight keep a knife, to protect her with.

She wasn’t certain why he allowed it; the Bolton had mad eyes, and a part of Shireen suspected that he had done it because he thought it was amusing, that her knight thought he could protect her from an entire fortress of Bolton loyal soldiers.

He was the sort of man who, she thought, would find that sort of thing amusing.

She thought he found her Onion Knight’s devotion to her amusing as well, and she didn’t understand why it was amusing to him when all of the rest of her father’s soldiers here had been killed, because clearly he hadn’t found them amusing.

But she also knew that she would never understand the man’s reasoning, would never understand why he had decided to let her Onion Knight live, why he kept her trapped down here until he needed her for something, either, rather than trying to ransom her.

Because he was mad, she knew.
She knew it from looking into his eyes, that first night as the bodies of her father’s men burned around her, some of them still alive, she suspected, though she had never shared that particular thought with Ser Davos.

She thought it would only make him look sadder, and he was already so sad, by what had happened. She didn’t want to see it get worse because of her.

Ramsay’s wife, Arya Stark, had asked him to keep Shireen and her knight somewhere safe, shaking as she asked it, because she was just as frightened of him as Shireen had been, when she had had to sit there and watch him flay alive all of her father’s soldiers, the ones who had fought so bravely for her but hadn’t been fortunate enough to die in the night, while the Bolton took Winterfell back from them, from where he had been hiding out in the woods, which shouldn’t have been possible at all.

But Arya hadn’t wanted Shireen to be exposed to more than what had happened that night, it seemed, and had been just brave enough to ask for that.

Arya was just as afraid of her husband, Shireen thought, as Shireen felt, every time she looked up into those mad eyes, when he demanded an audience with her and she had to stand before the chair her father had sat in, while Winterfell was his, and pretend that he didn’t terrify her.

And her husband had thought it was amusing to honor her request by sending Shireen down where, “No one will disturb her, Wife,” he had said, and laughed while he said it.

For a single, frightening moment, Shireen had been terrified that Ramsay Bolton was going to throw her into the pit of her father’s flayed, burned soldiers, the ones he had forced her to watch die, and she had felt anger towards the other woman, for intervening on her behalf at all.

But he hadn’t.

Shireen sniffed, leaning back against the wall as she closed her eyes, not wanting to think about the room around her.

Didn’t want to think of how many dead Starks were buried in this crypt where she was forced to sleep, forced to spend most of her days alongside the Onion Knight, because after those first few days, when Ramsay had first been victorious in taking Winterfell, he had gotten bored with her and hadn’t dragged her before him again, since.

The Onion Knight was on the other side of the crypts; she thought that it comforted him, to stand at the doors entering the crypts, with his knife in his hands, just in case anyone tried to come for her.

She didn’t think that he would be able to hold off anyone, but she had seen him fight off several of Ramsay’s guards, when they came down for her. She didn’t understand why; Ramsay did not seem like the sort of man bothered by his own men’s deaths, and he only sent more, after the Onion Knight had killed those.

He always told her not to look, when he did it, but Shireen looked, anyway.

Looked, and imagined that this time, her Onion Knight might have actually cut through Ramsay Bolton, this time, and they could be free of the bastard.

There was not much else to do, inside these crypts, than to think. At least when she was allowed to still sleep inside of the fortress, as terrifying as it had been to sleep so close to Ramsay Bolton, she’d had her books, because Ramsay didn’t seem to find anything amusing in taking them away from her.
Down here, she had only been allowed a bath tub and her blankets and gowns, and precious few of those, as well.

She could not read to the Onion Knight, could only recite stories of the Dance of Dragons while the Onion Knight listened patiently and pretended that she wasn’t getting the stories wrong, each time she recited them again, her memories of them fading a little bit more with each retelling.

And so, Shireen spent her time imagining, when she wasn’t talking to the Onion Knight. Imagining that this time, he would find some way for them to escape, that they would leave this place and go back home, where she had always felt safe, even if she had been lonely, and her father would come back and find her there, once he had been victorious.

She would finally be the princess he told her that she was, then.

The doors to the entrance of the crypts opened then, and her Onion Knight stood up sharply, the knife that Ramsay Bolton had allowed him to keep for his own amusement raised in the air.

He lowered it, when he saw that their guest was not a guard, but Myranda, the kennel master’s daughter, who had never been far from Ramsay’s side, when he first retook Winterfell.

She sniffed, haughtily, and sought out Shireen’s gaze, in the darkness of the crypts.

They were allowed torches, down here, but sometimes they went out, and the two of them would have to sit in the darkness and wait for Myranda to return with another torch.

This time, the torch had not yet gone out, but it kept flickering.

“I’m here to give the Princess her bath,” Myranda said, and the Onion Knight stiffened.

“Can’t it happen outside these damn crypts?” He hissed at her, voice so soft, she was sure he thought she couldn’t hear him. “He hasn’t let her out of here in days.”

Myranda let out a noise like a scoff; in the beginning, she had thought it was funny, Shireen thought, to pretend to be kind to Shireen.

Now, she seemed bored with that.

“I can draw a bath in the tub that he had brought down here for her, if you turn away,” she said primly, and the Onion Knight, her fierce protector, scoffed.

“She is a Princess, you know,” he said. “She’s not used to…”

“We must all get used to things we aren’t used to,” Myranda said, with a little smirk, and Shireen bit back a sigh, holding up her hand.

They both fell silent, turning to look at her expectantly.

“Its fine,” she assured the Onion Knight, even if it wasn’t really, not at all.

But her Onion Knight already worried enough; she saw no reason to make him worry even more.

Myranda got to work, as always, making it seem like some great chore, to pull the buckets down the steps, despite the Onion Knight being turned down when he offered to help her.

She filled the bath tub, and this time, Shireen hoped that the water was warm, as the Onion Knight turned around to afford them some allusion of privacy.
Myranda didn’t seem to care if the bath was private or not, but Shireen had been forced to get used to that.

Even when she was sleeping upstairs, Myranda had been there, for every bath, and Shireen didn’t know if it was because she enjoyed humiliating her, or if she thought that Shireen wasn’t capable of giving herself her own bath, as a princess.

Shireen would gladly have given herself her own bath, if it meant she didn’t have to spend time with Myranda, and all of her questions.

She sighed, shrugging out of her gown, which was getting filthy, from how long she had spent down here, but Myranda never offered to wash her gowns, and slipping into the bath with only the slightest feeling of self-consciousness.

During the first few days after Ramsay had taken Winterfell, before Arya had asked for her to not be sleeping so close to her husband’s chambers, had asked his promise on it, Shireen had slept in the Lady of Winterfell’s chambers, still.

She had been forced to eat her meals with the rest of the wretched Bolton family, forced to sit at the table her parents had once sat at, across from Ramsay Bolton and Arya Stark, next to Walda Frey.

No one spoke of what had happened to Roose; the last time that her father had fought the Bolton army, Roose Bolton had been at the head of that army, but he wasn’t here, now.

Shireen wondered if he had gone back to the Dreadfort, but wasn’t quite brave enough to ask.

But Walda Frey was kind; she looked at Shireen like she pitied her, like she was already imagining what Shireen would look like, dead and flayed, like the rest of her father’s men had been, but she was kind.

Arya was kind, too, but she was even more frightened of her husband than Walda seemed to be, and they hadn’t spoken much, before she had asked Ramsay to take some pity on Shireen, and he had thought it would be funny to send Shireen down to the crypts, with the dead, in response.

Myranda had been kind too, in the beginning. Had told Shireen that she wanted her to be happy here, that she was an honored guest, even if Ramsay did not acknowledge her as a princess.

And then, the kindness had worn off, and Shireen had seen in her the same madness that she had seen in Ramsay Bolton’s eyes.

“Do you have anything that you want to tell me, Princess?” Myranda asked, with that same mocking title that they all used since the first time that the Onion Knight had called her that.

She almost wished that he would just call her Shireen, because it hurt worse, to hear them all mocking her with that title.

As if it had never belonged to her in the first place.

Shireen reached up to pull her hair out of the other woman’s grip. “No,” she whispered, in a small voice.

She knew that she was going to have to get better at lying, if she was truly stuck here, with Ramsay Bolton.

If her father was never going to come back for her, something that she was still trying to find it hard
to accept, because she was sure that her father would have come back for her, after he had heard what happened to Winterfell, to his men here.

But he hadn’t, not as the days grew shorter and Ramsay brought her before his chair, as the new Lord of Winterfell, and asked her how she might feel about it, if he declared himself her Regent, now that her father seemed to have disappeared Beyond the Wall.

And if it ended up being that way, if Ramsay Bolton became her Regent, she was going to have to know how to lie to him.

It felt wrong, lying. She had never been very good at it, because she had never spent much time around many people to begin with, given that her father and mother kept her locked away for so much of her young life, and when she did get to speak to others, she didn’t want to lie to them.

But she thought that she could learn to lie to Ramsay.

And she needed to practice, on Myranda, now that she was the only other person, besides the Onion Knight, that Shireen saw regularly enough to lie to.

And in a way, this lie was even the truth.

She didn’t want to tell Myranda anything, because she knew that Myranda was Ramsay’s woman, for all that he was married to Arya Stark, just as the Red Woman belonged to her father, and he to her, and not to her mother, not really.

Myranda would probably tell Ramsay anything that Shireen told her.

Myranda hummed. “Not even about the Shadow?” She asked, and Shireen closed her eyes.

The Shadow.

Myranda asked her about the Shadow every time that she came down, and Shireen wondered how she knew; he didn’t talk, so surely she had not gotten the information from him, but somehow, she always knew when he had come to visit her.

Still, she practiced lying, because what else could she do?

She had the Onion Knight, but he was her knight, and she couldn’t bear the thought that if she did finally tell Myranda about the Shadow, her only other friend would be taken from her, too.

She was afraid of the Shadow, sometimes, but not like she was afraid of Ramsay, and the Shadow was her friend, while Ramsay very much wasn’t.

She cleared her throat. Opened her eyes again, and, even though she had already clearly been caught, she whispered, “No.”

Myranda was silent. Then, she reached out and tugged on Shireen’s hair, a little too tightly. Shireen squirmed, trying to pull away from her, but Myranda held fast.

“You shouldn’t try to lie to me, Princess,” Myranda taunted. “Bad things happen to liars, you should know that.”

Shireen sniffed; Myranda was holding her hair in a punishing grip, and it caused her eyes to prick with unshed tears.

But she wasn’t going to cry, in front of this woman, she thought, desperately.
“And if Ramsay is going to be your Regent, he needs to know that he can trust you,” Myranda went on, and Shireen bit back a scoff.

She knew that was the plan he had told her, that it was the thing he intended, now that he was here, because there was a difference between being Lord of Winterfell and the Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, but she also knew that he wouldn’t let her live, that long.

And it was a terrifying thought, but one that she knew to be true. It was the reason that the Onion Knight guarded the entrance to the crypts, day and night, the reason that she never saw him sleeping unless she begged him to. The reason that Ramsay kept her down here at Arya request, rather than bringing her up to sleep in the rooms she had been sleeping in, before.

Ramsay might claim to be her regent for a little while, if that was even his intention and he wasn’t pretending all along, but eventually, she would disappear. Because she annoyed him, or because he thought it would be amusing.

And her father would never come back for her, before then.

Shireen didn’t say anything of this to Myranda, however; she didn’t even tell it to her faithful knight, because she knew that he worried about her enough, already.

Sometimes, when she had begged her Onion Knight to sleep and his breathing finally evened out, where he refused to move away from the door, she would whisper it to the crypts, where the dead could not respond to her.

She would whisper to them that she knew she would be joining them soon enough, and she hoped that they did not feel too imposed upon, that she was forced to live down here, among them, for now.

Myranda let go of her hair abruptly, and stood up from where she had been kneeling behind the bathtub. “I think you’re all clean now, Princess,” she said, coldly, and Shireen lifted her chin as the other woman said, “Get out so I can dump the bathwater.”

Shireen forced herself to step out; the crypts felt freezing now, after her bath, and she searched the floor desperately for the gown she had been wearing before, pulling it on over her head and refusing to meet the other woman’s eyes, as she did so.

Myranda let out something like a scoff, before she tipped the bath a bit, dumping the water back into the buckets that she had brought with her, before sniffing again and making her way back up the stairs, out of the crypts, the buckets in both of her hands.

The doors shut behind her with a loud bang, and Shireen jumped a little, at the sound. At the reminder that there were always at least two guards outside those doors, to make sure that she and the Onion Knight couldn’t escape again.

Shireen took a deep breath, adjusting her gown again, and let it out slowly.

“All decent, Princess?” She heard the Onion Knight ask then, and despite herself, Shireen smiled.

“Yes,” she said, and her Onion Knight stepped out of the shadows, and Shireen forced herself not to flinch, yet again, at the sight of the scar on his neck, from those first few days after Ramsay had taken Winterfell, when she had been sleeping in the Lady of Winterfell’s chambers but the Onion Knight, after Ramsay had finally taken his sword from him, was forced to sleep in a kennel, beside Ramsay Bolton’s angry dogs.

He had tried to help her escape, in those first nights, because he was furious with the Bolton, and
Shireen didn’t know how he had done it, but somehow, he had escaped the kennel where the dogs were, and come to her.

They had gotten as far as the outer courtyard, before they had been found, standing in front of the pile of her father’s soldiers.

Found by the dogs, and by Myranda and Ramsay, who looked amused at their little escape attempt.

That was when her knight had gotten the scar on his neck.

They didn’t speak about it now, though; sometimes, if she wasn’t looking at him, Shireen could pretend it wasn’t there, a reminder of how he had failed, and how she had failed to keep her faithful knight safe, in turn.

That was when Arya Stark had asked that Shireen not have to sleep so close to Ramsay’s rooms, and he had thrown them in the crypt, instead.

She sniffed, glancing around. She supposed that, even filled with dead Starks, the crypts were better than the sound of creaking floorboards, every time someone moved outside of her rooms, and she wondered if this time, it was Ramsay, come to hurt her in that way that seemed to make Arya Stark so afraid, had made her scream, in the nights when Shireen had still been sleeping up there, and could hear it.

Now, she suspected that she was simply too far away to hear the screams, but they still occurred, like they had.

She swallowed hard at the thought, hugging herself a little as she sat down against the wall; there weren’t any chairs down here, because the dead didn’t need them.

Ramsay had not even allowed the bath tub until the second week that she had been trapped down here, and even then, someone had to bring the water for it.

Shireen sniffed again, told herself to stop being stupid, because she knew that if she started crying in front of the Onion Knight, it would only make him feel bad, and she didn’t want to make him feel bad.

He had done everything he could, to protect her.

It just wasn’t enough, because in the end, he wasn’t really her father, the only one who really could, now.

“Everything all right, Princess?” Her knight asked her, even if he had to know that it wasn’t, not really.

She sniffed, in answer.

The crypts were large, housing many dead Starks, but they were not large enough that the Onion Knight could not have heard her conversation, with Myranda.

She knew that he didn’t like her spending so much time with the Shadow, because the Shadow didn’t speak and he thought the Shadow was mad, like Ramsay Bolton was, but he never objected, every time she lied to Myranda about it.

She was still his Princess, after all, and he knew that the Shadow was her friend, now, just as he was.
He wouldn’t try to take him from her.

“Do you think…” Shireen bit the inside of her cheek, glancing out of the corner of her eyes at the knight. “Do you think Father won’t come back because he’s punishing me, for this?” She whispered, finally putting a voice to the worry she had been trying to hold back all of this time, because she couldn’t stand making the Onion Knight look even more sad than he already did.

But the question plagued at her, the longer she spent in the crypts, wondering when she, too, would be buried alongside all of these bodies.

The Onion Knight sucked in a breath. “Princes…”

Shireen sniffed again, rubbing at her eyes, not able to look at the Onion Knight, now.

“Your father loves you very much, Princess,” the Onion Knight said, a bit stiffly. “He only did it so that he could keep you safe.”

“No, he didn’t,” Shireen whispered, interrupting him, and the Onion Knight turned to her with wide eyes.

“Princes…”

“If he loved me, he would have taken me with him,” she whispered, very sure of the thought. “Like he took Mother, and the Red Woman.”

She tried not to think about the fact that her father probably would have chosen the Red Woman over her mother, if he’d wanted to, and didn’t want to think about the thought that even then, he loved her mother more than her.

Else, he would have taken her with him, when he left this place, and she would never have ended up as a captive to Ramsay Bolton. Or, at the very least, he would have come back for her, the moment he learned that Ramsay had taken Winterfell, where he knew his daughter to be.

She sniffed, reaching up to wipe at her eyes with her grimy hands.

Myranda had just insisted on bathing her, and already, she was dirty again.

That was what came of living down here, she thought, glancing around as the Onion Knight bent down in front of her.

“Your father was trying to protect you, Princess,” he told her, gently, and his eyes were pained. “He was going to fight the Lannisters, and he didn’t want to drag you into a battle. He thought that…I’m sure that he thought the Boltons were gone for good, else he would never have left you here.”

Shireen sniffed again, refusing to meet his eyes. “Then he should have come back,” she whispered, so softly that the Onion Knight had to lean forwards to hear her.

The Onion Knight let out a sigh, at her words. “They say your father’s gone North,” he said. “Can’t imagine why, but I’m sure that he doesn’t know about what’s happened here. Or he would come back.”

He said it like he didn’t truly believe it, but wanted her to, the same way that he always told her that everything would be all right, it would.

She licked her lips. “I know,” she lied, because she didn’t really know that anymore, did she?
Her father had almost sacrificed her to the Lord of Light, before the Battle of Winterfell. Had wanted to, because the Red Woman whispered it in his ear, and she had always thought that the Red Woman was good, that she was her friend, before that moment.

She had told him that the Lord of Light demanded a sacrifice, and the only reason that Shireen hadn’t been sacrificed, she knew, was because of the Onion Knight.

Because he had reminded her father of how he had made sacrifices to the Lord of Light already, even if Shireen didn’t know what he was talking about and the thought of it made her cringe, and still, Joffrey Baratheon lived.

That had been what had staid her father’s hand, not his love for his daughter, and it had made her sick, to realize that.

And then, he had left her in Winterfell, while he had gone West, which he had never done before, not since he had first taken her from Dragonstone, and she didn’t know if it was a punishment, for the fact that he hadn’t sacrificed her when he should have.

And then, the Boltons had taken back Winterfell, and she wondered if her father had not returned for her because he had recognized his failure, in not sacrificing her to the Lord of Light, was the reason that the Boltons had managed to take Winterfell back.

Wondered if he was sacrificing her to them, now, rather than the Lord of Light.

Shireen loved her father, and it hurt, to know that she had failed him by staying alive. That she was in this position at all because he hadn’t done what the Red Woman told him to, with her.

The Onion Knight’s eyes were sad, as he took a seat against the wall beside her.

She thought he knew what she was thinking, but he didn’t try to convince her otherwise. Just sat with her, and she was glad for his silence.

A girl who called herself Arya Stark took a deep breath, as the doors to her chambers were ripped open, trying not to flinch at the loud sound as it echoed through the room.

Myranda stepped into her chambers with all of the prim smugness of a queen, for all that she was nothing more than a kennel master’s daughter, and they both knew it. She eyed Arya up and down, and then smirked a little, and clapped her hands together.

The loud sound made Arya flinch, too, where she sat on the bed, or rather, laid on it, barely able to sit up properly after her husband’s…ministrations, the night before.

Her gown had slipped down, exposing much of what he had done to her, and it was that Myranda was smirking at, the bitch.

Arya wondered whether Ramsay bruised her when he made love to Myranda, and if she enjoyed it when Arya could not. If it was the same sort of bruising, or if he was somehow nice to her because he liked her madness, saw it as akin to his own.

Myranda eyed her with amusement. “Ramsay says its time for supper, now,” she said, and Arya grimaced as she got to her feet, and reached for her torn robe, where Ramsay had left it on the floor beside her bed, earlier.

“Already?” She asked, trying to infuse this situation with normalcy when they both knew that there
was nothing normal about it.

Myranda, the kennel master’s daughter, was Ramsay’s whore, and she loved him with a jealous, possessive love.

Arya couldn’t imagine what was wrong with the mind of someone who loved Ramsay Bolton so obviously.

Myranda hummed. “He’s invited his mother, Walda, as well,” she said. “He wants you there, now.”

Arya grimaced, shrugging into her torn robe more painful than she had thought it would be. She thought for a moment about what to do with her hair, before giving up on it altogether; Ramsay’s men had spent the last several months before they had retaken Winterfell living in the woods, and even before that, they had seen her in worse states.

She saw no reason to pretend otherwise now, just because they bowed before her and called her the Lady of Winterfell, once again.

Myranda pursed her lips in irritation, but didn’t say anything as Arya turned to her and said, “I’m ready.”

Myranda hummed. “Fine,” she muttered, and turned, stalking from the room, leading the way into a dining hall where Arya Stark had once eaten meals with her family, a dining hall that had once been filled with happiness and music.

Now, it was filled only with the sound of silence, the creaking of guards’ armor, and Ramsay Bolton’s smile, where he sat already at the head of the table, across from Fat Walda.

He smiled, as Arya stepped into the dining hall, stood to kiss her cheek, before she sat down beside him, Myranda sitting by his other side.

“I see you dressed up for the occasion, Wife,” Ramsay teased her, but Arya could not even bring herself to feel fear at what he might do to her for not having dressed up.

She was too tired.

“Mother,” Ramsay said, clutching his mother’s arms as he leaned down to kiss her, and Fat Walda Frey shuddered, but didn’t dare pull away as he did so, before he took a seat across from her and between Myranda and Arya, once more.

The meal was tense, silent.

Arya was not usually invited to the meals; she had to go to the kitchens most days and beg, like the dogs, and the servants there were only slightly nicer than Ramsay was with his animals, even if they pretended to respect her as the Lady of Winterfell.

“I’ve been thinking, Mother,” Ramsay said into the silence that accompanied forks being scraped across plates, and drinking, and guards watching on, and Walda lifted her head.

Arya didn’t think she would ever become accustomed to Ramsay calling her that, just as she would never get accustomed to Ramsay calling her ‘Arya.’

But especially not after Ramsay had killed Roose in front of Walda.

“Oh?” The other woman asked, trying to sound nonchalant.
Ramsay smirked, and suddenly, Jeyne knew.

She knew that he knew, somehow, about what Walda had done. About the letter that she had sent her corpse of a father, a man who had never loved her if he had married her off to the Boltons in the first place, but certainly hadn’t after Stannis had retaken Winterfell and he hadn’t lifted a finger to find her.

And still, she had sent it, because he was her father. Begging for help against Ramsay Bolton, who saw her child as nothing more than a threat, now that his father was also gone.

Ramsay didn’t say any of this, however. What he did say, still smirking, was, “My dogs haven’t been fed in an age, poor things. They must be almost willing to eat each other, at this point, just to get some food in their stomachs.”

Walda’s face went very pale. “No…” she breathed, eyes widening.

Arya sighed, and looked away, suddenly no longer hungry at all, despite the fact that she, too, couldn’t remember the last time that she had eaten.

Walda’s mouth fell open; she glanced from Ramsay to Arya, and then back to Ramsay, seeming to realize only then that she would receive no sympathy, from Arya.

Oh, she had her sympathy. But Walda should know by now that there was nothing Arya could do, to stop her husband.

There was nothing anyone could do.

“Please,” Walda said, desperation bleeding into her voice. “Please, don’t do this. Ramsay, please! He’s your brother.”

Ramsay chuckled, stabbing another slab of meat and chewing on it loudly. “You had to know this was coming, Mother,” he said, voice cheerful, as if they were discussing the weather. “And your husband was my father; that didn’t stop me.”

He said it as if he thought she ought to be proud of him, for butchering his own father in the woods after they had lost the battle to Stannis Baratheon.

Arya sat very still; her stomach suddenly felt queasy, and she knew that Ramsay would make some comment about her not eating enough, when he took her to bed later, but that would be better than throwing up in front of him, now, she thought.

Walda swallowed hard; the sound of it was loud in the otherwise silent dining room, and Arya flinched.

“Please, Ramsay,” Walda continued, real fear bleeding into her tone now, as she seemed to realize that this wasn’t some new, cruel joke, that he fully intended to make do on the threat. “Please, don’t do this. Not to him. Hurt me, but don’t hurt him. Please. He’s just a child!”

Ramsay grunted, lifting his chin. “And who would take care of him without you, Mother?” he asked her. “You’re so good with him. I’d hate to think that he would grow up alone, an orphan.”

Walda started to sob, pushing back her chair but not daring to get up from it.

“I grew up without a mother, after all, and look how I turned out,” Ramsay continued, smirking for a moment before his expression morphed into one of mock sympathy. “I know you wouldn’t want that
for your son.”

Walda swallowed thickly. “Please…” she whimpered, but seemed unable to continue beyond that one word, and Arya looked away as the tears streamed down the other woman’s face, feeling uncomfortable, now.

She knew that if she got up and left, if she spoke out at all, Ramsay would still kill Walda and the child, and he would do worse things, to her.

And Myranda, damn her, smiling where she sat on the other side of Ramsay, would watch.

He didn’t have his creature, his Reek, to watch anymore, so Myranda did, and Ramsay liked to show off for her even more than he had for Reek.

“This is for the best,” Ramsay told her, reaching out to take Walda’s hand in his; she snatched hers away, but he didn’t seem at all bothered by that, just shrugging and leaning back in his chair.

“After you’re gone, I won’t have any reason to keep playing nice with the Freys,” Ramsay went on, still smiling, though the look was almost gentle, now.

The same look that he had given Arya on their wedding night, before he tore open her gown and called for Reek.

“I’ll be able to be rid of them, finally,” Ramsay continued, as if he thought Walda ought to be proud of him for making such plans. “And the North hates them, for what they did to the Starks; when they’re gone, I’ll have an even better claim to Winterfell.” He eyed Arya. “What do you think, Wife? A good present for you?”

Arya shook, and didn’t speak.

Ramsay shrugged again. “Well, if you don’t appreciate it there’s another princess in the castle who might. She definitely stands to gain from it, too.”

Arya felt her stomach drop out, beneath her.

Ramsay smirked, because Walda was crying hysterically now, not listening to a word that he was saying, but he kept talking, anyway, and Myranda was staring at him with rapt attention.

Still, Ramsay was looking at Arya, not Myranda or Walda, and Arya shivered as she knew that he would want to hurt her tonight, that Myranda would encourage it for the way that he was looking at her, now.

“What do you think? Should we invite Her to the proceedings, to watch, Arya?” Her husband asked, at her side.

The thought of inviting Her to the proceedings - of inviting Her to watch Ramsay sic his dogs on a child and his mother, as Arya knew it would happen - was abhorrent, to her, and she wanted to be sick at the thought.

Her mind spun.

She couldn’t save Walda and he child; she could see that in Ramsay’s mind, he’d already made up his mind about it.

But if she could, surely, she should try to keep Her away from it.
And he had been calling her Arya - everyone had, even those who were in on the secret - ever since their marriage, so she should have been used to it, by now. Should have been used to answering to that name.

But in the bedchamber, he didn’t call her anything, and so she took another bite of her food without looking up, without realizing that her husband had asked her anything at all, even though she should have.

She had not slept at all, the night before. Her husband had not come to her chambers at all, and sometimes, those nights were worse, because she wasn’t given the warning that he wasn’t coming, and so she would wait all night, sometimes, to see if he would.

It was better to be ready for him than to wake in the night, caught by surprise because her husband wanted to perform his husbandly duties.

“Wife!” Ramsay shouted, though his demeanor didn’t change in the least, and Myranda snorted a little as she took another sip of her wine at his other side, while Walda, still shaking and whimpering, flinched again.

Arya flinched. “I…” she swallowed hard. Looked at Walda, where the other woman was still shaking and crying, and then away, because Walda was staring at her like she thought Arya might have some sort of solution for this. Then, lifting her chin, “I think it would be unwise, my lord, to bring Her out of the crypts. She’s more comfortable down there, and the Lords of the North seem to prefer things when she’s down there, too.”

Ramsay stared at her for a moment, and then he burst out laughing. “My wife is learning, Mother,” he told Walda, grinning as the woman kept sobbing in front of them.

It was only then that Arya realized he’d purposely had Walda sit on the other side of the table from them, so that she was against them, Arya noticed.

Arya shivered.

She wondered how long he’d been planning this; things were always worse, the more thought Ramsay put into them.

She hoped that he would have the dogs eat them; that, at least, would be over with more quickly than if he had them flayed alive, like the Boltons did to their enemies on the battlefield.

“Well, no time like the present,” Ramsay said, into the silence. “Don’t you think?”

Walda’s tears streamed down her face and onto the plate beneath her hands, and she didn’t answer.

Myranda hummed. “I’ll have the guards go and find the boy,” she said, smirking, and Walda let out another desperate sob as the guards remaining in the room moved towards her.

Ramsay got to his feet, as well, and Arya tried desperately to think of some escape for herself, from what was about to happen.

She couldn’t stop it, but she didn’t want to be forced to watch it, either.

“I’m feeling a bit…tired,” Arya gasped out. “Perhaps I could go and lie down, instead?”

Ramsay raised an eyebrow. “Do you think you’re pregnant?” He asked her, and Arya felt the blood drain from her face.
“I…No, my lord,” she said, and Ramsay shrugged, leaning forward and grabbing ahold of her, then.

“Your name is Arya Stark,” Ramsay said, lifting her chin in his hand, and Arya shivered a little as she forced herself to meet his eyes.

Nothing good ever came of meeting his eyes. He didn’t like to be challenged by those who feared him.

“And you will watch this because it pleases me,” he went on, and Arya lifted her chin out of his grip, for just a moment, before nodding meekly and lowering her head again.

Ramsay rolled his eyes, and walked out into the courtyard of Winterfell, and Arya forced herself to follow him, even as her legs threatened to give out beneath her.

She saw, with some relief, that chairs had been set out for them, to watch the…proceedings, and she gritted her teeth and tried not to react to the thought of what those proceedings would be.

She was already going to be punished, tonight, for not reacting the first time he’d called her ‘Arya,’ at the supper table.

She lowered her eyes. “Yes, my lord,” she whispered, and Ramsay let go of her arm as he took his seat.

She sat, as well, and pretended that her stomach wasn’t queasy and unpleasant, ever since that meal. Pretended that her legs would carry her, if she could just persuade herself to get up and run away from this horrible place.

Instead, her eyes strayed to the middle of the courtyard, where the guards, all so very loyal to Ramsay, dragged out Walda and her son, Walda’s hands bound behind her back, but her mouth let free so that all could hear her screams.

The guards were holding her child as one might a fox caught on the hunt, and Arya grimaced, looking away, but there was nowhere to look that felt safe.

Not Walda and her son and the guards, and not the kennel master, bringing out the dogs, as they strained on their harnesses and growled at the air.

Myranda, where she stood at Ramsay’s side, let out a little laugh. “Look at them, Ramsay,” she said, her voice almost teasing. “They’re so hungry. You’ve been neglecting them.”

Ramsay laughed, and Arya felt sick again.

There was a pit, in the middle of the courtyard where Starks had once stood so neatly in a row to meet lords and kings who came to Winterfell.

It was where the Boltons had stood, as well, as they first greeted Jeyne Poole, pretending that she was Arya because it pleased them to do so, because they had something to gain from convincing the rest of a rebellious North that they now had Arya Stark at Winterfell.

Now, it was a pit.

Ramsay had turned it into that, when he took Winterfell back from what remained of Stannis’ soldiers there, after the man had gone North and no one had heard from him for some time.

They had been living in the woods, Ramsay and his men, Myranda and Jeyne. Had been forced to
live like animals for months, because it looked to Ramsay like he would never get his chance to take
back Winterfell by then, but he was a stubborn man and refused to slink back home with his tail
between his legs.

Or at least, that was what he had told Roose, before he buried a knife in his chest and declared to the
soldiers of House Bolton that his father had been a coward.

Jeyne remembered the look of shock in Roose’s eyes, moments before he died, as he realized that his
son really did have what it took to kill his own father.

But Ramsay’s persistence had eventually paid off; eventually, and Jeyne didn’t quite know how, he
had learned that Stannis had gone Beyond the Wall and disappeared for good, and that had been the
same day that he had decided to take back Winterfell, under cover of darkness.

Quietly, of course, because the North might not like Stannis much, but they certainly preferred him to
the Boltons, just now.

And then…

And then, it had been a bloodbath, even though there were more soldiers inside the Keep than
Ramsay had with him.

He’d flayed them alive, in the pit that had been made from their blood drenching the soil of the
courtyard so much that the land started to dip inwards, the bodies piled on each other for days, flayed
and flayed until each man died of the flaying alone.

Ramsay had gotten rid of the bodies eventually, after they laid out there as trophies, but he seemed to
like the symbolism of the pit, and it was where he punished anyone else who wronged him, these
days.

Except for Jeyne. Her punishments were always of a…more private nature.

Walda was still sobbing, as she was led out before the dogs, as Ramsay grinned and spread his arms
wide.

“Anything else you’d like to say, Mother?” He asked her, and the guards let go of her for a single
moment.

Walda tried to run for her son. The guards grabbed her again, and Ramsay laughed.

Jeyne swallowed hard.

“I guess not,” Ramsay said, chuckling, and his men chuckled with him because they feared him,
Jeyne knew, but it was cold comfort, today.

Then, Ramsay nodded to the kennel master to let the dogs loose, and his men all backed up as the
dogs entered the pit, frothing at the mouth for some food after being left without for so long.

Walda’s anguished screams filled the air, and Jeyne cracked an eye open to find that one of the
guards had thrown Ramsay’s brother into the pit before the dogs could reach Walda.

The guards, however, had all backed up, not wanting to become targets of the dogs, themselves.

Jeyne squeezed her eyes shut until her husband leaned over and hissed, “What did I just tell you,
Wife?”
She forced her eyes open again, forced herself to remember how to breathe as the dogs made quick
work of the child - he was only an infant, after all - and turned their snouts in Walda’s direction, next.

Her name was Jeyne Poole, she thought to herself, in the privacy of her own mind where even
Ramsay Bolton could not get to her, no matter how hard he tried.

Sometimes, she had the thought while he was abusing her, in the bedchamber. Sometimes, she had it
at inane times of the day, when she knew that Ramsay wasn’t watching her and couldn’t know her
thoughts, as she sometimes suspected he had the ability do to.

She was having the thought now, and she knew that it was wrong, because she should be thinking
only of Walda, as her child was thrown into a pit of wild dogs who didn’t hesitate to tear him apart,
despite the child’s cries, despite the way that Walda fell to her knees and screamed.

She wasn’t trying to get away. She had just seen the worst sight of her entire life, Jeyne was sure,
and she was giving up.

There was no escape attempt, no tears, no threats of what her father might do to Ramsay, for this.

Just…screams, for a child already lost, a child whom she would soon join.

My name is Jeyne Poole.

Jeyne Poole.

Jeyne Poole.

She repeated it over and over, in her mind, as she watched the dogs eat Ramsay’s little brother while
his stepmother, Fat Walda, watched, and then, she kept up the litany, as she watched the dogs turn
on Fat Walda next, where she was bound and flailing on the ground, where she had all but given up
fighting them off as the last of her child’s screams had stopped, as the woman’s screams and cries,
more for grief for her child than for her own pain, filled the air.

If she were Arya, she would get up, she would do something, because Arya had always been a
courageous little thing, even when she was being stupid. She would always do what she thought was
right, the way that she had ordered her dog on Joffrey Baratheon, after he had tormented the
butcher’s boy, or at least, that was how Sansa had told her it was done.

Arya was good, and brave, and had never questioned her own mind.

Jeyne Poole was just a steward’s daughter, blessed to be Sansa’s friend and thus spend so much time
with her.

Jeyne Poole wasn’t brave, or smart, or particularly good with words. She had just enjoyed spending
time with Sansa, and learning the sorts of things that Sansa learned, from the septas.

Jeyne Poole couldn’t do anything if the Lord of Winterfell ordered someone’s death, even if she
thought it was wrong.

She was shaking, in her seat, and her husband reached out, snatching her hand in hers and squeezing
it so tightly that Jeyne flinched, the way she knew he wanted her to.

He smirked at her, leaning down to whisper in her ear, “If you cry over her, I’ll feed you to the dogs
next, Wife.”
She tried to tell herself that it was a lie, even as her shaking only got worse. That Ramsay needed her alive, because the North hated him, and because he had only managed to bring them all in line by marrying her. And because he needed to put a child in her belly eventually, so that House Bolton could continue on without worry of being overthrown.

She wasn’t quite convinced of the words, though, even as she thought them. Even as her husband dropped her hand and turned back to the dogs, smiling widely.

Walda Frey had always been kind to her. She was a kind woman; never asking for more than she got, seemingly happy with Roose Bolton, up until the day his own son had murdered him, though her husband was as cold and cruel as any man Arya had ever met.

She had pitied Arya, too, she knew that, though she did not hold it against the other woman.

While Roose was cold, his son was cruel in other ways, and Arya had no doubt that Walda heard those screams, every night that Ramsay came to visit her bedchambers.

During the day, Walda would often come and sit with her, for long hours at a time, never asking for anything, because Arya did not speak, most times, just sitting with her, making sure that she had something to eat, for all that her nickname ridiculed Walda for thinking of food too often, and Arya appreciated it.

She would ask Arya about her life in Winterfell, before she had ever married Ramsay, before she had seen her father killed and been rescued from the vile clutches of the Lannisters by Lord Baelish, would ask her what she used to do here, when she was a lady, as if she would happily bring back such activities again.

Jeyne had never had the heart to tell her that she wasn’t really Arya Stark, that she didn’t know much about what Arya had done to entertain herself when they were younger because she and Sansa had spent so much time avoiding the other girl, and Arya had spent so much time around the boys whom Sansa’s mother said it was inappropriate to be around for so long during the day, instead of learning to be a lady.

Now, Jeyne wished that she had learned some of the things that Arya might have, being around boys for so much of her young life.

She wished she’d learned how to wield a knife.

She appreciated what Walda might have said if she told her that she was never really Arya Stark.

She appreciated it when sometimes during her pregnancy, Walda would sit with her and sew, and talk about how her son was going to be the true heir to House Bolton, once he was born, because she was married to Roose while Ramsay’s mother had not been, and she would say it in a whisper as she looked over her shoulder, but like she knew that Arya would never tell anyone else about those secret conversations.

She never had.

And now, that child who was to be Walda’s salvation, and Jeyne’s too, if she was being honest... well, by the time the dogs were done with him, there was nothing left of him, not even flesh, only the blood staining the dogs’ snouts.

There was something left of Walda, but even then, Jeyne knew that her husband starved his dogs so that they would always eat whatever he placed in front of them, and they were hungry, today.
Ramsay was laughing, when it was over with, and beside him, Myranda was laughing, as well.

And then Ramsay clapped his hands, and one of his servants stepped forward. “Go and find the little Princess,” he said. “I have a gift for her.”

Jeyne reached out, hand grabbing Ramsay’s wrist where he still held it in the air, and he half turned in his chair, eyes going very wide at the open defiance, but he did not try to shake off her hand.

She suspected it would have been embarrassingly easy for him, if he had tried.

“What?” He snapped at her, and Jeyne forced herself not to grimace, because she knew that he would punish her for this later, and she might as well not give him more ammunition.

She looked down at the splotches of red on the ground of the courtyard, and swallowed hard.

Wondered if she should have done something more. If it would have been worth it, to try and oppose Ramsay to save the child, or, at the very least, Walda, from such a death, or if he would have killed them and hurt her, anyway.

The way he used to do at the beginning of their marriage, when she was more interesting to him than she was now, when Reek was there to watch.

She suspected that he’d enjoyed it more, because Reek was watching, and that thought gave her a little bit of the fury that she needed to oppose him now, because Walda and her son were dead, but he had no right to be crueler to anyone else, today.

To Jeyne, perhaps, because she was his, but not to Her. Not today.

Jeyne didn’t think she could live through another cruelty to someone else, today. Not when her heart was already beating in her chest, and she thought that she would have fainted if she weren’t already sitting, earlier.

On his other side, standing because she was not a lady, Myranda’s eyes widened at her defiance.

Jeyne licked her lips. “Don’t,” she whispered, so softly that only the three of them could hear, as the dogs finally stopped, and began licking at their paws in desperation.

Ramsay’s eyes met hers for a moment, and then hardened. He ripped his wrist out from her grip as easily as she had thought he would, and then snapped, “You are my wife, Lady Arya, not my counselor, and not my lord. Do not presume to question me.”

Jeyne bit her lip. “I…”

She thought of Arya Stark, that fiery little munchkin she had known growing up alongside Sansa, and thought that Arya Stark would never have been silenced by an angry husband, would never have sat back and done nothing if she thought something was wrong.

But Arya Stark was dead; everyone knew that. It was why Lord Baelish had brought her here, why he had handed her over to Ramsay as a wife, given her the name of Arya when only he, Lord Roose, Reek and Ramsay knew the truth about who she really was.

Arya was dead, or Baelish would never have dared go through with this, not when he could have the real deal.

Arya was dead, and sometimes, Jeyne wished that she was dead, but she was still alive, and that
meant she had to get out of here.

She had to get out of here, no matter the cost.

She looked down at the dogs, as the kennel master and his boys dragged the creatures back to their kennel, as the lords who had stayed to watch Fat Walda and her son’s demise - for whatever reason, because they feared Ramsay or were as sadistic as he was, she didn’t know - started to disperse.

As Myranda moved closer to Ramsay, staking her claim after the way that Jeyne had touched him by bending down and whispering something in his ear that made him snicker.

And Fat Walda and her son were gone, as if they had never been, the only reminder of them the red splotches on the ground of the courtyard, that Jeyne could not tear her eyes away from.

She hadn’t cried, Jeyne tried to tell herself, as several of the guards disappeared to bring Her here, the way that Ramsay had ordered.

She hadn’t cried, and that was good, even if a part of her desperately wanted to, and felt like a coward, for having not done so.

And then the guards were dragging Shireen Baratheon and her Onion Knight out into the courtyard next, and this time, Jeyne thought that she might really cry.

She suddenly felt a sympathy for Theon that she had never truly felt before, when he had sat back and watched as Ramsay abused her.

This was what it must have felt like, for him, she thought, to be this powerless, this useless in the face of Ramsay Bolton.

“Princess!” Ramsay said, grinning at her as he jumped to his feet, and the Onion Knight stepped forward at the motion, but that only made Ramsay’s smile grow. He reached out, running a hand through Shireen Baratheon’s hair, and the Onion Knight swallowed hard and reached for a knife that he didn’t possess.

Jeyne knew that Ramsay let him keep a knife, down in the crypts where he kept the two of them captive together. He thought it was hilarious. Every time he sent a guard down there to fetch the princess, to tell her some new horror story about her life, the Onion Knight, as he called the man who never left her side, would try to fight them off.

And every time, they were brought up here, anyway.

Not because the Onion Knight was a bad fighter; to the contrary, he had killed more than half of the men that Ramsay sent down there, but he never got past the third step of the crypts with the Princess.

Ramsay’s dogs wouldn’t allow that, and the Onion Knight would never endanger the Princess by trying to take on the dogs alone, and leaving her in Winterfell, alone.

But still, every time Ramsay brought the Princess and the Onion Knight up to see him, the Onion Knight looked a little more defeated, each time, and Jeyne felt another swell of pity for him today, as his eyes took in the sight of the courtyard, the sight of the blood, staining the ground.

The dogs were gone, but the evidence of what they had just done was not, and Jeyne imagined that they could hear the screams even down in the crypts, today.

Ramsay stepped back, raising his hands in mocking surrender to the Onion Knight, before smiling
down at Shireen again.

And…she truly was a princess, Jeyne thought. The girl was clearly terrified, but she didn’t let a bit of that show on her face, as she stared down the new Lord of Winterfell, the one who had usurped her father’s position here after Stannis Baratheon had disappeared and Ramsay had found Winterfell ripe for the picking.

Jeyne would have been proud of her, if she didn’t fear whatever Ramsay was planning, next.

Ramsay was still smiling; that was never a good sign. He liked to pretend to be kind, Jeyne knew, right before he did something horribly cruel.

“I have a gift for you, Princess,” he told Shireen as he bounded back to his chair, sat down in it like a lord holding court, and Shireen did not advance forward into the pit of drying blood.

The Onion Knight stiffened, at those words.

Jeyne bit the inside of her cheek until she could taste blood.

Myranda, at Ramsay’s side, smirked a little. “You’re very lucky, Princess,” she said, in the same voice that Ramsay had used. “The Lord of Winterfell does not give gifts out often.”

Shireen swallowed hard; Jeyne could almost hear it, from where she sat, but she didn’t speak.

Jeyne had a feeling that was for the best; had a terrible feeling that the girl might say something along the lines of the fact that her father was the Lord of Winterfell, after he had taken it from the Boltons, and that would only make everything worse, Jeyne knew.

Ramsay tilted his head back in his chair, looking up at the bright, cold sky for a moment before his gaze returned to Shireen. “You know that we’ve enjoyed hosting you here, Princess, even at great personal cost. Princesses, of course, must be treated in the manner to which they’re accustomed.”

Shireen gulped.

Ramsay eyed her for a moment longer, and Jeyne hated this. Hated the suspense that came with not knowing what it was Ramsay was about to say. What it was this gift was, after what he had just done to Walda and the child.

“You should thank us, for our hospitality,” Ramsay continued. “There are…other ways that we could have dealt with the situation, which would have been less kind, to the daughter of a traitor.”

The Onion Knight looked furious.

“After all,” Ramsay gestured to the blood staining the ground in front of him, “I had to host my father’s wife and her child here, even after my father fell in glorious battle against yours.”

Jeyne didn’t roll her eyes; she knew that the punishment for that would only be worse. Ramsay wanted to create a narrative, because, no doubt, he thought Shireen an innocent girl who shouldn’t hear the truth.

If she knew the truth, Jeyne thought, she would have had her Onion Knight slit her throat, down there in the crypts where they were kept with the bodies of the dead.

Shireen swallowed hard. “I…She was your mother, too, my lord,” she said. “You should have hosted her.”
So, she knew. Jeyne wondered if one of the guards - the butcher’s boys, as Ramsay liked to call them - had told the two of them, on their way up.

Shireen’s eyes flitted over to the pit, and then away.

Ramsay grinned. “Yes, but they weren’t really my family,” he said. “She was my father’s wife, but she wasn’t my mother. My mother was a whore.”

Silence.

Ramsay cleared his throat; clearly, he had not gotten the reaction that he wanted. “Do you want to know why I didn’t have to host them anymore, Princess? And it was about having to. Even after my father’s death, I knew that I couldn’t be rid of them.”

Shireen licked her lips. “Walda was the daughter of Walder Frey,” she said, very quietly. “And he doesn’t like you, very much.”

Ramsay threw back his head, and laughed. He jumped to his feet then, and the Onion Knight stiffened as he moved around the pit to come stand in front of Shireen, tilting up her chin.

“No, he doesn’t,” he said. “Even though we were the ones who helped him do his dirty work, with the Starks.” A shrug. “Well, to each their own. I didn’t like his fat daughter, nor her son.”

Shireen started to shake then, in earnest, the cracks starting to appear in her facade.

Ramsay chucked her chin, and let go of her, but did not move away. Myranda, pouting, stalked forward and put a proprietary hand on his arm.

“But that is my gift to you, Princess,” Ramsay said, nodding to the pit, where the smell of flesh still stung at the air in front of Jeyne’s nose.

“I…” Shireen blinked at the pit, horror in her expression for a moment before she buried it deep, and then blinked back up at Ramsay. “I don’t understand.”

Ramsay hummed. “I’ve finally chosen a side, Princess. Bent the knee, as they say.”

Shireen’s eyes widened, and Jeyne felt a stab of pity, guessing already, solely from the amount of time she had spent around Ramsay, where this was going.

“Are…are you sending me back to my mother, at the Rock?” Shireen asked, hopefully, even as the Onion Knight closed his eyes.

The Onion Knight knew what sort of creature called himself the Lord of Winterfell, now.

“Now, that would be silly,” Ramsay said, laughing at her. “Wouldn’t it, after I just killed the daughter of one of the Lannisters’ strongest supporters?” He eyed the Onion Knight. “You’ve been neglecting her studies. If she’s ever going to make a good traitor’s daughter, she ought to know who’s who, in the world around her.”

The Onion Knight’s cold eyes grew flinty. “I’ll keep that in mind, m’lord.”

Ramsay squinted at him, and then shrugged, bending down so that he was eye level with Shireen.

“No, you’re not going to the Rock, and you can thank your father for that. Because he left far too many Lannisters alive at the Rock, when he took it, and then…went North, because he couldn’t take it anymore. They’ve taken the Rock for the Lannisters, and I’m afraid that your mother probably isn’t
very happy, right now, at the Rock."

Shireen squinted at him, looking bemused now, but that pit in Jeyne’s stomach only grew.

“So, I’ve decided not to send you somewhere where you’ll also be unhappy, Princess,” Ramsay said.

He was drawing it out, damn him, and enjoying it far too much, Jeyne thought.

“I’m sending you somewhere else,” Ramsay said. “And they won’t think of you as a Princess, there, I don’t think, but I dare say you’ll like it better than you do, here, or surrounded by Lannisters who hate your father for getting the better of them and then disappearing. Now, you ought to thank me, don’t you think?”

Shireen licked her lips, her throat suddenly very dry.

She was leaving, she thought, She was finally leaving.

And she knew that she should have been more bothered by the fact that he wasn’t sending her back to her mother, was sending her to King’s Landing, which was just another fortress full of those who weren’t her friends, but surely…

Surely, they couldn’t be worse than Ramsay Bolton, as her captors.

“I…Thank you, my lord,” she whispered, the Onion Knight standing stiffly beside her, and Ramsay Bolton threw back his head and laughed.
Chapter Notes

Are...are y'all still out there?

Also, if you liked the shorter chapters better, let me know!

Her own son had banished her. Her dear, beloved boy, who had once been able to deny her nothing, and she him, in turn, had sent her away from King’s Landing like a common strumpet, looking at her like he didn’t much care if he never saw her, again.

It had been humiliating, but worse than that, it had been horrifying, to learn that her own son was sending her away, because of some foolish idea that she had somehow turned against him, when they were the only two people in the world who still cared about each other.

Certainly Margaery Tyrell didn’t care about her son, with the way she’d been parading him around, fucking him public, in front of his own mother, like a shameless whore.

Her ladies, the ones who had agreed to return to the Rock with her, were all giving her a wide birth, the closer they got to her homeland. None of them seemed certain whether to believe the accusations against her, and none of them were brave enough to ask.

And she almost didn’t blame them, furious though she let herself be with them at every opportunity, pretending shocked silence for most of the journey, and then blowing up at any one of them at the slightest excuse.

They seemed happy enough when she sent Qyburn back, told the man to keep an eye on things, in King’s Landing, even if she could not, but still, they were frightened of her, of what sort of woman would turn against her own son.

She scoffed; as if she would ever turn against Joffrey. All the things she had done in this long war, everything since she had had Robert’s cloak placed around her shoulders, had been for her children.

And one day, Joffrey would understand that again.

One day, they would all understand that again, she thought, as the great spires of Casterly Rock came into view, even…

Jaime.

All of her thoughts were about Jaime, now.

Joffrey might have sent her away, but that was only because Margaery had gotten inside his head, the same way that great bitch, Brienne of Tarth, and their wicked brother had gotten inside of Jaime’s.

But Jaime had been away from both of them for so long now, that Cersei felt something like assurance, that when she saw him again, he would have returned to their senses.
He had taken Tommen with him, after all, even if she would not forgive him for having lost Myrcella back to the Martells, and that meant something.

It meant that every day, Jaime was looking down at their child, their son, and remembering who belonged to. Tommen was theirs, and Jaime could not forget that, even when he was at his angriest.

And if that was the case, it meant that Cersei could still turn this around. She would convince Jaime that he had been wrong to leave her, if he didn’t know it already, because she had only wanted what was best for their family, after all, and then they could be a family, again.

They could get Myrcella back from the Martells, and Jaime could raise their armies against King’s Landing, if they had to, to get her son back from the Tyrells who had so poisoned his already fragile mind.

She could still fix this.

She just needed to see her brother, again. Just needed to feel Jaime’s arms around her, to breathe in his scent and know that he was still hers, and everything would be well, once more.

And then they rounded the next hill, and Cersei’s troops, her ladies, all came to a stop, just…staring.

She forced her horse up before all of them, and found that she, too, could not help but stare.

No.

No, what she was seeing was impossible. What she was seeing…it didn’t make sense, and she blinked several times, to make sure that the mirage in front of her wasn’t real.

But it - the troops, gathered in long lines in the valley before the Rock - remained, no matter how many times Cersei tried to will them away.

Oh no, Cersei thought, something like dull horror filling her.

No, no, no.

Something was terribly wrong.

Something was wrong, because there shouldn’t be Baratheon soldiers waving the Baratheon stag’s flag in front of her home.

Cersei pulled her horse to a sudden halt, glancing at her soldiers in confusion. “What is this?” She demanded of them, because surely one of them must have sent a scout ahead.

The men looked as confused as she did, however, and Cersei bit back a silent scream.

Dear gods, all of her nightmares were coming to plague her, now.

She should have made good on her promise and had Margaery Tyrell strangled in her sleep, before she ever married Cersei’s son.

The Baratheon flags did not disappear the next time she opened her eyes; in fact, they were coming towards her.

“Your Grace…” one of her men said, no doubt about to tell her that they should leave this place and find cover, but Cersei held up a hand, and he fell silent.
No, she thought. No, she needed to know what this was. Needed to know what had happened here, because Jaime would never have given up Casterly Rock to Stannis Baratheon, not after he had brought their son here.

Not after their father had fought so hard for it.

It made sense, she thought, dully. Of course Jaime had not come to their aid, when the smallfolk and their fanatical leaders had risen up against them, because he had been…

He had been…

No, she would not accept that.

She would not accept that after everything she had suffered, her own son turning her away, half of her family abandoning her, Jaime was…

That he was…

“Well, well, what do we have here?” A slimy voice said, and Cersei gritted her teeth as she turned around to face that voice.

A man with a Baratheon stag on his chest, grinning at her. “The Lady of the Rock, come back too late to lay claim to it.”

Cersei felt something like a migraine coming on. “What is the meaning of this?” She demanded, as her soldiers, the ones whom Margaery Tyrell had graciously allowed to leave with her, flocked around her, loosing their swords.

Even if she already knew, even if a part of her knew exactly what this was…

“Perhaps we ought to lay claim to you,” the guards said, looking her up and down, and her soldiers moved forward then.

“Lay a hand on her and it will be the last thing you ever do,” one of them said, even as Cersei wondered if they even believed the words, after they had witnessed her own son banish her, after they had been dispatched to make sure that she actually did as she was told.

The men glanced at each other, and then shrugged, and the bloodbath began.

The entire Baratheon army, or, she thought critically, looking out over the valley, a good half of it was here, after all, while she only had a handful of guards and ladies, and by the end of it, she did not even have those.

She sat on her horse above her dead soldiers and dead ladies, and contemplated how fast she might be able to make her flight, before even the Baratheon soldiers kept her from that, one of them reaching up and yanking her free of her saddle.

She stumbled to the ground as they pawed at her, pushing her up against her own horse, their wicked laughter filling the air, because they might follow one they believed to be such an honorable man, but in the end, they all really were men, weren’t they?

She reached up, trying to fight one of them off, but her hand slipped in the blood staining his cheek, blood belonging to one of her girls.

She felt cold fury welling up within her, as the soldier pushed her around so that she was facing
away from him, pawing at her gown, two more men joining him.

She was staring down at one of her dead lady’s faces, as one of the men bent her over, and Cersei felt bile rising up in her throat.

“Let me go,” Cersei gritted out, through clenched teeth, and the guards looked at her for a moment, their Baratheon armor glinting in the light of the sun, before they laughed.

“You’ve got no more power here, you Lannister slut,” one of the men said, shoving her up against the horse she had ridden into the valley with, and Cersei gritted her teeth and fought back, kicked and scratched and screamed, because she had not just lost her son and been forced to come back here only to be raped by some common thug who had bent the knee to Stannis Baratheon.

“I am the Lady of this Rock,” she gritted out, “And if you lay a hand on me, it will be the last thing you ever do.”

The men laughed again; their laughter grated.

“One of your men just said that, Your Grace,” he said, mockingly, “and look at him.”

He pulled her up just enough to grab her by the chin and force it in the direction of her dead men, and Cersei felt sick.

Stannis. Stannis had taken the Rock, and Margaery had taken her son.

“I’ve always wanted to see what a Lannister lady’s cunt looked like, after the way they’ve fucked us all over,” one of the men said, reaching beneath her gown, and Cersei closed her eyes and screamed, the last scream left within her, as some more of the fight bled out of her.

Because if Stannis had the Rock, if Jaime and Tommen were dead, if Myrcella had truly chosen Martells over her own family, if Margaery Tyrell had really poisoned Joffrey so fully against his own mother...

What did any of it matter, now?

He slapped her with the same hand that he had just touched her with, and Cersei swallowed hard and lifted her chin.

“Go ahead,” she gritted out, “Do your worst, but know that the cunt you’re touching is far better than anything you were meant to have.”

The men looked at each other, and then laughed, reaching for her again.

And it didn’t matter, Cersei thought. It didn’t matter because if Stannis’ men were at the Rock, were at her home, then that meant that Jaime wasn’t here, that her son had banished her and Jaime was dead...

And then, suddenly, there was Selyse Baratheon standing in front of her, going for a calm stroll with her serving girls around her, looking for all the world like she belonged at the Rock more than Cersei did, and Cersei could not have that.

She would not have that.

“Let her go,” Selyse said, sharply, and Cersei stared, panting, as the guards instantly dropped her.

She wasn’t expecting it; her legs flopped uselessly, and she nearly fell to the ground before she
managed to get them under herself once again.

Selyse eyed her coldly, before her cold eyes returned to the guards. “You ought to be ashamed of yourselves,” she snapped at them. “My husband would never have stood for this, if he were still here.”

The men looked up at her like chastised children, and it only made the humiliation that Cersei felt grow, as she readjusted her torn gown and had to be rescued by a mouse like Selyse Baratheon.

“Yes, Your Grace,” one of the men said, instantly. “We did not mean…”

Selyse’s eyes were still cold. “I know what you meant to do,” she told them, coldly. “It is the same thing that every Lannister soldier still here would like to do to me, to remind me of my place.”

Cersei’s head shot up.

There were still Lannister soldiers here, she thought, eyes widening.

And if there were still Lannisters here, then that meant, somehow, that either Stannis hadn’t yet taken the Rock for himself, or he’d left enough of them as prisoners, and if some of them were prisoners, then perhaps there was still hope.

Perhaps Jaime and her son still lived.

Cersei no longer believed in the gods, but in that moment, she prayed. Furiously, hopelessly.

“You may go,” Selyse said, then, and the guards, still looking like chastised children, turned and left.

Selyse turned to her, then, and Cersei found that she didn’t want to have this conversation. Didn’t want to find herself beholden in any way to Selyse Baratheon.

“Are you all right?” Selyse asked her, and behind her, her servants murmured amongst themselves.

Cersei lifted her chin. “I’m fine,” she gritted out. “What the fuck is going on?”

Selyse sighed. “There have been…some changes around here,” she said, and Cersei rolled her eyes, because she could deduce that much on her own, thank you.

“Stannis took the Rock?” she asked, forcing herself to at least appear calm, even as her heart beat furiously in her chest.

Selyse hesitated; Cersei forgot how to breathe.

Finally, Selyse sighed. “No, Cersei,” she said, softly. “Your brother held out against him. The Rock held out against him.”

Cersei shook her head, brows furrowing. “What the fuck does that mean? Why are you still here, if the Rock is holding out against Stannis?”

Selyse sighed, and didn’t answer.

“Where is Jaime?” Cersei demanded, into the silence growing between them. She had the not knowing, hated the look Selyse was giving her, somewhere between sympathy and shared grief.

Dear gods, Cersei couldn’t stand to learn that she had lost anything else, at this point. “Where is my
son?"

Selyse bit her lip, before offering softly, “You’ve missed a great deal, Lady Cersei.”

Cersei lifted her chin. “It’s Queen, actually,” she corrected.

Selyse hummed. “Is it?”

Cersei was getting tired of the other woman’s attitude, her nonchalance in the face of Cersei’s fear and desperation.

“Where is Tommen?” Cersei screeched at her, fear clawing up her throat.

No. No, this was all some horrible nightmare, and she was going to wake up from it soon, and find that her son hadn’t sent her away from King’s Landing, that the Lannister flag still flew at the Rock, that everything was all right with the world, that her brother didn’t loathe their son, that Tommen was safe.

Selyse sighed. “He’s alive, in the Rock, Cersei. He’s safe,” she said, and Cersei remembered, suddenly, how to breathe again.

Tommen was alive. Stannis hadn’t killed the boy, somehow, and he was alive. Her son was alive, and her heart could beat again, she hadn’t lost everything.

“And Jaime?” She whispered, hopefully, now.

Selyse looked away. “I fear that we have both lost our loves,” she said, and Cersei stiffened.

“And the Baratheon soldiers?” Cersei asked, from where she sat in the Regent’s chair beside her son’s throne, her legs strewn over one of the arms of it, “How are they…settling into things?”

Truthfully, she didn’t much care, so long as there wasn’t a revolt, Cersei thought. At the moment, that was the only true worry that she had.

Eventually, she would show them the mistake that they had made, in declaring for Stannis Baratheon in the first place, but for now, she still needed the bastards.

Ser Benedict Broom, her master-at-arms, cleared his throat. “As…well as can be expected, Your Grace,” he informed her. “There has been some…discontent amongst the lower ranks, but the lords whom you managed to persuade in the courtyard have mostly managed this.”

Cersei nodded. “I see. Invite them all to a feast,” she said, “to be held in the Great Hall, so that they might feel…that they are being compensated well, for their change of heart. And bring as many whores in from Lannisport as you can find.”

Ser Benedict blinked at her, and then said, “Your Grace, your father forbade any whores from being brought into the Rock while he was Lord of it…”

“Well, I am Lord of it now,” Cersei snapped at him, icily, “and I command you to bring as many as you can find. Men are all the same; give them a good whore, and they’ll do whatever you like.”

Ser Benedict pressed his lips together, as if he didn’t quite agree with that assessment, but didn’t dare try to contradict her, for which Cersei was rather grateful.

She didn’t have time to be getting into arguments with her own people. She had enough to deal with,
planning how to get her family back together again, and Tommen on the Iron Throne, and
contending with the Baratheon soldiers that were still here and only hesitantly following her now, to
deal with that.

She narrowed her eyes at her master-at-arms. “How ready are we for a full-scale assault?” She asked.
“If House Tyrell refuses to bend the knee, as those obstinate upstarts will, are we able to bring them
to heel?”

Her master-at-arms grimaced. “I believe we will just barely be able to meet them on equal footing,
Your Grace, as long as their alliance with House Martell stands.”

Cersei grimaced. Of course, because it wasn’t enough that both Houses had to hate House Lannister,
of course they were united in their hatred of her.

And of course, both Houses had a claim to a member of her family, even if the child in Margaery’s
womb was not living, yet.

“And there’s been no more word of Stannis?”

A shrug. “Nothing since he went North with-”

“Yes, I know who he went North with,” Cersei snapped, and the man fell silent.

She didn’t want to hear about how Stannis Baratheon had somehow convinced her idiot of a brother
to go Beyond the Wall with him. It was the sort of foolish thing that she could imagine the Imp
doing, or, Jaime, if Stannis somehow made a good argument for chasing fairytales, as he clearly had.

And they were going to get themselves killed, doing it.

But Jaime would come back. Jaime had to come back.

If Jaime didn’t come back, Cersei would drag him back from the seven hells herself, if she had to.

He had no right to go and get himself killed, without her.

Cersei’s brows furrowed, and then, as she glanced out at the empty hall, inspiration struck.

“I want you to find Alysanne Lefford, and bring that traitorous bitch here,” Cersei hissed to the man.

He blinked at her. “Lady Lefford?” He asked. He sounded as if he couldn’t possibly understand
what she would want with the other woman, and Cersei scoffed at him.

Lady Lefford was the reason they were all in this mess, after all. If it weren’t for her petty desire for
vengeance, Stannis would never have been able to take half of the Westerlands so easily, and
perhaps, Jaime would never have been forced to go North, with him.

She was going to pay for that. For taking what was Cersei’s, just because she could not handle what
the Crown had demanded of her. Just because she wanted vengeance for something that Cersei had
nearly forgotten about.

She glared at him. “Are you deaf? The bitch has offended me greatly, and allowed Stannis
Baratheon into our kingdom, endangering thousands of lives for her own selfish reasons. Find her,
and bring her to me.”

Oh, she had plans for Alysanne Lefford.
He gulped. “As you wish, Your Grace.”

Janei had never had a real opinion about her cousin, Cersei.

Oh, when she was a little girl, she had been terribly conceited, about the fact that her cousin was the Queen, that she had given birth to three such beautiful princes and princesses.

She had enjoyed telling her other friends how lucky she was, to have a cousin who was the queen, and truth be told, she had sometimes bragged about it so much that her friends found it annoying.

But it was quite a different matter entirely, to have a cousin whom she saw once maybe every year, rather than being forced into servitude to her cousin, in person, who was…something of a bitch.

She grimaced, biting back a sigh only because she knew that Cersei would reprimand her for it if she heard it, and tried to pretend that cleaning her cousin’s rooms didn’t make her want to bang her head into the wall.

Her cousin, who had sent Janei’s mother away because she kept crying that her children were being used as hostages.

The last of Janei’s sympathy, over the fact that Joffrey was dead, had quite dried up when Cersei had informed her that her mother was already gone, and she hadn’t even had the chance to say goodbye to her.

Cersei had done that. Cersei had stolen her mother away from her, because her mother was understandably upset with the way that Cersei had all but taken her children as her own hostages, Janei thought, bitterly, and Cersei couldn’t stand to see the woman crying over it, so she’d sent her away.

And Janei would not forgive her for it.

She bit back a sigh as she changed the sheets on Cersei’s bed.

When Cersei had first come back to the Rock, she’d gotten into some sort of…horrible altercation, with the Baratheon soldiers waiting outside, and lost the lives of her servants and her guards, so it seemed that none of her normal ladies could attend to her.

That was why she had chosen Janei, really, she knew. Because she needed someone to wait on her, someone who wasn’t just one of the normal servants of the Rock, though she had brought some of those into her service, as well, Janei knew.

But because there were so few of them left these days - the first days of Stannis’ negotiations with Jaime, and then later his leaving with her cousin had been dark days, indeed - Janei was left to do much of the work herself.

And so, she was changing the sheets on her cousin’s bed instead of sneaking off to find her brother, to comfort Martyn for just a few moments in the spare time that the both had, when that was all that she wanted to do.

Find her brother, and know that even if Cersei had gotten away with sending their mother off somewhere she couldn’t cry in front of them, at least Janei and Martyn still had each other.

But Martyn was always guarding Tommen, and Janei was always running errands for Cersei.
She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a real conversation with someone.

A knock at the door startled her from those thoughts, and Janei sighed. She knew the knock meant that it was not Cersei on the other side of that door, which was something of a relief, she supposed, but not much of one.

When Jaime and Stannis Baratheon had first left the Rock, there had been pandemonium. Soldiers who refused to ride North with them, who thought that they were simply going to get themselves killed because they’d lost their stomachs for war, were the ones who remained at the Rock, beyond the few whom Stannis had assigned there to watch over his wife, and who Jaime had assigned there to watch over Tommen.

There had been a revolt, in those first few days, as indeed, Janei, still a young woman, had known would come, even if for some reason Jaime and Stannis had thought that their truce would last when both of them had left.

The revolt had lasted almost a week, with Lannister bannermen and Baratheon bannermen fighting for the right to lay claim to the Rock in the valley below it, and Janei had never been so frightened in her entire life, not even when Stannis had first thought to attack the Rock before Jaime had flown the white flag, because at least then, her cousin had still been there, had still been able to negotiate with these cruel men who wanted what didn’t belong to them.

But he wasn’t there, this time, and Janei had spent those days huddled in a corner of the Rock with her mother and brother and Genna and Tommen, though she could not say rightly that Genna had huddled with the rest of them, busy making plans for their escape, if they ended up needing to flee, if the Lannister soldiers lost the battle.

And then, by the end of it, they were right back where they had started, with this fragile truce between them, neither one of them laying true claim to the Rock, but neither one of them trying to be rid of the other, either.

Janei didn’t understand it. Didn’t understand how men who so loved bloodlust could so easily give up on a fight, but she had been grateful.

And now, all of those men had pledged themselves to Cersei, and Janei understood that even less, but she didn’t have her mother here to comfort her, now, and she knew, at least in part, what it meant.

There was going to be a war. There was going to be more fighting, of the sort that she had faced during that week long revolt, and Janei could not stand the idea of another war, of having to hide away in a corner in fright because at any moment, the enemy could knock down those doors and have their way with her, simply because she was a woman.

She sucked in a deep breath, and told herself that whoever was on the other side of that door was not there to start a war.

They wouldn’t have knocked, either.

She sniffed hard at the knock to her door, head lifting suddenly, and said softly, “Come in.”

A moment later, Tommen stepped into the room, and Janei froze at the sight of him.

If she were being honest, she would admit that she had been trying to avoid Tommen as much as she had Cersei, in recent weeks, since Cersei had announced his coronation.
With Cersei, she didn’t have the chance to avoid her often, and she was awful enough that Janei didn’t feel guilty for doing so, but Tommen was…different.

Sweet, and she felt bad seeing him like this, named King when he didn’t want it, when Cersei was the only one who had, so Janei had been doing her best to avoid him, as well.

But he wasn’t her sweet little cousin anymore, Janei reminded herself. Cersei had seen to that when she had named him King, and dragged them into this new war.

“Your Grace,” she said, sniffing again as she forced herself to curtsey for the boy, and Tommen squinted at her in confusion for a moment, as if he couldn’t understand why she would curtsey to him when she had never done so in the past, before he shrugged.

“Hello, Janei,” he said, stepping further into the room and taking a seat at Cersei’s desk as if it belonged to him, and for a moment, Janei grimaced at the thought of Cersei walking in on the two of them, before she remembered that Tommen was Cersei’s son.

Once, since Janei had started her service for the other woman, Cersei had caught her sitting before her mirror, putting some of Cersei’s more extravagant paint on her lips, and the other woman had smacked her for daring to touch what didn’t belong to her.

Janei was hesitant about touching anything that she wasn’t told to in these rooms, after that.

“What are you doing here, Your Grace?” Janei asked, abandoning the sheets for now and walking over to him, taking the seat across from him. “Shouldn’t you be at your lessons, with the maesters?”

The boy shrugged; his legs swung in the air, the chair too tall for him, and Janei swallowed hard, reminded herself that it wasn’t his fault that his mother had named him the King.

He was still a little boy, and still her cousin.

“I’m done with that, for today,” he informed her, rather primly. “Usually, I chase Ser Pounce down to the kitchens, but…”

He bit his lip, looking away.

“Mother thought it would be better if I took some time away from Ser Pounce for a little while, so I’m…”

Bored, he didn’t say, but Janei heard it, all the same.

She bit back a sigh.

“What are you doing, today?” Tommen asked her, and she reflected that the boy must truly be bored, if he wanted to know that.

“I…Your mother has me cleaning her rooms, today,” she said. “And then, I’m to have tea with Aunt Genna, later, but not until all of my chores are done.”

Tommen blinked at her. “Can’t you have the servants do the chores?” He asked, innocently, and Janei ground her teeth together, reflecting that he might as well ask such a thing, when they were cousins.

“I…Cersei wanted me to do them,” she told him, not wanting to get further into this conversation, suddenly.
It wasn’t fair, that he had come here, she noticed, as she glanced out the open door, with some new member of his Kingsguard who wasn’t her brother, that she couldn’t even see Martyn, now, and Cersei would no doubt reprimand her for being late about her chores, because she was spending time with the woman’s son, instead.

Tommens’s voice got very solemn suddenly, with her words, and Janei looked away, wondering if she had revealed too much, with the small bite in them.

“I’m sorry about Aunt Dorna being sent away,” Tommen said, when they had been sitting together in silence for too long. “I didn’t know about it, either.”

Janei swallowed hard.

“Thanks,” she whispered, because no one else had bothered to say that to her or Martyn, since Dorna had been sent away, but she still didn’t know how to respond, when it was Tommen’s mother who had been the one to send him off.

She was avoiding Martyn, too, for all that she wanted nothing more than to go and find him, now.

The one time that the two of them had spoken alone to each other, since their mother had been sent away without either of them knowing, they had simply stood together in awkward silence, neither of them certain how to react to this.

Martyn had started crying; Janei had hugged him, and then hurried away as quickly as she could, when he looked at her with wide eyes and asked if she couldn’t intercede with Cersei again, to bring their mother back.

Truth be told, Janei was avoiding as many people as she could, these days.

“Maybe soon, Mother will let her come back, and she can serve as one of her ladies, too,” Tommen said, then, lifting his head, and he sounded rather excited about the possibility.

Janei ground her teeth. “That would be lovely, Your Grace,” she told him, though she didn’t think for a moment it would happen.

Tommens blinked at her. “You don’t have to call me that,” he said, softly. “I’m just...We’re still family, aren’t we?”

His eyes got very wide as he said those words, and Janei wanted absolutely to assure him that they were, though a part of her didn’t, at the same time.

They didn’t feel like a family, anymore.

“Of course, Y-Tommen,” she said, softly, and Tommen smiled at her, and it was so hard to feel any sort of resentment towards him for who his mother was, when he was smiling at her, like that. “But you’re also the King.”

He gulped. “I...Yes,” he said, slowly, as if he were still getting over the shock of it, himself.

Janei supposed she could sympathize with that.

She wondered if he had ever imagined that he might be the King, when his brother took the throne. They were not so far apart in age, after all, and Joffrey was hardly a sickly child, from what she understood, even if he had been something of a beast.
Tommens didn’t strike her as the sort of boy who would enjoy being a king, would enjoy abusing those sorts of privileges.

Abusing.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath.

“Your mother is your regent, right now,” she informed him, something that he had to already know, “but one day, you’re going to really be the King, and people will have to listen to you and do whatever you say.”

Tommens’s eyes widened, for a moment, before he cleared his throat, pumping his legs again. “Then I’ll outlaw beets,” he said, scrunching up his nose at the thought of them.

JANEI bit back a laugh. “Yes, well, perhaps, when you are the King, and your mother isn’t your regent anymore, you can decree that my mother has to come back. That Cersei can’t send her away.”

Tommens squinted at her for a moment longer, before he seemed to shrink in on himself. “I…That would be years and years from now. I don’t think… I don’t think that I’ll be King that long.”

JANEI stared at him. “W…Why do you think that?” She asked, carefully.

It was disturbing to her, quite suddenly, that Tommen didn’t think he would be king long enough to be his own man. That he didn’t think he would survive that long, as she could clearly see, in his eyes.

He was just a little kid.

He shrugged. “Joffrey wasn’t King that long,” he said, softly, “And he was crowned in King’s Landing, where the King is supposed to be crowned.”

JANEI swallowed. “You’re not your brother, Tommen,” she started to say, but the words fly rather hollow, in her throat.

Tommens blinked up at her. “I’ll ask Mother to bring Dorna back,” he said, quietly. “Since she’s my Regent, she’s supposed to do what I want, isn’t she?”

JANEI pressed her lips together, and wondered if Cersei would see it that way. “I…Thank you, Tommen,” she said, though she had a horrible feeling that all of this was about to backfire on her, somehow.

Dear gods, she just wanted her mother to come back, and Cersei would know, of course, exactly where the request had come from, the moment Tommen asked it of her.

He smiled at her. “And I’ll tell her about the beets,” he said, and JANEI forced herself not to roll her eyes, because after all, she’d forgotten how young Tommen was, during this conversation, it seemed.

“That’s…very kind of you, Your Grace,” JANEI said, very quietly, because she didn’t want to tell him that Cersei would probably hit her again, for daring to try and manipulate her precious boy.

She just wanted to see her mother again. Just wanted to know that she was all right, and that when Cersei said she had sent her away, that didn’t really mean that she was dead in a ditch, somewhere.

She just wanted things to go back to the way they used to be, before, when Cersei was still in King’s Landing and Stannis Baratheon was some danger known of, but never faced.
Janei missed the way things used to be, when she was a child and none of this had meant anything, when they said that there was a war on.

“You should probably go, Your Grace,” she said, because she didn’t want to say anything else to him that would find its way back to Cersei’s ears, and she tried not to feel guilty at the way that Tommen’s face crumpled, with her words. “I’m sure you have many important things to do, as the King.”

He shrugged. “Mother doesn’t let me do much,” he said. “She says I’m too young, and that one day when I’m older, I’ll have so much responsibility that I’ll be glad that she’s taking care of things, now.”

Janei squinted at him. She wondered how Joffrey would have reacted, if his mother had ever dared to say such things to him.

Then, she shrugged. She wasn’t good at manipulating people, anyway, and she didn’t want to be known as someone who could. She didn’t like the dirty feeling that it left her with, afterwards.

“Well, maybe she’s right,” she said, quietly. “But I really do have to finish these bedsheets, Your Grace.”

He glanced at the unmade bed, and his lower lip jutted out in a pout. “Maybe…could we spend some more time together, soon?” He asked her. “It’s only…I don’t have Ser Pounce anymore, since he’s better off in the kitchens, and the maesters won’t let me do anything fun, with my studies.”


Gods, it would be worth it, to hold her tongue and say nothing while Tommen came to see her, if only he would tell her a little bit about how Martyn was doing.

Tommen shrugged. “Mother says that I shouldn’t be learning the sword,” he said. “Or, she did, at one point, so I’m not sure if she would want me learning anything from Martyn. And she says that riding horses is too dangerous now, because of the Baratheon soldiers.”


Tommen shrugged again. “All right,” he said, and, as he moved towards the door, “I hope that Aunt Dorna comes back, soon.”

Janei felt her heart clench. “Me, too,” she whispered, and then Tommen and his guard who wasn’t her brother was gone, and Janei hurried to finish up making the bed before Cersei returned and asked her why she was being so lazy, lately.

It did not take long for Cersei to return. A part of Janei was surprised that she had not walked in on the two of them, talking, and she didn’t know why that thought was so terrifying to her.

She didn’t think that Cersei would care that they had been talking, but she did fear how the other woman would react if she knew that Janei had asked Tommen for help with her mother.

Janei did not want her to think that she was trying to manipulate her darling son. She knew how protective the other woman was of him.

Janei dipped into a curtsey, as Cersei stalked inside and slammed the door after herself, and tried not to flinch as she realized Cersei must be in some sort of mood. Maybe.
“I’ve cleaned your chambers, Your Grace,” she said, keeping her eyes downcast as Cersei stalked into the room; Janei could never tell what sort of mood her cousin might be in, these days, and she had found out that it was better to keep her head down when the other woman was around for her own safety. “And I gathered your letters together here, on the table.”

She gestured to it, and tried not to react to the fact that her hands were shaking.

Cersei turned to her then, raising an eyebrow. “Oh, you don’t need to call me that, dear,” she said, “If it’s just the two of us. Cousin, is fine.”

Janei gritted her teeth together. “Yes, cousin,” she repeated, and Cersei looked at her for a moment longer, and then moved forward, taking Janei’s hands into her own.

Janei’s hands suddenly felt like they had been soaked in mud.

“I know that you’re disheartened, about your mother going to live at the Crag,” Cersei said, still smiling, and gods, Janei hated her a little more for it, “But I hope that you come to realize soon that it is for the best.”

Janei swallowed.

“How?” She whispered, and Cersei’s hands abruptly dropped hers.

“Your mother is a wonderful woman,” Cersei said, and her eyes were glittering now, “but she sometimes has difficulty understanding her position within House Lannister. I think that you and your brother will benefit from some time on your own, especially considering your age.”

Janei swallowed.

“And dear?” Cersei asked, as she turned from her and started to strip off her outfit, “This could be very good for you, to learn how to be a woman, if you ever wish to fool a husband into thinking that you love him.”

And Janei couldn’t help what she did next; her jaw fell open.

Cersei was facing her again, and she smiled, now. “Tommen will need a wife someday, after all.”

Janei felt her stomach drop. “I…”

Tommen.

Tommen, who she had just thought of as a very young child, was going to need a wife, some day.

She thought she was going to be sick.

Cersei moved towards her, then, and Janei resisted the urge to take a step back from the other woman.

“Is something the matter?” Cersei asked her. “You like Tommen, don’t you, Janei?”

Janei licked her lips. “I…I love Tommen,” she whispered, lowering her eyes. “He is my cousin, but I don’t…I…”

She could feel her eyes filling with tears.

Cersei reached out, then, taking her chin in her hand and lifting it. “Give it some thought, Janei.
Tommen is a sweet boy, and you’ll likely never find a better husband. And cousins can be good. My mother and father were cousins, when they wed. Besides that, you have a better temperament for a queen than Margaery Tyrell does.”

Janei swallowed. “I…” she moved quickly away from the other woman, towards the desk that Tommen had been sitting at, earlier.

Tommen, who was just a boy, and who she probably wouldn’t marry anyway for years and years, but who had just told her that he didn’t think he would survive that long.

“There were…some letters came for you earlier, Your Grace. From…From House Tyrell,” she said, and her hands were all but shaking, as she picked them up off the desk.

She didn’t dare to say ‘The Crown,’ as the letters had introduced themselves.

Cersei slumped down onto the couch, reaching up to cover her eyes with her hand.

“Well, read it, then,” Cersei muttered, waving a dismissive hand towards the sealed letter on the table, as she slumped down into the chair in front of her bed. “Let us hear what House Tyrell has to say.”

Janei swallowed, reaching for the letter and picking it up. She unsealed it, slowly, keeping one eye on Cersei all the while.

Her eyes scanned over the words before she read them aloud, but Cersei didn’t seem to care that she was being slow about it.

“You’ve been invited to the funeral of King Joffrey of House Baratheon, where it will take place in King’s Landing in a fortnight. House Tyrell would…would like to negotiate with you, after the funeral has taken place, over the state of the realm,” Janei read, and then glanced up with wide eyes to Cersei.

Cersei moved off the couch with speed, snatching the letter out of Janei’s hands, and Janei let it go without a fuss, taking a step back, glad that the other woman wasn’t slapping her this time, instead.

Cersei’s eyes scanned across the page, and Janei bit the inside of her cheek, because if House Tyrell was already asking to negotiate, she thought, that couldn’t be good.

They hadn’t even fought a real battle yet, and Janei didn’t want anyone fighting battles, didn’t want to run the risk of her own brother fighting in those battles, but that look, in Tommen’s eyes…

It had scared her, when he said that he didn’t think he would be King for very long.

“Well,” Cersei muttered bitterly, as she threw the letter aside. Janei watched it fall to the ground with a flutter. “It’s nice of her to invite me to my own son’s funeral.”

Janei cleared her throat, looking away.

Cersei harrumphed. “I’ll have to discuss it with my advisors, of course,” she murmured, under her breath, and Janei didn’t think that she was still talking to her, was still even aware that Janei was still in the room, but she forced herself to listen, anyway. “And Tommen won’t be going, of course. Of course the Tyrells would turn my son’s funeral into a political event, so that his own brother couldn’t attend…”

Janei sighed, and went back to finishing the sheets.
Visiting her son was becoming something of a chore, Cersei thought, and almost felt guilty for the thought.

In the latter days of Joffrey’s reign, before he had sent her away, visiting him had felt like something of a chore, as well, and she didn’t like the comparison, didn’t want to think that Tommen was slipping through her fingers the same way that Joffrey was.

But she was busy, these days, as the Regent, keeping things together from a place of vulnerability, when they had been far less vulnerable, in King’s Landing, when Joffrey had been king.

Still, she tried to carve some time out of her day, each day, to visit Tommen. To ask him about his lessons, and make sure that the boy was on his way to becoming a good king, when he did reach the right age for it.

And besides that, she was his mother. She knew that they had not spent much time together throughout much of his upbringing, and especially not after Joffrey had been crowned King, but she’d had to devote her time to Joffrey then; he had needed her more. Had needed her guidance, and protection, even if he had spurned it, in the end.

Cersei was determined to spend enough time with her younger son that he knew never to spurn her, when she offered help.

“Tommen,” she said, as she walked into his chambers and found him writing out his assignments from the maesters.

She’d made sure that they increased his lessons, now that he was to be king. He would not be ruling on his own for many years yet, not if Cersei had anything to do with it, but when he did become king, he needed to have an understanding of what he was doing.

Sometimes, she thought Joffrey had not understood what he was doing, and that was why things had gotten so bad with the smallfolk, near the end.

She came forward as he turned in his chair and beamed at her, always such a happy child, and she leaned over his shoulder, looking down at his work.

“How are your studies going?” She asked. “The maesters say you’ve been very devoted to them.”

At the same time, she did not want him to grow too bookish.

Bookish kings were always seen as weak, by the people, and he would have his mother and his Small Council, once she had chosen them out, to support him, once he was sitting on the Iron Throne.

She just had to get him there, again.

He shrugged. “I’m learning about the Faith, just now,” he said, and Cersei felt herself stiffening, at those words.

“Oh?”

He nodded. “And their relationship with the Crown. It’s very important.” His brows furrowed, as Cersei’s heart sank further at the reminder of those who had ultimately torn her son away from her. “Why wasn’t I crowned by a septon? I’m supposed to be crowned by the High Septon.”
Cersei gritted her teeth, reflecting that she was going to have to have a word with these maesters about the sorts of lessons that they were teaching her son.

The Faith was not as powerful as the Crown, and she didn’t want him believing that it was, not when he became King.

“There is no High Septon, just yet,” Cersei told him, as calmly as she could manage, thinking of the way the man had been butchered by Joffrey, the last good thing her son had done, as King. “And you will have another coronation in King’s Landing, when we get it back for you.”

He sniffed. “The way Grandfather did, when he fought off Stannis at the Battle of Blackwater with the Tyrells?”

Cersei ground her teeth together. “Yes,” she said. “Like that. Stealing it away from the usurpers who tried to take it from you.”

He bit his lip. “Do you think…Do you think we could do that, without anyone getting hurt?” He asked her. “It’s only…Stannis’ men are here now, and they were with him, then.”

Oh, Cersei remembered that dearly. And they would pay for it dearly, when the time came that she had the power to make them do so.

She remembered holding her son on the Iron Throne, and whispering to him that she was a lioness who would protect him, as she prepared to kill the boy with poison before Stannis and his hordes ever got to him.

And now, she was forced to bribe them with fine wines and promises of great wealth, if only they spared her son now.

Cersei reached up to rub at her temples. “I don’t think that’s very realistic, Tommen,” she told him, perhaps harsher than she had intended. “But you’ll understand, when you’re older. Are the lessons really that interesting to you?”

Joffrey had loved learning about the Targaryens, but little else. Jaime, she remembered, had hated his lessons, had more often than not persuaded her to sneak out with him so that they could play soldiers or ride horses.

Tommen enjoyed sitting here for hours, learning these things, and Cersei didn’t quite know what to make of such a child.

He shrugged. “I guess,” he said. “But the maesters will only teach me so much a day, and the rest of the day…”

He was bored, Cersei realized.

She pressed her lips together, trying to think of some way to remedy this that didn’t mean going back on the punishment she had dictated, of his cats being taken from him because he spent too much time with the damn things.

“Perhaps…” she said slowly, and when he looked at her eagerly, she said, “Perhaps you might go horseback riding with Martyn.”

His eyes lit up, and she held up a hand. “Provided that you are extremely careful, and stay away from where the Baratheon soldiers are still encamped, and take Lannister guards with you.”
His brows furrowed. “But aren’t the Baratheon soldiers ours, now?”

Cersei wouldn’t risk it. “And only for an hour each day. Understood?”

He nodded, eagerly. “Janei says that I might come up with games to play with Martyn, too. Like cyvasse. She says that he…”

“When have you been spending time with Janei?” Cersei interrupted, eyeing him down her nose.

Tommens’s shoulders hunched in on themselves, and Cersei resisted the urge to roll her eyes. The boy was a king now; he should know how to look like one, after all.

“I…Well, she’s been spending some time with me, lately,” he whispered. “Since…since Ser Pounce had to go down to the kitchens…”

Cersei rolled her eyes; she supposed she had walked in to that one, after all, as annoying as it was to hear the first person that Tommen might try to spend time with once she’d taken his stupid cats away was a girl.

“And how are your lessons going, Tommen?” She asked him.

Joffrey had always favored learning about the history of the Targaryens, and she hoped that this time, Tommen would pick something useful to dig deeper into.


Cersei leaned forward. “What is it?” She asked, because he looked so longing, for a moment. Dear gods, she hoped he wasn’t about to bring up those damn cats again.

Perhaps Joffrey had had the right idea, about cutting them open. At least he didn’t hide away with them, the way that Tommen always seemed to.

“I wish that I could spar, again,” he said. “I enjoyed that, when Ser Loras let me…”

“Ser Loras was a pillow biting idiot,” Cersei gritted out, raising a hand to silence him, “And his sister is a traitor and a whore. I don’t want you speaking about them so cordially, again.”

Tommens bit his lip. “But…”

“But what?” Cersei demanded, her patience wearing thin, already. She couldn’t stand the thought that her son had enjoyed sparring. It was a dangerous sport, and it would only lead him to think that he should be in the battlefield.

Cersei did not intend for him to ever fight in a battlefield.

Joffrey never had, and his realm had been well defended.

“But she’s my goodsister, isn’t she?” He asked, still sounding confused, and his confusion was the only reason that Cersei didn’t throttle him, for the words.

Cersei took a deep breath, and let the air out, slowly.

She had told herself, before, that she was going to have to make this war something that Tommen could believe in, even if the boy’s belief didn’t particularly matter, so long as she was Regent.

But she didn’t need him fighting her over it at every second, either.
“Margaery Tyrell was your brother’s wife, yes,” she said, reaching out and taking Tommen’s hands in her own. “But there’s something that you need to know about the Tyrells, something I’m sure your maesters have mentioned. They’re opportunistic idiots. Do you know what that means?”

His brows furrowed. “Um…”

“It means that they let their ambitions get in the way of everything else,” Cersei continued, calmly. “They always have. And I would not be surprised if…” her eyes narrowed. “If the child your goodsister is claiming belongs on the Iron Throne does not even belong to your brother. It took her a long time to get pregnant, after all.”

And she hadn’t gotten pregnant until after Cersei had left King’s Landing.

The realization, something she had only wanted to use to manipulate Tommen into going along with her, hit her like a stone, then.

Margaery had only gotten pregnant after Cersei had left King’s Landing, when Cersei wouldn’t be there to try and fight her over the paternity of the child. And yes, she had been fucking Joffrey in front of so many people all the time, but she would only need to do that if…

If she thought that there would be doubts, about any child that she gave birth to.

Cersei saw red, for several moments, and was only able to pull herself back together when Tommen let out a small cry and she realized that she had been squeezing his fingers, too hard.

In the end, she supposed, it didn’t matter who the child belonged to, even if the thought that Margaery Tyrell was masquerading around with a child she was only pretending was Joffrey’s infuriated her.

No, she thought. Even if it was a useful ruse, even Margaery Tyrell wouldn’t be stupid enough to pretend her unborn child was Joffrey’s, if it was not, not after he had died. She wouldn’t want to risk her own child, in such a way.

All of Cersei’s children had already been born, when Robert had died, which made their claim to the throne far more realistic.

No, if the child hadn’t been Joffrey’s, surely, Margaery would not risk such a thing. Would not risk harm befalling her own child.

But still, the way that Tommen’s eyes widened was rather gratifying.

“And in that case,” Cersei went on, “Not only are you the rightful heir to the throne, but Margaery Tyrell is an adulteress and a traitor. You don’t want to think Kindly about such people, do you?”

Her son stared at her for a moment, before shrugging, and Cersei ground her teeth together.

“Tommen.”

He bit his lip. “I guess not,” he said. “But…but they’re still family, aren’t they?”

Cersei resisted the urge to roll her eyes, as she placed her hands against Tommen’s cheeks. “We’re family, Tommen. Me, you, Myrcella, and Jaime. We’re the only family that matters, either.”

He bit his lip. “But…but what about Janei and Martyn?” he asked, so innocently, and for a moment, Cersei felt frustration welling up within her.
Whatever else he was, Joffrey had understood her, when she told him that they were the only family that mattered.

Tommen… Tommen’s bleeding heart thought that everyone mattered, and that was a dangerous belief to have, for a king.

“Janei and Martyn are your lessers, Tommen,” she said, kneeling down beside his desk, and he flinched a little at her tone, but Cersei could not bring herself to regret it. “They aren’t your family. They don’t matter. They exist to serve you, the way that your Uncle Kevan exists to serve House Lannister. Do you understand?”

He stared at her for a moment, and she knew that he didn’t understand, but she didn’t get the chance to continue before there was a knock on the door and one of her spies stepped inside.

“What is it?” She snapped, annoyed that he had interrupted without her permission.

At the look on his face, she stood.

“Your Grace,” the man said, and she smiled at Tommen one more time before walking over to the man. He leaned close to whisper, “We’ve retrieved Lady Alysanne Lefford, Your Grace.”

Cersei smiled, a cool feeling of calm washing over her, at the words, and she forced herself to forget about Margaery Tyrell, for a few moments.

“Bring her to my chambers. And guard?” She called out to the man waiting by the door; he hurried forward. “If I have to find out that my son has been receiving visitors from him and not yourself, you’ll find yourself mucking stables from now on. Understood?”

The man blinked at her, and then dipped into a bow. “Yes, Your Grace.”

She turned back to Tommen, then. “Remember, Tommen. You must have guards with you at all times, and if your lessons turn out poorly because you’ve been spending so much time in the son, you won’t anymore. Understood?”

He nodded, albeit a little shakily, and, satisfied, Cersei turned and strode from the room.

Frankly, she was surprised that her master-at-arms had managed to get Alysanne Lefford here so quickly. It had only been a few days since the order had been given, after all, and the Westerlands were a wide country land. Besides that, a part of her had hoped that Alysanne would fight back and refuse to come, so that she could punish her further with the full support of those lands.

Still, she supposed, Alysanne Lefford had to have known that this was coming.

The woman was waiting in the yet again empty Great Hall, and Cersei smiled coldly at her as she took her seat in the Regent’s chair, leaning back in it and eying Alysanne up and down.

The other woman looked worse for wear, since the last time that Cersei had seen her, though Cersei did not mind admitting that it had been some time since then, and that she no doubt looked worse for wear, as well.

It was the sort of thing one must come to expect, after losing a child.

She did not expect Alysanne to wish her condolences, over the loss of her oldest boy, not after what Joffrey had done to Leona Lefford, but it still grated on her nerves when Alysanne walked forward of her own free will, without having to be dragged forward by the guards, and did not curtsey before
her.

Her father had respected Alysanne, Cersei remembered, which was a difficult thing for most to achieve, from her father. It was one of the reasons that she had sought the other woman out in particular, when she had wanted to find her son a new wife, one who wasn’t Sansa Stark and who was nothing like Margaery Tyrell.

She wondered if this was why, this stoic coolness greeting Cersei, after she had been dragged here in chains.

Cersei lifted her chin, forced herself to meet the other woman’s eyes, to see the anger in them.

Well, Cersei was angry, too.

That was why Alysanne was here, after all, and not safe in the home that she’d opened the doors to Stannis Baratheon to, for her own family’s protection, and to get back at Cersei, in particular.

Cersei knew that was why. Knew it in her soul, just as she knew that if she had actually returned the girl’s body to Alysanne, after Joffrey had had his way with it, what Alysanne might have done would have been worse.

She ought to be grateful that Cersei had refused her that request. Leona Lefford had been absolutely unrecognizable, by the time that Joffrey was done with her.

“Lady Alysanne,” Cersei said, in a mocking tone. “I did not expect you to show up, even with your King’s summons.”

Alysanne lifted her chin. “I didn’t have much of a choice, Your Grace,” she said, coldly, “When this so-called King has cut off all trade to the Golden Tooth.”

Cersei hummed. “Well, and what did you expect, darling?” She asked haughtily. “You are a traitor, and the King cannot waste resources on a traitor when there are so many other mouths to feed, in the Westerlands.”

Alysanne scoffed at her, not deigning to meet her eyes again, then.

Cersei stepped down from her chair, folding her hands before her. “Aren’t you going to wish the King condolences?” She asked. “For the death of his brother.”

Alysanne sniffed. “I don’t see a King here, only you.” She looked Cersei up and down. “Unless you’re the one claiming the title? I don’t believe that’s how the succession works, though.”

Cersei ground her teeth.

“I would wish the King condolences,” Alysanne said, “on having you for a mother, if you would let me see him.”

Cersei could feel something like a migraine coming on, as she stalked closer to the other woman.

“You will mind your tongue before me,” she gritted out, but she knew instantly that it had been the wrong thing to say; the other woman looked amused, that she had managed to get under Cersei’s skin so easily.

Alysanne lifted her chin, and didn’t respond.

Cersei stared at her for a moment, before finally scoffing, wanting very much to bring this woman
low after all of the devastation that she had wrought on the Westerlands, and for her own petty reasons.

Letting Stannis Baratheon into them, forcing Cersei’s brother to bring arms against the man, forcing her to lose him to Beyond the Wall.

Finally, Alyssanne murmured, “I will not wish condolences on the little monster that you lost. He killed my daughter.”

For a moment, Cersei wanted to kill the other woman, then and there. Wanted to flay her alive to see what lay underneath. Wanted, suddenly, to see if she would be as unrecognizable as her daughter, if Cersei did to her the things that Joffrey had done to Leona Lefford.

But she reminded herself that the fate she had in mind for Alyssanne was a better one, after all.

Cersei stared at her for a moment, wanting very much to hit her, before snorting and moving away from the other woman.

“Do you think I care what happened to your daughter?” She asked. “Because of you, Stannis Baratheon killed thousands of sons and daughters, as he entered the Westerlands. He only stopped because my brother stopped him. I think that you ought to pay for that, don’t you agree?”

Alyssanne lifted her chin. “Go ahead and kill me, then, Your Grace,” she gritted out.

Cersei bit her lip. “Oh, don’t think I shall kill you,” she said. “No. My father understood the use of making an example of someone, and you harmed our family far more than the Reynes did. No. You shall be made quite the example of, for anyone else who thinks its a good idea to commit treason against the Crown.”

“You’re not the Crown,” Alyssanne scoffed. “You’re just one lucky bitch.”

Cersei smacked her, hard, across the face.

“You were content to think me the Crown when you wanted to marry your daughter to my son,” she said, coldly. “And you should have mourned her in peace, and not tried to get revenge against your betters. The Crown does it wills; it is your job to do as you’re told.”

Alyssanne spat to the side. “Your Crown will turn to dust,” she spat. “It will fester and rot away, the way that my daughter’s body did because you would not even let me look at her. You will become nothing, and my daughter shall be avenged.”

Cersei laughed, leaning forward and grabbing the other woman by the hair, forcing her head up to face Cersei. “You sold your daughter to have the pride of saying she had married the Crown,” she said. “You knew what Joffrey was. You knew what he was capable of. And then you turned around and threw a fit, let Stannis Baratheon kill a thousand other daughters and sons, simply because you made a mistake.”

Alyssanne’s eyes widened as she stared up at her, and Cersei’s lips curved into a smile.

“Tell me I’m lying,” she said. “Tell me you didn’t barter your daughter for fame and fortune, and then get offended when you lost your gamble.” Silence. “Tell me!”

Alyssanne breathed in harshly through her nose. “You are a mother, too,” she whispered. “I thought that you might protect her for that reason alone.”
Cersei dropped the other woman’s hair as if it had been burning her. She took a step back. “Your lands will be stripped from you,” she said, into the silence. “They will go to Stannis Baratheon’s highest general in the Westerlands, for his support to Tommen in this war effort. Ironic, after you were the one to let Stannis walk across your borders in the first place. And your House will be forgotten, just as your daughter has been forgotten.”

Alysanne let out a sound that might have been a keen, as she rocked back on her haunches, and Cersei couldn’t help but stare at her. Everything she had ever seen of the other woman, had ever heard about her, suggested that Alysanne Lefford was as cold and cruel as any man.

She did not look as cold and cruel as any man, where she knelt before Cersei.

She looked like a weak, old woman, and Cersei enjoyed the sight, very much.

It proved that her father had been wrong, about some things.

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“Janei,” Genna said, embracing the younger girl as she stepped into her parlor room, and then leading her over to the divan. “How are you holding up?”

Janei sniffed, instantly looking smaller now that she was sitting again. Her eyes were puffy, and Genna imagined that she must not have been forced into Cersei’s presence in the recent past, lest the woman would have reprimanded her for those tears.

Janei had gotten thinner, in the time since Genna had seen her last, she reflected, with some annoyance. She had no doubt that the girl was wasting away, the way that her mother had been, before Cersei had sent her away, and she loathed the thought.

Loathed the thought that Cersei was tearing down their House, one woman at a time.

She gritted her teeth, petting Janei gently, not letting her irritation show.

“I…I’m fine,” Janei promised, which Genna knew instantly was a lie, but she didn’t bother to call the other girl out on it, because she thought that serving as Cersei Lannister’s lady’s maid, the girl must be questioned quite enough for one lifetime.

Instead, Genna hummed, and poured the other girl some warm tea, watched as she reached out and took it with hands that were almost shaking, bringing it to her lips and drinking it rather too slowly, for Genna’s liking.

Genna had not known that Cersei was going to send Dorna away, anymore than Janei seemed to have, and it was infuriating to her, that Cersei had done so without even letting the woman say goodbye to her children.

It was ironic, she couldn’t help but think, that Cersei so blamed Margaery Tyrell for not letting her say goodbye to her son, and then had turned around and done exactly the same thing to Dorna.

But she had been too late to stop it, and by the time she had learned of it, Cersei was already obsessing over her next problem; how she was going to declare war on the Tyrells from relatively equal footing.

She wanted Shireen back, but so far, she had not done anything to get the other girl back, that Genna knew about. She was too focused on her plans for retrieving Myrcella, and inventing a war with the Tyrells that Genna was not even certain the Tyrells wanted, at this point.
She sighed, leaning back in the sofa and giving Janei a long, expectant look.

Janei sighed; she was a smart girl, for all that Cersei was most certainly underestimating her, and she knew why she had been invited to this tea, after all.

“I think that she’s…lonely,” Janei said, looking down at their enclosed fingers, and Genna pressed her lips together. “That’s why she wants me to be one of her ladies.”

That did not surprise Genna; Cersei and her brother had always been attached at the hip, and every time that they were separated, the two acted like they had lost some part of their soul, wandering the halls aimlessly like lovestruck maidens.

Well, they had, until the last time that Genna had seen Jaime, when he had last been here. Frankly, she had been rather startled by the change in the man. By his lack of interest in his sister, in the capital, in his devotion to Tommen and to the war effort.

It had been…refreshing, and disturbing, at the same time, to see him so changed in so little time.

"And I think that she…she’s trying to decide who she wants to marry Tommen to,” Janei continued, her words trembling a bit as she said them.

Genna grimaced; she was not surprised at the revelation, as she knew Cersei rather too well for that, but Janei looked rather shellshocked, and she pulled the other girl closer, at the words.

“What else?” She whispered in her ear, because she knew that Cersei kept her spies everywhere.

She would have been a fool to trust Cersei, when the other woman had told her that she would bring her the most important of her decisions before she acted on them, and Janei was a surprisingly good source of information, she noticed.

Janei licked her lips, taking another shaky sip of her tea. “House Tyrell invited her to the King’s funeral, to negotiate afterwards.”

Genna sucked in a breath. “And?”

“She said she’s going,” Janei said, very quietly, and Genna turned to her more fully, lifting the other girl’s chin.

“What else?” She asked, because she could tell that there was more.

Janei sniffed. “She’s going to declare Margaery’s child a bastard, when she’s in King’s Landing,” Janei gasped out. “She says she has some sort of proof, that Margaery was unfaithful to her husband, and she’s going to use it to cast doubt that the child Margaery is carrying is actually Joffrey’s.”

Genna swore under her breath. “She’s lost her damn mind,” Genna breathed, something like horror filling her expression.

Janei didn’t respond to that. Perhaps because she too, knew it to be true.

“And Tommen?”

Janei shrugged. “She doesn’t want him to go.”

Which was at least sensible, Genna supposed, even if it was infuriating.

“What about Myrcella? What is she doing about Dorne?”
Janei shrugged. “I don’t know,” she admitted, swallowing hard. Genna gave her a hard look, and Janei glanced away. “She doesn’t tell me some things.”

Genna sighed; she supposed the girl was doing her best, after all. “All right,” she said, patting Janei’s arm. “All right. Well. Go on, then.”

Janei all but fled, and Genna leaned back in her seat with a long sigh.

All for her mother, Janei reminded herself, as she walked out of Genna’s parlor, and made her way back to Cersei to make her report to the other woman, about Genna’s responses, about what specifically the other woman had asked about.

Anything for her mother.
“Margaery will be...indisposed, for the next few days, as she deals with her grief for her husband,” Sansa informed the girls, and tried not to feel guilty for the way that she looked away from them, as she said the words, for she knew they would all have questions.

Every single one of them knew how Margaery felt about her husband, and sending all of her ladies away while she grieved for an indeterminate amount of time was...strange, for the way she did feel. She had never done that, not even when Ser Osmund had raped her, not when she had nearly lost her child.

They knew that there is something off about Sansa’s statement, that whatever was wrong with Margaery to the point where she is refusing the help of all of her ladies save for one mute maidservant, it isn’t grief over her husband, and Sansa can see the curiosity there in their eyes, alongside the sympathy and confusion.

Alla stepped forward, then, seeming to have found her voice alone amongst the group, despite being the youngest amongst them.

Her eyes were very soft.

Sansa wondered what learning the truth about what had happened to Margaery might have done to her, if she had been the one to find Margaery instead of Sansa.

“Is she all right?” Alla asked, nervously, and Sansa swallowed hard. Because she knew she couldn’t tell them the truth, and yet, she wasn’t certain how to spin a lie that any of them would believe, not when they all knew what sort of a man Joffrey had been.

“...No. She...has suffered a loss,” Sansa said, which was the most true thing that she could bring herself to say about what had happened. “And she would appreciate your distance, and your thoughts and prayers, as she cannot go to the Sept herself.”

Not after the slaughterhouse that Joffrey had made of it, the last time that he’d been there.

“Of course,” Megga said, sounding near tears herself, something which it was hard to fathom thinking of Megga as doing, Sansa thought, suddenly.

It was a strange thought, when she had so many more occupying her head, at the moment.

“All that matters now,” Sansa continued, swallowing hard, “Is that she will recover, and that her child’s claim to the throne will not be harmed by this...tragic accident.”

Beside Megga, Elinor’s eyes narrowed, but she didn’t speak up. Sansa might have slapped her, if she had.

Gods, she was furious with the other girl. Furious with what she had done, what she had forced Sansa to do, in turn.

Throughout the rest of her address to the girls, carefully tailored truths because she wasn’t certain
they would believe her if she lied to them outright, she could feel Elinor’s gaze on her, pinning her, demanding a better explanation than the one Sansa had given.

But Sansa...

Sansa didn’t want to talk to Elinor. Elinor could have avoided this if she’d just warned Sansa, warned Margaery, that the boy meant to deliver Joffrey’s poison would be taking it himself, in Olenna’s original plan.

She walked out, walked down a corridor and then another, her feet moving faster with each step because she could hear someone following around behind her, and dear gods, she couldn’t answer any questions right now.

Margaery had seemed all right, as she had addressed the whole court while she informed them that their king was dead, but she wasn’t, and Sansa needed to be with her. Needed to be there for her, even if it was just to sit in shocked silence together.

“Sansa!” Elinor cried, reaching out then and grabbing Sansa’s sleeve, desperately. Sansa paused, turned back to face her. Grabbed the other girl, because dear gods, if Elinor was going to insist on having this conversation, they weren’t going to do it here, out in the hallway.

She dragged the girl into the nearest empty room, and slammed the door shut behind them.

Elinor didn’t miss a beat, despite the rough treatment of being thrown up against that door, a moment later. “What the seven hells is going on?”

Sansa scoffed. “Why? Do you need to report it to your mistress, now?”

Elinor grimaced, backing up a step. “Sansa, I just…”

But Sansa didn’t let her finish, the helpless anger she’d been feeling ever since she’d walked in on Margaery like that, known that the Kingsguard standing beside her was nothing but a threat now that he’d seen it as well, bubbling up to the surface, now that she had a target for that rage.

“I hope your husband is well, Elinor,” she said, every word biting. “After you told me how he took a turn for the worse, the other night.”

Elinor’s flinch was the most satisfying thing that Sansa had seen for some time.

Sansa lifted her chin. “Unless…you were lying, for some reason, but I can’t imagine why you would lie about something like that, when you knew how pivotal your own role was, to the plan.”

Elinor flinched harder, that time, reaching up to run a hand through her hair. “I…”

She couldn’t even think up a good lie, Sansa thought, annoyance filling her.

Olenna had chosen the wrong protege indeed, she thought darkly. The Queen of Thorns always had a lie ready.

“What’s going on?” Sansa repeated incredulously, spinning on the other woman. “If Olenna Tyrell asked you to plunge a dagger into your own chest and twist the knife, would you do it?”

Elinor paused, pulled up short by Sansa’s aggression. She opened and closed her mouth. “I…”

Sansa scoffed, turning her back on the other girl. “Obviously not. You were willing to go along with everything she told you to do, even lie to us about the boy, but the moment you actually had to do it,
you were a coward and forced me to, instead. Used your own husband as an excuse to get out of killing a child, yourself. Did you think that would alleviate the guilt, Elinor? Did you think making me kill him, unknowingly, would make you feel better about the whole thing?"

“Sansa, please,” Elinor said, looking down. “Olenna was just trying to help her. You know that. And I…”

“I was just trying to help her,” Sansa said. “And I thought you were, too. But instead, I failed to save her from a fate worse than death because of you.”

Elinor flinched back then, as if Sansa really had slapped her, and Sansa had the sudden feeling that she didn’t need to explain what had happened to Elinor, what Margaery had gone through, and she squeezed her eyes shut, for it should have been Margaery’s decision whether or not to share any of that with her.

“Because you failed to tell me something very important,” Sansa gritted out, “and I hesitated when I shouldn’t have.”

Elinor swallowed. “You would never…” she shook her head. “You would never have gone through with it, if you’d known.”

“Damn right I wouldn’t have!” Sansa snapped, and Elinor winced at the sound. Sansa lowered her voice, it occurring to her that they shouldn’t be having this conversation in the middle of the open hallway.

But then again, what did it matter, when everyone in King’s Landing seemed happy enough with the new arrangement?

There was little love lost for Joffrey among smallfolk and nobles alike, after all.

Still, she grabbed Elinor, pulling her into the nearest open room, slamming the door behind the both of them. Elinor tripped on air as Sansa dragged her into the room, and Sansa felt a moment’s guilt for manhandling the pregnant woman, but it faded fast.

“I would have gone with my original plan,” Sansa said. “I would have wrapped my hands around his fucking throat and choked the life out of him myself if I knew what your plan was. I would have killed him myself, like I wanted to in the first place, if I’d known that Olenna’s plan included killing innocents alongside the guilty.”

Elinor scoffed. “He was happy enough to volunteer.

“To help us poison a madman, not to die as a sacrifice for it,” Sansa snapped. “And is that so wrong? I imagine any one of Joffrey’s servants would have jumped at the chance, child or no.”

Elinor shrugged. “Do you really think Olenna would have let that boy live, with what he knew? With what could be tortured out of him, no matter how much he hated his master?”

Sansa stared at her, deflating slightly.

No, Olenna would not have let him live, and it hardly mattered now, anyways, because Baelish certainly had not.

But that didn’t mean that Sansa had to accept his death so easily, had to accept Elinor’s friendship again.
“Sansa,” Elinor whispered desperately, “What happened last night?”

Sansa looked away.

She hadn’t been able to tell the other girls, because they hadn’t been in on the plan and because she couldn’t bear the thought of revealing Margaery’s secret to the world.

But dear gods, right now, she was so angry with Elinor.

“He raped her,” Sansa said bluntly, pursing her lips at the way that Elinor’s whole body flinched, at those words. “He raped her, over and over again, and now he’s dead.”

Elinor was staring at her, mouth open, clearly at a loss for words, with the way that Sansa had chosen to reveal that information to her.

“He was a madman, and he’d figured out who she was, last night,” Sansa said. “So he raped her.”

She didn’t know if she recognized the woman she felt like today, anymore than she had recognized Margaery last night, for the way she was gaining some sort of perverse pleasure from Elinor’s pain at the words.

Elinor…deflated, at the admission, sagging against the door and staring at Sansa as if she didn’t recognize her.

She had wanted the truth, Sansa reminded herself, and she was just giving it to her, even if she felt a stab of guilt at the way Elinor was staring back at her, clutching to her arm so tightly Sansa winced.

“I…” Elinor swallowed hard, and her eyes filled with unshed tears.

“And I could have stopped it,” Sansa went on, mercilessly, because she had been holding all of this in silence, because Margaery needed her right now, and if she broke down in front of the other girl, that would be unfair, after what she had just gone through.

And if she broke down in front of Baelish, he would think she was still the weak girl he pretended that she was, and she couldn’t have that, just now. She needed him to deal with her on an equal level.

But Elinor…Elinor had done this. Elinor had been the reason she was so blindsided by that boy, bringing her poison, the reason she had taken so long to make sure that poison got to Margaery and Joffrey.

And in the mean time, Joffrey had…he had…

“I could have stopped it, if I’d just gotten there earlier,” Sansa whispered, and she didn’t care that there were tears, now, in her own, eyes that Elinor was staring at her in wide-eyed shock, because she couldn’t talk about this with anyone else, and every time Margaery broke down in front of her, it was another reminder that she had been too late.

Dear gods, she’d been too late…

Sansa cleared her throat, attempting to pull away from Elinor, but the other girl still had a viselike grip on her arm.

“That’s what happened,” she whispered, hoarsely.

Elinor swallowed. “Sansa…” she breathed, but Sansa suddenly knew that this had been a horrible
idea, confiding in Elinor at all, that she needed to get away from her, back to Margaery, now.

The only other one who understood what had happened, that night, besides Baelish.

“Let go of me,” Sansa gritted out, when Elinor was still holding onto her so tightly.

Elinor dropped her wrist, stepping back. “Sansa…”

Sansa turned and walked out of the room, not bothering to stay and hear whatever other excuses she might have come up with, next.

“Sansa,” Baelish said, walking into her chambers uninvited, and Brienne let out a harrumph of annoyance before leaving them to it, but only because it was what Sansa had asked of the other woman time and time again.

She knew that Brienne didn’t approve of the man, that she thought him a snake, as indeed, anyone who knew him well should.

But she needed Brienne to trust her, with this.

The door shut behind Baelish, forcing Brienne’s probing eyes out, and Baelish moved closer, pressed himself up against Sansa as he took her face in his hands and pressed their foreheads together.

Sansa forced herself to remain very still, to not pull away.

She wondered if he thought that the meek little thing she had become, since she had agreed to become his wife, was the same woman who made love to Margaery, or if he was trying to coax that woman out of her, with every time he touched her, so patiently.

And then, Baelish whispered, “The new High Septon has been appointed, and approved by the other septons.”

Sansa closed her eyes so that he couldn’t see the shock in her eyes, at his words.

“I thought…” her forehead furrowed, as she tried to figure out how to play this, before she opened wide eyes to stare into Baelish’s. “I thought that these things usually took longer.”

Baelish shrugged. “I think the septons realized that it would be within their best interest, to speed things along.”

Sansa hummed, forced herself not to move away from Baelish. “Then…how long will it be, before my marriage to Tyrion is annulled?”

Baelish smiled down at her; she thought it was one of the first true smiles she had ever seen, on his face, and the thought was unsettling. “Not long, my lady,” he told her, and Sansa closed her eyes again, breathed in deeply.

She knew that she ought to pretend to be pleased with the news, but all she felt was dread. Dread, at the thought of losing the one protection she still clung to, the one thing that kept her out of Baelish’s bed, the last place that she wanted to be.

If she couldn’t have Margaery’s bed, he still wasn’t an option, she thought, darkly, and she was rapidly losing ideas of how to deal with him.
His scent was overpowering, in that moment, and she pulled away.

“I have some news of my own,” she said and watched as his face fell, just a bit, as he pulled back from her and cleared his throat.

“Oh?”

“Cersei,” Sansa said slowly, handing over the letter she had just received, addressed to ‘Queen Margaery,’ and signed by ‘Queen Cersei,’ conspicuously without any other titles, not knowing how to feel about the letter’s contents, just now, “She’s agreed to come and speak with us, at the funeral.”

Sansa didn’t know how to feel about the news. Cersei had come, and she knew that ought to be a good thing, because it meant that she was willing to hear whatever they had to say, in their negotiations, but she knew Cersei.

Knew her well, and it wasn’t like Cersei, to give up on a fight, so quickly.

Baelish stared. Then, “This is good news, actually,” he said. “It means she’s not confident in her position.”

Sansa snorted. “What does that matter?” She asked, feel the panic well up within her. “The moment she comes here and sees…what’s left of Joffrey’s body, she won’t give two shits whether she has the confident position, here, or not.”

Baelish eyed her, and didn’t bother to argue, no doubt realizing that she was right. “Hm, yes,” he agreed, and Sansa stared at him. He reached out, taking her by the shoulders. “Do you trust me?”

The words hung in the air for several moments, after he had asked them.

No, Sansa thought.

“Yes,” she whispered.

He could see the lie in her eyes, for he had once told her that she was not as good of a liar as she thought she was, but he pretended to believe her, anyway, and that scared her more than the thought of Cersei coming here at the head of an army.

He smiled at her. “House Bolton, in their…eagerness to prove their newfound loyalty to the Crown has rather…acted out.”

Sansa stared at him. “I don’t understand,” she said, heart beating in her chest, wondering if he had somehow read the letter that they had received from Ramsay, knew about…

About Shireen.

She could not let him find out about Shireen, Sansa thought, horror clogging her throat.

Baelish grimaced. “I don’t know if this is because they understand your position on the Small Council to mean that House Stark is gaining prominence again, but House Bolton has…gifted us with something.”

No, Sansa thought. Of course Baelish had found it.

His eyes sparkled. “House Frey is…no more.”

Sansa blinked at him, the words not fully making sense, as she repeated them in her mind. “What?”
She asked.

Baelish looked gleeful, the bastard. “House Bolton killed Walda Frey, Roose Bolton’s widow, and attacked House Frey in the middle of the night, before they could retaliate, laid waste to their lands, and took Lord Walder Frey up on the top of his castle, and flayed him alive in front of his daughters, after they had butchered his sons,” he said. “They left his body up there to be found in the morning, and made his daughters haul it down to be buried, before they too, were butchered.”

Sansa flinched.

“Before he died,” Baelish went on, “from what I understand, Ramsay Bolton took his head off, and replaced it with a fish’s head, before he ate the rest of the fish over an open fire while his men killed those girls.”

Sansa stared at him. “He…they…”

They had taken her brother’s head off, and replaced it with a wolf’s head. Roose Bolton had been there, at the Red Wedding, as the smallfolk called it.

And now…

And now, his son had killed the Freys.

“All of them?” She whispered, hoarsely.

Baelish licked his lips. “I understand that only…Edmure Tully and his pregnant wife were allowed to live, to take the news to Riverrun, which is how we heard of it.”

Sansa closed her eyes. Edmure was her uncle, her mother’s brother, and a part of her was truly glad to learn that he had somehow survived, but moreso horrified, by what she had just heard, by what the Bolton bastard had done.

The Bolton bastard whom Joffrey had legitimized, and who had just publicly bent the knee to House Tyrell.

He sounded like a monster.

He sounded as bad as Walder Frey.

And yet, he was now the reason that Walder Frey and all those people who had been involved in her brother’s death, her mother’s death, were gone.

She grimaced, not knowing how to feel at all about the news, as she turned back to face Baelish again.

“Are they…expecting something in return?” She asked, terror filling her at the thought that they might now demand to keep Shireen, despite their promise.

Baelish hesitated for a moment, staring at her intently, before he said, “From what I understand, my lady, the North has little love for House Bolton, even less now that Roose Bolton is dead.”

Yes, and there had been suspicious circumstances surrounding his death, Sansa remembered.

Dear gods, it was annoying, needing help from every quarter, and yet knowing that it meant dealing with people like Ramsay Bolton.
“They simply want the endorsement of the Crown, in return for their bent knees. Ramsay Bolton is a bastard, but he does claim to be married to your sister.”

Sansa hesitated, jolted by that reminder; Jeyne. He meant Jeyne.

Jeyne, who Baelish had once taunted her about, when he thought that he would never have her again, and by the look on his face, he wanted her to forget that, now.

She licked her lips, tried to think about the best way to handle this, without his prompting, because Sansa was tired of doing everything that Baelish told her to do.

Still, she couldn’t help thinking about it. Couldn’t help wondering if Walder Frey’s final moments had been as horrible as her mother’s must have been, watching her son and his wife die in front of her.

If the fish that Ramsay had eaten had tasted good, after he had removed its head.

She shuddered; where had that thought come from?

“You once promised me a good deal, Lord Baelish,” she said, “in return for this marriage, between us.”

Baelish eyed her. “And I believe I’ve delivered on more than what I promised,” he told her, and Sansa shrugged.

“Perhaps so,” she agreed, “but all the same, I think that every bride deserves a wedding present, doesn’t she?”

He eyed her, pulling her hands into his and kissing them gently. “And what sort of present are you looking for, my lady?” He asked her.

Sansa met his eyes, looked at him the way that she used to look at Margaery, when the two of them bedded each other feverishly, while still trying to hide from the rest of the court.

“The North,” she whispered, and enjoyed the way his eyes widened, at her words.

Yes, she thought. Perhaps, even if she was losing these battles between the two of them, there was still a way to win the war.

She took a deep breath, waiting.

Baelish's eyes were hard, searching, as they met hers. "My lady..." he began, but he'd already told her, already given away the fact that he didn't think of her that way. Had made that more than clear, for all that Baelish was the sort of man who had a thousand plots going on at once.

She knew what it was that he wanted, knew what it was that he wanted to call her, and it wasn't wife.

Well, wasn't just.

"The Boltons..."

"Helped the Freys butcher my mother and brother," Sansa interrupted him, spitting the words out, choosing not to point out that she knew who else had been involved in that, and it hadn't just been the Lannisters. She met his eyes, and Baelish took a half step back from her, but didn't falter otherwise. "I don't trust them."
Baelish swallowed. "I'm not sure that...matters, my lady," he warned her. "The North is a fickle place, as you well know. They will not bend the knee unless they have a lord to force them to do so. And with Ramsay Bolton married to Lady Arya, they have no reason to turn against us, just now."

Sansa licked her lips, wanting to believe that the North might bend the knee for her sake, but she was not so naive, anymore.

But the reminder that there was a girl paraded around Winterfell, pretending to be her sister, and that, worse than that, that girl was Jeyne...

She cleared her throat. "I won't accept House Bolton as the wardens of the North, Baelish," she said. "And if you want me for a wife, you're going to do something about it."

He reached out then, taking her hand in his. "Sansa..." he said it like he thought she was an insolent child, making unreasonable demands.

She took a careful breath, thought of the way that he had looked at her, in those early days after Margaery had killed her husband, softened her eyes in response.

She remembered that despite the way his...lust, feelings, whatever they were, seemed to have grown for her in recent months, rather than diminishing, Baelish had always loved the innocent young girl that she was.

However disturbing that was.

But she was not that little girl any longer; that was the problem. She had grown up, while he was busy ignoring it, while she was busy convincing him that she hadn't, and now that she had need of him, he wouldn't do as she willed because he didn't see the political advantage behind it.

So she would just have to give him another.

"I hate the thought that the people who killed my dear mother still live," she whispered, twisting her arm in his grip, reaching up to touch her fingers against his. "They say that Roose Bolton himself was the one who stabbed my brother, and his spawn is just as wicked as he."

Baelish stared at her for a beat, licked his lips. "Getting rid of an ally and leaving a void behind never bodes well, my lady," he said, brushing his fingers gently against hers.

Sansa licked her lips, whispered harshly, "They will never be my allies so long as they were complicit in my mother's death," she said. "I will never be able to see them that way."

She thought Baelish might have paled, but if he had, he quickly remembered himself.

For a moment, she wondered how he was going to spin that, wondered if he was going to find some new way to keep himself from being implicated in what had happened to her mother, but it didn't matter.

She knew the truth, after all, no matter how much he claimed to love her mother, once.

She looked forward to figuring him out a little better, though. It might help her figure out what the rest of his game was, as well.

For a moment, she almost wished that he would get down on his knees, here and now, and confess all to her in the hopes that she would still want him by her side, rather than risk a betrayal later, but Baelish was not that sort of man. He was not the sort of man to make a sacrifice of any sort, when it
was personal.

"Find me another Northern House, a House that will bend the knee, given the right amount of support from the Crown," Sansa told him. "Surely a man of your...machinations can figure that out for me. And I will consider that a very good wedding present."

Baelish licked his lips. "And if it...can't be done?" he asked her, slowly.

Sansa snorted. "Then I will do something very stupid, my lord," she told him, something like the fury she had to keep hidden, these days, flashing in her eyes. "And you'll have to consider your wedding present being cleaning it up."

She thought, from the way he looked at her after those words, that he believed her.

She managed to extricate herself from him, then, walking towards the door without once looking back. She did look back once she had gotten down the hallway, to make sure that he wasn't following her, or having one of his creatures follow her, though she did not have much to hide, at least from him, about where she was going.

"Is Margaery within?" Sansa asked the serving girl, as she came to a stop outside of Margaery's chambers Joffrey's chambers. She found it rather hard to think of them as Margaery's now, even as she thought she was beginning to understand Margaery's reasons. "I need..."

She needed to speak with her. Needed to hear from someone else about whether or not the thing she had asked of Baelish had been incredibly stupid, needed a second opinion that she actually trusted.

Because maybe Margaery had been through a great deal, maybe Sansa was no longer certain that Margaery was...able to think in the ways she had once been able to, but Sansa had always at listened to her, even when she didn't trust her.

And she thought that Margaery had at least done her the same courtesy.

"The Queen has gone out to the orphanage she patrons," the serving girl informed her, and Sansa felt her stomach sink in her chest.

"She's gone out? To the people?" she demanded, something like worry welling up within her at the words, though she thought that there was something else there, that perhaps she was just annoyed that Margaery was not there when she needed her. "Again?"

She'd thought she'd at least made it clear to Margaery's ladies, if not Margaery herself, that she shouldn't be going out amongst the smallfolk, not when half of them wished her dead, these days.

The serving girl looked nervous. "I...yes, my lady," she said. "She said that she wanted to bring them some gifts."

Sansa gritted her teeth. "And I don't suppose that she at least took some guards, this time?"

The girl looked confused, and Sansa remembered that not all of the Keep knew about Margaery's last little escapade into the city. Still, she was too annoyed at the moment to care.

"Yes, my lady," the girl informed her, and Sansa sighed.

"Well, I suppose that's something," she muttered, and stalked away, intent on finding Garlan, if she could not find his sister.
“My lady,” Alla said slowly, where she walked at Margaery’s side with a bag full of dried foods, in her hands, “Are you sure that this is a good idea?”

Margaery tossed her hair over her shoulder, tried to keep her voice light as she didn’t look at the other girl while they walked through the filthy, busy streets of Flea Bottom, and said, “Of course. I’ve neglected them for far too long, already.”

She knew that wasn’t what Alla was objecting to; the girl was smart, and Margaery had hardly kept herself above drowning, these past few months. She knew that something was terribly wrong, even if she hadn’t quite worked out what it was yet, and she worried as all of Margaery’s ladies seemed to, these days, despite her young age.

Margaery would have spared her that, if only she had been thinking a bit more clearly, after Joffrey’s death, but she could spare her that worry, now, if only Alla would let her.

And besides, she was quite determined.

The walls of the Keep, great though they were, seemed to be closing in on her, these days.

Sh had thought, that with the move out of Cersei’s chambers and into Joffrey’s, where nothing could truly harm her again, she would feel safe from the nightmares, now.

She didn’t.

Oh, they weren’t quite so bad, in the knowledge that she slept in the bed of a man she’d killed, but they were no longer just of the son she would have, these days.

Now, she dreamt of her brothers, the ones she had failed just as she feared that she would fail this child.

She had needed to get out of that place, needed to feel the fresh air on her face for only a little while, needed to know that there was still a world beyond the Red Keep, and so she had insisted on coming here, despite the objections of everyone who knew about it, including Septa Unella.

Septa Unella may want her to repent of her sins, but she seemed to have no interest in Margaery’s going out amongst the people.

Margaery supposed that ought to tell her how dangerous it was for her amongst them these days, but she didn’t care.

She had already suffered her husband’s wrath, as they had. She was quite certain that anything else they could do to her would pale, in comparison to that.

After all, they hadn’t managed to defeat her husband.

She felt a flash of guilt, the moment the thought came to her, and stepped over a puddle in the alleyway with particular gusto.

Alla sniffed, eying her with something like wariness. “Yes, but…You could just send them some food, Your Grace, you shouldn’t have to go yourself, especially with the way that-”

Alla clamped up abruptly, and Margaery closed her eyes, knowing what she was going to say even if Alla was too cowardly to finish the sentence.

Especially with the way that the people of King’s Landing hated her, just now, almost as much as
they had once hated her husband, she suspected.

She sniffed, stepping over a puddle as they walked through a familiar street, the smallfolk hurrying out of their way as they did so, heads down, not a one of them smiling at Margaery, like they always used to.

And she knew that she shouldn’t expect them to, after the things that she had done, but she felt guilty, all the same.

She hadn’t truly loved them, then, though she had pretended to, and they had pretended to love her in turn, because she brought them food and clothes and other things that the Lannisters never once considered for them.

And now, she was only bringing them these things to atone for her own guilt, in the part she had played of late in their suffering.

She forced that thought from her mind as her guards banged on the doors of the orphanage, and she resisted the urge to roll her eyes, because that was hardly the image she was here to send.

And then she remembered that this wasn’t exactly about images, as the door to the orange opened and one of the septa blinked out at her in surprise.

It was noon day, and yet the woman already looked exhausted. Margaery felt a stab of pity for her.

“Your Grace,” the septa said, looking surprised to see her, and Margaery flinched a little, though she did not think that the other woman was accusing her of anything.

She wasn’t certain if it was because she was faced with yet another septa - told herself that it couldn’t be, when she was facing Septa Unella quite fine, these days - or because she felt guilt for the fact that she had not come to see her own orphanage for so long that they seemed surprised to see her.

She forced herself to smile, all the same, gesturing behind her to her ladies, who were holding the bags she’d ordered brought along.

“I’ve brought some food, and some toys, for the children,” she said. “I thought they might like the… distraction.”

And then, with a pang of guilt, Margaery found herself wondering if this was still atonement, this thing that she was doing, on the septa’s own suggestion, if she was only doing it as a distraction from her own guilty concerns.

Then, was it really atonement at all, or another product of her own selfishness?

She shook her head, walking forward when the septa stepped aside for her with a bright smile; she wasn’t going to turn down food for the children, after all.

The septa was still smiling as she led Margaery through the orphanage, ringing a bell for the children, and stepped into the outer courtyard that she could remember greeting all of these children, of an orphanage she had been patroness to, once before, after the Battle of Blackwater, when so many of their parents had died in that fight, a fight their king had run from.

She’d given them toys and food, and told them that their parents were very brave.

It had been some time since then, and the children all gathering in the courtyard before her were of a similar age to the ones she had seen then; too young, and none of them familiar to her.
She wondered how many of the children here before her were orphans because their parents had
died in the Slaughter of the Sept, as she had heard the smallfolk were calling it, these days.

Wondered if any of them had been at the Sept, that day.

She grimaced a little, and turned quickly so that the children would not see it, as she reached into her
bag and pulled out the first thing that she could find.

“Hello,” Margaery told the children, and they stared up at her with wide eyes as she blinked down at
them, feeling suddenly overwhelmed, despite feeling so confident in this plan, earlier. “I’ve come
because I would like to give you some gifts, if you’d like…”

The orphans seemed to have multiplied in number, since the last time that Margaery had been here.

Logic told her that it made sense; the people of King’s Landing were quite poor, and there were always
orphans, among them. No matter how much atoning she did, she would never be able to stop that.

But she couldn’t help but think that there seemed to be a disproportionate number of them here now,
since the last time she had come here, and that had been…before everything that had happened, at
the Sept.

She hadn’t had the stomach to go and visit them afterwards, while she was still married to Joffrey. A
part of her had known it would be like this.

She wondered how any of this children had become orphans because of the slaughter at the Sept,
how many of them were here because of her, specifically.

She pulled out a loaf of bread, and found herself staring at it in lieu of the children, which was rather
disconcerting, because she had always enjoyed talking to children.

It was one of the things that had once made her so confident in her own ability to raise a son that
would not be Joffrey’s, even if he had his name.

If not his blood.

She shook her head, forced herself not to think about that now, in front of so many people, when she
was no longer certain what her face was hiding and what it was not.

The moment the children saw the food, she could no longer feel their prying, judgmental eyes on her,
and Margaery remembered to breathe again.

Alysanne, at her side, reached out as if to touch her, before her arm faltered, fell back to her side.

Margaery bit the inside of her cheek until she tasted blood.

She spent as much time as she was able to among them, reflecting on how much harder doing so felt
now, when this had been one of the few things that she had actually enjoyed about her duties, as a
queen, before.

But then, everything had been very different before, besides just this.

One of the children stepped closer to her, then, and she grimaced as, in response one of her guards
moved closer to her side, as if he truly thought that there was some danger from a boy who barely
reached up to Margaery’s thigh.

She forced herself to relax as, despite her own irritation with the man, she couldn’t help but think that
perhaps there was something to his concern, and forced herself to smile at the boy, as she held a toy out to him.

He took it in one hand, turned it over and over, and then sent her a shy smile.

“Won’t your baby run out of toys, if you give them all away?” He asked her, and Margaery stared at him for a moment, before she bit back a laugh.

It felt like a strange, unnatural thing to do, to not laugh. She couldn't even remember the last time that she had wanted to, and now here she was, trying not to.

“He’ll have others,” she told him, keenly aware of the fact that if it weren’t for her coming here, these children would not, while her child would have whatever he damn well pleased.

The child reached up without warning then, placing a hand on her bulging stomach. “Is it a boy or a girl?” He asked, and Margaery swallowed hard, as she blinked down at the child with his hand on her stomach.

“I…Don’t know yet,” she said, slowly.

The boy licked his lips. “I hope it’s a boy,” he said, and Margaery’s brows furrowed as she blinked down at him.

“Why…why is that?” She asked him.

Of course, she wanted the child to be a boy, as well, but she suspected that it was for very different reasons than the child in front of her.

He shook his head, hand falling away from her belly. “My sister was in the Sept, with our mother,” he said, softly. “She wanted a blessing, after the trial was over. I don’t think… I don’t think she would have died, if she’d been a boy. She wouldn’t have needed a blessing, then. It was about… she was scared of becoming…”

Margaery flinched, staring down at the young boy in something like horror.

He never finished the sentence, because he was staring up into her eyes now, and despite his young age, he seemed to realize how uncomfortable she suddenly was, for he fell silent.

“Jerehn,” one of the septas said, her voice lightly scolding as she reached out to grab the child by the arm, pulling that arm away from Margaery’s stomach, a move she had not thought to consider, herself. “What are you doing? That is the Queen.”

Margaery licked her lips. “He’s all right,” she said, softly, and Jerehn blinked up at her.

Margaery forced herself to smile down at him. “I’m sorry,” she said. “About your sister. You’re very brave. You… you’ve all been very brave,” Margaery stammered out, when she realized how many of the children seemed to be watching them, struggling not to jump to her feet and run away, as a part of her very much wanted to do, in that moment.

She had been right.

There were more of these orphans here, and they were here because of her. Because of what she had induced her husband to do.

If it hadn’t been for her…
She swallowed hard.

That little boy, Jerehn, the septa had called him, he had lost a sister because of her.

And she still had a child, in her womb, not even brought into this world yet, something her mother had once told her was a woman’s greatest consolation.

She swallowed; she had been convinced of that fact, when she had plotted to murder her own husband. Had been convinced that once she had this child, it would make everything that she and Sansa had suffered all right.

But the people of King’s Landing had suffered a great deal more than she, and over a longer period of time.

What made her child any different from the ones in front of her, the ones who had died alongside their parents in the Sept because of a slaughter she had helped initiate, besides the belly that child would emerge from?

She took a deep breath, and then another, even as she felt blood squishing between the crevices of her toes, like it had on the day her husband had these children’s mothers and fathers butchered alongside the Sparrows, many of them only there for the promise of food and a better life than the one they’d been forced to lead thus far.

These children would never see their parents again; they had lost them because of what she had done.

Her son would never get the chance to know his father. She supposed that with a father like Joffrey, he ought to feel pleased, though he would never know it.

But Olyvar was still the boy’s father, not entirely certain where that thought had come from, only knowing that she had to honor her promise to the other man, a promise that she wanted to honor, but one she wasn’t entirely certain that she could when had first made it.

But she had to, now.

She had to fulfill her promise to Olyvar, because if things had somehow been the other way around, if she had been the peasant girl and he the one in need of an heir, her child might have already been dead.

She sucked in a breath of air, at the thought, at how horrifying it already was, despite all of the dreams she kept having about that child, about the terror he would become because he was Joffrey’s son.

Forced herself to calm down, as she glanced over at Alysanne, where the girl stood beside her, still holding out loaves of bread for the children.

Alysanne’s eyes were very wide, as well.

She didn’t think that her ladies understood her much at all, these days; a part of her wasn’t certain that she knew herself, anymore. But her ladies seemed more and more disturbed, with every new action that Margery took, as if they thought that if they questioned her on her actions at all, she would explode on them.

She hated having that reputation with them, as well. She knew that, in the beginning of the days after Joffrey’s death, she had been quite…unapproachable, but had hoped that in the months since then,
she had seemed slightly more…back to her normal self.

She took a deep breath, and then another.

Alysanne seemed to realize then, that she needed to go, for she abruptly handed the bag in her hands off to one of the septas, and reached out, taking Margaery’s sleeved arm - despite the heat of the hot summer day - in her hand.

Margaery flinched away from the touch so hard, she nearly lost her balance and fell to the ground, and suddenly, if they hadn’t all been before, they were certainly staring at her, now.

“I…I need to go,” she informed the orphanage as a whole, trying hard to infuse her voice with calm because there were so many eyes on her. “But I…I am pleased, that you like the food. I shall have the kitchens bring down more for you, soon enough.”

And with that, she all but fled, her guards struggling to keep up with her as one of the septas called out, behind her.

She made it as far as the outside of the orphanage, the alley she had been standing in before, when she realized that she was still stuck in Flea Bottom.

It might have been different, this feeling like bile climbing its way up the back of her throat, if this were not Flea Bottom.

She felt a hand brushing her arm again, tried to flinch away from it, but her guards were not concerned with her comfort in this moment, as they dragged her away from the orphanage, from the growing crowd around them, all of them too close, just now.

She couldn’t quite remember how to breathe.

She couldn’t remember how to push the guard off of her, because he was so much larger than her, clad in armor, when she was wearing only the thin strips of metal she’d put on this morning around her wrists and chest.

“You!” A voice screeched through the haze descending on her, and Margaery flinched at the sound of it - not because it was particularly loud in the way that it cut through her haze, though that was another reason she wanted to get away from these people, just now - but because she could hear already the accusation in the tone.

She turned, slowly, her guards forming up around her, and Alla pressing into her side. “Your Grace, we should-”

“Murderer!” The old woman that the crowd in the streets abruptly parted for screamed at her, jabbing a finger into the air, in Margaery’s direction.

Margaery froze, sent still by the fury in the old woman’s tired eyes, as she jabbed that finger through the air and Margaery felt it as if it had entered her chest, immobilized her.

“You killed my son!” The crone screamed, as she walked forward before the guards moved to hold
her back. They did so with relative ease; she was an old woman, after all, and clearly not possessed of any magic, the way that the witch Margaery had once met in these streets, and who had so plaugued her since, had been.

She sagged against the guards holding her back, not bothering to fight them off, as her old, yellow eyes met Margaery’s.

“You killed my son!” She repeated, and the words seemed to echo through the streets. She let out a loud sob that seemed to echo louder than that, and Margaery flinched at the sound.

“Murderer,” the woman said, and her voice was softer now, but it seemed to carry through the silent crowd, all the same. “He was just a boy, an innocent boy. He had nothing to do with those fanatics, but you had him killed like one. You murderer!”

She spat at the ground, and the guards grabbed her a bit more roughly, then.

Margaery swallowed hard.

Because she knew, of course.

No one had told her, she suspected, because they already thought her fragile enough to fall over at the slightest breeze, the slightest knowledge that something was truly wrong, but she had known from the moment Baelish told her he had rounded up her husband’s murderers.

And that not only because he had been staring that murderer in the face while he gave the report.

But because the very idea that there were many Sparrows left, let alone enough to amount to a believable number of assassins able to sneak into the Keep, was laughable. She had seen what her husband had done to them, both at the Sept and in the days after, as they fled the city if they could, and fell on the swords of the gold cloaks, when they found that they could not get out of the city.

And it was not as if they could easily hide who they were, with the markings on their foreheads.

Markings Baelish had branded into the foreheads of the twelve young men he had rounded up off of the streets, men he had no doubt promised Sansa would not be missed, so that she would go along with this insane plan…

Oh, Margaery had known that they likely weren’t even fanatics. Had known that Baelish was not the sort of man to be crippled by his conscience, who would care where they had come from and whether they deserved death.

And she had stood by and did nothing, anyway, because if she spoke out, she’d be exposing her own sins.

She shut her eyes, tightly.

She hadn’t asked Sansa whether her suspicions were the case or not, because she knew Sansa thought her in the dark, and she thought it might be a kinder thing, to let Sansa think that.

But she knew.

She knew, and her nightmares had only grown worse, since that night.

When she opened her eyes again, the guards were trying to force the old woman to her knees, and Margaery stared at them in horror.
“Let her go,” Margaery told the guards, and they stared at her in confusion. She could hear the shocked murmurs of the crowd, around them, that their queen was pardoning a woman who had just accused her of murder.

She knew that it only spoke to her own guilt, to let the woman go after such an accusation, and yet. And yet, Margaery had seen enough evidence of the blood she had shed, today. She’d like to keep the streets clear of a little more, if she could.

She waited, allowing herself a small moment of humor in the thought, Cersei would never do this. Somehow, that only made her feel worse.

Eventually, slowly, as if they expected Margaery to change her mind at any moment, the guards let the old woman go.

The old woman spat to the ground, as they did so, clearly ungrateful, before she stalked away and was enveloped by the crowd.

“Has there been anything else from Olenna?” Sansa asked Elinor, as she stepped into the other woman’s rooms.

She had taken care to make sure that the child and his father were both gone; the two of them had gone into the gardens with an armed guard, earlier, and Sansa was glad for that, because she very much needed to speak with Elinor alone.

Even if Elinor didn’t want to speak with her, either.

Elinor glanced up, from where she was half-lying across the divan, and Sansa supposed that it must be very tiring, indeed, for her to have given birth to a child and still be needed as Olenna’s spy.

She tried to feel a little sympathy for her, as Elinor sat up and rubbed at her temples.

“I was just about to fall asleep after spending the whole night up with my child,” Elinor said, annoyance bleeding into her tone, but then she saw the look on Sansa’s face, and straightened. “What is it?”

They would never be friends, Sansa thought, not after what had happened, but it felt good, to have someone to come to, when she needed to vent, even if she didn’t trust Elinor very much, anymore.

Sansa swallowed hard. “I need to know when Olenna is coming,” she said. “I can only deal with one headache at a time.”

Elinor blinked at her. “What’s happened?” She asked.

Sansa shook her head. “It doesn’t matter,” she said, quietly. “I just need to know, about Olenna.”

Elinor licked her lips.

“You won’t tell me anything,” Elinor accused, and looked like a petulant child, for her trouble. Sansa felt guilty for the thought the moment she had it, for she, too, knew what it was like to be kept in the dark about everything going on around her, but she couldn’t help but feel genuinely annoyed. “And I’m sick of telling you things, telling Olenna things, and not knowing a damn thing, myself.”

Sansa blinked at her. “Are you drunk?” She asked, finally, having only just noticed the slur in the
other girl’s voice.

Elinor glowered at her. “And so what if I am?” She asked. “I wasn’t allowed to drink the whole time I was pregnant. I think I’m entitled, now.” She swayed a little, on the couch.

Sansa sighed, moving forward and taking the seat across from her, and decided that perhaps there was something that she could offer Elinor, because she could still see the pain in Elinor’s expression, the day that Elinor had confronted her the first time and told her what had happened to Margaery.

And honestly, since then, they’d been dancing around the subject.

She knew that it was Margaery’s secret to keep, but half of King’s Landing knew it already, and while Margaery might still be furious with her grandmother, and Sansa with Elinor, they had made the mistake of all keeping things from each other, once.

She thought perhaps if she extended the olive branch this time, they might be able to avoid doing so, again.

“She killed him,” Sansa whispered, and heard Elinor’s sharp intake of breath, at her words. She didn’t dare look at the other woman as she kept talking. “It all went wrong…The boy and I, we took too long, and I guess Joffrey…was more of his wretched self, that night, because he…and then she killed him, for it.”

Elinor shook her head. “No,” she said, softly. “It was supposed to be the poison, and when they displayed him at the funeral…he was ripped open, Sansa. His whole body had been absolutely destroyed. So what happened?”

Sansa licked her lips. She wondered if it was as hard for Margaery to think about what had happened as it was for her.

Of course, no doubt it was a great deal harder, but it was not as if Margaery would ever tell Sansa that.

“He…” Sansa felt her breathing quicken a little, just thinking about it. Thinking about the state that she had found Margaery in, that night. Thinking about how if she’d just not had a crisis of conscience about the boy meant to deliver that poison, a boy whom Baelish had murdered for his knowledge of the plot afterwards anyway, she might have been able to save Margaery from her grisly fate, might have been able to shoulder some of the burden for what had come afterwards.

She felt her eyes pricking with tears, and reached up to rub at them absently, still avoiding Elinor’s gaze.

And it felt good, to confide in someone who wasn’t Garlan, even though she hadn’t expected it to feel good to rip open those old wounds at all.

“He was hurting her,” Sansa said. “I saw her afterwards; he hurt her, badly, but she wouldn’t let me send for a maester because she said that she didn’t want to have to kill anyone else for knowing the truth. And then she bashed his brains in.”

Elinor swallowed thickly. “Were you…”

She looked like she didn’t quite know how to finish the question.

“By the time I got there, he was already dead,” Sansa whispered. “And I didn’t quite…I didn’t know what to do, Elinor. She was standing there, looking at me like she’d given up, and I couldn’t lose her
to him, not after all of that time of us fighting back, of us trying to outsmart him. I couldn’t lose her.”

She hadn’t even told this to Brienne, to Baelish, hadn’t quite dared, or known how, she supposed.

But Elinor understood not wanting to lose Margaery. Risking so much to keep her from harm, because she had stayed by Olenna’s side, even after Margaery had banished her own grandmother, to keep Margaery safe.

Still, a part of her hoped that this conversation wouldn’t get back to Olenna, that Elinor would keep it to herself or was too drunk to remember it, come morning.

“That’s why Baelish is suddenly so powerful,” Sansa continued, swallowing hard as she sank down a little into the pillows. “Because I didn’t know who else to turn to, just then.”

Elinor gulped, and then pressed her lips together. “You’re right,” she whispered. “It was my fault. I didn’t want to be responsible for killing that boy, when I was pregnant with a child of my own. I thought perhaps the gods might…that I would be punished, for doing that. So I told you that my husband was sick, so that I didn’t have to do it.”

Sansa eyed her. “I know,” she said, gently.

And dear gods, as much as she had been trying to convince herself that she did, she couldn’t quite bring herself to hate Elinor for that, either.

Elinor swallowed hard, glancing over her shoulder as if to be sure they were alone, when Sansa never would have had this conversation if they weren’t. “I’m sorry. It is my fault. If I’d done it, you wouldn’t have that on your conscience, and the boy would have gotten to Margaery, earlier.”

Sansa licked her lips. “It isn’t your fault, Elinor,” she said. “You were the one who wanted to go along with Olenna’s plan, to wait.”

“And if we had?” Elinor asked, voice scathing in a way that made Sansa flinch. “If we had, perhaps he would have taken to raping her every night. Perhaps we wouldn’t have been prepared if she did snap and kill him. Perhaps we’d all be dead, now, too, and Joffrey would have won, anyway.”

Sansa sucked in a deep breath; they weren’t foreign thoughts to her, everything that Elinor had just voiced, after all.

Joffrey had been going mad, in the end; she had seen it. She had no doubt that if he had lived, if Margaery had meekly stood by and let him rape her, which wasn’t something she thought Margaery capable of, eventually, she would have snapped.

Eventually, he would have died, and they wouldn’t have been prepared for it, in the same situation that they were now, but worse.

“It’s nor your fault,” Sansa repeated, and the words felt heavy, on her tongue, as Elinor turned to her with wide, drunk eyes. “It’s not anyone’s fault, well, except his. And I’m sorry I’ve been treating you as if it were.”

Elinor stared at her for a moment, and then let out a bitter bark of laughter. “I suppose you’re right about that.”

Sansa shrugged. “You don’t know what Olenna’s planning, do you?” She asked, gently, and Elinor’s eyes met hers. “She hasn’t told you.”
Elinor swallowed hard, looking suddenly very small. “No,” she admitted, in a whisper, and Sansa bit back a sigh.

“Oh, okay,” she said, and Elinor blinked at her.

“I know that she doesn’t like Baelish,” Elinor said. “She doesn’t like the power he suddenly has. And I know that she’s up to something… with Varys, but I don’t know what.”

Sansa blinked at her. “Varys?” She repeated, surprised by that.

Elinor shrugged, looking smaller still. “Yes,” she said. “Varys is her other spy, here, but I don’t know what he wants, and I don’t know what she wants. I just know that she doesn’t like Baelish, and she doesn’t like how vulnerable House Tyrell is, at the moment.”

Sansa hummed. “All right,” she repeated. “I suppose… I suppose I can work with that. But I want to know the moment you do, when she’s coming here for the funeral. I think it might be a good idea to make sure she, Margaery and Cersei aren’t left in a room together.”

Elinor smiled a little, at that. “I think it might,” she said, softly.

Sansa’s next stop was Lady Nym’s chambers, and she would be lying if she said that, despite the migraines that accompanied having to deal with… all of this on her own, juggling so many things at once didn’t make her feel a little bit powerful.

A reminder that she wasn’t just Sansa Stark, the little prisoner of the Lannisters anymore, but that all of these people were actually listening to her.

Even if it meant having to outguess Baelish at every turn, and still feel like she was losing the war against him.

The moment lasted up until she opened Lady Nym’s door, unannounced, as the door was unguarded, and got a very… full view of Lady Nym and Megga, in bed together.

She flushed, contemplated walking out, but all of this had to be timed very carefully, and if Cersei was about to depart the Rock for the funeral, it had to be now, this new plan that she needed Lady Nym for.

She took a deep breath, and stepped forward, face flaming.

“Lady Nym,” Sansa said, stepping into the room, ignoring the loud squeal that Megga let out before she reached for the blanket and covered her lower half with it, leaving Lady Nym conspicuously bare.

Sansa resisted the urge to roll her eyes. No wonder Megga hadn’t seen fit to warn her about where Margaery was going.

Lady Nym sat up in the bed, looking for all the world very comfortable in her skin, something that Sansa couldn’t help but envy her for, just a little.

“Lady Sansa,” she greeted, lips twisting up into a little smirk. “Something I can do for you, or are you here to watch the show?”

Sansa realized that she was flushing the same crimson that Megga was, only then. She turned away, slightly. “We need to talk,” she said, biting her lip. “And I didn’t realize that you would be…"
indisposed.”

Megga let out another little noise.

Lady Nym shrugged, getting to her feet and reaching for one of the robes on the floor. “Then, talk,” she said, tying it around herself in Sansa’s peripheral vision, and Sansa forced herself to turn back to face the other woman, as Lady Nym sat back down on the bed and reached out to run a hand through Megga’s hair.

Megga swallowed hard, glancing between the two of them. “Maybe the two of you could…talk somewhere else?” She asked, tone dripping with annoyance, and Sansa smiled, despite herself.

“All right,” she said, and motioned for Lady Nym to lead the way into the outer parlor.

Lady Nym rolled her eyes, but walked out, anyway, and Sansa felt relief spread through her as the door shut behind them, leaving Megga alone in the bedchamber.

“If you hurt her, I’ll kill you,” Sansa said, as they both sat down. “You’ve been teaching me how, after all.”

Lady Nym limped over to the other couch, and raised an eyebrow at Sansa. “You wouldn’t be able to kill me,” she said, coolly, and Sansa rolled her eyes.

“She’s been through a lot…” she began, but Lady Nym cut her off.

“And we were…in the middle of something,” Lady Nym said, and Sansa bit her lip to fight down a smirk, “so what do you want?”

Sansa swallowed. “There’s…something very important, that I need from you,” she murmured.

“You?” Lady Nym asked, leaning forward now, her interest obviously piqued. “Not Margaery?”

Sansa shrugged. “Margaery has enough to deal with, at the moment. And besides…” she eyed the door that they had just shut. She lowered her voice. “I think you’ll like this. It involves the chance to kill a few Lannisters.”

Lady Nym’s eyes brightened, as Sansa had known they would.

Chapter End Notes

Please comment!
“My darling, I love you,” Mellario whispered, as she pressed a kiss to Arianne’s forehead. “I love you so much. Never…never forget that.”

Arianne swallowed hard. “I don’t understand, Mother,” she said. “Where are you going?”

Mellario sniffed, glancing up at Doran, and then back down to Arianne again, and her eyes were filled with tears.

Arianne felt an odd sense of jealousy, for the few scant moments that her mother had not been looking at her.

“I…I am going home, Arianne,” her mother told her, and Arianne shut her eyes tightly, because…she didn’t understand.

“But to the Water Gardens?” She asked, because even at her age, she understood that her mother liked the Water Gardens better than she ever had Sunspear. There were no politics there, only their family, and…less shouting, always.

But her mother was already shaking her head. “No, my love,” she said, and a single tear slipped down her cheek, as she pulled Arianne close again, and Arianne breathed in the scent of her mother, swallowing hard.

“No, I am going to Norvos.”


She knew that her mother had been born in Norvos, that her father had brought her back from that strange place to marry her, but Norvos was far away, from what Arianne understood of her lessons. One had to take a ship to get there, at all.

“I…” Mellario let out a long sigh, pulling back so that she could meet Arianne’s eyes. “I need to go away, for a little while,” she said. “To…make sense of some things. I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

Arianne swallowed hard. “But can’t you come back?”

Mellario’s body sagged, a little.

“I wish that I could take you with me, my love,” Mellario told her, softly. She reached out, running her hand through Trystane’s curls. “Both of you. But your place is here. As a princess, with your father.”

Arianne swallowed; she loved her father, but she didn’t want to lose her mother for him, either.

“I…Why can’t you two just make up?” She asked, and behind her, she heard her father clear his throat, but she hurried on before he could tell her to stop talking. “Uncle Oberyn and his paramours fight all the time, but he and Ellaria always make up.”

Her mother sniffed. “It’s…it’s not about that, my love. I don’t…It’s hard to explain,” she went on,
running a hand through Arianne’s hair, “especially to one so young, but I promise you, that I’m
doing what I have to do. And it is not an easy decision, but I am doing it for you, my love.”

Arianne sniffed. Beside her, Trystane was openly crying, because he was still a baby who didn’t
understand this situation at all, beyond the fact that their mother was leaving them, getting on a ship
and going somewhere far away.

Quentyn wasn’t there, because he had already been sent to be fostered, and Arianne knew that, at
the heart of all of this, was her mother’s decision to leave. That something in their family had
irreparably been broken, when Quentyn had gone away, something that couldn’t be fixed.

Mellario leaned close. “Take care of your brother, Arianne. Promise me, that you will keep him
safe.”

Arianne swallowed hard, choking on her tears too hard to utter a word in response.

And then her mother was walking away, without ever offering a real explanation for why she was
leaving, and Arianne crumpled the moment the other woman was gone away on the ship, where she
stood at the harbor bay, watching her go.

She did not look back.

Arianne fell to her knees, and suddenly her father was there, pulling her up with a strength she
hadn’t known he still possessed, pulling her around to face him, and Arianne buried her face in his
chest, crying openly, even though Oberyn’s children were all there to see her, even though her father
had never seen her cry before, because she had always wanted to be strong for him.

Doran held her as she sobbed in his arms, squeezing her so tightly that Arianne almost found it
difficult to breathe, but it felt nice, to be held. To know that even if her mother had left them, her
father would not let go of her, as well.

It was the last time that he ever embraced her again.

“Your Highness?” One of the guards asked, and Arianne forced herself to look up from the scroll
she was reading, taking a deep breath.

“Open the doors,” she said, for she was late, on purpose, of course, and the guards dipped into a bow
before they opened the doors for her.

She glanced out at the crowd; her father might have thought her quite incompetent enough as to
support her brother over her, perhaps, but one thing that Arianne knew well how to do was to host a
good party. The nobles, by now, would all be satisfied with their meals and with the company she
had made sure was available to them, even if the fact that her mother was also there might still be
strange, to some.

And she needed her guests quite contented today; she was going to figure out how many of them
were loyal to her, and how many of them were loyal to Gerold, tonight.

And how many of them might still be loyal to her father, or to Quentyn.

She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, as she stepped through the great doors and into the ball
room, and the whole room erupted into clapping for her. She smiled, nodded to several of the more
prominent lords, and then, of course, her eyes sought out her mother’s, at the feasting table.
She knew that she should not be surprised, by the sight of her mother here; she had made her presence more than known, since her arrival in Dorne, much to Arianne’s annoyance, though she had yet to try and seek Arianne out.

Though perhaps that was what annoyed her even more, that her mother had come all of this way for some unknown purpose and had yet to have an actual conversation with her own daughter.

Mellario had never quite fit in, when Doran first brought her back to Dorne to be his wife.

She had always been a firestorm, like the ones that happened out in the desert sometimes because children were messing around and there were no wells nearby; the sand would glisten, and it was the sort of thing you couldn’t look away from, not until it was over and the sand had become glass.

She was a firestorm, and half of Dorne had feared her as much as they had loved Doran, in the beginning.

So she did not settle in easily, once she had returned to Dorne, this time, either. Every time she entered a room, the whole room seemed to still, waiting with bated breath.

Arianne did, as well, but that was for a different reason, she suspected.

After that first dance, when Mellario had left to go to chambers that were no longer hers, Arianne had remembered to breathe again.

She had spent half the night awake, after she had fucked Gerold Dayne, laying beside him in the bed and wondering how long it would be before he tried to turn against her. Wondering when her mother would reproach her for what she had done in overthrowing her own father, wondering why she was here at all.

Her mother had refused to ever return to Dorne, and now, she was here.

It had to mean something, and it was infuriating that she didn’t know.

Worse than that, her mother hadn’t tried to come and speak with her alone since then, and it had been some time, since then.

She hadn’t said anything; not when it was clear that Doran was imprisoned and that Dorne didn’t seem to care, not when Obara and Tyene had laughed about it at the feast, and her husband had laughed about it when he was the first to tell Mellario the news.

Arianne was still annoyed at her husband for that, for his clear lack of caring. Most of Dorne knew about the way that Mellario and Doran had parted ways being less than civil, but Arianne thought that her husband could have been less of a complete child about the whole thing.

But none of that mattered, today. She wasn’t about to let her mother distract her from what she was here to do; she’d already let enough people do that already.

Arianne walked forward, took her seat at the head of one of the long feasting tables, beside her husband.

Spread her arms, encouraging the nobles to begin the feast, as she took her seat, and ignored the displeased look on her husband’s face as he leaned over and whispered, “Where the fuck have you been? We’ve been waiting forever.”

One of the nobles sitting nearest to them glanced up sharply at the whisper; clearly, Gerold had not
been as quite as he thought he was. Idiot.

She leaned close, forcing a smile as she murmured through it, “Is that any way to speak to your Princess?”

Gerold gave her a dark look, and reached for his wine glass.

Arianne ignored him; she was nervous, yes, but nothing was going to bring down her good mood, at the moment.

She was stuck in a room filled with nobles who depended on her hospitality, tonight, and that was one thing that she could do well.

And the feast went even better than she had anticipated, despite her lateness, as all of the nobles pandered to her in a way that they had never done when she had thrown these gatherings in the past, though they had pandered to her then, too.

And she thought that perhaps she understood a bit of the reason for her husband’s mood, when none of the nobles seemed particularly interested in pandering to him, tonight.

Arianne bit back a smile, as she reached for her glass of wine, and a noble asked her, “Your Highness, we thank you for the invitation, and praise your good health. We wondering about your thoughts on the Southern Marshes, and whether or not there might be a chance of Martell swords coming south to help us defend?”

Arianne sighed as the request continued.

She had heard of these pirates, raiding and pillaging along the coastline; they were the reason that Margaery Tyrell had ever come here, after all, and she had heard that their raiding had gone as far as the Reach, where the treatment of their victims was even worse, then.

Already, she had sent several of their fastest ships to try and fight off the pirates, or take them prisoner, and it had not…gone well.

The pirates seemed to have only grown more brazen, since then, burning the fields closest to the coastlines, in the Reach, and making slaves of the farmers they found there. She heard that Olenna Tyrell was having difficulty dealing with them, herself.

“Of course,” she promised the man. “We will do whatever it takes to protect our borders from these…filthy pirates, I assure you.”

The man dipped his head. “You have our thanks, Your Highness,” he told her, and Arianne forced a smile.

The rest of the feast went on like that, though Arianne found that she didn’t mind. It felt…almost nice, to be needed by her people, especially when she knew that it was only binding them to her further.

Her mother did not speak up once, during the feast, for all that she had been laughing with many of the women before it, Arianne thought, with some annoyance.

She did not even glance over in Arianne’s direction once, during the meal. Did not when it was over and the food was cleared away, and not when the nobles all gathered in little groups, after that.

Arianne glanced over at her husband; he sighed and moved away from her, and Arianne wanted
desperately for a drink.

For a moment, Arianne considered going over to her mother herself; her mother had not bothered to seek her out since her arrival here, but that didn’t mean that Arianne couldn’t approach her.

She was the Princess of Dorne, after all, and she had a right to know why her mother had finally come back, even if her mother seemed content to leave her in suspense.

Instead, she glanced over at her mother, saw her standing in a group of ladies near her own age, all of them laughing amongst themselves as if it weren’t a strange thing at all to be carrying on a conversation with a woman who had been absent from Dorne so long, and Arianne faltered.

Walked over to one of the servants carrying around trays filled with glasses of Dornish Red, instead. The servant handed a glass to her delicately, and Arianne gave him a look as she reached for a second before she had finished the first.

He glanced down sharply, and Arianne bit back an amused smile as she handed him back an empty flute, and kept the second to sip on.

She blinked, and suddenly there were two more nobles in front of her. She eyed them; Lord and Lady Pellin did not live near the Southern borders, at least, so she would not have to promise them reinforcements that she was keeping on standby for an attack that she was no longer even certain her brother was going to stage, at this point.

Hells, at this point, she was beginning to wonder if it would be more prudent to worry over her husband doing so, even if tonight, with the way he was glowering in the corner, he had proven himself more than a little inept.

Good.

She needed his soldiers, not his wits.

“Your Highness, we are more than honored that you thought to invite us…”

Arianne held up a hand. “Of course,” she said. “You have proven yourselves to be dear friends to the Crown.”

She wondered if her father had even known their names.

They dipped into another bow at her words, the woman taking a step forward to murmur gently, “Oberyn would want it, of course. He would be proud.”

She smiled, pretending that the mention of her uncle didn’t cause her to want to reach for another drink. “Thank you,” she said. “That is…most kind. I know that my uncle believed strongly in this cause, and it is good to know that there are others willing to take it up, even after his death.”

They nodded, and she didn’t think that they had a deceitful bone in their bodies, but then again, this was as close to court as many of the lords and ladies of Dorne would ever come.

So she offered, still looking at her mother out of the corner of her vision, “In fact, from what I understand, Obella is just old enough that she ought to be fostered, soon. I wonder if…”

They exchanged glances. “Your Grace, we would be most honored, indeed,” they said again, and Arianne had to resist the urge not to roll her eyes.
Well, at least with these two, she would not have to worry about Obella being raised to hide her true feelings.

“I would like to give it some thought, of course; Oberyn’s daughters are all near to my heart,” Arianne told them, laying a hand on the woman’s arm. “But remind me, soon, and we shall speak of it more.”

She felt something like guilt, at the thought of fostering out Oberyn’s children without first consulting Ellaria, especially when her mother was here now, a potent reminder of how the threat of fostering had nearly broken up her own family, as a child, but Arianne knew it was something she was going to have to give consideration, sooner or later.

And it would be better to do so now, she thought, while she could use the fostering to her own advantage, in convincing the nobles to remain at her side, than later, when she was given little choice in the matter.

She didn’t think that her husband was quite smart enough to come up with a similar plan on his own, but she wasn’t about to give him the chance.

She sighed; she would go and talk to Ellaria, she decided, before she agreed to foster out any more of her children. The other woman had the right to know that as much, at the very least.

And to say goodbye to them, the way that even Arianne’s mother had done, Arianne thought, biting back another sigh.

Oberyn would be proud, Arianne mused on the words the two nobles had just said to her, as she stepped away from the couple and onto the next group of nobles whom she had to woo.

It was funny; she hadn’t been doing any of this for Oberyn, not really. This had started out as an attempt to keep Dorne; if the princess of Dorne could deliver the Seven Kingdoms, in the form of Myrcella as the Queen, then surely, she had thought, her father would have to realize what a formidable ruler she could become.

He would have to take her seriously, she had thought, and she had not been able to think much beyond that, too hurt at the knowledge that her own father thought her unfit for the throne, when she had only ever wanted to make him proud.

She loathed the Lannisters as much as the next Dornishman, but that thought had been far from her mind when she had first learned of how the Golden Company had abandoned Myr, conveniently around the same time that her brother had traveled East.

And then Margaery Tyrell had come along, and Arianne had started to wonder if perhaps there wasn’t far more that she could reach for, in the same way that the Tyrell Queen was reaching for it.

She wondered if Oberyn would be proud of her for that. For grasping for more than she had thought she could ever have, when this had started out as merely an attempt to defend her right to the throne.

She didn’t think he would. If this had started out as some way to avenge her aunt, to restore Dorne to its former glory, perhaps…

Arianne pursed her lips.

She didn’t like the thought that he too, wouldn’t understand what she was doing here. Wouldn’t approve of it, just as her father didn’t, just as her mother obviously didn’t, either.
She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, and her eyes sought out Myrcella, where the other girl stood near the back of the room.

A part of Arianne was surprised that the younger girl had not gone back to her childish refusal to attend these gatherings at all; for some time, she had refused, after she had been brought back here and realized that Arianne had not also sent for Trystane, as if she thought that her refusal to attend would force Arianne to do as she wished.

Arianne supposed a part of her understood the logic; if no one ever saw the Baratheon princess, no one would believe that she was still a hostage to be used against the Tyrells, or the Lannisters.

But Arianne was more than happy to keep her out of sight of the Dornish nobles who already loathed her, if that was what Myrcella had wanted.

She shook her head; Myrcella had stopped her childishness, after a few weeks, and was now attending the gatherings with a sort of forced calm that she didn’t often display when alone with Arianne.

These days, though, she did not attempt to be around Arianne for very long.

Arianne took a deep breath, walking over to where Myrcella was leaning against the wall, one hand on her pregnant belly, and forced a smile at her.

“Is this spot taken?” She asked her, and Myrcella eyed her with the sort of forced annoyance that she had when the septa told her she had neglected her prayers, most days.

Arianne tried not to let it get to her.

Myrcella pursed her lips. “Do we have to pretend to be civil, even in public?” She asked, and Arianne felt a pang of something that she told herself was not hurt, at the vitriol in the other girl’s voice.

She had caused that, even if she didn’t entirely know how. Myrcella, the sweet young girl who had first come to Dorne a lifetime ago, was gone now, and yet, Arianne still loved her.

“I…suppose not,” she said, slowly, though it pained her. “Though we should at least try not to look like we hate one another, if we’re to keep the peace in Dorne.”

Myrcella scoffed. “Peace,” she said. “I’m not sure that peace is something Dorne wants.”

Arianne gave her a scalding look. “Myrcella…”

“You know, it’s hard enough, when you’ve swollen with child, not to drink, when you are the captive of those who have made it clear they only want you for your political use, but when they pretend to be friends with you as well…”

She reached out for one of the wine glasses passing by on a tray, and Arianne deftly reached out to pluck it from her fingers, taking a sip of it, herself.

Myrcella made a face. “Anything else, Your Highness?” She asked. “I assume, if you sought me out in the crowd, it was to speak of my husband. Have you figured out a way to get him back, yet?”

Arianne bit back a sigh. “Myrcella…” she said, and gave the girl a long, searching look. “Where did I go wrong, with you?”
Myrcella eyed her. “I wonder sometimes, if your heart isn’t made of stone,” she admitted softly, and the words surprised Arianne.

Surprised her, because a part of her had still thought that perhaps there was a way to win Myrcella back, that perhaps there was a way to salvage this relationship, as she badly wanted to, when there were so many others that she could not, anymore.

“You only had me brought back here so that I could be of some use to you,” Myrcella went on, her voice perfectly flat. “Either as hostage to keep the Lannisters in line, or the Tyrells. You couldn’t even be bothered to bring your own brother back here, though. That is where you, as you said it, went wrong with me.”

Arianne eyed her. “You believe I don’t care about you,” and she had already suspected as much, but the accusations still stung, all the same.

Myrcella lifted her chin, meeting the other woman’s eyes. “I’m not sure you care about anyone,” she said, harshly.

Arianne raised an eyebrow, annoyed at the other girl’s hypocrisy, annoyed that she had taken to blaming Arianne for merely capitalizing on what the other girl had inadvertently given her.

“Then why did you come back?” She shot back, annoyed at the self-righteousness in the other girl’s voice, when the guards told her of Myrcella’s nightmares, every single night.

Myrcella fell silent, at those words.

“If you really think me so heartless, why would you come back here?” Arianne asked, a certain deadness entering her voice as she tried not to look down at Myrcella’s stomach, found herself wondering if the child within would be born with her brother’s dark locks…or blond.

Myrcella shook her head. “I…I didn’t,” she admitted, softly. “I gave up something, something I might never get back, to come back here, because I thought you were better than my mother, better than what I was leaving behind. But it’s been…months,” she swallowed hard, “and you don’t really want Trystane to come back at all, do you? Because he might challenge you, like you think Quentyn will.”

Arianne stared at her. “Where the fuck did you hear that?” She demanded, but Myrcella only sent her a cold smile.

Perhaps I’m not as stupid as you think I am,” she muttered, and Arianne sighed.

“I’ve never thought that,” she said softly, but Myrcella only blinked back at her, unflinching. Arianne took a deep breath. “Myrcella…”

She didn’t get the chance to finish whatever it was she was about to say, not before a scream split through the air, and Arianne glanced up sharply, saw her mother looking at her with wide eyes.

Saw the assassin, who looked remarkably like the one she had once sent after Margaery Tyrell, in order to spur her into finally acting on her thoughts, rushing towards the two of them, she and Myrcella, the only ones hiding at the back of the room.

The assassin’s hand was raised, and Arianne saw a glint of a knife, as the guards rushed forward in an attempt to stop the man, as her husband shouted out in something that sounded remarkably like concern for her, but they would be too late, Arianne knew.
And in any case, the assassin’s sharp blue eyes were not on Arianne; they were on Myrcella.

He slid the last several paces across the room, then got up on his knees, and raised the knife as if to plunge it into Myrcella’s stomach-

Arianne didn’t think, she just moved; diving in front of Myrcella, pushing the girl out of the way.

“Arianne!” She heard someone shout, and she thought it might have been Myrcella, but her vision darkened before she could be sure.

When Arianne awoke, she was lying in her husband’s bed, and it was still such a strange thing to her, that she jumped up a little, startled.

“Don’t try to move,” a voice spat out, to her left. “The maesters worked hard on those damn stitches.”

Arianne grimaced, leaning back as she glanced down at her stomach, which was bared from below her breasts, and bound up with bandages.

She then glanced over at Obara, where the other woman was sitting in a hardback chair in the corner. She was scowling, and it was no more a pretty sight than the bloodied rags on her stomach.

Arianne grimaced. “How bad is it?”

Obara eyed her, gritting her teeth. “You’ll be fine,” she muttered, and Arianne released a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding.

“And Myrcella?” She asked. “Is she…is she well?”

Obara closed her eyes, breathing out slowly. “She’s fine. Not a scratch on her, even if the girl doesn’t have the decency to seem the least bit grateful,” she said, and Arianne smiled.

“Good,” she said, because she remembered running in front of the other girl, but didn’t remember much else.

Silence; Arianne was already cringing as she glanced up at the other girl.

“Why the fuck did you do that?” Obara demanded, as Arianne blinked wearily up at her.

“I…” The truth was, she hadn’t thought, she had just acted. Had run forward the moment she saw the assassin going for Myrcella, because he was aiming that knife towards Myrcella’s stomach, and as much as the girl seemed to hate her at the moment, she knew that she had to do something.

Because Myrcella…Myrcella was different. Someone whom Arianne could love without having to worry about trusting her, and that was not someone that Arianne had ever encountered before.

Obara let out a long sigh. “You’re an idiot. You could have gotten yourself killed, and then what would have been the point of…any of this?”

Arianne sighed. “Yes, I understand.”

“Your mother was crying over you,” Obara continued mercilessly, and Arianne flinched. “The whole time that the maesters were tending to you, she wouldn’t let you out of her sight.”

Arianne closed her eyes. “I didn’t mean to make her worry. I didn’t mean to make any of you
worry.”

“Yes, but you are the princess now,” Obara pointed out. “You have to think about these things, no matter how much you may…care for that girl.”

Arianne looked away.

“Gerold is plotting against me,” she said, quietly.

Obara’s head jerked up. “You think he sent that…assailant?” She asked, and there was something strange and measured in her tone.

Arianne bit back a sigh. “I don’t know what to think,” she said. “Only that I know he is eager for a war, regardless of whom that war is fought against, and he is furious that I have not given it to him, yet.”

Obara hummed; her eyes were hooded. “Many people in Dorne are eager for war, Arianne,” she said, softly.

Arianne shrugged. “But not everyone is in a position to do something about it,” she argued. “Gerold is.”

Obara pressed her lips together. “If he was plotting against you, he could have Myrcella strangled in her sleep,” she pointed out. “And besides, Myrcella is not even that important in the grand scheme of things, not anymore. You’re not still planning to crown her, after all.”

Arianne eyed her. She couldn’t deny that the other woman was right, that if Gerold had wanted to kill Myrcella, he could have done so far more easily than at a busy gathering like this one, where there were so many others who hated Myrcella.

“It’s not as useful, anymore. She makes a much better hostage, to keep the Tyrells in line in case they try to turn against us,” Arianne pointed out, because she didn’t like the question still in Obara’s eyes.

The other woman, alongside Tyene, had been very vocal, once, about wanting to crown Myrcella, and she’d made no secret of the fact that she disliked the way that Arianne had folded, under the agreement she’d made with Margaery, after Obara and Tyene had been imprisoned by their own uncle.

Arianne did not entirely know what Obara wanted, now.

“Question the assassin until he gives something up,” Arianne ordered her. “I want to know who sent him, and anything else that he will spill.”

Obara raised an eyebrow. “I thought that torture was something the kingdom of Dorne frowned upon.”

Arianne snorted. “Officially, perhaps. But I must keep my kingdom safe from all harm, even if it means torturing an assassin.”

“But it’s not the kingdom you’re keeping safe,” Obara pointed out, and Arianne’s eyes narrowed. “It’s Myrcella.”

She bit back a snort. “Do you really think that if Margaery Tyrell and her tyrannical grandmother realized we had gotten our hostage killed, that their last reason to trust us is gone, they will just sit by and do nothing? I was protecting the kingdom as much as everything else that I have done since I
became the reigning Princess.”

Obara grimaced. “Arianne…” a pause, a hesitation, and Arianne had a feeling that she wasn’t going to like what the other girl had to say. “I am your cousin, and I have always seen you as a friend. Have always agreed with the things that you have done, without question, without comment.”

Arianne lifted her chin. “What is it?” She asked, something like annoyance welling up inside of her.

“You know that I would support you in all things,” Obara said, and, after a moment’s hesitation, Arianne nodded. Obara seemed to notice the hesitation, but didn’t bother to comment on it. “But… You have to face the possibility that it was the Tyrells themselves who sent this assassin after Myrcella. Cersei claimed that her son had been attacked, and that was why she named him a king. Perhaps…perhaps there was some truth, to her words.”

She said it like she was sucking on a lemon.

Arianne grimaced. “If the Tyrells wanted Myrcella dead, they would have a good reason for it. They haven’t one.”

“Unless they think that we might break our promise and attack them,” Obara pointed out, sharply.

Arianne sighed. “I would think that our allies would at least afford us the same chance for negotiations they offer even an enemy, in Cersei.”

Obara looked more than a little annoyed, at those words. ”Yes, but you promised us a war, Arianne. And…I don’t know if it is because you simply do not confide in me, or you’ve changed your mind, but I think…I think that the people of Dorne have a right to know what it is you’re planning. And I think it’s a mistake, keeping anything hidden from them. We’re not the Lannisters, or the Tyrells. Our people are proud to call us their liege lords.”

Arianne stared at her, licked her lips, a little startled by her cousin’s honesty. It told her far more than perhaps even Obara knew.

“I…You’re right,” she said, and then sighed. “The truth is, I entered into this alliance with the Tyrells because I thought that my brother was going to attack us, and try to take what rightfully belonged to me. So I took it first, and I prepared for war.”

Obara nodded; she knew all of this.

“But now…” she thought about her mother, about the fact that she had returned now, of all times, when she had sworn never to do so again. Her brother had not been heard from. The Golden Company had left Myr, but her mother had seen her brother in Norvos.

It didn’t make sense.

“No, I’m not so sure that is the thing we should be fearing.”

Obara reached out, put a hand on her shoulder. “The Lannisters are weakened, now, Arianne,” she pointed out. “That was what Margaery Tyrell promised us, and dear gods, did that girl deliver. But now…now, they’re sitting back and offering negotiations. We don’t owe them anything, at this point. That was the nature of your agreement, wasn’t it? The enemy of my enemy is my friend?”

Arianne pursed her lips. The nature of her agreement had been that she would help Margaery if Margaery helped her, that they would eventually seal the deal with a marriage, though she had not gone into much detail about that with Obara and Tyene.
But…the nature of their agreement had also been that Arianne very much intended to go back on it, the moment she had the chance, and it was infuriating now, to have a crisis of conscience when she least needed it.

“The Lannisters are weakened; if we attacked them, we would be forcing the Tyrells to attack them, as well,” Obara continued, a light entering her eyes that she had not seen since they had overthrown Arianne’s father. “They’re clearly hesitant, but together, we could take them now. Easily.”

Arianne sniffed. “The heir to the throne, according to the Tyrells, is a child who isn’t even born yet. I can understand their hesitation.”

“But I cannot understand yours,” Obara bit out. “What does it matter, what the old laws of succession say about who should be king and who should not, in the end? No one cares. The smallfolk don’t care. The nobles don’t care, so long as they get something out of it, in the end.” She scoffed. “Robert Baratheon’s claim to the throne came through his grandmother’s Targaryen blood. But no one gave a damn about that. He put a sword through Rhaegar Targaryen, and he became king. That is all that matters.”

Arianne pressed her lips together. “I’m hesitateing,” she said, because it was infuriating, not being able to trust who she could explain herself to, and Obara was, after all, her cousin, “Which is so unlike me, because…Because I made this agreement with the Tyrells, and it’s not…it’s not that I feel the need to honor my word.”

It wasn’t, which was strange; she felt a strange guilt, at the thought of breaking her word to Margaery, when the other girl, in her mad quest for vengeance, had been so bright eyed at the thought of them bringing the Lannisters down together, but that wasn’t the reason she kept hesitating.

Because she had already been thinking about how she might break her word, when she and Margaery came up with their plan in the first place, and Margaery Tyrell was no fool.

Arianne knew that a part of her must have been plotting her own betrayal, in that moment.

And a part of her feared awakening that betrayal, the moment she enacted hers.

She licked her lips. “The Tyrells are the most powerful House in the realms, at the moment,” she said, slowly. “The Lannisters have a claim to that, as well, but the Tyrells have the Iron Throne, just now. I…worry what changing our plans might cause them to do, when Dorne is already splintered.”

Obara put her other hand on Arianne’s shoulder. “Arianne,” she said, slowly, “Dorne has never been overtaken, not by any Targaryens, not by Lannisters or Tyrells, who have tried the longest to try and steal from us. They have no reason to turn against us, if we agree to help them destroy the Lannisters, and…after that,” she said, a slow smile crossing her features, “I think we might even find an even fight.”

Arianne rolled her eyes. “There’s always a first time to lose,” she said. “And I do not want to be the princess who did so.”

Obara sighed, giving her a long look. “Sometimes, Arianne, you have to take a risk. I would have thought the girl who tried to crown Myrcella Baratheon would have known that.”

Arianne eyed her a moment longer, and then smiled. “I suppose you may have a point,” she admitted. “And besides, it’s not as if we’re trying to do that, now. The Tyrells will have to accept whatever help they can get, at this point, whether they want this war or not.”

Obara smirked. “Glad to hear it,” she murmured. “Your Highness.”
“Arianne,” Mellario said, and she sounded startled to see her, as if she hadn’t come all of this way to seek her out, and then come to Arianne’s chambers, after that, even if perhaps she hadn’t known those chambers to be her own.

Her doe eyes looked Arianne up and down, and then her face crumpled, a bit. “Is something wrong?”

Yes, Arianne wanted to say. Yes, something was wrong. She had taken her father’s throne because he was too weak to do what needed to be done, and then had found herself in the exact same position.

And now, her people were demanding a war that she wasn’t sure she should be entering at all.

Something was terribly wrong, and Arianne felt like her control was slipping through her fingers, but telling her mother…

That wasn’t the sort of relationship that the two of them had, not after her mother had left her like she had, when Arianne was too young to understand why her own mother didn’t want her anymore.

So she didn’t say any of that.

Mellario let out a sigh, as if she had heard all of the things that Arianne hadn’t said, and then gestured for Arianne to sit, in her own chambers.

Arianne bit back a smile, amused despite herself.

Mellario, at the very least, did not offer her tea, waving a hand for the serving woman who had followed her from Norvos to leave them in peace, and the other woman gave Arianne a long, harsh look before she walked out, shutting the door behind her.

“I’m glad that you’ve come to see me,” Mellario murmured. “I…I’m sorry that we could not speak earlier.”

Arianne did not bother to point out that her mother had been the one to keep away from her, for so long.

“I’ve found that this position is…very busy,” Arianne said, not willing to admit, even to herself, that perhaps she had been avoiding her mother, as well.

Mellario hummed. “Your father thought so, too,” she said, and Arianne straightened up in her chair, stiffening.

“Did he?” She asked, because she could remember the fights that her father and mother had always had, but found it difficult to remember much else, from that time, though she should have been old enough.

Mellario eyed her. “Arianne…”

“If that’s why you’re here,” Arianne interrupted her, “It’s not something that I want to talk about. You’ve been gone so long…”

“I saw your brother, in Norvos,” Mellario said, and her eyes were soft and wet, and Arianne closed her own, unable to look at the other woman, her mother, who had clearly been so pleased by the visit of her son, a son that Arianne was even now intending to overthrow, if he tried to take her throne.
A son that she was even now trying to find.

Mellario didn’t seem to notice. “He...told me his mission, to the East,” she said. “Told me what his father had sent him to do, and told me that he had not forgotten me, in all of the time that I have been apart from him.”

Arianne did open her eyes then, wanting to rail at the other woman, to remind her that it had been she who had left, not them. That she had left all of them, not just Quentyn, just because she couldn’t cope with the thought of being separated from her children.

A contradiction in all of its forms.

But the words felt like disapproval, like a chastisement, that Arianne herself had not accompanied her brother.

As if she had the ability to do so. As if Arianne had even known that Quentyn was leaving in the first place, much less stopping along the way to...wherever the fuck he was going, to say hello to a mother that neither of them had spoken to in so long.

Mellario sighed, reaching for the bottle of chilled wine when Arianne did not immediately offer it to her. She poured some into the nearest glass, which Arianne herself had drank from last, long, and Arianne found herself simply staring at the other woman, uncertain how she was meant to react to...well, to any of this.

Her mother had returned to Dorne, after years of refusing to come back because she disagreed with the way that Doran was raising their children. She had returned, and her first private words to Arianne were of Quentyn, because of course they were.

Her parents had always favored her younger brother to her.

“I haven’t heard from him in some time,” Arianne murmured. “He’s been gone a while.” She cleared her throat. “Was he...did he seem well, to you?”

Mellario eyed her. “He seemed…lost,” she said, and there was something about the way she said it that made Arianne think her mother was not speaking of Quentyn, not at all.

Arianne straightened up a little taller, in her seat. “I’m not lost,” she gritted out, but her mother’s eyes were sad, as they met hers.

Mellario pressed her lips together tightly. “I think…” she said, slowly, “I think that you should speak with your father about this, Arianne. I think that there are some things yet that you do not understand.”

Arianne licked her lips. “That’s rich, coming from you. You’d think that would be the last thing you might advise me, given how you never let him have a chance to explain himself,” she said, and hated herself instantly for thinking the words, much less saying them aloud, because she had spent a lifetime wanting to see her mother again, to speak with her again, where her father had ignored her for so long, but the words were out there, now.

A reminder that as much as Doran had neglected Arianne for so much of her life, Mellario had been the first parent to abandon her.

Mellario flinched, as though she’d been struck. “Arianne...” she said, reaching out for her daughter, but Arianne flinched away from the older woman, the thought of her touch burning against Arianne’s skin.
“No,” Arianne said. “No, you don’t get to come back here, after all of these years, and lecture me like a child.”

“Arianne,” Mellario said, and her voice was more gentle than Arianne had ever heard it, more gentle than it had been even on the day she had said farewell to her children, in the Water Gardens, and Arianne had cried for the last time as a child, because she had thought that she would never see her mother again.

“Do you remember what it was that I said, when Doran tried to take my son away from my arms and foster him to Yronwood?” she asked, and Arianne closed her eyes.

Mellario cleared her throat, and, just like that, Arianne found herself opening them again. She was like a moth to the flame; her mother was some exotic thing, something she could not look away from no matter how hard she tried, no matter how many times Mellario mentioned Quentyn.

“I told him that he was selling his own flesh and blood to cover his debts,” she said. “I did not understand then, nor do I now, the idea of sending your own child away to someone else, to let them raise that child and let your child think of them as father. As...as mother,” she faltered, then.

Arianne swallowed hard.

She knew that that argument over Quentyn had been, if the not beginning, the catalyst for the end of her parents’ marriage, even if divorce was not acceptable to the two of them and they had merely spent these last decades apart, rather than with a marriage that had truly been ended.

Mellario had thought her child far too young to be sent away to be fostered by some lord who held no great love for the Martells, and Doran had disagreed. It was one of many disagreements between the two of them, these two who had married for love and knew little really of one another, but in the end, Doran had ended up sending Quentyn to Yronwood, anyway.

Mellario had never forgiven him.

“Your father wanted to send you to be the Archon’s cupbearer, in Tyrosh,” Mellario continued, and Arianne’s eyes flew open then, because she had only a distant memory of that affair.

That her father had wanted her fostered out when she was younger, but relented and changed his mind about after long, was something that her family never spoke about. She knew that he had wanted to foster her out from Oberyn, and sometimes, Arianne wondered if her father blamed her for the fact that she had not been fostered out. If he had wanted her to be fostered because he had not known how to be a father, and had thought that sending her away would make him love her more.

After all, he had been happy to keep his distance from her throughout her life, whether she lived in Sunspear or not.

“I threatened to kill myself,” Mellario whispered, and Arianne felt her jaw dropping open, at those words. “I told your father that I would have Areo Hotah lay me on his sword, if he tried to take you away from me the way that he had taken my son.”

Arianne’s breaths were coming quick now, and hard.

“And I saw,” Mellario whispered, and she sounded near broken, now. “I saw my husband for what he was, then. I knew the anger that drove your uncle, Oberyn; I had not seen how it possessed your father until that day, when I threatened to lay on Areo Hotah’s sword and he looked at me as though I had told him that I would drag you with me.”
Arianne shook her head, taking a step back from the other woman, wanting, like a small child, to reach up and cover her ears. She couldn’t. She was spellbound, as Mellario reached out and gently placed a hand on her wrist, and Arianne found that she couldn’t pull away from that, either.

“He didn’t foster you out, but I lost you that day, all the same,” Mellario said. “Just as I lost him. He looked at me, and he saw yet another uncertainty, an unstable thing that might steal the last of his happiness away from him, if he allowed me to. And I cannot say that he was wrong. That I wouldn’t have stolen you and Trystane away onto a ship if I had to, if I thought that you would not be with me.”

Arianne’s lower lip quivered. “But you left us anyway, in the end,” she said. She wanted to rail against her mother, to demand to know why, after all of that fighting for her, for her brother, she could leave them anyway, in the end, but the words came out a quiet whimper, one that she hated herself for.

She reached up with her free hand to find herself wiping at her wet eyes.

Mellario nodded, sadly. “And I am sorry for it, but I left you because your father asked it of me,” she said, and Arianne felt her stomach sink. “We could not agree on anything, by then, and I think we both feared the effect that it would have on you and Trystane. I left because I had threatened to kill myself, through Hotah, if you were not raised the way that I wanted you to be, and Doran did not want you to lose a mother like that, did not want to lose his children to my hot temper.” Her smile was bitter. “So I left, because I could not stand the thought of raising you in this world, with your father, nor of raising you alone in Norvos.”

That pit in the midst of Arianne’s stomach tightened. “So it was Father, who sent you away,” she whispered, and Mellario shook her head, violently.

“No,” she said, and there were tears in her own eyes. “No, Arianne. I left, because your father was right. Gods, I am not explaining this well.” She sent Arianne a gentle smile. “I left because, in the end, I thought it to be the best thing to do for you. Because I did not want to raise you in a home where your parents could never agree that what you were doing was good, and right.”

Arianne scoffed. “Well, that happened anyway.”

Mellario pursed her lips. “Gods,” she whispered, reaching up to wipe the wiry hair from her eyes. “I am not explaining this well. Arianne, the day that I decided to leave Norvos, I was going to take you with me. I wanted to take you with me, because Trystane was just a child and would not understand if I took him away from the only home he had ever known, but you...you were my daughter, my oldest girl, and the thought of leaving you behind made me sick. You may have been a Princess of Dorne, but you were my daughter, first and foremost.”

Arianne’s stomach clenched again. She swallowed hard, rapt.

Mellario sighed. “I got you as far as the harbor, before Doran dragged us both back to Sunspear,” she said. “And demanded to know what I was doing. I...I am surprised, honestly, that you do not remember this yourself.”

Arianne shook her head.

Mellario’s other hand reached out, so that she was holding both of Arianne’s wrists in her hands, and Arianne did not feel trapped by the touch. On the contrary, she felt...comforted, strangely, for she had never been one to enjoy the feeling of another against her, save for in the bedroom.
And even then, it had more to do with pleasure than comfort.

“Your father looked at me,” Mellario said, quietly, “And he demanded to know why, if I was to leave and deprive him of one that he loved so much, I must take another that he loved with me. Why I must steal you away, and leave him with only pain. And...I found then, that I could not do it. I could not steal you away from him, and I am sorry if that has left you with some measure of pain because of me. I truly am.”

Arianne’s breath caught in her throat. “Areo Hotah,” she said, softly, “He was meant to protect us, my brothers and I, wasn’t he? That’s why he remained.”

“Your father loves fiercely. He loved your aunt fiercely. He loved me fiercely. He just does not know how to show that love, not in the best of ways. But he loves you, Arianne,” Mellario said, her hand searing on Arianne’s arm, as she nodded in answer to Arianne’s question. “So I think that you will be surprised by whatever his answer for all of this is, if you just give him the chance to explain himself.”

Arianne did manage to pull away from the other woman, then, drawing in deep breaths. “I...I need some time alone, I think,” she said, softly.

Mellario nodded. “Think it over,” she said. “Your father loves you Arianne, and he only ever wanted what was best for us, as a family.”

From the story that her mother had just told her, Arianne had gotten a different impression, but she didn’t bother to argue with the other woman, just nodded absently and started to move away from her, plotting already how she was going to deal with the fact that her brother had apparently had the time to go to Norvos, during his travels.

Had seen their mother there, and she had said nothing of him trying to raise an army against her, but at the same time, she didn’t know if she could trust her mother enough to tell her if he had been.

After all, her own father had thought her an enemy, and become one to her, himself.

“Arianne?” Mellario said, in the doorway. “Take it from someone who has experience with these things. If you hold on too tightly, you’re going to lose the thing you cling to so hard, anyway.”

Arianne dragged in a deep breath through her nose, nodding.

She thought her mother was right, but she had a feeling that she had learned the sort o lesson that her mother hadn’t intended her to.

“What did your mother want?” Gerold asked, gently.

Arianne turned, then, pressing herself into her husband’s chest and leaning hard against him, trying to pretend she didn’t notice how odd he found this, when she had never really sought comfort from him before.

But the feel of him, strong and tall and pressed against her, almost taught Arianne how to breathe, again.

After a moment’s hesitation, she felt her husband’s arms wrap around her, pulling her close, and Arianne breathed in his scent and found it strangely calming.

“She…” Arianne honestly wasn’t certain how to explain what had just happened. “She wanted me to
speak with my father again.”

Gerold’s hold on her tightened. “Why?”

Arianne shook her head, where it still rested against him. “She thinks that I am wrong about him. She thinks that I am wrong about…” she let out an incredulous scoff, gesturing vaguely around their room. “About all of this.”

Gerold did not speak for several moments. Then, “Do you believe her?”

It was the first time that Gerold had expressed any sort of doubt in their plan, and the thought brought Arianne up short, for her husband was not the sort of man who put much thought into doubts, once he had made up his mind about something.

She knew that they did not have the traditional sort of marriage, knew that, while it had been a marriage of convenience and that was traditional enough, neither of them had invested much into this marriage by way of trying, beyond the occasional fuck, as they had already done before they were married.

Both of them were far too concerned with what was to come.

Hells, the only reason that Gerold had married her in the first place was because Arianne had promised him a war against her brother, had promised him that he would sit on the throne by her side. Because the men of Dorne wanted blood for all that they had suffered in silence, and Arianne could promise that where, for whatever reason, her father could not.

But if she was wrong...If she was wrong, then she knew this marriage would mean nothing. Her father could just as easily have it annulled, and marry her off to some old lord like he had always threatened to do when she was younger, that she could not interfere in his plans again.

His plans that somehow included sending her brother to the East at the same time that the Golden Company was moving West.

She licked her lips, aware that she needed to be very careful, in how she presented this to her husband, lest she lose him - and his support, his armies - for good.

“No,” she said. “No, I don’t.” She sat up a little, leaning over her husband. “I believe in what we can accomplish, now that we finally have the chance to do so. I believe that now we’re here, we shouldn’t waste our chance.”

Gerold’s eyes widened a little, at the fervor in her words. “You’ve said this before,” he said. “And still, here we are.”

Arianne hummed. “Because I’ve been afraid. Afraid of what my father might think, afraid of destroying this kingdom when I am trying to save it,” she told him. “But I was wrong, to be afraid. And I know what I have to do, now.”

Gerold stared up at her, as she moved between his legs, stood before him. “What?” He asked, and his voice was almost breathless.

Arianne pressed her lips together, as she reached up and ran a hand through her husband’s hair. “I have to find my brother, wherever he is. And I have to kill him.”

Gerold stared at her, and Arianne lifted her chin, forced herself to sound a little more certain, at the very least.
“Before he can drag this country down with him.”

Gerold kissed her.

She waited until she was sure that her husband was sound asleep, before she snuck out of the bed and reached for her robes, slipping them on before she padded her way out other husband’s chambers and into the hall.

She knew that in the morning, it would not matter, because her husband would wonder where she had gone anyway, but Arianne would have an explanation for her absence, by then.

She glanced back one more time, at her husband, where he lay still on the bed, and her heart clenched a bit.

No matter what she thought about Gerold personally, she couldn’t deny that the man was a good lover, passionate and obsessed, almost, and had once been a confidante and a friend.

It was a shame that this had to happen the way that it would.

She turned to the guards, where they stood outside her door, and pressed a finger to her lips.

“Not a word,” she warned them, and they bowed as one to her.

Her men may think that Gerold was just as powerful as Arianne now, an assumption that, as their reigning Princess, she would need to soon disabuse them of, but they would not disobey a direct order from her, she was certain of it.

“And I need you to do something else for me,” she whispered, into the silence.

Her men straightened. “Whatever you wish, Your Highness.”

Arianne forced herself to smile, cocking her head at them. “My brother. While he has been… overseas, endangering the future of this kingdom, he was in Norvos. I need you to send one of your best scouts, and find out where he is. Understood?”

They glanced at one another, and then nodded.

“As Your Highness commands,” one of them said, and Arianne swallowed.

“No one is to know of this, do you understand? Not my husband, not anyone.”

The guards exchanged those nervous glances again.

“As you wish, Your Highness,” they said, and Arianne gave them another long look before starting to walk down the corridor.

“Ah, excuse me, Your Highness,” one of the guards interrupted. “But your husband has ordered that, due to the attack on Myrcella, you should not be alone at any time.”

Arianne cocked an eyebrow, wondered if perhaps there had been some truth to what Obara had warned her.

“I am your princess,” she said, coldly. “And I understand the concern, but I will be fine.”

In fact, she supposed, it would be strange if she were not accompanied by guards, wherever she
went, but Arianne had no intention of anyone knowing where she was going.

If they did, their tongues would wag, and Arianne could no longer trust that the things she did in secret would not be used against her - by anyone in her court, not just her husband.

She had seen the look in Obara’s eyes, when the other girl had all but questioned the reason for her to not crown Myrcella.

She took a deep breath as she passed around the corner of the corridor and realized that the guards weren’t following her, and then quickened her pace, through the castle and out of it, ignoring the way that the guards outside called out to her, going to the stables where she could not be detained, because, after all, she was the Princess.

In the end, it was all too easy to sneak out of her own palace.

It was slightly harder, sneaking into the tower where she was keeping her father as a prisoner, and convincing a guard whom she had explicitly told never to allow anyone but himself to enter, to let her in.

When she was still her father’s daughter, he would not have allowed her in.

Now, he simply did so with a raised eyebrow, and Arianne stepped through a door that she had not walked inside of since she had put her father here in the first place, and she didn’t know if it was because of the guilt that she felt for keeping him locked away, or because she couldn’t stand the thought of having to deal with him, after the way he had made it clear he didn’t give much of a damn about her.

She took a deep breath, forced herself to remember that she had been the one to usurp her father, not the other way around, and either way, he should not elicit such emotion within her.

She was better than him.

She was still moving slowly, unfortunately, but still, she was better than him. Stronger. She had had the guts to do the thing that he could not.

She would make Dorne as great as it had once been, back before it had ever bent the knee to the Targaryens for a marriage, back when the world over had known Dorne as never bowing to anyone.

Her father glanced up, from where he sat in the chair by the single window in his cell, and his eyes widened a little, at the sight of her.

He looked older, though it had only been a few months since his imprisonment. She supposed it must be difficult, to be locked away for so long.

“Hello, Arianne. I didn’t expect to see you again.”

Arianne licked her lips, shutting the door behind herself. “Hello, Father.”

Chapter End Notes

Please don't forget to comment!
Chapter Notes

Warning for brief mentions of forced abortion, rape. Also, guys. You have no idea the deep recesses of reddit I found myself in, trying to figure out if Ser Robert Strong could still...you know. Sorry. I mean, it was...implied in the show? But...anyway.

On another note, I actually...split this chapter in half. *Looks at the word count and runs away screaming*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“How is she?” Sansa asked, softly, annoyed that she was now reduced to interrogating Margaery’s ladies outside her door in order to make sure that she was all right.

She shot the guards a glare, where they stood in the corner of the hallway, of course trying to leave them to their privacy, because no one seemed to understand what Sansa’s place in this new world was yet, but they did understand that she was not to be trifled with, while they guarded the Queen’s chambers.

She took a deep breath, trying to remind herself that it wasn’t Margaery’s fault that she was being so...standoffish. After what she had been though, Sansa didn’t think that she could blame her for much of anything, these days, even if Baelish was infuriated that she didn’t seem to be...responding well, to Sansa’s manipulations.

In truth, Margaery wasn’t responding well to anything, but Sansa was managing to get certain things done, whether she wanted to do them, or not.

The gods pity them if Baelish ever found that out, of course.

But it meant that Margaery was not forced to do things she did not want to do, at the moment, and at the moment, she seemed quite content not to do much more than make a single daily appearance, and then disappear into Cersei’s old chambers for the rest of the day, seeing no one.

Which was why Sansa was reduced to making her plans with Garlan, rather than Margaery, and interrogating Margaery’s ladies just to make sure that Margaery was eating and sleeping.

Alla grimaced, shutting the door behind her so that they wouldn’t be overheard. Not that Margaery seemed to be enticed to come out of her inner chambers, but Sansa supposed it was better to be careful.

She had a feeling, these days, that Margaery wouldn’t like the thought that she was being spied upon.

“She…won’t come out of her bedchambers,” Alla confessed, eyes downcast. “At all. And she won’t eat anything. If any of us try to come in, she orders us out.”

She sounded incredibly sad about it, and Sansa felt a stab of guilt, that none of Margaery’s ladies seemed to know the full story about what had happened to her, and none of them could.
Sansa took a deep breath. “I see,” she said, biting back a sigh, because she certainly didn’t want to be the one to intrude on Margaery, not with the way that the other woman seemed to be avoiding her, these days.

But she had to make these attempts at meetings most days, regardless, because Baelish was convinced that she was persuading Margaery as to their plans at the end of each day.

He had no idea that Sansa had no more control over Margaery, these days, than Margaery had had over Joffrey, near the end of her marriage.

She was just working around the other girl, and that was not an easy task, either, when one was not the Queen. Nor, even, anyone of consequence, besides that of a traitor’s daughter being kept prisoner here.

If she was even a prisoner anymore; of that, Sansa was no longer entirely sure, and it occurred to her that she ought to be more concerned about that, and yet.

And yet, these days the only thing she found herself worrying about, save for the damnation of all of King’s Landing in flames when she came to the inevitable conclusion that she was incapable of ruling on her own without even control of the Small Council, was Margaery.

Alla sighed, and she blinked up at Sansa with wide eyes. “Sansa, what…what happened to her?”

Sansa flinched, quickly looking away.

It had been only a week since that day, and Sansa…Sansa could still feel how difficult it had been, to take the knife in her hands and twist it, over and over again, as blood poured out over her fingers and Margaery stared at her with deadened eyes…

Sansa took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. The image faded, but the sensation, that slow spurt of blood that had followed removing the knife, remained.

And if she wasn’t all right…then dear gods, she couldn’t imagine what Margaery must be feeling, at the moment.

Of course, she also couldn’t imagine it because whenever she did manage to meet Margaery’s eyes, the other girl looked at her like she thought was going to blurt out her greatest secret then and there, in front of half the Small Council, or the court.

And if she didn’t want to tell any of her ladies about it, that was fine by Sansa, who would rather not relive any of it again, thank you very much.

So she treaded carefully, asking, “Has she…what has she told you?”

Alla scoffed, making a face of disgust. “She doesn’t tell us anything. She won’t.” A pause. “I’m worried about her.”

Sansa took a deep breath. “Alla…” a pause, and Sansa took another deep breath, tried to decide how she wanted to word this.

Because of course, she could see the worry in Alla’s eyes, knew that it was cruel to keep the other girl in the dark, to keep any of the girls in the dark when she knew how they cared about Margaery, but it was not her secret to tell.

And if Margaery wanted no one to know, there was nothing Sansa could do about that, even if
something like sourness filled her tongue.

“She watched her husband be killed, right in front of her,” Sansa said, slowly, and tried to pretend that she didn’t see the look in Alla’s eyes, the disbelief, there. “By the fanatics. And...by the time that I found her, she...well, I think that they...Attacked her, before I got there. Before Ser Meryn killed some of them, and they him.”

She grimaced; that was yet another part of the lie that sat uncomfortably in her stomach, the idea that Ser Meryn was able to kill off some of the fanatics, before his untimely end. That he was some sort of hero, in the end, when Sansa had never seen him as such.

But Baelish had insisted that it wouldn’t be believable, otherwise.

Of course, the fanatics had carried off the bodies of their friends, before anyone else could get to the Queen in time.

“Joffrey,” Alla repeated, and Sansa stared at her blankly.

“What?”

“Her husband was Joffrey,” Alla said, and there was something like anger in her voice; she knew that Sansa was lying, and she was calling her out on it.

Sansa closed her eyes.

“She hated him,” Alla continued, and there was something cold and merciless in her tone that Sansa had never heard from her before, the one of Margaery’s ladies who had always seemed like such a child, to Sansa. “She might not have let on about it all the time, but I know her. She loathed him, and he was loathsome for a good reason. I can’t imagine that even his horrific death should have upset her this much.”

Sansa stared at her, mouth opening and closing, truly struck speechless by the other girl, by what she’d just said.

And it was strange; Sansa hadn’t thought of the situation like that once, not since Joffrey had died. Hadn’t thought that it was strange that Margaery ought to be mourning him at all, even as she tried so hard to spin the story for their audience. Hadn’t thought it was strange that Margaery might want to mourn her own dear husband because, after all, he had been her husband.

The whole world over might know how she truly felt about him, but she would be the worse of the two, in their minds, should they ever know the truth.

And yet.

And yet, she knew why Margaery was acting the way she was. Knew that the violation she had endured had...changed her, inherently.

But she couldn’t help but think of this from Alla’s perspective, couldn’t help but think, in this moment, how it did almost feel like Margaery was mourning Joffrey.

She had killed him, and she had every right to feel whatever the fuck she wanted to feel about that, but Sansa wasn’t mourning Ser Meryn.

And Margaery walked about like a ghost these days, like a person who was barely there, in spirit, like someone who wanted to be anywhere but there.
And when she was done for the day, she locked herself away in her chambers and refused entry to any of her ladies, or to Sansa.

Sansa swallowed hard. She was about to open her mouth, about to reprimand Alla, because surely this meant the other girl was getting far too close to the truth and she needed to be put in her place, when a servant walked up with a covered bowl.

Sansa turned on her, glad of the distraction, suddenly, because she didn’t know what she could say to justify all of this, without telling Alla the truth. Not when Alla seemed insistent on finding it out for herself.

“What are you doing with that?” Sansa asked, lifting the cloth without thinking, because after all, they were originally going to poison Joffrey.

Perhaps she was paranoid, but if Cersei ever found out the truth about what they had done, she was certain the other woman would find such a revenge ironic enough to enact.

“I…The kitchens sent this, my lady,” the serving girl said as she dipped into a curtsey, rather awkwardly with the tray in her hands so full.

Sansa hummed. “Did you have someone taste it?” She asked, and Alla squinted at her suspiciously, but the servants had already been informed of this extra chore, after all.

And Sansa might not have believed that they had done so, when the serving girl nodded obediently, if she hadn’t been the one to threaten them herself, should they fail and anything happen to the Queen Regent because of it.

Sansa nodded, then, impulsively, because it would mean getting away from Alla and that she could taste the food herself, if she had to, “I’ll take it for her. You’re dismissed.”

The serving girl squinted at her, this time, and then dipped into another curtsey, gratefully handing over the bowl and all but disappearing down the hall in the time it took Sansa to blink.

When she looked back at the shut door of Margaery’s chambers, Alla was still staring at her.

“What’s going on?” Alla asked, crossing her arms over her chest as she stared into Sansa’s eyes. “Why are you having people taste Margaery’s food, and why won’t she talk to any of us? And don’t for a moment think you can make me believe that it’s because…”

“You’re dismissed, Alla,” Sansa interrupted her. “And you ought to have some more compassion for your Queen. No wonder she won’t tell you anything about how she feels.”

The guards, behind them, shifted uncomfortably; Sansa abruptly remembered that they were all Tyrells, now.

Alla lifted her chin, dipping into a defiant little curtsey before she walked off, and Sansa released a breath she hadn’t even realized she’d been holding as she turned and walked into the Queen’s chambers.

She hadn’t been in them for some time, and they seemed strange, now that she was back here. As the door shut behind her, the air felt cloying, like there was some presence here, bearing down on all of them.

Which was strange, because she thought if anything, the presence would be next door, in Joffrey’s chambers.
Sansa swallowed hard, stepping further into the rooms. Margaery had dismissed all of her servants, and that was strange too, because Sansa could think of only a handful of occasions when Margaery was not surrounded by her servants.

Usually, it was because the two of them were trying to find some time alone, and Margaery had told all of her ladies that she had a headache and they needed to leave her be.

Sansa smiled wistfully at the memory, before she took a deep breath and stepped further inside, into Margaery’s bedchambers, calling out softly to announce herself before she stepped within, because she had a feeling that Margaery wouldn’t appreciate being surprised.

“Margaery?” She called, as she pushed the door open. “I’ve brought you some foo-”

She paused, in the midst of kicking the door open a little further.

Margaery was sitting on the edge of the bed, her head in her hands, and she looked up sharply, as Sansa entered the room, a look like a startled animal on her face.

She hadn’t been crying, Sansa noticed; her cheeks were bone dry. Just…sitting there, unmoving, and for some reason that Sansa could not quite put a name to, that was the more disturbing fact, in her mind.

She swallowed, stepping further inside and pretending that all was well, because she knew that if she pretended otherwise, Margaery would push her away again, like she’d been doing since all of this had started, and Sansa couldn’t bear that.

“I brought you some food,” she repeated, with a forced smile, and Margaery eyed the tray in her hands suspiciously.

She swallowed. “I…I’m not hungry.”

Sansa moved forward regardless, setting the tray down on the little table beside Margaery’s bed and pulling the cloth the rest of the way loose.

“I’ve had the servants taste it, to make sure that it’s all right,” Sansa assured her, struck by the oddity of this situation. Of her, trying to convince Margaery to eat the food.

Margaery snorted, hugging herself a little tighter, as Sansa moved closer to her, and Sansa faltered.

“You think Cersei couldn’t bribe a few servants, if she wanted to?” She asked. “Even from Casterly Rock?”

Sansa pursed her lips. “I think she’s got more important things to worry about now,” she pointed out, because the rumors that Stannis had successfully taken the Rock were no longer just rumors, now.

Margaery snorted again. There was no humor in the sound. “More important than avenging her child?” She asked, as if Sansa were foolish for thinking that anything would be more important than that, to Cersei’s mind.

Sansa supposed she had a point.

“You need to eat,” Sansa said gently, recognizing the irony in her own statement. She wondered if this gnawing feeling of powerlessness, of worry, was what Shae had often felt, in trying to get Sansa to eat a little more.
She thought of the way that Margaery had kissed her just to cram food down her throat, once, the way that a mother bird fed its young, and grimaced.

Margaery kept her back turned to Sansa, not bothering to respond at all to her words.

“Margaery….” Sansa tried not to let her frustrations bleed into her voice. After all, she could hardly blame Margaery for what she was feeling, just now, when she herself had done the same thing to her own body.

Instead, she sat down, on the other side of the bed from Margaery, because she couldn’t ignore the way that Margaery had flinched away from her, and held the bowl out to her.

Margaery didn’t try to meet her eyes, but Sansa didn’t blame her for that. She’d noticed that particular quirk, as well, besides the hands that shook when she thought no one was looking, but far too many people were.

As if Margaery thought that if anyone looked her in the eyes, her secrets would be laid bare.

Sansa wanted to tell her that with the way she was acting, people would find out her secrets long before that, but she knew it would only alienate the two of them further.

And right now, she’d do anything for Margaery not to beg her away.

She wondered if it stemmed out of the thought of punishing herself for Margaery as well, and the thought was suddenly quite unbearable. She didn’t want that for the other girl, didn’t want her to have to face such a thing, in her state.

She’d done nothing wrong, to Sansa’s mind, even if Margaery didn’t seem to agree with her, on that assessment.

They’d been planning to murder Joffrey that night, anyway; things had just gone a bit awry.

Margaery was silent, and suddenly, coupled with the cloying presence pressing down on Sansa’s chambers, the silence was unbearable.

“Margaery, please.”

Margaery glanced up at her finally, eyes bloodshot. “I’m not hungry,” she said, softly, before glancing down again, at her entwined fingers. “I…I’m really not hungry.”

Sansa thought this was a rather strange feeling, asking Margaery to eat because the other woman refused to, as she thought of how a year ago, it had been the other way around.

And Margaery had been only moderately more successful than Sansa felt, now.

“You have to eat,” she whispered, holding the bowl out enticingly. “Before it gets cold, yes?”

Margaery’s eyes were bleary, as they stared down at the bowl in front of her.

Slowly, her hands moving as if through water, Margaery reached for the bowl, brought the spoon to her lips.

Sansa watched her with rapt attention, and thought how strange it was, to be on the other side of this situation, for once.

Margaery ate as if she thought she would choke on every bite, but she did eat, and Sansa supposed
there was something like victory, in that.

Even if none of this had felt like a victory, yet. Or, if it was a victory, a rather hollow one, with Joffrey’s ghost hanging over them, at every moment, in every word that Margaery didn’t say, in every opportunity that she refused to take.

Sansa watched Margaery eat, in silence, and hated the silence a little more each moment, even as she resolved not to leave until Margaery asked her to.

She didn’t think she could bear it if she left of her own accord, and didn’t know when next she’d get a moment alone with Margaery again.

When Margaery did finally speak, the words felt loud in the silent room, for all that Sansa had to lean forward, across the bed, causing Margaery to flinch again, in order to hear them.

“Do you think that…some things,” Margaery said, and her voice was slow, measured, “Do you think that some things tarnish the soul beyond repair?”

Sansa eyed her, out of the corner of her gaze.

She knew exactly what Margaery was talking about, of course; even if she didn’t believe that Margaery’s every waking thought, these days, was about what she had done that day, it was obvious enough.

“I…I don’t know that I believe that at all,” she said, which wasn’t quite the truth, but the question had so surprised her that Sansa didn’t know how to answer it.

Margaery swallowed hard, cocking her head at Sansa. “At all?” She asked, and her voice was incredulous, as if she couldn’t imagine how Sansa couldn’t feel guilt over what they had done, even to one as horrible as Joffrey.

And Sansa…Sansa supposed that she shouldn’t be so surprised by Margaery’s reaction. Sansa had once spent months beating herself up over her part in Oberyn’s death, and it was a death he had all but volunteered for, when he declared that he would fight the Mountain in single combat.

She had blamed herself for that as if she had wielded the blade herself, had pushed her fingers into his eye sockets as the Mountain had done, and now…

She still felt the faint stirrings of guilt, over what had happened to Oberyn, just as she felt them for her father.

But she had killed Ser Meryn without a second thought, and if the opportunity arose again, if she were forced to repeat her actions of the past year, she might have made sure Joffrey died when she finally poisoned him, rather than making herself so nervous she drew out the poison too long for it to have a killing effect.

Because he was dead now, and all she felt was…sad. Sad, for Margaery, not for him, but there was no guilt, there.

He had been horrible, and as horrible as things might be between them now, they were still better.

Because Joffrey was dead, and Sansa preferred him as a ghost than as a living, breathing monster.

It was what she had to believe, that she felt no guilt at all for his death, that this cloying feeling overwhelming her was because of what Margaery felt, because sometimes, when she closed her
eyes, she still saw the shock on Ser Meryn’s face, as he turned to her.

And she had justified killing Joffrey, had justified what had happened to Oberyn.

Meryn Trant might have beat her at Joffrey’s orders, but they had been at Joffrey’s orders, whether or not he had enjoyed it.

She had no reason to kill him, and she felt far less guilty about it than Margaery did over the death of a man that she had every reason to kill, Sansa knew that without Margaery even having to explain it to her.

“Maybe some things,” Sansa allowed, shrugging, as she thought of the Freys and what they had done to her brother and mother. As she thought of her father’s head, falling down the steps before the Sept.

Margaery sniffed, and Sansa hurried on, “But not this. You did what you had to do,” she said. “He…He was hurting you, and he was…horrible.”

In her mind, that was enough.

It had to be enough, because otherwise, there was no excuse for what Sansa had done.

Ser Meryn Trant had hurt her, yes, had beaten her, time and time again, on Joffrey’s orders, and worse than that, he had enjoyed it. She knew he had, from the look in his eyes as he hit the flat of his sword against her bare back.

None of the knights have ever refused to beat her for Joffrey, but none of the rest of them had seemed to enjoy it, either.

She could feel the knife again, twisting between his ribs as she pushed it in further, further than she thought she was supposed to to kill a man, but she had wanted to make sure that he was really dead.

He was a threat, and he had to die, and that had been reason enough to kill him, even if it hadn’t been entirely unsatisfying, watching the knife plunge into his ribs, and knowing that she had done that.

No, she thought, willing the remembrance away. It had been terrifying.

Not exhilarating, not pleasing, not empty, not any of those other words, because that would mean things that Sansa did not want to consider.

She glanced over at Margaery, whose hands shook even as she held the spoon to her lips, grimaced at the texture of the gruel that Sansa had brought her because Alysanne didn’t think that Margaery would be able to stomach anything else.

“Do you…” Margaery bit her lip, and Sansa leaned forward, because at least Margaery was talking to her, just now. “Do you regret it?” She asked. “Killing Ser Meryn.”

Sansa closed her eyes, because she had known this question was coming ever since she had looked up from Ser Meryn’s twitching corpse and caught Margaery staring at her with wide, dead eyes.

And if she lied, she didn’t think that she would ever gain back Margaery’s trust in these days, when Margaery was already so…fragile.

A word that Sansa had never thought she would have to use for Margaery, not once.
She swallowed. “No,” she said, because that was the truth, and because she thought that Margaery might be helped, in hearing it.

When she opened her eyes again, she didn’t know what Margaery thought of her answer, because Margaery was making a concentrated effort to stare down at her soup, in lieu of Sansa.

When she spoke again, Sansa found herself listening to the other woman with rapt attention, because, for all that Alla was frustrated that Margaery would not speak about what had happened to her, Sansa had seen how it pained the other woman, to recount the tale for her and Baelish, just the one time.

She had never spoken about it, again. Had spared no details of that night when she first told them, so that she would not have to speak of it again, Sansa knew.

“He said that he was going to...” Margaery bit her lower lip, hard, and Sansa’s jaw tightened, for she thought she knew what the other woman was going to say, before she fell silent. Had a horrible feeling that she knew exactly what Joffrey had throated her with, for her to look at Sansa like that, for her to refuse to meet Sansa’s gaze.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter now.”

Sansa closed her eyes.

She thought she knew what Margaery had been about to say. Thought that she finally understood what had caused Margaery to snap that night, when she had endured her husband for so long, before that.

He had been getting worse, in the end, it was true, but she had endured him, all the same.

Until something happened that meant she couldn’t, anymore.

“Is...Is the food all right?” Sansa asked, in lieu of anything else to say, because she didn’t think there was anything else to say, after that.

Margaery shrugged, her lips curling. “It’s fine,” she said. “I know…the maesters say that the nausea should have passed by now, but I’m never very hungry, these days.”

Sansa eyed her. “You’re not...getting sick still, are you?” She asked.

She wasn’t making herself sick, was what she wanted to ask.

Margaery shrugged a thin shoulder. She had been thin, when she first returned from her strange little trip to Highgarden, and Sansa worried that she hadn’t gained enough of that weight back, even with the pregnancy.

She was still far too thin, but with a bump, where the child was.

Sansa looked away from it.

Margaery was biting her lip, flipping her spoon over and over in the broth of her bowl, staring at it intently. “I’m fine, Sansa. You don’t have to worry about me, so much. I know that you do.”

Despite her words, she didn’t even look fine as she said them, Sansa thought.

And that thought prompted her to reach out, despite all of the times that Margaery had flinched away from anyone who tried to touch her since that night, because surely...
She knew that Margaery had suffered a violation, but she wanted the other girl to know that she was here for her, that she would always have her, close enough to touch, if that was what she wanted.

Her hand made it as far as the edge of the bowl, before she faltered at the sound of Margaery’s breath catching.

The other girl blinked up at her with wide eyes, and Sansa let her hand fall, onto the sheets.

They sat like that, for Sansa didn’t know how long, before Sansa pulled her hand back to her side.

“Sansa, I…” Margaery flinched away from her, the same way that she had done that first night after murdering her husband, and every night since.

Sansa paused, flinched, pulling back.

“Sansa, I can’t…” Margaery said, looking down at her hands, in lieu of the other girl, and Sansa forced herself not to react at all to the rejection, small though it had been.

“I...ever since that night,” Margaery whispered, hoarsely. “I haven’t been able to think about...not without…”

Sansa swallowed hard, forcing down the bile at the back of her throat.

Gods, she hadn’t meant...She hadn’t meant that she wanted that from Margaery, and she would have thought that the other girl would know she wouldn’t ask for that, not after what had happened…

Sansa cleared her throat. “Oh,” she said, because she didn’t know what else to say, in the face of the hurt swimming in her own eyes, and her voice was soft, but there was a fury in her eyes that for a moment, a fury that she forced down because it belonged to Joffrey, not to Margaery.

When she looked up at Margaery again, she thought that she had not been able to force it down quickly enough.

She swallowed hard. “Of course. I’m sorry, I…”

“No, it’s all right,” Margaery said, even if her voice was dead.

“I didn’t mean to…”

Margaery reached out to her, and then paused, going very still before she snatched her hand back and lowered it to her side, once again. Her fingers idly traced around the spoon.

Gods, this was torture, Sansa thought.

And then, because she couldn’t help herself, or perhaps because she wanted to suffer for the lack of guilt she felt when Margaery seemed so riddled with it, she asked, “Have you been sleeping?”

She knew the answer already, of course, in the bags under Margaery’s eyes, and the concern on Alla’s face. Still, she asked.

Margaery looked away from her. “I...No,” she said, and her voice was whisper soft, and it was on the tip of Sansa’s tongue, to offer to stay with her while she slept.

Not...for anything more than sleeping, but even as she had the thought, she knew that Margaery would not accept it. She would not even touch Sansa, and here Sansa was, trying to invite herself
“I want to abolish drawing and quartering,” Margaery announced, as she flounced into the Small Council chambers with more energy than Sansa had seen from her in some time. She sank down at the head of the table, frowning at her Small Council when there was no response from them.

Sansa glanced around; they were clearly blindsided by the abrupt decision, as Sansa herself was, but as the Regent, she supposed that Margaery had the right to suggest such a thing.

Even if it was the last thing they should be worrying about right now, with far many more problems taking precedence, at the moment.

Margaery was undaunted by the lack of a reaction, it seemed.

“It is one of the most cruel forms of execution that are available to the Crown, and there are…far quicker methods, after all.”

Drawing and quartering, Sansa knew, was one of the worst forms of execution that was outlined to the Crown, typically assigned to commoners, and among those, the ones who had done the worst treasons. Even if it was not one of the worst that the Crown had employed.

Technically, the pretend sparrows could have been executed in such a way, but Margaery, perhaps because she knew that they weren’t really sparrows, Sansa thought, something like worry rushing through her at the reminder, had insisted that they merely be hanged.

But of course, there were other cruel ways to kill a man, ways the Crown had indulged in before, even if they were not clearly outlined in the law.

The Mad King burning her grandfather, came to mind.

But having a man pulled apart by horses and then ripping out his intestines and cutting him into quarters was rather a close second, she thought, and wondered where Margaery had gotten the idea to abolish it.

Unless, of course, she was doing so precisely because it had been suggested to her, when the men who had supposedly killed her husband had all been rounded up.

Silence met the Regent’s words, as she took her seat, and Sansa glanced nervously around at the other occupants of the table.

All of them, save for Trystane, who looked rather amused, looked shocked by her words. And Baelish was looking at Sansa as if this was somehow her fault.

The men blinked at her.

Then, clearing his throat, Kevan, who had strangely become something like a voice of reason in these meetings, despite his ultimatum to Sansa and Baelish to get Margaery under control lately, said, “Your Grace…”

“My husband executed more than his fair share, during his time as king,” Margaery said, calmly, and Sansa closed her eyes.

Ah. So this was about her guilt. Again.

For a moment, Sansa found herself wondering if it was the form of execution that Margaery found so
She closed her eyes, and saw Ser Ilyn Payne taking off her father’s head.

Any other time, she might have even found herself agreeing with Margaery, even as she understood the necessity of being able to kill, but right now…right now, they had far too many other issues to deal with.

The Boltons, Cersei…

She let out a sigh, and did not fail to notice the annoyed look that Kevan Lannister sent her way, no doubt because of her silence.

“I can’t imagine why you should have a problem with my wishing to…temper down such a thing,” Margaery went on, and Sansa found herself wishing that she could take on the other woman’s guilt, if it would keep her from making decisions like this.

“Your forgiveness, Your Grace,” Baelish sat forward, a patient smile on his face, as if she were a child and he a… “But it did not sound like that was what you said. And executions, distasteful as they are, are a good deterrent to the smallfolk, to keep them from acting against the Crown, and to-”

“Well, they don’t seem to do a very good job of that,” Margaery said, and her voice was hoarse. “The people are only more furious with the Crown in the days since the Slaughter of the Sept, after we killed so many of them for their…treason. I think that…this sort of law might go some way in convincing them that we are not their enemy, here.”

Every time she closed her eyes, she saw that old woman, who had accused her of being a murderer, and knew that she had no defense for that accusation, no matter how many times she prayed to the gods for forgiveness.

The Small Council fell silent.

“I understand that you think this is…a strange order to give,” Margaery said, lifting her chin, “in light of everything else going on at the moment, but the goodwill of the smallfolk is important, too.”

The Grandmaester licked his lips. Out of all of them, Sansa wondered when he had become something like the voice of reason, but he was certainly insinuating himself into many of Sansa’s own decisions, these days.

“That is…an admirable wish, Your Grace,” he informed her, “but it is just not possible. If the smallfolk hear this, they will take it to mean that they can get away with anything.”

Margaery eyed each of them in turn, raising a single eyebrow in clear disbelief.

For a moment, Sansa’s breath caught; the woman in front of her looked like the one that she remembered.

She wondered if the rest of the Small Council, fools though some of them might have been, understood what Margaery wasn’t saying but Sansa thought she was hearing, as well. If that was why they were protesting it so greatly, or if it was merely because they disliked the idea of Margaery making such a decision when she had hardly displayed a keen understanding of her position, of late.

“Do you know anything about the people, Grandmaester?” She asked him, and the man fell silent, gaping at her like a fish. “My husband, may he rest in peace, knew nothing of the people, save for the times when he was cruel to them. I understand when cruelty, when making a hard decision, is
important, but I also understand that there is no need to treat the smallfolk as if they are criminals merely for existing, when we too, have wronged them. My son will not be that sort of King. And if you will not accept my proposal, as my son’s *subjects*, then perhaps the people should know of that.”

Trystane, who was always silent during these meetings, spoke up, then. “I think it sounds like a great idea,” he said, and the whole room blinked at him, as one. He didn’t back down. “She’s got a point, and in Dorne, we don’t practice such cruel methods of torture. We kill a man with honor.”

He said it like he didn’t think King’s Landing understood the meaning of the word; Sansa rolled her eyes.

Randyl Tarly cleared his throat, then, always faithful to taking Margaery’s side of things. “The Regent’s point is well made,” he said, sending a nod in Margaery’s direction. “Even in Highgarden, we try to avoid such things, save for the worst of treasons. And even then…” he grimaced, and Sansa thought of the rumors of the things that he had done to his own firstborn son, before he had sent him to the Wall.

She wondered if there had been such concern on his face, then.

Kevan Lannister cleared his throat. “*Her Grace’s* suggestion has merit,” he said, fixing Trystane with a scolding look, though the boy didn’t seem to react to it at all. “But…”

Margaery clapped her hands together. “Well, I’m glad you agree, Lord Hand,” she said. “You’ll see that the people are informed of it, as well as the soldiers, who I hear from the Septa Unella have been…less than kind to the smallfolk, patrolling the streets, both Tyrell soldiers and Lannister.”

Sansa stared; as strange and…disturbing as Margaery’s sudden passion was, she had to admit, it felt almost…nice, to see a hint of the old Margaery before her, again.

And then, Lord Kevan was trying to mention something else, something to do with the conditions at the Rock, something to do with the fact that also, the Freys had been wiped out, and Margaery held up a hand, quieting him.

“That’s all for today, gentlemen,” she said, calmly, and stood, walking out.

Kevan cleared his throat. “But, Your Grace…”

The door had already shut behind her.

Varys grunted. “Well, Lord Hand,” he said, quietly, “I’m sure there are some things in that long list you have before you that you can do without the Regent’s permission?”

Sansa sighed.

“Get her under control,” Baelish hissed in her ear, as he walked past her as if he had said nothing, and Sansa swallowed hard, watching him leave the Small Council room.

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Septa Unella and her ladies were waiting for Margaery, as she stepped out of the Small Council chambers, and Margaery forced a smile that she didn’t really feel. Her ladies fell in line behind her as she started to walk away, but Margaery gestured for the septa to walk alongside her.

She had told them to wait for her, of course. That she didn’t intend for the meeting to take very long, because she had other concerns, at the moment.
Her husband, for all that he had never been a terribly astute man, had spent half of his reign fearing the return of Dragons, only to be told from every side that he was a fool for doing so, that they should be dealing with far more pressing concerns, every time he brought it up.

And perhaps he had been a little obsessed with Targaryens, Margaery knew. But he hadn’t necessarily been wrong to focus on the things the Small Council did not want him to.

They were men, after all, most of them, and men could be remarkably shortsighted.

Margaery did not know if her husband had been right, to focus so much on the damned dragons, but she did understand the importance of keeping the people from trying to rebel again.

Cersei wouldn’t care if they had a revolt on their hands, when she brought her army to King’s Landing for her son’s funeral. She would see it as an opportunity to take advantage, perhaps even to attack.

Margaery had no intention of giving her any such excuse, which meant keeping the smallfolk in line, somehow, even if that seemed to be the last of her Small Council’s concerns.

She had seen the way they had all looked at her, as if they thought her unhinged.

Well, perhaps they would think otherwise soon enough.

And even if they did not, at least they would not look at her so pityingly, would not spend all of their time underestimating her.

Even Sansa, who had been sitting at that table, staring at Margaery the same way that the rest of the Small Council had been.

“What’s wrong?” The septa at her side asked her as they walked along, and Margaery was almost surprised that the other woman cared enough to ask.

But of course, Septa Unella had been trying to insinuate herself into every facet of Margaery’s life since her arrival here; for a woman who had grown up a pauper, she seemed to have a remarkable grasp of court games, which was one reason that Margaery thought perhaps she might be right, about some things.

She judged them all for the same sins, and she was right to do so, clearly.

“I told the Small Council that I wished to abolish drawing and quartering,” Margaery said, annoyed. “They think me weak for it. They think I am doing it for nothing more than the kindness of my heart.”

The septa sighed. “I suppose they are merely greedy men,” she said, seeming to notice the way that they were being watched, out here in the open hallway.

“I don’t just want to abolish drawing and quartering,” Margaery said, as the septa blinked at her. She swallowed hard, admitting to the other woman what she had not quite been brave enough to admit to the rest of her Small Council. “Eventually, when the fighting is over and my son sits on the throne, I want to show the people of King’s Landing that they don’t have to fear the Crown.”

She left the rest of what she meant unsaid; Joffrey had killed enough of the peasants for two lifetimes.

If she cold manage it, she would like to do something to make up for that.
One of her ladies; she thought it might be Megga, who was always second guessing her decisions these days, choked behind her, but she ignored the other girl.

“I think that’s a good idea, Your Grace,” the septa said, staring at her. Clearly, she had heard what Margaery hadn’t said, as well.

Margaery lifted her chin. “Do you?” She asked.

She hadn’t announced it because she wanted the septa to tell her that it was a good idea.

…In truth, she was not entirely certain why she had announced it, the moment she got the other woman alone. She had just felt the need to, and Margaery felt something like shame blossoming across her cheeks, as she wondered if that was indeed the reason why she had brought it up.

If she had wanted the other woman to tell her that it was yet another step towards absolution.

She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

“I’m not doing this for some…some point system,” Margaery said, softly, into the silence, not sure why she felt the need to explain herself to the septa.

When she turned to look at the septa again, the woman’s eyes were intense, and shining. “I believe you,” she said, and she said it as though it were a good thing, rather than a bad one.

Margaery’s brow furrowed in confusion, but she didn’t bother to correct the other woman.

She supposed it was all right that she didn’t, if Margaery herself didn’t know why she was doing it, either.

And then Sansa Stark was standing before her, clearing her throat rather loudly and seeming annoyed by the septa’s presence at Margaery’s side. Or perhaps that was just her annoyance over Margaery’s unconventional meeting, today.

“Sansa,” Margaery said, smiling softly at the sight of her, and something within Sansa seemed to come back to life a bit, at the look on her face. The pure happiness to see her there, where she had not seen that expression on Margaery’s face for some time.

Perhaps…Perhaps there really was some way to claw their way out of this, Margaery thought, heart skipping a beat.

“Your Grace,” Sansa said, because they were surrounded by people, after all, knights and ladies and…Septa Unella, Margaery supposed.

“We need to talk,” Sansa said, glancing sideways at the Septa. “About the decision that you just made.”

Margaery frowned. “Whatever you have to say about that, you can say it in front of the septa,” she said, and Sansa’s eyes widened a little, clearly surprised by the declaration.

And…gods, Margaery wished that she could explain herself to Sansa, could explain why she was cleaving herself so close to the septa these days, but she knew that Sansa would only hear excuses, in her explanation that she thought it might be the only way to keep the smallfolk on their side, again.

Sansa would hear all of those words, and would only think that this had something to do with Margaery’s shock, and perhaps it did, to some extent, but that was not all.
She needed the septa; she only wished that Sansa could understand that, eventually.

“You do realize that if you outlaw executions, there’s no impediment for any number of these smallfolk who hate you so to come into the Keep and kill you the way they did your husband,” Sansa gritted out, sounding angry now.

Margaery sighed. “I’m not going to outlaw prisons, Sansa,” she pointed out. “And I didn’t say executions.”

She’d meant it, though; they both knew that. She’d seen the moment Sansa had understood that, in the Small Council meeting.

Sansa sighed, her eyes flitting over to the septa before they returned to Margaery. “Perhaps we can have this conversation in private;” she suggested, again, and Margaery bit back a sigh.

“Perhaps later,” she agreed.

Sansa raised an eyebrow. “You have some pressing engagement?” She asked, and for a moment, Margaery blinked at her, reminded, somehow, of Tyrion Lannister and his sarcasm.

She cleared her throat, and the vision vanished. “I… I am going out amongst the smallfolk, again,” she informed Sansa, and flinched at the worry that flashed on Sansa’s features. “It went… well, last time, and I wish to let them know that they have a friend in the Crown, and not an enemy. Don’t worry; this time, I am taking guards with me, I promise.”

Sansa gritted her teeth. “Perhaps if Your Grace had told me ahead of time, we might have been able to arrange for the outing to go…”

“I don’t want to arrange anything,” Margaery interrupted her, calmly. “I want things to go well because they are, and if I have to wait for some time for that to happen, I shall.”

Sansa sighed, again. “Then perhaps I ought to go with you,” she suggested, the words sounding very forced, but Margaery just shook her head, reaching out and taking the other girl’s hands in her own.

It was an instinctive reaction, a way to calm Sansa down that had always worked in the past, but Margaery froze the moment she realized what she had done.

She couldn’t remember the last time that she had voluntarily touched anyone, and just the feel of Sansa’s hands against her own…

She shivered.

Sansa’s hands fell away of their own accord; Sansa had clearly noticed her dilemma, and decided to fix things herself.

As she was always doing, these days.

Margaery sniffed. “You have things to do here, Sansa,” she said, gently, because she might not be the most astute in what was going on in her own kingdom, these days, but she did know that Sansa was a large part of why it was still standing.

And Margaery… Margaery couldn’t take over those duties herself, these days, but she could at least try to put on a front for the smallfolk. She could manage that, she thought.

Sansa lifted her chin. “I could put them aside,” she said, but Margaery was afraid that, even if it
looked like she was pushing the other girl away, she was going to have to insist.

Because Sansa wouldn’t like what Margaery was about to do, would, she was sure, try to stop it, if she was there to do so.

“I can’t ask that of you,” Margaery said very softly, resisting the sudden urge to flinch, because she had thought that the two of them had promised to stop doing this thing to each other, and yet, Margaery couldn’t stop.

Because Sansa would try to stop her.

“I’ve already asked so much of you, lately.”

Sansa flinched; Margaery thought she heard the septa suck in a breath, beside her, and realized that they were being rather too obvious. She pulled away from Sansa, giving the other girl a tremulous smile.

“I really should go and get ready,” she said, before all but fleeing the other girl’s presence. Her ladies poured after her, but she could feel the septa’s eyes burning a hole in the back of her head, where she could not feel Sansa doing so.

When she made it back to her chambers - her husband’s chambers, actually - the septa did not excuse herself, and neither did Megga, as the rest of Margaery’s ladies did, following her into her bedchambers.

The septa stared at her in knowing, judgmental silence.

Margaery swallowed hard, turning to Megga. “Why don’t you…”

“I’ll just go and grab your dress then, shall I?” Megga muttered, sounding terribly bitter.

Margaery gave her a nod, and Megga huffed before she turned and stalked out of the room, leaving Margaery alone with the septa.

The septa, who had not stopped staring at her the way she was now, like she thought that Margaery was already damned to the seven hells, since Sansa had intercepted them outside of the Small Council chambers.

And Margaery thought she knew exactly why.

Margaery opened her eyes, turning to the other woman, feeling pained as the septa’s gaze looked over at her in such grievance.

Grief, as if she thought that Margaery’s decisions were somehow her own.

Septa Nysterica had once thought so, as well. Margaery wondered if they were taught such things, as septas.

She almost didn’t want to bring it up at all, didn’t want to hear whatever explanation that the septa had, because everything that the septa had said since Margaery had met her in the sept that day had started to make sense, and she didn’t want this thing to make sense as well, not if it was what she thought it was.

But she did, anyway, keeping her eyes open even when she wanted to squeeze them shut and hide away from the other woman’s sharp gaze.
“You…you want me to stop,” she said, slowly. “With Sansa.”

She wanted to tell the other woman that there was no need to worry over that. That there was no need to worry that Margaery and Sansa were still living in what the Faith could not agree upon being sin or not, because the thought of touching anyone again, not just Sansa but anyone at all, with even the most innocuous touches, made her feel ill.

And she knew that there was something horrible about that, in the way that Sansa’s eyes died inside a little, every time that Margaery came into contact with the other girl and flinched back from her.

Knew that the thing that crawled its way up her throat, every time she turned her back on Sansa because she couldn’t stand the guilt in the other girl’s eyes, as if Sansa had anything to feel guilty for when Margaery had been the one to insist, over and over again, that they do things her way, that her way was the only way…Was a guilt that she would never stop atoning for, because she was the one who ought to feel guilty, not Sansa.

And it killed her a little more, each time she had to see that look in Sansa’s eyes, in the moments after Margaery flinched away from her and Sansa remembered why things couldn’t go back to the way they had always been Before, so Margaery was not ashamed to admit that she avoided the other woman every chance she could, in order to avoid seeing that look in her eyes again and knowing that she was the cause of it.

Because she wasn’t certain that she ever could. Go back to the way things had been Before, that she would be able to touch Sansa again like they had always done before without a shred of doubt, even if there had always been fear.

Margaery swallowed hard.

She didn’t tell the septa any of that.

That she and Sansa had actually…stopped their sinning, if indeed this woman considered it sinning, since Margaery had killed Joffrey.

So, in a way, Margaery killing her husband might have done some good towards her soul.

She bit back a snort, at the idea, knowing better than to word it aloud.

The septa would hardly find it to indicate that she wanted to atone for her actions, after all.

She sniffed.

The septa gave her a long look. “Your Grace,” she said finally, and her voice was almost patient, “I believe that you have made great strides, in your progress. I…I see that pain in your eyes, these days, the pain that goes along with a sinner’s remorse, and you may not believe it, but that is the first great step. The first step towards finding forgiveness.”

Margaery licked her lips.

“But the Seven must see some…proof, of your atonement,” the septa said. “It need not be as great and mighty a thing as to atone for all of your sins at once, but some show of your repentance…must be done.”

She said it almost as if she understood exactly what it was that Margaery had given up, but then, she supposed, the other woman would.
Unlike anyone else, she had been there, when Margaery had been given her ultimatum, by the High Sparrow. She knew, as no one else did, what had ultimately caused Margaery to do the thing she did, to make Joffrey kill all of those people.

She knew who had inspired that, in Margaery’s mind. The one thing that had caused Margaery to react, sitting in that cell, where all of this woman’s annoyances had not.

She knew what Sansa was to her, and Margaery had been a fool not to realize that the moment she saw this woman again, but she felt…terribly alone, these days. And perhaps that was a result of her own choosing, but still, it hurt.

And this woman’s judgment, the promise that perhaps there was a way to come back from the things she had done, was at least better than the silence of her own mind.

She supposed that she ought to be more horrified by this realization that the septa, who was hardly a friend, for all that she had offered her help, knew the truth about her and Sansa.

But she was so fucking tired.

Margaery swallowed hard, glancing down at the floor instead of the septa’s eyes, and saw her husband’s blood staining the floor.

It had taken the servants four days to get the blood out, Margaery remembered. Four days.

“The Seven Pointed Star says nothing about two women laying together,” the septa said, sighing. “You’re right about that.”

Margaery lifted her head, staring at the other woman with wide eyes.

The septa’s eyes were hard. “But there is a difference between following a faith to the letter of the law, and following it in spirit. You and Sansa Stark can never marry, and she is the reason that you allowed the Slaughter of the Sept to happen, in the first place.”

Margaery flinched, swallowed hard. “I…”

“Do you know why the High Sparrow was so popular amongst the smallfolk?” The septa asked, and Margaery blinked at her.

“Because…because the Lannisters have been cruel lords,” she said, softly.

She understood that. A part of her had not even been able to blame the smallfolk, when they rose up against her husband. A part of her had almost wanted them to kill him, because then they would all be free of him.

But she had needed him alive, and so she had forced them to live with him, too.

She grimaced, thinking of every common girl that was dragged before Joffrey’s throne, beaten like he had his Kingsguard beat Sansa, chopped into pieces and fed to the smallfolk, because Joffrey thought it would be funny and because the girl had come begging for food.

Every idiot who thought that if they just went before the Iron Throne and pled their case, it would be different. The king would have mercy on them if only he truly understood their plight.

Thought of the girls who didn’t make it before the Iron Throne, because they were pretty…or worse, because they were ugly.
She had pretended to turn a blind eye to all of them, because the thought of what her husband had done to Sansa, that night, when he had told Margaery to beat her with a crossbow, the thought of what he had done to her, only a couple of times, but causing enough bruises to make her brother grit his teeth and reach for his sword…

Margaery took a deep breath.

During her pregnancy, she knew that the girls had gotten more numerous in number. Her ladies had informed her of those numbers, the number of girls who went into Joffrey’s bedchambers when Margaery could not, because she had told him that they couldn’t fuck if she was pregnant, and who never came out again.

She hadn’t told Sansa about the girls, because Sansa was…Sansa was not well, she thought, even if Sansa was having the same thought about her, and she was terrified that Sansa would get it into her head that it was her own fault, somehow.

Her husband’s appetite had been ravenous, and Margaery had done that, too, by getting pregnant with another man’s child.

Oh, she understood well why the smallfolk might want to rise up against their mad king. Why they might grow tired of king after king, mad or not, not giving a damn about their needs.

But the reminder of the High Sparrow, a man who had been no kinder to her than Joffrey had ever been, and just as devious, made her flinch.

The septa shrugged. “The nobles are always cruel,” she said, shortly, with a wisdom that went beyond her years, and Margaery grimaced, not bothering to deny it.

“But the High Sparrow promised the smallfolk something more,” the septa went on. “He promised them freedom.”

“He promised them suffering for their sins,” Margaery whispered.

Septa Unella gave her a dry laugh. “The smallfolk are always suffering,” she said. “But there is a freedom in choosing what you shall suffer. And a freedom in knowing that we all might suffer equally, for the same sins.”

Margaery sniffed, reaching up to wipe at her nose.

She thought of Joffrey, of the way he had touched her that night, of what he had done to her, and thought perhaps the septa was right. Thought perhaps that had been a kind of choice.

But she had made it, just as she had made the choice to destroy the Sept, and everyone in it who did not pledge their loyalty to House Lannister.

The septa pressed her lips together, as if she knew already Margaery’s thoughts. “The nobles follow the Faith only in what they wish to,” she said. “Only in the bare minimum. They do what they do because they think of the Faith as a way to control the smallfolk, and not as what it truly is.”

Margaery closed her eyes, gritted her teeth. “I am not doing this because I want to suffer,” she whispered. “I’m not trying to follow some…set of rules to make myself feel better.”

But you are, aren’t you? A cruel voice that sounded far too much like Loras’ whispered in her ear, and Margery flinched. You’re doing this because she is the one person who will tell you that what you did was wrong. Everyone else is too afraid to.
She blinked up at the septa. “And I need your help. I thought… I thought that you would help me, when I brought you here.”

The septa hesitated a moment longer, and then murmured, “When we were in the Sept, all of those days that I sat with you and asked for your confession, and you refused to grant it, I knew that you did not see the Faith, no matter what you said. Do you know how I knew?”

Margaery bit the inside of her cheek.

“I could see it in your eyes,” the septa continued, calmly, and Margaery shivered. “There is a…sort of unrepentant guilt there, in all unrepentant sinners. The ones who don’t believe that they have anything to atone for, who look down on everyone who does. They see themselves as innocent of any wrongdoing save what they might condemn in their own minds, reveling in their own sin.”

Margaery licked her lips. “And that’s…what you saw in my eyes, then?” She whispered, and even as she asked it she knew it was the truth.

Even in the Sept, knowing that she’d come back to a kingdom that was hardly still hers, knowing that what she and Sansa had done together could have gotten them killed… even then, she hadn’t felt a shred of guilt for the things that she had done.

She had felt guilt for marrying Joffrey in the first place, which she knew had only gotten her brothers killed, in the end, but she didn’t feel guilty for a thing she had done with Sansa, for the things she had done in order to keep Joffrey satisfied, as a wife.

She swallowed hard.

She felt guilt for the things she had done in the Sept, though. For getting her husband to kill all of those people, for the people she had sat by and not helped, while Joffrey had played his sick little games with them.

Silent, on the chair beside his throne, as he ordered death sentences and mutilations, as he laughed in the face of people’s pain.

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly.

Margaery closed her eyes, breathed in deeply.

“I’m afraid,” she whispered, not opening her eyes, because doing so would only remind her of who she was talking to, and she didn’t think she would be able to force out the words, in that case. “I’m afraid that no matter what happens, I will never be able to atone for my sins.”

The septa gave her a long look. “And laying aside the sins of the flesh is only one small gesture of your penitence, Your Grace. One small thing to give up, in order to prove your true wish for atonement.”

Margaery swallowed. “To the gods, or to you?”

When she opened her eyes again, the septa was looking at her sharply. “The gods did not force you to kill those people, Your Grace,” she said, coolly. “Did not force you to manipulate your husband into doing so. Did not force you to believe that you were greater than your husband, that you could so easily manipulate him once you married him. You did all of that. It was not Sansa Stark, though she represents your hubris, in thinking you could get away with all of that without consequence.”

Margaery flinched, her whole body jerking at the septa’s words, here, where they stood in the middle
of the chambers her husband had raped her in…

Consequence.

She squeezed her eyes shut.

Sansa thought that the reason she was so… changed, by what had happened that night, was because of what Joffrey had done to her. And perhaps that was part of it, though that was not the part that haunted Margaery’s nightmares, every single night. It was not the part that made her flinch, every time someone reached for her, every time she thought of what had happened, that night.

Yes, her husband had raped her, and it had been horrible, but it was something that she had known him capable of from the moment he laid lusty eyes on her, in the throne room, from the moment she sat with her grandmother and Sansa Stark in the gardens and the younger girl told her that Joffrey was a monster.

He had been one, and Margaery had gone into her marriage fully aware of that, and desperately hoping she would be able to hold him at bay.

But she had also gone into that marriage with a full understanding of what she intended to do to stop that from occurring… of who she was.

She had never expected to become the monster, as well. To turn around and bash her husband’s brains in like some sort of…

She took a shaky breath, and then another.

Sansa didn’t understand that; it was the reason she was avoiding spending too much time alone with the other girl, because she knew that it would come up again. Because Sansa couldn’t understand; she had been filled with guilt, after Oberyn Martell’s death, after her father’s, but she had gutted Ser Meryn Trant that night like he was a fish, and Margaery hadn’t seen a hint of guilt in her eyes since then.

She wouldn’t understand why it was worse for Margaery, to realize that she had killed her husband, than that he had raped her.

She swallowed hard.

She was a noble, of course, and she understood what that had meant from a young age, perhaps even younger than Sansa ever had; the smallfolk were their sheep, but they were also going to die, at some point or another, because of choices that she made.

Soldiers would die, as well.

But she had never thought she would be the one wielding the knife.

She shook, hard.

But to hear the septa bring up those sins, to call them a consequence…

She sucked in a breath, and then another. “I…”

My rape was not a consequence of my actions, she wanted to whisper. There had been no way to know that it would even happen, that night.

She squeezed her eyes shut, thought of that little boy in the orphanage, who had told her that he
hoped her child was a boy, so that it would not be killed the way his sister had been. Thought of the blood that had squished between her toes, on the day of the Slaughter.

Remembered the same distant sensation of blood between her toes, as Joffrey’s blood spread across the floor, staining her bare feet.

The door to her bedchambers flew open then, Megga’s eyes very wide as she held out a dress, and Margaery wondered how long she had been standing outside the door, listening in.

“Your gown, Your Grace,” Megga announced, and the look that she sent the septa’s way was blistering.

The septa lifted her chin, appearing totally unbothered by the look. “I shall leave you to dress, Your Grace,” she said, and then turned, walking out of the room, leaving her and Megga alone.

Neither moved, for several long moments.

And then, hesitantly, Megga whispered, “She’s wrong, you know.”

Margaery swallowed hard, snatching the dress out of Megga’s hands, reaching up to unfasten the gown she was wearing on her own, because she had gotten used to dressing herself, of late.

She couldn’t stand the feel of anyone else’s hands, touching her.

“You’re not at fault for what happened to you,” Megga continued, undaunted. “She shouldn’t have implied that.”

Margaery let out a tired bark of laughter. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

Megga crossed her arms over her chest. “I think we should.”

Margaery let the gown she was wearing drop to the ground, stepped into the next one. “Well, I am still your Queen, and I don’t want to.”

Megga swallowed. “You seem to want to with the septa,” she accused, and Margaery balked, at the anger in those words. “Is it because she tells you what you want to hear? That you’re guilty, that you’re at fault for all of this?”

Margaery flinched. “I told you we’re not talking about this, Megga,” she snapped, before turning and stalking past the other woman, towards the door, as she awkwardly did up the ties to her gown behind her back.

Megga stepped forward as if to help her, and then hesitated. She was standing in front of the door, now, the only way out now that Baelish had sealed the door they claimed the fanatics had gotten through to kill her husband, and Margaery grimaced, reaching up to rub at her arms, not liking the sudden feeling that she was trapped.

“Margaery…”

“Megga,” she snapped, reeling on the other woman. “If you bring this up again in my presence, I swear by the gods I’ll have you sent back to Highgarden. Do you understand?” Her eyes were wet, suddenly, and Margaery didn’t know why. “I…I can’t talk about it. I can’t.”

“She’s using you,” Megga whispered, hoarsely. “She’s playing some sick game with you, Margaery, because you’re…you’re vulnerable, right now, and she can see that. You need to…you need to get
Margaery lifted her chin. “I’m not getting rid of her, Megga, just because she says things you don’t like to hear,” she muttered.

Megga gritted her teeth. “It’s not just that, and you damn well know it,” she snapped. “The things she’s saying…gods, Margaery. Is that how she always talks to you?”

Margaery swallowed. “I’m supposed to be out amongst the smallfolk just now, Megga. You’re keeping me from that.”

Megga swallowed hard, moving as if to step away from where she blocked the door, and then hesitating. “If I was Elinor, you would listen to me.”

Margaery pushed past her, somehow managing not to touch the other girl. “Yes, well, Sansa has made sure that Elinor isn’t serving me, hasn’t she?” She asked, and tried not to sound too bitter about that.

Margaery forced herself to smile, and stopped thinking about her damned septa, who had refused to come along on this little trip once she realized exactly where Margaery was going, as she walked towards one of Baelish’s better known brothels, her ladies fidgeting, at her sides.

Septa Unella had not approved of Margaery’s newest idea for outreach, but she had left the other woman in charge of getting together baskets of toys to bring the orphans, once their new orphanage was completed, and that had kept the other woman occupied, while she did her work.

She wouldn’t approve of this, but it was something that Margaery knew she needed to do, with or without the other woman’s approval.

“My lady…” Alysanne began, as the doors to the brothel were flung open and two Kingsguard stepped in before them, “Perhaps this is a bad idea. If anyone saw that you came in here…”

“Make way, for the Queen Regent!” The Kingsguard shouted, their voices booming through the small brothel, and Margaery bit back a smile at the shouts and curses of the people holed up in these rooms.

“Make way for the Queen Regent! She demands that any…carnal relations cease immediately, and every whore in this brothel be brought before her!” The Kingsguard continued, and then suddenly, emerging half-naked into the corridor, was Olyvar, staring at her with wide eyes, looking shocked by the sight of her, here.

She supposed she understood why.

He didn’t normally sleep with the clients, he had told her, once, not unless they were particularly wealthy, or particularly useful to Baelish. She found it surprising that he was sleeping with one here, in one of the lesser known of Baelish’s brothels.

But then, she supposed, perhaps that did make sense; no doubt, this was where the lords who didn’t want to be found out went to fuck their whores, after all.

There were more startled screams as the Kingsguard walked through the brothel, throwing open doors and letting the lords within know that they were no longer welcome, until Margaery was standing in the middle of an open parlor, several girls in various states of undress standing before her, looking shocked at the sight of the Queen in front of them.
One of them reached for the nearest available blanket, sitting on the divan, and threw it over herself, and Margaery bit back a smirk as her ladies blushed behind her.

And then Olyvar was there, standing beside her and hissing, “Your Grace, what are you doing?”

She lifted an eyebrow at him. “Fulfilling my end of the bargain, dear,” she said coolly, in a soft whisper that only her ladies could hear, but she knew that the girls would never spread what they had heard.

She waited until all of the girls had been brought into the brothel; she was being as careful about this as she could, though she knew how dangerous it was, to address so many of Baelish’s women at once.

But she had made sure that Baelish wasn’t here, that he was busy with matters for the Crown, and this was, after all, the lowest paid of any brothels that Baelish owned in King’s Landing, in the worst part of Flea Bottom.

They would listen to her.

“I imagine it must seem strange, for me to come here and visit you,” Margaery said, into the silence that followed the last few stragglers.

The girls were silent.

Olyvar was staring at her as if she had a second head; she ignored him.

“You have been in service to Lord Baelish for a long time, many of you,” Margaery said, where she stood beside Olyvar in the middle of Baelish’s least popular brothel, but where all of them knew who Olyvar was.

Where all of them must have seen the significance, of Olyvar standing beside the Regent, when Baelish wasn’t here.

She knew that this was a risk, but after what Olyvar had told her about Ros, it was a very calculated one, and one that she thought it worthwhile, to take.

Baelish already knew that she didn’t approve of him; he had to, even if she had made that deal with him.

And after all, they had to have an excuse for Olyvar to suddenly be serving as Garlan’s pageboy.

She swallowed, glancing out at the girls. They looked tired, all of them, in varying states of exhaustion and undress, and having spent too long in this life to feel at all ashamed about their nakedness.

They had spent long enough in this life, she thought, that they ought not be staring at her fancy gown, at the jewels around her neck, as if they had never seen such finery. But she knew that Baelish kept the girls as poor as he could, while still enticing them to work for him.

That was how he kept them in this life until they no longer served a purpose, and ended up diseased and dead, in a back alley in Flea Bottom.

They all knew that. They all knew what had happened to Ros; they would listen to her.

And perhaps, she could give them back a little of the agency that she was seeking, herself.
“And I know Lord Baelish well,” Margaery continued, as the girls shifted, still looking confused about her presence here. “I know what sort of master he must be, to you.”

They exchanged nervous glances; Olyvar was staring at her now with something like fear in his eyes, but she ignored him.

She didn’t want to be afraid, anymore. Of Baelish, of herself, of some new threat, come along to take away everything that she had worked so hard for. Didn’t want to be blindsided the next time someone who thought he was entitled to what she had snuck into her chambers and demanded that she pay up.

And she and Sansa, right now, they were doing their best.

Well, Sansa was doing her best, but Margaery intended to remedy that, now, as best she could.

She just wanted to get back up on her feet again.

She cleared her throat. “So. I have come,” she gestured to the ladies behind her, “To bring you some gifts. Food, and some…representations of the Crown’s thanks, for the many things that I know you have overheard in order to help the Crown remain upright”

The girls blinked at her, and Margaery bit back a smile at the thought they were at least listening to her.

She didn’t need to convince all of them, today, to give her much attention. Just needed to persuade them to keep this little meeting from Baelish for long enough to consider what it was that she offered. Just needed them to remember this, the next time that Baelish ordered them to do something that they weren’t particularly fond of.

And she thought, with the way that some of the younger ones were looking at the food and clothes she had brought them, that they were already listening to her.

Oh, she knew about what Baelish could do to them. She remembered when Cersei had butchered one of her ladies, Reanna, and pretended that she had nothing to do with it. She remembered the servants whispering about the whore whom Joffrey had done exactly the same thing, to, the whore that Olyvar had brought up, again.

And she knew that it was not going to be easy, stealing Baelish’s whores away from him, when they all feared him so. But it was worth a try.

After all, if things went the way she wanted them to, Baelish was not going to be around forever, and she would rather know that she had these girls’ loyalty sooner rather than later, rather than have to earn it then.

The girls went quieter still, if that were possible. Behind Margaery, her ladies shifted nervously; she knew that they hadn’t expected this, when she had told them that she wanted to go to one of Baelish’s brothels.

Because she hadn’t said outwardly what it was that she wanted from these girls, but the fact that she had brought up Baelish was telling enough, for the older whores, she knew.

Margaery closed her eyes.

Cersei had taught her son that it was fear, which made the people stay in line. He had clearly learned the lesson, the day that he had slaughtered so many of those people, in the Sept.
But Margaery hoped to prove her wrong, and perhaps this way, as the septa had suggested, make amends for her own part, in that horrible day.

And for what she had done to Olyvar, in asking something of him that perhaps she’d had no right to ask.

They all turned, looking at Margaery expectantly.

The girls looked at each other, all of them nervous.

She knew that was one thing they all wanted. However they had found themselves in this life, it had been in the hopes of making a little money, of surviving, and she was offering them something more than that, something they must have been disillusioned of the idea of ever receiving from Baelish some time ago.

And she was perhaps the one person who could be taken seriously, in offering it.

“And if you ever need anything,” she said, as the girls hesitantly took the gifts she had brought them, accepting her thanks, “I want you to know that you can come to me. Nothing is too small, I can assure you of that.”

One of the women dipped into a curtsey before her.

One by one, the confused women followed her, and Margaery cleared her throat, pursing her lips.

“There,” she said, reaching back to take one of the bags of goods she had brought with her from Megga, handing it to the first woman who had curtseyed.

It felt…strange, even knowing that she was the Regent, to watch them all curtsey before her like this.

Margaery didn’t know how she felt about it.

She knew that Baelish at the very least provided for his whores; he made sure that they had a roof over their head, that they were kept healthy so that they did not gain a reputation amongst his clients, but she also knew what sort of man he was, as she had told them.

Even if the gifts were not much, she thought at least they were a step in the right direction. And at least the girls would remember this, one day, when it came time for them to make a choice.

And the gifts were not just food and nice clothes, either. She had made sure to visit the Grandmaester, ignoring the curious way he had looked at her, and asked for a dozen potions, to make sure that a woman who had been active of late would not get pregnant.

That had been a horrifying detail, from Olyvar, back when they were still trying to make a child together.

It seemed that Baelish was the sort of man who cared more to make sure that the girls did not keep their children, rather than ensuring that they did not get pregnant at all.

He used to be less strict on such things, as well, apparently, before the Queen had ordered that all of the children that could have been her husband’s bastards were slaughtered. Now, there were no children here.

Margaery knew one to be the lesser of two evils, provided the women had a choice at all.

She stepped outside of the main room, about to leave, her ladies trailing in confusion after her, when
Olyvar hurried after her, clearing his throat.

“How was that?” Margaery asked Olyvar, at her side.

He eyed her. “Whores are not trusting women, Your Grace,” he warned her, and Margaery rolled her eyes, for she didn’t need him to tell her that. “But I think…I think that one day, they will remember your kindness.”

He chewed on his lower lip for a moment, before he offered, “In the interest of…disclosure, I should warn you that they would be far more amenable to your words if I weren’t here.”

He said it like he was expecting her to order Megga to cut him down, then and there, nervously fidgeting.

Margaery let him wait in suspense for a few moments, but she wasn’t cruel, and she could hear the sound of rustling behind the curtains at the end of the hall, knew that this was meant for an audience.

“Well, they’re going to have to get used to that,” Margaery said, lightly scolding. Then, she raised her voice, “After all, if I broke my deal with you, they’d hardly have reason to trust me at all.”

Olyvar stared at her like he didn’t quite know what to make of her. “They…don’t know about the deal, Your Grace,” he reminded her, and Margaery smiled at him.

“Of course they don’t,” she said, far too knowingly, and Olyvar blinked at her in obvious confusion. “Now,” Margaery said, “How do I get out of here without half of King’s Landing finding out that I’ve just spent a significant portion of my day inside a whorehouse?”

Olyvar grinned at her. “Luckily, my lord has gone to a different brothel to conduct business today, Your Grace,” he said. “He should be back soon enough, but I think that King’s Landing will not know you were here, all the same.”

Margaery smiled at him. “Olyvar,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest, “We should…we should talk about that deal we made again, soon. I know that Garlan’s latest page was just sent back to Highgarden for an…indiscretion.”

Olyvar stared at her, his eyes widening, before his lips pulled into a smile. “I…I would like that, Your Grace,” he said.

“Good,” she said. “Now, I’ll see you soon, yes?” She asked, and she didn’t miss the way that his eyes dipped down to her waist, before they raised to meet hers again.

When she stepped out of the doors to the brothel, however, Margaery realized how wrong he had been, that half of King’s Landing would not know that she had been at Baelish’s brothel.

There was already a large crowd of confused looking smallfolk standing outside the door, and she grimaced a little as she remembered the last time she had been out amongst them.

They all stood there, not moving, as her guards stepped out ahead of her, intent on leading her back to the Keep, but Margaery cleared her throat, because she wasn’t quite done yet.

If she had an audience, she might as well make a use of it, she supposed.

“I wish to go to the Sept, next,” she informed one of the guards, who blinked at her in obvious concern.
“Your Grace…”

“I won’t take ‘no,’ for an answer,” she told him, calmly, and the man looked at her a moment longer, before letting out a long sigh, and communicating the order to the rest of his fellow guards.

Megga was glaring at her like she would very much like to drag Margaery back to the Keep herself.

The crowd, growing stronger as they moved, followed them to the Sept, as Margaery had expected they would.

It was hot, and her ankles felt swollen; she was sweating, which she supposed had to do with the many layers that she was wearing, and she barely made it to the steps of the Sept before she suddenly felt rather ill.

She wasn’t wearing a metal gown, today, because that was not a message she wanted to impart to the smallfolk today, but the pink flower covered black gown covered far too much of her skin.

Knowingly, Megga handed her a jug of water, and Margaery drank from it greedily as her people watched her.

She handed it back to Megga, ashamed to realize that her hands were shaking again.

She stared up at the great outer walls of the Sept, aware of her audience, and forced herself to breathe, to decide exactly how she was going to do this.

She was not certain if the breathing came so difficultly, these days, because of that ever present terror welling up inside of her breasts, or because of the child constantly sucking at her hips, but she supposed that either way, it hardly mattered.

Her Small Council had made no secret of the fact that they disapproved of her plan to abolish the death penalty. That they had thought it yet another display of her weakness, of her stupidity, as she had grasped at power and flailed for control from the very moment that her husband had died.

None of them thought she knew what she was doing; to them, she was nothing more than a child, despite all of those years she had spent manipulating Joffrey, and as long as she allowed that, she knew that view of her would not change.

Not until she forced it to.

She turned back around, forcing herself to face so many of the people that she had unthinkingly wronged, that day.

“I wish to make an announcement before the people,” Margaery informed the men, and the guards exchanged glances.

“Your Grace…” they said, but she heard only the disapproving voices of her Small Council, saw only Sansa’s concerned eyes, as she looked on her these days, and saw nothing more than this broken thing.

Margaery lifted her chin. “I am their Regent, and I have every right to make an announcement to them,” she said, coldly, and felt Megga going stiff, beside her. “Or are you trying to tell me that you want to keep me from my people?”

They were not her people, she knew the soldiers wanted to say. Many of them had only been brought here in recent months, and had no idea what had happened to cause all of this, but they
knew that the people cared very little for their current queen, just as they had cared very little for their late king.

That might have been different, once, but it was very true, now.

“The last time that I appeared before so many of you,” Margaery said, as she stood on the steps of the Sept of Baelor, and reflected that perhaps even this had been too bold for her.

She swallowed hard, glancing behind her, at what remained of the Sept.

It was still standing, of course; Joffrey’s soldiers had not quite been that wicked with their deeds, but there was something about it now…It felt like nothing more than the burnt husk of what it had been, once, because none of these commoners had dared to step inside, while she had been near, and it looked so…blank.

There were cracks in the walls, which had never been there before.

“The last time that I appeared before any of you, it was on the steps of the Keep,” she said, and as she kept talking, she felt her voice rising, could see the way that the smallfolk were slowly giving her their undivided attention. “As I presided over the executions of those responsible for my husband’s deaths. Or, those whom I thought to be responsible for my husband’s deaths.”

Megga shot her a look of pure horror that Margaery forced herself to ignore.

Margaery thought of the mother who had accused her, the last time she had gone out amongst the people, and wondered if she stood in this crowd, as well.

She almost hoped that she did.

The thought lent a bit of strength to Margaery’s next words.

“The truth is, we know that at least some of those men were responsible for Joffrey’s death,” Margaery continued, looking away from Megga, looking out into the murmuring crowd, which shifted and started, before her.

She supposed none of them had expected her to say that, after all.

“And my men shall conduct a thorough investigation into whether that was the case with all of them,” Margaery went on, calmly. “Or whether a mistake was made. I will not lie to you; in the months after my husband’s death, I have been…beside myself.” She took a careful breath, knowing that if anything about this was wrong, she might find herself standing in the middle of a mob, instead of before an interested people. “I have not been myself, and because of that, I have failed my people. The investigation into my husband’s death was placed in the hands of others, and those that I trusted, but because of that, I do not know if mistakes were made, along the way.”

Now, the restlessness had gone completely silent; for the first time since her husband’s death, the feeling of so many eyes on her did not make Margaery completely uncomfortable.

None of them had expected her to say that; they were all surprised that their Queen was so openly admitting wrong before any of them, after the way the King had refused to accept any wrongdoing of hers, the last time that she was here.

She took a deep breath; it felt exhilarating, their absolute shock.

“And I promise you,” she said, as she went on, “That I shall take responsibility for any other actions
done under my regency for my son, from this moment forward.”

Utter silence; she thought she could have heard the sound of the first child being cut down, at the Slaughter.

She shut her eyes, tightly.

Opened them again; when she did, Megga was stepping a little closer to her.

“My son’s reign is important to me. To all of us; it is a chance to start anew, and one that I do not want to see wasted. One that I am sure that none of you wish to see wasted, either.”

That was the absolute truth, Margaery thought, and somehow, it made her words more believable, as they boomed out over the crowd.

“And because I cannot trust the executioner to make sure that the men that are being killed in my son’s name are guilty, because I do not want such a mistake to ever be made again, and for that mistake to lay on my son’s head, I hereby decree that there shall be no more executions in my son’s name. Ever again.”

A pause; she licked her lips, could see that the entire crowd was hanging on her every word.

“Any who are found guilty of an offense worthy of death will have a punishment meant to fit their crime, even if that means they shall be imprisoned in the Black Cells for the rest of their days, but there will be no more deaths when such a thing can be prevented, here.”

She thought of blood, squishing between her toes. Thought of her husband, screaming at his men to kill them all.

Thought of the triumph she had felt, at the look of shock on the High Sparrow’s face, as he realized that she had beat him. The feeling that it was his fault that this was happening, not hers, because he had threatened someone dear to her, and that made it all right.

“I cannot promise you peace,” Margaery continued, because she knew that it needed to be said, if any of them were going to believe her, one day. “There is a war coming, and there will be sorrows to come, but what I do promise you is that I have come here today, against the advice of my Small Council, to make this promise to you; that sorrow will never come at your King’s hands.”

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly, wondered if she felt like a king, yet.

“That, I promise you,” Margaery continued, and felt as if she were laying her own head upon the block in that moment, with so many ears bearing witness to that promise. “Until the end of my days.”

For a moment, that awkward, shocked silence prevailed. She could see it in their faces; none of them knew how to react to her words. No doubt, they thought that she was lying to them, or that she didn’t know what she was saying; she meant to disabuse them of that notion, eventually, but she thought that she understood their distrust.

It was the same distrust that she had just seen in the eyes of Baelish’s whores.

And they were right not to trust her; the Crown had hardly proven to care much for the smallfolk and what they wanted, in years past. Not when the Mad King wished to burn them all, not when Robert spent their money on whores and wine, not when her husband thought that it would be funny to drag a couple of them in front of him a day and watch them be flayed alive.
The Crown ruled them, but not because it had their best interests at heart.

The Crown was the reason that Margaery had slaughtered so many of them, at the Sept.

So she stood there, hands folded neatly in front of her swollen chest, trying to tell herself that eventually, she would be able to convince them. That even if they didn’t believe her now, they wouldn’t dare say it, and that would hopefully give her the time that she needed.

For it was a promise that she fully intended to keep, regardless of whether or not anyone believed her capable of it.

She had felt already the effects of having so much blood on her hands, whether she had been the one to do the killing, or not.

She would not have that blood on her child’s, one day.

And then, slowly, a noise swept out over the crowd.

Slowly, they began to cheer.

“Long live the King!”

“Long live the Queen Regent!”

Slowly, Margaery smiled.

And then her guards were reaching for her, because the people were reaching for her, reaching out like they wanted to touch her, wanted to let her know what they thought of that, and her guards were dragging her off the steps, and shouting for the people to make way for their Queen.

They parted like butter.

“Long live the Queen!” Someone yelled, as they parted into something like a trail for her and her soldiers to walk through, and after that, that was what they all yelled.

They did not call her “Good Queen Marg” as they had once done; she doubted that they ever would again.

But it was enough.

“Margaery,” Megga hissed, at her side, reaching out to snatch at Margaery’s sleeve, and Margaery grimaced, but forced herself not to pull away, because who knew how many eyes were on her, at the moment. “What the fuck did you just do?”

Margaery lifted her chin, meeting Megga’s eyes.

She could see the absolute disbelief in Megga’s eyes, that she had done something so monumentally stupid, and she supposed she understood the shock in the girl’s face, supposed it wasn’t the most sensical thing to do.

But Megga couldn’t understand.

She was yet another one of Margaery’s victims; Margaery had been the one who told her to keep an eye on Cersei, had been the reason Megga found herself in the Black Cells, and then in the Sept, in the first place.
One day, Margaery hoped to atone for that, too.

“I decided what sort of queen I want to be, Megga,” she said, and if she was a little short with her response…Well, it covered the absolute shock she felt, windswept and being dragged away by her own soldiers, that it had worked.

Sometimes, Rosamund was glad that Sansa hadn’t killed her. Glad that her final memories hadn’t been of pain and suffering and little else, of Cersei’s twisted smile as she told her to find out everything she could about Sansa’s life, now, if she wanted to keep her own.

As if she thought Rosamund would want to, after the things Cersei had let her creatures do to her. That she would ever want to do anything that Cersei demanded of her, when Cersei had been the one to turn her into this twisted…wicked thing, that only wanted to curl into a ball and be run over by the first storming horses she came across.

She flinched a little at the thought, not because it terrified her, but because it terrified her how much her mind still yearned for such a thing to happen, even if it was entirely be accident.

If only it would, then she wouldn’t have to spend the rest of her days as an obedient servant to Sansa Stark, waiting for the other girl to fulfill her promise of one day killing her. Wouldn’t have to spend her days scraping and bowing before Margaery Tyrell, because Sansa spent so much time in the other girl’s presence, these days, even if she didn’t spend nearly as much time in her bed.

And a part of her knew that it hadn’t been Margaery’s fault, the things that had happened to her, but Rosamund had had months alone in that cell, with nothing more to do than to overthink every single event of her life, and fear the moments when that maester would send his creature down to hurt her, again and again, or would come down himself, simply because he could.

And Margaery had been the one to send her away in the first place, had been the reason that not a soul in King’s Landing had missed her.

And all because she had testified against Sansa Stark, for something that the girl had done.

Rosamund closed her eyes, breathed out deeply through her mouth.

Gods, she was exhausted.

She was becoming more and more exhausted, these days, with the more chores that Sansa heaped on her, while still expecting Rosamund to be her perfect little spy, to ferret out the information that Sansa didn’t have the time nor the opportunity to figure out for herself, with the way that she was slowly trying to take over the day to day operations of the Keep.

Rosamund almost admired her for that, for the careful, silent way she seemed to be weaving her plans, and perhaps she would have, if only Sansa would have killed her as she had asked the other woman.

She took a deep breath, and walked up to the doorway of Baelish’s most popular brothel, hesitating before she reached out to open the door rather than knocking, not entirely certain how one went about this sort of thing.

She wasn’t used to it, after all.

The door opened, slowly, and a young, scantily clad brunette squinted out at her.
She grimaced, pretending it was a smile; she had just passed Margaery, on the way here, which had been something of a terrifying experience, because she had not expected to see the Regent on her way to this part of the city, at all.

Had just passed Baelish, who had been in the crowd when Margaery had made that…strange announcement, as well.

Rosamund reached into the purse that Sansa had provided for her, and holding out a coin.

Still, the brunette at the door hesitated.

“You don’t look like the sort of person who’d be interested, here,” the whore said, looking Rosamund up and down.

Rosamund forced herself to smile. “Yes, well…” she said, forcing her lips to curve into a pretty smile. “I suppose that could be said of many of the lonely ladies in the Keep.”

The whore stared at her for a moment longer, and then she smiled, stepping out of the way for Rosamund to step inside.

“You have anyone in particular in mind?” She asked, and Rosamund swallowed.

Because this, this was the hard part. Considering what Cersei had done to her in the Black Cells, had her creatures do to her, Rosamund had very distinctive features, and she had no doubt that Baelish would recognize her, if he saw her, or one of his whores happened to describe her to him.

So, she had to be sure to be noticed by as few people as possible.

A part of her wondered why Sansa didn’t send Pod to do this sort of thing. After all, he was a regular fixture at Baelish’s brothels these days, though Rosamund couldn’t imagine how he made enough money to spend so much time there, when he was nothing more than Brienne’s squire, these days.

He had been Tyrion’s, but Tyrion had been the Hand of the King, at one time. Brienne was a lady, but she was also Sansa’s meager guard.

Still, he would have been a better fit here, would have been able to explain away his presence here far better than Rosamund ever could.

She supposed he just wasn’t trusted enough to be Sansa’s spy, which was…annoying.

“You seem pretty enough,” Rosamund said, reaching out to take the other girl’s hands in her own. She was older than Rosamund, by several years, Rosamund thought, and she wasn’t nearly as pretty as the types that Rosamund might usually go for, but that hardly mattered, now.

She needed to keep this contained, after all.

The girl stared at her for a moment longer, before her lips pulled into a grin. “My room’s this way,” she said, and all but dragged Rosamund along behind her.

Rosamund allowed herself to be led, and then paused, when she heard the sound of rather familiar voices coming from across the hall.

The walls of a brothel were thin as paper.

“What about this one?” She asked, pointing to one of the doors on that side of the hall. Risky, of course, but everything about this was risky.
The whore blinked at her. “Those aren’t my rooms,” she said, more wary, now.

Rosamund forced herself to smile, reaching out and touching the girl’s cheek. “Yes, well, they’re empty, aren’t they?” She asked.

The woman sniffed, and then shrugged, allowing Rosamund to lead her into the room, then.

The door shut behind them, and already the whore was reaching for Rosamund’s cheek, for the elaborate scarring that ran down her face.

“What happened here?” She asked, sounding more curious than disgusted, and Rosamund bit back a flinch.

She saw the way people looked at her, now. No one said anything, certainly not any of the ladies that she had once been friends with, because they didn’t know what had happened to her and were likely too afraid to ask, but she saw their looks all the same, mixtures of pity and revulsion.

And sometimes, she wondered if Margaery’s ladies, her former friends, thought that she deserved what had happened to her, for betraying her mistress in such a way at all.

Sometimes, Rosamund found herself looking in the mirror, and wondering if she recognized the woman in front of her, wondered if the fact that she didn’t was because of the scars covering her skin, or because being down in the Black Cells for so long had made her into something other.

She licked her lips; it was fascinating to have someone look at her without that sense of revulsion, without that pity, for once.

She swept forward, pushing the hair out of her eyes. “I don’t want to talk about that,” she said, and kissed the other girl, hard, wanting.

Rosamund couldn’t remember the last time she’d gotten anything she wanted.

The whore melted against her, knowing her craft well enough to at least fake enthusiasm if she didn’t feel it, but Rosamund kept her eyes open, waiting for the other girl to close hers.

After several moments, she did, and that was the moment Rosamund struck.

She reached out with her free hand, tightening it into a fist as she wrapped it around the whore’s back, and then slammed it into the back of her head.

The whore let out a cry of surprise, stumbling backwards, but Rosamund didn’t give her the chance to cry out, reaching into her pocket with her other hand to pull out the rather large rock she’d found outside of the brothel, slamming it into the girl’s temple, this time.

Rosamund watched the girl crumple to the floor, expressionless, watched the blood trickle down her forehead, down the lips that Rosamund had just kissed.

She swallowed hard, and thought that once, what she had just done would have terrified her, would have sent her into shock.

She felt nothing, watching the girl crumple to the ground, felt nothing as she knelt down beside her and felt for a pulse, and, feeling none, walked over and latched the door, before moving to the wall that she had heard Baelish’s familiar, whispering tones from.

Sansa had told her to come here, to find out what she could about any plans that Baelish might be
keeping from her, and Rosamund had a feeling that the other girl might disapprove of her methods, but Rosamund genuinely could not bring herself to care.

If Sansa disapproved of her methods, she ought to kill her, as Rosamund had originally wanted, and find some other servant to do her bidding.

She took a deep breath, determined to hold it to make sure that she heard everything, and leaned her ear against the wall, waiting.

She did not have to wait long.

“I see the Queen was here,” Baelish said, and he did not sound pleased by the observation.

Silence.

“What did she want?” Now, he sounded impatient, and Rosamund almost smiled, glad that someone was still able to upset him, these days.

A cleared throat. “She…passed out gifts, amongst the whores,” a familiar voice said. “That was all. It was…strange.”

Baelish sighed. “Yes, she’s trying hard to be noticed amongst the smallfolk for being good again, I suppose.”

Silence.

“Lord Kevan is going to be a problem for us,” Baelish was saying, and Rosamund took a careful breath, careful not to breathe loudly enough to be overheard, from her hiding place.

She knew that Baelish was up to something; he’d gotten awfully chummy with Sansa, after the late King’s death, had amassed quite a bit of power for a man who wasn’t the Hand of the King, but she didn’t understand Sansa’s obsession with having her spy follow Baelish around, when the other man hardly ever slipped up, and was actually trying to help her.

There were quite enough lords and ladies in King’s Landing who were not being so helpful, and Rosamund privately thought that Lady Sansa’s attention would be better focused on them.

But then, it was not her duty to question her new mistress, only to do as she asked.

And if it was Sansa’s wish to have Rosamund waste her time trying not to be noticed by a paranoid man while he walked about, she supposed that there were worse things she could be doing with her time.

She’d gotten good at not being visible, at not being heard, during her time in the Black Cells. The more attention she drew to herself, there, the more Cersei’s creatures had tormented her.

“Sansa is determined to try to make nice with House Lannister, and she won’t kill him,” Baelish went on, and Rosamund licked her lips, because that sounded rather like…

Perhaps Sansa was right to be paranoid about this man she claimed to trust so well.

“And I don’t suppose that Lord Kevan is…immune, to…womanly charms,” the other voice, that of the blonde boy Baelish used as a confidante, Olyvar, she thought his name was, said.

She’d met him only a few times, had seen him in the palace, there for some clandestine meeting or another with a noble, to recognize the sound of his voice, but still, she was surprised that he was
trusted enough to be talking to Baelish, about something like this.

Baelish was silent.

An uncomfortable silence. “Of course,” Olyvar said, looking slightly nervous that his lord hadn’t liked his plan.

Rosamund understood that feeling rather well. She felt it every time she did something stupid and Sansa Stark looked at her in exactly the same sort of way, as if she were nothing more than the dirt beneath her shoes.

“I want you to ensure that all of the girls going to the Grandmaester know how to read,” Baelish said, into the silence, and Olyvar gave a short little bow.

“As you wish, my lord.”

Baelish did not look impressed by that, either. “That means that once they’ve gotten him to knock off, they’re to read anything in his chambers that they can get their hands on.”

Olyvar swallowed. “Understood.”

Rosamund’s eyes narrowed, as she wondered what was so interesting about the Grandmaester, these days. He seemed like one of the least suspicious of the men on the Small Council, these days, in her opinion.

But then, her opinion hardly mattered, these days.

If it did, perhaps Sansa would actually be using her for useful things, rather than spying on men who were already on her side.

But then, her lady was rather paranoid.

“The King’s funeral is in a fortnight,” Baelish went on, and Rosamund’s brows furrowed. “They will not have it until Cersei arrives, lest they instigate a war.”

A pause, and then, the boy was saying, slowly, “I thought…"

“Sa…The Regent believes that a war can be avoided,” Baelish went on, and Rosamund’s eyes narrowed, because she didn’t think that he was the sort of man to make such a slip up, so obviously.

“Cersei Lannister is hardly the sort of woman who needs an excuse to go to war, but we need to ensure that one happens,” Baelish went on, and Rosamund sucked in a breath, and then reached up, covering her mouth with her hands. “She doesn’t care about her uncle enough for it to matter much to her, should he die when she arrives.”

She doubted that Baelish and his whore could hear her breathing, through the wall, but she had spent enough time as the pet of Cersei’s failed maester not to be sure of anything, when listening to things she shouldn’t be.

Olyvar sounded confused. “I thought…” he said again, and Rosamund had no doubt that some sort of unspoken communication went through them, before Olyvar cleared his throat. “And?”

“Cersei has already declared that her son is the rightful heir, because Margaery’s child is not born yet. There is a logical next step to that explanation, before she can have the war that she wants, and she certainly won’t want to pander to the Tyrells like her father did, if a war is possible. She’s too
arrogant to think she could lose it.”

A pause.

“I… My lord, please…” Olyvar began, and he sounded disturbed, suddenly, though Rosamund didn’t understand why.

“You know what it is that I need from you. You’re no fool, though your actions of late have given me reason to wonder. Can you do that?” Baelish asked, and Rosamund blinked back her annoyance, realizing that the fact she couldn’t see them certainly wasn’t helping her, here.

“No,” Olyvar breathed, and for a moment, Rosamund was surprised by the sheer emotion in his voice, the desperation there.

“Come now, boy,” Baelish said, and there was nothing of the pretend care she always heard for Sansa in his voice then, when she eavesdropped on them together, only cruelty. “You’ve been in my employ for a dozen years. You know that I know everything that happens in King’s Landing. Did you really think I wouldn’t find out?”

Silence.

Then, “Please…”

Rosamund didn’t know what was happening, didn’t know what had suddenly gotten Olyvar so disturbed, but she had a feeling that it heralded nothing good for her mistress.

She held her breath.

“Please, my lord, I…”

“The only reason that you aren’t dead right now,” Baelish continued, in that same cold, calculating tone that he never used with Sansa, “is because I can still see the use for you that I saw the first time I met you, when your useless mother dropped you off on my doorstep.”

Silence.

“What did she promise you?” Baelish asked. “I understood that was where you… drew the line, so to speak.”

And slowly, it sank in, what they were talking about, what they had to be talking about, for anything of this conversation to make sense.

Slowly, her lips mouthed the words she wasn’t stupid enough to say aloud.

Oh, by the fucking seven…

Olyvar chose then to speak again, finally. “My lord, if Cersei learns of that, she’ll… she’ll kill that child. You know that.”

Another long silence, and gods, Rosamund hated having to sit here and listen, and not be able to see their faces.

When that false maester had tortured her in the Black Cells, he hadn’t seemed terribly concerned with whether or not she saw his face, and Rosamund had spent far too much time watching it, while he tortured her, while he watched her own expressions, in turn.
They were disturbing reactions, the ways he responded to her hurts, but she had been able to read his thoughts, all the same.

It was one of the few things that had kept her sane, down there.

She’d gotten good at reading people, since then.

“And the Regent, along with it, I’m sure,” Baelish went on. “A sad fate for an already tragic woman.” A pause, careful, calculated. “But it will have nothing to do with me.”

Rosamund closed her eyes.

She had seen the interest that Baelish had in her lady, of course. Knew that there was something wrong with the way that he looked at her, like he possessed her already, knew that there was something wrong with the way he looked at Margaery, every time he thought no one was looking at him.

No one ever looked at Rosamund; her time in the Black Cells, and her elevation, so to speak, to becoming Sansa’s servant had made her nearly invisible, to most, even to Baelish.

She knew what envy looked like, when she saw it.

Olyvar sounded…ruined, when he spoke again, and she had a strange picture, in her mind, of him on his knees before the other man. “Please, it’s…it’s my child, too.”

Another long pause, and Rosamund felt abruptly sick.

She thought of the thing that had grown inside of her, during her time down in the Black Cells, the thing that had grown and made her think that perhaps, just perhaps, the things that the maester did to her might be over with.

That she might gain a little reprieve. That perhaps, if she had something else that the maester wanted to experiment on, he would have at least the decency to wait until it was out of her.

It hadn’t occurred to her to worry about the child itself, to want to protect it. By then, she’d been nothing more than a scared, traumatized mess, and the child within her stomach, if it could even be called that, certainly wasn’t real to her.

But it might serve to spare her a little pain, in this life that seemed to be filled with it. It had been the maester, after all, who had told his…creature to do this to her, in the first place.

He’d watched, too, fascinated, she thought, by this creature he had made.

As it turned out, he hadn’t been patient on that end.

And instead, she had awoken, sometime in the middle of what could either by day or night, because there was no such thing as time down in the Black Cells, to the sensation of the maester cutting into her womb. To the sensation of him cutting It out of her.

She had passed out within seconds, after that, out of sheer shock, because this maester had done horrible things to her in the time he’d kept her down here, but nothing quite like this, but when she had awoken, her stomach had been slim and empty again, a long, thick scar running along her stomach, her waist.

She closed her eyes, breathed in deeply, and then out slowly.
The first time that the creature known as Ser Robert Strong had taken off his helmet and she had seen...what was left of him, she had been terrified of the thought of...whatever he was, managing to get a child on her.

It wouldn’t be a child, her terrified mind had been convinced. Whatever he was, Ser Robert Strong, as the maester always referred to him, for all that Rosamund knew who he was, he wasn’t exactly human anymore, and whatever he put inside of her, surely, it wouldn’t quite be human, either.

Somehow, the thought of giving birth to something similar to him was worse than the rape. The thought of something living inside of her belly, not quite human.

Not when he looked like that, like something other than human. It would be something worse, something horrible, and Rosamund had tried to convince herself, in the days after the maester had ripped her womb open and sewn it shut again, that perhaps it had been for the best.

Whatever the thing in her stomach had been, it hadn’t been a baby, not really. Couldn’t be.

And yet, in the days after, she’d felt that loss as if she had lost a part of herself.

She couldn’t imagine what it might feel like, for Margaery, to lose a child to Cersei, too.

And while she didn’t feel much for Margaery anymore, after the other woman had left her to Cersei’s devices, even if she hadn’t realized it, by expelling her from her ladies, that wasn’t a fate that Rosamund wanted for the other girl, either.

Especially if that child wasn’t really Joffrey’s. Didn’t really belong to a monster, the way that the thing inside of Rosamund’s stomach had.

“Your child?” Baelish echoed, and now, his voice was dangerously soft, almost to the point of being kind.

Sometimes, the maester had been kind, when he wanted to make sure that he didn’t break her spirit completely.

She hadn’t even known his name, until she’d gotten out of the Black Cells.

“I think you’re confused, Olyvar.”

Rosamund squeezed her eyes shut.

“That is not your child. It’s a tool, to use against the dear queen. To make sure that Cersei Lannister goes to war, and at the right time.” Another pause. “And you? You’re mine. So you’ll do as you’re fucking told. You always will. You should have known that when you let me kill her brother.”

Brienne, as usual, was waiting outside of Sansa’s chambers, guarding them, so Rosamund thought she should have been forgiven for thinking that Sansa was within.

Sansa hardly ever went anywhere without Brienne, these days. The woman was not a member of the Kingsguard, but Rosamund thought that Sansa trusted her more than any of the knights who had so recently been placed on the Kingsguard.

And she was incredibly loyal to Sansa, for all that Rosamund could tell that a great many of the things that Sansa did these days bothered Brienne.

She didn’t know what sort of bond the two of them shared, but clearly, it was a strange sort of thing,
and Rosamund had made sure never to slip up around Brienne’s hawkish gaze.

She stepped inside, and was rather startled to find that, despite her earlier assumption, Sansa wasn’t within, even if a part of her was rather relieved.

After what she had just learned, she didn’t think she could face the other girl, didn’t think that she could face anyone, just now.

A part of her wanted to find Sansa’s chamber pot and be sick into it until there was nothing left in her stomach, the way it had been after that maester had cut her open, the way she had seen Sansa do, the day Joffrey had died, but never again since then.

She needed to breathe. Needed to wrap her mind around this, before she reported her findings to Sansa again.

Because…gods.

She had known that Baelish was up to something, but not this.

And she didn’t want to face something like this, not when it kept reminding her of the things she had hoped to leave behind in the Black Cells.

She almost stepped back out, and asked Brienne why she was still guarding this room, when Sansa wasn’t here, and then she saw her.

Megga, sitting on the divan in the middle of the room, flipping through one of the genealogy books that Sansa was so obsessed with, these days.

This one was about the Lannisters.

Rosamund had a sneaking suspicion about the reason behind that suspicion, but she made sure never to voice it. She had a feeling that Sansa would make good on her promise to make Rosamund miserable, if she ever did.

Megga glanced up sharply from the book, a look of supreme boredom on her features before she realized who was there. And then, her face shifted into one of absolute suspicion.

“What are you doing in here?” Megga demanded, and Rosamund squinted at her, eyes rather wide.

“I…” Rosamund took a deep breath.

She didn’t know what to make of Megga, and every time she came into contact with the other girl, she found herself growing a little more angry.

Angry, because Megga had been through the same things that she had been through, or, at the very least, some of the same things, and yet here she was, back to her regular self, save for perhaps being a little darker, and Rosamund was the one who was defective, Rosamund was the one with the scars, the one who couldn’t let go of the things that had been done to her, in those cells, while Megga was…fine.

“I was looking for Lady Sansa,” Rosamund said. “And I have more reason to be here, after all, she is my lady.”

Megga gave her a dark look, not impressed by her indignation. “She’s my friend,” she said calmly, and Rosamund wanted to roll her eyes, wanted to tell her that hardly mattered.
Once upon a time, they had all been friends, Margaery and her ladies.

“Well, clearly, she’s not here,” Rosamund said. “And, as she’s not, I should probably be cleaning this place up.”

She stepped towards the bedchambers, to do just that, determined to ignore Megga’s presence there at all, if that was what was expected of her, but Megga spoke, again.

“Where have you been?” Megga asked.

Rosamund slowed, turned around. “Why?” She asked, and if she sounded a little bitter, Rosamund privately thought that she had a reason to be so.

Megga’s eyes narrowed. “Because Sansa may trust you now, for whatever inane reason, but that doesn’t mean that the rest of us have to,” she spat out.

Rosamund blinked at her. Then, slowly, she smiled. “I’m not sure that matters,” she said. “After all, you may have Sansa’s confidence in some things, but not all. And you certainly don’t have the Regent’s, at the moment.”

Megga pressed her lips together. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she gritted out, but Rosamund was not deterred.

“Imagine it, Megga,” she said. “You and I, we were so alike, in the beginning. Lady Alerie asked us if we were interested in being Margaery’s ladies in waiting, when she was to marry Renly, and we both thought it was the most exciting thing that could happen to us. We might have been friends with Margaery, but that wasn’t why we accepted. We’re both from minor branches of House Tyrell; the best we could hope for was to become mothers to some brainless lord.”

Megga shifted on her feet.

“But Margaery becoming Queen?” Rosamund’s smile was thin, warped by her disfigurement. “That changed everything, for us. We rose so far, and all we had to do was be friends to Margaery…and report everything that she did to her grandmother. You remember; it didn’t seem like that great of a sacrifice.”

Megga’s lips had gone white. “We’ve both grown up, since then,” she spat out, sounding suddenly nervous.

Oh, Rosamund knew that she wasn’t still reporting to Olenna; that was Elinor’s job now, the reason that she was so ostracized by the rest of the ladies, the same mistake that Rosamund had made.

But Margaery might have been a good friend to all of them, but Rosamund doubted she had ever once trusted them, at first, not truly.

That might have begun to change, later, but after what Elinor had done, the same damn thing that Rosamund had, she doubted that Margaery trusted any of her ladies, anymore.

And something about taunting Megga with that realization made Rosamund feel good, after Rosamund had spent so long in that cell and emerged a different person, and Megga seemed exactly the same.

It wasn’t fair; she wanted to see Megga lose her composure, the way that Rosamund had lost so much more than that, at the very least.
“You should know,” Megga said coldly, her eyes sweeping over Rosamund as if she found her quite unsatisfactory, and Rosamund lifted her chin, wanted to ask the other woman what gave her the right to judge Rosamund, now. “That if you do anything to betray Sansa or the Regent, you’ll have me to answer to.”

Rosamund sniffed. She remembered a time, that didn’t feel so very long ago, after all, when the two of them would sit over a nice cup of tea and gossip about boys and about how much they loathed being glorified servants for the Queen.

Rosamund had meant those words, had wanted to find a better life for herself, which was part of the reason that she had done as Olenna asked and testified against Sansa.

She hadn’t known, at the time, that Megga had never meant those words at all.

But now, she knew it quite clearly.

Because Rosamund had done the one thing to try and get herself into a better life, a better existence, as Olenna had promised her, and it had backfired so spectacularly. But Megga was content, crawling back to clean Margaery Tyrell’s sheets and sit and eat with her, and pretend that they were all still the friends that they had been before Margaery had ever married Renly Baratheon.

Was content to have gone through all of that suffering, accused of being a spy for Margaery by Cersei Lannister, forced into the same situation, the same experiments, that Rosamund had been forced to endure, and endure it simply to come back to Margaery and do whatever else had been expected of her.

Rosamund hated her for that.

She hadn’t known, when she was chosen for the honor of being one of Margaery’s ladies, that that was what it would be like. Had thought, as she remembered distinctly being told, that it would be pretty dresses, and having tea with a woman who was also a queen, and finding a good match from the court, as every lady in waiting was promised.

Had thought it would be happiness to get away from her rather dull home life and prospects, and instead, had received only misery for her trouble. And she didn’t understand how Megga could still want that, after what had happened to the both of them, what had happened to Reanna.

She sniffed. “I know my duties,” she told Megga, as harshly as she could manage without tipping the other girl off. They had been friends as children for so very long, after all; Megga had once been able to read her like an open book.

Rosamund would like to avoid that possibility, if she might. Scars and all, she didn’t know how well Megga could still read her, and the terrifying possibility that she had already figured it out…

Megga rolled her eyes. “Do you?” She asked, and Rosamund shifted uncomfortably under the look in the other woman’s eyes.

“Better than you, it would seem, if you’re here bothering Lady Sansa’s servant, rather than attending to your mistress,” Rosamund said, as coldly as she could manage, and that time, Megga did flinch.

Rosamund knew that the Regent, much of the time, ordered that none of her ladies attend to her, unless they were out in public, and even then, it seemed she didn’t particularly care for their company.

Megga lifted her chin. “What happened to you, in the Black Cells, Rosamund? Sansa may not, but I
remember the girl that you once were.” She asked, and for the first time since Rosamund had emerged from them, perhaps the first time since Rosamund had been banished by Margaery, she thought she saw pity in the other girl’s eyes, for her.

Rosamund swallowed hard, pursuing her lips. “That girl is dead,” she said, softly, though she had meant her words to be harsh. “She died down there. What I want to know, is why didn’t you?”

Megga flinched. “I…” she licked her lips. “I didn’t spend nearly as long down there as you did,” she said finally, a meager explanation, to Rosamund’s eyes.

Because any amount of time stuck down there as one of the maester’s experiments would have been enough to drive anyone mad, Rosamund knew, and she was not the only girl that he had used for such experiments.

She was just the only one his creature had gotten a child, and so her torment had been particularly worse.

Megga swallowed. “I…that maester, he was cruel, but I think…I think that he wanted me relatively unharmed,” she whispered. “In case Cersei had to use me against the Tyrells.”

Rosamund scoffed.

She could have been that hostage, she supposed, except Cersei had known that the Tyrells wouldn’t pay shit for her, after she had outlived her usefulness to them.

Megga’s eyes were sad. “What did he do to you?” She asked, as if her words had been enough of an explanation that Rosamund ought to share her own experience.

“Get out,” she hissed, and Megga blinked, looking shocked at the fury in her voice, but she didn’t move. “Get the fuck out,” Rosamund repeated, “before I tell Sansa you’ve been snooping through her things. As you said, I have her confidence, at the moment.”

Megga eyed her, but there wasn’t fear or anger in her eyes, only that infernal pity.

Well, too bad.

Rosamund didn’t want her pity.

It had been bad enough getting Sansa’s pity, when the other girl had found her down in the Black Cells, when she was there to save Megga, not Rosamund.

Although, in that case, Rosamund had not been able to bring herself to blame the other girl for that.

Rosamund waited until she was certain that Megga was gone, before she turned and walked to the door.

Brienne was still waiting outside of it, and her eyes narrowed as Rosamund reemerged, her arms full of sheets.

“I…I thought that I would go and have these cleaned, while our lady doesn’t need them,” Rosamund said to her questioning gaze, because after all, it was midday, and if Rosamund was a true servant to Lady Sansa, she would have had them cleaned this morning, after Sansa had actually slept in them.

But instead, Sansa wanted her watching Lord Baelish.

Brienne stared at her for a moment longer, before shrugging, looking incredibly uninterested.
“Of course,” she said, gesturing for Rosamund to go ahead of her.

Rosamund squinted up at her, instead.

“Tell her…” Rosamund took a deep breath, watching the man write the words down carefully, wondering if she would still be able to write on her own, if Cersei’s creature hadn’t methodically broken and unbroken all of her fingers, while she was in the cells.

Sansa didn’t seem to notice the defect; she had no use for Rosamund’s writing abilities, after all, and only checked on the letters that Rosamund was sending Cersei when she knew about them, after all.

And even then, she hadn’t known what Rosamund’s handwriting had looked like, before.

But Rosamund had to be careful, of her next words, just in case.

She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, as she considered what she wanted to communicate.

It was clear, from what little of that conversation Rosamund had been able to overhear, that Baelish was more than a little worried about the effect that the Lannisters might have, at the moment, worried about what, exactly, they knew about the King’s death.

But it was also clear that he was all but instigating the Seven Kingdoms into another bloody civil war.

Sansa would not like that; she had made her feelings clear, both to Rosamund and to anyone else who would listen, that she did not want a war, did not want one at all, not when it would mean that Tommen would become the target of the entirety of House Tyrell’s army.

She had some feelings for the boy, regardless of who his brother had been, who his mother was, and wanted to avoid a war.

Rosamund supposed she ought to be more nervous about the fact that Baelish very much did, but that hardly surprised her.

Despite his rise to even further power since the King’s death, he seemed to do rather well on his feet.

“Tell her that Lady Sansa suspects nothing,” she said. “That she’s too busy chasing enemies where there are none. Chasing Lord Baelish, whom she doesn’t trust nearly as much as she acts like she does. She’ll…” she sniffed. “She’ll like that, I think.”

In truth, she didn’t know what Cersei would like, but that hardly mattered.

The moment she heard those words, Cersei would reach out to Baelish.

Sansa had promised Rosamund a sad, slow existence as her spy against Cersei, had offered her the chance to make a new life for herself, after everything that had happened to her. Had promised her that she wouldn’t kill her, but would simply make her life miserable, if she ever turned against Sansa.

But what she didn’t know, could never understand, Rosamund suspected, was that Cersei had offered her something much better.

Cersei offered her death, and that was something that Rosamund clung to with both hands, because she was too cowardly to take her own life, but Cersei had been the one to do all of this to her; it was only fitting that she be the one to finish it, as well.

And she knew already that Cersei Lannister kept her promises.
After all, a Lannister always paid their debts.

And Rosamund was determined to ensure that Cersei owed her a great deal, when the time came for Rosamund to finally outlive her usefulness.

Rosamund closed her eyes, let her breath out slowly.

When she opened her eyes again, the young man, who had been nothing more than a simple servant while Joffrey was King, but who was now employed as one of the few spies that Cersei had left in King’s Landing, was already sealing the letter.

Rosamund had had to teach him to write. That had been difficult, too, but she had done it.

Because it was better than forcing Cersei to try and read her unreadable scrawl.

She sent the young man a smile. “And make sure that it gets to her quickly, won’t you?” She demanded. “Our lady doesn’t like tardiness, as you well know.”

The boy nodded, looking a little fearful at the implied threat in her words.
DORNE

Chapter Notes

Alternate title: In which Arianne has a very bad day...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Father,” Arianne said, softly.

She didn’t like being confronted with the sight of her father, locked away. Seeing what she had done to him was very different than the abstract idea of knowing that she had taken everything her father held dear, and locked him away in a tower the way they said the Stark girl had been, in the last moments of her life.

“I need to know what it is that you’re planning,” Arianne said, tightly.

Doran raised an eyebrow. “I have been able to plan nothing since you placed four deaf guards outside my door, Daughter, and ordered that Ellaria, for all that she is also locked up in here, is not allowed to see me,” he said, voice heavy with disapproval, but Arianne was already speaking over him before he was done.

“Bullshit,” she gritted out. “I meant, I want to know what my brother is doing in the East. Why you refuse to lift a finger against the Lannisters after everything they’ve taken from us.” She pressed her lips together. “Mother said that you wept, when she tried to take me away from this place. I want to know then, why you would conspire with Quentyn to take my birthright from me, now.”

Had she truly disappointed him so much, now that she was grown?

Her father stared at her for several long moments, looking genuinely hurt by her words before he hid the emotion well, before sinking back in his chair. “Sit down, Arianne,” he said, sounding incredibly tired.

Arianne crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t think I will,” she said, the strange feeling that if she did, she would regret it forever.

Would regret a lot of things forever, settling over her.

Doran shot her an annoyed look. “Sit down,” he snapped, and he sounded so much like the father he’d never been to her, in that moment, that she moved to the empty chair, and sat.

He pushed the cyvasse pieces closer to her, and Arianne eyed him, annoyance welling up within her.

When she was little, before her mother had left and while her father still paid some modicum of attention to her, before he gave up on the pretense entirely, he had insisted on such games.

Cyvasse was a relatively new game, but there had been other games of strategy, in the past.

Arianne had never beat him.

But he was beaten now, sitting in this cell in the tower where he had once placed Obara and Tyene.
Funny; it didn’t feel like much of a victory.

Doran gestured for her to go first, and Arianne did so, squinting down at the board for only a moment before she made her move; he had already been halfway through a game with himself.

And she wasn’t here to play games, after all. She wanted to finally hear the truth.

“How is the throne?” Her father asked her, and it was such an unexpected question that Arianne barked out a laugh.

Her father glanced up at her from the cyvasse table, unamused.

She cleared her throat, feeling suddenly like a reprimanded child. “I didn’t realize how exhausting your role is,” she admitted, and it felt good to have someone to talk to about this, where she couldn’t trust anyone else in Dorne with such a thing, didn’t know if there was anyone else at all that she could trust.

She wondered if Margaery Tyrell was exhausted, sitting on the Iron Throne, as her reports claimed.

But there was no harm in telling her father this now, when he was stuck in here and could not use it against her.

_Do you really believe that?_ A voice inside of her whispered, and Arianne shuddered.

“I found it to be the same, in the beginning,” her father said, and Arianne was almost startled by the admission, by the fact that he was confiding in her at all. She blinked up at him, cyvasse board momentarily forgotten. Doran let out a dry laugh. “Who am I kidding? It never grew less tiring.”

She knew that.

That was why she had dethroned him, in the end.

Something like fear welled up inside of her, that it would never grow easier for her, either, and one day soon, she would face the same predicament.

“Why are you here, Arianne?” Her father asked her, and he sounded so tired, more tired than Arianne felt, these days.

She squeezed her eyes shut; when she opened them, it was with firm resolve. “Why did you want to give my throne to Quentyn? Was I that much of a disappointment to you?”

“I never plotted against you with Quentyn,” her father told her, and Arianne wanted to scoff, but found herself transfixed, instead. “You merely saw shadows where there were none, and so I told you nothing, for fear that you would only find more.”

That time, Arianne did scoff. “Oh, so I imagined the fact that my dear brother went east, and not some months later, the Golden Company broke their first contract?”

Doran did not back down. “You heard two completely unrelated events, and panicked.”

Arianne lifted her chin; she was not a fool. She was perfectly aware of her father’s opinion of her, but she was not a fool. “I’m sure.”

Her father plucked up a cyvasse piece, played it in his fingers without setting it back down. Arianne found herself watching his every move.
“I must know how you learned that Quentyn was abroad, in the first place,” he said, and Arianne bit back a scoff.

It had not been difficult, after all, to learn of her brother’s betrayal. Not since she was fourteen years old, and had walked into her brother’s study to find that her father had written him a letter, a letter detailing how he would one day sit in his father’s place, on the throne of Dorne, and Arianne would not.

It was not difficult to imagine betrayal, ever since then. And then her brother had snuck out of the country, without a word to anyone, and at the same time, the Golden Company had broken their contract with Myr.

Arianne had been waiting with baited breath ever since then, and had learned precisely nothing. No attack had ever come, and she was tired of waiting, of being so damn dependent on the Tyrells.

It was not in her nature.

Her father glanced up at her, then, meeting her eyes, and Arianne suddenly didn’t like the feeling of meeting that gaze.

“Your brother went with Yronwood, Maester Kedry, and three of Lord Yronwood’s best young knights on a long and perilous voyage, with an uncertain welcome at its end. He has gone to bring us back our heart’s desire.”

Arianne’s heart skipped a beat. Her eyes narrowed. “And what is that?” She asked, slightly breathless, and she wasn’t sure if it was with anticipation, or with anger.

“Vengeance,” he said, his voice soft, as if he were afraid that one of his deaf guards might be listening. Arianne might have snorted, if she were not so enraptured by his next words. “Justice. Fire and blood.”

Arianne flinched back at those words, as if her father had struck her.

They pounded, over and over again in her ears, a strange litany of words that didn’t make sense, couldn’t make sense, because her father…

Her father had always been weak, had never cared for vengeance, but merely for the survival of what remained of their family.

It was why she had…

Her heart skipped a beat. She found it suddenly difficult to breathe.

Arianne stared at him, her jaw slackening. She closed it quickly, swallowed hard, reminded herself that she was the Princess of Dorne, now.

All because her father hadn’t even bothered to tell her…whatever it was, he was planning.

And her next words came out of their own accord, because godsdamnit, she’d had a right to know, and he’d kept it from her, whatever this was, and now, they were all fucked because of it.

Some of that anger might have bled into her next words, as she slammed down the cyvasse piece in her hand, one of the elephants.

“Why wouldn’t you tell me that?” She demanded. “Before I…before I went and fucked everything
up, when I tried to overthrow you, why the fuck wouldn’t you say something?”

Doran reached out, touching her cheek. The touch was so soft, and one that she was not used to receiving from her father, after all of these years. Arianne leaned into the touch, and hated herself a little more for it.

Gods, she’d dethroned him. She’d dethroned him because she had thought, as the rest of Dorne had, that he wasn’t doing anything.

“You remind me so much of him,” he said, and Arianne blinked at him, brows furrowing. “Oberyn. He was always fire and fury, and sometimes I wondered if it was a mistake to tell him anything of what I planned. I wonder…” He closed his eyes. “I wonder if perhaps then, he would not have challenged the Mountain, would not have stolen Sansa Stark. I wonder if he would still be here, today.”

Arianne flinched.

Once, she would have loved to be compared to her uncle, a man that she had admired with all of her being, but he was dead now. He was dead, because he had challenged the Mountain, while her father had sent her brother towards dragons.

“You imagine how difficult it was to get him to go along with any of these plans, either,” Doran went on, but Arianne’s heart was pounding, and she thought that she’d heard enough of this, by now.

Fire and blood.

Justice.

Fire and blood.

A dragon’s roar.

For a moment, she wanted to be impressed by her father’s manipulations. Wanted to be surprised, that he had managed such a feat and she had been silly and stupid enough to not take notice.

She knew that she ought to be asking for the rest of that plan, now that her father had finally admitted it to her, ought to be asking what that meant for the throne of Dorne, for her, and her brothers.

But as her world shifted, Arianne could only think of one thing, and one thing alone.

It was a simple thing, something her mother had mentioned the last time they’d had an actual conversation, and yet, she could not let it go.

She shook herself, as if waking from a great sleep, and narrowed her eyes at her father.

“Does Mother know?” She asked. “Why Quentyn went East, what your plan has been, all of this time.”

Her father was silent, for several long moments, and Arianne supposed that was answer enough. He did not look shocked, at the news that Mellario was here, and given the way that they had parted, he should have.

But it made sense, she thought, with a sickening sort of clarity. When Mellario had left them, that hadn’t made sense. She had said that she clung too tightly to them, but then she had just abandoned
And she had left Areo Hotah, her own guard, behind with Doran, not with Arianne or Trystane or Quentyn, as if she thought that he needed him the most, as if she cared what her husband needed at that point, given how angry she had been when she had left.

Everything about that situation was wrong, and Arianne had never seen it, before this.

“Mother said that she saw Quentyn, in Norvos,” Arianne said, and her voice was shaking, though, at the moment, she could not even bring herself to care. “So I assume you sent him to her, or knew that he would go to her. Why?”

Her father lifted his chin, reached up to wipe his hand across his lips. For a moment, she thought that he was going to remain silent, would refuse to answer her. But then, he spoke.

“You mother went to Norvos with a purpose, Arianne,” Doran said, and for a moment, Arianne couldn’t breathe.

She had known that purpose her whole life.

Had known it when she came into this world without a cock, and her father had seen her as nothing more than a disappointing first child, a girl when he had so wanted a son.

Had known it when her mother threatened to hurt herself, when Doran’s least favorite child was to be sent away.

Had known it when her mother held her close and kissed her hair, and told her that she loved her, but she had to go.

That purpose had defined the rest of Arianne’s life. Had left her without both father and mother, alone where she had always craved affection, looking for it in all of the wrong places.

It had spurred her towards hatred of her own father, because he had been the one to make their mother leave, after all.

And now…

And now, nothing of the last decades of her life made sense anymore.

Arianne looked up at her father, and there were tears in her eyes. “Why?” She demanded, because she had to know.

Her father’s eyes were sad. “Norvos is much closer to Braavos than Dorne is, my daughter,” he told her, and Arianne closed her eyes.

Braavos.

The Dragon Queen had been raised in Braavos, before she was sold to those Dothraki animals, Arianne remembered.

“And it is not usual for a Westerosi husband and wife to live apart.”

She couldn’t breathe.

She couldn’t breathe; it felt like something heavy and warm was sitting on her chest, and Arianne tried to drag in several more breaths, and found herself failing, each time.
He was lying, she tried to tell herself. It was the only thing that made sense, because all of these years, she had lived with the knowledge that she had been the one to drive her mother away; Mellario had all but confirmed it, with that story she had told.

And it had all been only that, a story, so that Doran would have some excuse to weave his webs in the East as well as the South.

“I never intended to steal the throne from you, Arianne,” her father went on, “Because I had a brighter future in line for you. A throne far more powerful than the Dornish one that would go to your brother by default, without you there to claim it.”

Arianne stared at him, felt her heart beating a little faster. “You…”

“There was an agreement, when Rhaella’s children were smuggled out of the Seven Kingdoms,” Doran went on, and Arianne had to remind herself to breathe, lest she fall over dead then and there, “That one day, Dorne would be united with House Targaryen again, when Prince Viserys returned home to reclaim his birthright. You were to marry him, and be Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, not just the Princess of Dorne.”

Arianne stared at him.

“But…Viserys is dead,” she stated the obvious, and her father did not look amused.

“Yes,” he said. “And his sister champions her right to the throne, now. But there is another Targaryen. That is why your brother has gone to meet her, in the hopes that we can convince her to see things our way.”

Arianne closed her eyes.

“Because Elia’s son still lives.”

Arianne stared at him. “Elia’s son was butchered by the Mountain,” she breathed, because that was the only thing that made sense just now, the truth that had been parroted to her for years, the fury in Oberyn’s gaze whenever he thought of the Lannisters.

She swallowed hard. “He’s dead.”

Her father met her eyes. “He’s not,” he said, very softly. “He lives, Aegon Targaryen, and he’s on his way here, to meet you.”

Arianne stared at him, for several long moments, and then cleared her throat. “Would it not make more sense for him to marry his aunt?” She asked. “Considering the fact that you sent Quentyn to make her see our side of things, and she has three dragons?”

Her father didn’t flinch. “That would hardly bring justice to Dorne, Arianne,” he said, lightly reproving, and Arianne suddenly remembered how to breathe, enough to snap at him.

“And when exactly was I going to find out that you had bartered me away for justice?” She gritted out. “On my wedding day?”

Her father stared at her; he looked genuinely shocked, by her outrage, and Arianne scoffed, jumping to her feet, moving away from him to pace in the remarkably small cell that she had thrown him in.

Her father watched her, silent.
“Arianne…”

She held up a hand. “What made you think I would want that?” She asked him, and her father blinked at her, bemused. “That I would want to spend the rest of my days chained to a man who reminded me of how our family had been destroyed, that I would never be able to rule Dorne, as my father before me did, when this has always been my home?”

Her life had been defined by the women who had left them; by Mellario, and she had always thought her father blamed her for her mother leaving. After all, it had been Arianne’s fostering which had sent her mother over the edge.

By Elia’s death, which had broken Oberyn as much as it had broken Dorne itself.

And now, her father wanted her to marry Elia’s son, or a boy claiming to be that son, and Arianne felt her heart hammering in her chest.

Wanted her to become Elia Martell, that broken, sad woman who had been forced to live with a husband who left her for a child of a girl, who forgot about his children in his greatest need. Wanted her to become the same woman who had died alone and brutally, in King’s Landing.

She wondered if that was why her father never looked at her closely.

Her father looked at her, now, as if the thought of what she might have wanted had never once crossed his mind, and Arianne shut her eyes tightly, breathed out slowly.

She stumbled to her feet then, stumbled over to the door and banged on it for the guards outside to let her out.

She heard her father calling out for her, but Arianne ignored him as the door opened, as she barely squeezed past the guard and out into the hall, and stood there, stock still.

Her heart was pounding in her ears; Arianne was aware that the guards were trying to speak to her, were calling out for her, but she couldn’t hear anything that they were saying, not above the sound of drums in her ears.

Couldn’t hear it above the sudden difficulty that came with breathing, as Arianne reached out blindly for the wall and leaned against it, hard.

She found her mother sitting out in the gardens that she had so loved and tended to, in Sunspear, when she returned from visiting her father. By then, it was early morning, though she was still surprised that the other woman was awake.

Mellario looked up, sending Arianne a tremulous smile, and Arianne promptly forgot any curiosity about what the other woman was doing up at such a time.

“Is it true?” Arianne asked, into the silence.

Her mother bit her lip. “Arianne…”

“Is it true?” Arianne gritted out, shaking the other woman. “Tell me the fucking truth, right now, or I swear by the gods, I won’t be responsible for my next actions.”

Mellario looked startled, by the threat, before she nodded, slowly.

Arianne released her as if the other woman’s touch had burned.
“You know, I expect this sort of thing from him,” Arianne said, jabbing a finger back in the direction of the tower. “But you? You’re my mother. You’re the only real parent I ever had, and here you are, lying to me, just like him.”

Mellario closed her eyes. “Arianne, you don’t understand…”

“Why did you come back here?” Arianne interrupted her. “Was it because I had imprisoned your husband, or to make your reports, after Quentyn came and told you he was finally doing as Father wanted from the start?”

Mellario flinched. She stared at Arianne for several long moments, and, for a horrifying second, Arianne thought that the other woman was going to burst into tears.

She didn’t.

Instead, Mellario clasped her hands in front of her and said, in the gentlest voice Arianne had ever heard from her, but somehow not gentle enough, “I never wanted to leave you, Arianne. I wanted to take you with me, but your father would not allow it. He thought it would draw too much attention.”

“You have family in Norvos!” Arianne cried, the dam bursting, with those words. “Family that you could have asked to send those reports for you, instead of going yourself! Instead of leaving us, if it was so heartbreaking for you to leave your children here!”

Mellario flinched; even as Arianne said those words, she knew that they weren’t true. That for some reason, Doran and Mellario had deemed it important that she go herself, and there had to be a reason for that.

There had to be.

“That wasn’t enough,” Mellario said, gently, but the words stung more than anything that Doran had just said to her. “Arianne, it wasn’t enough.”

She barely heard the other woman.

“I spent my life thinking that my father blamed me for the fact that you left us!” Arianne shouted at her, tears springing up in her eyes. “Spent my life thinking that I was never a good enough replacement for you, because you were gone and I was here, and Father never looked at me the same again.”

Mellario closed her eyes, swallowing hard. “That wasn’t the case at all, Arianne,” she whispered. “But I am sorry that you had to go through that.”

Arianne snorted. “If you were sorry, you wouldn’t have come prancing back here acting like you blamed me for what I did, after you both purposely kept me in the dark for so long that I felt it was my only choice!”

Mellario flinched. “I… I didn’t know,” she whispered. “I sent my reports to Doran, as much information as I could, but he only sent me the things he thought I needed to know. And then, the reports just…stopped.”

They both knew why that had been.

Arianne lifted her chin.

“Why the fuck did you come back here?” She demanded. “If you’ve been giving Father these reports
all of these years, why come back now?"

Her mother’s eyes were shining; she had not imagined that, earlier. Now, a single tear slipped down her dark cheek.

“It’s your brother, Arianne,” she said, and Arianne did not think that she had it in her to endure any more life changing news, today, but apparently the gods did not care what Arianne needed.

But she knew, in the moments before her mother spoke again, what the other woman was going to say.

She knew it, and still, her stomach twisted, she felt suddenly queasy, she wanted to lift her hands to her ears like a small child, cover them as Mellario spoke again.

“Quentyn, he…I came back, Arianne, because he’s…he’s gone.”

Arianne stared at her, watched two more tears slip down her cheeks in quick succession, trying to find the lie in her eyes automatically, because too many people had been lying to her, lately.

“No,” Arianne breathed. “No, no, no…” she was already shaking her head, could feel tears slipping down her cheeks even as she reveled in the irony of all of this, that a week ago she had feared that her brother was coming here to kill her, and now, she was crying over his…

His…

Her mother reached out, wrapping her arms around Arianne’s shoulders, and Arianne wanted nothing more than to flinch away from the other woman, but she couldn’t.

She couldn’t, because Quentyn was gone. Quentyn, who she had thought wanted to betray her, but who had been serving the family far better than she had, in years past.

Quentyn, who had seen their mother last of all, apparently, and who was now…

“How?” She whispered, too shocked to be ashamed by the tears wetting her mother’s gown.

Her mother rubbed a gentle hand up and down her back, the way she had done whenever Arianne came crying to her as a child, the few times that had been.

“That is something you cannot tell your father,” Mellario whispered in her ear, and Arianne squeezed her eyes shut, and the world seemed to halt, for several moments-

“Arianne Martell!” She heard her husband shouting, heard the sound of soldiers’ armor, clanking across sand, and Arianne wanted to scream at him that she didn’t have the energy for this now, that this was perhaps the worst time for her husband to suddenly decided he needed to speak with her.

Still, she knew better than to ignore her husband. To do so would be a rather fatal mistake, these days, with the amount of power that she had handed him, with their wedding.

Arianne stepped back from the other woman, shaken. “What is it?” She demanded, wiping at her eyes.

Blinking at the sight of so many soldiers, standing alongside Gerold. Of Obara, standing at his right hand, her face expressionless as she took in the sight of Arianne and her mother.

And it struck her, then, that Gerold should not be out of the bed she had left him in, hours ago. That he had been sound asleep, when she had left him, and it was barely dawn, now.
Her heart hammered in her chest.

Her mother reached for her hand.

“What…what is the meaning of this?” Arianne asked of them, because they were outside of the palace at a strange time of the night, and surrounded by soldiers, and she had left her husband sound asleep.

Or at least, she had thought he had been sound asleep, when she went to go and finally get some answers from her father.

She closed her eyes, breathed in and out, slowly.

Obara, at Gerold’s side, shifted, looking distinctly uncomfortable, and Arianne wondered if it was the same look that had been on Lady Nym’s face, when she had gone to their uncle about Obara and Tyene’s treason.

No one spoke.

And then, Gerold reached forward and grabbed her by the arm, in an iron grip, shaking it out of Mellario’s hold, and Arianne stared at him incredulously, and then at the soldiers behind him, who didn’t move, didn’t react at all.

Had known what he was planning.

Obara, at Gerold’s side, silent. Her lips were pinched, as if she weren’t quite comfortable wit the iron grip that Gerold had on Arianne, but that was her only complaint, just now.

Arianne wanted to spit at her, after the way she had confided in her cousin the other day, only to get this in response.

“What is the meaning of this?” Arianne repeated, voice raised, trying hard to pull on Gerold’s iron grip on her arm, and finding herself unable to be rid of his grip. She could hardly think straight, could hardly see for the red in her eyes. Quentyn was dead. Quentyn was dead, and her father didn’t even know, because she’d had him locked away.

Her little brother was dead.

The guards shifted, slightly uncomfortable now, but a look from Obara quelled them easily enough.

“You are being placed under protection, Arianne, not arrest,” Gerold told her, the words almost gentle, for all that his grip was not. “We have determined the person who sent the assassin to Dorne, and think that it is not worth the risk, to leave you out where Cersei and her creatures might come for you, again.”

Cersei.

Arianne shook her head; as far as excused went, it seemed a foolish one, when the assassin had been aiming for Myrcella, not Arianne.

Arianne pursed her lips, glancing at her husband’s fiery, angry gaze, and reflected that if she’d just fucked him a couple more times, she might have avoided this situation, entirely.

If she’d just been a little more patient, Arianne thought, and bit back a hysterical laugh.

At her side, her mother had gone very still; she was not trying to fight back, but then, she wouldn’t,
would she? Arianne thought, after what she had just told her.

“Unhand me, this instant,” Arianne snapped at her husband. “I am your Princess, and I will decide what risks are to be taken for my own protection, not you.”

Her husband’s face twisted into a grimace; his grip on her tightened further.

“Patience,” Gerold said. “That is something you ought to take into consideration for yourself, love,” he warned her. “I think, where you’re going, you’re going to need it.”

Arianne glared at him. “You’re nothing but a grasping jackass, the way you’ve always been. And you are not doing this for my own protection, but so that you can take what belongs to me.”

She’d been a fool, to get married at all, she saw that now. She’d been worried about a threat from her brother, when she should have been worried about the threat of the man in her bed.

Gerold shrugged. “And you’re a whore,” he said.

Her mother let out a quiet noise of distress, at the word, but Arianne couldn’t pay attention to her, just now.

“You were a whore the first time you got into my bed, and you were a whore for the Tyrells, when they promised to let you lick the Queen Regent’s cunt, first chance you got to avoid a war, just like your father.” He leaned forward. “I hope it was worth it.”

Arianne tried to pull herself free of his grip, glowering. “Let. Go. Of. Me.” She turned to the guards, surrounding them, already aware that they would not heed her orders.

But if she had learned one thing tonight, it was that pretense was an important thing, indeed.

“I am your princess, and you will obey my commands over that of my husband’s,” she snapped at them. “This is a coup, not whatever attempts of protection he claims it to be.”

The guards glanced at Gerold; other than that, none of them moved.

Arianne gritted her teeth, turning to Obara, then. “And you,” she said. “You’re my cousin. I should have left you to rot in that tower.”

Obara flinched.

Gerold raised his hand, as if to smack her, and Mellario was suddenly there, pushing herself in front of Arianne.

“Please,” she begged, and Arianne squeeze her eyes shut, wishing that her mother did not have to witness this, of all people.

Of all nights, of course Gerold would choose this one, to betray her.

“Please, I have already lost one child,” she begged. “Do not force me to lose another. Not tonight.”

For a moment, Gerold’s gaze softened, under those words, but Arianne was already waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Arianne’s eyes flew open, resisting the sudden, vicious urge to tell her mother to shut the fuck up.

But it was too late; her husband may not be the brightest of warriors, but he was not a fool.
“Another?” He asked, glancing between Mellario and her mother.

Behind him, Obara’s eyes widened, turning sharply to Arianne.

Arianne ignored the other woman.

“Quentyn?” Gerold asked, sounding equal parts pleased and sorrowful, at the news. “It could not be Trystane, or we would all have heard about it, by now.”

Mellario seemed only then to realize what she had done, closing her eyes, letting out a slow breath. She dropped to her knees, then.

“Please,” she begged, and Arianne thought that she should never have had to witness her mother begging, before.

She didn’t want to see another moment of it.

“I am your princess!” Arianne shouted, ripping herself free of Gerold in his shock, and moving back from him, turning her fierce glare on the soldiers in a feeble attempt to guilt them that she already knew would not succeed.

Her heart was not in it.

Gerold stalked forward then, Arianne’s men silent before him as he came to a pause in front of her, reaching out to take her chin in his hand, and holding it gently.

Arianne spit on him.

He grimaced, reaching up to wipe at his face. Then, he smacked her across the face.

“Not anymore, Your Highness,” Gerold told her. “You are to be placed under lock and key for your own protection. In the mean time, I shall serve as Regent to Dorne, in your name. You need not worry. As your husband, I shall see to it that your wishes are granted. That war finally comes to Dorne.”

No, Arianne thought, and she’d realized it before, the first time that Doran had explained things, and then again as she confronted her mother, furious that both of them had kept her in the dark when she was just fucking them all and didn’t even know it, but now, now it felt even more real.

Dorne was about to enter into a war that they could not possibly win, at a time when they should be holding back, waiting for the Dragon to make their mark, whichever damn dragon it ended up being.

Shouldn’t be teaming up with the Tyrells, because the Tyrells were the ones holding the dragon’s Iron Throne, at the moment, and surely the first thing they would do, when either of them got here, was to try and get it back.

And Arianne…

Arianne had been the one to doom them to that fate, by ever teaming up with Margaery Tyrell. There had been a reason her father had refused to speak to the other girl about vengeance, because he already had his plans for it, and they did not include the Tyrells, not at all.

She lifted her free hand to her hair, wanting to rip it out, in that moment.

Mellario looked just as pained, from where she knelt in the sand, but Arianne couldn’t pay attention to her, just now.
She couldn’t, because she suddenly had far more pressing issues.

“Gerold,” she reached out, panicked, placing both hands on her husband’s arms. “Please, you cannot do this. You cannot. It…”

Gerold shook her off, looking annoyed, and Arianne remembered.

Remembered that she had only ever seen him as someone to bed and to use, for all the time she had known him. Had looked at him in recent months with the same disgust he was now showing her, whenever he tried to get closer to her.

She had brought this on herself.

Fuck.

“Take the Princess to the tower where her father and Ellaria Sand are being kept,” Gerold said, then. “Since she seems so keen.”

Arianne reached out for him again, but soldiers who ought to have been loyal to her were already gripping her arms, pulling her along, and much as she kicked and screamed, she was helpless against them.

“You cannot go to war!” She cried out, a last straw.

Obara’s brows furrowed.

Gerold smiled at his wife. “You have a sharp mind, my love,” he told her, “and ambitions that I have always adored. But when you took the throne, you became as soft bellied as your father. So I will do this for you, and you will thank me for it, one day.”

If she ever saw the outside of a cell again, Arianne interpreted, though Gerold, for all his posturing, was not on good enough footing to make such a claim in front of so many guards.

“You will pay for this,” she gritted out, fully meaning the words as her gaze swept up and down her husband. “I swear it. You will all pay for this.”

Her husband smiled at her. “Words, Arianne,” he said, darkly. “That is all you’ve ever given. Just like your father.”

Arianne closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, she was standing in one of the cells of the tower she had once imprisoned her own father in, the door slamming behind her, the deaf guards walking away.

Ellaria standing in front of her, shock on her face for only a moment before it disappeared, replaced by the idle amusement of an already resigned woman.

“Well,” Ellaria said, smirking slightly as the door slammed shut behind Arianne, “This is ironic, I must say.”

Arianne scowled at the other woman.

Ellaria laughed.

“I need to get a message to the Lady Nym,” Obara informed the messenger, who was all but shaking
before her. But she didn’t have time for his fear of the threats she had just issued; she didn’t have time at all. It was nearly sunup, and then, the whole of Dorne would know what they had done, tonight.

“And if you ever speak of this to anyone, to my husband, to my cousins…I will see to it that you die a most horrible death, do you understand?”

The man gulped. “As you wish, my lady,” he said, and she almost reminded him that she was not a lady, but now was not the time.

Obara nodded, slowly. “Tell my sister that Dorne can wait no longer, and is declaring war on House Lannister. And…tell her that this is by no means an act against the Crown. Ask her whether Margaery Tyrell will stand in my way.”

My way, she liked the way that sounded. She wondered what Margaery Tyrell would think of it, of a bastard demanding an ultimatum of her.

The messenger dipped his head. “Yes, Your Highness.”

And then, he was gone.

Obara watched him go with disinterest; it did not matter how long it took the Tyrells to find out what had happened here, just that when they did, it was this version of events, and not the true one.

That should buy them some time, for her sister had always been a very paranoid woman, and she knew that she would be suspicious to be receiving such a message from Obara, and not from Arianne, when she received it.

Obara sighed, reaching up to rub at her temples.

She prayed to gods that she didn’t believe in that she was doing the right thing, tonight.

She had a feeling that it was all going to come back and bite her in the arse, soon.

She had seen the look on Arianne's face, as her own husband arrested her for her "protection." Had seen the betrayal there, the absolute horror, as if she couldn't believe that they would turn against her after she had so easily turned against her own father. She didn't know what Arianne had been doing, what she had learned from visiting her father, but Obara had a strange feeling that she was missing something horribly important, just now.

And a part of Obara felt guilty for what she had done, but the truth remained that Gerald would be a much easier to control leader than Arianne had ever been, and that he would do the one thing that Arianne could not afford to, these days, or simply would not; he would crown Myrcella Baratheon, as Obara had always planned for her to be.

It was the perfect time to do so, after all. Joffrey was dead, and the Lannisters - for were the Tyrells anything less than Lannisters now? - seemed to be squabbling too much over who had the right to the throne now to notice, much less do anything about such an act.

Obara paused, in the throne room.

Gerold, in full battle armor, stood before her cousin’s throne, staring at it with something like awe on his features, now that nothing stood in the way of his gaining it. Staring at it like he intended to take a seat in it himself.
She felt her gut twist with something like nervousness, and hoped that she had not just made a terrible mistake, in handing it over to him so easily.

“Well,” Gerold said, as he sat down in the throne meant for his wife as if he had been born into it himself, and Obara moved forward to stand by his side, keenly aware of the shift in power, now.

Before, she had been the one leading him. Now, with him sitting on her cousin’s throne, there was no hiding what their relationship meant.

She swallowed hard, suddenly nervous that, now that Gerold had gotten a taste for the throne, he would never give it up again.

“That was unpleasant.” Then, he grinned at her, utterly unrepentant. She wished she had his optimism. “But the bitch got what she deserved, either way.”

“Those guards we brought along.” Obara said, examining her nails, “They will have to be killed. The whole of Dorne must think that we did this for her own protection, that she was all right with it.”

Gerold grimaced. “Coupes are such difficult things,” he said. “I remember.”

O bara didn’t even flinch. “And there will be more resistance this time, you must realize that,” she pointed out. “Ariann e may have overthrown Doran without too much difficulty, but she was still his daughter. Dorne will smell the bullshit, this time.”

Gerold licked his lips. “They all saw that assassin try to murder Myrcella, saw the knife go through Arianne,” he said. “So long as once or twice a month, she lets the world know she still lives and I still operate in her name, we’ll be fine.”

Obara was not so sure, but then, this had not been her plan, not from the start.

“You’ll need her seal,” she said, handing over the piece of paper that she had stolen from Arianne’s rooms, the moment Arianne had gone to the tower and her husband had “awoken” to find guards loyal enough to him to help arrest her.

Gerold took it, nodding his thanks in her direction, before he smiled at her again. “What do you think? Do I make a good regent?”

“You shouldn’t have lied to her about who you intend to be Regent for,” Obara said, toneless, and Gerold stared at her for a moment longer before he laughed.

“I suppose it would have been funny to see the shock on her face,” he admitted. “But you were the one who warned me that we must take this slowly.”

“Not too slowly; the child won’t be in Margaery Tyrell’s womb forever, and there’s always a chance that it will be a boy,” Obara warned him. “The funeral.”

“Yes,” he agreed, nodding vigorously. “I like that. A queen born out of her brother’s ashes, the way Arianne was born out of Quentyn’s, without even knowing it.”

He laughed.

Obara paled, the reminder that her cousin was apparently dead hitting her like a punch to the gut.

She had never had any particular strong feelings for Quentyn; most of their lives had been spent apart, and Arianne had seen him as a threat to her long before he had gone East to bring back an
army.

“Makes you wonder if she made up all of that shit about her brother intending to bring a civil war to Dorne,” Gerold continued, and Obara’s jaw clenched, because she had seen the shock on Arianne’s face.

Had seen how off, she had been.

It had to be a surprise, she had to have not known.

“It gave her the perfect excuse to steal the throne from her father, to string along Dorne because she didn’t know what to do once she got the throne,” Gerold pointed out. “A threat from the East.”

For some reason, those words made Obara feel queasy, as she remembered the look on Arianne’s face, as she all but begged Gerold not to go to war, a war that she had always wanted in the past, after one conversation with her father.

“Yes,” she said, slowly. “It’s very strange.”

“We should have a funeral for him, here,” Gerold went on. “Don’t want to look less than sympathetic to the Martells.”

She didn’t bother to point out that she was also a Martell; Obara knew that Gerold would only remind her that she had been Oberyn’s bastard, not his trueborn daughter.

Not that that had ever mattered, to him.

“Now,” Gerold said, leaning back on the throne, “Where is our new Queen?”

Myrcella took a deep breath, and stepped into the tower that Tyene had taken her to, in recent days.

It would not look strange, that she was here, she knew, when Tyene had brought her here so many times recently, even if she was alone, this time. Not to the guards at the bottom of the tower, not to any servants who might notice her.

So much was changing, just now, that she knew they had much larger problems than whether or not she was accompanied to this tower, today.

She didn’t know where Tyene was, was only glad that the other woman had not been guarding her in her rooms, during the commotion tonight, because it meant that no one was guarding Myrcella.

Myrcella had the feeling that Tyene had been meant to, but she had disappeared, shortly before Myrcella had gone to sleep, and it had been a simple thing, to convince her already worried guard that Arianne had sent for her, in the night.

She smiled, as she walked by the guards at the tower where Oberyn Martell had always kept his poisons, and slowly made her way up the steps.

She did not have much time, of course, but she also did not want to draw undue attention to herself. The moment someone realized that she was not meant to be here, she knew, she would be dragged before the throne with her enemies demanding an explanation.

And with a vial of poison in her pocket, she knew, that would not go well for her. Not when Arianne was no longer around to forgive everything that she did without question, because she felt bad about the way she treated her, and Trystane.
Say what she liked about Arianne, Myrcella could admit that the other woman was at least predictable in that sense, if no other.

Myrcella swallowed hard, glancing at the vials of poison, all carefully shelved, after the last time that she and Tyene had been here, scanning it for a particular vial, and racking her brain for anything about it that might make it stand out in a hurry.

She heard shouting, down in the courtyard, and Myrcella panicked, hurrying forward to thumb through the vials individually, without the presence of mind this time to make sure that she put them back where she found them, exactly.

And then, near the back of the second shelf she searched, she found it.

Dragon’s Breath.

Myrcella smiled, as she recognized the stuff, even as she prayed to the gods that she would never have occasion to use it, that, despite the power shift in Dorne this night, she and her child would remain safe.

Well, safe as they could be.

A nasty little voice in her ear reminded her that if she just refused to go with Tyene when her party attacked Jaime’s on the way to the Rock, she wouldn’t be in this mess.

But then again, they said that Cersei had crowned Tommen, that she was back at the Rock now, and the thought of having to face her mother again, especially after Joffrey’s death, to have to see the woman’s tears for a boy that Myrcella loathed with all of her being disgusted her just as much as she was disgusted with herself for coming here, and without Trystane, in the first place.

She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, reminded herself that she was safe so long as she had this extra piece of insurance, that she was doing this with the eventual goal, a goal that Arianne herself didn’t seem to understand at all, despite being his own sister, of getting Trystane back.

Of getting her family back.

Myrcella slipped the poison into her pocket, and remembered how to breathe again.

She had a feeling that fainting during her coronation would be rather embarrassing.

When he was a boy, Tyrion had always wanted to go to Dorne.

He remembered that Oberyn and Elia had come to visit them, when they were still young children, because back then, there had still been talk of Elia and Jaime being wed, or of Oberyn and Cersei being wed, before Tywin had decided that it was an immortal offense, for Elia to steal Cersei’s rightful place at Rhaegar’s side.

And that had been the last time that anyone had spoken of the Tyrells and the Lannisters visiting one another, especially after…everything that had come after that.

But Tyrion had read much about Dorne, as a child, had thought that it sounded wonderful, and had thought even more as he grew older and learned of their free women and good wine.

Now, as he stepped off the ship they had taken from Essos to Sunspear and stretched his aching muscles, Tyrion thought that the only thing notable about Dorne, from any other city of the many
that he had looked at recently, was that it was too damn hot.

“Fucking hells,” Bronn muttered beside him as they stepped off the docks of the harbor, and a dozen merchants accosted them, trying to sell their wares. Tyrion waved them all away in annoyance, reflecting that perhaps they should have found a less notable way of entering the city; after all, he was rather distinguished a character.

He had a horrible feeling that they had already been recognized, as they walked though the harbor.

But that hardly mattered; he had given no thought to disguising himself, once he finally got here. The Martells hated the Lannisters enough to at least hear him out, after what he was accused of doing.

Or at least, he hoped so.

Beside him, Bronn swore again and reached up to mop at his forehead. “I thought your brother would be the last person to drag me to this godsforsaken place.”

Tyrion eyed him in some amusement, waving away yet another merchant.

“How many people have dragged you to Dorne before this?” He asked, out of a sense of idle curiosity, and to distract himself from the worry fo what he would need to do if the Martells decided that it was just the same to them if their guards ran him through.

He supposed it wouldn’t matter, then, if they did. Sansa and Cersei had already stolen from him what semblance of a life he’d had left; what he’d had in Lys, and in Braavos, before that, could not strictly be called living, after all.

Bronn had said it himself when he’d found him; he had been drinking himself to death, for all that he had been too drunk, in the moment, to admit it.

Even later, after he’d sobered up and agreed, for some insane reason, to go to Dorne, he hadn’t wanted to admit it, though Bronn had seen through the facade that he had put up clearly enough.

But it had not been easy, sobering up this time. Not like all of the times in the past; this time, it had taken days to stop the tremors in his hands, to stop thinking about the need for a stiff drink, every time something did not entirely go his way.

If the Martells wanted to kill him, he could not even blame them, he knew. He was walking right into their hands, after all.

Myrcella, he reminded himself. He had come here for Myrcella, whom he had sent here in the first place, and the Martells clearly had some use for her, as well.

It had been his fault, he knew that, the one thing that he had done that Cersei could truly blame him for, he supposed.

And if she was going to blame him for Joffrey’s death, then he might as well make up for it by making sure that her other children survived.

Even if it wasn’t his fault that Joffrey was dead, and he didn’t feel particularly bad about it, only that Jaime and Cersei had lost a son.

But he was tired of drinking himself to death in Lys, that was for damn sure, and if this meant that his sister wouldn’t have a death wish out for him, perhaps more than just one good could come of making sure that she didn’t lose her other children, as well.
Bronn shifted, looking the closet to uncomfortable that Tyrion had ever seen him, a stark reminder of the last time that they parted ways. “I dunno,” he said. “It’s a hot country, full of beautiful women.”

Tyrion rolled his eyes, taking that to mean that he wasn’t going to explain more than that. “And I don’t suppose that you and Jaime managed to find a way into the castle, the last time you were here.”

Bronn grinned at him. “Oh, didn’t we ever,” he said.

Tyrion raised an eyebrow. “Well?”

Bronn grimaced. “I think I liked you better when you were drinking yourself to death in Lys,” he muttered.

Tyrion rolled his eyes. “You didn’t speak to me the entire time that we were in Lys,” he muttered.

Bronn eyed him. “Exactly,” he said. “Nobody was trying to kill me then, though.”

Tyrion’s lips twitched. “You were still a sellsword, over there. And well paid, at that.”

Bronn shrugged. “Sellswords don’t do shit, over there,” he said. “Just get fat and make money.”

“Well, if you hadn’t made money, we never would have been able to afford the trip here,” Tyrion pointed out, as he pressed a hand to his lips.

Bronn looked less than impressed. “Yes, whoever said Lannisters shit gold was an idiot,” he muttered. “You could have spent less of what you had, while we were in Lys.”

Tyrion neglected to point out that he’d only had what was on him at the time he’d left King’s Landing, which had not been much, thanks to his wife’s little deception.

“To the palace, my lord?” Bronn asked him, and Tyrion bit back a sigh.

He supposed it would be better to get this first meeting over with now, than later.

He noticed the guards then, at the

“Are you sure this is a good idea, my lord?” Bronn asked, and Tyrion rolled his eyes.

“It’s a bit too late for that now, don’t you think?” He asked, and Bronn looked annoyed, but it passed quickly. “Besides, this was your idea.”

Bronn shrugged. “Yes,” he said, staring up at the palace of Sunspear. “But my idea was to do something, not quite…this.”

Tyrion rolled his eyes, taking a step forward. “Well then,” he muttered, as the guards finally laid eyes on them. “You should have been more specific.”

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think in the comments!
Brienne of Tarth did not understand her lady’s fascination with Margaery Tyrell.

She hadn’t spent much time with Margaery, in the time she had been in King’s Landing. In truth, the words that Margaery had spoken to her in the days before her wedding to Joffrey Baratheon had so startled Brienne that she thought perhaps she would not like the woman if she knew her better.

After all, Margaery had all but told her to forget about Renly, a man Brienne had thought worthy of being a true king, and whom Margaery herself had been married to, and smiled so prettily at her new husband as if Renly had never existed at all.

Her grandmother was an intimidating woman, and for all that she seemed to not judge Brienne on her face and the armor she wore rather than the gowns, seemed actually to be mildly interested in her, Brienne could see that she was a plotter. That she got what she wanted by getting her hands as dirty as she needed to. Could see it in her eyes, the same eyes she saw reflected in the granddaughter’s.

And then, after the wedding, Margaery had seemed, at best, mildly tolerant of her husband’s worst behaviors, and at worst, to enjoy them herself.

And Brienne would be the first to admit that she had not done all that she could to protect Sansa, in those early days. That she could have been there for her far more, that she should have been. Perhaps if she had done what she had promised to Lady Catelyn from the beginning, had been there for Sansa when she thought at first it might do the girl more harm to pay attention to her, considering the King’s own interest in her, she would have understood this fascination better.

She knew that her lady and Margaery Tyrell had been close, even then, though the girls had tried to hide it rather valiantly. It was perhaps only because Brienne was watching Sansa so closely, from afar, that she had seen it at all, this thing that the two girls shared which they tried to hide.

A fascination bordering on obsession.

For that was perhaps the only word that Brienne felt comfortable ascribing to Sansa’s interest in Margaery Tyrell.

She had seen her at her lowest, after the world thought that Margaery was dead, when Sansa had gone to Highgarden and been left behind by her husband, and she thought she understood only then what Sansa had felt for the Regent.

Had seen her grief, and thought she understood a little of it from how she had felt when Renly had died, and the world blamed her for that death rather than the shadow demon who had stolen him from it. Had seen the way she reacted when Margaery Tyrell returned to life, as Renly had not, how quickly she had agreed to go back to the place that had only ever brought her pain and harm, and Brienne thought she knew what it was that lay between them, then.

But then the King had died, and Brienne felt no grief at the boy’s death, only grief, if that was the right word, for Sansa’s involvement for it, a grief that felt like Lady Catelyn’s hand squeezing around her heart, crying out for what had become of the daughter she had lost.
And she had seen a darkness in Sansa’s eyes, a darkness that had startled even Brienne, who had seen a demon kill Renly Baratheon, because it was nothing like the girl she had thought Sansa was, nothing like the woman Catelyn had been, save for the day when she had asked Brienne to take the Kingslayer back to King’s Landing to save her only daughters, and damn the consequences if her son found out about it.

Seeing that darkness in Sansa’s eyes, as she spoke of premeditated murder in the same way her mother had spoken of defying her son, had been terrifying. Brienne had wondered if she had already failed to protect the girl she had promised her lady she would save.

It had been her feelings for Margaery, oddly enough, which had Brienne convinced that Sansa was still savable. That she was still Catelyn Stark’s daughter, even if she was beginning to wonder if Sansa herself even believed that.

Margaery Tyrell, who had started to truly suffer under her husband’s reign as they came closer to his death, who had nearly lost a child, but it had been Sansa, sobbing in her chambers when she thought Brienne couldn’t hear her, who had mourned for it, as she had after Margaery’s death.

It had been Sansa who had decided to do whatever it took, to kill Joffrey if she had to, just because her lady was in pain, where she had endured so many years of Joffrey’s torments herself in silence.

And it was Sansa, now, caring for Margaery in any way she could after the boy’s death, for all that Brienne didn’t understand why Margaery should feel traumatized by the death of a man she had clearly loathed, all but wrapping Margaery in blankets and taking on her responsibilities for herself, responsibilities that she had no need to take on, that had Brienne convinced that girl had always been there, all along, even when Brienne hadn’t seen it.

But Margaery…

For all that Brienne had worried at first that Sansa was not the girl her mother thought she was, the Regent hardly seemed pleased by the attention that Sansa was pouring over her, seemed more bothered, every time that Sansa tried to do something for her, and given the way she had latched onto her husband, becoming a very different woman than she had been when she was married to Renly, Brienne had to wonder if her feelings for Sansa were as genuine as the ones Sansa clearly had for her.

The thought that Sansa was sacrificing so much of herself for a woman who clearly didn’t have the same feelings for her made Brienne feel sick, every time she saw them together.

Brienne sighed, walking along in silence behind the younger woman as Sansa all but marched to the Regent’s chambers, the ones that had once belonged to Cersei Lannister.

The Regent had sent a summons for Sansa, an official one through one of her scheming ladies, though the girls’ schemes did not actually seem that evil, for the most part, and Sansa had come running the moment she received it.

Brienne had insisted on going with her, even if Sansa had seemed a little annoyed at the presumption. Brienne didn’t care; Sansa did not allow her to sit in on those private meetings that she had with that snake, Baelish, for all that Brienne practically begged her to, and she didn’t know if it was because Sansa didn’t trust Brienne, or thought that Baelish wouldn’t, but she wasn’t about to let Sansa out of her sight if she could help it.

Sansa paused outside the Regent’s door, nodding to the grim faced guards standing outside the door. “The Regent summoned me,” she said, but the guards were already moving aside for her.
Brienne didn’t know exactly what Baelish had done, to convince the newest members of the
Kingsguard, installed by Garlan Tyrell rather quickly and haphazardly after the King’s death, to
convince them to take Sansa so seriously, but the guards hardly seemed surprised by her presence,
nor like they were going to stop her.

“Brienne,” Sansa said, turning to face her, then, “You may wait out here.”

Brienne lifted her chin. She’d spent far too long standing just outside of Sansa’s life, looking in.
Joffrey was dead, but there were plenty enough attention that Sansa could find here which Brienne
thought wouldn’t be good for her.

“I will come with you, my lady,” she said, and Sansa looked annoyed for the briefest of moments,
before she shrugged and stepped through the doors, the guards not hesitating to let Brienne through,
as well.

A Regent was usually surrounded by their subordinates, Brienne had found. Renly certainly was;
she didn’t think she could ever think of a moment when he was alone, the whole time that she had
served him, even if that had not been very long at all.

It was the same with Margaery, once she had married Joffrey, and even before that. She was always
surrounded by her ladies, never alone, though Brienne had very much gotten the idea that she
wished she was, or that, at the very least, Sansa wished she was.

Now, though, she was sitting on the sofa in the outer parlor of what had once been Cersei’s
chambers, chambers that Brienne had done her best to avoid since coming to King’s Landing, not
surrounded by servants or ladies, but utterly alone.

Her complexion was dark, as she looked up at Sansa with hooded eyes, and Brienne suddenly found
herself wondering if it had been a mistake, to come in here with Sansa.

“Your Grace,” Sansa said, as if the three of them didn’t know she’d rather call the lady something
else, and Margaery dipped her head, and then gestured for Sansa to take a seat. She moved as if to
do the same with Brienne, but Brienne was already moving to the far wall and leaning against it.

Sansa swallowed hard, looking pained by even that small amount of distance between the two of
them. Privately, Brienne thought it was something of a miracle that the two of them had not been
found out ages ago, but then, she supposed, she knew Sansa rather better than most did, these days.

Brienne glanced away from the naked longing in Sansa’s eyes then, finding something in that as
both distinctly familiar and very painful, and instead found herself staring at a section of the wall on
which resided a mutilated stag, blood pouring from its body and out into a forest.

Brienne wondered if Cersei had been the one to commission the painting, or if Margaery had, for it
seemed a little too on the nose.

“Sansa,” Margaery said, and there was something very tired in the other woman’s voice. Brienne
found herself glancing back at the other woman despite herself.

It was not that she disliked Margaery; Brienne simple recognized that they resided in entirely
different worlds. It was the same thing that she had realized during her first conversation with Cersei
Lannister; she had very much known that the other woman was sizing her up, was trying to decide if
she found her to be a threat, during that first conversation they’d had at the wedding. She was not a
fool; she knew the rumors about the Queen and her brother, after all.

And Brienne had recognized then and there that if Cersei Lannister wanted to wage a war on her
that had nothing to do with swords, there was no chance of Brienne winning.

It was the same, with Margaery.

But there was no denying that since her husband’s death, Margaery Tyrell had changed. She seemed a shell of her former self at the best of times, but there was something about her that, while Brienne disliked her dismissive treatment of Sansa at times, seemed more sincere. Seemed more like someone that Brienne could trust to speak her mind, rather than to play games.

Just now, Margaery looked pained at the look on Sansa’s face, but it vanished quickly enough. She reached down, folding her hands together carefully in her lap, staring at the table that separated the two girls. She let out a soft sigh.

Brienne wondered if perhaps she simply didn’t know how to show her feelings for Sansa, though she’d certainly not had a problem with doing it before. If, somehow, she truly had cared for her little beast of a husband, and felt guilty for the way she felt about Sansa, now.

If that was the case, Brienne thought she might be able to understand the woman a little better, even if it was a disturbing thought.

Brienne closed her eyes, and thought of Jaime Lannister, of his green eyes and sincere expression when he told her how the Mad King had really died, and wondered if it was a little like that.

If there was something to Margaery Tyrell that she simply couldn’t see, because she wasn’t Sansa Stark. Because she didn’t know the woman as intimately as she now knew the man they called the Kingslayer.

“My father told me that he came to see me yesterday, and the guards wouldn’t even let him in,” Margaery said coldly, and Brienne grimaced at the way that Sansa flinched at them, at how much of an accusation they sounded like.

Sansa licked her lips. “Margaery…”

“Did you tell the guards not to admit my own father to see me?” Margaery demanded, and her voice was hardening a little, as she said it. “Why...would you do that? I don’t understand that.”

Sansa reached out as if to take Margaery’s hand, and then hesitated, pulling back from her. Brienne had noticed that, for all the two of them certainly seemed affectionate before the King’s death, risking perhaps even being caught when they were first reunited, they didn’t touch, now, ever.

“Yes,” Sansa said, stiffly, now. “I told the guards not to let anyone in to see you. I thought…”

“On whose orders?” Margaery demanded. “Those men are all members of the Kingsguard, but they were loyal to House Tyrell, first. They have no right to tell my father not to see me.”

Sansa grimaced. “On yours,” she said, and Margaery stared at her, wide eyed, for several moments. “Margaery…”
She reached out again. This time, Margaery flinched back from her, and Brienne saw the flash of hurt on Sansa’s features while Margaery did not.

She bit back another sigh, leaning back hard against the wall she stood against.

“He’s my father,” Margaery bit out then, sounding furious for all that her facial expression hadn’t changed a whit. “And he may be...He may...” She shook her head. “But you don’t have the right to tell him whether he can or cannot see me, Sansa. You...Why would you do that?”

Sansa swallowed hard. “Margaery, I don’t know if you just don’t see it because of what you’ve been through or...Or what, but I worry that the more people who will see you, the more will realize that something is going on.”

“Don’t tell me what I’ve been through,” Margaery whispered, and her voice sounded all the harsher for it, as her eyes flitted over to Brienne.

Sansa winced. “I just meant...I’m trying to protect you.”

“From my father?” Margaery echoed incredulously, and even Brienne had thought the excuse sounded a little weak. She knew little about Mace Tyrell, but he seemed to have a genuine affection for his daughter. His eyes lit up every time she walked into the throne room and sat herself down on the Iron Throne. “Do you honestly think my father would use that against me?”

Brienne’s eyes narrowed, and she had a feeling she was missing a rather important piece of the story, here.

Sansa let out a sigh. “You’re not yourself, lately,” she said. “I thought that the less people who know that, the better. Including your father, yes.”

Margaery licked her lips. “You had no right to do that without consulting me,” she whispered, but she didn’t sound angry simply...hurt, as if she couldn’t quite believe that Sansa had done it.

For a moment, Brienne thought she might be close to understanding the other girl. And then the moment was lost.

Sansa lifted her chin. “I won’t do it again, if that’s what you want,” she whispered.

Margaery stared at her. “I want my guards to listen to their Regent over you, if I give them an order,” she said. “Or, at the very least, to consult me before doing as you want and not as I do.”

Sansa looked pained, again. She fist her hands in the fabric of her gown at her waist. Brienne found herself tracking the movement.

“Margaery...The Court has not seen you in almost a week, since you gave the order for your husband’s killers to be brought to justice and declared yourself Regent,” Sansa said the words slowly, as if she were talking to a young child. “They need to see you, or they’re going to lose confidence in you, and there will be nothing I can do to stop that.”

“You just said that they weren’t allowed to see me,” Margaery gritted out, sitting back on the sofa and crossing her arms, looking rather petulant, Brienne thought.

Sansa sniffed. “Because I can’t...be certain, anymore, what they’re going to see, accidentally,” she whispered, not meeting Margaery’s eyes.

Margaery scoffed. “Oh, what?” she demanded, rising to her feet, then. “Do you think I’ll show
them the marks he left on me, tear off my gown and ask if it seems believable that someone else attacked me so intimately?” Her eyes were fierce, flinty. “Do you think I’ll just happen to blurt out what really happened, that night?”

Brienne’s eyes widened.

Sansa glanced over at her then, flinching, her eyes pleading.

Margaery realized what she had done a second later, lifting a hand to her mouth and covering it, half turning away from the both of them as she took one careful breath, and then another.

“Brienne won’t tell a soul,” Sansa said, into the silence, as realization swept over Brienne.

Margaery scoffed. “You’re right,” she said, turning back around. “I’m...Sansa, what’s wrong with me?”

Brienne sucked in a breath through her teeth.

Sansa leapt to her feet at once, walking around the table to reach out and touch Margaery’s hands, gently. Margaery flinched away, at first, and then reached out and latched her fingers onto Sansa’s.

“You just need some time,” Sansa promised her, slowly. “And I’m going to take care of things until you’re...feeling more yourself again, all right? But I need you to trust me.”

Margaery’s eyes were wide as they met Sansa’s, as, slowly, she nodded.

Brienne had the feeling that both of them had forgotten she was there, in that moment, or rather, that they wished she was not. She found herself staring at the wall again, as Sansa whispered sweet nothings to the woman Brienne was steadily watching her kill herself over, and thought she finally understood.

Jaime had said goodbye to her, before he had taken Tommen and Myrcella with him to the Rock. He’d said it like he knew he wasn’t coming back, and it had been the most gentle she had ever seen him, even after the first time they’d kissed.

It was how Sansa sounded, now, and it sent worry down Brienne’s spine, as it had when Jaime had sounded like that, rather than the reassurance she hoped Margaery felt.

And then, just like that, they were leaving again, though Margaery seemed alternately to want to beg them to stay and to want them to leave.

They passed by the guards, and Sansa leaned close enough to whisper, “The Regent has changed her mind. Her father, Garlan Tyrell, the servants, and no one else save myself. Do you understand?”

They nodded, silent as the grave.

Brienne watched and found herself wondering what sort of woman Sansa might have been, had she become Joffrey’s Queen as Brienne knew was originally intended for the girl. Wondered if she ever would have found someone to cling to as desperately as Margaery did now to her.

“They ordered them to keep her father out?” Brienne asked, out of curiosity, as they made their way down the hall. She knew that it was none of her business, if Sansa did not want to tell her, but Lady Catelyn had confided some things in her, and she thought the lady had felt better for it.
And besides that, there was something disturbing about all of this. About the fact that Sansa had been able to keep the Regent’s father from visiting his own daughter on her orders, rather than Margaery’s, and that Petyr Baelish was spending so much time alone with the girl, and that Margaery Tyrell, for all her plotting before, seemed to hold little interest at all in the Iron Throne, these days.

Sansa sighed. “It gave me no pleasure, I assure you,” she said, softly. “Pet...Baelish informed me that just the other day, Olenna let Gendry Waters out of her dungeons and is dressing him up in finery,” she said.

Brienne’s brows furrowed. She knew that something had gone wrong, in their plan to murder Joffrey, which she had asked not to be a part of beyond what she had done to get Tyrion Lannister out of the city for his brother, who would never have forgiven her, she was certain, if she had allowed him to take the fall for it. She knew that even before that, Margaery had sent her own grandmother, whom she had once been inseparable with, out of the city. That Olenna had done something Margaery had found reprehensible, from the ay Sansa skirted around the issue.

But she knew that, despite that exile, Olenna was still a great source of power for House Tyrell, and in the Reach.

And she remembered the boy whom Olenna had been keeping in her dungeons, a boy who had claimed he knew that Margaery was alive long before the rest of King’s Landing had. Who had known about it while Sansa had been mourning the other girl.

She knew that he had been Margaery’s messenger to the Tyrells that she still lived, though they hadn’t heeded the message, but she knew little else about him, except, apparently, that he was a bastard of King’s Landing. She didn’t know why Olenna’s letting him out of the dungeons was significant.

Sansa let out a little sigh, not as if she were annoyed with Brienne, but rather with having to speak about the situation at all. “Gendry is Robert Baratheon’s trueborn son,” she said. “If Olenna is giving him attention instead of seeing him dead in a ditch somewhere, much as it pains me to think of that, while her granddaughter reigns for Robert Baratheon’s grandson, it’s significant. And Mace Tyrell has never done anything without his mother’s permission.” Her eyes darkened. “I’m surprised Margaery allowed him to remain after she set her grandmother away, but I suppose she thought that would look weak…”

She trailed off then, seemingly lost in thought.

Brienne took a careful breath.

Robert Baratheon’s trueborn son.

Jaime’s children…

She glanced sideways at Sansa. “You think that she’s...lost confidence in her granddaughter?” she asked, and the question was almost too surprising.

They were winning, after all. Margaery sat on the Iron Throne even when she was not supposed to, her child about ready to come out into the world as its new King, if it was a boy.

If it was a boy…

And if it wasn’t, Lady Olenna had a perfect spare, apparently, in the bastard son of Robert Baratheon, after her family had already gone as far as to accuse the Lannisters of incest once
before.

“I don’t know,” Sansa whispered, sounding terribly lost, then. Brienne felt a stab of pity for her; after all, she had not been doing this for much longer than Brienne had, playing this horrible game.

Brienne took a deep breath, turning away from the younger woman as they neared her chambers again just in time to see Petyr Baelish, standing down the hall, staring at her. And there was something about him, just now, looking at her like that when he thought that she wouldn’t see him, that made Brienne shiver.

She very much didn’t like the attention that he was giving Sansa, these days, all the more for the fact that Margaery Tyrell was not giving her any.

Brienne was watching her.

She had been doing that more and more, lately, and Sansa knew it was because the other woman was worried about her, but Sansa still found it unnerving.

She felt, absurdly, for Brienne had only once questioned her actions since coming to protect her, that Brienne was judging her with those looks. And perhaps she was but merely keeping it to herself.

Still, Sansa was exhausted from spending half of the night up with Garlan, to the point where she was rather worried that one of the servants would catch them together and assume the worst, trying to figure out how they were going to deal with the Boltons, now that they seemed willing to ally with the Crown.

Sansa was adamant that they would not remain allies for long, but Garlan, like Baelish, seemed to see the sense in keeping them around, much to her annoyance.

“What is it?” Sansa finally asked, turning to the other woman, where she stood in the corner of Sansa’s chambers.

Sansa had told her, more than once, that she was welcome to sit down if she liked, when she was standing guard over Sansa in private, but the other woman seemed determined to do the done thing, in guarding her.

Sansa didn’t know if that was because she took her duties as a knight so seriously, or because Sansa was Catelyn Stark’s daughter.

A part of her didn’t want to know the answer.

She was waiting for Rosamund to report to her, about what she had found during her time at Baelish’s brothel, and was getting more and more annoyed that the girl had yet to show her face.

After all, Brienne had reported that Rosamund had found her way back to Sansa’s chambers, so clearly, she had not been caught.

But she wasn’t there now.

“Nothing, my lady,” Brienne said, but Sansa thought she knew the other woman too well for that, these days.

She raised an eyebrow, waiting.

Brienne let out a sigh. “I’m just…worried about you, my lady,” she said, and no matter how many
times Sansa told her that she didn’t need to call her that, Brienne continued.

Sansa bit back a sigh. “I…”

“You are surrounded by enemies, now more than ever, it feels like,” Brienne pointed out, and Sansa flinched.

She wanted to tell Brienne that, for all the flailing she had done of late, all of the mistakes she was making, all of the late night migraines that kept her up far too long into the night, migraines that Brienne knew about because, unlike Rosamund, she was always there to offer comfort, even if Sansa refused it, she didn’t feel like she was surrounded by more enemies than ever before.

For the first time in a long time, despite Margaery’s antics, Sansa finally felt like she was getting somewhere. Like she was in control of some aspects of her life, and she could reach out and take control of more, if she had to.

And it felt…nice, in a way that Sansa had not felt in a long time, not to feel so powerless.

Yes, she was surrounded by enemies, but she knew what they wanted, for the most part, was even learning damn well how to control Baelish, as well.

“I’m not sure who I should be protecting you from, some days,” Brienne continued, and Sansa sighed, because she knew exactly who Brienne was referring to, with those words.

“He’s not a threat, Brienne, I promise,” she said, lifting her chin, daring the other woman to challenge her, which of course, she did.

“That man is a snake, you must realize that,” she said. “He…he was the one who returned only some of your father’s bones to your mother, when she came to see Renly. He was there, to make sure he got what he wanted out of things, too.”

Sansa licked her lips, because she hadn’t meant to sound dismissive of Brienne’s concerns.

She shared them; she didn’t know how she was going to be rid of Baelish, in the end, but for now, she still needed him, and she worried that he knew that well enough to make sure that when the time came, she wouldn’t be able to be rid of him.

“I don’t trust him, if that’s what you’re worried about,” she promised Brienne. “But…He has his uses.”

“Your mother trusted him,” Brienne whispered, softly. “I believe. That did not go well for her. I would not see you suffer the same fate.”

Sansa flinched. “Brienne…”

“My lady,” Brienne held up a hand. “I don’t say that to hurt you. But…you have to be more careful. I know you are being careful, I know it, but…” she licked her lips. “I worry. There seem precious few left in King’s Landing who worry about you, as well.”

Sansa flinched again, opened her mouth to respond, though she had no idea how she was supposed to respond to that, when the door opened, and Megga stepped inside, not bothering to knock.

Sansa rolled her eyes, turning to face the other girl. “You know, if you just invite yourself in like that all of the time, people might start to suspect.”
Megga shrugged. “Margaery already knows that I’m spying for you, I think,” she admitted, and Sansa blinked at her in shock.

“Then why hasn’t she said anything?” She demanded, because that didn’t sound like the Margaery she knew of late. Margaery had made it rather clear what she thought of any attempts to manipulate her, after all, once she found out about them.

Sansa grimaced, remembering their last confrontation over that.

“I’ve been looking for you,” Megga said, and sounded a little shaken. Sansa wondered if it was because Lady Nym was gone, or if it was something else.

She seemed oddly attached to the other woman, now, in a way that she hadn’t seen Megga be attached to anyone, Before. And a part of Sansa wanted to be happy for her, she couldn’t help but wonder about that.

Perhaps, perhaps Lady Nym was…truly helping Megga, work through the things that had happened to her, down in the Black Cells.

Sansa grimaced; much as she disliked the other girl, she found herself wishing that there was someone in Rosamund’s life who could do the same for her, so she didn’t have to spend half of her time wondering if Rosamund’s mind would finally be lost to madness.

“Yes?”

“Margaery just did something incredibly stupid, speaking of her not liking to be spied on,” Megga snapped, and she sounded strangely angry with Sansa, though Sansa, for once, had no idea what she was talking about.

“What?” Sansa asked, struggling hard not to add a quiet, “now,” onto the end of that.

Brienne crossed her arms over her chest, where she stood in the corner of the room, looking uncomfortable.

She had made it no secret, in recent months, that she didn’t trust Margaery, and Sansa supposed she understood the other woman’s reasons. She hadn’t exactly been close with Sansa for very long, even now wasn’t close with her like Shae had been, so she didn’t know.

Didn’t know what Margaery meant to her, and instead all she seemed to see of their relationship was Sansa cleaning up Margaery’s messes, as Margaery slowly descended into more chaotic decisions, rather than getting better as Sansa had hoped that she would.

If she had seen them, before, had known Sansa as well back then, then perhaps, she would understand now, Sansa told herself. She wouldn’t question so many of Sansa’s decisions, either.

But Brienne didn’t outright question Sansa’s reasons for helping the other woman, either. Sansa had a feeling the other woman knew something of how she felt for Margaery, even if she perhaps didn’t think that Margaery returned those feelings.

She just…hadn’t seen them before all of this, Sansa reminded herself. If she had…

Sansa bit back a sigh. “What is it?” She asked, when Megga didn’t respond immediately.

“The Regent,” Megga bit out, as if she didn’t know full well Margaery’s name, looking furious for the first time in a while, “just outlawed executions.”
Sansa blinked at her. “Come again?” She asked, her jaw falling open, as she turned around in her chair to face Megga fully.

She had seen the look in Margaery’s eyes of course, at that Small Council meeting. Had known that Margaery wanted badly to suggest that very thing, even though she had somehow managed to restrain herself. Had seen how guilty she obviously felt because of what she blamed herself for, even if no one else did.

But she hadn’t thought that Margaery would actually do it.

“Well, as near as she can, announcing it to the people,” Megga said, shakily, as she took a seat on the divan in Sansa’s chambers without being invited, letting out a long sigh. “There were at least a hundred people there. There’s no way half of King’s Landing doesn’t know by now. They’re calling her Good Queen Marg again. Well, some of them.”

Sansa sighed. “And, I imagine, the Small Council will be the last to know about this,” she said, gritting her teeth.

It made a certain sort of sense. The Small Council had not reacted favorably to her suggestion, and so Margaery, fully leaning into her position as the Regent, had gone around them, to the people, so that if the Small Council tried to stop her now, they would look like they were undermining their Regent.

Sansa sighed; it was the sort of thing the old Margaery might have convinced Joffrey to do, and thus, she knew, it had to have been Margaery’s plan from the start, which was…unsettling, in a way, because she hadn’t thought Margaery capable of such deceit, at the moment.

Gods, she could hardly pretend to look interested in most Small Council meetings, these days.

Perhaps she was wrong about Margaery, these past few weeks. She had labored under the belief that Margaery wasn’t capable of her old plots and plans, that she couldn’t handle them, and now, here she was, running circles around the Small Council just for…incredibly stupid reasons.

It wasn’t as if the Crown could actually keep such a promise, noble though it was.

“Fuck,” Sansa breathed, and Brienne looked a little startled, at her cursing, but Sansa couldn’t even bring herself to be amused, by the look on the other woman’s face.

Sansa got to her feet, reaching for her shawl.

She didn’t know how she was going to fix this, just now, only knew that she had to do something, before Margaery did another foolish thing that got them all killed, liking promising to lay down the gates for Cersei Lannister, next, out of some misplaced guilt for what had happened to Joffrey.

She thought that if she could just get Margaery alone for a few minutes, could just shake some sense into her…

“Sansa, that’s not all,” Megga said, at her back now, and Sansa stifled a sigh.

“What now?” She demanded, annoyance filling her as she turned around to face Megga, again.

Megga looked a little…concerned, about the next thing she was about to say in front of Brienne, but Sansa waved an impatient hand.

She didn’t have time for that, after all. Not now. Not with Margaery determined to tear down this throne she’d spent so long working towards, once.
“Septa Unella,” Megga said slowly, and she said her next words very carefully, as if she was almost…terrified of whatever reaction that Sansa might have to her words.

And somehow, before she even knew what Megga was going to say, she knew exactly what the other girl was going to say.

Sansa closed her eyes.

“She knows.”

Sansa slammed her hand against the doorframe. Megga jumped, and Sansa only felt moderately guilty as she opened her eyes again, rounding on Megga, and she tried not to notice the way that Megga flinched back from her.

“You’re certain?”

Beside her, Brienne went suddenly very still.

“I…overheard them,” Megga said, quietly. “Sansa…Margaery…” she sighed, looking torn, and Sansa waited. “The septa has some sort of hold over her. I fear…I fear that she feels such guilt, over Joffrey’s actions at the Sept, that the septa could convince her to do anything, just invoking that time.”

Sansa swallowed hard.

So much for Sansa thinking that perhaps Margaery was coming back to herself.

Sansa reached up, running a hand through her loose hair.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

This was just what she needed, just what she had been fearing would happen from the very moment that witch had insinuated herself back into Margaery’s life. She had known something like this would happen, and that was why she had loathed the thought of Margaery spending so much time around her of late, when she was already so vulnerable…

And of course the bitch was already using it to manipulate her.

“I’m going to kill her,” Sansa whispered, as Megga grimaced, and Sansa genuinely didn’t know if she was talking about Margaery, or the septa, with those words.

Because godsdamnit, how could Margaery be so stupid as to tell her something like that? As to tell her the one thing that could get all of them killed? How could she have thought for a single moment that appeasing her own guilt was more important than their very lives?

Because this would get out, Sansa knew. The septa would not have gone to all of that trouble just to keep such a secret to herself, no matter what the Seven Pointed Star said about confession. She would see to it that it got out, and the moment anyone heard a whisper of it, Cersei would.

Cersei would turn her armies on King’s Landing and slaughter them both, for her son’s revenge.

Sansa shuddered.

“Sansa…” Megga grimaced. “Margaery all but threatened me with exile back to Highgarden, if I questioned her about the septa again,” she said, and Brienne looked more than a little concerned, now. “I don’t think she’ll…react favorably, if something were to happen to the septa.”
Sansa shook her head, pulling her shawl a little more tightly around her shoulders. “I don’t care,” she said, voice cold, and was almost as startled as Megga to realize how much she meant those words.

Because godsdamnit, she loved Margaery, she did, but she had been running around putting out every single fire that Margaery had initiated since the night Margaery had killed her husband, the king, and she was tired of being three steps behind a girl who wasn’t thinking about a damn thing that she was doing.

She was fucking tired of losing the game, of clawing her way to the top only to be pushed back down again by someone who she…

She licked her lips. “The septa has been with her for barely two weeks, and already she’s convinced Margaery to abolish the death penalty and to tell her…to tell her something that Margaery, in her right mind, would never tell a damn soul. She’s a threat.”

And Sansa believed that.

It had nothing, she told herself, to do with the fact that Margaery had welcomed the septa back into her life with open arms after so firmly rejecting Sansa, these past few months. Nothing to do with the fact that Margaery had turned her away but was listening to a woman like the septa, was confiding in her.

She swallowed hard. “Are you going to help me, or not?”

Megga grimaced. “That depends on what you’re talking about, exactly,” she said, softly. “I agree that she’s a terrible influence over Margaery, but if you’re talking about…” she swallowed. “Sansa…”

“You didn’t seem to have a problem with it when it was Joffrey,” Sansa spat out, and Brienne looked…horrified, as if she no longer recognized the young woman that she was looking at as her mother’s daughter.

And perhaps this angry thing that was welling up inside of Sansa’s chest wasn’t Catelyn Stark’s daughter. Perhaps that girl had died some time ago.

When she had twisted the knife in Ser Meryn’s gut.

But that was fine, she told herself. She didn’t need Megga’s permission, didn’t Brienne’s, for that matter.

She didn’t.

The septa knew the truth about them, and that made her enemy, whether Sansa wanted her death or not.

She swallowed. “Megga, I can’t do this without you. I need-”

The door opened then, Rosamund rushing inside, looking sweaty and wide eyed. “My lady!” She cried, looking surprised to find Sansa here. “I went to the library to look for you, and you weren’t there.”

Sansa raised an eyebrow. “Why would I be in the library?” She asked, softly.

Rosamund shook her head. “You weren’t here, earlier,” she offered, and only then seemed to notice Megga and Brienne. She dipped into a bow. “I have something I have to tell you.”
Sansa lifted a hand, already walking past her towards the door.

“I don’t have time to talk right now, Rosamund,” Sansa said, “about whatever it was you found out in the brothel. We’ll talk about it later. I’m busy.”

Trying to make sure that Margaery didn’t get them all killed, which was becoming something of a full time job, these days.

Rosamund crossed her arms over her chest. “You’ll have time for this, my lady,” she said, and Sansa’s head jerked up at her words, because rarely was Rosamund ever so forceful.

Megga looked suddenly very tired.

“Time for what?” She asked, not sure that she was ready for anymore surprises to be thrown into her life, these days.

“Septa Unella,” Sansa said, eyeing the other woman with trepidation.

She didn’t like her here, in the chambers that Margaery now claimed as her own. She didn’t like that she was here, in the Keep, nor that Margaery seemed so taken with her, after she had been such a devout follower of the Sparrows, according to Megga.

But if she was going to be rid of the woman, the way that Kevan wanted and the way that Sansa knew needed to be done, if they were going to pull Margaery back into this game, then she needed to do it right.

She had found her, slinking around Margaery’s empty chambers, the ones that used to belong to Joffrey, and already, Sansa felt irritation with the other woman growing, didn’t like that she was here, at all, alone, no less, because neither Margaery nor any of her ladies seemed to be around.

Sansa let herself into the rooms with an odd glance in the direction of the guard standing outside of them, knowing that Margaery would have said Septa Unella could enter, but finding it irritating, all the same, that she was allowed entry without even a second glance, after everything.

Surely, even the guards had more common sense than that.

But apparently no one had common sense, these days, Sansa included. Sansa had decided to partner herself with Baelish, a man whom, historically, no one had gotten the better of since her father had married her mother, and now, she was only digging a hole deeper for herself.

But the septa; the septa was someone she could deal with, surely, to pull herself up from this feeling that she was drowning.

She reached out, shutting the door behind her, leaving the two of them alone, and Septa Unella’s eyes shot up, at the small sound.

“Lady Sansa,” Septa Unella said, and her eyes were glittering, but her face was expressionless. “Can I help you with something?”

Sansa ground her teeth; she had more right to be in these rooms than the septa did, after all.

Gods, she hated these rooms.

Every step she took inside of them reminded her of what had happened that night, of what she had walked in on. Margaery, covered in blood, Joffrey’s body laying across the floor, barely
Ser Meryn Trant, standing over Margaery, sword raised.

Yes, she hated these rooms. She would have been perfectly content if they had burned them, the way that Cersei had done with the Tower of the Hand after Lord Tywin’s death, but instead, Margaery was sleeping in them.

And perhaps that said more about Margaery’s current state than anything else could.

Sansa crossed her arms over her chest. “Yes, actually, you can,” she muttered. “I’m having a bit of confusion about why you’re still here. What it is that you want with Margaery.”

Septa Unella raised a brow. “I have made my intentions towards the Regent very clear, my lady,” she said, as if she thought Sansa quite dumb. “I wish only to help her heal, after all of the pain that she has endured. And I think that is something that can be overcome with the help of the Faith alone.”

Sansa swallowed. She thought of the old gods, of the heart tree in the Kingswood that she sometimes went to for prayer, if she was feeling particularly low.

She hadn’t gone to it, lately.

She hadn’t been so sick that she vomited into her chamber pot lately, either, she thought, the first time she’d had such a thought since the last time she had done so, and she wondered why that was.

Wondered why, even with everything going to shit around her, she wasn’t reacting to things the way she might have done a year ago, less than that.

She looked at Septa Unella, and wondered if this was just the way that the woman wanted Margaery to react, so she could keep her claws in her, so that she could pry a confession out of her and get her revenge on the one who had destroyed her master, that damned fanatic.

She wasn’t about to let this woman get her claws into Margaery. She wasn’t about to let her bring them down, after she had worked so hard to crawl up to the top, to get them here in the first place.

Not Margaery, not her family, not Baelish, her.

Sansa lifted her chin.

Kevan was right. Sansa was right. They had to be rid of this woman.

But…in the moments after her fury had abated towards the septa in her chambers, when Rosamund explained to her that she might, perhaps, be facing an even larger threat in the form of her own advisor, Sansa had decided that she could at least offer this woman a little mercy.

Megga had claimed that she had overheard them, that she thought the septa knew, but Sansa had to be certain of that, for herself. Had to know what sort of woman this septa was, that she truly would do something with that information, sin or not.

Sansa licked her lips, walking forward.

She could, perhaps, not afford to be that magnanimous, but Sansa did not think she had the strength to deal with both Baelish and Septa Unella, at the moment.

“It must be a new experience for you,” Sansa said, cocking her head at the septa, “Living amongst all
of this finery.” She gestured around them, to ornate walls and beautiful carpets. “From what I understood of the High Sparrow’s message, he wouldn’t approve.”

The septa hummed. “The Regent understands my need for simplicity, and not wanting to spend lavishly on things that are of this world,” she told Sansa. “She even approves, in her own way. And she seems to be sincere in her own efforts towards the Faith.”

Sansa cleared her throat. “Oh?” She asked. “How?”

She knew Margaery well, and while she knew that Margaery sympathized with the plight of the smallfolk, she also knew that Margaery enjoyed her finery and her fancy gowns very much.

Sansa had…rather intimate knowledge of those fancy gowns, after all.

Of Myrish silk sheets and golden tapestries.

The septa’s smile was thin. “She recognizes that these are all things that the Crown has managed to get because of the devotion of the smallfolk,” she said. “I understand that you are keeper of her finances, these days.”

That was not something that this septa was supposed to know, as certainly most of King’s Landing did not.

“I hope you’ve noticed that she has not bought a single new gown, nor anything of lavish refinement, since my arrival here.”

Sansa…hadn’t noticed that. She’d been too busy trying to keep the realm together when it was all but falling to pieces, to notice that.

“And she gives back, in her own way.” Her smile turned sharp, then, as she saw the obvious surprise on Sansa’s face. “Oh, you didn’t know? She’s been going out amongst the smallfolk again, giving to them golden coins and food to eat. I understand that she’s even offered to build the orphanage that she patrons a nicer building, away from Flea Bottom, despite the objections of many of the merchants.”

Sansa blinked at her, mouth opening and closing. “I…”

No, she hadn’t known any of that, and it was infuriating.

Dear gods, what did Megga think she was doing, keeping an eye on Margaery for Sansa, and not telling her any of this?

And it was infuriating to learn something like this from Septa Unella.

“The smallfolk are very close to hating her, just now,” Sansa ground out. “Why would you tell her to go out amongst them?”

Unless she wanted Margaery to get herself killed, going out amongst a people who had not forgotten that her husband had slaughtered so many of their number, that she had killed more of them when it had been found out that Sparrows had killed her husband.

Sparrows, who were really just the first dozen able-bodied men that Baelish had been able to round up, in the nights after Joffrey’s death. Who had families who must have known that, who must have loathed Margaery for that.
Dear gods, it was a terrible idea, for her to go out amongst them. She didn’t know if that was the sort of thing that could be forgotten, if Margaery could ever win their love back, much as she might want it.

And this…septa was manipulating her into wanting it enough to get herself killed.

Septa Unella cocked her head, looking at Sansa thoughtfully. “You care a great deal for the Regent,” she commented, and Sansa felt herself going very still. “She cares a great deal for you too, you know.”

Sansa lifted her chin, not liking what she surmised to be a threat, in those words. “She cares more for me than she will for you, septa, so I wouldn’t advise trying to come between us.”

The other woman had hardly been subtle, out in the hallway, with the dagger like glares that she had been sending Sansa’s way, even if Megga hadn’t told her that the septa knew about the two of them.

The septa hummed, and something cruel entered her eyes, something that had Sansa stiffening before the other woman even spoke. “Oh, I learned my lesson about that some time ago,” the septa said, coldly. “During the Slaughter of the Sept. I presume you know why it happened? Why the Regent blames herself so much for it?”

Sansa felt her body growing cold. Dear gods, she wanted to be rid of this woman, right now.

Instead, she swallowed hard and forced herself to say, woodenly, “Margaery is a very empathetic woman, towards the smallfolk, but it was her husband who caused that slaughter, not her.”

The septa shrugged. “She’s a woman who knows how to manipulate her husband, something that the Seven Pointed Star preaches against. A wife ought to be meek and humble, ought to stand by her husband, but remind him of the ways of righteousness when he strays. The Regent reveled in her husband’s cruelty, that day.”

The cold feeling sweeping over Sansa only grew, at those words. “She blames herself for his cruelty that day,” she gritted out, hating that Margaery was taking advice from this woman over her.

No wonder she felt so guilty over something that wasn’t her fault, these days, with this woman preaching in her ear.

The septa eyed her. “Perhaps you don’t know her as well as you thought, my lady,” she said, and Sansa half expected her to wink, then. She didn’t. “The High Sparrow asked the Queen to confess, once more, that day. Asked her to get on her knees, and confess what sort of man she was married to. Asked her to confess that he had…” she pursed her lips, looking Sansa up and down. “Well, I believe you were mentioned more than once. Your…sins, and what ought to be done as penance for them, when you were so…involved, with the Queen and the King.”

Sansa forgot how to breathe, for a moment.

The septa continued, mercilessly, and Sansa wanted to cover her ears like a small child. “Your…being at fault, in many of the same things that the Queen was implicated in. The High Sparrow was very interested in seeing you brought to trial for such…sins, as well. He did not simply wish to see the King and Queen brought to justice, but all of us, after all.”

Sansa’s heart beat faster, in her chest. It was suddenly difficult to breathe. She swallowed hard. “I don’t…I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she whispered, hoarsely.

The septa leaned forward, and her eyes were almost…sad, which struck Sansa as the wrong emotion.
entirely. “I think you do, dear. I think you know that the Queen, the moment she learned that you might be placed in…an even less forgiving position than she had been, before the Faith, would do just about anything, to keep you from that. Even facilitate her husband’s slaughtering of entire sept full of people.”

Sansa went very pale.

No.

No, she was lying. She was lying, because there was no way that they could have known about…

Joffrey had sent his mother away for colluding with the enemy.

Sansa had been so proud to laugh in Cersei’s face while she told her what she and Margaery had been doing, all this time, the words carefully cloaked in a lie that would implicate Joffrey, as well.

Margaery had seen to it that the Sparrows would never be able to bring the most damning of her charges against her, against Sansa as well, by getting her husband angry enough to slaughter every last member of the Sparrows, first.

When she ought to have known that her grandmother, at the very least, would have a plan to get her out of that situation, to get her away from the fanatics, but she had goaded Joffrey into slaughtering that entire room, instead of waiting…

Her heart skipped a beat.

She took an actual step back from the septa, and Septa Unella smiled at her.

“There now,” she said, calmly enough. “You see why I stick by the Regent’s side. Why I am as convinced as she that she needs to find penance, in the eyes of the Faith, for the things that she has done. Why you won’t be able to scare me away from helping one truly who truly seeks the light, after committing so many…atrocities.”

Sansa licked her lips.

It wasn’t the worst thing that Septa Unella could know; she didn’t know that Margaery had killed her own husband, that the child in her womb didn’t belong to that husband, but clearly, she knew something damning enough.

And Sansa didn’t know if Margaery was keeping her around because the septa was holding that over her head, or for some other reason, because she truly felt such guilt for what she had done, a guilt that Sansa had seen often enough in the days after Joffrey’s death to know was real.

She didn’t know which one it was, or whether it was a combination of both, but the septa clearly still knew about the two of them, and that was dangerous enough knowledge, on its own.

For a moment, she let herself imagine getting rid of the woman, here and now, for what she knew.

Let herself imagine pulling out the knife that she had used on Ser Meryn, the moment the two of them walked in on Margaery and Joffrey’s brutalized, dead body, and stabbing it between the woman’s ribs, the way she had with Ser Meryn.

Stabbing it into the woman’s left eye, instead, and watching it go into her brain. Of going to find Baelish, again, and asking the man to help her cover up yet another thing, because if Margaery ever found out…
If Margaery found out, and the septa really was by her side because she was hoping to find some sort of absolution with the other woman, where she should have known that Sansa would gladly listen to anything she needed to say, Sansa knew that Margaery would be furious with her, for it.

Because, for whatever reason, Margaery had chosen to take the septa under her wing, rather than killing her, and Sansa knew she wouldn’t like it if Sansa acted against her, now, even if she was trying to protect her.

She swallowed hard, and wished she had the old Margaery back, the one who wouldn’t blink twice about this sort of thing, even if, back then, Sansa would have.

“Let me make something very clear,” Sansa said, advancing on the other woman, enjoying the small amount of surprise that flashed across her face. “There are quite a few at court who don’t like you.”

The septa raised an eyebrow. “Are you…”

Sansa interrupted her, “They don’t like what you represent anymore than I do, because they all know who you used to serve. They don’t want you in King’s Landing, and they don’t want you near the Queen, vulnerable as she is after the death of her beloved husband. Hells, they wouldn’t even mind if you…fell out a window, during the night. And the Regent might feel bad about it for a time, but I’m sure she’d move on.”

The last words came out close to a growl.

Septa Unella didn’t even flinch. “I am not so sure that she would believe such an act to be an accident, my lady,” she said. “Her heart…it is broken, these days. She would not be able to accept such a thing.”

Damn her, Sansa knew her heart was broken. She didn’t need this woman to tell her that.

And this woman had no right to be manipulating Margaery’s heart, either.

She lifted her chin.

“But Cersei Lannister is coming to King’s Landing, soon. And she will like you even less than all of them,” Sansa continued, coldly. “I don’t care what sort of deal you think you might be able to make with her, but your master was the reason she was ultimately banished from King’s Landing, and that is not something she will forget. The moment she sees you here, one of those damned fanatics, standing next to the Regent, she will start plotting a horrible demise for you. Because she might not give a damn about Margaery, but she will hate the sight of the Sparrows manipulating Joffrey’s wife, winning, after all she went through because of them. After the Sparrows murdered her son.”

A small spike of fear crossed the septa’s features, then, and Sansa’s lips curved up into a smile.

“It might just be the one thing that she and I would agree on,” Sansa continued, mercilessly, because she wanted to see more of that fear, after the septa had just instilled so much of it in her.

The septa lifted her chin, however. “I am a servant of the Faith, Lady Sansa,” she informed her. “I do not fear mortal peril.”

Sansa forced a smile that she didn’t feel at all, at the moment. “Cersei isn’t any mortal,” she said, coldly, because a part of her thought it was true. “She’s a cockroach, something loved by the Stranger himself. Somehow, despite everything that’s ever happened to her, every enemy she’s ever faced, she’s always found a way to crawl out on top again.”
It was the one consistent thing that Sansa knew about the other woman, after all.

“So if I were you, I would fear her. She has a way of getting what she wants, whenever she wants it.”

The septa swallowed. “You seem to have no guilt, for the sins you have committed,” the septa said, finally, clearly trying to find back some of the ground Sansa had stolen from her. “The Regent feels remorse, but you don’t.”

Sansa swallowed hard, biting back a flinch because she didn’t want to give the other woman the satisfaction of seeing her do so.

Oh, she didn’t understand Sansa, at all, Sansa thought, and felt a thrill at the thought.

She may be able to hold something horrible over her, might be able to prey on Margaery’s guilt, but she didn’t understand Sansa at all, and that was good.

Sansa had lived with guilt for half of her life. She had become quite accustomed to simply…hiding it, the way that she hid her emotions in order to survive, with Joffrey, with Cersei.

She had carried guilt with her for what had happened to Lady, for what had happened to her father, for what had happened to Oberyn, for what had happened to her mother and brother, because she had spent so long, not even bothering to fight back against the people who had killed them.

She knew what guilt was; at this point, it was something like a second friend, to Sansa.

But none of those things were the sins that this septa seemed to think that Sansa ought to feel guilty for.

This septa was playing a game for the first time that Sansa had been playing for many years, against better players than she.

That meant that Sansa could still win this.

“Again, that’s Cersei, actually,” Sansa told her, calmly. “In fact, with all of the horrible things she’s ever done, things that would put…anything you had against Margaery to shame, I don’t think she’s ever felt remorse for them.”

It was the truth, after all, Sansa thought, even as the septa’s eyes sparked, with those words.

“So…I wish you good fortune, with that,” Sansa said, smirking. “I have a feeling you might need it, if you’re truly so determined to remain by Margaery’s side for so long.”

She turned, and walked out of the room, biting back a smile.

There, she thought. She still felt terribly unsettled by this whole thing, but at least she had placed the septa…on the right path, as it were.

She and Cersei rather deserved each other, Sansa thought. Assuming they ever did meet.

Because hopefully, she would have dealt with the septa, by then.

She would give her this one chance to bow out gracefully, now, though.

Because she wasn’t Cersei.
She squeezed her eyes shut, and pretended that she didn’t see, as she always did these days, the sight of the knife that Margaery had once given her twisting between Ser Meryn Trant’s ribs.

“If you’re here to tell me that you think I made a mistake, with my…announcement to the smallfolk, then you needn’t bother,” Margaery snapped, as Sansa opened the door behind her, to her parlor. “I’ve already gotten quite an earful from everyone from my father to the servants.”

Sansa grimaced. “I’m not,” she said, very softly, and slowly, Margaery turned around to face her, one hand on her protruding stomach and the other pressed against her temple.

Margaery sagged a little, at the sight of her, sinking down onto the sofa. She seemed to realize that Sansa was not there for a fight, which was a rather refreshing realization, Sansa couldn’t help but think, these days.

Sometimes, lately, it felt like all they did was argue, skirt around the issues, fight.

She took a careful breath, let it out slowly. She wasn’t here to fight, after all. “Can I sit down?” she asked, and reflected that there was once a time when she would not have felt the need to ask.

Margaery grunted, gesturing over to the sofa across from her. “I warn you,” she said, sounding very tired, “that this child keeps kicking on my bladder, and I’m already in an irritable mood.”

Sansa smiled, despite the words. “I’ll keep that in mind,” she promised, because even when Margaery was irritable, there was something about her, sitting here complaining about the child, that was almost sweet.

Almost made Sansa forget the shitshow outside of these doors.

She took a seat at the same time that Margaery did, stretching herself out over the whole of the sofa across from Sansa, and Sansa couldn’t help but grin a little, at the unkempt look. Margaery had once always strove to be so prim and proper, after all.

“What is it?” Margaery asked, sounding slightly happy to see her, Sansa hoped, but also annoyed. Sansa glanced down at her ankles, where they were sitting up on the table.

“I…”

She didn’t know, honestly.

It wasn’t as if she could tell Margaery that she had spoken with the septa, because a terrified part of her wondered if the Regent wouldn’t then start to confide...other things in the septa, things that could get all of them killed, if she thought the septa had kept that secret for long enough.

And Sansa could not have that hanging over their heads, as well.

She knew also that if she told Margaery she was considering getting rid of the septa, permanently, Margaery would hardly approve of the idea, might even try to talk her out of it, which was exactly why Sansa knew that she couldn’t bring it up. Keeping it from Margaery might hurt them both in the long run, but it was also better to ask for forgiveness than permission.

That was what they had done when they had killed Joffrey, wasn’t it?

A part of her wanted to lean forward and offer to rub Margaery’s ankles, if she thought it might make the other girl feel better, but they were passed that sort of casual intimacy, these days. Sansa didn’t
even know if her touch would be welcome, even if Margaery did feel sore.

But she had still come here, after talking to the septa, because, in many ways, Margaery was still one of the few people in King’s Landing that Sansa still trusted.

And because she wanted to know if what the septa had told her about the sept and why Margaery had goaded her husband into slaughtering them, if indeed that was what Margaery had done, was the truth. Even if it was a painful memory for Margaery, something that she seemed to bring up, these days, even less than she did her husband’s death, Sansa had to know.

She had to know, before she got rid of the septa for good.

“Why wouldn’t you tell me that…that was why you…” Sansa licked her lips, suddenly struggling to find words. She leaned forward on the sofa, pressing her elbows into her knees. “I had no idea. About the Slaughter of the Sept. About why…” she swallowed hard, seeing the way that Margaery’s face twisted, in response. “You wanted…You wanted to spare me from being arrested, as well.”

Margaery looked away suddenly, hugging herself, and Sansa wanted nothing more than to walk around the table and wrap her arms around the other girl, but she forced herself not to, because she had no idea how Margaery would react to that, these days.

“I…” Margaery licked her lips. “I didn’t want you to ever find out,” she admitted, and Sansa blinked at her in confusion.

“What?” Sansa asked, cocking her head at her.

Margaery swallowed thickly. “It’s not exactly a memory that I’m fond of,” she admitted, softly, and Sansa felt her stomach sink.

Of course it wasn’t.

Because hundreds of people had died in the Sept that day; the smallfolk were still furious about it, for all that they seemed a bit more accepting of Margaery with her newest idea to ban the most vile of executions, and Margaery had known it would happen before it did, when she decided to save Sansa from a similar fate.

But she hadn’t done it, Sansa wanted to remind her. It wasn’t her fault that Joffrey had given that order, that she knew what Joffrey’s anger was like; she was not the cause of it, after all. She had only known what might happen, as Sansa had known what might happen when she had testified against Oberyn Martell.

She licked her lips, not liking that comparison.

“How did you find out?” Margaery asked finally, rubbing absently at her stomach, looking pained, but Sansa had a feeling that she might bite her head off if Sansa asked what was wrong.

Sansa grimaced. She thought, for a moment, about lying and saying that Megga had been the one to tell her, but she didn’t like the thought of lying to Margaery, after all that they had been through together, and she didn’t know if Megga even knew, either.

“The septa,” she said, darkly. “She told me that you were about to confess, when instead the High Sparrow mentioned my sins, as well.”

Margaery flinched, hugging herself a little tighter.
“I understand why you did it,” Sansa said, softly. “I’m...grateful that you did it. But Margaery, just the fact that you gave in to a bunch of crazed fanatics does not make you responsible for the deaths of all of those people. That was very much Joffrey. I don’t know what the septa has told you, but you didn’t kill those people. You know how he was. You know what he was. He would have…” she licked her lips. “He probably would have done it either way, especially if you had confessed to something.”

And being responsible for the deaths of all of those people herself...that was not a burden that Sansa thought she could bear, either way.

She understood why Margaery might blame herself for it, but in the end, it had been Joffrey who had given the order, the High Sparrow who had instigated it, for, after living years under Joffrey’s reign, how could he have expected anything else of a response, from the things that he had done?

Margaery grunted. “Is that true?” she whispered, and Sansa blinked at her. Margaery shrugged thin shoulders. “I did it because I knew how he would react. I saved you the only way that I was sure would work, because I knew that the moment Joffrey was there, feeling threatened, he’d do what he did. And I didn’t even…” she swallowed. “I didn’t feel a damn thing, when it happened. Except that I knew you would be safe, the way you would have been if I’d just…” she gritted her teeth. “Gone to Highgarden instead of going back to King’s Landing.”

Sansa went very still. “I...I chose to come back here,” she whispered, because she wanted...no, needed Margaery to understand that.

The moment she’d learned that Margaery was back in King’s Landing, even as a prisoner of the fanatics, Sansa had come running back here, barely having to be convinced by Olenna.

And perhaps that said something about Sansa, that the moment she’d finally gotten away from this horrible place, she’d returned, but that wasn’t Margaery’s fault.

Even if Margaery clearly still blamed herself for it.

“And if I hadn’t been here, you wouldn’t have,” Margaery said, very softly.

Sansa scoffed, seeing the rather circular logic of her argument. “And if you hadn’t offered the things you did to the Martells?” she asked, secretly pleased they were able to have an argument like this at all, these days.

Barely a month ago, she didn’t think that Margaery would have been capable of it.

“Do you really think they would have let you go without knowing that it might benefit them, somehow?”

Margaery licked her lips. “I...” she shook her head, which was as much of an admittance as Sansa thought she was going to get from the other woman. Then, “You weren’t there, Sansa. You didn’t see ...gods, all of those people, dying, because of what I wanted.”

Because of you , seemed to hang in the air, though it didn’t hang on Margaery’s lips, and Sansa didn’t think the other girl would say it.

It was true though, Sansa thought. Margaery had done what she did because she had been protecting Sansa, not herself. After all, if she had wanted to save herself, she could have sold out her husband at anytime before that, and she hadn’t.

She’d only reacted when she thought that there was some threat to Sansa.
And perhaps she didn’t even realize that, in the days after the slaughter, but she seemed very much to understand it now, with the way she had been steadily avoiding Sansa, these days. Sansa shuddered, and wondered if the other girl had even realized she was doing it.

Wondered if the brunt of the guilt had only cropped up after she had killed her husband, if that was why Margaery had seemed so...fine, in the days after the slaughter, only to be crippled by it now.

Sansa did move forward, then, moving around the table to kneel in front of Margaery, whose feet fell from the table. She blinked down at Sansa, looking very confused.

Sansa swallowed hard, resisting the urge to reach out and touch her knee. “Thank you,” she whispered, and Margaery stared at her, startled. “For doing it.”

Margaery licked suddenly very dry lips. She looked exhausted; Sansa saw the large, dark circles under her eyes, sitting this close to her, and wondered if she hadn’t been sleeping any better since she had taken over her husband’s chambers, as well.

It had to mean something, Sansa told herself. The fact that Margaery had given so much of herself, of her sanity, to keep Sansa safe, first from the High Sparrow, and then from Joffrey, when his interest had turned once again towards her.

All of those people...Joffrey had very much been responsible for their deaths, Sansa truly believed that, but she thought it might weigh a little less on Margaery’s conscience if she thanked her, all the same.

And Sansa had seen, of late, the consequences of anything weighing on Margaery’s conscience, after all.

And then, Margaery surprised her, by, ever so hesitantly reaching out to touch Sansa’s hands, where they hung uselessly in the air above the table, squeezing one of them gently in thanks, a dismissal of this conversation, Sansa thought.

“Will you...will you stay with me, while I sleep?” Margaery asked, and there was something terribly vulnerable, in her tone, that made Sansa want to instantly agree.

“I...Of course,” she said, and refrained from mentioning how that was all she had wanted for a very long time, now.

Margaery stood then, rather slowly, and Sansa allowed the other woman to lead her back to the bedroom, to lay her down on the bed and then slowly follow her, being careful not to touch her, at first.

It was hardly evening, Sansa thought idly, but didn’t dare to pull away, where they lay together on the bed, not at first, and not later, in the night when she was sure that Margaery had fallen asleep, because suddenly the other woman was clinging to her like a limpet, where she had hardly dared to touch her, before.

Margaery held her like she thought that this would be the last time she would be able to do so.

And Sansa stayed awake all night long, the septa’s ominous threats echoing through her ears as she watched the steady rise and fall of Margaery’s chest, stared at her protruding stomach, saw that she was sleeping fine for what was perhaps the first time since Joffrey’s death.

“The people like the septa,” Megga said, and Sansa resisted the urge to ask her where she was
getting her information, as they sat in Sansa’s chambers, about the only ones she trusted to make her plots in, these days, with Baelish’s ears everywhere. Megga was drinking tea; rather, she was spinning her spoon around in the teacup that Rosamund had offered her earlier, before the two of them had sent the other girl away.

Sansa wasn’t fool enough to trust her with everything, after all.

Megga pressed her lips together when Sansa didn’t respond. The truth was, Sansa felt rather exhausted; she had been up half of the night, with Margaery, and clarity still had not come to her.

She had hoped that Megga would bring her better news, as well.

“They like that she is at Margaery’s side, now, guiding her as some sort of counselor. They think it means that the Crown is headed in the right direction.”

Sansa understood what Megga wasn’t saying; and right now, they needed the support of the smallfolk wherever they could find it. They all knew what happened when they lost it, after all.

But Sansa could not abide the thought of Septa Unella remaining at Margaery’s side for the rest of her reign, learning her secrets, figuring out how to use them against her, how to turn her even more into this shell of a person she had become with Joffrey’s death, this guilt-ridden woman she was becoming.

This wasn’t the Margaery that Sansa had fallen in love with, and she’d be damned if she lost any more of her because a religious fanatic thought to manipulate her further.

Sansa hummed. “Then find something that will make them dislike her,” she told Megga, because she was running out of options, at the moment.

Megga grimaced. “I...Hate to say it, but I’m not sure that the smallfolk, as they are currently, will believe anything that we bring against the septa.”

Sansa snorted. “Funny; they seemed happy enough to believe anything that the High Sparrow accused Margaery of, for all that they once claimed to love her, without any shred of evidence.”

Cersei was wrong about a great many things, Sansa thought, but the irritation that she felt with the smallfolk at all times seemed entirely justified, these days.

Megga met her eyes. “You may just...have to accept that they won’t believe anything you bring against the septa, Sansa, if you’re...that serious about being rid of her,” she whispered, and she still sounded horrified by the suggestion.

Sansa reached up, pinching the bridge of her nose.

Megga was, of course, a wonderful partner in crime most days, because Sansa didn’t have much options in those, save for, perhaps, Baelish, though she could hardly count him a friend these days, if Rosamund was to be believed, but she was always squeamish about these things.

And Sansa supposed that any other time, that would be a good thing. Hells, if it had been just a few months ago, she would have considered that a good thing.

Now, though, she wasn’t certain that it was. Now, it felt like she had wasted far too many years of her life fearing that she would become something Other, when killing Ser Meryn Trant had barely affected her.
She hoped.

Sansa licked her lips. “I know,” she said, softly, because that was something she’d given thought to, as well.

But it was worth the risk, she had to believe that. The septa may be becoming a symbol to the smallfolk that the Crown had changed, that their Queen had changed, may represent the restoration of trust between the people and the Crown, but Sansa was not willing to make that sacrifice if it meant that Margaery would end up trusting the woman, as well.

Because no matter what the septa said to try to convince her that she truly cared about Margaery’s repentance, or whatever it was she truly wanted from the other woman, Sansa couldn’t bring herself to believe her. Couldn’t bring herself to believe that she would stop at just that, after the way that the High Sparrow had been so stubborn about getting the Queen to confess to all of the people.

No, the septa would not have approached Margaery, would not have insinuated herself into Margaery’s life so quickly and so seamlessly, if she weren’t playing some longer game. The conversation they’d had had all but confirmed it, even if it had just left Sansa with more questions.

“Do you know anything about her past?” Sansa asked. “Anything we can use against her?”

Megga grimaced. “Nothing that will stick,” she admitted, after several moments. “She was the second born daughter of some lower noble, who had her sent away to become a septa because he didn’t think she would find a suitable match, most likely. Or one that would advance their House.”

“What House?” Sansa asked, suspiciously.

Megga shrugged. “Not one worth knowing,” she admitted, then, “They’re all dead now, anyway. Her sister died of some sweating sickness, as a teenager. The septa refused to return home when her family asked her to, and they did not survive to the next harvest.”

“She refused to go home,” Sansa echoed in disbelief. She could not imagine doing the same, if her own family had begged such a thing of her, if she had the opportunity to do so.

And then she thought of what a stupid little girl she had been, in believing that she would one day become Joffrey’s beoved queen, and wondered if perhaps the septa had fallen in love with the Faith in the same way.

She supposed it might explain the other woman’s fanatical devotion to it.

Megga shrugged. “Perhaps they were cruel to her,” she said, and something shifted, behind her eyes. “It can’t have been easy, to know that her parents didn’t think her pretty enough or intelligent enough to find a husband.”

Sansa had a feeling Megga was off the mark, about that. Septa Unella didn’t strike her as the sort of woman who cared overmuch what anyone thought of her, even her parents, and who certainly didn’t care about things as superficial as beauty and marriage.

“Well, see if you can find anything else out,” Sansa instructed her. “Anything that I can use against her would be helpful. Preferably soon.”

Cersei was due to arrive in King’s Landing soon enough, after all, and the funeral was hardly a place for this showdown to happen. Not with Cersei’s suspicious eyes watching.

No, whatever was going to happen with the funeral, it would need to be before the funeral.
Megga nodded her head, and then looked like she was going to ask something else, before she hesitated. Sansa bit back a sigh.

“Do you…” Megga swallowed, looking suddenly nervous, and Sansa had a horrible feeling she knew what Megga’s next words would be about. “I don’t suppose you know how long it will be until Lady Nym returns?” she asked, and despite herself, Sansa found herself relaxing, just a bit.

She had been worried that the other girl would bring up Rosamund, someone whom Sansa very much didn’t want to find herself talking about.

Not when she still didn’t know how she felt about the other girl.

She licked her lips. “I sent Lady Nym on an...important mission,” she reminded the other girl, wondering if Lady Nym had mentioned it to her before she had left, testing her. She hoped she hadn’t; after all, Sansa had warned her not to tell a soul about it.

Megga lifted her chin. “I know,” she said. “And I’m wondering when she’ll be back.”

Sansa sighed. “She’s…” she chose her next words carefully, because she had learned her lesson, with Baelish, about entrusting everything to just one person, when that person’s motives were not entirely clear to her.

She sighed, feeling a headache coming on.

The problem was, she still trusted Baelish. Still needed him, and she knew that Megga was not like Baelish, but dear gods, the things that Rosamund had told her…

“The truth is,” Sansa said, softly, “It will be some time before Lady Nym comes back. Her mission is rather...sensitive in nature, and requires a certain level of finesse.”

Megga pursed her lips. “And I suppose that’s all you’re going to tell me,” she said softly, sounding annoyed, and Sansa thought she knew how the other girl felt.

If they had been talking about Margaery just now, after all, even if she didn’t quite understand the depth of Megga’s feelings for Nym, nor the other girl’s for her, she wouldn’t have been satisfied with that answer, either.

She lifted her chin. “I’m afraid so,” she said, before taking a careful sip of her tea.

Megga sighed, getting to her feet abruptly, still carrying the teacup. Sansa squinted at her.

“I’m not going to help you plot the septa’s murder, Sansa,” she said. “I...I witnessed some...horrible and strange things, during my time as a silent sister, but I won’t be party to that. There are some things I don’t think that I…” she cut off abruptly, swallowing hard.

Sansa bit the inside of her cheek, wanting to ask if this was because of Sansa’s refusal to tell her where Lady Nym was and when she would be back, or if her sudden squeamishness was actually genuine. She bit back a sigh, understanding that if she made an enemy of Megga...well, she would have few friends left in King’s Landing, then, and Sansa very much didn’t want to make an enemy of her, in any case.

She sighed. “I understand,” she said, even as her heart sank a little, for she had a feeling that she would not be able to bring down the one woman holding half of King’s landing off from riots by herself. And that would mean turning to someone who could.
Megga walked out, then, and out of the corner of her eye, through the doorway, Sansa saw a flash of blonde hair that was far too recognizable, these days, with so few Lannisters left in King’s Landing, anyway.

Somehow, Megga seemed to miss the young man, but Sansa did not, slamming down her teacup with rather more force than necessary as she marched out of her chambers and confronted the man standing in the shadows.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Sansa demanded as she slammed him against the wall with rather more force than necessary, because this...this was the last thing that Sansa needed right now, to have to deal with the man who had fathered Margaery’s child on top of this septa, who could so easily find out that truth if he was nearby…

He licked his lips, looking surprised by her force. Sansa couldn’t bring herself to care.

He represented everything she was trying to hide, in this moment, and it was infuriating to see him pop up like this, out of nowhere. She was dealing with enough surprises as it was, these days.

“I seek an audience with the Queen,” he said, and Sansa scoffed.

“And what makes you think she’ll grant you one?” she asked, nastily. “You have some...understanding with her, I suppose?”

For a moment, Olyvar went pale, but then he lifted his chin, stubbornly.

“The Regent promised me that Garlan Tyrell’s squire was soon to return to Highgarden, and that she could give me that position,” Olyvar said, and there was no joy in his eyes at this ambition, as Sansa had thought there would be. Instead, he looked almost...afraid. “I came to get an answer to that promise.”

Sansa raised an eyebrow, even as her heart skipped a beat at the thought of the boy who had fathered Margaery’s child actually living in the Keep, so close, and getting a position he had no reason to expect, as well. She thought of what Rosamund had told her, of what she had learned in Baelish’s brothel.

She pushed him away from her.

“She’s not that stupid, Olyvar. And neither am I.”

Olyvar lifted his chin. “She promised me,” he repeated, stubbornly. He sounded, strangely, like a desperate child, and for a moment, Sansa felt a stab of pity for him.

“Yes, well, I’m promising you that’s not going to happen,” Sansa gritted out, pulling back from him. “Not while I’m here. Not ever.”

And she meant it. She didn’t know what Margaery had been thinking, if she really had promised him such a thing. She knew that Margaery had something of a weak spot for him, and she didn’t know if it was because of the relationship he’d apparently had with her brother, or because he was the father of her child, but all she did know was that it was certainly a dangerous thing.

And that the very idea of Olyvar being here, being so close to the child that he had fathered, endangering all of them...it scared the shit out of her.

Olyvar brushed himself off. “You have to help me,” he said, and Sansa stared at him.
“I don’t have to do anything,” she said, coolly. “I don’t owe you anything, and neither does the Regent.”

“Baelish knows,” he said, and Sansa stilled, because...because there was no way to know if this was a trick or not, after what Rosamund had overheard at the brothel, and if it was, she needed to look surprised, after all. Olyvar jumped on her silence. “He knows about us. He knows...I don’t know how, I swear by the gods that I didn’t tell him, but somehow, he knows the truth about…”

Sansa slammed her hand over his mouth. “If you gave anything away, I swear by the old gods and the new that I will see you pay for it,” she hissed out, but Olyvar only looked pained.

“I know you think I can’t be trusted,” he whispered hoarsely, hugging himself, now. “And you probably have good reason not to. But that is my child, too.”

Sansa stared into his eyes for a long moment, saw the fear there that she’d seen reflected in her own eyes so many times before, and then deflated, pulling her hand back.

She thought that Margaery was a fool, for keeping him alive as long as she was, for relying on him so much when he was such an obvious liability, when she knew that he had hardly been good for her brother, as well.

But the fact remained that Margaery very much seemed to want him to live.

“I can’t stay there any longer,” Olyvar went on. “Baelish, he…” his eyes were very wide, and soft, as they glanced up to meet hers, again. “Please. He knows what I did, and I...I’m afraid of what he’ll do to me. He wants to use me, I think, to bring her down. You have to know that. That that’s a possibility. You know he would do that. And I can’t...At first,” he swallowed hard. “It didn’t mean much to me, but that’s still my child. I can’t...I can’t stand by and watch Baelish destroy him.”

Sansa closed her eyes. She knew what Rosamund had overheard, after all, knew that it made sense, because of course Baelish didn’t want Margaery sitting on the Iron Throne forever, even if he had helped put her there.

She knew what he wanted, after all.

And, despite herself, she couldn’t help but feel pity for Olyvar, as he invoked his son, or, at the very least, what they all hoped would become a son.

She supposed a part of her understood what it was about this boy that caused Margaery to act so stupidly.

She licked her lips, taking in a deep breath, centering herself as she tried to decide what to do, what she could do that would leave her not feeling terrible guilt.

She swallowed, pulling back even further from him. “If you do anything to endanger Margaery or the child, and I do mean anything, I will have your cock cut off and fed to the palace dogs,” she told him, harshly. “And I’ll make sure you live to see it,” she continued, even as she saw the relief in his eyes. “Do you understand?”

He hesitated for only a moment, before nodding shakily. “Thank you,” he whispered, softly. “You have no idea...”

“And if you ever refer to that child as yours again,” Sansa continued mercilessly, or what she hoped he would see as such, “I’ll do the same. You may work here for the rest of your life, and you will never see him that way. He will never know who you are. I doubt he will even learn your name.
You have to stop thinking about him that way, or Baelish will know he can use it against you. Against all of us. Margaery’s child belongs to the Iron Throne, and the throne alone.”

She thought Olyvar began to understand that a little better, as he met her eyes, and Sansa breathed a sigh of relief.

Yes, he did understand.

Jaime Lannister had done it, had spent years around his sister’s children, pretending that they were Robert Baratheon’s, that he had no further attachment to them than that of an uncle. Years, and Sansa hoped she could do the same with that child in Margaery’s belly, if she and Margaery ever did rekindle their relationship.

Could keep up the pretense, because children were terribly perceptive creatures, and she didn’t intend to lose her head because either one of them had slipped up around this child.

She and Olyvar had both, somehow, come to want that child as it grew in Margaery’s belly, both done something incredibly foolish in beginning to see it as theirs, and not Joffrey’s, and neither would ever have him, regardless of what she had once told Margaery.

But she could do this one thing for the father of Margaery’s child, if nothing else.

“Garlan does not share his brother’s inclinations,” Sansa informed him, tartly. “You won’t be able to manipulate him the way you did Loras, if this is some sort of trick.”

Olyvar flinched. “It isn’t,” he said, hoarsely. “And, for what it’s worth, I didn’t...I wasn’t manipulating him, for some of it.”

“But not all of it,” Sansa noted, and Olyvar grimaced again.

“I’m not here for Baelish, this time,” he whispered, voice so soft she had to lean forward to hear him. “When Margaery first approached me about...all of this,” Sansa glanced nervously over her shoulder, “She asked me if I wanted to find myself working for him for the rest of my days, however short they ended up being. I don’t want that. And I don’t want a man who sees my child,” he grimaced, no doubt remembering her warning, “as expendable, after everything I’ve sacrificed for him, having that sort of power over my life.”

Sansa thought, for once, that they finally understood each other when he sent her a tremulous smile, at the end of those words. And perhaps she was making a mistake, in agreeing to this when just moments ago she had been strongly opposed to it, but Sansa couldn’t help but think that at least she was doing so with a clear conscience.

And that was something in short supply for her, these days.

“Anyone know what this is about?” Elinor asked, as she walked up beside where Sansa and Megga were standing in the crowd before the Iron Throne, and Sansa tried not to react to the other woman’s presence.

She wasn’t a child, after all, and she had dealt with far worse people than Elinor.

Megga pressed her lips together in something like disapproval. “Haven’t got a clue,” she admitted, and Elinor bit back a sigh.
Margaery was standing before the Iron Throne; the other woman hadn’t sat in it for several days, now, and Sansa was beginning to wonder why. It wasn’t the done thing, for a Regent to so obviously take the throne, but Margaery had quite soundly proven lately that she cared very little about that.

Instead, just now, she stood just before the Iron Throne, one hand carefully resting on her pregnant belly, the septa at her side, as she always seemed to be, these days.

She had gathered half of the ladies of the court before her, this morning, and many of the men had come along as well, including several members of her Small Council, and Sansa had a feeling they were there to see what other foolish decisions their Regent decided to announce in their absence.

Sansa nervously met Baelish’s eyes, where he stood near the back of the room, slinking around in the shadows as he always was.

She wondered if he had realized that Olyvar was gone, yet. Wondered what his countermove would be, to the knowledge that Margaery, for he would assume it was her, of that Sansa was certain, had stolen one of his best whores.

“In the days leading up to the Queen Mother’s arrival in King’s Landing, and to my husband’s, may he rest in peace, funeral, I invite you all to gather in prayer with me,” Margaery said, folding her hands together before her, almost in supplication. Sansa grimaced. “Prayer for the people of the Seven Kingdoms, prayer for my son, when he is born, and prayer for your king, now that he has departed the land of the living.” She glanced over at the septa by her side, who gave her an encouraging nod. “Septa Unella has kindly offered to lead us in that prayer, today, but I ask that all of you make some time out of your day for it in the coming days. The gods know that there has been little enough prayer in this place, in recent years.”

Elinor sucked in a breath.

The septa stepped forward then, standing abreast with Margaery, and Sansa squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again, half in the hope that this was nothing but her imagination.

“Gods, she looks so pleased with herself,” Sansa muttered bitterly, as she watched the septa, where she stood beside Margaery.

Margaery, who could not even stand the sight of a septa, in the days after her imprisonment by the Faith. Who could not stand to be touched, after what Joffrey had done to her, and now here she was, standing so close to the septa that they were nearly touching, and smiling about their prayers.

The nobles all seemed…confused, at the very least, to be led in prayer by their Regent and her pet septa, for they had never known her to be more than a somewhat religious woman, in the past.

Especially when she was married to the King.

But here she was, demanding that they all attend to prayers with her, if they could not all go to the Sept together, for the people seemed to hate the nobles as much as they did Margaery.

“Well, she has moved up quite a bit in the world,” Elinor whispered, at her side.

“Yes,” Sansa muttered. “From one figurehead to another.”

Both of whom had all but returned from the dead, too, which was rather odd, as well…

Sansa swallowed hard as the septa began to pray, her words low and somehow echoing throughout
the room, and Sansa looked out at the crowd and saw the way that each and every noble, save perhaps the youngest amongst them, seemed to check out from the moment she began.

They were going to lose them, Sansa realized. It didn’t matter how the smallfolk seemed to feel about the septa standing at Margaery’s side, not if the nobles totally lost faith in their Regent, when Cersei represented just as incompetent an alternative, at the moment.

“She’s always going to be a threat,” Sansa whispered, hoarsely, into the silence, and Megga, at her side, grimaced.

“Sansa…” she began, carefully, as Elinor glanced over at the two of them, eyes widening as she clearly came to a conclusion about what Sansa meant.

Sansa lifted her chin, ignoring the other girl. “Look at them,” she whispered. “We need their armies when Cersei inevitably declares war on us, and they’ve lost their faith just as Margaery is finding it.”

And they needed those armies, desperately just now, with Cersei championing her son’s cause. Needed them not to think that Cersei and her son were a safer, saner, alternative. Not now. Needed the nobles to think that they had a capable, competent leader in Margaery, with her family seemingly split apart at the seams, with Olenna back in Highgarden, a clear signal that something was wrong to anyone who knew the Tyrells well.

It was true that the majority of the people in the throne room were only women, and not in charge of those armies, but Sansa had witnessed firsthand, in the last few years, what a woman was capable of when she whispered into the heart of a man, and there were plenty enough of those around to get the word out, just now.

It was not just that this woman was a threat to Sansa and Margaery, a threat that could expose their relationship to the world. She knew too much, yes, but she also represented havoc in the Keep, lack of ability to the nobles, whose armies they needed more than the goodwill of the smallfolk, much as it might appease Margaery to receive it.

For a moment, Sansa found herself wondering if she shouldn’t think to turn to Garlan, first, after he had taken control of the soldiers in King’s Landing, as her mind inevitably turned to the one person who could help her fix this situation, with both Elinor and Megga looking at her in such horror. And Elinor had little right to do so, Sansa thought bitterly, after she had been responsible for that boy’s death after she adhered to Olenna’s plan.

No, they would not help her, but she knew someone who would, someone who would not balk at what needed to be done, even if a part of Sansa felt guilty for thinking it.

And, even then, she found herself wondering if her guilt came from the thought of killing a woman, even one who was a threat to her, or doing so behind Margaery’s back, after Margaery had shown her how much the septa seemed to mean to her.

It seemed like the worst things always happened, when she and Margaery kept secrets from one another.

And then Sansa’s eyes sought out Baelish’s, where he stood in the crowd, watching Sansa with some annoyance, she realized, because she had been watching Margaery.

For a man no one ever seemed to understand, he was hardly subtle in his jealousy, Sansa thought, with the way he was watching her. She found herself wondering how he had remained in King’s Landing as a wolf in...well, perhaps that was the wrong metaphor.
When the prayer was done, Sansa had hardly realized it was happening at all, but the nobles all seemed quick to flee. Sansa wondered if it was out of fear that Margaery would try to keep them there in prayer longer, or to run off and gossip about how their once dismissive Queen had turned to religion so quickly.

“It’s strange,” Lord Mace said, suddenly at her side, Elinor and Megga having disappeared with the crowd, and Sansa turned to him as he let out a small sigh. “She was never this religious before his death. It…It’s unsettling.”

He seemed to be saying it to the air, rather than to her; still, Sansa knew what he meant, even if it felt strange to commiserate with Mace Tyrell about anything.

The man had hardly made a dent in his daughter’s politics, since his arrival in King’s Landing, for all that Sansa had once feared that he would be a plant for Olenna, telling her of everything and anything that happened here in her absence.

Of course, she had that in Elinor, now, and hardly needed her son, but Sansa had thought that, for all Mace Tyrell’s ambitions, he would have stepped up a little taller since the King’s death. She was rather surprised that he hadn’t, that he seemed terribly forgettable, in recent months.

And she wondered if she wasn’t missing something, there, when Mace Tyrell’s ambition had done everything from getting Renly Baratheon killed by his own brother to sticking Margaery with a madman for a husband.

She dipped into a curtsey, quickly dismissing herself from the other man before he tried to draw her into conversation, standing on her tiptoes a moment later in an attempt to seek out Baelish in the crowd, where he seemed to have vanished.

Instead, she found herself facing yet another member of the Small Council, though this one was that even more in name than Mace Tyrell was, these days.

“My lady,” Trystane said, as he stepped closer to her. “I was wondering if I might have a word with you?”

Sansa reached up, pinching the bridge of her nose. The last thing that she wanted to do right now was to have a word with the Prince of Dorne, and be reminded that he was here in King’s Landing at all, when she had far more pressing concerns, and was actively planning an assassination.

Her second one.

But Trystane was here, standing in front of her and looking rather pitiful, she thought, which was a far cry from the last time she had paid much attention to him, as he railed against Joffrey and then was foolish enough to challenge him to a duel, as if Joffrey would ever accept.

She wondered if that was because he had found his place here, as she had once been forced to do. As Margaery’s…hostage, she supposed.

Because it was just another reminder of the headache she was trying to put off, of an entire kingdom full of people whom Margaery had, apparently, promised a war to, and, if Lady Nym was to be believed, even more than that.

“What is it, Your Highness?” She asked him, biting back a sigh.

Trystane gave her a little bow, and Sansa raised an eyebrow, wondering if he had been astute
enough to recognize what many other lords in King’s Landing seemed not to have, since she had taken control of the throne, behind the scenes.

It was an unsettling thought, when Trystane was nearer in her age to theirs.

She forced herself to focus a little more of her attention on him. “What is it?” she repeated, forcing her voice to sound a little more understanding.

Trystane grimaced. “It’s a…personal matter,” he explained, slowly, as he reached out to guide her to the corner of the room, where they might be less likely to be overheard, and Sansa found her annoyance growing, as she did not see Baelish once again even there, and Trystane’s hand remained on her elbow until she shook it off.

“Are your rooms unsatisfactory?” she asked, feeling a spike of guilt as she remembered the way he had been looked on with suspicion after the King’s death, because it was not as if they could admit who the collaborators had been, in that case.

She’d made sure he’d been moved, after he emerged from the Black Cells, to far more comfortable rooms than he’d originally received, and given servants who were also meant to monitor his activities, though she knew from firsthand experience that a gilded cage was still a cage.

He shook his head.

“My sister has…in her wisdom, and without explanation, suddenly decided that Myrcella and I can no longer communicate,” he said, clearing his throat a little. “I know that you and Myrcella were once…something like friends, here. I was hoping that perhaps you might intercede on our behalf. She is still my wife, after all.”

Sansa cleared her throat. “And what would make you think that I might have that sort of influence over your sister?” She asked. “I would think you would have better luck, there.”

He swallowed hard. “I don’t think I have any luck with my sister, these days,” he muttered, sounding rather resentful.

Sansa raised an eyebrow. “You say she won’t let you write letters, at all?” She asked. “I thought she had agreed that you and Myrcella could write one another so long as your letters were…”

“Read?” Trystane finished, wryly, and Sansa grimaced. “Yes, that was the deal she made with the Regent. And now, I’m not allowed to write to my own wife, or hear that she’s all right.”

Sansa swallowed, feeling something like pity welling up within her, and at the most inconvenient of times.

She had only been allowed to write her own family once, and that only with a dozen members of the Small Council reading over her shoulder, while she had been a prisoner here, and had family left to write to.

It made her rather more sympathetic to Trystane’s cause, just now, and to think that this time, it was his own sister keeping him from writing such letters...

“Tell you what,” she said, tiredly. “I don’t think that I will have much luck, interceding with your sister, either, but I will have Lady Nym write her a letter, the moment she returns to King’s Landing, letting her know that the…Crown disapproves of her attempts to separate two young people who are beloved by the Crown.”
Trystane raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think the Regent even remembers my name,” he said.

Sansa frowned at him. “You are a very important ally, Trystane,” she said, and wanted to tell him that he ought to be grateful he felt that way, when she saw so much of herself in him, like looking into a mirror that was a couple of years old, and she had longed for a time when Joffrey might ignore her enough to forget her name. “Of course the Regent remembers your name.”

Of course, his captivity here was nothing like hers had been; they were not cruel to him, had made sure that he had someone continuing his studies here, even when Margaery had seemed concerned, the one time she had walked in on him sparring with Lady Nym over spears, had welcomed him onto the Small Council, though the rest of the Small Council hated it.

She did it, perhaps, because she felt guilty, seeing someone in a position so similar to her own, and perhaps because she had appreciated the companionship that Myrcella had offered, the last time she had been in King’s Landing.

And because the last time that Trystane had gotten himself riled up over his treatment by the Crown, he had nearly gotten both his cousin and Margaery’s child killed.

Sansa would like to avoid any repeat performances, and she had no real reason to see him unhappy here, either, even if she could not return him to Dorne.

She had not quite the same faith in them as Margaery seemed to, these days, not after she, and Olenna, had all but gotten Oberyn Martell killed, between the two of them.

She grimaced, going still at the thought, as she realized she didn’t know if she had ever told Margaery about that, doubted Olenna ever had.

“My lady?” Trystane said, and she realized that she had been silent for some time.

Sansa cleared her throat. “The moment she returns,” she promised him, even as she privately wondered if Lady Nym even had that sort of pull with her cousin, with the way that she had all but attached herself to Margaery, these days.

Trystane’s eyes widened. “She’s not here?” he asked, and Sansa cursed inwardly at letting such a thing slip.

She really was too distracted, at the moment.

“No, she’s... The Regent sent her on an important mission,” Sansa told him. “And one that I probably shouldn’t have mentioned.”

Though she was surprised, in truth, that Trystane had not reached out to his own cousin first, before Sansa, of all people.

Trystane blinked at her. “Ah,” he said. “Well, I thank you for whatever you might be able to accomplish, in this,” he said, softly. “I... Not being able to even hear from Myrcella...”

She thought she understood what he meant.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, Your Highness, I really should be...” she gestured in front of them, and it seemed only then that Trystane realized he was still holding onto her elbow.

“Oh,” he said, letting go of her. “Sorry.”
She found herself rather glad that he had not reached out to Margaery first, in that moment, though she doubted he would have been so forward as to drag Margaery across the room as he had Sansa.

She walked forward, thought she spied the end of Baelish’s robes as he slipped from the room, just then, only to encounter yet another distraction.

Even if this one was the reason she was seeking out Baelish in the first place.

“Septa Unella,” Sansa said with a sigh, giving up on the idea of catching Baelish before he vanished for good, then, as she wondered where Margaery had gone, without her trusted septa.

“Lady Sansa,” the septa said, giving her a short, haughty nod of her head, as if she were not the daughter of some lesser noble, and a septa, at that. “I couldn’t help but notice, during prayers, that you seemed rather...distracted.”

Sansa grimaced, lifting her chin. “I find it strange that the one leading those prayers should have noticed such a thing,” she said, tartly, and the septa sent her a sharp smile.

“One of the first things that we septas are taught is that the ones we pray with are almost as important as the prayers themselves,” the septa said, softly.

Sansa raised an eyebrow. “And you expect me to believe that you are so concerned with mine?”

The septa looked strangely...hurt, by her words. “I am concerned with every soul that has not yet repented, Lady,” she said, calmly. “Even yours.”

The words sent a shiver down Sansa’s spine. “Do excuse me,” she said, and the septa eyed her carefully as she walked away.

The problem, Sansa thought, as she went to track down Baelish herself, was that she could sense no guile in the other woman’s words. She seemed to genuinely believe them, and that, Sansa thought, was even more dangerous to the both of them.

Sansa took a deep breath, knocking on the door of the chambers that Baelish used while he was occupying the Keep, these days.

“Enter,” a familiar voice said, and Sansa took a deep breath before she stepped inside.

“I need your help, Petyr,” Sansa said immediately, and hated herself a little more when he instantly lifted his head, smiled at her, reached out to cup her cheek in his hand, and she didn’t flinch away at the touch.

“What is it?” He asked her, in that gentle tone he always reserved for her, and Sansa squeezed her eyes shut, and wished that it hadn’t come to this.

Wished that she didn’t owe him so much, wished that Margaery hadn’t been foolish enough to bring Septa Unella back into their lives, wished that they could have just gotten on with their lives, after Joffrey’s death.

That was all that Sansa wanted, since then. Joffrey was dead yes, and she knew that whatever had happened between Margaery and Joffrey, in the moments before his death, had been absolutely traumatizing for the other girl.

But things would be so much easier if they could just...move on.
And Sansa was doing her best to be accommodating, because she knew that to be otherwise would just be selfish, but she was doing everything for Margaery, just now. Gods, she was practically running the Seven Kingdoms for her.

And there was no one there for Sansa, save for Petyr, with his hand on her cheek and his thoughts already far past that.

She licked her lips. “I don’t...this septa, I don’t know how she knows, I don’t know if it was Margaery or she found out some other way,” she couldn’t dare insinuate that it was Baelish’s fault, not when she needed him rather desperately at the moment, but, “She knows. About us. And I’m not certain that I can...deal with her alone, not with the way that she seems to have cleaved herself to Margaery’s side.”

Baelish stared at her, then, finally pulling back from her to consider her words, and then said, carefully, “The Regent...is not going to like it,” and he looked concerned for her, but damn him, Sansa could see the way his eyes were shining, at the thought.

It was why she had spared Megga and gone to him, after all; she knew damn well that he would agree to anything he thought might bring a rift between Sansa and Margaery.

And perhaps he was right; perhaps she was a fool for doing this, perhaps she was a fool for believing that Margaery would simply forgive her for it, after the things that Margaery had confessed to her, about what this septa seemed to represent, for her.

But Sansa had to be willing to take that risk, because it wasn’t just about Margaery’s trust, this. It was about her life. About the life of the child in her belly, because what Sansa and Margaery had done together might well get them killed, but it could also get that child killed, as well.

Could have Cersei Lannister wondering who else Margaery might have slept with, while she was married to her darling boy.

Sansa gritted her teeth as she looked down, so that she didn’t have to see that smarmy look on Baelish’s face.

“I know,” she whispered, hoarsely. “But...” she twisted the knife. “You’re the only one I trust to know the truth about this, Petyr. The only one who I know will actually help us. I need your help, now, even if she does hate me for it. Because I know I said that I would...deal with this myself, but I can’t...I can’t lose her.”

There.

And he would very much want Sansa to lose her, as he had all but told her in the past, as he had clearly told Olyvar, but none of that could matter, at the moment.

Because Sansa might not regret what she was about to do, might feel very little remorse for it, as the septa had even accused her of, but she also knew that if she did it with her own hands, Margaery truly wouldn’t forgive her for it.

When she glanced up at Baelish again, he was the picture of concern.

“You’re right,” he agreed, voice raspy. He sounded...almost shaken, and she wondered if he knew exactly what she was doing, just now. “If this septa knows the truth about the two of you, she will find some way to use it to her advantage, or to expose it, if she truly is as fanatical as she claims to be.”
Sansa nodded, swallowing hard, not quite trusting herself to speak. She thought of the girl she had once been, a lifetime ago, the sweet, innocent creature that she had been.

The sweet thing that her mother must have been, for Baelish to fall so hard for her.

“I can’t do it,” she whispered, hoarsely, biting her lower lip, and watching the way Baelish’s eyes flew to the motion. “I…What I did to Ser Meryn, I can’t…I can’t do that again.”

The knife twisted, in her mind’s eye.

She wondered why it felt so different, to get Oberyn and her father killed, to nearly kill Joffrey and almost feel guilty over it, than it did to finally twist the knife inside of Ser Meryn Trant.

Baelish reached out then, running a gentle hand through her hair. “Don’t worry, my lady,” he said, his voice gentle then, but with a hint of something dangerous in it. “I’ll take care of it.”

She closed her eyes, and thought of what Rosamund had told her, about his plans for Margaery, his plans for them.

She opened her eyes, and smiled at him. “You’ve always taken care of me,” she responded, and flinched inwardly, wondering if that had been going too far.

But when Baelish bent down and kissed her, then, she thought it was worth it.

“Septa Unella?” Margaery called out, when her knocking on the door had no effect. She wondered, for a moment, if the septa had gone out of the chambers that she had commissioned for the other woman, close to her own, but then, there were few others in the Keep who seemed to want to spend time with the other woman, and she did not go to the Sept so late at night.

Margaery swallowed hard, taking a deep breath as if tensing for some unknown danger, before stepping into the septa’s chambers, and she froze, as she did so.

The sight before her was brutal, but not only that, it was terribly familiar.

Margaery inhaled, but felt no breath coming into her lungs.

“Septa!” She cried out, and then rushed forward, falling to her knees beside the older woman’s prone form, ignoring the feeling of wet blood seeping into her gown at the knees, a feeling that was far too familiar, after...after the last time.

No, she thought. No, this couldn’t be happening.

Not again.

She wasn’t breathing, Margaery realized, moments later, as she felt for the woman’s pulse, and came up empty. Though, of course, she had known that it would not. Had known that the septa was already dead from the moment that she had walked into the room and found her lying in exactly the same way that Joffrey had been, after Margaery had...after she had killed him.

Brains bashed in, body crumpled on the floor, blood pooling around it.

She dropped the septa’s hand abruptly.

“No,” she breathed, horror filling her. “No, no, no. No, not you, too.”
The septa lay still, and very dead, and Margaery felt tears entering her eyes even if she hadn’t had the
time to come to know this woman barely at all.

But she had represented something, had represented hope, a hope that Margaery had not thought she
would feel again after Joffrey’s death, and something like fear clawed its way up Margaery’s throat
as she felt her child kick, ominously, within her.

“Guards!” She called out behind her, and heard the Kingsguard come running, as they had not
bothered to do on the night of her own husband’s death. “Find a maester!”

It was too late, she knew, because it had been too late for Joffrey too, when he had looked just like
this, but she screamed for the maester, anyway.

Elinor had heard about the Queen’s dramatic declaration to the smallfolk by the end of the day, and
had a horrible feeling that she would be getting a raven about it, soon, demanding to know why she
was not better at keeping Margaery in check.

Hells, everyone had heard about the promise that Margaery had made to the smallfolk at this point,
even her husband, as she walked in on him, seated on the divan in their chambers, playing with their
son.

Making faces, and then laughing when their son grew increasingly more amused with each one, for
all that they never seemed to change much.

Still, Elinor stopped and smiled a little, at the sight of it. At the sight of her beautiful little family, for
once looking so happy.

She wished she could stay in this moment forever.

She wished they could go back to Highgarden, where she had never actually spent much time with
her husband, could go back to her family’s home and disappear into the sheets and never return.

She was so tired of King’s Landing, of the plots and plans that kept them here, the plots that only
ever got her and the people she loved hurt.

She licked her lips, reaching out to touch her husband’s cheek, where he lay on the bed beside her,
looking exhausted. Even the slightest exertion got him tired, these days, she knew.

She was almost glad of that. Was almost glad that he had not been one of the guards out
accompanying Margaery, when she had made the suicidal decision to…ban death, or whatever it
was she was actually doing.

Elinor would have been terrified for him, even if the people seemed to have reacted fairly well to the
whole thing.

Her husband’s eyes fluttered, and then blinked open, and he stared at her for a moment longer,
before he smiled.

“You should be sleeping,” he said. “Our son kept you up half the night.”

Elinor smiled. “Our son,” she repeated, and after a moment, her husband smiled as well, so sweetly.

And then, as if on cue, their child began to cry, from the other room.

Elinor sighed.
Alyn reached out, placing a hand over hers. “I can get it,” he said, softly, but Elinor shook her head. “You were sleeping so well,” she said. “Besides, he probably wants me.”

A flash of what might have been hurt crossed over Alyn’s features, and she forced herself not to think about it as she got to her feet and reached for her robe, walking out into the main room.

Her heart stopped, for the second time in recent weeks, as she saw Lord Varys leaning over her child’s crib, once again, silent as the grave.

He glanced up, as she entered the room, shutting the door to her bedchambers behind her and crossing her arms over her chest.

“I don’t want you in here, anymore,” Elinor whispered, and Varys stared at her with a single, raised brow, before stepping away from her son’s crib.

Dear gods, she thought, she was going to have to move their son’s crib into her own chambers, just to make sure that he was safe.

And then she thought about how Varys seemed to have attained the ability to walk through walls, and surely it wouldn’t matter, where she had her son sleep at night, so long as he was able to move about unheard.

She took a careful breath, and let it out slowly. “What are you doing here?”

“The Queen went against the advice of the Small Council, today,” Varys said, and his tone was almost conversational, as he glanced over at her child, in the crib.

She closed her eyes, opened them again. “I’d hardly imagined that a bunch of men had suddenly decided that they disliked killing things,” she muttered.

Varys was unamused. “It was my understanding that the Queen no longer had much interest in the goings on of the Small Council, and after all of my years serving on it, I count myself a rather good judge of character.”

Elinor chewed on her bottom lip, before she muttered, “Well, perhaps she is finally…taking an interest,” she said.

“Or,” Varys went on, as if she hadn’t spoken, “Perhaps someone else is taking an interest, and finally convincing her to do as they will.”

Elinor could have laughed, at that.

If Sansa Stark wasn’t capable of that, no one was, she thought.

“I don’t control the Queen,” Elinor said, shortly. “You’re not Olenna, so I think you know that.”

Varys gave her a long look. “She is a…persistent woman,” he said, slowly.

Elinor lifted her chin. “I don’t control Sansa either, if that’s your next question.”

Varys stalked forward, until he was standing merely a hair’s breadth away from her, and Elinor’s breath caught in her throat.

“Then why does Baelish?” He asked her, coldly.
Elinor swallowed hard.

She had a feeling she knew the answer to that question, but wasn’t certain if it was the sort of thing she should be confusing to Varys, or to Lady Olenna. Didn’t know if it was the sort of thing that Sansa would forgive her for.

But it made sense, the theory she’d worked out in the privacy of her own mind. That Baelish wasn’t so much a trusted fellow as someone who knew more than he ought to.

“Why are you here this late at night, Lord Varys?” She asked him.

He eyed her. “Why do you call me ‘lord’?” He asked her. “Olenna made it rather clear, before she left, that she doesn’t see me as such, and the title is not strictly…true.”

Elinor shrugged. “Because it’s polite, I suppose.”

He waited.

Elinor felt her gut twist, as she realized what he meant by that.

She supposed she was surprised, at this point, that the news had not come earlier. That she had not found out, the moment that Sansa had thrown her out of Margaery’s ladies, that she had outlived her usefulness to the Lady Olenna.

After all, the rest of the ladies in Margaery’s entourage had all been spies for Olenna once; it was not uncommon, amongst ladies in waiting, whoever the lady might be, and they were fortunate that so many of them had been for Olenna, but they were hardly that, now.

Margaery had scared them away from it for good, after all, the day that she had decided to banish her own grandmother.

And Margaery might take Elinor back, if she had a mind to; Elinor was concerned that Margaery’s mind was lost to all of them at this point, however; even to herself.

Sansa was the one in charge of Margaery’s affairs, these days, both openly and in private, and all that mattered was that Sansa would never allow her back in, even if the boy had, after all, died in the end.

Olenna had only Elinor, and Elinor was next to useless, now, for anything besides getting information, something that she could easily get from Varys, if she so wanted.

“How’s this my polite warning?” She asked him. “I’ve failed Olenna, and so you’ve come to let me know that I don’t have much longer for this world?”

Strangely, she was not as horrified at the threat as she had always thought she would be, when it finally came.

After all, she had spent so long living in fear of the other shoe dropping, of whatever it was that Olenna would do to her, once she decided that Elinor had finally failed her, that now that it was here, it felt…strangely less threatening.

Varys sighed. He looked saddened by the thought that it might be; Elinor could not imagine why. For all that they were working towards a similar purpose, Elinor knew that it was not the same one.

They were both birds, twittering their lies to their masters, but, for all his attempts to prove her wrong, Elinor was not entirely convinced that they followed the same master at all.
“Is it…possible that the Queen has been playing all of us, all of this time?” He asked her, and there was something sharp and dangerous in his tone, something that made Elinor, despite her apathy, stand up and take notice. “Olenna is not here, and you know Margaery better than I ever could.”

He said it without a hint of judgment, even as Elinor blushed and glanced nervously over her shoulder.

Her husband knew about her past relationship with the Regent, of course, because it was the sort of thing she could imagine Olenna trying to hold over them, one day, or someone else doing so.

It had been her true test of her husband, in the early days of their relationship, and he had reacted better than she had ever expected him to.

But they didn’t talk about it, since then, and besides the fact that she didn’t want her husband to know why they truly remained in King’s Landing, she wouldn’t like to remind him of that relationship, again.

“That she…isn’t nearly as…badly affected by her husband’s death as she has let on?” Varys pushed, when Elinor remained silent.

Elinor blinked up at him. “You’re…asking me if I think Margaery is faking her feelings for her wretched husband’s death.”

Varys’ lips twitched into a small smirk. “I suppose it is rather unbelievable,” he said, letting out a sigh. “But you and I both know that something else happened, that night.”

Elinor sucked in a breath; they did not speak of it, what might have happened that night, though they both had an idea, just as the rest of the Keep did not speak of it.

And here he was, telling her that she did not have much more use to Olenna, and asking her about that night.

“In any case,” Varys went on, unfettered by Elinor’s silence, “it still does not explain her actions of late, not unless she’s faking them.”

Elinor bit the inside of her cheek.

The truth was, she had wondered the same thing, the first and only time that Margaery had come to visit her in her chambers, had come to see her child and had looked beautifully sad at the sight of him.

Had looked…almost like the woman that Elinor had once known so well, except that there was a pervasive sadness hanging over her, at all times.

In that moment, Elinor had not seen at all the girl who had worked so hard for the damn throne only to sit on it staring at her nails, when it was finally hers.

Elinor had known Margaery for many years, but never before Olenna had gotten her hooks into the other girl, and so she had always known Margaery’s ambition, had always known her drive to get what she wanted, whether that thing was the last lemon cake on the table, or the Crown.

She no longer recognized the Margaery sitting in the Iron Throne as if she didn’t know it was meant for her son or her Hand, and not for her.

So it made sense, she supposed. This theory that Varys and Olenna had come up with, that
Margaery’s traumatized responses to everything around her, the disinterest in her own regency, the lack of respect for the throne, the fact that she’d brought a septa into the Keep after sending Nysterica away, were all a carefully tailored reaction, to keep the rest of King’s Landing, hells, the rest of the Seven Kingdoms, from overestimating her.

It did make sense, she thought. And it made sense that Olenna so wanted to believe it.

It was just the sort of thing Margaery might have done, once. Made them all underestimate her, made them all think of her in one way when she was really another thing entirely, for her own advantage, just as she had once done with Joffrey.

But the more Elinor thought about it, the less she believed it to be the case.

She knew Margaery, after all, as Varys had said. She knew her well, and she knew when Margaery was pretending, and when she was not.

And…whatever had happened to Margaery that night - Elinor squeezed her eyes shut, and tried not to think of the words Sansa had once thrown at her - it had changed her, utterly.

There were only small traces of the Margaery that Elinor had once known, inside of the other girl. That was why Olenna could not recognize her either, why she was clinging to anything she could find, to explain away all of this.

For a moment, because Varys had already been polite enough to let her know that Olenna would not have a use for her much longer, Elinor considered lying. Considered leaving Olenna in the horrible suspense of what her granddaughter might be up to, that thing that she could not yet understand.

But she supposed that she owed it to Margaery, to Sansa, not to do that to them.

“I don’t think it’s a pretense,” Elinor said, slowly. “And I know that’s exactly what Olenna doesn’t want to hear, but the things that happened that night…They changed her, utterly.”

Varys studied her, looking for some sort of sign that she was lying, she supposed, before he finally let out a small sigh.

“That’s…unfortunate,” he said, and he said it as if he truly meant it.

Elinor eyed him warily, wondered what master it was he served, that he was playing the long game with someone like Olenna Tyrell, that he cared enough to look like he meant it, when Elinor told him that Margaery had lost herself.

Wondered why he should care so much about the mental well being of Margaery Tyrell, besides the more obvious reasons, because he cared so much for the damn good of the realm, as he’d told her once.

That didn’t explain his frequent visits here, how often his questioning turned to Margaery, the look of absolute pity in his eyes, as he uttered these words, tonight.

And before all of this, he’d been working with Margaery, she remembered, the two of them trying to curb some of Joffrey’s more base tendencies. Had taken something like a special interest in her ever since her arrival in King’s Landing, though he’d certainly been subtle about it.

And the moment Olenna was gone, he’d volunteered to keep her in the know.

He had plans for Margaery, plans that consisted of her actually being able to think critically for
herself, it seemed, and Elinor supposed that she should be more worried about that.

But the words of his threat earlier, the polite warning he’d given her, were finally sinking in, and she took a small step back from him, and then another.

She could endure whatever Olenna threw at her, because she had been expecting it for so damn long, but Varys was standing next to her child, just as he always was.

It struck her, then, that he was always standing by her child, whenever they had these meetings.

*Always staring.*

She remembered abruptly that he had a small army of tongueless children who did his bidding, and wondered if, without the use of his cock, there was some more…insidious purpose he had for them.

She shivered, moving to take her child into her arms.

Willas let out a little squeal of annoyance, twisting in her arms, but Elinor didn’t dare set him back down.

Varys’ eyes were soft, as they alighted on her son for another moment, and then he stepped back, as if to reassure her that he meant her child no harm.

It wasn’t reassuring in the least.

Especially not with his next words.

“He looks like his namesake, you know,” Varys said, into the silence of Elinor trying to figure out why the fuck he cared about Margaery at all, why he was so invested in this.

Elinor licked her lips. “Get out,” she whispered.

And Varys left without it ever occurring to Elinor to ask him how he knew what Willas Tyrell had once looked like.

She shook her head, remembering to breathe only once the door had shut behind him once more, and considered her son for a moment.

He did sort of look like Willas, she supposed. But then, she was a Tyrell, for all that the rest of her family seemed to have forgotten that fact. It made sense that he would look like Willas.

She was shaking as she carried her son back into the bedchambers that she shared with her husband, because like hells was she going to leave him out in his crib after that confrontation.

She set him down between her and her husband, on the bed, and slowly climbed in after him, ignoring the soft sigh that her husband gave as he said, “We shouldn’t encourage this, you know.”

“He’s just a babe,” Elinor reminded him.

Her husband smiled at her, reached out to touch her cheek, and Elinor flinched a little, under that touch.

Between them, Willas let out a little cry, and Elinor instantly turned her attention on him, so that her husband could not see her tears.

He saw her tense shoulders, anyway, she supposed.
“What’s wrong, love?” He asked her.

Her gentle, sweet husband, who was only ever concerned for her, when Elinor had fucked the both of them, because she could stand the thought of her own death, could stand the thought of whatever revenge Olenna got on her for telling Sansa about the Tyrells’ plans, but she couldn’t stand the thought that her son, her husband, would pay that price.

And Olenna knew how to make things hurt; they would be the first ones she came after, Elinor knew that.

Oh, she would not hurt them. Not now that Elinor’s husband had made such a miraculous recovery. He would live out the rest of his days alone, toiling away in misery, and their son…No doubt, Olenna would find some excuse to keep him close that not even her husband could deny.

And that would be enough. Elinor, separated from the last amount of family that she was allowed to have.

Elinor forced herself to smile, pressed a kiss against her forehead. “It’s nothing,” she promised. “Nothing. He was merely fussy.”

He gave her a long, searching look, and then shrugged as she sank down against him.

Elinor took a careful breath, pulling the blankets back up over them and wrapping an arm around her husband’s chest.

She didn’t know how long she lay there, wondering if Varys was still out there somewhere, knew only that her husband wasn’t falling asleep, either.

“We should leave,” Elinor said, into the silence, and her husband turned to her in the bed, regarding her nervously, now.

“Elinor?” He asked, gently. “You think…You want to return to Highgarden, now?”

Elinor pressed her lips together.

No. No, because Olenna was in Highgarden, and if she went back there, she would either go mad or find herself brought right back here, to keep up her spying for the other woman, because Olenna couldn’t be bothered to find another spy when Elinor was perfectly useful, still.

“We could go to your home,” Elinor whispered. “Or to Oldtown, and hide among the merchant lords, there.”

Her husband let out a bitter laugh. “And what would I sell?” He asked her. “A feeble cripple?”

Elinor swallowed. “They called Willas Tyrell that,” she said, and thought about how they had named their child after Willas. “He managed to…reform Oldtown, in a way that no other noble lord had managed, before him, without anyone ever finding out that he had done so. I think…I think we could build a life together, if we wanted to, there. Or anywhere.”

Just not here, she thought, desperately.

Her husband swallowed. “Elinor…” He took a deep breath. “During the Battle of Blackwater, every time that I was afraid, every time that I killed a man, I cried out your name. I thought…” he laughed a little. “I thought that you would be my charm, against those who might otherwise kill me.”
Elinor licked her lips. She remembered thinking the story was amusing, cute, almost, the first time that she had heard it from one of the other men serving alongside Alyn. Now, she thought it was sad.

That her husband had derived that sort of courage from her, when she wasn’t feeling very courageous, of late.

“But I’m not… I’m a soldier, Elinor. It’s what I’ve always wanted to be. And now, I can’t even be that.” He coughed, and she leaned forward on instinct, asking him if he felt ill on the tip of her tongue. “I’m not brave enough to start a new life. I’m…”

Comfortable, Elinor thought. They were comfortable, now, living under Olenna’s patronage, because Elinor might resent the other woman for insisting that she remain here when all Elinor wanted was to return home, but it could not be denied that she was living comfortably. Her husband would never have to lift a finger again, her rooms were larger than the ones she had shared with Margaery’s ladies, when she had still been one of them.

And if she demanded that they leave, she would be taking that away from him.

And after what had happened, after the way he had been injured… because of her, she couldn’t take anything else away from him.

She moved closer to him, wrapped her arms around him tightly. Pressed her head against his shoulder.

Her husband let out a dry sob, and Elinor squeezed him tighter, sniffing herself.

“I can’t…” he repeated, and she shushed him, gently, pressing her lips against his.

“It’s all right,” she murmured. “It’s fine, Alyn.”

He took a shuddering breath. “I’m sorry.”

She leaned closer. “No,” she said. “No. Alyn…”

He let out a dry laugh. “I’m sorry,” he repeated, “That you ended up married to someone like me. I’m sorry that you had to have my child, instead of the child of…”

Elinor’s eyes dripped. “No,” she said, more forceful, this time. “Don’t say that. Don’t talk like that.”

Because she hated that he thought of himself that way, hated that she had been the one to do it to him, because she had disobeyed Olenna, in some small way, and now, she was dependent on the other woman to keep her husband alive.

She took a deep breath, and didn’t tell him about Varys’ veiled threat.

“Our son is going to be strong, and wise, just like his father,” Elinor crooned against his skin, and her husband snorted.

“I don’t think that I am either of those things, Elinor,” he whispered. “If anything, that’s you.”

Elinor bit back an equally harsh laugh. “Perhaps neither of us are those things,” she admitted. “But our son will be. We’ll raise him to be.” She leaned close and whispered against his ear, “I promise.”
Don't forget to leave a comment!
Casterly Rock

Chapter Notes

I’m afraid that Arya’s transformation here would make a bit more sense if the Braavos story had been finished (sorry) but here we are.

One quick note, though, my Arya spent some time with Tywin at Harrenhall, like she did in the show, even if it makes no sense plot/character wise, because I loved that in the show.

Anyway, without spoiling too much from the Braavos story, have our first Arya chapter.
*Runs away*

Most nights, she dreamt about the Merling Queen.

The Merling Queen, laying beneath her in the woman’s bedchambers, drenched in her own sweat and blood, and staring up at Arya (a girl) with those sad, resigned eyes, as if she had forgiven Arya for ever taking the knife to her without even knowing why Arya had done so.

And Arya did not even have a reason to give her, as she stood over the Merling Queen in her dreams and plunged the knife through her stomach.

It was a horrible feeling, not knowing why she was even taking that woman’s life, why she was blindly following the words of a man who had only ever helped her because she had named him for her kill.

Sometimes, in these dreams, which always ended with Arya killing her, no matter how many times she tried to stop herself, the Merlin Queen’s face would turn into Shae’s face, and Arya awoke in the night, sweating and biting back a strangled scream that she was far too controlled, these days, to let loose.

She stared up at the stark, tall walls of Casterly Rock, and shuddered.

When she had first became Lord Tywin Lannister’s cupbearer, terrified that he might recognize her at any moment, Arya had imagined that Casterly Rock was just the same cold, imposing place that its owner had been, with high, rock walls and little warmth.

She had never seen it, of course. Tywin had come to Harrenhall while he was busy fighting her brother, had kept her there because she amused him, he knew, because she wasn’t what he had expected in the beaten down, subjugated people he had found there.

A part of her wondered, sometimes, if he hadn’t kept her around because he knew who she was, but then, if he had, she didn’t understand why he ever would have let her go.

She hadn’t been wrong, she realized, as she came to a pause in front of the old building. Casterly Rock was the perfect residence for the man she had served as cupbearer for over those few months. Cold, elusive, and terrifying.
Arya swallowed hard, staring up at it, and told herself to keep fucking walking.

She wasn’t about to stop now, when she had already come all of this way.

She didn’t know where else to go, after all.

In truth, Arya didn’t know why she had come here.

When she had departed from Braavos, it had been with the resolve to finally return home, whatever form that ended up taking. She had lost most of her family; only Jon and Sansa remained, and she didn’t know if she had the power to get back to either one of them.

Jon was at the Wall, and Sansa…

She shut her eyes, and every night, she dreamed of the Merling Queen, or of Shae, and both reminded her of Sansa.

She didn’t know how she would react to actually meeting the other girl. She didn’t know if she’d be able to meet Sansa’s eyes at all.

But the moment her feet touched the ground in Westeros, she’d found herself walking West, until she made her way here.

Heading West, as she dreamt of Tywin Lannister sitting over a pile of his own shit, of Cersei Lannister, the last, grinning bitch of House Lannister, the last of those who had so destroyed her own family, sitting prettily in Casterly Rock these days, exiled by her own son, who appeared to hate her almost as much as Arya did, somehow.

And she knew why her feet walked west even if she tried to pretend that she had given up that life, that sort of thing, for good.

And now, she was standing in front of the Rock, that imposing, terrifying place built from rock that had once housed the great Tywin Lannister, and she…didn’t understand what she saw.

He was dead now, she’d heard. Had died over his own shit, and though a part of her had come to appreciate what he had had been during the time she spent as his cupbearer, another part of her thought he deserved such an inglorious death.

She still hated herself, a little, for the way she hadn’t slit his throat, or given his name to J’aquen Har, when she had the chance. He had gone on to order her mother’s death, her brother’s death, and if she had just acted, instead of surviving...

The valley before the Rock, Lannisport, around it…it was all full of soldiers, a long trail of soldiers wearing nondescript silver armor that looked like it hadn’t been washed in some time, pitching tents whose names were so faded she couldn’t even see the colors that had once belonged to them, and Arya…

Arya didn’t understand why there was an army parked outside of the Rock. An army, standing between her and the Rock.

An army that didn’t look like it belonged to the Lannisters, at first glance.

And why the army didn’t seem to have any colors associated with it, something almost unheard of in a place that insisted on the rule of feudal lords over armies, regardless of which king they followed.
But the fact remained that none of the soldiers were wearing armor she could easily identify; it had been some years since Arya had been in Westeros, and she wondered if that was the cause, but she was sure that she would have recognized the ridiculous uniforms that the Lannisters wore.

She swallowed hard, and kept walking.

As long as she was here, Arya supposed, she might as well finish off one of the names on her list, the name of someone who truly deserved to die.

Cersei Lannister was going to die tonight, and then perhaps she would stop dreaming of the woman Tyrion Lannister had called, so lovingly, Shae.

And if Cersei really was dead, as a part of her feared, then she might as well make sure of that. Might as well see Cersei Lannister’s head hanging from the walls of the Rock, the way they said her father’s head had.

She hadn’t stayed in King’s Landing long enough to find out, after all.

She glanced at the tents, trying to find some women among them; she could dress as a serving boy, to sneak into the Rock, but she’d prefer to not have to change her outfit overmuch, and she knew that if any of the soldiers at the gates pulled the hood back from her head, they would see her long hair.

She had taken many faces while she had been in Braavos, but she wouldn’t be able to pretend to be Arry, with hair this long.

She swallowed, feeling a little overwhelmed, suddenly, wondering if she should just turn around and leave now, if it was worth it, to try to sneak into the city to find Cersei Lannister’s head.

Stannis, if this was indeed Stannis’ army, wouldn’t know what she looked like; she couldn’t remember ever spending any significant amount of time with the man, and she couldn’t think of another lord save for Tywin who might have recognized her either and been able to take the Rock, and she was long dead, she knew, to the people of Westeros.

But on the off chance that one of them did, she didn’t think she would be able to amuse them enough into becoming their cupbearer, this time.

And then she saw the serving women, walking in a clump up the hill towards the Rock, carrying baskets full of clothes and, she thought, bread, and Arya made up her mind.

Her clothes were not so fine as theirs; in Braavos, she had gotten used to wearing pants because they allowed her greater mobility, in her kills, and when she had decided that she was returning to Westeros, she’d found the grubby gown she’d stolen from a woman’s basket of them tight in all of the wrong places and strangely uncomfortable, for all that it was so freeing around her legs.

But she had been wearing the gown for days, now, washing it only once at the single tavern she’d stayed at, before she left in the early morning, not liking the look the other, all male, patrons had given her.

She could have dealt with them, if she had to, but Arya hadn’t wanted to, not then, even if they all deserved to die, for the way that they were looking at her, she privately thought.

But she thought that her clothes were just nice enough that she might be able to convince the guards that she was also one of the maids, as she hurried along behind them, and just hoped that the maids would not be required to back up her story.
They walked through the camp like they were entirely at home with it, which Arya found strange, because at least two of them were wearing red and gold gowns, which still didn’t make sense.

She wondered if the people of the West had hated their overlords so much that they had happily accepted Stannis’ rule over them, and grunted.

One of the maids, a girl wearing the dull grays of the Baratheons, turned around and looked at her, but her face was blank, and Arya realized something then; not all of these girls were Lannister maids.

Some of them belonged to the Baratheons, somehow, which meant that Stannis’, or whoever’s, men must have been here for some time, but she doubted that every serving girl knew the name of every other serving girl.

Lucky.

She winked at the other girl, who gave her a disgusted look and turned back around again, flipping her hair as she did so.

Arya rolled her eyes.

She swallowed, following the maids through the doorway, a little shocked that the Lannisters allowed servants to get into their walls so easily. Tywin Lannister had never been a trusting man, after all, and she would have expected more from him.

But then, Tywin Lannister was dead.

She had heard about that, while she was in Braavos. That Tywin Lannister, a man who had both awed and terrified her, had died taking a shit on his toilet, poisoned by two different people and stabbed by a third.

And one of the people who had poisoned him had been…

Arya grimaced, shaking her head.

She hadn’t wanted to react, in the markets of Braavos, knowing that the Waif was somewhere around, watching her, no doubt watching for some sort of reaction to that exact news, but later, she had gone to the place where she had hidden Needle, and…

Well, she hadn’t cried for Tywin Lannister. She doubted even his children, whom he himself had admitted he had always been hard on, had ever cried after learning of their father’s death.

But she had felt…something, something nameless and horrifying, which had slithered its way up her throat until she didn’t want to be Arya Stark anymore, because surely Arya Stark shouldn’t feel anything at all with the death of a man who had orchestrated her brother’s death.

“Halt,” the guards at the gate before the Rock said, and Arya stilled with the other serving girls, as the guards squinted at them.

Lannister guards, Arya noted, her heart thudding in her chest. She had no idea what the fuck was happening, just now; why there were Lannister guards at the gates of the Rock, and Stannis’ soldiers stood at the base of it, not seeming to be in the middle of a siege at all, as she might have originally thought.

One of the guards reached out, then, chucking the chin of the girl in front of her. “You,” he said to her, and Arya could see the way she was shaking from the way her brown and grey dress was
trembling, in front of her. “You’ll stay behind.”

The girl let out a whimper, and Arya had no doubt the girl knew exactly why she was to stay behind.

She lifted her chin, tempted to say something, because she had spent far too long keeping silent, and the reminder that she had been silent while Tywin Lannister lived still weighed heavily on her, especially here.

As one, the other maids moved away from her, and Arya felt annoyance bubbling up within her at their actions, but found herself moving away with them, because after all, there was nothing she could do for this girl in full view of the encampment below, and besides, Arya needed to figure out what the fuck was going on.

This…wasn’t normal, any of it.

She swallowed hard, avoiding the maid’s eyes with the other maids as they walked through the gates, the doors shutting behind them, and the maids in front of her seemed to let out a collective sigh of relief, then.

And then they were moving, and Arya found herself left behind as they hurried off to do whatever it was they had chanced…that, to do.

She wandered.

She did not see Cersei’s head on the outer gates of the Keep, and she did not see the woman’s remains nailed up to the door, and she honestly could not think of a better place for them to put Cersei Lannister.

But if there were Lannister guards…

For a moment, she allowed herself to think of the possibility that the Lannisters had simply laid down their arms to Stannis, but had insisted on wearing their old uniforms, before she shook her head at the thought.

No, that didn’t make any sense, either.

There were Lannister guards here, which meant that somewhere in this Keep, there was a Lannister.

Arya could feel the blood pumping in her chest again, with the thought.

It didn’t make sense. Tywin Lannister was dead, but he had always been a proud man, and she could not imagine the Lannisters suddenly agreeing to allow other soldiers into their midst, to allow themselves to be besieged without fighting back, as they now seemed to be.

She took a deep breath, separating herself from the other serving girls as she walked forward, disappearing down a hallway unseen.

She had a feeling that, if Cersei Lannister was still in this great palace, if Arya hadn’t made a complete mistake in coming here, because none of the other noble Houses had ever done shit for hers, she would be holed up somewhere deep within the palace, somewhere that it would take the longest for the guards to find her.

Arya had her work cut out for her, trying to find the other woman.

She swallowed hard, reaching for Needle, where it hung inside her clothes, to feel its familiar,
reassuring presence there.

She had nearly thrown it into the ocean, when the Kindly Man had told her the truth about the Many Faced God, and about the Faceless Men, when she had forced it out of him and realized that whatever she was doing there, for them, it was for nothing.

That Shae had died for nothing.

She shook that thought from her head; if she got distracted now, there was no telling who might stumble upon her.

She found a courtyard then, blinking in confusion because she had been quite certain that she was walking deeper into the Keep, but of course the Lannisters didn’t know how to build a decent building, she thought, with some annoyance.

She almost walked back when two men walked around the corner then, and Arya swore, plastering herself up against the far wall of the tower and squeezing herself into as small of a position as she could, still standing.

She supposed that spending all of that time in Braavos had taught her one thing; how not to be noticed.

And then the men sat down at the table in the courtyard, and Arya swore softly under her breath, annoyed that they were not going to quickly pass her by.

And then her eyes narrowed, and she supposed that if she did stay put, and if these men were more than useless drunks, she might find out a bit of what the hells was going on, by listening in on them.

“Heh,” the other man muttered. “That’s what they get, for what they did. If the King were here, he would be pleased to hear that justice had prevailed, even if it was by the hands of other traitors.”

The first man snorted. “I don’t think Stannis or his Red Lady would give a single shit about the Freys,” he said. “They’re just lackeys to the Lannisters. And he’s not the King anymore.” He glanced nervously over his shoulder, and Arya grimaced, almost caught.

Arya went very still, her attention caught the moment the Freys’ names were said.

The Freys.

She closed her eyes.

Walder Frey was at the top of her list, upon returning to Westeros. Tywin Lannister may have given the order, or Cersei, or Joffrey, but Walder had been the one to invite her mother and brother to a wedding, and then had proceeded to have them slaughtered at it.

And these men…

Arya’s eyes narrowed, wondering why Lannister men should give a single shit about the Freys dying, why the King, of all people, ought to care…

Her brows furrowed as she realized suddenly she wasn’t sure who the King was, at the moment. Tommen?

She doubted that the child would be spoken of with such devotion, if that were the case. The last time she’d seen him, he’d been a little boy who cried too easily, as if begging his brother to use him
for a target.

In Braavos, she had heard that it was a woman who ruled Westeros now, a woman who claimed the King’s power and ruled through a child yet to be born, and surely a newborn wouldn't care about something like justice…

Unless...

“Say what you like about the Starks, the King always had a healthy respect for them,” the first man said. “And what the Freys did to them…well, they deserve everything they got.’

He looked a little queasy though, Arya thought, as she turned her head around the pillar to get a good look at these men, wondering just what the fuck was going on.

And that was when she noticed it.

They were wearing Baratheon armor, though they wore the colors of House Lannister. Fuck if she hadn’t noticed it before, though the soldiers in the valley had not been wearing colors at all.

The soldiers who had been following Tywin Lannister had all been wearing the gold and red of the Lannisters, not a single one of them pretending that they followed a Baratheon King.

Which meant…

Which meant that…

“Still…” one of the men said, still looking disturbed. “I think even the King’s woman would agree that what the Boltons did, it was…too fucking far. And the Boltons were at the fucking Red Wedding too, you know.”

A shrug. “Hard to tell where any of these fucking Houses were at any given time, these days,” the first man muttered, not looking like he particularly cared.

Mercenary, Arya labeled him, though the other man, with all of his talk about the King and about justice, was no doubt a true soldier.

A good little soldier, sent into war to die like one.

No doubt, they’d both been part of the army which had taken Casterly Rock, and if Stannis Baratheon controlled the Rock, the last place where Cersei Lannister was rumored to be, then…

Well, Arya couldn’t imagine that Cersei Lannister was still alive.

She felt numb.

If Cersei Lannister was dead, then she had come all of the way to the Rock for nothing, it appeared. She’d fucked herself, when she could have gone and groveled at Sansa’s feet, or at least gone to the Wall to find the only brother she had left.

And instead, she’d sent herself here, to a place full of Lannisters and men who followed Stannis Baratheon because they believed him a god.

A cough from one of the men. “Did you hear that they were flayed alive, all of them, like the Boltons used to do to their enemies? The women and children, too. The Bastard is mad, that one.”

The first voice sounded rather dismissive, even as Arya grimaced.
She remembered Roose Bolton, remembered the sort of man he had been. He was not kind.

But he had been a friend to House Stark, she had thought. And now, he had killed the Boltons. She thought that had to count for something.

“Just be glad Cersei Lannister isn’t mad enough to do the same,” the other man muttered. “Mad bitch would probably like to, if she thought she could get away with it, but she knows she needs us.”

Arya closed her eyes.

So Cersei was still alive, Arya hadn’t been mistaken about that, in the things she had picked up in the marketplaces of Braavos, and then later still, on the ship returning here.

Good.

Needle itched, against her side, and she grimaced, and wondered if it was so good at all, as the Merling Queen’s face flashed before her eyes again.

“The King is dead, more like than not,” he went on, “And Cersei Lannister may be a cunt, but she sure as shit ain’t stupid. Well, now. Must be plenty stupid to fuck your own—”

“Shut the fuck up, idiot.”

But they both laughed, all the same.

She waited until the mercenary was gone, and then she struck.

“Excuse me,” Arya said, trying her hardest to sound like a Western girl, like what she imagined Robb’s little wife had sounded like, as she walked out from behind the pillar, and the man jumped a little, at the sight of her. “What’s this you say about the Freys?”

The men exchanged uncomfortable glances. “F-How long you been standing there, girlie?”

She shrugged, trying to look nonchalant, and rather suspecting that she’d failed. “Long enough. What happened to the Freys?”

She wondered if a Western lady would be this direct, and then she thought of Cersei Lannister, how she had killed her own husband, the King, and found that she didn’t particular care if she was deemed strange for being direct, or not.

“Well, it ain’t for dainty little ears, m’lady,” the first man said, and Arya rolled her eyes.

“My ears are hardly…” she allowed her eyes to trail up and down his body suggestively, the way that she had seen the Merling Queen do to plenty a man, making them weak to her every suggestion, “Dainty.”

He flushed, giving her the same onceover she had just given him, and apparently liking what he saw.

Arya had learned enough, from her time among the Merling Queen’s ladies, even if that time had not been particularly long, to know how to position her body, how to make herself look more desirable to a man, from watching the Merling Queen adjust accordingly every time she met a new man. She had known from the moment she walked up to him that he would tell her what she wanted to know.

“I’m surprised you haven’t heard,” the man said, shrugging. “Freys were all butchered not a few nights hence, every man, woman and child in the Riverlands. The Bolton Bastard of Winterfell claimed responsibility for it, came like an animal in the middle of the night and flayed them all alive.
They say they could hear their screams down the River. He was gone by morning. The Blackfish has already claimed their lands for himself. Might have half a prayer of actually taking back the Riverlands, now.”

Arya sucked in a breath. “Why?” she asked, forcing herself not to react more than that, even as the blood pumped in her ears.

The Freys were dead.

The Freys were dead.

Every man, woman and child was dead, and the Bolton Bastard of Winterfell had killed them. The Bolton Bastard of Winterfell.

Everything about that title sounded so wrong, to Arya’s ears.

The mercenary shrugged. “They’re saying Cersei Lannister asked him to bring Shireen Baratheon here, and bend the knee,” he said. “This was his answer. The little princess is already halfway to King’s Landing.”

Arya swallowed thickly. “To King’s Landing,” she repeated, because her understanding of this place might be a little rusty after so long, but she would have thought that with Cersei Lannister’s grandson on the throne, King’s Landing would not be seen as an…enemy.

But clearly they were, if the Bolton Bastard of Winterfell was killing Lannister allies, or as close to allies as the Freys could be to anyone when they were only ever looking out for themselves, to spite Cersei.

She should have gone to the Freys, Arya thought, as she had originally planned. She had wanted to go to the Freys, and make them pay for the things that they had done to her brother and her mother.

They said that the Freys had sewn a wolf’s head onto her brother’s neck, after chopping his head off in the first place.

They had very much deserved their place on her list, for that.

She closed her eyes, and saw Shae, spread out beneath her, body twisted in odd contortions, neck slit, blood pouring out onto the bed, onto her Lannister lover.

Her eyes flew open.

She should have gone to the Freys.

If she had, she could have made them pay, personally, for what they had done to her family, and instead, a family who had been at her brother’s murder, who had actively participated in it, had done it, had gotten rid of them, and she had not.

Had killed them, and where the fuck was the justice in that?

“Hey,” the soldier said, reaching up to rub at the back of his neck. “I don’t think I should have told you that. You look a little…green. Perhaps you should sit…”

Arya shook her head. “Whose orders did they do it on?” She demanded, because she had to know.

The man shrugged. “No one’s. Cersei Lannister declared war on the Tyrells, and the Boltons slaughtered the Freys in the night while they were traveling to help Cersei out, uh, here,” he looked
uncomfortable again, “Against King Stannis, and killed every last one of them. And then, when it
was daybreak, they had somehow made it to the Freys’ Keep, and slaughtered the rest of them.
Every man, woman, and child.”

He grimaced, again.

Arya stared at him.

“It was their way of declaring for the Tyrells,” the man finished, uncomfortably, looking almost
suspicious of her now, and she supposed she was acting strangely, when she ought to already know
most of this, as he’d said. “Ah, I forgot to ask. Are you a Lannister servant?”

She stared at him, supposed that made sense, to explain why she was reacting the way that she was,
as if she gave a single fuck about the Freys, other than in knowing that she had not been able to kill
them herself.

What had been the point of spending all of that time training, when she only came back too late to
kill anyone who had been on her list? She may have learned much, but it felt useless to her, now.

She should never have gone to Braavos in the first place.

She nodded, idly. “I…Yes,” she whispered, making her voice sound small, so that he would leave
her alone. “I have a cousin who’s a Frey.”

The man swallowed. “Ah,” he murmured. “I shouldn’t’ve…”

She shook her head. “How did they die?” He stared at her. “I mean…” she flushed. “Did any of
them die well? Lord Frey, perhaps?”

She was fully aware that he might lie to her, now that she had just said she had a cousin, no doubt
dead now, who was a Frey, but she thought that she might at least make the effort.

She hoped that Walder Frey had squealed like a pig, after the way he had laughed about her mother
and brother, had killed them at a wedding.

The man shrugged, still looking uncomfortable. “This new Lord Bolton, he is…” he shuddered
slightly. “A beast of a man, they say. I didn’t mean to surprise you with this knowledge. The whole
castle’s been talking about it, I would have thought a Lannister girl would have known…”

He noticed, then, her lack of golden Lannister hair, she thought, as he fell silent.

My husband, in fact, will be looking for me, soon…”

She was moving away by then, terrified that he would reach out and grab her and that she would
have to kill him for it, but the man didn’t seem to care, standing still as she all but fled the courtyard.

She was glad. It wasn’t him she suddenly wanted to kill, at the moment.

The new Lord Bolton was a beast, he’d said.

The new Lord Bolton.

The Boltons had been her family’s allies, she knew, in the North, up until the moment when they’d
betrayed her brother at the Red Wedding, had actively taken part in the murders, themselves, she’d
heard.
The Waif had enjoyed throwing that at her, whenever Arya didn’t react enough for her, so she knew that as much.

And now, the Freys were dead, butchered in the night, unsuspecting, just as her mother and brother had been unsuspecting, and Arya couldn’t even be happy about the justice of it, because the Boltons had butchered them, and the Boltons had no doubt had the idea because they were at the Fucking Wedding, themselves.

She gritted her teeth, realizing she had walked all of the way to the other end of the courtyard without the soldier following her only then, and she took a deep breath, forcing herself to be calm, because she needed to be calm, to get out of this place.

She’d been a fool, to come here at all.

If she was going to waste this trip, she should have asked that soldier how it was that Cersei Lannister was still alive when he was a Baratheon soldier, but instead, she’d learned that the Freys were dead, and she could not even have that bit of justice.

She ought to go track down this new Lord Bolton, now, and let him know exactly what she thought of him stealing away what rightfully belonged to her.

She ought to flay him alive, the way it was rumored House Bolton used to punish their enemies…

She ought to…

No.

She had promised herself that she wasn’t going to do that anymore. That she wasn’t going to kill just because she could; a long time ago, a little girl had seen her father, her mother and brother, murdered, and she had made a list of those who had wronged them, who had wronged her.

She had gone to Braavos to learn how to kill the people left on her list, not to kill people who didn’t matter, and she was going to stick to that list.

She had to.

Arya Stark took a deep breath, and was just about to leave the courtyard and…and, she didn’t know what, when she noticed something, a figure, walking along the outer courtyard of the Rock, and her eyes narrowed suddenly, because there was no way that was who she thought it was…

A moment later, Arya forgot all of her protestations about not killing anyone else who wasn’t on her list, anyone else whose death wouldn’t matter, wouldn’t have meaning to her.

She sucked in a breath, and Arya’s eyes widened at the sight of the man, and before she knew what she was doing, her feet were stalking across the courtyard, following him, leaving the soldier behind without a second glance.

Because she knew this man, and that wasn’t possible, because she shouldn’t know anyone in the Rock, she shouldn’t see this particular fucking man in the Rock.

He rounded the corner, out of the courtyard and into a narrow hallway, and Arya followed him, unthinking, the fury she’d been trying to force down moments ago rearing its ugly head once more, and this time, she didn’t try to stop it.

She reveled in it.
This man wasn’t on her list, but by the gods, he ought to have been.

Arya didn’t think she’d put him on her list because she’d simply been… too shocked that yet another person who had pledged their loyalty to the Starks, who she’d known as a brother, once, had betrayed them.

Had been lost to her.

She ought to have added him to the list, when she’d heard about the things he’d done to her brothers, but she’d been too horrified, and by then, she’d been No One, not Arya Stark, and she knew that she shouldn’t have cared, so she hadn’t dared to add it.

Besides, she knew that the Waif would ask her why his name was on her list, and she didn’t think that she could bear to talk about Rickon and Bran.

They were innocents, in all of this, more so than her father and brother had been, because they were just children, and she didn’t want to think of them and death in the same breath.

But he had still done that. Still murdered them, because it suited his wretched, jealous little self to steal Winterfell from the Starks, who had raised him like their own-

By that point, she was already moving, so close that she could reach out and touch him, if she wanted to.

She didn’t.

The darkness of the corridor they were in, abandoned save for the two of them, made her feel brave enough to speak up.

“Theon,” she hissed, and watched his back go very still, watched as he slowly turned around, and his jaw fell open at the sight of her.

If she had been No One, she thought that she might have enjoyed the look on his face, the utter and complete shock there, before his face morphed into something pathetic and terrified, and he swallowed hard.

Arya found herself mirroring the action, unthinking.

“No,” he said, and his eyes blew wide with terror, belying his words as he backed up one step, and then another. “No, I’m not him, I swear. My name is Reek, it’s not Theon, I don’t know…”

“Stop lying, Theon,” she snapped, as she backed him up against the wall behind him. He gulped, and suddenly, a knife was in her hand, pressed against his belly. A part of her just wanted to start cutting into him, without giving him the chance to speak to her again, because how dare he try to deny who he was, when they had grown up together, when she knew damn well exactly who he was. “Or I swear by the gods, I’ll start cutting you open until you admit who you are, you fucking coward.”

Her eyes were wet. She didn’t know when that had started, and she angrily reached up to swipe at one of them with her free hand. The other, holding the knife, trembled.

She might just cut him open again.

He let out a whimper, as if she’d spoken the thought aloud. “Please, my name is Reek,” he whispered. “I swear, I’m not that man anymore, and I didn’t-“
“Shut the fuck up!” She shouted, and then stilled, fully aware that her shout would no doubt bring servants or soldiers running, at any moment.

She maneuvered him as quickly as she could through the corridor, and found a small room in the hallway behind that one to throw him into, shutting the door behind the both of them and latching, it tightly.

Theon stared at her, looking betrayed, and she felt another burst of fury, that he might look at her like that, after what he had done.

She raised the knife.

Perhaps he hadn’t been on her list, but he belonged there, and she had never given anyone else on her list the chance to explain themselves. She certainly wasn’t going to start, now.

“Wait, please!” He begged, falling down onto his knees on the floor, and Arya stared down at him in disgust, the knife lowering slightly as she found herself wondering if he was even worth it, this pathetic, sad little creature kneeling at her feet, who she had once looked up to the same way that she had looked up to Robb.

She had just told herself that he deserved to be on her list, though he had never been, and now, here she was, not even able to kill him because he was too fucking pathetic.

“Get up, Theon,” she snapped at him, and he grimaced, raising his hands above him wordlessly, his whole body shaking.

She thought about her brothers, about poor Rickon and Bran, who’d been barely more than babes the last time she had seen them, about how she might have been a child forced to grow up far too quickly, but her brothers had never gotten that chance.

Theon had killed them before they ever had that chance.

“Arya…” he stared up at her, with wide, haunted eyes, and Arya gritted her teeth, pressing the knife into the soft flesh of his stomach.

Or…not so flesh. The Theon she had known had never had much fat on him, but the man in front of her looked barely more than flesh and bones.

She didn’t let herself think about why for very long.

“I said get the fuck up!” She snapped at him, a small, wicked part of her delighting in the way that he flinched at her raised voice.

And then he was getting to his feet, hands still raised above his head, trying valiantly to meet her eyes. Well, valiant for a fucking coward.

“She didn’t kill your brothers, Arya,” he told her, and he was crying, but she didn’t care, because she was crying, too, and he deserved everything she was about to do to him, because again, he was lying. He swallowed hard. “I know you don’t believe me now, but I didn’t kill your brothers, I swear.”

He was still shaking.

She wondered if he was that afraid to die, or if he feared what she would do to him before she killed him.
“Because you’re not Theon?” She sneered.

He flinched. “I-I...”

She scoffed at him. “My father treated you like a son, like family,” she told him, mercilessly when she saw the way he wilted a little, under her words. “He was only ever kind to you, and he didn’t have to be. But he had honor. And those boys… they were your brothers, too. Where was the honor in killing them, Theon?”

Theon’s eyes were wet. His tears were slipping down in dirty tracks on his cheeks.

Arya couldn’t meet them, suddenly; she found herself talking to somewhere at his chest level, rather than his face. “Why did you do it?”

She had thought, a moment ago, that she didn’t need an explanation, but those other people on her list… they had wronged her, but they hadn’t been family, once.

His lips quivered. “I… I didn’t kill them, Arya,” he swore, his whole body shaking when she stuck the knife a little bit deeper, until she encountered resistance, and she wanted nothing more than to plunge the knife further, to watch the blood and the guts seep out of him the way they had the Merling Queen...

“Arya, I swear by the old gods, I didn’t touch them!” He cried, and there was something almost animal in the way that he curled in on himself, hands still raised, not bothering to flee or fight back, that Arya paused.

“I heard what you did,” she snapped at him. “You hung their little bodies outside of Winterfell after you burned them. You butchered them like animals, little boys who used to call you Theo because they were too young to say your name right, and you killed them just so you could call yourself the Fucking Lord of Winterfell!”

He was shaking his head, again, sobs leaking out of him loudly, and Arya would have spared a thought to the idea that they might be overheard if she kept shouting and he kept crying for very much longer, but no one had come so far, and she found that she didn’t particularly care, just now.

She just wanted him to stop lying to her, to fucking explain himself so that she could kill him and then get out of this fucking place, which never brought anything but misery.

Cersei, still alive. Theon, too much of a coward to admit everything that he’d stolen from her.

“Not… not them,” Theon rasped out, and she stared at him. “I swear, it wasn’t them, Arya. It wasn’t them. I needed the bodies, so I took them, but it wasn’t Rickon and Bran. I wouldn’t…I couldn’t have done that.”

Arya stared at him. She wanted to disbelieve him, to continue driving the knife through his stomach until she felt his insides in her hands, but… horrifyingly, she believed him, could see the truth in his eyes, and somehow, that was worse.

“Where are they?” She demanded, not letting up on the knife because she didn’t think that her hand was capable of it.

Theon shook his head. “I don’t know.” She raised an eyebrow. “I swear, I don’t. They… they left, a long time before the Boltons ever took Winterfell. I lost them, and then I had two boys from the village who looked like them killed and said they were dead so that I could claim Winterfell,” he gasped out, all in one horrible, pathetic breath, and Arya stared at him.
“No,” she breathed, and her legs suddenly felt wobbly.

Theon cleared his throat. “It…it’s true,” he whispered, hoarsely. “I swear, Arya, it’s true. I…”

Her little brothers could still be alive.

It was unlikely, she could admit, and didn’t feel as horrible at the admittance as she might have, believing them dead all of this time, if no one else in the Seven Kingdoms had seen them, but then again, no one had seen her, either.

Something that felt strangely like…hope, welled up within her, and she swallowed hard.

It had been a long time since she’d had the feeling. She almost didn’t recognize it when she did.

But…

But even if her brothers were still alive out there, somewhere, Theon had still killed two little boys her brothers’ ages, so that he could take her home for himself.

Surely, he deserved to pay for that, she thought, and even as she had the thought, she found that she couldn’t drive the knife into his gut, even though dear gods, she wanted to.

She sagged a little, the knife going limp in her hand, though she didn’t lower it.

Theon seemed very aware of that fact, as he stared down at it, and Arya let out a sigh.

“What the fuck happened to you, Theon?” She whispered.

He blinked up at her. “I…I…”

He didn’t bother to offer an explanation after that, falling silent, and Arya gritted her teeth, annoyed with him all over again.

She huffed, turning and walking towards the door to the room, and unlatching it.

“What-Where are you going?” He asked her back, and Arya sighed, because she had just made up her mind that perhaps leaving him alive would be a more fitting punishment than killing him, and there he went again…talking.

“Winterfell,” she said, shortly.

He sucked in a breath. “Why? The Boltons…Arya, they’re not nice people, and now that Stannis is gone to the North, they’ll either already have Winterfell back, or they’ll be taking it back, very soon.”

Arya gritted her teeth. “Not if I can stop it.”

She could hear him scrambling up behind her. “No, you don’t understand. Arya…these people…hells, why would you want to go there?”

She didn’t need to explain herself to him, Arya told herself. She didn’t need to tell him that after what had happened to Shae, she couldn’t bring herself to meet her sister’s gaze, to go back to Sansa, where she was still stuck in King’s Landing, and that she was going to Winterfell to find brothers who were no doubt long gone, if no one had found them since they’d escaped Theon, on the off chance that they were hiding in the woods, just waiting for her to find them.

“Wait,” he said, and Arya paused, turning around, supposing that she could at least humor him in this
one thing, if she was going to leave him alive to let his guilt slowly eat away at him. Theon took a deep breath.

“I’ll go with you, to Winterfell,” Theon said, swallowing hard.

Arya stared at him. “No,” she said, finally, and he slumped a little. She felt strangely compelled to defend her choice. “You would just slow me down.”

He sighed. “There’s something I have to do, there. Someone I left behind.”

Arya scoffed. “Who, my brothers?” She demanded.

Theon shook his head. “Arya, please.”

Arya cocked her head. “Why did you leave Winterfell to begin with?” She asked, curious.

The last thing she’d heard, Theon had stolen Winterfell from her brothers after he’d executed them like criminals, and not the children they were, and she supposed it made sense that he would have lost it, being such a fucking coward, but it didn’t make sense that he was here, at the Rock.

He sighed. “Stannis…Lord Stannis, he took me with him, when he took Winterfell. My…Ramsay Bolton, Roose Bolton’s bastard…well, I suppose Lord Bolton, now, he just…I was his captive, and he just forgot about me, when he was fleeing. Lord Stannis thought I would be of more use here because, I suppose, he thought he was coming back.”

He said it like the knowledge hurt him, somehow, that the man who had kept him captive - Arya assumed - had left him behind to be caught by Stannis Baratheon, instead.

She didn’t dare ask.

He’d told her that his name was Reek, after all. She wasn’t certain that she wanted to know.

It would only make her feel bad for him, she knew that much, and the last thing she wanted at the moment was to feel pity for him.

“Stannis…King Stannis, he thought that I would be a good bargaining chip against the Iron Islands, and he intended to…to use me, for that,” he whispered, and his voice was very hoarse. He lowered his head, and whispered, “They didn’t want me, either. I…I don’t know why he’s still kept me alive, after that.”

Arya sucked in a breath. “Imagine that,” she said, cruelly, because she could, and because she wanted the words to hurt, “Your own family, after you butchered the last one that you found, didn’t want you near them.”

Theon grimaced. “Arya…”

She lifted her chin. “You may not have killed them,” she hissed at him, “but if you did, and this is just some sort of false hope you’re giving me, I swear, by something that matters,” she didn’t say the old gods and the new, because they hardly mattered, didn’t they? “I swear, that I will come back here and make you wish that Stannis had killed you.”

Theon lowered his head.

Satisfied, Arya turned around and threw open the door to the room, walking out into the hallway, ignoring Theon when he called after her.
“Wait!”

She kept walking, down the hallway, back the way she had come, ignoring both Theon and the strange looks of the few servants who passed them, looking confused at the sight of the young woman ignoring the man trailing after her, no doubt coming to completely the wrong impression about the matter, too.

“Arya, it’s about your brother,” he said, and she turned around, and blinked at him.

For a moment, she thought he was going to say that one of them was dead, that he’d said ‘brother’ because something had happened to one of them, but…looking into his eyes, she’d believed him earlier, and besides, there was something about the way he’d said the word…

Oh, gods.

“Jon?” She whispered, because even if Theon hadn’t killed her younger brothers, they had never been found, and that meant that they were no doubt lost. Jon was the only one left to her, besides Sansa, and she couldn’t go to Sansa now, not if what the woman had said was true and she really was Sansa’s friend.

He shook his head. “Take me with you, and I’ll tell you,” he promised.

She snorted, the answer to that coming easily. Not worth it, not even a little bit. No doubt he was just trying to trick her, and he didn’t know a damn thing about Jon. It wouldn’t make sense that he would know anything about Jon, at the Wall, anyway.

“No,” she said, and started walking again, a calculated move.

“It’s not safe for you out there, alone,” he called after, and she bit back a laugh.

“I’ll be fine,” she told him, not bothering to turn around as she did so. “I’ve survived on my own this long, trust me.”

A heavy silence. Arya bit back a sigh, a traitorous part of her warring up within her.

No.

No, she was not about to help Theon Greyjoy get away from his captor, even if he hadn’t killed her brothers. He’d still betrayed Robb and stolen Winterfell for himself. She didn’t owe him anything.

“He’s not at the Wall,” Theon told her. “So if you’re going to Winterfell hoping to go to the Wall after, you’re not going to find him there.”

Arya paused, turning back around at the base of the courtyard. “Where is he?” She breathed.

Theon grimaced, opening his mouth, and for one horrifying moment, she thought that he was going to tell her that, after all of this time, Jon was dead. That she had left only Sansa, who would hate her the moment she laid eyes on her, because, by the way the woman and the Imp had put it, Shae had been the only friend Sansa had, in King’s Landing.

And then the courtyard was pouring with dozens of people, streaming into the place with a frenzied fear, tripping over themselves as they poured out of the corridor that she and Theon had just left, and out of a dozen other ones, besides that, making their way for the great gates of the Keep, and Arya blinked in confusion, glancing at Theon.
But Theon…

Theon had already been swept up by the crowd and pulled away, and Arya swore under her breath, because now, of course, she had to go after him.

She had to know what he meant, about her brother.

About…Jon.

Fuck.

She started forward, following after him without really thinking about what she was doing, because she knew that if she did, she was only going to be annoyed with herself.

Theon, or Reek, whatever he was calling himself now, chased after her.

“Please, Arya,” he told her. “Jon isn’t at the Wall. You can’t…”

“I already told you, I’m into going to the Wall,” Arya hissed out, spinning on him then. “I’m going home.”

Theon shuddered. “Arya…”

“Who are the boys you murdered, then?” she demanded, and found some satisfaction in the way that Theon flinched. She knew that was somewhat hypocritical of her; after all, she didn’t know the names of many of those she had murdered in Braavos, for the Many Faced God. Hadn’t cared, at the time.

She cared now, though she didn’t know if that meant anything.

“If they weren’t my brothers, who were they? What were their names?”

Theon flinched again.

Arya lifted her chin. “Where’s Cersei?” she asked, determined that he was going to be of at least some use, if he was going to follow her around like a useless puppy whom she couldn’t even bring herself to kill, not even after the things that he had done to her family.

He grimaced. “Not here,” he said, and Arya felt her stomach sink, at his words.

She had come all of this way for nothing, it seemed. She could have easily learned along the road to Winterfell what had become of her family home, what had become of the Freys because of the people who now had Winterfell.

“She went to King’s Landing, to attend Joffrey’s funeral,” he said, and if there was one good thing she had learned since returning to this wretched kingdom, Arya thought, it was that at least Joffrey was very much dead.

For a moment, Arya considered that was where she ought to go next. Even if she couldn’t stomach the thought of facing Sansa, she knew that she would have to find her sister eventually; Sansa was what remained of her family, these days, and Cersei was in King’s Landing.

Arya had come here to kill Cersei. She might as well go to King’s Landing.

But…her heart yearned for Winterfell, yearned to meet this man who thought he could steal her vengeance from her and put the bastard in his place. Yearned to know what had become of her
brothers, brothers she had long thought dead.

“Then I’m going,” she said, bitterly, and started walking, ignoring the way that Theon, or Reek, chased after her, calling out desperately for her to wait.

She had waited long enough to go home, after all.

She made it as far as the outer walls of the Keep, ignoring the way that Theon shouted after her even with the strange looks that were sent her way because of it, all of the way to the outer gates where the guards gave her a bit more attention than they had, going in.

The serving girl they had singled out before was nowhere in sight, now.

Theon moved forward, almost protectively, and Arya grimaced, wanting to shrug off his touch the moment his arm wrapped so proprietarily around her waist.

Wanting to punch him, more like.

“Look at that,” one of the guards said, amused now more than interested in her. “Freak’s found himself a bitch desperate enough for him,” one of them said. “I don’t suppose you wanna cue us in how you managed it, eh?”

Theon flushed crimson.

Arya lifted her chin. “I’m due out in the valley,” she said, crisply. “Master’s expecting me. Unless you want to explain to my lord why I’m late?”

Theon blinked at her.

The soldiers grimaced. “Of course not…” one of them began, but didn’t get much farther.

“She’s not going anywhere,” a new soldier said, stalking up the hill towards them, followed by at least a dozen more, and followed with the eyes of far more than that. “None of you are. Not while you belong to Cersei Lannister and her brat.”

Arya did roll her eyes, then. For a moment, she’d been terrified that he had somehow found out who she was, but this was almost worse. To be lumped in with Cersei Lannister about anything...Arya made a face.

“The bitch is gone,” the Baratheon soldier said, straightening up. “Left her bastard behind, and we’ll take no more of her demands here, without her here to grovel with her gold for them.”

Laughter, throughout the crowd.

The Lannister soldiers seemed annoyed by that. “You seemed happy enough to listen to her demands while she was here, with your own ‘king’ gone and fucked off to his own death.”

“I’ll hear no words against Cersei Lannister,” another said, and Arya resisted the sudden urge to laugh.

“Nor I against the true King,” the first man said, and Arya slid fluidly under an arm and into the crowd of soldiers who looked absolutely ready to swing their swords at any second.

Vaguely, she was aware of Theon following along behind her, but Arya ignored him. She suddenly had a much larger concern, for the valley was a large one, which stood between them and the way out of the Westerlands, and it was suddenly about to become the scene of a battle, she could see that
damn well clearly, now.

“You will let us pass into the Rock, or you will meet the end of my sword, coward,” the man said, and Arya grimaced as she pulled her hood up a little higher around her neck, glancing sideways at Theon, who was determinedly not meeting her gaze as she walked along, as silent as she could manage.

She knew how to make herself disappear. The fact that Theon would not leave her alone, however, was a challenge she didn’t like, not just now.

She had not come this far to be cut down by a Baratheon, or a Lannister.

She knew a moment before it happened, watched with something like blankness as the first, Baratheon soldier cut into the Lannister man’s throat, as blood spurted out over the grass.

As pandemonium broke out, with that first swing, and without really understanding why she did it, Arya reached out and grabbed Theon’s arm, dragging him along behind her lest he get himself killed in the melee.

He had promised her a secret, after all, and she couldn’t quite stomach the thought of leaving him here to die, by chance or accident, rather than by her own sword, after the things he had done.

Theon stared at her in shock as they rounded another soldier, staring down at their entwined fingers.

Arya dropped his hand in disgust, and kept marching forward, pulling Needle free of her clothes when it became apparent that they weren’t getting out of this valley without a fight, and that Theon had no weapon of his own.

He knows where Jon is, she told herself, as she considered him over the top of Needle.

And then she swung, and Theon ducked with a silent, tortured scream as she buried Needle in the throat of the soldier rushing at them behind him.

The man fell to the ground with a dull thud.

Arya watched him, that feeling of impassiveness that she’d felt as she watched the Merling Queen die beneath her rising up in her once again.

She hated it. Hated that she was forced to feel it for the sake of Theon Greyjoy, of all people.

“He’s North of the Wall, Arya,” Theon said, very quietly, as he stared down at the man, gurgling on the ground. “With Stannis Baratheon, and Ser Jaime Lannister.” He licked his lips.

Arya stared at him, something like fear welling up within her. For a moment, she didn’t understand his words, didn’t understand what he meant until she realized that he was giving away his only leverage, because of what she had just done, and then, she didn’t understand how he could be so stupid as to tell her when they weren’t even clear of what was rapidly becoming a new battle.

And then the words sank in, and she didn’t have time to think about the rest.

She knew her brother had spent all of these years at the Wall, but surely, that was very different from… “What the fuck is he doing there?” She asked, even if a part of her already knew the answer to that question, somehow.

Sometimes, in the night, since she had stopped being No One, she dreamt of white faces and blue
“Janei,” Genna whispered fiercely, and there was a fear in her words that Janei had not heard even when Cersei had crowned Tommen as King. “I need you to listen very carefully. Our lives depend on it.”

Janei grimaced, not liking the sudden fear on the woman’s face. “What is it?” she asked, even as the sounds of battle raged outside. She remembered that sound, from the last time that Stannis Baratheon’s men had marched through the Westerlands, burning the ground behind them, killing anyone who stood against them in the name of a king who was, in fact, a bastard.

Genna stared at her for several long moments, as if she were choosing her next words carefully, and Janei was distantly aware that the other woman was trying not to scare her.

But when the servants had burst into their chambers, announcing that a fight had broken out at the gates that was quickly turning into a bloodbath, Janei had known that this wasn’t some simple misunderstanding, that something terrible was about to happen.

She licked her lips.

Since then, the fight had turned into a full blown battle, the members of Stannis’ army who had not two weeks ago declared for Cersei’s son turning on the Lannister soldiers who remained at the Rock, defending Tommen’s claim.

She could hear the shouts and sounds of war from Genna’s chambers, and Janei found it suddenly difficult to breathe as she remembered how it had felt for the Rock to be surrounded by Stannis’ men, and at the mercy of whatever Jaime and Stannis Baratheon managed to negotiate before all of them were killed.

She gulped.

Jaime wasn’t here now, and neither was Stannis. For that matter, neither was Cersei. She had made the decision to leave her son amongst these men, and Janei had thought that with her absence, she might finally be able to breathe again, because surely if Cersei trusted the situation enough to leave her son here, then they had to be safe.

And of course, not days after she started for King’s Landing, the Baratheons and Lannisters were at each other’s throats once more, without a single Baratheon or Lannister to lead them.

She knew what it was that Genna was going to tell her, now. Knew that it would be the same thing that the other woman had prepared her to do the last time that this had happened, when Jaime Lannister was still here and the other woman feared that he would not be able to negotiate with Stannis Baratheon because he was not the sort of man to be negotiated with.

She swallowed hard.

Somehow, Jaime had managed it, even with much of his own army still back in King’s Landing, with many more of them frightened at the thought of fighting Stannis’ army, growing as it was.

But he wasn’t here, now.

He’d gone North with that very same man and most of their troops, and left them here in the hands of Baratheon soldiers who didn’t give a damn about Lannisters, not when their lord was constantly reminding them that the Lannisters were nothing more than duplicitous liars.
And they wouldn’t care that Tommen was a child, either. Stannis hadn’t cared about that when he had declared all of the Baratheon children bastards.

She swallowed hard.

She knew what Genna was going to ask her, and yet, she was terrified at the thought of doing that thing.

It had been a miracle, Janei had thought at the time, that Genna had convinced Cersei to let Janei stay here, to serve Tommen, while she went to King’s Landing without him. Cersei had been very insistent, though Tommen had thrown the first tantrum over it that she had ever seen from him, when he was normally such a well behaved boy, that he not travel with her to King’s Landing, even for his own brother’s funeral.

And Janei did not know if it was because Cersei was beginning to trust Janei now, if she trusted her with Tommen, or because she wanted her to keep an eye on Genna that she gave in so easily to Genna’s entreaties to leave her here, but now, Janei was beginning to wonder if she would regret not traveling with Cersei to the capital.

She licked her lips. “I…”

“Janei,” Genna said, and her voice was harsher now, coarser. “Do you want to be responsible for Tommen’s death?”

Janei flinched at the other woman’s tone. “I can’t…”

“You are the only one who can do this, do you understand?” Genna asked her, calmly, and Janei glanced up sharply, meeting the other woman’s gaze, not liking the words the other woman was leaving out.

She was older, of course, but she was not so old that she could not come with them, Janei thought, desperately. And yet, she knew that was exactly what Genna was going to say next. Because it was what she had said the last time.

That she could not flee while there was still a Rock to defend, that someone had to remain behind to fight to the last, because Lannisters were not cowards, but proud lions.

Janei felt a little bit like a coward. No matter what was happening in King’s Landing, she doubted that it included a siege from traitorous soldiers who knew far too much about the city to begin with.

“Take Tommen and your brother out through the sewers,” Genna whispered. “You remembered where I showed you how to get out through there?”


“I’ll take care of Cersei, if she seeks to take me to task for this,” Genna muttered, darkly. Then, “Find something less flashy for the boy to wear, something a serving boy would wear, for protection. He is not a king, no matter what Cersei seeks to call him, Janei, and you must do whatever you can to keep him safe from those who will see him as only that. Do you understand?”

Janei swallowed hard. “I…”

“Swear to me,” Genna said, squeezing her shoulderblades. Hard.

Janei gulped. “I swear,” she whispered, and the finality of the situation seemed to settle around her
shoulders even as Genna let go of them.

Genna didn’t think that they would keep Casterly Rock, she realized, by the end of this fight. Or, if they did, she didn’t think it would be safe for Tommen to remain here as a King, anyway.

Cersei had said, while Janei combed out her hair, that she had named her son king in order to protect him. Genna was instructing her not to call him that, not to treat him as such, in order to protect him.

Janei’s mind buzzed in worry.

“Go to your mother, in Crakehall,” Genna went on. “She’ll be able to keep you safe, there, and the soldiers won’t come for you for at least a little while. I can figure out where to go, from there, to fix all of this. But in the mean time...Do not let the world know that the King is in Crakehall, do you understand? You must do whatever you can to ensure an army doesn’t show up there, Janei. Promise me.”

Janei didn’t bother to point out, just then, that if it was the Lannister soldiers coming for them, they would want Selyse, who was there, and if it was not, she and her brother and Tommen would hardly be safer from the Baratheon soldiers at Crakehall than they were here.

She thought she understood what Genna meant, after all. If it came down to it, she was to speak for Genna, letting the world know that the Lannisters didn’t consider Tommen a king, for his own safety, because if they did, someone would always want to kill him.

She thought about Cersei’s sharp eyes and dangerous fury, about the fear she had seen on Genna’s features as Cersei crowned her son and asked the Baratheon soldiers to join her, now that their king had abandoned them.

And they had done it, far too easily, it seemed.

She licked her lips. “Come with me,” she whispered, hoarsely. Because she couldn’t do as Genna wanted her to now. She was just a girl, and not a particularly smart or brave one, at that.

She couldn’t speak for House Lannister, against Cersei, if something did happen to Genna. Couldn’t keep Tommen safe against an army.

And yet, Genna was asking her to do just that.

Genna’s smile was sad. “Someone has to clean up your cousin’s mess, dear,” she said, sounding annoyingly resolved. “Now, go. Hurry.”

Janei did, running down the hallway with tears pricking at her eyes at the thought of what might happen to Genna if she did leave her behind, as she ran to Tommen’s chambers, and threw open the door to find Martyn, dressed in his armor and sword raised, waiting for her.

Well, perhaps not for her, but certainly for an intruder.

Tommen was sitting on the bed, looking dangerously close to tears.

Martyn’s face melted in relief, at the realization that she was his sister, and not an enemy. Slowly, he lowered his sword.

Janei found herself wishing he wouldn’t.

“What’s going on-?”
“We have to go,” Janei interrupted, and saw the same fear that she felt reflected on Martyn’s features.

“They have the gates surrounded. We can see them out there, through the window,” Martyn said, scrambling to his feet and reaching for his scabbard, as Janei rushed further into the room and towards Tommen’s clothes, stacked away in a wardrobe somewhere. It took her longer than she liked to find some that didn’t look like they belonged to a king.

Even a noble boy was better than a king, she reasoned, as she found a hood to cover his golden hair.

“We’re not going out through the gates,” she said, carefully, tossing the clothes at Tommen. The boy blushed as he fumbled with them, and Janei swallowed hard.

Gods, he was far too young to be anything like the king Cersei wanted to name him as.

She wished they had time to run to the kitchens and grab some food, before they ran, but Janei didn’t even think they really had time for Tommen to change clothes.

“Where are we going?” Tommen asked, clinging like a limpet to the clothes in his hands.

Janei glanced down at him, feeling suddenly sick that all of this fighting might result in the loss of his head, that this might just be only the beginning, with the fact that Cersei had all but declared war against the Tyrells when she had crowned him.

Sometimes, she forgot how young he was, Janei thought idly. Barely more than a child, with barely more than a basic understanding of what was going on around him, and outside those gates, downstairs, men were already falling on their swords for him.

That was what it meant to be a king, even if Tommen wasn’t really the king of anything, as Genna had said.

“Somewhere safe,” she promised him, even as the words tasted like ash in her mouth.

She glanced up at Martyn, and found that his eyes were as wide and frightened as her own. He hesitated a moment, and then nodded.

“Yes, Your Grace,” he said. “We’re going to Crakehall, to my mother. You’ll be safe there. I’m your Kingsguard.” He straightened his shoulders, the ill fitting armor making Janei grimace at the thought of running all of the way there, if they had to.

“I am meant to do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

The words didn’t seem to reassure Tommen, Janei thought, as she gave his hand another gentle squeeze. She couldn’t quite blame him. Martyn looked so damn young, too.

“We have to run now, though,” she whispered, because even if Genna seemed to have planned for this, had known they would have to use the sewers to escape if the way she had brought Janei down to see them not a week before was any indication, she couldn’t have known exactly how this was going to happen.

Clearly, once they made their way out of the sewers, they were going to have to escape on foot, and with the sounds of battle still clanging behind them, Janei hated their odds.

Still, they didn’t have another choice, she thought, as the screams seemed to swell into a crescendo.

Martyn’s grip on his sword tightened, his face spasming nervously, and Janei wished, for once, that
her brother was better at hiding his emotions from her. That when he lied and told Tommen that he would protect them, she believed him a little more.

“Do you hear me, Tommen?” she whispered, and waited for the boy to turn and look at her again, even as Martyn already started moving. “Run!”
“I don’t know what to do,” Sansa whispered hoarsely, into the darkness. “Margaery is…” she cleared her throat. “The Margaery that I know, the woman who was once so good at all of this, who could spin circles around Joffrey…I’m afraid that she’s gone.”

Admitting those words aloud was terrifying; somehow, it made them all the more likely to be true.

But she knew that they were; she had been watching, in something like the blind terror she had felt ever since Joffrey had cut off her father’s head and she had realized who he truly was, ever since Margaery had killed her husband and Sansa had wondered if the other girl truly was capable of this.

Everything that they had sacrificed, everyone who had died to get them to this point, and now that they were here, she wasn’t certain that Margaery was capable of anything she used to be.

Sansa swallowed hard, desperately wanting to hear her companion tell her that she was jumping at shadows, seeing things that weren’t really there. That Margaery was just…adjusting, and trying to convince the rest of them that she mourned her husband.

It was all a charade, like her marriage had been.

Today, when Margaery had sat on the Iron Throne and not given a single damn about anything her lords said to her in their reports, that had been a show her of her fierce love for a dead husband.

When they had told her that they had found her husband’s “murderers” and wanted to know what she wanted done with them, and she had all but laughed in their faces maniacally, that had been a show, hysteria, perhaps.

Silence.

Slowly, Sansa turned around to meet Baelish’s eyes, her own widening. “You think that she’s gone too, don’t you?” She asked.

Baelish’s eyes were gentle; he looked sad to be admitting it, which was more than she would have expected from him.

Hells, everything that he had done for her since the moment she had sent that boy running to him had been more than she was expecting. Especially after the way that she had treated him in Highgarden, and dear gods, Sansa didn’t know what to make of it.

Didn’t know what to make of his careful calculations, on the night of the king’s death, when neither she nor Margaery was capable of coherent thought, much less covering up the death of a king, didn’t know what to make of the absurdly gentle way that he treated Sansa, after he had taunted her with Jeyne’s fate.

Didn’t know what to make of the way that he plotted to keep Margaery as the Regent of the Iron Throne, when she knew that he was jealous of the other girl, of what she had with Sansa.

She swallowed hard.
Baelish sighed. “When I first met Margaery Tyrell,” he said, voice whisper soft despite the fact that they were very much alone here, in Sansa’s chambers, “I was immediately impressed by her ambition. She struck me as the sort of woman who will take whatever she wishes, whatever the cost, and who had the smarts to do so.”

Sansa licked her lips; she didn’t want to reminisce about the woman that she loved with a man who claimed to love her, after all. She just wanted to know that everything was going to be okay.

“And I think…” Baelish went on, in that whisper soft voice, as he moved closer to her, “I think that any woman capable of stringing Joffrey Baratheon along for the amount of time that she did, is capable of coming back from this.”

Sansa swallowed hard, staring up at him in surprise.

He truly believed that, she realized. He truly believed that Margaery could come back from this, that she could survive this and become the person she had once been.

It was strange, Sansa realized, as she pulled back abruptly from him, staring at Petyr Baelish in a new light as she realized that he had just told her the truth.

She had thought she was finally beginning to understand him, but perhaps she had only been beginning to understand what he wanted her to.

Oh, she was not naive enough to think that she was as smart as he was, not after everything she had seen him to be capable of. But in this moment, realizing that she could tell he had been lying to her about nearly everything from the start, just because of one reassuring comment about Margaery… oh, it felt good, even if a part of her was terrified about what it meant for what his plans truly were.

She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly before daring to speak again. “I don’t know what to do,” she repeated. “Even if she does come back, considering what happened today I think it will take time…”

“And in that time, Cersei will have figured out what she wants to do in retaliation to her son’s death,” Baelish said, calmly, when the words he spoke of didn’t make Sansa feel calm, not at all. “And the lords of King’s Landing will scrape for any available power they can find, with a weak Regent on the Iron Throne.”

Sansa swallowed hard. “You said you’d help me,” she whispered.

He raised a single eyebrow; she had summoned him here to talk about the marriage Margaery had promised her into, on the night of Joffrey’s death, a marriage that Sansa had agreed to, but didn’t want.

At the time, she had thought it was the only way, given the way Baelish always looked at her.

Now, she wasn’t so certain.

“I said that I would help you cover up Joffrey’s murder,” he said, slowly.

Sansa nodded her head. “Yes,” she whispered, “and if the Queen goes mad because of what he did to her, it won’t take the rest of the court long to figure out we were lying about he died.”

Baelish stared at her for a moment, and then he stepped forward, taking her hands in his own.

She stared down at their touching fingers, swallowed hard.
She wondered if her mother had ever liked him, or had merely felt pity for him. Wondered if he had repulsed her as much as he did Sansa.

“Sansa…” he drew the word out slowly, and Sansa closed her eyes. Could hear the longing in his voice, but it wasn’t…wasn’t the sort of longing she had expected it to be.

It reminded Sansa of the longing she’d heard in Margaery’s voice, when she spoke of how she was going to murder her husband.

Her eyes snapped open, at those words, and she blinked up at him, as he moved closer still to her.

“I have watched over you since you were such a young, naïve thing, in this court,” Baelish said, and she swallowed hard, tried not to show how it unsettled her, to hear him talk about her like this. “I have seen you mature into a woman who knows how to play the game, when before, you could not even lie. I see you, Sansa Stark.”

She swallowed hard, transfixed by his words even when she knew that she shouldn’t be.

And a part of her knew that he was right, at least somewhat.

If they wanted to survive this, Margaery had already proven that at least at the moment, she was incapable of much more than staying alive, herself. That she couldn’t lead the Seven Kingdoms, like this.

And Sansa…Sansa knew her. She knew enough of Margaery to know what she might decide to do, in the coming months, if she were in her right mind. She knew enough about Margaery’s family to know what they would expect, from their Regent.

She knew enough about Cersei to know how the other woman would retaliate, whether she knew the truth of what had happened to her son, or not.

“I see that you are capable of far more than the people of King’s Landing seem to think that you are,” he went on. “That your future…it could be something truly greater than anyone who ever met the hostage daughter of House Stark could ever imagine. That you could be the true power behind the Iron Throne, that you could bring this city to its knees, with all of the secrets you know about it. With just a bit of help. You can do this. You can keep this throne together, until we can figure out something more…certain.”

Sansa blinked, the spell lost, with those words. She imagined she knew damn well whose help he envisioned her having.

And she had no doubt that whatever ‘certain’ plan Baelish had in mind, it was not one she would like.

“What do you want from me?” She whispered. “I mean, really, really want from me. No more lies, this time. I have to know.”

She met his eyes, then, in the vain hope that doing so might reveal something of those ambitions to her, because for all that Petyr Baelish had been a constant in her life for so long now, she still wasn’t certain that she knew the answer to that question, not completely.

Oh, she knew that he wanted to have her, in the most intimate of ways, could see that well enough in the way that he sometimes looked at her, in the way that he usually looked at Margaery when he thought she wasn’t looking.
But, while she had been certain at Highgarden it was her body he wanted, now, she was not so
certain.

She knew enough about Petyr Baelish to know that he didn’t like revealing his plans, for all that
made him the more irritating, and he had been more than open, since she had begged him for his
help in covering up Joffrey’s murder, about what he wanted from her.

That struck her as…terribly naive of a thing to trust, she thought.

Baelish leaned forward, pressing their foreheads together, and Sansa breathed in deep and let the
air out slowly. He reached out, cupping her cheek.

“I thought you knew what I wanted.”

She pulled back then, staring up at him. “No,” she breathed, taking a step back from him. “No, this
time, tell me the truth. If you wanted to marry me, they’ve already chosen a new High Septon. But
you don’t want that. You possibly never did, not even when Margaery offered me up to you. I
thought I was stringing you along, but it turns out, you’ve been stringing me.”

Baelish blinked at her, and his face dipped into a small frown. “You know what I want, Sansa.
You’ve known for some time, I think.”

“I don’t know, anymore,” she whispered. “I thought you wanted me.”

He stared at her, then, and because he was always so difficult for her to read, back when she had
thought he was a friend of her family’s and he had only been her father’s enemy, only been her
mother’s friend, she did not know whether the look in his eyes was one of pity or of lust.

“Every time I’m faced with a decision,” he said, finally, “I close my eyes and see the same picture.
Whenever I consider an action, I ask myself, ‘Will this action help to make this picture a reality?’
Pull it out of my mind, and into the world. And I only act if the answer is yes.”

She swallowed hard. “What picture?” She whispered.

“A picture of you, on the Iron Throne, and me, by your side. In whatever way you’ll have me.”

Sansa felt her insides freeze.

She wanted to say a dozen things, in response to that. Wanted to point out that if she, somehow,
impossibly, was on the Iron Throne, it would mean that Margaery was not. Hells, it would mean that
a great many people were no longer capable of taking the Iron Throne for themselves.

She closed her eyes, and breathed out deeply.

It wasn’t what she wanted, either.

When she was a little girl, she had wanted to marry Joffrey and have his children, to become the
next Queen of Westeros, but only because she was married to its king.

But to be King…

She had never wanted that; for so many years, stuck here amongst her enemies, all Sansa had ever
wanted was to go home.

And then, she had met Margaery, and thought that perhaps life in King’s Landing could be bearable
but that was only because Margaery was here, beside her, because Margaery provided her the
comfort she needed to continue on, because Margaery understood, a bit, of what she suffered, of the choices she had to make just to survive, and loved her, anyway.

And this future Baelish was suggesting, it didn’t include Margaery.

“It’s a pretty picture,” she breathed, pulling away from him. “But it’s not one I share. And you know why.”

He stared at her, for several long, terrifying moments, and Sansa saw a dangerous sort of anger in his eyes, of the sort that shook her to her core.

She swallowed hard, resisting the urge to step back from him.

There were only a few men she had ever said ‘no,’ to, in her entire life, and it never ended well.

“You, my love, are my future. As I said: whatever way you’ll have me,” Baelish said, and Sansa stared up into the man’s eyes and, for the first time since Highgarden, she didn’t believe a single word he was saying.

Oh, they were pretty words, as she had said a moment ago. But they were just that.

His eyes were dull as he said them; perhaps he had loved her mother, she thought, had truly, actually loved the woman her mother had been, when they were young and he had been naive enough to think he might be able to marry her.

But he didn’t love Sansa; not the way he loved her mother, at least. He loved her for what she could gain him, she realized. He loved her because she was the last of House Stark, just as the Lannisters had loved her for being a Stark, just as Tyrion had tried to care for her because she was the pathetic, sad remainder of House Stark.

She was tired of being thought of only as Sansa Stark, not when she hadn’t felt like a Stark in a very long time.

Sansa Stark would have died, in King’s Landing, years ago. Sansa Stark would never have killed Ser Meryn Trant. She never would have fallen in love with Margaery, her ambition and all.

She never would have killed Joffrey the way she had plotted to do, either.

She sniffed, hard.

“What do I do about Margaery?” She whispered, and Baelish’s eyes were sad, for several long moments, but she didn’t think it was because she had rejected his offer, of becoming this Queen he wanted her to be.

Oh, she had no doubt that a man like Petyr Baelish did not hear the word ‘no,’ even when it was said directly to his face.

Her grandfather had told him ‘no,’ after all, and he had started a war just to prove the man wrong, to prove that he could have been capable of marrying Catelyn Stark, if he wanted.

He still would weave his plans for her, but at least she knew a little more of them, now.

And perhaps he was lying, about his ultimate goal for her, but it did tell her one thing, this look in his eyes; he was determined to try harder, to manipulate her. He had given away much, today, but she had given away something, too, that he wasn’t tricking her as well as he thought that he was,
and she knew that he would only work harder at that, now.

“I think that a...symbolic gesture, might help with that,” Baelish said, slowly. “How do you feel about the Small Council?”

Trystane had thought that he was finally beginning to understand how to survive at court, after all of this time of being forced to remain here. Had thought he knew what was expected of him, what was expected of the rest of the nobles, in order to keep the peace.

He was beginning to wonder if perhaps he didn’t know anything at all, after all of this time, about the court of King’s Landing.

One moment, half of the nobles were arguing over whether they thought the Queen Regent had lost her mind, and in the next, they were wondering when the next tourney would be, whether it would be appropriate to host one on the occasion of the King’s funeral.

One moment, they were worrying about a full scale war with the Regent’s goodmother, and in the next, pestered him about whether or not he thought the Dornish would be sending anymore Dornish Red, since they had neglected to do so for the past several months and the Regent, in her condition, appeared to not be bothered by that.

He had a feeling that they were specifically asking because it was rumored that Cersei Lannister was already on her way to King’s Landing, would be getting here within a few days, and every time someone asked him, as if he knew anything about what went on in Dorne these days, considering the way his sister had shut him out and left him here as a hostage, Trystane resisted the urge to nastily inform them that the wine would not get here soon enough, regardless, even if Dorne sent it today.

He bit back a sigh, the thought of Dorne reminding him of why he was here in the first place, that his sister had left him here to be nothing more than the Regent’s hostage, and a paltry one, at that.

He found himself wondering whether his sister had taken to ruling like she did everything else, in the time that he had been away from Dorne. She had certainly taken to their father’s level of ruthlessness, in leaving him here alone and stealing away his wife.

He didn’t even understand why she had done what she had; their father may be ill, but he still had many years ahead of him, of that, Trystane was certain, and while he had not exactly been ruling Dorne with an iron fist from Sunspear, preferring instead to delegate from the Water Gardens after Oberyn’s death, Trystane would have thought his sister might have more sympathy for their father before she decided to stage a coup against him.

A coup that, stupidly, Trystane hadn’t even expected, before he’d learned about it in King’s Landing alongside the Lannisters, which felt even more like a slap in the face.

He knew that Arianne hated playing mistress of the castle without any of the power that came along with it; she was quite good at keeping the general state of Sunspear safe, and making sure that the people labored under the illusion that their family was still happily working towards its good, but she had always wanted more, he had known that about her from the moment their father had set her as mistress of the Keep.

Their father just hadn’t been around to see it, much.

But Arianne was the eldest of their father’s children, and therefore would have gotten all of that and more, eventually.
He didn’t understand why she couldn’t have waited. Why she thought she had to steal power from their father while he was still alive.

And of course he knew that a part of that was because he wasn’t there when it happened, but still, plotting against their father wasn’t something he had ever believed her capable of.

Their family had a hell of a lot of issues, but they were supposed to be different from the Lannisters and Tyrells and Targaryens of Westeros.

They were supposed to be better.

He knew that Arianne resented their father, of course, for the fact that he could not spend as much time with his children as normal fathers could. It was something that Trystane had resented the man for as a child as well, treating his children like silent dolls until he had need of them, and then expecting them to come at his beck and call.

That was, until one of his father’s tasks had been to woo Princess Myrcella, recently arrived from King’s Landing, and Trystane had found himself suddenly gaining something of an appreciation for politics, and the many things his father saw to.

Still, he supposed there were some things about King’s Landing which remained the same as Dorne. Their scheming, for one, though he’d ever thought the people of Dorne schemed quite so much as those in King’s Landing, save for his own sister.

And there were some things that were entirely different; the fact that there was a mob going on outside their doors being the main one of these, he thought idly, as he craned his neck in a vain attempt to see the smallfolk from the terrace window, where the soldiers were holding them back by what looked to be sheer force of will.

They seemed to have quite a lot of those, in King’s Landing. Mobs of people angry with their rule, furious with the way that the Crown kept wronging them, though Trystane could not say if they were justified or not, beyond what he knew of the Slaughter of the Sept.

Say what they liked about Dorne, and the nobles of King’s Landing were never shy about doing so in front of him, if they so wished, but at least the people who lived in Sunspear actually liked their rulers.

Well, they had when Trystane had still lived there.

Who was to say how they felt about them, now. He certainly didn’t know enough. His own sister was refusing to write to him, was refusing to let him write to his wife, as well.

She had, for some horrible reason, decided that he wasn’t deserving of his wife’s letters anymore, or perhaps, for who knew, that she wasn’t deserving of his. All he knew was that absolutely nothing had changed in the relationship between House Tyrell and House Martell at the moment, and so whatever it was that had convinced Arianne not to let them write to one another anymore, it had more to do with them than it did with the Regent.

The Regent.

He still wasn’t sure what he thought of the woman.

Whatever it was that she had agreed upon with his sister, she didn’t seem the sort of woman overly concerned with politics these days, nor had she ever seemed as much when she had still been little more than the King’s wife, and yet, clearly her ambitions were higher than she let on.
When she had been Joffrey’s wife, she had seemed uncaring, almost dismissive of the world around him, obsessed only with her husband’s affections and doing as she pleased and damn the consequences. She certainly hadn’t seemed concerned with the lives of the citizens who had died in the Sept because she didn’t commit adultery against her husband, which he thought frightfully ironic; he didn’t know what sort of idiotic woman would think it was a good idea to sleep with someone else while married to a madman like Joffrey, but apparently this High Sparrow had thought such.

Strangely, she had seemed almost concerned when he himself had demanded to go against Joffrey in combat, but he knew that she had some sort of arrangement with his sister and his cousins by then, even if he couldn’t understand why a woman who seemed to hardly concern herself with politics might have such a thing at all as Arianne’s ear.

Once her husband had died, however, it was as if she had become a completely different person, and he wasn’t sure if that was a better thing or a worse one.

This latest stunt, of outlawing drawing and quartering and then her septa, a woman that the people seemed to greatly respect because she had once been a traitorous fanatic, something that Trystane was still trying to wrap his head around, had gone missing.

Missing for several days, before the news of her death got out, that was.

King’s anding had gone to chaos ever since.

It seemed to him, that when the Regent promised the smallfolk, against the advice of her counselors, that there would be no more executions in King’s Landing, and then not days later, her own septa turned up dead…well, that seemed suspicious enough.

And apparently the smallfolk themselves felt the same, if the way that they were rioting outside of the gates was any indication.

Especially now that the news of the septa’s death seemed to have reached them.

They were rioting even now, and the Regent’s brother had gone out to pacify them hours ago. Apparently, he’d been unsuccessful.

Not much surprise there.

The promise of food and a swift end to the plague overtaking half of the city wasn’t going to do much for a mob of angry peasants, especially if they thought their Regent might turn around and kill them as indiscriminately as their king always had in the past.

Dear gods, King’s Landing was a bit of a shitshow. And he knew that he shouldn’t be thinking it, but trystane was enjoying himself, all the same.

Because he was, after all, nothing more than a captive here, no matter the gilded cage or the placeholder seat they had given him on the Small Council. And he might as well find some amusement from the fact that his captors seemed totally incompetent, these days.

Not that they had fared much better under Joffrey, but still. The riots outside those doors proved that they were not doing better than he had, and they were all Lannisters, no matter what they called themselves.

Save for his wife, they were hardly redeemable people.

Trystane privately thought that this all might have gone easier for the Crown if they had not publicly
acknowledged the septa’s death, if they had swept it under the rug because then half of King’s Landing would have forgotten about it in a few days; that seemed to be the way of things here.

But the Regent had insisted on finding the septa’s original family, and returning her body to them, and things had only gone to the Seven Hells, after that.

It turned out that the woman’s original family did not want her back; they were lower nobles themselves, and didn’t much appreciate the way that their daughter had turned her back on the Crown in order to prop up the High Sparrow.

That or, and Trystane found this suggestion to be the more likely of the two, they were terrified of what reprisals they might find themselves on the receiving end of, after welcoming back the body of a woman who had openly committed treason against the Crown.

He felt something like pity for their family.

He knew what it was like to have a family member’s body withheld from them because he had been considered something of a traitor. It was the same trick that Joffrey had pulled with his own uncle’s body, before Arianne had insisted upon its return.

The one good thing she’d done since whatever the fuck it was she was doing now.

A sudden crash split through the air, and Trystane’s head jerked up as something came sailing through a now broken window, several nobles who had gathered to watch crying out in surprise while two guards rushed forward to assess the situation.

“Prince Trystane,” Elinor Tyrell blinked at him as she walked over from where she had been conversing with one of the Tyrell’s soldiers who had just returned. “You shouldn’t be out here.”

He lifted his chin, wanted to tell her that she was just a disgraced lady in waiting to the Regent, and she had no right to tell him what to do, either, but he bit the words back, because he liked surviving, even if it involved far too much tongue in cheek.

And, after all, married or no, she was very pretty, and a mother, and he didn’t want to insult her when she might still have the Regent’s ear; that was rather unclear, these days.

“I…” he shook his head. “I keep expecting the Small Council to be called. So far, it hasn’t been.”

She looked at him for a long moment, and then sighed. “Lady Sansa told me that you had requested something of her, recently,” she said, slowly, and her eyes roved over Trystane’s form as if she expected him to blurt it out then and there.

But while bastards and women were treated far kinder in Dorne than they had ever been here, Trystane wasn’t foolish enough to put information like that into the hands of a disgraced lady’s maid, as all of the court whispered her to be.

Lady Stark was...something else, and he didn’t still quite understand how she had amassed such power over such a short amount of time without anyone finding out about it, but he knew that she was a far surer bet than Elinor Ambrose was.

He had thought that going to her and appealing to her sense of pity might get him what he wanted, but so far, he’d heard nothing more from his sister or from Myrcella, and he was growing worried.

He couldn’t claim to know his sister’s mind any longer, but Myrcella was an innocent in all of this, regardless of who her parents were. She didn’t deserve to go through anything that Arianne might
want to keep from him just because she was a Lannister, something he wasn’t sure that his sister nor any of his cousins had ever understood.

“Has she learned anything?” he asked, hopeful despite the look on her face.

He told himself that she could just be stressed about the rioting outside.

Elinor swallowed. “We have yet to hear an answer from Dorne,” she told him, and Trystane wilted, a bit. Her eyes softened. “But don’t despair. From what I understand, they have accepted the invitation to come to King Joffrey’s funeral, and are sending an emissary for that who should be here any day. If your sister does not respond by then, I’m sure that Lady Sansa…or the Regent might have a word with whomever they send.”

Trystane pretended to feel more relieved by that than he did. If the Regent was speaking to an emissary from Dorne, he doubted that his letters to Myrcella would be high on the agenda.

He nodded towards the double doors separating those within the Keep from those without. “They certainly seem to be angry, out there,” he commented, because he was annoyed and because he could. “Will there still be a funeral?”

He made sure to ask it in the most innocuous tone that he could manage.

He was learning, after all.

It had taken nearly seeing his cousin ripped apart by the Mountain and being thrown in a Black Cell for a few days, accused of conspiracy against the King, but he was finally learning.

And he intended to make it back to Myrcella alive, thank you very much. So long as she was still there, waiting for him, and his sister hadn’t fucked up too much, in Dorne.

Elinor gave him a strained smile. “Of course there shall still be a funeral. It is not for two days, yet. This will all have blown over by then, of that, the Small Council is convinced.”

Trystane’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t remember that being brought up at the Small Council’s last meeting,” he pointed out, perhaps more mullishly than he meant to.

But he did not have many freedoms here; in some ways, he was still locked in a cage. The time that he spent during those Small Council meetings, studying the people here, all of whom were likely his enemies, and learning what he could about the politics of the kingdom, were his only few freedoms left, even if they did not ask for his opinion at these meetings and his presence there seemed to be for courtesy and not much else.

The idea that they were having meetings that he was not invited to irked him.

Elinor shrugged a thin shoulder. “It was during the night,” she told him. “The Regent herself was not even present, still in mourning for the septa.”

She made a face then, as if she realized she had already said too much, and Trystane’s eyes narrowed.

“How can they have a Small Council meeting without the Regent?” he asked, as innocently as he could, but he thought that Elinor was already unto him, by now.

She just smiled, thinly. “Well, it happened all the time with the last two kings, I’m sure,” she told him. “Besides, the Regent’s pregnancy is nearing its end. One cannot expect her to attend to every
duty when the Heir must come first.”

Trystane made a face. “Of course,” he said, because even then, that didn’t explain why he hadn’t been at the meeting.

Elinor turned to go, and he called out behind her, “They seem to have a lot of riots here in King’s Landing, don’t they? It’s not the sort of thing I’m used to, coming from Dorne.”

Elinor turned back to face him, forcing an obviously fake smile. “I imagine a great many things about King’s Landing are different from what you are used to, in Dorne,” she told him, unpleasantly, before walking away again.

Trystane sighed. So much for finding out something useful from her.

Margaery had been avoiding her, ever since she had walked in on the septa and found her dead in her chambers.

And Sansa wished that she could have spared the other woman that, could have spared her having to discover the septa’s body. In truth, she had not meant for Margaery to be the one to find the body at all, but then, she supposed, there were few others in King’s Landing who might have gone searching for it.

But it had happened, already, and there was nothing Sansa could do to change that.

And she supposed that Margaery had been avoiding her enough before that that it really shouldn’t matter, that she was avoiding her even more now, but this was getting ridiculous.

If they could just talk about this...if they could, perhaps they could talk about the rest of it, too, and finally get it off of both their chests.

She had gone to Margaery’s chambers to ask her why the fuck she was offering to find the septa’s family and speak to them personally over the woman’s loss, and why, for that matter, she had skipped the last three Small Council meetings, only to be told by an apologetic but firm Alla that Margaery was not seeing her, just now.

“My lady,” the servant called out to her for the third time from where he was chasing after her, and Sansa sighed, turning around to face the young man who had a pile of scrolls in his hands.

“Yes, what is it?” She asked, reaching up to push the hair out of her eyes.

The young man grimaced. “I...These are the new levies, that the Small Council wants the Regent to sign now that we may be going to war,” he said, holding out the papers.

Sansa reached up, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Yes?” She said, because she may be the sole reason Margaery went to Small Council meetings at all these days, as Margaery had once been for Joffrey, but she was not the Regent.

At least, as far as anyone seemed to care.

She glanced down at the levies, having the terrible feeling that signing in not law more taxes against an already strained and angry populace wasn’t the best idea, just now. But it wasn’t as if they had another choice.

They were barely three kingdoms, these days, rather than the usual seven, and someone had to pay
for the King’s funeral.

The young man gulped. “I…ah, the Regent was not to be disturbed, my lady, but the Small Council needs these levies put into place by tomorrow.” He gulped. “Lord Baelish seemed to think that you could…handle things.”

Sansa squinted at him, annoyance building up within her.

She knew what this was, knew what Lord Baelish intended, by having this serving boy bring the levies to her, word that in such a way, rather than try again later, or beg her to have Margaery sign them.

She had known what he was doing for some time now, and yet, knowing something of Baelish’s manipulations didn’t make her entirely impervious to it, Sansa thought, annoyed further.

Baelish wanted her to get a taste of the power she could have, if only she would take his offer, if only she would run away to the Vale with him and he could…he could…

She liked that feeling, of having power over someone else, over multiple someones, even if she was not the best at using it, she had learned, in recent months.

She had gone powerless for so long, and she was a better person than most who acquired a taste for it.

She just hated that the more power she took, the less Margaery seemed to have, and how little anyone, including Margaery, seemed to mind that, these days.

She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “I will present it to the Regent,” she told the boy, and then hesitated, as he began turning away from her. “You can inform Baelish of that, specifically.”

The boy nodded, obviously just wanting to get away from her at this point, and Sansa sighed as she watched him go.

She wanted him to get that message to Baelish specifically so that he could know that his manipulations weren’t working on her as much as he’d like, even if that wasn’t entirely the truth.

But sometimes, she’d learned, one had to bluff their way through this shit.

She turned around, intending to go back the way she had come to try to talk her way past Alla again, biting back another sigh.

Gods, seh missed when things were simple. When the only thing she really had to worry about was finding a way to sneak into Margaery’s chambers in the middle of the night, when no one was around to witness what they might do to one another.

She flinched, the moment she had the thought, because that wasn’t quite the truth.

Things hadn’t been simple, back then. They had been forced to sneak around in such a way because their lives had been at stake, because of who Margaery’s husband was and what family was keeping Sansa captive here.

In a way, things were a lot simpler, now. Neither of them had husbands keeping them from one another, even if the High Septon was taking his time annulling Sansa’s marriage without her husband present, fugitive or no, and Baelish hardly seemed interested in marrying her for all that she knew it was what he wanted, but it was harder, in others.
After all, they were about to find themselves at the head of a war, Sansa knew, however much she would like to avoid one.

With Cersei Lannister, that would be next to impossible.

She would only have to hope that Lady Nym succeeded in the mission she sent her on, or they would be fighting that war.

She came to a sudden stop outside of Margaery’s - Joffrey’s - chambers as she watched the door open, Alla nowhere to be seen, and her breath caught in her throat for a moment.

She felt like a silly child, reacting in such a way at the thought of seeing Margaery again after the way the other woman had been avoiding her, but in the end, it wasn’t Margaery who walked out the door.

“Sansa…” Garlan looked pained, where he stood just outside of Margaery’s door, having clearly just emerged. “I...am surprised to see you here.”

She supposed it was perhaps the most diplomatic way he could tell her she was less than welcome, here.

Because Margaery knew what she had done, clearly. She had guessed what Sansa must have done the moment the septa was dead, if the way she had been avoiding Sansa was any indication.

And Sansa knew that a part of her deserved that, but dear gods, Margaery could be stubborn. If she would just let Sansa explain…

Garlan didn’t look like he thought Margaery would listen to any explanation she gave, though.

Sansa felt her stomach sink. “I…” she opened and closed her mouth. “Garlan…”

Garlan’s eyes were sympathetic, though he did not move out of the way for her. It struck her that he was not a member of his sister’s Kingsguard, for all that he acted like an unofficial Lord Commander, these days, and she wondered if Margaery had summoned him to speak more about whether the smallfolk were actually being dealt with, these days.

She was far too focused on that, in Sansa’s estimation, when the real trouble would be the damned nobles. If only she could get Margaery to understand that.

“I can tell her that you came to see her, though,” he offered, quietly, and Sansa bit back a sigh.

“Do you think I did the wrong thing?” she asked, softly, and Garlan flinched a little.

He took a deep breath. It had been a risk, bringing up the death of the septa to him at all, but she had come to know Garlan rather well in recent months, and she thought that he must know what she had done, and, at least partially, why she had done it.

He wasn’t a fool, after all, for all that Olenna Tyrell seemed to believe the men of her family to be exactly that. Sansa grimaced as she found herself wondering if the other woman now believed the same thing about Margaery.

“When my sister was five summers old,” he said, abruptly changing the topic, and Sansa blinked at him, “I remember the septa who was tasked with her education, before our grandmother took it over...She died, of a sweating sickness. It was over within a day of her first growing sick; she was quite old. I think it was the was the first time Margaery had ever seen death, up close.”
Sansa flinched.

“Margaery was so attached to her, you see, because Loras was the favorite child, then. Our mother...for all her kindness towards her children, adored Loras the most, and I think that even then, Margaery knew that. Knew that whatever she did, Alerie wouldn’t love her quite the same way she loved Loras.” He shrugged, as if the words were inconsequential.

Strangely, they made Sansa think of Jon, and her own mother, and she wondered if it was worse to be a bastard or a woman, out of the womb.

“But she never tried to gain her attention,” Garlan said. “She just...knew that she could not compete with Loras, and she never seemed bitter for it, not while her septa lived. The woman...she was exasperated with Margaery, more times than not, but she adored her. Lavished affection on her at all times. And Margaery...Margaery spent any time she wasn’t with her proving herself to be just as much of a boy as Loras. Well, in some ways.”

Sansa licked her lips. “And then she died,” she surmised.

Garlan shrugged. “I don’t know...I don’t know what her agreement was, with this septa,” he continued, “And I only think I know part of the story of why you would...But I do know that she...she needs space, when these sort of things happen. When she feels like she’s been betrayed.”

Sansa flinched, and tried not to think about what Garlan was implying, that a child Margaery had blamed her septa for her death, just as she now blamed Sansa for Septa Unella’s.

It was a childish way to react, of course, but she thought she understood perhaps a little better, between that and the guilt she knew that Margaery still felt over what had happened at the Sept.

It didn’t make her feel any better, though.

“But she’s not the sort of person to hold grudges forever,” he went on, apologetically, and Sansa stared at him as she tried to reconcile what he had just said with what she knew of Margaery’s relationship with Joffrey.

And yes, Joffrey had been a madman and an idiot, and cruel and horrible, but what was what she had done but simple revenge?

She sighed. “I hope not,” she whispered, and Garlan reached out to squeeze her arm, in a way that was meant to be reassuring.

It only reminded her of how much Margaery flinched away from anyone who tried to touch her like that, these days.

Garlan seemed to notice that, dropping his grip and looking rather sad. Sansa avoided his gaze, forced herself to think about other things, besides Margaery, because dear gods, if that was all she thought of just now, she’d get them all killed when Cersei arrived. She had come here for a purpose, and she could sign the levies herself in Margaey’s name, just as Baelish had said, but now that she had Garlan here, she might as well confide in him.

“The funeral is in two days,” she reminded him. “And we cannot...We cannot afford to have a mob in King’s Landing when Cersei arrives, or whoever is coming from Dorne. We cannot afford for them to see us this weak, just now, when Cersei is already championing Tommen’s claim to the throne. Tell me you can do something about it.”

He made a face. It was not a reassuring look, despite his next words. “I’ll take care of things out in
the city, don’t worry about that,” he reassured her. “Just...focus on what needs to be done here, and I’ll try to talk her around.”

Not when Margaery refused to even speak to her, when Sansa had only been trying to protect her from herself.

She licked her lips, nodded. “Thank you,” she said, and Garlan’s eyes were still sad as he started to walk away from her, and then hesitated, turning back.

“Sansa?” he said, softly.

Sansa blinked at him.

He bit his lip, looking almost like he didn’t want to utter the next words. “I know why you and Margaery did what you did,” he said, and had her immediately flinching again. “But she’s still my grandmother. And...she wants to come, to support Margaery. If not for the funeral, then she would like to be here for the birth.”

Sansa swallowed hard.

Olenna was a topic that wasn’t addressed, between Sansa and Margaery. They didn't speak about how Sansa and Olenna had been plotting against Margaery for all of that time, didn’t speak about the things that Olenna had done before Margaery’s “death,” and even directly after it.

Didn’t speak about the fact that Margaery had sent her own grandmother away because she didn’t approve of the other woman’s plan, and things had immediately gone to shit.

And Sansa couldn’t imagine speaking to her, especially now, about Olenna attending what many women thought to be the best moments of their lives.

She shook her head, glancing away again.

Garlan let out a long sigh. “I hesitated to bring it up, with her,’ he said, nodding towards Margaery’s door, a great hulking presence in the empty hall, “But I thought I’d ask.”

Sansa bit the inside of her cheek. “I don’t think it would be wise to bring it up, just now,” she said, even as she felt a pang of guilt, knowing that it must hurt Olenna, to be separated from a beloved granddaughter like this, in this way.

Especially if she was now begging Sansa to let her attend the birthing.

Sansa’s eyes narrowed a little, at the thought. Because Olenna Tyrell was never the sort of woman who begged for anything, and if she was begging for that now, Sansa had to wonder why. Had to wonder if perhaps they should bring this up with Margaery, for no other reason than to figure out why Olenna had been so silent all these months, in Highgarden.

Sansa certainly doubted that it was out of respect for her granddaughter’s wishes, after all. Much as she loved Margaery, such things did not seem to occur to her, save for, perhaps, Margaery’s relationship with Sansa.

She glanced at Garlan. “Perhaps you could bring it up,” seh suggested, gently. “After the funeral, when Cersei is gone again.”

Garlan met her eyes, and then nodded, shortly.
Sansa glanced at that great hulking door, and then walked back in the direction she’d just come from, and kept walking, all of the way back to her own chambers in the Maidenvault.

She could feel a sigh at the back of her throat, though it wouldn't emerge.

Rosamund was waiting, when she walked back into her rooms, as was Brienne. The two of them looked like two conspirators caught in the middle of something, though Sansa highly doubted that Brienne could be confused with a conspirator by anyone.

She had such an honest face, and Sansa, despite herself, trusted the other woman far more than she did Rosamund, these days.

She forced a smile in Brienne’s direction, at the very least to assure the other woman that she was all right; Brienne had known she was going to find Margaery, after all.

Brienne’s answering smile was hesitant. She was always hesitant to smile, Sansa had noticed, as if she wasn’t quite comfortable with the motion. Still, Sansa found it comforting that she did so, all the same.

“Has there been any answer from Dorne?” Sansa asked Rosamund, remembering the last thing she had asked of the other girl as she flopped down onto the closest chair she could find.

Rosamund blinked at her. “No, my lady,” she said, and Sansa squinted.

“Nothing?” she clarified, and once more, Rosamund shook her head.

Sansa bit back a sigh. “Wonderful,” she muttered under her breath.

She had sent a letter to Arianne, interceding on Trystane’s behalf, not entirely certain why she had, but wanting to help him, all the same.

And because there was something...strange, about Arianne suddenly deciding not to allow him and Myrella to send letters to one another, when they had been happy to do so before now. Not quite suspicious, perhaps, but strange, all the same.

They had heard nothing from Dorne at all, in fact, since they had sent word that one of their emissaries would be arriving soon to witness the King’s funeral, and the more Sansa thought about that, the more worried she became.

She knew that the Tyrells had their spies, within the court. Olenna Tyrell was not the sort of woman who depended upon only her son’s observation skills, to find out what was going on here in her forced absence.

She doubted that the Tyrells were the only ones, knew that if not Grandmæster Pycelle or the Mountain, who had not been expelled from the Kingsguard upon the moment of Joffrey’s death out of sheer terror of him, someone was likely sending word to Cersei, as well.

And she was quite sure that the Martells must have their spies here, too, to go along with their plans for as long as they had, leaving their ships in the harbor to protect against the Lannister fleets, or not attacking the Lannisters sooner, as Margaery had once intimated they would like to.

She only wished she knew who they were, so that she could either reach out to them to figure out what the fuck the Martells were up to, for it was obvious that Trystane knew nothing and Lady Nym, at the very least, knew too little, or to find out what they might not be doing.
Gods, sometimes Sansa wished that Olenna were still here. That she couidl go to the other woman
now and ask her what the fuck she was supposed to do about all of this, about Baelish and about the
fact that the Martells weren’t answering their letters, and about Margaery, too.

She had a horrible feeling that Olenna wouldn't have an answer that she liked, for the latter, but she
could use the woman’s counsel, just now.

It would, at least, provide some balance to the counsel that she received from Baelish, she thought,
throwing the levies down on her desk.

“Lady Brienne,” she said, turning to her loyal guard, because she very much needed a distraction
from all of this just now, if she could not find better counsel in Olenna Tyrell. “With Lady Nym’s
absence from King’s Landing these last few days, I was wondering...was wondering if perhaps you
could help me with the sword?”

This time, Brienne all but beamed at her, whatever her earlier woes were forgotten.

“We need to talk,” Sansa said, as she came into Margaery’s chambers unannounced.

“Can’t it wait?” Margaery asked, and the coldness in her tone made Sansa flinch.

It had been a day since the last time that Sansa had tried to talk to her, and been turned away; Cersei
would be here tomorrow afternoon.

It couldn’t wait.

They had to present a united front against Cersei, when she arrived, or she would be able to smell the
blood in the same way that her son had always been able to.

They had managed to get rid of the protestors, for now, by using more force than Sansa was
comfortable admitting to, but gods knew how long that would last. If Cersei found other weaknesses
once she arrived, they’d be damned.

And they had not come this far too be damned, no matter the look on Margaery’s face when Sansa
burst through her door uninvited.

Margaery looked exhausted, with black circles under her eyes and a smudged face. Like she hadn’t
slept since she had found the dead septa, and Sansa wished she could have spared Margaery being
the one finding her, but then again, that was what came from not organizing the woman’s death
herself.

She thought of all the things that Margaery had told her about her incarceration by the Faith, of how
the septa had come to speak to her every day, had been cold and cruel and tried to get her to confess
to the sort of sins which could get her killed, and told herself that she didn’t feel guilty for getting rid
of the woman before she could do so again, albeit with different methods.

Sansa lifted her chin. “No,” she said, because she had been giving Margaery space, since all of this
had begun, because she thought it was what the other woman needed.

But she wasn’t going to lose Margaery, not over this. Not now, after everything they had been
through together.

She couldn’t.
Besides, they just needed to provide a united front for a few days, and then Margaery could go back to ignoring her, if it made her feel better.

Cersei would not be here longer than that.

Margaery huffed out a sigh, turning and sinking down onto the chair, and giving Sansa a disapproving look. “I’ve been having the child kick on my bladder with the strength of a horse for the past six hours,” she informed Sansa, “So if I get up and leave halfway through, we can pretend that’s why.”

Sansa glanced away, sighing. “We need to talk about this.”

“Do we?” Margaery asked, cocking her head, and a part of Sansa had forgotten how nasty she could be, when she wanted to be. Sansa had always found it amusing, if a little concerning, when she directed that nastiness at Cersei while still playing to the niceties of court.

It didn’t feel so nice to be on the receiving end of it, however.

“It didn’t seem like you wanted to talk about things when you had her killed because you didn’t like the influence she had over me, without even discussing it with me in the first place,” Margaery went on, merciless, and Sansa glanced down at her hands.

Margaery’s hands were shaking, the way they did this time whenever she talked about Joffrey’s death, or what had happened at the Sept.

Sansa swallowed. “I didn’t kill her,” she said, softly, and Margaery let out a disbelieving snort, forcing Sansa to clarify, “I didn’t know he...I didn’t know he was going to do it like that.”

“He had her arranged in exactly the same way that Joffrey was, when he…” Margaery cut herself off abruptly, reaching a hand up to her mouth.

Sansa sighed. “I’m sorry,” she said, because there wasn’t much else she could say, even if the words sounded strangely hollow.

She wished she could apologize, and mean it.

But she couldn’t, and that was the problem, or at least, that was what Sansa thought the problem must be.

“I know you think I’ve...gone off the deep end, since everything that happened with Joffrey,” Margaery said, and she wouldn’t look her in the eyes, which hurt more than Sansa wanted to admit. “And I know that I haven’t exactly been...forthcoming about anything, lately, and that you probably have good reason to worry over me.”

Sansa heaved a sigh, knowing exactly where this was going. “Margaery…”

She almost wanted to ask Margaery how she had found out that it was her, how she knew exactly, but she knew that would only make things worse, in light of this argument. There was no point in the two of them hiding things from each other anymore; that was what had caused all of their problems in the first place.

The point was, Margaery knew, and she was absolutely furious over it.

“But I was finding myself again, Sansa,” Margaery interrupted her, and Sansa flinched. “At least, I thought I might be on the way to that. And the septa...I knew what she was. I knew that at least part
of her wanted very much for me to fail. But damnit, Sansa, she was helping me.”

Sansa felt much like a child, taken to task over something she had done wrong, and she wanted to open her mouth and defend herself, wanted to remind Margaery of all the reasons why she had done this, why it had been a terrible idea for Margaery to invite the septa here in the first place, but…

She realized, Margaery already knew all of that. She had known it, and she had invited the risk anyway, and Sansa…didn’t quite know how to react, in light of that.

“She knew about us,” Sansa said, instead, because she thought that might be the one thing which might make Margaery see sense, over all of this.

Margaery blinked at her.

And Sansa…Sansa’s eyes narrowed, because she wanted to believe that she just couldn’t read Margaery well anymore, since what had happened, but she already knew, Sansa could see that as much on her face.

Margaery had already known that; there was no surprise in her eyes.

Sansa flinched back. “How could you tell her that?” She demanded.

Margaery looked away, quickly. “I didn’t tell her that,” she spat out, sounding annoyed that Sansa would even suspect her, though Sansa privately thought that she had good reason to, at this point. “She knew it already. She knew it when they threatened you while I was a prisoner in the Sept, and she knew it when she first approached me about finding atonement.”

Sansa blinked at her. She supposed that made sense, after what Margaery had told her about the High Sparrow’s threats to Sansa’s own life. A naive part of her had simply hoped they had not gone beyond the High Sparrow, that Margaery wouldn't be foolish enough to allow anyone else who knew the truth so close to her side.

“So why in the hells did you invite her to your side?” she demanded. “You had to know she might be planning something against you.”

“Because I’m tired,” Margaery said, softly. “I’m tired of killing, Sansa. I’m tired of being responsible for the deaths of so many. And I thought that...between the two of us, we might be able to salvage this. We might be able to bring the people back to the Crown. I certainly didn’t want another riot like the one outside.”

Sansa flinched.

“And I didn’t think that any other members of the Faith were going to try to help me. I knew that Septa Unella was just fanatical enough to give me another chance.”

Another chance.

Sansa closed her eyes.

She knew that was what Margaery wanted, of course. Just another chance, after all of the wrongs that she blamed herself for, when Sansa couldn’t bring herself to blame her for any of them. Not when they could all be laid at Joffrey’s feet.

And perhaps that was why she did not understand Margaery’s obsession with gaining absolution from the septa. Perhaps that was why, no matter how many times she wrapped her mind around it,
she couldn’t understand it.

*You don’t need help,* she wanted to say.

Instead, she found herself saying, “You are the Regent, Margaery. It was exactly what you wanted before Joffrey’s death. That means being responsible for the lives and deaths of others.”

Margaery closed her eyes. When she opened them again, they were shining, and Sansa forced herself not to look at them, for fear that she might feel the sudden urge to cry, herself.

“I haven’t been ruling King’s Landing for quite some time, Sansa,” Margaery said, looking at her sadly. “And I’m not fool enough to think that I don’t owe you for that.”

Sansa opened her mouth, wanted to tell the other woman that of course she didn’t owe her, that she didn’t owe her anything, but she bit the words back, because something like despair was welling its way up her throat, as if her body knew already what Margaery was going to say next.

“But sometimes…” Margaery pressed her lips together. “Sometimes, I wonder if you don’t enjoy it too much,” she said, and Sansa felt the breath escape her, at the other woman’s words. Felt black spots spiraling into her vision. “I...I saw, the way you killed Ser Meryn. I saw the look in your eyes when you did it, Sansa. And it...it scared me, a little. It made me wonder…”

She didn’t finish that sentence, but then again, Sansa thought, she didn’t have to.

Sansa flinched back from the other woman as if she had been burned.

“I...” she opened her mouth, to refute the other girl’s words, to tell her that she was wrong.

The words were meant to hurt, just as Sansa’s towards Margaery had been a moment ago, and they had succeeded.

She hadn’t enjoyed killing Ser Meryn, she told herself.

She hadn’t felt anything when she killed him, and Sansa found that more terrifying than the thought that she might have enjoyed it, after the way that she had built up killing in her mind.

“I’ve done everything I have recently to protect you,” she whispered, but the words felt hollow, even to her own ears.

Margaery bit her lip. “Yes. And then you killed her,” Margaery said, shaking her head at Sansa, looking like she didn’t recognize her anymore, and Sansa could stomach a lot of things, had stomedached a lot of things, since coming to King’s Landing, but she couldn’t quite stomach that. “You killed her, after I told you what atonement meant to me, what she meant to me, and do you even feel anything over it?”

Sansa lifted her chin, took a step forward, tried not to flinch at the way that Margaery took a step back from her, obviously overwhelmed by how close Sansa had gotten, in that moment.

But it did fuel her annoyance, with her next words. “I did it to protect you. You...you killed the King, Margaery,” she pointed out, and she hadn’t wanted to bring it up until she said those words, words meant to hurt just as Margaery’s had, of course she hadn’t, but then again, they wouldn’t be in this mess at all if Margaery hadn’t done it, would they?

Sansa was tired of seeing the look in Margaery’s eyes, whenever she did look at her, these days, as if she blamed her for some or all of this, was tired of hearing that accusation that Margaery had just
thrown at her even if this was the first time she’d said it aloud, when Margaery had been the one who killed the King.

Margaery flinched back as if Sansa had struck her, and Sansa instantly regretted the words, but she knew as well as Margaery that she could not take them back, anymore than Margaery could take back what had happened to her, that night.

Anymore than Sansa could, how it had changed them both.

“And I have paid for that, every day since then,” Margaery gritted out, her eyes shining with something that might have been unshed tears, and might have been fury.

Sansa swallowed.

She...she didn’t understand what had happened between them. Didn’t understand why every single one of their conversations, these days, turned into arguments that ended in accusations and the sudden urge to cry. Didn't understand what had happened between the two of them to bring them to this place, just now.

She loved Margaery. Margaery loved her.

And she knew that what had happened to Margaery had been horrible, and that she needed time to heal from it, even still physically, but gods, Sansa was so tired of fighting with her.

Things were supposed to be different, once Joffrey died. They were supposed to be better, the two of them on the same side taking on the rest of Westeros.

It didn’t feel like that, these days, and that too, Sansa wanted to lay at Joffrey’s feet.

“What is that you want, Margaery?” Sansa demanded. “Yes, I’ve been doing what I thought was necessary to protect you, all of this time. But what is it that you want? Because you have to tell me, in order for me to help you.”

She didn’t know where those words had come from. Perhaps from months of telling Margaery what documents to sign and what lords to raise, when she ought to have known those for herself.

Sometimes, these days, Margaery reminded her of a lifeless little doll, and Sansa hated her for it.

Margaery swallowed, leaning back in the chair. She looked physically pained, and Sansa wondered if what she had said earlier about the child was true.

The maesters were reporting Margaery’s condition to her with every check that they did, but perhaps they had missed something. Perhaps…

“I think...I think we’re doing this wrong. I think we have been, since we...I think we should ask my grandmother to come back,” Margaery whispered, and the words were hoarse and full of a shame that Sansa didn’t quite understand.

Until she realized why.

Margaery didn’t think she was doing a good enough job, at whatever this was that Sansa found herself doing. She had sent her grandmother away so that they could do this together, and then, when she had needed Sansa, Sansa had disappointed her. And she had disappointed herself.

And it was hard to pretend that the realization didn't’ sting, horribly.
She licked her lips. Swallowed. “If that’s what you want,” she agreed, because she didn’t think there was anything else she could say, in that moment.

Margaery’s eyes lit up, as if she was surprised that Sansa had made that concession, as if Sansa could ever tell her ‘no.’ She’d helped her kill a king, hadn’t she?

Even if a part of her hadn’t just done that for Margaery’s sake.

Margaery looked strangely relieved, now. “It is,” she said. “I think...she can help us,” she said. “I think we need her help.”

Sansa found herself regretting the conversation she’d had with Garlan not just a day before, now. She had a terrible feeling that, although Olenna had presented herself as the one begging to be welcomed back, Sansa would find herself groveling to the other woman again.

It was one thing to want her counsel once more.

It was quite another thing to be presented with Olenna Tyrell, knowing that she was only back here because Sansa and Margaery had fucked up so badly to begin with.

She felt tears stinging her eyes as she moved away from Margaery, not trusting herself to speak.

“My guards,” Margaery called at her back, just as she was thinking up some excuse to get away from the other girl. Sansa swallowed, not trusting herself to turn around. “They report to you all of the time too, don’t they?” she asked. “Still?”

Sansa swallowed, turning back, then. “Margaery…”

“I’ve noticed that at least Megga and Alla do that, too,” Margaery went on, mercilessly. “And I know why. But after...She was in my rooms when I walked in, Sansa. I don’t...I can’t have that happen again. I can’t have them spying on me for you, if that’s what you and...he use it for.’

Sansa felt her throat go dry. “I don’t tell him anything,” she whispered, which wasn’t strictly true. But she certainly didn’t tell him things like that.

Margaery shook her head. “And I want to believe you,” she whispered, hoarsely. “But you did tell him to get rid of her, didn’t you?”

She couldn’t make her break from Margaery quick enough, for all that she’d been hoping for so many days to at least speak to her again.

She had known that Margaery would be furious. But the sort of quiet fury she’d displayed in there, the genuine mourning for a woman who could have ruined them...somehow, all of that had been worse than anything Sansa had imagined in her head, before she finally got to see the other woman alone.

Before she could think about what she was doing, she was running, down a hall of surprised nobles, passed guards who called out after her, wiping at the tears that were stubbornly clinging to her lashes until she came to an abrupt stop, surprised and yet not at all by where she had ended up.

Because of course she had ended up here.

She didn’t knock. She just shoved the door open and all but stumbled inside, knowing he would be there. Because he was always there when she needed him.
“Sansa?” Baelish looked surprised at the sight of her, and she supposed that he ought to be, when she had half a dozen other things that she should be worrying about, Arianne’s troubling silence and the riots outside their doors chief amongst them.

Baelish had moved into the Keep when it became clear that he had been the one to round up those “fanatics,” not Margaery. She wondered how long he would stay here, so close at her beck and call.

She walked hurriedly into the room, not caring that the door didn’t quite shut behind her. Baelish was the real schemer, here. The only one she really needed to worry about.

“I made a mistake,” Sansa whispered, as he wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her in for a gentle embrace, the way that her father used to do when she came to him crying. “Having you kill her. It was a mistake.”

About silly, useless things that had bothered her at the time, like Arya threatening to cut off Sansa’s hair while she slept, or Theon and Robb teasing her about being so ladylike.

But it felt…nice, in a way that Sansa did not want to admit, not even to herself. Felt nice to have someone comforting her the way that her father used to, comforting her with all of the care of a father, even if she knew by now that it was feigned.

That whatever game Baelish was planning, the promise that he had once made to her had been filled with romance because he remembered her to be a little girl who was easily swayed by such things.

That everything he did went towards some ultimate plan that she still was not privy to, because he had been lying through his teeth to her, when he told her he wanted to see her on the Iron Throne, and she had thought that voice to be so sincere, before this.

He didn’t want her in the same way that he had wanted her mother, didn’t lust after her body, the way she had thought in Highgarden.

It had taken her a little while to figure it out, but she thought she knew what it was that he lusted after, when he did look at her.

He had had genuine feelings for her mother, had even loved her, perhaps.

And Sansa was her mother’s daughter, the last of the Starks, almost the last of the Tullys.

A consolation prize, for when he finally got everything that he was working towards.

And she did not want to be that, not after everything she had gone through since her mother’s death. She did not want to be nothing more than his trophy, his reward for all of his hard work, when Sansa had worked damn hard, too.

And still, in this moment, she let herself believe he was genuine. Clung to him as the tears escaped her eyes, as she knew that she ought to be confiding in anyone else.

It had been his idea to kill the septa, after all, some time ago, and Sansa had resisted because she knew how Margaery would react to that, as indeed, she had.

And then, the septa had told her that she knew, and Sansa knew then that the other woman had to die. For all her threats about Cersei, Sansa had to make sure that the two women never met each other, and so she had done something abhorrent, and she hadn’t gone to Baelish about it, when he might have even helped her cover it up from Margaery so that she did not have to feel such guilt when Margaery confronted her about it, because she hadn’t wanted to owe him yet something else.
And yet, here she was, begging him for an absolution that she hadn’t understood Margaery’s need for. Because he was the only other one who understood. Because Margaery didn’t offer up comfort, these days, and Sansa did not know who else to turn to.

Oh, Garlan knew the whole story, as did Elinor, but they hadn’t lived it, not like she had, not like Margaery had, not like Baelish had always stood witness to.

Baelish had always been there, and even if that had not always been a good thing, it had always meant something.

“Sansa,” he said, very softly, petting her hair, “Take a deep breath. There you are.”

She hiccuped, didn’t want to pull away from him. “Even if I had you do it, I killed her, and Margaery’s never going to forgive me for it,” she whispered, and she didn’t know why she was fool enough to give this man ammunition, but she had to tell someone.

Baelish brushed a hand through her hair. “You did the right thing.”

Sansa blinked up at him, startled, before she remembered who this man was, that he had stared death in the face plenty of times without once caring for those who had been lost, save for her mother.

She remembered that her aunt was dead as well, his wife.

She swallowed hard. “It doesn’t feel like it,” she whispered, and the disturbing thing, though she didn’t share that with Baelish, was that she didn’t feel bad about killing the septa.

She had thought she would feel bad, when she killed Ser Meryn, the same way that she had felt bad about killing Oberyn, even if she had not done that deed herself, but she did not feel bad about the septa, either.

She felt bad, of course, that Margaery seemed so affected by it, but the septa had known their greatest secret, their most dangerous one, and Sansa had known from the look in the woman’s eyes when Sansa confronted her that she could not allow her to live.

“And what else would you have done?” Baelish asked her, ever the teacher, ever trying to walk her through her decisions.

If there was one thing that was good about this...whatever this was, between her and Baelish, it was that he forced her to confront each and every one of her decisions. To commit to them or throw them aside.

And she both loved and hated him for it.

Perhaps Margaery was sincere about wanting to bring the Faith and the Crown together, but that wasn’t worth their lives. The smallfolk might hate them, but they had not succeeded in killing a queen before.

Cersei would kill the both of them, if she knew the truth.

Sansa had done what she had because of that, even if it did disturb her that Margaery felt worse about it than she had, when she had been the one who…

“You told me that you thought she could come back from this. When I asked you to do it. And then you killed her like that, and don’t think I’ve forgotten,” Sansa whispered, as she pulled back from him. And she wondered about speaking so much to Baelish about a woman he believed to be his
rival, but considering the revelation she’d had about him not so long ago, she thought it didn’t matter.

He didn’t care for her heart, the way she had once thought. He didn’t care that it belonged to Margaery, and for now, he still wanted Margaery on the Iron Throne.

Of course, given what she knew about him, she didn’t know how much longer that would last.

“But I don’t…” she sucked in a breath, and let it out slowly. “The septa, she…she knew about us. Somehow, she knew. And Margaery claims that it wasn’t her, but if she somehow let it be known…I had to do it, but I...She won’t even look at me, anymore.”

And she knew it was wrong, somewhere deep inside, to be giving him this ammunition, but who else could she turn to, now?

Margaery had made it clear, in recent weeks, and in the months before them, that it wouldn’t be her. And she was right; Sansa hadn’t been listening.

Baelish sucked in a breath. “As I said,” he murmured, and for a moment, she thought that he might kiss her. “You did the right thing.”

“Then why doesn’t it feel like it?” she whispered.

Baelish was quiet for several moments. When he spoke again, there was something about his voice that sent shivers down her spine.

“When we were younger, your mother and I were in love, did you know that?” he asked her, and his voice was perfectly tailored in the way that it always was when he mentioned her mother, to manipulate her, because she knew half the things he said in that voice couldn’t be true.

She’d seen it in his eyes, once, and known.

“I wanted to marry her, I really did. But she was promised to your uncle, Brandon Stark, instead. Your grandfather laughed me out of his home,” he went on, in that same lilting tone. “So I challenged him to a duel. And lost. Terribly, I might add. I was lucky that your mother ever gave me the time of day again.”

Sansa felt her jaw twitch, and resisted the urge to say something cutting, to tell him that in all of the time her mother had lived at Winterfell, she had never so much as mentioned his name.

Because she was here right now, in his arms, and that meant something even if she didn’t want it to. And turning him away after she’d already done so to Margaery today didn’t sound like the greatest idea.

Or had Margaery turned her away?

She took a careful breath, and wondered how much of what Baelish was telling her was true. She doubted that her lady mother, who had always been so concerned with propriety, would ever have considered someone of Baelish’s background as more than a friend, doubted that it was anything more than a renewed effort to manipulate her, on his part.

And she liked to think that her mother and father had loved each other as few nobles did.

But the words got through to her, all the same.

“And because of that single moment, I made it my life’s goal that no one should ever laugh at who I
was again,” he went on, coolly enough, and Sansa, though she knew this had to be a manipulation, was surprised he was admitting that much of himself to her. “You want something, Sansa. There’s no wrong in that, no matter what anyone tells you. Even her. Always believe that.” He paused. “I am sorry, though, for the way I had that septa displayed. That was...a mistake.”

He didn’t admit to those, she thought, her face buried against his shoulder.

She had him, she realized dully. The one moment she hadn’t been trying, hadn’t been acting for it, and finally, she had him.

It made her feel sick.

Four washerwomen stood at a well near the heart of the city, close to the Keep because the water in other areas was still unsuitable to drink, according to maesters who sat in the Keep drinking water imported from the Reach, these days.

And thus, the women were forced to trek all the way down here to this well, deemed safe enough, just to get some water and drag it back to Flea Bottom, where their family would then be forced to ration it amongst each other, just to avoid death itself.

So they were already an unhappy bunch when one of them began talking.

“Can’t believe the gall of the Crown,” she said. “You hear they’re planning to dump that septa woman’s body with the rotting food over the side of the Keep, now that she’s dead? I imagine that’ll fuck with the water supply as much as whatever this new plague is.”

The other three turned abruptly to her, looking horrified.

“You might start off with something a little lighter,” one of them admonished, shaking herself. “I have to go back and make my boys a meal, now, thinking about that.”

“They say that the septa was butchered the way she was, and not just gotten rid of quietly, because the Queen confessed something to her that she wasn’t going to keep to herself,” the first washerwoman said, considering. “Something bad.”

The other women around the well glanced at her. “Oh? And how would you know that?”

The first woman shrugged. “I’m...seeing one of the guards who was asked to...get rid of the body. By the Lady Sansa, of all people.”

The women glanced at one another, silence falling over them, before one hesitantly set down her washing and asked, “And what did he say?”

She shrugged again, leaning over the well, now. It was a strange thing to do, with the rumors of the plague still affecting much of the water in the city, the Tyrells forced to bring in water for the people in order to keep them all from dying after drinking it, though that was a slow and arduous task.

The maesters from the Keep claimed that it was safe enough to wash clothes in, and as many of these women found their water suddenly rationed, they weren’t using their drinking water for that. But still, it seemed a risky thing to do.

But she looked quite at home there. “He said that Lady Stark told him not to tell anyone at the Sept what had happened to the woman, and to make sure that no one found her body. That it was important they didn’t know why she had died.”
The women exchanged glances again, their washing forgotten.

“That Lady Stark sure seems to have a lot of pull these days, for a tossed aside wife of the King and the wife of the man who they say helped kill him,” one said, almost hesitantly.

There was no one around to hear them, though. It was midday, and terribly hot, and most people were either working for their livings or home where their houses might offer a bit of relief from the sun.

The first woman made a face. “That’s ‘cuz they say she blackmailed her way there,” she said, shrugging. “Who knows? She seems to be doing the Queen’s dirty work for her alongside everyone else.”

The other women exchanged glances. “And here I thought she’d be different,” one of them sighed, as if they knew this woman personally.

The first woman shrugged again. “Well, I’m sure I don’t know everything,” she said. “But I’ve never met a noble who cared about the lives of people like us.”

The other women grunted. “Can’t say that’s a lie,” one of them muttered, darkly; she had lost a son at the Sept, months earlier.

“What are you lovely women talking about?” a new voice joined the crowd, a young man dressed in shabby clothes and wearing a hat that was entirely too fine for him, one that he claimed to have stolen off of a lord while “taxing” him for leaving the city.

He adjusted the hat as he leaned rather suggestively against the well, showing off an impressive array of women’s handkerchiefs tied to his belt.

He was the sort of character that every single one of these washerwomen knew, who went from house to house attempting to sell such “taxed” items to the highest bidder, if he could find anyone brave enough to reach above their station.

He was regarded as something of a harmless buffoon, who would, sooner or later, be caught and hanged for his crimes, but whom none of them would be turning in unless a city guard came for one of said items.

The women exchanged glances, looking slightly amused that he had joined their conversation.

One of the older ones, as she leaned down to pluck her pile of clothes out of the well’s bucket, smirked at him. “Oh, you know. Treason and sedition.”

“Big words,” the young man said, smirking. “Are you sure you know what they mean?”

She stared at him in surprise for a moment, and then let out a sound of disapproval, swatting him with one of her wet towels. “Why you little scoundrel!” she called after him, as he dove out of her way and the other washerwomen laughed at his plight.

Just as he was caught by the spray of the towel, a group of four men with far more dour expressions joined the group at the well, and the washerwomen almost immediately sobered, the older woman who had begun her chase of the boy abruptly stepping back and lowering her chosen weapon to her side.

“This brat giving you trouble?” one of the men asked, narrowing his eyes at the boy in question, who quickly lowered his gaze and glanced away.
The men didn’t carry swords on them, as that would have been too high of a commodity in the lower levels of King’s Landing, but they were carrying sharp looking knives that glistened against their belts, and they were perhaps double the size of anyone else present.

The older woman shook her head. “No, he isn’t,” she said, lowering her gaze as well when the man abruptly turned and looked her way. “Was just having us on, is all.”

The new man grunted, glancing back at his companions, who merely shrugged. “Oh, is that all?” he asked, hand reaching dangerously close to his knife. He looked at the boy. “Get lost, brat,” he said. “Unless you’ve got anything worth selling.”

The boy shrugged, reaching into his jerkin and pulling out a lady’s purse. “Nobles can’t get out of King’s Landing quickly enough, these days,” he offered. “Perhaps your wife would like it?”

The man glanced at it, grunting in something like disgust, before one of his companions let out a loud laugh. “Or maybe your bitch,” he suggested, and the rest of the men let out a round of raucous laughter.

The washerwomen looked uncomfortable, now, packing up their belongings with relative haste.

All of them save for the first one to have spoken at all, who narrowed her eyes at the group of men, with those words. “We was just talking about the Regent, actually,” she said, loudly, to the dismay of her own companions and the young man attempting to sell the purse. “How much like her husband she’s turned out to be, when she was supposed to be so bloody different.”

For a moment, he looked surprised that she had bothered to strike up a conversation with him at all. And then, he smirked. “Right bitch, isn’t she?” he asked.

The men behind him chortled.

“Her and the rest of them ain’t no different,” another added. “No matter how much she likes to pretend her farts smell of roses.”

“Fuck them,” one of the men agreed loudly, spitting ot the side. “You’re right. They don’t give a damn about us. This new Queen keeps making promises and letting her people fuck us, anyways. Just like her miserable excuse for a husband always did.”

“At least he kept his promises,” another muttered darkly.

“Us against them,” one of the original washerwomen said, looking rather nervous at the thought.

But the first woman to speak smiled, instead. “Us against them,” she repeated, raising a single fist into the air.

The men exchanged glances, and then copied her motion. “Us against them.”

“What did they ever do for us, anyways? But steal our sons and keep our food hostage against us.”

“Us against them.”

The original washerwomen exchanged glances, none of them entirely certain that they wanted to be involved in whatever came out of this, when just this morning they had been complaining about far lesser things, like their husbands and the long walk to this particular well.

Sedition sounded like something entirely other from the rest of that.
But the men had gathered quite a crowd, with their shouted words, with their fists raised in the air, and the washerwomen could only watch in something approaching dismay as the men took advantage of that new audience, of the people slinking down the street or out of their homes to hear what, exactly, was going on.

“They’ve never given a shit about us,” one of the men, the unofficial leader of the bunch, if the way he was raising his voice was any indication, “All those lords in their high castles, laughing down at us while they raise our taxes and do whatever they like with our food supply either fucking way.”

“Hear, hear!” one of the other men in the crowd shouted, not one of the originals, the first washerwomen who had begun this conversation noticed, then.

She bit back something of a smile.

That meant people were catching on.

“And now, they sit up there on their gold and kill any of us who dares to question them when we risk our livelihoods already to do so!” the man shouted, getting up on top of the well’s edge. “Their Queen comes down here making lofty promises, but when has she ever delivered on them? When she had a hundred of her guards run us through for daring to protest her?”

Below him, the crowd hesitated for barely a moment, and then cheered like their very lives depended on it. Perhaps in their minds, they did.

The first washerwoman smirked, her job here clearly done, she thought, as she walked away from the crowd and towards a hooded man leaning against a wall at the back of it.

She paused in front of him, not bothering to meet his gaze and draw attention to herself as she adjusted the clothing on her hip. It had to be washed still, anyways.

“Like that, my lord?” the whore who had, moments ago, been a washerwoman, asked.

Baelish smiled at her, a nasty smile that exposed none of his teeth. But then, he wasn’t the sort of man who ever exposed himself, or what his plans were actually for.

Whatever it was he was really up to, the Regent was going to regret coming to visit their whorehouse, she knew. She had come to them as a gesture, and Olyvar, the idiot, had hardly been subtle, before all but disappearing, and some of the girls said that he was working at the Keep now, in pointing out that she was trying to steal them from Baelish for a purpose.

It was a nice idea, she thought. She would have preferred to work for a woman, even if she was a noblewoman. A woman understood what it was to be like them, to be bartered and sold, whether they were noble or not.

But she had never seen Baelish lose a game that he set his mind to, not in the entire time that she’d known him, and so she knew who she had to follow, in the end.

After all, every whore who found their way into one of Baelish’s whorehouses, whatever their motivations, soon ended up hearing what had happened to the last whore who had dared to cross him.

“That was acceptable,” he told her, and she forced herself to send him a smile, in return. It wasn’t hard to summon up the smile, though she didn’t feel it. After all, she knew how to fake emotions for a man.
She kept walking, past him in the crowd, just in case one of the Queen’s agents happened to see them together. They said that she had something of a little spy network of her own, at least in the Keep, and her master didn’t know if that had expanded to the rest of the city, as well.

But she knew that Lord Varys’ little birds were always around.

A part of her hoped that they would report what had happened before this shitshow got worse. That the Queen might find some way to salvage this, even if she could not work alongside her.

Sansa had come to ask Elinor for her advice, because, much as she was still a little angry with the other woman, she found that it would be rather hypocritical for her to continue to be so, after what she had done to the septa.

If she blamed Elinor for what had happened to Joffrey’s serving boy, that night, she may as well point the finger at herself for what she had done to Margaery’s septa, and if she didn’t feel much guilt about that, she shouldn’t be so angry with Elinor, she thought.

The thought made her shudder.

After all, they had both allowed someone to die because of their plans. She thought perhaps Elinor might have some wisdom to pass along to her, and it wasn’t as if Margaery would see her, just now.

And she hated the feeling she got whenever she went to Baelish for advice, these days. Hated the way that her mind had reacted, as he whispered sweet nothings in her ear when she went to him because she was hurt over what Margaery had said to her.

She should have known better than to do that. Should have known better than to go to him in the first place, and even worse, to have listened to him, when she knew what he was. Knew what he was trying to turn her into.

Elinor, at the very least, was a fresh voice in the midst of all of this chaos, and she didn’t want to bother Garlan these days, when he clearly had enough on his plate.

It had been humiliating enough, trying to decide how she was going to go about asking him to invite Olenna to King’s Landing now, after their previous conversation.

Until she had realized that she didn’t need to ask Garlan to invite Olenna; there was someone else in King’s Landing who still kept a near constant correspondence up with Olenna, someone who’s message might even get to her faster than Garlan’s.

Even still, she would have gone to see Megga to talk about this, but she didn’t think Megga would understand. She thought that Megga at the very least suspected what had happened to Margaery, would understand why it felt like such a betrayal, to take the septa away from her, but Sansa didn’t think she could bear explaining it, if she didn’t.

Elinor knew. That was enough.

She found Elinor sitting in her parlor, a far roomier parlor than she had once possessed, but the emptiness of the room impressed even Sansa.

And she didn’t know where Elinor’s husband was, or the child, but Elinor glanced up sharply when Sansa entered, her eyes widening, but that was not enough to hide, from Sansa, at the very least, how very red they were.
Clearly, Elinor had been crying, and Sansa found herself sympathetic, despite herself.

“Are you all right?” Sansa asked, quietly, as she walked further into the room. Elinor gestured for her to take a seat across from her, shrugging.

Elinor pursed her lips. She looked in two minds about answering the question, and then, much to Sansa’s surprise, she did.

“Lord Varys came into my rooms while my son was sleeping,” she whispered, and for a moment, Sansa thought she was joking, but there was nothing amusing about the fear in Elinor’s eyes, a fear that she understood all too well.

In truth, she didn’t understand Lord Varys. Had never understood him, since she had first seen him on the Small Council here. He seemed a man without any true motivations, and yet, he was always involved in something.

But this...this didn’t sound much like him, at all. Intimidating a woman by being in the room with her sleeping son...that sounded more like something that Joffrey would have done, while he still lived, and Sansa didn’t understand what Varys’ interest in Elinor would have been, anyway.

But it was clear that he was up to something, and for that reason alone, Sansa needed more information.

Or at least, that was what she told herself, and not that she was worried about Elinor, seeing her eyes so red like that.

“What…” she licked her lips. “What did he want?”

Elinor grimaced. “I don’t know,” she said, tightly. “But this isn’t the first time that he’s done this.”

Sansa’s head jerked up. “What?” she demanded.

That was new.

And, she had to admit, very strange.

Elinor shrugged her thin shoulders. “He did this once before,” she whispered. “Held my son while I walked in and found him like that.” She shuddered. “I’m scared, Sansa. I don’t know what he wants, but he keeps coming here and asking about Margaery, and I know that he’s sending information to Olenna…”

Sansa cut her off, eyebrows shooting up in surprise. “Olenna?” she echoed.

Elinor looked slightly shamefaced, shrugging one thin shoulder. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, glancing up at Sansa. “I thought you knew.”

Sansa sat back in her chair.

She had known about Elinor, of course. After she had all but kicked Elior out of Margaery’s ladies, she had known that the other girl had no reason to stay in King’s Landing, save for the maesters slowly patching up her husband and her impending childbirth.

But the child was born now, and the maesters, whom Sansa checked with constantly over Margaery anyways, assured her that Alyn was well enough to travel, even if they didn’t think that he would ever be completely better.
She had no reason to stay here now, save for the fact that she was passing information to Olenna, and, much as Sansa disliked that thought, she knew it to be the truth.

But Varys…

She didn’t understand what possible reason that Varys might have to conspire with Olenna, unless he had already given up on Margaery but wasn’t quite ready to accept Cersei back into the ranks of King’s Landing once again, but…

If he was threatening Elinor, who was passing information along to Olenna as well…

“What exactly did he want?” Sansa demanded.

Elnior eyed her. “He...he asked me if I thought that Margaery was...If she was pretending to be so affected by the King’s death,” she murmured. “And then he seemed...disappointed, when I told him that I wasn’t sure that she was.”

Sansa grimaced. After all, Varys had to have something in mind for Margaery, if he was asking her closest companions what they thought of her mental state.

“He...he has some plan for her,” Elinor piped up, as if she had read the words right out of Sansa’s mind. “Something that he wants her for. Desperately, if you ask me.”

And he had some reason that he kept intimidating Elinor through her son, as well, Sansa thought, slightly more concerned about that. After all, if Varys was plotting against Margaery, she would figure out what he was up to, would ask for Baelish’s help, if she had to. Gods knew there was no love lost between the two men.

But Elinor’s child was defenseless, and…

And she thought of the boy who had been meant to drink Joffrey’s poison alongside him, and grimaced.

He didn’t deserve to suffer because of anything that they did.

“Has he tried to hurt your son?” Sansa asked, quietly.

Elinor shrugged one shoulder. “No,” she admitted, “But I don’t know what he wants with him. Don’t know if it’s some sort of sick game, or something else, and…”

She sounded like very soon, she was going to forget how to breathe.

Without thinking, Sansa moved around to where she was sitting and put a hand on her shoulder. It felt nice to feel a human’s touch against her skin, a human who wasn’t Baelish.

She took a deep breath, and then another. “There’s...something I need you to do for me, Elinor,” Sansa admitted, finally, and the other girl blinked up at her. “And in return, I promise that Varys will never harm a hair on your child’s head.”

Elinor swallowed hard. “You can’t promise that.”

Sansa took a deep breath. “I can if there’s no one left to do the harming,” she said, and Elinor blinked again.

“I need you to get a message to Olenna Tyrell for me. I need you to tell her that the funeral won’t happen without her.”
Elinor’s jaw went slack. “Are you...sure?” she asked finally, carefully.

Sansa grimaced. “No,” she admitted, because she wasn’t. She wasn’t sure about anything, at the moment. But she did know that Margaery would not be able to face Cersei Lannister, for so many days, without her grandmother present.

That, whatever had happened between the two of them in recent months, Margaery trusted her grandmother more than she did Sansa at the moment, which hurt, yes, but which Sansa didn’t have the time to fix, just now.

She had taken one counselor from Margaery’s side, and, much as she felt that Olenna Tyrell was perhaps not the person to replace her with, she felt rather duty bound to offer her a new one, especially when it was something Margaery was asking for.

“Can you do it? In time?” Sansa clarified.

Elinor squinted at her. “I want to go home,” she said, and Sansa stared at her. “Back to Highgarden. My husband will be happier there than he ever was here, and our son won’t terrify me by attracting Lord Varys’ attentions, there.” She lifted her chin. “That’s my price.”

Sansa met her gaze. "Done," she said, because in the end, that was no hardship on her part, these days.

Chapter End Notes

Please comment!
“Are you...sure that this is something you want to do, my lady?” Varys asked her carefully, as Olenna lifted her chin and met his eyes.

Some men were easy to read. Embarrassingly so, for men who played gods with the lives of others.

Varys was not one of those men, if indeed he was a man. He had the mind of a woman, she had found, and she meant that as a compliment.

Men often did not think beyond the length of their own cocks.

Varys was lucky that he did not have that impediment.

“When Petyr Baelish asked my granddaughter if she wanted to be queen, I believe it was because he thought that the Lannisters were the greatest power that could take on Stannis Baratheon, at that moment, but they could not do it without help. Now, with Stannis fucked off to wherever he has gone, Baelish does not seem so concerned about the affairs of the throne. I understand his little wife has found herself fallen off a cliff.”

“Moon door, in fact,’ Varys said, and he sounded almost...sad about it, though Olenna doubted that he was saddened by much.

Olenna snorted. “Likely story. Of course, mine own dear husband rode off a cliff, so I suppose one can hardly throw stones.”

Varys eyed her. “Surely you’re not suggesting that a man as...precariously positioned as Lord Baelish would murder his own bride,” he said, not sounding at all surprised by the accusation.

Olenna hummed. “And you wonder why I turn to you instead of to him?” she shook her head. “Though at least he does not hide behind one particular family or another. It makes it easier to guess his motives, I say, than it does yours.”

Varys made a face. “My lady, I have only ever…”

“Been interested in the safety of the realm, yes, you’ve said,” Olenna interrupted him, popping another grape into her mouth from the platter that sat between them in the little gazebo, a platter that he had yet to touch. “Interesting, then, that you’ve thrown your lot in with the Lannisters, who seem determined to run it into the ground, between them.”

Varys sat back in his chair. “My lady…”

“But, as I said, I do not trust Baelish,” Olenna went on. “He is the sort of man who thrives on the chaos going on around him, who...hells, even seems to enjoy it.”

Varys grimaced. “He once told me that chaos was a ladder,’ he admitted, and Olenna harrumphed. “But I do not understand why you would now trust me, when you have made it clear that you had no interest in me in the past.”

She waved a dismissive hand. He had made his offer, multiple times, in fact, and Olenna had turned
him down multiple times. It had been useful, to know what was coming when no one else in Westeros seemed to, but she had more present concerns, these days. “I already have one king married to my granddaughter, why should I reach for another when one is bad enough?”

She had never wanted her granddaughter to become the queen. That had been something that Mace Tyrell had wanted, something that Margaery herself had decided she wanted because Petyr Baelish whispered the possibility in her ear, or because she wasn’t as smart as she thought she was.

Olenna was just trying to keep their family safe. By whatever means possible.

And it seemed that the woman sitting beside the Iron Throne was always burned. Olenna did not intend for her granddaughter to be the next one lost.

She had already endured the disgusting habits of Joffrey Baratheon, or Lannister, or whatever he thought himself to be on this given day, had already seen the handprints on her back, left by a husband who got off on that more than on the thought of sex itself.

She would endure nothing further, if Olenna could help it.

Varys let out a sigh. “My lady…”

“No. But you can do something for me.” She smiled, thinly. “You can tell me what price the Martells might demand.”

Varys gave her a long, searching look.

She wondered if he knew how she had gotten her information, if he knew that she knew he was so deep in the Martells’ pockets because he had originally approached them about marrying their little princess to his dragon, and not the Tyrells.

If he knew that was why she had held him at arms’ length until this point, why she still didn’t trust him, now.

It didn’t matter. Let him guess, she thought idly. It would change nothing, in the end.

Finally, Varys let out a long sigh. “What do you know of the Viper of Dorne, Prince Oberyn?”

Olenna hummed. “I know that he is a character. A womanizer. And that his hatred for the Lannisters is legendary.”

He had certainly established a name for himself, since arriving in King’s Landing for her granddaughter’s wedding, fucking every whore, male or female, in the brothels of the town and some beyond that, and making vague threats towards the Lannisters at every turn.

She would almost admire him if she didn’t think he would turn up dead within the week, should Cersei Lannister or Tywin Lannister tire of those threats.

The Lannisters never forgave a debt, after all, something Olenna knew well.

It was why Joffrey Baratheon still lived, despite the offer that Petyr Baelish had once made to her, before her granddaughter’s wedding.

Varys’ smile was thin, now. He looked almost relieved. Olenna wondered what else she ought to know about the Viper of Dorne.

Silly name, just as the Lion of Casterly Rock was one. It was not as if the Tyrells went around calling
themselves the Roses of Highgarden, or the Redwynes the Grapes of the Arbor.

“Well, he has a particular interest in the Lannisters, as I’m sure you’ve noticed,” Varys said, the words almost idle. “In fact, I’m quite sure he will demand nothing less than a golden head.”

Olenna stared at him for several long moments, lost in thought.

She had refused Baelish’s original invitation to help her kill the King because she didn’t trust the snake, didn’t know what sort of thing he might be tempted to do with information like that, once the mad little king was out of the way and her granddaughter was free to marry the next Lannister in line, with half a dozen other Lannisters stuck in King’s Landing mourning the little bastard.

Baelish seemed the sort of man to immediately turn on her with any information he could glean from such a scenario without incriminating himself, and she doubted that Cersei Lannister would carry very much where such information came from, after all.

He seemed the sort of man who would plan ahead for such a thing from the moment he had first approached her, and that was why she had refused him, even when he made sure that she knew of all the horrible things that Joffrey had supposedly done to the women in his life, even including a noble girl.

Varys was much the same, playing his own game for his own reasons, but at least when he looked at Sansa Stark, it was not with lust in his eyes, but pity.

Men capable of pity, she had found, were still capable of the same atrocities as men who were not, but at least they were easier to understand.

“Do you think Tywin Lannister would allow any of his children to pass on without burning the whole of the Reach for it?” Olenna asked, scoffing. “What about the brother? I hear that Doran Martell has slightly more of a levelhead.”

Varys leaned forward in his chair, the noise of the garden around them serving to mask his next words. “I believe that particular head is the one that Oberyn Martell and his brother are most interested in, my lady.”

Olenna blinked at him. She sat back in her chair, motioning for one of the servants standing a good way off, too far to listen in on their conversation just in case Tywin Lannister, with all of his gold, might have paid them off. Most of them knew better, but Olenna would not take such chances.

“Finally, something interesting,” she said, smiling at him.

Varys smiled back, hesitantly, the sort of smile of a man who is wondering what monster lurks beneath the eyes staring back into his.

Wondering if it was a monster he himself had created.

(page break)

Laila took a deep breath as she glanced back at the village behind her, fighting back the tears leaking from her eyes as the smoke rose around it.

She would never be able to return here, she realized. Would never be able to walk back into her family’s cottage and tell off her brother for sneaking some of their mother’s pie before dinnertime, on the special occasions that they were able to have pie.
She would never see her brother again; she had seen him fall into line behind the other prisoners taken by those monsters earlier, just as she was managing to escape.

Laila took a deep breath, forcing calm.

There was nothing that she could do for her brother now, nor for her parents, who had fallen when the flames had first engulfed their home within the Shield Islands.

She kicked her horse to get it moving, because the stubborn creature had smelled the smoke by now, as well, and certainly didn’t want to run into more of it.

But that was exactly where they had to go, just now. Past her family’s home, the only place she had known her entire life, to the edges of the Shield Islands, in the vague hope that she might find the beacon before-

Laila clutched her aching side, drawing in several pained breaths as her horse finally began moving, charging through smoke and a lack of trees, letting out a loud neigh that had Laila worried that she might be overheard.

After several horrifyingly long moments, she glanced over her shoulder, relief flooding through her as she realized that she was not being followed.

Or, perhaps it was not entirely relief. A part of her, the part of her that didn’t scream that this was what her father had always told her might happen, but which he prayed never did, was yelling at her to turn back. No matter what happened next, at least she would be able to see her brother again.

It had been horrifying, watching her village home burned to the ground around the sound of her parents’ screams, smelling the distinct smell of burning flesh from where she hid in the stables, until the smoke overwhelmed her and she was forced to make a run for it with her horse if she didn’t want to end up joining her own family in death.

It had been a mistake that she was even out of her home in the first place. She was supposed to be helping her mother cook their supper, and instead, she had snuck off to see Rhys, a boy whom her parents would never let her marry but who she wanted so desperately, anyways.

It all seemed so silly, now.

She wondered what had become of him. They had been kissing under the few trees that remained on the Shield Islands when they first heard the screams, when they saw the smoke rising in the air from the other side of their own island and realized that something was desperately, terribly wrong.

Laila had started running before she even realized what she was doing. She could hear Rhys calling out behind her, yelling her name, but she ignored him. She wondered if he had made a break for it, or if she would find him at the beacon, would find that the beacon was already lit and she was wasting her time, running her horse all of the way there.

But it didn’t matter, she told herself. Every person who lived on the Shield Islands had a sacred duty to get one of those beacons lit, if they ever came under attack again.

Laila dragged in a quick breath, and then another, the sight of that long, unfurled sail that sat in the makeshift harbor their island claimed flashing before her mind again, and she kicked her horse along a little harder, a little more desperately.

Her breathing became more labored alongside the horse’s, something that brought Laila an idle sense of amusement until she realized she was only focusing on that so that she could not think about what
she had just seen.

Could not think about how she had run all of the way back to their village only to find half of it already burned to the ground, men who did not look like soldiers but more like pirates marching through what remained of it, pushing along friends and family members who had watched Laila grow up, now hanging their heads low, in chains.

Her father had still been alive the first time this had happened. The first time they had come and taken away those who lived here to sell them as slaves, the first time these upstarts had destroyed life as it was known on the Shield Islands.

He had never wanted it to happen again, rarely ever talked about it. Only told Laila to make sure that she had a piece of flint on her at all times, no matter where she was, just in case.

Just in case the worst happened again, and the rest of the Reach was not there to defend them, as they had not been the last time.

He had survived, that time, by hiding in the stables until it was over, underneath a newborn, dead foal whom the Greyjoy soldiers hadn’t bothered to remove. He’d been just small enough for that.

He hadn’t survived this time, though, and Laila’s eyes once again filled with tears at the reminder of what her father had looked like, half buried under rubble in front of her, as she reached out to check his pulse in a vain attempt after the pirates, or soldiers, whatever they really were, had gone.

She had known already what she would find. His flesh had already mostly burnt away, leaving behind a pool of skin and charred remains, where he lay alongside her mother, who was in a far worse condition because the pirates didn’t seem to have cared whether she lived or not.

Laila licked her lips, biting back the nausea rising up in her throat at the reminder of what her parents had looked like, after they had been burned alive in their own homes.

There was nothing she could do for them now, she reminded herself.

But if she could get to the beacon in time, perhaps she could save her brother from a fate worse than death, from a life of slavery and suffering. Perhaps, if the beacons were lit in time and the rest of the Reach reacted quickly enough, they could still save her brother.

Could stop these nightmare ships and take off her brother’s chains, and they could find some way to survive this, the same way that her father had survived it, the first time.

She sucked in a breath, and then another, her horse once again hesitating as they crested another hill.

“No,” she whispered to the old mare. All of the rest of the horses, the good ones, the ones who were workers in the fields or who really knew how to run, had been taken alongside the slaves. The young of their village, the agile. “No, Smarza, keep moving. You have to keep moving. Please.”

The horse let out a grunt of what she imagined to be dismay, and kept moving. She acted like she knew the route they were taking as well as Laila did, which was something of a relief, Laila thought, since she was beginning to feel rather dizzy, her eyesight blackening around the edges.

Laila breathed a sigh of relief that quickly cut off into a wheeze, as she clutched at her side, glancing down nervously at it. She shook her head; it didn’t matter now, she told herself.

All that mattered was that she made it to the beacon, that no other families were forced to go through what she had just gone through, what her mother and father had brother had been put through.
And then, just when Laila was beginning to fear that she might fall off of her horse out of sheer weakness alone, she saw it. Standing proudly unlit atop the last hill of this island, before the stone cliff promptly plunged down into the sea.

The waves were beating angrily against the sides of the cliff, Laila noticed, as she pulled her horse to a stop directly before the beacon. A storm was coming, and she did not know how long the beacons would last in the face of that. As if the gods themselves were angry, and taking it out on the Shield Islands.

Those ships had looked like they belonged in a nightmare, not reality.

The beacon stood before her, unlit, and Laila took a deep breath as she slid down from her horse and hurried forward, the piece of flint sitting in her pocket, as indeed the citizens of the Shield Islands were always told to have a piece of flint on their person, chafing against her fingers.

She knew what she had to do, she thought, as she pulled the piece of flint out of her pocket and hurried forward.

There was normally a guard at the beacon. When the lords of the Shield Islands saw that an enemy was approaching, the beacons were meant to be lit so that the rest of the Reach could be made aware. It would not be enough to save her beloved home, but Laila had grown up her entire life in the knowledge that this very act might become her responsibility, one day.

And she was not going to let her parents die for nothing, was not going to lose her brother to the likes of those cruel men who had sailed in without a single bit of resistance, because the Redwyne Fleet was too busy guarding against other enemies these days to focus on new ones, on their ships that looked like something out of a nightmare.

There were no guards here today, and she wondered if they had gone running to save their own skins when they saw those nightmarish ships enter the harbor, or if they had never been here at all, shirking their responsibilities in the same way that Laila had been, when she had snuck off with Rhys.

She glanced down at her side again, as she pulled the piece of flint out of her pocket and began desperately hitting it against the stones which held up the beacon.

She forced herself to remember to breathe, because with every movement her side hurt all the worse, and she could feel her gown beginning to grow wet and heavy.

The brewing storm above her let out a furious thundercrack.

A spark ignited from her piece of flint, and Laila let out a noise of obvious relief, coaxing it to life and then lifting her new torch up to the top of the beacon.

For a moment, nothing happened.

And then, the beacon blazed to life, loud and crackling in the cool summer air, as behind her, Smarza let out a loud cry and then turned and ran back in the direction they had just come.

As Laila stepped back from the beacon, she found that she did not even have the energy left to swear, at the sight of her mare abandoning her.

She could only stare with wide eyes into the flames, and hope that what she had just done would be enough. Would be enough of a warning, would be enough to stop the nightmares from overtaking the rest of the Reach, from spreading to other families.
If only the beacon did more than warn with a light, she thought, desperately. If only she could somehow send a message, as well, to warn what was coming, because even with this beacon, she wasn’t sure that would be enough to stop those particular nightmares, horrible as they had been.

She clutched her side and sank down to her knees, watching the flames grow and reminded uncomfortably of what her own village had looked like, at the sight. It had not been very different from this, only, it did not stand on a hill.

Of course, that was the problem with beacons. They could relay danger, but not who that danger was coming from.

As Laila clutched her side and felt the life’s blood bleed out of the wound between her ribs her with disturbing force, she whispered a single name, a name that no one would hear, because there was no one left to hear it.

Still, it floated out into the wind and was silenced almost immediately, as Laila’s next breath came in a short gasp and the next did not come at all.

“Greyjoy.”

The beacon burned for two more hours, but there was not enough oil on it, these days, for it to burn longer than that.

Across the bay, another fire was lit, but Laila never saw it.

Gendry took a deep breath, glancing in the mirror that the servants had placed in his chambers, and let the breath out slowly.

He felt…strange, in the clothing he wore. Like it didn’t quite fit, which was a ridiculous concern to have, considering the lengths that the Lady Olenna had gone to, to ensure that these clothes did, in fact, fit.

He knew that the clothes didn’t feel comfortable because he was keenly aware of their cost; they were rich silks and velvets, and he’d never worn anything similar in his life, used to the life of a peasant.

But the Lady Olenna said that it was the sort of thing he must get used to, now.

There were a great many things that she wanted him to get used to, these days.

The first of these being his last name.

Gendry…Baratheon.

The name tasted strange, on his lips, like it belonged to someone else entirely, and he was being forced to pretend that it was his own.

Which, in a way, he supposed, was the truth. He had been Gendry Waters for so much of his life, and it was, after all, his name. His mother had not been married to his father, had been a simple common woman from King’s Landing, and that was all he had known for so long.

And the world didn’t feel any different, for all that he now bore the name Baratheon. He was still the same man he had always been; whoever his father had been, he had not been much of one.

His father’s last name had not done anything for him when his mother had died so young and left
him on his own. It hadn’t mattered when he had finally found an apprenticeship as a blacksmith, or when he had been forced to leave King’s Landing in order to find work somewhere else.

It hadn’t mattered to Margaery Tyrell, either. She’d taken it in with the sort of idle curiosity of someone whose plans didn’t factor that in at all.

But Olenna Tyrell seemed to think that name mattered a great deal, even as her granddaughter stood regent for the Iron Throne, and Gendry…did not understand that. Did not understand why she still wanted him, when her granddaughter had everything they could have wanted. Did not understand why she was still treating him like a pawn for her to use, when now, surely, he represented nothing more than a threat to her.

Servants were another thing that Gendry wasn’t used to. He couldn’t remember the last time that he’d been alone, since his new patronness had released him from her dungeons, surrounded by either guards or servants at all times.

He knew that it was because Olenna didn’t want him out of her sight for any given amount of time; whatever plan she had for him, and he still had yet to get an honest answer from her about that, she wasn’t about to let him run away.

He felt very much still a prisoner here, in some ways, though his guards were certainly nicer, and they treated him not like a prisoner at all, but like a lord, someone worthy of respect, which was also not something that he was prepared for.

He wondered what his father would have thought, if one day he had met Gendry. If he would have cared that Gendry was his blood at all. They said that Robert Baratheon had a dozen bastards in every brothel in Flea Bottom, that he had only ever acknowledged one who lived in the Vale, far from here.

Still, it had an interesting ring to it.

Gendry Baratheon.

He remembered telling Sansa Stark, the redhead who reminded him so completely, and at the same time not at all, of Arya, or Arry, as he had known her in another life, when she had been a boy, what it felt like to be Gendry Baratheon, when that had never been his name.

She had been Arya’s sister, and there had been something fascinating about that, at the time, that, despite the years it had been since the last time he had seen the younger girl, her sister was standing before him, alive and well.

Arya had not talked about her sister much; she had not talked about her family much at all, and Gendry thought he knew why, when he saw the sadness in her eyes the few times she had brought them up.

The whole of Westeros knew of the tragedy of the Starks, after all. He’d known it before he’d come to know a little boy called Arry, who was really a girl.

He remembered mentioning two half brothers and a half sister that he had never met, but only heard about in the same obscure way that every member of the common learned about their betters. They were princes and princesses, and Gendry had been lucky enough, for a commoner, to have ever even met Arya Stark.

But he had, and now, he had met far more than her.
He knew what they said about his half brother, that he had been spoilt and wicked, that he had enjoyed torturing his own people as much as he enjoyed torturing the girl who was supposed to be his wife, the one who reminded him almost nothing of Arya, save for that spark he had seen in her, while they talked about Margaery Tyrell.

He wondered if that was what the other two were like, wondered if Robert Baratheon had spoiled his children and Gendry was better off never knowing him at all.

He licked his lips, turning away from the mirror and tugging on those damn boots that the noblemen here all wore. They were uncomfortable, and they pinched.

He hadn’t quite worked up the courage to complain about them to his benefactress yet, though.

There was a knock at the door, and Gendry, who was used to people just bursting into his rooms if they wanted to see him, sighed and called for them to enter.

He didn’t deny the small sigh of relief that he let out when he realized that it was Leonette on the other side of that door, looking like she wanted nothing more than to see him.

She was one of the few around here, he thought, who almost made him feel like he might belong here. He thought it was perhaps because so few people in Highgarden seemed to act like Leonette belonged here, either, no matter that she was married to the future Lord of Highgarden.

He did notice some things, after all.

“You look very handsome,” Leonette Tyrell said as she stepped up beside him, reaching out to adjust his cravat, and it took everything within Gendry not to flinch away from her touch, no matter that he did rather like her.

He reminded himself that these Tyrells all seemed to be very tactile people; Olenna Tyrell did not care how many times he flinched away from her when she grabbed his arm as they walked at her slow, encumbered face, or grabbed his hand to make a point.

And Leonette’s touch was not…unpleasant, especially compared to that of a woman who had left him locked away in her dungeons for weeks, because she hadn’t wanted to believe him when he told her that her granddaughter was still alive, something that he…still did not understand.

He would have thought she would be pleased to learn that her granddaughter lived still, when all of Highgarden had been mourning her, when he had arrived.

But then, the longer he spent around Olenna Tyrell, the less he seemed to understand her.

She was a terrifyingly intelligent woman, with half a dozen plots up her sleeve at any given time, and the more time he spent with her, though it did not help him to understand her more, made him think that perhaps he understood Margaery Tyrell, a bit better.

Leonette was kind enough, but she was not someone that Gendry thought he could ever grow accustomed to being around. She was a lady, and he was very aware of that any time that they spent any time alone together.

But she was also a mother whom Olenna had decided spent too much time around her newborns, and so, she was spending more and more time with Gendry, these days.

He tried to be kind and accommodate her, in light of that. He couldn’t imagine what it would be like, to be told that you shouldn’t be spending so much time alone with your child, and besides, he hardly
remembered his own mother.

Didn’t know if she had wanted to spend more time with him herself, before she had passed.

Leonette smiled at him, as she pulled back. “I dare say, you’re starting to look something like a noble,” she told him, and Gendry squinted at her.

“I don’t feel much like one,” he admitted, because it was the sort of thing that he could admit to Leonette, he knew, while he could not admit it to Olenna.

She did not want to hear his doubts, after all; she had made that very clear, the first time that he had offered them up.

“You are Gendry of House Baratheon, the last trueborn son of Robert Baratheon,” she had said, her fingers digging into his arm, when he questioned her over the things that Stannis and his Red Woman had said about him, and she had confirmed them. “Do you understand?”

He had nodded, and never brought up those doubts again, surreal as all of this had been since then.

He did not feel like the last trueborn son of Robert Baratheon; he had never met his father, after all, and he did not feel like anyone so important. His name was hardly one that sparked terror, the way that Joffrey Baratheon’s had, and yet, Olenna seemed to see some significance in it.

He didn’t understand why she had gone from leaving him in her dungeons to parading him around like a wanted guest in her household, though he was not able to leave it, at the same time. Did not understand why she now thought that his last name was so important, when he was just a bastard.

But then, she had explained that much to him, on the first night she had let him out of the dungeons and the two of them had dinner together, an even more surreal experience than the first time he had learned who his father was.

“You are the last trueborn son of House Baratheon,” she had explained to him, and his brows had furrowed, because Margaery Tyrell had already gone back to King’s Landing to be with her husband again, Joffrey Baratheon, and Olenna had already decided, as far as he knew, to lay down arms against the Lannisters when she learned of that.

“But what about…” he’d begun, but Olenna had lifted a finger to her lips, and he had fallen silent.

“Those children…they are nothing more than Cersei Lannister’s bastards,” she said. “By all accounts, you have a better claim to the throne than they do.”

Gendry stared at her.

And yes, Margaery had partially explained this to him once, as well, but it seemed a very different thing, to be told that when he thought he was about to die aboard a pirate ship, and to be told it sitting across a gilded table, eating food too rich for his stomach and wearing clothes that were itchy and too fine for him, from a woman who seemed very capable of doing something with that information.

A woman capable of raising armies because she didn’t like the current king, and had made no secret of that fact since his arrival here.

“I don’t…”

He wanted to say that he was just a bastard, too, even if the current king on the throne had no claim
to it, because it was the only bit of logic that he could still cling to in this moment, with Olenna regarding him so seriously, as if she very much expected something to come of her words, expected a more exciting response from him.

But he didn’t know what she wanted from him. He wasn’t one of these nobles, for all that Olenna seemed to want to make him one, now that he was useful to her. He didn’t know their games.

And she struck him as very good at them.

Her hold on his arm gentled, then.

“Tell me, Gendry,” she had said, and it had been the most gentle she had ever been around him, “How do you feel about taking back what is yours?”

Gendry flinched back to the present, realized that Leonette had just asked him something “I…sorry,” he said.

Leonette’s smile was gentle. “It’s all right,” she said. “I was asking whether there was anything that you needed.”

Despite the kindness in her tone, the question left him feeling more than a little overwhelmed. He couldn’t think of a damn thing that Lady Olenna had not provided for him, in the time since she had taken him out of that cell, from the opulent rooms he now slept in, to the money she provided him, to the horses. Hells, he had a feeling that if he asked it of her, she might even let him set up a blacksmith’s shop, even in Highgarden.

Then again, she might not, because that was a rather…common thing to do, and she seemed of the opinion that he needed to be weaned off of such things.

“I…” He licked his lips. “I feel like you’ve been more than generous to me,” he pointed out, because half a year ago, he would never have expected to be treated like this, and not just because Olenna had kept him imprisoned in her dungeons.

Leonette smiled at him. “Perhaps we should have dinner together some time, Gendry,” she told him. “And you could tell me about your life, before all of this? And your mother.”

Gendry flinched, a bit. “I…would like that,” he admitted, because even if the topic of conversation sounded rather unsettling, he was getting terribly bored around here.

He didn’t know much about his mother, though, he wanted to tell her, but he held those words back. He didn’t want her to think that he was trying to brush her off.

For all that Olenna was kind with her generosity, he was no allowed to leave Highgarden save for the horseback rides that he sometimes took with Dickon Tarly, and even then, he could see little enough that the two of them had in common, the few times that Dickon actually had the time to deal with him, rather than with Olenna’s armies, now that his father was in King’s Landing, serving the Regent.

Dickon was a military man, through and through, and bore the rides without complaint, but they were largely silent.

But Gendry was not allowed to practice at swords, with Dickon or with any of the guards, and that was another unsettling thing about living a noble’s life, that he never seemed to be alone.

He had been more alone as a prisoner in Olenna’s cells, and even then, there had still been guards,
guards who were not allowed near him now, lest they recognize him.

He took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, wondering if Leonette knew. If she knew what it was that Olenna was planning for him, if she knew that Lady Olenna intended to do more with him than to dress him up in fine clothes and pretend that who his father had been mattered, when he was nothing more than a bastard.

But Lady Olenna struck him as the sort of woman who did not reveal her plans to anyone who she didn’t immediately need to know them, and so, he didn’t bring it up to Leonette, now.

Leonette was kind, in a sort of motherly way, and she didn’t strike him as the sort of woman who would approve of…whatever it was Olenna Tyrell was planning to do with him.

He swallowed hard. “I’d like that very much,” he repeated, and she smiled at him, pulling away, then.

“You know,” she said, and her voice was suddenly gentle, and he wondered for a moment if she was going to bring up her children again, “I know what it’s like to be something of an outsider, here. You can always come to me, if you need something.”

Gendry squinted at her. “I...I’ll keep that in mind,” he said, because he didn’t think it appropriate to ask why some nobles ostracized another, when they all felt themselves above the smallfolk.

He also didn’t think she quite understood how he felt here, even if she did feel like something of an outsider.

He thought of Margaery, this woman’s goodsister. She hadn’t liked the pirates any more than he had, when the two of them had found themselves their prisoners, but by the gods, she had gone out of her way to befriend some of them.

He supposed this situation was a little like that one.

“Well, wish me good fortune,” Leonette said, over her shoulder, as she moved to the door. “You know, Lady Olenna has…required me to come and eat this meal with her, but I’ll be happy to eat with you some other time, as well.”

He licked his lips, as she walked away, and just barely managed to force out, “Do you think that Lady Olenna might...permit me to spend some time in the forges?” He asked, at her back, because he thought that might have a better chance of being granted, after all.

Leonette turned back, raising an eyebrow at him.

He shrugged a thin shoulder. “It was what I used to do...before.”

Leonette pressed her lips together. “I think Lady Olenna would find such a task...demeaning, for one of her guests, when we already have blacksmiths aplenty,” she said, and her words almost sounded apologetic, for all that they seemed final.

She walked back to him, then, and her eyes were...strangely understanding, he thought.

“Lady Olenna is a great woman,” she said, softly, and he wondered if her words were so soft because of the guards outside. “And she takes care of those under her protection, but you should know that she does not easily take...criticism.” Something in her eyes hardened, then. “Especially not these days.”
Gendry blinked at her, thought about the fact that Olenna Tyrell and her servants seemed to go out of their way to make sure that Leonette’s children wanted for nothing - wanted for nothing so much that their own mother certainly didn’t seem to be needed for their rearing.

He wondered if she had done that with every Tyrell, or specifically with these two.

Twin girls, they were, and he strangest sight of Gendry’s life, perhaps besides a Red Woman leaning over him throwing leeches onto his skin, must have been seeing Olenna’s face twist into a motherly expression as she cooed over the girls, and then twist back into something sharp and cold when Leonette approached them.

“Is that what you did?” He asked her, and Leonette flinched, looking away.

Her voice was very different, when she responded.

“I told her that I wanted to go to King’s Landing and be with my husband, and that I wanted to take my children with me, because I’m unhappy here,” she said, and her voice was whisper soft. “And now, I only see my children when I am accompanied, and my letters to my husband are all read, and I must eat with Lady Olenna once a day. Make of that what you will, Gendry Baratheon, but don’t do anything foolish.”

He swallowed hard, eyes widening slightly at her words. “What’s something foolish you think I might do?” he asked her, out of pure curiosity.

He thought of the way that Olenna Tyrell had looked at him, hard and calculating, as she asked him whether he wanted to take back what she deemed to be his birthright.

If she was right, that meant that Margaery Tyrell should not be the Regent, because her child had no claim to the throne. It also meant that Robert Baratheon’s prince and princess weren’t related to Gendry at all.

He reached up, awkwardly rubbing at his throat.

Leonette’s fingers twitched, curled around the door. “Just...watch your back, Gendry Baratheon,” she warned him, as if she knew something that he didn’t. “Even when you think you’re finally safe.”

He wanted to tell her that he didn’t think there was much worry about that.

He didn’t.

The door shut behind her.

“The children are settling in nicely to their new rooms, I hear,” Olenna said, and Leonette glanced up from her bowl of soup, sending the other woman a carefully curated smile that promised fury, if she dared question it.

Olenna did not have to pretend she didn’t understand why; she had been the driving force behind getting the children their own chambers, after all.

It wasn’t good for the children to be too attached to their mother, Olenna had decided, as she watched the way the other woman practically clung to the twins, at every waking moment.

As she watched her hold onto them like they were her lifeline, and then demand to go to King’s Landing with the Heirs to Highgarden, girls though they were, because Garlan was there and she
didn’t like it here.

As if women could have things that they liked just because they wanted them, Olenna thought, with a small snort that seemed to catch Leonette’s attention, if the wide eyed look she sent her way was any indication.

They were young yet, and could still rely on her, but mothers were for having children. Septas and servants were for raising them. Especially in noble families; imagine if the future Lady of House Tyrell saw fit to spend her time as wet-nurse and maid to her children, daughters no less, for the rest of her days.

That was how she had been raised, and it had never done her any harm.

Olenna sniffed at the false smile on Leonette’s face, and leaned back in her chair.

She knew that Leonette had disapproved of her decision; her children were only a few months old, after all, and she had always been a doting young fool, even if Olenna applauded her ability to land Garlan, considering the disaster of a family that she had been born into.

But there was little that Leonette could do about it; she had already made her appeal, and Olenna had found it rather lacking.

And while Leonette would one day be the Lady of Highgarden, now that Garlan was in line to be its lord, Olenna was so currently, for all that Alerie had the title.

Leonette would just have to learn to get in line, like Alerie had, though Olenna would admit that Alerie had not put up nearly as much of a fuss, in that regard. She had been content to be a loving wife, and known her place well enough from the first few minutes she had spent with Olenna.

Leonette would just have to learn.

It was for her own good, after all.

When they went to war with the Lannisters, as Olenna had no doubt they inevitably would, Leonette would need to be capable of thinking of more than just her own children, as a Lady of their House.

Garlan was not here, and she supposed that the young woman must be bored, indeed. So she’d given her something to occupy her time with, even if Leonette seemed to find it as distasteful as she had being told she would not need to sleep in the same chambers as her children, anymore.

Leonette had not taken kindly to her added, duties, one of them being this lunch with Olenna every week, but she knew that the other woman would, eventually, fall into place.

They always did.

It was the one comfort that she had, just now, besides the weekly letters that Elinor was sending her from King’s Landing.

“So I’ve heard,” Leonette said, through clenched teeth.

She had never been able to perfect the ability to hide what she was thinking. It was useful, in manipulating her, but rather annoying in the future Lady of Highgarden.

Of course, Olenna had not known before that Leonette would be her only choice in that regard, so she supposed this was partially her own doing.
“And Gendry,” Olenna said, into the silence, after she took a loud slurp from her soup. “I notice you spend quite a bit of time with him. How is he settling in?”

Leonette took a careful breath, setting down her spoon. “He’s...troubled, I think, by what his place is here.”

Olenna snorted. “If I wanted to know that, I could have figured it out without your input, dear,” she said, coolly, and Leonette flinched.

This was as much about her need to keep an eye on Gendry as to figure out how well Leonette was progressing, she told herself. It did not do much to comfort her.

“He thinks that he’s still a prisoner here,” she said. “He asked me for permission to go down to the forges.”

“So he’s not an idiot,” Olenna hummed. “I hope you told him no.”

Leonette opened her mouth, and then closed it. “I…”

The door opened then, a servant popping his head in, interrupting her.

Olenna sighed.

“Gods, what is it now?” Olenna demanded, as she waved the piece of meat in her hands and turned a fierce glare on the serving boy before her.

He flinched. “It’s...ah, Lord Dickon Tarly, my lady,” he announced, and instantly, a change seemed to come over the Lady Olenna.

She set down the piece of meat in her hands, sending a smile in Leonette’s direction, before she got to her feet, reaching awkwardly for her cane. Leonette reached out as if to help her, and Olenna shot the woman a scalding look.

“Well, be a dear and let him in, would you?” she asked, forcing a smile she didn’t particularly feel. “Don’t leave the poor loitering out in the corridor.”

The servant bowed. “Yes, my lady.”

“Dickon Tarly?” Leonette asked, with a raised brow, as the servant went back out into the hall.

Olenna hummed. “Something that you will need to keep in mind, my dear, when you become the Lady of Highgarden, is that playing nice with your vassals is just as important as your husband’s ambitions. It is something that this family has willfully tried to deny for some time now. We can no longer afford to.”

Leonette blinked at her. “The Tarlys-”

“Know how to deal with the other Houses in this dreaded kingdom,” Olenna told her, coolly. “So long as we can keep a handle on them. I don’t want to deal with a civil war on top of dealing with that cunt, Cersei.”

And whatever was happening in Dorne, she added, silently.

Fortunately, the door opened then, and Dickon Tarly, tall and burly as ever, Olenna thought, stepped inside, dipping his head to them like a serving boy, rather than the firstborn son of a lord.
“Dickon,” she said, sending the young man a happy smile, despite the fact that he was just as charming as his dour father.

He was easy on the eyes, though.

She suspected that would be useful, later.

“I’m sorry for the interruption, my lady,” he said, dipping his head to her, and Olenna waved a dismissive hand.

“It’s no trouble at all,” she said, sitting and gesturing for him to do the same. “Lady Leonette and I were just eating our lunch. Would you care to join us?”

Leonette stared at her.

Dickon, the young fool, looked a bit startled by the invitation. Well, she supposed, as he awkwardly took the seat between the two of them, at least he had manners.

He sat, leg bouncing awkwardly, and she wondered what sort of man Randyl Tarly had raised, in the son that he had so prised above another. Wondered if he even understood how to act in a formal setting; she knew that he was a warrior, strong and battle smart, but she had heard little else to recommend him.

Not that he needed smarts, in any case, for the future that she intended for him.

He would have been a good husband for Margaery, she thought, a pang of something like guilt following the thought. More than a foolish, but brave enough, and eager to please someone so above him, even if she was a woman.

A far better husband than one who loved her brother, or one who enjoyed beating little girls than he did making them.

And it would have gone a long way towards keeping Randyl Tarly in line, she thought bitterly. The man seemed content to do their bidding now that they had placed him on the Small Council and asked him for his help in leading the war that they all knew was coming, but he certainly didn’t ask for much.

His son was not the same, far more content with what he was given, which was a rare enough thing to see, in a nobleman’s son.

Refreshing, almost.

And not in the same way that Gendry seemed to be, taking what was offered to him because he was far too shocked by her sudden turnaround concerning him than truly appreciative.

But he was a bastard, born into poverty, and she did not expect him to ask for more.

He was her maverick, her hidden piece, just in case everything else went to the seven hells, and while he certainly didn’t seem to understand her interest in him, she thought he understood that just fine, where even Dickon Tarly would not.

Gendry had a good head on his shoulders, having been burned before. She would have to keep a closer eye on him than she did Dickon, which was what fueled her next words.

Dickon Tarly took the plate of cheese that she offered him, looking confused about what he was
meant to do with it, and Olenna rolled her eyes when he wasn’t looking up at her.

He took a careful bite, and then another, as if he was surprised by how good it was, and then dipped his head in her direction.

“Now,” she asked, “What is it?”

Dickon pursed his lips as he took his seat, and awkwardly took some of the meat that Olenna forced in his direction. “I’m...afraid that it’s bad news, my lady,” he informed her. “Ah...about the pirates, on the coastline.”

Olenna frowned. “I don’t like bad news so late in the morning, Dickon,” she said. “It’s not good for digestion.”

He grimaced. “My apologies, my lady,” he told her, “but I felt that the situation warranted it. The pirates are getting bolder; we’ve lost three fields, this time, and more than a dozen field workers were taken on to their ships. And, this time...we lost the Shield Islands before we even realized that they had been taken. The beacon was lit earlier this morning. You can see the smoke from the coastline.”

Of course they were, Olenna thought, because it wasn’t as if half the Reach and King’s Landing itself depended on those fields, those laborers.

“We managed to cut them off before they burned the next field, my lady, but unfortunately we are not able to catch up with them in time to stop them, most times. And the loss of the Shield Islands…”

He trailed off then, not needing to say more.

This had all happened before, after all.

Olenna closed her eyes.

She was not surprised by the report; Dorne, for all that their current relationship was...rather fraught, had been sending them warnings of pirates raiding along their own coastlines, taking prisoners that were never seen from again.

The pirates were getting bolder, if they were coming this far, and getting this close to Oldtown. Most of the Tyrell army might unfortunately be needed in King’s Landing, but Olenna might have to recall some of them to deal with it, if the situation escalated.

Dorne certainly wasn’t dealing with it, after all.

Gerold Dayne was doing his best to handle matters, riding out to the Southern villages each day in an attempt to hold back the hordes, but from what she understood, he was having to do so only after the fact; the pirates attacked sporadically, and there seemed to be no sense in their attacks.

Sometimes, they did not even seem like the same pirates, or that they were working together.

And Gerold could barely keep a handle on his new wife, who flip flopped between issues like she didn’t know what she wanted, now that she had finally scraped her way to power.

That was the problem, with young girls taking thrones that didn’t belong to them.

Olenna sighed, reaching up to pinch the bridge of her nose.

“And we still have no idea who these...pirates are?” She demanded.
She knew the answer before he said it, of course, but it still irked her, when he did respond.

Dickon glanced away. “They leave no survivors to identify them, my lady,” he said, and Olenna let out another sigh, the news not surprising her.

She thought of that strange, greedy pirate who had kidnapped her granddaughter out of the sea, who had all but sold her to the Martells for a cache of gold, and wondered if he was any relation to these new terrors.

He seemed to have followed the general trajectory of the rest of these pirates, after all, though there was nothing soothing about the fact that he seemed at least amenable to negotiation, while Olenna still had no idea what it was that these pirates even wanted.

All of their attempts at negotiation had come up empty; the pirates terrorizing their borders, as they had terrorized Dorne before this, seemed to have no interest in talks, nor in money that they could not take for themselves, rather than having it handed to them.

And they were exactly the sort of headache that Olenna didn’t need, just now.

She reached out, then, taking Dickon Tarly’s hand again and patting it. “I want you to go to the coastline and deal with this yourself, my boy,” she told him. “Do not return until you have taught these fools a lesson; that the Reach is not to be trifled with. That these pirates cannot be allowed to continue preying on our subjects without any sort of retaliation, and we must be ready for them, next time. I don’t care if you have to camp out on the beach until they come to you, but deal with them. I am entrusting you with a great deal, Lord Dickon. Please, for the sake of the Reach, do not fail us.”

Dickon blinked at her hand on his, and then dipped his head. “As you wish, my lady,” he said, and Olenna forced herself to smile at him.

“And then, once you have defeated these awful pirates, I think it’s time to discuss your marriage prospects,” Olenna went on. “I find it passing strange that a young man as handsome as yourself has no potential bride to speak of, save a girl of three and ten.”

Dickon flushed. “My father…”

“Do you want to marry this girl?” Olenna asked. “Your father is a wise man, of course,” she said, biting her tongue, “But I am sure that he did not arrange this marriage with thoughts of the heart in mind. Nor with the realization that we might soon be at war, and heirs may be…gods forbid, necessarily soon.”

Dickon swallowed thickly. “I know my duty, my lady,” he told her, an edge entering his voice.

Good.

Olenna smiled tightly. “Of course you do, my boy. Pay an old woman’s mutterings no mind. I merely think…” she sighed again, glancing sideways at him. “My granddaughter would have been a much happier woman as wife to a lord like you than to the late King, I think.”

Dickon blinked at her. “I…”

He didn’t seem to know how to respond; she wondered if he was a bit dull, as her own husband had been.

It was not an impediment, of course.
“Well, I’ve clearly given you something to think about,” Olenna interrupted him, “And you have a battle to prepare. Good day, Lord Dickon.”

He blinked at her again. Then, “Yes, my lady,” he said, giving her a little bow as he got to his feet and all but fled the room.

Leonette raised a brow, as he left. “What do you have planned for that one?” she asked, sounding more bemused than annoyed at the thought that Olenna was grooming him for something.

Smart girl.

“I’m not sure that’s something you need to concern yourself with just now, my dear,” Olenna told her, reaching for another chunk of cheese.

Leonette let out a sigh. “Then I’ll ask something else, in the hopes that you might actually answer me this time. What are you planning for Gendry?” Leonette demanded, and Olenna turned, raising an eyebrow at the other woman.

Setting aside that she wasn’t sure why the other woman was asking that now, of all times, she was surprised that Leonette was bothering to get involved in her politics. They had never seemed to interest her before.

Like Dickon, she had always been content with her marriage to Garlan, and little else than that.

But then again, Olenna supposed she might have inspired this, with the way she was trying to push the other woman to step up, at least in part.

Even if being questioned was irritating.

“What ever do you mean, dear?” She asked, and then gestured towards Leonette’s bowl. “Your soup is getting cold.”

“You won’t let me see my children, or my husband,” Leonette pointed out, sharply. “I’m not entirely sure why, but I thought it was because you want me doing something else. And I don’t just think it’s because you’re worried about me bringing shame to the family by carrying my girls around on my hips all the time. You’re afraid that if I go to King’s Landing, I’ll let something slip to them that you don’t want them to know about. That’s why you’re punishing me for even considering it, why you’re keeping my children from me so that I don’t try to leave with them in the night.”

Olenna set down her spoon abruptly. “Is that what you think?”

“And whatever it is, I might not even have to know all of it, to let slip something important,” Leonette continued, coolly. “I don’t know much, of course, for all your protests that I need to do more to protect this family by stepping up, now. But I do happen to know about the way you’ve been all but spoiling Gendry. So.” She raised an eyebrow. “I think, if you’re going to insist on keeping me here, you might as well tell me what’s going on. You have all of my letters read, anyway.”

Olenna hummed. “You’re being paranoid, my dear girl,” she said. “No one is reading your letters.”

“Horseshit,” Leonette said, staring her down.

Olenna smirked. “Language, child.”

“I’m hardly a child,” Leonette said. “And I’ve heard you say far worse, my lady.”
She looked angry, Olenna thought, as she turned her whole attention on the girl for the first time in some time. Angry, and her fingers were twitching, around her spoon.

Olenna knew from experience how antsy one could get, when their children were kept from them at such a young age. Knew that need to do something about it, or to do something in general, if she could not fix that particular problem.

Olenna supposed it couldn’t hurt to tell her a little more about why she was doing it.

Leonette was right; she did intend for the other girl to eventually step up, as the Lady of Highgarden, a role she had never been destined for before, and she supposed letting her in on a little of the secret, when she had no way of spreading terror to King’s Landing, wouldn’t hurt, at this point.

There was little she could do to stop it, after all.

She leaned forward, a sharp smile twisting her lips. It felt strange to smile, after so long, after losing so much.

“What do you know about dragons, Leonette?” She asked, and the other girl’s eyes widened.

“I…I…”

Olenna took another sip of her soup, and then reached for the glass of murky water that the maesters made her drink with every meal, now.

It tasted like horse piss, but she managed to down it all in one gulp, all the same.

“Because I spent a good deal of my girlhood with them, and the one thing that you should know about them, of course,” Olenna continued, at Leonette’s floundering, reminding herself that the girl had wanted to know, and it wasn’t her fault if the girl didn’t take it well, “is that when let loose on Westeros, they like to burn everything within sight, unless they have a firm hand guiding them.”

Leonette swallowed hard. “Are…are we likely to encounter dragons soon, my lady?” She whispered, voice low, and Olenna thought she saw fear flash in the other woman’s eyes.

Good. At least she was taking this seriously.

It proved that she had been right to ask for more information, even if Olenna wasn’t sure where her grooming of this particular young woman might go.

Then again, she had been certain she had known where her grooming of Margaery would go, and she had made a mistake, then.

This time, with this plan, she didn’t intend to leave open many avenues for mistakes to occur.

Olenna smiled at her. “Perhaps you are sharper than you look, dear,” she said.

Leonette didn’t look impressed by the compliment. She opened and closed her mouth, and then whispered, “And…are we truly to expect these dragons to be allies?” She asked, carefully. “I’ve heard that they can be…temperamental creatures, and she...she has the one thing they surely want.”

The throne.

And she was unlikely to give it up these days, stubborn brat, with everything that she had sacrificed to get this far.
Yes, Leonette may not be the smartest young woman that Olenna had ever met, but she knew Margaery well.

Olenna shrugged. “For now,” she said, and watched Leonette shiver.

“I’ve heard that dragons don’t take well to wrongs, especially not…especially not the Dragon Queen,” she pointed out, softly, worried, no doubt, for Margaery.

It was good to know that people still were, Olenna supposed.

Still, Olenna smirked at her. “Well, then, it’s a good thing that she is not the dragon I refer to, dear,” she said, and Leonette closed her eyes, opened them again.

She didn’t ask, as Olenna had thought she might. Instead, she changed the subject abruptly.

“And they don’t know in King’s Landing, do they?” She asked, hoarsely.

Of course they didn’t, Olenna thought, scathing. From all reports, her granddaughter hardly knew her head from her own arse, these days.

Olenna hummed. “Some know,” she said. “A snake and a spider. I could hardly keep such things from either of them, even if I wanted to. The rest, though? No, they don’t know.”

She had paid a great price to make sure that the spider and the snake, neither of whom knew the other knew, but both of whom must have at least suspected, made sure that information did not go beyond the both of them, in King’s Landing.

That would be a terrible mistake, she thought. Margaery would no doubt do something foolish like ally with Cersei to chase off said dragons, and then they would all be far too dead to enjoy the spoils of victory.

But Olenna had done a great many things she was not proud of, in recent years, and she intended to live to see those things bear fruit, for Margaery.

The girl might hate her at the moment, but she deserved that, at the very least.

Leonette stared at her. “Why not?” She asked, sounding slightly horrified, and Olenna made a mental note to make sure none of her ladies missed a single letter going out of Highgarden from the other woman, just in case. “Your granddaughter is sitting on the Iron Throne, they say. Don’t you think she ought to know what’s coming for that throne? The Targaryens have never been known to share such things. If she’s surprised by their arrival…”

Olenna hummed, affecting a lack of concern. “You weren’t in King’s Landing during those final days before King Joffrey’s death, by dear girl, but if you were, you would know that she has changed greatly from the ambitious young woman you once knew.” She sighed. “I fear that if she knew the truth, she would…panic, the way that she clearly did when she had her husband butchered, and do something very foolish to get us all killed.”

Leonette grimaced; it was no secret, to Leonette, at the very least, though the rest of the Reach was left blissfully unaware, what had really happened to Joffrey.

Olenna supposed that was her own fault; she had thrown quite the tantrum, in those first few days, after her own granddaughter had sent her away like a disgraced scullery maid, and Leonette and Alerie had been her only companions, in those days.
It did not help, of course, that Olenna very much believed that if Margaery were party to the truth, she would do something foolish, just now.

Varys seemed to believe that the way she was carrying on was an act, designed to make them all underestimate her, and Olenna hadn’t bothered to disabuse him of the notion, not when Baelish was busy whispering in Sansa Stark’s ear this day, and Varys seemed convinced that Sansa was taking on a great role, in the Keep, at the moment.

It was good to have someone paranoid enough to keep an eye on Baelish, but Olenna knew her granddaughter.

She knew that the Margaery she had raised would never act the way she was now, not unless something had…severely changed her. It would not even have occurred to her.

Leonette’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t…I don’t understand what any of that has to do with Gendry,” she admitted, finally. “I thought…I thought perhaps he was going to be a backup plan for you, if the child your granddaughter has is a girl. That you would have him marry her, and paint him as the last true heir of Robert Baratheon.”

Olenna snorted. She supposed she understood where such ideas had come from, given all of the interest that she had shown in Gendry of late, but she was no fool.

Gendry had spent his early days here in a cell, and as grateful as he ought to be if she did place him on a throne and give him a wife like Margaery, she had no doubt that was something he would not forget.

She preferred the sort of king who had no reason to turn against them, one day.

And such kings were in short supply.

“You do realize that Robert Baratheon left behind other bastards, for all that Cersei and her spawn tried so hard to be rid of them. Gendry is hardly the oldest of these, even if Stannis’ castle will soon…cease to house one of them. You’ve spent a good deal of time with this boy, since he has come to stay with us, Leonette. Tell me: do you think he has the makings of a king?”

Leonette took a deep breath.

Gendry Baratheon, from what little Olenna had gleaned of him, since he had arrived here, was a nice young man, strangely forgiving, though that might have been from fear more than anything else, and with a strong sense of justice, as well as a fair bit of impetuousness to come all of this way to deliver a message for a girl he barely knew, and with a good head on his shoulders.

He would make a terrible king; he’d be dead within a month.

“Then what are you planning for him?” Leonette demanded.

Olenna sighed, supposing that if she didn’t spell it out, Leonette might cause trouble for her in the long run, and might never let her hear the end of it. She could only hope the other woman was not too attached to him, from all of the time they’d been spending together.

“The boy is not a stag, Leonette. He is a lamb.”

Leonette stared at her for a moment longer, before she got to her feet abruptly, her chair scraping back loudly.
Olenna winced.

“I can see why she sent you away, now,” Leonette gritted out, before Olenna could say anything, and then turned and marched from the room, slamming the door behind her.

Olenna sighed, reaching for her spoon once more.

She had given up on explaining her actions to the young people around her, these days. They did not understand the meaning of the words greater good, it seemed, but when it was all done, they would. And they would thank her for spilling blood where they did not have to.

It was the least she could do for Margaery, now, after everything she had put her through.

Olenna sighed, long and low, as the last of her ladies fled her chambers.

She reached up, unfastening the cloth around her neck, and remembered abruptly how to breathe properly again.

It was getting harder and harder, though she refused to admit it, to keep up the charade. To maintain her ironclad control over Highgarden, when she was already plotting how to move that control beyond, to King’s Landing.

And now, pirates were raiding their shores, and she had to deal with Leonette.

It was hardly endearing her to the kingdoms, she thought, to know that she could hardly bring these pirates under control, when she wanted to control far more than that.

The fact that she was putting Dickon Tarly in charge of this might help a bit, but Mace was still sitting on his arse in King’s Landing, looking terribly unconcerned with the Reach from his lack of attention to it, even if Olenna understood why he refused to leave his children there again.

Not after what had happened with those fanatics, not that she thought her son would be capable of stopping any new uprisings, either.

Olenna let out a sigh; in truth, if her own granddaughter hadn’t all but exiled her from King’s Landing, she knew she would be there too, now, and the Reach would be in an even worse state of disarray, she was certain.

Still, for the sake of the fragile men who raised their banners for House Tyrell, she knew it would have been better if Mace were here, rather than her.

She took a deep breath, sitting down hard on her bed now that the servants were no longer around to see such weakness, and rubbing at her eyes.

Gods, she was getting more and more tired, these days. She knew that came with age, but she loathed it, all the same. There were hardly enough hours in a day to begin with, and now, she had to deal with this, as well.

Though she had Leonette, now. The girl had almost begged Olenna to use her in some capacity, to alleviate her boredom, and she may come to regret that eventually, but Olenna would be a fool not to take her up on it, now. There were several tasks she could already think of Leonette taking over.

Tasks that Alerie would not have been able to manage, if Olenna bothered to approach the other woman with them. Leonette may be similar to Alerie in temperament, but there was a drive in there
that simply wasn’t existent in Mace’s wife, Olenna thought.

Revealing as much as she had to Leonette had not been ideal, but she supposed it would be helpful to have another person, besides the Spider, to throw ideas off of, when she was still not certain how much she could trust said spider’s webs.

She was not certain how much she could trust Leonette at the moment either, with how desperately she seemed to want to leave this place, but she was better than the mirror, Olenna thought.

And she was running rather thin on allies, these days, especially when most days it felt like she was looking at half of a map, with the lack of information that she got, here.

She knew about the dragons, knew about the Spider’s plans for her granddaughter now, perhaps too late, knew about that pranced up peacock, Baelish, and the way that he was manipulating her granddaughter and Sansa Stark in equal measure, but there were things that she simply couldn’t know, as well, being all of the way out here.

She hadn’t been able to prepare for Margaery to bring some septa into her life and nearly throw King’s Landing into the hands of fanatics once more. Hadn’t been prepared for Baelish and his threats, and of course, had only barely been prepared for that cunt, Cersei, to do her worst, now that she had the freedom to do so, in the Rock.

Cersei, of course, had immediately blamed the Tyrells for what she claimed had nearly happened to her own son, an excuse to crown the boy, as if that had not only endangered him far more.

The bitch seemed to think it was some display of her affection for the little brat, as if it didn’t prove to all of the realms that she intended to see him as nothing more than a placeholder for the Iron Throne, for her throne.

It was absolutely ridiculous of an accusation, Olenna reflected. As if there would have been anything to gain from her killing Tommen Lannister, when all of the Seven Kingdoms would suspect her first of all in doing it.

And besides, she truly had nothing to gain from it.

Once, a long time ago, she had thought about killing Joffrey, and she had felt no guilt over such plans, when Sansa Stark had informed her about what sort of boy he really was.

In the months after his marriage to her granddaughter, she had greatly regretted not simply allying with a snake like Baelish and butchering the boy at his own wedding, the way the other man had suggested.

Baelish was a snake, and hardly trustworthy, but at least he had not enjoyed torturing kittens and beating his own wife.

She had thought that the boy could be controlled far better than someone like Baelish could, at the time. Now, she wondered if Cersei wasn’t right about one thing; that simply killing anyone who stood in your way, or framing them for the attempted murder of someone you cared for, was a fuck of a lot easier.

She gritted her teeth.

She considered her greatest failure to be the fact that she had not spared her granddaughter from a miserable marriage with that little cunt. If she had, they would not be in this mess at all.
Margaery would have married the boy’s impressionable little brother, and perhaps it would have been awkward, but it would not have resulted in her suffering a traumatic rape, would not have resulted in her granddaughter all but losing her mind, in turn.

And the boy could have been as easily manipulated as Joffrey had been, but without all of the tears, without the need to kill him just to maintain Margaery’s position. No one would have expected a child for many years to come, and Cersei would have been far easier to deal with in that respect, as well.

She pressed her lips together.

What was done was done, and much as Olenna loathed much of the way things had turned out, she knew that it made little difference, now.

What mattered was making sure that Margaery and Cersei, between the two of them, didn’t foul this up any more than they already had.

Eventually, they would deal with Cersei, but at the moment, with the child not even out of Margaery’s womb yet, they could take no chances.

Olenna still had to have contingencies for when everything went to hell, even if her granddaughter seemed to not care about such things.

Her granddaughter, who had not reached out to her since a few days after the King’s death, in a letter obviously written by Sansa and not Margaery at all, asking that Highgarden show its support for the Crown publicly.

Olenna had rolled her eyes, reading it.

Yes, she was furious with her granddaughter, but she wasn’t fool enough to let on about that fury to the rest of the Seven Kingdoms, not if they wanted Margaery’s child on the Iron Throne, after all of this.

She knew that Sansa Stark didn’t understand that sort of thing, from the dynamic she had witnessed of their family these past few years, but if she had known them before all of this, she would. She would know that whatever fights they went through, they were all Tyrells, in the end.

Highgarden had been the first to proclaim for the new Regent. The rest of the Reach had followed, with more difficulty than Dorne had, certainly, which was concerning in and of itself.

The thought that Dorne was up to something was never far from her mind. She knew about the fragile alliance that they had formed with Margaery, but she also knew about the things that they had kept from Margaery, the things that Varys was trying even still to keep from her.

She knew that Doran Martell intended to marry his daughter to Aegon Targaryen, despite Varys’ very best attempts to keep that information from her. So whatever agreement they had with Margaery, she doubted very much that it was set in stone.

And the fact that Arianne Martell could scrape together all of the lords of Dorne to agree to proclaim for Margaery’s Regency before Olenna had managed to do so for the Reach lords...irked Olenna more than she could say.

She coughed then, knowing exactly what was happening but unable to stop the stress from leeching straight for her throat, unable to stop the phlegm that coughed its way up her throat as she flailed desperately for the nearest handkerchief, and coughed into it.
That first cough turned into a dozen, and Olenna grimaced, which only made the sensation worse, only made the phlegm clawing its way up her throat stick there, until she had to nearly choke to dislodge it.

Of course, with it came blood.

The door burst open as her coughing only grew worse, as her face reddened and she found herself nearly doubling over on the bed, the handkerchief wasted, now.

“My lady?” The serving girl who entered asked, looking concerned.

Olenna turned, glaring at the other girl. “Get the fuck out,” she snapped at the girl, whose eyes had gone very wide at the sight of the blood on Olenna’s handkerchief. “And send for the damn maester.”

The girl bobbed her head up and down, and all but fled the room.

The moment she was gone, Olenna sighed. The girl would have to be sworn to silence, of course, or moved to some position where no one would bother to ask her whether or not her lady was ill.

No one could know, after all.

She returned not too long after with the maesters, who was surprisingly agile for a man of his years, but then, she supposed, he had to be, to deal with their family.

He took a deep breath, at the sight of Olenna, her arms covered in blood, and turned to the serving girl. “Get some hot water and towels,” he told her. “And go to my study, and grab the concoction there labeled with her name.” The girl nodded. “Quickly, do you understand?”

The girl fled.

The maester turned back to Olenna, then, walking forward and reaching out to clean her off, a little. Olenna bristled.

He reached into the pack that he had brought along with him, and gave it to her to drink.

Olenna let out a long sigh.

The maester reached down then, to rub at her throat as he often did, to check for lumps there.

“Heaven you been drinking the concoction, my lady?” the maester asked, sounding more than a little impatient with her.

Olenna lifted her chin. “Yes, I’ve been drinking your horse piss like its fucking wine,” she told him, perhaps a little more snippily than she had intended, but dear gods, she was annoyed. “It’s supposed to take care of this sort of thing. Clearly, you’ve failed in that.”

The maester swallowed. “My lady, it takes some time for the concoction to work. Had I known about it earlier…”

“You’re a maester, aren’t you?” Olenna asked him, coolly. “You’re supposed to be the maester for all of Highgarden. If you can’t manage to deal with this, perhaps I need to find someone who can do it better.”

“My lady,” the maester said carefully, “The concoction will work for a little while, yes, and should have already begun to take effect, but it will not last forever. Eventually, you understand that.”
“If I wanted someone to predict my future, I would have called for a witch, not a maester,” Olenna snapped at him. “I want you to make this work. I have things I need to…”

She broke off again, coughing.

The maester sighed, speaking when she had finally finished. This time, at least, there was less blood.

“You’ve taken on too much, my lady,” he told her. “If you want my opinion. You need to rest.”

“I can rest when these things are done,” Olenna muttered.

He swallowed. “Forgive my impertinence, my lady, but you may not be able to.”

Olenna glared at him. “Can you do something about this,” she gestured down at her soiled gown, “or not?”

He grimaced. “I can,” he agreed. “I can give you more potions to drink, and I can recommend looking down your throat, and removing some of the phlegm.” He cleared his throat. “Blood letting may also…”

“I don’t have the time for that,” Olenna snapped. “Just bring me the concoctions, the moment you’re done with them.”

He sighed. “As you wish, my lady.”

The serving girl returned, then, handing the items he had asked for over to the maester, before she turned hesitantly to Olenna.

“One of the messengers found me in the hallway, my lady,” she reported, holding out a sheet of parchment. “A raven delivered this, not an hour ago.”

Olenna snatched it out of her hand. “At least someone here knows their duties. Go,” she said, as they both bowed to her and left.

For a moment, the serving girl hesitated, looking like she was going to offer to find Olenna a new gown, but then she clearly thought better of it.

The door shut silently behind them, and Olenna sighed, long and hard.

Olenna looked down at the note in her hands, sent by way of raven from within the city of King’s Landing, rather than from within the Keep, because she was paranoid that someone in King’s Landing would find it, otherwise.

She would have preferred a note from Varys, who knew far more than he ought to, but who at least knew more than Olenna did about the goings on in King’s Landing, these days, but a letter from Elinor was good enough, she supposed, considering the scant amount of information that left the capital, these days.

She knew that was Sansa’s, or perhaps, if Varys was to be believed, Baelish’s intention, to make sure that few enough in the Seven Kingdoms knew how fragile the new Regent’s hold on the Iron Throne currently was, but it was beyond frustrating, for a woman who had always depended on information.

And, though a part of her did not want to admit it, she wished for some word of her granddaughter simply because she missed the little brat rather terribly.
She sighed, and opened the letter, skimming it quickly.

Someone - and Olenna did not know if she had Sansa to thank for this, or someone else - had convinced Margaery to allow her grandmother back, even if only for the funeral.

“Good girl,” Olenna murmured, fighting back a smile.

Finally, some good fucking news.

Chapter End Notes

Spelling errors will be corrected soon, as I didn't have time to look this chapter over.

Let me know what you think!
“They’re saying that the plague from the city is spreading,” Joffrey said, and beneath the dismissive interest in his eyes, Margaery thought she could smell fear, as well.

She knew how her husband felt about sickness, after all. He wouldn’t even come to visit her, while he had thought that she was ill with the plague, and she knew that the reports of the plague growing in the city would only provide him with a convenient excuse not to go down amongst his people after slaughtering so many of them.

Even if the people saw it as a convenient excuse for their anger against their king, a proof that what he had done in the Sept had been wrong.

He was sitting next to her at the table, eating a shared supper with her as it was one of the few meals that Margaery could manage to keep down, these days. Her cousins had always made having a child seem so easy, as had Leonette, though she knew the other girl had been far more advanced in her pregnancy when Margaery had come to visit her.

She hadn’t thought she would be sicking up until the noon hour every day.

But she knew that what she was feeling these days was paltry in comparison to the sickness sweeping through Flea Bottom. The maesters said that a dozen people died a day, though it had only begun to interest her husband when he had insisted on seeing one of the bodies of the dead, for all that the maesters warned him against bringing it into the Keep.

Margaery had gone with him, of course, one of the first things she had done since making her way out of bed, since her near miscarriage, and had regretted ever saying she felt well enough to do so. The bloated, blue and white corpse that stared lidlessly up at her had made her want to be sick all over again.

Plague, the maesters said it was. Something new, and horrible, and something that was only just beaten back by a combination of remedies that the maesters were barely beginning to understand, themselves.

Men, women and children - the plague did not seem to discriminate between any of them, she had found.

She was forbidden from going down to Flea Bottom ever since she had nearly lost the child, but that had not stopped her from sending her ladies out, with the dire warning not to get too close to anyone with the disease unless they become infected, themselves.

And what her ladies reported was increasingly more disturbing.

Margaery hummed. “How terrible,” she said, and then, when her husband shot her a distinctly annoyed look, no doubt at another sign of her weakness, these days, she elaborated, “That it is spreading amongst your people, I mean. I had thought that the Hand of the King could keep it contained. Did he not promise such a thing?”

Joffrey grimaced, leaning back in his chair. “I no longer know whether my uncle is friend or foe, these days,” he said, a panic light filling his eyes, and Margaery blinked at him in surprise.
She knew that there was no love lost between uncle and nephew, but Tyrion was still the Hand of the King, for all of her father’s attempts to make it otherwise, and she would have thought that meant something.

Then again, she remembered the way that Tyrion had screamed at Cersei and Joffrey, while Cersei had still been here, at that dining hall in front of everyone, airing every grievance he had against them, and accusing them of everything from conspiracy to murder.

She supposed it made sense that there was even less love lost between them, now.

It made him a convenient scapegoat, much as Margaery hated even having the thought, if anything did happen to her beloved husband that was too suspicious.

She licked her lips. “You think that he is deliberately not dealing with a crisis under your nose,” Margaery said, eyes widening with a surprise she didn’t feel.

She had to admit, even if she didn’t believe it to be the case, from what little she did know of Tyrion Lannister, trying to keep her distance from him because her grandmother had warned her that he was a smart Imp indeed, that the thought unsettled her.

The smallfolk might hate them now, but they were still their subjects. They had a duty, even if Joffrey didn’t see it as such, to protect them. To help them, if they were about to be wiped out from a sickness the likes of which the maesters had never seen before.

And the thought that a nobleman was using the smallfolk as collateral against his own nephew...

Joffrey shrugged. “I think that he hates me as much as he hates my mother,” he said. Then, his voice took on a wistful tone. “Sometimes, I wish that I hadn’t sent her away. She knows how to deal with him better than I.”

Margaery swallowed, thinking carefully about her response. The last thing she wanted was for Cersei Lannister to come marching back into the capital. “Well, she spent a good many years suffering as his sister,” she said. “I imagine she knows his tricks, by now. But if you think that he is not a good Hand of the King anymore, then you ought to have him replaced. Don’t you think?”

It would make the idea that he had snuck into Joffrey’s chambers and had him killed that much less likely, but it would be a better solution than Cersei’s return here.

Joffrey waved a dismissive hand; she had found that he cared about her suggestions less and less, these days. “I’ll deal with him if it’s true. I’ve had Ser Meryn following him, as he was following my mother. He hasn’t found anything particularly useful, though.”

Margaery hummed. “I only hope that the whole of King’s Landing does not become infected with this plague because of your uncle’s malice,” she said, softly, and Joffrey’s face darkened at the thought.

“It already dipped into the Keep,” Joffrey said. “Or, we thought it did, when you were ill.”

He moved away from her then, at the sudden reminder, and Margaery bit back a grimace. The last thing she wanted was for her husband to become paranoid that she was still somehow ill.

“I didn’t have the plague from the city,” Margaery reminded her husband, tiredly. “If I had, the maesters would never have allowed me to leave my rooms again, I fear. I was just ill from the pregnancy.”
“And you had no way of knowing earlier that was the case?” Joffrey asked, sounding terribly skeptical.

Margaery pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling a headache coming on.

She had thought, with this pregnancy, that she would be able to induce her husband to be kinder to her, to adore her as much as he had seemed to at the beginning of their marriage, but the moment she had nearly lost the babe, she had also lost her husband.

She thought he must have seen it as a sign of weakness on her part, that she had nearly lost the child he had married her to have, that he was so desperate to have, these days, with how weak and vulnerable his own reign was, how alone he felt without his mother here to whisper poison in his ear.

But Margaery hated that he took his fears out on her now that she was finally giving him what he wanted, even if she was at least glad that he was not taking them out on Sansa.

“I…” she swallowed hard, glancing down at her belly, which was hardly distended. She placed a hand over it, rubbing gently, feeling Joffrey’s eyes on her. “We have wanted for a child so long now, I was beginning to fear that miracle might never come to pass. It was not within my mind that I might instead be pregnant.”

Joffrey’s face darkened. “You thought it more likely you had the plague than that you had my child in your womb?” he demanded, darkly, and Margaery bit back an ironic smile before she responded.

“I feared that I was failing you as a wife, my love,” she said, delicately. “As, indeed, I almost did when I nearly lost this small miracle.”

Joffrey’s eyes flitted down to her stomach again, and then back to her face. “If you had lost him then, I would have the Mountain cut you open,” he said, without any inflection to his voice, and the words were so surprising, when perhaps they shouldn’t have been, that Margaery flinched.

It was not as if she was unfamiliar with her husband’s…darker impulses, after all. She had just not realized she was this close to losing him altogether, even though she had seen the way he looked at her, sometimes.

Her grandmother had wanted her to wait until this child was born from her womb. Now, looking into her husband’s eyes, Margaery found herself wondering if she would have survived the delivery, if the child were not a boy.

She swallowed thickly. “As would have been your right,” she whispered hoarsely, “After I have failed you already in so many ways.”

Her husband blinked at her. And then, a slow smile spread over his features. “They sat that he cut Elia Martell in half, when he raped her to death in front of her son,” he said, and Margaery…Margaery had spent years with this monster as her husband, and she still could not understand how he smiled so happily as he said such a thing. “I’ve always wondered if he did it with the sheer girth of his cock.”

Margaery grimaced. “I would think that Elia Martell would have to be made of sterner stuff than that, Your Grace,” she said, even as she hated thinking about it at all, “After her husband left her to make love to a child.”

Joffrey smirked. “A Stark, no less,” he said, and Margaery closed her eyes, realizing then that she had said something very foolish.
When she didn’t respond, her husband pounced.

“Why do you spend so much time with the Lady Sansa?” Joffrey asked then, suspicion dripping from his every word, and Margaery stiffened.

“I’ve already told you, my love,” she said, reaching out to touch his wrist, “She amuses me, as she amuses you. I will stop,” she said, trying to fight down the pain she felt at making the very suggestion, “If it distresses you.”

Or causes you to give her more attention yourself, she added, silently, still not liking the interest he had in the other girl. Every time he professed interest in Sansa, Margaery had noticed, it did not end well for the other girl, and they only had a little while longer now, that they even needed Joffrey alive for.

She would spare Sansa what she could, before the end.

Margaery swallowed hard, reaching down to place a hand over her stomach, a silent reminder of what she was giving her husband that Sansa could not. A son and heir.

If only he would see it that way, these days.

Joffrey sniffed. “I used to find her amusing, as you do,” he said. “Now...I have dreams about her.”

Margaery stiffened, in her seat. “Dreams?” she echoed, very much not liking the sound of that.

Joffrey shrugged. “In my dreams, I see the Dragon Prince, sometimes,” he said, and his voice was whisper soft, and Margaery felt herself grow very still.

Her husband had always been so obsessed with the dragons, had dragged her along to the crypts where they were buried like a giddy child, regaling all of their stories of bloodshed and fire.

And now, he was dreaming about them...

Joffrey continued, likely not noticing her sudden worry, “He warns me that there are enemies all around, and that the three heads of the dragon must rise again. Did you know he was obsessed with the idea that the dragons would return, before my father cut his head off? He probably thought, like the Mad King, that when he died on the field of battle, he would turn into one.”

Margaery looked at her husband, who sneered over peasants dying by the plague and laughed over the thought of how Elia Martell had died, and wondered what he would turn into, once he died.

“The rioting hasn’t stopped, Your Grace. I’m afraid that they’re saying that down in Flea Bottom, the plague is still rampant,” Varys said, and he sounded pained about it, and for a moment Margaery found herself reconsidering her opinion on him, wondering if he really did care about the people.

She didn’t understand him. He had told her, many times, or twice, that he cared about the fate of the smallfolk more than anything; Margaery had begun to believe that was the reason he had taken such an interest in her, because of her charity with them, but now, she wasn’t so sure.

She thought that he might be up to something else, and it terrified her, not knowing what that was.

“I thought that the sickness there had become contained,” she said, forcing herself to focus on his words, rather than his motives.

Still, his words alone made her nervous. She knew that the sickness in Flea Bottom, the one that
Tyrion Lannister had first discovered and which the world had thought might afflict her, before it became obvious that she was ill with another malady, with pregnancy, had not yet vanished from the poorest and most dirty parts of the city. Her brother was doing his best to keep it contained and to help make those areas cleaner, so that it was less likely to spread, as that seemed to be something each contaminated area had in common, but clearly, it was not enough.

Not if the sickness was still running rampant, as Varys claimed.

She grimaced at the look on Varys’ face. “Unfortunately, Your Grace, while it was contained to a small section of the city for some time, it is spreading once more. There is...concern that those who dislike the...Crown of late are purposely moving to new areas of King’s Landing to infect the people there, and remind them that the sickness is one that the Crown is blamed for.”

Margaery felt a headache coming on. She sat back in her chair, rubbing at her temples. She could feel the eyes of every member of the Small Council on her.

For, while her husband had done many horrible things for which he was blamed by the smallfolk, this one thing for which they blamed him could also be blamed on her. Could not be swept under the rug or explained away by the fact that her husband was dead.

No, the sickness was still within the city, when Margaery had thought it would not become another headache that she would have to deal with, and it appeared that the people still blamed the Crown, and what had happened at the Sept, for it.

“Then why have I been able to go out amongst the people, of late, without encountering it?” she demanded, idly.

Kevan Lannister cleared his throat. “Your brother has done an admirable job of keeping the sickness contained, Your Grace, but the problem is not only that it is being spread to surprising new areas of the city alone.” He waited for her to acknowledge his words, fear lancing through her heart, before he continued, “It is also that the sickness seems to progress through its victims far more quickly than it did before. That might also be why we have not heard about it as much. Victims appear to die within the day.”

Margaery’s heart skipped a beat.

She knew it was selfish, to think of herself when those victims were her people, but she could not help but do so, could not help but think that, pregnant as she was, she would be even more of a target to such a sickness.

“And the maesters still have no idea what it is?” Margaery asked, nervously, her hand dancing over the fabric of her gown near her belly.

And then she thought of all of those children, in the orphanage that she had ordered rebuilt larger and better able to care for so many of them, and swallowed. They would be the ones most at risk to this sort of thing, she thought, something like worry welling up within her, and not just because she had gone to visit them so recently.

She closed her eyes, and tried not to tell herself what a remarkable coincidence it was, that she was learning of how the plague was spreading just as she lost Septa Unella as a counselor, a loss which still stung.

The septa was gone, and she could not offer Margaery her guidance, now. Margaery did not even think that she would be able to find another septa willing to do so, after the way in which she had
lost the last one.

She licked her lips, and thought of something she had first asked Sansa, and then asked the septa.

*Is this the gods way of punishing us?*

Sansa had told her that she didn’t think the gods cared enough to do so. The septa had told her that the gods’ punishments were unique to the individual, not to the people.

And still, her people suffered and blamed her, and she wondered if they weren’t right to do so.

Varys made a face. “I am afraid that the maesters are still as confused about the nature of this disease as they were when it first appeared, Your Grace,” he told her, and Margaery slammed her fist down on the table.

Trystane Martell, sitting at the other end of it, jumped a little.

“That is unacceptable,” she told the table at large. “When last I heard, dozens of the afflicted could die within a single week. If the disease is spreading more rapidly, that number will grow, as well. If the maesters cannot find a cure, then find someone who can, or we may have to risk evacuating the city.”

The men exchanged glances. “Your Grace…” Baelish began, then. “Many more of your people are not afflicted, and evacuating the city will only leave us more vulnerable to any armies that…” he glanced over at Kevan before continuing coldly, “Cersei Lannister may attempt to bring against us.”

Margaery lifted her chin. “I understand you think it a rash action,” she told him, coldly, “And I understand that might be, perhaps, why I have not heard about this sickness earlier. But I will not risk the lives of my people to a sickness that maesters do not have a cure for, nor even an understanding of, when Cersei Lannister is coming here to speak of peace, not war, and because my Small Council jumps at shadows.”

Kevan cleared his throat, then, “Ah, Your Grace, my niece has said that she comes here to speak of peace, but I would advise you not to take that at face value. She-”

“I am well aware of your niece’s duplicity,” Margaery informed him, coldly, as she stood to her feet and the rest of the Small Council stood, as well. “She was the one who brought us to this impasse with the smallfolk to begin with, as I am certain you must remember, though my late husband is ultimately blamed for it. But she is one woman, a woman whom we have an army to defend against, and you sit here and tell me that there is nothing we have which defends against this sickness that the poorest of my people are most vulnerable to. Is that not so?”

The men exchanged glances.

“I would pray then,” she continued, “As I will do, that the maesters find a speedy resolution to this. Before Cersei Lannister gets here.”

She thought then of that maester Cersei Lannister kept as a pet, the one who had lost his chain because of his experiments, and wondered if he might not have a better chance at understanding the sickness than the ones who had thus far failed her. Megga had told her...horrible things about his experiments, down in the Black Cells, and there were many more things which Margaery was convinced the other girl had not told her, but perhaps those things could be of use.

Wondered what had become of the cruel man. She thought she remembered him leaving for the Rock with Cersei, when she had been banished, but she couldn’t be certain.
“Now,” she clapped her hands together, “The preparations for the funeral. Lord Baelish? I hope that
i do not need to remind you that should anything go wrong with this funeral, my dear goodmother
may see it as a slight against my husband’s family.”

Baelish’s smile was thin. “All preparations are accounted for, Your Grace,” he promised her. “The
funeral, I dare say, will be one of the finest that a King of the Seven Kingdoms has ever known.”

Good.

As if her husband deserved that, Margaery thought, even as she forced a smile in Baelish’s direction.
“I am gratified to hear it,” she said. “And that is all I wish to hear today, gentleman. You’re
dismissed.”

She moved towards the door, and then out of it, where her ladies and her Kingsguard waited for her
as they always did after these meetings, before she heard a voice calling after her.

Margaery met Megga’s eyes, where she stood waiting with the others, before closing her own.

She should have known, she thought, that she would not get out of this meeting without being forced
to confront Sansa again. Sansa, who had sat silently throughout the entire meeting, looking at
Margaery in much the same way that a kicked puppy might, and Margaery had spent far too much of
the meeting trying to avoid that gaze.

She...she didn’t know what she would do, if she was forced to have a conversation with Sansa,
which was why she had been trying so valiantly to avoid it.

Because she was still furious, over the nature of the septa’s death, knew that Sansa had been
involved directly in that death, and she didn’t want to say anything to Sansa that she would later
regret, because every time she hurt Sansa with her words, Margaery found herself feeling more guilty
for it than she thought Sansa did hurt.

So, she had been ignoring her. But of course that couldn’t last. Of course couldn’t leave well enough
alone, and give her a little space to think about this.

She hadn’t given Sansa any space since Joffrey had died, though that wasn’t the same thing as
leaving her alone, Margaery reflected, for she seemed to do that often enough.

She sighed, forcing herself to turn around and face the other girl, to meet those sad eyes that had
sought hers out so many times during the meeting.

“Your Grace,” Sansa said, coming to an abrupt stop before her. “I thought we might have a word.”

Margaery lifted her chin. “I’m not sure that there is anything we need to say to one another at the
moment, Sansa, and I am quite busy with matters of the realm.”

Sansa flinched. “I…”

And Margaery...gods help her, couldn’t even stay angry with Sansa for long, much though she
wanted to.

Sansa could deny it all she liked, but Margaery knew that Sansa had gone to Baelish about the septa.
She would never be so cruel as to kill her herself, in such a way, but there were only a few people in
King’s Landing who knew the exact manner in which Joffrey had died, and Baelish was certainly
one of them.
And he certainly had no reason to be kind to Margaery, these days.

They had talked, of course, she and Margaery, and she wasn’t certain what other reaction that Sansa had expected from her today, after that last talk, when Sansa had all but admitted to her wrongdoing.

She supposed that she was just...still angry, not that Sansa had done it, perhaps, because a part of her did understand why Sansa had done it, did understand her reasons for it, even if she didn’t agree with them, but because she didn’t...she didn’t even seem to realize why what she had done had been wrong.

*And what about you?* A nasty little voice whispered, in her ear. *You’ve killed far more than Sansa ever has.*

She forced that thought out of her mind.

She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

“What is it?” she asked, softly.

Sansa looked relieved that she had agreed to talk to her at all, and Margaery felt another spike of guilt, for that.

Once upon a time, she had known that Septa Unella was nothing more than a power hungry fanatic, who believed in the words of the High Sparrow but also knew that they would allow her to hurt a member of the royal family without getting into any sort of trouble for it.

Once upon a time, not even Joffrey had been able to come between Margaery and Sansa.

She found herself allowing Sansa to lead her into the nearest empty room, their guards standing outside the door like pillars, they were so still, as the door closed behind them, as Megga glanced worriedly at Margaery, of all things, and Margaery had to assure her that they would be fine, alone.

Again, she noticed the flash of hurt cross Sansa’s face, before she buried it once again.

“Thank you,” Sansa said, quietly, when Margaery turned to look at her again.

“What is it?” Margaery repeated, and she couldn’t quite help it if her voice was harsh, one again.

Sansa had hurt her, and there was nothing like guilt in her eyes, just now. Just hurt, as if Margaery had been the only one to do anything wrong in this relationship-

She cut that thought off before it could show across her face.

She didn’t want to be that person, the one who traded blows with someone that she loved, the one who counted offenses that they had caused against each other.

She had never thought that she would become that person.

“Your grandmother has accepted to come, as you wanted,” Sansa said, into the silence, and Margaery stared at her for a moment longer before nodding in a way that was almost absent.

“Oh,” she said, with barely any inflection at all in the tone, and Sansa squinted at her.

Sansa stared at her for a moment longer, and then shook her head, started to walk back from the other woman, not entirely sure why she had thought that this time, talking things out would be different.
She licked her lips, glancing towards the door.

For a moment, Margaery found herself wishing that the other girl would stay, that she wouldn't try to run away now that she had finally said what little she had wanted to.

The Keep was cold, without her nearby, Margaery had found.

And then, Margaery spoke. “Do you think it will matter?”

Sansa blinked, turning back to face her. “Sorry?”

Margaery took a shuddering breath, and this time, when she met Sansa’s eyes, she could see the same fear that she felt reflected in Sansa’s eyes, too. Sansa knew what was coming. She knew who was coming, soon.

She understood.

It was something of a relief, to see that same fear she felt reflected on someone else’s face, these days.

“Do you think having my grandmother here will matter, when she comes?” Margaery repeated.

For a moment, Sansa looked confused. And then, she sighed.

She swallowed hard, hugging herself because she knew that attempting to hug Margaery would go unappreciated, perhaps. Margaery glanced away.

“I...Margaery, I know it doesn’t feel like it right now...Well, I can’t know, but...” she bit her lip, and then sighed. “You’re surrounded by people who care for you. Let her see that, and not anything else.”

Margaery blinked at her. She thought that the words were meant to have more impact on Margaery than they did, that she was supposed to finally realize, upon hearing them, that she really wasn’t alone. That she really was surrounded by people who would do just about anything for her.

But Sansa just kept staring at her, waiting, and Margaery...she didn’t know what the other girl wanted, in this moment. Didn’t know what she might be able to say that could fix this situation, before Cersei arrived for her son’s funeral and blew it all to the seven hells, once more.

Then, “I feel alone,” she whispered, because she didn’t know what else to say, because it was the only thought on the forefront of her mind, in this moment, with Sansa looking at her so intensely, wanting her to believe her words so obviously.

Sansa licked her lips. “I...I’m sorry,” she said, and for the first time since Septa Unella had died, Margaery thought she believed the words.

She swallowed hard, reaching up to rub at her forehead. “I haven’t been sleeping,” she said. “Ever since...Ever since Cersei agreed to come to the capital. I thought that I was doing better, and then...” she glanced down, because looking at Sansa, in this moment, was too impossible. “I keep dreaming about him.”

Sansa flinched.

“Not about his death,” Margaery clarified, because she wasn’t quite certain what else to say, in that moment. “Just...things I forgot about. Or, things that I’m not quite sure happened. I...” she rubbed at
her forehead, again. “I dreamt the other night that he threatened to cut me open and see what was inside, if I did lose the baby.” She shook her head, as Sansa jerked in front of her, sheer horror flitting across her features. “And for the life of me, I can’t remember whether it happened or not.

“You’re...always welcome to come to me, if you need someone to talk to,” Sansa offered, gently. “Or you can’t sleep.”

And it should have felt silly, for Sansa to offer such a thing, when she had never needed to in the past, when they had never needed such permissions with each other at all, not really, but Margaery felt...oddly touched, by the words.

As if she hadn’t been certain whether seh could, before.

She dipped her head. “Thank you,” she whispered, and told herself that she might actually take Sansa up on such an offer.

And then she reminded herself that she had been acting rather cruelly towards Sansa lately, and wondered if she actually would.

Sansa took a deep breath, as she stepped outside of the room that she and Margaery had entered to be alone and found herself surrounded by Margaery’s Kingsguard.

It was a startling thing, these days, when she kept telling herself that it should not be. The Kingsguard who now surrounded Margaery meant Sansa no harm; Garlan had been instrumental in picking each and every one of them out of the noble Houses of the Reach, just to make sure of that.

Of course, there was still Ser Robert Strong, that horrible creature whom Joffrey had brought into the ranks of the Kingsguard while he still lived; they had been rather too worried about expelling him from the Kingsguard, and what his response might be, to formally expel him when they weren’t even certain whether anyone might be able to take him on.

But, thankfully, he had not shown up at the Keep since Joffrey’s death, almost as if he had known he was not welcome here.

Sansa only hoped that it remained so.

She took a deep breath, stepping daintily through the throng of Kingsguard and Margaery’s ladies, not meeting Megga’s eye when the other girl purposely tried to get her attention.

She didn’t have time to talk about Margaery with Megga, didn’t have time to worry about whatever it was making Megga pinch her lips together and look at Sansa in something like annoyance for purposely ignoring her.

Instead, she kept walking, back towards the Small Council chambers, where Varys was already hovering outside the door, as if he knew that Sansa wanted to speak with him.

As if he’d been waiting for her.

Sansa licked her lips, forcing herself not to cross her arms defensively over her stomach.

“Lord Varys,” she said instead, forcing herself to smile warmly at him.

Varys gave her a shallow bow. “My lady,” he said. “I was hoping to speak with you about what just happened at the Small Council meeting. As I’m sure you’re aware-”
“Lord Varys, I have received a few complaints about you, from one of Margaery’s ladies in waiting,” Sansa interrupted him, smoothly. “Now, normally, I would not take these complaints at face value, because the woman in question is in something like disgrace, but I have to ask, considering the interests of another soon to be mother in King’s Landing.” She folded her hands together. “What is your interest in her infant son?”

Varys blinked at her. For a moment, he actually looked surprised that Elinor had brought something like this to Sansa’s attention. Perhaps he thought Elinor would have kept quiet about such a thing, considering that she was spying for Olenna.

But it wasn’t as if Elinor needed to keep such a thing secret from Sansa, who already knew that well.

And then he stood a little taller. “It is not her son that I have an interest in, my lady,” he informed her, archly.

Sansa licked her lips, trying to pretend she didn’t hear the way he said ‘her,’ trying to pretend that wasn’t what she was suddenly focusing on.

“I see,” she said, even as her heart started to beat a little faster. “Well, I’m afraid that if such behavior continues, Her Grace might have to rethink your position on the Small Council. It is already a disgrace that one member of the Small Council is known for his clandestine meetings with young serving girls, and another owns half of the whorehouses in King’s Landing, if not more. The Regent would like to avoid being seen as a...degenerate, amongst her own people.”

Varys raised a single brow. “I assure you, my lady, I am the last of those on the Small Council that Her Grace should be worried about removing. And I would wonder why, then, she would not also considering the clandestine relationship between two members of her Small Council as also worthy of scorn.”

Her and Baelish, Sansa realized, fuming.

Sansa hummed. “I am only a humble messenger,” she told him, smiling sweetly, but Varys just stared at her, clearly disbelieving.

“You do understand that ordering those who are not infected by this plague out of the city if we cannot find a cure for it is an absolutely foolish decision,” he told her, slowly. “Cersei will see it as the perfect chance to strike at us, especially with what your ladyship and the Lady Olenna are planning.”

Sansa swallowed hard. “Let me worry about that,” she said, calmly. “I have no doubt that Cersei Lannister will have no intention of attacking us...any time soon.”

Varys squinted at her. “I suppose you know something that I don’t,” he said, the words almost idle, as he cocked his head, staring at her in something like a new light.

Sansa’s smile was thin. “I just know that Lady Cersei might be rather...preoccupied, in the coming days, when she does finally arrive in King’s Landing. I just need to know…” she took a deep breath. “This plan that Lady Olenna has, for when she does arrive. What do you think of it?”

Varys stared at her. “You’re asking for my opinion,” he said, slowly.

Sansa blinked at him.

Varys let out a sigh. “I think...whatever this plan of yours, you had better hope that it will successfully keep Cersei from attacking, as you seem to think it will,” he said. “I spent many years...
alongside that Lady, and I found that she can be rather...impetuous, from time to time.”

Sansa lifted her chin. “I spent many years alongside her son,” she reminded him. “I know what she’s capable of, Lord Varys. Now, do I have your word that you will stop bothering Margaery’s lady?”

“Former lady, I thought it was,” he murmured, but Sansa just kept staring at him.

He let out a long sigh, finally. “As Her Grace wishes, of course,” he agreed, and Sansa just eyed him a moment longer, before sighing and moving away from him.

He was right, of course. Right that this plan that she had, this dangerous mission that she had sent Lady Nym on and had, as of yet, heard no response about, might just fail. That if it did, if she was not entirely certain that Lady Nym had succeeded in her task, Cersei may well arrive in King’s Landing with the armies of the Westerlands behind her, and then they would be well and truly fucked.

Though, Sansa could believe that the other woman would wait until after the funeral. She had just that sort of flare about her.

And hopefully, she would have heard at least something back from Lady Nym, by then.

As if thoughts of her had summoned the other woman, Sansa suddenly found herself blinking down at a young messenger boy, who had clearly run all of the way here from where Sansa had assigned him to wait for Lady Nym’s raven, and to bring it to her the moment it arrived.

She swallowed hard, taking the letter from his hands almost before he had the chance to speak, as he stood panting in front of her.

“My lady,” he began, but Sansa had already torn it open, reading it over carefully.

It was in code, of course; a code that the two of them had decided upon already, before Lady Nym had ever left, because, after all, she was traveling deep into territory that belonged to the enemy, and if they weren’t careful, anyone could have come across this raven before Sansa did.

But the words she did read reassured her completely. She closed her eyes, breathing out a sigh of relief.

Finally, something she had planned out was going right, as it should.

When she opened her eyes again, the messenger boy was still standing in front of her, waiting. Sansa bit back a sigh, reaching into the pouch at her waist and pulling out a gold dragon, handing it over to him.

He skipped away quickly enough, after that. No doubt trying to avoid being handed new orders, Sansa thought idly.

She turned the missive over several times in her hands, and then glanced around the corridor, before her eyes fell on the torch hanging from the other end of the hall.

She moved over to it, holding the letter up over the open flame, and watched as it burned away to ash before her, the sight strangely transfixing.

She supposed she should have known that this was one thing in which not even Lady Nym would fail her. If she was being honest with herself, though, a part of Sansa had been rather terrified that she was going to hear, secondhand, that Lady Nym had not only failed in her mission but rather...killed
She took a deep breath. Lady Nym was not the woman she had thought she was when, she first met her. She knew that Lady Nym would not fail her in this, even if a part of her had worried that she might be a bit...overzealous. She knew how much they were depending on this very thing, knew how Cersei would respond if they mucked it up in any way.

But none of that mattered, now. Lady Nym had done exactly as Sansa had asked of her, and, beyond that, the Boltons had sent her a message not yesterday letting her know that Shireen Baratheon was already on her way to King’s Landing.

Everything else may be going wrong at the moment, but at least Sansa knew that these two things were not.

Now, she just had to make sure that Cersei didn’t walk into the Great Hall and accuse Margaery of adultery, first thing.

And for that, she needed to find Rosamund.

Which was not difficult, she admitted, as she walked back into the Maidenvault and found Brienne and Rosamund alone there, once again.

A part of her was disturbed about the amount of time that Rosamund and Brienne seemed to spend together, when she trusted Brienne so well and Rosamund so little. But then, she supposed, it was useful that someone on their side was at least trying to reach out to Rosamund, and Brienne was the least duplicitous person that Sansa knew.

If anyone could convince Rosamund of their sincerity, when Sansa knew the other girl was still questioning it, and that part of that was Sansa’s own fault, it would be Brienne.

They both glanced up, as Sansa entered the room. Brienne even sent her a little bow, and Sansa found herself flushing, a little.

“Rosamund,” she said, turning to the other girl so that she didn’t have to think about why, “I need you to do something for me, starting tomorrow.”

Rosamund swallowed hard, exchanging a glance with Brienne before giving Sansa a little curtsey. “Whatever my lady demands,” she said, and Sansa resisted the urge to roll her eyes, because they both knew that she did not really consider Sansa to be her lady.

“When Cersei comes, I want you to keep her as distracted as possible,” Sansa told Rosamund, crossing her arms over her chest. “Make something up, if you have to. But I know better by now than to let Cersei alone.”

Rosamund licked her lips, looking suddenly nervous in a way that Rosamund had not seen her look in some time. “And what about Baelish?” she asked, carefully. “If he goes to her…”

“Let me worry about Baelish,” Sansa snapped, interrupting her. She noticed the way that Rosamund flinched from her tone of voice, and forced herself to calm down. Rosamund, for all her failings, was a very scarred young woman; Sansa didn’t intend to scare her further, and she hadn’t meant to shout at her, either. She sighed. “I…I just need you to keep Cersei occupied, do you understand? I don’t care what sort of information you have to make up, to keep her attention. Yes?”

Rosamund looked like the last thing that she wanted to do was keep Cersei distracted, but she nodded.
Sansa smiled. “Thank you,” she said, genuine relief filling her. “Now, go. I need to...I need to be alone, for a little while.”

She needed to go and speak with Baelish soon, about their plans for the funeral, and for Cersei’s arrival - they were planning on putting her in her old rooms, the ones that used to be Margaery’s, before she had taken Joffrey’s - and because she needed to know exactly what it was he was planning, for Cersei’s arrival, that he had not told her about.

And she thought she might have a way of figuring that out, without letting him know that she was onto him.

Rosamund dipped into another curtsey, and then was gone.

Sansa let out a sigh when she realized that Brienne was not going to leave. That, instead, she had crossed her arms over her chest and was watching Sansa intently.

“Is something wrong, my lady?” she asked, finally, and Sansa shook her head.

“Look, I just need...” No, she didn’t think that was going to work. It would only serve to make Brienne more worried about her, something that she certainly didn’t want.

“I did something terrible,” Sansa whispered, hoarsely, and the words felt almost good to say. “Something that...something that I’m not sure I can be forgiven for.”

For once, she thought she understood the obsession Margaery had with gaining absolution for the things she had done, even if she didn’t want to. Because that would mean that, in some ways, Margaery was right.

Brienne eyed her, carefully, as the door shut behind Rosamund for good. “My lady..” she hesitated for a moment, and then said, gently enough, “Do you want to talk about it?”

She had talked to Baelish about it, and he had told her that she was making the right decision, but Sansa knew who he was, these days.

Knew that she would be a fool to trust him with much more, when it came to Margaery, because Margaery was, for him, something like the competition.

And it felt...nice, to think of getting these words off her chest, to tell someone else what she had done and hear what they had to say about it, even if the way that Brienne was looking at her made her feel uncomfortable.

Brienne was a good woman, Sansa knew. She may not know everything about her, and may regret that, to some extent, but she did know that Brienne was good, that she was honorable.

“...” Sansa took a deep breath, not certain that she could. She took another deep breath, and then another, finding it suddenly felt rather difficult to breathe.

She told herself that was just the panic of even thinking about talking about it with another person.

She swallowed hard. ‘Cersei is coming, and I’m not sure that Margaery won’t break down right in front of her and confess everything,” she whispered, because she needed to say it to someone, and Brienne...she could trust Brienne, she knew that.

And she didn’t know who else she could trust, these days.
Brienne blinked at her, clearly surprised. “My lady…” she began, and then swallowed hard. “Do you think that...perhaps, keeping the Regent away from Lady Cersei might help?”

Sansa was already shaking her head. She hadn’t wanted that. She’d just wanted…

“Cersei will know something’s wrong, then,” Sansa admitted. “She has to face her. And I can’t be there next to her, holding her hand, like I’d like to.”

Both because Cersei would find a reason to declare war for that alone, after what she had once accused Sansa and Margaery of, and because she didn’t think that Margaery would allow it, either.

Brienne looked sympathetic; Sansa found herself wondering if the other woman had felt something like this for teh Kingslayer, before he had left King’s Landing. If she really did understand.

And the thought of that made her feel a little ill.

She took a careful breath. “I...I shouldn’t be saying these things, Brienne,” she said, softly. “I...I don’t want to…”

Burden you, she thought.

But then she reminded herself that she had shared all of this and more with Baelish, and that Brienne was at least more trustworthy than he was, and she ought to trust the other woman as well.

Besides, she thought, it had felt good to get things off of her chest, with Baelish. Perhaps it would feel so again, with Brienne.

Brienne’s eyes were gentle, as she opened her arms to Sansa. “You can tell me whatever you like, my lady,” she told Sansa, gently. “I promised to protect you.”

Sansa stared at her for a moment, and before she even knew what she was doing, she was stepping into Brienne’s open arms.

It felt a little like hugging her mother had, as a child, when she awoke from a particularly intense nightmare.

When she started to talk, this time, unlike all of the times that she had gone to Baelish in the last few months, it actually felt...good.

When Margaery closed her eyes, she saw her husband’s laughing features, as he talked about cutting her open to see what was inside after she had failed to give him the son that he wanted.

She awoke with a gasp, her whole body covered in sweat despite the chill of the night, and sitting up fully. She told herself to breathe, told herself that she was fine, that she didn’t need to feel so panicked; Joffrey was dead, she had made sure of that.

He was never going to hurt her again. Was never going to be able to threaten her again, outside of her dreams.

Still, she found it difficult to breathe.

She reached down, placing a hand on her bulging stomach as she dragged in one ragged breath, and then another.

Her child was fine, she told herself. He was fine. He was fine.
She could feel him kicking against her fingers, even now. He was fine.

She tossed her hair, short and irritating as it was most days, behind her ears, and sighed, forgoing the thought of sleep despite the exhaustion already settling in her bones.

The maesters kept warning her that she needed to rest as much as possible. They said that she was taking on too much, that the stress of her new position was getting to her, that she should be resting as much as she could.

Margaery hadn’t felt safe enough to rest in a long time, and sometimes, from the way her child kicked against her stomach at the worst of times, she wondered if he didn’t, either. If he somehow knew the life that he had been born into, the danger that would follow him for the rest of his days, so long as any of his enemies lived.

She sighed, reaching up to rub at her temples.

She had thought that moving into her husband’s chambers, where there were no monsters under the bed because she had already faced them here might help her, but tonight, she had tossed and turned for hours with no relief.

Her husband was dead. She had thought that moving here, sleeping in these chambers, would serve as a reminder of that, when she awoke in the middle of the night and needed that very reassurance, but lately, it only seemed to be making things worse.

Her husband was going to be buried in the crypts in two days, finally laid to rest amongst the old Kings of the Seven Kingdoms, but it didn’t feel like she was finally laying him to rest, just now.

It felt like he would always haunt her.

Cersei was arriving tomorrow, to attend her own son’s funeral, and the thought of her arrival made Margaery’s heart beat wildly, in her chest. She knew why inviting the other woman was necessary, but the thought of facing her again, after she had bashed in Joffrey’s brains, terrified her.

She had the terrible feeling that Cersei would take one look at her and know exactly what she had done, would want to kill her then and there. Would know that the child in her womb could not keep Margaery safe, because it didn’t belong to Joffrey.

A part of her wanted to beg off, wanted to pretend to be ill so that she wouldn’t have to face Cersei at all, but she knew that would only serve to make the other woman more suspicious. She certainly wouldn’t believe any excuses about Margaery mourning her husband so deeply.

Somehow, from the beginning, she had always known how Margaery felt about Joffrey, even when no one else, not even Sansa, had seemed to understand that. Which meant that Margaery was going to have to be strong, in front of her, if she wanted to survive.

She swallowed hard, remembering the last time she had so nervously tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep. Remembering what had helped her finally succumb to a worriless sleep.

She took a deep breath, sliding off of her husband’s bed and slipping her feet into the sandals beside them, even as the child within her made his displeasure known at the movement, this late at night.

She knew where she was going before her feet even started moving in that direction, and a part of her hated herself for it. Hated herself for the weakness of needing Sansa when she had been so thoughtlessly cruel to her lately, but she couldn’t quite help it.
Couldn’t stop herself from walking through the night, passed her concerned guards who called after and were ignored, all of the way to the Maidenvault, where she could only hope that Sansa was meeting with her and not having another one of her secret meetings that she thought the whole of the Keep didn’t know about with Baelish or Garlan.

She was aware of her guards following behind her; the Regent, and the mother of the future king, could never be left alone, of course, but they were like gnats, flying around her ears, and all she wanted in this moment was to be left alone, with Sansa.

It had been easier to escape her guards when she had just been the consort of the King, after all.

Margaery hesitated outside of the door, the septa’s disapproving eyes lashing before her eyes first, and then the hurt look on Sansa’s face when Margaery had ignored her at the Small Council meeting.

She remembered knocking, before. Back when she was never sure whether Tyrion Lannister would open the door, or whether his wife would. She thought it would feel strange to knock now, on a door that used to belong to her own chambers.

And yet, she wasn’t certain if Sansa would welcome her with open arms tonight, after the way that she had treated her.

And she did feel guilty about that.

She knew why Sansa had the septa killed, after all. Once upon a time, she would have understood the sentiment rather too well, would have seen what Sansa did, that the septa was nothing more than a threat to them.

But Margaery had been trying to turn over a new leaf, and she was surrounded by nobles who didn’t give a damn who she had killed, just as they had not truly cared about her husband’s victims, either. They were nothing more than the collateral, next to the opportunity to be the power behind the throne.

And Sansa...she remembered a time when Sansa had made herself sick, even thinking about being responsible for Oberyn being found guilty of murdering Tywin Lannister. When she had almost been willing to let herself be brought down for the murder, rather than implicate him as she had, when the whole of King’s Landing already knew that he was guilty.

They had both changed. Had both become different women, since Joffrey’s death, and Margaery would have once thought that Sansa had changed for the better, but now, with Baelish whispering in her ear and Sana having a penchant for the death of those who got in her way, Margaery wasn’t so sure.

Sometimes, it terrified her, thinking of what Sansa might be willing to do, the lengths to which she might be willing to go, to protect Margaery. And Margaery that was what she had been doing ever since Margaery had returned from the dead, from Dorne. She had been doing her best to protect her, and Margaeyr knew that she ought to be grateful for that, but it was terrifying, to think about.

Margaery had been willing to let all of those people in the Sept risk death by the hands of her husband’s army, in order to protect Sansa.

And she was only beginning to realize what Sansa was willing to do for her.

Margaery let out a careful breath that she hadn’t realized she was holding, and knocked on the door.

A moment later, Rosamund Tyrell was squinting out at her, and the girl’s eyes widened at the sight
In truth, though she had seen the other girl with Sansa often enough lately, Margaery was surprised that Rosamund remained as Sansa’s new lady’s maid. She could have arranged to find one who wasn’t so untrustworthy, one who had not been placed there because Cersei wanted to hurt her and spy on her, and Margaery wondered why she didn’t.

She had that sort of power, now.

Margaery licked her lips. “Is Sansa…”

And suddenly Sansa was there, all but running out of her bedchambers, Brienne at her side, her eyes going wide at the sight of Margaery.

Margaery supposed she deserved that look of shock, at the sight of Margaery here, at Sansa’s rooms. She didn’t think she could remember the last time she had come here of her own accord, after all.

Rosamund glanced between them, and then pushed past Margaery, all but disappearing into the hall behind her. Margaery raised a brow.

It made less sense than the other doubt, niggling at the back of Margaery’s mind, after all. The doubt that had been plaguing her ever since Sansa had elected to give her some space, to let her figure things out, something that Margaery could admit she had wanted, in the beginning, because what she had done to Joffrey, just as what she had done to the smallfolk, had terrified her, and Sansa was a living reminder of that terror.

Sansa had been there, that night. She had seen the aftermath, had seen everything that Margaery had done to him long after his brains were bashed into the carpeting.

But the doubt was still there, remained long after she realized the answer: Sansa was still here.

Sansa was still here, even though the only thing keeping her here; the fact that the Lannisters were using her as a hostage, as a claim to the North, was gone. Kevan Lannister might put up some paltry attempt, and Margaery knew that her own family would be less than pleased at the thought of losing the North, as well, but there were no guards holding Sansa back.

Hells, she was practically running things, now.

Yet she was still here.

Margaery closed her eyes, and swallowed hard. When she opened them again, Sansa was still staring at her, with that awestruck expression Margaery knew she didn’t deserve.

“I…” she eyed Sansa, realized that the other girl wasn’t in her dressing gown, and therefore probably hadn’t been sleeping, as Margaery had been trying to do. “I was wondering if I could speak with you.” She glanced at Brienne. “I could… I could come back another time…”

“No,” Sansa said, with an urgency that made Margaery feel nervous, and then she stepped forward, hesitantly. “No, I’d like it if you stayed.”

Margaery knew that. Sometimes, she thought that was the problem.

“It’s late, my lady…” Brienne spoke up then, an implicit warning in her voice that made Margaery’s heart skip a beat.
She knew, of course, that it would be foolish not to let Sansa’s only guard these days know about the relationship between them, but dear gods, it felt like the whole of King’s Landing knew, these days.

Septa Unella had known.

Margaery closed her eyes, and saw the other woman’s brains bashed in, exactly the same way that Joffrey’s had been.

She grimaced.

“It’s all right, Brienne,” Sansa said quietly, placing a hand on the other woman’s arm. It was only then Margaery noticed the tear tracks on her cheeks. She didn’t remember the last time that she had seen Sansa cry in front of her. “You may go.”

Brienne sent Margaery a look that was almost suspicious, before dipping her head in Sansa’s direction and heading for the door, following Rosamund out. The door shut silently behind her, leaving the two of them alone once more, and Margaery felt suddenly, unaccountably nervous, as if she had made a terrible mistake, in deciding to come here.

She opened her mouth, and realized she didn’t know what to say.

Sansa was staring at her as if she were something breakable.

“Don’t say it,” Margaery said, as the silence grew too uncomfortable, and Sansa’s eyes leapt up to meet her own.

“I…”

Margaery hugged herself. “I couldn’t...I couldn't sleep,” she admitted, thinking of the last time that this had happened, thinking of how Sansa had agreed to be with her, then, had wrapped her arms around her despite Margaery’s hesitation, and slept beside her until Margaery had fallen asleep.

When Margaery had awoken, Sansa was gone, and that ache was back now, familiar and too deep.

Sansa’s eyes softened. “Well, I...I haven’t gone to sleep yet, but...Would you like me to escort you back?” she asked, and there was that damnably hopeful tone in her voice again.

She sounded nervous, like Garlan had in the first few weeks after he had married Leonette; it had been a better match than he might hope for, but in the beginning, they had loved each other without really knowing each other, and she remembered how nervous he had been with a crystal clarity, now.

She wondered if Willas, yet another of her victims, had been nervous upon learning that he was to marry Cersei. He had been kind enough in her letters, but she knew her brother well, too.

“I was wondering, actually…” she knew it was a horrible idea, but the idea of sleeping in Joffrey’s chambers the night before his mother arrived sounded like a worse one. “I was wondering if I could sleep here, tonight.”

The words tumbled out of her mouth like vomit, teh easier to say.

Sansa blinked at her.

Margaery took a step back then, arms falling to her sides. “Actually, it’s a terrible idea. I didn’t tell my ladies. I…” She moved as if to go back out the door.
“All right,” Sansa interrupted her, the words sounding terribly impulsive, and Margaery froze, before she turned back around. Sansa’s smile was rather sad. “You know you can sleep here whenever you want, Margaery.”

She wouldn’t be able to sleep here when Cersei was back in King’s Landing, Margaery didn’t remind the other girl. She would have to sleep the night that she buried her husband in his own bed, because she had been stubborn enough to claim it, to think that it might help her, somehow.

But she didn’t say any of that. Because Sansa looked so hopefully, and tonight was all that mattered, in the moment.

Margaery licked her lips. “Are you...are you sure?” she asked, quietly, and Sansa’s smile grew.


Margaery didn’t feel like sitting. She only felt like sleeping, but she had a feeling that telling Sansa that would only cause hurt to flash across her features, yet again, because of Margaery, and that was something that Margaery very much wanted to avoid, tonight.

For just one night, she wanted to forget that so many of their conversations ended in argument. She wanted to believe that they were on the same page, once again.

So she didn’t say it.

She just sat down next to Sansa, closing her eyes and breathing in deeply, and pretending that she didn’t feel the terrible awkwardness permeating in the air.

“I…” Margaery bit her lip. “I’m sorry for the way I snapped at you, earlier,” she said, because Sansa had apologized for the septa even though she hadn’t meant it.

Sansa blinked at her, and seemed to realize that, as well. “I…” she cut off then, clearly not certain what to say.

“I hope I didn’t wake you,” Margaery interrupted her, and Sansa just stared at her again.

“I...I wasn’t sleeping,” she said, and Margaery hugged herself, sliding a little further away from Sansa on the sofa.

“So neither was I,” she admitted.

“Joffrey?” Sansa asked, into the heavy silence that followed. “Or the baby?”

Margaery swallowed thickly. “Both,” she whispered, and could almost feel the sympathy coming off of Sansa, though she wasn’t even looking at her.

She couldn’t look at her, because if she did all she would be able to think about was how Sansa had killed the septa, or, worse than that, how Sansa had found her standing in a pool of her own husband’s blood, had been the only other person still living who had seen her like that.

Weak. Vulnerable, and not just because of what her husband had just done to her. Because Sansa knew what she had done to him.

Because she hadn’t just killed him, had she? No, she’d done much worse than that. She’d butchered him, like the animal he’d been, and Sansa had seen that.

And Sansa didn’t seem to care that she had done it at all.
Margaery looked away, swallowing thickly.

“Come on,” Sansa said, waiting, and Margaery blinked up at her, confused, wondering if Sansa was about to kick her out of her rooms. She would be within her rights to do so, she supposed, but still, she wouldn’t have expected that. Not from her.

“You came here to sleep, didn’t you?” Sansa asked, and her words were almost gentle.

Margaery flinched. The gentleness was not something that she was used to, it was not something that she was prepared to deal with, at the moment, when she had done hardly enough to warrant it, of late.

But Sansa just waited, almost patient.

Margaery took a deep breath, and took her hand.

Sansa led her back into her chambers like she thought that Margaery was a scared animal who was going to take off running at any moment if she pushed her too hard, and honestly, Margaery couldn’t say that she was wrong.

But still, she followed her.

Followed her all of the way to the bed, where they both stood stock still, neither one sure where to go from here.

That hadn’t been their domain in so long.

“I still haven’t forgiven you for the septa,” Margaery whispered, hoarsely, after Sansa had finally moved, had blown out the single candle in the room.

She felt Sansa’s hands running through her hair, and for the first time the touch wasn’t grating since the last time her husband had touched her. “I know,” Sansa said, softly.

Margaery grimaced; that hadn’t been the answer that she wanted, even if she wasn’t certain what answer it was she was looking for.

Septa Unella was dead, and Margaery wanted to pretend that she hated Sansa for being the cause of that death, for taking the choice out of Margaery’s hands, but that was not what she was angry about.

She hadn’t cared for the septa as a person, after all; horrible as it was to think it, even in the privacy of her own mind, the septa had been nothing more than a symbol of redemption, for Margaery.

And now, she was dead, to help protect yet another of Margaery’s sins, even if thinking of what she had shared with Sansa, what was in her belly, as sins made her physically ill.

But she was dead, and there could be no clearer signs from the gods that she still wasn’t certain she believed in, that there could be no redemption for her. That she had to keep moving forward in this life of sin and cruelty and murder, no matter what she might truly want.

Every time she closed her eyes, these days, she thought of that little boy in the orphanage, the one who had wished her a son because his own sister had been murdered due to her own actions.

The septa had told her that everyone could find absolution from the gods.

Margaery wasn’t certain that she was right, about that. That there was any coming back from something like that, no matter what the septa believed, no matter what Margaery had wanted to
believe.

And yet, Sansa kept petting her hair, and Margaery remembered the way the thought of facilitating someone’s death had nonce broken her, and how she cared so little about it, now.

She wished that she could feel that way about the smallfolk, about Joffrey. That they would stop eating away at her the way Oberyn’s death seemed to have stopped eating away at Sansa.

“I’m sorry,” Sansa said, after a lengthy silence, and Margaery’s heart skipped a beat. She forced herself not to turn around in the bed to face the other girl, with the horrible thought that something would happen then, if she did, which could not be taken back.

So she lay still, motionless.

“I didn't want to take her away from you,” Sansa whispered, into her hair, and this time, Margaery could actually hear the apology in her voice. Not for killing the septa, but for stealing her away from Margaery after Margaery had finally confided in her what the other woman meant to her. “I should have done it myself, too.”

Margaery closed her eyes, swallowing hard.

She wanted to contest those words. Wanted to tell Sansa that she shouldn't have done it at all, and yet, bothersome as the thought was, Margaery knew she wasn’t able to. Because she knew why Sansa had done it, knew it intimately, and once, she wouldn’t have been able to blame her for it.

Ut she supposed that this was as close to an apology as Margaery was going to get, for what had happened to the septa.

She didn’t think she could forgive Sansa for it so quickly, but then, Sansa had once taken some time to forgive her over the way she had manipulated her into speaking against Oberyn.

Perhaps she wouldn’t mind, even if it did make Margaery feel guilty, to hurt her anymore.

But she was hurting, too.

Gods, her head ached. The child in her stomach kicked out angrily at her bladder, and Margaery grimaced, resolving herself to the thought that she might not find sleep at all tonight, not even in Sansa’s arms.

“I’m scared to face her again,” Margaery whispered, into the darkness, because she thought she might as well say it now, while they were alone and she could.

She felt Sansa’s forehead wrinkle, against her neck. “Margaery…”

“Cersei,” Margaery clarified, wondering if Sansa truly thought her that far gone. “I’m terrified of what it’s going ot be like, seeing her again, when she arrives at the capital. I’m terrified that...somehow, she’ll know the truth the moment she looks at me.”

She felt Sansa’s fingers in her hair tighten, and tried not to flinch away from the other girl. For a moment, there was nothing but silence.

Then, “I won’t let her hurt you,” she whispered, and Margaery felt her heart ache.

She wanted to tell Sansa not to make promises that she couldn’t keep because, regardless of her bravado at the Small Council meeting, she knew Cersei. Cersei was a force to be reckoned with;
every time she was down, she found a way to get herself back up again, and make her enemies pay.

She was taking some time to get herself back up again now, and Margaery was terrified at the thought of what her vengeance would look like, when it finally came.

This time, Sansa fell asleep long before she did.

While the septa had been here, amongst the living or in the Keep, Margaery wasn’t sure which, they had encountered the simple problem of not being sure what to do about Margaery going to the Sept. Of course, if she went to the Sept too often, there was the concern that the smallfolk might tear her apart for it.

But she could not be seen to be blatantly ignoring the Faith, either.

So the septa had come up with what Margaery had not been certain was an acceptable solution, but one that she had found rather relieving, all the same.

A smaller version of one of the prayer rooms of the sept, with a septon who had agreed to come and pray with her when she needed it, an unassuming man who came from a rich family and reminded Margaery nothing of the High Sparrow, and with the Seven staring down at her from above.

It had been converted out of a room she thought had once belonged to one of Robert Baratheon’s whores, when he had them spend the night, since it was so close to Joffrey’s chambers, which she found rather ironic enough to be likable.

But today, she found herself kneeling on the floor of this tiny sept, the words that she would say to gods that she wasn’t sure would ever forgive her caught on her tongue.

When the septa had been here, she had known exactly the words to say, to remind Margaery of what she had done and how she might atone for it. Now, forced to read from the Seven Pointed Star as the septon laid it out before her, a mockery of her time as a prisoner of the Faith, but then, she thought the septa had asked for it to be this way on purpose, and she had not had the courage to object, Margaery didn’t know what words of comfort she was supposed to find from this.

She wasn’t sure what prayers she might utter, after the things she had done, to pray to the gods for protection against Cersei Lannister, when she arrived in just a few scant hours.

After all that she had done, she wasn’t certain that the gods would care to shield her from Cersei Lannister, even if she was even less loving towards the gods than Margaery had ever been.

She took a deep breath, raising a hand for the septon to stop speaking.

He did so, almost immediately. “What is it, Your Grace?” he asked her, quietly, glancing down at the bulge in her stomach as if he expected her to say that she was about to give birth to the thing in her belly, and he was the last defense against it.

Come to think of it, he looked rather green.

Margaery sighed.

She still had a little time before the child was born, at least, but...men. And men of the cloth, she doubted knew about the rigors of childbearing even less.

“I...I can’t hear any more, today,” she said, quietly. “I find I’m getting overtired, and I need to
prepare for her...for the arrival of our guests.”

She forced the thought of Cersei’s smug, accusing gaze out of her mind.

Cersei didn’t know, she thought. Cersei couldn’t know. They’d done their best to cover it up as best as they could, using even Baelish for it, which felt like a last resort, now, and Cersei might suspect that Margaery had been less than helpful towards her husband in his final moments, but there was no way for her to know.

The septon looked concerned. “Is there anything that you would like to unburden yourself with, Your Grace?” he asked her, quietly, and Margaery bodily flinched, thinking of the septa.

Thinking of how the septa had told her that if she just unburdened herself to someone, that not only would the gods forgive her, but that she might find the ability to forgive herself.

And then Sansa had killed her.

Margaery shook her head, trying to tell herself that she knew why Sansa had done it, that Sansa had just been trying to protect her, and she shouldn’t think of it any other way.

But she couldn’t quite help thinking of it that way.

Sansa, who always wanted to talk about what had happened, when Margaery didn’t. Sansa, who treated her these days like some fragile, breakable thing when the septa let her know what she really thought about her.

Sansa, who had killed the septa.

Margaery squeezed her eyes shut.

When she opened them again, she thought that she could breathe once more.

“I just...need to prepare,” she told the septon, getting to her feet and moving away from him. “I don’t have time for anything else, at the moment, I’m afraid.” She forced a smile, so that he would know that she was joking with him, but he still looked rather concerned.

“Yes, Your Grace,” he said, giving her a shallow little bow, and Margaery quickly moved away from him, before she could find herself thinking about how the septa had bowed to her in much the same manner, like she didn’t really see Margaery as a queen, at all.

She swallowed, nearly running out the door, to find her Kingsguard and Megga waiting for her. They looked concerned about the way she had just run out of that room, but none of them said a word about it, and Margaery breathed a quiet sigh of relief as they started moving again.

She remembered how difficult it had been to convince her Kingsguard the first time to leave her alone in that room, and she didn’t want to give them cause to think they needed to be with her there, again.

Megga stepped forward as they started walking back to Margaery’s chambers, as they left the Kingsguard behind there, as well.

“Is something wrong, Your Grace?” she asked, and Margaery wondered why people kept asking her that, the last few days.

She forced down a retort.
Dear gods, what was it with everyone around her wanting her to talk about how she felt?

“I’m fine,” she said.

Megga just gave her a knowing look, and gestured for her to walk inside those rooms before her. Margaery grimaced, and stepped inside, jumping a little as the door shut behind Megga.

Her ladies were waiting for her, of course. They always were, these days.

Hovering around her like they wanted to witness the first breakdown themselves-

Margaery closed her eyes, told herself that she was only thinking this bitterly today because of who was arriving, because of what today was.

Tomorrow would be Joffrey’s funeral.

Today - Margaery shook her head.

She supposed if she didn’t think about it until it happened, it would be better.

It didn’t feel that way, though.

“Let’s get you ready, shall we?” Megga asked, then, and Margaery flinched again.

She moved forward, let one of the girls get out one of the black mourning gowns that she would need to wear before the realm if she didn’t want anyone - Cersei - making a scene about what she was wearing, especially today.

Margaery still felt strange, changing in front of these girls, girls who had known her almost her entire life. Alla still flinched, every time she saw the burns on Margaery’s skin.

The dress she wore was made of black satin with red roses sewn into the sleeves, and Margaery sneered down at it, longing for one of the gowns she’d started to wear after her husband’s death, the ones that looked like armor and reminded her entirely too much of the gown that she had once complimented Cersei on, while eating dinner with her and her son, and she had first realized that Cersei was going to be an enemy.

But gods forbid if the other woman thought that she was trying to copy her.

Megga reached out, smoothing down Margaery’s gown, and Margaery forced herself not to flinch away from the other girl when she did so.

Megga pretended not to notice. “You’re nervous,” she said, softly.

Somehow, the other ladies seemed to have vanished since Margaery had pulled her gown over her head.

Margaery sent her a scorching look.

Megga looked almost apologetic, but the look faded fast. “You can’t afford to be nervous,” she reminded her, and there was something hard an unapologetic in her voice as she spoke. Margaery took a deep breath, wanting to look away and finding that she couldn’t, just as she could never look away whenever the septa had reprimanded her for something. “Cersei will take one look at you and strike where it hurts the most.”

Margaery gave her an unimpressed glance. “You think I don’t know that?” she demanded, coolly.
Then, she sighed as Megga just blinked at her. “Sorry. I just...nerves.”

Megga’s answering smile was sad. “You won’t be alone,” she promised, and Margaery wondered how she was always so easily able to read Margaery these days, when they had never been the closest of companions, before.

No, that had always been Elinor, not Megga.

And yet these days, Margaery hardly saw Elinor, and Megga seemed to know her more than she knew herself, sometimes.

“But when she woke in the morning, Sansa had already been gone.”

She swallowed hard; she knew that was her own fault, after all. She knew she had made it very clear to Sansa that she wasn’t really welcome around Margaery, not after what she had been through.

It hadn’t been her intention, but nevertheless, that was what had happened. That was where they had found themselves when Margaery had all but begged to spend the night with Sansa, and had awoken alone, in the morning.

Megga eyed her carefully. “She’s a very smart girl,” she told Margaery, and Margaery wanted to bristle, wanted to tell her that of course she knew that, but she supposed she deserved such a response, after the way she had treated Sansa lately.

It was comforting, in a way, to know that Sansa, too, had someone.

Margaery swallowed hard, smoothing down her gown and giving Megga a simple nod.

*Here we go*, she thought, as she stepped through the door to her chambers, and the Kingsguard outside of her room all bowed as one, and then escorted her down the hall, her ladies falling into step behind her.

She could feel the stares of the nobles that they did pass, the ones who weren’t already in the Great Hall, the nobles who had come here to gawk at their mourning little queen and see what new foolish decisions she would make along the way, but Margaery forced herself to look straight ahead and not at a single one of them.

Today, they were all beneath her, because if she put herself on equal footing with them, she wouldn’t be prepared.

Wouldn’t be prepared for Her.

She could feel Megga at her side, and a childish part of Margaery wanted to reach out and grab the other girl’s hand, for strength or comfort or something in between.

She didn’t.

She wasn’t wearing armor today, and she couldn’t afford to show any weakness besides that.

Still, when she walked into the throne room and could feel the stares of so many on her, wondering if this was it. If today would finally be the day that their Regent snapped.
They all knew something was wrong with her, whether they thought it was because she was mourning her husband, or terrified of Cersei, of the new responsibility that she had assumed.

She met her father’s gaze, as she walked forward, and pretended that she could gain some comfort from the way that he nodded to her, from the look in his eyes that she thought was meant to be reassuring.

She couldn’t remember the last time her father had made her feel comforted, and not because he was cruel to her, by any means.

She had just never expected it of him.

But he was the only one here; Garlan was out in the city even now, making sure that they weren’t about to have another plague within the city walls while Cersei was present.

And there was Sansa, of course, standing entirely too close to the Iron Throne already, but when she smiled at Margaery, Margaery could admit that she did feel some measure of comfort, from the other girl’s smile.

Like she used to.

She didn’t know if anything had changed, after last night, but she supposed that she had realized, to some extent, how much the two of them needed each other. How much better they always were, together.

She hadn’t slept, but just being next to Sansa had felt...nice.

Margaery sat down primly on the Iron Throne, giving the chair beside it, where the Regent was meant to sit, the barest of glances before she did so.

The effect would be lost on her, of course, because she was not yet here, but Margaery thought her point would be made well enough by the number of people who were still here.

She stretched her arms out onto the arms of the Iron Throne, and nodded to one of the guards to open the main doors of the Keep to their newest ‘guests.’

For a moment, she thought that she was about to come face to face with Cersei again, for the first time since she had murdered the woman’s son, but it was not Cersei who came hobbling through the main doors of the Great Hall, leaning heavily on a walking stick and ignoring the outstretched arm of one of her guards.

Margaery didn’t feel relief at the sight of her, though.

“The Lady Olenna Tyrell,” a herald called, as if Margaery needed someone to tell her who the woman before her was, as if half of the court had not already flinched back from the other woman, as if they could feel the irritation bleeding off of her in the same way that Margaery currently could.

Olenna walked forward slowly, ignoring all of the stares and the murmuring - most of the court knew by now that Margaery had been the one to send her grandmother away, even if they didn’t know why and never would - as she came to a sudden halt before the Iron Throne.

She didn’t bow, just inclined her head, and Margaery felt her breath catch in her throat.

She knew the look in her grandmother’s eyes, after all. It was the same look that she often gave Margaery as a child, and Loras and Garlan far more than that, every time that they had disappointed
her in some way, no matter how small.

It had always terrified them, to receive that look.

“Grandmother,” Margaery said, affording the woman a genuine smile, telling herself that seeing her grandmother again almost made up for that look.

Her grandmother was here now, and that meant they could figure this out, she thought. Her grandmother would know exactly what to do, if only Margaery could hold it together for long enough.

They may not have parted on the best of terms, and Margaery would freely admit that she had been very much responsible for that; she knew what sort of a woman her grandmother was, from the beginning, knew that she was the sort of woman who meddled in the sorts of things that took lives, that she was the woman who made the hard choices when Mace could only think a few steps ahead, rather than then.

No, her grandmother had always been like that. Had been almost predictable, in that way.

The problem had come when Margaery had changed. When she had started thinking that her grandmother’s plots weren’t worth the death toll that they wrought, not after all of the deaths that had come before them. When she had started thinking that she could do better.

Hubris, that had been, she could admit that now.

Now that she needed the sight of her grandmother to remember how to breathe again, because her grandmother always knew how to fix her son’s colossal fuck ups, no matter how bad they were, and Margaery could only hope that Olenna could fix hers, now.

Olenna gave her a long, knowing look, and Margaery felt as if her grandmother was slowly peeling away her skin and looking beneath, was finding every single one of the faults and weaknesses that Margaery had exposed since she had assumed the throne, here.

Assumed the throne.

Margaery swallowed hard, and lifted her chin.

Her grandmother finally murmured, “It is good to see you again, Your Grace,” rather than calling her granddaughter, and Margaery forced back a flinch.

“I…” she took a deep breath, aware of the many eyes on them. A pair of them belonging to Sansa. “It is good to see you, as well. You will have your old accommodations in the Maidenvault, of course. I hope… I hope the journey was not too taxing.”

She had never seen her grandmother lean so heavily on her walking stick before, not even when she was trying to appear more feeble to the lords of the Reach in order to gain their sympathy.

Her grandmother harrumphed. “The Kingsroad is filthy, Granddaughter,” she said. “Your green cloaks should be watching it more carefully, lest bandits take up the road.”

Margaery cocked her head. Apparently her grandmother had no intention of making crawling back into her good graces easy.

“Were you accosted by bandits?” she asked, carefully.
Her grandmother made a noise of contempt. “It is only a matter of time,” she said, and Margaery bit back a sigh.

“My dear brother Garlan will look into it immediately, of course,” she promised, even if Garlan certainly had no time for such things, these days.

Olenna just eyed her, and then, as if she had given up on finding out anything else about Margaery’s weaknesses, or had decided her not worth her time already, something that made Margaery’s heart beat a little faster, Olenna’s eyes sought out Sansa, in the crowd.

The moment they had, Margaery remembered how to breathe again, even if she didn’t like the silent communication that seemed to run between the two women then, a communication she couldn’t understand.

She knew that she had been unfair to Sansa, lately. That they hadn’t been talking, as they should. But something about the sight of Olenna and Sansa speaking to each other in front of so many people without moving their lips made Margaery unaccountably annoyed.

She told herself it was not jealousy, because in this case, she wasn’t certain who she was jealous of.

She cleared her throat, and the herald stepped forward then, to announce their next arrival. Olenna let out a deep sigh, and gripped the arm of one of her guards, who led her into the crowd.

And thus began a good hour of Margaery being forced to greet each and everyone of the Reach lords who had arrived to mourn the death of her husband, a man none of them even knew and whom many had disliked her House for marrying, in the first place.

“Lord Ryon of House Allyrion, the delegate from Dorne,” the herald announced then, his voice reflecting some of his confusion, and Margaery sat up a little straighter in her chair as the Reach lords began to murmur amongst themselves.

Margaery resisted the urge to roll her eyes; she had known that it would be difficult to convince the Reach to play along with the people of Dorne when she needed it, but she didn’t need to remind them of the fleet sitting even now in their harbor. The last thing she needed was for some lord from Dorne stirring up trouble amongst a bunch of angry Reach lords.

Even if this had not been what she was expecting, from the letters she had been getting from Arianne.

“You are not Lady Tyene,” Margaery said, cocking her head at the man standing before him. “I understand that was the delegate that Her Highness was meant to send, for this funeral.”

A pause. The man shifted forward, his elaborate robes swirling around his feet. He looked like a man who was not used to politics that did not stop at the end of a spear, Margaery thought, appraising him. The robes, too, looked strange on him, as if they were meant to hide the body beneath.

A body made for war.

He cleared his throat, bowing lowly before her. Margaery raised an eyebrow.

She regretted that she knew so little about the lords of Dorne; it was a requirement, for the young lords and ladies of Westeros to learn the names of other Houses, generally, but the rivalry between the Reach and Dorne was such that Margaery knew little more than that about them, most times.

Her brother had loved Oberyn Martell, in his own way, but he had been one of the few in the Reach
to admit to such a thing.

She knew nothing about House Allyrion, save that they had once been a reigning power in Dorne, when House Martell had not.

She wondered what they thought of the new power structure, there. She knew that they were closely allied with House Yronwood, but that told her nothing, in all truth.

But she was not surprised that a daughter of Oberyn Martell had refused to come to the funeral of Joffrey Baratheon, but Lady Nym was not here, sent away for whatever reason despite the fleet she had left outside, but they needed to present a united front, today, more than ever, and she could not deny being more than a little annoyed by the snub.

“I am afraid that the delegate from Dorne was unable to attend on behalf of Princess Arianne, due to an unfortunate illness,” the man said. “She extends her deepest apologies. I am here in her place.”

Margaery hummed. “I see,” she said. Then, she shrugged. “Well, do you have anything else to say, or are you simply going to take up the rest of the day with Lady Tyene’s apologies? I confess, I’m not entirely sure why Dorne felt the need to send you at all, when Prince Trystane is here amongst us, if the Lady Tyene truly could not come.”

The man didn’t even have the grace to look offended by her words. Instead, he simply bowed to her again, and stepped back into the crowd.

Margaery noticed Trystane staring at him, rather wide eyed, another hint that this man wasn’t some ambassador as he claimed to be.

She bit back a sigh; wonderful. This was just what she needed, right now.

The Reach lords were still muttering angrily amongst each other, as Lord Ryon took his place in the crowd.

And then, Margaery forgot all about Lord Allyrion, as the herald announced their next visitor, and it was only then that Margaery realized someone - Sansa, or perhaps Baelish - must have arranged this on purpose, so that Cersei was one of the last to be welcomed into the Keep.

So that she was left waiting outside of it, surrounded by angry smallfolk and knowing damn well that she should have been one of the first to enter, as the mother of a King.

But then, her own son had exiled her.

It would mean nothing to Cersei, but Margaery found herself hoping that it would mean something to everyone else in the crowd.

“She court recognizes Cersei Lannister, Queen Mother,” the herald announced her, and Margaery took a deep breath as the woman walked into the room, because she knew that she could not afford to do so once the other woman had actually entered it.

Cersei walked forward surrounded by guards who Margaery knew had lost their swords the moment they had entered King’s Landing, lest they try to instigate something.

Yet another insult, but at least this one was not so petty.

Cersei looked…different, from the last time that Margaery had seen her, and she would know. That last time that she had seen Cersei was emblazoned in her mind now, Cersei’s indignant shouts and
furious expression as the guards all but dragged her out of the room, as Joffrey screamed at her that she was lucky he had not taken her head, for the treason she was accused of.

Older, somehow. As if she had aged a dozen years in far less than one.

For a moment, Margaery felt something like a spark of pity for her, knowing how she had cared about Joffrey. Knowing that she had been perhaps the only person who had actually cared about him, madman though he was.

And she had not been there, when he died.

Even with her child not yet out of her womb, Margaery could not imagine how that must feel, hateful as Cersei was.

“Your Grace,” Margaery greeted her, lifting her chin as she did so, summoning up the woman she had been, once. “I am happy to welcome you to King’s Landing again, and that you accepted this invitation.”

Cersei glowered at her.

That, at least, was familiar.

“It was not as if I could refuse,” Cersei all but hissed out, and the murmurings of the crowd started up again, Lord Ryon seemingly forgotten.

Margaery forced a smile. “I am glad to hear it. I know that things between our House has been...difficult, of late. I hope that between the two of us, while we are here, we might be able to resolve some of that conflict. Your coming here is a necessary first step towards that, and-”

“Make no mistake,” Cersei interrupted her then, teeth gritted. “I am here to lay my son to rest, and for nothing more than that. I was not there to be with my son, when he died.”

She looked Margaery up and down, and dear gods, she should have pretended to be sick, rather than meet with Cersei, no matter how suspicious it might look if she refused to see her. Should have pretended she blamed her for Joffrey’s death, anything to avoid facing her now.

“And I blame you for that,” Cersei continued, coldly. A long, calculated pause. “Your Grace.”

Margaery forced a thin smile. “It was not I who got myself banished from King’s Landing for turning on the King, Your Grace,” she reminded Cersei, coldly. “You are here because I felt pity for you, where my husband, may he rest in peace, did not.”

Cersei raised her hand as if to slap her, and Margaery flinched before the hand ever touched her cheek. It did not, course; one of her Kingsguard moved forward to intercept it with a furious look on his face, and Cersei looked almost surprised at the interruption before her eyes swept over the Kingsguard and she realized, perhaps for the first time since entering the Keep, how few of them were familiar to her.

Silence fell.

Cersei took a step back, properly chastened.

Margaery licked her lips. “Of course, I would never keep the mother of a child away from her son’s funeral,” she went on. “That would be...terribly cruel.”
Cersei eyed her, sharply.

“But I find it strange, Your Grace,” Margaery said, and told herself that talking to Cersei again like this was still terrifying, that it wasn’t more terrifying how easily her mind had slid back into the words she always used with Cersei, the way that she riled her, every time that they were forced to speak with each other.

She had barely been able to keep track of her own kingdom, days ago. And yet, talking to Cersei, a woman whose arrival she had been dreading ever since Cersei had accepted her invitation to come here, was disturbingly...easy.

She would not say enjoyable, she told herself.

She could not look into this woman’s eyes and think about the fact that she had bashed her son’s head in.

And had enjoyed that, too.

“That your son is not here to pay his respects to his brother,” Margaery went on, forcing such thoughts out of her mind as Cersei glared at her. “Did he not want to honor his brother, after so quickly claiming said brother’s throne?”

A gasp; Margaery was fairly certain that it belonged to Elinor, somewhere in the crowd.

“I don’t recognize you as the Regent, dear, when my son is the rightful King,” Cersei sneered. “I don’t suppose your father is coming for the funeral, after the lovely things that he had to say about my son when you supposedly died?”

Margaery’s smile froze on her face; Cersei raised an eyebrow. After all, that was interesting.

“No, he won’t be, though he sends his regrets for any such remarks,” a familiar, old voice said, and Cersei closed her eyes. “Clearly, he was...misled.”

Cersei breathed out slowly through her nose. “Lady Olenna.” She turned around, slowly. “I wasn’t aware that you were in King’s Landing. Or fit enough to make the journey here.”

Olenna Tyrell hobbled forward through the parting crowd, leaning heavily on her cane. “Lovely to see you again, dear Cersei,” she greeted. “I was beginning to wonder why things were so quiet here.”

Cersei glowered at her. “I haven’t found them to be quiet since my own departure here, let alone yours.”

Olenna’s answering smile was shimmering. Margaery shifted in her chair. “I understand there are other lords yet to be introduced to Her Grace,” she said. “Unless you intend to stand around trading barbs until suppertime. I must warn you, though, we of House Tyrell are rather hungry, after such a long journey.”

Margaery’s eyes narrowed, because her grandmother was clearly giving her an out, but she was not aware of yet more lords meant to be introduced to her, before the meal. They had practically exhausted her already, making her smile and wave at every member of House Tyrell and the Reach who had come to pay their respects to a husband she was pretending to mourn.

Cersei, too, looked suspicious, but as if she expected this new lord to be carrying a hatchet he might then attempt to bury in her skull.
Margaery supposed she could not blame the other woman for thinking such a thing. She knew that, were their situations reversed, Cersei might at least try to do the same thing.

Instead, she sighed, watching as Cersei fell back into the crowd, and leaned back in her chair, gesturing for the herald to get on with it. She didn’t have all day, after all.

“The Crown recognizes Lord Gendry of the House Baratheon, heir apparent of Storm’s End, and last legitimate son of his father, Robert Baratheon,” the herald announced then, and Margaery felt her whole body grow cold as she turned with wide eyes towards the door, as the doors to the Great Hall opened then and the young man she had once known as Arry stepped through them, dressed in Baratheon colors and looking rather uncomfortable in them.

But rather like he had always been meant for them, at the same time.

Beside Margaery, Cersei’s breath left her in a whoosh of air, and Margaery felt her own breath escaping her in the next moment.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“What the fuck is this?” Cersei gritted out, but Varys was stepping forward then, damn him, holding out a letter for her to read, which Cersei snatched out of his hands with fury.

Margaery glanced between him and Olenna, who looked unpleasantly unsurprised by all of this, and Margaery took a deep breath, lest she start shouting in front of all of these people.

She should have damn well known this was going to happen. She had invited her grandmother back for less than a day, and already she had done something like this.

“The Crown has legitimized Gendry of House Baratheon in light of the fact that there are no other heirs to Storm’s End loyal to the Crown, and it cannot be allowed to fall into the hands of traitors such as Stannis Baratheon,” he said, far too smoothly, as Margaery glared at him from Cersei’s side.

Clearly, this had all been planned, and without her permission, too.

She didn’t remember signing any documents which had legitimized the boy she had met aboard a pirate ship.

“The Crown” her arse, she thought, with annoyance, even if it made a sort of sense.

She remembered that she had sent Gendry to her grandmother, before all of this, and had foolishly never thought to check on him again. From how uncomfortable he looked now, she didn’t think this had been his idea, but clearly, he had moved up in the world, and she couldn’t help but be a little annoyed with him, for that.

The Crown had legitimized him, she remembered. The Crown had legitimized him as the last heir to Storm’s End not standing in open rebellion against the Crown.

Against her.

She swallowed hard.

And now, with a loophole like that, a loophole that other kings and queens had made use of in the past well enough, they could claim that Tommen had no real claim to Storm’s End, because he was
in open rebellion with the Crown, even if he wasn’t a bastard…

Gods, she knew exactly why they hadn’t told her about this ahead of time. It was a dire warning, a slap in the face much like the one Cersei had just wanted to give her, to Cersei, but it terrified Margaery, all the same.

Because if Tommen’s legitimacy as Lord of Storm’s End could be questioned, Cersei could so easily turn this around and question the legitimacy of the child in Margaery’s belly, even if the word ‘bastard’ was never mentioned.

“You would steal Storm’s End from my son and hand it over to a bastard?” Cersei hissed out, glaring down her nose at Gendry.

But Margaery wasn’t looking at her at all, now. Instead, she was looking fearfully in Sansa’s direction. Sansa, who did not look surprised by any of this.

Sansa, who had been taking over more and more of Margaery’s responsibilities ever since her husband’s death, since the announcement of her regency. Sansa, who had been signing documents in her name, documents thrown in her direction by Baelish, in all of his scheming.

She closed her eyes, wishing that she could feel surprised.

So. It had not just been a ploy of her mother’s.

And of course it could not be; Varys had said he had the official pardon of the Crown, after all, and there was only one person who could have given him that.

And she was now refusing to meet Margaery’s eyes.

Margaery took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

Well, it had already happened; there was no turning back at this point.

She saw that now; there would be no alliance, out of this funeral. There would be no negotiations.

She didn’t know if that was what Sansa and her mother had always intended; she remembered that Sansa, out of all of the members of her Small Council, had been the one to insist that they come to some sort of peace with Cersei, and she was ashamed to admit that she had not been paying enough attention to the other girl to tell if that had been genuine, or not.

She did not know if her grandmother and Sansa had insisted on Cersei coming here so that they could make this war seem more her fault than theirs, to every noble who was still on the fence about their options, these days.

She swallowed hard, and went for it, telling herself that Olenna and Sansa had given her no other choice, not really.

“It is a pity,” she said, as Cersei turned to face her, absolutely livid, now. “That your son could not be here to defend his rights to Storm’s End, and bend the knee to the Crown,” she said. “I suppose that his claim to a throne that does not yet belong to him means more to Prince Tommen than respecting his departed brother.”

For a moment, she thought that Cersei was going to lunge at her from across the room. Instead, Cersei swallowed hard, clasping her hands together in a way that Margaery had once mocked, and said primly, “My son’s actions were taken in light of what he believed to be his duty, nothing more.”
Ah, Margaery thought. An interesting approach to take, she supposed.

“Well,” she said, slowly, “Perhaps in the coming days, we might come to a different understanding.”

Let it not be said by anyone in the crowd that she was not trying, Margaery thought, even if a part of her knew that she was only baiting the other woman.

Her gaze sought out Kevan Lannister in the crowd, who already looked defeated.

Cersei lifted her chin. “As I said,” she said, coolly, “I am here to lay my son to rest.”

Margaery bit back a sigh. “Is that all of them?” she asked of the herald, conveying her annoyance that the list of courtiers did not match the one that he had originally given her, this morning, with Gendry here.

The herald gulped. “Yes, Your Grace.”

Margaery got to her feet, then. “Very well,” she said, loudly enough for the whole hall to hear. “My husband shall be laid to rest tomorrow morning, and I hope that you all can attend. I am...grateful, on his behalf, that so many of you have come to pay your respects.”

She thought Cersei might have been rolling her eyes, but couldn’t quite tell.

Either way, she ignored the other woman, gesturing to her guards that she was leaving, then.

The nobles all but scattered, the moment she left, none of them wanting to find themselves alone with Cersei, Margaery imagined.

But she had one person in mind, and once she walked out of the Great Hall, she found herself waiting for the other girl to make herself known, annoyance still bubbling up inside of her.

And then Sansa walked through the doors that Margaery had just left out of, and Margaery chewed on her lower lip for a moment, debating whether or not she really wanted to poke this beast when it had finally started to feel like things were going well between them, of late.

But she hadn’t known about their plan for Gendry, and while a part of her understood it, another part of her was furious, furious that the two of them didn’t seem to have even considered the other dangers that such a claim could make, rather than invoking Cersei’s anger.

“Sansa!” she snapped, when the other girl kept walking.

Finally, Sansa turned around to face her, and Margaery found herself placing her hands on her hips for a moment, terribly disturbed by the look on Sansa’s face.

As if she thought that Margaery was overreacting to all of this, before Margaery had even spoken.

Margaery took a careful breath, grabbing Sansa by the arm and all but dragging her the rest of the way back into her chambers in the Maidenvault. Margaery’s old chambers.

There was nothing about them anymore that reminded Margaery of when she had lived in them.

“Was that my grandmother's doing, or Baelish’s?” Margaery demanded, bursting into Sansa’s chambers.

She knew the answer already, of course, but she wanted to hear it from Sansa’s own lips.
Sansa blinked at her. “I…”

“What the fuck was that?” Margaery interrupted her, because she could tell that Sansa was about to give her an excuse rather than an answer, and dear gods, this was not something they could afford to play around with, not with Cersei Fucking Lannister back in King’s Landing.

Gods, she had told Sansa how terrified she was at the thought of Cersei’s return, and this was how Sansa reacted? How her own grandmother reacted, at a time when they could not afford to look weak?

Sansa blinked up at her. “What?” she asked, and dear gods, Margaery had never been more annoyed with Sansa than she was in this moment. Then, shamefaced, “It was a joint decision, Margaery. I didn’t tell you because…”

Because she thought Margaery had enough to deal with, these days.

That was the excuse that Sansa always used, these days, and Margaery only ever found out the important things when it was far too late, because of it.

“You just...You just announced to the entire court that Gendry was of House Baratheon was the last trueborn son of House Baratheon,” Margaery cried. “Why the fuck do you think I’m angry?’

Sansa closed her eyes. “Listen to me,” she said. “I...Your son is the King, Margaery.”

“The King?” Margaery repeated, laughing incredulously. “My son isn’t the King of anything. Cersei has made that damn clear, by refusing to bend the knee, by championing Tommen. The Martells haven’t even lived up to their end of the bargain. Their fleet is here, and every second it is I’m afraid they’re going to turn on us. Hells, my son isn’t even a son, yet. He is holding on by a thread, and he isn’t even born yet, and you just let the whole world know, yet again, that there is no reason to believe his father was even Robert Baratheon’s son!” She reached up, pushing the hair out of her eyes. “Godsdamnit, Sansa, he’s a bastard son of a bastard son! My son is not a king’s blood. He is the bastard son of a whore, and Cersei only needs one guess to wonder why we’re so damned defensive about Tommen.”

“No, Margaery, you don’t understand,” Sansa said, and her eyes were alight with...with something that Margaery hesitated to put a name to, and dear gods, how could she have been this stupid? How could she have done this to her?

“I had to do this. For us. For…” she reached out, placing a hand on Margaery’s stomach. “For this child.”

“You’ve killed me,” Margaery hissed out. Sansa flinched. “And this child. Dear gods, how can you not see it?”

Sansa shook her head, taking a step back from Margaery. “No,” she said. “No, you don’t understand. Margaery, this is good for us.”

“Good for us?” Margaery demanded, and fuck it, if her voice was shrill. If everyone in the vicinity could hear. They were all Tyrells, after all. “How?”

But Sansa looked disturbed, by her raised voice, and walked over to the door, latching it shut. She turned around then, hissing, “Yes, good for us. Good for taking away any claim that Tommen has to the throne. If he has not bent the knee to whom the rest of Westeros agrees is the natural heir, he has no right to it.”
Margaery felt her heart sink in her chest, as she realized then what Sansa was planning, what her grandmother was planning. “That will never work,” she whispered, but Sansa spoke above her. “The Westerlands will not agree to sit by and do nothing while Tommen gives up that claim. Cersei will never agree to that.”

“If this doesn’t work, and it will, we’re going to claim, through the whores of King’s landing, through all of Baelish’s and Varys’ spies, that Joffrey was the only trueborn son of Robert. That Cersei gave him an heir, and then turned to the comfort of her brother.”

Margaery sucked in a breath, shaking her head. “No one will believe that,” she said.

They all looked just the same, even if Myrcella and Tommen were nothing like their brother.

Sansa raised an eyebrow. “Do they have to? No one believed Joffrey was Robert’s son when Cersei put him on the throne, but they bowed to him, all the same.”

Margaery let out another ragged laugh. “There were plenty who didn’t.”

“And what if you have a girl?” Sansa asked, and Margaery flinched. “I know you don’t want to talk about that. But if you have a girl, Tommen is the natural heir to the throne. Cersei is more than prepared to make that claim, so long as there is breath in her body. So long as Tommen has one.”

“Myrcella…” Margaery closed her eyes. “Fuck. The Martells will see this as an act of war, Sansa. As a sign that we’ve dropped our alliance with them!”

Because Myrcella was their assurance that the Tyrells would not turn on them, and now, she was nothing more than a bastard wasted on a marriage to one of their princes.

Sansa shook her head. “No they won’t. Nym agreed to this.”

“Nym is not Arianne!” Margaery snapped at her, and Sansa fell silent.

Then, “If you have a girl, you won’t be able to claim the throne for her, either. The rest of Westeros is not Dorne. Tommen will be the natural heir, and everything we’ve done to get to this point will fuck us over. I am trying to protect us, and your child.”

“And Tommen?” Margaery rasped out. “If he’s a bastard, the logical choice would be to kill him so that he’s not a threat to us.” She felt sick at the thought. “Is that your next step, Sansa? To kill him the way we killed that serving boy, the way we killed all of those random beggars off the streets, pretending they were Sparrows?”

Sansa flinched. “I didn’t think…”


Sansa closed her eyes. “I...Tommen won’t be harmed. This is the only way I can see, to make sure that none of us are harmed. That Cersei can’t raise an army against us, without a way to make it happen.”

Margaery swallowed hard. “And what is that?” she asked, even as she placed a protective hand over her belly.

Sansa bit the inside of her cheek. “Tommen is...he’s on his way here, Margaery. If he’s here, and a bastard, he can’t harm us.”
Margaery licked her lips. “Were you going to tell me he was on his way?” she asked.

Sansa hesitated, and Margaery let out a long sigh.

“I know...I know I’ve not been myself, since…” she trailed off, looking away. “And I know I’ve given you plenty of reasons not to trust me, either. But I am still the Regent, and I’d appreciate not being left in the dark like my grandmother tried to do. I think we both know that I do better with more information, rather than less.”

Sansa sighed, actually looking apologetic, in a way that she hadn’t when she had apologized about the septa, and that was how Margaery knew to believe her. “I’m sorry.”

Margaery chewed on her lower lip. “And besides, do you think kidnapping Tommen and keeping him prisoner here is going to stop Cersei? She’s already crowned him king, and she’ll be able to scrape her way out of that situation. She’ll declare war, Sansa, officially. And she’s here, now. She won’t leave without him, once she realizes what we’ve done.”

Sansa shrugged. “We both know she would have declared war, anyway.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m sure we can win it!” Margaery cried out.

Gods, how could Sansa be so blase about all of this? Just thinking it made Margaery feel sick.

Sansa opened her eyes, then.

“I have something better than a larger army,” Sansa said, and Margaery scoffed, even as, inwardly, she wondered if Sansa had lost her damn mind.

“I have both Tommen and Shireen Baratheon, now.”

Margaery gaped at her.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think, now that everyone’s finally back together!
Shireen couldn’t remember the last time that she had been to King’s Landing. Certainly before her father had declared himself the rightful King of Westeros and they had stopped traveling there altogether.

They had been riding for days, days that had dragged on with only her Onion Knight to talk to; while the Tyrell guards who had met them on the Kingsroad did not stare at her in the unsettling way that Ramsay Bolton’s men had, they didn’t try to talk to her, either.

She thought, in fact, that they were going out of their way not to talk to her, for all that they kept her surrounded at all times, not letting her sleep in a tent by herself, either, as terrifying as it was to be watched while she slept.

Even Ramsay Bolton had afforded her that courtesy.

But the journey was long, and for all that Shireen was used to riding horses by now, she found that she did not particularly care for it, so many days in a row, with her knight forced to ride behind her, and surrounded by guards whom she knew to be disloyal to her father.

So it was almost a relief, to see the tall towers of King’s Landing branching out before them on the Kingsroad, after so many days’ travel of near silence, even if Shireen still had no idea what awaited her, within those walls. Had no idea why the Tyrells, who had first been sworn to her Uncle, the false King Renly, and then to her cousin, the false King Joffrey, should want her.

She had hoped...well, she had hoped that her father, whom she couldn’t really remember negotiating with anyone, in the past, had finally paid some ransom for her to be returned to him, when Ramsay had first told her that she would be leaving Winterfell.

She had not liked being his hostage. She did not know what the Tyrells would be like as her captors, but she did not like the idea of being theirs, either.

For all that Ramsay had told her she was going to the Tyrells, however, it was Baratheon colors, interspersed with the green of House Tyrell, which hung from the ramparts of King’s Landing, she noticed, the closer that they got to it.

“Do you know what she’s like?” Shireen whispered, glancing up at her dutiful Onion Knight. “The Regent, I mean.”

It seemed strange, to her, a pregnant woman ruling on the Iron Throne that her father so desperately wanted.

The Onion Knight grimaced, looking genuinely sad that he didn’t have a better answer for her, she thought. “I don’t, Princess,” he told her, and the words were almost gentle. “I’m afraid I’ve never met her.”

Shireen bit her lip; she’d feared that. She knew that the Regent had been her Uncle Renly’s wife, once, when he had named himself the False King, and her knight had not been with them, before that, or at least, not for long, if he had been.

But still, she was scared. She thought her knight knew that, from the way she kept feeling his gaze on her, where he sat behind her on the horse, worried and unable to do much about it, surrounded by so many guards.
Tyrell guards, wearing Tyrell green, which she knew only from her books, because it was not as if she had ever met one. She knew the stories, of how her father and her Uncle Renly had been held captive in Storm’s End by Reach soldiers, reduced to eating rats to stay alive during her Uncle Robert’s Rebellion, and she wondered if they were going to force such an existence upon her, now.

A part of her hoped that her knight would find a way to get them out of this before that happened, even if she knew how unlikely that was, when he was only one man, alone, and seemed just as nervous as she felt, though he was trying to hide it for her sake, she knew.

He had been like that in Winterfell, as well. Sitting beside her, looking nervous every time the door to the crypts opened, every time she whispered in the darkness with the Shadow, as if he thought someone was going to come along that he wouldn’t be able to protect her from.

They said the Regent had an army controlling King’s Landing, at the moment, and as much as she adored him, she knew that her knight would not be able to stand up against all of them any more than he had been able to stand up against the ragtag remains of the Bolton army that had retaken Winterfell the moment her father turned his back on it.

“Do you think she’s nice?” she asked, quietly, nervously, because she supposed that mattered, now, where it had never mattered before. Her father hadn’t been nice, when she had trapped Shireen’s father in Storm’s End and eaten feasts outside their home for weeks on end, but perhaps this false regent wasn’t like her father. “They say that she’s going to be a mother, to the bastard’s son.”

The Onion Knight made another unreadable face, and Shireen blinked up at him in confusion, even as she noticed the Tyrell guards around them shifting on their horses, looking suddenly very irritated but as if they weren’t certain what to do about it.

“What is it?” she asked.

Her knight sighed. “Where we’re going, it’s probably best that you get used to not thinking of him as a bastard, Princess. Or calling him that,” he warned her. “They won’t like it.”

He said it like he thought they might try to do something about that dislike, if she said it too many times, and Shireen felt her heart claw its way up her throat.

Shireen blinked at him. “But he is a bastard,” she protested, brows knitting.

Again, the soldiers looked annoyed.

She wasn’t trying to be contrary, which for a moment she feared he thought, she just...genuinely didn’t understand. Her father had told her, with her uncle Robert’s death, that she was now the only rightful princess of the Seven Kingdoms, and while she pitied Myrcella and Tommen for the fact that they were mere bastards, she had liked Edric Stone well enough, and he hadn’t seemed very sad about the fact that he was a bastard.

Hadn’t; he was dead now, she knew. Had been killed after her father had decided to send him to Winterfell with her, at her own insistence. Dead at Ramsay Bolton’s hands.

And now Ramsay Bolton, another bastard, was handing her over to this Queen Regent Margaery, who wasn’t really a queen, but who Shireen had to pretend to recognize as a queen, now.

It was all terribly confusing.

She noticed the Onion Knight looking at her in something like concern. “It’s like how Joffrey called himself a king even though he wasn’t,” he told her, in a whisper, as if he thought the guards around
them couldn’t hear. “You have to realize they see you that way, now.”

Shireen’s forehead wrinkled further. “But...I am the Princess,” she said, because she didn’t understand much about the war that her father was waging, that she was no longer certain he was winning, but she did know that.

He had sat her down and explained that to her, once, near the beginning of all of this, right after they had received the news that her uncle had died, and she had thought that she finally understood it, though apparently not.

She was the only true Princess left in the Seven Kingdoms, as his legitimate daughter, and all of the rest of these, her Uncle Robert’s children whom she had never really played with, as a child, and Renly, they were all false pretenders to a throne that belonged to her father, as her Uncle’s natural heir.

It hadn’t made a lot of sense to her, at the time, but she knew that her father was always right about these things.

And now, her Onion Knight was telling her that wasn’t true, anymore. That these people, the guards surrounding her as well as the ones in King’s Landing, all believed this false regent to be true, while she was not.

She was the pretender.

It was a strange new reality, for Shireen.

“I haven’t been to King’s Landing in such a long time,” Shireen said, quietly, as she stared up at the great spires of King’s Landing.

She hadn’t been allowed to go much of anywhere, when she was younger, because of her affliction, but she had still been to King’s Landing several times, had enjoyed it there, even though she didn’t spend much time out of her rooms when she was there. It was so warm, and pretty.

She wouldn’t say that she had missed it, during all of this time at war, but seeing it now made her think, just a bit, of how she had enjoyed it.

The Onion Knight leaned down beside her, and got several harsh looks from their guards - captors, Shireen reminded herself, no matter that they were much kinder than Ramsay Bolton’s guards had been, and she got the idea that they pitied her.

Her Knight held up his hands. “I just want to talk to her,” he said. “It will only take a minute.”

The soldiers - in their Tyrell green - glanced at one another, and then one of them, the one that Shireen thought was in charge of them, shrugged. “Just one moment,” he said, climbing down from his horse, and her Knight turned back to her.

Shireen swallowed hard.

They had been allowed to share a horse, though her Knight’s arms were bound, and Shireen hated seeing him like that, hated seeing that he was being treated badly by the people holding them, even if they weren’t treating her so badly.

She licked her lips.

“Whatever happens in there,” her Knight told her, “I promised your father that I would protect you,
and I will.”

Shireen forced herself to meet his eyes, twisting around in the saddle to meet them. “I know,” she whispered, and after a moment’s hesitation, her Knight smiled at her.

“Enough. Let’s get moving,” the soldier yelled, and they were moving again, their horse pulled along by two guards holding it between them.

Shireen grimaced as the sensation startled their horse and it started to move a little faster, as her knight wrapped an arm around her waist to keep her upright, as King’s Landing grew ever closer.

She hoped that the Tyrell regent was different from her father.

She knew that her father had hated that she knew that story, at all. She knew he wouldn’t want her to live it.

But she had to believe that if she did end up living it, her father would come back for her.

She swallowed hard.

He would come back for her.

He had to come back for her.

It was ironic, Margaery thought, that in killing her own husband, she had all but assured that he would have one of the most magnificent funerals any King of the Seven Kingdoms had ever received.

Anything less than that would only make Cersei suspicious, of course, and it was not as if the Tyrells had the excuse of not having enough money for it.

Even with the threat of war looming, if her husband’s funeral was less costly than his wedding had been, she knew that Cersei would try to use that against her, at some point.

And Margaery did not intend on giving Cersei Lannister any more help in this battle waging between them, be it of the mind or otherwise, than she already had.

So, while she had spent so much time recently trying to avoid her duties, Margaery spent the whole of the morning before the funeral putting the finishing touches on how her husband would be immortalized, making sure that every choice made was the most expensive it could be, citing that House Tyrell personally would be paying for it, now that her grandmother was here to give that reassurance.

Baelish had done a fairly good job with the preparations already, and Margaery supposed she owed him for that; it certainly looked like she had been the one to put such care into preparations, with the way he had done it. Just enough finery, a woman’s touch.

And yet, just now, she found even that suspicious, for all that he had helped her cover up this murder. She knew, after all, that he had only done it for Sansa’s sake.

But damned, if the brothel owner didn’t know finery well enough.

Her husband was to be buried in robes made of spun gold, with a beautiful new crown made of golden stags, with no hint that he was anything less than Baratheon and Lannister both, about him.
And the procession that was to lead his body through the streets to the Sept, now that it had been carefully prepared, was to be surrounded by Tyrell guards, lest any member of the smallfolk decide to incite another riot in his death, not that Margaery might blame them for it.

It was a perfectly understandable reaction, after all, where her husband was concerned.

But it couldn’t be allowed to happen. Not while Cersei was here.

She got to her feet, standing from the table where she’d been at work for some hours now, making sure that every detail was finalized, and smoothed down her gown, a thing made of midnight black with long sleeves that covered her burns, and a high neck that nearly made her forget how short her hair had gotten, in the past year.

Green lace covered her breasts, the closest thing to armor that she could have, with Cersei here, knowing the other woman would know where such a look had come from, as badly as Margaery yearned for it.

It had taken most of the morning to deal with some of these issues - for all that Baelish was a man of taste, some of the things he had called for had been suspiciously extravagant - and she had dressed for the funeral, first, as uncomfortable as the gown she wore was, after several hours in it.

And she had been extremely annoyed when she noticed that he’d ordered Sparrows to be released when her husband was placed in his tomb, alongside Elia Martell and dozens of Targaryens.

She’d make him pay for that, eventually. Not today, though.

The servants kept following her even as she walked out to find Sansa, though, and to let her know it was time.

While they walked, Margaery supposed there was more she could come up with.

“The feast needs to have more food and drink than we can make do with,” Margaery told the servants. “Of course, the mood must still be somber. Meat and wine. Dornish Red, of course.”

Gods forbid Cersei accused her of celebrating her husband’s death, rather than mourning it.

“Ah, but Your Grace…There is barely enough Dornish Red for that,” one of them said, and Margaery paused in her walking, turning to face the man.

“Come again?”

The servant gulped. “There have been no more shipments of Dornish Red for a fortnight, Your Grace…” he began again, but Margaery was already stomping off, her servants following after her.

She tried to hide some of the worry she felt, but already, Margaery could feel her heart pounding.

The Dornish had sent the wrong emissary for the funeral, and now she learned, far later than she should have, that they were no longer sending their wine, either.

Something was wrong with the alliance, if, indeed, there even still was one.

“Your Grace?” her servants called after her, sounding rather desperate, and Margaery reached up a hand to run it through her short hair before nodding, forcing calm.

“Right. Then find as much mead as you can. Bribe the lower merchants, if you have to. Something strong enough that our lords and ladies won’t realize how strong it is. Understood?”
The man hesitated for a moment, and then nodded.

Margaery kept walking. “And I want anything anyone drinks or eats tasted,” she told them. “Myself, the Lady Sansa, Lady Olenna. See to it.”

“Your Grace,” she heard Megga call out, even as the woman started walking down the hall to meet her. Margaery resisted the urge to roll her eyes; she was hardly in the mood for another lecture from Megga, today.

Today, of all days.

And she could see from the look on Megga’s face that the other girl was getting ready for a lecture.

“Your Grace, I think that Cersei knows something,” Megga said, tightly. “She…” A pause. “She’s been acting strangely. And she’s keeping a close eye on Rosamund.”

“I can’t talk right now, Megga,” Margaery told her, blithely, even as those words made her wince. Dear gods, just when everything was starting to feel like it was coming back together, something new always happened. Something like this.

First the Dornish, and now Cersei.

Megga made a face. “Shireen Baratheon is in the throne room, Your Grace.”

Margaery stared. “Why didn’t you lead with that?” she demanded, irritation leaking into her voice.

“Princess Shireen,” Margaery greeted, forcing a welcoming smile and standing to her feet from where she sat on the Iron Throne as the Princess was led into the Great Hall, surrounded by Tyrells and a single knight whom Margaery was, frankly, surprised was still alive, because she thought that the little girl must be very frightened, to be standing before so many of her father’s enemies.

“Welcome to King’s Landing.”

Shireen looked like she was resisting the sudden urge to hug herself. Margaery supposed this must be very frightening for her, indeed, to be standing here in front of all of her father’s enemies, almost totally alone save for an old man who had refused to leave her side.

She wasn’t much different in age from Tommen, from what Margaery remembered, and a part of her felt a stab of pity for the little girl.

Their world was terribly cruel to little girls.

Shireen blinked up at her, doe eyed and soft, and Margaery didn’t pay much attention to the affliction that covered half of her face in stone, because she knew that her own body was scarred, and that at this age, it didn’t matter, for Shireen.

She had never seen greyscale, before.

Children could be cruel, and she remembered a cousin, the same one who she had told Sansa had porridge face, telling her that if she ever did anything bad as a child, the gods would smite her with greyscale, leading to a long and painful death.

Margaery licked her lips.

She wondered if Shireen Baratheon was lonely, and that was why her knight had survived this long.
Sheer force of will, in not wanting to leave her in a place where she was entirely alone.

As Shireen walked forward to greet her, Margaery caught the look on Cersei’s face, out of the corner of her eye, and went suddenly still. It seemed to spook Shireen, who halted where she stood, not daring to come any closer as a little of the real Margaery flashed across her face, and Shireen recognized it.

Margaery swallowed hard.

Cersei ground her teeth together, meeting Margaery’s eyes, and Margaery knew, then. She didn’t know how she knew; she remembered that Sansa had told her that there had been other...bids, for the girl, and a part of Margaery had wondered if Sansa meant her own mother, Selyse, but it made sense, now.

Of course Cersei had wanted her. She may be impulsive, and a bit mad, though not in the same way that her son was, but she wasn’t a fool. She would have known, as Margaery did, as Sansa had, what a prize Shireen Baratheon was.

Stannis Baratheon was the only person standing between Margaery, Cersei, and the Iron Throne, these days. Or, well, the only one who mattered, especially if Cersei and Margaery did manage to come to some sort of accord, in the coming days.

Oh, who was she kidding, Margaery thought.

The only accord the two of them could ever come to was a knife in the other’s throat.

“I know that you must have had a very frightening journey, to come here, but you’re here now, and you have my word that you shall not be harmed, here,” Margaery went on, meeting the girl’s gaze as she reached out and gave her hands a gentle squeeze.

There was something sharp in those eyes, despite the fright that Margaery also saw there. Margaery found that almost reassuring; it meant that whatever else the Bolton bastard was, he had not broken the little girl, yet.

And she knew that she wasn’t supposed to be thinking such things, that Shireen Baratheon was the daughter of perhaps her greatest enemy, if Cersei Lannister was not that, but she found it reassuring, all the same.

She was not sure what she would have been able to do with a broken princess.

Shireen squinted at her, as if she was not sure what at all to make of her, and Margaery forced herself to smile gently.

“Now,” Margaery said, “We’ve had nice rooms prepared for you, near my own, and I thought perhaps you would like to get settled for a little while, before the funeral. I know I am happy that you made it in time for the funeral, as well.”

Shireen kept squinting at her, intelligent enough to know that Margaery probably didn’t care about her at all, but looking like she didn’t know whether she should call her out on it, or not.

Brave little thing, Margaery thought, idly, as another pang of guilt filled her.

She had not wanted it to be like this. Had not wanted to become Queen merely because she was keeping Trystane, Shireen, and Tommen, apparently, if Lady Nym succeeded in her mission, as her captives, forcing the other kingdoms to bend the knee or see children suffer.
She understood the political advantage in having Shireen as a captive, here, but Margaery had not wanted to become a Queen merely because she kept children captive in fright, terrified of the day when Margaery might decide they were no longer useful, as Sansa had been for years under Joffrey’s reign.

She had not wanted to be that sort of queen.

She had not wanted to be the sort of queen who was remembered for imprisoning her rivals’ children and slaughtering a sept of people and killing her husband, but here they were.

She glanced once more at Cersei, and wondered what sort of Queen Cersei wished she could be, or whether she had ever given that any thought.

She got the feeling that Cersei would not necessarily mind, if she was never loved by her people, so long as she was able to rule them.

But things did not have to be bad for Shireen, she told herself, like they had been for Sansa.

She only hoped that Shireen would realize that, as well.

Shireen stared up at her silently, and then, ever so slowly, dipped into a small curtsey before the woman who now held her prisoner.

The motion was so unexpected that Margaery startled, staring down at this little girl who had already so easily come to understand her situation, and felt another pang of guilt.

Then, she cleared her throat, turning to the crowd so that she didn’t have to look down at Shireen and wonder if, one day, her child would be forced to bow and scrape before their captor who sat on the Iron Throne because Margaery had wanted it so badly.

She didn’t like that thought.

“In fact, I invite you all to attend to my husband’s funeral, today,” she said, loudly enough that the whole Hall could hear now, though she knew damn well they’d been hanging on her every word, before. “After the funeral, which will take place at the Sept, we shall have a feast commemorating my husband’s life, may he rest in peace, as he would have wanted.”

Cersei, once again, was grinding her teeth together.

Margaery nodded, slightly, as she reached down and placed her hand on her stomach, watched Cersei’s eyes track the motion. “I am grateful to see so many putting aside their differences to honor my husband’s life.”

The room was suddenly clapping and bowing before her, and Margaery pretended that the sensation meant nothing.

And then she was dismissing them, because she was keeping track of time, after all, and she wanted the funeral to take place as early in the day as possible, lest the people of King’s Landing suddenly decide that they had no food in their bellies and wanted to revolt the moment they saw her husband’s corpse, a reminder of all of their suffering so far.

She walked out into the hall, surrounded by her Kingsguard and with most of her ladies seeming to have scattered, though Margaery wondered if that had something to do with the presence of Olenna, so nearby. She didn’t give it much thought, however.
She found that she didn’t have the time.

Sansa joined her out in the hall not long after, and Margaery lifted her chin and tried not to think about all of the ways that Sansa had been trying to protect her while also keeping secrets from her, lately. Wondered how much of that had been Sansa, and how much of it had been Olenna.

Nobles milled out after them, eager to pay their respects to a man that they had never respected in life, because Margaery and Olenna had their eyes on all of them.

And, she supposed, because now Sansa did, as well.

“Cersei looked rather unpleasantly surprised to see Shireen here,” Margaery said out of the corner of her mouth, as the other woman came to a stop alongside her in the hallway.

Sansa hummed. “As I understand it, she also made a bid for the Princess,” she said, quietly, so that the nobles trailing past them could not overhear the words. “Failed, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Margaery echoed, as her grandmother came to a sudden stop in front of the two of them, glancing between them sharply.

Then, “We are about to attend your husband’s funeral, my dear,” she said, reaching out and grabbing Margaery’s hands in a vice-like grip. “Should you not be at the beginning of this circus, rather than skulking around at the end of it?”

Margaery resisted the sudden urge to grind her teeth together. “What did you promise the Boltons, to get them to hand over Shireen? Besides, of course, House Frey?”

Sansa swallowed hard, glancing with wide eyes between Olenna and Margaery, mouth parting before she shut it, abruptly, remembering once again that they were being watched.

Olenna lifted her chin. “It was a fair enough price,” she said.

Margaery shook her head. “Trust a rabid dog, and he’ll only learn that he can bite you,” she muttered, and Olenna harrumphed.

Sansa cleared her throat as one of the nobles came up to bow before Margaery, and Margaery forced a smile towards the man. And then he was moving away, and her smile fell from her face, so easily.

“I suppose some good has come of this, then,” Margaery muttered, reaching up to rub at her forehead. “Are we going to name her Lady of Storm’s End now, then, or just leave that to...Gendry?”

Sansa, where she stood beside Olenna, flinched a little.

Olenna glanced between the two of them, looking supremely annoyed. “And here I would have thought that you appreciated my finding a way to...spare your friend,” she said, very coldly. “I understand that loss of life is rather important to you, these days.”

This time, it was Margaery who looked away.

“Margaery...” Sansa began, and then bit her lip. “I wanted to tell you. About Gendry, and Shireen and Tommen. I just...wasn’t sure how you would react, if you knew ahead of time.”

No, she had known how Margaery would react, Margaery thought, the retort dying on her lips before she ever breathed life into it. She had known that Margaery wouldn’t like it, that she would
see it as a threat to her own son, and so she hadn’t told her, on purpose, in order to avoid that.

She had done enough things that she felt guilty for, of late, and Margaery hated that she had done this, as well.

But now wasn’t the time.

“We can talk about all of this after the funeral,” Olenna interrupted the two of them, frowning. “Though I would have hoped that the two of you could have managed to talk about it for a little bit, before that.”

She looked between the two of them then, calmly assessing. Then, she let out a long sigh.

“There will be guards surrounding us at all times,” she promised. “There shall be no issues, today. And with Cersei there, it is even more important that the both of you do not show weakness. So stop looking at each other like that.”

Sansa flinched, opened her mouth to say something, and Margaery did as well, perhaps only because Sansa had opened hers.

“Very well,” Olenna said, interrupting the both of them. “If apparently this cannot wait, I suppose we’re just going to have to have this conversation here.”

Margaery flinched, recognizing that tone well enough from her childhood.

Sansa, bless her, did not.

“I have given you two the time that you wanted,” Olenna said, into the silence that followed, and Margaery bit the inside of her cheek to keep from retorting that Olenna had not made much of a choice in that, because it was becoming more and more clear to Margaery, these days, that Margaery had never had control of the situation to begin with.

If she had wanted to, Olenna could have remained behind in King’s Landing then, and there would not have been much that Margaery would have been able to do about it.

“I have let you run amok here,” Olenna continued, gaze flinty as she glanced between the two of them. “For the past several months, for all of the good it did, and here we are. In those past few months, you’ve nearly confessed all of your crimes to a septa, gotten yourselves f**ked by Baelish, and handed the keys to the Kingdom over to Cersei. You have accomplished very little in that time, besides destroying the faith placed in you by most of the Seven Kingdoms, and you,” her gaze turned to Margaery, “especially, by your own family.”

Margaery gritted her teeth together.

“You are lucky to still be hanging onto the Throne by a thread,” Olenna continued, harshly, “but with Cersei here, gods know how long that will last. Sansa has done a remarkable job of cleaning up your messes since you’ve taken the throne, but she is only one girl, and an inexperienced one, at that.” Her gaze turned to Sansa, then. “Letting you both get under the thumb of Petyr Fucking Baelish was a foolish decision, but here we are.”

Sansa flinched.

Olenna pretended not to notice, or just simply didn’t care, Margaery imagined. “So. I am here now, and you’re going to do as you’re told, whatever might be going on between the two of you at the moment. I don’t care why you’re fighting, I don’t care what you both think is best for the realm at the
moment, when you have both squandered that opportunity. Is that understood?"

Margaery and Sansa exchanged glances.

Margaery hated that she felt something like a rivalry for the girl she had fallen in love with while married to the man she was burying, today.

It was never supposed to be like this, she thought, and thought perhaps Sansa saw something of those thoughts in her eyes, if the look she gave her was any indication.

“I said,” Olenna repeated, “Is that understood?”

After a moment’s hesitation, both girls nodded.

Olenna hummed. “Good.”

The funeral for her son had been extravagant; whatever she thought of the Highgarden Whore, Cersei supposed, the girl certainly knew how to plan an event.

And that only made her think about why Margaery Tyrell, who had only ever loved her son for show to begin with, might put on such an extravagant show in his death, as well.

She had been the picture of a mourning wife, silent and cold as marble, as she walked along right behind her husband’s coffin, being carried by a litter, walked along beside Cersei, who had wanted nothing more than to push her down in front of it, or in front of the silent crowd.

Silent, Cersei was sure, because they knew that they couldn’t attack that litter, but dearly wanted to.

But they had made it to the Sept without any incident, neither Margaery or Cersei speaking two words to each other as they walked along, because there was no reason for them to do so, with so many eyes upon them. Cersei had been glad of that; for just a few moments, she had wanted to forget how much she hated the little whore so that she could mourn her son in peace.

Because her son was dead, and she hadn’t been able to properly mourn him, not really. Not when she had not been able to see his body, back in Casterly Rock, not when she had to focus on protecting the children she had left, instead.

And she was not about to let Margaery Tyrell get in the way of her finally being able to mourn him, now.

So they walked in silence, all of the way to the Sept, listened to this new High Septon who, rumor had it, Baelish had appointed, jape of all japes, give a halfhearted and yet somehow passionate speech about the young being taken from this earth far too early, about what a great king Joffrey had been, despite the tumultuous reign he had led.

Cersei had closed her eyes and pretended that she was listening to someone who did not likely loathe her son speak, and for a moment, everything had been all right.

Her son was being buried in the same building where he had slaughtered hundreds, they said.

Cersei had not been there for that, either. Had not been allowed to be, and much as she wanted to forget her anger at the moment and grieve her son in peace, she found that she couldn’t, not in this building, not with Margaery Tyrell standing beside her, not even pretending to have the decency to shed a few tears over her dead husband, Cersei’s son.
Simply standing there, stone faced, as she stared down at the covered coffin that Joffrey was still inside.

That wasn’t normal, Cersei realized suddenly, and wondered if it was the shock which had made her take so long to realize that.

Usually, his body would be on display for all of them to see, and maybe Margaery had thought that the smallfolk might try to cite something, if they saw a physical body, but it was surrounded by guards, now.

And she knew that he had been attacked, they said, by those fanatics, who had beaten him to death, so of course his body would not look good, but she thought that she had a right to see what her son looked like in death, either way.

And Margaery was keeping his body covered.

Cersei gritted her teeth, as she walked back from the halls of the Sept now that the funeral was done, now that she had been given so many condolences by Tyrell ladies and lords who wanted to know if they might name their sons after her monster of one, one day in the future, who told her they cared about her son when she knew that they were all secretly relieved he was dead.

She nodded and forced a smile through all of it, however, because the funeral was over now, extravagant as it was, and it would be noticed if she was not at the funeral feast, later.

But she had every intention of seeing her son’s body, now that he was laid to rest in his tomb beneath the Sept. She had that right, as his mother, even if he had not been seen by anyone else.

And it was not, it turned out, particularly hard to find him.

The room he had been laid to rest in was surrounded by Tyrell guards, and she told herself that they were only guarding the room because Margaery was worried that the smallfolk might try to get in and vandalize it, now that the funeral was over, but a small part of her wondered if that wasn’t the case, at all.

The guards did not move aside as she walked up to them, as she paused before the door they guarded, waiting expectantly.

“Let me pass,” Cersei hissed out, and the guards flinched for a moment, before the one on the left lifted his chin.

“I am afraid that the Regent has declared that no one be allowed to see the King, may he rest in peace, before he is entombed, Your Grace,” he said, though he at least had the decency to look ashamed over it, over his refusing to let a mother see her own child’s long dead corpse.

Cersei gritted her teeth. “Excuse me?” she hissed out, ire rising at his words.

He wasn’t looking at her at all, now. “Forgive me, Your Grace.” He actually looked guilty, the fucker. “You may speak with the Queen Regent, Your Grace, and she may give me different orders. But I have mine, now.”
Cersei leaned forward, forcing him to meet her gaze, then. She wasn’t going to let this guard run away from this, not when the Regent was not even here, and he did not have the compassion to let her see her son.

She turned to the other guard. “And you will do nothing, either?”

He looked even more uncomfortable than the first guard, but he, too, did not try to move out of her way. Cersei ground her teeth together until she could feel a migraine coming on.

“One day,” she hissed out, voice cold as ice, “I will make you pay for this. Personally.”

The guard gulped; she had no doubt that he believed her, but that was a cold comfort to the knowledge that she was still not going to be allowed to see her son’s body.

(page break)

“You were not at the funeral, Lord Varys,” Baelish said, as he stepped into the room.

The funeral was over now, of course, but the majority of the nobles had not returned from the Sept, all trying to get in their moment with the new Regent.

Varys and Baelish were some of the few who did not need to bother with such frivolous acts these days, it seemed.

Varys turned, squinting at him. “Won’t it look strange for the man who has so insinuated himself at the very base of the throne to not be there, either? Perhaps far stranger than it is for me to be so absent.”

Baelish raised a brow at him. “I have not insinuated myself, as you claim,” he muttered. “I have only ever sought to do exactly as the Regent asks of me, to prove my worth to the Crown.”

“Oh?” Varys asked. “And is that what you were doing when you had your whores go about in the city, blaming the pestilence on our good queen and stirring up the mob?”

Baelish’s face darkened. “I have always considered us friends, Varys,” he said, and ignored Varys’ answering snort. “I have done more for this new Regent than you seem to have, Lord Varys. Especially in these past few months. Forgive me, but you’ve seemed almost...idle, in all of that time. Uncaring anymore than Grandmaester Pycelle.”

Varys harrumphed. “The Grandmaester chose his side some time ago, from what I understand.”

Baelish sent him a nasty smile. “A turncoat, I know. I’m sure that our Lady Cersei shall have some way of...dealing with that, in time.”

Silence fell between them, the both of them staring up at the Iron Throne, sitting empty before them.

“You know, Lord Baelish,” Varys said, far too calmly, as the silence grew too long, “For a man who plays this game so carefully, you seem to have lost sight of the bigger picture. Unless, of course, this is all merely your audition.”

“Audition?” Baelish asked, cocking his head to turn and stare at Varys, rather than at the throne, now. Good. I’m not sure what you mean.”

Varys snorted. “Oh, I think you do.” He pressed his lips together. “You forget that I valued the girl, Ros, far more than you did. She told me of the sick things you ask your girls to do their first night, to
make sure that they never cause trouble with clients down the road. To each other, no less.”

Baelish hummed. “It seems to me that the Regent might have avoided some heartbreak herself, if she’d known what she was getting into.”

Varys grimaced. “Yes. She does seem...worryingly ill suited to the part, these days. Though I still hold out hope.”

“Perhaps it is you who have lost sight of the bigger picture then, old friend,” Baelish said, with a cold smile. “For I begin to wonder if perhaps you have had the thought that there aren’t others...better suited to this role, who have yet to play the part.”

Varys eyed him as he walked out of the room. “Lord Baelish,” he said.

Baelish’s answering smile was nasty. “Tell me, Lord Varys,” he called after him, and Varys came to a sudden halt, then. “Do you think, when he arrives, that he’ll make you a real lord? I suppose it won’t make up for your lack of a cock, but at least you’ll have that cold comfort.”

Varys went very still, where he stood in the doorway. Finally, he turned around. “And here I thought you were serving our Regent,” he said, slowly, something like horror splashing across his face.

Baelish’s smile thinned. “I have never served anyone save myself, Lord Varys,” he said, pointedly. “I would have thought that you, of all people, would know that about me, by now. But I would warn you...I don’t think that this lordling will...be as profitable as perhaps you think.”

Varys’ eyes were hard. “And I would warn you, my lord,” he said, voice cool, “That not everything can turn a profit just because you will it. There are some who value honor more than a gold coin.”

Baelish raised a brow. “I have yet to meet one, my friend.”

Varys looked him up and down, and then said, “This game you’re playing, with the Regent and Sansa Stark...Perhaps it won’t end the way that you hope it will, either.”

Dear gods, things were worse here than Olenna had thought, she realized, as she sat down hard on her bed and watched her servants mill about her, preparing to get her ready for the funeral feast, which was not for several hours yet.

And that gave Olenna a little bit of time to think, something that she apparently rather desperately needed.

The funeral itself had been fine; Margaery and Sansa had managed to pull themselves together for long enough to not tip off Cersei that something was wrong, thank the gods, but that still left Olenna needing to find the most expedient way of cleaning up their messes.

The messes that she felt partially at fault for, having left them to them, these past several months.

It was not as if that wasn’t what Margaery had wanted; she had made that painfully clear when she had banished Olenna from King’s Landing in almost the same way that Cersei had been, with so little fanfare and with a sneer.

Dear gods, things used to be so different between them. Her granddaughter used to listen to her, used to be so loving.

Now, she hardly recognized the girl, and that was not only because since she had become Queen
Regent, she was constantly reacting, rather than acting on her own. Not only because she now seemed like a shell of her former self.

And Olenna, of course, had never experienced the thing that Margaery had suffered to come to this point in her life, not really, and perhaps that meant she could never understand.

But at the moment, she didn’t have the time to understand. She only had time to clean up Margaery’s mess and make sure she never made the same mistakes again, before Cersei did something like declare war on them.

There was a knock at the door, then, and Olenna bit back a sigh.

She knew who it would be, who it had to be, just now, and still, she found herself...oddly disappointed.

Men.

Her serving girl glanced back at her, got a nod before moving to open the door.

“Lady Olenna,” Baelish said, bowing slightly.

She sneered at him, sitting up on her bed. “I am old and sickly, Lord Baelish, or so my maesters say, and I certainly have enough of them, these days. I don’t have time to pretend that we are friends. Stirring the pot already, when Joffrey is barely in the ground? Hm. I expected more from you. What the fuck do you want?”

Her servants, without much more fanfare than that, excused themselves.

Baelish grimaced as he watched the door shut behind them all. “The King, may he rest in peace, has been dead for several months now, my lady,” he pointed out. “Just because he is being buried today…”

Olenna sniffed. “I think that there is only one person annoyed by how long it has been since his body was respected,” she said. “And she is perhaps fortunate that there was a funeral at all, I hear.”

Baelish grimaced. “Yes,” he said. “It is sad, isn’t it, how many families have been split apart in recent years, due to these wars, isn’t it?”

From any other person, they might have sounded like condolences.

Olenna thought they sounded like a threat. Her eyes narrowed.

“As I said,” she sneered out, “You have hardly been a true friend to me, in recent months, so what the fuck are you meddling in, today?”

Baelish gave her a long, assessing look. He would have to be a fool to have not guessed that she and Varys were allies these days, or, at the very least...mutually using one another. She had expected this visit to happen, but perhaps not so quickly.

It made him look desperate, something she would have thought Petyr Baelish would give anything to avoid.

But then again, she supposed, he had to know the position he was in, these days. Had to know that just now, Olenna was the reason that Margaery was on the Iron Throne, even if he wanted to take credit for it. She was the one providing the armies, the gold.
Baelish was just keeping his mouth shut, and he could do that easily enough when he was dead, as well.

“May I sit?” he asked her, gesturing to the sofa in front of her bed.

Olenna did not like that he was in her bedchambers at all.

She shrugged, and watched him take a seat, as if he were a much older man than she knew him to be.

She wondered what sort of death he wouldn’t be expecting.

He fidgeted, and she knew him as a man who did not fidget. He was putting this on for her benefit, she knew, and she knew just as well that whatever it was he was about to say, she was not going to like it.

Not at all.

“It is just...there is something that I think you should know, Your Grace. About the Martells, and about the death of your favorite grandson, Willas Tyrell.”

That caught her attention, and her head jerked up, her eyes cold. “You know, when you first approached me about poisoning my granddaughter’s future husband, I thought about it. Truly considered it, I’ll have you know. It seemed a stroke of luck that two of us might benefit from the chaos that death would cause. But then I realized. You were the one who approached my granddaughter, and then my son, about her marrying the boy in the first place, and for you to suggest such a thing afterwards...well, I have never enjoyed being anyone’s puppet, my lord. And I certainly won’t become such now.”

Baelish shook his head. “You misunderstand, my lady. I serve the Regent now...”

“You had better have a damn good reason for invoking my grandson’s name, in the hopes that you might turn me against an ally, Baelish,” Olenna said, pulling out her handkerchief to cough into it. “For something better than your chaos, surely.”

He grimaced. “I’m afraid I do, my lady.”

The funeral feast had been planned meticulously, before they were even certain that Cersei would be attending it, from the food that would be there to the seating arrangement. Cersei was sitting very close to Margaery, and Sansa hated it.

Hated that Cersei, as one of those most aggrieved by Joffrey’s death, was allowed to sit beside Margaery, who was also meant to be aggrieved by it, and that Sansa could not sit between them, as a buffer between the two of them, lest something happen.

For she knew that they had been lucky, so far.

Gods, she just knew something was going to happen.

She grimaced, taking another sip of the bitter wine in her glass, watered down because they did not have enough Dornish Red to pass the night, and later they would be switching to horse swill. It was surprisingly good, but then, she did not enjoy drinking, overmuch.

She watched Cersei lean over and say something to Margaery, watched Margaery pass her a piece of
bread, and grimaced, hating how far away she was from them, that she could not hear whatever it was they were saying.

Instead, she was relegated to this seat, a full table away, beside Trystane, another reminder of how badly things were going lately, another reminder of her guilt, for keeping him a prisoner here, just like she had been kept as a prisoner for so long.

She had been trying not to look at him, as they began their meal, but she knew that she was not going to be able to avoid speaking to him forever, sitting beside him.

It was at moments like these that she almost missed her husband, sitting beside her. At least if Tyrion were here, some antic or comment of his would have been able to distract her from that sick feeling twisting in her stomach, reminding her that anything could go wrong at any moment.

But he wasn’t here, and she was left to sit beside Trystane, because she had helped to frame him for Joffrey’s murder.

She grimaced at the thought, and took another sip of her watered down, bitter wine on an empty stomach.

And of course, that was the moment when Trystane decided that they were going to have to talk.

“Have you happened to hear from my sister yet, my lady?” He asked her, and he sounded terribly hesitant as he did so.

Sansa felt a stab of pity for him, even as she set down her wine glass. She remembered that he, too, had been kept in the Black Cells, for a little while after Joffrey’s death. She hadn’t wanted to order that, hadn’t liked that Baelish had done so, but understood why it would be necessary, why Cersei might be suspicious if they didn’t look at everyone.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and found that she honestly meant it. “I haven’t heard anything from her, but you can rest assured that the Crown is going to get to the bottom of this. Communication is...vital, in alliances. You will speak with her soon.”

Trystane’s gaze swept, almost unbidden, to the corner of the room, where the Dornish emissary who wasn’t Tyene Sand was standing, and Sansa bit back a grimace as she had the same thought that he inevitably was, that there must be some reason that Arianne, who had up until now been so very cooperative, might have changed her mind about communicating with them, just as she had changed her mind about the emissary she had sent.

But that was a problem that didn’t exist today, and Sansa wasn’t about to invent one, not when she had damned enough things to worry about, just now.

Chief amongst them Cersei, where she sat at the head of the room with so many eyes on her, and so close to a gooddaughter whom she hated.

It was only because she was keeping such a close eye on the woman that Sansa noticed the way that Rosamund and Cersei held eye contact for several long moments, before Rosamund’s eyes flitted to her.

And, predictably, so did Cersei’s.

Sansa closed her own, and took another sip of her wine. Beside her, Trystane was saying something, but Sansa’s ears were already ringing, and she took another sip of her wine in an attempt to center herself.
Perhaps it wasn’t as watered down as she thought, Sansa thought, as she set it down and pushed it away from her, reminding herself that drinking on an empty stomach wasn’t a good idea. She wasn’t her husband, after all; she couldn’t pull off such a thing.

She took a bite of the bread on her plate, and found that it tasted more bitter than her wine.

Sansa sighed, pushing it away from her in disgust, not bothering to disguise the way that she was staring over at Margaery, for all that Olenna was giving her a rather harsh flare for it.

She knew she was being obvious, but that was the problem; these days, Margaery could be fairly obvious, as well.

She didn’t want her giving anything away to Cersei without Sansa at least knowing about it.

And it was killing her, to be so far away from the both of them now, not able to reach out and take a handle of the situation, if she had to.

Without thinking about it, Sansa reached for her wine glass again. Trystane raised an eyebrow, but didn’t dare comment, it seemed.

There was only so long that Margaery could sit beside Cersei Lannister without wanting to drive her fork through the other woman’s eye. It was something of a struggle, to sit still and frown over a husband she had killed beside his mother, and pretend she didn’t see the way that Cersei kept glaring at her.

Halfway through the feast, she just wanted it to be over. But she knew that she could not make up some excuse about needing to rest for the sake of the child until she had at least toasted her husband, in some way.

She bit back a sigh, and reached for her wine glass, feeling Cersei’s sharp, silent glare on her.

“I propose a toast,” Margaery said, standing to her feet, then. The whole room quieted, at her words, and she pretended that it was because they were respecting her authority as the Regent and not because of who her husband had been.

She glanced over at the Lannisters, all sitting very comfortably at the large table that had been arranged for them, save for Cersei. Lord Kevan was amongst them; Sansa had wanted to remind the court, many of whom seemed content with Lord Kevan as Hand of the King, despite Mace’s interest in the title, who his allegiance truly belonged to.

They were all as pretty as a picture, dressed in Lannister colors, all save for Cersei, who was dressed very much like a Baratheon wife should be. “To my late husband, Joffrey Baratheon. May he rest in peace.”

“To the King!” the room cheered, and Margaery took the smallest of sips from her wine glass before setting it back down. The maesters said that it could be bad for the child, if she drank.

She glanced over at Cersei, and wondered if Cersei had ever drank, while she was pregnant.

And it was only because she was already looking at Cersei that she saw what the other woman was going to do.

She grimaced as it happened, but even then, she knew that she had no other way of stopping what was about to happen.
Cersei poured out her wine onto the table she was sitting at. The whole room turned and stared.

“It’s not like you to waste good wine, goodmother,” Margaery said, around a tight smile.

Cersei pressed her lips together, clearly ready to retort.

She did not get the chance.

The door flew open, then, Megga running into the room with a note in her hand, face somehow ashen and yet sweaty from running. Perhaps she had gotten the note and ran all of the way here, Margaery thought, as her stomach twisted and she wondered what else could possibly go wrong, today.

She was going to find out that quite a bit could.

Megga noticed the many eyes on her, it seemed, only then, taking a moment to gather herself before she came to stand beside Margaery.

“What is it?” Margaery demanded, in a soft whisper, as she gestured for the musicians to start up their music again, the guests easily distracted, with the amount of alcohol they had in the room. “Whatever this is, it better be important.”

All save for Cersei, who had her eyes on Margaery and Megga, now. Who was looking at Megga as if she was surprised to see her alive again.

That made Margaery smirk, despite the look on Megga’s face.

“They say…” Megga pressed her lips together, glancing sideways at Trystane, where he sat in the crowd, his cousin suspiciously absent.

Margaery supposed that was because she was finalizing the deal to bring Shireen here, though of course, no one had bothered to tell her that before Lady Nym had gone, no doubt believing that it wasn’t something she needed to concern herself with, in her current state.

“What?” Margaery demanded, not even caring, in this moment, that Cersei was sitting so closely beside her and that she could not afford to look weak in front of the other woman.

Whatever this was, Megga looked more frightened than Margaery had ever seen her, and if Cersei was here, standing beside her, then it couldn't be because of something that Cersei herself had done.

She had to believe that Cersei was not that far gone, at the very least.

Megga grimaced, seeming to realize that Margaery was not about to run out of the feast and let the whole of King’s Landing know something was wrong, before she next spoke.

“They say that Myrcella Baratheon is the trueborn heir to the throne, as the next in line to her brother, and they have named her Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. They ask King’s Landing, and ever other kingdom in Westeros, to bend the knee or die.”

Beside her, Cersei froze.

“What?” she hissed out, voice shrill, and the music suddenly stopped, the musicians looking suddenly uncertain.

Megga looked shamefaced.
Margaery just stared at her, lips parted, unable to help the shock that flitted across her features, because...Because no, this couldn’t be happening.

The Martells were their allies. Arianne was their ally, and that was not just Margaery’s naivety. Arianne had made it very clear to her that what she wanted out of this alliance was Cersei, and they hadn’t gotten her yet, by the gods.

And then she had gone and...done this.

Margaery squeezed her eyes shut, feeling a headache coming on.

No, no this had to be some sort of mistake, some trick. Arianne would not do this to her. Arianne could not do this to her, yet.

“Where did you get this information?” Margaery hissed out, because she was still holding onto the hope that perhaps this was some sort of mistake, that Megga had gotten her information wrong.

Because Arianne...Arianne would not have done this, not yet. Not when she had deposed her own father for her chance at revenge on the Lannisters, and they were barely affected, even in Joffrey’s death.

Unless...Margaery closed her eyes.

Unless Arianne herself had also been deposed, even if there was no one else in Dorne whom she could think of besides...Gerold Dayne.

Her eyes flew open again, staring at Megga intently as Megga handed over the incriminating note in her hands, as Margaery’s gaze swept over it.

It was signed by Gerold Dayne. Hand of the Queen.

Margaery swore loudly, and slammed it down on the table, barely noticed as Cersei picked it up with shaking fingers.

Fuck.

The door burst open a second time then, before Margaery even had the time to process this duplicity, as Cersei screamed for the guards, Tyrell guards, to arrest Trystane and this Dornish emissary, though she did not have the right to do so, and Margaery could only tiredly wave a hand for them to do as Cersei said, for once in agreement with the other woman.

Gods, her head was pounding.

A guard rushed into the room, red faced and sweating, wild eyed, and Margaery wanted to scream at him to get out, that she didn’t have the capability of dealing with something else, now.

Something worse, by the looks of it.

But that was not what she said, as her gaze sought out her grandmother’s in the crowd, for reassurance, and she couldn’t find it.

“Gods, what is it now?” Margaery demanded, turning to sneer at the messenger, and the man flinched a little, under that gaze.

The guard took a moment to catch his breath, and Margaery dimly realized that Cersei was still screaming, and gods...this, this feast was supposed to showcase their strength, tonight.
It was proving to do just the opposite, and if Cersei wasn’t as suddenly distraught as Margaery now felt, Margaery would have been more concerned about that.

But at the moment, all she could do was stare at the guard in trepidation as he announced his news.

And, in that moment, she forgot all about the Martells’ duplicity.

“I…Aegon Targaryen has taken Storm’s End, Your Grace.”

Margaery blinked at him.

“Come again?” she asked, feeling as if the air had just been knocked out of her. As if, suddenly, she couldn’t breathe.

Aegon Targaryen had taken Storm’s End.

Aegon Targaryen.

Fucking hells, she had not even known this boy was a threat, whoever he was. She had known about the Dragon Queen, had heard rumors that there was a Dragon boy in the East, as well, but...fuck.

How could they possibly not know, if he had gotten all of the way to Storm’s End?

But even as the messenger repeated the words, Margaery could hardly bring herself to understand them.

Aegon Targaryen had taken Storm’s End.

Aegon Targaryen...Targaryen, another one, a threat Margaery had not even known was one at all...had taken...Storm’s End.

“How the fuck did we not know about this? How did we not know that Aegon Targaryen was even in Westeros?” Margaery demanded, and she didn’t care that she hardly sounded like a lady, in this moment, and that there were so many lords watching her.

Aegon Targaryen had taken Storm’s End, and the Dornish had just crowned Myrcella the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms.

Cersei was sitting beside her, drinking out of the same pitcher as Margaery.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Her lords gave her no answers.

Margaery swore again, and downed the rest of her glass of wine.

It was only because she was panicking, her eyes flitting through the room, looking for answers, that she noticed Sansa, sitting near the back beside Trystane, looking rather green as she stumbled to her feet.

Margaery blinked at her, not quite comprehending as Sansa reached up to grasp at her throat, stumbling away from her table, inciting several worried looks as she caused the table to skid away from her and fell to the floor.

Margaery felt as if the air had been knocked out of her a second time. She forced herself to suck in a breath, and then another, as she watched Sansa struggle to do that very thing, as she heard someone
whisper, “Poison.”

No.

No, this couldn’t be happening.

Not now, not after everything they had already suffered. Not after the fights they had been having. This couldn’t be happening.

No.

“Sansa,” Margaery breathed, the air rushing out of her in a quiet whoosh. Then, because this couldn’t be happening, dear gods, not after everything, “Sansa!”

It came out in a scream that had the whole room spinning to her, and then towards Sansa Stark, where she stood near the back of it, her body writhing in the air as she lost her footing and plummeted down to the ground with a loud smack.

Several other screams joined Margaery’s, but she didn’t hear any of them, didn’t hear anything but the wind rushing in her ears as she jumped to her feet and made to run to the other girl, this girl whom she had been pushing away ever since It had happened, when she should have been-

“What are you doing?” She hissed at Garlan, glancing down at where he sat beside her, holding her arm in an iron grip.

“Your Grace,” he said, tightly, “Something is wrong. We need to get you out of here. Need to make sure that you and the child are secure.”

“No,” Margaery said, shaking her head, feeling as if her legs would not be supporting her at all if Garlan were not there, holding her up. “No, I won’t leave her. I won’t—”

“Margaery.”

She stared at him for a moment, and then fought against him, wanting to run to her, wanting to make sure that she was all right. Dear gods, she couldn’t even remember the last thing she had said to Sansa that had been kind, and now here she was, choking up blood on the floor in front of Margaery, and Garlan was holding her back.

And then his eyes flitted to Cersei, where she stood beside Margaery, and Margaery understood.

She had displayed enough weakness, tonight, much as it killed her not to run to Sansa. Cersei already suspected that there was something between them; Margaery could not give her proof of that, even as she choked on her own spit and found it suddenly difficult to breathe, as Garlan yanked her away, towards the door, and she heard screams going up amongst their guests.

For a moment, Margaery wanted to scream at him to let her go anyway, that it didn't matter, because dear gods, Sansa could be dying and she was running away, and she didn't quite care, in that instance, what Cersei thought of her weakness.

As she was being dragged away, her eyes met Cersei’s.

And the other woman didn’t smirk, as Margaery almost expected her to, because she had just received the knowledge that there was another contender for the throne, and that her own daughter had been crowned, she supposed, by someone who was now both of their enemies.
But Margaery thought that she would have.

Thought she understood exactly who had poisoned - poisoned - Sansa, just by that look in Cersei’s eyes, bewildered, as if she wasn’t sure whether she ought to be pleased about what had just happened or as horrified and clammy as Margaery herself felt.

Margaery bit back a scream as the door slammed behind her and her guards.
“I don’t like this plan,” Obara said, where she sat at the table with Arianne and Tyene, after Myrcella had left them.

They had just told Myrcella the news about her brother, and Arianne supposed that the girl would need some time to herself, even if she felt no real grief, for the little monster’s death.

Arianne could still see her, off in the distance, walking away, and wondered if the girl was smiling at the news she had just received.

Arianne lifted her iced tea to her lips, took a careful sip before setting the cup back down. “You don’t have to like it, Obara, you just have to do as you’re told.”

“She’s right,” Tyene said, at Arianne’s other side. “Half of Dorne already thinks of us as nothing but traitors, having tried to crown Myrcella once before. Our own sister thought we were nothing but traitors, locking us up in that damned tower. And now, we’ll just be doing it again.”

“You won’t be doing it again,” Arianne stated, archly. “My husband will be doing it again. When the dust settles, you’ll be seen as the heroes who brought him down from the inside. Who restored Dorne to its rightful place.”

The sisters exchanged glances; Arianne knew, without either of them really having to inform her at all, that they thought there were far too many risks to this plan.

But her brother had yet to show up with his army of mercenary, and Arianne was starting to worry that he never would, that she would not have a foot to stand on, now that she had taken her father’s throne and promised the whole of Dorne a war that was not swift in coming.

This was her contingency plan, the one that had started forming in her mind when she was a little girl of four and ten, and had walked into her father’s study to find a letter laying out for her brother, promising him her throne, her inheritance as his eldest child.

A contingency plan that had fully formed the moment Myrcella Baratheon had stepped off the docks in Sunspear.

“Myrcella loathes you, now,” Tyene said, into the silence. “I’m sorry, but she does. She’s all but admitted it to me, multiple times, though she tries to pretend otherwise. I think that girl would happily see you suffer for Trystane.”

Arianne grimaced; she knew that. Had known that ever since Myrcella had returned to Dorne, to the knowledge that Arianne had brought her here to use her as a pawn, and not to reunite her with the family Myrcella had thought she had gained, here.

But that worked to Arianne’s purposes, too; after all, none of this would work if Arianne was not kept entirely in the dark, and Myrcella would not come to her at all about it, when the Sand Snakes and Gerold first approached her, if she loathed Arianne.

Just another way that her own brother had become useful to her, even if Quentyn had turned out to not be.

Arianne hummed. “One day,” she said, softly, “She will understand. Will understand that I did all of this for her.”
That wasn’t true, of course; Arianne had done much of this for herself, for Dorne to survive in an age where sitting back and doing nothing was only crushing the spirit of her people, without her father ever realizing it.

But she hoped that one day, Myrcella would eventually understand why she had done what she did.

“You really think this is worth it?” Obara asked, carefully. “With Trystane stuck in King’s Landing?”

“That’s why I can’t be seen to be involved,” Arianne said, through gritted teeth. “Margaery Tyrell may have hated her husband enough to cause all of this, but she has a soft heart, where it counts. I saw that, in the Water Gardens. She won’t harm him so long as she thinks I wasn’t involved in this.”

Tyene hummed. “Still,” she said, coldly, and Arianne knew that they both blamed her, for leaving Trystane in King’s Landing while she had gone to such effort to bring Myrcella back here. “It’s quite a risk, that you’re taking. Who’s to say Margaery Tyrell, or her wicked grandmother, will ever believe that you had no part in this scheme?”

And she knew that they were right, in a way. Leaving Trystane in King’s Landing, surrounded by Tyrells who were allies now but who could so easily become enemies had been a risk.

But, for all of her father’s claims that she never thought with her head, Arianne had been playing the long game, when she left him there.

Margaery had agreed to let her take back Myrcella, but she was not a fool. She knew that their alliance was tenuous at best, that the moment either one of them found a better option, the alliance would be off.

And if Arianne had taken back her brother, Margaery would have no reason at all to trust her.

Besides, considering the particular game that Arianne was playing, Trystane might be better off in King’s Landing. There, at the very least, he was a hostage, useful against Arianne, rather than a threat to her husband, and a dead man.

He was, after all, an heir to the throne of Dorne. A legitimate heir, where her husband was not.

Take care of your brother, her mother had made her promise, before she had left them all for good.

And Arianne wasn’t sure if she was obeying her mother now, with her actions, but she was doing her damned best, she thought.

And of course there was the risk that neither Margaery nor her grandmother would believe that Arianne was faultless in all of this, that they would blame her just as much for getting her kingdom into this mess that her husband was determined to lead them into as if she had done it herself, and Trystane would pay the price for it.

But Arianne knew Gerold, knew him well. They had been lovers since long before they should have been, children then.

He was a stubborn man, and fueled by the sort of fury that only grew until nothing was standing in the way of what he wanted.

Margaery Tyrell was fueled by a fury born out of pain; it was not the same thing, not to Arianne’s mind, and therefore, she was a little safer.
“Can you do this?” Arianne asked Obara, calmly.

The other girl pressed her lips together, nodded. “I don’t like it,” she admitted, because it wasn’t as if Tyene was keeping down how she really felt; she’d been wearing a perpetual grimace since Arianne had suggested this plan. “But I can do it.”

Arianne hummed, taking another sip of her tea. “Then do it,” she gritted out, knowing just where to strike, “And when the dust settles, we’ll have made Oberyn proud.”

“This was a fucking great idea, Tyrion,” Bronn muttered sarcastically, as Tyrion slammed into the wall of the cell beside him, shoved inside by the Dornish guards who had brought them directly to the palace’s dungeons the moment Tyrion mentioned his name. The cell door slammed loudly behind him. “Really. Fucking stupendous.”

Tyrion grunted, not wanting to admit that he’d had better ones. Bronn couldn’t see him at the moment, the wall of a cell separating them, and Tyrion felt absurdly grateful for that.

Because Bronn was right, and he didn’t much like the idea of having to face the other man, after that.

“I mean, honestly,” Bronn went on, at Tyrion’s silence, “What better way to announce your intentions to defect to the Martells and your niece, then to walk up the front gates of the people who hate your family?”

Tyrion grimaced. “Yes, I got that,” he said, and Bronn fell silent for only a moment before his tirade started up again.

“You know, in Lys, I was under the impression that you were doing this because you wanted to find something to live for, after Shae,” Bronn said, and Tyrion flinched a little, where Bronn still couldn’t see it.

“Now, I’m starting to wonder if you didn’t drag me all the way to this dust bowl because these were the first people you thought of who might try to kill you,” Bronn continued, mercilessly, and Tyrion squeezed his eyes shut.

Squeezed them shut as he thought of Shae, as she stood before Arya Stark and tried to tell the girl that she and Sansa were close, that if she did this, she would just be hurting Sansa.

And then Arya Stark had turned her knife on him.

“In which case,” Bronn went on, not quite sounding as calm as his words seemed to imply, “I’m a little offended that you dragged me along.”

“They’re not going to leave us down here,” Tyrion said, tiredly. “They’ll want to know why I’m here, why I would risk coming here.”

Bonne hummed. “Will they, though? My impression of the Martells, from the last time I was here, was that, besides Doran, they’re all rather content to see every Lannister into the grave as soon as possible. You should have seen Jaime, trying to play nice with them.” He snorted, at some memory neither of them seemed interested in sharing.

They didn’t though, Tyrion thought. For some reason, they had latched onto Myrcella, like she was different from any other Lannister they’d met, like they…

Cared about her.
They had kidnapped her from a family that she must have told them she loathed, and she had seemed, despite her anger with Tyrion for sending her to them in the first place, like she had been better, with the Martells.

Happier, away from Joffrey and his poison.

And he doubted that the Martells, who had made no secret of their (rightful) antagonism towards the Lannisters, would have been able to pretend that they liked Myrcella for so long.

They were not known for their patience, after all.

Gods, he wished suddenly that he’d stayed in Lys with his wine and the whores there. At least they had known how to deal with him.

“They’ll want to know why I’m here,” Tyrion continued, and wondered if he was trying to convince himself, as well. “At the very least, they’ll want to know about Joffrey.”

He had been counting on that, when he turned himself in at the palace. Had hoped that it would at least admit him to a quick audience with the Princess, but it seemed that the Martells were rather busy with something.

The streets had been filled with commoners, crowding about the palace, held back only by the guards, all of them trying to figure out what was going on, when he and Bronn had arrived.

The flags of House Martell had been raised, the trumpets sounded, and Tyrion…Tyrion knew that something big must be happening, for there to be so many guards about, but of course they’d gotten no answers before they were dragged down here and thrown in the first empty cells their guards could find.

Tyrion had demanded to speak with the Princess, around that time, but the guards had merely laughed and walked off, the door slamming behind them.

And he was beginning to worry, though he didn’t dare to share those worries with Bronn, who had enough to worry about, just now, that the other man was right. That they wouldn’t care why he had killed Joffrey, supposedly, when he was just another Lannister, despite their affinity for his niece.

And then, just as Tyrion had thought he might explode on Bronn, who was already muttering about how if he’d known that Tyrion had a death wish, he would have stayed behind in Lys and found some woman to marry, the door to the dungeons opened, and a young woman clad rather scantily in the colors of House Martell walked through the door.

She was not Arianne, Tyrion knew that instantly. For one thing, she was too young, too slight, from the rumors he had heard about Arianne Martell’s beauty, and without the presence that a lady of noble breeding usually had, but the look that she cast over Bronn and Tyrion was calculating, dangerous, all the same.

“Well, well,” Bronn drawled, “I didn’t realize that the Dornish were so kind as to provide their prisoners with entertainment.”

Tyrion rolled his eyes. “She’s the Prince’s niece, idiot,” he muttered, and Bronn felt silent. Tyrion got the distinct impression that he was suddenly worried.

He wondered why Bronn hadn’t met Tyene, the last time he’d been in Dorne, with Jaime, considering he seemed to know so much more about this place. Tyrion rolled his eyes.
Then again, Jaime had told him that Bronn had spent the majority of his time in these very same dungeons.

Tyene, where she stood in front of both of their cells, smirked. “You ought to work on what you decide to do with that tongue, when you’re at someone else’s mercy,” she said, and Tyrion could hear Bronn sputtering, but Tyene seemed to have lost all interest in him as she turned to Tyrion, then.

“Tyrion Lannister,” she said, stepping close enough that if he got up, he might have been able to touch her, through the bars. “My lady wants to know what you’re doing here.”

Tyrion pursed his lips. “Your lady…Princess Arianne,” he said, but Tyene only quirked an eyebrow at him, waiting. “I’m here to see to my niece, as I explained to the guards when they took us.”

Tyene snorted. “You could have just sent a letter,” she pointed out. “Might have been less trouble for a man on the run.”

He hummed. “I wanted to make sure that she ever got it,” he said, through gritted teeth.

Tyene cocked her head at him. “Was that an accusation?” She asked.

He shrugged. “I’ve been far from Westeros, in recent months. I wasn’t sure that a letter would ever find its way here.”

Tyene’s lips quirked, as if she were amused despite herself. And then, her gaze hardened. “Because you killed the King,” she said, calmly, calculating.

Her eyes searched his, waiting for some admission of guilt, he supposed.

Or for something else, he realized, blinking in surprise at the intensity in her eyes, as she watched him. More than just calculating, he saw now. There was something else there, something that she was hiding; she looked afraid, at the sight of him here, and Tyrion couldn’t imagine why, not when he was a lone Lannister in a sea of snakes.

Tyrion lifted his chin. “Apparently,” he said, and after a moment, Tyene’s lips twisted into something like a smile.

“What makes you think Myrcella wants to see you?” She asked, cocking her head at him and all but sneering. “For all you’ve known, all of this time, we kidnapped her, and you didn’t seem to give a damn about that when she disappeared. No one in King’s Landing did.”

Tyrion flinched. “I…hoped that she would be safe, here,” he said. “She seemed to enjoy her time here, from what I could tell.”

For a moment, Tyene actually looked…saddened, by his words. She licked her lips. “A caged bird has no choice but to love the hand that feeds it,” she said, softly.

Tyrion’s brows furrowed, and he opened his mouth to ask, but he didn’t get the chance, because Tyene was talking again.

“For all we know, you’ve orchestrated this whole thing, being framed for a murder, coming here, to get your niece back in some Lannister scheme. Your brother did something equally as stupid, not so long ago. You’ll find that Dorne is not so willing to give her up, this time.”

She said it with an edge in her voice, and Tyrion suddenly had no doubt that the other girl would gladly fight for Myrcella, if it came down to it.
Good, he thought. He had come here out of guilt, but he was glad that there were at least some in
Dorne who cared about his niece, truly, the way that she seemed to care about them.

Tyrion flinched. “I’m here now,” he said, softly. “Her brother is dead. I thought it might be good for
her to see a familiar face.”

Tyene hummed. “Did you?” She said. “Funny, that you should only come to think that after you
supposedly killed said brother.”

Tyrion reached up, rubbing at his temples. “I didn’t do that,” he said, tiredly, and heard Bronn hiss in
a breath, on the other side of that wall. “She knows that I wouldn’t do that.”

Tyene studied him for several long moments, and then swallowed hard, seeming to accept his
words.

“Pity,” she said, finally, sighing. “I was just beginning to think we might eventually become friends.”

In the cell beside his, Bronn guffawed.

Tyrion sighed, reaching up to pinch at the bridge of his nose. “When might I see her?” he asked,
because he was getting tired of this conversation, and he had a feeling that there was little more that
he could learn from it.

“When my lady decides that you can see her,” Tyene snapped at him, all fury once more.

Tyrion raised his hands, in an attempt to placate her. “I just think that she’ll want to see me, if she
knows that I’m here,” he said, and Tyene rolled her eyes. “Or, if your lady doesn’t approve of that,
I’d be happy to speak to her, instead. Anything rather than sitting in this cell

Tyene leaned forward, hissing out nastily, “Oh, do you disapprove of your lodgings, Dwarf?
Perhaps I could arrange for ones that are more suitable. We don’t have anything like the Black Cells
here in Sunspear, but I’m sure that we could arrange to have you sent back to King’s Landing, if you
would prefer. I know my dear father spent some time in the Black Cells during his time there, and he
was at least as guilty as you of the same accusation. And I’m sure they’d be glad to see you again.”

Tyrion closed his eyes. “My lady…”

“I’m not a lady,” Tyene told him, coolly.

Bronn whistled, lowly.

Tyrion opened his eyes again. “Does Princess Arianne know that I’m even here? I can help you. I
may be a Lannister, but I…”

Tyene straightened, then. “As I said, my lady will see you when she wishes,” she told him, primly,
and walked towards the doors of the cells.

“Wait,” Tyrion called after her, desperately. She paused, but didn’t turn around. “I know about
Aegon Targaryen and the Golden Company. If you’re planning to-”

She hesitated only a moment longer, before slamming the door behind her.

“What the fuck do you mean, Quentyn doesn’t even have an army?” Gerold demanded, rounding on
her after slamming his hand down hard on the wooden table they were using for strategizing
sessions, these days.
Well, Obara was using them to strategize. Gerold seemed content to fuck them up as much as possible, as he seemed to do often, these days.

Tyene reached up, rubbing at her temples as she felt something like a headache coming on.

Obara lifted her chin. “What the Imp said is the truth,” she said. “We’ve had some ravens confirm it. Quentyn is dead; the Dragon Queen sicced her dragons on him, and they burned him alive and ate him.”

She said it with all of the inflection of someone who had never cared about Quentyn in his life, Tyene thought, with a shiver.

Quentyn had been their cousin, and now she spoke of his death as if it didn’t concern her at all. Tyene remembered the first time he had danced with her, how he had spun her around in circles over and over again, long after Ellaria tried to tell her to go to bed…

She had cried, when Arianne told them that Quentyn was dead.

Obara hadn’t.

Gerold swore, under his breath, and then stabbed a finger back in the direction of the Great Hall. “And what the fuck am I supposed to tell our sworn shields now?” he demanded. “My wife usurped her father on the promise that she would lead Dorne into a war, and I took power from her because she was taking too long about it. And now, it seems, we don’t even have a war to fight. Fuck!”

More pieces scattered over the board.

For once, Tyene didn’t feel annoyed with him for the sudden burst of emotion, her own mind echoing the sentiment.

They had fucked themselves. They’d been fucking idiots, and now, they were facing the possibility of a defensive war on all sides, or clinging to power through placating all of their neighbors at once, and that wasn’t the glory they were supposed to be bringing Dorne.

“We do,” Obara said, and the room fell silent, Tyene sucking in a breath as she turned to face the other girl.

“No,” she breathed, but Gerold was already leaning forward eagerly, desperately, Tyene fancied, because it was not as if he had another choice.

He needed a war, if he was cling on to his fragile excuse for taking power; they all did.

But the one that she knew Obara was about to suggest…

“Aegon Targaryen is crossing the Narrow Sea as we speak, for all we know, he’s already here and we just haven’t heard anything yet,” Obara said. “The Dwarf confirmed that, too. They say that the Dragon Queen refused a marriage proposal from him, just as she did with Quentyn, though of course she was crueler with our cousin. No doubt because she thought herself better than him.”

Silence.

“You want to marry Myrcella to Aegon,” Tyene said, skeptically. “That’ll never work.”

Obara shrugged. “And why not?” she asked.

Tyene stared at her incredulously. “He’ll never agree to that. Her father was the Usurper who killed
his on the battlefield! Half of Westeros can’t even decide if she’s a bastard or not, and in case you’ve
forgotten, she’s pregnant with our cousin’s child!”

Gerold took a deep breath. “We’ve already announced that we plan to crown Myrcella on the day of
King Joffrey’s funeral,” he said, harshly. “If we back out now, we’ll lose the support of the nobles
for good. She’s right.”

Tyene rounded on him. “Arianne made a pact with the Tyrell Regent. A pact in good faith, that she
didn’t intend to break until it would be advantageous to us. Who’s to say that Aegon Targaryen is
even going to make it across the narrow Sea? Or that he has the army to defeat the Tyrells and the
Lannisters? You know they’re the same. They’ll decide to put aside their grievances, strong as they
are, just long enough to oust someone trying to steal what they believe to be theirs, and you know it.
And we’ll be left with nothing, all over again.”

“Didn’t your Dwarf just say it?” Obara countered, raising an eyebrow. “That Aegon Targaryen was
coming, with the Golden Company we thought that Quentyn was bringing here? And what the fuck
did you think was going to happen when the rest of Westeros learned that we had crowned Myrcella,
against the will of the Lannisters and the Tyrells? We might as well find an ally where we can.”

Tyene fell silent, then.

Gerold licked his lips. “We could have a septon annul the marriage, easily,” he said. “When the child
is born, send it to the South to be raised by some lord who will never know its name. Offer her to
Aegon as a wife, and if he doesn’t want a Lannister for a wife, it will be simply enough to be rid of
her and call that a gift, as well.”

Tyene stared between the two of them in horror. “No,” she repeated, but she already felt like her
words were falling on deaf ears, at this point.

Neither of them would meet her eyes.

“No,” Tyene repeated. “We’re not here to kill a little girl. That wasn’t the agreement. We’re
supposed to be crowning her.”

They exchanged glances.

“This isn’t just about one girl,” Obara reminded her, the words almost gentle, and somehow, that
made them worse. “We owe it to Dorne to-”

“Isn’t that what Father used to say?” Tyene interrupted her, not wanting to hear this. “That the
Lannisters did whatever they wished, that the Tyrells clamored for power where they could find it,
but we didn’t hurt little girls in Dorne?”

Obara swallowed. “And now our father lays buried beside the tomb that we’ve allotted to Elia
Martell, because there was not enough of her to make the journey back to Dorne,” she said,
scoffingly, and Tyene flinched. “What did their kindness bring us?”

Gerold glanced between the two of them, considering. “I don’t understand,” he said, finally.

“Myrcella is a Lannister. I thought it was understood that crowning her was a way to go to war with
House Lannister.”

Tyene cleared her throat. “I thought it was understood that we would try to win that war, that she
would live through it because she was our claim to the Iron Throne.”

Gerold snorted. “You didn’t tell me your sister was so damn naive, Obara.”
Obara glanced between the two of them as if she couldn’t decide who she was more annoyed with, at the moment. “I'll talk to her,” she said. “You talk to the other lords. I know you don’t do subtle, but try to figure out if this is something that they would agree to.”

Gerold gave her an annoyed look. “Any other orders, my lady?” he asked her.

Obara just pointed towards the door.

Tyene watched him go with a sinking feeling in her chest, watched the door slam behind him in his annoyance.

“Please tell me that this plan didn’t come from Arianne,” Tyene said, into the silence that followed his departure.

Obara shrugged a thin shoulder. “I’m just the messenger,” she said, in a thin voice, and Tyene stared at her.

“Don’t give me that shit,” she said. “I know you. I know that you itch for war as much as Gerold does, that you know how important it is to our people in a way that perhaps even Arianne doesn’t understand. Tell me this plan came from her.”

Obara lifted her eyes to meet Tyene’s. “Do you remember when we plotted to crown Myrcella with Arianne, the first time?”

Tyene rolled her eyes. “Of course I do—”

“And Nym figured out what it was we were planning and went to Doran about it, because she thought that what we were doing was treason, and that our uncle needed to know about it?”

Tyene shook her head. “Of course I remember. What does that have to do with—”

“Arianne knew she was going to do that,” Obara interrupted her, coolly. “She knew that she was going to overhear us that night, intentionally planned things so that the girl Nym was with would forget to arrive, and—”

“You’re delusional,” Tyene accused, taking a step back from her. “That makes no sense. Why would she want…?”

She trailed off then, actually thinking about the words.

Obara nodded. “Because she knew that Doran would have us locked away in the tower, would look like a cruel guardian for locking away two daughters who had just lost their beloved father and were justifiably angry over it. Because she knew that she could use that against him. Margaery Tyrell dropping on her doorstep was just a way to speed along that process. If she hadn’t come along, chances are we would have been there some time. But we weren’t, because Arianne managed to use that, too.”

Tyene blinked at her. “If you think that’s true, then why the fuck are you still listening to her?” she demanded.

Obara shook her head. “Because it didn’t make sense to us, in the beginning,” she said. “It didn’t make sense for Lady Nym to overhear us saying that and for Arianne to let her go to Doran about it. But it happened, because it’s what Arianne wanted. What I’m saying is, this is her plan, and I for one trust her a hell of a lot more than I ever did Doran, or anyone else who thinks they can rule Dorne.”
Tyene shook her head, taking another step back from her. “You’re talking about killing a little girl that we’ve helped raise, that we’ve watched grow up these past years, if the plan doesn’t go as conveniently as we want,” she said. “A girl that our cousin loves, dearly.”

Obara shrugged. “And that would be sad,” she agreed. “But Dorne must always come first, Tyene. Doran didn’t put Dorne first for so long, and look where it left us.”

Tyene blew out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. “You know, after Myrcella got back from King’s Landing, she asked me if I thought that Arianne ever really loved her,” she said, and Obara flinched, just a little. “I told her that I thought Arianne loved people in the only way she knew how. But she doesn’t, does she? She doesn’t give a fuck about that girl, not really. Not beyond what she can do for us.”

Obara looked away.

“You’re talking about murdering her. How can you want to do that?” Tyene asked, from where she stood in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest.

Obara lifted her chin. “I didn’t see you complaining about it much the first time that Arianne suggested Myrcella’s coronation and we discussed what might happen if we failed, which would have been the time.”

Tyene gritted her teeth. “I didn’t think it was a good idea, then,” she snapped. “But convincing Arianne not to do something is like trying to reason with the sea.”

Obara hummed. “Then you don’t object.”

Tyene rolled her eyes, moving forward. “Obara,’ she said, and her voice was quiet, and the same as it had once sounded when they were very young and didn’t know what to make of each other, “Arianne manoeuvred herself into a prison cell. Quentyn is dead, and we’re about to crown Myrcella when two Targaryens are making plans to travel across the Narrow Sea and lay claim to the Iron Throne themselves.” She took a deep breath. “Just tell me you believe in what she’s doing, and I won’t object. But…”

Obara met her eyes. “As I recall, you were the one who came to us with the news that the Imp knew about Aegon Targaryen, Sister,” she said, softly.

Tyene swallowed. “Because I was afraid that he would say something in front of Gerold and the Princess, and then we’d all be fucked for keeping it from him in the first place. Gerold is a hothead; the last thing we need now is for him to think that he can no longer trust us, and they say that the Imp is a master manipulator. But if I had any idea that you and Arianne were thinking about...about teaming up with Aegon Targaryen and kiling a girl we all care about, if needs be...I would have fucking kept my mouth shut and let you all deal with the shitshow yourselves.”

Obara was already shaking her head before Tyene had even finished. “Doran wanted to marry Arianne to Aegon, you know,” she said, and Tyene just blinked at her. “He told her he’d been planning it ever since he heard about the boy’s existence. This...surely you realize this is a better solution. It might just keep Myrcella alive.”

“And if it doesn’t, you’ll have no qualms about finishing her off,” Tyene muttered. “You and Arianne. And Gerold.”

Obara’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t you dare act like you’re an innocent in all of this, Tyene,” she said, coolly. “You knew from the moment we first began plotting to crown her that this might end in her
death. And crowning her now, when Aegon is coming and we haven’t reached out to him? That will just spur her death along all the more.”

Tyene shook her head. “Maybe you’re right,” she whispered. “Maybe I did think that was a possibility. But I thought that we’d try a bit harder than just...oh, handing her over to be slaughtered, if things didn’t go exactly the way that we wanted.”

Obara stared at her for a moment longer, and then snorted in disgust. “You’re forgetting something, Tyene,” she pointed out. “You’re the daughter of a Martell, not a Lannister.”

Then she turned and stormed out of the room, while Tyene raised a hand to her throat and struggled past the sudden urge to cry.

It wasn’t because Obara was right, she told herself. She was just...overly emotional, because of what had happened to Quentyn.

Myrcella took a deep breath, staring at herself in the mirror and barely recognizing the young woman staring back at her.

She told herself it was because she looked very much like a queen now, dressed in such fine robes and preparing for her real coronation, and not because of anything else. Not because she looked in the mirror and saw her pregnant belly and thought she looked far more like her own mother than the last time that she had seen Trystane.

She thought of the poison she kept in her bodice these days, and wondered if her mother had ever thought about slipping something as deadly in her husband’s drink, every night that he did something that worried her, or if that had only come later, when she had known the truth was about to out itself and she had no other option than to stop it.

She took a deep breath, and told herself that she was not her mother.

She was doing this for Trystane. The poison was just to protect herself, if Gerold Dayne, a man whom half of Dorne knew to be rather...impetuous, tried anything that might get her killed.

She wasn’t going to have to use it. Tyene would make sure of that, she told herself.

“Are you sure we’re doing the right thing?” Myrcella asked Tyene, over her shoulder, as the girl helped her prepare her gown for the ceremony.

Dear gods, she wished that Trystane were here, that she could ask that question of him, rather than of Tyene. Trystane, whom she knew would have given her an honest answer, for all that Tyene cared about her.

Tyene wanted this as badly as Gerold Dayne did, but Trystane loved her unconditionally.

And Myrcella wanted to believe that she was doing the right thing, the only thing that she could do to survive this situation, but a part of her wondered if she wasn’t lying to herself as much as Arianne had been, when she had decided that taking over her father’s throne was for the best.

But Trystane wasn’t here, and Gerold Dayne, for all that he seemed to want Myrcella’s advancement, was a cold, cruel man, capable of locking up his own wife because she didn’t agree with him, and no one had even given a damn, when he did it.

And Myrcella had her child to think about.
Even if a part of her wondered if this wasn’t just putting her baby in more danger, being placed on a pedestal as a target for half of the Seven Kingdoms, dragging Dorne into a war that they wanted but she wasn’t certain she did.

She just wanted to be left alone by her mother. Just wanted to get Trystane back, to have her family back again.

And this was beginning to look like the only way to achieve any of that.

Tyene reached out, smoothing down Myrcella’s shoulders. “You are the rightful heir to the Iron Throne,” Tyene reminded her, lips warm against Myrcella’s ear. “Margaery Tyrell all but admitted to Arianne that any child she had would not be your brother’s, and either way, the child isn’t even born yet. Your brother is younger than you, and has only your...mother to guide him. You know you’re doing the right thing, Myrcella; why are you doubting yourself now?”

Myrcella swallowed hard, meeting her gaze in the mirror. She sounded...different, Myrcella decided, though seh wasn’t certain why. Perhaps she too was nervous about what this would lead to.

Myrcella certainly was.

She knew Arianne well enough now, she thought, to understand her motivations, but it was Gerold who worried her. Gerold, who had locked Arianne away in order to take her throne, who had then decided that they would crown Myrcella on the very day of her brother’s funeral as a final ‘fuck you,’ to the Tyrells and Lannisters both, before they declared war in her name.

And he had promised that she would get Trystane back, out of all of this, that she would finally be safe, here in Dorne, as a queen, but still, Myrcella worried.

This was not how things were supposed to go.

But, she told herself, Tyene was right. She was the rightful heir to the throne. She certainly deserved it more than an unborn child who had never known Joffrey’s wrath, thank the gods. And this way, she could get Trystane back without ever having to worry about him finding a knife in his back from the Tyrells or her mother.

Besides, she thought, swallowing hard, Tyene wouldn’t lead her wrong. She wasn’t like Arianne, or Gerold. When she talked, Myrcella truly believed she cared about her.

She had been the one to start teaching her about those poisons, after all, knowing that she would likely steal one.

And it would certainly feel nice, to be the one in power, for a change.

Myrcella didn’t think she’d ever felt like she had power. Once she was queen, no matter what Gerold wanted, he wouldn’t be able to do it without at least a little bit of her permission.

“And...Trystane,” Myrcella said, carefully, because it didn’t matter how many times Tyene and Obara tried to convince her that he would be safe, she never could quite believe it, “You do not think that the Tyrells...that there will be some sort of backlash for this?”

She did not know everything, of course, about the plans that Arianne had made with Margaery Tyrell, didn’t think that even the Sand Snakes knew that. She only knew that by crowning her, they were going very much against them.

And Myrcella had only agreed to all of this because of what Obara and Tyene offered her, what
Arianne could not; that she would rule the Seven Kingdoms with Trystane by her side, free never to answer to her mother again, free to forget that her sorry excuse for a brother had ever once come between them.

Tyene and Obara seemed certain that they could do it, with Gerold Dayne’s help, for he was a great lord in Dorne and could deliver on his promises, with ten thousand strong behind him. Myrcella could see her husband again, when the Tyrells insisted on keeping him with them, despite Arianne having asked once for his return.

And Myrcella would do just about anything, at the moment, to be reunited with her husband. She had returned to this place in the first place, alongside Tyene, because she had thought that Trystane would be awaiting her when she arrived.

And he wasn’t.

Myrcella had been horrified, at the realization that not only was her husband still stuck in King’s Landing, a prisoner of her brother who now knew that Myrcella had betrayed their family, but that the Martells seemed to have little interest in getting him out. Arianne, indeed, seemed to believe him safe there, up until the moment her fool of a husband had challenged her brother to single combat and nearly died for it, himself.

Lady Nym, they said, had not been so fortunate. Oh, she was still alive, but Myrcella had heard often enough the horrible things that had been done to Elia Martell, in death at the hands of the Mountain, since arriving in Dorne.

And Arianne, for all her pretty promises of being better than her father at exacting revenge, had done nothing since taking the throne.

It had been easy for Obara and Tyene to convince Myrcella of the merits of finding another way, especially when they had always sought to be her friends and Arianne, since Myrcella’s return here, had only ever grated on her nerves, a constant reminder of the open space in Myrcella’s psyche that her mother had once occupied.

Able to manipulate Myrcella, to control her, in ways that no one else could, and after the fiasco Myrcella had faced in King’s Landing, she was tired of mothers.

She just wanted to see her husband again, to be with him again and know that no one else in either of their families could hurt him, because she was the Queen and she would protect him.

But that couldn’t happen if Trystane was dead before he ever reached Dorne, of course.

Tyene’s jaw clenched. She looked annoyed that Myrcella kept repeating the question. Arianne would never have let her annoyance show on her face; she would have realized that Myrcella would doubt her, for it.

“They know how valuable of a hostage your husband is, Myrcella,” Tyene said, gently, putting her hands on Myrcella’s shoulder and squeezing them gently. “They are not your brother, now. And they will not harm him if they want to see peace with Dorne again. More likely than not, Margaery Tyrell will give birth to a girl, and then all of this worrying would have been for nothing.”

Myrcella’s brows furrowed. She knew that the Tyrells were at least more level headed than her brother, but she had been in King’s Landing, after all, when they had declared war on House Lannister and declared her brother a bastard, all because they had not gotten what they wanted, now that Margaery was presumed dead.
Margaery was alive again, and claiming the throne for a child who had not even left her womb, yet.

Myrcella knew that Tyene, that Obara and Gerold Dayne, they were all right about this. Margaery Tyrell had no way of knowing what the gender of her child would be, much less if it would even survive to birthing.

Myrcella, therefore, was very much the rightful heir to the throne, even if there were some who did not want her to take it because they feared that she would not be so easily manipulated as Tommen, or a babe.

Myrcella didn’t want to see either of them hurt, of course, even if the child was her beast of a brother’s son. But she knew that should Tommen ascend the throne in the Westerlands, Cersei would be the one ruling, through him, and the thought of their mother manipulating Tommen the way she had Joffrey, all of those years, turning him into the monster that Joffrey had become simply by virtue of Cersei refusing to tell him ‘no,’ sickened Myrcella.

She would not lose her brother or her husband, this way.

And after all, why should she not reach for the throne, after everything that she had suffered at the hands of one who sat upon it?

She licked her lips. “Do you think…do you think that I’ll be able to get him back, now that I’m to be Queen?” She asked, quietly.

Tyene paused in her adjusting of Myrcella’s gown, glanced at the servants all around them, and then said, carefully, “The Tyrells will never accept you as Queen, Myrcella, even if that child in Margaery Tyrell’s womb is a girl.”

Myrcella’s face fell. Then why the fuck was she even…

“But Dorne will fight for you,” Tyene continued, reaching up to press a gentle hand to Myrcella’s cheek. “They will fight for you, and for your prince.” She glanced down at Myrcella’s stomach. “Both of them. We’re not all like Doran, like Arianne. In Dorne, family means something. I have every confidence that this is a fight we can win. We’ll get Trystane back, I promise you that.”

Yes, Gerold had promised her that, as well, but Myrcella had believed Tyene’s earlier words far more than she believed these ones.

Myrcella swallowed hard, her heart hammering in her throat, now.

She knew that it would be difficult, that there would be many who wouldn’t accept her as their queen, once she took the throne that had once been her brother’s. That it might even lead to a war, the way that they were saying her mother was about to go to war against the Tyrells.

But she had to believe that it would be worth it. That she would no longer feel like a used pawn of Arianne and the rest of her family, when she finally got what was owed to her, after suffering for so long at the hands of her brother.

Her brother had done horrible things to her for so long, and it felt only right that she should take this from him, in his death.

She’d earned it, after all.

And Arianne seemed to have no interest in getting Trystane back for her. The way things had been doing, she had seemed content to leave him with the Tyrells indefinitely, to sit back and be their ally
for some reason that Myrcella couldn’t understand, when the Tyrells had proven themselves to be a fickle bunch, over and over.

This way, at the very least, there was a chance. A chance that she wouldn’t spend the rest of her life a prisoner of the Tyrells or of the Lannisters, a chance that she could get the happy ending that she deserved, after everything that her brother, and then the rest of her family, had put her through.

Margaery’s child had not even been brought into this world yet, Obara had explained to her, which meant that it couldn’t be an heir, not really. And by Dornish law, she was the older sibling even if she was a girl.

Besides, a part of Myrcella ached at the thought of her mother using Tommen as a pawn, making him a king when her younger brother didn’t have the temperament for it, Myrcella knew. When he would have been content living out the rest of his days as a prince, with his cats and with a family who loved him.

He’d had that, in Jaime, and Myrcella wished he could have that in her, but she’d been selfish, had wanted more than that.

This way, at the very least, she could spare him the Iron Throne, the throne that his brother had loved so much, but which Tommen never would.

But she had no delusions about why she was really doing this.

The Tyrells had her husband. Cersei had her brother.

She knew that there would be a war over this, had known it when Obara and Gerold first approached her about it. There would be a war, because her mother would never accept this, not now that she had crowned Myrcella’s brother.

And neither would the Tyrells.

She had to get Trystane back. She was doing this to get him back, to carve out a world for herself where she no longer felt so terrified of everything around her.

And if Gerold Dayne and the Sand Snakes didn’t want him back, for whatever absurd reason, then she was just going to have to find her own way to do it.

She was, after all, going to be the Queen.

And she would not accept Gerold Dayne’s regency for the rest of her days. Nor, even, for the rest of Trystane’s.

A knock on the door caused Myrcella to jump, and Tyene frowned as one of the servants went to answer.

Outside was Ser Gerold, standing there in all of his battle regalia, and he smiled at her, for the first time that she could remember him doing so.

She knew that he didn’t like her. He, like much of Dorne, saw her as nothing more than a Lannister.

But he also saw that she had her uses, he knew, one of them being that he would not have to pretend to be carrying out Arianne’s will forever, if he was regent to a far more powerful title.

“Are you ready?” Gerold asked.
Myrcella narrowed her eyes at him. She knew that he, far more than Tyene or Obara, who truly cared for her, saw her as nothing but a little girl, an easily manipulated thing that would bring him fame and fortune, as well as this war that he clamored for. He thought that he could be the true power behind the throne, as the Hand of the Queen.

Myrcella would disabuse him of that notion, in time, but for now, she knew it was useful. After all, Arianne would never have crowned her this impulsively.

She nodded, sending the man an eager, bright smile, and he clapped her on the shoulder, grinning. “That’s my girl,” he said, far too familiar, and she wanted to shrug off his touch, but Myrcella allowed it, for now.

She had learned much about adapting to her surroundings in recent months, about keeping her mouth shut until the proper time to strike, when she had been far too quick to speak her mind, in the past, and damn the consequences.

She supposed that, in a way, that had been her brother’s parting lesson to her.

And while she had certainly never felt safe around her brother, she was very aware, lately, that she was no more safe around these Martells.

“Almost done,” Tyene said, pricking her with a pin, and Myrcella jumped, sending the other woman a glare. “There.”

She leaned back then, staring at Myrcella appreciatively. “You look like a Queen,” she said, and Gerold moved forward, grabbing Myrcella by the arm.

“She’d better damn look like a queen,” he muttered, harshly, and Myrcella flinched at the rough treatment to her arm.

Tyene pressed her lips together, but didn’t comment.

And then Myrcella was being all but dragged out of the dressing room, and down the hall. She yanked her arm out of Gerold’s grip then, shooting him a glare.

“How would it look if you were dragging me the whole way?” She hissed at him, the guards around them listening but silent, and by the look in Gerold’s eyes, she knew that she would pay for that eventually, but Myrcella could not bring herself to care.

She entered the throne room with her head held high.

The throne that had been created for her, in secret so that Arianne would not find it, was beautiful, Myrcella thought, as she walked across the throne room to sit on it.

Made of some strange mixture of spun glass so delicate it looked like it might break at any moment, and wood that had been purposely shaped to look like the horns of a stag, with little blossoms along the top ridges.

It had been moved to the center of the room, the throne of the Prince of Dorne sitting beside it, looking dwarfed in comparison.

The crown, she had seen before, though she licked her lips at the sight of it now, sitting in the hands of a septon. She knew that technically, she was meant to be crowned by the High Septon in King’s Landing, but given that what they were doing was technically treason, Myrcella supposed that she could make do.
Her crown was made to look like the horns of a stag, as well, though it was made of gold and with a golden lion roaring on the centerpiece.

It suited her, she thought. No longer delicate, the way that she had once been, but blunt and fierce, as she wanted to become.

She stepped forward, knelt down in front of the throne, for all that pregnant belly moaned at the movement.

The septon stepped forward then, placed the crown gently on her forehead.

Myrcella stepped up to the throne, and turned around, sitting gingerly down in it, the crown atop her head feeling strange.

“All hail Myrcella Baratheon, First of Her Name, Rightful Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, of the Andals and the First Men…”

Myrcella closed her eyes, and breathed in something that felt very much like vindication, for all of the years she had spent being pushed aside by her mother, abused by her brother.

Queen Myrcella Baratheon.

It had a nice ring to it, she thought, smiling.

And Prince Consort Trystane? That had an even better one.

“My lady has decided that she wishes to see you, now,” Tyene said, as she stepped into the prison surrounded by Martell guards.

Tyrion grunted; he had no idea how long they had been down here, but his lips were chapped and his limbs ached.

“Does she now?” Bronn muttered, sounding as annoyed as Tyrion felt.

He knew that they had good reason for their suspicions, was not surprised by their treatment since their arrival here, but he still found it annoying.

He did not know if the Martells feared more that he had actually killed Joffrey and had come here to do the same to Myrcella, or if they feared that he might have some influence over the girl, as a Lannister.

He might have told them that they needn’t have bothered. He had come here to redeem himself in Myrcella’s eyes, in Jaime’s, after what he had been accused of.

And even if he hadn’t killed Joffrey, Myrcella had more than enough reason to hate him. She blamed him for her being sent into a nest of snakes in the first place.

No doubt the moment Arianne asked her what to do with him, she’d gladly see him punished for his slights against her, even if she didn’t give a fuck about Joffrey.

He sighed, leaning his head back against the wall as the Martell guards moved forward.

“I don’t suppose we’ll be on the block when this happens?” Bronn quipped, but Tyene merely ignored him, coming to Tyrion’s cell, first, and opening the door. She let him out, and then hesitated outside of Bronn’s door.
Tyrion wondered if Arianne hadn’t mentioned him, and she was trying to decide what to do with him, now.

Bronn lifted his chin. “You’re not taking him without me,” he said, and Tyene blinked at him for a moment, before shrugging and gesturing for the guards to let him out of his cell, as well.

Tyrion stood to his feet, stretching his legs and finding that it didn’t help the painful pins and needles sensation running up and down his body, a sensation that was familiar from the last time he’d spent a good while inside a cell.

Gods, he was getting tired of being arrested on the whims of a woman.

He shook his head, following Tyene and her guards out of the room while Bronn muttered something about finally getting to see some fucking sunlight, and Tyrion almost couldn’t blame him for the sentiment, even as he tried to wrap his mind around what he might be able to say to someone as clearly hostile as Arianne that would convince her to see his side of things, to use him as a tool rather than an enemy.

And clearly, at the moment, she saw him as an enemy, if the way that she’d kept the two of them locked up here for so long was any indication.

Gods, this had been a fucking stupid plan, from beginning to end. Seeing Bronn again had clearly surprised him so much through his feverish alcoholic gaze that he had realized he needed to do something to help his family, to help Myrcella, who in all of this was an innocent when there were so many who were not, but he had been stupid to think that he could just walk into Dorne, a place openly hostile to the Lannisters, and convince them to take him seriously.

He was almost surprised they had not yet taken his head.

And he was almost surprised at that thought, for that was a part of the reason, he could admit, in the safety of his own mind, that he had suggested coming here of all places in the first place.

Perhaps he could help Myrcella, but if he couldn't, at least he could find a quick death, where Shae's disapproving gaze didn't follow him every time he walked into a whorehouse in Lys.

Now, though, he felt guilty about dragging Bronn into all of this, even if Bronn had been the one to drag him back here in the first place.

He made a face as they made their way out of the dungeons, down corridors full of people who turned and stared at the chained dwarf and the chained sellsword, no doubt wondering what the fuck they were still doing alive, Tyrion thought idly.

He ignored them all, staring straight ahead, knowing that not one of them would prove to be a friend to him. Yet.

Perhaps one day, if he managed to survive the next few hours, Tyrion thought, they could be useful.

For now, though, he ignored them.

Ignored them all of the way into the throne room, past the dozens of stone faced guards and shocked looking nobles standing within this throne room, and he wondered at that, for he would have thought that the Martells would be all too gleeful to announce, at least to their own people if not to the world, that they had managed to capture the world's most hated Lannister.

But then again, they had said nothing when they had captured Margaery Tyrell. Perhaps this was
simply more of the same.

He walked past them all, dragged along by the chain that Tyene Sand was holding, wondering if perhaps she would lead him like a horse all of the way to his death as they came to a sudden stop before the throne.

Tyrion kept his eyes on the floor, because that was preferable to the stares all around him, more likely to make eye contact with him if he did lift his head, now. He could hear their murmuring, and just now, that was bad enough.

Tyene, with a sort of savage pleasure, he couldn’t help but think, slammed Tyrion to his knees, and he grunted out in pain, glancing over nervously at Bronn, as the man fell to his knees with considerably more force beside him. He looked just as nervous as Tyrion suddenly felt, but he wasn’t looking at Tyrion.

He was staring up at the throne that this little slip of Martell girl had managed to steal from her own father, in the way that Tyrion had not even managed to take Casterly Rock from his in death.

And he wasn’t quite certain why he felt nervous; when Bronn had told him that he was returning to Westeros and Tyrion was damn well coming with him, Tyrion had resigned himself to whatever fates the gods decided to send him.

But now, on his knees before the impetuous Princess of Dorne, he found himself wondering if perhaps he wanted to live a little more than he’d thought.

After all, he’d let Bronn and Brienne kidnap him, hadn’t he?

"Our prisoners, Your Grace," a voice said, and Tyrion flinched at that appellation addressed towards Arianne Martell, wondered if perhaps Margaery Tyrell had conveniently forgot to reveal even more than she had, that they had lost Dorne some time ago.

That didn’t seem like the sort of thing she might do. He thought she would far rather rule over the whole of the Seven Kingdoms, if she thought she could get her hands on them, after all.

Tyrion struggled to feet again, at that thought, because he was not going to find himself on his knees, begging before the Princess of Dorne for his very life.

And then he looked up, and found himself meeting the eyes of someone who was most definitely not Arianne Martell.

He froze, legs wobbling slightly as the full weight of what he was seeing set in. Beside him, he heard Bronn swear savagely, finally seeming to come to his senses, though he had clearly known longer than Tyrion, in the last few seconds.

The guards around them shifted, clearly ready for a fight, if necessary.

“You should bend the knee before your Queen,” another one of Oberyn Martell’s daughters gritted out then, and Tyrion closed his eyes.

Fuck.

“I wasn’t aware that Princess Arianne had…” Tyrion gritted out, and then wondered what the point of that would even be.

After all, he didn’t even see her here, whereas here Myrcella was, sitting on a throne made of spun
glass and a stag’s head, a potent enough image, before him, looking just as lost as he suddenly felt.

She looked beautiful. She looked more like Cersei than Tyrion had ever known her to.

When she was a child, he had always thought she looked so much like Jaime he didn't understand how half of the Seven Kingdoms didn't see it as proof of who her father was.

She was wearing a crown of gold, more beautiful than Joffrey's had ever been.

She almost looked like she belonged on the throne, and that thought made Tyrion's heart hammer painfully in his chest. He wanted to yell at her, then, no matter how many people stood in front of them watching, wanted to grab her up in his arms and run away, if only they weren't chained, because she looked almost like she belonged on that throne, but not quite.

And he knew what would happen next, because of that one word. Almost.

“Myrcella,” he breathed, and was promptly threatened with the blunt edge of a spear for his trouble.

“Wait,” Myrcella said, and gods, what was happening? What the fuck were they doing, here?

He looked up at her, wide eyed.

She looked entirely too comfortable, on a throne, he thought. It was not the Iron Throne, but what the fuck did that matter, to the people of Dorne, who had never bent the knee to the Iron Throne in the first place?

“Uncle,” Myrcella breathed, looking as shocked to see him as he felt to see her.

Playing cyvasse against herself was entirely unsatisfying, Arianne realized, as she fiddled with the piece in her hand, determining her next move.

It didn’t matter what move she made, after all, when she was playing herself. She would lose, one way or another.

She sighed, slamming the piece down onto the board and reaching up to rub at her temples as she leaned back in the sole chair in her lonely cell.

It was difficult to concentrate on anything, even the game in front of her, her soul source of entertainment besides plotting her revenge, over and over in a dozen different scenarios, and sometimes she found herself wondering if this was what her father felt like, trapped in his chair, suffering gout, and wondering when he might get revenge for those he had lost, when all she could think about was…

Quentyn.

Her brother was dead, killed in Mereen after he had gone to meet this dragon that her father seemed to have staked their entire family's futures on. Killed running off to do their father’s bidding, as he’d always done, the perfect son, no matter what it was that their father demanded of him.

She sucked in a harsh breath, grimacing.

When she had set out to do all of this, Arianne hadn’t known what it would cost her. Originally, she had only intended to crown Myrcella, had hoped that once she had, her father would finally look at her, the daughter who had always been there, like he did Quentyn. Would finally see her as worthy of his secrets, would finally see her as worthy of his throne.
And now, Quentyn was gone. Quentyn was dead, and he hadn’t been her favorite brother, but she had loved him, in her own, slightly jealous way.

And she had never even gotten the chance to reconcile with him, after she had genuinely believed that he was trying to steal her throne. She had known him, near the end, as trying to steal that throne from her, when he had never been trying to do that.

He’d been trying to make her a queen, and he didn’t know her well enough, just as their father didn’t, to know that was something that Arianne could never want.

Even if she wasn’t entirely certain what it was that she did want, these days.

And now...dear gods, how things had changed, and yet so many of them hadn’t.

Quentyn was dead, Trystane was a captive in King’s Landing, and Arianne...

“Tyrion Lannister has met the Queen. At her coronation, no less. I dare say it was a bit dramatic,” Obara said, as she walked into the cell that Arianne had been placed into, several days after spending her time in a cell with Ellaria and realizing she would go mad, trying to convince the other woman that she was also a prisoner.

That every time Ellaria spoke, her teeth didn’t grit together and she didn’t want to hit the other woman.

The door shut behind her; the mute guards did not react at all, though surely they must have been suspicious about all of this. But they knew their place; knew who their Princess was.

Arianne took a careful breath, and then another.

“And did he believe it?” Arianne asked simply, glancing up from the game of cyvasse she had been playing against herself.

If he hadn’t, then all of this...the manipulations of the people she cared about, because she had cared about Gerold, once, the secret plots, her own arrest, dear gods, even the days she had spent in silent agony, in the knowledge that her brother was dead and that she, like her own mother, was unable to mourn him with anyone else, would have been for nothing.

She gritted her teeth.

She had been playing this game with one hand tied behind her back, thanks to her father, and because of that, not only was Quentyn dead, but she’d royally fucked up her own father’s plans in the fear that he was acting against her.

And because she had no interest in being queen, she supposed that she might as well set to work adding her newfound knowledge to her own plans, adjusting them accordingly.

If only she knew how.

But what she did know was that if Tyrion Lannister, a man somewhat renowned for his wit, even guessed at the truth about what was going on here, they would be more than fucked.

She supposed she finally understood, now that she, too, was forced to spend her days in here, what her father found so engrossing about playing a game against oneself. How she had to look at every advantage, every turn, had to sacrifice one thing for the good of another.
She sniffed, forcing those thoughts back into the void where they belonged.

She had been moved from the cell she had been sharing with Ellaria after the first few days of being there, after she had gotten what she wanted from the other woman.

Her cell now was at the top of the tower, far finer than the one that she had shared with Ellaria, and more spacious, as well. She had servants attending to her every need, because after all, it was meant to look like she had a choice in being here.

If anyone caught on to the conditions of her cell being less than ideal, they would realize what her husband had really done.

Obara grunted. “Of course he did,” she said. “All but had a laugh at our expense, when he realized that we were serious about crowning her, but the Imp seems a little unhinged, these days. Still, the Lannisters have always looked down on us; why should they be any different now?”

Arianne hummed. “You’re sure?” She said, turning and raising an eyebrow at Obara. “They say this Imp is very smart, very good at hiding his thoughts.”

And dear gods, she didn’t have the time to deal with another Lannister right now, but she supposed this was a good test of whether or not anything they were doing at the moment mattered.

And gods knew that her cousins were not...great at understanding the hidden depths of others.

Obara lifted her chin. “He believed it,” she repeated. “Though it’s probably for the best that Myrcella believes it so well.”

Arianne nodded absently, turning back to her game. “Yes, she is a stubborn little thing, but she’s not the greatest actor.”

She’d been able to tell that in recent months, trying to read the young girl as she switched from one personality to the next, trying to keep Arianne on her toes, just trying to survive.

Arianne hoped that now she had a crown upon her head, the girl would learn fast.

They didn’t have time for anything else, after all.

“Just as long as the Tyrells believe it,” Obara said, because in the end, Arianne knew that she was right.

Tyrion Lannister coming here and swearing allegiance to his niece when his sister was championing her brother, after supposedly killing his own nephew was fascinating, but in the end, it was not important.

If he did turn out to be some sort of spy, some sort of traitor, they could easily do away with him, in a kingdom surrounded by those who hated the Lannisters and would not blink twice at his removal.

But the important thing was that the Tyrells believed the pageantry, in an event that had once been meant to be slightly more genuine.

“When I was in that cell with Ellaria, I learned something...disturbing,” Arianne said, quietly.

Obara raised an eyebrow. “More disturbing than the fact that we’re going to war at a time when we should be hanging back?” She asked.

Arianne gave her an annoyed look. She knew that Obara was against this, now that she knew the full
truth, as Arianne did, even more than she had been when Arianne had first suggested it. But she
damn well wasn’t going to give up now.

Her father’s idiotic plan to crown her queen also relied on the same dragons who had screwed over
her aunt, and while she understood that it was only smart to not totally alienate new enemies,
Arianne had no intention of playing nice with them, either.

Still, Obara did deserve to know.

It was secrets that had destroyed her father’s chances at revenge, after all. Arianne was not going to
let them destroy hers, as well.

Arianne grimaced. “Ellaria was the one who sent the assassin after Willas Tyrell. She was all but
gleeful, to tell me about it.”

Obara’s brows furrowed, her mouth opening and closing. She swore softly, under her breath, about
summing up Arianne’s own feelings on the matter.

“But…the Lannisters did that,” she said finally, slowly.

Arianne grunted. “Apparently not,” she said. “Though I’m sure that Cersei Lannister was happy
enough for it to happen. No doubt, she thinks her son was responsible, and she ought to have some
happy thoughts about him, even in his death.”

Obara snorted, and then reached up, rubbing at her face. “Do you think our offer will actually tempt
Aegon?”

“It changes nothing,” Arianne said, softly, because it truly didn’t. “Save that we have confirmation
now that the alliance with the Tyrells would never have worked out. Which we already knew the
moment the Imp confirmed what my father said, that Aegon is coming.”

She had to admit, knowing that, after everything, was a bit of a relief. She had done the right thing,
with the information she’d had, even if it hadn’t been whole.

She moved the elephant on her board.

She had known all along, of course, that they wouldn’t be able to keep their word to the Tyrells.
That either they moved first, or the Tyrells would eventually betray them, because Margaery Tyrell
was willing to kill her now husband, and maybe even as she had made the deal, she had thought that
peace was attainable, but it certainly wasn’t, now.

The moment she learned, as she eventually would, that Willas Tyrell had been killed by an agent of
Ellaria’s, their deal would be off.

Arianne intended to be the one to profit from breaking off that deal first, though, even if a part of her
felt guilty for betraying Margaery, felt guilty for knowing what had really happened to Margaery
Tyrell’s brother.

But now…what mattered was that Margaery Tyrell had her brother, at the moment. That she, too,
had lost a brother, and it all had to be worth something, all had to mean something, these years that
she had been kept out of the loop about things which very much concerned her, things which could
have turned the tide of this war long ago.

She was going to make sure that it meant something.
“Gerold was always going to want to crown Myrcella,” Arianne went on, into the silence, “And we were always going to be sucked into a war. That is the one thing that my father doesn’t understand. For all his plots, his machinations, the people of Dorne don’t have his patience. They have fire in their blood, and the longer he stood by and did nothing, the more that fire festered.” She looked off, at the window to her cell. “This was always going to happen.”

Behind her, she heard Obara grunt. “The people may have wanted this war, but they’re not happy about Gerold being the one to lead it. You were the one who promised that you would lead the charge. They followed their Princess.”

Arianne hummed; she didn’t think the people of Dorne had liked her much more than they had cared for her father, after all, but she supposed she could understand their apprehension, at suddenly being handed over to Gerold Dayne.

“He is my husband,” she said. “They know that he speaks for me in all things.”

“He doesn’t seem to know that,” Obara pointed out, and Arianne smiled a bit, despite herself.

It was true; the plan had required keeping her husband in dark about his own role in it, because Arianne doubted he would like how that role ended, and so he hadn’t known that every step he’d taken had been a manipulation carefully plotted out by her and Obara, all this time.

Everything from the disgust he felt towards his new wife’s cowardice, to the actions he took to gain her throne.

It helped that he was so damned easily predictable, that Arianne had known him so long that she knew every damn thing about him.

She was going to enjoy finally putting him back in his place.

“The people think that he might have killed you, rather than locking you away because of some sickness, because of the danger. And they think you a coward, for not coming out, if you aren’t dead.”

Arianne snorted. “They think a great deal,” she said.

Obara shrugged a thin shoulder. “I told you, I never liked this plan, Arianne. Far too much subterfuge, and I’ve never been good at that.”

Arianne didn’t much care; at this point, she was running on fumes, was doing her best to hold things together, and Obara knew that.

It had been a solid plan, in the beginning. A damn good one, if Arianne did say so herself.

But back then, she’d had no idea that Aegon Targaryen was crossing the Narrow Sea. Had no idea that her brother was dead. Had no idea that her father intended to marry her off to Aegon like some broodmare.

It changed things, knowing that.

“If I was seen to be leading this charge,” Arianne said, calmly, “The Tyrells would have killed Trystane in retaliation, or at the very least, tried to use him against me. Gerold has no reason to care what happens to Trystane, and as long as I am not dead and not seen to be in charge, the Tyrells have a reason to keep him alive.”
She had thought that over a thousand times, how to keep Trystane safe after her father had sent him
to be a hostage in the first place, when she had been planning this betrayal all along. He was
already in a great deal of danger there in the first place, and if she got her brother killed, she would
never forgive herself.

Especially now, Arianne thought, swallowing hard as she thought of what her mother had told her,
that thing at the back of her mind that she had been trying valiantly not to think about, ever since she
had been dumped into this cell.

Quentyn was dead. She had lost one brother, and she damn well did not intend to lose another, not to
her ambitions, like her father had lost both Quentyn...and herself.

She grimaced, shutting her eyes tightly as she acknowledged that not so very long ago, she had not
been so concerned about her only remaining brother’s survival. She had been convinced that Lady
Nym, for all her faults, would keep him safe.

Now, though, she could not afford to take that risk. This had been the only way to go through with a
plan that she was no longer certain was a good one.

“You know, you can be a cold bitch, sometimes,” Obara said, into the silence that followed.

Arianne snorted. “Says the woman who vowed to kill her own sister, after her betrayal,” she said.

“Trystane never betrayed you,” Obara pointed out. “He’s practically a child.”

She was angry, Arianne realized suddenly. She supposed Obara had reason for that.

“But he’s not a child,” she countered. “He’s the husband of the new Queen of the Seven Kingdoms,
and if he were here, he would be a direct threat to Gerold. You and I both know that Gerold has less
patience than the Tyrells; if he thought Trystane would try to take the regency away from him, he’d
have my brother killed just as likely as the Tyrells might have done.”

Obara swallowed, not bothering to refute the claim. She knew it to be true as much as Arianne did.

Gerold Dayne was a force to be reckoned with, even if he was rather thick. They could not
underestimate him, as Arianne had once underestimated her father.

“You know, there’s still time,” Obara said, her words slow, measured. Arianne suspected that she’d
been talking with Tyene. “We could try to call off this off.”

Arianne laughed bitterly. “Then the people of Dorne really wouldn’t care if my husband did away
with me. To offer them hope, something that even my own father didn’t do, and then take it away?
They’d hate me as much as they hate the Lannisters. You know this is what we have to do.”

Obara swallowed; she knew that, of course.

“No,” Arianne continued, “We’ll just have to figure out a way around all of these dragons, one that
doesn’t involve me marrying one.”

Obara snorted. “You think the Dragon Queen would be interested?”

Arianne shrugged, thinking painfully of the words that her mother had whispered in her ear, shortly
before her husband had her arrested.

No, she doubted very much that the dragon queen would be interested in any sort of agreement that
Arianne tried to make with her, especially with the callous way that she had reacted to Quentyn’s death.

All of their hopes were now pinned on a young man that Doran had promised her hand in marriage to, a man that Arianne very much did not intend to marry.

After all, if she did, all of the plans she had made thus far, all of the sacrifices, would have been for nothing.

Quentyn’s death would have been for nothing, the danger she had placed Trystane in would have been for nothing. Locking up her own father would have been for nothing.

She would go back to being her father’s pawn, Myrcella would likely lose her head, and Dorne would be once again under the thrall of the Iron Throne.

Arianne intended to avoid all of those things, if she could manage it.

Obara let out a sigh. “Tyene accused us of being heartless for even considering this,” she said, and Arianne moved back to the cyvasse board, moving a piece against herself.

The elephant, again.

She licked her lips, thought of the look in her father’s eyes, as he promised fire and blood and vengeance. Thought of look on her mother’s face, as she begged her not to tell her father about Quentyn’s death.

Quentyn, who had died because he had dared want for more than he could have.

She shook her head. “You know I would not consider it unless I thought that Dorne had no other choice,” she reminded Obara. “I love that girl.”

If she said it enough times, she thought she might begin to believe it, as well.
Aegon Targaryen stood in the halls that had once belonged to the Usurper King, lips pressed together in a thin line as he watched the servants tear down the flags that had been hung, flags of the Tyrells’ green and yellow roses, and breathed in the smell of salt water.

Storm’s End was a beauty of a castle. If it had not been protected by what amounted to a skeleton army, he thought, it would have been nearly impossible to take. It was a fortress, and a perfect place for Aegon to begin his campaign, in Westeros.

He watched as his men moved around him, either going to explore the rest of the castle or going to secure the prisoners that they had taken, now that the fighting was over, feeling an odd sense of pride for their bravery during the battle, before his eyes sought out the chair belonging to the Lord of Storm’s End, a fixture in the Great Hall of the castle.

A chair which now belonged to him, by rights.

He wondered if he would feel comfortable, sitting on it. It certainly looked more comfortable than the Iron Throne, but he still felt strange, having finally set foot on the shores of Westeros.

Even the air seemed to smell different here, cooler than he was used to but saltier, as well.

He wondered how long it would take him to feel like he truly belonged here.

Beside him, Jon reached out, placing a hand on his shoulder, and Aegon started a little, from the contact, not having noticed Jon sneak up on him.

“How does it feel, Your Grace?” He asked, quietly. “To have won your first kingdom with only a minimal spilling of blood?”

Aegon forced himself to smile, as he turned to face Jon.

It felt good, he admitted, in the privacy of his own mind. Even better than he had been expecting it to feel.

He had realized, during the fighting over Griffin’s Roost, that the queasiness he felt before a battle, before the idea of one, was a foolish sensation, as he had begun the fighting.

He wanted to be known as a merciful king, but there was something about joining a fight, once he faced the actual action of it, which made the queasiness in his stomach recede, made him think of nothing but the fight before him, and finishing it quickly.

Jon, who knew exactly what he was thinking, it seemed, by pointing that out, and a little relief spread through Aegon as he reminded himself that he had done this in the most merciful way that he could, with the least amount of blood spilled.

Jon’s ancestral home of Griffin’s Roost had fallen easily, as well, for which Aegon was also grateful, and after that, they had marched on Storm’s End at Jon’s suggestion, the men still high on the victory.
He had wanted Aegon to stay at Griffin’s Roost, where he would be safe, but Aegon had insisted on leading the charge so that he would not lose the respect of his men, even with the queasy feeling in his stomach that had accompanied the attack on Griffin’s Roost, at the thought of fighting against those who just believed that they were defending their home.

He had officially named Jon as Hand of the King, at his ancestral home, before they had left, and as once again the Lord of Griffin’s Roost, had seen the tears in Jon’s eyes at the knowledge that after all of these years, he was finally home again.

But he was right. As with the rest of the greatest keeps of the Stormlands, Storm’s End had fallen easily; the few remaining soldiers there belonging to Stannis Baratheon were discouraged by the rumors that Stannis had died somewhere North of the Wall, for all anyone knew, and were nothing more than captives of the Tyrells, who had taken the place some time ago for themselves, rather than for Joffrey, as Aegon had heard it told.

They had declared it for Joffrey once Margaery Tyrell had returned from the dead and to her husband’s side, and now, it still belonged to them.

But the Tyrell forces, the few of them that remained there after so many had been recalled to King’s Landing to protect the new Regent there, had been no match for the Golden Company.

They had surrendered by the end of the third night, and Aegon had felt relief, a part of him hoping, even as he knew it was unrealistic, that the rest of the war would go this easily.

They had even allowed those who had surrendered, or, as much of them as they could, to live, some to write letters back to the Tyrells to tell them of the defeat, and the rest to be imprisoned beneath the castle, as Aegon decided what to do with them.

The Golden Company had made it clear they thought the men ought to be killed, but Jon had advised caution, and Aegon thought it wasn’t right to kill men outside of the heat of battle, not after they had surrendered.

Instead, he wanted to give them the chance to bend the knee.

Jon had seemed...somewhat skeptical that the men eventually would bend the knee, but Aegon had faith that he would be able to show them a better way, than did all of the lords and ladies of the Seven Kingdoms, now.

Would be able to show them the kind of king that he wished to be.

“How long do you think it will be,” Aegon asked quietly, as they walked out of the Great Hall and into a narrow corridor, not entirely certain where they were going, “before the rest of the Seven Kingdoms learns that we’ve taken the Stormlands?”

Jon pressed his lips together. “Not long, Your Grace,” he said, and Aegon shifted a little, not liking the way the title fit on Jon’s lips so easily. “King’s Landing will be the first and most immediate threat; they are closest, and have much to lose, by this.”

Aegon grimaced. That was something he had hoped to avoid, if only Stannis had remained in Westeros where he would be available to fight, though he had a feeling that Jon would never have let him go up against Stannis first, and alone.

He did not much like the thought of taking the Stormlands only to turn and steal King’s Landing away from a pregnant woman and an unborn child.
With the Stormlands, it had been easier. Griffin’s Roost was Jon’s home, a place that was only being returned to its rightful heir, and the rest of the Stormlands…well, Jon had forced the Golden Company to swear that there would be no raping, something that Aegon too had insisted on.

He was not that sort of king, and he would not lead that sort of army. The women of the castles they had come upon had been placed under house arrest, but had not been treated unduly. Aegon had insisted, before he left those places in the hands of his men, that the women be treated as they were accustomed to, only not allowed to leave or send letters out of their keeps.

But this…attacking Margaery Tyrell in her Keep, as one of his greatest threats…

Something about it felt…dirty.

They walked down another corridor, and then came to a stop before a rather opulent room.

Jon stopped, hand still on Aegon’s shoulder, and gestured for him to go inside.

Aegon sucked in a breath, at the sight of it.

“These will be your chambers for as long as Storm’s End is where we direct the war from, Your Grace,” Jon informed him, as Aegon glanced around. “Fit for a king.”

Aegon licked his lips.

Certainly a step up in the world, he thought, almost idly, before turning to face Jon.

He didn’t ask if these rooms had once belonged to Robert Baratheon, if Stannis had used them. He wasn’t certain he wanted to know the answer.

“I want to be a good king,” he told Jon. “Do you think…I don’t want to cause unnecessary hurt to these usurpers.” Especially when they were only scared mothers, from what he understood. “I want to give them the chance to bend the knee, if they’ll take it.”

Jon grimaced. Aegon knew that he didn’t approve, that he was furious that so many Houses had so easily turned against Aegon’s father, but he was afraid he was going to have to insist, if Jon did argue with him.

Jon may be his Hand, but Aegon did not want to be a conqueror, like his namesake.

He wanted to be the sort of king that the people didn’t loathe enough to forget about, the moment the next claimant came along.

“As of right now, we’ve been assured, King’s Landing is rather distracted,” Jon admitted, and Aegon’s head lifted. “With the funeral of the late false King, Joffrey. Cersei Lannister was even invited to attend the funeral, from what I understand.”

Aegon gulped. He didn’t like the thought of attacking a pregnant woman and a grieving mother, but even he had to admit that the fact that both of his opponents in this war were in the same place was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

He had a feeling that the Golden Company would not forgive him if he did so, either.

That was a surprise, though, that Cersei had been invited to King’s Landing, given what he knew of the animosity between the Queen Mother and Margaery Tyrell.

“And when they’re no longer distracted?” Aegon asked, impatiently, not wanting to hear the other
man tell him that.

Jon sighed. “Then…if Your Grace commands it, we will give them the chance to bend the knee. But
in the mean time, I think it would be prudent to stage an attack, while we’re ahead, on some of the
Crownlands. Or to deal with Dorne.”

Aegon’s brows furrowed. The last he’d heard, Dorne hadn’t had to be something they needed to
‘deal with’ the way Jon had said it needling him.

No one had ever taken Dorne, he remembered reading. When it had finally been absorbed into the
Seven Kingdoms, it was only because Dorne had wanted it that way.

He didn’t want to fight his mother’s homeland, either.

“And what of Dorne?” He asked. “Have we gotten a response from them?”

Jon grimaced. “Not…as such, from Prince Doran, Your Grace,” he warned, “but there is something
that you should know.”

Aegon eyed him; he had a feeling he wasn’t going to like whatever the other man had to say, much
to his annoyance.

He had thought, as Jon had once assured him, that Dorne would be one of the easier kingdoms to
bring to bear. They were his mother’s family, and he didn’t like the thought of being at odds with
them.

Jon let out a sigh.

“There has been a…shift in power in Dorne, of late, and Myrcella Baratheon was just crowned
Queen of the Seven Kingdoms by Ser Gerold Dayne and Oberyn Martell’s bastard daughters.”

Aegon sucked in a breath. “Myrcella Baratheon?” He repeated.

That…made little sense to him. He had heard of the shift in power, of course, had heard that Prince
Doran’s faction had started to abandon him in favor of his daughter, who called for peace with the
Tyrells and war with the Lannisters, but this…this was something completely foreign.

Besides all of that, her brother still lived, and was the rightful king before her, according to Westerosi
law, even if Dornish law was somewhat different. She had no real right to the throne.

Clearly, she was just a pawn in the hands of these new overlords of Dorne, and the thought made
him angry in a way he couldn’t quite explain.

And it meant that the War of the Five Kings, as they had begun to call it in Essos, was beginning
again.

He didn’t like the thought.

Jon nodded. “She was crowned in the night, while we were taking the Stormlands, Your Grace,” he
informed Aegon. “The Dornish are calling for a war, to support her claim.”

Aegon reached up, pinching the bridge of his nose.

That was…not good. They had counted on the people of Dorne supporting Aegon’s claim, not
Myrcella’s.
“So…there are three Lannister children vying for the throne, right now,” Aegon said. He paused; one of them unborn. “Do you think that there is a way to…upset this new balance in Dorne, and bring my mother’s brother back to power?”

Jon shook his head, and Aegon’s brows furrowed, wondering if he had forgotten some other bastard out there.

“No, Your Grace,” he said. “Tommen Baratheon was just taken from the Rock, no doubt by the Tyrells. If he does reach King’s Landing alive, Cersei won’t have a King to champion. As for Doran…perhaps.”

Aegon’s eyes narrowed, his gut twisting at what Jon had just insinuated.

“You think the Tyrells would kill the boy?” He asked, something about the idea unsettling him after he had just come to the conclusion that he didn’t want to kill their pregnant regent or her child, once it was born.

Surely, there was some other way, to avoid so many innocent deaths.

Surely a mother wouldn’t kill a boy as young Tommen.

Jon’s jaw twitched. “I think that it is…a possibility we cannot ignore, Your Grace,” he reminded Tommen. “Which is why we need to act decisively, now.”

Aegon closed his eyes. He had known this advice was coming, of course, but that didn’t mean he had to like it. “You think we should attack King’s Landing.”

Jon eyed him. “There is…something else which we need to do, first, Your Grace.”

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The feast that the Golden Company had insisted upon, when they successfully took Storm’s End, lasted nearly half of the first night of their arrival there. It was rowdy; they were a group of mercenaries, and Aegon had expected nothing less, despite the discipline they displayed while fighting.

But Jon had insisted that rewarding the men, even if they were not doing so with money quite yet, was important. That they needed to keep up morale, and when half of the Golden Company had been slightly skeptical about leaving their post in Myr to raise arms for a boy no one had ever heard of, Aegon supposed he could understand why doing so was important.

Still, he loathed these sorts of things.

He would be much more comfortable exploring the many halls of Storm’s End, understanding this place which had served as home to his enemies, once.

He wondered if Stannis Baratheon, North of the Wall as they now knew he was, had heard yet that a Targaryen had stolen his ancestral home from him. He wondered what these old halls had to say about one of their previous inhabitants.

Aegon sighed, reaching down to take another sip of the wine in front of him as he watched one of the men challenge the other to a mock fight, watched the men start to cheer as if they were not yet tired of war.

The fight for Storm’s End, as Jon had said, had been mostly bloodless, and he knew these men had been hired for such a purpose, that sooner or later, they were going to tire of sitting around or taking
castles so easily. That they were already hungering to take King’s Landing, while he dreaded it.

But he could not quite understand their constant interest in fighting.

By his side, his closest friend amongst these men, Rolly, leaned close to him. “Something the matter?” he asked, leaving off the title Jon was insisting they all call him by now, though in technicality Aegon did not quite have a crown, yet.

Aegon forced a smile as he took a sip of his wine, so that Rolly could not see the whole of his face. “I’m fine,” he assured his friend, because it was not as if he could have such a conversation here.

Rolly stared at him for a moment, and then clapped him on the shoulder. “I know you’re eager to finish this war,” he said, and Aegon raised an eyebrow in surprise; he hadn’t realized he was being so obvious. “But have faith, Your Grace. In the mean time, you have the right to enjoy yourself a little bit, you realize.”

He snorted, and Aegon glanced up, with half a feeling that Rolly was talking about something specifically. When he did, he noticed the serving girl staring at him, in the corner of the room, while she refilled the wine glasses of the men at the table she was closest to.

They were all staring at her; she wasn’t the prettiest thing that Aegon had ever seen, somewhat mousy and rather short, but there was something about that intense look in her eyes, as they met his...

The girl noticed Aegon’s stare, and lifted her eyes, meeting his eyes for a single moment before she winked at him and turned away, pouring another knight’s glass of wine.

Aegon swallowed, startled when he knew he shouldn’t be by the girl’s obvious flirtation.

“She’s beautiful,” Rolly said, by his side, and Aegon resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He had almost forgotten that the other boy was there, under that girl’s dark gaze, and he reached out with a shaky hand to take a sip of his wine.

Rolly chuckled at his expense, and stabbed the meat on his fork a little harder.

She was beautiful, Aegon could admit, in the privacy of his own mind. Beautiful, and unattainable, because he was a king and she was a Tyrell servant. Because the Tyrells had claimed this place after Stannis Baratheon had left, just as they had tried to claim Dragonstone.

If he was going to marry a woman, it was going to be either his aunt, once he had convinced her that he was a worthy contender for the Iron Throne and that their combined strength was better than the two of them fighting apart, or Arianne Martell, as his mother’s brother wanted.

But if Dorne was truly lost to them…

He shuddered a little, at the thought. He didn’t want Dorne to be lost to them, even if he secretly thought it would be a better idea to wed his aunt than his cousin, with her army of Dothraki and three dragons.

He shook his head, forcing such thoughts from his mind with another glass of wine.

Tonight was meant to be a night of celebration, after all not of plots, and he intended to make the most of it.

After all, who knew where the coming days would lead them?
Suddenly, the fighting on the floor came to an end, and Aegon blinked in surprise, glancing over at Jon, who was dinging his spoon against his glass in order to get the attention of the men.

The room was totally quiet, then.

Aegon found himself almost jealous of the way that Jon could gain the attention of all of these men so easily, when Aegon always felt strangely inadequate, around all of them, rightful heir to the throne or no. Like he was a boy playing at a silly game, rather than a prince asking them to help him take back his birthright.

“Today was a victory for House Targaryen!” He announced, and the men were hesitant for a moment, before they began cheering for the words.

Aegon knew that they had a rather complicated history with House Targaryen, after all, but he was glad that they were able to put that aside, for this. For justice.

“But more than that,” Jon continued, and Aegon wished he had the man’s confidence, to speak before all of these men, to rally them with more than just the promise of money, “This was a victory for all of us, today. A step closer to taking back the Seven Kingdoms from the despair that they’ve fallen into.”

The cheer, this time, was a little louder.

Aegon noticed that Lord Harry did not cheer while the others did, despite being the one who had ultimately agreed to come with them, on this journey. He tried not to let it bother him, though.

“We do not have a High Septon on hand, because we have yet to take King’s Landing and because there are…doubts, about the one they’ve appointed there,” Jon said, and there were chuckles throughout the crowd, accompanying a joke Aegon didn’t really understand, because the last High Septon he remembered reading about from their spies had been that fanatical one who was dead, now, “But we would not be able to do this properly without a septon, and there is one on hand, for us.”

He gestured, and the man stepped forward, a little shakily. Aegon wondered what he thought they were going to do to him, anyway.

They needed him alive, even if his loyalty was to House Tyrell, to make this legitimate, and he doubted that a septon would be foolish enough to refuse to do as they were asking.

Besides, Aegon did not like the thought of killing septons.

Jon spread his arms wide. “This will be done again, with rather more pomp and ceremony, I assume, once we take King’s Landing, but for now, I give you: King Aegon!”

And despite what Aegon thought they all thought of him personally, the men cheered again, at that, raising their wine glasses and their mead to cheer a boy who had not yet become King.

And Jon pulled him to his feet, led him to the front of the Great Hall, where Stannis Baratheon had once sat to preside over his people, and he could feel the mousy eyes of the servant girl searing into his back along with all of the rest.

The septon that they had found was dragged forward, despite the man’s stuttering protests that he did not have the right to do what they required of him.

“Nonsense,” Jon said. “We require only the blessing of the Faith.”
The Faith, Aegon thought, still feeling a little blindsided as he stood before this large chair. He knew that gaining their support was important; not a year ago, the King had nearly lost his throne, as well as his queen’s head, because of the Faith.

They needed the Faith to give their approval of his kingship, or they would never be able to successfully hold King’s Landing, Jon had told him, even as he told him that the Faith was something to be used, and not to be followed.

The septon sighed, looking like a rather put upon grandfather, in this moment, and Aegon almost would have laughed at that image in his head if his palms weren’t suddenly sweating.

This was not how he had thought he was going to be named King, but he supposed it made sense. He needed to be a King before he took King’s Landing, or Margaery Tyrell and her goodmother would never take his claim seriously. They didn’t care, he knew, whether he was a Targaryen or not; their claims to the throne themselves were by the right of conquest, were by feudal law, that his grandfather and his father had failed them as rulers, and so they had taken the throne to protect the Realm.

He would just have to prove himself to them. And if he could do it without shedding their blood, the way his grandfather had shed the blood of so many...all the better.

As he sank down into this chair, though, that felt suddenly like very difficult work.

“King Aegon of House Targaryen, Sixth of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and of the First Men, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms. Long live the King!” The septon’s voice grew louder as he continued, until he managed to shout out the last bit, but no one seemed to notice his earlier hesitancy.

Jon handed him something, something that made Aegon tense when he saw it, realizing what it was. He wondered, for a moment, first where Jon had gotten it, since coming up here, and then where he had gotten it, before that.

For all that it was beautiful and golden, it looked old, even from here. He handed it to the septon, who blinked at it for a moment before sighing tiredly.

Aegon’s lips quirked in amusement; no one else had seen it, but Jon was giving the man a rather fierce glare.

“Long live the King!” The crowd cheered.

Aegon lifted his head, the crown feeling rather strange and heavy atop it, and waited for their cries to fall silent before he spoke.

“You have all served me well, in getting me this far,” he told the men, a little startled by the way that his voice boomed out through the Great Hall.

He supposed he understood the septon’s earlier nervousness, now.

“I swear to you that when I take my throne in King’s Landing, I shall repay you all for that,” he said, and this time, when the men cheered, he thought that they meant it, that it was not just politeness and drunkenness.

And that...felt better than he had expected it to.

King. And more than that, a king to whom men listened.
Jon, where he stood at Aegon’s right hand, gave him a quiet smile and a nod. He may be Aegon’s Hand, but he believed in him, Aegon knew, and that felt good, too.

Lord Harry, Lord Commander of the Golden Company, came forward, dipping into a bow before him.

He knew that Harry had never been very fond of him; that he doubted whether or not Aegon was the true son of his father, that he was weary of the fight, that he hadn't liked leaving his contract in Myr, though the rest of his men had been happy to promise their allegiance to Aegon in return for taking Westeros for him, and getting much out of it themselves.

But the man had fought admirably, these past few weeks, in the taking of most of the Crownlands, and Aegon thought that he deserved to be recognized, for that.

They had lost many good men to storms, on the passage over to Westeros, much to Aegon’s chagrin, and nearly half of their forces had been lost on the way over here, but it had still been enough to overtake the Tyrells at Storm’s End.

It still felt strange, to see men bow to him and call him “king.”

“For your great services to the Crown,” Aegon informed him, voice booming loudly out through the hall in a way that made him shift nervously in the makeshift throne, “I name you Lord of War to the King.”

He knew that he could not name him Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, partially because he was uncertain if the other man would accept the title and partially because Jon had told him not to name anyone else to the Kingsguard.

He had not approved of Aegon naming his friend, “Duck,” to the Kingsguard, he said, because he wanted those positions left open for the sons of high lords of Westeros, which would bind them better to Aegon’s side.

And Aegon supposed that he understood the wisdom in that, but he did not regret naming Rolly. The other boy was his closest friend, or what amounted to one, and had been the one to help teach him to fight, as they prepared for this war.

Rolly, where he was still seated at the feasting tables, was grinning up at him.

And, standing beside him, refilling the glass that Aegon had left behind there, was the serving girl who had caught his eye earlier.

They made eye contact for a moment, and then she winked at him. Aegon could feel himself flushing, hoping that no one else would notice.

He told himself that it could just as easily be written off as nervousness, after what had just happened.

After he had just been crowned. King of the Seven Kingdoms.

He wondered, sometimes, if the gods allowed the dead to look down on the world they had left behind.

He wondered, if his mother was watching him, if she was proud of him.

“Tomorrow,” Jon said then, interrupting him, “We march on Dragonstone,” he announced, and the
men cheered. “And after that,” a pause, and even Aegon found himself catching his breath then, because he knew what was coming, knew, and still loathed it, all the same. “King’s Landing!”

The men cheered again.

Aegon closed his eyes, letting out a slow breath.

“Long live the King!” Jon shouted, and the men took up the chant, until Aegon almost forgot what Jon had announced, almost forgot what their plan was.

Almost forgot how many people might end up suffering, because of it.

“Rolly,” Aegon announced loudly as his friend all but dragged him down the hall, towards the chambers that had once belonged to both Robert and then Stannis Baratheon, swaying dangerously, “You’re my closest friend.”

Rolly let out a laugh. “You can’t hold your liquor, Your Grace,” he said, and Aegon swatted this off the way that one might swat a fly.

Jon had said the same thing when he had dismissed Aegon to go to bed like a much younger child, not half an hour earlier. He hadn’t looked quite as amused as Rolly was now, though.

“You have to tell me,” Aegon said, giggling slightly at the reminder himself, “Did I look ridiculous up there, with that crown on my head?”

Rolly snorted; for all that he was half carrying Aegon, Aegon was not entirely sure that he was any more sober than he himself was, for all his self-righteousness and amusement at Aegon’s expense.

“Very, Your Grace,” he said, putting a rather large emphasis on the title. “Like a pompous prick, I have to say. You know, they say the Governor in Braavos looks like that, every time he goes out in public.”

Aegon rolled his eyes. “Isn’t he dead, now? I thought they replaced him with someone a little more...humble.”

Rolly shrugged. “Not really my area,” they came to a sudden stop in front of the rooms that had been allotted for Aegon. “This, though?” he smirked. “You’re welcome.”

Aegon’s brows knit in confusion. “Huh?”

Rolly rolled his eyes. “Well, why don’t you go in and find out?” he asked.

Aegon swallowed hard, staring at the shut door. “There’s something about it,” he admitted. “Sleeping in the chambers of the men who owned this place before I took it. It feels…”

Wrong, he wanted to say, but the word caught in his throat.

Rolly snorted again. “Better get used to that, Your Grace. You know how many kings have died after sleeping in the nicest chambers in King’s Landing?” Aegon made a face. “Besides,” Rolly went on, giving him a little push past the guards and into the room itself, “I got you a little present that might help you forget that.”

Aegon glanced back sharply at him as the door opened, and then, as it did, abruptly had his question answered.
The mousy haired serving girl who had met his eyes in the throne room was standing in the middle of his chambers now, not wearing a stitch of clothing on her. She smirked, when Aegon’s eyes trailed her form, his mouth parting slightly.

The guards, behind him, made a sharp noise before being shut off with a glare from Rolly, who stepped up behind Aegon and rested his hands on Aegon’s shoulders.

“I saw the way you were looking at her, earlier,” Rolly whispered, in his ear. Then, “Don’t worry; she said she was...very willing, when I asked.”

Aegon swallowed thickly.

Rolly clapped him on the shoulder, again, letting go of him then, and Aegon stumbled forward a little bit before righting himself, not wanting to look like a complete fool in front of this girl, and in front of Rolly. Still, Rolly snorted at his expense.

And then, Rolly was gone, the door slamming shut behind him. Aegon jumped a little, at the noise, and saw the way the serving girl’s lips curled into a smirk.

“Your Grace,” the mousy serving girl said, dipping into a bow before him.

He squinted at her.

“Something wrong, Your Grace?” she asked, all but batting her eyelashes at her, and Aegon shook his head, slowly.

“Only that I’m surprised you would call me that, considering what House your loyalty belongs to,” he pointed out, and the girl blinked at him a moment longer, before humming.

She shook her head. “Once, House Tyrell pledged their loyalty to House Targaryen and fought against the Baratheons in the Rebellion,” she said, shrugging. “So I see nothing wrong with...continuing that loyalty.”

Yes, that was troubling, Aegon thought, his brows furrowing.

He wanted to find a way to end all of this without excessive bloodshed, and yet, he knew that it would be difficult to trust House Tyrell at all, even if they did come to some sort of fragile peace. They gave their word so easily, and so easily did they turn around and give it to someone else, when it suited them.

They had pledged to House Targaryen, and had sat outside this very castle for all of those long months of the Rebellion, not wanting to side with the rebels themselves but not willing to shed real blood in case House Targaryen lost the war.

Besides, it had been easier for Mace Tyrell, more profitable, to sit outside of Storm’s End and try to starve out children than to fight against Robert Baratheon and his hordes, as Jon had explained to him.

It was almost fitting, then, that this was where Aegon had been crowned. He wondered if that was why Jon had insisted on it tonight.

But still, if he could find a way to trust their word, Aegon thought, he would very much like to.

He cocked his head at the mousy young woman before him. The more he looked at her, the more beautiful she became.
“In fact,” she said, moving closer to him, “I can’t help but think that I ought to be the one to…prove that loyalty, just now.” She reached out, running a hand down his arm.

Aegon went still, at the touch.

She blinked up at him, seductively. “Have you ever been with a woman?” she asked, quietly.

He blinked at her, unwilling to tell her that he had never even kissed a woman.

But she just smiled, reaching up for the buttons of his dress shirt in silence.

“I can offer you nothing,” he told her, as his hands swept down her shoulders, unbidden, while she pulled his shirt open.

She laughed, a beautiful sound, like tinkling glass, and surged forward, kissing him.

It was the first time that Aegon had ever felt a woman’s kiss. She was soft, and warm, and he leaned into it desperately.

“I know,” she said, pulling back and giving him a beatific smile. Then, she pushed him back gently against the wall. “I am a mere servant, you a…” her hands swept down his chest, down towards his trousers, “Great king. And I have…always wanted to know what one tastes like.”

He stared at her.

And then, slowly, he smiled.

He wasn’t betrothed to anyone yet, after all.

And besides, he’d heard that his aunt had been with many women. He might as well get some practice in.

He dreamt of his mother, that night.

He couldn’t remember what she looked like, had only vague afterimages of warmth and kindness, knew from Jon that she had been very beautiful, even if that beauty had failed to keep his father enticed.

But, for all that Jon had said that with a certain sadness in his voice, as if he thought that if only Aegon’s lovely mother had managed to do so, some things might have been avoided, Aegon did not blame his mother for that.

Whatever wife he ended up with, he intended to treat her with enough respect to avoid beginning a war, as his father had done.

In his dream, she was screaming.

He’d had this dream before; multiple times, in fact, and somehow, while he slept, he knew it was just another dream, and yet still, he felt that cold feeling sweeping over him, as his mother screamed.

He awoke in a cold sweat, heard one of the guards coming in, asking him if everything was all right, if he was being attacked, but Aegon waved the other man off, reaching up to mop at his face.

He didn’t understand what the dream meant, didn’t know if it was just his nightmares reasserting themselves, the nightmares he’d had shortly after Jon had told him what really happened to his
parents, why his mother had never been there for him, in his childhood, and that she hadn't just died in childbirth, as he'd always been told before that. No, instead she'd died in one of the worst ways imaginable...

He wondered if history was doomed to repeat itself.

Aegon sighed, sitting up in the bed and reaching for his trousers, where they had ended up discarded on the floor, earlier. It felt so foolish, just now, to have wasted time with such frivolities when he had all but forgotten what he was really doing here, what all of this was about.

He didn't want to shed blood, didn't want history to repeat itself, but wasn't he doing all of this for a good reason? To prevent such things from happening again? He should not have lost sight of that, even for a moment. Jon's admonition about drinking, earlier, made a sick sort of sense, now that he felt far too sober.

His mother had been screaming, in his dreams, because he had yet to fulfill his promise to her, the one he had made to the stars the same night that Jon had finally told him who he really was. His promise to avenge her.

For a moment, he found himself wondering where the serving girl - Aenea, she had said her name was - had gone, before he remembered that they had never quite made it to the bed. That she had insisted it would not be proper for a serving girl to share the bed of a king, and then had all but begged him to take her against the wall outside of his chambers.

He hadn't been quite brave enough for that, but she had been happy enough with the wall inside his bedchambers, all the same.

He wondered if that was something...normal, for a servant, or if this was because she was a Tyrell. He knew very little about their people, but their Queen had already had two husbands, was angling for a third, apparently.

Perhaps, like in Essos and the other Free Cities, such things did not concern them as much as they did other lords and ladies in Westeros.

He smiled slightly, at the memory, even if he still felt vaguely guilty for losing sight of his purpose here for even that small amount of time, before shaking his head towards the guard asking after him.

“Actually,” he called to the servant, “I need you to find me a quill and some parchment.”

He would not become like his father, or Robert Baratheon, or any of these other men who had thought that they could stand by and let women be butchered for the throne.

After all, he was taking the throne to put an end to all of the fighting, not to cause more suffering.

He licked his lips. “And I need a messenger awoken, to take a message for me.”

The guard blinked at him. “To where, Your Grace?”

He swallowed, knowing that if he told the man, it would make its way back to Jon, who would try to stop him from doing this, he knew. But...he had to try. “To King’s Landing.”

Chapter End Notes
Shorter chapter today, but let me know what you think!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!