# Trials and Tricks

**Rating:** Explicit  
**Archive Warning:** Major Character Death, Rape/Non-Con, Graphic Depictions Of Violence  
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**Fandom:** A Song of Ice and Fire - George R. R. Martin, Game of Thrones (TV), A Song of Ice and Fire & Related Fandoms  
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## Summary

“This girl is not your sister, Jon, nor is she the girl you once knew. She’s accused of murdering a child. The Lords of the Vale are determined to see her brought to trial for Robert Arryn’s death. Furthermore, she was found with Petyr Baelish’s blood literally on her hands.”
Altered summary:
Years after the war, dangerous circumstances reunite Sansa Stark, former Queen in the North and now Lady of Winterfell and accused traitor and murderer, with Jon, now Prince Jon of the Targaryen Empire. Together with some old friends and Jon's Aunt Dany, they try to cope, stay alive, sane, and keep the new empire afloat. Politics, intrigue, action, angst, romance and sex abound.

Notes

Hey this is my first archive work! Let me know what you think!

Basically, this is my idea of what could happen and how fucked up things can get in this series, and how characters cope with bleak outcomes. Lots of dialogue and legal stuff, especially in this first chapter. More personal/sexy stuff to follow.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The Accused

Chapter One: The Accused

The entire throne room was silent but for the sound of Missendei’s voice echoing. The crowds gathered on either side of the central aisle were silent as the grave.


Jon gripped Longclaw’s hilt, his knuckles a bright white underneath his thick leather gloves. He stood upon the royal dais with his eyes glued to the accused, who stood quietly before the steps of the dais, her blue eyes staring straight ahead. She was trying to pretend that she wasn’t shivering violently, but it was no secret. She had every reason to shiver. The fact that she was being dragged before the Dragon Queen and the court to answer to a whole host of severe charges would have been enough to make any young woman lose their composure. Sansa was also standing in the large, cavernous throne room dressed in nothing more than a length of dirty sackcloth that barely went past her abdomen. And it was still winter.

Jon had to give her credit, though, she kept her bare arms by her side resolutely, and not a tear fell. If anything, Sansa just looked exhausted.

Meanwhile, Sansa’s ever-smug accusers, Lord Damon Coldwater and Lord Rhys Moore, stood at the foot of the dais, smirking in satisfaction. Both were looking quite healthy. Lord Damon, flaxen-haired and portly, was adorned in red and blue velvets trimmed with white fox fur. He looked every bit his forty-eight years and more. Lord Moore, tall, muscular, and very handsome, was in gold and white.

Jon felt more bothered by her state than she looked to be. Seeing her like this killed him. She was not only barely dressed but also filthy and thin. Her once beautiful, shining red hair was a rat’s nest. Jon barely recognized her.

He just wanted to scream at his Aunt, who stoically sat to his left upon the Iron Throne. How could you do this to her? She’s been through enough! Leave her be! But Daenerys insisted upon this. “This girl is not your sister, Jon, nor is she the girl you once knew. She’s accused of murdering a child. The Lords of the Vale are determined to see her brought to trial for Robert Arryn’s death. Furthermore, she was found with Petyr Baelish’s blood literally on her hands.”

“How do you answer to these charges, Lady Sansa?” Daenerys inquired.

Jon’s former half sister took a deep, shuddering breath before speaking. “On the charges of fraud, complicity in the deaths of Joffrey Baratheon and Lady Lysa Tully Arryn, and the murders of Robert Arryn and Harrold Hardyng, I plead Not Guilty.”

She spoke unbelievably well, given the circumstances. Daenerys’s eyes widened. “And the other charges?”

“As to treason, to my knowledge, I have committed no acts of betrayal towards Your Grace or any
rightful King or Queen of Westeros. I admit to involvement in the Northern Secession Movement in order to free my homeland from Lannister control, however I maintain that I abandoned such goals upon the restoration of House Targaryen. I killed both Wallace Coldwater and Petyr Baelish in self-defense. Furthermore I claim my slaying of Lord Baelish was partially done in service to Your Grace."

That last bit sparked quite a few whispers. Daenerys leaned forward, looking intrigued. “If you would explain your claims regarding Lord Baelish’s death in detail?”

Sansa nodded. “Upon Your Grace’s arrival to the shores of Westeros, Lord Baelish wished for me to continue to assert my claim to the title of Queen in the North and ally myself with Stannis Baratheon against you. His intention was that I would betroth my son, Eddard Hardying Stark, to Shireen Baratheon to secure the alliance, satisfy Stannis, but still maintain a separate Northern crown in the process. I wished to instead give up the title of Queen and support your claim. During an argument, Lord Baelish grew aggressive and forced himself on me. As he did so, he confessed to murdering my husband, Harrold Hardying. It was at this point that I managed to grab a nearby blunt object and bludgeon him to death with it.”

Everyone gasped. Jon started forward, but Daenerys held out an arm to stop him.

“I see.” Daenerys pursed her lips. “Lady Sansa, you do know the claims that have been made about you regarding your alleged murder victims?”

“I believe that Lord Damon Coldwater and Lord Rhys Moore are claiming that I was Lord Baelish’s willing and knowing accomplice in a treasonous plot to create a new kingdom comprised of the North, the Trident, and the Vale. They claim I helped Lord Baelish murder Lady Lysa and Lord Robert. That I fraudulently married Ser Harrold Hardying, Lord Robert’s heir Presumptive, in order to seize full legitimate control of the Vale. They claim that I happily and willingly deceived them into making me Lady of the Vale and supporting my campaigns to reclaim the North and the Trident by marrying Harry. That I lied about both being a maid and that I lied when I said my marriage to Tyrion Lannister went unconsummated in order to secure the match. They say that not only was I lying about Tyrion having never touched me, but that before and during my marriage to Harrold, I was Lord Baelish’s lover. They also claim that my son, Eddard, was not Harry’s child, but Littlefinger’s bastard. The Lords also accuse me of purposely passing Eddard off as Harry’s trueborn son as to cement Baelish’s and my own control of the Vale and install a Baelish as Lord of the Eyrie. Alleged, I helped Baelish murder my husband after we’d taken back Winterfell so that Petyr and I could be married and install ourselves as King and Queen of the North, Trident, and Vale, and that I only killed him to avert suspicion of my complicity in his crimes.”

“And you maintain your innocence in all of this?”

“I will admit that I did know that Lord Baelish murdered Lysa Arryn and lied about it. I did so out of concern for my own safety, and was coerced into doing so. I also knew that Lord Baelish wanted to control the Vale and install me as Lady of the Eyrie, and that he was counting on my cousin Robert dying in order to make that happen. I had no idea he intended to murder the boy, and I still question that he did to this day. My cousin was not a strong or healthy boy. He was small, mentally unsound, constantly ill, weak, and afflicted with the shaking sickness. Winter was coming, and so while I would not be surprised if Lord Baelish killed him, it is entirely possible that Lord Robert did in fact die of natural causes. My opinion is that Lord Baelish merely allowed his death to happen, believing it to be a certainty.”

“What of charges that Lord Baelish exacerbated the Lord’s weakness with an overuse of sweetsleep?”
“That is more than possible. I presented the Maester’s warnings regarding that very issue to Lord Baelish, and he ignored them.”

Jon’s jaw dropped. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Sansa? Covering the footprints of a murderer? Cooperating with a man who was counting on the death of a child? His stomach turned.

Sansa continued to speak. “If Lord Baelish did in fact poison Lord Robert, though, I had no involvement in that. Littlefinger did not tell me everything.”

“But you did know of a number of his crimes and intentions.”

“Yes, I did.”

“And you cooperated with him?”

That was a trick question, and Sansa knew it judging by the way her mouth twisted.

“It depends on what you’re referring to. Lord Baelish committed an incalculable number of offenses, nearly all of which I had no involvement with and/or knowledge of. I lied for him to the Lords Declarant and I was willing to marry Harrold Hardyng once he’d informed me that he’d arranged the betrothal. I also continued to masquerade as his bastard daughter and oversaw the household of the Eyrie following Lady Lysa’s death.”

“Are you saying that Lord Baelish betrothed you to Harrold Hardyng before he actually told you?” That actually was a very good point to seize upon. Jon was pleased to hear it. He knew Sansa had chosen her words carefully, and she’d clearly been hoping Daenerys would seize upon that statement. If true, it perfectly exhibited that Baelish was doing most of his plotting without Sansa’s involvement and illustrated the degree of her coercion. It made her look less like his willing, nefarious collaborator and more like a pawn in the man’s game.

Sansa nodded. “Yes. Littlefinger did not seek my consent in these matters or others. I arrived at The Gates of the Moon and he informed me that he’d arranged a match for me already.”

“Lady Sansa, why did you lie for Lord Baelish regarding Lysa Arryn’s death?” Daenerys inquired upon hearing this. By the looks of things, she wasn’t going to delve too deep quite yet. After all, they’d have witnesses and evidence brought forward later on to confirm or deny Sansa’s statements.

“This was in the aftermath of Joffrey’s assassination, and I was wanted for his murder. Lord Baelish had me spirited out of King’s Landing. He was protecting me, having me live under the identity of his bastard daughter Alayne.” This was all known by now. But it was a pertinent thing to remind people of. Jon looked upon his former half-sister in amazement. Despite her disheveled appearance, she was doing a brilliant job defending herself.

She looks unprepared, but sounds like she’s been practicing for days.

Jon could only look on in awe as his sister continued. “The only people who knew of my true identity were him, one of the men in his employ, and Lady Lysa. I was afraid that if I defied him in any way, that he would expose me and that I would be delivered back to Queen Cersei and executed. Furthermore, he killed Lady Lysa because she’d tried to kill me.”

Another spark of whispers. Daenerys’s jaw fell. “Tell us about what happened.”

“My Aunt Lysa loved Lord Baelish passionately, and she was a very unstable and jealous woman. Lord Baelish had dearly loved my mother, Catelyn, Lady Lysa’s sister. I believe part of the reason he had helped me was because of her. I greatly resemble my mother, you see. Lysa knew who I was, and with my mother dead, she transferred her jealousy towards my mother onto me. She had reason to, as Littlefinger had transferred his lust for my mother to me as well. One morning in the Eyrie, he...
kissed me, and my Aunt saw. What she didn’t see was that I’d pushed him away. That afternoon, she summoned me to the Audience Hall of the Eyrie and had the door locked. She brought me over to the Moon Door, opened it, held me over it, and tried to throw me out. There was a struggle between us. Thankfully, Lord Baelish arrived at this point and managed to break into the Hall and distract her. I escaped my Aunt’s grip while her attention was diverted, and he pushed her out of the Moon Door.”

Jon shut his eyes and gritted his teeth. This story was already enough to make him sick, but it was going to get worse. A number of the basic points of this story, he knew somewhat. But all of Sansa’s details were just making an already horrifying outline of the tale that much worse.

To Daenerys’s credit, her voice actually did start to sound sympathetic as she asked, “Lady Sansa, were you Lord Baelish’s lover?”

“Lord Baelish liked to think I was. He didn’t rape me in the traditional sense until after I was pregnant with my son Eddard. However, he’d begun forcing inappropriate contact with me right around the time of my betrothal to Harrold Hardyng.”

More whispers. Jon glared around at the surrounding court. That managed to quiet them. Daenerys looked like she was shaking, her face was a mask of horror.

“Would you please clarify your relationship with Petyr Baelish?”

“Until the night after Joffrey’s death, I didn’t even know I had one. I knew Lord Baelish as this advisor to the Queen, a man who had betrayed my father and had history with my mother. We’d had a couple of conversations before where he warned me about the court. Aside from that, I didn’t know him well at all. When Joffrey was dying, I was whisked away from the wedding by on Ser Dontos of House Holland. I had saved Dontos from execution by King Joffrey many moons earlier and since then he had been meeting me in secret to plot my escape from King’s Landing. I knew at the time that he had accomplices, but was kept completely in the dark about their identities. It was only after I stepped onto a ship that I discovered that Lord Baelish had engineered my escape and Joffrey’s murder.”

Daenerys interrupted. “Speaking of which, would you clarify your involvement in that affair?”

“Yes. Weeks prior to Joffrey’s death, Ser Dontos gifted me with a hairnet made with black amethysts. He told me I should wear it to the royal wedding and that a certain point, I would receive a signal and would need to sneak away to the Sept when I saw it. I wore the hair net as instructed. I did not know it until later, but the gems in my hairnet were not black amethysts at all, but crystallized poisons. During the wedding, one of Baelish’s co-conspirators had snuck over and pulled one of the gems from my hair without me realizing it, and deposited it in Joffrey’s cup. When Joffrey started choking, I took that as my signal and snuck away to the Sept in the midst of the panic. There, Ser Dontos met me again and led me away to the harbor and brought to a ship where Lord Baelish was waiting. It was there that he revealed that he’d killed Joffrey and arranged my escape. Until then, I’d had no idea that there was a plot to kill Joffrey, that the hairnet was involved, or who had arranged Joffrey’s death. All I knew of was some sort of plot for me to escape during the royal wedding that involved a hairnet. All other details were kept from me. To this day I cannot be completely sure as to who was truly involved. I was an unwitting pawn in the assassination.”

“Who do you believe may have been Lord Baelish’s conspirators?”

“It is hard for me to tell. Ser Dontos, of course. But other than that, little to nothing was revealed to me. Petyr rarely ever told me much in case I ever betrayed him. He was a very careful man.”
“What of rumored Tyrell involvement?”

At this, Sansa hesitated. Jon wasn’t sure why. At this point, it was generally accepted that someone from Highgarden had to have been involved in Joffrey’s murder. Mace, Alerie, Margaery, and Loras Tyrell were all currently imprisoned in the Great Sept and awaiting trial for that and a score of other crimes. But why would Sansa be afraid to speak of that? “I believe that Lady Olenna Redwyne Tyrell, the Queen of Thorns, was an accomplice. At one point during the wedding, she had come up to me to adjust my headdress. It is possible that she took the poison and put it in Joffrey’s cup. But I do not believe the other Tyrells were aware of what she was doing. Lady Olenna had a habit of embarking on her own secret undertakings which she carried out under the nose of her son and daughter-in-law. She had never been in favor of Margaery marrying Joffrey. However, Lord Mace was very determined to make his daughter a Queen against the advice of his Mother. Lady Olenna, when she wasn’t obeyed, had a habit of taking matters into her own hands to get what she wanted. She was well aware that Joffrey was an absolute monster. She even had me tell her herself. The woman absolutely adored her granddaughter above all others and wasn’t going to risk Margaery’s safety in such a manner, especially after what happened with King Renly. All the other Tyrells, however, were certain that placing Loras on the Kingsguard would be enough to keep Lady Margaery safe. Lady Olenna wasn’t as confident.”

“And what of Lady Margaery?”

“I believe Margaery was innocent of any plot to kill Joffrey. She may have become aware of her grandmother’s actions after the fact, however, I have no reason to believe that she knew of anything beforehand.”

“Very well. Be aware that your testimony may be required again when the other Tyrells are charged. But we should move on.” Daenerys sighed. “Returning to your relationship with Lord Baelish, what happened after you got on his ship?”

“He told me he was taking me to the Vale, and that I would have to masquerade as his bastard for a while in order to keep myself safe. He promised me that I would be protected in the Eyrie with my Aunt. For a while he merely treated me as a daughter and acted as my friend. Then one day, I was out in the gardens, and he kissed me.”

“This was the kiss that led to Lady Lysa trying to kill you?”

“Yes.”

“And what happened after that?”

“After her death?”

“Yes.”

“He started treating me as his daughter and as an apprentice of sorts. When he was actually at The Eyrie--- he traveled around The Vale constantly, leaving me behind--- he would confide in me any plans he felt I should be aware of and began to tutor me in politics and subterfuge. While he was securing his control of the Vale, he had me nurse Lord Robert and oversee the Eyrie’s household for him. He helped me craft my lies for the Lords Declarant, and I spoke whatever words he instructed me to say. He treated me like I was his beloved daughter both in public and private. Our relationship altered once we moved to the Gates of the Moon.”

“What happened?”
“Lord Baelish began to act on his lust towards me.” Sansa replied nervously. She was now staring at the ground intently, her jaw clenched.

“He took your maidenhead.” Daenerys replied. Sansa shook her head.

“No. My marriage to Tyrion Lannister was unconsummated. I was still a maid. And for me to have a valid marriage, I had to be a true virgin. So Lord Baelish forced himself on me in less conventional ways, making sure not to breach my Maiden’s place.”

Jon shivered. He could vaguely imagine some of what that might entail, but he didn’t want to think about it in detail. Littlefinger had been the most prolific and powerful pimp in the Seven Realms. Jon was sure whatever the man got up to went far beyond what Jon could think of. He couldn’t bear to hear Sansa have to elaborate, so he spoke. “I don’t think it’s necessary for Lady Sansa to have to go into detail about how Lord Baelish satisfied his lusts. The point is, your maidenhead was not breached, correct?”

“Yes. Lord Baelish forced himself on me in other ways.” Sansa said, not meeting his eyes.

“So you relationship was nonconsensual?”

“I was coerced into allowing him to do as he wished with my body, knowing that if I didn’t comply, it could mean my death. After a couple of initial struggles, I eventually gave up trying to fight him off and allowed him to do as he wished. I consider every intimate encounter I had with him during that time period to be rape. However, it was the sort of rape that allowed me to go to my marriage bed technically a maid. My maiden’s sheet bled that night. Harrold Hardyng was the first man I ever had traditional intercourse with. Petyr didn’t start raping me in the conventional sense until after I was pregnant with my son. After Harry died, I had no one to turn to, and I sought Petyr as a source of comfort. It was after Harry’s death that our relationship became somewhat consensual. That is, until the night of Lord Baelish’s death. Until that evening, I’d had no idea that he’d killed Harry.”

Daenerys frowned, her eyes flickering in disbelief. “You didn’t suspect?”

“No. Harry had died in battle. I thought it was by an enemy’s blow. I had no idea Petyr arranged it. It’s possible I suspected him on a subconscious level, but that I was in denial because of everything that had happened. I was fighting a war, protecting and caring for my newborn child, and trying to reclaim my family’s birthright.”

“And yet you stayed with your raper?”

Sansa looked up at Daenerys. “He was all I had.”

Once again, Jon moved to run towards her and Daenerys stopped him. She gave him a warning look this time. Not again, Nephew. She then turned back to the accused.

“So why did you kill him?” The Dragon Queen asked.

“All manner of reasons, both political and personal. Learning that he’d killed my husband definitely turned out to be the tipping point in our relationship. It was when I finally achieved full clarity as to the nature of our personal relationship. It didn’t help that the last time he raped me, it was particularly violent. But there were also, I admit, political reasons. His plan was too risky. I had no doubt that you would squash any force Stannis and I would bring against you. I knew that if we did this, we’d lose everything and that my son would be killed. I believed the only way to keep Eddard safe was to ally myself with you. Petyr was willing to put Eddie’s life at risk just to be King of the Vale. Furthermore, he’d killed Harry. And all of it, including the rape, was too much. So I killed him to
save myself and to save my son….” At this point, Sansa’s voice wavered. She began to shake more violently. “Of course, I didn’t know then that I would never be able to save my son no matter what I did.”

And it was at this point that Sansa sunk to the ground, hugging herself. This time, Daenerys couldn’t stop Jon from running off the dais.

As Jon neared his sister, a woman in purple hurried over to Sansa and blocked him out. “Get away from her, you Targaryen scum. Hasn’t she been through enough?”

Jon recognized her. The woman was Lady Anya Waynwood. Nearly all of the Lords of the Vale had been calling for Sansa’s head, but she’d had two supporters: Lady Waynwood, and Lady Myranda Royce. It was their intervention that allowed Sansa to have a trial. Otherwise, she’d have just been dragged to the Vale and thrown through the Moon Door.

A recess was declared. Daenerys stood up. “We will resume this trial tomorrow morning. In the meantime, I order that Lady Sansa be taken out of the custody of the Septons and moved from her cell in the Great Sept. She is to be placed in the custody of Prince Jon until further notice.”

Jon looked up at his Aunt, overcome with appreciation. He could tell by the look on Daenerys’s face that she’d more or less made up her mind. Her suspicions were melting away and being replaced with pity. Daenerys came over to him quickly, leaning in to whisper in his ear, “Get her someplace she can actually hide and experience some comfort.”

Lord Damon, his eyes dark and narrowed, stepped forward. “Your Grace, I must protest. Placing this woman in the custody of a man she used to call brother presents a clear conflict of interest.”

Daenerys turned a burning violet gaze upon him. “Lord Coldwater, I would not question my commands right now if I were you.”

There was no further protest. Jon diverted his attention to Sansa, crouching down next to Lady Waynwood, who gave him a poisonous look.

“My Lady, please. I mean her no harm.” He protested. “I will make sure she is taken somewhere safe.”

“If you cared a fig for her, Boy, you’d have never let this trial come to pass in the first place.” Lady Anya snarled. “You have allowed her to endure this much humiliation.”

“Anya…” Sansa said, struggling to get up. Both Lady Waynwood and Jon helped her get to her feet. “This accomplishes nothing. He can take me whether you and I want him to or not. The Queen put me in his custody.”

Jon’s heart sank. He didn’t want to take her away against her will. He wanted her to trust him. “I could ask the Queen to place you in Lady Anya’s care.”

“Lady Anya is a witness for the defense, it would be illegal.” Sansa replied, still shaking. “It’s fine, Your Grace.”

He had a million questions for her. They could wait. Jon removed his black velvet cloak and threw it over Sansa’s shoulders. She almost fell under the weight of it, and Jon quickly scooped her up. She stiffened in his arms, as if his touch hurt, but didn’t struggle. Jon called his guards to him and gave quiet orders for them to have a room in the royal wing prepared. “Get a couple of maids, as well, and have a bath brought to my room. See if we can’t acquire some proper clothing for her.”
He invited Lady Waynwood to follow him. When they got to the exit of the throne room, Lady Myranda Royce stood waiting. She insisted on joining them as well. The two women followed him back to his apartments. When he entered, Satin, who had been sitting by the window, sprung to his feet and rushed over. “My Lord, what----?”

“My sister has been assigned to my care.” Jon said simply. “Go have some food prepared for her and brought here.”

The steward nodded and hurried off. Jon laid Sansa down on his bed as gently as he could. Before he could say something, Lady Myranda pushed Jon aside and felt Sansa’s forehead.

“You’re not feverish, thank the Gods.”

“The Gods couldn’t be bothered if I’m feverish or not,” Sansa mumbled, looking away.

“They’ve kept you alive this long,” Lady Waynwood replied, pursing her lips. “They must care about something.”

“I’d have preferred it if they had extended their concern for my child.”

Jon swallowed. “What can I do?”

Lady Waynwood glared at him. “You could get that Aunt of yours to do the right thing and put an end to this charade. Or maybe you can’t. In that case, you’re useless.”

Myranda sighed and turned to Jon, her expression a bit more sympathetic. “If you could secure her a reliable bedmate for the night. I can’t do it, I’m a witness as well. But if there is anyone you can think of…”

“My Direwolf, Ghost.” Jon replied. “He can sleep with her tonight. He won’t hurt her, and no one can claim he presents a political conflict.”

Myranda nodded. “They’ve been keeping her in that awful little cell with a dirty mat on the floor, a rag for a blanket, and cold broth to eat for a week now.”

“And he did nothing to fix it!” Lady Waynwood growled. “The Lady of Winterfell and the Eyrie! A trueborn daughter of House Stark! Cousin to the Prince of the Realm! And the Prince of the Realm couldn’t be bothered until now to get her a bed to sleep on.”

“I tried to intercede on her behalf,” Jon said weakly. He’d made inquiries as to Sansa’s accommodations and asked to visit her. But Sansa herself had refused to see him.

“Oh yes, I’m sure your efforts were legendary.” Lady Waynwood glared some more.

“My Aunt is in a precarious position. She doesn’t want to offend the Lords of the Vale.” He knew that was a weak excuse even now.

“That woman has dragons. She killed the Night’s King. She doesn’t need to worry about offending a few idiots. These charges are worth spit and everyone knows it. Coldwater and Moore started this all so they could seize control of the Vale and to get revenge for Wallace’s death. Never mind that the man murdered a three-year-old boy in his nursery. Where’s Eddard’s justice? Where’s Sansa’s?”

“It will come, I promise you.” Jon said solemnly. I guarantee it. “Once Sansa is acquitted, we will bring charges against the Coldwaters and Moores. They will face justice for this.”
“They should have all been arrested the moment Eddard died.” Myranda said angrily. “Instead, they just used everyone’s hatred for Littlefinger as an excuse to distract everyone.”

“I know. But it won’t work. Sansa… Sansa thus far has done beautifully. And the evidence is in her favor. She has told her tale incredibly well and it holds up far better than what Coldwater and Moore are claiming.” Jon replied. “Anyone who believed them who saw what happened today are undoubtedly calling them into question.”

Their conversation was interrupted with Satin and a number of maids arriving with a steaming tray of food, a tub, and pails of hot water. Lady Waynwood took this opportunity to dismiss Jon from his own chambers. Jon reluctantly went, leaving Ghost behind. He charged towards his Aunt’s private chambers, only barely waiting for the guard to announce him before he burst in. Daenerys sat at her map table near the window, alone. Her actual appearance suddenly reminded him of how intimidating she could be. Jon took a deep breath, but his Aunt stopped him short.

“I know what you’re going to say, Jon. So let me spare you the breath. ”
Chapter Two: The Lords of the Vale

“I know what you’re going to say, Jon. So let me spare you the breath. Yes, I am well aware now that this is a farce. Yes, I now fully believe that your sister is being persecuted. Yes, even bothering to proceed with this trial instead of throwing out the whole thing is completely unfair. If I could just do whatever I wanted, I’d have her accusers thrown in the Dragon Pit and be sending craftsmen, laborers, and supplies up North to rebuild Winterfell this very instant. Unfortunately, the trial must proceed. Coldwater and Moore are absolute scoundrels, but they’ve managed to convince nearly all of the Lords of the Vale that Sansa is guilty. Even Lord Royce is feuding with his daughter over this. If I simply throw the case out, they’ll all revolt. I have to give them at least a trial, or I’d be subjecting this country to uprising and war once again. Sansa is your cousin, and we’ve only just secured the throne. I can’t throw away all charges against a woman believed by many to have ruthlessly murdered and plotted a takeover of an entire realm without risking everything we’ve worked for and achieved over the past eight years. I’m sorry this happened, but I can at least give you my assurance of an acquittal. And when that happens, it will be Coldwater and Moore on trial. But I need to justify such actions publicly, and I can only do that by trying your cousin. But I doubt that this will last the week. Their case is pathetic and based more on collective bias and mania than actual fact. Until then, I will do everything I can to make this as painless as possible.”

Jon stopped short. This lecture was more or less a compilation of various things she’d been telling him for over a fortnight. The excuses had placated him somewhat, but that was before he’d actually seen the state his cousin was in. And after hearing her story today, he honestly couldn’t comprehend how there weren’t enough people swayed to do away with the rest of it. “Daenerys, hasn’t this been enough?”

Dany rubbed her temple in frustration. “I’m sorry, but no, it hasn’t. But soon there will be enough, I
assure you. Your cousin was impressive today. She’s pretty much convinced every Lord and Lady outside the Vale and a number within it by now of her innocence. We just need a bit more testimony and evidence, and I’ll probably be able to acquit her within three days unless something goes horribly awry. But for now, just keep her safe and make her comfortable.”

Jon clenched his fists, walking a good length to get close to his Aunt. Daenerys’s rooms were among the largest in the keep, a grand set of apartments constructed for the King of Westeros. Walls of burnished red clay, alabaster and marble were topped with high ceilings. The windows themselves were huge. Jon sometimes seriously wondered if his ancestor Aegon the Conqueror had them built in an attempt to fit his dragons, but had simply been forced to give up. And this was only the solar. His Aunt, who he now stood over, was a contrast in size. “How exactly am I supposed to make her comfortable? I’m fairly certain she detests me at this point. This should have never happened. Anyone with a sense of decency—“

“No, not with a sense of decency. The *luxury* of decency. Anyone with the luxury of being able to act according to their sense of decency at all times would have thrown this out by now. But I don’t have that luxury, Jon. I cannot do the decent thing for everyone, I can only do the decent thing for most. I cannot have the Houses of the Vale rising up in arms against us. There’s still a huge chunk of that realm that believes your cousin murdered an eight-year-old boy.”

“What of the three-year-old boy who was murdered?” *What of my nephew? The one who, thanks to Wallace Coldwater, I will never get to meet?*

Daenerys folded her arms over her windowsill and planted her face between them. “There will be justice for that, I assure you. Unfortunately, I can’t try Coldwater and Moore for that until Sansa’s innocence is established.”

The Targaryen prince ran his hand through his hair. “I think she did an excellent job of establishing her innocence today.”

“She did. She’ll do a more thorough job tomorrow, I’ll bet. If she can make it through the process, we can resolve this quickly.” Dany groaned. “Tomorrow is going to be the worst, though.”

“Dany, I’m not sure I can tolerate much more of this. I can be a patient man, but this——”

“----This is your duty, Jon *Targaryen.*” Dany looked up then, her eyes practically glowing purple. “Part of your duty is to control your emotions for the good of the realm. I almost had you dragged out of the throne room today. I cannot afford to weather an outburst from you. We’ve discussed this before. Until this afternoon, I thought you understood, but now I’m starting to wonder. You must learn to do your duty properly and not let your feelings cloud your judgment if you ever want to lead.”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. He did not appreciate being condescended to by his Aunt. “I was taught to lead and to follow, Your Grace. I lead the Night’s Watch—“

“Who stabbed you repeatedly for breaking your vows and putting their affairs aside for those of your friends. I don’t intend for you to give a repeat performance of that. And this isn’t some band of a few hundred convicts and old men. This is an *empire.* An empire that includes The Vale of Arryn.”

“Your empire.” At the moment, Jon couldn’t care less about the Vale. As far as he was concerned, it was a mountain wreck filled with cowardly, over-privileged, vindictive, self-serving idiots. Daenerys had an army of over two hundred thousand strong. She could easily quell an uprising.

His Aunt stood up then, her eyes brighter than ever. She was a head shorter than Jon, but that failed
to dampen the impression she gave. “Yes, my empire. My newly and barely intact empire. Filled with cold, hungry people who endured seven years of warfare in addition to winter and hoards of wights. Who are sick of the nobility shoving spears into their children’s hands and making them risk their lives to resolve the disputes of the rich and well-fed. Do you think the people who inhabit the fishing villages care who the Lord of the Eyrie is when they’re having their homes burnt to the ground? Your sister could be as innocent as the Maiden, and any one of the mothers in this realm would weep with sympathy over what happened to her son. But that isn’t enough to justify subjecting their own children to death by starvation or battle. I’d be able to put down an uprising from the Vale, but too many people would die in the process. Proceeding with this trial is the least bloody way I can resolve this without sacrificing innocent farmboys to Coldwater swords.”

Jon could practically feel the breath of her dragons on his neck, though the three of them were safely locked away in the pit. It had gotten to the point that she was so closely associated with them that she might as well breathe fire herself.

The fact was, there was no one in this world more intimidating to Jon than his Aunt Daenerys. He’d negotiated with Mance Rayder and Janos Slynt, witnessed the magic of the Red Woman Melisandre, dined with giants, and clashed his steel against a blade wielded by the Night’s King. But Daenerys had burned the Red Woman and the Night’s King alive and sent Mance Rayder and his giants running for the hills. She also happened to be barely over five feet in height and weighed about seven stone. What is more terrifying than a dragon? A small person who can control three dragons.

But Daenerys wasn’t even at her most terrifying to Jon when she was riding one of her dragons. No, the famous Breaker of Chains was at her worst during moments like these, when she was displaying just how much smarter she was than everyone else in the room. Jon knew on a conscious level that his Aunt was right, and he truly hated that. He kept himself from stepping back, though. He stared deep into her violet eyes. Sometimes, he could swear that he saw actual flames dancing within her irises.

“My cousin deserves justice.”

Dany looked heavenward. “Jon, she hung the people responsible for killing her brother and burning Winterfell to the ground upon the bridge of the Twins. She bludgeoned her rapist to death with a candlestick and lodged a fire poker into the eye socket and brain of the man who killed her child. At this point, I can’t do anything about the people who hurt her the most directly. She’s killed most of them. But I can assure you, Coldwater and Moore will get their due once her trial is complete. I don’t know what else I can reasonably promise you.”

“There has to be more we can do.” Jon replied bitterly.

“Well, what does she want?” Dany asked. “What has she said?”

Jon reddened. His Aunt picked up on his expression and groaned.

“So you didn’t ask her?”

“She’s not exactly in the best state for negotiations at the moment.” Jon snapped. “And prior to this, she refused to receive me at the Great Sept. I’ve barely spoken to her. The only people she really seems to speak to are Myranda Royce and that old shrew, Anya Waynwood.”

Dany’s eyes narrowed. “Anya Waynwood is anything but a shrew. Old, yes. But not a shrew. She saved your cousin’s life.”

That was true. It had been the Lady of Ironoaks who had managed to talk the other major Lords of
the Vale down from throwing Sansa directly out of the Moon Door after they’d captured her from Winterfell and dragged her to the Vale.

Jon felt like he was fourteen again, being told off by Donal Noye for his arrogance and bullying. Now he stepped away, leaning his back against the wall, closing his eyes and groaning. “Dany, I want to help her. I feel powerless. How is it that becoming a prince has made me more powerless than ever to help my cousin?”

Her eyes softened. “Jon, you can help her. You just can’t fix everything. No one can fix everything. Not even me. I learned that the hard way. There are some things you can do to help her, though.”

“What? Playing nursemaid?”

“Not just that. Something rather pressing, actually.”

“What?” Jon opened his eyes. His Aunt was walking over to a mahogany desk in the corner. She began to shuffle some parchment around and pulled a few sheets from a drawer.

“Young sister’s debts. If you could perhaps sort through this and at least weed out the fraudulent claims from the legitimate ones, I’m sure it would do a lot for her.”

Jon’s heart sank. “You want me to keep ledgers?”

“Jon, your sister’s troubles aren’t going to end in the courtroom. House Stark’s finances are an absolute calamity. This would do a lot to ease her struggles. It also wouldn’t hurt if you started writing letters to whomever might be able to testify against Coldwater and Moore.”

Back to my stewardship. Jon nodded solemnly and he went to take the papers from his Aunt, making a mental note to write to the Citadel to have Sam summoned to the Red Keep post-haste. When he reached out and laid his fingers upon the documents, Daenerys held onto the papers. Jon’s eyes met hers, and he saw that the fire of her gaze had gone out.

“I honestly do feel awful.” Dany said softly. “I don’t want things to be like this. Truly I don’t. Please give your cousin my regards.”

It was during moments like these that Jon was able to see more of the mother than the dragons in the Mother of Dragons. Jon swallowed. “Can I keep her in one of the Queens’ chambers?”

“That’s fine. Whatever chambers you want to put her in. I’ll inform Lara that I’ve authorized it. Take whatever she needs.”

She needs her son back. Jon thought bitterly. But Dany was no Lord of Light necromancer. She couldn’t do that for Sansa.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The next day, Sansa arrived in court freshly bathed, groomed, and dressed in a gown of blue velvet on loan from the Princess of Dorne. She wasn’t shaking so much now, there was only a slight tremor in her hands as she gripped a stack of parchment to her stomach.

Lord Rhys Moore spoke for the accusers, a fair move on their part. Word had already spread that a number of representatives from Houses Hunter, Royce, and Upcliff had withdrawn from the side of the prosecution. Pryor, Egen, Linderly, Templeton and Belmore were still holding strong along with a host of others though. Lord Moore, his brown hair slightly silver but still thick and lustrous, his teeth very white and straight, and his gold and white silks freshly laundered, cut a far more confident
figure than his corpulent partner in crime would.

“Your Grace, the story Lady Lannister told yesterday was truly a sad one. Fortunately, however, it was far from an honest one.” The man gestured theatrically to Sansa, who stared ahead stoically. Moore continued.

“He actually said his name. Jon thought with absolute shock. This man actually dared to use the name Eddard Stark. Right in front of the mother of an Eddard Stark he arranged to have killed. Jon thought he was going to break his fingers clutching Longclaw so tightly. Daenerys gave him a warning look, but even that was mixed with shock.

If Moore noticed the anger upon their faces, he showed no sign. “They say that Sansa Lannister masqueraded as Littlefinger’s daughter for a year in the Vale, but maybe that isn’t entirely true. Perhaps the identity of Baelish’s daughter started out as a mask, but it eventually became something of the truth. Lady Lannister certainly obeyed him as a daughter would, even if her other interactions with him may have deviated from what is considered suitable for a father and child. By her own admission, Lady Lannister engaged in numerous lurid sexual practices with the man, even when she was married to my cousin, Ser Harrold Hardyng. And it is not too surprising, as Baelish, a prolific pimp, was hardly the first obscene pervert she had encounters with. This woman was married to The Imp, Tyrion Lannister, the deformed half-man son of the man who ordered the deaths of your brother Prince Rhaegar’s first wife and eldest children. Her first and only true husband was so open and shameless over his lewd excesses he even announced them to the court of the Eyrie when he was on trial for the attempted murder of his future bride’s own brother, the late Lord Bran Stark. And despite this, Lady Sansa married him. And after Lord Tyrion was no longer useful to her, she moved on to another rich lecher, Petyr Baelish. This man was determined to overtake the Vale, as we all know. He took advantage of the beloved Lady Lysa Arryn, married her, and once she had made him Lord Protector of the Vale, he disposed of her. Lady Sansa was in the room when he did so, and yet she lied to an assembly of esteemed Lords, blaming an innocent singer for the death of her Aunt, condemning the poor man to death. Marillion was his name.”

Lord Moore turned around and looked directly at Sansa. “You remember him, Lady Lannister? Marillion? A man who went mad after being accused of murdering his adored patron? A man who took a great liking to you as well, I believe. As I remember, when his rooms were searched, drafts of a song called ‘The Roadside Rose’ were found. They contained references to a maiden called Alayne who was bastard born and cold-hearted. The song spoke of desperate yearnings and promises to do whatever it took to gain this maiden’s favors.”

Whispers erupted on all sides of the room. Daenerys seemed to be losing patience. “Enough! Lord Moore, can you produce these pages?”

The Lord of Draftkeep nodded. “I have other samples of his hand with them as well for comparison, including the false confession.”

He gestured towards Coldwater, who was sitting to the side with a collection of chests that contained evidence. Two servants in Coldwater livery quickly opened one and produced pages of old parchment, bringing them to Missendei, who in turn handed them to Daenerys. The Dragon Queen scanned them carefully before handing them to Jon.
To his chagrin, the script contained on the song pages did match the ones bearing Marillion’s confession quite well. The song itself was shockingly explicit, but one line did manage to catch Jon’s eye. He leaned over his Aunt’s shoulder. “D- Your Grace, take a look at this.”

“Roadside Rose, it would not do/to be base-born and frigid too/If you ignore my golden plea/I will make you bleed for me/You won’t always have a guard Alayne/For you’ve not the first maidenhead I’ve slain.” Daenerys read aloud. She looked up then. “Hardly a passionate love letter.”

“It expresses quite a fervent ardor, and other lines are far sweeter. It was clearly meant more for seduction than violation.” Lord Moore said hastily. “And one must admit it presents a strange coincidence. A man is besotted with a young lass who denies him her charms in a manner he describes as cruel. He is desperate for her, and then weeks later he is falsely confessing to the murder of a woman he once held in high regard at the bidding of the girl he is desperate for.”

Jon was honestly ready to beat this man bloody. “You yourself admitted the singer was mad. That does not mean Lady Sansa enticed him.”

“With all due respect, Your Grace, your cousin has a history of exploiting her charms and making lewd displays. Indeed, in this very throne room she wantonly exposed her breasts to the entire court!”

Jon’s eyes went to his sister, who was still staring ahead blankly. What was he talking about?

Ser Podrick Payne, a normally unassuming young man from the Westerlands, quickly clarified this with an outburst. “SHE WAS FORCEFULLY STRIPPED AND BEATEN BY JOFFREY’S KINGSGUARD, YOU SWINE!”

Another eruption of whispers as Ser Podrick charged out from the left side of the crowd, looking furious. Daenerys had the guards restrain the young man.

“Ser Podrick, if you wish to speak on Lady Sansa’s behalf, you are to do so during the defense testimony. You will not turn my courtroom into a battlefield.”

Under Daenerys’s burning gaze, Podrick managed to calm himself. He gulped and stepped back. “My apologies, Your Grace.”

Daenerys looked back to Moore. “Lord Moore, you may continue.”

“Lady Sansa knew what she was doing.” Moore said hastily. “Marillion wasn’t the only one she managed to charm. She rarely ever left Lord Robert’s side, even inviting the child into her bed at night. I believe if he hadn’t been so sickly, she’d have seduced him and married him. But the young Lordling was too weak, and she and Littlefinger knew it. Upon their first meeting with the Lords Declarant, when Lady Lysa’s body wasn’t even cold in the ground, Lord Baelish broached the subject of bringing Ser Harrold to the Eyrie to Lady Waynwood. A few moons later, he’d bought up the Waynwoods’ debt and provided a shockingly generous dowry for his daughter to marry the heir presumptive to the Eyrie. All the while, Lady Sansa cared for Lord Robert’s needs, happily administering Sweetsleep to the young Lordling. At the same time she was preparing a maiden cloak to wed the boy’s heir! When she met Harry at the Gates of the Moon, she employed her charms quite explicitly. The young man was besotted. All of a sudden, a young man who was the envy of every lady in the Vale, who had rejected the suit of a trueborn daughter of the Lord of the Gates, was prepared to wed the bastard daughter of a lowborn pimp! And every evening, she was taking ‘lessons’ with her ‘father.’”

This sort of theatrical storytelling, worthy of the most favored troubadours at court, continued. Lord Moore went on to claim Sansa managed to seduce the entire Vale, that she’d been pregnant with
Eddard prior to her nuptials, that a Septa was bribed to proclaim her a maid, that she and Lord Baelish used extortion tactics to convince the Lords of the Vale to support a campaign to the North. That once Winterfell was rebuilt and she’d bled the Eyrie’s treasury dry that she arranged to have Harry killed. That she and Littlefinger were secretly betrothed. He said that poor Wallace Coldwater, a devoted friend of Harry’s, had been driven mad by the war and the betrayal of his friend. That he had acted rashly, yes, the night he broke into Eddard Hardying Stark’s nursery and bashed the child’s brains in. But that he had done so in a madness and had acted without the knowledge of his father or the anti-Stark supporters. He even dared to suggest that Wallace hadn’t killed Eddie at all, that Sansa had done it and framed him for it so she could discredit her enemies.

That was the end of Jon’s self-control. He immediately started towards Moore, absolutely furious. Four members of the Queensguard had to hold him back. Daenerys herself rose from her seat. Everyone could hear Drogon roaring all the way from the Dragon pit.

“Lord Moore, you are here to present your justification for the charges laid at Lady Sansa’s feet. Not to invent further crimes to accuse her of. There has been absolutely no evidence that she killed her child. Unless you are ready to present something other than speculation at this very minute, then you are to withdraw those comments.”

Lord Rhys blanched, stepping back. “I have no physical evidence or testimony to present at this time in that regard, Your Grace. Forgive me, I got carried away. It is just… hard for me to swallow the idea that a young man as fine and kind as Lord Wallace could commit such a despicable act.”

There was chaos in the throne room. Jon was still struggling against the guard, there was shouting and unrest among the spectators, Daenerys looked furious and now all three of her scaled children could be heard howling from the pits.

Jon was quite sympathetic to the winged beasts. He was shouting, still struggling. After several minutes, Ser Barriston approached him. The old man did not lay a hand on the prince, he did not shout. He merely leaned down and put his face an inch from Jon’s.

“If you do not calm yourself, Your Grace, your Aunt will be forced to remove you from the throne room for the remainder of the trial. Which means your cousin will face the rest of this without the presence of her last remaining family member. If that is what you want, then by all means, keep struggling.”

Jon went limp at once. “How is she?”

Ser Barriston moved aside. Jon looked down at the defendant’s podium. Sansa was gripping the edges, her knuckles white. When Jon calmed himself, the guards who had restrained him went to join their comrades, who were currently surrounding and protecting a terrified-looking Moore.

Daenerys screamed at the top of her lungs for quiet. That did little. Finally, to Jon’s terror, she cried out commands in Dothraki. The roars of the dragons grew louder and were soon accompanied by the flapping of wings. The windows of the throne room were soon darkened by the forms of the three immense beasts. That scared everyone into settling into a terrified hush.

Dany, looking weary, took advantage of the quiet. “That is the end of the testimony from Moore and Coldwater. I call for another recess, we shall resume----“

“NO.”

That was not a word that the Mother of Dragons heard very often. The queen’s eyes were practically the size of dinner plates. Jon looked down at the defendant’s podium in shock. Sansa stood straight,
her blue eyes fixed upon her monarch.

It took Daenerys a moment to recover from her shock. “Pardon, Lady Stark?”

“I-I said no, Your Grace.” Sansa said, suddenly wilting slightly. “I would present my evidence in response to my accusers today. It is my right.”

Daenerys paused, surveying the younger woman with interest. “Are you absolutely sure?”

“I am prepared, My Queen.”

“Sansa!” Lady Waynwood, who was inches from the podium, held out her hands, looking truly worried. “Honestly, Child, you needn’t—–“

“I am not a child, and I very much need, Lady Waynwood.” Sansa replied. “I have just been accused of murdering my own son. I deserve to be heard.”

“Very well, Lady Sansa. If you are determined.” Daenerys said, smirking. She sat back down. “What would you like to address first?”

“I was going to begin with Lady Lysa’s death, but circumstances demand I present evidence regarding what happened with my son. I want to prove once and for all that Wallace Coldwater did indeed brutally slaughter my little boy.”

“Proceed.”

Sansa cleared her throat. “My maid at Winterfell, Danyra and Maester Cornwell serve as my witnesses in this matter.”

Danyra, an older woman with beady black eyes, came forward and confirmed that the guards that had been assigned to protect Eddie as well as his nurse were found dead. In practically a shriek, she exclaimed, ‘There is no way in all the seven hells Lady Sansa could have overpowered three guards! Nor could she have quieted the nurse before the woman managed to scream. By the time Lady Sansa and I reached the room, that monster was already crushing that child’s head in his fist! Lady Sansa pounced on him when she saw him holding onto her son’s head, the boy’s body was limp like a rag doll’s. And the monster was actually grinning, if you could believe it. She tore and scratched at his face, but he managed to bash the boy’s head against the wall. Then he turned on her. He threw her to the ground and she landed roughly, near the fire-place. He grabbed Lady Sansa and pushed her head near the burning coals. She managed to grab the poker and wacked him over the head with it. He fell back, and she jumped atop him and drove the poker into his eye.”

There were audible moans in the audience. Danyra withdrew then. Sansa lifted her chin and displayed silvery white burn scars along the right underside of her jaw. “Another gift from Lord Wallace.”

After this, Sansa began to shake. “For further evidence, I’d like Maester Cornwell to come forward and bring with him….“

She paused then and shook more violently. Sansa swallowed hard. “… The remains of my son, Lord Eddard Hardyng Stark.”

People gasped as the surprisingly young, dark-haired Maester strode into the throne room, coming down the aisle pushing a cart before him. The cart was about five feet in length, covered in black velvet. Lain neatly atop it for all to see was a small skeleton, the bones laid out in perfect anatomical order. When the Maester got close, Jon could see, to his horror, the skull: it was in pieces looking not
unlike a porcelain bowl that had been dropped on the ground.

Sansa kept her eyes averted as she choked out, “Proceed, Maester Cornwell.”

The young Maester’s voice was so small that Daenerys had to command him to speak up. He explained in a stutter that the strength of Eddie’s bones, his weight, and the degree to which his body was damaged meant that he could have only been killed by a young man of great size and strength. “Certainly not within the capabilities of a young woman like Lady Sansa. Furthermore, I should add that the way Lord Eddard was killed bears a striking resemblance to the way Prince Rhaegar’s wife and children were slaughtered by the Mountain.”

He then explained how the way Eddard was killed perfectly corresponded to Sansa’s story, and that some of the bruises she’d sustained at the time matched the same impressions that had been made on Eddie’s flesh.

By the end, Daenerys asked Moore and Coldwater if they had any comments.

“It still doesn’t mean we had anything to do with it!” Coldwater protested.

“No one said you did, Ser.” Daenerys said coolly. “Lady Sansa, you’ve made your case. I don’t think anyone would doubt what happened that night. Is there any other evidence you’d like to present?”

“Y-yes.” Sansa said, her eyes still averted. She ordered Cornwell to take the bones away. “I want to address the legitimacy of both my marriages and my son.”

“Very well.”

Sansa called in a number of servants and launderers who had served in the castle during the time of her imprisonment and marriage to Tyrion Lannister. All of them testified that the sheets of Sansa’s first marriage bed remained unsoiled. At one point, Podrick, now looking terrified, was brought forward.

“Ser Podrick Payne, you served as Lord Tyrion’s squire, yes?” The Queen asked.

Podrick nodded. “I did, Your Grace. From the time Lord Tyrion joined his family’s forces in the Riverlands until his arrest for King Joffrey’s murder.”

“And what did your duties entail?”

“I saw to his household needs---- I made sure his clothes were clean, his things were in order, his armor was polished. I carried messages and ran other errands for him. I served him meals and did secretarial work.”

“And during this time, did you know Lady Sansa?”

Podrick glanced at the Lady of Winterfell, then looked back at the queen. “I did, Madam. Not the entire time, of course. I hadn’t been to court until Lord Tyrion brought me, and I’d never been to Winterfell. I didn’t see her much at first, though, just when we were around the King. After they were married, I saw her more.”

“What was your impression of Lady Sansa?”

“Well, I was afraid of her.”
There was laughter then. Podrick fidgeted.

“Why?”

“Well, she was this fine, high-born lady. Also, I was afraid of everyone.”

More laughter. Jon frowned. He’d seen this before. Daenerys quieted the laughter by raising her hand, then leaned forward. “Did you dislike her?”

“Oh, no! Not at all. She was a sweet lady, Your Grace. The first time I saw her was at King Joffrey’s Name Day tournament. Lord Tyrion and I had just arrived at court. Before we entered, Lord Tyrion stopped us because something serious was happening and he wanted to watch.”

“What was this?”

“Well, Ser Dontos of House Holland, he’d arrived to the tournament drunk. Joffrey wanted to have him executed. Lady Sansa convinced him not to. She got the king to make Dontos his fool instead. I thought that was very kind. So I liked her.”

“I see. What can you tell us of the relationship between Lord Tyrion and Lady Sansa?”

“It… It wasn’t easy. I remember that Lord Tyrion worried about her even before the match was made. Joffrey liked to hurt her. At first, before the Battle of Blackwater, she was to marry Joffrey. He kept her nearby and had her tell him how she loved him and compliment him and sing for him. If she didn’t do what he liked— if she said something he didn’t like, or didn’t look pretty enough, or didn’t know the song he wanted her to sing, he’d have his men beat her. He usually did it in private, but every so often it would happen in public. Everyone knew he hurt her. Lord Tyrion felt sorry for her, I know. He hated his nephew. Most people did, though they usually lied about it. And then one day, after Sansa’s brother won this big battle, Joffrey had her brought to the throne room. He aimed his crossbow at her and threatened to shoot her and then he had his guards beat her and strip her naked. You may remember what Lord Moore said about her being, um, exposed. And you may remember, I got angry—“

“Yes, Ser Podrick, that was a half hour ago. We remember.”

“Well, yes, that’s what he was talking about. Joffrey had her stripped naked and beaten. But Lord Tyrion stopped it. He had her covered up and brought to the Tower of the Hand—“

Oh, Seven Hells.

“---The Tower of the Hand?” Daenerys asked sharply. “What for?”

Podrick looked ready to panic. “She was all bloody and beaten! He had her put in one of the rooms and called the Maester to treat her! He just wanted to keep her away from Joffrey and the Queen for a while! He left her there, too. Once he’d made sure she was guarded, he left to go talk to some of the ministers. He was acting Hand of the King at the time, very busy. He only came back hours later. He spoke to Sansa briefly, and she went back to the castle. Nothing happened.”

Thank you, Lannister. Jon thought, wishing the poor man could hear him.

“--- Do you have any reason to believe your master loved her or lusted for her?”

“Maybe he wanted her a bit. She was—-is--- a beautiful lady. But mostly he pitied her. He didn’t love her, though. He was in love with his whore, Shae. He saw that woman in secret, against his father’s wishes. He adored her. He referred to Sansa as a child most of the time. But I know he liked her. He
said she’d likely survive everything, and he said she was a good girl. I know that he didn’t want to marry her, though. He argued with Lord Tywin about it for weeks.”

“What about after they were married?”

“Well, the day they got married, Lady Sansa looked ready to cry. She wasn’t happy at all. At one point, when Lord Tyron was to put the cloak on her shoulders, he needed her to kneel, and she refused to at first. The whole day she looked ready to cry. Then King Joffrey called for the bedding, but Lord Tyron refused. Joffrey insisted, and started grabbing at her. He said he’d have his bedding, and Lord Tyron said, ‘Then you’ll be bedding your bride with wooden cock.’ There was this silence, and the King threw a tantrum. Lord Tywin defused the situation and Tyrion and Sansa went to their chambers privately.”

“Do you believe the marriage was consummated?”

Podrick blushed. “No, Your Grace. The maids say that the sheets were always clean, and I can confirm that. And there were other things. Before he was married, Lord Tyrion slept without his clothes on. Once he had to share a bed with Lady Sansa, he started wearing leggings and nightshirts. He acted very frustrated most of the time, and he made complaints.”

There were titters among the spectators. Podrick frowned. “People knew, as well. It was court gossip that Lady Sansa didn’t let Lord Tyrion touch her. And I recall an argument between Lord Tyrion and his father. Lord Tywin threatened to hang any woman who slept with Lord Tyrion, so he was frustrated. Lord Tyron wanted to make Lord Tyrion bed Lady Sansa. By this point, Lady Sansa was heir to Winterfell, and they wanted a Lannister to rule the North. I heard Lord Tywin insist upon it weeks after they were married. He knew. Everyone knew. Even King Joffrey made a joke of it the day he died. At his wedding breakfast, in front of everyone. But Lord Tyrion wouldn’t do it. People say he was a filthy lecher, but he was never, ever the type to force himself on a girl, especially not a girl like Lady Sansa. To be truthful, he treated her more like a niece than a wife.”

“Thank you, Ser Podrick. That will be enough for now.” Daenerys sighed wearily. “Lady Sansa, what other evidence would you like to present?”

“I have my maiden’s sheet from the night of my marriage to Harry, a written account from the Septa who examined me prior to my wedding, as well as accounts from servants who were present. I also have evidence regarding the parentage of my son, Eddard.”

The reading of the Septa’s report and presentation of the bloody maiden’s sheet turned Jon’s stomach, but it was still nothing compared to seeing his nephew’s skeleton. What was interesting, however, was when other documents regarding Eddard were brought forward. First there was the records of both Harry and Eddie’s births. Harrold Hardyng, born eighth day of the second moon, 285 AL to Ser Baxter Hardyng and Lady Dara Waynwood. Blue eyes and brown hair. Lord Eddard Hardyng Stark, born third day of the fifth moon, 302 A.L. at the Eyrie to Lord Harrold Hardyng of the Eyrie, Warden of the East and Lady Sansa Hardyng Stark, Lady of Winterfell and the Eyrie, Warden of the North. Blue eyes and red-brown hair.

Sansa produced letters from eyewitnesses commenting on Eddie’s appearance, images of her husband, son, and Petyr Baelish, and even her husband’s bastard. Comparisons were made that left no doubt whose child this boy was. Not a trace of Littlefinger was present in the boy’s face. Harrold Hardyng’s famous dimples, however, were.

Next came the birth announcement, dated the third day of the third moon of 302 AL, along with Harry and Sansa’s marriage record, dated the first day of the second moon, 301.
"Figures were never my strong point, Lord Moore. But I believe that basic mathematics would not line up with your accusation that my son was conceived prior to my wedding." Sansa said, still frowning.

By the end of it all, Jon felt dizzy, but also a bit happy. There was no way that boy hadn’t been Harry’s, and anyone with eyes could see it. After the evidence regarding Eddie was presented, Daenerys asked Sansa if she was ready for a recess. The Lady of Winterfell nodded. “I can present further evidence in the morning.”

Jon wanted to run to her when court was adjourned, but his Aunt pulled him aside. “Nephew, we need to speak.”
Chapter Summary

An awkward dinner, broken bones, and catch-phrases revisited.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your comment. I hope they’ll continue. I want to know what you like and don’t like. I’m really excited for this.

Updates may be slow after tomorrow because I will be heading out of town soon, though I’ll try to update on my trip if I can.

Chapter Three: Sansa Shatters

"Mama, are you making Winterfell for me?"

She could tell that boy a hundred times that the castle had been constructed by Brandon the Builder hundred of years ago. It didn’t matter. He’d always end up pointing out the window at the craftsmen putting up a wall or roof.

“If it was made hundreds of years ago, then why are they still making it? Are you trying to make this into a surprise? Because I know now. I saw through your trick, Mama! You’re making Winterfell for me!"

The funniest part of it was that he wasn’t entirely wrong. Sansa had no idea how her son ended up so clever. She’d never been known for her brains. Neither had Harry. Eddie had displayed a quick wit that reminded his mother of Arya. He’d possessed his Aunt’s sense of mischief as well, loving to hide in various places and then jump out at people. Sansa would pretend to be scared, but she knew where he was. Whenever the boy hid he was given away by his loud giggling.

Every time she stepped into a room, she kept expecting to spot a pile of blankets or piece of furniture shaking, to hear giggles coming from whatever object he was hiding in. And when she remembered that it wasn’t going to happen ever again…

*Put those thoughts away now,* Sansa chided herself as she walked back to the royal apartments, surrounded by guards. *They do you no good. When you return to your rooms, you will not find a red-headed little boy laughing behind the drapes. You will not hear his laughter again. You haven’t truly heard his laughter in three moons. You’re more likely to become Queen of the Andals than see or hear that child again.*

She concentrated on anything she could. As she was escorted through the palace, she passed a number of whispering courtiers. As she drew near, without fail, their whispers would fade away and be replaced with curious, sympathetic looks. The expressions on their stupid faces were almost as bad as the ones they’d worn the night before, when they’d been curious and hostile.
When they entered the royal wing, it was a bit better. For one thing, Ghost was waiting by the
doorway and silently trotted to her side. There was certainly far less noise here. The Royal wing was
one of the least crowded areas of the Red Keep.

It hadn’t always been that way. Construction of the Red Keep had begun during the reign of Aegon
the Conqueror and was only completed during the reign of Maegor I. By the time work had been
underway on it, the royal family already consisted of a King, two Queens, three princes and five
princesses. By the time it was finished, the royal family had expanded even more. Overall, there
were about fifteen sets of apartments in the wing. During the reign of Robert Baratheon, officially the
royal family consisted only of six to ten people counting Stannis’s family. It left for a lot of extra
space and Robert Baratheon made use of it by allowing high-ranking nobles to live there. Sansa
herself had been given one of the original Queen’s chambers after her father’s arrest, as she was still
betrothed to Joffrey at the time. High members of the Small Council were always bustling in and out
with their families and households when she’d lived here before.

The royal family now only consisted of two members, but unlike Robert Bartheon, Daenerys hadn’t
seen fit to invite other members of the court to inhabit these rooms. Since she’d taken the Iron
Throne, Sansa had been the only non-servant without the name “Targaryen” to live here.

There had been three “Queen’s” chambers built in the royal wing: one for each of Aegon’s wives
and a third for Alyssa Valeryon, Aenys I’s bride. Currently, Daenerys occupied the cavernous
King’s apartments at the very end of the wing, while Jon had taken the quarters originally built for
King Maegor I when he was still just a prince second in line. All three of the Queen’s chambers,
neary as luxurious as the King chambers though not nearly as large, were offered to serve as Sansa’s
new cell after she was taken into royal custody. One had once been Sansa’s original cell, the second
had belonged to Cersei, and the third had been Joffrey’s. All of them contained bad memories.

Instead, Sansa had taken the quarters made for Crown Prince Aenys, the future Aenys I. They
weren’t as large as the Queen’s chambers, but they were actually quite wonderful. Aenys had not
known a thing about ruling a kingdom, but what he had understood was art. He’d been passionate
about it.

The rooms had belonged to Princess Myrcella when Sansa had last been in the capitol. Cersei had
once admitted to Sansa that Joffrey had lived in them during the first two and a half years of his life.

“But even by that young age, Joffrey proved too… spirited… to properly preserve the decorations.”
Cersei’s admitted one sunny afternoon sewing in the Queen's solar. This was when the first Eddard
Stark was still alive. What she’d really meant was that he kept trying to destroy everything, so they
put him in the less-delicate Visenya rooms.

Sansa was grateful for it, as the vision of the quarters was truly something to behold. She used to
practically bleed with envy whenever she’d visit Myrcella all those years ago. Prince Aenys, ever the
aesthetic zealot, had commissioned all of his very favorite artists to adorn the walls with various
images and scenes. Some were of breathtaking landscapes and images of places like Dragonstone.
Others were scenes from various legends, some of which had been unfortunately lost to time aside
from these painting. A few were historical scenes, including one of Aenys’s parents riding their
dragons to conquer Westeros. Each fresco was so brilliant and realistic that one felt like you cold just
step right into them.

Even the ceilings were painted, and the moldings were intricate patterns of silvery-white. As if that
wasn’t enough, there was a balcony that went around both the solar and bedchamber that overlooked
the South Gardens. Even the furniture was art. The posts of Sansa’s bed were in the shapes of
dragon’s limbs and the headboard looked like the wings and head of one of Daenerys’s beasts.
When Sansa arrived, she’d been astonished to hear that Jon hadn’t chosen to inhabit the Aenys chambers. To the right of the bed hung a glittering depiction of The Wall itself that she’d thought would be perfect for her cousin.

Sansa left the guards at the door of her solar, ushering Ghost in and closing the door behind her, leaning back against it. She knew Randa and Anya would arrive soon with all manner of documents and objects for her to examine.

*Almost done. Almost done.* She told herself. *And then…*

*Then what?*

The Winterfell she’d grown up in had been turned to ash. The Winterfell she’d remade for her son to grow up in had been crushed to a pile of rubble by mobs sent from The Vale. The Stark treasury was dry and wasn’t being replenished since the tax system had gone haywire since her arrest. She wasn’t able to just go back and rebuild it again. She had no husband, no children. Even with an acquittal and increased support even in the Vale, she knew she could never return there. It was the dead of winter. She had no means to help her suffering people anymore. The Lords of the North had done pretty much nothing to aid her since she was arrested. The Karstarks had been taken over by some Wildling clan. The Umbers were all but completely gone, as were the Reeds. The Mormonts were embroiled in their own legal troubles. The Ryswells, Cerwyns, Flints, and Manderlys were useless. She didn’t entirely blame them. It was winter, and everyone was struggling to survive up North. She more than anyone knew what a struggle that could be even in summer.

Her Uncle Edmure had offered his support, but the man proved dreadfully short-sighted. His letters to her gave the impression that he didn’t consider her situation to be particularly dire.

Sansa met the red eyes of her cousin’s direwolf. The beast always looked angry, and she appreciated that. Over the years, Sansa acquired an appreciation for anger. She considered it one of the very few emotions that made sense.

The Lady of Winterfell gave herself ten minutes of relaxation just leaning against the door before she began to prepare for her friends’ arrival. It came quickly. Randa’s good spirits seemed more sincere than usual, while Lady Anya’s concern remained.

“I have no fears of your conviction now, but I’m still worried about you, Dear.” Anya admitted. “If you wish, Randa and I can handle the rest of this. You deserve some rest.”

“No.” Sansa replied, sounding harsher than she’d meant. “I mean, please, Anya. I appreciate the concern, but I insist upon staying involved. I cannot relax now, not when we’re so close.”

Randa put her arm about Sansa’s shoulders and led her over to the dining table in the middle of the solar. Lady Anya, carrying a satchel full of papers, set her things down and spread the parchment out before them.

“There’s very little left. Lothar Brune’s testimony. Mine. Lady Waynwood’s. A few Lords of the Vale who have come over to our side. A couple servants from Winterfell and the Eyrie. A few letters. Littlefinger and Wallace’s bodies. Nothing we haven’t discussed before.” Randa explained, leaning over the papers. “We just need a few signatures. We can handle the rest of the heavy lifting. Your Uncle has written a letter to confirm Littlefinger’s obsession with your mother. And a couple of Harry’s comrades decided to come forward. It’s open and shut.”

Sansa nodded weakly. Every inch of her ached.
“How is Dara?” She asked, inquiring after the bastard stepdaughter who had been brought before the Dragon Queen.

“She’s fine, asleep in my quarters.” Anya assured her.

“I would like to see her before you send her back to Ironoaks.” Dara and her half-sister Lycelle were Lady Anya’s wards now at Sansa’s request. Lycelle was back at Ironoaks, only four and far too scared to appear at the Red Keep. Sansa had been their guardian between Harry’s death and her arrest, but she was incapable of caring for them now.

“I’m sure she’d love to dine with you after her nap. She misses you and wants to ask you dozens of questions.”

Sansa wanted to bury her head in the girl’s sandy brown hair and gaze at her dimples.

A couple of hours later, Sansa had generous helpings of fresh trout, green beans, and lemon cakes settled where the court documents had been during the meeting. Lady Waynwood delivered the bright-eyed child, still in the red and white lamb’s wool dress she’d worn to court, to the solar. Dara’s blue eyes widened when she entered.

“Wooooooow! My Lady, this place is so pretty!” Dara broke away from her guardian’s grip and sped right up to an image of Queen Nymeria. Sansa smiled and walked up behind the child, stroking her river of wavy hair.

“I’m glad you like it.” Sansa replied, gazing at Nymeria’s face.

Lady Waynwood cleared her throat. Sansa looked over.

“My apologies, My Lady, but if you don’t mind I have to leave Dara with you for the evening. I was invited to dine with Lady Corbray and I can’t refuse.”

“Oh.” Sansa’s face fell. She’d prepared dinner for three. “It’s fine, Lady Waynwood, I understand. I’ll be happy to keep her. Dara, say good-bye to your Aunt.”

Anya nodded and the little girl bobbed her great-aunt a curtsey. The old woman withdrew, and Dara turned to Sansa.

“May I live here with you now? Aunt Anya says soon you won’t be in trouble anymore.”

Sansa blanched. “I’m sorry, Dara, but you’re going to have to stay at Ironoaks for now. Even after the trial, I have many issues to deal with and I can’t take care of you properly right now.”

Dara frowned. “Is it because of Winterfell?”

Sansa nodded. “That and a few other things.”

“Oh.” Dara looked down. “I’m sorry. Am I making you sad?”

“No, it’s fine—“

“Aunt Anya said I needed to do my best to make you happy.”

Sansa snorted. “I’m happy you’re here. Are you hungry?”

Dara nodded. Sansa led her over to the table. She’d just finished sitting the girl down and loading up her plate when there was a knock on the door. A page entered.
“His Grace Prince Jon has come to call upon you, Lady Stark.”

Dara’s mouth, already laden with a mouthful of green beans, fell open. “Woooow!”

Sansa sighed. She’d hoped for one normal night where she wasn’t reminded of her current troubles. But she’d been avoiding Jon for weeks and really couldn’t afford to do it anymore. “Send him in.”

Jon strode in with a corked bottle and two goblets, stopping dead when he saw Sansa standing over Dara. The Lady of Winterfell tapped her step-daughter’s full mouth closed and walked out from behind the table to curtsey. “Your Grace.”

Dara jumped off her chair and hurried over, mimicking her Lady’s motions as best she could. “Your Grace.”

Jon bowed awkwardly. “Lady Stark and Lady---?”

“My step-daughter, Dara Stone of Ironoaks.” Sansa explained.

“Oh. Yes. Right.” Jon cleared his throat and set the bottle and cups aside. “My apologies, My Ladies. I did not mean to interrupt your meal.”

“That’s okay. Lady Sansa had another plate and too much food because she thought Aunt Anya would be eating with us. So you should have supper with us instead.” Dara blurted out. Sansa almost smacked her.

Jon’s lip curled. “Well, if the Lady doesn’t mind…”

“No.”  Yes. “Please, Your Grace, join us.”

“Very well.” Jon was visibly pleased as he grabbed the drinks he’d brought. “I have wine for us, so I suppose I’m not an utterly hapless guest.”

“May I have some?” Dara inquired.

“No.” Sansa said, meaning it this time. The three of them gathered around the table once more. After helping the girl into her chair once more Sansa sat down awkwardly, allowing Jon to pour her a cup of the Arbor gold he’d brought. She took a generous sip, desperate to calm her nerves.

“I saw you in court today, Lady Dara. You were very brave, speaking for your step-mother like that.” Jon remarked.

“Bastard brave.” Dara replied, grinning and giggling.

“What?”

“That’s what Lady Sansa says. Though my sister Lycelle is a bastard and she wasn’t brave enough to come.”

Jon arched his brow, seemingly amused. “Is Lycelle one of Lord Harry’s bastards as well?”

“Yes. She has a different mother though. She’s back at Ironoaks.”

“Is she as pretty as you?”

“No.”

“Yes.” Sansa corrected her. Dara didn’t seem to care, she was too busy staring at Jon.
“Are you really the Prince?”

Jon smiled. “Yes, I am.”

The girl’s blue eyes narrowed. “Are you sure?”

“Dara!”

Jon was laughing, though. “Sometimes I have trouble believing it myself. But my Aunt the Queen says I am, and I listen to her. Why do you ask?”

“You don’t dress right.”

Sansa dropped her fork at this point. “Dara Stone, you will mind your tongue!”

Jon looked down at his black wool doublet. “I don’t? How should I dress?”

“Princes are supposed to wear silks and velvets and gold and jewels. You don’t wear any of that. My father wore finer things than you, and he wasn’t even a Prince. He was just Lord of the Eyrie.”

*Mother, Maiden, and Crone.* “Dara, I’m warning you…”

“It’s fine,” Jon assured her, still laughing. “To be honest with you, Lady Dara, I’ve only been a prince for a very short time. I haven’t much practice. Before this, I was just a man of the Night’s Watch.”

Dara wrinkled her nose. “I’m sorry.”

Even Sansa had to choke back a laugh at that.

“Don’t be.” Jon seemed to be enjoying himself. “I was a bastard once, you know.”

“You were a bastard of the North. Jon Snow.”

“That’s right.”

“Except you weren’t, you were a prince all along and you didn’t know it.”

“Also right. Very good. You’re a clever girl.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” The girl gave a smug smile. “So why don’t you dress like a prince now?”

“Well, I’m in black. Black is a Targaryen color.”

“So is red, but I don’t see any of that.”

“I like to keep things simple.”

“Yes. You do.” It was clear from her tone that she didn’t consider this a virtue.

Sansa decided she’d had enough. She got up then, glaring at her step-daughter. “Stop it now, Dara, or I’ll have you sent back to Lady Anya’s quarters. You need to mind your manners.”

The girl’s smile fell away. “I’m sorry, Aunt Sansa. I’m sorry, Prince Jon.”

Sansa sat back down again, rubbing her forehead. There was an awkward couple of minutes where the only sound was of chewing. Finally, Jon spoke.
“Are you well, My Lady?”

“Of course, Your Grace.” No, you fool! How could I possibly be well?

“Lady Sansa…” Dara began nervously.

“Yes?”

“Are you going to braid my hair tonight?”

That actually brought a smile to her face. She used to practice for the daughters she’d planned to have on Lycelle and Dara. During the evenings from when she first married Harry to the night of Eddie’s death, she’d brushed their hair for them. It was something her mother used to do for her. Lycelle and Dara’s mothers, both maids now, were always rushing around and didn’t have the patience for arranging their daughters’ hair.

“Of course, Sweetling.”

Dara smiled at her, and there were the dimples. Sansa stared for a few moments, just taking them in. The sight was bittersweet.

“Lady Catelyn used to do Sansa’s hair every evening.” Both women looked at Jon, who seemed to be studying his plate.

“Sansa did it every night at Winterfell with my sister and I. She had to stop when they took her away.”

“I’m sorry they did that. Those nasty men aren’t going to get away with this.”

“I know, Lady Anya told me. I don’t know why you’re trying Lady Sansa. She didn’t do anything wrong. She’s a good lady. My Papa thought she was perfect. Why can’t you help her?”

Both of the adults froze, their eyes meeting. Sansa proceeded to shoot her step-daughter a warning look. I swear, Child. If this wasn’t one of the last opportunities I have to see you for months at least, you’d be sent right back to your bed this instant. Why can’t you just behave?

“I’m trying.” Jon said quietly. He was studying his plate again. It suddenly felt very cold. Jon stood up. “If you will excuse me, Ladies.”

He walked out before they had a chance to respond. Sansa and Dara finished their meal in silence. Sansa quickly washed her hands, gathered her brush and some blue satin ribbons, sat Dara in front of her dressing table, and began to comb the girl’s hair.

“Sansa, are you mad at me?” Dara asked quietly. Sansa’s stomach twisted.

“No, not really. I’m mad at everyone else.” And that was the truth. She couldn’t be mad at Dara. The girl had very bravely come to the capital and spoken on her behalf. She misbehaved, but she was a wonderful child. A wonderful child whose world had been turned completely upside down.

“So am I.”

Sansa dropped the brush and embraced her husband’s bastard. They wept together for several minutes until there were no more tears to be shed. Sansa wiped the girl’s nose and finished her hair. By the time she was done, the child’s eyes were drooping shut. Sansa picked her up, laying the small head on her shoulder and walked out to the halls. The guards were still there.
“Lady Sansa?”

“I must take the child back to her Aunt’s quarters.”

The head guard, a grizzled, middle-aged man with grey hair, frowned. “I’m afraid we can’t allow you to roam the castle freely. You are still a prisoner.”

Sansa’s eyes narrowed. “I do not mind if you accompany me.”

“We’re instructed to stay put. I’m sorry, My Lady. One of us can take her.”

Sansa didn’t know these men. She’d long since learned not to trust men in armor. She tensed up. “Please, Ser. I just wish to---"

“Our orders were clear, Lady Stark. Darren!”

One of the younger guards came forward, holding out his arms to take the girl. Sansa recoiled, clutching the girl to her. “No!”

“Lady Stark, please give her to me.”


“What’s happening?”

Jon was rounding a corner of the hall with Ghost, looking concerned.

The guards all bowed. “Your Grace,” The leader said, “Lady Sansa wanted to bring the bastard girl brought back to Lady Waynwood’s chambers. But she’s strictly forbidden from wandering the castle, or making unauthorized visits, especially to any court witnesses. But she will not allow one of us to take the bastard instead.”

Jon closed his eyes and bit his lip. “Lady Sansa is in my custody, Ser Timmure, I give my permission.”

“I’m sorry, Your Grace, but that would be in violation of the legal codes.” Timmure replied, looking thoroughly uncomfortable.

Jon groaned and rubbed his temple. “Fine.”

He walked over to Sansa, slowly. “My Lady, allow me to take her. I will make sure she gets back safely.”

She believed that, but that didn’t make handing the girl over any easier. Every one of her instincts shouted no. But she did it all the same.

“I will return to you once I have delivered her.” Jon promised. “Ghost can stay with you in the meantime.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Sansa curtsied, hating every moment of this. Jon nodded his head and walked away. Sansa returned to her solar with the beast. Before she could do anything, there was another knock on the door. The two maids that had been assigned to her asked if they could clean up the meal left on the table.
“Quickly, then leave.” Sansa replied stiffly. The two young women stepped in, looking timid. Sansa ignored them and marched outside to the balcony. She waited for them to be gone. The second they were, she turned around to face the railing, pounded her fists against the hard red stone, and screamed at the top of her lungs.

She started beating her fists against the rail, sobbing and howling. *I just wanted to tuck her into bed. I just wanted to carry her down the halls and tuck her into bed. I just wanted to survive. I just wanted to go home. I just wanted to see my child grow up. I just wanted to see my family. I just wanted a fine, noble husband and children. I just wanted what everyone ever told me to want.*

Every time she closed her eyes, she could see her son’s shattered skull. She could see her father’s head mounted on a pike. She could see Rickon’s body. She could see Winterfell in ashes and rubble. She could see Joffrey aiming his crossbow at her.

Closing your eyes was supposed to keep a person from seeing things they didn’t want to see. Apparently, she was as hopeless at closing her eyes properly as she was at keeping her own child safe.

*I shouldn’t have ever let him out of my sight. I shouldn’t have left him to the nurse and guards. I should have kept him by my side every night. Every day. Every moment. I should have gotten to his rooms faster. I should have had more guards. I should have taken the unrest in the Vale more seriously. If I had, he’d be alive. But I didn’t, and he’s dead. I let my baby die, I betrayed my father to the Queen, I let Petyr rape me when I was married to Harry, and I let Winterfell be destroyed a second time. I’m a failure as a mother, daughter, wife, and lady.*

She felt herself being yanked back from the edge and looked around. Ghost had a bunch of her skirts clenched in his jaws and was pulling her, his red eyes seemingly more furious than ever. Sansa fell, landing on her tailbone hard. She reached up and clutched at Ghost’s neck. It was only when she saw the red stains on his white fur that she realized she was bleeding.

She saw the state her hands were in before she felt the pain. It wasn’t the worst thing she’d ever felt by far, but it wasn’t slight in the least. *And now I’ve broken my hands as well.*

“Sansa!”

And now Ghost’s master was rushing over, stricken with fear. He grasped her wrists and helped her up, staring at her hands in horror. “What did you do?”

She didn’t answer him. Jon shouted for the guards and commanded them to call Grand Maester Merys and fetch the maids. He picked her up, carrying her into the solar and sitting her at her dining table.

“Sansa? Sansa, can you hear me?”

“Yes, Jon.” She replied softly, staring at the table. “Of course I can. You’re shouting.”

The maids rushed in, one of them shrieking when they saw her hands. Jon impatiently told them to fetch water and bandages, and the non shrieking one did so swiftly. When she came back with a basin and cloth, the girl handed them to Jon before smacking her shrieking counterpart. That quieted her. Jon started cleaning Sansa’s hands while thanking the level-headed girl—Anais—for the silence. The other one, Karlet, was sent away.

Anais helped Jon washed the blood from her hands. The Lady of Winterfell hissed when she felt the water. It stung. But she gave no resistance.
Merys entered in his dressing gown, clearly flustered.

“Oh my!” He cried upon seeing Sansa’s hands. But he hurried over and began examining them at once. He played with a few joints, conjuring up new jolts of pain that caused the Lady of Winterfell to cry out. It didn’t take him long to declare both of Sansa’s pinky fingers broken. “She needs them bandaged and braced, but they should heal well enough. I can do it quickly enough. What happened?”

“I was angry and pounded both my fists against the balcony rail. I wasn’t thinking clearly. I didn’t mean to hurt myself, I was just upset.” Sansa answered. “May I rest now?”

Maester Merys nodded. “You may go lie down. I can brace your fingers while you’re in bed just fine. But I’d suggest that you postpone your court session for tomorrow.”

“I’m getting acquitted tomorrow. I can’t. I refuse.”

Merys sighed. “My Lady, I could get the authorization to force you.”

“You’d be so cruel, Grand Maester?” Sansa asked sharply. “I would never forgive you.”

Almost as if on cue, Ghost bared his fangs to the Maester in a most threatening manner. The old man recoiled somewhat.

“Fine, however, I will insist that after your trial, you stay abed for at least a week. And until I say otherwise, you are to be in the presence of someone else. Someone human.”

“I will watch over her tonight,” Jon said firmly. “I’ll stay by her bed.”

Merys nodded. “Yes, she probably should be in the presence of family. As much as possible. Lady Sansa is not well, Your Grace.”

“Clearly.”

Three quarters of an hour later, Sansa was lying in her bed, her fingers in splints. She’d been given some milk of the poppy, but less than Merys had recommended. She needed to be sharp tomorrow morning.

Jon was sitting in a chair by her bed, looking miserable. They were alone now, the Grand Maester having completed his treatment and Anais having changed Sansa into a bed gown and washed her face. There was silence. Sansa stared at her cousin, discovering yet another thing to feel guilty for.

“You’re supposed to get to sleep.” Jon chided her, finally.

“Every time I close my eyes, I see all the very worst things I’ve encountered in my life. All the very worst memories, and I have a long list of awful ones.” Sansa replied, wondering why she was being this honest. Jon flinched.

“I sometimes see the White Walkers.” Jon admitted. “I close my eyes and see their glowing ones. And I swear, I can hear them speaking their language. I even feel cold.”

“It’s winter. Of course you feel cold.”

Jon snorted, leaning forward and running a hand through his hair. “No. Not really. I don’t feel cold here. Maybe it’s cold to everyone else, but compared to The Wall and everything beyond it, this is nothing. It feels warm down here, even in winter. When you’ve bled to death in the winter snow...
beyond Winterfell, a southron city inhabited by dragons will always feel warm.”

“I wish I could be like that. But once I feel something awful, I always carry it with me. If I felt that cold, I’d probably always feel it.”

Jon swallowed. “Why wouldn’t you see me?”

“Hmm?”

“Before now? I tried to visit you in the Sept, but you wouldn’t receive me. And until now, we haven’t been alone with each other. We’ve barely spoken. Why?”

Sansa groaned. “A hundred thousand reasons. I worried that taking private meetings with you would compromise the trial in some way. You’re already my cousin, suspicions of influence were already going to be present. I knew you’d be standing on that dais, and I also knew that as long as there was record of me meeting someone standing on that dais privately, my accusers would always be able to claim the trial was fixed. The only way I could possibly salvage anything was to see this through on my own merits.”

Jon’s eyes widened. “What did you care what claims were made as long as you were acquitted?”

“Because I’m aware of the position such a conflict would put the realm in. The less unrest in The Vale, the better it is for everyone.”

“That’s it? Just politics?”

“No. Not at all. I had personal reasons.”

“What could those be?” Jon asked, clearly perturbed. Sansa rolled her eyes.

“For one thing, Jon, I was humiliated.” Sansa told him.

“By what?”

“Are you joking? Everything! What isn’t humiliating about my life? When you’d last seen me, I was haughtily riding off to King’s Landing, prepared to be Queen. Now I’m a despoiled, homeless criminal who, until a few days ago, was relieving myself in a bucket in the Great Sept of Baelor. My home is burnt to the ground, my family is dead, my fortune has been squandered, my lands are overrun, and my reputation is ruined. And all the worst parts of my life, the lowest of my lows, are known to the public in explicit detail. Meanwhile, you’re now heir to the Iron Throne, the newly discovered Dragon Prince who bravely faced down the Night’s King and defended the Wall. I’m the Northern Whore who tried to defraud the realm and let a man I called Father shoot his seed all over my face.”

Jon cringed, and Sansa wanted to as well. She was utterly floored by the explicitness with which she was speaking. She didn’t do this. This was not her.

“Sansa, I’m sorry. I should have realized… but honestly, what does that truly matter? You’re my cousin!”

“I notice you call me your cousin quite easily,” she remarked. “It isn’t hard for you to think of me that way, to stop referring to me as ‘sister’ by accident. You’d have trouble if I were Arya. But I’m not. You have no issues with thinking of me as someone other than your sister because we were never close. You were never attached to me the way you were to the others. I had no way of knowing how you felt about me now. I was the one who always made sure to refer to you as ‘half-
brother’ and for all I knew you resented me for it. That and other things. You never liked me and for all I knew you hated me. I was the haughty, privileged sister who always dismissed you. You were the base-born boy mistreated by a woman who looked exactly like me. But now you’re prince of the realm and I’m the tawdry slut despised by an entire realm.”

“You thought I was happy about this?”

“I had no idea. The young man I’d known as my half-brother didn’t smile about the misfortune of others, but I had no idea who this Prince Jon Targaryen was. It’s been eight years, Jon. Tell me, is the woman you’re looking at now at all like the little girl who wanted to be a Princess?”

“Yes.”

Sansa stopped short. She had to admit, that got her. What in the world could he mean by that? Yes? How could he possibly say ‘yes’ to that question?

“You’re wrong.” Sansa said angrily. “That girl is dead.”

“I’m fairly sure I could tell if you were. I’ve been dead myself. I would know.”

She turned away from him. “You know nothing.”

In the background, she could hear him whisper, “...Jon Snow.”
Bonds

Chapter Summary

Conversations and alcohol prove both a hindrance and a help to the Lady of Winterfell. A new project is embarked upon.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone---

First, I wanted to thank you all for your comments. They're really fantastic and thorough. I'm thrilled with the response I'm getting because the criticism has been enormously helpful. For instance, some of you have been noting some dissonance with Dany's characterization. To tell you the truth, I wasn't planning on making Dany such a big character in this story originally, so that might have contributed to any issues. I do plan on developing that more later on and maybe explaining it a bit better---- I do actually have reasons for the way she does things. That will come later, I promise. I'm actually considering putting in a couple of chapters in Dany's POV later on-- do you all think it would help? In this chapter, though, I focussed mostly on Jon and Sansa. This is still their story, after all. I have to apologize in advance--- the depiction of the trial proceedings in this part is pretty minute. But I felt the outcome was predictable enough that it wouldn't hurt the story too much. Sansa's trial is just a section of the overall narrative, not the focus, and I think it serves its purpose here.

Any suggestions and/or musings about Jon and Sansa's characters and what you think might happen later in the story are welcome/appreciated. I was also wondering what you guys might think of me putting multiple POVs in chapters. I found operating exclusively from Sansa's side in this chapter a bit challenging.

Thanks so much and enjoy :)  

Next chapter will be in Jon's POV.

And special thanks to my friend Liesa who is on vacation with me for editing this :)

Chapter Four: Bonds

The pain in her hands woke her, inspiring her first thought of the day.

*You fool. You just can’t stop hurting yourself, can you?*

She was happy, at least, that she hadn’t taken the entire dose of poppy milk that the Grand Maester had suggested. She could feel the full force of her broken pinky fingers, but her mind was clear and her head didn’t hurt. Nearly all of her senses quickly kicked in. It was the sound of faint snoring that caused her to open her eyes.
Judging by the light, it was still quite early. But there was enough light for Sansa to tell that both Jon and Ghost had stayed the whole night. The Direwolf was curled up at the foot of her bed, almost hanging off the edge of the platform on which the bed stood thanks to his immense size. Jon was to her right, still in the same chair, his head leaned back. His mouth hung open. Behind him was, appropriately, the painting of The Wall.

_I forgot he slept like that._ When she was very young, Jon and Robb shared a bedchamber. On certain nights, she’d gone to her older brothers’ room when spooked by a nightmare or thunderstorm. To distract her from her fear, Robb would point Jon’s ridiculous sleeping face out to her and make her laugh. Robb and Theon once played a prank on him where they put something in his mouth---- Sansa couldn’t quite remember what it was--- while he was asleep. He’d almost choked to death. It was the worst trouble either of the boys had ever been in.

_Some things never change. Dara was right, he doesn’t quite look like a prince._ Jon was among the most simply dressed in the Red Keep. She had yet to see him in a garment that wasn’t black, grey, white, or brown. He generally favored garments of wool and linen, with no embroidery or decoration. It wasn’t that his attire was unsightly. His clothes were all of good quality, properly fitted, and freshly laundered. But no one looking at him would guess that he was the heir to an empire. And the color scheme, with his intense eyes and dark hair and frequently somber expression, made him look rather grim.

The finest thing he had was Longclaw, the sword of Valyrian Steel he carried. The hilt was fashioned in the shape of a white wolf’s head with an inlaid tile that depicted a white direwolf upon a grey background.

That confused her. _That’s the crest for a Stark bastard. Jon is a legitimate son of House Targaryen now. Why not have it altered?_ Sansa understood the shape of the handle--- for Ghost. But it made no sense to keep the wrong family symbol.

She kept observing him, not feeling so self-conscious doing so when he couldn’t stare right back. Sansa had grown more and more uncomfortable with being stared at over the years, especially by men. Eyes that looked upon her were rarely kind. But now, Jon’s eyes were shut.

_He could be mistaken for one of the servants, the way he presents himself. A higher-up servant, of course. Maybe a squire. But he doesn’t look like a prince, and he should._

His aunt left no doubt in anyone’s minds that she was a queen. Her gowns were all exquisitely-crafted constructions of silk, satin, samite, and velvet, often embroidered with intricate patterns. She didn’t shy away from jewelry, either. When she appeared in the throne room she practically glittered.

_Jon doesn’t need to dress too ostentatiously, but he could use some more finery._ Sansa mused. A doublet in crimson silk, velvet, or lamb’s wool. He could wear a black jerkin and breeches. Maybe a silver chain for his neck. He could look like a prince if he tried. It wouldn't be hard. It’s not like he’s plain or anything. He’d be one of the best-looking men at court if he’d stop dressing like he was still at the damn Wall. _How is anyone supposed to take him seriously here if he looks like a page in mourning?_

Jon gave a loud snort and awoke, startling his cousin. He spotted her staring at him at once and wiped his mouth. “Good Morning, My Lady. Are you feeling well?”

“As well as could be expected, Your Grace.” Sansa replied, slowly sitting up.

“You needn’t call me Your Grace when we’re alone.”
“You needn’t call me ‘My Lady’.” Sansa rubbed her forehead.

“Very well. Were you watching me sleep?”

“Only for a couple of minutes. Does that bother you?”

“No. I just don’t understand what could possibly be worth watching.”

“I was thinking about your clothes.”

Jon hesitated before asking, “What about them?”

“You need better ones.”

Judging by his expression, he was more or less expecting and dreading that answer. He rolled his eyes. “Not you too.”

“You looked like you should be carrying messages, not standing by the Iron Throne. It’s not appropriate.”

“I have no business drowning myself in brightly colored silks while smallfolk are struggling to eat.”

“You needn’t drown yourself. You just need to look like you belong at this court. How is anyone supposed to take you seriously if you look like a servant?”

“How is anyone supposed to take me seriously if I look like a dandy?”

“Wearing something that isn’t black doesn’t make you a dandy.” Sansa regretted bringing it up. She didn’t want to have this sort of argument first thing in the morning. “Nevermind. Forget I said anything. I need to get up and prepare for my trial.”

“Right.” Jon stood up, suddenly looking guilty.

“What is it?”

“I meant to tell you last night--- I’m not going to be there today.”

“I see.”

“Daenerys thinks I can’t stay emotionally detached.”

“She’s right.”

“She is. But she says my presence there is starting to send the wrong message. I’m sorry. She insists.”

“It is fine, Jon.” I don’t need you there. I never needed you there.

“When it’s over, I’d like us to meet.”

“That is fine.” It would be necessary anyways. Sansa would no longer technically be in his custody once she was acquitted. And she had no household or means to build one. “Thank you, Jon.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Everything had gone as Sansa planned. Daenerys, smiling, declared her innocent of all charges and proceeded to have Coldwater and Moore arrested right there in the throne room for involvement in
Eddie’s death.

The pleasure and relief she experienced upon witnessing this was only momentary. Sansa endured scores of people approaching her and offering her their congratulations. At that moment, Sansa just wanted to rest. The second it was declared that she was innocent, and that Eddie’s name would be recorded in the records as a legitimate Lord of the Eyrie, she found herself not caring about the court whatsoever. She only managed to receive a few of the sycophantic morons before loudly declaring that she had to depart. Sansa felt like she was going to faint at any moment. The last of her strength had been used up by these people. She had no more to give them.

Not that it mattered. The second she stepped out of the throne room, she was greeted with yet more crowds in the halls, eager to speak with her. Sansa wished Ghost were present. He would be able to keep the crowds at bay.

It was the Queen exiting the throne room that relieved some of the pressure. With the air of someone completely secure of her ownership of her surroundings, she parted the crowd and called Sansa to follow her. “Take lunch with me.”

Sansa felt too drained to handle the Dragon Queen. But I don’t have a choice, do I? She obeyed her monarch, bowing her head and following closely in her wake. Daenerys called for a meal to brought to her solar.

A brisk, refreshing quiet enveloped Sansa and the monarch when they entered the royal wing. As soon as the doors closed behind them, Daenerys looked at her. “Hear that? That is why I put a stop to allowing the nobility to lodge here.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Sansa was grateful for the silence, but did not feel up to giving a very nuanced response. Her wits were exhausted. If she’s looking for an entertaining conversation, she must look elsewhere.

“Look at you, you’re exhausted. I’m surprised you can even walk.”

“My apologies.”

“For what? Being tired?”

“I---- Yes.”

“Why are you apologizing for being tired? Why shouldn’t you be?”

“It’s the middle of the day, Your Grace.” What do you want me to say?

Daenerys sighed and the two entered her solar. Three maids were already laying out the food: roast duck, grapes, peas, hard cheese, brown bread with butter and Dornish sour to drink. The Queen had her guest sit down at the dining table in the middle of the enormous room. Sansa peered around. She hadn’t visited the King’s solar prior to this. Joffrey usually preferred to have her beaten in her own chambers.

“Go ahead and eat.” Daenerys said, leaning back with her cup of wine and surveying Sansa. The Lady of Winterfell shifted uncomfortably, fumbling with the knife and fork with her splintered hands. She took a nervous bite of the duck and was greeted with a most unfamiliar—but not at all unpleasant--- flavor.

“Like it?” Daenerys asked, noting her wide-eyed reaction. “It’s a spice from Yunkai. Some type of special pepper that doesn’t grow here. I stockpile it whenever I’m visiting.”
“Delicious.” Sansa replied upon swallowing, meaning it. “I’ve never had anything like it.”

“Well, I’m glad. Now, Lady Sansa, I am aware you’re very tired. So I’m going to handle this quickly and then let you finish eating and go to bed. We need to discuss your place at court. You’re a free woman now, and therefore no longer in my nephew’s custody. Therefore we must discuss your living arrangements.”

*That didn’t take long. Already prepared to remove me, are you? No non-Targaryens in the royal wing.* Sansa wondered vaguely where they’d place her. As the head of a High House, cousin to the Prince, Lady Paramount of one realm and the widow of the Lord Paramount of another, she’d be entitled to some sort of decent accommodations. But even those accommodations required the inhabitants to pay for their household. *I’m penniless. Even my gown is borrowed. I wonder where I shall sleep tonight.*

Cersei Lannister had kept her where she was between being set aside by Joffrey and her marriage to Tyrion. After that she’d been put in The Imp’s quarters in the High Nobles’ wing. But Daenerys Targaryen was not Cersei Lannister.

“Both my nephew and Lady Waynwood have made offers to provide for your living expenses. If you wish, you may live in the High Nobles’ Wing. You will be supplied with rooms which befit your birth and rank. Or, you may stay where you are.”

Sansa’s eyes widened. “But I am not of royal blood, Your Grace.”

“Well, some Northern secessionists might argue that point. But that’s irrelevant. You might not be royal yourself, but you share blood *with* a royal. If you’re willing to let Jon be your provider, you can stay here. It is still Targaryen gold paying for everything, anyways. You’ll just be counted as part of Jon’s household.”

The younger woman blushed. She didn’t like this discussion. She’d already been raised to believe that discussing gold with anyone but one’s spouse, master of coin or steward was inappropriate. But openly talking about being beholden to someone else’s charity was especially humiliating.

“So I’d be his ward?” *Nineteen years old, twice married, one child gone, a war fought, Lady of Winterfell, Lady of the Eyrie, and Warden of the North. And I’m to be Jon’s ward.*

“More or less. Though I doubt Jon would try to assert any authority over you. You don’t have to stay in this area of the castle if he provides for you. He just wants to make sure you’re safe and comfortable.”

“The Prince is very generous, but I wouldn’t want to be a drain on his purse.”

Daenerys snorted. “You needn’t worry over that. Jon is Prince of the Andals and Lord of Dragonstone. Both those titles provide him with a generous income and outside of buying food and supplies for the smallfolk, he rarely spends a copper of it. You’ve seen how he dresses. His purse is overflowing. Meanwhile, you’re in debt and so is Lady Waynwood. Although, her debt isn’t nearly as bad as yours. The trial is over. There is no need to resist his help anymore. And he’s been desperate to assist you. Let him.”

*And increase my debt even more. Dependent on some man who could easily control me once again. But better my debt than Anya’s. She’s done enough to help me. Sansa swallowed a mouthful of peas and her pride. “Very well then.”*

Daenerys smiled. “Excellent. He’ll be happy to hear it. I assume you’ll stay where you are?”
Sansa nodded. It would make it easier to avoid the court.

“Very good. There’s also something you can help me with. I need you to testify against Coldwater and Moore, and I was hoping you’d be a witness in the Tyrell trials as well.”

Sansa’s blood ran cold. “You want me to speak against them?”

“Are your experiences with them incriminating? If so, yes. But I believe that at your trial you said that you believe them to be innocent. If that is true, speak for their defense and tell us why.”

“I will do so.” Sansa said, blushing again. She was so tired. And she kept dropping her fork. Every second of this meal was humiliating.

“You’re drained. You may retire now if you wish.”

Sansa stood up so quickly that she knocked her chair back. She bumped the table then and her cup fell over, spilling the red wine on the white silk dress she wore. Sansa went as red as the stains when the maids hurried over to clean up. It didn’t matter, the dress was ruined. Arianne Martell’s dress. The first thing Jon will have to pay for.

Not being able to meet the Queen’s eyes, Sansa bobbed a curtsey, murmured an apology, and fled from the room. Anais greeted her in the Aenys chambers, her eyes widening when she saw the stained dress. Without saying a word, Anais helped her out of it. Sansa waved away the girl’s attempts to fix her hair and headed straight for the bedroom, sinking down into the pillows and burying her face.

Several hours later, Anais was shaking her awake. Sansa blinked. The sun was almost completely set. “What is it?”

“Pardon me, My Lady, but the prince has come calling.”

“Send him in,” Sansa said wearily. Anais looked at Sansa, wide-eyed.

“But My Lady, your appearance.”

“Right. Right.” She was still only in her shift. “Give me the dress I wore yesterday.”

Anais promptly brought the gown over and helped Sansa into it. The maid fixed Sansa’s hair and before long, the Warden of the North was entering her solar to find Jon standing by the balcony door. Ghost was sitting outside. Her cousin set aside a plate of lemon cakes he was holding and bowed.

“My Lady, forgive the intrusion. But we were planning on meeting after the trial, and I decided to come to you.”

“Right.” Sansa smiled graciously. “Forgive me, I forgot.”

One of his eyebrows went into an arch, as if he wasn’t sure he believed this. He picked up the plate of cakes again and set them down on the dining table. “I brought these for you.”

“Your generosity, as ever, is unmatched.” Sansa picked up the plate. “Let’s sit by the fire.”

There was an area of the solar by the fire surrounded by chairs and a sofa. Sansa took one of the stiffer arm chairs, taking care not to get too comfortable while simultaneously giving the impression of being casual. Jon sat next to her, gazing at her carefully.
“How are you feeling, My Lady?”

“Quite well. I have reason to.” She didn’t plan on being as candid with Jon as she was last night.

“You should be proud of yourself, you defended yourself brilliantly.” Jon replied. “I knew after day one that your acquittal was assured.”

“I owe most of it to Anya and Randa. They arranged for most of my evidence.”

“Your personal testimony was still admirable. The Tyrells are very lucky to be having you speaking in their defense.”

“They are good friends.”

“I imagine they’ll be even better ones when this is over.”

Sansa gave him an appraising look. Well, he’s not blind. He knows not to put me on some pedestal of complete altruism. She chose her words carefully. Just enough of the truth. Just enough.

“One must accumulate as many good friends as one can in order to avoid having to become too dependent on a single party.” I would know.

“Can’t that create a conflict of interest?”

“Do your interests conflict with those of the Tyrells?” Tell me, please.

“If they do, I am unaware as to how. I didn’t mean to suggest such a thing. I was just asking.”

Sansa decided not to probe and just answer his original query. “Not if you ally yourself with the right people.”

“I hope I can take your acceptance of my help as an indicator that you consider me one of the right people.”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”

Jon shrugged, but Sansa got the strange feeling that he actually had an answer to that, and it was a good one. He could just think I’m trying to exploit him. That I’m desperate.

“I do wish to thank you, Your Grace. For your patronage. And to my embarrassment, I confess I have already managed to add to your expenses. I accidentally stained one of the dresses I borrowed from Princess Arianne today. We’ll need to replace it.”

He waved this aside. “It is no trouble. I’ll have a dressmaker sent to you tomorrow so you won’t have to borrow gowns anymore.”

“Once again, thank you.”

“It is the least I can do. I’m placing an order for materials and craftsmen to go North on the morrow, by the way. And I’ve looked into your debts. Many are fraudulent, several shouldn’t even be addressed to you.”

Sansa blushed. “You needn’t---”

“I need. I am in a position to help you. I’m going to take advantage of it.”
She clenched her teeth. Sansa had no energy to argue, nor did she want to just accept this so easily. “Jon, if you don’t mind, I’d prefer to address this subject at another time. I’m quite weary right now.”

“I believe it. All the more reason for you to---“

“Cousin, if you wish to keep a woman, I suggest you find yourself a bride.”

He flushed slightly. “That is a tiresome topic.”

“Once I sort out the tax system in the North, I will be able to pay back my debts.” Sansa said, changing her tactics.

“Not quickly enough to give you a suitable living.”

She groaned. “Jon, please.”

“Sansa, I am not trying to coddle you. But I worry that you might make a rash decision.”

“What sort of rash decision?”

“Like choosing to marry someone for the wrong reasons.”

“And what exactly are the right reasons supposed to be?”

“Love and personal happiness.” He actually seems like he means that.

“Maybe for a milkmaid. Not for a lady. No one would ever marry me for love, Jon. That’s not why a person like me weds. Not that I was entertaining such an idea.”

His eyes narrowed. “Are you sure?”

“What made you think I was?”

“Willas Tyrell still lacks a wife.”

Ah, that old chestnut. “And you think that is why I’m supporting his parents and siblings? You’re supporting me. It doesn’t mean you’re trying to make me your spouse.”

Wait… Sansa focused closely on her cousin, who was shaking his head and frowning.

“That’s different. You’re family.”

“And Margaery Tyrell was one of the only friends I had at King’s Landing. Jon, I’m not looking to wed at the moment. I promise you.”

Jon was visibly relieved. “I’m glad to hear it.”

Why? Why would that make you happy? Ideas were popping into in her head now at a rapid pace.

“I suppose we both have much to be happy for;” Sansa replied, suddenly very engaged. She felt a new burst of energy. “We should have a toast. Shall I call Karlet to fetch us some wine?”

“I had Karlet dismissed from your household. She’ll be replaced with someone more level-headed like Anais soon.”

Sansa was a bit irked by this. While she probably would have done it herself, she took issue with Jon doing it for her without consulting her. But she put her feelings aside. “I see. Well, we’ll call Anais
then. Anais!”

An order for a bottle of Arbor gold was given. “Bring it quickly.”

When it was brought, Sansa poured the cups herself, giving Jon a more generous portion. A toast was made to the successful prosecution of Coldwater and Moore and the prosperity of Winterfell. Sansa sipped daintily and continued to do so as the night wore on. The two spoke of Slaver’s Bay, the dispersal of the now defunct Night’s Watch, and the dragons. All the while, Sansa made sure to refill Jon’s cup as many times as she could. When the discussion of the three beasts moved to the discovery that Rhaegal was female and the attempts to breed the creatures, Sansa pounced.

“And you? After all, the Targaryen line must continue. Unless Daenerys is searching for a new husband.” Would it matter even if she was?

Jon flinched. “I think she’s a bit distracted now. As am I. We’re both working very hard to try and keep the kingdom afloat.”

“You collaborate on that, why not this issue as well? The stability of the kingdom depends as much on continuing the line as keeping the Lords happy. I don’t see why you don’t marry each other. You are Targaryens after all.”

Jon was almost sputtering now, his pale skin flushing. “No… I couldn’t. And besides, if Dany can’t…”

Have children. “Can’t what?”

“She was married twice and only had some strange… No, I shouldn’t mention it. She doesn’t like people talking about it.” Jon furrowed his brow and looked at his lap. “The point is, we’ve decided I should be looking outside the Targaryen family.”

I. Not we. I. “So you’ve discussed it?”

“Yes. But you mustn’t tell a soul.”

“I won’t.” Sansa replied. She wasn’t lying. I don’t need to tell anyone. I just need to know myself.

Deciding that she’d extracted enough information for the night, Sansa moved on to another topic. She told Jon about the Royces and Waynwoods, making sure to talk at length. After another half hour had passed, she stood up, making sure to sway a bit as if disoriented.

“I’m sorry, Jon, but I must bid you goodnight. I’m quite weary.”

He stood as well. “Of course. Is there anything I can do for you before I leave?”

“Walk me to my bedchamber door. I fear I may have had a little too much.” She hadn’t. Sansa was very good at controlling her intake. Sobriety had always been a great ally, especially when others were inebriated.

He gave her his arm. His grip was not steady. When they got to the door, Sansa turned and hugged him.

“Jon?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry I’ve been so distant.”
“You’re forgiven, My Lady.”

She pulled away then and smiled at him. “Thank you. You’re still not paying all my debts for me, though. Good night.”

She retreated back to her room before he had a chance to protest.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Sansa woke the next morning with a fresher outlook than she could remember having for a very, very long time. For a while, her primary goal had been to win her trial and have Eddie’s name put in the records as a Lord of the Vale. But she’d been worried for a while about what she’d focus on after she finished that. Her mind had been consumed by the trial, but now that it was over her thoughts were more scattered than the sands of Dorne after a windstorm. She knew she wanted to try and rebuild the North again. The problem was that she had no idea where she’d start and worried her confusion would lead to disillusionment. Sansa was prone to melancholy, and she knew it. She found that she was most successful at avoiding it by having something clear on which to channel her thoughts and energy.

I’ve made a rocky start, but nothing that I can’t recover from. She thought as she sat up that morning. But I have to make a clear choice as to whether I really want to pursue this.

It would be tricky, but Sansa knew how to handle tricky. Before Anais came in, she got up and went to the desk against the opposite wall. No wasting any time, she grabbed a quill and ink and began penning an apology letter to Arianne Martell. By the time Anais came in with her morning bath and the news that the dressmaker Jon had arranged was expected in an hour, Sansa already had the letter written out perfectly.

“After we’re done with the seamstress, I’d like to stretch my legs and tour the grounds.” Sansa mused to her maid as she lounged in the tub.

“The gardens aren’t how you remember them, My Lady.” Anais said, pouring some water over Sansa’s head. “Winter has left them without the blooms you once knew. It’s replaced them with a biting cold.”

“Nonetheless, I’ve been cooped up too long. And I’m a Stark of the North. I can handle a little cold. If the gardens prove disappointing, I can always examine the training yards.” Sansa said as her maid began to shampoo her hair.

“The training yards, My Lady?” Anais asked.

“Yes. The training yards. I’m sure I can find something with which to amuse myself there.” Sansa stretched her arms out and examined her body. She was too thin. She’d been fed next to nothing for weeks and it had taken a toll on her appearance. Not only was she not as fleshy as she would have liked, but her hair was also thinner. Nothing unfixable, of course. A couple moons of being well-fed would put more meat on her bones and thicken her hair.

If I can make myself as beautiful as I was when I married Harry… Sansa hadn’t given much thought to her appearance in a long time. It occupied her whole world when she was a girl. But other things got in the way as she grew up. Once being beautiful helped her survive— it kept Joffrey happy and charmed Harry into marrying her. After that though, it stopped mattering as much. She was fighting a war, mothering a son, leading a people through winter, and rebuilding a castle, among other things. She knew that she was still beautiful. Even after being kept on the brink of starvation for moons on end and enduring the miseries of her life, she still managed to make heads turn. But it is one thing to
make heads turn. It is another to bring men to their knees. I need to be able to do the latter. That is the arena I’m in again. One where a pretty face and fine teats make for weapons as useful as any blade. Thank the Gods I’m still young.

She had to find out what soaps and oils Daenerys used in her bath, though. For a woman who spent a great deal of her time around fire, she had incredible skin. The basic soap and shampoo Anais was using just wouldn’t do at this point.

The dressmaker who arrived turned out to be the one employed by the Dragon Queen herself. Sansa was pleased by this. She implored the woman to make the gowns and kirtles loose enough to accommodate any weight she might gain and gear the bodice more towards style than comfort. When it was all completed, Sansa slipped into yet another loan from Arianne Martell--- this one navy damask, and stepped out with her maid. She made a decent show of pretending to be interested in the wilting gardens before going to the main yards where the noblemen of the court practiced at combat. She was relieved to discover she’d managed to catch her cousin in the midst of a sparring match with Lord Edric Dayne.

Jon trounced the young man easily three rounds in a row, displaying rather thrilling skill. Sansa watched as Jon lent a hand to the young Lord of Starfall, lifting him up and then patiently began demonstrating a couple of his maneuvers. Her cousin had Dayne practice them with him, slowly going through the motions with a smile on his face. After a few minutes, the former bastard left Dayne to practice. He walked over to his squire, a dark-haired young man of fifteen or so who handed his charge a wet cloth.

Sansa watched as her cousin wiped his face, removing smudges of dirt from his clear, fair skin. He ran his hands through his thick black hair, parting his full lips into a smile that displayed straight, white teeth. A young serving boy approached him with a canteen full of water. Jon paused to thank the child before taking a swig.

_I can definitely work with this._ Sansa mused, noting the twisting in her lower belly.
Chapter Summary

Politics at play with the beginning of the Tyrell trials.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! I'm so excited about this story now. Thanks so much for the comments and kudos!

Chapter Five: Connections and Roses

At this point in his life, Jon still wasn’t used to the level of boot licking he encountered from the courtiers of King’s Landing. He’d witnessed starvation, fear, and war, and yet couldn’t recall ever experiencing so much desperation expressed as fervently as it was here. And the most pathetic thing was that it wasn’t desire for safety and sustenance people were after; it was gratification, power and wealth.

Every day it seemed he received invitations, compliments, and attention. Once upon a time, a man like Steffon Roote would sneer at him and call him “bastard.” This morning when Jon passed him in the halls on the way back from training, sweaty and smelly, the samite-clad Lord bowed as deeply as his generous belly would allow. “My prince.”

There were times when Jon truly wished he hadn’t been given a Lord’s education and hadn’t had proper manners drilled into him. If he hadn’t, then he’d have an excuse for being rude and dismissing these people. Unfortunately, good etiquette dictated that he must at least acknowledge the man.

Jon nodded to him. “Lord Roote.”

The middle-aged Lord smiled so widely that his thick mustache almost tickled his ears. He took this basic courtesy as an invitation to run up alongside Jon, breathing heavily after the first few steps.

“I wanted to offer my compliments. I hear you frequently encounter victory in the till yards.”

And what else is it that you want, aside from the opportunity to fill my ear with flattery regarding my ability to bring a few green boys to their knees during sword practice? I’m sure there’s something that you consider even more desirable. Or even many things. “Thank you, Lord Roote, but I consider the true victories to be when I train these young men to be better warriors. I prefer it when I am knocked to the ground. It’s a sign of progress.”

“Of course. And I am sure you are making great progress, too.” Roote said hastily. “After all, we all have to do our best in achieving our goals, do we not?”

If your goals are to utter the emptiest statements imaginable as a preamble to asking for a favor, then you are certainly doing your best. “We must. I am sure you have your own goals to pursue.”
“I do. In fact I currently am working on expanding upon Harroway Tower. It was flooded, you know.”

“I had heard. I had also heard that the proper repairs were made.”

“They were. But I wanted to insure that I never have to worry about repairs again. If I had the funds to add another wing…”

“How would another wing added to your keep protect you from future flooding?”

Judging by the look on the man’s face, he hadn’t expected Jon to ask this very obvious question.

“Well, it’s complicated. I could have the plans sent to you. But I thought perhaps you could speak to your Aunt about lending us----“

“---That won’t be necessary.” Jon said, wiping sweat from his brow and charging towards the door of the royal wing. “If you’ll excuse me, Lord Roote.”

This happened several times a day now. A lot of noble families had used the devastation from the war as an excuse to make luxurious and unnecessary additions to their seats in the name of “repairs.” That was only one of the things they spoke to him about regularly. But whether it was funds for something, a request for his company, not-so-subtle hints about being assigned a seat on the council or a request for support in some random dispute, the conversation usually came with the words, “If you could speak with your Aunt.”

He really only tried to remember the requests regarding the small folk. Most of the time sycophants came with requests for superficial things. But then there were the ones who kissed his arse because they wanted grain sent to the outlying villages of their territories. Those he actually did speak to his Aunt about.

But most of the time it was about something selfish. That was what always floored him. The continent had just pulled itself out of civil war. It was still winter. The white walkers were still a very fresh memory. And these people wanted bigger apartments at court.

There was one person, however, who wasn’t constantly seeking favors from him. Jon entered the royal wing only to encounter one of the few people that he always enjoyed seeing. A beautiful woman with large, deep blue eyes, shining red hair, fair skin, and full lips emerged from the doors of the Aenys chambers, looking tall and elegant. Sansa’s hair was put up in an elaborate set of buns, save for two long, narrow braids that hung on either side of her head. She was in a gown Jon hadn’t seen before, this one a v-necked overdress of grey samite with blue threads in a pattern of flowers over skirts of white damask. Myrish lace formed a high, split, v-shaped collar that emphasize the length of her neck. The gown was belted in silver and from her ears hung silver pendants.

Her appearance in the days since the trial had improved considerably, as had her mood. She had begrudgingly accepted Jon’s help with her finances. However, on the matter of her wardrobe she’d been difficult. When she first met with the dressmaker, she’d ordered very simple designs and a volume of clothing that didn’t come close to what a High Lady of the court would require. The dressmaker voiced these concerns to Jon, who insisted to Sansa that she expand and choose whatever she wanted. There had been a fairly long discussion. Sansa uttered a thousand sentiments that basically amounted to wishing to avoid being a burden and a charity case. Eventually he wore her down. Once upon a time, his former half-sister delighted in dressing well. He wanted her to enjoy that once more.

Jon found that he liked taking care of his cousin. He experienced a great deal of relief in knowing
that, for once, she was well cared for. Since their father died, she hadn’t been shown love or concern. She’d known only abuse and exploitation.

He worried that such things had become the only things she could handle. Her resistance of his help troubled him. He felt ready to charge into her bedroom the night of her acquittal after she’d left him with that aside about her debts and argue with her some more about it. But he’d stopped himself the second he saw himself lift his hand. Then he reminded himself of all the times she’d experienced various people trying to control her life and overpower her. He then returned to his chambers.

It disturbed him, though, to consider it. The idea that she saw even his desire to help her--- his cousin, the only member of his original family left to him--- as a potential act of manipulation and/or aggression made his skin crawl. He could see it there in her eyes. She saw everything and everyone as a potential threat.

Even me. She could look at Ghost and just smile and run her hands through his fur and nestle his neck. Ghost was a wolf the size of a horse with glowing red eyes. But she had no reservations with that animal. However, when Jon approached her, she always seemed to check herself. And it wasn’t that she was scared of him. But she still looked at him as someone she was not ready to trust. Every time she looked into his eyes, he could detect a hint of this terrible question: What do you want from me?

Because to Sansa, no one ever did anything kind out of love or compassion. It was to take something.

And no one could blame her. Everything she’s experienced in the last eight years has taught her to think this way.

And the worst part was, it was getting to the point where Jon was starting to confirm these feelings of hers himself.

At first, he hadn’t wanted anything from Sansa. He just wanted to see her happy, safe, and healthy. And that remained the most important thing to him. But then, things started to change.

Right now was a good example of this. He looked upon her at this moment, radiant in her silks, and was ready to choke on his own tongue.

The thing was, once a good chunk of the insanity regarding the trial had been resolved, once the threats to her life were gone, once she had started working to help others, Sansa had started seeming less like an embattled tragic figure and more like a fleshed-out survivor. And with that, she made her cousin truly look at her.

Seven Hells, I forgot how beautiful she is. She couldn’t have looked like this before, could she? Jon found himself thinking as he gazed at her.

Everyone knew Sansa was a beauty. Even when they were children, it was a pretty basic fact. Once, it had almost been her defining trait. Jon had last seen her when she was eleven, gleefully mounting a horse in her grey velvet cloak, off to be a princess. Even then she looked the part. She’d only just begun to blossom into maidenhood, but her transformation from girl to woman already looked like it would magically avoid the awkward stage most experienced. You knew when you saw her that she was a beautiful girl on course to becoming a breathtaking woman.

Jon was now viewing the process completed. Now that he wasn’t so distracted by her fighting for her life, he could see the results. They were downright staggering. A fortnight ago, she’d stood filthy,
When she saw him, she blushed. Jon had no idea why she might feel self-conscious, but when he saw her place her hands over her belt, he understood. Right, because I paid for everything she’s wearing.

At first, Jon hadn’t been able to understand why the idea of him paying for everything bothered her so much. In the first couple of days, when they’d had their arguments about it, he’d started growing annoyed. In irritation, he suggested that she took issue with accepting monetary help from a bastard.

“You’re not a bastard. Neither was Littlefinger.”

After that, he’d been more sympathetic. To his discomfort, he found that his feelings toward the woman he’d once thought of as his half-sister growing a little less pure. Especially right now.

“My Lady.” He said, bowing, his eyes not leaving her face. “You look well today. Is that a new gown?”

“Your Grace.” She curtsied. “Thank you. It is. The first part of my order came in today. Do you like it?”

“It’s lovely.” You’re lovely. “You’re wearing Stark colors, I see.”

“With a hint of Tully, of course.” She smiled and walked close to him. She lifted her overdress slightly so he could see the samite better. She ran her fingers along the blue threads that ran through the grey silk. They formed designs of wolves running along a stream with fish jumping up out of the water and swimming along side them.

Seeing that brought back a memory Jon had of Arya during the royal visit to Winterfell when they had been watching Robb spar with Joffrey. They had noted how the prince’s attire and banners put his mother’s red and gold Lannister lion sigil right alongside his alleged father’s gold and black crowned stag. He’d asked his little sister if she’d combine both her parents’ symbols. The girl had laughed, saying she didn’t think much of the idea of a wolf with a trout in its mouth.

Sansa’s alternative was far finer. Jon thought Arya would like it, even wear it herself. She’d probably appreciate the way the fish was not only swimming along side the wolf, but keeping up as well, jumping from the stream high enough to match its running companion.

“You don’t mind, do you?”

Jon looked up at her, surprised at the question. “Why would I mind?”

“You and my mother… I know she wasn’t as kind to you as she could have been. And I’d heard rumors that my Uncles were… less than welcoming to you when you and the Queen lodged at Riverrun.”

The statement about her mother was an understatement, but the part about her uncles was the opposite. When Jon and Daenerys had stayed at Riverrun following their defeat of the White Walkers, neither had been treated poorly. Edmure Tully displayed some discomfort at hosting the man his sister had so resented. Aside from a few odd looks and comments, however, he was fine. A bit distant, but not outright antagonistic or disrespectful. The Blackfish was perfectly accommodating and Jon had liked the man immensely. He was the sort of tough, grizzled, but honorable man that reminded Jon of his best mentors at The Wall.

“Your Uncles were very kind, Sansa. Anything you’ve heard about hostility between us is mere
gossip. I bear no animosity towards House Tully. You should wear some of your mother’s colors. Whatever she was to me, she was a good and loving mother to you and your siblings and a fine wife to our father.”

“I’m glad you feel that way.”

He shrugged. Honestly, what styles or colors she wore wasn’t a huge concern. He wanted her outfitted like the lady she was, the way she would like to dress. Sansa was the type who enjoyed wearing beautiful things, so she should wear them. If this were Arya, he’d prefer breeches and leathers.

His cousin looked lovely, too. He was glad to see her new wardrobe had started to arrive. After her acquittal, there had been no shortage of ladies at court willing to lend her gowns. But the borrowed attire rarely fit her quite right—Sansa was uncommonly tall and slim, especially after her time in captivity where she’d been skin and bones. She was gradually gaining weight, but hadn’t been nearly as healthy as most of the other women at court. Thus, most of the dresses hung loosely, yet not low enough. Half the time she looked like she was practically swimming in her borrowed clothes. Furthermore, one could usually tell that they weren’t hers for other reasons. Most of the women here usually sported some reference to their family in their attire. If they weren’t in the colors of their house, there was some embroidery resembling a family sigil. Everyone knew who Sansa was, so she had no business walking around in a gown with Martell suns or Florent foxes stitched into the cuffs. Thus every inch of her informed a person that she was more or less impoverished.

Sansa was a High Lady of the court, ruler of Winterfell and regent of the largest territory in the kingdom. She deserved to look the part. He felt it better for her, too. If she looked every bit the lady she was, it made her seem less vulnerable. The less vulnerable she seemed, the less people would think they could take advantage of her.

Also, she looked beautiful. For some reason, that part mattered to him now.

He was suddenly very conscious of the fact that he was sweaty and dirty. Patches of mud covered his leathers, his hair was plastered to his skin, he was wearing informal clothing, and he stank. This bothered him. He stepped back.

“If you’ll excuse me, Cousin. I fear I am no fit state for your presence.”

“It is no bother. You go and wash up. I was just going to meet with Lord Tarly.”

“Randyll Tarly?” Jon’s blood ran cold. He despised the man. The man who had threatened the life of Jon’s best friend, his own son. Currently, the Lord of Horn Hill was at court, something Jon didn’t like being reminded of. What had really offended him was the fact that not once had Lord Tarly ever even attempted to find out what happened to his eldest son. The Night’s Watch was dispersed now, though Sam was still at the Citadel working on his Maester’s Chain. There could potentially be arguments now for Sam’s claim to Horn Hill, but the matter hadn’t been broached. Lord Randyll hadn’t even sent a message asking what had become of the young man. According to all records, he’d never expressed any interest at all. In his letters, Sam had asked Jon not to bring it up with anyone either, and Jon had respected his wishes. He’d gone out of his way to avoid Lord Tarly, and would have preferred it if Sansa did the same. “What could you want with Randyll Tarly?”

“He is a Lord in The Reach, and one of House Tyrell’s chief representatives at court now that Lord Mace is imprisoned.” Sansa replied. “I am a witness for the Tyrell’s defense, so I’m conferring with him regarding the case.”

“Oh, right.” Since Sansa’s trial, most of the court hearings had been regarding the Lannister and
Baratheon estates, with the Tyrells scheduled to go to court the next day. The family was put under the custody of Ser Garlan, who was keeping them in quarters in the far side of the palace. But Lord Tarly was handling the bulk of the defense. “Will you be seeing the Tyrells?”

“Most likely. At least a couple of them have been present during past meetings. I do hope Dear Margaery is feeling better.”

“Well, I don’t wish to keep you.” Jon bowed. “Good day, My Lady.”

He saw her again that evening in the royal dining room. Daenerys began requesting Sansa’s presence at supper shortly after the trial, and thus they all dined together nearly every night. His Aunt often peppered Sansa with questions regarding her court experiences, social rules, her travels about the realm. Jon got the feeling the Mother of Dragons often didn’t feel comfortable in a Westeros social setting, and she was using Sansa for her knowledge of court life.

There was another reason Jon felt Dany enjoyed Sansa’s company: Sansa never asked for anything. In nearly every other meal either Targaryen took with a courtier, there were requests, references to various political matters, and not-so-subtle hints and arguments for their particular political positions. Sansa didn’t do that. Though she was currently a witness for the Tyrell defense, at no point did she bring their case up. She made no comments regarding the character of the people she was defending, didn’t present any arguments for their innocence, or even mention any testimony. She also didn’t discuss the upcoming trial for Coldwater and Moore. Nor did she speak much of her own political ends. Unless, of course, she was asked. When at the dining table, Sansa preferred to keep conversation on topics such as the weather, court gossip, sewing, family, traveling… things like that. Thus she’d become a favorite.

Not that Daenerys and Sansa never talked politics, they just didn’t bring it to the dinner table.

That evening the two women were deep in conversation when Jon arrived, sitting side by side, their heads together. They both smiled as he entered the room, rising so he could come over and kiss both their hands. Jon took his regular seat to Daenerys’s right and poured himself a cup of ale.

“I hope I wasn’t interrupting anything important.” Jon remarked, gazing at his cousin. She was still in the same gown from earlier.

“We were just discussing fashion,” Dany said, pulling a lock of hair behind her ear. “I was admiring your cousin’s gown.”

Something about his Aunt’s tone aroused some suspicion. This is leading somewhere.

“Sansa has excellent taste.” Jon remarked before taking a sip.

“She does. You should let her assist you in selecting your wardrobe.”

And there it is. Jon groaned. “Honestly?”

“He’s stubborn, isn’t he?” Dany remarked, a brow arched at their companion.

“Gods, yes.” Sansa smiled. “He’s addicted to black. You’d think he never left The Wall.”

They both laughed and Jon resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Instead, he changed the subject. “Sansa, how was your meeting with Lord Tarly?”

Sansa hesitated. “It went well. Margaery was there, as usual. Lord Mace was not.”
“I’d heard the man is a buffoon.” Dany said.

“Lord Tyrell isn’t a fool, he’s just not as clever as some of the others in his family.” Sansa shot Jon a warning look. “But the meeting was productive. We feel quite prepared for tomorrow.”

Daenerys nodded. “Excellent. Tell me, Lady Stark, do you think the court is growing impatient with the trials?”

“No. The entire realm is in shambles after everything. Houses are left without heirs, the realms were divided, a number of crimes took place. Sorting all this out is going to take time. It needs to be done. Also, they like the spectacle. It’s something to entertain them in the winter months. It’s the closest thing they have to a tourney. I think perhaps those that are accused and awaiting trial are growing impatient, but that’s to be expected.”

“I wonder what they’ll do once the ‘spectacle’ is over.” Dany mused, sitting back in her chair. “They might actually go back to their own territories.”

“Some inevitably will, I expect.” Jon said, cutting up the pork chop that had been set in front of him. “I hope so. I wouldn’t mind less intrigue.”

“I was hoping that when the trials are over and some of the Northern affairs are settled well enough that you two might take a tour of the North.” Dany replied.

Both of the looked at her, shocked. Sansa’s eye widened. “Both of us, Your Grace?”

“Yes, both of you. I know Winterfell isn’t even close to being livable again, but you’re still Warden of the North, Lady Sansa. There is only so much ruling you can do from down here. It would do your lands good to have you take a trip up and down the territory.”

Jon didn’t appreciate the condescension he heard in Dany’s voice, but if Sansa was bothered she gave no sign.

“Well, yes, but I don’t understand why Jon would come.”

“Well, while I don’t doubt your loyalties, Lady Sansa, I still have reason to worry about any secessionists still holding onto that idea. The last thing we need is for you to be captured and pulled into some random scheme. Jon’s presence will keep you better protected, serve as a symbol of your unity with House Targaryen, and remind any would-be rebels that the Iron Throne is still watching over the North.”

Jon swallowed, uncomfortable. He hadn’t been North since the end of the wars. Everything Daenerys said made perfect sense, but he wasn’t sure how his cousin would feel about this. He looked into her eyes. She smiled.

“It makes sense. We could check on the progress rebuilding Winterfell ourselves. But don’t you need Jon here?”

“Neither of you would be staying away permanently. I can handle a few moons without him. Of course, this will have to happen after the trials are completed and the tax system up there is secured.”

Sansa nodded. “I could take the opportunity to reinstate my household.”

“I expect you to come back to court, Lady Stark. Winterfell won’t be livable again for a long time. Establish a Lord for regency, and then come back.”
“Of course, Your Grace, I just wasn’t aware that my presence would be required at that point.”

“I require an advisor on the council to represent the North.”

“Surely someone else---“

“Someone else can do that once Winterfell is fit to live in again. As of now, there are few people I feel comfortable trusting. Once you have a proper place to live, you are free to return to Winterfell. Unless of course, you want to leave court that badly?”

Do you? Jon examined her face. Sansa bit her lip.

“I just want to do my duty to my people.”

“If you’re that desperate to leave, you may. But I’d prefer you making King’s Landing your primary home for at least another year and a half.”

Jon was worried. Sansa had been kept in King’s Landing on the insistence of a Queen before. He watched his cousin closely. She didn’t look horrified, just a little unsure. “If you wish, Your Grace. If we might discuss it tomorrow after the Tyrell hearing?”

“Very well.”

Jon escorted her out after the meal was completed. “Are you alright?”

Sansa nodded. “I’m fine, Jon.”

“I can speak to my Aunt about this if you want. I didn’t know you wanted to return North so quickly.”

“Not immediately, I just didn’t know she cared about that. Really, it makes sense. I can’t just take up the reigns all at once again. Winterfell is gone, I have no means to rebuild a court that would make running the North manageable, and for now it’s in good hands having Lady Mormont as my regent. It’s dangerous up there, too. And I’m the only Stark left. If I were to try and live up there without a proper environment, the realm would be left without an official warden. That could lead to conflict.”

Jon nodded. Also, I don’t want you to go yet.

“How do you feel about accompanying me on a tour?”

“I’d be happy to do so.” Jon replied.

She smiled. “Good. I am glad for your company. It’s a great comfort.”

As is yours. He squeezed her hand.

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The Tyrell hearing took place early in the morning, with all four of the family standing before the royal dais. Lord Mace, Lady Alerie and Ser Loras all looked uneasy, while Lady Margaery seemed more calm.

Margaery Tyrell was of the greatest interest to Jon and really, to everyone. It was amazing how inconsequential the Lord of the Reach seemed even in the scheme of his own family. Margaery had been a Queen three times over, and she was famously the beloved favorite of the infamous Queen of Thorns. Though three times she’d married a man with the name ‘Baratheon’, she was adorned in the
green silk of her house.

Twenty-two years of age, Margaery was a beautiful young woman, with chestnut hair and striking dark eyes. She held herself with a certain poise and confidence that Jon found impressive. When the Tyrells had entered, the Rose of Highgarden had shot Sansa a kind smile as she passed her, one the Lady of Winterfell had returned.

“Margaery Tyrell was one of the only friends Sansa had during her captivity. Jon reminded himself. He was grateful for that. But there was still a part of him that had misgivings. The Queen of Thorns might be dead, but the old woman had made no secret that she’d taught Margaery everything she knew. Jon wasn’t so sure the “Maid” of Highgarden was entirely trustworthy.

What caught his notice was that when the family got close to the royal dais, Margaery did not hesitate to set her gaze upon him whenever she wasn’t looking at the Queen. As Missendei read out the charges and Randyll Tarly made the opening statements on behalf of the defense, Margaery’s eyes often met his. Every so often she gave a small smile.

Jon looked over at his cousin, standing in the crowds near the foot of the dais. She met his eyes as well once in a while, but most of the time, she kept her eyes glued to the proceedings. Jon eventually focused on Lord Tarly, searching for a resemblance to his son. There was none.

“While Lady Olenna, a willful woman, may have played a hand in the murder of the young man known as Joffrey Baratheon, she did so without the knowledge of her relatives.” Tarly was saying. “Lord and Lady Tyrell, Ser Loras, and Lady Margaery had nothing to gain and everything to lose from his death.”

That much is true. If they had been implicated, Margaery would have gone from a crown to chains. And she has. Lord Mace does not have the look of a plotter as it is, nor does his wife. Why risk it? And it wasn’t like the Lannisters were shy about trying to destroy prominent families. Jon honestly didn’t think Mace, Alerie, or Loras were involved, and he had strong doubts about Margaery as well, though she seemed the most likely of any of them to be involved. *It was said that she had a very strong influence on Tommen. That was why the Lannister woman had those charges brought against her. I doubt she could have had the same effect on that monster Joffrey.*

Honestly, Jon didn’t care whether the Tyrells killed Joffrey or not. Someone had to do it. That boy was scum and needed to be removed. Lady Olenna had done the realm a great service. No one questioned that. What troubled Jon was the degree of this family’s ambition, and their dealings with his cousin.

*These aren’t people who are afraid to take advantage of others.* Jon thought, frowning. *But then, who at court is?*

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

It took less than a few hours following the first Tyrell hearing for Jon to enter Sansa’s chambers to find an enormous bouquet of yellow roses sitting upon her dining table. Sansa herself was lying on her bed, staring up at her canopy with a glum look.

“Where did these come from?” Jon asked, fingering the golden blossoms. Flowers at this point were rare. Someone had spent a great deal of gold to get them here.

“Willas Tyrell.” She replied, running a hand through her hair. “As usual, Highgarden refuses to waste any time. Officially, the flowers are thanks for my aid in clearing the names of his family members.”
“And unofficially?”

“Read the card.”

Jon extracted the piece of paper from the vase. Upon it was a saccharine note written in curly script praising her loveliness, charm, and kindness. The Prince frowned. “His parents and siblings aren’t even out of prison yet.”

“But, as you noted a while ago, Willas is still unmarried.”

Even Jon was rather floored by the lack of tact displayed before him. “Are you sure it’s—”

“Yes. This is no mere thank you. If it was, he’d have had a servant deliver them. But it was Garlan.”

“Perhaps he just thinks you have my ear.”

“Oh, he definitely thinks that. It’s why he’s the first to overlook my soiled virtue. You’ve noticed which blooms he picked?”

“Tyrell roses.”

“A lot of gold to spend on a simple thank you bouquet. But it serves as a nice reminder, doesn’t it? He’s probably hoping I’ll put them in my hair and consider how good I look in yellow and green.”

Jon grimaced. “If he’d had any sense, he’d have had winter roses brought in from the North.”

Something in Sansa’s face softened at that. She smiled. “That would be lovely. I’d like to see winter roses again when we go North. By the way, I’ve consented to Daenerys’s terms.”

Jon expected as much. “She must have been happy.”

“She was. So tell me, what do you think of them?”

“The Tyrells?”

“Yes.”

“Your friend Margaery is the only one I find particularly interesting.”

“Now that her grandmother is gone, she’s the only one who is. She’s the wits of the family.”

“I believe it.” Jon walked over to the chair he usually took by her bedside.

“If she was head of the House, the Tyrells would be better off because it would be her defending them. But as it is, she isn’t, and so they gave that duty to Randyll Tarly. What do you think of her otherwise?”

_She troubles me._ Jon shrugged. “Not much. I haven’t interacted with her enough. She’s fine. By all accounts she’s clever and brave.”

“And beautiful.”

Jon smiled. “She knows it, too. That much I can tell. But in this case I doubt it’s relevant.”

“It’s relevant to other things.”

“Perhaps. Even with her wealth and looks, her past may make it difficult for her to make a great
match.”

“I’m sure Margaery will find a way regardless.”

“That’s her business. I couldn’t care less.”
Chapter Six: Hot and Cold

“That’s her business. I couldn’t care less.”

Sansa looked away so Jon couldn’t see her eyes glint when he said that. *Margaery won’t like that at all. So I won’t tell her.*

For the first time in very long, she felt quite triumphant. That happened more and more these days. Right now, she wanted to kiss him for saying that. She wanted to crawl into his lap and kiss him until they were both breathless.

That was how she was used to handling men. When they did things to make her happy, she rewarded them. When Petyr would help her manipulate some Lord into joining her cause, she’d strip off her gown and bend over. When Harry won a battle or brought her a gift, she’d either get in his lap or on her knees.

It was expected. *Because men are dogs.*

Jon was different, though. He seemed to relegate the canine side of his personality to Ghost. Her royal cousin had the strangest habit of actually behaving like a human.

When she looked at him now, her heart ached. *This was the father my son should have had.*

Jon could see everything there was to know about Margaery Tyrell. Sansa had heard some of the courtiers whisper and say Jon was stupid. They said that because he spoke rarely and they had that idiot mentality where they believed speaking equaled thinking. They were the type of people who possessed few thoughts of their own.

She could just imagine Eddie being raised by her cousin, being taught not to speak or act impulsively, to observe and think things through, being taught kindness and honor. That boy could have grown into the great man she wasn’t sure she alone could have molded him into.
“You don’t like Margaery?”

“Not really.”

*Good.* “That’s unfortunate.”

“You weren’t hoping to whisper in my ear about this case, were you?” Jon asked. His tone implied that he was teasing, but his eyes did narrow a tad.

“What? No! I don’t need to. I’ve gone over this entire case several times with Lord Randyll and the Tyrells. I’m confidant we’ll be victorious. I don’t need to use you to get what I want. If I wasn’t willing to take advantage of our relationship in my own case, what makes you think I would do it for the Tyrells?” Everything she said was exactly how she felt. She did not want Jon suspecting her of taking advantage of him. She intended on being one of the few he felt wouldn’t do that.

“You said Margaery was your only friend during your captivity.”

“I don’t care for her more than I care for you.”

“So then why does it matter to you if I like her or not?”

“Is it so hard to believe that I care about what you think?”

“Would my opinion end your friendship with her?” He said this with a hint of eagerness. *Interesting.*

“If it was negative and well-founded, it might. Perhaps you might discover something terrible about her. In that case, then yes, I would end our relationship. If it was something petty that fueled your distaste for her, then no, I would not.”

He leaned back, looking relieved. “Understood. I do have reasons for disliking her, many of which you probably already know about. I find her ambitious and a tad ruthless. Even if she didn’t kill Joffrey, she’s still proved herself calculating on more than one occasion. I believe she happily takes advantage of others to get what she wants.”

“Well of course she does. She’s a courtier.”

“So are you, but you don’t stab people in the back.”

“I’ve bludgeoned a man to death with a candlestick.” *Remember that? You seem to forget these things with some regularity.*

“He raped you and murdered your husband.”

“Fair enough. I just wanted to clarify.”

“So you agree with me?”

“About Margaery being calculating, ambitious, and ruthless?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I think ruthless is a strong word. I think there are things Margaery wouldn’t stoop to. I’ll admit there’s a very short list of those things. Yes, Margaery is calculating and ambitious, but she isn’t needlessly cruel. She’s clever, and she’s willing to compromise. While she works hard at getting what she wants, her methods tend to involve less bloodshed than the methods of many others. She’s capable of kindness and understanding. She’s a harshly political creature, but she’s certainly
preferable to, say, a Cersei or Tywin Lannister.”

“Are those our standards now? ‘Not as bad as a Lannister’?”

“Or a Petyr Baelish.”

Jon swallowed, adopting that uncomfortable manner that always appeared whenever Littlefinger was mentioned. She could see him desperately looking for a way to change the subject.

“I think she tried to flirt with me during the hearing.”

Sansa held back a smile. That she knew. She’d observed Margaery and Jon during the event. The Maid of Highgarden hadn’t been utterly shameless, but she hadn’t been the soul of subtlety either. Sansa actually found it rather entertaining. Jon always seemed uncomfortable with flirtation. It often made for some very funny interactions, as ladies constantly batted their eyelashes at him. Margaery hadn’t batted her eyelashes, but she did smile and make little gestures designed to draw attention to her various physical charms. *The Tyrells don’t waste time.*

“I could speak to her about it, if you wish.”

“He doesn’t smile often. But when he does, it’s wonderful. His smiles meet his eyes. So many smiles don’t. I don’t even think mine do anymore.

It’s odd how her mood was shifting these days. Not since her pregnancy had her emotions jumped around so much. Right before Jon came in, she’d felt troubled. Her feelings regarding her current aims were shaky at best.

When the roses arrived an hour prior, Sansa considered them along with her options. *Maybe I should give up on this. I may be aiming too high. Willas Tyrell isn’t the worst option for me. He would be marrying me for my title and claim, but is that any better than what I married Harry for?*

Once upon a time, when she still believed that life could be a song, she’d responded to Dontos telling her why Willas wanted to marry her by thinking that she’d make him love her regardless. She’d show up at Highgarden in her new gown and be so beautiful that he’d forget all about Winterfell and just want her.

She might have done that, made him want her. But she’d learned a long time ago the difference between wanting someone and loving them.

Harry used to claim he loved her, but they were married for years and it was always apparent that he didn’t know a thing about her. He spent most of his time training, fighting, drinking or whoring and came home to her at night. They rarely spoke, and never about anything important or personal. At one point when she was pregnant he asked why she suddenly craved lemon cakes.

To be fair, Harry was never very bright. Willas Tyrell by all accounts was. Even the Queen of Thorns admitted that he had some wits, and she never said that of any man. *And he’s crippled, which means I could overpower him if he ever tried to hurt me. He’s also rich. He could pay to rebuild Winterfell. I would always live comfortably.*

She’d honestly considered giving up for a little while. Not because she hadn’t made excellent progress (had she ever), but because she wasn’t sure she could go through with it. And then Jon had walked in and they’d started speaking.
Sansa’s approach to lying and manipulation had always been based more in telling carefully measured degrees of the truth over outright falsities. It created a safety net in case anyone might find out something you didn’t expect. It tied up loose ends. It made it easier to lead people astray. But with Jon, she found not only honesty, but also sincerity unexpectedly easy.

That bothered her, finding it so easy to be real with him without even thinking. Wanting to tell him things. Forgetting to lie. The most important thing she’d ever learned about survival was to never forget to lie.

She reminded herself now, something she hadn’t had to do in a very, very long time.

“She wants another crown.” Jon grumbled. “You’d think three would be enough.”

“It makes her no different from any other lady at court.”

“Don’t remind me.” Jon groaned.

“Well, even if she doesn’t get her crown, it couldn’t hurt to make a friend of her. The Tyrells are the Wardens of the South, they control the majority of the food supply, they aren’t stupid or as unscrupulous as the Lannisters. They’re a major family, and the Targaryens have only just reclaimed the throne.”

“They are ambitious.”

“If you’re going to make ambition something to alienate people over, then you’re going to make an enemy of everyone in the realm.”

Jon threw his head back. “Yes, I realize that. You sound like Daenerys.”

“Daenerys is the most powerful person in the world. There’s a reason for that.”

“Well then, discuss this with her. Not me. I don’t want to deal with the Tyrells.”

Sansa smiled, getting up off her bed and walking over to him. She rubbed his shoulder comfortingly. “You really are having trouble adjusting to your new role, aren’t you?”

Jon gave her a look that communicated very clearly without words that she was right. “I have no stomach for the level of dishonesty and selfishness I encounter here. It infuriates me. And it’s all over such inconsequential things. At least when I encountered political nonsense at The Wall, people were engaging in it for survival. And it all felt real. Everything here is an illusion. The Red Woman’s magic wasn’t as dishonest as the hourly conversations in King’s Landing. At least she did things because she believed in them. People here lie for gold and titles.”

“It’s a game, Jon.” Sansa replied. “That’s how you have to think about it. And you have to learn to play.”

“I’m not sure I can.”

You can and will. Or you will die. Just like Father. “Don’t despair now. You’ve been a prince for barely over a year. You will adjust. If you can survive beyond The Wall, there is no reason you can’t navigate King’s Landing.”

“I survived because I was thrown head first into an impossible situation. I had all the wrong
expectations about it, but I adjusted because I could and I had to. But I’m not suited for dishonesty and underhandedness.”

“And I am?” Sansa asked, withdrawing. She was genuinely stung by that implication. “I learned to play the game. Are you suggesting it’s because dishonor is my nature?”

Jon cringed. “I didn’t mean---“

“Let me tell you something, Jon Targaryen. You speak of The Wall as if it is the only dangerous place in the world. You say you were thrown head first into that place without proper knowledge of what you got yourself into, but that you learned regardless. How is that any different than my situation down here? You at least knew it would be cold and dangerous. I came down to King’s Landing thinking I was living in a song. I watched Illyn Payne cut my father’s head from his shoulders. I almost died countless times. And I didn’t survive because I was suited to this. One of the first things Petyr Baelish ever told me was that to survive, one had to know how to lie, and I was one of the worst liars he’d ever met. And I was. I was a little girl. But I learned because I’d die if I didn’t. It’s the same thing. Except now, you have the advantage of being Prince of the Realm.”

“I’m sorry.” He said, looking at his lap. “I didn’t mean to insult you. I didn’t think---“

“That’s obvious.” She went to sit on her bed again. This upset her. Probably because dishonor might very well suit me.

This time, it was Jon who walked over. He sat next to her and put his hand on her shoulder. “Sansa, that isn’t what I meant.”

“Are you sure? Sometimes I wonder, Jon. I wonder what you think of me. I wonder if, when you look at me, you think, ‘Gods, why couldn’t it have been Robb, Arya, or Bran who survived?’”

Jon grabbed her shoulders and turned her to face him. Staring deep into her eyes, he growled. “Don’t ever think that. I would never want to trade you for one of the others. Never. Just because I hate that they’re dead does not mean I resent you for surviving. I thank the Gods every day that you’re still alive.”

His eyes were so intense. She could tell he meant every word of what he said. She felt very warm all of a sudden. She smiled and muttered. “I was right.”

“What?”

Sansa bit her bottom lip. “Years ago, before I married Harry, in the Vale, I’d heard that Lord Eddard Stark’s bastard had been named Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. And I thought about how sweet it would be to see you again. I was right.”

His eyes seemed to get even darker. Sansa could feel his thumbs begin to stroke the lamb’s wool of her kirtle where his hands still held her. She pulled away before he had a chance to start stroking her hair. That seemed to break Jon’s reverie. He stood up at once.

“My Lady, I thank you for your company. I beg your pardon, but I should depart. I have--- things to attend to.”

*Like the tent in your pants.* Sansa thought, keeping her eyes on his face. She didn’t need to look down to know it was there. “Of course, Jon. Don’t let me keep you.”

He got out of there quickly, closing the bedchamber door behind him. Sansa went over to the door once he was gone and bolted it. The Warden of the North walked back to the bed, gently loosening
the ties of her bodice, stroking the skin underneath. When she lay back against the pillow, she freed her breasts completely with one hand and pulled up her skirts with the other. As she slipped her fingertips underneath her smallclothes and between her folds, she began indulging her imagination.

*Jon could be watching me through the keyhole.* She thought giddily, slowly massaging the hood of her nub. Petyr and Harry both liked to watch her pleasure herself. Petyr liked to make a game of it, doing it “secretly” and then bursting in and taking her right before she reached her peak. She doubted Jon would do such a thing, but it was fun to imagine. *Jon would be crouching by the door, his face flushed, his breeches unlaced, hand at his cock.*

The image was a little silly, but highly endearing. She liked the idea of him touching himself to thoughts or images of her. She could imagine him now, sitting in his bed not unlike she was now, taking off his clothes and taking himself in hand, whimpering her name.

She was almost tempted to get up at that moment, barge into his chambers, and help him. The idea gave her a thrill as she continued to play with herself, increasing the pressure on her nub and pinching one of her nipples. She’d charge in and find Jon sitting naked against his headboard, his cock standing at attention. His dark eyes would be wide when they saw her. She kick the door shut behind her and offer her cousin some assistance. He might resist slightly at first, but she’d start undoing her bodice and the second he saw her breasts he’d give in. She’d walk over, straddle his hips, and then yank his hand between her legs so that he could feel how wet she was. He’d smile at her and go, ‘Oh, you beautiful girl’, flip her over and fuck her like mad. She’d run her fingers over his sweaty, toned chest and then scratch at his back. He’d bury his head in her breasts and neck. They’d run their hands through each others’ hair and pull a little. Sansa worked at her nub furiously.

*Or maybe he’d be the one to charge in here. He never, ever would do such a thing, of course. For some reason, that just made the idea of him doing it all the more appealing. But if he did, I wouldn’t hesitate. I wouldn’t even say a word. I’d pull my dress off, get on all fours, look back and smile at him. And he’d get behind me, and I’d straighten up and lean back as he took me, reaching back to pull his hair. And he’d be reaching around and rubbing my nub for me. Or maybe before he fucked me, he’d get behind me and bury his face between my legs. And he’d make me peak like that, and then fuck me, and then I could lean back and kiss him and feel and taste myself on his mouth and beard…*

Sansa arched her back and cried out as she came.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Two days later, the Lady of Winterfell held back tears as she stood at the East Gate of the Red Keep. “I wish I could stay longer, but I simply must return to Ironoaks.”

Any had been repeating this to her for weeks now. But it still hurt. The old woman clasped Sansa’s hand in hers and smiled warmly.

“I’m sorry I must leave you, Child.”

“I’m not a child, Lady Waynwood,” Sansa replied, trying to smile. “And don’t be sorry. Go back home, look after the girls for me. Write to me often.”

“Of course, Dear Heart, I will.” Lady Anya embraced her, cradling her head as she’d been doing for years. “You take care of yourself, Darling.”

Sansa pulled away then, nodding at the older woman before turning to Randa, who smiled through
her tears.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Randa said. “You’re not that little girl we brought down from the Eyrie all those years ago.”

Sansa reached out and hugged her friend tightly. As she did, Randa whispered in her ear. “Don’t hesitate to make an utter slut of yourself while we’re gone. And definitely make sure to write to me to tell me all about it when you do.”

The Lady of Winterfell managed to laugh as she pulled away. “You mind the Gates. I’m sure your father has already made a mess of them without you.”

Randa rolled her eyes. “I’m petrified of what I’ll find when I get there.”

“My Ladies, we must depart.” One of the guards insisted. “We want to beat any poor weather.”

Both women nodded, said their last good-byes, and piled into their wagon house. As the wagons rolled away, Randa stuck her head out a window and waved. Sansa stood and waited until their party was out of sight before turning back to the castle.

“I’m sorry about your friends,” Anais said to her as they made their way back to the solar. “I know their presence was a great comfort to you, My Lady.”

Sansa nodded, not looking at the maid. She kept her head down in case she accidentally let a tear fall. She didn’t want anyone seeing as she made her way through the halls.

“Lady Sansa!”

The shout came from the other end of the hall. A yellow-haired young man in armor trotted up to her. Sansa recognized him after a few seconds.

“Ser Marq.” She said, curtseying.

“Is something wrong?” The knight asked, looking perturbed.

“No, not at all.” Sansa said, rubbing under her eyes.

He puffed up his chest. “If someone has offended you, I could---“

“No. No one has done a thing. Ser. I am fine.” She had no time for this. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to prepare for the next Tyrell hearing.”

She moved past him, but then he called after her. “Lady Sansa!”

She forced herself to smile and look back. The handsome knight hesitated before speaking.

“I am close with your Uncle Edmure, My Lady. So I would not have the niece of one of my dearest friends unwell. Are you sure you don’t require me to intercede with anyone on your behalf? As a loyal friend to the Lord of Riverrun, I could not stand by and allow someone to harm the niece of Lord Edmure Tully.”

Oh, for the Maiden’s sake. “Ser Marq, I assure you, I do not require your help. I thank you for your concern, however. Good day.”

She curtsied again and ran off before he could say another word. Even Anais was scoffing as they entered her solar.
“He seems awfully eager to make himself your Florian, doesn’t he?” Anais remarked as she helped Sansa with her cloak. “He’s not spoken ten words to you before, and now he’s offering to fight for your honor?”

Sansa snorted. “The Lords of the Riverlands are all eager to help the niece of Edmure Tully now.”

“The niece of Edmure Tully.” Anais scowled. “You’re Warden of the North, Lady of Winterfell and the Vale, and you’re cousin to the Prince. But they call you the niece of Edmure Tully.”

“It’s a way for them to establish familiarity,” Sansa explained as the two wandered into her bedchamber. She sat at her dressing table and Anais began rearranging her hair. “Their closeness with my Uncle gives them a reason to engage me in various interactions. They view it as an advantage, knowing my Uncle.”

She liked explaining these things to Anais, who was sharp and observant. Now that Randa was gone, she’d have fewer people to talk to so candidly. Anais wasn’t afraid to speak her mind behind closed doors. Sansa found it refreshing.

“Is it?”

“Maybe.” Not at all, really. Not for what they’re looking for.

She, of course, didn’t speak too candidly with her maid. People still gossiped, servants especially. Sansa trusted the girl with her hair, but not necessarily her secrets.

She allowed Anais to believe she was considering suitors, but was careful not to reveal whom she had in mind. Her maid simply believed she tried to look as desirable as possible to gain the attention of as many eligible men as she could.

So when Anais suggested a low-cut dress of blue, white and silver with a pearl and silver Direwolf’s head brooch that fastened at the center of her bodice, Sansa wasn’t worried. She merely smiled and winked conspiratorially at her maid as she put the gown on. The cut of the dress, along with the bodice made to enhance her bust and the brooch made her breasts almost hypnotic.

It used to be that she didn’t need such an uncomfortable bodice design. A few years ago, her breasts just sort of stayed up without much help. Birthing and nursing Eddie had caused them fall slightly. They were still fine, but they needed help to look their best.

It used to not matter to her. Nursing her son had been worth it. She used to love watching him stare up at her, and then see his eyes slowly droop closed. The silk she wore was similar in color to those eyes.

Sansa swallowed hard and closed her eyes. Thoughts of her boy hit her constantly, often at inopportune moments. When she spoke to people, when she testified in court, when she ate with her cousin and the queen, when she happened to see a young child playing in the halls or in the gardens.

“My Lady?” Anais asked, concerned. Sansa opened her eyes to see her maid holding a handkerchief out to her. Sansa took it and dabbed her eyes.

“Thank you.”

Get a hold on yourself, she scolded herself, you need to focus on your testimony. As soon as the Tyrell trial is finished, Coldwater and Moore will go before the court. And then you can have Eddie’s killers punished. It won’t bring your son any justice if you let yourself be compromised by your emotions. You are free to weep for him as much as you wish once his killers’ heads are
detached from their shoulders. And if you focus well enough, you’ll be able to make sure that no one ever hurts a child of yours again. Dragons have returned. Take comfort in that.

Sansa threw her shoulders back and composed herself. “I’m ready, Anais.”

When she spoke at the witness’s podium that afternoon, Sansa concentrated on her words and all the eyes on her. She usually abhorred the stares of others, but it was something to distract her. And there was at least one pair of eyes on her that she enjoyed. When she was dismissed from questioning, Sansa glanced at Margaery, who nodded at her with a smile. Then the queen, who was distracted by the calling of the next witness. Only then did she turn her gaze to Jon, whose eyes were fixed upon her. She met his eyes for a second, then lowered them modestly.

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It took another two days for the Tyrells to be acquitted. All of them but Margaery almost fainted with relief. The Rose of Highgarden allowed her father, mother, and brother to receive all of the obligatory well wishers that flocked to them. For her part, Margaery marched right over to Sansa, smiling wide.

"Lady Stark!" Margaery said, grabbing Sansa’s hand and squeezing it. “You’ve saved us!”

That was debatable. Sansa’s testimony wasn’t as crucial to the defense as that of several others. She hadn’t offered anything that proved their innocence so much as implied it. But that’s as irrelevant as Margaery’s guilt or innocence in Joffrey’s death.

Sansa grinned at her friend. “I was happy to help however I could, Dear Margaery. I wasn’t going to let my friends suffer.”

“Oh, you wonderful thing. Brave and sweet as ever. You have our eternal gratitude.”

Not as good as ‘forever in your debt’, but it should work for now. “As are you. You didn’t seem to waver once.”

“Still, it is a relief to be a free woman once more.”

“I can relate.”

Both women laughed. Margaery pulled a lock of hair behind her ear and smiled.

“I’m sure you can. So, considering the occasion, I was hoping you’d join me tonight for my first supper as a free woman.”

The Lady of Winterfell disguised her glee as dismay. “Oh, Dear Margaery I’d love to. But I am expected to dine with my cousin and his Aunt.”

She used the words ‘my cousin and his Aunt’ to sound more modest than she was actually being. She was still more or less saying, I share my meals with the ruler and heir to this entire country. I share my thoughts as well. Keep that in mind when you craft your little plots. I am someone whose good side you want to remain on, not someone you’d ever wish to antagonize. If you want my friendship, you will mind yourself. And you definitely want my friendship, Margaery Tyrell.

She normally didn’t gloat about her connections to the throne, or even speak of it. She found such habits tacky and undignified. And frankly, she felt it did no one any favors. Sansa enjoyed the friendship she established with Daenerys and her bond with Jon, she had no interest in jeopardizing or exploiting either.
But with Margaery Tyrell, she was making an exception. She didn’t need the Maid of Highgarden forgetting the current state of things and deciding that Sansa could be used as a pawn. *I’m not that scared, helpless little girl anymore. You might be able to cooperate with me, but you will not be manipulating me. Things have changed.*

“Oh, I understand, Sweetling.” Margaery replied, her brown eyes flashing. “One doesn’t exactly rebuff the Mother of Dragons.”

“No, one doesn’t.” Sansa laughed. “But I’d love to break bread with you soon. Perhaps we might share dessert in my solar after supper this evening.”

“Only if you let me supply the dessert. Lemon cakes?”

“Of course.” Both women giggled. “I’ll send word when I’m free.”

The other woman nodded, smiling brightly.

As if on cue, Jon appeared, coming over to stand by Sansa’s side. He bowed and kissed her hand first before extending the same courtesy to a curtseying Margaery.

“Congratulations on your acquittal, Lady Margaery.” Jon said stiffly. Sansa noted with appreciation that her cousin was staring rather determinedly at The Reach’s favorite daughter. Only Sansa knew why. She’d dressed in a rather becoming gown of Hardyng red and white. The collar was lace that parted in a low and rather becoming V-shape before it hit the satin patterned in red and white diamonds. All throughout the trial Jon had been trying his best not to stare at her chest. It was an effort he was still making.

Margaery, in her far less modest gown of green and gold silk, appreciated his gaze. She blushed and smiled prettily. “Thank you, Your Grace. It is a great relief.”

“It is to me as well, hearing that you were spared involvement in the plot to kill Joffrey. It endangered so many people.” Jon glanced at Sansa, but tore his eyes away quickly.

“My grandmother, the Gods bless her soul, could act impulsively.” Margaery said, not flinching from Jon’s eyes or implication. “But I am glad the innocent have been protected. I am just sorry that anyone dear to me was in danger in the first place. Like dear Sansa.”

“Oh, you brilliant minx, you.”

Jon shifted uncomfortably. “Perhaps.”

Sansa decided to interject before something went wrong. “I’m quite lucky to have such lovely people think of me in such affectionate terms. After the conflict that has overrun our country, we could all spare some warm feelings towards each other. New eras call for new bonds.”
“Hear, hear.” Margaery said enthusiastically. Her expression towards Sansa was one of gratitude and admiration. She seemed to pick up on the awkwardness of the situation, judging by her next words. “However, one must still preserve old ones, of course. And speaking of which, I fear I must attend to my relatives. Your Grace, My Lady, if you’d excuse me.”

She curtsied again to Jon, but embraced Sansa. The Warden of the North accepted this warmly and whispered in her ear. “I’m sorry, he’s always a bit nervous around women he isn’t related to.”

Margaery withdrew, casting Sansa a very interested look before hurrying back over to her parents. When she was gone, Jon leaned over and whispered. “Are you sure that’s not the Queen of Thorns?”

Sansa giggled. “I don’t feel this is the best place to discuss such things, My Prince. You have a meeting with the Queen after supper tonight, yes?”

“I do.”

“Come to my solar afterwards.”

Several hours later, Sansa was entertaining Margaery over Arbor Gold.

“You must tell your brother that I appreciated his gift,” Sansa said, gesturing over to the bouquet of roses sitting on an end table. Margaery glanced at them and smiled.

“He wanted to express his gratitude in some way,” the Tyrell girl replied. She got up and walked over to the yellow blooms. “Do you like them?”

“One can’t exactly dislike roses. But these are particularly lovely.” Sansa remarked, watching as her friend leaned over to sniff one of the blossoms. “I keep meaning to make a little chain with some of them to wear in my hair, but with everything happening, I keep forgetting.”

Margaery’s face split into a huge grin and the redhead knew she was taking the bait. “Oh, we simply must do it now. I’ll crown you my Queen of Love and Beauty.”

There was a bit of her that took girlish delight in this. Sansa’s smile was genuine. “Oh, and are you to be my knight?”

“Oh, sod knights.” Margaery replied, pulling some of the flowers out of the vase. “My brother is the Knight of Flowers and he’s still utterly useless. You’re more worthy to wear golden roses than he is. You’ve done more to protect us.”

It didn’t escape the Northern woman’s notice that Margaery referred to them as golden roses rather than yellow ones. “Well, alright. Make me a crown.”

Jon was due soon. His nightly meetings with his Aunt rarely went over an hour and a half. Sansa helped Margaery weave the blossoms together. As they did, the former Baratheon Queen brought up the subject that Sansa had been waiting for.

“So, your half-brother seems… chilly.”

“It’s like I said earlier, he has trouble speaking to women he’s not related to. Especially attractive ones. I used to try and teach him how to talk to ladies when we were children. It didn’t take. Once he gets to know you, though, he’ll warm up.”

“I certainly hope so. If one can’t inspire warmth in a Targaryen…”
Sansa laughed. “Well, he’s half Stark, remember. There’s as much ice in his blood as there is fire.”

“Hmmph. You’re more a Stark than him and you’re not so cold.”

“He isn’t cold, Margaery. I hope you don’t think that. He’s just awkward. He’s going to get to know you better, and he’ll like you.”

“And what makes you so sure?”

*I’m sure of the opposite, actually. That is what I’m counting on.* “He likes a clever woman. You’re nothing if not clever.”

A glimmer of appreciation appeared in Margaery’s eyes as she finished the crown. She got up then and walked behind Sansa. There was a knock on the door.

Pretending not to know who was behind it, Sansa called for the person to enter. *Perfect timing once again, Cousin.*

And then Jon walked into her solar just in time to see Margaery placing a circlet of golden roses in Sansa’s hair.
Red

Chapter Summary

SYMBOLISM!!!, sexual tension, and pretty colors.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so I lost a couple of files for my other story, so that's going to be delayed. In the meantime, here is another chapter. I thought it might be fun to have some clothing porn and put the fashionista side of Sansa's character to good use. I'll also admit a lot of this is set up for the next chapter, so there's not a whole ton of interactions with other characters. But I'm starting out my multiple POVs, so tell me what you think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Seven: Red

Jon:

He stopped short when he opened the door and saw the scene before him. Margaery Tyrell standing over his cousin, placing a wreath of Tyrell blooms upon her brow. In that moment, he felt he needed no further discussion with Sansa regarding what type of person he was dealing with. Sansa cooperating with this baffled him. Just a few days ago, she’d been noting with what he’d thought to be disdain that the Tyrells probably wanted her to put those same blooms in her hair and consider the color scheme. But now she was letting Margaery do that for her?

What is this? Apparently, her friendship with Tyrell goes deeper than I realized. Jon composed himself and walked in, leaving Ghost outside the door.

“My Ladies. Good evening.”

Both stood up quickly and curtsied.

Jon still hadn’t gotten used to every woman aside from his Aunt curtsying to him. He’d spent most of his life a bastard, expected to show deference to almost every woman he met. Now the Warden of the North and the eldest daughter of the Lord of Highgarden, both former queens, were curtsying to him. This sort of thing never felt right.

“Your Grace!” Sansa said, walking over to him. “Your meeting with the Queen was shorter than usual.”

Was it? Jon wasn’t sure how long he’d spent in Daenerys’s solar. Usually their nightly meetings didn’t go over two hours. He had no idea how long he’d been with the Queen, now that he thought about it. Jon bent down and kissed Sansa’s hand.

“I hope I am not interrupting anything.” Actually, I really hope I am.
“Not at all. Margaery was just crowning me her Queen of Love and Beauty.” Sansa giggled.

**Considering recent events, shouldn’t you be the knight in this case? It’s not like Margaery has proven herself shy about accepting crowns. “How sweet.”**

“I’m glad you think so, Prince Jon. I think Lady Sansa is very suited for roses, don’t you?” Margaery approached him with a smile on her face.

“Yes, she always looked her best in Winter Roses,” Jon kissed her hand quickly, “Lady Margaery.”

“Well, I suppose these golden ones will have to do for now.” The Maid of Highgarden laughed.

*Golden roses. Not yellow ones.* Jon gave her a small smile. “Perhaps. I’m surprised to see you here, Maid Margaery. I’d have thought you’d be in your apartments resting after your ordeal.”

“On the contrary, the greatest part of that ordeal was not having enough to do. I’m filled with energy after being cooped up for so long. I felt I just had to catch up with my old friend. We’ve had so little time to talk, and had to stick to conversing about the trial. There was no moment to spare for diverting ourselves with frivolous conversation.”

*So being kept in one place was the greatest part of the ordeal, not you and your family living under the threat of execution.*

“I doubt any conversation with you could be accurately described as frivolous, Lady Margaery.”

*Not by anyone paying attention.*

“You’re too kind, Prince Jon. But you’d be surprised. I flatter myself on being full of surprises. A first impression of me is rarely an accurate one.”

_Sansa was right. She is clever._ “I suppose it never hurts to keep people guessing. Would my impression of you as a bright, charming Lady be inaccurate?”

“Oh, you’re teasing me, My Prince. If I say no, I’m insulting myself. If I say yes, it’s self-congratulation. Neither is becoming or proper.”

“I wouldn’t want you feeling like I’ve ensnared you in some way. So I suppose I’ll just have to rely on my instincts.” Jon was growing weary of this conversation already. He turned to Sansa. “How are your hands, My Lady?”

“Better,” Sansa replied, holding up her splintered fingers. “The Grand Maester says they’re healing quite well.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“You’re Grace, I beg your pardon, but was there something you needed of me?” Sansa asked.

“I wanted to confer with you about some of the Northern accounts, actually.” That was actually true. Sam was now finally en route to King’s Landing at Jon’s request.

“I see.” Sansa turned to Margaery and smiled. “I’m sorry, My Friend, but duty calls. I fear I must say goodnight to you.”

“Oh course,” Margaery replied, eyeing them both with interest. “I don’t mind. I will see you tomorrow, Sweet Sansa.”

Margaery leaned forward and embraced her friend before leaving the room. Jon felt grateful Ghost
was out there. He didn’t need Margaery Tyrell creeping behind the door to listen to their conversations. When she was gone, Jon let out a sigh of relief.

Sansa laughed. “Oh, come now, she’s not so bad.”

“She’s more thorn than blossom.” Jon reached out and brushed Sansa’s garland with his fingertips. “So how do you like the look of yourself in Tyrell roses?”

Sansa reached up and pulled it off. “Oh come now, Jon. It was just a bit of girlish fun.”

“Was it?”

She rolled her eyes and set the garland aside. “Did it bother you to see me wearing Martell suns when I was borrowing gowns from the Princess of Dorne?”

“No, because you had to borrow gowns. And Arianne Martell doesn’t have some bachelor brother looking to assume any new titles. You have your own things now. You don’t need to be wearing anybody’s symbols or colors but your own.” Jon gestured to her dress of red and white diamonds.

“These are Hardyng colors, as much my colors as those of House Stark or Tully. I am Sansa Hardyng Stark, remember?”

“Right, of course.” Jon felt like an idiot. He’d forgotten. Sometimes he liked to forget things, such the fact that his cousin had once been claimed by someone.

“Does it bother you to see me in my husband’s sigil? Shall I take this off?”

Jon did a double-take when he heard that last bit. “What? No! Of course not. It’s fine. Wear whatever you want. I just worry about you being taken advantage of. You deserve better than to be carted off to Highgarden as a marriage prize.”

She smiled when he said this. “I don’t intend for that to happen, Jon. Now, you said that there was something you wanted to discuss with me regarding the North?”

“Yes. A fortnight ago I sent word for a friend of mine, a student at the Citadel, to come to court. His name is Samwell Tarly. He’s very, very clever, and managed the Watch’s resources during the War of the White Walkers. I thought he might help you with your debts and the Northern taxes.”

“Tarly? Like---?”

“Yes, he’s Lord Randyll’s eldest.”

“Funny, Lord Randyll never mentioned him. I was led to believe the heir to Horn Hill was called Dickon.”

I believe it. Jon thought angrily. He kept a straight face. “That is because Sam joined the Watch.”

“I see.” Sansa nodded, thankfully asking no more. “Thank you, Jon. I’m sure Lord Samwell will prove a great help to me.”

“He should arrive in a couple of days. You’ll like him. He’s one of my very best friends. I thought it better that a trustworthy man like him assist you instead of some greedy capital snake.”

Her mouth fell open for a second. Then she threw her arms around his neck. For wild moment, Jon thought she was going to kiss his mouth. To a degree of disappointment that he had difficulty admitting to, she only pecked his cheek.
Jon was still a bit shocked, even if he was mostly thrilled. Sansa hadn’t shown him this much outright affection since they were very young. When she was very small and would climb into bed with either Jon or Robb after a nightmare, sometimes she’d kiss them goodnight. The last time that happened, she’d been five. By age six she’d decided she was too old and too proper a lady to share a bed with her older brothers.

That little girl was gone. Right now, the person in front of him was this gorgeous young woman. A gorgeous young woman who was pressed up against him.

Even since they’d been reunited, Sansa had been careful with her gestures of affection. They were more familiar with each other than they had been as older children, and did have a level of closeness one might not expect. He’d sat on her bed with her, he’d carried her, she’d put her hand on his shoulder. Things like that. But Sansa always maintained some careful boundaries, and so had he. Every bit of contact they’d made was carefully measured. Jon was sure that she’d embraced Margaery more at this point.

Not that he blamed her. Even now, Jon had some serious discomfort being around certain things. Small blades like the ones used to slit his throat. Fire like the kind that burned his hand. He could keep himself composed around them, but there was always an unpleasant little twitch in his belly whenever flames or daggers got too close. It was why he avoided the Dragon Pit.

He imagined bodily contact, especially with men, was the same for Sansa. She’d even winced a little when Margaery pulled her into a hug. After years of abuse from Littlefinger, she was understandably nervous about being touched.

But now she was willingly pulling him to her. He paused to appreciate how soft she was. He’d touched her before, when carrying her, but at both times he’d been in such a panic that he’d not really noticed. Now he did.

She was warm and soft and she smelled sweet. Tentatively, Jon wrapped his arms around her. She took a deep breath and looked up at him. “Thank you.”

Jon wasn’t quite sure what it was about this thing in particular that made her so grateful, but he was happy for it nonetheless. “It’s no trouble.”

“It’s thoughtful.” She hesitated, then pulled away. “I actually have something for you, too. But I need you to go to your chambers and wait for me.”

“Wait, what?” What could she possibly want that she has to show me in my chambers? He didn’t want to challenge his conscience by answering that question for himself.

“Just go. Tell Satin to expect me.” She gave his chest a little push. “Go!”

Satin? But Jon did as his cousin bid, turning on his heel and reluctantly heading back to his rooms, Ghost trotting by his side. When he entered his solar, he found his steward busying himself with some sheets. The young man looked up.

“My cousin is arriving soon with… something. She said that you should be prepared for her.”

Satin looked surprised, but a bit eager. “Of course.”

And then he hurried into the bedchamber. Jon decided not to follow and instead stand by the window. Ghost sat by his side and Jon ruffled the animal’s fur.

Before long, there was a knock, and Satin rushed into the room to open the door. Jon turned to see
his cousin walking in with her maid, who was holding a package wrapped in gauzy cloth.

“I was going to wait until after the Coldwater and Moore trials, and it isn’t all finished yet, but I thought I’d give you at least part of it now.”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

Sansa nodded to her maid, who hurried over to Jon’s dining table at the center of the room and began unwrapping the package. Jon’s breath hitched as he saw a flash of red. Sansa hurried over and lifted the contents of the package up.

Hanging from her fingertips was a shirt of blood red silk-damask with a v-neck, narrow sleeves, and the slightest hint of crimson lace at the collar.

*She can’t be intending for me to wear that, can she? It looks like something Theon Greyjoy would have pranced about in.* Jon looked down so Sansa couldn’t see him going as red as the doublet she was presenting.

“I know how you feel about this sort of thing, Jon.” Sansa said at once. “But you need to start dressing for your position. Before you reject this outright, at least try it on. I worked quite hard on it. It wasn’t easy stitching it together with two broken fingers. I had to have Anais help me.”

Jon looked up. He had to give his cousin credit, she knew how to work with him. She’d sewed it together for him, even with her hands in that state. He had to do as she asked now. Jon looked at the shirt again. *Well, at least the color isn’t as ridiculously vibrant as some of the things Daenerys tried to get me to wear.*

He sighed and walked over, taking the shirt in hand.

“Thank you, My Lady. I will try it tomorrow and---“

Her lip curled. “No. Now. You’ll go into your bedchamber and try it on now. If you don’t do it now, you’ll never do it. And I want to see how it looks.”

Jon groaned. That had been his intention. He’d talk to her tomorrow and tell her that, unfortunately, it didn’t quite fit. Or something.

“As you wish, My Lady.” *Prince of the Andals, Lord of Dragonstone, Heir to the Iron Throne, Former Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. And I’m doing as my Lady Cousin commands.*

Jon walked back into his bedchamber, Satin following eagerly. There he found three different black jerkins on the bed. One of them was a black velvet one gifted from Daenerys that he only wore when forced. Jon looked at Satin with irritation. “Were you lot planning this?!”

His steward didn’t even bother lying. “She made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.”

“And that was?”

“She offered to force you to dress better.”

“What is so very wrong with the way I dress? You never complained before.”

“That was when we were all freezing our bollocks off at The Wall, surrounded by Wildlings who had necklaces made of human teeth. We’re at court now, and you’re a prince. Put the bloody shirt on.”
“Watch your tongue.” Jon admonished him, but he began removing his jerkin and doublet. When he was down to his chemise, Satin came forward with the gift and helped him pull it over his head, forcing him to handle it gingerly.

“Careful, this is good material.” Satin said. “Not that rubbish homespun stuff you are used to.”

*That ‘rubbish home-spun stuff’ is in fact very good wool that can actually stay together. I’ve had some of those shirts for years.* Jon knew it was no use arguing. For some reason, whenever it came to clothing, logic seemed to go right out the window. Jon pulled some of the laces in the front closed tight. After he did this, Satin moved to help him some more, but Jon moved away. “Stop it.”

“But with a shirt like this, you need to---”

Jon tucked the laces underneath the collar and straightened the shirt. “I know, Satin. I *know* how to wear things like this. I was raised at Winterfell, remember? I understand the intricacies of noble attire.”

He could feel the fabric and lace tickling the sides of his neck. Thankfully, it was an open V collar, so it didn’t strangle him or anything. The garment was surprisingly comfortable.

He waited a couple of seconds for his ward to give a snarky reply, but none came. Jon looked at his attendant, who was staring, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

*Oh Gods, I must look ridiculous.* “You have something to say, Satin?”

“Oh.”

Jon hurried over to the mirror, expecting the worst. When he saw his reflection, he stepped back in shock.

He’d been expecting some sort of foppish nightmare. He’d expected to look like a tomato. He’d expected to look painfully shiny and dandyish, like the type of man who spent more time at the tailors than at the till yard. He’d expected to appear as flamboyant as so many of those spoiled, vain little Lordlings at court, or like some Braavosi merchant prince. He’d expected to look as ridiculous as he had in those extravagant clothes Daenerys had gifted him when he first arrived at court, with the bright reds and gold stitching and ruffled cuffs.

This was not like that.

The color on this wasn’t the same bright scarlet that he usually saw. It was closer to a burgundy, subdued enough not to seem flashy. Though there was a little bit of sheen from the fabric, it wasn’t overpowering or practically reflective like some silks he’d seen. There were no ruffles on the cuffs, no decoration whatsoever. While there was a bit of lace at the collar, it was barely noticeable and only served to give the edge some texture and allow the collar to meld better with his curly hair. The length was shorter than he was used to, but it looked good. The cut looked snug without feeling that way, and it emphasized the broadness of his shoulders and chest and while making his waist look narrower. He appeared more athletic in this than he did in his actual athletic clothing. He seemed taller as well.

*Oh. Well this… This isn’t… I don’t look Braavosi.* “Satin?”

“Yes?”

“Sh-should I wear a jerkin with this?”
“You can. You don’t need to, though. But, um, the velvet might look nice. But show Lady Sansa how it looks without it, first.”

Jon sincerely hoped that his confidence in his appearance wasn’t wildly unearned. If she ended up laughing at him, he’d never live it down.

Jon went to the door nervously and opened it. Sansa and Anais were facing away, scratching Ghost’s ears. Jon cleared his throat. Both women turned.

When they saw him, there was no laughter or chatter. Both of their mouths fell open and their eyes widened. A little color rushed to Sansa’s cheeks.

“Oh.”

_I’m never taking this thing off._

After a couple of seconds, Sansa leaned over and whispered in Anais’s ear. At first it seemed like the girl hadn’t heard. But a moment later she managed to tear her eyes away and scurry out of the room. Sansa smiled at him. Her blue eyes seemed to brighten in color.

“Jon, you look very, very handsome.”

That made him smile.

She walked close to him, and Jon found himself hoping she’d embrace him again. But instead, she looked off to the side, at Satin.

“If you would please get the velvet, Satin.”

Satin reappeared with the thing too quickly. Sansa took it from the servant and had Jon hold out his arms.

The garment was about the only thing Daenerys gave him that he could stand to keep. It was a black velvet vest that laced up the front, with just a little silver trim. Sansa slipped it over his shoulders and unlike with Satin, he was happy to let her fasten it for him. Even though he’d much rather have Sansa perform the opposite of her current action, there was still something appealing about allowing her to dress him. When she finished, she ushered him through the door to his bedchamber, and pulled him before the mirror.

“Now, this is what you’d wear to a banquet, to something formal. I wanted to put you in the most extravagant thing I made first. I know how much you like your simplicity, so I felt it prudent to get you to try the least simple thing at once so you’d feel comfortable with everything else.”

“Everything else? Did you buy me a whole new wardrobe?” He teased. He liked how she looked next to him, both of them in red.

“No, of course not. I just made you a few shirts. I’ve got three ready for you, and another three which aren’t finished yet.”

“Did Daenerys put you up to this?” Jon asked, recalling a prior conversation.

“No, I decided to do this on my own, actually. I felt that it was only fair since you were buying me new clothes that I make some for you as well. But Daenerys was supportive when I told her.”

“What? Did everyone know of this but me?”
“It was Daenerys, Missendei, Satin, Anais, and I who knew. No one else.”

“So my entire family and their immediate staff have all been plotting against me.” Jon pretended to pout. “Lovely.”

“Are you not pleased?”

“It’s very fine, Sansa. I’m grateful and I like it very much.” He reached out and squeezed her hand. “Thank you.”

“Good. I have a couple of simpler ones that are finished. I want you to start wearing them.”

“Do you find my regular attire so atrocious?” He smiled as he said this, but he was only half-joking.

Sansa’s lips pressed together in a thin little line. “Jon, this isn’t just about attractiveness. It’s about the message you send. When you dress like a servant, people think you have no confidence or pride in yourself and your house. They also assume that you’re poor.”

“God forbid.”

“No, it’s a problem for you. It makes it look like Daenerys can’t afford to have you dressed properly, and therefore sends the message that the royal family is vulnerable. People here are always looking for weaknesses. So when you walk around dressed like you’re still at Castle Black, they think that you’re financially troubled and that you’re insecure about your position and thus easy to control. Rumors get started, and that becomes a whole other issue when your own people start thinking you’re weak. After everything that has happened to this country, that’s the last thing you want anyone believing. Furthermore, it makes people think that this country is still in the same desperate, miserable place we were in when you actually had to wear cheap black wool and leathers all the time. No one says you have to look like Loras Tyrell. But you do have to at least look like you’re not in the middle of a war anymore. Also, the fact that you don’t wear full Targaryen colors suggests that you’re not fully loyal to the throne, and that strife exists between you and Daenerys.”

“There’s no way people could start to think that much simply because of what I wear.”

“You’d be surprised. Why do you think Margaery wears so much green? Because she doesn’t want to remind anyone that she ever laid claim to the name ‘Baratheon.’ Likewise, I avoid gold and I only ever wear red with white. When I was pretending to be Littlefinger’s bastard, I made sure to dress as simply as possible so as not to arouse any suspicion. Robb’s crown of the North was hideous—bronze and iron and design to look like little swords. Why? Because gold is for Lannisters and he was fighting a war.”

“It sounds like you’ve given this a lot of thought.” Jon said, smirking.

“Once upon a time, image was everything to me. When Littlefinger became Lord of Harrenhal, he changed his family’s sigil from a titan to a mockingbird. Why? The titan reminded everyone that his lineage was Braavosi and therefore foreign. A mockingbird flew, just as he flew through the ranks of nobility, it has a reputation for being a quick and clever animal, but it is unassuming and small enough not to arouse suspicion. Also, because most of the time he was secretly mocking everyone around him. Everything we do communicates a variety of things, Jon. Symbols have power. I mean, think about the Night’s Watch. Can you honestly think of something worse to wear in a snowy wasteland during the day than black? No camouflage, people can spot you coming from a mile away, which isn’t exactly conducive to fending off wildlings who know the landscape back and forth. If you truly only watched the Wall at night, it would be one thing, but you were on duty during the day when everything around you is white. But black is distinctive, fierce and threatening. It
suggests death. So that is what you wore.”

Jon was quite impressed. *Who knew artifice could run so deep.*

“You just know everything, don’t you? You know every little in and out of everything around you.”

He sort of adored her right now.

It was at this point that Anais entered with the other two shirts and handed them to Satin, who folded them carefully. Both servants withdrew from the bedchamber. Sansa waited for them to leave before answering.

“No, but I was taught how to influence the thinking of others and to read things that aren’t spelled out. And when you’re raised to think that the most important thing you have to offer the world is your appearance, it isn’t hard to understand the intricacies of image.”

“So what should my image be, then?”

Sansa smiled a little. “You should keep to a basic theme. Red doublet, black trousers and jerkin. More ornate clothing for fancy occasions, simple but rich fabrics for daily wear. The uniform nature suggests that you are organized, free from vanity, and not extravagant. The color shows pride in yourself and your family. Just enough richness in your clothing shows security in your position, confidence, and that you belong among the elite. The darkness of the red emphasizes masculinity, seriousness, strength, and self-awareness. It also leaves no question that you were raised in the North. Both red and black suggest power, aggression, passion, sensuality, and ferocity. Black suggests cold and hardship. Red suggests heat and vibrancy. So you’re a man for both winter and summer. Don’t ever let the red overpower the black, though. The Targaryens are and were red against black while the opposite was the sigil of the Blackfyres. It would not only remind people that you were once a bastard, but also suggest disunity and rebellion, which is the last thing anyone should think of. Also, too much red reminds people of the Lannisters.”

Jon found this strangely appealing. He absolutely adored her when she got like this. Sansa speaking on such subjects was like watching Val ride or Ygritte shoot an arrow. It was impressive, thrilling, and a little intimidating. Sansa wielded her words and knowledge like a weapon. If Ygritte and Val had been spearwives, Sansa was a speechwife.

Every syllable went straight to his groin. The best parts were when she uttered words like *passion, sensuality, and masculinity.* Three things he rather wanted to display to her right now.

Jon reached out and stroked the end of her long, red braid. “I don’t know, I rather like red. The Free Folk thought red was lucky. Kissed by fire, they called it. Red hair was treasured. It doesn’t make me think of a Lannister. It makes me think of someone else entirely.”

Sansa actually shivered. “Well, I’m glad you think of me, Jon.”

*And what of you? Do you think of me? In such a manner as I’ve started thinking of you?* It occurred to Jon that she might. *We’re so close, Sansa. We’re so close. You’re inches from me. Just get a little closer and show me. You don’t need to fear this. I’m not Petyr Baelish. I’m not Harrold Hardyng. I’m not Joffrey Baratheon or any of those others who hurt you. I’m going to do better than them. I’m going to give you everything you deserve. Just let me know that you want it.*

“I do.” Was all Jon said, his face inches from hers.

She reached out and cupped his chin. They stared at each other for a few seconds. Then she hung her head and pressed her temple to his chest.
“My son’s killers are going on trial tomorrow. I am their chief accuser. I cannot afford to have my reputation tarnished further at this time. I owe it to my child to keep my credibility as intact as possible until those men are executed. Satin and Anais are waiting outside. I’m sorry.”

Jon was fairly positive that his was not the only audible groan.

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Sansa:

She wanted to weep in frustration as she pulled away from the man before her. She wanted to do a bunch of other things that also involved the secretion of bodily fluids, and she wanted to do them very, very badly.

But the words she just spoke were the truth, even if they weren’t the whole truth. She also couldn’t risk word getting out of her having an affair with Jon just yet for other reasons. There was the Tyrell issue. There was Daenerys. There was Jon himself.

She looked into his eyes and whispered. “Wait.”

His skin was flushed, his mouth agape. You poor man. I’m going to give you everything. Soon. Just wait. You were supposed to wait longer.

She went to the door of the bedchamber and opened it to find the servants very clearly trying to look busy and distracted. Satin was playing around with some miniature statues on a side table, Anais was examining the ceiling.

“Come, Anais,” Sansa said, gesturing to her friend. “We must let my cousin retire.”

She didn’t look back at Jon as she hurried out. When she got into bed, she frigged herself twice, tangling herself in the sheets before falling into a fitful sleep.

Sansa took her frustrations out on Coldwater and Moore the next day, attacking them with every ounce of energy she had and enjoying their looks of terror as she accused them before the entire court.

Now they were the ones in dirty little rags from the Great Sept. Now they were the ones hungry and afraid. Now she was the one who got to express her anger and resentment upon them. Only this time, the accusations were true.

“They arranged to kill my son.” She proclaimed. “House Moore was next in line to inherit the Eyrie. They’d made promises to House Coldwater to raise them to second in command in the Vale if they supported them. Wallace Coldwater stole into my son’s nursery that night not out of righteous anger over the supposed deception of his friend, Harrold Hardyng. He murdered Harry’s trueborn son for personal gain. Lord Moore has no sons of his own, but he has three daughters. The oldest of which was betrothed to Lord Wallace. The only thing standing in the way of them taking over The Vale was my son. So that monster crushed his skull.”

It was her turn to conjure up the theatrics. Lord Moore had put on a good show at her trial. But he was no match for Sansa, who had the advantage of genuine emotion and claims behind her. But when she looked at them, cowering in the defendant’s box, she felt little relief.

Gods, I just want them gone. I want this finished. I’m so tired of all this. Of these people. I just want to rest. She’d repeated these thoughts to herself since she woke this morning. But she still managed to have Anais dress her hair with the band of pearls. She still managed to put on the best of her new
gowns—- ivory with silver embroidery and a white fur collar, a slip of red and white diamonds--- and the ruby necklace Anya had managed to preserve for her. It was an ensemble specifically designed to look like her wedding gown. All she was missing was her maiden’s cloak. It wasn’t necessary. She wasn’t a maiden anymore. She was a widow and mother. And she was fighting for her child.

*Just keep going. Just a little longer. Then you can move on with your life. You're fighting as much for yourself as you are for Eddie. And then you can travel North and bury his bones in you family’s crypts for the final time and get to working on giving that boy those brothers and sisters he used to ask for.*

Eddie would ask for brothers and sisters constantly. She’d wanted to wait until he was older, until Winterfell was finished being rebuilt. Now she almost regretted it.

*But it probably would have just meant more dead babes. Well, soon I won’t have to worry about that anymore. In an age of new dragons, no one would dare lay a hand on a royal child. No one will ever touch a Stark of Winterfell again. The next Starks will be princes, as much the blood of fire as of winter. The next Lord of Winterfell is going to be a prince who rides on the backs of dragons as surely as he runs with wolves. And no one will ever try to harm one of my own again. I just need to put the last of those who have hurt us to the flames.*

At the end of the hearing she finally looked at Jon for the first time since the night before. He was wearing one of the red lamb’s wool doublets she’d made him. When she saw that, she managed her first smile of the day. He didn’t smile, but there was enough heat in his gaze to melt all of the winter snow in the realm.

Chapter End Notes

*I'll admit, I almost titled this chapter 'Tease'. You can be mad if you want. I understand.*
Chapter Eight: Divulgence

Sansa:

She’d escaped to the Godswood after the proceedings to collect her thoughts and enjoy some solitude. This area had grown more vacant in the years since she last lived in the capital. Very few representatives from The North ventured past the Neck these days, and south of that the Old Gods were rarely kept. Sansa even told Anais to leave her be, though the young woman was growing into a more indispensable companion every day. But she was starting to get the feeling that Anais herself was growing eager for some solitude.

The Lady of Winterfell was a relatively low-maintenance mistress. Her period in King’s Landing had made her wary of having too many servants. Her role as her cousin Robert’s nursemaid had taught her to sympathize more with those who had to attend to others. Her time as a bastard in the Vale and on the war campaign had taught her a great deal of self-sufficiency. Thus, she didn’t depend on help as much as the average lady. She generally poured her own wine, brushed her own hair, dressed herself, and her personal habits were neat and organized enough that the staff didn’t have to do too much picking up after her.

But still, Anais had a lot of her work cut out for her after Karlet’s dismissal. And Sansa did take up more of her time out of a desire for her companionship. The young woman was tired. She needed a break.

Sansa knew she should hire another maid. After Karlet was gone, Sansa found herself more than a little miffed that Jon had the girl dismissed without her approval. She’d postponed employing a new
maid partly out of pettiness. I should hire someone new, if only to help Anais. I’m definitely going to require new help once our trip North starts. I don’t even know if Anais would want to go North. It would be a lot to subject her to.

The young woman went to sit at the roots of the Heart tree. I should try to find some people from The North. Anais was a child of The Crownlands. Writing to one of my bannermen might be prudent.

She spent some time thinking on a variety of subjects, trying to keep her mind off Coldwater and Moore as much as possible. But after a while, she must have dozed off.

“Sansa?”

She opened her eyes, knowing the voice. Jon was standing over her, looking concerned. She smiled up at him, letting him help her up.

“Jon.” She replied, maintaining her grip on his hand even after she was standing. She wished she could feel more of him through the gloves. But Jon always wore two pairs, thus she mostly just felt cushioning and fabric. “How are you?”

“Fine. And you?”

“Me? I’m well. Tired, but well enough.”

“Are you sure?” His eyes flashed with concern.

“Yes. The hearing today was more exhausting than traumatic. I’ve grown used to the process, I’m in no danger, and I have confidence in the case I’ve built. Mostly I’m just weary of dealing with those monsters. It’s like having to haul around the carcass of a beast that attacked you. It’s no longer a threat, but you still hate looking at it.”

Jon looked down at their hands shyly. “You were… excellent. They were petrified.”

Sansa smiled and blushed. She already knew this, but she still liked to hear it. “Thank you.”

To her delight, Jon stepped closer and ran his hand up her arm. “Satin and Anais aren’t here. No one is. Ghost is keeping guard. I thought maybe we could speak freely.”

Do you mean speak freely or rub genitals? The cynical part of her brain inquired silently. She admonished herself at once. No... Jon means speak freely. He does. I should trust him. “I used to meet Dontos here.”

Jon pursed his lips. “Why are you here now? I remember that you tended to favor the Seven over the Old Gods.”

“Solitude.”

“Am I disturbing you then?”

“No. I want us to speak freely. But I thought we’ve done this before.”

“Have we? I always feel like you’re guarding yourself.”

She flinched. “I choose my words carefully. It doesn’t mean that I don’t mean what I say. I just always try to say it right. Do you voice every thought that comes into your head?”

“Of course not. But I tend to say more when I’m with you.”
There was snow on the ground, every breath was visible, it was well into the winter season. But Sansa couldn’t feel any chill. “As do I.”

“But you still withhold things. I know you do.”

“As do you, Jon.”

“I do not---.”

“Really? Because I don’t recall you announcing when your feelings for me began to go beyond what a cousin feels for his kin.”

Jon bit his lip and went red. “A fair point, My Lady. In my defense, this is a rather recent development.”

_of course it is. Everything between us is these days. “So tell me now.”_

“You obviously have worked out. Why do you need me to say it?”

“Trust me, Jon, it’s necessary. If you’re unwilling to say it, then I can’t be sure.”

“It’s not that I’m unwilling. It’s just… I’m no poet. I’m not skilled with words like you are. Or those fine Lords and knights at court.”

“Poems. Knights. Lords.” Sansa scoffed. “All things that have failed me. Joffrey gave me pretty compliments and declarations of affection. Dontos called me his Jonquil. It is Winter, Jon. This is not the time for pretty verses. I’m not that little girl who required fancy wordplay.”

“Even if you don’t need it, I’d wager it’s something you could still want. I want to give you what you want.”

_oh, for pity’s sake. He’s more of a hopeless romantic than I am. How is that even possible? “Jon, I’ve been telling you for the last several minutes what I want. Trust me that I am speaking freely to you now.”_

Jon looked down once more, swallowed, and took a deep breath, his eyes shut tight. “I don’t care for you like a brother or cousin. I love you like I loved Ygritte, like I loved Val. Only more so. From when I was on the Watch until now, I had to keep reminding myself to kill the boy and let the man be born. I was so tied down and lost. Even coming back from death didn’t help me feel more secure. And then, all of a sudden, I find out that I’m not even Jon Snow. I’m Jon Targaryen. The name, the role, the title, the duties, it all seemed completely impossible for me to master. I felt more stuck within the boy Jon Snow than ever. I wonder where I am, what I’m doing, how I will ever understand how to be a prince, how I will ever be the type of leader this country needs. I don’t know how to do any of the things Jon Targaryen is supposed to do, and I had no idea how to learn, either. Everyone else seemed to know except me. But when I’m with you, when I’m speaking with you, I finally feel like I’m learning. I not only feel like I can birth the man, but I actually want to. I’m less afraid, less confused. I feel more ready for it all. When I’m upset about something or conflicted, when there’s something difficult I have to handle, either you are with me to counsel me through it, or you make me feel better after I’ve dealt with it. I can see the good parts of my new life so much easier. And I’ve got this incredible woman with me who knew the boy, and is helping birth the man. I don’t need to kill the boy for the man to be born with you around. I know they can coexist. I just can’t imagine any part of my future without you. I don’t understand how I got by so long without you. You comfort me and allow me to see things in a better light, and you manage to do it without sugar-coating things or lying. Just with you. There’s no Jon Targaryen, Prince of the Andals without Sansa
Stark, Warden of the North. There’s just always going to be that sullen boy Jon Snow, bastard of Winterfell. I feel like I could face a thousand winters with you. And I’m just desperate to be at least a fraction the friend and ally you are to me. At first, I wanted to help you out of pity. But it isn’t about that anymore. I want to help you and be with you because I need a world with you in it. As a friend, a cousin, a lover… whatever. But I’d prefer lover, because I’m absolutely in love with you.”

Sansa almost lost her balance. She clutched Jon’s arm a little tighter just to secure herself. She leaned forward and kissed him.

He didn’t taste sweet. In the songs and stories she used to be told about love and romance, lips and kisses were always described as sweet. She’d gone into her first kiss expecting a sensation similar to ingesting a lemon cake or caramel. Joffrey had tasted sour, the Hound, Harry, and Tyrion had tasted like wine. Petyr had been the closest to ‘sweet’ with his minty breath, though he still wasn’t exactly sugary. Mouths just didn’t taste like sugar. They weren’t supposed to. She’d discovered that years ago.

But Jon was the first man she’d kissed where she didn’t feel disappointed by the taste of him. His mouth was warm, soft and smooth. There was no bitterness or sourness. The taste itself was rather neutral, and it mattered least of all compared to the other sensations. The warmth of his body, the relief at finally having some contact, the softness of his lips, the satisfying scratch of his beard, the strength of his arms around her, the emotional connection she felt. She wanted him, he wanted her. That was clearly communicated. But it wasn’t simply naked, animalistic desire. It was personal, intimate, and familiar. There wasn’t anything to be afraid of, there weren’t any ulterior motives, no artifice, no superficiality. Nothing was being forced or demanded.

She pressed her whole body up against him with a sense of urgency she hadn’t experienced since her arrest. The whole, wintery world melted away and the two of them were melting together. He had his arms around her so tight. But unlike when she’d been held before, it didn’t feel like she was being restrained, it felt like she was being clung to. Her insides were twisting and burning in the most delicious manner. Sansa reached up and ran her fingers through his curly hair. They kept getting caught in the little tangles. It was lovely. The only complaint she had was that her pinky fingers were wrapped up in splints so she couldn’t feel as much as she would have liked.

He let go for a second, and Sansa was about to pull away from his mouth and complain. Then she heard a rustle of fabric and realized he was wrapping them both up in his fur-lined black cloak. She instantly felt not just hot, but cozy and safe. His hands were back on her in seconds, one fisting her hair, the other stroking her back. Sansa grinded her hips against his.

He’s as hard as Valyrian steel. There was a little jolt of fear when she felt that. The last time she’d felt a man like this, Petyr ended up choking her while thrusting in and out of her like he was back fighting Brandon Stark for Catelyn Tully’s hand. His lust seemed less focused on her and more on blood. He’d gotten it, too. Though he ended up paying in triple for the amount of blood he got from her. She could remember him so clearly, leaning over her, his face red, his normally steady green-grey eyes wide and bloodshot, his spittle flying in her face as he cried out about how he’d take what was his, what he was owed, what should have always belonged to him, forgetting whether he was talking to Sansa, Alayne, Lysa, or Cat.

Harry never raped her, but their couplings were rarely all that pleasurable. He’d kiss her sweetly, play with her breasts, and thrust in hard and fast like he was charging into battle. It was often over quickly, and left her sore. He was huge, and he seemed to think it compensated for lack of technique. Bedding him always reminded Sansa of being atop a runaway horse. Then he’d collapse next to her and be asleep in seconds.
Both men always seemed to think that because they were shaped similarly, that their cocks were indeed some type of sword or lance made of something even more precious than Valyrian steel. They both liked to be praised for their genitals, and have Sansa worship their cocks a bit.

Such thoughts broke the mood she was in a bit. *Don’t think about that. Think about Jon. Jon isn’t Petyr or Harry. Jon is kind. Jon won’t hurt you.*

“Come on, Sansa,” Jon sad, pulling his mouth away and whispering. “Relax. No one can see us.”

*Am I not relaxing?* She wasn’t aware that she’d stopped. *Do I seem frigid or unenthusiastic?* Petyr and Harry both used to hate it when she didn’t seem willing or wanton enough for them. Harry used to respond to any perceived lack of desire by saying that if she didn’t want it, she should at least have the decency to suck his cock. Petyr used to respond by telling her that she couldn’t deceive him, that he knew that she was truly a little slut and he would prove it. He’d proceed to do so by fingering her until she came. If he was feeling particularly vicious, he’d do so while fucking her in the arse. He also liked to threaten to do something in public so everyone could see what a whore she was next time she tried to feign disinterest.

Sansa concentrated and affected little moans. In between smaller kisses, she spoke. “Jon… Please… Want it so bad…”

“‘It’?” Jon asked, sounding puzzled. Sansa’s heart sank.

*So it’s this game, is it?* Petyr sometimes liked to play this game. Have her beg explicitly for what she “wanted.”

“So it’s this game, is it?” She replied before kissing him again.

His eyes widened. He groaned. “You wicked girl.”

Petyr liked to do this too, draw dirty words from her, then admonish her for being wanton. He’d call her wicked names, and then have her repeat them. She never would have pegged Jon for the type who liked such things, and she held out hope that he wasn’t the type who would want to hear her call herself a whore.

“I’m not.” She protested.

“You are. Wicked girl.” He was smiling.

Sansa sighed. “Fine, I’m a wicked girl. I’m filthy.”

“Filthy?” He groaned, closing his eyes and grinding against her. His cock slipped between her legs, pushing against the fabric of her skirts.

*He’s loving it. Give him what he wants.* Sansa’s arousal seemed to have vanished. She was so disappointed.

“Yes, Jon. I’m a filthy, wicked, wanton, little whore.”

His smile fell and his eyes popped open. He stopped grinding against her. “Sansa… No. That’s not right.”

“Do you prefer ‘slut’?” Sometimes Petyr enjoyed correcting her on that. He’d snarl that he knew whores, and that she didn’t get to call herself one until he decided to pay her. That until he’d judged that she was good enough to give gold for, she was just a slut. Sometimes these encounters would
end with him cumming, laughing, tossing her a gold dragon and congratulating her on becoming worthy of the title of whore. Sometimes Harry also liked to play games where they pretended she was a prostitute, though his games were always less brutal and insulting than Petyr’s.

Jon stopped dead and pulled away from her as if stung. “Is that what he told you? Is that what he made you think?”

Oh Gods. I’ve made a huge mistake. What is wrong with me? She shrunk back, tears welling up. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re—” Jon bit down on his gloved fist, face reddening. When he started advancing towards her, she shrunk back more. He walked past her and up to the Heart Tree, leaning against it and pounding his fist against the trunk.

He’s never going to want me again. I’m too damaged. I’ve ruined everything. She’d purposely kept fairly mum on the subject of what transpired between her, Petyr, and Harry. She didn’t want Jon to see her as tainted, as too damaged. She didn’t want more of his pity. She wanted to seem as pure and strong as possible.

It’s all over. You’ve exposed yourself, you fool. You’ve sung your song off-key, Little Bird. Stupid, stupid girl. You really aren’t worthy to be a whore. Whores can make men believe what they want. They can hide their damage. You cannot.

“I’m so sorry, Jon. I didn’t mean to upset you. I thought—”

“Please don’t say you thought that was what I wanted to hear.” Jon said, looking over at her with the saddest eyes she’d ever seen. “I would never, ever want to hear you say such things about yourself. You’re not a whore. You’re not a slut. Seven Hells, why would you ever even use those words?”

“Petyr…”

“I thought Petyr Baelish was gone. He’s not here anymore. He doesn’t get to tell you what to say. Gods, I wasn’t even thinking. I was so caught up… You’re not filthy or wicked, either. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.” He turned around now. He looked miserable. And that just made her cry.

Her cousin rushed over and hugged her, stroking her hair.

“Gods, Sansa, please don’t cry. This is my fault.”

“No, it’s mine.” She sobbed. “I should have known you’d never—”

“How are you supposed to know any different? I did call you wicked. I insisted upon it. I meant it playfully, Sansa. I don’t think that of you.”

“I know. I know.” She cried, hating herself for this display of weakness. “But now you know how ruined I am and I’m ashamed. I’m surprised you can bear to touch me.”

“You’re not ruined. And I’ll always want to touch you. There isn’t a thing in this world I want more.”

“No. Every time you try to touch me from now on, you’ll be repelled. You’ll worry that you’re hurting me, that you’ll be reminding me of him. You’ll treat me like I’m made of glass.”

“I’ve seen you put the fear of the Gods into child-murderers. I don’t think you’re made of glass.” Jon sighed. “Sansa, please… Don’t do this. Don’t try to hide from me. And don’t be angry with yourself.
You’ve survived so much. You’ve proven yourself unbroken time and again. Don’t think this is enough to undo everything else. We’ve probably gone a little too far, too fast. I took it for granted that you were willing and I—-

“No! Don’t do that.” Sansa interrupted. She pulled away, drying her tears. “If I don’t get to blame myself, then neither do you. And I was willing. I just got a little scared. I made a mistake, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t want you. That’s not what this was. I don’t want you believing for a second that you took advantage of me.”

Jon bit his lip. “So you do want me, but you panicked.”

“More or less, yes.”

Jon took a deep breath. “Gods. Alright. We need to… We need to be careful. Do you think… Do you think maybe that for a while, at least, we should talk more when we’re… with… each other?”

“How so?”

“In a way which insures that neither of us gets the wrong idea, we just say what we’re going to do and what we want? That way no one needs to panic. There aren’t any misunderstandings.”

“That sounds… Prudent.” She smiled a little. *It might even be fun.*

“What if you were to tell me what happened? So I know what to avoid?”

Sansa went red. “No, Jon. It’s humiliating.”

“I know. I know. I’m sorry. The last thing I want is to make you relive that.” He rubbed his forehead. “Please believe me. But you’re right, I may worry about reminding you of him unless I know exactly what boundaries there are. I want to be good to you, and I don’t want to repeat what happened here.”

Sansa rubbed her face, miserable. She understood his logic, but that didn’t make it easier. “I just… I can’t give you an answer. Can we wait until the trial is over?”

Jon nodded. “Of course. You needn’t even ask.”

She felt calmer now, but more exhausted than ever. “Jon, I need to get back to my rooms. I need to sleep.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jon:

Dinner was extremely awkward. Sansa had slept for a couple of hours before Daenerys called for supper. Jon and Sansa sat across from each other, Sansa keeping her eyes downcast and answering Daenerys’s questions with one-word answers. Jon drank the entire time. The Dragon Queen, clearly concerned, dismissed the Lady of Winterfell early. The second she had left the room, Jon spoke.

“Dany, what traces are left of House Baelish?”

Daenerys looked at him in alarm. “Baelish? Practically nothing, really. Littlefinger was all there was of the family— there weren’t even any bastards. His grandfather was a hedge knight and his father was the most insignificant of the Lords. I gave the family’s old seat on the Fingers to an ally in
Yunkai who wanted to make a trading post of it. He’s been fairly successful. Harrenhal I’ve given to some branch Lord or another. Aside from Littlefinger’s name being listed in some records books, there is nothing. If you’re looking for some new form of vengeance to take on Sansa’s behalf, you won’t find it. Everything Baelish built died when he bled out in the Lady’s chamber of Winterfell. Well, aside from his gold.”

“And that?”

“Gods, Jon. I don’t remember off the top of my head. Ask Lord Butterwell. He’s Master of Coin for a reason.” Daenerys sighed. “Something new must have brought this on. I thought I noticed something between you two this evening. Did she finally decide to divulge some of the details of her abuse?”

“Yes.” Jon didn’t feel the need to inform Dany of the context in which this transpired. Once Sansa had recovered from what happened, she once again stressed the need to maintain secrecy of their affair.

Dany shuddered. “It’s not an easy thing to hear about the people you love. When I heard some of the accounts from the slaves I freed, I almost had all three cities of Slaver’s Bay burnt to the ground. I kept trying to fix things, you know. I tried to remove every last trace of what those places had been when I took over. Not by destroying everything--- I resisted that impulse because even then I knew all anyone would have left would be ashes. But I thought I could fix it all if I just altered everything. Well, I don’t need to remind you how that worked out. All I knew to do was punish and interfere. I thought I could just create a paradise by saying how I wanted it all to work and commanding that it be done. I couldn’t reconcile the idea that awful things sometimes just couldn’t be washed out at once.”

“Your point?”

She leaned forward. “My point is that all that could possibly be done to punish Littlefinger for his crimes has been done. That doesn’t alter some of the remnants of what he did. Trying to find new ways to simply punish isn’t going to cleanse your cousin’s mind of those memories. You’re not a miracle worker. It’s possible for her to heal gradually, but you need to focus less on the anger and how you wish the world could be and more on what the situation actually is. It’s not about Littlefinger anymore or how he should be punished. He’s gone. It’s about her and what she needs. Not what you think she should need, but what she says she needs.”

“In this case, I’m not sure what she needs.” Jon downed a fourth cup. A servant rushed over to refill it.

“She might not be sure either. But until she figures it out, don’t try to force anything on her.”

“The last time I failed to be proactive in my family’s affairs, almost everyone was killed.”

“Jon, do you honestly think you could have saved your brother from the Freys and Boltons? Or your father from the Lannisters? Or Bran from being adopted by The Children? And no one knows what happened to Arya, but whatever it was, I doubt you could have prevented it. I know you still blame yourself regarding Rickon, but what exactly were you supposed to do during the attack on Skaagos? If you’d abandoned the Flight against the Night’s King, Rickon probably would have died eventually along with practically everyone else in the realm. You know there is no way I would have killed that… thing… without you. Sansa would probably be dead too if you weren’t with me. Or she’d be a wight herself. Come now, I thought we’d been over this.”

“We have. And everything you say makes sense. I’ve been telling myself the same thing for over a
year, Daenerys. It doesn’t change the fact that I feel guilty. Logic doesn’t come into play here. It’s not about that.”

“I know.” She looked at her lap sourly. “Gods, do I know. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be lecturing you on this. I’d just rather not worry about you being miserable all the time. You’re always so miserable.”

“I’m not.” Jon insisted. “I can be happy.”

“See, the sentence ‘I can be happy’ is already rather pathetic. But with your voice and face, it actually makes me miserable. It sounds about as true as that Lord of Light bollocks. No, less true.”

“I’m sorry you find me so depressing.”

“I suppose it can’t be helped. So many things are depressing these days. It’s the nature of winter.” Daenerys rubbed her temple. “But I thought maybe your cousin’s company would improve your mood.”

“It has for the most part, actually.” Jon was rather touched by his Aunt’s concern. The fact that she could even spare a thought about him with everything she had to deal with spoke volumes. “I thank you for proving so accommodating. I know your feelings towards the Starks aren’t exactly warm.”

“Oh, I recovered from that when I found out that you are my nephew. With that great white beast following you around, it’s not like your lineage is something I can ignore. I have no room to resent Eddard Stark and his progeny for my family’s demise after discovering that he’s the reason I have any relations left to me at all. I’ve spent my entire life trying to regain the family that was stolen from me. You’re the only Targaryen left, and she’s your kin. So I count her as my own. Of course, it helps that she’s halfway decent and that her presence doesn’t make me lose my appetite.”

“I’m glad to hear that you like her. She likes you.” There is one comfort, at least.

“She’d bloody better.” Daenerys took a sip from her cup. “I hope all of my High Lords like me. I need them to. My goal is to be the complete and utter opposite of my father.”

“That’s an excellent strategy. You will have a long reign if you keep to it.”

“And that’s why I want you to keep an eye on the gentlemen of The North.”

He almost spilled his wine. “Pardon?”

Daenerys took another sip. “We need to find Sansa the best match possible. She has her own line to continue, after all.”

Jon’s blood ran cold. “I’m afraid I don’t quite follow.”

“Oh, honestly Jon, she’s practically your ward. When you go North, keep track of the unmarried young Lords. Find her someone kind and clever and loyal and good-looking. Preferably rich. DO NOT let her get cornered by some fat old lech. She’s duty-obsessed, like you, I wouldn’t be surprised if she subjected herself to some match with some odious social climber with enough coin to rebuild Winterfell for her for the sake of her domain.”

“You can’t honestly be thinking of marrying her off right after everything she’s been through.”

“Well, she wouldn’t be wed immediately, of course. But a betrothal would benefit everyone greatly. The Stark line is in even more jeopardy than the Targaryen one. If she were at least promised to someone, she could have a set base up North until Winterfell is finished and begin preparing to
restore her family. It would probably keep the Northerners happy as well.”

“Dany, I am not comfortable with this. We should just let Sansa decide in her own time.” A fifth cup had been drained at this point.

“Oh, I don’t intend to force her into anything, Jon. I just mean we should prepare and encourage such a thing. I’m not going to strong-arm anyone into marrying anyone. If I was that type of person, I’d have forced you to take a bride by now. Don’t overreact.”

“I’m not overreacting. I honestly doubt Sansa would appreciate such a discussion transpiring between us.”

“You honestly haven’t considered Sansa’s marriage prospects?” Daenerys seemed astonished. “Jon, she’s a young, unmarried woman in her prime, a High Lady, and your cousin. The future of House Stark rests upon her and her only child is dead. Such things must be considered. You’re her only remaining male relative. I’d have thought one of your first impulses upon her being freed would be attending to this issue. Almost everyone else has been speculating. You have responsibilities.”

“My responsibility is to the realm, and to her happiness. She hasn’t wished to entertain possible matches, so I will not. She is a High Lord in her own right, and the leader of her House. When it is time for her to wed, she can make that decision on her own.”

Daenerys raised her eyebrows and looked off to the side. “What makes you think she hasn’t?”

“What makes you think she has?” His blood turned to ice.

“She’s been encouraging good relations with the Tyrells. I heard Willas sent her flowers.”

“She cannot control who sends her gifts.” Jon rolled his eyes. “Those were sent as a thank you for her testimony. She is friends with Lady Margaery.”

“That much I know. She did, after all, suggest that the Tyrells be allowed to dine with us sometime next week.”

“What?”

“Yes.”

Jon downed his sixth and final cup. After swallowing, he looked at Daenerys with wide eyes. “You didn’t agree, did you?”

“I did. Sansa so rarely makes any sort of request of me, I didn’t see any harm in granting this one. As it is, it’s been noted that I rarely dine with my courtiers. I felt this might lessen my reputation for being standoffish. I thought it might do Sansa some good politically. Word will get out that it helps to make a friend of the Lady of Winterfell, and more will prove eager to do favors for her in regards to restoring Winterfell and the North. Of course, it’s not official yet. The invitation is dependent on her. She wants to receive some extra funding from them for the restoration of the Glass Gardens in her home.”

Jon’s jaw dropped. He’d heard nothing of this. When had this happened? Margaery Tyrell had already begun her work. Sansa had said it herself— *The Tyrells don’t waste time*. She hadn’t said a word to Jon about it.

“When was this decided?”
“This morning before the Coldwater and Moore hearing.”

“Dany, I beg you to reconsider. These people—“

“---Are now the richest family in the country. Not to mention the type of people I’d like to keep an eye on. I’ve said as much to your cousin, and she is helping me with that.”

Jon stood up. *She kept this from me. I thought we’d reached an understanding.* He clenched both his teeth and his fists. “I have to go.”
Dainty as the Night's King

Chapter Summary

Jon makes a tit of himself and starts having doubts. Sam arrives. More awkwardness ensues.

Chapter Notes

So, hey, remember how I said that I would be super busy today and wouldn't be able to post today and that's why I posted the last chapter a day earlier? Well, due to some personal issues, I ended up not being as busy as I thought I would be.

I already had this chappie mostly written, but I did some major edits today and here it is. It's way longer than I'm used to and the next one will probably be way long as well. This chapter is an utter monster, to be honest. And it's all in Jon's perspective. So yeah. This is what happens when travel arrangements get delayed.

Also: I'm thinking of getting a beta, so if anyone knows someone...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Nine: Dainty as the Night's King

Jon:

The Tyrells. She arranged a royal dinner for the Tyrells. And she didn’t tell me. What else has she not told me? The Targaryen prince was furious. He felt exploited. Betrayed. Sansa knew how he felt about those people. Here he’d been thinking she was one of the few who wouldn’t try to use him and his Aunt for her own gain.

He charged down the halls and didn’t even knock when he burst into his cousin’s solar. Anais stood up at once and protested.

“Get her out here, now.” He said angrily, his teeth clenched.

“Please, Your Grace, she’s very tired and---“

“Now, Girl.” He replied. “Before I yank the door open myself.”

Anais squeaked and hurried into the bedchamber. Jon paced in circles. He spotted the bouquet of yellow roses. Gold roses. Tyrell roses. He reminded himself. And here I was worrying about her. Thinking she was being pressured. Poor Sansa. Poor, sweet little Sansa. The only one who didn’t give a shit about the damn crown. Except for when it benefits her to do so.

Jon walked over to the floral arrangement, grabbed it, walked out to the balcony, and dumped them out over the edge. When he brought the vase back in, the bedchamber door opened. Sansa emerged, sleepy eyed, in her white silk dressing gown, an uncharacteristically familiar arm thrown around the
shoulder of her scared-looking servant.

“Jon, what is happening?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you should ask Margaery Tyrell. Is she hiding in your sheets right now?”

Sansa looked confused for a second before her eyes got brighter. “This isn’t about the dinner invitation, is it?”

“What do you think? When were you going to tell me?”

“Jon…” Sansa said in a low voice, walking towards him and bowing her head. “Let’s go to my bedchamber and discuss this.”

She reached for his hand, which he pulled away.

“Why? So you can try and distract me the way you used to distract Harry?”

She smacked him hard across the face. It took Jon about half a second to realize that he deserved it.

He went red and looked back at Sansa. “My apologies, My Lady.”

“For what? Barging into my apartments? Terrorizing my servant? Interrupting my much-needed rest? Suggesting that I wanted to service you carnally?”

“I spoke out of turn.” He admitted. But he still wanted—nay, needed to know about the Tyrells.

“You’re doing everything out of turn. Are you drunk?”

*I might be,* he realized. He’d swallowed a lot of wine to deal with the awkwardness while Sansa was at dinner, to handle the further embarrassment of the conversation with Dany afterward, and had a couple cups before the meal to handle the emotional turmoil that had taken place in the godswood. Realizing that he was in perhaps no state to visit and interrogate his cousin and that he would most likely regret this in the morning, Jon backed away.

“I--- I am so sorry, My Lady. I should leave now.”

“Yes. Yes you should.”

~_~_~_~_~_~_~

The headache in the morning was excruciating, but it couldn’t even compete with the utter shame he felt knowing what a tit he’d made of himself. He lay in bed that morning, pressing a pillow over his head as Satin scurried around the room preparing his bath.

“Don’t bother with the bath unless you’re going to drown me in it.” The Prince of the Andals remarked.

“Oh yes, I certainly will. And then your Aunt can have me burnt alive and I will go down in history as the bastard whore who single-handedly doomed the realm by killing the last Targaryen heir.” Satin grumbled. “No, sorry, that will have to wait until you’ve sired at least a couple of princes or princesses. But I’ll promise to do it once your second child is born if it’ll get you out of bed.”

Jon did sit up. He’d gotten out of bed under much worse circumstances, including death. He needed to face his cousin, his Aunt, everyone. He looked at Ghost, lying on his bed. Maybe he was imagining it due to his guilt, but the beast’s gaze seemed rather judgmental this morning.
“I made a grave error last night.” He said as he stepped out of bed and began removing his bed clothing.

“Yes, I know all about it. Anais told me. You’re an absolute fool. I’m surprised Lady Stark didn’t give you the belt. But I guess that’s why she rules The North and I’m a manservant.” Satin remarked dryly, his dark eyes also a bit judgmental.

“Is that what you spend all your time doing?” Jon asked as he stepped into the water. “Gossiping with the other servants?”

“No. I spend all of my time looking after you and running your household. Usually I only ever gossip with Anais. And that’s only when something utterly ridiculous happens. Like a prince barging into a High Lady’s apartment in the middle of the night hollering about dinner invitations and dragging her out of bed.”

Jon started rubbing up the bar of soap against a scrubbing cloth, focusing on it instead of his servant’s disapproving manner. “I didn’t drag her out of bed.”

“No, you made Anais do it, which is worse. That poor girl works hard enough.”

“You seem to be very concerned with the well-being of my cousin’s servant.” Jon’s head and brow went up.

“I should be. I’m in charge of your household, remember? Which means she’s my responsibility.”

But Jon noticed a faint blush creep up into Satin’s cheeks. The former whore started focusing intently on gathering up Jon’s clothes and folding them.

“I thought you preferred the company of men.” Jon teased. Though he was a bit confused. Satin’s orientation had never been of enormous interest to him. But his steward had always given a certain impression…

“I don’t have any preference. I’ve never seen the tendency to discriminate as anything but a vice.” His steward replied.

“Wait, what? Satin, I’m speaking of…”

“I know what you are speaking of, Your Grace. The Great Titan of Braavos would know what you are speaking of.” Satin looked over and rolled his eyes. “Why does this concern you, anyways?”

“Well, I wasn’t until a few moments ago. But you’ve inspired some curiosity.” Also I’m welcoming any thoughts that might distract me from last night’s events.

Satin leaned back, cringing. Jon immediately realized how he must have taken what was just said.

“Not like that!” Jon said hastily. “No, I meant… I just don’t understand how one doesn’t discriminate in such a matter. I thought everyone had a preference.”

“Well, you were wrong.”

“So you and Anais…”

“I didn’t say anything about her.” Satin turned away again.

Deciding to drop the subject, Jon focused on scrubbing himself down. “Satin, how should I best apologize to my cousin?”
“Do something nice for her.”

“I’m almost always nice to her.” He hated knowing that thanks to what occurred the prior evening, he had to use ‘almost’ as a qualifier.

“I meant get her a gift.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. Oh. But not today.”

“Why not?”

“Because today is the day Sam arrives and between that and everything else, you won’t have time to pick out something nice enough to make up for your display last night. But first, you must take breakfast with the woman you insulted last night. She insisted you take your morning meal with her today. You’re wearing the good doublet and jerkin.”

The Prince of the Realms arrived at the Aenys Chambers not only dressed in his damask and velvet, but also groomed to a greater extent than he was used to. When he refused to let Satin shave his beard, the steward insisted that he at least apply some cologne. Jon didn’t actually own any. Satin gave him some of his.

He felt like an utter fool, but Satin insisted it would help him earn back his cousin’s good favor.

Jon certainly wanted forgiveness, but he also wished to discover the truth about the Tyrells. The utter calamity of his behavior the night before didn’t null the issue, after all.

There are things she’s scheming, and she may not have been completely honest with me. He prayed to the Old Gods and New that this wasn’t the case. Not Sansa, please.

The door was opened by Anais, who gave him a very disapproving look. Sansa sat at her dining table, upon which sat a sumptuous breakfast for two. She looked radiant in grey samite and white Myrish lace and damask. Her hair was loose, put in the Northern style so it hung around her shoulders in a river of red. Sansa did not stand or curtsy when he entered. Her neglect of standard etiquette served as a fine indicator of just how colossal his blunder was.

Jon walked over with the plate of cakes, placed it before her, bowed and kissed her hand. Before he could utter a word, Sansa spoke.

“You will apologize to Anais for your behavior last night. You scared her half to death.”

Then she took a bite of one of the Apology Cakes.

Common sense and decency dictated that he do this, so Jon spun around and faced the chestnut-haired maid. “Anais, you have my sincerest apologies.”

The maid curtsied. “Apology accepted, Your Grace.”

He did feel bad for the girl, and for any part he played in her discomfort. Sansa liked her exceedingly. If the girl’s behavior the night Sansa broke her fingers was an indicator of her personality and professionalism, that affection was deserved.

“Thank you, Madam.” Jon turned to Sansa again, who was delicately finishing her cake. She held up another hand for silence until she finished.
The last bit was swallowed and Sansa wiped her mouth. She asked Anais to go fetch some cider from the kitchens, and then looked at Jon. “You failed to act like a gentleman last night. It was unbecoming and unworthy of you. If intoxication leads to insensitivity for you, then I’d advise that you monitor your intake more closely in the future. My already emotionally fragile state was exacerbated by your display as well as the distrust you projected. In other words, you hurt my feelings. If you are half the man I think you are, then I doubt that is a goal of yours. If your desire is to make me rethink my good opinion of you, then continue with such behavior. If not, I’d advise that you keep in mind that I have a very low tolerance for having men charge into my rooms in the middle of the night.”

Jon went to go sit in the chair across from her. That was his place, and he’d just been put in it. He noted the change in the way she was speaking from her usual tone and manner when they discussed things personally. That’s her courtroom voice. I’m on trial.

“I acted like a complete tit the night before and have no excuse for it. I cannot even begin to express my remorse over my behavior. You deserve better. I’m so sorry.”

Sansa nodded. “Good. You should be. You shall remain that way for a while. In the mean time, you had questions last night. Now that you are sober enough to express your concerns rationally and conceivably understand rational answers, you may ask again.”

That isn’t forgiveness, but she doesn’t owe me any at the moment. She is offering me answers. Generous enough. Jon looked at his hands. “Sansa, why have you kept your dealings with the Tyrells a secret?”

“There are two things I haven’t told you about in regards to the Tyrells. One is the possible dinner invitation I’ve arranged with the Queen. That’s because it was only proposed and decided upon yesterday morning. I planned on telling you sometime that afternoon. However, this may come as a surprise to you, but I was distracted by certain events that took place following the hearings.”

He supposed he could understand why she might find that distracting. He cringed. That was another episode of embarrassment that he wasn’t happy about. “And the other matter?”

“Did you know that Daenerys personally requested that I testify at the Tyrell trials?”

“I did not.”

“She did. You may ask her if you wish. Shortly after that, when she released them into the custody of Randyll Tarly, she also asked me privately if I might keep a discreet eye on them. As you may know, Margaery Tyrell is a paragon of a King’s Landing political schemer. Daenerys isn’t quite used to the methods of this court and wants to examine them for herself by keeping the Tyrells close and establishing a connection with them. But your Aunt has a reputation for being suspicious and she knew that if she just reached out to them personally right after their trial that it would put them on their guard. However, if an old acquaintance of theirs with a reputation for being naïve and targeted for exploitation began helping them establish a connection to the new monarch, any and all outreach on Daenerys’s part would seem more organic.”

Jon sat back in his chair, going red. This sounded exactly like the sort of thing that Daenerys would do. And the sort of thing Sansa would prove perfect for. One of the things he’d noticed about his cousin was that she rarely minded when people underestimated her. In the courtroom, she proved herself a brilliant debater. But her testimony often included a lot of affectations, details, and stories which encouraged pity. The way she conducted herself in public often included her playing up her femininity, vulnerability, and sweetness. Public Sansa and Jon’s Sansa differed in a number of ways. Public Sansa acted far more like the girl he’d known, was less articulate, straightforward, and fierce.
than the one he often spoke to in private. This had been especially apparent during her interactions
with Margaery Tyrell, where there were many giggles, mentions of romantic notions, and gossipy
statements uttered. All of a sudden, Sansa allowing Margaery to crown her with that garland of
yellow roses made all of the sense in the world. *Seven Hells, she’s brilliant. She even fooled me. I
thought Margaery was playing tricks on her, but it was the other way around.*

“Daenerys said something about you having an interest in Willas Tyrell.”

“And I already told you, I don’t. I’ve more or less played along with that, and Daenerys knows I
have political interests in the Tyrells as well. I’ve explained them to her. She might think I’m
considering a match. Willas is Heir to Highgarden and extremely wealthy. His gold could go a long
way in repairing the damage to my home. But I never said to her or anyone else that I want to marry
him.”

Relief washed over him. But something did bother him. “Well, considering that Willas is Heir to
Highgarden and extremely wealthy, why aren’t you looking for a match?”

“There were arrangements for me to marry Willas before. The way it was handled proved less than
pleasant. And I’ve not had many success stories when it comes to being betrothed to men I don’t
know simply for money and status. While I possess few romantic notions anymore in regards to
matrimony, I do intend to take advantage of my relatively new autonomy and avoid that trap.”

Jon sighed. *Thank the Gods.* But his embarrassment overpowered his relief, as did some lingering
issues. “Sansa, Daenerys also suggested that you wished to encourage certain—“

He was interrupted by Anais coming in with a pitcher of cider. Sansa glanced at her maid
meaningfully. “We can discuss this later.”

Jon frowned. There was still the matter of the political favors Daenerys mentioned. But it seemed
Sansa had no interest in talking about that now. It left some lingering doubts he simply wasn’t
comfortable with yet. Jon left her chambers later still somewhat unsatisfied. While he didn’t doubt
Sansa’s words, there were still things that hadn’t been addressed.

“Word will get out that it helps to make a friend of the Lady of Winterfell, and more will prove eager
to do favors for her in regards to restoring Winterfell and the North... The invitation is dependent on
her. She wants to receive some extra funding from them for the restoration of the Glass Gardens in
her home.” Daenerys’s words kept echoing in his head. Jon didn’t want to think Sansa was using
him and his Aunt. And that still wasn’t addressed in a satisfying manner.

*Please, Sansa. Don’t be just another courtier. There must be an explanation. I should trust her. I
love her.* He wouldn’t jump to conclusions. She only stopped him there because she worried about
privacy. He just needed to get some more private time, and she’d surely answer more questions. The
woman he loved would not be so callous. Not this one.

*Ah.* A nasty voice in his head told him. *You might love her, but she’s yet to say she loves you.*

Jon tried to push this aside.

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Sam arrived by cart at the south gate. With him rode Gilly and seven-year-old Little Sam. All three of
them were practically drowning in their furs. Sam in particular looked like a great grey bear.

The servants helped unpack the cart as Sam came forward to greet Jon and Sansa. Jon, now changed
out of his silks and into his lamb’s wool, was grateful for his cousin’s presence, whatever
uncomfortable feelings he was wrestling with at the moment. He'd worried she wouldn't want to attend after what took place last night. But she'd arrived with her lips pursed, saying barely a word to him but dressed as well as if she were receiving a High Lord.

"Your Grace." Sam said, giving Jon a bow that was more or less a joke. Jon smiled and embraced his friend.

"How are you, Sam?"

"Well enough, considering." Sam told him before turning to Sansa. This time his bow was quite serious. He took her hand and kissed it. "Lady Stark."

"Maester Samwell. It is an honor." She replied sweetly.

"Well, not quite that honor yet, My Lady. I've got one more link in the chain to go." He replied, blushing. "I'd like to introduce my family."

Sam looked over to see Gilly and Little Sam still at the cart, fussing with the boxes. "Gilly! Sam!"

The two looked and started making their way over, slowly. When they came closer, both of them stared in shock at Jon and Sansa, but Sansa especially.

"This is my wife, Gilly. Jon, you remember Gilly. And this is Sam, my son."

Both of them stood, just staring. Sam Senior started to look a little embarrassed. "Gilly…"

His wife squinted at Sansa. "Is that the Queen, then? The one with the dragons?"

Sansa blushed. "I'm afraid I cannot lay claim to such an honor."

"Oh, right! I forgot. No, you're not the Queen with the dragons. You're the other one. The Queen in the North, right?"

Sansa stilled and Jon cringed. No one spoke of Sansa’s former title at the capital. It was something Daenerys had been kind enough to overlook and everyone followed her lead of ignoring it. Still, mentioning Sansa had been a Queen out loud could be dangerous.

"I am no Queen, Mistress Gilly." Sansa said in a choked voice. "People once called me one, but I am merely the Lady of Winterfell and Warden of the North."

"It's Lady Stark, remember?" Sam grumbled. "We've been over this."

"Well, dressed like that, how am I supposed to think she's not a Queen?" Gilly sighed. She smiled. "Hello, My Lady."

The conversation proceeded to grow more awkward when Little Sam, who'd not been paying attention, asked if Sansa was a princess. After being corrected, he declared he wished to steal Sansa for her red hair. His father admonished him that he couldn't steal a lady like Sansa, and Little Sam then suggested Jon steal her, since he was a prince and princes should be able to steal ladies. There were more panicked explanations, apologies on Sam's part, and compliments and reassurance from the Lady of the North.

Jon glanced at her nervously. Sansa experienced troubles sometimes after interacting with children, especially boys. Every child she saw reminded her of what she’d lost. She seemed to be shivering a little, and there was a stricken look to her eyes.
Sam didn’t seem to notice, though. He just smiled and thanked her. As the servants unloaded the family’s things—a process that took very little time, Jon arranged for Sam to meet him in his solar once the Citadel student and his family settled in. Sam bowed and hurried away. Jon turned to Sansa and asked if she wanted him to summon her when Sam was ready.

She nodded briefly. “If you’ll excuse me, Your Grace. I have certain other matters to attend to.”

Jon had his own affairs to take care of. He went back to his bedchamber and sat at his desk, staring down at a large pile of parchment before him. There was always a new stack of documents for him to sign, new accounts for him to look over, new edicts and treaties for him to proofread and make notes on. Daenerys liked to be a very hands-on monarch and wasn’t entirely trusting. She found the idea of having all of her domains’ affairs handled by a small council distasteful and dangerous. The problem was, she was only one person. Not to mention the fact that the sheer size of her empire was just staggering. As if Westeros itself wasn’t enough of a struggle to take care of, she also had a khahasaar and the three cities of Slaver’s Bay. At first, she hadn’t wanted to give too many responsibilities to Jon. Daenerys had issues with feeling inadequate, and was always sure she had something to prove.

When they were first united, Dany was hesitant to allow him to do anything that didn’t involve the Wall, the wars, or simple ceremonial tasks. She’d made him Lord of Dragonstone, but with the greatest reluctance and only after demoting the title from ‘Prince’ to ‘Lord’ a la Robert and Stannis Baratheon. She’d held him at arm’s length, avoided discussion on a number of issues and excluded him from more than a few state meetings. She’d tried to encourage him to “enjoy” his new place in life and amuse himself with his newfound wealth and status.

It proved remarkably frustrating. But Jon actually sort of understood her hesitation. There were more than a few Lords who, at the beginning, had proposed Dany hand over her dragons and titles to Jon. Jon was not only the son of Prince Rhaegar and therefore had a legitimate claim to the Iron Throne, but also born and raised in Westeros, not to mention male. Jon never possessed any desire to take Dany’s throne from her. Not the throne of Westeros and certainly not the leadership of any of her territories across the Narrow Sea. And he definitely didn’t want to take her dragons. Jon never wanted to be a king. The very idea seemed preposterous to him. Dany, on the other hand, had been fighting for this exact thing her entire life. It just seemed logical to Jon that she should rule. She’d succeeded in something that the Targaryens had sacrificed castles and sanity for years trying to achieve: resurrecting the dragons. She could not be harmed by fire. Jon had an arm full of burns that meant he could not make such a claim. All signs pointed to the fact that she was indeed that legendary prince who was promised. And yet, people liked to ignore this, along with all the territories she’d conquered, the slaves she’d freed, and the wars she’d won. Her foreignness Jon could sort of understand people taking issue with. But those who questioned her rights seemed to have more resistance on account of her gender. One would think the fact after she’d literally brought dragons back from extinction and conquered numerous territories in a manner similar to the realm’s greatest king would make what lay between her legs a moot point. But there were people of tradition, old ways of thinking, and strongly held beliefs regarding the roles of people based on gender (also known as bigoted morons) who disagreed. And with all that, along with the fact that they’d barely known each other, Jon could sympathize with Dany’s initial hesitation to trust him and make him a major part of her government.

Of course, certain things came to light before long. Dany eventually found herself forced to accept that the level of work ruling her entire empire was impossible for her to manage on her own. She also came to understand Jon a little better. It became clear to her that Jon harbored no designs towards her position or throne. She realized how little she knew of her own country and that it would take time to learn. But she still wasn’t ready to trust the court of King’s Landing. The one which so often spouted bigotry and so easily adapted to the reigns of kings like Robert and Joffrey Baratheon didn’t strike
her as a place to find ideal regents. But Jon wasn’t a creature of the court, he was an honorable man who had no desire to ‘improve’ his position, and he was family. The two developed a surprisingly close friendship. She trusted him. Thus, he was entitled to use the Crown’s seal, sign documents on behalf of his Aunt, and represent the royal family in a political capacity. Jon became the unofficial Hand of the Queen.

As a result, Jon spent a good chunk of his day at his desk. When he wasn’t standing by at some ceremony, training in the till yard, or attending meetings, he was usually here. When he’d first settled into these apartments, he’d simply used the ancient old desk and chair that had been used by all the prior inhabitants. But a few moons ago, he’d gotten a bigger, more modern writing table with a slanted reading platform and holder for his inkwell, and acquired a cushioned seat. The table was positioned in corner right next to a window that he often kept open when he was writing. The chill of winter air reminded him of The Wall and he liked the view. The icy image of the winter frost covered gate almost looked like a section of his former residence if he squinted.

Paperwork could be painfully dull, but Jon didn’t complain much. He found it more pleasant than dealing with a number of the people who populated the capital. Jon had never been remarkably social, and he was at his best when he wasn’t required to be a titan of charisma. Thankfully, he had a drop-dead gorgeous Aunt who could control dragons, so the figurehead-oriented duties weren’t put on his shoulders too often. He liked leading, but theatricality and image had never been great skills or interests of his. He’d always leaned more towards the defense/organization/crisis management sides of leadership than the diplomacy/subterfuge/political maneuvering areas.

Jon experienced difficulty getting through the documents—all drafted by Missendei, who certainly had a more difficult job than he did—today. He was distracted by thoughts of his cousin. Aside from his newfound frustrations regarding her political activities, there was their emotional and physical relationship. Or what he wished was a physical relationship. Their encounter in the godswood left him shaken.

She’d been so lovely and yielding and sweet. Jon had felt so sure he’d done something right, with her in his arms like that. And at first, it seemed perfect. She’d responded to him so passionately. But then he’d detected that bit of hesitance when her body seemed to freeze against him. He thought he’d understood her nervousness, thought if he reassured her that they were alone it would be fine. When she’d looked at him and said out loud that she wanted his cock, it was absolutely thrilling. He thought saying such things maybe warmed her blood, that she was fine then. Sansa was a lover of words, it made sense to him that she might like such a thing. He found he liked it, with her. But when she’d called herself a whore, it shook him. And he realized that she was still uncomfortable.

It killed him to think Petyr Baelish could still have such an influence on her. And it killed him that she couldn’t express herself properly. That something would get in the way of her simply taking what she wanted, taking a little pleasure after everything.

And I’d be able to give her such pleasure, such comfort. He wanted her so badly. He wanted to see what she was like when she came. Do her toes curl? Does she cry out? What does it look like when she arches her back and throws her head back? He could just imagine her hair cascading over his pillow, blue eyes wide and wild, her body vibrating as she shuddered in pleasure.

A new sense of guilt now accompanied these thoughts. Something that should be so beautiful and good was used to hurt her in the worst way. Jon would not be a part of hurting her.

He crushed the quill he was holding in his fist. The prince told himself to calm his nerves. He proceeded to do what he often did in these situations; think of something dull and complicated that he had to memorize and recite it to himself. He went with Daenerys’s styles and titles. “Her Grace
and/or Radiance Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, First of her Name, The Unburnt, Queen of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lady of the Seven Kingdoms, Queen of Meereen, Queen of Slaver’s Bay, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Princess of Dragonstone, Breaker of Chains, Mother of Dragons, Bride of Fire, Slayer of the Night’s King, Protector of the Realm, Mother of the Empire.”

We have to streamline all of that. He thought to himself. Daenerys’s domain is recognized as an empire now, surely we could save time by creating a title that encapsulates all of that in fewer words? She’s the sovereign of far more than seven realms at this point anyways. I should speak to Daenerys and Missendei about it. I wonder if Sansa would have any ideas.

And then an image of blue eyes flashed in his head. To calm himself, Jon began to recite his own titles, which were only slightly less ridiculous. “His Grace Jon of House Targaryen, Prince of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Prince of the Seven Realms of Westeros, Prince of Meereen and Slaver’s Bay, Khalakka of the Great Grass Sea, Lord of Dragonstone.”

He managed to resume his work with some success and complete a decent stack of paperwork when Satin knocked on his door to announce Sam had arrived. Jon bid his steward to go fetch Sansa before going to greet his old friend again. Sam peered around the room, looking a little nervous.

“Are these the Maegor rooms?”

“Yes.”

“They look more like an armory than a royal residence.”

Jon snorted. Out of all the royal apartments, Jon picked these. He’d been expected to choose the Aenys rooms--- the first ones constructed for a crown prince and the ones Sansa currently occupied. But he’d preferred the ones belonging to the third Targaryen King. While Jon had little to no respect for the original owner, these were apartments built for a man who prepared for brutal periods and had little time for anything superfluous. There weren’t many ornaments or pieces of artwork, the furniture was sturdy, there was an area in the corner of the solar where one could actually exercise, numerous maps were painted onto the walls, and there were a couple of weapon and armor racks built into the floors and walls as well. “I take it you disapprove?”

“Well, the wars are over.”

Jon rolled his eyes. “One must always be prepared, Sam.”

“Yes, yes. ‘Winter is Coming’, even if it’s already here. And you’re always going to want to be a ranger, even as a prince.” Sam laughed. “And speaking of ‘Winter is Coming’, you wanted me to help your cousin, yes?”

“She’s coming now, with the Northern ledgers. Her debts aren’t quite as bad as they were when I first wrote to you, but the tax collecting up North has gone mad, so there’s almost no source of state income. Winterfell is gone, and she spent practically everything regaining the North and trying to rebuild her home. And her husband had debts as well.”

“What about his income? Wasn’t he Lord of the Vale?”

“She was cut off from the accounts of the Eyrie shortly before she was arrested. With her husband and son born, she has been denied any claim to them.”

“That’s bollocks.” Sam said, shaking his head. “If she’s been charged with her husband’s debts, then she’s entitled to at least enough of his estate to pay them. Not to mention some manner of pension as
his widow. She might also be entitled to some of Baelish’s gold. It’s been established in court that he abused her and made her a widow. She was also the closest thing he had to kin.”

That last statement made Jon’s stomach turn. “There’s some records of production up North since her arrest, as well as damages and charges for rebuilding efforts. A lot of her finances were handled by Baelish, and he’d kept it all fairly intact for her. But when she—”

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. Sansa entered with Satin and Anais behind her, both carrying stacks of books. Jon and Sam hurried over to help, bringing the books over to the circular dining table in the middle of the room, where a large pitcher of wine and three cups stood. Sansa bowed and thanked them. Jon was a bit distracted by her. Gods, she’s too lovely. The type of woman I can almost accept being used by.

The three of them sat and Sansa proceeded to explain her situation.

“When I was arrested and Winterfell was destroyed again, a number of the records were lost, property was looted, and a great deal of the paperwork for the tax system disappeared. There weren’t any provisions made for if Eddie and I both were gone, so the region went without leadership for a few moons before Maege Mormont was granted regency. There’s been a lot of damage since my arrest, and almost no means to pay for recovery. The Stark treasury is essentially empty.” Sansa confessed as Sam began peering over the pages of various tombs. “Anything that does manage to be collected goes to repairing roads and villages, but it isn’t enough. And unfortunately, I’m utterly hopeless at figures so I can’t properly calculate everything. I’m afraid I’ve made a real mess.”

“Do not blame yourself,” Sam said, looking over some of the records from the War of the Five Kings and the Bolton reigns. “You didn’t exactly have much to work with. By the looks of things, your brother’s campaigns made a right mess of things. I can tell just with a quick glance at these figures that he wasn’t paying the closest attention to his spending. And it looks like he lost a lot of his backing towards the end. Aside from him, I get the impression Ramsay Bolton had absolutely no idea how to manage a treasury.”

“Ramsay Snow was never intended to be Lord of anything, and thus he wasn’t given a Lord’s education.” Jon replied. “He was well-known for not being a long-term planner.”

Sam turned a page and his eyes widened. “I would say so. Even with a burnt keep, he was still spending as much on his household as if Winterfell were intact.”

Sansa shifted uncomfortably. “When we arrived at my home, we found mountains of bloodstained pink and red silks and rooms full of new, elaborate torture devices.”

Sam shuddered. “What about damages to the castle?”

“They were extensive. There are records of what had to be done in terms of structural repair. There was further restoration needed on areas that hadn’t even been damaged in the fire because they were completely filthy. Some parts of the keep had extensive infestations. The payments for repairs were done in installments, and we would have had enough to pay for it according to Petyr’s plan, but…”

“You were arrested, property was seized, documents were lost, new debts came to light and Winterfell was destroyed all over again.”

Sansa blushed. “Yes. And I’m not even sure exactly how bad it’s gotten. I know enough about business and finances to have continued Littlefinger’s work. But the numbers themselves elude me. I had a master of coin when I ruled the North, but he died in the second sacking. And I’m afraid I’m not entirely sure whom I can trust with this information. I don’t want the nature of my finances being
exposed. The only income the North has depends on investors from other regions and if they were to know…”

“All would come crashing down.” Sam nodded. “My Lady, would you mind if I took these books from you?”

She hesitated, glancing at Jon.

“You can trust me!” Sam protested.

“It’s not that, it’s just that I’m worried the records might be stolen.”

Sam bit his lip. “If My Lady wishes, I suppose I could look over them in your chambers. I’m sure they’ll be safe there. But I’ll have to impose upon you.”

Jon shrugged. Having his best friend in Sansa rooms for hours on end might provide an opportunity. “If it is alright with Sansa.”

“I don’t mind. Will you require assistance, Master Samwell?” She asked.

“I might, why?”

“Satin could help you. He manages my household.” Jon proposed eagerly.

Sansa looked at him. Her eyes flashed. “If you wish, I could show you to my chambers fairly soon. I’m sure you’d like to catch up with Jon first, though.”

The Citadel student considered this. “I thank you, My Lady. Is there any specific time in which you want me to arrive at your chambers?”

“In a couple of hours. I’ll be attending a trial session. It’ll be several hours long, and it should give you enough time to look without me getting in the way.” Sansa smiled. “Would that be suitable?”

_The session will not take several hours. Certainly not long enough for Sam to read over everything._

Jon smiled as well. _She’s got the same idea._

Sam nodded. “Very well.”

The Prince’s cousin stood then, gesturing for Satin and Anais to help her gather the ledgers. “Very well, Master Samwell. I await your arrival. Thank you so much for your help. I hope you enjoy King’s Landing.”

They both stood with her and bowed. Sam graciously accepted the good wishes and Sansa departed. Both young men sat down and Sam stared at Jon, who grinned.

“How are you, Old Friend? I haven’t seen you in ages.” Jon leaned forward eagerly. It was so good to see Sam again. Faces of true friends so rarely made appearances in the Red Keep.

“The same as ever. I’m warm and well-fed and surrounded by books, so I’m happy. I’m very close to finishing my chain.”

Sam reached into the pocket of his brown robe and pulled out a twinkling length of metal, showing it to the prince. Jon took it in hand and grinned.

“I knew you’d be a success.” He remarked, feeling proud. “The Citadel was the sort of place where you belonged.”
Sam nodded, taking his chain and stuffing it back in his pocket. “You saved my life, sending me there.”

“I didn’t do much bringing you back for that last year.” Having Sam return near the tail end of the war against the White Walkers was always a decision that afflicted Jon with guilt. It tore one of the best men he knew from one of the first places he’d truly belonged back to an awful realm of danger. Sam survived by the grace of the Gods alone.

Sam shrugged, refilling his cup of the Dornish Red Jon had attained for them. “I was needed. I don’t blame you, nor do I resent it. It was enough of a pleasure knowing I could be useful. I’d have rather died doing something that mattered than waste my life away hiding in the Citadel being useless while my friends were fighting. And I returned. And I got Gilly back.”

“Speaking of which, how is your family?” Jon asked, sitting back. Gilly seems less timid than I remember her. The boy looks healthy enough. "How are the elders at the Citadel handling having them?"

A shortage of Maesters had forced the order to ease up on their vows, thus making it legal for married men to join. This hadn't been the most popular decision, however. Some were still hostile.

“Quite well. Some of the elders can be unpleasant, but nothing too serious. As for the family, well, Sam still has far too much Wildling in him, and I’m not quite sure where he gets it from. He was raised below the Wall. Gilly’s adapted better, but she’s still, well, Gilly. I am sorry about earlier. They’re still not used to this sort of thing.”

“I don’t mind, really. I found it entertaining.” Though considering that, I’m not sure why you brought them with you. Surely you’d want them left safe back at the Citadel. “It’s a nice break from the pretense I experience down here. The trip wasn’t rough for them, was it?”

“No trip is rough for Gilly. Not after being raised as she was. Sam liked the adventure of it. Normally, I would have spared them the trip regardless, but…” Sam left that open for a query. Jon smiled and gave in.

“But?”

“Well, Gilly and I don’t want to be apart at the moment because we’re trying for a babe.”

Jon grinned. “Sam, that’s brilliant. Congratulations.”

His friend blushed. “Well, we figured I’ll finish my chain soon, so we’ll have a decent enough living after that. And enough time’s passed since the end of the war, and we’re that much closer to spring coming. Little Sam’s wanted a sibling for a long while, but we thought it best to wait until things were settled long enough. We feel now is the time, though.”

“I’m absolutely thrilled.” Jon couldn’t stop smiling. He was just so happy for his friend. If anyone deserved a happy little family life, it was Samwell Tarly. “You’re all settled in, aren’t you?”

“I like to think so.” Sam took a gulp of wine. “And what about you? When are you planning to settle in?”

Jon went red. Not you too, Sam. His patience with this topic wore thin. Various nobles constantly inquired about such things. They dropped hints, always accompanied by mentions of various unwed daughters, granddaughters, or nieces. He understood that a sense of urgency existed, but he was denied the right to look forward to this matter with the manner of excitement or personal fulfillment that Sam had. Jon’s marriage and family, whenever it came to be, would belong to the realm. There
was really only one person he could imagine building a life with at this point, and right now embarking on such an undertaking would ask too much of her.

“There are no plans as of yet.” The prince muttered.

Sam winced. “Jon. No offense, but unless Daenerys weds and conceives—“

“---I am aware, Sam!” Jon replied curtly. He regretted his tone when he saw the look on his friend’s face. “It’s just not the right time.”

“Is there at least a candidate for the right girl? Or candidates?”

Jon glanced around. Satin still hadn’t returned. “There’s one.”

His friend leaned forward eagerly. “Oh?”

“You mustn’t say a word, not even to Gilly.”

Sam sighed. “Fine.”

Jon swallowed. “Sansa.”

His companion’s eyes widened. “Your cousin?”

The prince felt his stomach twist. “I know, but—”

“You don’t need to explain yourself, Jon.” Sam said hastily. “I mean, compared to your forebears, it’s nothing! And I understand. She’s lovely. But it is a little surprising. You never spoke much of her when we were younger. If it would have been one of your cousins, I’d have expected it to be the other one, Arya.”

Jon cringed and leaned away, disgusted. “Never! Why would you think that?”

“Well, she was the one you always spoke of!” Sam reddened as he protested. “You always talked about how much you missed her, how dear she was to you, how much you had in common. You were always telling stories about her. You almost never talked about Sansa. And well, you’ve always had certain preferences.”

“For what? Sisters?” Jon was ready to gag.

“No! For girls who could beat you in a fight!” Sam shook his head. “Ygritte shot you through with arrows. Val was a one-woman ranger squad. You always described Arya as a little fighter. The only thing you ever said about Sansa was that she was a delicate little lady. ‘Delicate little lady’ has never exactly been something that has heated your blood. And besides, Arya isn’t your sister any more than Sansa is.”

“No, she was. I assure you of that.” Jon felt a familiar pang in his chest that usually accompanied thoughts of Arya. His stomach also seemed to turn. Thoughts of his little sister often brought him pain. Thinking about her in this context made him ill. “No matter my name or blood, Arya Stark was and will always be my little sister. Sansa is not. Nor is she some delicate little lady anymore.”

“She seems like one.”

That’s exactly what she wants everyone to think. Jon didn’t feel like discussing his newfound insecurities regarding his cousin with Sam yet. Not until I’ve spoken with Sansa some more.
“She’s taller than you.” Jon retorted. His friend blushed.

“Well, yes but she’s… She’s very… She’s very…”

“What?”

“Well, she’s still very feminine and dainty, isn’t she?”

Jon recalled the reports he’d read of the state of both Wallace Coldwater and Petyr Baelish’s corpses. “Feminine? Yes. Dainty? No. She’s about as dainty as the Night’s King. She bashed in the skull of one man and shoved a hot poker into the brain of another.”

Sam yelped. Jon grinned.

“Gods above, what did they do?”

“One raped her repeatedly, the other killed her son.” His smile fell.

Sam froze. “Oh. Right.”

“Yes.”

There was an awkward pause as both men sipped their drinks. Finally Sam spoke again.

“Well, I guess I understand why you like her then.” Sam looked at his lap. “Are you going to marry her?”

Jon looked heavenward and groaned. “Sam, for pity’s sake. I don’t have an answer for that. I have no idea. I’m not even sure if she’d be willing.”

“Jon, you’re Prince of the Seven Realms. Aside from a certain dragon-riding Queen, there isn’t an unwilling woman this side of the Narrow Sea.”

This conversation had now gone to a place that made the former bastard very unhappy. The implication of his best friend’s statements made his stomach turn some more. Jon didn’t want his first meeting with his friend in over a year to end in screams, but he had no patience for hearing suggestions that his cousin would give herself away for as hollow a reason as titles and status at this point in her life. She is Lord Paramount of over half the continent, Lady of Winterfell, Lady of the Vale and Warden of the North, not some random lord’s daughter with nothing of her own to claim and nothing in her life except the idea of marrying up. She was betrothed to a prince once, and that did not end up working out well for her. I will not have it suggested that she is just another husband-hunter. Even if she might be more politically-minded than I thought, she’s got more methods than just pursuing matches. She’s better than that. He went with something different, though.

“Sansa’s different. She has had very unpleasant experiences with marriage. I’m not sure she’d be ready for such a thing. It’s not the time, Sam.” Jon scowled. “Can we please talk about anything else?”

“Sure! Fine! It’s none of my business anyways…” Sam held up his hands defensively.

“Exactly.”

“—Until the country goes to war again because both Targaryens failed to reproduce. So for the sake of the realm, I must ask: are you sure you remember where to put it?”

Jon downed the rest of his drink and then chucked his empty cup towards Sam, who dodged it. Both
Okay, so I'm pretty happy with this one, ridiculously long though it may be. But hey! I wanted to have some interactions with characters who are not just Jon/Sansa/Daenerys. I also wanted to flesh some things out about Jon's life, the state of the realm, the arrangements of him and Daenerys as royals.

My only concern is: did this get boring? I know it's long, so I'm a bit concerned. The original draft of this wasn't nearly as long, but I realized that the way I paced things didn't make a whole lot of sense in the original. My options boiled down to either re-writing the whole thing and restructuring from scratch, or just switching it around and adding new scenes.

Any notes on characterization, particularly of Jon, are welcome. I've discussed some of my struggles getting Jon right in the comments, and he's the character I worry about most of all.

SEXY TIMES THAT ACTUALLY HAVE A HAPPY ENDING *cough* come next chapter!
Trials and Lips

Chapter Notes

I want to thank my AWESOME BETA Illyana. You are the best, girl.

Not much to say on this one except that you guys are getting your sexytimes and some Tyrell stuff. I hope the sex stuff doesn't seem too rushed considering Sansa's issues. But it's fanfic, and I felt the wait had been enough. I am not trying to imply that she's "cured" of her baggage, but damn it, she needs to get laid. They both do. So enjoy.

Chapter Ten: Trials and Lips

Sansa:

She’d wasted no time hurrying to Jon’s apartments the moment the second session was over. When she entered, she met Ghost, who trotted over to her and nuzzled her neck. The animal licked under her chin, at the burn scars from that awful night. For once, the creature’s eyes didn’t look angry.

*I’m so weary of anger,* she reflected. Sansa was weary of anger, of violence, of cold, of lying, of everything. One of Jon’s armchairs in the corner looked inviting. Upon sitting, she put her head in her hands. She felt so old. *How is it that I’ve only lived nineteen years?*

The truth was, she had not felt young since she was twelve. *I was robbed of my youth. A prisoner at twelve, a bride at thirteen, a fugitive the same year, then a widow and bride again, a queen, a mother… I should be older.*

Sansa looked above the mantle where a mirror sat, and examined her appearance. The burn scars were not noticeable unless one looked closely; they molded well with her very fair skin. There were no lines anywhere. Her face was thinner than it had been all those years ago, but she honestly didn’t look that different from how she had at age thirteen.

Once upon a time, being beautiful had been the most wonderful thing in the world. From age three, people had stopped using the word ‘pretty’ to describe her and just used ‘beautiful’. It wasn’t a word often given to little girls. Most children were at some point called “beautiful children”. But with Sansa, it was different. She was a ‘beautiful’ or ‘exquisite’ girl, and even then Sansa knew that was not the same as being cooed over as a mere ‘beautiful child’ or ‘pretty girl’. At a very young age, people would stop to look at her. Sometimes they’d look at her more than they looked at Robb, though he’d been heir to Winterfell. And Robb had never been unattractive.

Sansa always loved it. She loved being smiled at, to be the subject of the admiring glances of others. She loved knowing people loved to look at her. She loved how her mother just *had* to comb her hair every night, because it was just that pretty. She loved that she could get people to do things for her just by smiling at them. She loved how people said that she’d have great prospects for marriage and success thanks to her face. To be beautiful, she believed, was the best trait that anyone, especially any woman, could possess. Beauty meant she was blessed with everything a girl could want, and would have everything else as well.

And then being beautiful became a curse. When she realized what people actually thought when they
saw her. When she realized crying pretty tears couldn’t convince Joffrey to spare her father’s life. When she realized that her face and body made men want to touch her and take things from her. When she realized that no matter how lovely she appeared, there were so many who wanted to hurt her. That it didn’t make people love her, only want her. To many, she wasn’t a person, but an ornament or asset. That people looked at her and did not see a pretty girl but a pretty thing. That her lovely face could attract harm far more easily than it attracted friends. Beautiful girls were not loved as often as the songs claimed. Beautiful girls were used.

Now she saw her face as more of a mask. Her face and body were more tools to get what she needed. Sansa didn’t feel any of the personal joy that she once experienced gazing at her reflection in a mirror. Something that had once been her favorite thing about her life had become just another tool.

When she was eleven, the king had come to Winterfell. He’d greeted her parents, then looked at Robb and confirmed his name. Then his eyes fell on Sansa. And he’d paused for a few more seconds than he had with Robb. His smile grew wider, his gaze more intent. “Oh, you’re a pretty one.”

And she’d felt thrilled. All Robb, heir to Winterfell, had gotten was ‘You’re Robb?’ from the King. Sansa had gotten a big smile and a compliment.

Now that she reflected on the encounter, she realized what must have been behind that smile. The man was notorious for his debauchery. Though Sansa had only been eleven at the time, she’d already started developing breasts and hips and she was uncommonly tall for her age. When fat old drunken Robert Baratheon looked at her, he wasn’t thinking, ‘Oh, what a lovely, darling young lady.’ He was probably thinking about her naked. That’s what most men thought of when they saw her, whether they liked her or not. Joffrey hadn’t liked her. But he’d liked her pretty.

But in this case, it helps me to be beautiful. Beauty is a blessing around the good men in the world. There are so few left, but I’ve found one. Most men look at you and think, ‘I want that.’ Jon looks at you and thinks, ‘I adore her.’

So when Jon entered the chamber and Sansa turned to face him, she didn’t feel any dread or discomfort when she met his eyes. She saw him flush and his pupils seemed bigger, and he wet his lips. There was heat, but it didn’t burn.

It took her a second to remember that she was supposed to be mad at him, and that they were in the middle of resolving an issue. Tyrells. Politics. Right.

Sansa reminded herself that she needed to have the upper hand in this situation. So she strolled towards him, pouting a little. “I believe you had some further questions for me, Your Grace?”

“Hmmm?” He blinked twice. “Oh, yes… I---“

“Yes?” She arched a brow and tilted her head, putting her long neck on full display. At this point, she was just having fun. She really didn’t need to lie to him about anything. She just loved seeing the way his cheeks colored and his eyes kept trying to leave her neck, but were dragged back every couple of seconds. He’s adorable when he’s nervous. He hides behind that sullen look all the time. But when he loses his mask, it’s wonderful.

Jon seemed to collect himself. “You’ve been using your connections to the crown for political gain.”

Sansa groaned. “Jon, I’m using them as much for the crown’s political gain as my own. With the approval of the crown itself. I’ve not lied to you, or harmed you in any way. I wouldn’t do that. This was not some attempt to hurt or exploit you. I’ve not outright asked you for consent regarding a number of my political actions because they haven’t involved you. And that is because they’re not
your business. I have castles, roads, villages, and glass gardens to rebuild, a winter to get through, people to feed, and bannermen to serve. Just because I love you does not mean I’ve stopped being the Lady of Winterfell. I’m sorry I haven’t shared every little detail about what that involves, but you gave me the impression that you didn’t mind me handling some of my affairs independently. Furthermore, in regards to House Tyrell, your aunt did wish for me to conduct myself with some discretion.”

Jon’s eyes widened and he stepped back. “What did you just say?”

“You want me to repeat it all?”

“The part about you being Lady of Winterfell.”

She rolled her eyes. “I said that I’m still Lady of Winterfell regardless of how much I l—”

Then she stopped. Jon grinned. Oh, Seven Hells. And of course his smile is so sweet I’m having trouble being mad at myself. How in the world did that escape from my mouth? And why did I almost say it again? That’s not how this is supposed to work. I’m supposed to hold him at arm’s length. Make him desperate. Sansa pursed her lips. She thought as quickly as she could. She’d been trained to anticipate and adapt to unforeseen circumstances. To find the opportunity in any mistake or new development. “You’re my family, Jon. My only remaining family. But if I want to have any more family ever again, I need to play politics. But I’m doing my best to do so in the most ethical way I can. I don’t know what more you could ask of me.”

Jon’s smile fell. That hurt her more than she was willing to admit.

“I don’t like you withholding things from me,” he said gruffly, looking away. “I felt like you were scheming behind my back.”

“I’m sorry. But it is not my place to share with you the private discussions I have with the queen any more than it is my place to share our private conversations with her. Jon, I know you wish that I would just tell you everything. But after all that’s happened, there are some secrets I need. And frankly, Daenerys did ask for my discretion, and I know how much you dislike anything to do with the Tyrells. I had no idea it would bother you so much.”

Jon walked over to a bench by his window and sat, rubbing his face. “Actually, I don’t even think that was what set me off.”

“What then?” she asked, her eyes narrowing.

“Daenerys said some things to me at dinner. About you.”

Her pulse quickened. Oh Gods. What have I done? Sansa thought she’d established an excellent rapport with her monarch. Why would she speak ill of me?

“What things?”

“She was talking about your marriage prospects.”

Oh, thank the Mother. Nothing serious then. Sansa tried not to smile. Let’s see where this goes.

“What about them?”

“She was saying that when we go to the North, I should keep my eye on any potential suitors. I said that you weren’t even interested in marriage right now. She replied suggesting that you might be
interested in Willas Tyrell…”

Well, he’s definitely jealous. Good. And Daenerys has planted ideas of marriage in his head. Also good. Now I have to play it right. Sansa bit her lip. “Jon… A lot of people depend on me continuing my bloodline. I will have to marry eventually. Preferably before winter is up. It’s still a dangerous world out there and if I were to die without issue, the Starks would be gone, the North would have no designated Lord, and the Houses would go to war over the regency. I have a duty to my people to wed.”

Jon clenched his fist. “I can’t stomach giving you away to some random lordling when I only just got you back.”

Perfect. Sansa frowned and summoned tears. “Do you think it’s any easier for me, Jon? You’ve told me the truth about Daenerys. You are the last Targaryen. The North and every other part of this continent depends on you making the right match as well. Don’t forget, my situation is no different. I’m also going to have to watch as you’re given away to some sweet noble virgin for the good of the realm while I’m stuck in yet another loveless marriage to someone who will look at me and see a keep and some fields instead of a person.

“And it’ll be even worse for me, because not only will I have to watch you with some untouched, undamaged little child, I’ll be expected to bow and curtsey and even wait on her. She’ll go down in history as the beloved wife of the man I love. Meanwhile, I’ll go down in history as the Stark no one wanted, the one who killed two men, was the mistress of one of the greatest villains of the Civil Wars, and couldn’t keep her own home intact after she’d rebuilt it. I’ll be put away up North and you’ll forget all about me.”

A few sentences in, the tears didn’t need forcing. Because she was imagining it. Her, standing to the side in the Great Sept next to some new version of Harry Hardyng. Some beautiful, fresh-faced girl in an ivory gown being escorted down the aisle. Jon smiling and putting a black and red cloak on her shoulders, the septon placing a jeweled coronet on her brow. Spending that night lying naked beneath some man who rutted into her like she was a brood sow while knowing Jon was with that sweet new wife of his, probably delighting in her perky teats and the feeling of her maidenhead giving away.

Years later, Sansa would be explaining to her children why their home wasn’t complete, watching as people looked at her and whispered about her behind their hands. Maybe she’d have to explain to her children who Petyr Baelish was. Meanwhile, she’d be curtseying to that same smiling girl with a half-dozen dark eyed, dark-haired sons she’d given Jon, who still managed to look so much like the brothers they’d lost. Princes with names like Robb and Bran and Rickon…

No. No. No.

Jon rushed over and pulled her into his arms. “I’ll never forget about you. Or stop loving you.”

She didn’t expect some grand proposal at that exact moment. But she did feel a little disappointed with this response. Not even the slightest suggestion of how we might avoid that exact situation? He could at least say that he doesn’t ever want to marry some sweet little noble virgin. Or something.

“You will. Some beautiful young girl who doesn’t say the wrong thing when you kiss her, who hasn’t been touched by someone else… You’ll have her and you’ll not want me.”

“No. No I won’t. I will always want you. More than anyone,” Jon babbled, nuzzling her hair. “I don’t care about any of that. I don’t care who’s touched you. You’re mine now.”
Ah, there we go. Sansa smiled against his shoulder. One step closer. She dropped the smile and looked up at Jon. Gods, I love looking at him. I love looking at his face. I love those sweet eyes. “I don’t want any lordling. I just want you. Not just as family. As... something else. I love you, Jon Snow.”

Sansa had intended to say Jon Targaryen or just Jon. But Jon Snow slipped out of her mouth. And for a second, she’d panicked. Maybe it would anger him to hear that name now. Maybe he loathed hearing a reminder of his bastard status. She had no idea why she’d said it.

Maybe it’s because while Jon Targaryen is the one I want to marry, it’s Jon Snow I love. Jon Snow is the person left when you strip away the titles and crown. And I love that person. Even if I succeed, I’ll always have to share Jon Targaryen with the entire kingdom. But not Jon Snow. I’m one of the few who knows him. I would have Jon Snow all to myself. Jon Snow would be mine and no one would ever be able to take him away from me. Not Petyr Baelish. Not Cersei Lannister. Not Joffrey Baratheon. Not Damon or Wallace Coldwater. Not even the Night’s King or Daenerys Targaryen.

When she heard his breath catch, she knew it was alright.

“You called me Snow,” he whispered. “No one has called me that in two years.”

“I don’t care what anyone calls you,” she replied breathlessly, “Out there you can be a Targaryen. But you’re in here now, with me. The woman who loves you. The man I love is Jon Snow. The sullen-faced bastard boy with the black curls and the white wolf.”

Their mouths connected, open and hungry, tongues battling for dominance. They kissed until they couldn’t breathe. Then they broke away for little pauses and kissed some more. They repeated this process until Jon started breaking away and speaking in between shorter ones.

“Sansa... I... want... to... kiss... you...”

“You... are...”

“No... somewhere... else...”

Then she pulled away for longer than a second. “What?”

He looked at the ground. “I know we’re supposed to talk about... what happened to you before we try this again. But maybe if I just tell you what I’m going to do, we can do this right?”

She smiled. “I’d prefer that. But what are you talking about?”

He pulled her close and grinned, leaning into her. “I want to take you into my bedchamber, lay you down, throw your skirts up, pull your smallclothes off with my teeth, and make you come with my mouth.”

She squeaked. I didn’t even have to ask him. “Oh, Jon... Please do that. Please.”

He gave a little moan. “Are you sure?”

“Gods yes,”

He grabbed her roughly, pulling her into the bedroom as fast as he could. He threw her down on the bed and proceeded to climb on, his eyes hot and dark. Sansa squirmed a little and parted her legs. She felt so hot. There was a delicious twisting in her lower belly. Both of them were panting like mad. Jon grabbed at her grey samite skirts and yanked them up around her hips. Sansa put her arms
down to flatten the bunched up fabric that blocked her view. She wanted to watch him.

When he caught sight of what was between her legs, he grinned.

“Gods you’re so wet already. I can see right through the fabric.”

She blushed and snickered. “Well, I can see the tent in your breeches.”

He glanced down, now red himself. “Apologies, my lady.”

“Don’t apologize. Take your shirt off.”

“What?”

“I---- I want to see you without your shirt.” She blushed. *I want to see his chest and stomach, though.* Also, the idea of him being more naked than she was gave her a sense of comfort.

Looking a little smug, he removed his jerkin and doublet. Sansa gave him an approving little look, then instructed him to proceed. He laughed.

“You’re an absolute delight.”

He did, in fact, bend down and pull her smallclothes down her thighs with his teeth, using his hands to tug them the rest of the way. She lifted her legs to help him and once they were off, he looked down at them for a moment.

“What?” she asked, suddenly worried. Had her moon blood come?

Jon glanced at her. Now it was his turn to blush. “May I keep these?”

“That’s awful. That’s filthy. That’s depraved. I love you. Yes. Now put your mouth on me.”

He paused. “You’re sure?”

Sansa swallowed. “I am. But… for right now… just your mouth, alright?”

He smiled and nodded.

“…And fingers. Fingers are alright too.” she added. Jon chuckled.

“Mouth and fingers.”

He began to descend upon her. But the image of a dark-haired man hovering over her in bed while her small clothes were off triggered something. Sansa froze.

“JON!”

He stopped, giving a strangled little whine. One look at her face, and he backed away and started getting off the bed.

“Jon, please.” She sat up, pleading. His expression was a mask of disappointment.

“I can’t do this, Sansa. I can’t scare you. I won’t do it. I’ll go to bed with you, but not if the ghost of your raper is in the sheets with us.”

“He doesn’t have to be,” she protested. *Think. Think. Seven Hells, Sansa Stark. You are going to bed this man and you are going to have his head between your legs. You’ve earned this. Now do it.* “I
have an idea.”

She thought about how controlling all her prior bedmates had been. How she’d always felt completely at their mercy, how she was always an object, always in the vulnerable position. They were always stronger than her. They could always keep her from struggling. She always felt trapped or restrained. Maybe if…? Oh gods, what if he turns away in disgust? She swallowed. He’s about to do that anyways and I could lose him forever if I don’t try anything.

“I need you vulnerable.”

“How so?” he asked at once, sounding intrigued.

She considered this. “I have to feel like I’m in control. And you need to be… at a disadvantage. I can’t feel like I’m at a disadvantage. And I need to know that I could leave at any time.”

“Sansa of course you can…”

“I know that consciously, Jon. But I’m going to need some measures to convince me. So you need to be vulnerable and I need control.”

“How do we do that?”

She bit her lip. “Well, first, you should take the rest of your clothes off.”

His eyes glinted. A sly smile appeared as he reached down and unlaced his breeches, kicking off his boots and stepping out of his trousers. When he was in his smallclothes, he started undoing the laces at an agonizingly slow pace. Sansa frowned.

“Now!”

He almost jumped out of his skin, but he got them off in seconds. He stood up straight then, standing perfectly still. Sansa zeroed in on his cock. Oh, thank the gods he’s not a monster like Harry.

Harrold Hardyng liked to think of himself as well-endowed. But Sansa thought that well-endowed implied something positive about one’s endowments. There was never anything positive about Harry’s situation. He was simply too big. He was too thick, too long. The thing had been hideous. And painful.

Jon’s was gorgeous. Sansa never thought she’d feel that way about a man’s genitals, because all penises looked ridiculous on some level. But there was something very appealing about what she was looking at now. It poked up and out from a surprisingly neat thatch of coarse dark curls. It was tan instead of red. It was big enough to impress but not big enough to terrify. And it was just attractive.

That, she thought as she wet her lips, is going inside me. A lot.

“Sansa, aren’t you going to——?”

“I’m not taking off my dress,” she told him.

He looked so disappointed that Sansa almost tore the gown to shreds right then and there. No. There needs to be a barrier for now.

Sansa cleared her throat. “Alright, Jon… Um, I was hoping you’d get on your back. I also thought I might…”
She cringed then. *I can’t possibly say this out loud.*

“What, Sansa? It’s fine.”

“I want to tie you up.”

“Tie me...?” His voice was so hoarse.

“Up. Yes. An ankle and one wrist to the bed at first.”

He swallowed. “At first?”

“Yes. Like we said. Mouth and fingers. You’ll need a hand free for when I sit on your face.”

His jaw dropped. Sansa went scarlet. She couldn’t believe she’d just said that. “Um, and then I’m going to just tie your hands together behind your head. Is that alright?”

His eyes were the size of dinner plates. “I, um…”

“It won’t always be this way,” she promised. “Just for the start. I just need to get used to a few things. And I know you won’t be able to trust me, but I’ll make it worth your while, I promise.”

“I trust you, my lady.” Jon scrambled onto the bed, getting on his back and looking at her eagerly. Sansa stood up over him and removed her stockings. He gasped. “You’re using those?”

“They’re silk. They’re safe.” She didn’t want to go into how she knew they were best. She knelt down and began tying him. She kissed his mouth then and went to straddle his head.

She kept herself up a bit, so as not to block his flow of air. She regretted having so many skirts, as they covered his pretty face. *I’ll get to see it when he’s finished and his chin is dripping.*

Sansa almost lost her control all at once. Jon didn’t waste any time. The first thing he did was kiss her pubic hair. A second later, he dipped his tongue in her folds and began teasing her around her entrance. Sansa squeaked.

*Oh gods. I don’t know if I’ll be able to control myself if he….*

He did. He moved his mouth to her nub, first caressing the hood and then targeting the little bead beneath, finding it easily. *Gods, that’s quite a skill.* Sansa arched her back and cried out, clenching her fists.

She’d been wanting something like this for a very long time. She’d asked Petyr to put his mouth on her one night after she’d gotten on her knees for him. He’d teased her and then refused. Harry acted appalled by such a notion. *“There’s nothing to suck on!”* He’d exclaimed. *“Yes, there is!”* She’d retorted. *“Just because you don’t know the first thing about it doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist!”* He’d been insulted by that and acted like a big baby. But she’d always wondered how it would feel.

As it turned out, it felt incredible. Jon, it seemed, possessed more understanding of her anatomy than Harry. He alternated between stabbing at her button with his tongue and sucking on the hood just enough to make her vibrate. She could barely think. She’d completely lost control of herself, writhing like a cat in heat and bucking her hips. She didn’t care. Being in control at that moment was not a priority.

She could feel it mounting. She was getting closer… Closer… She reached down, grabbed those dark curls she loved so much, and tried to push his face closer to her. As if that was possible. And then his fingers joined in, penetrating her entrance and burying deep inside her.
"Oh gods… Oh gods… Jon… I’m gonna… gonna…"

Jon’s voice was muffled, but he sounded encouraging. It sent her over the edge. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she howled. Everything lost its focus. It took her several seconds to remember where she was, who she was, or what was happening. The pleasure of it ebbed away slowly and the world came back into focus. *Oh gods, I must have suffocated him.* Sansa got off him. His face peeked out from her skirts and he was grinning, his chin very, very wet.

Sansa giggled. She was just so happy. She moved down his body so her arse was pressed against his cock. He gasped and she grabbed him by the hair once more and pulled him into a kiss, tasting herself on him.

When she pulled away, he had the smuggest smile.

"You look pleased with yourself," she remarked.

"I *am.* I’m extremely pleased. You’ve utterly *soaked* everything. Satin will be furious, though. You made a right mess."

Her eyes narrowed. “Oh? And what about you?”

“What about me?”

Sansa sat up and pinned him down. Moving further down his body, she smiled. “Let’s see you make a mess.”

She began to move her head towards its target. But he reached out and grabbed her wrist. “Sansa…”

*Oops, forgot to tie the other wrist.* She went to rectify the situation, untying the restrained arm and then binding both hands behind his head, looping the stocking in a figure eight. “What?”

He hesitated. ‘I would… I would not get a bastard on you.”

“There are a dozen ways to avoid that, Jon. I was going to use my mouth on you.”

She felt his cock twitch against her arse and she grinned. For some reason, she didn’t feel bothered by it. She felt too good to let the ghosts of her past ruin this. *Petyr’s gone. Harry’s gone. I’ve got Jon Snow instead.*

“You don’t have to…”

“What if I want to?”

“That’s fine.”

He said this so quickly that she had to laugh. She got back to her old position, crouched over the lower half of his body, head inches from his cock. Sansa looked up at him and licked her lips. He shuddered. His eyes didn’t leave hers as she sunk her mouth down over the head. Her lover yelped. She moved down, taking more of him in. His cock was warm, hard, thankfully clean. It was also big enough for this to prove horribly uncomfortable if she wasn’t careful. She pressed his hips down with her hands so he didn’t buck them, just in case. Sansa rolled her tongue along the vein. As he got deeper into her, she relaxed her gag reflex the way Petyr taught her years ago at the Gates of the Moon.

*Well, now I’m using what you taught me on the man raised by Eddard Stark. A prince, too.*
Someone who in eight years rose up higher than you could have ever dreamed, Petyr. How do you like that? You’ve lost another Tully girl to another son of House Stark. That’s what hurting me got you. All along you were actually preparing me to enthusiastically fellate another boy from Winterfell. And unlike with you, I actually like doing it this time. She felt herself laugh, which translated into a hum that vibrated around Jon’s flesh. That earned her a cry of, “OH GODS! LOVEYOULOVEYOULOVEYOU!”

Rather thrilled, she began bobbing up and down on him, using all the tricks she knew. She stroked a vein with her tongue and created a suction of air with her lips. Every little moment earned her sweeter endearments. But before long, Jon was crying for her to stop, please. She did, letting his dick out of her mouth with a pop. Jon stared at her with manic eyes.

“Sansa… Sweetling … please, may I… Let me into your cunt, please.”

Sansa grinned, loving that he was pleading with her. She bunched up her skirts and hovered over him, lowering herself onto his erection.

“Oh!” She exclaimed. This was the first time she’d had a man inside of her in this way that it didn’t hurt or cause her any form of shame or discomfort. Jon bit his lip and grunted.

“Gods, but you are beautiful,” he said roughly.

Both of them rolled their hips, pulling apart and pushing together. They were joined together in a way that felt so whole and perfect. She felt ready to melt into him. She was melting into him. He’s inside me. I’m wrapped around him. We’re swallowing each other. He’s part of me. I’m part of him. Complete. Complete. We’re complete. We’re perfect.

“Jon! Oh, fuck!” She didn’t curse often. This was definitely a special occasion certainly worthy of such words.

“So tight… Love you… perfect girl… sweet girl…” He was panting like mad.

And she was on the brink again. “OH! JON!”

She shattered around him in the best way, and collapsed on his chest. He kissed the top of her head and asked that she let him pull out.

“No, Jon, please,” she said. “I have moon tea. Don’t pull out. Stay. Stay with me.”

Sansa had no intention of getting pregnant yet, but she wanted to feel him spill within her. She wanted to know what it would feel like when she finally achieved all her goals and would have him planting their babes inside her.

“Sansa, please,” he whimpered.

He let me tie him up. Sansa reluctantly sat up and un-impaled herself. Instead, she arranged herself so his cock was pushing right up against her mound and nub.

“Call me Jon Snow again,” he whimpered.

“I love you, Jon Snow,” she said languidly, meaning it more than she’d ever meant anything. Sansa looked down and into his eyes.

She felt something hot spurt onto her skin. He relaxed then. Sansa went to untie him, then collapsed next to him. Both lovers turned on their sides, facing each other.
“You’re going to be mad at me,” Jon told her.

“Why?”

“I’ve ruined your lovely silk dress.”

She started giggling. She didn’t give a rat’s arse about the dress. “Gowns can be ruined. This cannot.”

She reached out and ran a hand through his hair.

He stroked her arm. “I’m glad you’re not angry.”

“I’ve grown weary of anger. I’d rather be happy. Don’t you want happiness?”

He chuckled. “Yes. Of course. If one can want something they have, then I do want happiness.”

“I’ve made you happy, then?”

“Yes.”

She snuggled in closer. Jon turned on his back, wrapping an arm around her. Sansa rested her head upon his chest. “Good. I would like to think I make you a fine mistress.”

He gave a quizzical look. “Is that what you are? My mistress?”

“Do you prefer paramour? I believe that’s what the Dornishmen call it. What else could I be?”

He stroked her hair, not answering her. Sansa smiled, sure that he was considering that question in his head. Not long now.

In the meantime, she was quite happy being his mistress. Being a prince’s mistress is not such a bad thing. Ellaria Sand was happy. I’m sure I will be as well.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Jon:

Coldwater and Moores’ trial went several days longer than expected. Not because the prosecution wasn’t solid, but because new charges were being laid at their feet every day. Terrorizing the smallfolk of the North and the Vale. Blackmail. Looting of property. Misuse of the Eyrie’s treasury. They’d made the claim that Sansa had drained the accounts of the Vale, but it turned out that was something they’d contributed to themselves, taking thousands of Gold Dragons out in Eddard Hardyng Stark’s name while he was still alive and forging Sansa and Baelish’s signatures to authorize it. Reports came in that they’d been intimidating Daenerys’ trader friend at The Fingers too. None of this went over well.

While Jon found great pleasure in watching these foul knaves go down, he did feel sorry for his lover, who clearly just wanted this all to finish as soon as possible. After a few days, her own testimony finished. She’d no more to say. But as chief accuser, the court required her presence. This involved a great deal of her standing to the side, having to look at the men who conspired to kill her and her son, and doing nothing else.

Two days after their first tryst, after Sansa had tied him, she stripped her clothes off while standing over him, allowing him to see her in all her naked glory. If he’d gone blind at that moment, he would be content knowing the last thing he ever saw was Sansa completely starkers.
A day after that, she let him have a free hand and touch her with it throughout the entire encounter. Two days following, he was untied completely. Somehow, in the middle of this, she’d gotten him to promise to help her in her work with the Tyrells.

“Not only to contribute, but also so you can watch and learn how to handle them,” she’d murmured to him in the middle of the night while he’d nestled at her breasts. “You need to learn to play.”

She slipped into his chambers every night, and slipped out before sunrise. By day six of their affair, Satin informed Jon that he wasn’t an idiot. He knew exactly what was going on. He’d quieted his master’s nerves by telling him that he was as much a traitor as Jon was a Lannister, and that he would speak of it to no one except Anais, who’d also figured it out.

Four days after that, everyone was gathered in the throne room so that the crown could finally come to a verdict. By this point, even the handsome, robust Lord Rhys Moore looked like dirt. Unlike Sansa and the Tyrells, no one had offered to take Coldwater and Moore into custody. So they’d been left in the Great Sept, eating only cold broth and shivering on the stone floors of their cells wearing nothing but dirty sacks.

Daenerys stood up and Jon began to stroke Longclaw’s hilt.

“Lord Damon Coldwater and Lord Rhys Moore, on charges of blackmail, slander of Sansa Hardyng Stark, Lady of Winterfell and the Vale and Warden of the North, exploitation of labor, embezzlement, fraud, abuse of the common folk, theft, and conspiracy to the murder of Eddard Hardyng Stark, Lord of the Eyrie, Warden of the East and Protector of the Vale, you are found guilty. You are hereby stripped of all lands, privileges, and titles. Your estates are hereby judged indebted to not only the treasury of the Eyrie, but to House Stark for any and all funds and/or property you stole from them, plus interest. Your Houses are furthermore indebted to House Stark in restitution for the abuse Lady Stark suffered at your hands and the damage done to the castle of Winterfell. For your abuses of the common folk, you are judged traitors to the realm. For your treason and for the murder of the child-Lord of the Eyrie, your liege Lord, you are sentenced to death by dragonfire. The date of your execution will be tonight, to take place after a penance walk from the Great Sept to Rhaenys’ Hill. Do you have any final statements?”

Lord Moore, his handsome face haggard, stepped forward. “What of my daughters, Your Grace? With my death, by blood my eldest, Lady Talma, inherits The Eyrie.”

“That will be determined by a council of Vale Lords. Your daughters will all be cared for by your cousin, Lord Upcliff, until further notice. He will see to their matches and future, and he will also be overseeing your estate with Lady Waynwood and Lord Yohn Royce. They will also attend to the estates and affairs of Damon Coldwater.”

Moore nodded. Coldwater, who hadn’t said a word in three days, kept silent. Daenerys ordered them taken away. Both men went quietly, their heads bowed and their shackled hands folded. Boos and hisses followed them.

As the crowds filed out, Jon noticed that Margaery and Loras Tyrell had gotten to his cousin first. He frowned. The dinner with the Tyrells had been postponed, which had been nothing but good news for him. Sansa’s exhaustion had started getting the better of her.

“I don’t have the mental wherewithal for negotiations with them at the moment,” she’d informed him three nights ago when he’d inquired about it. “Daenerys and I have decided to wait until this trial is over. But the second it is, I’m moving in. And I may need your help.”

Jon had groaned and protested. He disliked being a part of this. But she’d looked at him with those
big blue eyes and promised he didn’t have to do a thing until after the trial.

“Please Jon,” she’d pouted, “You’re going to have to come. Not only to remind them of my connection to you, but also to watch me work. And learn.”

He supposed observing how one negotiated with the richest family in the realm was worth observing. So he’d asked her to give him a signal. She promised to drop a special handkerchief with lemons embroidered on it.

He watched her now, shuffling her red and white skirts as Loras offered her his arm. And a lemon-patterned handkerchief tumbled from a pocket. Jon’s breath hitched and he took a step forward, hurrying over.

“Cousin, where are you off to?” he inquired. The three of them stopped and did the requisite bows and curtsies.

“To my chambers, Your Grace,” Sansa said. “I’ve invited Ser Loras and Lady Margaery for some lunch in my solar.”

“Have you forgotten, my lady? You gave your new steward leave to use that room for the day,” Jon replied, meaning Sam.

Sansa blushed prettily. “Silly me! That’s right! Oh, dear.”

“You may use my chambers if you wish. That is, if you do not mind dining in the presence of my direwolf,” Jon offered, feeling a bit shaky.

“My Prince, how kind!” Margaery said, grinning. “I doubt your lovely pet will deter our ability to eat. Indeed, I’ve felt quite curious about that animal. I’d love to meet that big, legendary beast of yours.”

Judging by the mischievous glances she shared with Sansa, that statement was in fact meant to have layers. Jon blushed. Loras looked a bit uncomfortable as well. Jon glanced at him.

“Ser, do you require help?”

“What?”

“Escorting both the ladies, Ser.”

“Oh.” Loras nodded. “Generous as ever, my Prince.”

Jon noted that the young man was ushering Margaery forward. Jon stiffened somewhat as the Maid of Highgarden, clad in a dark green velvet open-bodiced dress, took his arm. He and Margaery led Loras and Sansa out, walking towards the royal wing.

Jon tried not to look at Margaery Tyrell’s chest. It was hard not to, with her bosom so on display. *I can’t even call that a neckline. More like a chest line.*

“Are you pleased with the conclusions of the trial, Your Grace?” she asked, leaning towards him. He could smell her perfume. Tyrell roses and cinnamon. The cinnamon reminded him of Sansa. She liked wearing that scent too.

“Very pleased,” he replied gruffly.

“And how are you adapting to life in the capital?” she inquired, her dark eyes fixed upon him.
“Well enough, I suppose. It’s a far cry from The Wall.”

“I always wanted to see The Wall. Is it as impressive as they say? As big?”

“Bigger. More impressive. But I’m afraid Castle Black fails to measure up to the expectations most have. Or it did, anyways. You would have found it poor competition for Highgarden, I’m sure.”

She laughed and tossed her head back. “Highgarden has its charms and beauty. I’ll admit. But anything attached to such a symbol of cold and strength like The Wall would be worth seeing.”

*Help me, Sansa.* Jon thought, forcing himself not to look behind at her. He could hear her laughing at something Loras was saying in the background. *I’m not entirely sure what to do here.*

As if she could read his mind, Margaery spoke again. “Would you like to see Highgarden, Your Grace?”

“I--- I suppose. Yes. I would. But I doubt I’ll ever get the opportunity.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Margaery smirked. “You might be able to enjoy its bounty and wonders as much as you wish.”

*Oh, honestly, woman.* Jon didn’t much care for innuendo. He preferred outright, blunt statements. This was why he needed Sansa here. He loathed handling subtext of this nature.

But he forced himself to smile slightly. “Perhaps I will. But that is a ways off. My duties in the capital take precedence.”

“Of course. But remember, you’re always welcome.”

“I’ll make a note of it.”

Fortunately, it didn’t take them long to get to Jon’s chambers after that. He sent word for a couple of Satin’s workers, Grenn and Darrick to bring a proper luncheon to his chambers. When they entered, they all went in opposite directions. Margaery hurried over to where Ghost sat near the window, exclaiming in delight at the sight of the direwolf. Sansa went to sit at the dining table. Loras hurried over to a rack of weapons to inspect them. Jon granted the knight leave to look to his heart’s content. He glanced at Sansa, who indicated with her head that he should go over and continue with Margaery. Reluctantly, Jon did so, walking behind Margaery as she stroked the beast’s ears. For whatever reason, the animal seemed to accept these attentions eagerly. Jon frowned.

*Well, he seems to like her. I have to give her credit, the woman is fearless. Not a moment’s hesitation approaching him.* Margaery looked over her shoulder at him coyly.

“Look at those eyes, Targaryen red.”

Jon had never thought of it that way, but he supposed she was right. “Aye, but he’s a creature of ice and winter.”

“Sansa says you found them in the woods.”

“We did. My father, brothers, our father’s ward, some members of the household and I. It was shortly before the King came to visit Winterfell. Right when Jon Arryn died.” Jon recalled the memory with fondness. The thrilled look in his eyes when Father said they could have them, finding Ghost hidden away by the brook, how sweet the pups were. A smile came to his lips. “He was just a wee thing. The runt of the litter.”
“Hard to believe. But sometimes the greatest things start out in the humblest of forms, don’t they?”

“Aye.” Jon reached out and stroked the animal’s muzzle. *Daenerys said her dragons were the size of birds when they hatched. The Queen herself is a little woman, and she was once smaller, begging on the streets and riding on her brother’s back. I was a nervous bastard boy. Sansa was a wee girl who loved songs and crawled into her brothers’ beds when she had nightmares. “We all have to start small in one way or another.”

“But the best of us learn to grow strong, if you pardon the jest,” Margaery replied.

Jon shrugged, not minding it. He was starting to understand why Sansa might like this woman’s company. Schemer though she was, Margaery made for decent conversation. “This pup certainly has.”

Before long, settings and a meal were brought in and laid out. Jon sat between Margaery and Loras, Sansa directly across from him. He spoke of battle and weaponry with Loras for a while, allowing the girls to chat between themselves. Every so often, he’d be asked his opinion on something. Halfway through the meal, he felt Margaery’s knee pressed against his. She gave him knowing looks. He felt color rush to his cheeks. His knee jumped, bumping the underside of the table. Margaery grinned.

By the time they were done eating, she was actually stroking his calves under the table with her foot. By this point, all four of them were talking together and laughing. Margaery often tossed her chestnut curls as she giggled. Despite himself, Jon could feel his body heat increase. When it was all finished, Jon made a point of peeling back the wrist covers on both his right gloves. That was his signal to Sansa. *Come to my chambers as soon as you can. I’ll be waiting.*

Judging by her look, she understood, but it seemed she had business to attend to first. “Margaery, dear, weren’t you telling me of that cloak you’re sewing?”

“Oh yes, a gift for Willas. I’m almost finished. Would you like to see it?”

“Oh, certainly. Is it back in your chambers?”

“Yes, would you like to come back with us?”

“I’d be thrilled. You don’t mind, do you, Jon?”

He shook his head. “Not at all. I have some work to handle anyways. I will see you all tonight at the execution.”

All three of them left his solar, chattering. Jon waited for a few seconds before rising from his seat and going to his bedchamber. He went to sit at his desk, hoping to calm his nerves and ignore how hard he was. He scanned dull documents, trying to concentrate on any mistakes or clauses he found objectionable. But all he could think of was a coy smile, full breasts, cinnamon, blue eyes, the smell and taste of a wet cunt, red hair on his pillow… *Gods, how long does it take to inspect a cloak?* It seemed like hours since she left. Satin would undoubtedly be back very soon. He had to find more things for that man to do…

When the door opened and his flame-haired lover walked in, Jon sprung up and charged towards her. “Gods above…”

“No, just m--- oooh!”
He’d scooped her up and began sucking on her neck as he carried her to the bed. He sat her at the edge, her legs hanging off, and went to stand between them. The two made quick work of each other’s clothing. Jon buried his head between her breasts and suckled at her before thrusting his cock inside her cunt, and working his mouth up her neck. She was wetter than the Trident and the Narrow Sea put together. Her legs wrapped around his hips to get him deeper, and he just went mad.

“Fucking love you,” he growled. She squealed. He loved her for it. Their lips met, as did their tongues in an aggressive little dance. She wrapped her arms about his neck so they were skin to skin.

“Come for me, Sansa. I want you to burst. I want to feel you peak pressed up against me. Feel every inch of you as you do.”

“I’m going to come for you, Jon Snow…” She whispered in his ear. “Right… right… right… OH!”

She shuddered against him and around him, her core practically gushing. She was clutching him so tight. They were so close. They were practically one form now. Jon got lost in her, got lost in his mania. She was so hot, so tight, so wet, so perfect… Everything about her was lush and sweet and wonderful. He cried her name as he came.

He’d lost his control. He’d meant to pull out, spill himself elsewhere. Oh gods, what did I just do?

They fell back on the bed, and Jon rolled off of her, covering his eyes. “I’m sorry, Sansa. I didn’t mean to….”

She laughed. “Moon tea, Jon. It’s not hard to acquire. I had some procured for just such an occasion, you silly man.”

Relief washed over him. “Oh, thank the gods.”

“You think I would become your mistress without taking precautions?”

There’s that word again. Jon wasn’t sure he liked hearing her call herself that. Mistresses are the kept women of lords and kings who refuse to honor their wives. They’re women of ill repute. They’re the indulgences of dishonorable men. It suggested a relationship that was unchaste or shameful in some way. Or that it was some sort of arrangement of unequal status between them. But that’s not us. I’m not the sort of man who takes a mistress. And she’s not the sort of woman… She’s the Lady of Winterfell, for the pity’s sake!

Sansa seemed to get some manner of enjoyment out of referring to herself that way. But it made Jon feel guilty. “Why do you call yourself that?”

“What?”

“My mistress.”

“Have you decided you prefer ‘paramour’ after all?”

“It’s not that… I just don’t understand why you bring up words like that at all.”

“Jon, were you not just inside of me moments ago?”

“I was.” He smiled at this. I was.

“Do you wish to cease sharing my bed?”
“Of course not!” His smile fell.

“Well, then I am your mistress.”

“But it sounds so… That isn’t how I think of you… I don’t see myself as the type of man who would have a mistress.”

“But you do have a mistress, Jon. There’s no shame in it. You’re not taking advantage of me, you’re not sworn to be faithful to anyone. You have no wife. I have no husband. We’re betraying and harming no one. So why shouldn’t I be your mistress?”

Jon shook his head. “I just think of us as something else. You’re my lover.”

“Yes. And I’m a woman who shares your bed and is not your wife. A mistress. Calling me that doesn’t mean we don’t love each other.” She stroked his face. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of, Jon. I’ve seen things that are worthy of shame. We’re doing none of them.”

That is not a thing the Sansa Stark I used to know would ever say. Jon snorted. “Well, if you’re my mistress, what does that make me?”

She giggled and climbed over him, straddling his hips. “You’re just mine… right?”

She looked nervous for a second.

Oh, sweet girl. He reached up and touched her cheek. “Just yours.”

“Are you sure? You could have anyone. I… I wouldn’t get in your way. I promise.”

“Don’t promise that. I want no one else. Just you.” He sat up and pressed his forehead against hers. “What is this, Sweetling? You seem so nervous. You won today. I thought you’d feel on top of the world.”

“I’m afraid of tonight, Jon… I don’t think I can watch them burn. I’m too weak. I think I’m ready to see someone suffer and die, and then I lose my mind. Even when I killed Petyr and Wallace. When I actually did it, it was like I’d lost control. But when they were dead and I realized what had happened, I screamed and cried. When I watched Joffrey die, I was horrified. I hated all of them so much, yet I couldn’t stand to look upon them in their final moments. How am I going to stand up there in the Dragonpit and watch those men burn? I’m worried I’m going to faint or scream. I’m going to show everyone how weak I am. I may cry for the men who killed my son. What kind of person…?”

“One with a gentle heart. You mustn’t be afraid. Of this of all things.” He embraced her, wanting to make everything better. Wanting to reassure her. “You don’t take pleasure in the suffering of others and that is only a good thing. And if you feel afraid or upset, don’t worry. I’ll be right there. I’ll hold you up. It’s not wrong to cry. It’s not wrong to be upset. You’re such a good girl, Sansa. There’s no shame in having a heart. There’s only shame in being heartless.”

She rested against him. “When it’s over… Can we just…”

“What?”

Jon smiled. “I might be able to arrange such a thing. Just hold out for a little longer, alright? We still have that Tyrell dinner, after all.”

She nodded. “Alright.”

He hugged her to him so she wouldn’t see his worried expression. *She doesn’t want a period of freedom. She needs one.* He stroked her back. Her shoulder blades stuck out a bit too far. *She should have gained more weight by now. She needs to see Maester Merys.*
Identity

Chapter Summary

Coldwater and Moore meet the flames. Sansa reveals a secret. Plots are hatched. The royal family takes dinner with the Tyrells.

Chapter Notes

First, I need to thank my awesome betas Illyana and Bluecichlid, who were invaluable to this process. So much was improved thanks to them. YOU GUYS ARE AMAZEBALLS. Also, I want you guys to go read Bluecichlid's story. It's a thousand times better than mine and insanely suspenseful and interesting and beautifully written.

I was alerted to a canon error in my story: Daenerys's "Unburnt" status was temporary and tied to the magic that hatched the dragons. I'll admit that was a brain fart. I'm not even going to make excuses. It was in ADWD and I totally forgot. So, I'm going to explain that later on. Basically: Dany is permanently unburnt because magic and reasons. NOTHING TO SEE HERE. I'M NOT A CRAPPY FANGIRL AT ALL.

I'm giving you guys some more sex. This chapter ends on a bit of a lame note-- with people going to sleep. Usually I try to avoid this because it's an over-used and lame way to end a chapter for the most part. I was going to end this differently, but I realized that the plot would be getting ahead of itself.

Chapter Eleven: Identity

Daenerys:

It was a chilly winter night, but one would never know it within the Dragonpit, where the atmosphere was scorching. The Mother of Dragons stood upon the highest platform with Jon, Missandei, Sansa, Ser Barristan, and the High Septon. Her magnificent children were circling each other in the pits below, letting out little tufts of flame from their nostrils. They were waiting for the new meal that was currently walking to their home. Drogon, as usual, looked particularly eager.

The sounds of the jeering crowds grew ever closer and louder. The High Septon kept launching into new prayers for them all to say. Daenerys mouthed the words, but her attention was elsewhere.

Her nephew fidgeted. There was a combination of things he disapproved of at play here. He didn’t like playing lip service to the Faith of the Seven. The young man still visited the godswood and worshipped as his Northern adopted sires had in private. Also it was a public state occasion. He didn’t care much for those. And then there were the dragons.

Daenerys had learned to love and appreciate her nephew for his myriad of talents and virtues. Yet a source of anguish remained on his account. He still feared and avoided her dragons. Not enough to refuse to be around them when it was absolutely necessary, but enough to keep him away when it
was not. Jon didn’t like fire. Unlike his aunt, he burned easily. He had the ruined skin on his right hand to prove it. It made Daenerys fear for her family’s future. The continuation of the line depended on a Targaryen that feared fire.

*Well, it makes him more sensible than the ones who burnt Summerhall to the ground, I suppose. She reflected to herself. But what happens to my children when I’m gone?*

The Mother of Dragons would only ever be the Mother of Dragons.

*The continuation of the Targaryen line rests on Jon’s shoulders. If this were any other time period, that wouldn’t be such an issue, but...*

Dany often lay awake at night, pondering this. She tossed and turned and came up with no solution, only getting a sleepless night for her trouble. The only thing she could hope for was that Jon’s future children were more dragon-friendly than their father and bind to her children the way Jon was bound to his wolf.

There was one amusing part of this occasion: Sansa Stark, standing by Jon’s side. Normally the northerner was bedecked in lovely gowns of silk and velvet. For this occasion, however, she’d put luxury aside and gone in the opposite direction.

Almost everything Sansa wore was leather. She had on white linen breeches and a tunic, over which she wore a brown leather apron and long-sleeved jacket. She also had gloves and a pair of knee-high boots. Even her pretty red hair was covered in a leather sheathe. Everything was tight-fitting, no loose or flowing fabric anywhere.

Daenerys had smiled at her friend upon her arrival. The way she dressed was in fact the smart way, even if it didn’t lend much to style. But it seemed Sansa had taken one of their conversations to heart.

Dany often hosted the northerner in her chambers. Officially, it was for sewing lessons. Dany never learned any of the ‘feminine’ arts, having grown up on the streets, and it often made it hard for her to connect with the women of the court. Since some of the most accomplished political schemers often crafted their plots with their allies over needle and thread, musical instruments, flower arranging, or one of the myriad skills that every woman at court except the Queen herself possessed, this was an issue. Sansa was one of the most talented needlewomen at court, and so she offered Daenerys lessons. Really, it was just an excuse for the two women to talk politics. Similar to most of the other gatherings of halfway intelligent women at court.

During one of their chats, the topic had moved to hair. Daenerys, feeling hopeless with the mess of knots she’d created upon her length of linen, asked the Warden of the North if she could just braid her hair instead. Sansa had resisted, blushing, and Dany tried to insist.

“Why not? That’s one feminine skill I actually possess. I do it with Missandei all the time. Come now, I’d like to see how you’d looked with a hairstyle from Essos.”

“Please, Your Grace,” Sansa had answered, getting redder by the second. “I’d really rather you didn’t.”

Dany frowned. “What is the issue, my lady? I’ll be careful.”

“It’s not that, I just---“

“What?”

Sansa reluctantly put her embroidery hoop away and reached up. “Promise you won’t say a word?”
“I promise.”

The Queen had watched, fascinated, as a humiliated-looking Sansa reached up and removed about a third of what was on her head. Daenerys’s jaw had dropped. Sansa Stark’s thick, lustrous waves were now limper, thinner, and in the oddest manner. The hair around her head was still as thick, but the heaviness of it declined rapidly past a couple of inches.

“I started losing hair sometime after my husband’s death,” Sansa confessed to her monarch, staring down at her lap. “After Eddie died, it got much worse. It became quite thin. Since my trial ended, it’s been growing back, but the process is slow. So I’ve been using pieces.”

Dany had felt awful. Such a thing had to be humiliating, especially for a woman as renowned for her beauty and red hair as Sansa. Not wishing to make the situation any worse, Dany made a confession.

“To birth my dragons, I walked into the flames from which they were born. My skin was unharmed, of course. But all of my hair was burnt away. I was completely bald for weeks, and I had short hair. I ended up using wigs for a while as well.”

Sansa had clearly taken note of this, with her protective headdress, obviously wishing to protect what hair she had left. Dany gave Sansa a small smile when she arrived. Despite the obvious precautions, she seemed less hesitant about being in the dragons’ presence than Dany expected. Upon arrival she went to the rail of the platform and stared at them, fascinated. The Lady of Winterfell had seen the beasts before, Dany knew, but never up close. The Queen assumed that Sansa would fear them as surely as her cousin.

Sansa did start to grow more nervous as the condemned got closer, however. As the crowds outside began to jeer, she backed away from the ledge and reached for Jon’s hand.

Dany noted her nephew giving his cousin’s hand a little squeeze. *I see that’s going well.*

Eventually, the doors burst open and the guards entered with Coldwater and Moore. Both were naked and shaven completely. Coldwater’s flabby flesh jiggled as he moved. He heaved in fear, sweat dripping from every pore. Moore hardly looked better, now scrawny and weak. They were filthy, having been pelted with various projectiles during their walk.

A number of curious nobles flocked in behind them, many dressed in ridiculously impractical silks. Everywhere Dany looked, she saw flowing skirts, doublets, capes and cloaks. The woman scowled. Any of those things could easily catch fire and cause a disaster. Sure, it wasn’t a problem for Daenerys to wear her usual silks, but she was called ‘The Unburnt’ for a reason. The crowds settled in and Daenerys had Missandei speak first.

“Before we proceed, I must order that anyone here wearing loose clothing must either shed their attire or wait outside the gates for their own safety.”

There was a collective groan, and a huge chunk of the crowd filed out. A couple of people remained, though. Dany noticed Margaery and Loras Tyrell among their number. Lady Margaery stripped off her green silk gown with no hesitation, leaving herself in a clinging shift and chemise. She was the only woman among the audience who did so. A few women--- lady warriors like Brienne of Tarth and Obara Sand of Dorne, who already wore tight-fitting protective clothing--- remained. But Margaery was the only silk-clad lady willing to remove her dress and stay. She handed the gown and Loras’s cape to a servant and sent them on their way, ignoring the disapproving looks of her mother, who left the pit.

*I can’t wait to dine with this girl.* Dany tried not to smile and instead adopted a solemn expression as
she turned her eyes on Coldwater and Moore.

“Damon Coldwater and Rhys Moore, you have been found guilty of a multitude of heinous crimes, including but not limited to the murder of your child-age liege lord, the exploitation and abuse of your commonfolk, and a host of other treasonous offenses. For this, I, Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, First of Her Name, The Unburnt, Queen of the Andals and the Rhoynar and The First Men, Lady of the Seven Kingdoms, Queen of Meereen, Queen of Slaver’s Bay, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Princess of Dragonstone, Breaker of Chains, Mother of Dragons and Protector of the Realm, so hereby sentence you to death by dragon fire. Do you have any last words?”

Coldwater, who’d been mute for several days, actually stepped forward. “I do, Your Grace.”

Dany nodded. Coldwater looked up at Sansa.

“Lady Stark, I deserve this death. In the chaos that was the war, I lost all sense of honor, shame, and dignity. Worse still, I passed these failings onto my son. I created the monster that killed your child. I allowed my hatred for your mentor and a lust for power to blind me. There is no excuse for what was done to you and your family, and I have no wish to live as a man that encouraged his own son to become a murderer of children. I am glad that the monster I became will die tonight. But I wish to walk into the flames a man humbled and reformed. I beg not for mercy or a pardon, but I will ask that you believe me when I say that I am truly sorry for all that was done. I have no reason to ever hope for forgiveness, but I do at least hope that you’ll believe my apology sincere. I would walk into dragon fire a thousand times if it would bring your son back.”

The Queen, gaping, turned to look at Sansa. The Lady of Winterfell stared at the man below. Her expression would have looked entirely stoic if not for the tears that fell from her eyes. She took a deep, shuddering breath.

“I believe your words. Unfortunately, not even a hundred thousand deaths by dragon flame will bring my boy back. I’d have you stride into the fire a hundred thousand times regardless. You do not have my forgiveness, Ser, but I will believe your apology. Now face your death.”

Dany gave the order. Moore started screaming. He tried to make a break for it, but the guard restrained him.

Coldwater walked over to his screaming partner and decked him across the head.

“Oh, shut it, you stupid sod,” Coldwater snarled. “Save your screams for when you’re actually burning. Coward.”

The corpulent former lord yanked Moore by the arm and pulled the man, kicking and screaming, towards the ledge where the condemned were placed.

Drogon, Viserion and Rhaegal rose up above, spreading their wings magnificently. Everyone stepped back. A jet of flame from Drogon’s mouth rained down upon the two men. They both screamed, but not for very long. Seconds later, the flames were gone. Two charred corpses remained on the execution platform. Rhaegal and Viserion swooped down and snatched both corpses in their jaws. Drogon ripped parcels of the bodies from each, gulping his portion down quickly along with his sister and brother.

Their mother watched in admiration. A sudden urge to take them to the air consumed her. “Ser Barristan, the saddle.”

Her Lord Commander whistled and Drogon’s saddle was rushed over. The black beast landed upon
the high dais while his siblings swooped into the sky high above. Dany, Ser Barristan, and the guards hurried over and began to strap him in. To her disappointment, Dany realized Jon hadn’t come over to help.

_Usually he’s good about helping with this._ She looked over and saw her nephew against the wall, holding his cousin close and whispering comforting words to her. _Ah._

Dany climbed onto her child’s back, calling to Missandei that she’d be back by morning. Then she took to the sky with her children, embracing the wind, dark night, and the sensation of flight.

They all flew out beyond Blackwater Bay. Once they’d gotten a good distance, Daenerys had them hover so she could survey the skyline of King’s Landing. The immense structures of the Red Keep, Dragonpit, and Great Sept looked small from here. But they made for a beautiful image.

_And this is but a fraction of my legacy. Future Targaryens should be able to view what I shall leave them in this way, Dany thought sadly. The blood of the dragon must carry on. Everything I have built cannot end with my death. He must learn to ride. Jon has tamed his direwolf, but he must learn to tame dragons as well. It’s time for him to stop resisting his destiny. He’s too restrained by his northern roots. There’s only one way he will ever accept that his blood is as much fire as it is ice._

She flew around the Crownlands all night, carefully considering her options. She returned to the Keep in the early morning, having Drogon drop her off before the children flew back to the pit. Hyper-focused, Dany started for the royal wing, not even bothering to change her clothing. She did not go to the King’s Chambers, instead she burst into the Maegor solar.

It startled Jon’s valet, the pretty former whore Satin Flowers, who’d been polishing armor in the corner. He jumped to his feet at once. “Your Grace! Prince Jon isn’t here right now!”

Dany ignored him and headed straight for the bedchamber. Satin ran up, standing between her and the door. “If you please, My Queen, the prince’s bedchamber is not fit for your royal presence.”

The woman gave her nephew’s servant an amused look. _Oh, he is precious. And loyal. And brave._

“Stand aside. Now.”

He hesitated. She gave him a nod of warning and then brushed past him, bursting through the doors.

There was a feminine yelp. Sansa Stark sat up in bed, clutching Jon’s furs to her chest, red hair spilling over her milky shoulders, blue eyes wide.

“My Queen! I can explain!”

“You could, but you don’t really need to,” Daenerys replied, her lips curling as she shut the door behind her. “I expected as much, though I have to say I’m impressed with the progress you’ve made.”

Sansa relaxed slightly and her eyes narrowed. “You knew.”

“Of course I knew. I have dinner with you both every evening. I’ve watched you carefully. Anyone who knows Jon well enough and had been observing closely could tell. You’re just lucky that Jon has so few confidantes. And really, you’re good, Sansa, but not good enough to hide something that’s going on in my own house from me.”

The Lady of Winterfell hung her head. “I will leave court.”

“Why?” Dany snorted. “I don’t object. If I did, I would have ended it by now. Calm yourself, Wolf-
girl. I’m not here to condemn anyone. I’m here to talk to you about Jon.”

Sansa hesitated. “I will not divulge any secrets of his.”

“That would be an admirable display of loyalty if there were any secrets to divulge in the first place.” Dany chuckled and walked over to Sansa’s bedside, grabbing one of Jon’s tunics and tossing it to her friend as she sat down. Sansa pulled it on and relaxed. Daenerys smiled. “But Jon is without secrets. There’s you, but that’s not a secret to me. There’s nothing for you to betray. I know my nephew, I love him, and I don’t fear him. I am, however, concerned about him.”

“Jon is fine, Your Grace,” Sansa insisted.

“I know, but my concern isn’t personal, it’s political. My nephew could be King someday. Or, at the very least, his children could be kings. We are the last two Targaryens. I have three dragons and I am the only one who will ride. Jon refuses. I need this to change. Dragons live longer lifespans than we do. I need to know my children are taken care of when I’m gone. For their good and the good of my domains. Jon must ride.”

Sansa hesitated. “Yes. But he’s not comfortable doing so. And to tell you the truth, I don’t think it’s just the fire that scares him.”

Dany suspected as much. Jon wasn’t normally the type to let a petty fear like that stop him from doing what was necessary. She hadn’t been able to figure out what his other problems were, though. But then, that was partly why she was here, talking to Sansa. “What has he said?”

“Nothing much. We don’t really speak of it often.” Sansa bit her lip. “I just have this impression that he feels like he’d be invading your domain if he did. He has said things that the throne is completely yours, _you’re_ the dragon, not him. Sometimes he talks about how he’s still a northerner. You know he still refers to my father and siblings as his? I’m not his sister, but Arya Stark is. And Eddard Stark was his father. I think he’s worried he’ll be an intruder, that he’d be moving in on your claims and rights and he doesn’t want to do that. And he struggles with his new role, you know. I think he’s afraid of losing himself to the court.”

Daenerys rubbed her brow. “That man… riding a dragon wouldn’t mean giving up his wolf. I’m not expecting him to do that. And I am not threatened by him. I keep trying to convince him of it. I need another dragon rider. His children will have to know how to ride. I’ve given him my name, accepted him as my blood, included him in my government… I wouldn’t do that if he was an intruder.”

She sighed and looked at Sansa. “I need you to help me make him a rider.”

“Me?” Sansa looked shocked. “I don’t know anything about riding dragons.”

“That’s not what I meant. I want you to help me convince him to take the reins. If he’s afraid that he’s losing his northern identity, do what you can to make him feel more northern. But also encourage him to accept his identity as a dragon. We may have to play a bit, though. Tell me, has he given any indication that he wants to make you his wife?”

Sansa’s eyes widened. “…No, Your Grace. I am only his mistress, I assure you.”

Dany laughed again. “Now, sure. But we both know you’re playing the long game, Sansa Stark. Don’t worry about it. You’re ambitious, but you’re not stupid. I don’t think you’re plotting to marry him against my will. And I’d be happy to see you two wed.”

Her mouth fell open. “But…”
“It would make him happy, it would tie the North to the crown more closely, you’re of proper birth, you have connections not only to the North but also the Riverlands and the Vale, you’re good at all those ladylike things women of the court are supposed to be good at, you know how King’s Landing works, you actually care about Jon, you have both a heart and a brain, and you’re proven fertile. You’re not pregnant, are you?”

“No! I’ve been taking moon tea, Your Grace.”

“Good. If you were trying to get pregnant now, I’d have to rethink things.” Dany smiled. “I’m surprised Jon hasn’t said anything to you about making you his bride, though. It seems unlike him.”

“I believe he’s resisting out of concern for me. I’ve not had happy marriages, and I’m still recovering from my ordeals.”

“Well, I think I’m going to have to use you to get what I want, Lady Sansa,” Daenerys told her. “I’m going to start pressuring him to take the reins. I need you to encourage him. If he resists too much, I may have to resort to something else.”

“What?”

Daenerys hesitated, hating what she’d say next. She took a deep breath before speaking.

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Jon:

“My Queen.” Lord Mace gave a clumsy little bow to Jon’s aunt in the royal dining hall. Red-faced and heavy, he kissed Dany’s fingertips. “Thank you so much for your invitation.”

Jon shifted uncomfortably, dressed in his damask shirt and velvet jerkin. Around his neck hung a pendant, another gift from his cousin, in the shape of a dragon and a direwolf circling each other. He hated occasions like these, political dinners. This was too intimate a gathering for him to ignore his guests or slip away, but too formal for comfort.

“My pleasure, Lord Tyrell.” Though Dany didn’t exactly say this with conviction.

Everyone was dressed impeccably. The five Tyrells were bedecked in green and gold silks. Margaery’s brocade was particularly pretty. She gave Jon a little smile as her mother moved to kiss Daenerys’s hand. Jon remembered to smile back.

Lord Mace moved to bow to him. It was a long procession of dull greetings. Jon now understood why Robb used to complain. He returned the greeting, then kissed Lady Tyrell’s hand. At least Willas is at Highgarden. Jon thought to himself. He didn’t want to accidentally start to like his rival the way he’d started to like the man’s siblings. The younger Tyrell sons were both excellent opponents in the till yard. Despite their flamboyant sigils, one would never be able to doubt their strength. Garlan was smart and practical and told amusing stories. Loras had a chip on his shoulder and reacted harshly to anyone who made comments about his skin, but could otherwise be quite genial, especially to Jon, who was one of the few who didn’t flinch at the sight of the man’s neck and jaw.

When he kissed Margaery’s hand, he made sure to meet her eyes and compliment her appearance, as
Sansa had told him. The Maid of Highgarden tossed her head, letting the light catch the emeralds about her neck so that they practically glowed.

“You’re too kind, Your Grace.”

It became a bit more uncomfortable once they all sat down. Daenerys always sat at the head of the table no matter what the occasion, as was her place as queen. On normal, casual evenings when it was just the family, Jon would sit to her right while Sansa sat immediately to her left. But for a formal gathering, this was altered. As Prince and the chief male representative of House Targaryen, Jon had to sit on the other end of the table.

Before going to his seat, he pulled Dany’s chair out for her and then pushed her forward when she sat down. Jon was about to assist Sansa in taking the seat of honor to Daenerys’s right, but Lord Mace was suddenly there, making to sit down. This annoyed Jon, who didn’t like that oaf taking Sansa’s place. He was sure the Lord of Highgarden didn’t realize he was meant to take the left. Thankfully, Margaery spoke up when she saw what her father was doing.

“Papa, I think you’re in Lady Stark’s way,” Margaery piped up, rolling her eyes.

“Margaery!” Lord Mace said, looking annoyed. “I am Lord of Highgarden and Warden of the South and I---”

“--- You are the fourth highest ranking person here, right behind the Lady of Winterfell, Lady of the Eyrie, and Warden of the North,” Margaery replied. Lord Mace went even redder. Winking at Jon, Margaery continued. “I’m sure you don’t mean to show any disrespect to the Prince’s cousin or House Stark.”

Mace sputtered slightly. “O-of course not! Indeed, I intended to display quite the opposite. I merely wished to pull Lady Stark’s chair out for her!”

He yanked the chair out at once and turned to Sansa, holding out his arm and bowing. “My lady.”

Jon tried not to laugh. Despite himself, he felt grateful to Margaery. It would have been thoroughly awkward if he or Daenerys or Sansa had been forced to admonish Lord Tyrell. Sansa, looking as pretty and delicate as a snowflake in her white silk and silver gown, smiled graciously and allowed the Lord of Highgarden to take her hand and sit her down. The man pushed her chair a little too forcefully once she sat, but Sansa gave no sign. Instead, she caught Jon’s eye and held his gaze, making him dearly wish to be the one pushing her chair in. He tore his eyes away and looked at the Maid of Highgarden.

Thank you, Jon mouthed to Margaery. If it had been anyone but a Tyrell who had corrected him, it could be perceived as a slight. Lord Mace helped his wife take the seat next to Sansa before waddling over to his own seat to Dany’s left. Garlan took the place next to his mother, and Loras sat beside his father, leaving Margaery with no one to pull her chair out for her.

Feeling a bit nervous, Jon hurried over to her place and did this for her. She brushed passed him and smiled warmly, letting him take her hand and squeezing his when he did. Her eyes flashed.

“Thank you, My Prince,” Margaery said as Jon pushed her chair forward. Jon hurried over to his seat, only just then realizing he was right between Margaery and Garlan.

Jon tried not to look at his cousin too much during dinner, which was hard considering how lovely she looked. He always liked watching the dainty way she ate. When the meals were first brought out, biscuits in the shape of roses with yellow petals strewn atop, courtesy of the Tyrells, were presented.
When Sansa saw that, she gave this delighted little squeal and clap of her hands that was so adorable that Jon almost fainted.

But he couldn’t spend the night cooing over how his lover chewed on her honeyed duck and sipped her Dornish Red. He was supposed to give every indication that Sansa was helping this family make progress towards their political goals. The brief snatches of conversation he heard sounded on course, with both Tyrell parents making mention of how Loras was still strong and skilled despite his marred skin, clearly angling for talk of the Queensguard to pop up. Jon made strong attempts not to cut in at any mentions of Willas Tyrell’s name, instead trying to keep his focus on Margaery and act as charmed as possible.

This wouldn’t be so hard if one of Margaery’s goals wasn’t to seduce him. Jon didn’t dislike the woman as much as he once did. She was clever and engaging. Were it not for her flirtatious tosses of the head, fluttering eyelashes, coy smiles, and wayward feet underneath the table, Jon would be able to enjoy this conversation immensely. If he had his way, it would be Margaery, not Mace, sitting next to Dany trying to gain a position on the Small Council. That this girl was expected to further herself politically as a seductress instead of a statesman while her oafish sire dropped hints to the monarch about being made Master of State truly saddened the prince. He didn’t want this woman in his bed. But he was sure that she’d make a council meeting far more interesting.

“So there have been no direwolves spotted at all since you found Ghost?” she asked, leaning forward.

“I’m afraid not. A number of them were wiped out with the siege of the White Walkers. I think that was how our wolves ended up south of the Wall in the first place,” Jon replied. “I think their mother was fleeing.”

“How sad! But there are some left, right?”

“According to ranger reports, there are a few.”

Margaery nodded. “If only more she-wolves had the good sense Ghost’s mother did. I’m sure you’d like to be able to breed your pet so your children might enjoy them. Sansa could also have one again.”


“Such a pet seems dangerous for a woman. Though I suppose in an age where a Queen sits upon the Iron Throne and commands dragons, it’s not too great a stretch.” Garlan remarked. “Still, Lady Stark is not a bride of fire, is she? She’s a daintier thing than our queen.”

Margaery and Jon exchanged significant glances. She clearly finds this as amusing as I do.

“She was a daintier thing, when she was three-and-ten. As we all were at that age.” Margaery commented before taking a bite of snap pepper.

“She handled her old direwolf with skill at one-and-ten.” Jon told them. “Lady was a very well-trained creature.”

“It was awful, what happened to that poor pet of Sansa’s,” Margaery lamented. “My first husband was there when it happened, when the queen gave the order on the kingsroad.”

Jon shifted uncomfortably. He didn’t like discussing what happened to Lady. Sansa had cried in his arms recounting the story several nights ago. “Cersei Lannister was a vile woman.”
“You’ll get no argument from me on that point, Your Grace.” Margaery huffed and took a long sip of her wine before adding, “Many suffered at her command.”

Jon remembered then. *That’s right. Margaery was imprisoned on charges of adultery because of the Lannister woman.* Sometimes he forgot that even people like Margaery Tyrell were hurt by the Lannister regime. He always thought of the smallfolk and his family being the victims. But even the family’s supposed “allies” were threatened. There really hadn’t been a single major family that hadn’t been negatively affected by the wars.

“If there was anything the Lannisters proved, it was that not even a crown could protect a person.” Jon said grimly. It certainly hadn’t protected Cersei or most of her family. House Lannister now consisted of a few minor cousins who squabbled over the rights to Casterly Rock. The only thing left of the main family was a marred Myrcella, now Myrcella Waters, being fostered in isolation in Dorne as part of Prince Trystane’s household.

Margaery nodded. “Well, it certainly didn’t help any of them, did it? I suppose crowns only help those fit to wear them. Really, it’s not the crown. It’s the head under it.”

Jon nodded. “You speak the truth, Lady Margaery.”

*And this is why we need someone like you in our government. You have much to off*—* This thought was cut off by the sensation of Margaery stroking his calf with her toe. Jon stiffened. Seven Hells, woman. Can’t you just allow me to enjoy your company?*

Jon managed to bear it by thinking about what was coming later that night. Imagining that it was Sansa doing this to him, he managed to smile warmly at Margaery. She winked. Jon decided to engage the rest of the table, praising Loras’s skill in the yards.

“Ser Loras is an absolute terror. None can touch him.” He offered his aunt upon hearing talk of the Queensguard. “I would have been happy to have him and his brother at my side in battle.”

Garlan smiled, looking genuinely touched. “From a man who fought off the Wildlings at the Battle of Castle Black and took on the White Walkers and their king, such praise is greatly appreciated, Prince Jon.”

Dany took this opportunity to propose a toast for lasting friendship between Houses Targaryen, Tyrell, and Stark. They all raised their cups.

An excellent dessert of sherbet followed and Lord Mace made mention of Margaery knowing a great deal about foreign fabrics, and Daenerys asked the girl to take a cup of wine with her and Sansa.

Eternally grateful to his aunt, Jon managed to retire without much fuss. Jon rushed out of there and hurried to Sansa’s chambers. He was relieved to find that Anais and Sansa’s newest maid, Fanny, had arranged everything just as he wanted it.

He waited for her for a while. Sansa had been drawn into the conversation with Margaery and Dany. Every second he waited, he felt ever more foolish. What if this was ridiculous? What if she laughed at him? He paced her solar. He’d never been a great romantic. He didn’t know if this was legitimately appealing, or too cliché. Sam had assured him that Sansa would like this. Anais and Satin said the same thing. They’d all been surprised to hear that he’d come up with such a thing on his own. But then, maybe that wasn’t good. Jon had never possessed the skill for coming up with his own romantic gestures.

*No, I’ve already gone to the trouble.* Sam and Anais had arranged to keep Sansa out of her rooms all
Sansa seemed a bit surprised by his presence when she entered. But she’d smiled when she saw him and it made him so happy.

“I’ve got a surprise for you,” he told her, coming forward eagerly.

She smiled coyly. “And what is it, my lord? Shall I guess?”

He laughed, liking the idea. He held up the length of black silk in his hand. “You can guess, but only if you’re willing to put this over your eyes and let me lead you to the surprise.”

She actually giggled and turned. “Alright. Blind me.”

He came forward and began fastening the blindfold. As he did, she kept venturing little guesses.

“Is it a new gown?”

“You don’t want me picking out your gowns. Try again.”

“Is it jewelry?”

“No.” He made a mental note of that, though. He could save it for her nameday.

“A puppy?”

Jon took her arm and feigned outrage. “I thought I was your puppy. I’m not letting anyone replace me.”

She laughed and let him lead her into the bedchamber. “Some sort of beautiful thing from Essos I’ve never heard of?”

“No. Not quite. Think a little closer to home.” He stopped her right in the middle of the room. “Or don’t, because you’re out of time.”

Jon removed the blindfold and watched those blue eyes open and then widen when she saw what surrounded them. “Oh, Jon…”

He’d ordered a bunch of white curtains and tapestries embroidered to look like the trunks of trees, with details of red leaves. Satin and Anais had also gathered branches with leaves of the same color. The tapestries were hung over the walls and around the furnishings, with the branches gathered mounted on various surfaces.

The room looked like an entirely different place. Even the great dragon bed had been covered with white, with red-leaved branches attached to the posts, canopy and headboard. But the white and red that engulfed them wasn’t the only color present. Weeks prior Jon had placed a very special order. It had taken a long time to get here, but it was worth it. Bursts of blue intermingled with the white and red thanks to the piles of winter roses spread everywhere. So it all looked like….

“The godswood.” Sansa gasped. “You’ve brought Winterfell’s godswood to me, Jon.”

“Do you like it?” he asked with baited breath.

“No, Jon. I don’t like it.” She turned around, gazing at everything. “I… I… I love it. I love it so much… I… I…”
Then she burst into tears. Jon laughed in relief and pulled her into his arms. “Don’t cry. I didn’t do this to make you cry!”

She looked at him very intently. “Why did you do this?”

There was a long pause. Jon didn’t completely understand the question. Why wouldn’t I do this? Why do I need a reason? “Because I love you.”

*Because I love you. Because I wanted to do for you something that the girl I knew would have dreamed of a man doing for her. Because I want to be that man you always dreamed of. Because you look beautiful in winter roses that match your eyes. Because we both miss home. Because I want you to smile more. Because we both want to see the godswood again. Because I want to remind you that gold roses are nothing to our northern ones. Because I’d do anything to make you happy. Because I no longer regret leaving that cave. Because I feel like I’m home again.*

He didn’t get to say all of that, because her lips were on his and he wasn’t going to stop kissing Sansa just to say some things that probably sounded foolish. He indulged in the warm sweetness of her mouth for several minutes before breaking away for breath. “Wait, one more thing.”

She whined a little. “What?”

Jon hurried over to her dressing table and grabbed it: a crown of winter roses. “You’re my Queen of Love and Beauty now.”

He tried to place it on her brow, but she ducked away playfully. “Wait, Jon Snow. I wish to give you a little surprise of my own. Turn around and close your eyes.”

He whined a little, but he handed the garland to her and did as he was bid. He closed his eyes and listened to her giggle. She took far too long to crown herself, he thought. But then she finally bid him to look.

He almost fainted. Sansa was wearing winter roses and nothing else. His crown was atop her head, her hair was loosened and draped carefully so it covered her nipples. Between her legs, she held a bunch more blooms, just enough to cover that perfect little place that he desired so much. With all that white skin and red hair, she looked almost like a heart tree herself. Jon was certainly ready to worship at her.

*She looks like a vessel for the gods.*

Jon fell to his knees, hard as a rock. “I think I should go flower picking.”

He got on all fours and advanced on her. She laughed and backed away a little when he got close. He stared up at her and she wagged her finger. “Who said you could take these flowers, Wolf-boy?”

Jon started to rub his face against her thighs. She smelled so good. “May I pick your flowers, My Queen?”

Sansa shuddered. “Y-yes. Yes you may.”

Jon started yanking each flower out from between her thighs with his teeth. She gave delicious little gasps as he did. Jon growled as he uncovered that garden of red curls between her legs. Once the flowers were gone, he began lapping at her mound, penetrating her folds. She was already wet for him. She smelled warm and musky and sweet. But he wanted to be able to see between her legs better.

“Spread your legs for me.” He growled. “This wolf is going to eat you.”
He worried for a second that he sounded too harsh, too controlling. But Sansa’s whimper was one of arousal and she spread her legs at once. Jon could see it. That little pink hood that covered her button. This is the godswood, which means there need to be springs. I’m going to make one gush forth and I’m drinking from it.

He attacked that little button with his mouth. Gods, she tastes so good.

She began to shake, much to his satisfaction. She began to shake and cry out. He grabbed her hips firmly so she wouldn’t fall. She latched onto his hair. Jon swirled his tongue around her nub. He loved doing this to her. He loved tasting. He loved tasting Sansa. He loved that he was the first to do it to her. An odd, possessive feeling overtook him and he squeezed her arse. Mine.

Wolves stake their claims. I’m going to do that. I’m going to write my name. Let’s see how far I can go before she comes. He smiled and got to work. J-O-N-S-N-O-W-T-A-R-G-A-R-Y---

It was like an earthquake had hit, she was shaking so bad. “JON! JON! OH GODS!”

And his mouth, chin, and neck were soaked. Jon made a mental note of where he’d stopped. He was going to make a project of this. Let’s see how many times I can make her come with my mouth before I’ve spelled out my full name and titles. Next time, I’ll start on the “E” in Targaryen and go from there.

He might have continued at that moment, but Sansa was grabbing his hair and yanking him up. She kissed him hard and grinned before jumping away. She ran over to the bed and crawled on it. Still on all fours, she turned to face him.

“Come and get me, Jon Snow. Get behind me and fuck me like a wolf.”

He ran over at once and pounced. He sheathed himself in her quickly, reaching over and grabbing her breasts. She felt like home. She sounded like bliss. Jon pounded into her, hard, loving the way her hips enthusiastically bucked backwards to meet him.

“You like that, Wolf-girl?” he asked. “You like being taken like this?”

“Love it…” she gasped. Then she pushed herself up so her back was against his chest. Jon nuzzled her neck, but she grabbed his chin so he was looking straight ahead. “Look…”

Her dressing table was right at the far end of the room, across from them. Jon almost howled. They could see themselves in the mirror. Sansa was pressed up against him, her hair wild and messy, her skin flushed. His prim, proper little lady. All mussed and red and wild. Jon squeezed her left teat hard and reached down with the other hand to finger her nub.

His eyes still on the reflection, he whispered in her ear. “You are the most beautiful fucking thing in this world. I love you and I’m going to make you come so hard that you won’t be able to see.”

He watched as her mouth fell open. She started spasming. Jon watch this in the mirror, grinning. He was going to lose control soon, he knew. Sansa pulled herself down then, getting on all fours once more as he continued to fuck her.

“Look at yourself,” she said, pointing to the mirror. “Look at how gorgeous you are, Jon Snow.”

Jon caught his reflection. He looked fine, he supposed. He didn’t consider himself the main attraction of this, though. He wasn’t really here to appreciate himself.

They were indeed fucking like animals, like wolves. Jon felt almost like he was inside Ghost’s head
at that moment. There was that level of freedom, that level of primal instinct and desire, that level of intimacy and personal connection.

He came then, losing himself to her happily. The two of them collapsed in a tangle of limbs. Jon moved around and put himself in his favorite position: wrapped up in her, head at her breasts. She giggled.

“You always burrow in there after.”

He kissed her nipple. “Perfect place to rest my head.”

“Rest your head now, Jon Snow. Go to sleep. Dream about me.”

That shouldn’t be too hard.
Conversations and Negotiations

Chapter Summary

A portrait is discussed, tongues wag, Jon meets with Margaery, and Dany issues an ultimatum

Chapter Notes

I want to thank my beta, Illyana and Bluecichlid for their help. You ladies rule.

There are a few developments in this chapter, but this one is shorter than the last few. It's a bit filler-y. I hope you guys enjoy it though. Tell me what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twelve: Conversations and Negotiations

Sansa:

She’d turned over in the night, and now that she woke, Jon’s cock was poking her back. His arms were wrapped about her, his hands at her teats. This was a position she wasn’t entirely unfamiliar with. There are just some things all men have in common.

But this time, it wasn’t like when she’d woken up this way with Petyr or Harry, or even Tyrion on those uncomfortable mornings after he’d found his way to her in his sleep. This wasn’t awkward, like with Tyrion. It wasn’t terrifying and shameful like with Petyr. It wasn’t suffocating like with Harry. She liked Jon’s arms around her, the warmth of his embrace. She even liked the way he was grabbing at her teats. It felt possessive, but also protective and sweet.

His cock poking her in the back was just funny. She knew by now that all healthy men woke up this way, regardless of how they were sleeping or whom they were with. But there was a part of her that liked to think he’d followed her instructions and dreamt of her.

It’s all so beautiful. Her eyes wandered about the room, loving every tapestry and flower and branch. She wanted to cry again. Someone did this for me. He did it to make me smile. He didn’t do this to get me into bed. That was already assured. He didn’t do this because anyone forced him. He didn’t do this to send a message to someone else or use me politically. He did this to make me happy.

And to think I was worried last night. She’d come out of the dinner with the Tyrells feeling very insecure. Jon had warmed to Margaery considerably, by the looks of things. He’d given her warm smiles, ones that met his eyes. He’d exchanged little looks with her. He seemed more relaxed talking to her at certain points, very focused and engaged in their conversations. He actually didn’t seem to find it a chore to talk to her anymore.

Margaery had shown up looking absolutely stunning, of course. Sansa had once thought her friend’s gowns a bit too revealing. But Daenerys had come in with her Essosi dresses and revealing became
more fashionable. Next to both women, Sansa felt she looked almost dowdy in her white lace. Margaery looked like an absolute fantasy, her shoulders and breasts partially bare, the emeralds she wore calling attention to her long neck.

Progress was made that evening. But Sansa had hurried back to her rooms feeling little triumph. She’d been intent on freshening up before going to Jon’s quarters, making sure her hairpieces were in place. She’d even thought to put on that nightshift she’d been saving for his nameday. She wanted to make sure that she looked as beautiful and perfect as possible tonight so that he’d forget all about pretty Margaery and her dark, fetching eyes, perky bosom, and chestnut waves of hair.

When she walked in and saw him there, looking so eager and excited, she’d felt calmer. He had a way of looking at her like she was the most perfect thing he’d ever seen. And then when she’d seen what he’d done to her room…

No one else in the world would have done that. No one else in the world had the memories of Winterfell that they did. It was so intimate and personal and beautiful. Their lovemaking the night before was rougher, more primal than she was used to with him. But it hadn’t scared her, perhaps because of the scenery and how at home it made her feel. It provided an excellent opportunity, too, for Sansa to reinforce his Stark identity like Daenerys had asked.

Two wolves in the godswood, she thought, giggling. She liked to look upon his face when they made love, but this had a special appeal of its own. It felt very northern and visceral. She’d also liked watching him in the mirror, kneeling behind her like that, thrusting in and out of her, looking wild and primal. Just thinking about it made her wet between her legs. She reached down and began stroking herself.

Her flashes of the night before were interrupted by the sound of her lover’s voice.

“Well, that’s just not fair. Starting without me, are you?” He flipped her onto her back and then crouched over her, staring intently into her eyes.

“Yes,” she replied tartly, continuing to rub her cleft. “You were asleep.”

Jon’s eyes went up and down her form, his gaze hot. “I think I might still be.”

She reached up and pinched him.

“Ow!”

“You’re not asleep.”

He chuckled. “Fine then, I suppose I can do this.”

He reached down and his hand joined hers. Her breath caught and her back arched.

“Are you alright, my lady?”

She smacked his hand away. “I’m fine. Now let me finish.”

“You can’t honestly expect me to just sit by while you’re doing that.”

“You can touch yourself if you wish. I’ve always wanted to watch.”

His eyes widened and he sat down next to her.

“You… you what?” he asked hoarsely.
Sansa bit her lip and blushed. “I used to think about it. When I touched myself. I’d think about you doing the same thing.”

His hand went straight to his cock, wrapping around it. He began pumping at once. “You used to… you used to touch yourself… thinking about me?”

Sansa began working herself harder, summoning up little sparks of pleasure. “Oh… oh yes. The night after the first Tyrell hearing, when Willas sent me the roses. After you left… that was the first time…”

“Gods, Sansa…”

“I did it every night after, too. The night I gave you that shirt, I did it more than once.”

He whimpered, pumping himself with more urgency.

“I pictured you sitting in bed, hand on your cock, whimpering my name…” The pressure was mounting now. She was close.

“Pretty accurate,” he gasped, his eyes now closed. It was beautiful to see.

“I kept wanting to burst in there and help you finish.”

“OH… GODS… SANSA!” He came then. She followed him seconds later. When they were done, they both smiled at each other. Jon wiped his stomach off and lay back. Sansa climbed onto him, folding her arms over his chest and resting her head there, gazing up at him.

She smiled. “So, when did you start thinking about me?”

Jon went red. “Sansa…”

“Come now, I told you. It’s only fair.”

He glanced around, looking thoroughly embarrassed. And that’s when it hit her.

“It was before we were reunited, wasn’t it?”

“Um, there was that portrait done of you… when you first took the North.”

Sansa remembered. Four years ago, she’d marched passed The Neck. Petyr thought reproducing images of her and sending them far and wide was a good idea. “When they see that gorgeous face of yours, every man will gladly pick up a spear and fight for you.” Sansa laughed.

“That portrait of me was done when I was first betrothed to Harry.” Originally, the painting had her with her dark Alayne Stone hair. But it had been recolored in the reproductions. She could understand how it might inspire naughty thoughts. Originally it was intended to seduce The Young Falcon. It had her pouting in a very low-cut gown.

“It was very flattering.”

“I’m glad you liked it. But maybe you liked it a little too much.”

“Be merciful, Sweetling. That picture looked like it was specifically designed to make a man play with himself.”

Sansa felt her throat close up. He’d hit the nail right on the head. “I looked like a whore.”
She looked away then, sitting up. She suddenly felt very tired, and very embarrassed. Sometimes, Jon made her feel so good that she forgot all of the shameful things she’d been involved in. She could almost forget how she’d been taken by others before, how they’d put her on display. How she’d acted like a whore when it suited her needs. Even now she could remember sitting for that painting. Before the artist arrived, Petyr walked up to her, reached under her bodice, grabbed her nipples and pulled them up so that they were almost peeking up behind the red lace trim of her gown. “Lean forward,” he’d told her. She’d spent hours just like that, leaning forward, her breasts millimeters from spilling out of her gown completely. She’d been terrified that at any moment, they might fall out and the artist would see everything.

That picture was the most commonly known image of her in the world. Chances were, if one mentioned the name ‘Sansa Stark’ to any random person in the kingdom, that would be what they’d envision. The picture of her struggling not to breathe too deeply lest she accidentally expose herself to the artist.

Petyr always took pleasure in having her wear the most revealing dresses they could get away with. Sometimes it could be absolutely miserable, especially during the northern winter weather. She’d fallen ill on more than one occasion as a result. He only let her cover up after one illness almost resulted in her miscarrying Eddie.

Sansa looked at the ground, embarrassed. She didn’t want to be that girl anymore.

Last night, she’d thought for a second, when she saw what Jon had done to her room, that he was going to ask her to marry him. But then he didn’t. That image of a sweet noble virgin in an ivory gown flashed through her mind again.

She felt arms circle her. Jon rested his chin on her shoulder and kissed her cheek. “You are not a whore.”

“Really, what else would you call a woman who keeps to the bed of a man who is not her husband while he pays for her entire livelihood?” she asked, pulling away from him and getting up. She walked over to her dressing table and began removing the remains of the garland from her hair. “Just because I’m your whore doesn’t mean I’ve ceased to be one.”

She heard pounding footsteps. Seconds later, his hands were on her, turning her around roughly. She yelped. Memories of being handled this way rushed back to her. He glared at her.

“I would march you down to the godswood and make you my wife at this very moment if it were not for the fact that Daenerys might roast you alive for treason if I did.”

The mention of Daenerys’s name jolted her back to reality. Right. Our little discussion. She looked down at herself and tried to regain composure. I have to play this right. She swallowed heavily and looked at him again. “Is that true?”

He took a deep, shuddering breath and stepped back. “Aye. It is. That is, given that you were willing. I know you haven’t had the best experiences with matrimony. But if you were willing to try it with me…”

She reached up and stroked his face. “But why would you be willing to try it with me?”

Right now, she needed an ego boost.

He cocked his head. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, I’ve been used a variety of ways by more than one man. Everyone in the kingdom knows I’ve
engaged in the type of activities only the most desperate of whores will stoop to. It’s a matter of public record, after all. Why would a man who could have any woman in the kingdom want someone who testified in court about having shared a bed with a man she called father?”

“You were raped, Sansa. That’s his shame, not yours. I don’t care about that. Maybe other men have shared your bed, but I’m the first who has made love to you.”

Sansa gasped. She hadn’t realized it, but he was right. He was the first man she’d given herself to fully of her own free will, free from any coercion or psychological manipulation. But she couldn’t let her feelings get in the way at the moment. She had a job to do. She swallowed. “Yes. You are. And you also happen to be my half-brother.”

He pulled away then, looking stung. “I’m not. You know that. We were never truly siblings.”

“But for the longest time, we thought we were,” she pointed out. “You grew up in my father’s house. You called him father. You still call him that. You still refer to Robb, Bran, and Rickon as your brothers. You still call Arya sister. You spend your time with Ghost, but don’t go near the dragons your true House is known for unless forced. You love it when I call you Jon Snow. You yearn for Winterfell. You’re a wolf, not a dragon.”

“I love it when you call me Jon Snow because it reminds me that there is at least one person in my life who can see past the dragon fire and crown. I can share a mind with Ghost. He taught me to warg. I was closer to our siblings than I was with you. We never had much of a sibling relationship. I yearn for Winterfell because it was where I was raised. I am more prone to my wolf side, but only because I’ve known myself to be a dragon for such a small fraction of my life. I’m still learning. But I don’t see you as my sister.”

“You also don’t see yourself as a dragon. I can’t be the one to hold you back from spreading your wings, Jon. Until you can reconcile yourself to your Targaryen side, I’ll always feel like I’m holding you back.”

Jon froze. “Sansa…” he choked out. “Please… please don’t do this. What we have now… It’s not everything I want, but it’s the best thing I have. Don’t end this. Don’t end what we have.”

She saw his tears and her stomach lurched. “Jon… No… I’m not leaving you.”

Sansa pulled him close, kissing him. “I’m not leaving. I’m not. I’m right here. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I scared you. I’m not leaving.”

He gave this huge sigh of relief and held her tight. “Thank the gods. You scared me.”

“I just can’t be your wife,” she said, hating herself. “I can’t be your wife until you can learn to be a dragon. As long as you’re just a wolf, I’m just your whore.”

It was at this moment that Sansa’s new lady’s maid, Fanny, burst in, carrying a pile of sheets. The dark-haired, chubby maid stopped short when she saw Jon and Sansa, squeaked, dropped the sheets, and ran out.

The two looked at each other. Sansa bit her lip. “And now everyone will know.”

~_~_~_~_~

Jon:

Two days later, the court was abuzz with gossip about Prince Jon and Lady Stark. Garlan and Loras
Tyrell respectfully declined to train with him. Sansa emerged from a lunch date with Margaery looking despondent.

Jon used the free time the Tyrell brothers gave him to speak to Margaery himself. He came upon her in the gardens, walking among what used to be fully bloomed rose bushes. She kept her green velvet hood up.

“Lady Stark didn’t mean any harm to you,” Jon told her. “She spoke highly of you on several occasions.”

He didn’t need Margaery to pull her hood down to know that she was rolling her eyes. “Oh, did she? What kind of things did she say?”

“She said you were ambitious but not ruthless, highly intelligent, and that you were her one friend during her captivity here. She said that you’re capable of kindness, and that she respects you greatly.”

“I would prefer it, Your Grace, if you did not lie to me anymore. I would also prefer it if you did not pity me.”

“I’m not lying to you, Lady Margaery,” Jon said, frowning. “When I first met you, I didn’t like you. Sansa took offense to this. She spoke in your defense, and encouraged me to---”

“She encouraged you to encourage me.” Margaery turned then and lowered her hood. “What was the plan, Your Grace? Were you going to marry me for my family’s wealth and just keep Sansa as your mistress? Were you just going to humiliate me and set me aside before taking Sansa to wife? Payback for me replacing her with Joffrey?”

“Come now, you know better than that. She didn’t want to marry Joffrey. Your betrothal was a blessing to her.”

Margaery pursed her lips. “But it would have sent a powerful message, wouldn’t it? This time, it is the Tyrell girl being set aside for the Stark one. It would let the people know that even the bounty of Highgarden is no match for the Red Wolf of Winterfell.”

“Red Wolf?” Jon felt confused by this.

Margaery looked at Jon curiously. “What they called your cousin during her campaigns to retake the North. She rode in with her vanguard during her first battle at Maidenpool, wearing Stark white. But when the battle was over, she went and stood before her men, and her cloak and surcoat were completely stained with blood. Red clothes, red hair, blood everywhere. From then on she became the Red Wolf.”

Jon’s jaw dropped. He’d heard other nicknames his sister had earned— The Whore of Winterfell, Baelish’s Bitch, The False Bastard, Little Bird. He hadn’t heard of The Red Wolf. But that wasn’t all that shocked him. “She rode with the vanguard?”

“According to the stories, she did. They said she would cry the entire time, and that she rarely made a kill, but she rode out. They say she screamed the names of her parents, siblings, and son when she rode.”

The earth below him seemed to move. Sansa never spoke of this. Why? He’d detailed all of his exploits at The Wall, fighting for Daenerys. He’d told her of how he’d been forced to kill Qhorin Halfhand, how he’d faced down Mance Rayder’s forces at the Battle of Castle Black, the one time he’d ridden Rhaegal beside Daenerys, how they’d fought the Night’s King together. Sansa had
shared stories of watching her son die, pleading for their father’s life before the Iron Throne, escaping to her chambers during the Battle of Blackwater, caring for Robert Arryn She’d said nothing of fighting any battles herself. Jon had always assumed that Harry had led the forces. He had heard stories of her leading armies, but he’d always assumed it meant that she simply commanded them from afar and rode through the battlegrounds after victory. He didn’t realize she’d gone to fight herself. The truth was, he didn’t know much of the northern campaigns, those weren’t spoken of much in King’s Landing for political reasons. He’d heard tell that Sansa commanded that none of the minstrels sing any songs from the northern campaigns out of respect for the new alliance between the Targaryens and Starks.

Margaery was looking at him like she was shocked that he didn’t know this. Jon was shocked himself. He wasn’t sure how to react to this information. On one hand, news of just how fierce and brave his lover was heated his blood. On the other, it bothered him that Sansa never spoke of this to him. Granted, in the court, talk of Sansa’s efforts to make herself Queen in the North was kept to a bare minimum for political reasons. But that didn’t explain why she never spoke of it when they were alone.

“My cousin is a great woman,” Jon swallowed.


“Margaery Tyrell, the Rose of Highgarden,” Jon added. At this, Margaery glared.

“So you’ve come to mock me, is that it?”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that!” Jon hesitated. Damn it. “I just mean that… you’re one of the women of this age. One of the great ones.”

“Many would disagree with you.”

“Many are idiots. Just because you were on the wrong side doesn’t diminish your talents or accomplishments. You’re not Cersei Lannister. You’re a woman who dealt with her circumstances as best she could and could have done great things for the realm if not for some very bad luck and restraints. But I think that now you have a chance to prove your greatness.”

Margaery laughed and gestured around at the snow-laden piles of earth and shrubbery that used to host blooms. “Any chance I had for greatness is done. Winter has come. No roses can bloom now, save for the winter ones. I married three Baratheons, three pretenders in a row. I’ve found the first future king who doesn’t want me as his wife. Keep in mind, one of the men I married preferred my brother as a bedmate. But he still married me. And you don’t want me at all. I am trapped in the same situation as most highborn girls, my chances at greatness dried up. Unless of course you plan on taking after your forebears and wedding multiple brides.”

Jon shook his head. “I will have one wife. She would be expected to only take one husband. I do not believe in collecting brides. Women are people, not things. But Margaery, you don’t need to marry me for greatness. This is a new age. You have far more to offer than what lies between your legs.”

Margaery sighed. “Do you think anyone cares?”

“I do. The other night at dinner, all I could think was that I don’t want you in my bed, but I would like you on my aunt’s council. You’d make a far better advisor than your father.”
Her dark eyes flashed. “I would. But that is irrelevant. There barely is a council, and aside from queens, women don’t join.”

“Nymeria Sand did.”

“Desperate times. And she was temporary.”

“My aunt intends to put Sansa there as a representative of the North. I see no reason why you couldn’t represent the South.”

“You have my father.”

“He has the titles, but not the wits. We prefer the wits.”

“And have you said as much to your aunt?” Margaery asked, her lip curling.

“Not yet. But I could. That is, if you could perhaps forgive any perceived slights and encourage your family to remain friends with Houses Targaryen and Stark.”

Margaery stepped back, looking shocked. “Did Sansa put you up to this?”

Jon frowned. Now that he thought of it, this sounded like exactly the sort of thing Sansa might have instructed him to do. But his lover had fallen ill following her confrontation with Margaery and stayed abed all afternoon. Jon bit his lip. “This is my idea, but my cousin had made little hints before about how everyone would be better off if you were the one who represented your family and lands instead of Lord Mace. I refused to even consider such a thing at first, but she encouraged me to spend time with you. She wanted me to make a friend of you. I now know why. You are a good friend to have, Margaery Tyrell. Sansa is literally sick knowing that she might not be able to count you as hers anymore.”

Margaery’s eyes narrowed. “So you’re offering me this so I’ll be sweet to your little cousin?”

“I’m offering you this so that the realm might benefit from your intelligence. I’ll admit that Sansa’s feelings also play a part. But I planned on proposing such an idea to you before the nature of my relationship with my cousin was made public knowledge.”

“You really love her, don’t you?”

“Madly.” Jon looked down. “You should also know that Sansa and I didn’t begin our relationship until well after she started promoting your interests to me. She began making arrangements for our diner party before she and I shared a bed.”

Margaery sighed again. “What happens now, Your Grace?”

“I’m not sure, Lady Margaery. A great deal of that is up to you. I’m going to recommend you for the council regardless of whether you decide to forgive my cousin or not. It is up to you whether you wish to take the offer.” Jon looked up at the woman again. “I must go now. I have to take dinner with my aunt.”

He bowed. She curtsied.

He didn’t really want to go to dinner that evening. Sansa had asked for a reprieve. She’d returned from her lunch with Margaery in tears and pled illness. Jon wished to stay by her bedside. The whole court was in an uproar. Fanny, who’d been extremely new to Sansa’s employ, hadn’t known a thing regarding the nature of her mistress’s relationship with Jon. Jon had instructed Anais to keep it a
secret and to lie about who had ordered the changes to Sansa’s bedchamber. After the new maid had seen them, she’d wasted no time in telling all of her friends. The servants’ gossip reached the ears of the nobles before long.

Daenerys still hadn’t addressed this, but Jon knew it was waiting for him when he got to the dining room. Sure enough, the second he sat down, Dany spoke.

“Word has already spread, nephew. They’re calling Sansa the Dragon Prince’s Whore.”

Jon clutched his fork and knife tightly and clenched his teeth. “If I hear anyone call her that, I’ll---“

“You’ll what? Start brawls in the Red Keep?”

“No. Of course not. But I’ll make it clear that such talk doesn’t gain royal favor.” Sansa had informed him that displays of royal opinion could be weapons as potent as any sword.

Dany laughed. “Well, you’re learning, at least. You should have been more discreet.”

“You’re not angry?” Jon asked. His heart jumped. *Maybe…*

“That Sansa is your mistress? No. I’m not angry. I like Sansa. And I know she loves you.”

Jon set his utensils down and stared into the Dragon Queen’s eyes. “She does, Dany. And I love her. With all of my heart. She is kind and brave and strong and clever. She is a good woman, a good subject, and a great leader. I know she’d---“

Dany held her hand up. “Jon, her reputation is in ruins, partly thanks to you. Do you think people want the Whore of Winterfell as their princess?”

“She’s not a whore!” Jon shouted. He was so tired of hearing that. “She’s a lady!”

“Don’t raise your voice to me.” Dany frowned. “You won’t like the result.”

“Don’t call my lady a whore,” Jon replied.

Dany’s eyes widened. “Watch your tone, nephew. I may allow familiarity between us in private, but I am still your queen. I’d bid you to remember that.”

Jon reddened and looked at his lap. “My apologies, Your Grace. I just don’t like people saying those things about Sansa.”

“I don’t either. I don’t think she’s a whore. I am merely repeating what is said about her. I like it about as much as you do. But I have to consider these things. You know that.”

“Daenerys, please,” Jon said, looking at her again and taking her hand. “I’ll do anything. Anything at all. Let me wed Sansa. You know she’d make a fine princess. You’ve seen how she handles the court. With her, you’d have someone to lead the sewing circles and attend to all of those lady things you’re always worried about. You’d have someone who knows the kingdoms. You’d not only be tying the North closer to the crown, but also reinforcing ties to House Tully.

“And she’s fertile. She fell pregnant with Eddie only a couple of moons after she married Harry. By all accounts she had a fine pregnancy and birth. Eddie was a strong, clever boy. Her mother had five strong, healthy, beautiful children, three of whom were sons. She’s still young, in the prime of her childbearing years. You’d have a stronger hold on the North. The people like her. She is devoted to you and supports the Targaryen regime. She controls more land than all the other Lords of Westeros
put together. With her, you’d have the key to securing the loyalty of over half the realm.”

Daenerys smiled. “You’d do anything if I let you have her?”

“Anything.”

Dany smiled and leaned back. She took a sip of her wine. “Alright then. Become a dragon rider.”

Jon’s jaw dropped. “What?”

“You are going to learn to ride Rhaegal properly. And you are going to make a habit of doing it regularly. Furthermore, you have to make a promise to me. After I’ve let you marry Sansa, you will go on a tour of all my realms, including those across the Narrow Sea. The Dosh Khaleen want to meet the Khalakka of the Great Grass Sea. They’ll want to meet the new Khalakki as well. Slaver’s Bay will also want to meet their prince and princess. You will become a dragon rider, and you will promise me that your children will learn to ride as well. If you do all this, you can have Sansa as your bride.”

Jon’s blood froze. He avoided the dragons. He’d sworn to himself that after the destruction of the White Walkers he’d never get on one of their backs again. Part of it was the fire. Another part was that he didn’t want to give anyone the impression that he wished to take Daenerys’s place. People had made statements about how Jon should be the keeper of the dragons and the king, something Jon rejected outright. His intention had always been to stay away so that no one ever got the idea that he desired to replace his aunt.

Jon looked at his lap and clenched his teeth. “Alright.”

Dany smiled. “Good. We will start first thing tomorrow morning. Tomorrow afternoon, you, Missandei, Sansa and I will start drafting the contract. Once you are competent enough to ride Rhaegal without me, we’ll sign the contract and make a formal announcement. Tell Sansa to start working on a maiden’s cloak. But keep everything discreet.”

His heart rose and he smiled. “Thank you, Aunt Daenerys.”

“I’m sure you’d like to run off and tell your intended. So go. Go celebrate.”

Jon jumped up, kissed his aunt on the head, bowed, and ran off to Sansa’s chambers. He entered to find Sansa in her solar, wearily eating her dinner in her dressing gown. He ran over, grabbed her about the waist and swung her up into the air.

“JON!” she admonished, looking cross. “Have you gone mad?”

“I think I may have,” he said, laughing. “I’ve just agreed to start riding on the backs of giant, scaled, fire-breathing monsters.”

“What?”

“Well, those were her terms.”

“Whose terms? What are you talking about? Put me down!”

“No,” Jon insisted. “I’m not putting you down.”

Sansa glanced over at her servants. Anais was there. Glaring, she marched right up to Jon.

“Your Grace, she is the Lady of Winterfell and the Eyrie and Warden of the North. If she says you
are being overly familiar, then you are. Just because you are a prince doesn’t mean you can put your hands on a lady like that.”

“What about a princess?” Jon asked, smirking.

“What?” Both women in the room spoke in unison.

“I believe a prince can never be overly familiar with his princess,” Jon said, grinning up at a shocked looking Sansa. “And the Lady of Winterfell and the Eyrie is going to be my princess.”

Sansa’s jaw dropped. “Wh-what?”

“I spoke to my aunt. If I agree to become a dragon rider and tour all her domains, she’ll grant us permission to wed. I saddle Rhaegal tomorrow morning. In the afternoon, we’re all going to start drafting a contract with Missandei. You’re going to be Princess of Westeros and Slaver’s Bay and Khalakki of the Great Grass Sea.”

He set her down then. She promptly fainted. Jon managed to catch her. He looked at Anais in shock.

“I wasn’t expecting that reaction.”

The maid frowned and started ushering him towards the bedchamber. “She’s been sick all day. Her nerves probably couldn’t handle the shock.”

Jon’s joy took a hit as he lay his intended on the bed. “Is it serious?”

“I’m not sure. I doubt it. She’s exhausted. After all she’s been through, it’s to be expected.” Anais pulled the covers over Sansa, then looked at Jon. “You intend to marry her?”

Jon nodded.

“She’s your half-sister.”

“My cousin,” he corrected her, annoyed by this.

“Right. Of course. My mistake. The Starks were your cousins. Right.”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. He wasn’t used to hearing a servant speak to him like this since he was declared Prince of Westeros. None besides Satin. “It’s no concern of yours, madam.”

Anais stepped back. “Apologies, Your Grace. Will you be spending the night here?”

Jon nodded. “If you could have Satin fetch my things for me. I’d like to be here for my lady while she’s sick.”

“You wouldn’t want to get sick yourself. Especially not if you’re going to be riding dragons soon.”

“I’ll be fine. And Anais?”

“Yes?”

“I’d appreciate it if you kept these recent developments a secret.” He knew he could trust her on this. The maid was very devoted to his lover. She’d kept their relationship a secret for this long, after all.

The maid sighed. “Yes, Your Grace.”
Anais hurried off and Sansa stirred. She opened her eyes slowly. Jon crouched over her and stroked her face. “You’re awake.”


“I ran in and told you the good news. I’ve consented to become a dragon rider and Daenerys has consented to let us wed.”

“So I didn’t dream that.” Sansa rubbed her head and smiled. “I was afraid I had.”

“You didn’t.” Jon grinned. “So, do you consent? Will you be my wife?”

She blushed and giggled. “Of course, you silly man.”

Chapter End Notes

I consider this to be the end of one major chunk of the story. But this isn't the end by any means. Insane things are coming. So enjoy!!!
What It is Like to Fly

Chapter Summary

Sansa takes ill again and her symptoms are analyzed

Chapter Notes

Shout out to my betas, Bluecichlid and Illyana! Amazing as always, guys.

I don't have much to say regarding this one except: PREPARE FOR FEELS.

Chapter Thirteen: What It is Like to Fly

Jon:

King’s Landing looked beautiful from the sky. A landscape of snow-covered reddish-brown rock and burst of black and white met his eyes as he and Daenerys, hovered on dragonback about a mile out from the Blackwater Bay. The stench of the city was gone, replaced by salty sea air.

They were both on Rhaegal. He sat up front, his aunt pressed up against his back, her legs against his legs, her arms about his waist, her hands holding the reins along with him. She rested her face against his back.

“Are you ready to admit that something like this might make all the trouble worth it?” she teased.

This was the first time Jon had managed to get the beast to hover after over a fortnight of very uncomfortable struggles. Dany still guided his movements for safety’s sake, but he’d managed to master some of the basics on his own. Back at The Wall, he’d essentially relied on a few commands and Daenerys’s help in controlling Rhaegal, and even then he’d found himself grievously injured. In the last two weeks, his collection of burn scars had expanded, though not as much as he’d feared. But he often returned to the Red Keep bruised and cut up, needing Sam to see to his wounds. He currently had bandages on his left arm, and his nose had a splint.

“What makes this worth it is waiting for me back at the Red Keep,” he replied, “But yes, otherwise, the view might make up for the bruises and the broken nose.”

“You learn to fly well enough, and you’ll be able to view all sorts of things like this. The Wall. Qarth. Harrenhal. Dragonstone. Winterfell. The Great Titan of Braavos. You could show Sansa what it’s like to fly.”

Jon smiled. He liked the idea in concept. But there were the safety concerns. “I wouldn’t want her getting hurt.”

“It’s perfectly safe once you know what you’re doing. You just don’t know what you’re doing yet. But you’re learning.” She patted his arm. “Let’s circle the city one more time and then we can turn in.”
He took a deep breath and gave the order. Rhaegal began to flap her wings harder and move, speeding towards the land. Jon concentrated, trying to guide the beast’s movements as best he could. It’s getting easier. The beast didn’t resist him as much now.

When they descended into the Dragonpit, Jon slid off the creature before helping his aunt. He paused a short while, stroking the beast’s neck, admiring the jade like hue of her scales.

“Why Rhaegal?” he asked his aunt.

“Hmm?”

“Viserion is the calmest of the three. So why did you choose to teach me on Rhaegal?”

Dany laughed. “Well, you’ve always been good with women. Especially the dangerous ones.”

“I’m flattered,” he replied, meaning it.

She walked over and joined him, nuzzling her daughter’s giant neck. “And, well, I figured I’d save the calm one for your first babe.”

“Quite the inheritance.”

“Well, I have to leave them to someone, don’t I?” He noticed his aunt’s eyes drop slowly. Her smile fell a bit as well. Jon’s stomach sank. He reached out and pulled his aunt into a warm embrace. It killed him sometimes, knowing Dany wouldn’t have children. One of the cruelest jokes the gods had played was denying a woman who had built so much a child of her own to leave the fruits of her labor to. Sometimes, the guilt of knowing that he was going to profit from all of her hard work kept him up at night.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered to her.

“Don’t. Please don’t do that. Don’t apologize. If it weren’t for you, there would be no more Targaryens. So don’t apologize.” Dany pulled away and looked him in the eye. “Learn to ride properly so you can teach your children. Do your duty to my kingdoms and to me. That is all I ask.”

Jon nodded. “I will. For both of you.”

He and his aunt departed for the keep. When they got there, Jon went to change from his leathers into some more court-appropriate clothing, then headed straight to Sansa’s chambers. He entered her solar to find Sam there, pouring over the northern ledgers and hastily scribbling on some parchment.

He smiled when he saw his friend. “Still finishing up?”

“Well, I’m doing better. We’re almost done,” Sam said, grinning. “It’s actually been quite fun, doing this. The economy up there is fascinating. And say what you want about Baelish, he knew some creative methods of breeding coin.”

Jon smiled. “You can find practically anything fascinating as long as it’s written down.”

“That’s why I’m going to be a maester, I suppose.”

“Why isn’t Sansa out here with you?” Jon asked. Usually she was fairly good about keeping up with Sam. He often found the two of them with their heads together when he came to visit her.

Sansa still didn’t have much of a head for the figures themselves, but according to Sam she understood the concepts of things like investing and saving. She also was good at predicting the
value of certain things and had knowledge of how to make the best financial arrangements. As long as she had someone to do the math for her, she could usually work things out.

And she kept a careful watch over Sam. Sansa was wary of becoming ignorant of her finances and too dependent on others. She usually kept fairly close by when Sam was keeping her books.

Sam frowned. “She’s not feeling too well.”

“Again?” Jon’s heart sank. Sansa had been getting sick off and on for weeks now. She frequently complained of headaches, fatigue, dizziness, and nausea.

Sam nodded. “She’s with Merys right now. I wouldn’t go in there, though. He’s taking samples from her. He wants to run some tests.”

Jon held back, deeply concerned. If Merys was taking tests, then it had to be at least somewhat serious. His lover wasn’t exactly the type to cry ill very easily. Sansa could be very proud and vain about certain things. She hated to be pitied or seen as weak, and she liked to project an elegant image whenever possible. He walked over to Sam, not wishing to intrude upon his lover. Sansa would be mortified if Jon saw anything.

She had odd standards about certain things. By this point, Jon had seen her nude, sweating, and peaking. He’d been inside her. He still had that pair of used smallclothes she’d given him when they first made love. They’d shared a bed. They’d shared some of their deepest secrets with one another.

And yet there were certain things she would not let him see. She refused to use her chamber pot in his presence unless he turned his back. She never farted or belched in front of him. She even tried not to sneeze in his presence. There were parts of her bathing routine he wasn’t allowed to witness as well, such as when she had Anais trim the hair under her arms. When Jon had revealed to her one night that he knew about her hairpieces, she’d acted so mortified that it compelled him to never mention it again. They continued to pretend that either she didn’t use fake hair or that he didn’t know about it. Jon wasn’t entirely sure which and he didn’t want to ask.

When she bled, she almost wouldn’t let him in her bed. Even after he finally convinced her, she insisted there be all these preparations. It was like a little ritual. She’d made him wait outside while she removed her smallclothes and hid away her rags. She’d lain drying cloths down upon the bed, and washed herself thoroughly. After they were done, she made him close his eyes while she scrubbed herself off again, removed the towels, replaced her body linen, and even wiped the blood off his cock with a wet cloth.

It drove him mad sometimes. He’d encountered men before who were disgusted by any sign of anything less than pure, clean, ethereal perfection on a woman. Who purposely ignored and avoided any sign of a woman’s bodily needs. Men who sometimes made Jon wonder if they were aware that the women of the world shit and pissed the same way men did. Men who treated menstruation like it was some sort of horrible plague that could cause them to start bleeding from the genitals if they came into contact with a woman on her menses.

Jon was not one of these men. His first two lovers were Free Folk, who cared nothing for giving off any sort of ladylike mystique. He’d fucked both Ygritte and Val when they were bleeding without hesitation. Neither woman feared farting in his presence. When you lived in a frozen wasteland and had one set of clothes, you didn’t care much about concealing bodily functions. Ygritte used to get into belching competitions with the men around her. Val won more literal pissing contests than any man north of the Gift. And the two women didn’t even bother trimming the hair under their arms. Jon still thought they were lovely and wonderful.
Sansa still didn’t like exposing herself. It mortified her. Jon had tried to convince her to see things differently, but that only embarrassed her further. Since then, he decided to just go with what made her comfortable. He knew that coming into her chamber while the maester took samples of various bodily fluids would make her quite the opposite.

He distracted himself by looking over Sam’s shoulder. “What are you looking at now?”

“Oh, I’m calculating current wool production. It’s in great demand everywhere, what with winter and all. Sansa wants me to figure out whether we’ll have enough to expand back into the overseas market. She began to sell northern wool to the Free Cities during her time up north. But the market went to hell when she was arrested. Flocks were slaughtered by the Vale men during the second sacking of Winterfell. Since then, the Mormonts have been trying to replenish northern herds. It hasn’t been easy, though.”

Jon stepped back. He really wasn’t all that skilled in this area. While he never struggled with figures as Sansa did, business was never a subject he excelled at. Geography, tactics, civics, writing, and military history were always his best subjects. He never had much interest in trade. Since becoming prince, he’d been forced to address it more, but Daenerys thankfully shouldered most of the responsibility on that front.

“Is there anything I could do to help?” he asked, glancing at the bedchamber door nervously. Sansa didn’t like him getting too involved in these matters.

Sam gave Jon looked at Jon, half-amused, half-dismissive. “I don’t think the lady would like that.”

“I’m of the North too. I should be able to help if I wish,” Jon insisted.

“She said that you might bring that up at some point. She told me that if you did, I am to remind you that it might not look all that well if the prince of the realm showed too much special favor towards just one of the seven kingdoms. Any more direct help from you could damage you, your aunt, and Sansa herself politically.”

Jon groaned. “Alright, what about indirect help, then?”

Sam grinned. “Invite Jon Connington to court.”

Jon blanched. Connington had been the guardian of “Young Griff,” also known as Aegon Targaryen. The young man who claimed to be Jon’s half-brother died during a siege in the Stormlands years ago. Daenerys had rewarded Connington for his loyalty to the Targaryens by naming him Lord Paramount of the Stormlands. He’d settled down since. It was known that he was no great fan of Jon, whom he saw as a usurper.

“Connington? Why?”

“The Stormlands has an abundance of sheep. More than they know what to do with at the moment.”

“What makes you think I could convince him to hand some of the animals over?”

“Not you. Sansa.”

Jon nodded. Yes, that made perfect sense. He smiled at his friend. “Thank you, Sam. Tell me, how is Gilly?”

Sam grinned and ushered Jon closer. “She’s been craving rabbit meat like mad for the past week.”
Part of him burned with envy to hear this, but the other part of him was filled with joy. “That’s brilliant, Sam. Will you be heading back to the citadel for the birth?”

Sam nodded. “We’ll be leaving after she’s three moons in, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. But you know you’re free to have it here.”

“I know, but I want to complete my chain before the child is a year old. I’ve got to provide, you know.”

Jon grinned. “You know, Dragonstone still doesn’t have a maester.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “That’s… quite an offer, Jon. I thank you. But let’s deal with that when we come to it, yeah? I’d have to discuss it with Gilly.”

Jon nodded. “Take your time. It’ll be a long while before I actually inhabit that place in any capacity anyways.” He clapped his friend on the shoulder. “Congratulations, Sam.”

The citadel student blushed. “Jon… if it’s a boy…”

“Yes?”

“Well, we’d like to name him after you.”

Jon suddenly felt like he had something caught in his throat. And something in his eye. And in his other eye. He tried to remain composed. “Sam… I’d be honored. Of course.”

“Of course, we’re hoping for a girl so we can name it something that’s actually pretty.”

Jon appreciated this insult, since the laughter and mock outrage was an easy cover for any stray tears. He gave Sam a soft punch in the shoulder, snorting. “Careful now, Novice. I don’t think your family would want you put in the stocks for insulting his prince.”

Sam glanced towards the door. “Speaking of families… you know, Sansa might not actually be sick.”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Well, if you don’t mind me speaking plainly…”

Jon sighed. At this point, the whole court knew about him and Sansa. Sam hadn’t broached the subject until now, but he’d given little indications that he was as aware of it as everyone else. “Go ahead.”

“You’ve been sharing her bed for how long?”

“A while. Over a moon.” Jon didn’t want to get into specifics.

“Well, she’s been tired and nauseous and dizzy. Her head’s been hurting. All of those things can be indicators that she’s… well… that she’s in a certain delicate condition.”

His mouth went dry. Jon stumbled back. He suddenly felt quite dizzy himself. Maybe… A child? He didn’t want to get too excited. But the images of fat little fists, hairless heads peeking out from a bundle of blankets, and pink-gummed mouths flashed through his head.

If this was true, it could be wonderful. No, it would be. Daenerys would let them marry early. She
wouldn’t want to risk any royal bastards, especially from a woman who was already meant to be Jon’s bride. The Targaryen line would become more secure, Sansa could be a mother again, Jon could be a father. There’d be a beautiful little child who looked like them running around the halls of the Red Keep.

“She’s been taking moon tea, though.”

“Well, every once in a while, it doesn’t work. Or maybe someone’s been making it wrong. But don’t get too excited, Jon. I could be wrong. Just wait.”

His friend spoke sense, of course. Jon nodded and tried to compose himself.

Merys and his assistant withdrew from Sansa’s chambers fifteen minutes later, the assistant carrying a sealed chest. Jon hurried over to the Grand Maester, who bowed low. “Your Grace.”

“How is she, Merys?”

“She’s rather tired, and her stomach is troubling her. I gave her a tonic that should improve things. I’m going to run some tests on her, though.”

“Is there--- Is there any chance that she might be--- in an altered state instead of sick?”

Merys pursed his lips. “Such a thing is possible. But one can’t be sure. Her last blood was three weeks ago. It’s a bit early to tell. But if she doesn’t bleed in the next moon, we’ll have a strong indicator. Until then, I could run some tests.”

Jon nodded. “I’d ask that you be discreet about this. Don’t tell anyone, not even the queen.”

“Of course not, Your Grace. But I wouldn’t jump to conclusions. Her symptoms can mean a great many things. Calm yourself.”

“Is it alright if I go in and speak with her?”

“I wouldn’t just now. I gave her something to help her sleep. She needs rest.”

Jon nodded again, not wanting to disturb his lover. When the maester left, he called for Anais.

“I was wondering if there was anything I could do… anything I could get for her?”

“You’ve done enough,” Anais scowled.

Jon frowned. He honestly didn’t understand why this girl disliked him so much. “That’s being prepared, Mistress Anais. I meant health wise.”

“She’s eating well enough. I keep her chambers warm. She’s well taken care of, Your Grace. I know how to do my job.”

“I do not doubt that. I just want to make it easier for you.”

“Find me a new assistant. Someone actually loyal this time, not a useless shrieking ninny or a blabbering gossip like the last two. She doesn’t need to be some prim little angel, just someone willing to work hard and look out for my lady’s interests.”

Jon smiled. “I may know just the person.” He looked over at Sam. “Sam, what is Gilly up to?”

“Not much.”
“How would she like to work for my cousin?”

Sam seemed to consider this. “Well, I suppose she could. She’s always a bit happier when she’s able to stay active. But her manners…”

“She can learn those. As long as she’s discreet,” Anais cut in.

Sam shrugged. “I guess that can be arranged. I should tell you though, Mistress Anais, she’s recently with child. She can still work, but I don’t want her under too much strain. And she may throw up a bit.”

“As long as she doesn’t get it on the lady, the lady’s fine things, or me, I don’t mind. And being a maid to Lady Sansa isn’t hard labor. At most she’ll have to carry a couple buckets of steaming water.”

“That’s nothing. She used to carry bushels of firewood on her back when she was near full-term.”

“Well, I’m willing to try her out. I’ll have a uniform sent to her.”

Jon smiled, very happy to have helped. “Anais, whatever my lady needs, it’s hers, alright? Don’t hesitate to ask.”

“I won’t. Don’t get too eager though, Your Grace. We don’t know anything yet.” Anais rolled her eyes and went off to find a page.

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Sansa:

It was dark outside when she woke, so dark that it made her question for a second whether she’d opened her eyes at all. Sansa sat up and called for Anais.

A woman with a lantern entered, but it wasn’t Anais. The girl hurried over and lit the candles by Sansa’s bed. In the greater light, Sansa could make out her face. She was shocked.

She recognized the face: doelike eyes, girlish features. Sam’s wife, Gilly the wildling girl. Sansa hadn’t seen much of her since the family’s arrival. Sam had remarked that Gilly was a bit intimidated by the court and spent most of her time in their quarters, playing with their son. But now the woman was standing in her bedchamber, dressed in a grey handmaiden’s dress.

“Madam Tarly? What are you doing here?”

“Sam says I’m to be your new handmaiden. I’m going to be helping Mistress Anais.”

“Oh…” Sansa rubbed her temple. She didn’t want to be rude or indelicate, but she also wasn’t completely comfortable with this arrangement. Gilly seemed sweet enough, but she was also rather… coarse. Not to mention inexperienced. Sansa took a deep breath. “Gilly… have you ever been a lady’s maid before?”

“No, milady,” Gilly replied. “But I reckon it can’t be too hard. Anais says the work isn’t too rough. I’ve cared for lots of little children and my sisters before, and I served at Horn Hill.”

“You served at Horn Hill? How?”

“As a kitchen wench.”
Sansa bit her lip. “Was this Jon’s idea?”

“It was, milady.”

She groaned. She needed to speak to her intended about making decisions for her regarding her staff. “Where is Anais?”

“She said she had some errands to run to get your dinner and see to your laundry, milady.”

“And where is your son?”

“Right now he’s with Sam in our rooms. They’re doing lessons.”

Sansa took a deep breath. She was so tired. She didn’t really feel all that prepared to train a new maid. But she decided to make do. At least this one won’t be off spilling secrets.

“Alright, Gilly. Have the queen and prince already taken dinner?”

“I don’t know, milady.”

“Alright, I’m going to ask that you take note of these things from now on. Light the candles in here, and then go find out for me. Be quick about it.”

Gilly nodded and scurried around, lighting candles. When done, she left the room without curtseying. Sansa sighed, went to her dressing table and began fixing her hair.

To the wildling girl’s credit, she returned quickly to inform Sansa that yes, the royal family had sat down to dinner. “But the queen says you’re welcome to join them.”

“You spoke to the queen?” Sansa asked, scandalized. Surely even a wildling like Gilly knew…

“Well, yes. I walked into the dining room and told them you were worried about dinner. The queen and Jon--- Prince Jon--- were there.”

“Gilly…” Sansa sighed. “Did you at least get permission to enter?”

“Aye, I did.”

“And then you spoke to the queen directly?”

“Yes.”

“Next time, you are to address messages like that to her attendant, Missandei. Not the queen herself. Understand?”

“Yes, milady.”

“And anyways, you shouldn’t have entered. You should have just asked one of the guards if they were already eating. It wasn’t necessary to interrupt the queen.” Sansa sighed. This was going to be embarrassing. She had to go to dinner now, just so she could make the right apologies for the great breach of decorum.

“Have I made you mad, milady?”

“Yes, Gilly, but not at you. Go into my wardrobe and get one of my gowns. I need to dress.”
The young woman quickly retrieved a gauzy silk of red with blue and silver butterflies and flowers and a shimmering blue underlay. Sansa sighed.

“No, Gilly. I can’t wear that one.”

“Oh, but milady, it’s so beautiful! You’d look so lovely in it. The blue would match your eyes. And it’s as lovely as something the queen would wear.”

“Gilly, a gown like that is for formal occasions.”

“You’re dining with the queen!”

“I dine with the queen almost every night.”

“But she’s wearing something this fine.”

“She’s the queen. It does not do for a non-queen to look like one in an informal setting.”

“I just don’t understand. If I had something this beautiful, I’d wear it all the time. I’d always look my best.”

Sansa sighed. “Gilly…”

“ Alright, I’m putting it back.” She walked towards the wardrobe. “It’s a shame though, to hide something so beautiful. I bet the prince would love to see you in it.”

At that, Sansa laughed. “I’m saving that gown to wear on his nameday, actually. Get me the lilac dress, alright?”

Gilly pulled out the lilac silk and brought it to her. “This one’s pretty too. Do you always wear things like this?”

“I wear them often enough.”

“It must be nice, being able to wear pretty dresses all the time.”

“It’s part of my job. I am required to represent the North, so I must project an elegant image.” Sansa pulled her dressing gown off and held out her arms. “Help me put it on. It’s a wrap dress, so the laces aren’t complicated.”

Gilly assisted her quietly. When the gown was on, Sansa put her hair in a simple braid. She hurried off to the royal dining chamber. When she arrived, a place was set out for her with a full plate, though Dany and Jon were already almost finished. Sansa curtsied.

“Your Grace, I must apologize for my maid. She’s new and she doesn’t yet know proper etiquette. If she offended you---“

“I actually found it rather funny. Sit down and eat, Sansa. Don’t worry yourself.”

Jon pulled her chair out for her and Sansa sat, suddenly ravenous. Her venison looked incredible at that moment. Her portion looked abnormally generous, but she was grateful for it. As she ate, she became conscious of Jon staring at her a bit more intently than usual. She met his eyes and he smiled.

“Are you feeling better, my lady?” Dany asked her. Sansa swallowed her green beans and wiped her mouth.
“A bit better, Your Grace. I’ve been feeling very tired, recently, so it was good to get some sleep.”

“I’m growing a bit concerned. You’ve been ill rather frequently over the past fortnight.”

“I have. I think it may be a delayed reaction to everything that’s been happening. My body is adjusting to being at a normal schedule. It’s nothing to worry over.” Right now, the last thing she wanted was Daenerys thinking she wasn’t healthy. She was so close now. She didn’t need her health and, by extension, her fertility coming into question.

“It’s just a bit of fatigue,” Jon said, smiling at her warmly. “I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

“Grand Maester Merys is examining me. He doesn’t think there’s any cause for alarm. But I had him run some tests just in case. I’m being careful.”

“Well good, make sure you’re getting plenty to eat,” Jon said. “And don’t strain yourself too much.”

Sansa snorted. “Honestly, Jon, you make it sound like I’m back on trial. How am I going to strain myself at this point? Excessive sewing?”

“Let’s not pretend that you don’t work hard,” he protested. “You’re constantly seeing to things in the North, at court… You could use a rest.”

“Honestly, Jon. Calm down. I’m not a child.”

Daenerys was looking back and forth between them, an alarmed look on her face. “Is there something you two would like to tell me?”

An awkward silence filled the room. Jon looked nervous, and Sansa couldn’t understand why. She had no idea what Daenerys was talking about or what Jon looked nervous about.

“Nothing I can think of, Your Grace,” Sansa replied, honestly bewildered.

“Are you sure?”

“Quite sure. Unless Jon has something to tell you that I am unaware of. Jon?”

Both women looked at the prince. He seemed flustered. “Nothing!”

Then he looked at his plate. *Gods, we have to work on his lying. What could possibly be the matter?*

Both women continued to stare at Jon, mystified. Daenerys gave Sansa a quick, questioning glance. The Lady of Winterfell gave a silent reply expressing the same level of confusion. After a few seconds, Jon spoke again.

“You look beautiful tonight…. Both of you, I mean. You both look beautiful.”

Sansa was touched but still confused. Daenerys, apparently deciding to see the humor in Jon’s behavior, sat back and sipped her wine. She gave Sansa another little look. *Look into this for me.*

Sansa nodded and finished her meal. When she was done, Jon jumped to his feet. “Let me escort you out. If you don’t mind, Aunt Daenerys?”

Dany laughed and waved her hand. “Go.”

Jon hurried over to Sansa, pulled out her chair, and helped her up. Once they were out the door, he put his arm around her waist, leaned in, and kissed her cheek. “I love you.”
“I love you too. But I’m concerned. What is going on, Jon?”

He winked at her and they hurried to his chambers. Jon dismissed Satin almost at once, doing it in an abrupt manner that left the steward looking rightfully miffed. Sansa gasped. It wasn’t like Jon to be so brusque.

“That wasn’t kind, Jon.”

“I’ll apologize to him tomorrow,” Jon said hastily. “I needed to be alone with you.”

“Why? What’s happening?”

Jon stopped short and looked at her in surprise. “You mean you really aren’t aware? I’d have thought you’d be the first to know.”

“Know what?”

He smiled. “I was talking to Sam and Merys about your health this afternoon. They said your symptoms might not be an illness. They think you could be…”

Sansa’s jaw dropped.

“You’re not pregnant are you?” “No! I’ve been taking moon tea, Your Grace.” “Good. If you were trying to get pregnant now, I’d have to rethink things.”

It can’t be, right? I’ve not gotten sick at the smell of leather… I threw up for two months with Eddie. My breasts don’t feel tender… But… So much has been happening, perhaps I missed something?

A chill went down her spine. “But I’ve been drinking moon tea.”

“Sam says that sometimes it doesn’t work. Or that it could have been made wrong.”

The worst part about this was how giddy Jon seemed. He looked so pleased, so proud. But when he saw the look on her face, he stilled. “Sansa, aren’t you happy?”

“Jon, I just… We’re not sure yet, are we? I don’t want you to get your hopes up too quickly. I couldn’t bear it if you were disappointed.” I could, and I will. Because I cannot afford to incur the wrath of the queen. She could practically feel the dragon flame licking her heels. She could picture those violet eyes wide with fury and hatred, hear that commanding voice accuse her of betrayal. Would betraying Jon make you feel any better? Taking moon tea wasn’t a problem when she was using it to prevent this. But now that there might actually be something fully rooted and growing inside of her… Something that was partly Jon… Petyr’s babe was no issue. I owed him nothing. I never wanted that. But this is Jon.

He seemed so excited. It killed her. He wanted this so bad. And so did she. Just not now. Why now? This isn’t fair! I was so careful

Sansa was terrified. She couldn’t help but cry. Jon picked her up.

“Hey, Sweet Girl, don’t cry. If you’re not, it’s fine. It doesn’t have to be now.”

Running her prior experiences through her head, Sansa leaned into the collar of Jon’s leather jerkin and inhaled. When she was pregnant with Eddie, and when Petyr’s little parting gift to her took root, she couldn’t smell leather without wanting to throw up. There was no reaction now. But every pregnancy can be different. Mother always said that she had problems with leather when it was a
boy, but not with Arya and I. That’s how she knew Rickon was a boy before he was born. I could just be having a girl this time. I never learned what Petyr’s babe was.

She patted his cheek. “I’m going to go meet with Maester Merys tomorrow, alright? Let me go speak to him. Then we can… celebrate.”

“Yes, yes. You’re right.” Jon set her down. “I just… I would like it to be true.”

“It will be, eventually. But you have to be patient,” Sansa said. “I’m just worried what your aunt will think.”

“She’ll be thrilled! She’s been desperate for another Targaryen. The realm needs heirs, after all. If it’s a girl, could we name it after her? I was thinking about it today, before I talked to anyone. You know Dany wishes she could have a child. I think she’d be very happy if our first is another Daenerys. I know we’ve talked about Arya, but there will be more girls. If it’s a boy, I’m sure we can still use ‘Robb’. But a Daenerys… Daenerys Targaryen II. How do you like the sound of that?”

This was killing her. “Do you intend for us to have only girls? Because if we have boys, we’re not going to make our Daenerys a queen.”

“Maybe we are, if she comes first. It’s a new age. A queen sits on the throne now. We’ll change it. No more of that nonsense about preference for boys. It’s unnecessary. The Dornish always had the right idea. And if Daenerys comes first, we can give Winterfell to our Robb. Robb Stark ruling the North, the way it should have been.”

*Oh, please stop. Please stop being so wonderful.*

“…Sansa? Wouldn’t you like that?”

He was looking at her anxiously. She forced herself to smile.

“I’d love that, Jon. I’m sorry. I should be smiling. I don’t know why I’m not.”

“It’s alright. Your emotions aren’t going to be in the best order. I remember when your mother had you and the others. She cried for strange reasons then too. I guess you take after your mother. Do you think our child will have red hair?”

“Jon…”

“Right. Sorry.” He tried to force his smile away. “We’re not sure yet. I bet I’m overwhelming you. I’m sorry. I’m just so excited.”

She took both his hands in hers. “Look, don’t get too eager. Even if I’m not, babies will come. Why don’t we distract ourselves? Let’s talk about literally anything else.” *Please.*

He stopped. “Well, there is one thing I’ve been meaning to speak of with you.”

“Yes?”

He smirked. “You’ve never told me about your time as the Red Wolf.”

Her stomach sank. *Of course. The only subject almost as uncomfortable as the last one.* She sighed. “It’s too late to think of war.”

He laughed “Come on, Sansa. I want to hear about your glory in battle. My darling warrior.”
Give him a bit of what he wants. She sighed and pulled him close, faking a smile.

“I always wore white when I rode in, so that at the end, it would be completely stained and my men would know that I’d ridden with them,” Sansa told him. “I was an awful fighter, but that didn’t matter as much to them. As long as I was there, braving the same things they were.”

She rested her head against his chest. “I’ll tell you more later. For now, just make love to me. Please.”

He did make love to her, like it was both the first and last time. In the morning, he kissed her and ran off to the dragonpit, fire in his gaze.
The Politics of Fabric

Chapter Summary

Jon flies and thinks of Robb. Sansa takes meetings. Margaery takes hankies.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to my girls Blue and Illyana!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fourteen: The Politics of Fabric

Jon:

Jon cried out joyously as Rhaegal tore through the sky. He now understood why his aunt loved these things so much. It just seemed so easy all of a sudden. It was like he’d been born flying. The air whipped passed him, but it felt different from his experiences on the ground. There, it was as if the wind was hitting him. While flying, he was hitting right back. There was so much color, and the sense of power and vibrancy was unlike anything he’d ever experienced. No longer was he desperately clinging to some unstable monster. He was part of this creature. While he wasn’t warging like with Ghost, he still felt a connection to the creature he rode. Rhaegal was an animal he could work with, instead of against.

_We’re finally understanding each other._ Jon smirked, stroking the beast’s scales. Now, he felt like a dragon. He suddenly didn’t need Daenerys’s guidance.

Jon glanced behind him at his aunt. “Dany, I think---“

She gripped his wrists. “Are you sure?”

“Let me try.”

Daenerys nodded and they flew down to the pit. The two jumped off Rhaegal’s back to saddle Drogon. When finished, they strapped themselves back on Rhaegal’s back and Dany ordered the other dragon to follow.

“Allright,” she muttered to Jon, leaning close. “I’m going to ride you out until we’re over water, then I’ll leap onto Drogon. You’re to stay low, very low, once I get off, and then we’re going to follow you close. Slow and low, alright? Slow and low.”

Jon nodded, excited. He did as his aunt bid and they flew out over the ocean. Once out, they got just high enough for Drogon to fly underneath. Dany unstrapped herself, kissed her nephew on the cheek and smiled. “Here we go. Remember: slow and low.”

She leapt off the saddle, landing neatly onto Drogon’s neck and then shimmying down onto the saddle. When she’d strapped herself in again, she looked up and waved, grinning. Jon watched in
admiration as his aunt hung back, then gave a little kick to get Rhaegal moving again. *Slow and low,* he thought. *Slow and low.*

Slow and low was less fun. Jon didn’t want to go slow and low. He’d seen the sorts of things Rhaegal could do, he’d even felt it. But he also knew better. A fair amount of his initial fear remained, despite his newfound excitement. *I have a woman and possible child waiting for me. Slow and low it is.*

They did a few laps along the coastline, allowing Jon to revel in the beauty of the Crownlands landscape like never before. Even during prior flights, he’d always been at least somewhat distracted by fear. Now…

*I forget that Westeros is a beautiful place sometimes,* he realized. *I shouldn’t. Someday, this will all be Dany-Robb’s.*

He knew he shouldn’t be thinking like that. Sansa was meeting with Maester Merys to confirm as he rode. They truly didn’t know anything yet. Sansa seemed skeptical. Jon knew he should be as well. But once the idea of it popped into his head, he couldn’t contain his excitement. He’d dreamt last night about little footsteps across the gardens of the Red Keep and in the godswood of Winterfell. He dreamt of little giggles and children on his knee.

*I’ll teach them to ride dragons in the capital and swim in the springs of Winterfell.*

Jon hadn’t given intense thought to his future children until recently. As a man of the Night’s Watch, he never imagined having any. Once he became a prince and it was made clear that he would, it became something of a burden, because the realm now depended on him procreating. Those potential humans he was supposed to eventually help create weren’t children so much as heirs. Thinking of such things didn’t come with any feelings but pressure.

Sansa had changed things. At first, he still wasn’t giving much thought to children. Then there was this one day, before they’d even shared a bed, he was watching her sew and explain some of the finer parts of religious and state policies and he thought, *Oh, there you are.*

It wasn’t as if all of a sudden his mind went, ‘babes, babes, babes.’ But having children suddenly seemed like less of a duty as long as he had a chance of doing it with her. As their relationship intensified, he felt more comfortable envisioning such things. When Sam planted the idea in his head the day before, it was like a dam broke.

Jon knew he shouldn’t have preferences regarding what form his family took. It never created anything useful or positive about the world to have specific expectations or hopes regarding gender or roles for one’s children. And yet… He couldn’t help but think of things he wanted in particular.

In the contract drafted between House Targaryen and House Stark, a condition was that Winterfell and the Stark name be maintained as independent, and that Winterfell in the North would not become a holding of House Targaryen like Dragonstone or Summerhall. Though Targaryen was the greater name and house, Sansa would not give up the name Stark. She’d formally be Sansa Stark Targaryen. Their children would also be Stark Targaryens. The heir to the throne would not pass down the Stark name or inherit Winterfell. Winterfell, the domains of the North, and the name would go to the second in line. That child would take Sansa’s moniker as their formal name and be Prince/Princess of Winterfell, passing down the Stark domains through their line, independent of House Targaryen. Daenerys wasn’t wild about it, but Jon and Sansa both insisted. The heir apparent would be Prince/Princess Targaryen, second in line to the throne, the next would be Prince/Princess Stark, Lord/Lady of Winterfell.
Sansa said she wanted boys called Robb and Bran and Rickon and a girl called Arya. Jon wanted his Robb, Bran, Rickon, and Arya as well, but he knew it would be prudent for the heir to the throne to have a Targaryen name.

He actually wanted a girl first. The inheritance laws regarding the Iron Throne were still currently what the books called Semi-Salic, which meant the law did everything to keep girls from inheriting short of declaring them all ineligible outright. Even uncles inherited ahead of daughters. That was part of what made the adjustment to his new role so difficult, partly why people kept insisting he take the throne from Daenerys. He’d had to sign a document essentially giving Dany the throne so she could be queen once and for all. Such things absolutely infuriated him. It would give him a great thrill to turn that system upside down and do away with gender-preference. He wanted a girl named Daenerys, he wanted to make the next Targaryen Queen.

And that way, their first boy could be a Robb. He wanted a boy right after the girl, a Robb Stark to rule Winterfell. Jon’s brother never got to be full Lord of Winterfell like he deserved. He got to play at overseeing the castle in a co-regency with his mother, but only ever got to rule as acting Lord. When Robb actually inherited, he was leagues from their home. He’d already called his banners and begun marching towards King’s Landing when Eddard Stark was executed, and Robb never returned. One of Jon’s greatest sources of shame was his childhood dream of supplanting Robb as future Lord of Winterfell. Every moment he thought of it now, dreaming of his father bequeathing Ice to him and declaring him the true Stark heir, made him cringe and loathe himself.

The worst part was that it almost happened. Prior to his death, Robb made a secret new will which disinherited Sansa and named Jon his heir, a declaration painfully similar to the petitions of Stannis Baratheon. The will had been kept by Howland Reed. When Sansa first took the North, Lord Reed met with her about it in secret. He didn’t want to deny Sansa her inheritance. It was quietly but formally voided on the grounds that the basis for the change—Sansa’s marriage to Tyrion Lannister—had been annulled. The document was drafted to keep Winterfell from the Lannisters, and now the Lannisters had no claim. For security’s sake, after Sansa took Winterfell, Jon officially wrote a letter giving up any and all claims to the Stark holdings.

The whole thing troubled Jon, though. The idea that his stupid, selfish, callous, childish wish had come true after he’d come to regret such a hope proved a great source of anguish...

Robb was never one of those spoiled, entitled little lordlings who took his inheritance for granted. All manner of Lordlings and princes believed they had the right to do as they wished and treat others as inferiors. Jon had seen it in Joffrey Baratheon Theon Greyjoy, Robar Royce, and Roger Ryswell, as well as a whole host of others. But his brother wasn’t that sort. He had humility and honor, and he did his duty. Robb never lusted for anything more than he had, he was well aware that he had more than enough, and he wanted to do the right thing so he could at least feel somewhat worthy. Robb was everything the heir to a great holdfast should be. And yet it hadn’t mattered. He was forced to leave home and never return.

There was something deeply wrong with a world where Joffrey Baratheon got to sit smugly atop the Iron Throne he had no right to and order that girls be beaten for his pleasure while Robb Stark died screaming, never to see home again. Robb Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, should have been a reality.

His son might even end up looking like Robb. There was little chance that the new Daenerys would resemble her namesake. Jon hadn’t inherited the Targaryen looks at all and his aunt was the product of incest. But for new Robb… Jon resembled Lord Eddard closely, and Sansa looked very much like her mother. It wasn’t a great stretch to imagine the next Robb would look like the last one. Jon intended to raise his children in a manner similar to the way his father raised them. He couldn’t do it
 exactly--- his children would end up spending a good deal of the time at the Red Keep, and they’d be princes and princesses instead of lords and ladies. But there were still the core values Lord and Lady Stark instilled in their children—duty, honor, kindness, humility, selflessness, strength, courage. Jon felt he could teach his children all of those things. It wasn’t like he wouldn’t have help. His Father had an admittedly fine partner in Lady Stark— despite her treatment of Jon, she was an excellent mother to her own children. Jon would not only have Sansa, but Daenerys would be there as well. It wasn’t like they would have a shortage of good people eager to help.

He got lost in his head for a while before Dany flew up along side him. “Jon! We’re done for today! Go tell the Lady of Winterfell to prepare her fine gowns and start planning a celebration. We’ll sign your betrothal contract tonight and have a formal announcement within the week. It’s time for the court to enjoy a little pageantry. We’ll use the announcement of an engagement as an excuse.”

Jon threw a fist in the air and cheered. He managed to command Rhaegal to drop him off in the gardens of the Red Keep before she flew back to the pit. When he got off his mount, he paused to check one of the large sundials in the garden. It was later than he’d thought, near midday. He headed straight for the council chambers. Sansa said that she’d be there around this time, negotiating.

When she said that, Jon imagined her either sweet-talking some old men or chatting with a group of ladies over her needlework. But when he entered the chamber, he found his lover standing by a window, blushing and taking a piece of parchment from a golden-haired knight.

“Ser, I don’t know what I could possibly do to repay you. Your bravery this morning was impressive,” she was saying shyly. “But I must ask that you not hurt yourself on my behalf.”

“If you ask it, my lady, then I must honor such a request.” The gentleman then bowed and kissed her fingertips. “But be rest assured, putting coarse cravens in their place is no danger for men like me.”

Both of them laughed charmingly. Jon cleared his throat. The two turned to see him and immediately bowed and curtsied. Jon strode over to Sansa at once, taking her hand in his and kissing her fingertips.

“Dear Cousin Sansa,” he said, trying to smile in that way that Sansa told him he should when in the presence of courtiers. He didn’t let go of her hand as he turned to face her companion. “And Ser---?”

“Ser Marq Piper, Your Grace.” The man was fairly young, in his early thirties at most, very handsome with flowing blonde hair and a neatly kept goatee. His dress was elegant: blue velvet doublet and a peach satin vest. It was all very fashionable. Jon suddenly regretted not stopping in his chambers to change before he marched over here. He was still in brown dragon-riding leathers, from his neck to his toes. He’d removed his cap, but that had wreaked some havoc atop his head. With his rough, scorched attire, sweaty brow, and thoroughly out of control hair, he hardly cut the most princely figure. Especially next to Sansa, who looked lovely in blue and dove grey silk with white lace.

Jon knew the name. Piper was a Riverlands House. But he wasn’t thinking all that clearly at the moment and struggled to remember any specifics about them. The colors of the knight’s attire almost rang a bell in his head, but he still had issues.

“Right, of course,” he said blankly. Jon used to have the names, seats, mottos and arms of every noble house in the realm memorized as a boy. He still had most of them stored in his head. The Northern and Crownlands ones he had down perfectly. But for some reason, he’d always had difficulty keeping track of the Riverlands families. Maidens. Something to do with maidens. “It is an honor to meet with a representative from Maidenpool.”
Sansa pinched him. “Pinkmaiden, Your Grace.”


He was boasting a bit, but he felt he had a right to do so. And a reminder of the fact that he could command a dragon was surely enough to make people forget about his momentary lapses. One did not mock a dragonrider.

Ser Marq smiled. “I don’t blame you for being exhilarated, My Prince. We did see and hear the wings above a while ago. I assume the dragon was just dropping you and your aunt off?”

Jon frowned. There was a little smirk playing on Ser Marq’s lips. The message was clear. Wittle baby needs his auntie to hold his hand. So it gave Jon great pleasure to respond to the pompous arse with: “Actually, the Queen is probably still atop Drogon’s back, gliding over the Narrow Sea as we speak. Rhaegal only deposited me in the Keep.”

Sansa gasped. “So, does that mean…?”

Jon grinned at her, his eyes flashing. “I’m riding alone now.”

“Oh, Jon!” She set the piece of parchment down and grabbed both his hands. “Congratulations! That’s wonderful!”

Yes. Yes it is. Jon couldn’t help feeling a little smug.

“So the dragon prince finally flies,” Ser Marq remarked. “How exciting.”

“Isn’t it, though?” Sansa asked, breathless. “Oh, Ser Marq, we must put that in post-script.”

“Right away, my lady. “ Looking a little put out, the knight took the paper from the ledge where Sansa had placed it and brought it over to the council table, grabbing a nearby quill and scribbling away.

Sansa and Jon took this moment to gaze into one another’s eyes. Jon forgot his leathers at that moment. Everything seemed so perfect.

He really wanted to kiss her, pick her up, and spin her around. But he knew she’d be mortified. Even though everyone knew about them, she liked pretending they didn’t. She insisted upon discretion, which wasn’t always easy. While Sansa managed to behave herself, the same couldn’t be said about the court.

A few had reacted to the gossip by cozying up to Sansa more than ever, but plenty more had begun to shun her. Several houses from the Reach, Westerlands, and Stormlands displayed pure scorn. Those connected to The Faith explicitly avoided her. Sansa’s outspoken maid Anais had informed him of how several people had uttered words like ‘whore’ and ‘slut’ in fake whispers when she passed them in the halls.

Jon wished to react by displaying his support for her as much as possible. But Sansa rebuffed any public displays of affection. She’d explained that she didn’t want to reinforce the idea that she was merely his mistress. There were already whispers that she was turning Jon and Dany against each other and that she was out of favor with the throne. “I could be seen as flaunting my connection to
you. It would make for a very crass display. They already know you have… affection… for me. But showing that in public will send the message that your mistress is all I am. I may even be seen as a corrupting influence. You’re normally not the most expressive or public lover. You’ve always been seen as reserved and dignified. If I’m viewed as changing the behavior you’re known for, it looks bad. They’ll think I’m robbing you of your strong, upright Northern principles and dignity. That I’ve driven you mad.”

Jon would have called this ridiculous once. But, as he came to learn, the court was ridiculous itself. This idea wasn’t entirely absurd for King’s Landing. So he respected her wishes as much as possible, keeping to the same formal behavior in public that was expected between cousins.

Not that it’ll matter soon, Jon thought, grinning. Once she’s officially recognized as my lady and intended wife, I’ll be able to kiss her in front of anyone I want.

He waited impatiently for Marq to finish writing. “What exactly is he doing, Lady Sansa?”

“Ser Marq is writing to Lord and Lady Tully, asking that they come to court,” she informed him, “I have not seen my uncle for a very long time, but my requests to see him have fallen on deaf ears. He doesn’t like to leave Riverrun, as you know. But Ser Marq is a very dear friend, and if he writes making such a request, my lord uncle will surely come.”

Jon frowned. Edmure Tully had become notoriously paranoid about leaving his family home. His confinement to Casterly Rock had been less comfortable than he’d been promised all those years ago. Sansa, at this point, needed his support. There were few Northern nobles who could make the journey to the capital at this point—only representatives from Oldcastle and Widow’s Watch were making the journey now—and Sansa had few allies at court. Having Edmure Tully present as a reminder of her connections in the Riverlands would be invaluable, especially given her tenuous relationship with the Tyrells. It annoyed Jon that Lord Edmure could not be counted on to come visit his niece by virtue of her words alone, though it wasn’t a great surprise. He hadn’t been much help to her during the trials, either. That Sansa needed to charm some preening dandy from Pinkmaiden to convince the Lord of Riverrun to visit her was just infuriating.

Granted, there was bad blood between Sansa and Edmure, most of it concerning her mother and his wife. Sansa had been forced to put Lady Stoneheart to the sword during her retaking of the North, something Edmure protested vehemently. Edmure, for his part, continued to dote on his wife, Roslin Frey, publicly and privately. Sansa found the way he so openly adored the bride of the Red Wedding to be a slap in the face to her mother and brother.

Still, blood was blood. Not that Edmure Tully seemed to care. He barely even wrote to her, leaving most of the Stark-Tully correspondence to his aging uncle, Brynden the Blackfish, crippled in the wars and kept from most duties that took him from his desk.

“I will make sure of it, my dear lady,” Marq insisted. “I would fall upon my sword before failing the esteemed and lovely Lady Stark.”

He took her hand again and kissed it, practically purring, “Enchanted as always, my lady.”

The knight gave Jon a short little bow and an utterance of “Your Grace” before departing. Jon waited until he was well out the door, then grabbed his lover by the waist and spun her around.

“Dany says the contract will be signed tonight,” he told her. “We’re going to make the announcement within the week, as soon as a suitable celebration can be arranged.”

He kissed her then, and she smiled. But there was something in her eyes which troubled him. She
seemed nervous. “Sweetling, what is wrong?”

Tears began to fill her eyes. “Jon, I’m so sorry. I went to Maester Merys this morning. You’re going to have to wait a bit longer for your little Dany-Robb.”

Jon was crushed. Those little feet were now running away from him. He swallowed. *It’s my own damn fault for getting too excited too quickly.* But something else bothered him. “That means you’re sick.”

She nodded. “Maester Merys thinks I have some sort of respiratory infection or blockage. Nothing incurable, he says. He’s just got to locate the source of the fluid, and he can clear it right up. He’s running some further tests.”

The air left his lungs. “You should be in bed. Sansa… has everything been done?”

“Jon, please. The maester says it’s nothing life threatening. The blockage isn’t major and he found no signs of any growths or anything like that. It comes and goes. Just a little fluid. In a week, we’ll know what it is and I’ll be fine. I feel fantastic right now. Don’t worry, please.”

“I always worry, Sansa.”

“Worry about the kingdom and riding dragons. If I need fussing over, I’ll tell you.” She smiled and stroked his cheek. “We should be happy now. We’re going to be officially engaged, you’ve learned to fly. Just because there isn’t a little Targaryen growing inside me at this very moment doesn’t mean there’s anything to get upset about.”

She stepped closer and wrapped her arms about his waist. He sighed.

“You’re right. I’m just a little over-eager, I suppose. And it’s probably better that it’s not happening now. Rushing a wedding would look bad, and I’m sure Daenerys would prefer that we were married.” He pressed his forehead to hers. “I suppose I’ve become spoiled. Good things keep happening, and it’s made me impatient for more.”

“I’m not marrying a spoiled prince,” she admonished him, wagging her finger in a mocking fashion. “You’ll need to re-learn patience.”

Jon leaned forward and stroked her hips. “Do I have to re-learn it now?”

All he could think about at that moment was fucking her on the council table. *We can do away with the moon tea and make Dany-Robb right here.*

She pulled away. “Yes. I have a meeting with the Princess of Dorne in a quarter hour.”

The notion of his lover meeting with Arianne Martell honestly shocked him. Soon after the Lannister hearings, Arianne had returned to Dorne. She’d only just come back to court a couple of days ago. “But I thought you were trying to repair your relationship with the Tyrells.”

“I am. That’s why I’m meeting Arianne here instead of in my chambers. Margaery already knows about the meeting, she knew weeks ago I had to meet with Arianne when she returned to court. After all, I did borrow those gowns from her. Margaery also knows I only conduct the most intimate meetings in my personal apartments. So this looks more like a duty and less like pleasure. And doing it so publicly shows that I feel I have nothing to hide. But it also reminds the Tyrells that they already have enemies, enemies who have proven themselves willing to do favors for me. They don’t need House Stark growing too close to House Martell. Also, I want to send the message that I’m keeping an eye on all potential rivals.”
“Rivals for what?”

“Your hand and affections,” she replied, smirking.

“No such rivals exist,” he insisted.

“I know that. You know that. But until I’m bound to you in marriage, no one will believe it. They probably won’t believe it until I give you a son.”

Jon shifted uncomfortably. Being reminded of how he was viewed as some sort of prized piece of meat in the marriage market always troubled him. Soon it will be all over, though.

“A daughter might be better proof,” Jon replied. “After all, I intend on turning the entire succession upside down. Doing that should prove my devotion, don’t you think?”

“Stop getting ahead of yourself.” Sansa stroked his cheek. “Now go and bathe. You’re in no fit state to meet with the princess.”

Sansa:

She sent Jon away and took a few minutes to recover from everything. When Grand Maester Merys informed her this morning that she was not, in fact, with child, she’d been overcome with relief. The sickness bothered her at first, but the maester seemed unconcerned.

Her sense of relief soured when she told Jon, though. Disappointing him in such a manner bothered her. He’d exhibited such excitement over the prospect of them becoming parents. After making love, Jon talked well into the night about their future children, dubbing the possible fetus “Dany-Robb” and generally being adorable and heartbreaking all at once.

It hurt to tell him that it was a mistake. The pain in his eyes was evident, though of course he’d been lovely enough to immediately voice concerns over her health.

I don’t deserve him. I really---

“Lady Sansa!” Arianne Martell glided in, bedecked in a stunning dress of gold and white satin embroidered with silver suns, crescent moons, and stars. “It’s been too long!”

Sansa’s smile was genuine when she came forward to greet the Princess of Dorne and her cousin. The infamous Lady Nym, dressed in red velvet, stood by Arianne’s side, looking as elegant as ever. Behind them were a few attendants carrying baskets, who quickly moved to the council table to place settings and food.

“Princess. Lady Nym.” Sansa curtsied and kissed both their hands, grinning.

“Proper as ever,” Nym remarked, grinning. “One of these days, you’re going to have to learn to greet us as a sister.”

This was the fourth time the Sansa and the Martells had received one another. The three meetings that came before Arianne’s return to Dorne were things Margaery Tyrell was conveniently unaware of.

“I hope not,” Sansa replied, “I’m afraid my sister and I never got on too well.”

“Well, we’ll have to do better then. Of course, if you ever made her something like this---” Arianne
gestured to her dress, “Maybe you’d have been happier.”

Another thing Margaery Tyrell was conveniently unaware of was the origin of the gorgeous gown Arianne currently wore.

Sansa had replaced the white dress she’d ruined with a sincere letter of apology. But after Arianne returned to Dorne, she received a package. Inside was an exact replica of the gown Sansa had stained with the Queen’s wine. Along with it was a delicately stitched masterpiece of gold and white satin personally embroidered by the sender with silver stars, suns, and crescent moons. Eight pairs of doeskin gloves for the Sand Snakes and a silk scarf for Myrcella were also included, along with Sansa’s compliments.

“I’m glad you like it,” Sansa replied, “I was worried I hadn’t quite perfected the Dornish style. We dress very differently up north.”

“No, it’s lovely. And impressive, given you were working with broken fingers.” Arianne glanced down at her hands. “I’m glad to see that they’ve healed.”

Sansa nodded. “And the gloves and scarf? Were those to everyone’s liking?”

“Myrcella cried when she saw it,” Nym informed her as the women took their seats. The servants had lain out a very desert-friendly meal of dates, figs, and some type of spicy stew Sansa couldn’t identify. “Very few people send her gifts anymore, poor thing. Loreza reckons with her new gloves, she’s all ready to face the northern snows.”

“When Winterfell is rebuilt, she is welcome to face them there.” Sansa took a bite of the stew. It was some sort of fish, and far spicier than what she was used to. They want me to drink as much of their famous wine as possible. Arianne insisted that she provide the food for this lunch. It was instantly clear why.

“Oh, I’m not sure a daughter of Dorne could handle going so far north,” commented Arianne, “We’re desert folk.”

“I’m sure the legendary Sand Snakes could thrive in any temperature. We could use a desert influence, I’m sure.”

“Perhaps.” Arianne smiled. “I’m sure the North could benefit from a little more of the sun’s presence.”

“There’s many a place that could use more sunlight during the winter years.”

“And how have you been keeping warm in our absence, my lady?” Nym inquired. “From what we hear, fire, blood, and blankets may have been involved.”

Sansa affected a blush and stared down into her cup of wine modestly.

“Oh come now, Sweetling. Remember who you’re speaking with,” goaded the princess, “We’re not some uptight, prudish harpies looking to judge. Paramours are celebrated in Dorne, as is passion. Such things are not shunned by us.”

“It would be foolish for a northern wolf like you not to look for a way to keep her bed warm. You’re the last Stark, you can’t afford to freeze to death.”

Sansa knew Nym and Arianne wouldn’t judge her. They wanted to know for other reasons. This was less an inquiry about morals as it was about politics. She pretended to surrender begrudgingly.
“I suppose it’s no bother. Everyone knows at this point.” She bit her lip before continuing. “It isn’t hard to sleep soundly when there’s a piece of home lying beside you.”

Both women giggled.

“Every night?” Arianne asked.

Sansa hesitated to answer. She cast her eyes downward once more and frowned a little. She knew the purpose of this question. What Arianne really meant was, Just how devoted is he? Does he keep to your bed alone?

“I’d like to fall asleep with him every night and wake up beside him every morning, but you know… duties.”

This was actually very true, but Sansa crafted her tone and expressions to give different implications. She didn’t say that Jon didn’t spend every night with her, because he did. But he also didn’t always wake up with her because he was expected in the Dragonpit before dawn, and sometimes he managed to slip out of bed without rousing her. Whenever he succeeded, though, he always left a note. And some nights, one of them got to sleep before the other did. One of them would be kept up with duties, and send the other to bed with a kiss, then slip between the blankets while the other snored. The two still hadn’t spent a whole night apart in weeks.

But Sansa would rather have Arianne and Nym think she was the type of overly trusting woman who blamed lonely nights without her lover on the man simply having “duties.” It would be easier to gauge their ambitions if they believed they had opportunities.

From the glances the two exchanged, it was clear that Arianne was pleased to hear this. There was a little stab of jealousy.

“Well men must do their duty. They’re compelled to it. They can’t help it.” Nym stated with a quirk of her brow.

Sansa moved in for the kill. “Yes, and Jon is an honorable man. And I have no reason to complain, for he never fails in his duties to me. I know I’ll never have reason to doubt his devotion to his honor or duty. To the realm or to me.”

She allowed them to read between the lines. Though they seemed to do so with some skepticism, their expressions showed they were getting the message.

The Princess of Dorne nodded genially. “Well, even with the most devoted of lovers, we must also rely on our friends, mustn’t we?”

“Of course. And I admit to having a certain fondness towards establishing new friendships. It can never hurt to have too many friends.”

“Strong bonds are what solid homes are built upon,” Nym remarked, “Or rebuilt, as the case may be.”

Sansa grinned, pleased to have won another round. She took a long sip of her Dornish red and began speaking of construction and trade. By the end of the meal, Arianne presented her with an exquisite wreath necklace, the gold links shaped like little wolves running towards the centerpiece, a ruby and diamond sun.

It was easily one of the loveliest things she’d ever been given, and it was a giant propaganda piece. She loved it.
“We don’t have enough sun in the North,” Sansa remarked as Nym helped her put it on. “But you know what we have too much of?”

“What?”

“Snow. We have all this frozen water and nowhere to put it. I’ve heard fresh water is fairly scarce in Dorne. Isn’t that right?”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

She went to Jon’s apartments feeling rather smug. She felt a little less smug when she entered his solar to find him sitting at his table, still in his leathers, deep in conversation with Margaery Tyrell.

Both stood when she entered. Margaery’s face glistened with pretty tears, her cute button nose slightly red. The girl sniffed.

“Oh, Sansa, gods, this is embarrassing… I’m a mess.” Margaery reached up to wipe her nose. Clutched in her hand was a simple length of black linen embroidered with white. Sansa’s eyes zeroed in.

That was not Margaery’s handkerchief. Margaery Tyrell did not wipe her nose with simple black linen. Sansa knew Margaery’s handkerchiefs. Sansa had made some of Margaery’s handkerchiefs. They were always green silk embroidered ornately in gold with roses and her initials, edged in gold myrish lace.

Sansa frowned and walked forward. “Nonsense. It’s Jon who should be embarrassed. He’s not dressed to receive either of us.”

Her lover reddened. “Lady Tyrell had some urgent business to discuss with me.”

“Ah. Was your conversation fruitful?” Sansa asked.

“Yes, actually,” Jon said, suddenly seeming eager.

“I wanted to take the opportunity to speak with Prince Jon while you were with Arianne Martell,” Margaery said, “I feel so awful about the rift between us, you see. And I wanted his advice on how to make it right.”

“I gave her some ideas.” Jon winked.

Margaery grinned. “We sent a raven to Highgarden already. Half a mile of carts filled with grain, fruit, glass, lumber, brick, and iron is to be sent to Winterfell. Along with two dozen workers.”

Sansa stepped back. “I don’t know what to say…”

“Say that we can be friends again, Sweet Sansa. I don’t want any more bad blood between us.”

“Margaery… of course. There was never any bad blood in the first place!” Sansa let the Maid of Highgarden embrace her. When Margaery pulled away, Sansa noted that she still had the damn handkerchief.

“I’m so glad,” Margaery said. “I was absolutely sick over it. I mean… I felt so guilty.”

“Please don’t.”

Margaery shrugged. “If you say so. Though now I suppose I have something else to feel guilty for.”
“What?” Jon asked.

Margaery held up the length of black linen. “I’ve completely drenched your lovely linen!”

*She’s flaunting it. She’s actually flaunting it.* Before Sansa could say a word, Jon spoke.

“Do not trouble yourself,” he told her, chuckling. “It’s nothing too fine. Sansa’s made me dozens. I can go without one. Take it if you need it.”

“You’re too kind, Your Grace,” replied the Maid of Highgarden, “But you must allow me to replace it. I insist upon it, if only to save dear Sansa the trouble of making you another.”

Jon shrugged. “I’d be flattered.”

“Well, then, I must depart. I don’t wish to embarrass myself further.” Margaery grinned. “If you please, Lady Sansa, Your Grace.”

Jon bowed his head and Sansa curtsied. Before taking her leave, Margaery paused and prodded the ruby and diamond sun about Sansa’s neck with her finger.

“Lovely. A bauble from an admirer?”

“A gift from a friend.” Sansa said through clenched teeth.

“Must be a very good friend.” And with that she was gone.

Jon stood. “Where did that come from?”


Jon looked relieved. “Oh. Good. I thought for a second it might have been that ponce, Ser Marq.”

“No, no. It’s a red sun, see? The Martell sigil. There’s been a new trade agreement drafted.”

“That’s wonderful news,” Jon smiled at her and put his hands about her waist. “I’m sure you demanded that agreement include plenty of lemons.”

“Food of all types, and glass.”

“And what are you giving them?”

“Frozen fresh water.”

Jon’s eyes widened. “….Ice?”

“Well, we have plenty of it. And they don’t exactly have much fresh water of their own in Dorne.”

Her lover paused for several minutes, then began to laugh. “You’re a bloody genius.”

“And you still smell,” she scolded him.

“I’d think after what I just did for you, I’d smell of roses.”

*You do. That’s what I mean.* She frowned. “You let Margaery have your handkerchief.”

He looked confused again. “What?”
“Margaery. She has your handkerchief now.”

“Well, she was crying.”

“And she couldn’t have possibly used one of the dozens of pieces of silk she has in her possession to wipe her nose.”

Jon shrugged. “Maybe she just forgot to carry one today.”

“No. She didn’t. She wanted your handkerchief. And now she’s going to make you some. Soon, she’ll be making shirts for you as well.”

“Oh come now,” Jon protested, “You can’t honestly be jealous, can you? She came here trying to gain your forgiveness.”

“My forgiveness and your handkerchief. A length of black linen with your initials in white. Everyone will know you gave it to her, and that it’s yours.”

Jon started laughing. “So… what? She’s going to flaunt it like I’ve given her my favor? How romantic. I suppose I should have tied it up with a ribbon. I’m sure she’ll ride in a tourney with it fastened to her lance.”

“No, but she’ll gift her scraps of green silk and gold lace to her cousins, then start carrying lengths of black linen embroidered with white to wipe her nose. And the replacement she sends you will probably have little roses stitched onto the corners.”

“Someone’s lady love at last.” He gave this little smile and pretended to flutter his eyelids.

“This isn’t funny, Jon. It will undermine me.”

“Well then, you can take all of my other handkerchiefs and make a dress out of them. Margaery won’t be able to top that.”

“Stop it. You’re not listening to me! Do you want people to think I’m being replaced? Jon, my reputation is ruined. Think of what will happen if people believe Margaery has taken my place.”

Jon sighed. “Sansa… are you sure you’re not just reacting this way out of guilt?”

Sansa gasped. “Guilt for what, exactly?”

“Well, Margaery came in here, willing to resolve things. She gives you plenty of materials and labor to rebuild Winterfell. She’s crying and miserable. And you walk in with a big, sparkling Martell sun around your neck.”

“She was only doing that to—–“

“—–To get my handkerchief?”

“To manipulate you.” She gaped. “Jon… you used to be so suspicious of her. How can you not see what is happening here?”

He frowned. “Alright, fine. I see what you’re getting at. But you’re forgetting something.”

“What?”

“We’re literally signing the betrothal agreement tonight. Within a week, everyone will know that
you’re to be my wife.”

“I was betrothed to a prince before.”

He sighed. “Fine. What would you have me do then?”

She fumed. “I don’t know… I’m just so… I’m so scared, Jon.”

“Of what?”

“Of everything going wrong. You don’t understand… Things always go wrong for me. The second it seems like they’re looking up, it always ends up as just a precursor to even more misery. I think things are finally going my way, and then something awful happens.

“I thought I was going to marry a golden prince, and I ended up watching my father die and becoming the prisoner of lions. I thought I was going to be whisked away from my enemies and live a happy life in Highgarden, and I was married to the Imp. I thought Robb was going to charge into the capital and rescue me, and he was slaughtered at the Twins. I thought I was going to escape the capital forever, and I ended up in the power of a man who made molesting me his hobby. I thought I was going to retake the North, rebuild Winterfell and live a happy life with my beautiful child, and I watched everything I rebuilt crumble to the ground, watched as my infant son was murdered, and was dragged into a stinking prison.”

Sansa turned away so Jon couldn’t see her tears. “And now I’m on the brink of living out my life with the man I love, primed to be a princess, friend to the second coming of Aegon the Conqueror, Winterfell about to be rebuilt once more… So what comes next, then? Every time I’m given reason to hope, I’m only served a host of new horrors. Something has to go wrong. Something always goes wrong. So what will it be? Will I suddenly be rendered infertile, forcing you to set me aside and wed some other woman? Will something happen that will turn you and everyone else against me? Will I do something stupid that will ruin everything? Will you end up being the next person I love to die horribly? What?”

There was a long, awful pause. Then Jon opened his mouth.

“I’ll get new handkerchiefs.”

Chapter End Notes

*rimshot*
Chapter Summary

The Tullys arrive, announcements are made, there are two sex scenes and this chapter is super long. Enjoy.

Chapter Notes

First, thanks to Bluecichild for beta-ing this chapter!!!

This one is a monster, guys. Prepare yourselves. It took me this long to write it for a reason.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Fifteen: Court, Kin, Kink

Sansa:

Edmure Tully never got along well with his niece. When she’d stormed Riverrun with an army of Vale men, she’d received a letter from her uncle at Casterly Rock telling her not to try and retake the North. He’d counseled her to forget Winterfell and just take advantage of her new status as Lady of the Vale. “You’d live a fine and pretty life in the Eyrie. Whatever Petyr has convinced you of, don’t listen. He’s a weak man who constantly dreams above his station. No woman is fit for war, especially not winter war up north. Perhaps Littlefinger told you that you stand a chance against the Boltons. But he once thought he’d win a duel against Brandon Stark as well. Go back to The Vale and let that Young Falcon you married give you pretty babies and dresses. You’ll be happier for it.”

That had been his response to his niece reclaiming his family home for him. When they’d reunited, he took the opportunity to scold her for both killing Lady Stoneheart and risking his life and that of his “precious wife” Roslin. Sansa responded by officially declaring that Littlefinger would remain Lord Paramount of the Trident.

Roslin had been on his arm when Sansa met the Lord of Riverrun for the first time. He’d proudly and shamelessly introduced her as, “My wife, Lady Roslin Tully, Lady of Riverrun.”

Lady Roslin had addressed Sansa, then recognized as Queen in the North, as “Niece” in a clipped tone. Whenever Sansa called her Lady Roslin, Edmure was quick to remind his niece that his wife’s official title was “Lady Tully.”

If Sansa Stark never saw her aunt or uncle again, she’d have died happy. After Littlefinger’s death, her uncle became Lord Paramount of the Riverlands again. This put him on nearly equal footing with Sansa, who’d dropped her royal title. As a result, she was required to receive and acknowledge him, showing him honor as both a man of status and as a family elder. It was part of the reason Sansa usually stuck to writing to the Blackfish.
What bothered Sansa the most was how much her uncle fawned over the woman whose father ordered the deaths of her family. By all accounts, from the moment the Tullys were restored to Riverrun, Lady Roslin was given all a girl could wish for. Extravagant gifts, including a sumptuous feather bed draped in satin, a set of virginals inlaid with mother-of-pearl, trunks filled with gowns of silk and velvet, and casks of jewels were given to Lady Tully (By all accounts, it was never enough). They said that when the heir to Riverrun, Ambrose, was born, the banquet and tourney that was held celebrated the mother more than the son.

Indeed, when Sansa first met Lady Roslin, the woman was wearing more jewels than her queenly niece, including a pair of pearl hair clips that once belonged to Lady Catelyn.

So when Jon woke her that morning six days after the marriage contract was signed and informed her that she had to go greet the Tullys, Sansa was less than enthusiastic.

“You have to get up, Sweetling,” he murmured to her as daylight peeked through the lattice-stone and stained glass that made up her windows. Jon had just returned from dragonriding. He’d taken Rhaegal out briefly before dawn and was now standing over her in his leathers. “Your aunt and uncle—"

“Don’t call her that.” Sansa raised her head, having buried her face in the pillow below her. She had to hear this from her uncle and from the Blackfish. That didn’t mean she had any desire to hear her intended refer to that woman in such a way. As if she were my true blood. But then again, I never had much luck with blood aunts, either.

Jon sighed. “Fine then. Your Uncle and Lady Roslin will be arriving before midday.”

“I don’t want to get up.” She felt so exhausted, though she’d slept a full night. She and Jon hadn’t even made love. They’d both been worn out by the events of the day. Jon had put in extra hours with the dragon so he could end today’s practice early and greet the Tullys with her this morning, and every hour he didn’t spend on the dragon’s back was at his desk. Sansa had spent the last several days preparing for the betrothal celebrations, scurrying around the castle to treat with the representatives from House Flint and Locke who’d arrived, finalizing accounts with Sam, visiting with the Tyrells and Martells, drawing up plans for the small council with Dany and Jon, and making Jon new handkerchiefs. Margaery’s replacement for the one she borrowed from Jon turned out exactly as Sansa had predicted. The black fabric was silk instead of linen, embroidered in white thread, and little golden rosebuds were at the corners.

Sansa made Jon a new set of white linen embroidered with his initials in black and wolves of red. She considered it marking her territory. The problem was that she couldn’t make enough. Jon had used black kerchiefs for a reason. He often exerted himself physically in less than purely clean conditions. Stains from sweat, mud, blood, and soot were more easily concealed with black fabric. White was another story entirely.

She was making quite a few handkerchiefs.

Right now, she felt too tired and too comfortable to get up. She was in a thick lamb’s wool nightgown that she hadn’t had much opportunity to wear recently thanks to falling asleep naked most nights. It was why she rarely slept for long after Jon left the room--- his body heat kept her warm.

The only time she fell asleep clothed anymore was when she and Jon didn’t make love. This was not a common occurrence.

It sometimes shocked her how easily she’d taken to making love after her first encounters with Jon. The first several times, she needed to stay clothed and had to tie him up to feel safe. Once that
happened, though, once she truly felt secure, she’d been shocked by how fun it was.

Before, she’d used sex primarily as a weapon, armor, duty, or means of procreation. Most of the time sexual activity was inflicted upon her, either by force or psychological manipulation. Even the times when she’d peaked, it was usually against her will. Fucking, whether she gained physical pleasure from it or not, was usually one of the worst parts of her day. It was a nightly duty with Harry--- either she had to spread her legs or suck him off. Petyr liked doing it by the dayas well in order to feel like he was “keeping up” with her husband. Every encounter led to tears or frustration or both. Frequently there was pain as well.

Sansa couldn’t recall ever being in pain with Jon. Even when he left love bites or pounded into her roughly, at worst she felt a dull ache afterwards, and there was always something pleasant about that. It stirred up fine memories.

Part of it was how he’d let her tie him up those first several times. But even once he’d been set free to touch her as he liked, she always felt like she was the one with the power when they coupled.

And it wasn’t like Jon was a necessarily submissive lover, either. He could be dominant in some very interesting ways. Over a fortnight ago, she’d noted that when he’d put his head between her legs, his licks to her nub seemed very… deliberate. He’d revealed that he’d made a little ‘project’ to see how many times he could make her come with his mouth by writing out his full name and titles on her cunny, having begun the night he’d made her bedchamber into the godswood. It turned out to be twelve in all. There was something about this that she enjoyed. While it was possessive and territorial, it didn’t scare or humiliate her in the way Petyr used to in his assertions of possession. Petyr used to do all sorts of things to stake or express his claims upon her, from growling about how she was his to doing things like touching her whenever he wished or, at the worst times, spilling his seed upon her skin. Sometimes he’d even forbid her to wipe his seed away, making her rub it into her skin when he spilled on her face or leave it there and simply cover up with clothing.

Harry used to stake his claims as well. He liked spilling on her face when she sucked him off, but he never insisted she keep his seed on her skin. There were other things, though. He used to buy her various trinkets and baubles which were either rubies and diamond in a rhombus shape--- echoing the House Hardyng sigil, or were shaped like falcons or engraved with his initials. He liked touching her in public, too, and was often jealous of her speaking to other men. Strangely enough, he didn’t mind her alone time with Petyr, nor did he take issue with her spending time with male relatives. But if she were in the presence of young men, he often grew angry. He marked her in other ways, leaving love bites high on her neck and chest.

Jon’s little spelling project wasn’t like this at all. It was possessive, sure, and it was a way of marking her. But it was intimate, shared, and private. This wasn’t something others could see. It wasn’t designed to make her uncomfortable or prove anything to anyone else. She didn’t have any marks or fluids to hide, there was no anger or aggression. There wasn’t a sense of entitlement, either. She felt Jon more or less earned putting his name on her. It wasn’t like with Petyr or Harry, where they just decided she was hers because they wanted her. Jon was willing not only to work for it, but also to do something for her to get it. And when she’d asked about it, he hadn’t lied, nor had he insisted that he be allowed to continue. When he’d told her, he’d asked if it was alright, if she wanted him to stop. She did not. In fact, after that, she’d started spelling it out aloud as he went.

There were other, more traditional ways he asserted some dominance. He could be very vocal in bed. He wasn’t shy about telling Sansa exactly what he wanted to do with her or asking her to do things for him. There was always a bit of hesitance and there was always room for her to say no. But still, even at his most dominant, he never sounded hostile. Most of the time when Petyr or Harry told her what to do, they either sounded like they were fighting her somehow, or they tried to sound
apathetic.

She was quite sure that there were times that Petyr said things like, “I am going to bend you over my desk, rub your nub until you’ve soaked your petticoats, and then fuck you until you’re screaming my name.” But that was always in this threatening, angry voice.

When Jon said those words to her four days ago, it was more like: “I want to bend you over my desk and rub your nub until you’ve soaked your petticoats! And then I’d like to fuck you until you’re screaming my name!”

Even when he growled, he either waited until he’d asked for permission, or used words like “want” instead of “am.” It wasn’t what he was definitely going to do, it was what he’d like to do, if she’d let him.

And sometimes, yes, he grabbed her and fucked her hard, but he never made her feel like some sort of receptacle or object when he did. He always connected with her, always spoke to her, always wanted her to come. He never did things like choke her or pull her hair harshly or call her names. She felt wanted, rather than claimed.

It became something she loved doing, coupling. What was once a strain and unwanted duty was now a beloved activity. So she enjoyed doing it almost every night.

She never thought it would feel odd, waking up dressed. But now it did and yet, it wasn’t an uncomfortable oddness. She felt very snug, very cozy in her lamb’s wool. But she wanted her lover in there with her. She wished her nightgown was large enough for him to fit under it, put his head and arms through the holes and wear it with her.

She also wanted one day where they could spend the entire time wrapped up in the blankets and each other, with nothing and no one else to call them from the bedroom. She wanted to be snug and burrowed away with her direwolf lover, cozy and warm with no trout or dragons or territories or duties to get in the way.

Normally, she’d push such thoughts aside and drag herself out of bed. But today? She felt too tired, and she didn’t feel that facing her uncle and Lady Roslin were worth the bother.

Sansa slowly turned over and smiled hazily at Jon. Normally when he came back from dragonriding, she found his state unappealing. He usually smelled of smoke and sweat, he was covered head to toe in brown leather. When he took off his riding cap, his hair, which was fairly unruly on its own, was a disaster. Today she didn’t care. “Why don’t you just join me in here instead?”

She didn’t even feel like fucking him, just cozying up to him.

Jon’s eyes narrowed. “Sansa, you need Tully support, remember?”

He was right, of course. The announcement regarding their engagement was to be made tonight, and when it happened it would help if she had as many court allies there as possible. But at the moment, she couldn’t care less.

“Bribe me with something,” she whined. Her lover’s expression darkened.

“Sansa, are you feeling alright?”

The truth was, she didn’t feel all that great. But she wasn’t going to admit to the pain in her head, the weakness in her limbs. Jon was hyperconscious of her health at the moment, and she didn’t want to spark any extra worry.
But she also didn’t want to lie to him. “Jon, that woman represents the shattered hopes of the girl I used to be. She’s the antithesis of any sense of justice I once had. The night she became Lady Tully was the night of the death of my mother and brother. Her rise was their end and my agony. And yet she’s still Lady Tully. All her murderous, backstabbing father ever wanted was to merge his bloodline with a high house. And even if I could have hung him a thousand times, it doesn’t alter his triumph. And my uncle flaunts her. Every moment of every day, he gives my family’s killer everything he ever wanted. And now I have to watch.”

Jon sat on the bed and held out his arms, allowing her to crawl into his lap. “I’m sorry, Sweetling. But think of it this way: there’s one thing Walder Frey wanted that Edmure can’t give her.”

“What?”

“A crown. Remember? Roslin was almost Queen in the North. But that never happened. Instead, you became Queen in the North. And tonight, you’ll be declared the future Princess of the Empire. It won’t matter what Walder Frey wanted, or got, his blood is still going to have to bow down to both a Stark and a Tully. Before long, his daughter is going to have to curtsey to the woman who burned the Twins to the ground and hung her father and brothers from a bridge. Roslin won’t be happy, and what do you think Lord Walder would say about it?”

She chuckled and her heart opened up a little. *Jon must really be determined to make me feel better if he’s willing to bring up titles and social status.* Boasting about such things was against his nature. *But he’s willing to do it to make me smile.*

“Jon… do you think you could do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Well, I feel like if I’m going to have to put up with calling on Roslin Frey for weeks on end and watch as my uncle treats her like she’s made of stardust and silk, then I should be able to make him angry as well.”

“Oh?” He looked concerned. “Aren’t you worried about alienating him?”

“The way I intend to annoy him will only compel him to support me more. I want you to be openly affectionate with me in the presence of the Tullys.”

Jon’s face split into a grin. “How openly affectionate?”

Sansa snorted. “Well, you still have to be a gentleman, of course. Nothing too explicit, nothing that would justify him challenging you to a duel for my honor. But I also want to make it completely clear that you’re sharing my bed and that you intend to continue doing so for the rest of your life. I think it may make me feel better watching that Frey woman be doted on if I’m doted on a bit as well. Also, if you’d humiliate my uncle in the till yard at some point, that would be lovely.”

At this point, Gilly walked in, carrying a tray. She seemed unconcerned to see Jon there, or to see Sansa in his lap. “It’s time for Lady Sansa to eat.”

Sansa reluctantly pulled herself away from Jon and tried to smooth out her nightgown. “Gilly, you’re supposed to knock or wait for me to call you.”

“You’re going to be late if you don’t hurry.”

Sansa groaned. Over a week into the job, and Gilly still had no sense of decorum. “Where is Anais?”
“I haven’t seen her all morning.”

The Lady of Winterfell frowned. That wasn’t like her maid. At all. “Gilly, I need you to send word to the guards right away to find her.”

Jon snorted. “She’s probably with Satin.”

“Satin?”

“Yes. The two of them…”

Sansa’s eyes widened. “Are you sure?”

“About them having an affair? Fairly certain.”

“I don’t care about their affair. I meant do you honestly think they’d sneak off together now?” They were both smart people. Sansa thought that if they were to choose any time to disappear together, it wouldn’t be when their absence would be so easily noticed. “Go back to your quarters and see if Satin is there, if he is, send word to the guards that Anais is missing. I don’t like this.”

Jon stood up and shrugged. “Fine. I’ll look into it for you. I’ll see you in two hours at the north gate.”

He kissed her on the cheek before departing, nodding kindly to Gilly. When he was gone, Sansa bid her maid to lay her breakfast on the dining table in the solar and brush her hair while she ate.

Worry over Anais consumed her… Surely something awful hadn’t happened? Anais was a tough thing, but even the toughest were easily hurt in this court. She knew it was too early to raise too much alarm. She could just see her maid striding in, laughing and looking heavenward, annoyed at being interrupted from whatever it was she might be doing, tut-tutting over Sansa neglecting her duties to search for the girl. Sansa tried to focus on her food.

She did get distracted, though, when Gilly made a mess of her hair. The woman couldn’t straighten it properly. In the end, they had to pull the front parts back, and when her handmaiden failed at the complicated braids Sansa was used to, they ended up letting it fall into waves. Sansa didn’t like it. Her hair looked wild and uncontained. She decided the best way to deal with this was make sure everything else looked so wonderful that no one would notice.

Her eyes fell upon a bouquet of blue winter roses. Jon had ordered fresh ones for her to arrive every ten night. She had Gilly bring her one of her new gowns: a dove-grey and blue samite with a pattern of blue roses that opened over a petticoat of white. A silk rose sat above the opening of the overdress above the petticoat, and over it she pulled on her finest cloak of grey velvet lined and hemmed in white fur, light –weight but ever so lovely. She had Gilly weave some of her winter roses into a garland and pin it to her brow. She still looked a little wild, but she knew it wouldn’t matter. She wanted Jon to act absolutely besotted with her. She knew, looking at herself in the mirror that she’d insured that he wouldn’t need to act at all.

The best part was, to anyone else, she’d look as pure and innocent as the Maiden with the pale colors, modest sleeves, and girlish print. But blue roses now had a very special meaning for her and Jon, one which was private and intimate and brought a blush to her cheeks just thinking about it.

When Gilly announced that it was time to go meet her uncle, Sansa did a double-take. Anais still wasn’t back yet and the Lady of Winterfell felt her concern deepen. However, her fears were assuaged when she stepped outside her chambers to find a harried-looking Anais bolting towards her chamber.
“My Lady!” Anais called out breathlessly, her hair in a tangle. “I beg your pardon! A personal matter arose… My gods! Your hair!”

Sansa blushed. “Is it really awful?”

Part of her felt so relieved to see the girl that any thoughts of admonishing her for the remark failed to materialize. Jon was right, she was probably with Satin.

The maid stopped short and gazed. “Well… No. But it’s just… Different. It looks quite lovely, it just doesn’t look like anything you’d wear.”

“I did the best I could!” Gilly protested.

Anais looked Sansa up and down. “She looks fine. We need to get to the gate.”

She’d thought to tease the girl at first about meeting a lover but that impulse was quickly abandoned. Sansa watched her maid carefully. The girl seemed distracted, and there was something in her eyes which troubled the Lady of Winterfell. Her stomach sank as Anais rushed them towards the North Gate.

~ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ ~

Jon:

What did I do to deserve this? Jon wracked his brain for any reason he could have given his lover to torture him this way. Did I say something insensitive without knowing it? Is this because I wasn’t all that concerned about Anais?

But the maid was right there, looking distracted and strange as she stood behind her mistress. The wench was fine. Honestly, Jon had just been happy to have one morning without Sansa’s maid scowling at them in a judgmental fashion.

It couldn’t be because I made her get up, could it? That wouldn’t make sense. His lover was a lot of things, lazy was not one of them. Though she was acting unusually reluctant to get out of bed this morning.

Still, whatever it was, it couldn’t be worth this.

To anyone else, his lover’s appearance wouldn’t have appeared at all wanton. Indeed, there was a sweet girlishness to the way she’d pulled her hair back and allowed it to fall in soft waves. Her grey cloak and dress were modest enough.

But that wasn’t the point. The point was that printed on the silk of her gown and pleated into her hair were little reminders of one of the most passionate nights they’d ever spent together. To the rest of the world, winter roses were pretty blue flowers. To Jon, they were the things he’d pulled from between his lover’s legs with his teeth so he could dive between her lower folds and spell his name with his tongue. They were what she’d worn in her hair the night he’d taken her like a wolf for the first time. He’d watched himself fuck her while those damn flowers decorated her hair. Sansa might as well have walked out to the North Gate wearing nothing but her garland of roses and a smile.

He made a mental note to stop the shipments of blue roses. When he’d named her his Queen of Love and Beauty, he hadn’t necessarily meant Queen of Carnal Love and Incapacitating Beauty.

Well, he did a little. But not in public. When he greeted her, though, he became distracted once more. His cock was hard at once, an uncomfortable thing in the cold. Thank the gods for skirted doublets.
When she extended her hand for him to kiss, there was a tremor in it. Jon frowned. Before he could say a word, though, one of the sentries called out.

“Your Grace! The Tully banners are drawing near!”

Jon could see that as he peered through the rising gate. Flashes of blue, red and silver were getting bigger. But they weren’t doing it fast enough. Crowds parted down the city streets as horses and wheelhouses approached. Hurry up, damn you.

Edmure Tully had dawdled long enough. He should have been here weeks ago. Jon looked at Sansa. “Are you cold?”

“A little, Your Grace,” she replied, pulling her hood up. “I’m afraid I don’t have quite the same tolerance for a chill that you do.”

Jon began to untie his cloak at once. It was black velvet lined with fur and hooded. Sansa smiled and held up her hand. “This is no time for you to be placing your cloak on my shoulders, Your Grace.”

He scowled and bid Gilly to go fetch her mistress a scarf and another cloak. “A heavy one.”

“Honestly, Jon.”

“Please don’t ‘Honestly Jon’ me,” he replied, cross. “You need to stay warm.”

He was growing increasingly impatient with how dismissive his lover was about her health. She deflected his concerns constantly. Jon knew she had some legitimate reasons for this. Sansa worried that her fertility would come into question, that gossip would arise about her. But it did her no good to insist that she was fine in private.

But this wasn’t private, so she cast him a warning look. He sighed. “Do you want to get sick, my lady?”

“No.”

“Then wear the furs Gilly brings you.” You’re not a child, I shouldn’t feel like I’m speaking to one. Jon didn’t like telling his lover what to do, but this was getting worrisome. Did she wear the winter roses to distract me from her discomfort?

The thought was a troubling one. Sansa should know by now that no matter how lovely and desirable she made herself, the state of her well-being would always be the primary thing he concerned himself with. Though his pants were still tented.

She gave him a small smile. “As you wish, my prince. I wouldn’t want to make you worry.”

He relaxed somewhat when he saw her giving in. Gilly was fast on her feet, and she quickly returned with some heavy wolf pelts and a white lamb’s wool scarf. Sansa slipped the furs on underneath her cloak and wrapped the scarf about her neck and ears underneath her hood. “Do I please you, my lord?”

That annoyed him. She was making it sound like he was being controlling. Jon shied away from such behavior normally, and Sansa knew it. She was trying to embarrass him.

He decided not to take the bait. “Always, my lady. As long as you’re safe, healthy and happy. And me? Do I please my lady love?”
He felt a bit of triumph when he saw her expression soften and her cheeks redden. “Always, my prince.”

“Tell me, should I wear one of my coronets this evening at the banquet?”

Jon owned more than one coronet, a source of embarrassment to him. One was the three hundred year old wreathe that traditionally belonged to the heir to the throne: a succession of gold miniature dragons with onyx and ruby eyes. It was originally known as the Prince of Dragonstone coronet, but the name was altered to “Crown Prince coronet” when the Baratheons took over and Dragonstone was given to Stannis. The last owner of the thing had technically been Joffrey, but according to Sansa, he never wore it. The wreath had been too big for the Lannister bastard, and the piece was judged as being of too much significance historically to risk damage by reforging it to fit. Apparently, King Robert just decided to put it away until Joffrey grew into it and in the mean time a new one was made for the little shit. That one was still locked away in the treasury somewhere.

The second one had been Stannis Baratheon’s ‘Lord of Dragonstone’ piece, made for him by his brother shortly after Robert’s Rebellion. Since Jon now technically owned Dragonstone, the piece was his. It was silver and studded with onyx. It was odd to wear it, since Jon had known the man so intimately. Thankfully, Jon never actually saw the man wear it. Once he’d met Stannis, the man was wearing a gold king’s crown, having left the old wreath back home. The third was a gift from Daenerys, woven bands of gold and Valyrian steel with onyx and rubies meant to signify that he was heir to Slaver’s Bay.

Jon hated all three pieces. He disliked wearing jewelry in general, but the coronets always felt especially odd. He only wore one of them on the most formal of occasions and only to appease his aunt. But tonight would be the banquet in which he presented Sansa as his future bride. He’d be willing to wear one if she wanted it. He also wanted to make a point.

He smirked. Sansa often told him what to wear. The message was clear. I let you dictate my attire all of the time. I’m happy to do it because I know you love me and because it’s in my best interest. And I always defer to your judgment on such manners. So don’t act like I’m being unreasonable when I ask you to wear something for once. I’m just trying to look out for you, and I know a little about guarding against the cold. I’ll happily follow your advice on clothing on every occasion, I’ll even wear a bloody diadem if it would make you happy. It’s not unreasonable to ask you to keep yourself warm and comfortable once in a while. Don’t try to make me feel guilty for it.

She glanced at the ground and looked a bit embarrassed. “See if Daenerys is wearing something. If she is, wear either the silver or the Meereen coronet. Not the crown prince one, though.”

Jon shifted uncomfortably. He was glad she didn’t want him to wear the crown prince one. He loathed all three pieces, but the crown prince one was the gaudiest and easily the worst. Out of the three, he preferred Stannis’s old crown. There were no rubies or gold, the onyxes were small, and it wasn’t ostentatious. It easily blended into his hair well enough, and it was the least heavy.

As if reading his mind, she placed a hand on his arm.

“Wear the silver one and onyx one, the one that belonged to Stannis.” I’m sorry, her eyes said. “You’d look very handsome. Very dashing. Just as you do right now.”

He snorted and gave her hand a little squeeze before looking ahead again. The Tully party grew ever closer. Finally, they came through the gates, Edmure Tully on horseback, a flowing blue and red cloak lined with silver sable fur over red leathers and a blue lamb’s wool doublet. A thick, neatly trimmed auburn beard covered his face, and his hair fell to his shoulders. Both were streaked with grey. Following closely behind was a closed litter.
When the party stopped, Edmure jumped off his grey stallion and, instead of rushing forward to greet his hosts, hurried to the litter, which was being set down. He personally opened the hatch. A small hand gloved in doeskin appeared. Numerous little lumps indicating rings showed up underneath the material.

Roslin Frey Tully emerged. The first impression was slightly comical: the Lady of Riverrun was a tiny woman and she was buried under expensive silvery furs. She soon pulled down her hood revealing waves of brown hair and a pretty face with doe-like eyes, her mouth pressed into a thin line.

Hand in hand, the Tullys approached their hosts. Roslin’s mouth split into a stiff smile, revealing a gap between her teeth. When they got close, both of them, as well as the members of their party, took a knee.

Jon still wasn’t used to this sort of thing. He’d attended various royal receptions before, but he still wasn’t used to doing as the actual royal. Some of Ygritte’s old jabs sprung to mind. Kneeler. He couldn’t deny it. He was used to kneeling, far more than he was used to being knelt to.

There was something especially odd about this, considering there were Tully banners everywhere. He usually associated redheads in the blue, red and silver of Riverrun to be looking down upon him, scorning him as a bastard. Edmure Tully did look like his sister in male form, Jon could see it even through the beard. It proved disconcerting.

“Lord and Lady Tully,” he said, gesturing for them to rise. “You are welcome to the Red Keep.”

Edmure rose and bowed again. “My prince. We thank you for your hospitality.”

“You’re welcome, of course. Allow me to also offer you welcome on behalf of my aunt, the Queen.”

Jon looked at Lady Roslin and bowed. She curtsied and offered her hand, which he kissed. “Lady Tully, it is an honor to see you once more.”

He’d met her once before, at Riverrun when he and his aunt took visited on their way to the capital from The Wall.

“Many thanks, Your Grace.”

Edmure moved to Sansa and held out his arms. “Darling Sansa. You grow more beautiful every time I see you.”

Sansa accepted his embrace, though there was little warmth. “I thank you, my lord.”

Roslin hesitated before greeting the Lady of Winterfell. The two women’s eyes met. Roslin’s jaw was clenched, her smile obviously fake. Those doe eyes became instantly snakelike. Sansa concealed her feelings a bit better, a gracious smile on her lips.

“Niece.” Roslin said, curteying. Jon frowned. Sansa wasn’t Queen in the North anymore, but that didn’t make such a greeting wholly appropriate. The two women were not blood kin, nor were they close. Roslin was Lady of the Riverlands, yes, but through marriage, and she was of lower birth. Sansa was not only the daughter of a great House, but she was a Lord Paramount in her own right, a Warden of the kingdom, and dowager Lady of the Eyrie besides. While this wasn’t a breach of conduct extreme enough to insure reprimand, there was a marked lack of deference and respect in such an informal address. Even Daenerys greeted Sansa as ‘Lady Sansa’ or ‘Lady Stark’ in public, and she was queen.
There was no love lost between Sansa and Roslin, Jon knew. His lover had, after all, slaughtered her aunt’s family in revenge. And Roslin’s family had likewise been responsible for the deaths of Sansa’s loved ones. At Roslin’s wedding. Neither had an easy time receiving the other. But Jon took an instant dislike to the woman. The way she addressed his lover made him want to march them all down to the godswood at that moment, throw his cloak over Sansa’s shoulders, declare her his princess and order the gap-toothed Frey to kneel.

Even Edmure looked a bit uncomfortable. But Sansa’s face remained neutral.

“My lady,” she replied. “How was your journey?”

“A bit rushed, I’ll admit.”

_Good_. Jon thought. The woman wasn’t kidding, one had to hurry to make it from Riverrun to King’s Landing in under a week.

“That’s unfortunate, why don’t we go inside?” Jon asked, hating the awkwardness of the situation. He took Sansa’s hand, pausing to give it a squeeze before handing her to her uncle. He didn’t hide his reluctance in letting go of his lover or offering his arm to Lady Tully.

“Quarters have been prepared for you in the high noble’s wing,” Sansa informed her uncle as they walked into the Keep. “We hope they’re to your liking.”

“‘We’?” Edmure asked as they walked down the halls, a brow arched.

Jon smiled. “Yes, you are officially the guests of myself, my aunt, and Lady Stark.”

_So show her some respect._

“I wasn’t aware non-royals could serve as hosts in the Red Keep.” Roslin remarked. “Even former ones.”

“They can,” Jon informed her, irritated by the last bit. “If they are of a high enough place at court. Lady Stark is Lady of Winterfell and the Eyrie and Warden of the North, she’s officially recognized as an advisor of the Queen’s council, and she is also part of my household. Her guests are my guests.”

He hated this. This woman infuriated him. Jon loathed playing into superficial hierarchy, and yet these people were compelling him to do so.

“How nice. Are we to meet with the queen now or later?”

Jon smirked. “We thought you might wish to freshen up first before being brought before the Iron Throne. My dear cousin will present you then.”

They escorted both Tullys to their quarters and made sure they were comfortable. Jon rushed to help Sansa with her furs when they entered the rooms and held onto the garments. Once the standard pleasantries were exchanged, Jon put his hand to the small of his lover’s back and said, “Sansa, it’s almost midday.”

Sansa blushed and gave her aunt and uncle a look of false contrition. “My apologies, but we’re both supposed to report to the queen’s chambers. I hope you’ll forgive us.”

Edmure’s eyes narrowed. “Of course. Duty calls.”
To Jon’s satisfaction, it seemed both of the Tullys noticed the familiarity with which Jon addressed and touched the Lady of Winterfell. When Sansa took his arm, he pulled her close and took her hand as well, her cloak still over one arm. They all bowed and Jon made a show of being eager to pull her away. As he hustled her out of the room, she called back, “I’ll come and fetch you soon!”

When they exited, Jon kept his grip on Sansa’s arm. “I don’t like that woman.”

Sansa nodded. “Now do you understand?”

“Gods, do I ever.” Jon glanced around, noting the presence of Sansa’s handmaids. He leaned in slightly and whispered, “I want to get you alone.”

Sansa glanced over to her maids. “Gilly, if you would take my furs back to my chambers? And Anais? Send word to Ser Marq Piper that my uncle and aunt have arrived.”

Both girls curtsied and hurried off, Gilly dutifully taking Sansa’s cloak from Jon and Anais looking extremely relieved to be leaving. Jon and Sansa hurried to the royal wing and made for his chambers, Satin thankfully gone.

Jon paused to ruffle Ghost’s ears before grabbing his lover by the waist and pulling her towards the bedchamber. “Lady Sansa, you have been cruel to me today.”

“Have I?”

“First you show up wearing these.” Jon said, thumbing her garland of roses, “Then you try to shame me for insisting you wear an extra fur. That was unkind.”

Her face darkened. “I’m sorry, that was unkind. But I wore these for you.”

“And drove me to distraction. I can’t look at blue flowers without thinking about the two of us naked in your bedchamber. You made me hard as valyrian steel right out there in the cold, talking to your uncle. That is cruel.”

“I’m sorry,” she pouted, “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I wanted to look beautiful for you.”

“Yes, but you’re the only woman I know of who can be too beautiful. It drives a man to distraction. Thank the gods my doublet was long enough or I’d have traumatized your uncle.”

She giggled and pressed herself close against him. “Is poor Balerion still in distress?”

“Who?”

She laughed again and got to her knees.

“Let’s see,” she said, lifting up the skirts of his garment, revealing the tent in his breeches, “Oh! I see he is!”

“Sansa… Are you…? Are you talking about…?”

“It struck me a couple of nights ago that every good sword should have a name,” she told him, unlacing his breeches slowly, “Do you like it?”

His eyes widened. “You named my cock after Aegon the Conqueror’s dragon?”

“It’s conquered the North and besides, ‘Longclaw’ was already taken.”
Everything was forgiven. “I love you.”

She smiled and finished unlacing his breeches. His cock sprung out, hard and leaking.

A second later, Balerion was kissed by fire. Jon’s eyes rolled back in his head. She’s doing that thing with her mouth! Sansa didn’t do this often. Jon would never ask her. He knew the connotations of such a thing, especially for her. But when she does it, it’s like it’s my name day. She’s just so fucking good at it.

She could take so much of him in, her tongue always managed to find the right spot and sometimes, she’d sucking him in his way so it was like his cock was in a vacuum. She also did this thing where she tugged on his balls that just drove him mad.

What finally sent him over the edge, though, was when she looked up at him with those beautiful blue eyes. With that, he came with a cry of her name.

She swallowed his seed, and it was incredible. Jon couldn’t stand it. He pulled her up and kissed her, then had her sit on the edge of the bed.

Jon got to his knees and began pulling up her skirts.

“I love you so much.” He whispered before putting his mouth to her. He loved every perfect inch of her. Within minutes, his head was gripped between her legs and Jon reflected that she made for a far finer crown than those metal things he had to wear. He felt more like a prince with his head between her legs than he ever did standing beside the Iron Throne.

When she came, it was like the first drink of water after days of liquid deprivation. I’ll never get tired of her soaking my beard. She fell back and moaned. As Jon joined her on the bed, he watched in delight as her body gave these little jerks. He pulled her to him and kissed her again. “I love you, Sansa Stark.”

“I love you, Jon Snow.” She curled around him.

“Tonight, everyone will know that you’re mine.” He said, grinning. “All mine. Forever and ever.”

“Mmm.” She grinned. “And you’re all mine.”

“All yours.”

She kissed his forehead. “You know I have to go get my aunt and uncle and bring them to Daenerys.”

He groaned. “Fuck them.”

“No. I’m fucking you.”

Jon snorted. “Alright. Fine then… Forget them.”

“I can’t. They came all the way from the Trident.”

“I’d like to march them back and throw them in.”

“So would I. But I can’t.” She sat up and went to work putting her clothes back in place. “Would you please go and tell Daenerys to be ready for them?”

Jon nodded and reluctantly got up, shoving his cock back in his breeches and lacing them up. The
two checked each other and went their separate ways, parting with a kiss.

Jon found his aunt in the throne room, deep in conversation with Missandei. When she spotted him she got up and walked over, looking a bit bored. “Are the Tullys here?”

“Yes, and they’re insufferable.”

Dany groaned. “What should I be prepared for?”

“Oh, they’ll probably be lovely to you. But Lady Roslin disrespected Sansa.”

“I’ll put her in her place. Are they coming now?”

Jon nodded. “Also, I was wondering what you were planning on wearing tonight.”

She seemed amused by this question. “Black, red, hints of purple and some gold jewelry.”

“Are you wearing a diadem?”

“I considered wearing a crown, why?”

“I’m thinking of wearing one of my wreaths.”

Dany’s eyes flashed. She and Missandei exchanged significant looks, the mistress of letters was clearly holding back laughter. Jon frowned. “What?”

“It’s just that I used to think you’d rather set your hair on fire than wear one of those things. Now you’re voluntarily putting one on for the banquet?”

Jon reddened. “I, uh…”

“You wanted to look princely for your intended?”

“Maybe.” This was starting to get embarrassing. “I thought Sansa might like it. We are making the announcement tonight, after all.”

Missandei said something Jon couldn’t understand. Daenerys snorted.

“What?!” Jon was beginning to lose patience.

His aunt looked apologetic and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Jon… you’re going to make a wonderful husband.”

Jon didn’t feel flattered by this praise. He felt very self-conscious. The fact was, he was wearing the damn thing because he wanted to see Sansa’s eyes light up. That confession she’d made days ago about being terrified of things going wrong was major motivator behind this. The idea that she couldn’t even enjoy having her hopes fulfilled out of fear that things could be ruined gutted him. He thought maybe if, on the night of the announcement, he looked a bit more like the person she’d fantasized about, it might remind her of the optimistic girl she used to be and make her forget all the awful things she’d been through. She would get what she wanted for once.

Because the stress was truly getting to her. Jon suspected her ill health might be psychological. Sometimes, she would say things in her sleep about how life wasn’t a song, how she’d learned that.

Jon wanted her to feel like her life was a song for an evening. Maybe if he looked like a prince from a song, she could let go of things long enough, have enough happiness that her fears would be
alleviated and she’d start feeling better.

So he wanted to put on the damn crown and play the princely hero for her. He’d wear a dozen of the blasted things if it would help her get healthier.

But now he felt stupid. “I’m glad you find this so funny.”

“We think it’s lovely, actually. It is a little funny, but we’re not looking down on you.” Dany smiled. “I’m sorry if you feel that way. Please don’t be embarrassed. It’s so sweet, honestly.”

Jon swallowed. “Fine.”

A page came in at that moment, announcing Lady Stark and the Tullys. The three hurried onto the dais, Daenerys sitting upon the throne and the others taking their places on either side of her. Sansa entered, the Tully walking behind her. Jon almost laughed out loud when he saw Lady Roslin.

The woman looked like someone had dumped half of Riverrun’s treasury over her head. Her hair was pinned back with pearl clips. Around her neck was a sapphire choker and rope of freshwater pearls. Rubies studded her ear lobes. Four rings glittered on her fingers, pinned to her neckline was a white enamel trout with sapphires for eyes, a silver belt was studded with the same stones, and bejeweled cuffs sat at the end of each arm. She glittered so much that it took several seconds for Jon to realize her gown was red.

I no longer have to worry about looking silly in my coronet next to her, at least. There was only one time he could recall seeing a person wear more jewels: Daenerys at her coronation.

His aunt stood up, grinning. “My Dear Lady Stark!”

Dany gestured toward Sansa to climb the steps of the dais, and greeted her like a dear friend, clasping her hands and sitting down upon the throne once more. “I haven’t seen you all day! What have you been doing?”

“Receiving beloved relatives.” Sansa replied. She gestured down towards her uncle and aunt. Daenerys pretended to notice them for the first time and Sansa grinned. “Your Grace, allow me to present my uncle, Edmure of House Tully, Lord of Riverrun and Lord Paramount of the Trident, and his wife, Lady Roslin of House Frey.”

Both knelt. Daenerys didn’t invite them onto the dais when she bid them to rise. “Lord Tully, Lady Roslin, it is a pleasure.”

Jon almost felt sorry for them. Edmure went as red as his hair, gaping at the dragon queen.

“Your Grace, the honor is all ours. We thank you for your hospitality.”

“Well, any blood of Lady Stark’s is welcome in our capital.” Daenerys nodded to Edmure. “I hope you enjoy yourselves.”

“We shall. We’re very much looking forward to the banquet tonight.”

“Yes, very much.” Roslin said. She began to step forward, but Edmure grabbed her hand. To try and save face, he kissed her bejeweled fingertips.

“Is this your first time in King’s Landing, Lady Roslin?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”
“Well, how lucky you are to have Lady Stark as a host. Sansa knows the court inside and out. With her help, you should have a wonderful time in King’s Landing.”

“We hope to be a help to her, as well.” Edmure replied.

“I’m sure you will, Lord Tully.” Daenerys stood and smiled. “I trust your accommodations are to your liking?”

“They are, my queen. Thank you.”

“Excellent. If you need anything at all, the court staff will be happy to attend to you. But you must be weary from your journey.”

“We are,” Edmure agreed.

“Well, then, I will see you tonight. Please enjoy your stay.”

The Tullys both bowed and backed out of the room. Sansa thanked the queen and made her departure to go take tea with her visiting relations.

Jon didn’t see his lover for several hours after that. In fact, he didn’t see her until the banquet was well underway. Jon met Daenerys in the halls to make their entrance. His aunt looked stunning in a sleeveless gown of sheer black over red silk, panels of fabric sprouting from her shoulders to look like dragon wings. A ruby crown sat atop her head and she wore matching gold jewelry.

Jon worked to look his best as well. He hadn’t taken this much care with his appearance since Daenerys’s coronation. He’d put Stannis’s old Dragonstone wreath on, binding it to his forehead so parts of his hair fell over it a bit. His steward had trimmed his hair and beard. He wore a new jerkin of black velvet embroidered in silver over a new red silk shirt with extra long cuffs and black embroidery. He even had a new coat of black silk with red Targaryen dragons stitched on it. The doublet was another product of Sansa’s handiwork, but the rest were things Satin ordered from a tailor Ser Barristan favored. Daenerys grinned when she saw him and informed him that it was the best she’d ever seen him look.

He received a number of compliments when he arrived in the banquet hall. Even Loras Tyrell, who still managed to be a man of fashion despite his wounds, praised his attire. Several minutes into the party, Jon had a fair amount of confidence but nowhere to direct it.

And then Sansa arrived at last.

Jon decided he no longer bore Anais any ill will, if this was the product of her labors. The whole room went silent when the Lady of Winterfell entered.

She was a vision in red highlighted with shimmering blue that brought out her eyes. The neckline of her gown was wide and low so the edges of her shoulders and the tops of her breasts were visible, a ruby and pearl pendant pinned between them. Her arms were bare, instead lengths of red samite and cerulean damask hung from her shoulders, similar to Daenerys’s dress in that they looked like wings, though Sansa’s drapes were more like the folded wings of a crane than a dragon. The Martell necklace hung from her neck. Her hair was in a wavy ponytail that draped elegantly over her shoulder, a single blue winter bloom pinned at the base. A belt of gold highlighted her tiny waist.

While many lords and ladies that evening were glinting in their finery, Sansa Stark glowed.

Their eyes found each other at once, and her face split into the loveliest smile. The whole world seemed to disappear. There was just her. Jon vaguely wondered how he could have possibly been
irritated with her this morning, or how he could have ever possibly felt anything for her but
overwhelming love.

She approached the high table and curtsied, a smile playing on her lips. Jon couldn’t hear what she
was saying to Daenerys, but moments later, Sansa was coming over to sit by his side. He pulled the
chair out for her, taking her hand as she sat and refusing to let go.

“Jon,” she said, starry-eyed, “You look wonderful.”

_I look wonderful?_ That seemed an odd statement coming from a masterpiece made flesh. _If Aenys I
had seen her, he would have pinned her to his wall. If Baelor the Blessed had seen her, he’d have
declared her an incarnation of the Mother and Maiden and possibly forgotten his precious piety. If
Aegon the Unworthy had seen her, he’d never have left her bed._

He felt a tap on his shoulder and looked over, annoyed. Dany was smirking at him. “Shall I make the
announcement now, Nephew?”

“Yes, Your Grace, please.” Jon looked around the room. Almost every eye was on his lover. Every
male eye, and a good degree of the female ones as well, stared at Sansa with flashes of hunger. _You
can’t have her. She is mine._

Daenerys stood up and called for silence. “My Lords and Ladies, I welcome you to this wonderful,
blessed evening of wine and revelry. First of all, I’d like to welcome our newest visitors to court.
Most notably, Princess Arianne Martell, Lord Paramount of Dorne and her cousin, Lady Nymeria
Sand.”

Arianne and Lady Nym raised their cups to light applause. Daenerys continued.

“Lord and Lady Tully of Riverrun.”

The Tullys stood and waved.

“And visitors from The North, Ser Rickard Locke of Oldcastle and Lady Daynora Flint of Widow’s
Watch.”

The Northerners raised their cups. Daenerys waited for the hubbub to die down before speaking
again.

“My friends, while I am happy to greet our newest visitors, I must also make a confession. This feast
is being held for reasons beyond welcoming some new additions to court. I am pleased to say that I
have some rather fortuitous news which shall greatly affect the future of our realm.”

Daenerys grinned. “Twenty-three years ago, the country was torn apart thanks to conflict which
concerned Houses Targaryen and Stark. While the event which led to the war had the fortunate
consequence of producing my beloved nephew and heir, Prince Jon, it also led to a very dark period
for this kingdom. But I am happy to say that this dark period is coming to a close in the most apt way
possible. For the two houses which once fought one another shall soon be joined.”

There was a collective gasp. Daenerys continued speaking before those gasps could become frenzied
whispers.

“I am thrilled to announce that the dynasties of the Targaryens and the Starks are to continue
together. For my nephew, His Grace Jon of the House Targaryen, Prince of the Kingdoms of
Westeros and Slaver’s Bay, Khalakka of the Great Grass Sea and Lord of Dragonstone shall take the
esteemed Sansa of the House Stark, Lady of Winterfell and the Eyrie and Warden of the North, as
his bride.”

To Jon’s surprise, Margaery Tyrell, Arianne Martell, and Nymeria Sand were the ones to lead the applause. Jon took Sansa’s hand and they stood. Jon beamed, absolutely thrilled as the applause grew louder and louder. Cheers soon joined the clapping of hands.

Daenerys called out, raising her glass. “To Prince Jon and Lady Sansa! May their marriage be long, happy and fruitful!”

Everyone drank enthusiastically. Jon linked his arm with Sansa’s as they downed their wine. Seconds later, the hall echoed with cries of “KISS! KISS! KISS!”

Giddy, Jon turned to his intended and his lips met hers. With the soft, wet sensation of her lips against his, Jon felt he’d been given everything he’d ever wanted and been denied.

Jon didn’t even mind the hours of flattery and congratulations for once. He was happy to see and talk to everyone with Sansa on his arm. It was so much easier with her there, and it felt so much safer.

The banquet went well into the night, but Jon still felt filled with energy when he and his intended left the hall. They stumbled together through the dim, flickering halls of the Red Keep, laughing and smiling, well into their cups. After several minutes, they burst through a door that should have led to the royal wing. Instead, they found themselves in the Small Council Chamber. Sansa burst into hysterical laughter when she saw that, but Jon just grinned like an idiot and leaned close to nip at her neck and whisper in her ear.

“Hey,” he said, “I wanna… I wanna fuck you on the council table.”

“Jon!” She shrieked. “You’re drunk!”

“So? I wanted to fuck you on the council table when I was sober, too. A week ago, when I first managed to ride Rhaegal… I walked in and all I wanted was to fuck you right—” He pointed over at the table, “—Right there. Just lay you on your back and fuck you and then collapse face first between your teats after I come.”

She giggled. “Jon… That’s not proper.”

“Well, I’m a bastard, I don’t have to be proper.”

“You’re not a bastard.”

“I am. I’m the man you love, and you said that the one you love is Jon Snow, the bastard boy with the black curls and the white wolf.”

She cupped his face and smiled. “You remember that?”

“It was you telling me you love me,” he said proudly, puffing out his chest. “Of course I remember.”

Sansa gave this intoxicating little growl and jumped into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist and her arms about his shoulders. “You can fuck me wherever you like, Jon Snow.”

“Good…” Jon said, carrying her over to the table and plopping her down on it. “Because I want to fuck you here… I want to fuck you in the godswood here and in the one in Winterfell, and in the glass gardens, and in the springs.”

He started removing his clothes. “And I want to fuck you at Dragonstone. And at the Wall. And at
She laughed, reaching behind her back to unhook her belt and loosen the laces on her gown. “I’d like to fuck you at The Eyrie and at the Gates of the Moon. And in the chambers at Winterfell where my mother’s used to be. And I’d like to fuck you at Castle Black. And wherever you lost your virginity.”

Now it was his turn to laugh. “Good luck. I first fucked a girl in the middle of the lands beyond the Wall, at Mance Rayder’s camp.”

“Alright, but I want to fuck you on top of the Wall.” He laughed and yanked off his shirts. He went to remove the circlet, but she stopped him. “I want to fuck you while you’re wearing it.”

She pulled off her gown, he unlaced his breeches, tore off her shift and her girdle. He suckled at her bare teats, nipping at them, kissing them, rubbing his face in them.

“I want to fuck you on a ship across the Narrow Sea,” he babbled, “I want to fuck you in all of the Free Cities, and in a tent traveling with Daenerys’s khalasaar, and at Vaes Dothrak. And in all of the cities of Slaver’s Bay.”

He reached down, tore off her smallclothes and stroked at her folds. She was already wet. Jon grinned.

Sansa was panting, rutting against his hand. “I want to fuck you in Dorne… In the pools of the Water Gardens, at Sunspear, in the ruins of Summerhall.”

He groaned. They said that Prince Rhaegar used to travel to Summerhall and sleep beneath the stars. He wondered vaguely if his father ever brought his mother there, if they made love and then fell asleep with one another under the stars. Doing such a thing with Sansa seemed a beautiful image. I could have been conceived there. I could put a babe in Sansa there. We could have a boy and call him Rhaegar, or a girl and call her Lyanna.

Jon entered her, reveling in her hot, white heat. She moaned and tossed her head back.

He leaned over her and whispered, “I could fuck you anywhere, and I’d like to do it everywhere. As long as I’m inside you, I’m in paradise.”

They came together. As promised, Jon fell face first between her teats. She stroked his head. After a few minutes, she spoke.

“Jon, I know you’d like to fuck me anywhere, but I think it’s best if we still slept in our beds. I’m going to be in pain tomorrow if we stay here, to say nothing of the embarrassment.”

Jon peeled himself off her, lazily pulling his breeches on, tossing her the gown, and pulling his shirt back on. They gathered up the rest of their things, giggling as they went. Jon jokingly grabbed Sansa’s gold belt and put it around his neck, then put his coat over her shoulders, picked her up and carried her back to the royal wing. They made their way to Sansa’s chambers and collapsed on her bed. Jon pulled the front of her gown down so her teats spilled out, then planted his face between them. He fell asleep to the sound of her laughter.

He woke with a headache he didn’t care about and a woman he cared about more than anything. When he woke, he watched her face for a little while. There was a little river of drool coming from the corner of her mouth that was just adorable. He began to pull himself away when Sansa opened her eyes and yanked him by the arm.
“No… Don’t go…”

“I’ll be right back,” he promised her, “I just need to go clean my teeth and grab my dressing gown. Don’t move.”

She nodded and smiled, closing her eyes again. Jon hurried to his quarters, desperate to be back in her arms again.

When he arrived at his solar, he was shocked to find Sam there, sitting by the window and staring at the ground. His friend looked up when Jon entered. His face was red, tear-stained, and miserable.

Jon felt his bliss slowly leak away. Oh no. Gilly. The babe.

“Sam?” He said. “What is it?”

His friend stood up, shaking. “They wanted me to be the first to tell you.”

“Tell me what?” A steady chill came over him. He didn’t like this. He didn’t like this at all.

“It’s Sansa, Jon… She’s… She’s being poisoned.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope that was worth the length. More is coming.

Please don't hate me.
Poison

Chapter Summary

The royal family reacts to the news.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Blue for beta-ing!

This chapter is a bit less meaty than the one before, LOL. Its basically setting up a lot of the stuff to come. I hope you enjoy.

Chapter Sixteen: Poison

Jon:

He could hear Alliser Thorne taunting him about being a traitor’s bastard and ordering the Night’s Watch initiates to beat Sam. He could smell flesh being burnt by Melisandre’s fires. He could see the face of the Night’s King: ancient, fanged, horrible. He could feel the bite of Ygritte’s arrows in his back and his brothers’ blades slicing into his neck and stomach. He could taste that damn “three meat”, all-mutton stew.

For a little while that was all there was.

Very slowly, the colors of his apartments appeared before his eyes again. Sam’s horrified face began to take shape once more. He saw his friend’s lips move before a distant echo, garbled as if he were listening to him with his head under water, began to reach his ears.

“Jon… Jon… Can you hear me?”

And now he realized Sam was holding his shoulders and shaking him. Jon pushed him off, stepping back.

“Tell me again, Sam.” Jon managed to croak. “Say it again.”

Sam was the one telling him, because apparently they felt it would be easier for Jon to hear it from his best friend. But it didn’t make it easier. Because regardless of whether it was Sam, Daenerys, Satin, or Aegon the Conqueror back from the dead, the words were the same.

“It’s poison, Jon. That’s why Sansa has been sick. Someone has been poisoning her.”

“W-will sh-she live?”

“Yes! Well, there’s a chance! The poison they used… Slow Strangler… It’s designed to be administered gradually to induce a slow death. We caught it before the process was completed. Her lungs were damaged, but Maester Merys says that there’s a fair chance she’ll survive.”
Jon shut his eyes and bowed his head. He wasn’t willing to thank the Gods yet. Nothing was certain. But there was a chance.

“Wh-where is she?”

“She’s in her apartments. Gilly’s going to look after her.”

Jon brushed past his friend, charging for the door. Sam ran behind him.

“Jon, wait! I need a sample of your blood! We need to know if you’ve been exposed to what’s been put in her.”

He stopped short and turned around. “Will it help Sansa?”

“It could. Finding out if you or Daenerys have been poisoned as well will make it easier to determine what they’ve been planting the stuff in. I’ve got the kit right here. It’ll only take a few minutes.”

Jon yanked up his sleeve and went to sit. “Take as much as you need.”

“We need just a little. Daenerys is getting a sample drawn as well.”

Jon tried not to shake as Sam prepared his arm. “You said Gilly’s with her?”

“Aye.”

“Where’s Anais?”

“Anais… Anais is gone. No one can find her.” Absolute loathing for the outspoken, rude little maid overtook him. He was going to kill her. He was going to rip her smug little heart out.

“Find her.” He hissed as Sam drained blood from his vein. “I want every palace guard, the City Watch… Everyone… Everyone should be looking for her. I want her found. I want her brought to me alive. If she isn’t cowering before the Iron Throne before nightfall, someone else will be.”

“I’ll relay that order to Ser Barristan.” Sam said, removing the needle and patching up the wound.

“I also want the Tyrells placed under house arrest.” Jon said, standing. “And any Vale Lords who were Coldwater and Moore supporters. I want every servant in the royal wing questioned as well. No… every house servant in the keep who may have come into contact with her. I want a food taster checking everything my lady puts in her mouth.”

Sam bit his lip. “That… That may not help, Jon. This poison she’s been given, it’s a multi-dose, slow-acting chemical. Just one or two doses won’t have any clear effects. We haven’t pinpointed how she’s been infected, yet, but we’re going to test everything. But Maester Merys says we have to be discreet, we can’t give any sign that we know yet.”

“Anais will be out of the capital by the time we make such a discovery!” Jon said through clenched teeth.

“She may already be, Jon. But she can’t have acted alone. The best way for us to discover who is behind this is if we figure out where the poison is coming from. It will help lead us to Sansa’s attacker. If they don’t know we’re looking for them, it’ll be easier to catch them.” Sam sighed, removed the needle, and cleaned up Jon’s arm. “Daenerys wants you to meet her in her chambers in half an hour. We’re all meeting there. You, Sansa, Gilly, Satin, Grand Maester Merys, Missandei,
Ser Barristan, and I.”

Jon fumed, but nodded. He didn’t feel up to a meeting at all. He wanted to spend some alone time with Sansa... All of the things he either hadn’t told her before or hadn’t told her enough were flashing through his mind. But the best thing to do was to start the process of finding and punishing those responsible as soon as possible.

Sam took the vial of blood and nodded. “I have to take this to Grand Maester Merys. Satin is coming in to get you ready.”

Jon shook his head. “I’d rather prepare elsewhere.”

He burst out the door to find Satin waiting there, stony-faced. Jon glanced at the servant. “Bring my things to Sansa’s chambers. I will prepare there.”

Satin nodded and rushed into the rooms. Jon hurried to Sansa’s chambers. It felt like he hadn’t seen her in years, though it had really only been minutes. He burst into her bedchambers to find Merys there, standing and speaking to Sansa, who was perched on the edge of the bed, held by Gilly, listening to the Grand Maester with rapt attention. Jon was amazed by how calm she looked. All three turned to greet him.

“Hello, Jon,” Sansa said, her voice stoic and measured, “I assume you’ve heard?”

Jon hurried over and pulled her into his arms, pressing his face into her hair, trying to hold in tears. She stroked his back calmly and shushed him.

“Calm yourself, darling. I’m not dead yet.”

*Why are you so relaxed?!* He thought, a bit embarrassed. He took deep, measured breaths.

“And that’s a miracle!” Merys remarked. “The toxicity of Lady Sansa’s blood was far too high for her to be this healthy. She should at least be an invalid by now. I have no idea how she’s survived.”

Sansa pulled away. “I can actually answer that.”

“You can?!” They all said in unison.

Sansa nodded. “You see, when I was thirteen, my caretaker, Petyr Baelish, started serving me tiny doses of poison daily.”

“He what?!” Jon almost shouted. He thought that he couldn’t hate Baelish any more than he already did. *On top of that, it makes no sense. Baelish had no reason to kill Sansa. She was his finest pawn.*

“It was for my protection,” Sansa assured him. “Baelish needed me kept alive, he couldn’t afford it if I was assassinated. So to protect me from would-be poisoners, he started gradually administering non-lethal amounts of a number of poisons to me so that my body would build up an immunity. It’s a trick used by a number of assassins. I believe he said that it was perfected by the Red Viper of Dorne and one of his daughters. Of course, Slow Strangler is an especially rare cousin to the more traditional, instant version of the poison, and it’s designed to be given in multiple small doses, so while my body can resist it better than most, it can still kill me.”

Jon gaped. He’d never heard of such a thing. He supposed in a strange way, it made sense. He’d heard of inoculation before, and that involved exposure to less lethal versions of a disease. This poison art seemed similar.


“You never told me about this.” Jon remarked.

“It never really came up.” Sansa shrugged. “And anyways, you hate hearing about Petyr, and you definitely hate hearing anything that alludes to the volume of people who want me dead. So I avoid such subjects.”

“Are you… Are you still…?”

“In King’s Landing? Certainly.” She furrowed her brow. “Though not Slow Strangler. I didn't even know of that one until recently. It must be a variation on something else I've immunized myself to.”

She turned to Merys calmly. “I have a chance at survival, yes?”

“Yes,” he replied hastily. “It’s lucky that we caught it when we did, though. And that we owe to Prince Jon.”

“Me? What did I do?”

“You asked me to check if Lady Sansa was with child,” Merys replied, “That requires a particular test. And while the results came back negative, there was an oddity in the results that would not have shown up on any of the standard tests. Slow Strangler is one of the subtlest and rarest poisons in the world. You have to be very specific when checking for it. Luckily, one of the signs do show up when there are chemicals applied to the blood which are normally used to check for pregnancy.”

“The one to thank is my friend, Sam,” Jon told them, his heart bursting with love for his friend. “He’s the one who planted the idea in my head that Sansa might be pregnant. He encouraged me to ask for the tests.”

_**Sam, you are going to get a knighthood and a castle for this.**_ Jon was ready to give the man half of the Reach.

Gilly grinned. “That's my husband. My Sam is always thinking of things.”

_Yes. Yes he is. And thank the gods for him._

“My Lady, there is a chance for you to survive, but I’m afraid it won’t be easy.” Merys said. “Part of the way the poison works is that your body generates a dependency on one of the ingredients after a while. At this point, your body is certainly dependent. Going without the potion and allowing your body to recover will be… extremely unpleasant.”

Sansa cast her eyes downward. “Have we discovered how it’s been administered to me yet?”

“Not yet. We’re going to run some more tests. Everything you ingest from now on must be checked. There are a few foods and wines which kill the chemicals, so you’re going to have to stick to them until we can determine what it is that’s been spiked. The prince and queen are both having their blood tested to see if they’ve been exposed. If not, we can narrow it down to things only you’ve had.”

Sans nodded. “I believe Anais gave you documentation of my diet?”

“Yes, but as she’s a suspect, it’s possible that she left something out. I’ll need you to check over the food list yourself for omissions.”

Sansa nodded. “Of course. Grand Maester… I don’t know much about this poison. But I need to know… how can this affect my fertility?”
“I don’t believe there are any cases of the Slow Strangler rendering anyone sterile. However, since one of the few tests that can detect it is one used for pregnancy, there are next to no cases of it being used on a woman, according to my books. Right now, your body is too weak for you to bear children, however, once you are treated and healthy again, you are likely to be fit to carry children.”

“Likely or certain?”

Merys bit his lip. “I’m almost completely certain.”

Jon frowned. *This is what she’s worried about?*

Satin came in then with some fresh clothing for Jon. “Your Grace? You said you wanted to prepare to meet the queen in here?”

Jon looked at Sansa. “Daenerys knows. She wants us to meet her in her chambers.”

Dany:

She’d gone to bed wholly satisfied with the way things had gone. Because of the nature of the announcement at the banquet, most of the attention was focused on Sansa and Jon. For once, she didn’t have to bear the burden of charming the entire court and being watched every moment. King’s Landing wasn’t like Meereen, where people always stood back a bit and feared approaching a royal. People came towards her all the time in King’s Landing, and she had to converse with them constantly at formal occasions. While Dany delighted in speaking to the Smallfolk, she found the majority of nobles pretentious and self-serving, and found their conversation to be a bore. When she talked to most Westerosi, she always got the same feeling she did talking to a really desperate, unsubtle man trying to seduce her. Equal parts ridiculous and repellant.

She rarely knew what to say, either. Dany was excellent at formal speeches, and she prided herself on her frankness. But here, everything was artifice and subterfuge. The Westeros nobles made her uncomfortable.

Sansa had the ability to speak like a courtier. It was one of the things Daenerys liked about her. The woman was useful. So while Sansa managed to entertain the guests, Daenerys was able to relax a bit, enjoy herself, and flirt with that handsome Ser Daemon Sand.

Before the dragon queen had taken the Iron Throne, there were very specific roles laid out for kings and queens in Westeros. Kings ruled the kingdoms, fought the wars, made the state decisions, passed laws, and acted as a figurehead. Queens bore and raised the children, warmed the king’s bed, managed the court, organized the social aspects of the royal sphere, entertained, and served as decoration.

Daenerys had learned to rule. She made for both an excellent figurehead and decoration. But she wasn’t some gentle, ingratiating flower nor could she pretend to be. Being a delightful flower was what the court of the Andals expected and found charming in women. But Daenerys was a flame. She was more king than queen. She’d won a number of wars and campaigns, she could handle affairs of state, she was powerful. But people took issue with a woman being fierce and powerful as explicitly as she did. Even the most influential of ladies tended to put on a front of being dainty and demure, and covered their political activities with a thick layer of subterfuge and domesticity.

Even if she wanted to, Daenerys could not hide what she was. She couldn’t play the coy, sweet, harmless lady. No matter how much she batted her eyelashes, no matter how many times she uttered little compliments, she was still the woman who had conquered Slaver’s Bay and Westeros, brought dragons back to life, and led a Dothraki Khalasaar. No one would ever forget any of that. So even if
she mastered the ridiculous turns of phrase courtiers used, started speaking in double meanings, and remembered all the little courtesies and superficial details that were expected of a lady of the court, everyone would know how false it was. No one was going to believe that she didn’t know how what an edict was or what marching fire was. She was the Bride of Fire.

That’s what made Sansa Stark so perfect for this. Sansa had a talent for making people forget that she was ever called the Red Wolf, or that she fought a war. Not only did she know all the intricacies of Westeros etiquette and court life, but she was simply charming. There was something to her, a distinct air of vulnerability and sweetness that clung to her like a heavy perfume. It was not just that she could sew, dance, sing, and smile better than any woman at court. It wasn’t just that she dressed well and could remember which Lord just had a child, or which lady was giving which knight her favor. Sansa never intimidated anyone. She always seemed demure and proper and girlish. Despite knowing how to navigate the court with the best, she hid it well.

There was something to her. Part of it were those big, round, doll-like blue eyes and bow-shaped lips. Part of it was how easily she smiled. But she rarely ever failed in either getting people to put their guard down or like her.

And she knew how to handle the court. She knew all the ins and outs. She knew how to use that particular bland of double-layered speech which sounded like empty pleasantries and considerate kindness on top but underneath was wrought with meaning. She knew the various biases and motivations of the various families and nobles. Catalogued in her mind were the names, mottos, sigils, homes, alliances and feuds of each and every House. She could tell you which House dealt in trading wool, and which had iron mines. She could tell you why the Linderlys hated the Cerwyns, that Willas Tyrell had actually been friends with Oberyn Martell, and that House Trant was looking to popularize a new method of firing metal to make shields. She knew how many Houses had young sons eager to prove themselves in the till yards, which daughters were unmarried, and who was betrothed or squired to whom. She knew that Lady Blackwood liked strawberries and that Ser Tytos Hill was an obsessive Cyvasse player.

In short, Sansa had all those skills that were required of royal consorts.

There were other reasons Sansa worked so well, of course. There were still always rumblings of the North wanting to break free. A match with her tied that area to the Iron Throne more securely. Sansa was known and beloved of the North. She also had ties to the Riverlands, and her links to The Vale were improving daily. What had been the nail in the coffin to the original Targaryen rule had been the taking of Lyanna Stark. It served as a powerful symbol to have another daughter of that House willingly, openly, and honorably married to the new Targaryen prince, especially given Jon’s northern roots.

Sansa was also fertile. She’d conceived a healthy son with her first husband very shortly after their marriage. By all accounts the birth and pregnancy were untroubled, and Eddie had been a robust, intelligent, well-formed child. She’d not had children since, but that was by design. Her courses were regular and while she’d taken ill, she showed remarkable resilience throughout it.

Furthermore, she was a good subject and very devoted to both Jon and Daenerys. The matter of the succession was urgent, and Daenerys had dreaded possibly having to pressure Jon into a match. She loathed the idea, as she was extremely fond of her nephew. But facts were facts and the Targaryen Dynasty needed to be continued. Sansa Stark gave Daenerys an easy resolution. Jon loved her and she was the first woman he’d shown any interest in. He was finally eager to wed and sire heirs, and Daenerys didn’t need to force a thing.

Sansa would work beyond Westeros as well. Her war record and survival proved her strong enough
for the Dothraki. She was beautiful, charming, sophisticated, and fashionable enough for Slaver’s Bay.

It was all neat and tidy and it made Daenerys very happy. So she’d gone to sleep with a smile on her face.

But then, Grand Maester Merys woke her in the earliest hours, disturbing her slumber and her sense of security.

“Your Grace, we can’t find the prince or Lady Sansa anywhere, but someone had to know… The Lady of Winterfell is being poisoned.”

And with that, her neat, tidy little solution was threatened.

A few broken pieces of furniture later, Daenerys started crafting plans to deal with this. So when Jon, Sansa, their servants, and closest friends came to her chambers, Dany felt a bit prepared.

The Lady of Winterfell looked calm and collected, though a bit pale. Jon looked so miserable that Dany wanted badly to pull him into her arms, hold his hand, and tell him that everything would be alright. Her heir clutched Sansa’s arm tightly, as if he thought she’d drop dead if he let go.

With them was Merys, Barristan, that fat novice friend of Jon’s, the wildling handmaiden of Sansa’s, and Jon’s pretty steward, Satin.

They all sat around Daenerys’s dining table, looking nervous. Dany looked into the Lady of Winterfell’s eyes. “Sansa, how are you?”

“I’m as well as can be expected, Your Grace.”

Dany nodded. “We’re going to find out who did this. And those behind it will be punished, I promise you.”

Sansa nodded. “I trust the Queen’s Justice.”

Dany frowned. Sansa was using her courtier voice and mask. She’s more terrified than she lets on. “Maester Merys has filled you in on the details of this particular poison?”

They all nodded. Dany sighed. “Since we need to find out who did this, it would be better if whoever is behind this doesn’t know we’re looking for them. Anais’s escape is an issue. We’re going to give the impression that she is wanted for theft. Maester Merys informs me that being denied this substance will result in Lady Sansa falling ill. So, essentially, that’s what we’re going to be telling everyone for a little while. We’ll cloister Sansa off, telling everyone she’s sick, and quietly investigate. Once we’ve made satisfactory progress, we’ll go public with the news of foul play. But until then, we have to be discreet. Our plotters are more likely to make mistakes if they think they’ve succeeded.”

They all agreed, quietly, and further plans were detailed. Anais would be found and questioned. Sansa would spend this day acting like nothing was amiss, then withdraw from court tomorrow. Samples would be taken of everything she was meant to ingest on a typical day and tested for poison. While her body was detoxing, they’d pretend she had Lungwaste--- the disease that resembled the final results of Slow Strangler. Spies would be used, and they’d quietly examine the accounts of the court members and look for anyone who could have ordered Slow Strangler or the ingredients to make it. Arrangements would be made so no one left court until the culprit was caught. The Coldwater and Moore supporters, as well as anyone else who stood to profit from Sansa’s death, would be looked into.
It’s going to be a long list, Daenerys thought to herself as they went over names. Any Lord with an unmarried daughter or sister of childbearing years is suspect. As is anyone connected to the Stark bloodline who stand to inherit Winterfell upon Sansa’s death. Or anyone crossed by the Starks. So essentially, the entire court.

Daenerys’s stomach turned. She knew all too well what it was like to have so many people want you dead.

Daenerys was not going to let them win, though. For reasons personal and political, she could not let Sansa Stark die. She didn’t want to see what would happen to Jon if he lost her. Her nephew had lost so many already. Worst of all, she feared the North would go insane if the last Stark died in the home of a Targaryen.

Silently, she cursed the poisoner. You may have brought war back to this country, you fool.

Sansa:

“’There will be nausea, fever, fatigue, mood swings, and possibly, hallucinations. You may even go into shaking fits’.”

Images of Robert Arryn flashed through her mind as she sat at her dining table, listening to Maester Merys explaining exactly what she had to look forward to. Jon sat beside her, holding her hand in his lap. I used to hold Sweetrobin’s hand when he’d have fits, she remembered, if I have fits, will Jon hold mine?

She needed to be calm and strong. I am made of ice. I am made of stone. I am a Direwolf. I am of the North. I need to be strong and brave, like my Lady Mother. Like Father.

She’d spent the last several years of being strong and brave like Father. Like Mother. Like Robb. Like Arya. Like Bran. Like Jon. Like a Stark. When she was forced to pretend to love Joffrey and call her family a bunch of traitors after her father’s death, she’d been strong and brave like Father. When she had to put up with Sweetrobin’s fits and moods, she’d been nurturing and patient, like Mother. When she’d born the indignity of being raped by Petyr, she considered the indignity of being robbed of one’s legs like Bran, and she endured. When she had to march to the North, leading an army and braving down the Boltons, Lannisters, and Freys, she’d tried to be like Robb. When she’d discovered that Petyr had killed her husband, when she’d seen her son’s head clutched in Wallace Coldwater’s fists, she’d been fierce like Arya. When she’d gone to trial, she saw Jon’s face and remembered that he’d fought White Walkers.

But I’m not Father. I’m not Mother. I’m not Arya. I’m not Robb. I’m not Bran. I’m Sansa. She thought to herself. I’m Sansa and I’ve had to pretend to be someone else for so long. I retook the North. I won my trials. I’ve been taking care of my lands. I’m no longer a prisoner of some lunatic. I did everything I possibly could to survive and avenge my family. So why can’t I be allowed to stop being someone else and just be Sansa again for once?

She thought she had that chance last night. For a few glorious hours, Sansa didn’t feel the need to remind herself to be like Father or Mother or Robb or Jon or Arya. She’d walked into the banquet hall looking beautiful, like Sansa. Father, Robb, Jon and Arya hadn’t been known for being beautiful. Robb and Jon were both handsome, but Sansa was always the good looking one out of the Starks. Mother had been a beauty, but she’d never looked the way Sansa did last night. Sansa’s mother was a more reserved beauty. She dressed classically. Catelyn Tully Stark would never have worn sheer red samite. She’d never have had bare arms. Not even in her youth. Sansa used to read
about the past fashions, and during the years of her mother’s maidenhood, long sleeves were the fashion. Sheer silk was something that came into popularity much later as well.

Sansa knew she’d looked the way she used to fantasize about looking when she was very young. Everyone used to say that she’d be as beautiful as her mother when she was a young girl, and at the time, it was immensely flattering. She’d go to the godwood or the sept, get on her knees and pray. *Please Mother, please Maiden, please unnamed gods, let me be as pretty as Mama some day.*

On her eighth Name Day, Mother had let her wear her pretty pearl pins in her hair. Sansa hadn’t been able to stop looking at herself in the mirror when she saw that. She loved her mother’s pearl pins. They were not the fanciest things Catelyn owned, but they had such a romantic story behind them. Mama told her all the time. Papa was a reserved, frugal man who didn’t buy lots of fancy things, nor was he the sort to express his emotions easily. For a long time during their marriage, when Mother and Father were still getting to know one another, he never said he loved her. Mother was falling in love with Father, but was afraid he didn’t feel the same way, or that saying such a thing wasn’t Northern and would embarrass him, so she kept quiet. Then one evening, a few days after she’d announced that she was pregnant with Sansa, Father just out of the blue presented her with the pins and told her he loved her. So to Sansa, even though the clips weren’t as rich or expensive or fancy as some of Mother’s other things, the pearl pins were the most beautiful, because they were what a man gave a woman when he knew he loved her. Sansa felt so very fine with those pearls in her hair, glancing at herself from various angles. Mother had watched her from her bed, smiling.

*Someday, I want to be so lovely that some man will love me enough to give me something like this,* she’d thought to herself. And so she’d asked her mother, “Mama, do you think some day I’ll be as beautiful as you?”

And Catelyn Stark was beautiful. Even as she got older, she was lovely. Everyone spoke of her red hair and blue eyes, but there was more to it. She also had these perfectly shaped lips, and this perfect smile, and fantastic cheekbones. Even in her dullest garb, Catelyn Tully turned heads.

And at that moment in her chambers, Catelyn’s big blue eyes grew even bigger, she gasped a little, and she said, “Sansa, you’re going to be a far more beautiful woman than I ever was.”

It seemed impossible at the time. It seemed like the sort of thing only a mother would say to the daughter she doted on. For the most part, it still did. Even though since then, others had said she’d surpassed her mother’s looks. Petyr, who’d been madly in love with Sansa’s mother, even said so. But still, Sansa had trouble believing it. But last night, she could believe it. She didn’t feel like a ghost of her mother’s face. She felt new and uniquely lovely.

Especially when she saw Jon.

It was a like a girlhood fantasy come to life when he came into view. There was a parallel with her and Jon. Everyone always said how much Jon looked like her father. More than any of Lord Eddard’s other sons, who had the Tully look like Sansa. Jon had the dark hair, the height, the grey eyes, the solemn expression. But the thing was, Sansa never thought her father was especially handsome. He wasn’t an ugly man by any means. Lord Eddard kept trim, his skin was excellent, his eyes intense. But Jon was a downright beautiful man. His mouth had this stunning shape and fullness that any woman would envy. His cheekbones were high and sculpted, his face wasn’t quite as long as Lord Eddard’s, and his hair was this gorgeous tumble of thick dark curls. Jon always spoke of how girls at court pretended to like him because of the crown. But Sansa knew better.

Tonight he didn’t just look handsome, he looked like a prince. A handsome prince just like the ones Sansa used to dream about as a girl. He wasn’t golden haired, but that was a good thing. He was in
silks and he wore that fine silver coronet and when he looked at her, it was like she was all he could see or would ever want to see.

Then she was announced as his future princess and everyone clapped and cheered. All night, Jon kept by her side. He pressed his hand to the small of her back, kissed her hands and cheeks and even her mouth a few times. He threaded his fingers with hers. He smiled and told her how he loved her.

Just like one of little Sansa’s dreams. A dream that would not belong to Robb or Bran or Arya or Eddard or probably even Mother. A Sansa dream. When they made love that night, she’d felt it safe to dream like Sansa again.

“…. Dizziness, sweats, weakness, pain, and insomnia are also to be expected."

Sansa nodded woodenly.

Merys sighed. “I’ll be administering a tincture to help clean you out more quickly. I’ll bring you the first dose tonight. After that, you’ll take it twice a day.”

She nodded again. “How long before I’m well again?”

“With luck, it’ll take one or two weeks to clean you out completely. Then it will be another three weeks for your lungs to repair themselves and for you to gain enough strength to leave bed for extended periods. But after that, you may return to full health very quickly.”

“When will I start feeling the effects?”

“Sometime tomorrow.”

Sansa shivered. So little time.

A few more things were discussed with Merys before they sent him on his way. Sansa turned to Jon. “I’m scared.”

His eyes told her he was too. But he said, “You’ll be fine, Sansa.”

But nothing would be fine again. Sansa shook. “Jon, why did it have to be Anais?”

That was one thing she really had trouble handling. The pain she’d go through was one thing. The thought of never seeing Winterfell rebuilt or seeing Jon again were easily the worst parts. But that it was Anais of all people who had helped slip poison into her food and drink…

Sansa loved that girl. Anais knew how to do her job well, she was loyal, she was clever and wickedly funny. Over the last couple of moons, she’d been Sansa’s greatest source of comfort aside from Jon. And the best part about her was that Sansa thought that the affection and devotion Anais exhibited for her mistress might be genuine. This wasn’t just some shallow, bored maid echoing compliments and comfort for the sake of her own security and Sansa’s ego. Anais seemed legitimately concerned for her. She wasn’t afraid to speak her mind when she disagreed with something, and when she was kind, it definitely seemed to come from a place of true compassion. Sansa thought she’d found a friend. And she needed a friend, a true female friend, since Randa and Anya had returned to the Vale. Surely, Anais was that friend she sought.

But she wasn’t, you stupid girl, she chided herself, She was killing you all along. You’d think after years of false friends, you’d know one when you saw one. But you didn’t. Because you’re stupid.

She’d also been stupid enough to imagine that maybe, just maybe, her life would be a song at last.
But life is not a song. *I should have learned that. But I never learn.*

Last night, she’d dreamt like Sansa. Now, she cried like Sansa.
Like a Heartbeat Drives You Mad

Chapter Summary

An embarrassing secret is divulged, Jon starts losing his grip, Sansa's mind tortures her with ghosts

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Illyana and Blue once more! Also, you guys are awesome! OVER 250 KUDOS!! You all keep me writing.

Some notes:

In this chapter there are some things stated about Robb that may seem unfair/inaccurate to the canon. Most of these things are said by characters in extreme emotional duress, and some are said without full knowledge of what actually happened. For instance, when Sansa states that Robb punished Catelyn for freeing the Kingslayer. In this story, though this is more loyal to the books than the show, in my mind, Sansa believes it was Robb who made the call regarding that. As for Jon's words on Robb, he's saying a lot of this in a state of shock and anger. So he's being harsh here even though he loves Robb.

This is a long chapter, and some of the circumstances of the first part may seem off, but I do stand by that. The viewpoints jump back and forth between Jon and Sansa. I hope you guys enjoy though!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Seventeen: Like a Heartbeat Drives You Mad

Jon:

Torch were lit throughout the throne room to fight off the night’s darkness. Not that Jon needed it. He could fight in very dim conditions. The Wall had taught him well. He stood at the foot of the royal dais. His squire, the homely Nathen Cerwyn, cousin to Lady Jonelle, was helping him with his armor.

A crowd of various nobles and servants was gathered, all bowing their heads and whispering, staring at him with wide eyes, as if they couldn’t believe what they were seeing. “Why is this happening all of a sudden? Prince Jon never engages in such things. People have called Lady Stark all manner of rude names before. They’ve said much worse. So why is he doing this now?”

Today proved one of the worst of Jon’s life. After everything was discussed about the poison, both he and Sansa were expected to venture out of the royal wing and act as if nothing was amiss to keep up appearances. They found that there was just more to contend with.

Apparently, that morning, a couple of Lannisport representatives and Ironborn ship captains had
gone to the Small Council Chambers to discuss trade routes. When they entered, a couple of chairs were overturned and the table was shifted out of its usual position. Atop the table was the remains of a blue winter rose much like the one Sansa wore to the banquet the night before. If that weren’t enough, on the floor they found a dirty white linen handkerchief that had red wolves and the initials J.S.T in black.

Jon found himself followed by whispers and giggles. He’d brushed that off.

Then Margaery came to him in the till yard that afternoon, looking angry. At first, he’d rebuffed her, still annoyed by the stunt she’d pulled with the handkerchief. She asked him if it was true that he was setting Sansa aside, which got his attention, then told him what she’d witnessed near the entrance of the Maidenvault.

Stafford Pryor, a cousin of Rhys Moore, walked right up to Sansa earlier today. He’d smiled and said to her, in front of various ladies of the court, “Lady Stark, I’ve read many accounts by Targaryens detailing their experiences riding dragons. But tell me, what is it like to have a dragon ride you? Do you plan on giving your favors to Drogon and Viserion as well? You’re a lady known for your generosity, after all, and I’m sure their mother could spare the coin.”

Margaery’s voice shook as she recounted this to Jon.

“I knew Sansa wouldn’t tell you, but this is mad. There are limits to what one can tolerate. I can’t, as a lady of this court, let another lady be insulted so horribly, so publicly. This is King’s Landing, not… Pyke.” Margaery grimaced. “If some little sod can walk up to the Warden of the North and call her a whore who mates with reptiles, then all standards are gone. What’s to keep any other noblewoman from being shamed so? And… She started crying, Jon. Others laughed, she cried. I cannot…”

Margaery swallowed and continued. “Sansa and I aren’t on the best terms, but she didn’t deserve that. If someone is going to insult her, they should at least have the decency to do it with taste. And she’s hurt. I haven’t seen her cry in public like that since she was a girl. I watched her hold her composure while marrying the Imp. She told everyone not to say a word to you because she’s stubborn and she doesn’t want you doing anything rash. It’s time for something rash.”

Jon left the yard without a word to Margaery. He entered on the noble drawing rooms where a number of lords were gathered. Stafford Pryor, brown-haired and handsome, was sitting with his back to the entrance of the room, cup in hand and saying, “Honestly, between the mockingbirds, falcons, and dragons it’s fair to say that feathered or scaled, if it has wings, the Stark woman will fuck it. Of course that poor bastard is putting her away. He thought he was getting a lady, and that lady let him nail her on the council table. He can’t ignore the fact that she’s a harlot after that.”

Jon almost ran him through right then and there. He settled for grabbing him by the back of his hair and throwing him to the ground, throwing one of his gloves at the man’s chest.

“Throne room. Dusk,” He choked out before walking away.

Jon swore to Sam that if Anais wasn’t cowering before the Iron Throne by nightfall, someone else would be. Jon stopped breaking vows long ago.

Sansa, shaking slightly and looking like a wilting flower in blue, walked up to him. “You don’t have to do this, Jon.”

“Yes I do,” he said simply. He was through standing by while his lover bore the insults of spoiled simpletons. Before, he’d given into her pleas not to react to it for the sake of discretion. But
discretion at this point failed as an option. Besides, he’d now formally announced that she was his, he was allowed to act as her man. He might not have a chance to do it again.

*I will fight for her while she still breathes, at least once.* Tonight Merys would dose her with the antidote that would begin the painful process of detoxing her body. She didn’t need to go into that with her honor damaged. Jon glanced up at the throne, where Daenerys sat, violet eyes and bright white teeth flashing in eagerness. She gave him a quick nod and Jon resumed his preparation.

“In that case…” Sansa reached into her pocket and pulled out a small knot of grey silk with white snowflakes and her initials in blue. The silk was tied with a black ribbon decorated with green dragons and red and white wolves. “I was going to give this to you on your nameday.”

He let her bind it to his wrist, then grabbed her and kissed her deep in front of the court. *How is that for setting her aside?*

Nathen handed Longclaw to him, and Jon turned to his opponent. “Lord Stafford Pryor. You have insulted the honor of Sansa of the House Stark, Lady of Winterfell and the Vale, Warden of the North, and my betrothed. You made lewd, unwarranted, invasive comments about her private affairs. Furthermore, you have spread a lie that I ended my betrothal to her. By insulting her, you have insulted me. By insulting her honor, you have insulted mine. For this, I challenge you to single combat.”

Pryor stepped forward, then knelt. “I offer my sincerest apologies to you and to Lady Stark, My Prince. I spoke out of turn, I spoke while intoxicated, and my words were untrue, unbecoming, and undeserved.”

Jon frowned. He’d expected a fight. He *wanted* a fight. He growled. “So you admit that you said these things about my lady?”

“Jon…” Sansa called out. He ignored her and kept his eyes on Stafford.

“I did, Your Grace.”

“Then you have threatened my family’s honor.” He twisted his blade, letting the firelight glint off of it. “Am I supposed to take that lightly?”

“No, Your Grace.”

“And what other things have you said about my lady, Pryor? You were saying quite a lot to your companions in the drawing room. I only heard the tale end of it, I bet.” Jon strode up to the still-kneeling Pryor. Both men shook. Pryor with fear, Jon with fury. He was so *sick* of letting people hurt the ones he loved. *Not this time.* “What else was said?”

“My prince, I—“

Jon put the tip of his blade to Pryor’s neck. The man flinched and shook more violently, pulling his head back as much as possible. Longclaw’s point followed him, almost ready to cut…


“JON!” Sansa cried out. “Stop it!”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry for everything I said. I’ll never say another word against her or you or anyone… I swear it.” Pryor whimpered now. A stench wafted from him. Jon glanced down. The man was pissing his hose.
“JON! PLEASE!”

This time, both his lover and his aunt cried out to him. He cocked his head at the shaking lord. “The woman you slandered is pleading for you while you’re pissing yourself in public, Pryor. Consider that.”

There was a flurry of footsteps and Jon felt a pair of hands circle his waist. Sansa leaned forward and whispered to him. “Forget him, Jon, please. You’re going to harm your honor yourself if you go any further. He’s not worth it. I don’t want blood on my account. Spend this time with me instead.”

Jon lowered his blade and relaxed. He tried to think. Sansa was right: if he went any further, his own honor was damaged. The man yielded. He couldn’t in good conscience do anything more. Eddard Stark wouldn’t proceed. *Father would not be proud of this moment.*

Shame took over then. Jon grabbed Pryor’s blade and flung it off to a far distance. It landed at the feet of one of the crowd. He then stepped off, sheathing his blade and giving Sansa his arm. Before getting too far from the man, he looked over at Pryor once more.

“Clean yourself up. If you say another poor word about my lady, you’ll find me far less merciful. Thank the lady for her intervention.”

“Thank you, Lady Stark,” Pryor blubbered, looking at the floor.

Jon and Sansa went back to the royal dais as Daenerys ordered the crowds out. She smirked at Jon. “Blood of the dragon, Nephew.”

Jon shifted uncomfortably. He wasn’t exactly sure this was a proud moment for House Targaryen. *Or for me.*

Sansa:

Ghosts started haunting her bedchamber.

The first to appear was the only welcome one.

He’d been such a beautiful little boy, with auburn curls, bright blue eyes, dimples, and the sweetest smile. When Eddie smiled, the whole world got a little brighter. The winter seemed less cold, the wars seemed less bloody, Winterfell seemed to be rebuilt quicker.

Eddie hadn’t looked much like his namesake, he was too animated and excitable. But one thing Eddard Stark had always been was kind, and Eddie was a kind boy. Even at three, if he saw someone crying, he’d walk over and kiss them on the cheek and say, “Please be happy.” He’d do all sorts of things to try and make people happy. One of his favorite things was to do silly little dances to make others smile. Eddie liked to move. He liked to run and jump and dance. Sometimes it would drive Sansa mad, because he’d wander. Sometimes he fell, but even when he scraped a knee, he rarely cried. In the face of so much cold, suffering, and death, Eddie smiled. A little bit of summer in the middle of winter.

It was the second day of her confinement, and Sansa was sitting in bed, reading. She’d been irritable, and wanted to be alone. Her head pounded and she hadn’t slept the night before. And all of a sudden, she was crying.

And then she felt a bit of weight on her bed. She looked up, and little arms circled her neck and wet lips pressed against her cheek.
“Please be happy, Mama,” said a voice that broke her heart. “Don’t be sad. Don’t cry. I’m sorry you’re sick. But you’ll get better.”

There was a part of her that knew he wasn’t real. But he seemed so real, and she so wanted him to be. Eddie looked like he had the afternoon before he died: healthy and happy, in the little coat of play armor Sansa gave him so he could run around and pretend to be a knight.

“Ser-Eddie-Strong-and-Steady,” she said, using the nickname she gave him when they played. “Are you going to rescue me from the wicked plots?”

“No, Mama, we’re in bed now. When we’re in bed, I’m Ser-Edd-in-the-Bed.” That was true. When they acted out tales of chivalry at bedtime, or made blanket forts, or had pillow fights, he was Ser-Edd-in-the-Bed. If it got too late, he became Ser-Edd-Go-to-Bed. “And I can’t rescue you from wicked plots. I only rescued you as pretend. I was too small to rescue anyone but Naked Boy.”

Naked Boy was the baby bird that he’d found and nursed a few moons before he died. Sansa felt her heart sink. In her dreams, Eddie usually didn’t know he was dead.

“I’m sorry I didn’t rescue you,” she told him, feeling gutted. “I’m so sorry, Eddie.”

Her little fantasy boy curled up alongside her and kissed her cheek. “You can’t stop all the bad things, Mama. That man was mean and big. Bigger than both of us. It hurt a lot. Now I want to sleep, Mama. Can I sleep in your bed tonight? Can you sing me a song?”

She sang ‘The Ride of the Dragonknight.’ By the end, her baby boy had disappeared.

The next to come was Lady Stoneheart, that awful, disgusting, mutation of her mother. Lady Stoneheart hadn’t been able to speak when she was alive, but in death she possessed a strong, horrible voice.

“TRAITOR! You killed me! Your own MOTHER! You killed your mother and you betrayed your brother’s memory! You destroyed the crown of the North! YOU GAVE EVERYTHING ROBB FOUGHT FOR TO THE DRAGON BITCH! YOU LAY WITH THE BASTARD! I’m waiting for you, Sansa Lannister! WE’RE ALL WAITING FOR YOU! There has been no great injustice in this war than the fact that of the Starks, you’re the survivor! The Stark who isn’t a Stark! You’re a Lannister through and through. You married The Imp and now you’re fornicating with your bastard brother! TRAITOR! WHORE! LANNISTER TRAITOR! THE NORTH REMEMBERS! When you get down here, you’ll find us all waiting for you! We’re waiting! WE’RE ALL WAITING!”

Sansa dissolved into hysterical screams. Jon rushed in at this point. He left Ghost with her after that so she’d feel protected. From the next several hours, the wolf became her companion.

The worst, though, came in the wee hours of the morning. Sansa was woken in the middle of the night, needing to vomit. She pried herself out of Jon’s embrace, pulled herself over to the edge of the bed, and threw up into the chamber pot until she was dry heaving. She poured herself a drink of water then. When she turned over, she found that it was no longer Jon lying there. It was Robb.

Robb as she’d never seen him before. He was taller, his auburn hair was longer, he had a beard, and a there was a haunted, hungry, predatory look in his eyes. He wore Jon’s breeches and that hideous crown of the North.

She gasped and recoiled.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, in a mock-wounded tone. “Do you suddenly not like having a brother in your bed?”
“You’re not real,” she whispered. “My brother is dead.”

“Two of your brothers are dead,” corrected the apparition, “Boltons and Freys killed me. Rickon died on Skagos. Bran is now one of the Children. He’ll probably never die. One is not the same as two, Sansa. Did you forget? Not surprising. You were always hopeless with figures. And Jon… well, you know Jon is still alive. He’s pumped plenty of life into you by now, hasn’t he?”

She shook. This was worse than Lady Stoneheart. “Jon isn’t my brother.”

“Ah, right, you always did insist on calling him half-brother, didn’t you? Does that give you comfort when you spread your legs for him?”

“Jon isn’t really my half-brother.”

“And Baelish wasn’t your blood uncle, was he?”

Tears rushed to her eyes. “Petyr raped me.”

“Ah, but you enjoyed it, didn’t you? You came when he fucked you. Or… well… even when he didn’t fuck you. At least not in the most traditional sense.”

“Stop it.”

“What are you going to do if I don’t? Kill me?” Robb gave a laugh that sounded like a bark.

“You’re not real,” she said again, pulling away. “And even if you were, you’re wrong.”

“You’re not real. And even if you were, you’re wrong,” said Robb, mocking the pitch of her voice. “Like you could ever tell what was real. The girl who thought she was going to live a happy, blessed life with Joffrey Baratheon, the girl who thought ‘shift’ was a rude word for dung. You were always an idiot, Sansa. Even for a little girl, you were stupid. I was so happy when I heard you’d been married off to the Imp. It gave me an excuse to disinherit you.”

Sansa gasped. “No…”

“Yes.” Robb grinned. “Oh gods, you can’t imagine how unbelievably happy I was. The thought of such a stupid, shallow, thoughtless twit like you ruling Winterfell? It gave me nightmares. I looked at corpses daily, but none of that turned my stomach like the thought of you succeeding me. I had no trouble letting Winterfell be ruled by Bran, who was nine. But you? The North deserved better than you. Almost everyone deserved better than you. Only a deformed lecher like Tyrion Lannister really deserved you, and at least he had brains. But you are to intellect what he was to beauty. I was happily prepared to send a hundred men to The Wall and break thousands of years of tradition to put Jon in the Lord of Winterfell’s chair, against my mother’s wishes, if it meant keeping a stupid cunt like you from taking our father’s title. You were only ever going to be good for one thing, and that was done better in Tyrion Lannister’s bed than Father’s chair.”

“You’re a liar. You’re not Robb. Robb would never say such things. Robb loved me.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s why I was willing to give up the Kingslayer for you… Oh wait.” Robb smiled. “That didn’t happen, did it? I left you there to be raped to death by the Lannisters. And I disinherit you for it. Honestly, Sansa. You’re such a pig-headed little moron, thinking anyone loves you. For what? For being a stupid, useless, smug, arrogant, craven, weak little whore who can’t even protect her children? I never loved you. You were an annoying thorn in my side, vastly inferior to our sister. I only looked out for you because Mother and Father told me I had to. All those hours of making me play knights and maidens with you… It was pathetic. I hated you for it. The
only good qualities that you ever had were physical, and I couldn’t even enjoy those. I’m sure Jon
appreciates them, though. What else is there to enjoy? Your nagging about his appearance and
manners? Your half-baked political maneuvering? He’s only interested in you for two things: Your
body and Winterfell. He only says he loves you because he knows you’re dumb enough to believe
it.”

“No! No!” She covered her ears. She couldn’t stand this.

Robb continued. “You know Arya hated you. She saw right through you: a lying, stupid, useless
little brat. And we all did. We all hated you. We’d laugh at you, little Lady Prissy thinking she’s so
fine. We still laugh, but we’re also disgusted by your incest. You really are a Lannister, fucking her
brother.”

“Go away!” Sansa cried out.

Robb advanced upon her, grabbing her by the wrists and pinning her to the bed. “I never got to
enjoy you in life. But now, you’ve spread your legs for one brother. It’s only fair that I get my shot. “

“Stop it! Stop it!

“Sansa! SANSA!” Robb roared.

“PLEASE!!” She cried out, throwing her head back and closing her eyes. Not again. No. Not again.
Please no. “PLEASE! LET ME GO!”

The grips on her arms were released.

“Sansa, Sweetling,” said Robb, his face and voice starting to change, “I’m sorry. Are you alright?
Please, Love, can you hear me?”

~_~_~_~_~_~_~

Jon:

He’d woken to Sansa shaking, looking at him with horrified eyes.

“You’re a liar. You’re not Robb. Robb would never say such things. Robb loved me,” she
whimpered. Jon couldn’t stand the way she looked at him. She’s terrified of me. He knew on a
conscious level that she wasn’t really seeing him. Yet still, it gutted him. Merys warned him about
this. He took a measured breath and tried to remain calm as instructed.

“No, Sansa, I’m not. I’m Jon. Can you tell? It’s just me, it’s Jon. Robb isn’t here. Robb is dead and
gone. Robb loved you very much, but he’s gone. Whatever you think you’re hearing or seeing, it’s
not real. I’m real. I’m real, I’m here for you, and I love you. Please hear me. Please see me. Come
back.” Jon’s stomach sank. She wasn’t hearing him, judging by the way she shrunk away. Her fear
felt like a knife in the gut, and Jon would know. “Sansa, please. I’m right here. You’re safe. Robb
isn’t here. Your mother isn’t here. No one is here but you, me, and Ghost. We’re here to protect you.
No one is going to hurt you.”

That’s a promise I can’t keep, Jon thought bitterly, I’ve proven that. “Robb is not here. It is just us.”

“No! No!” She contorted her body, covering her ears and whimpering.

to me, please. You’re safe, it’s alright. It’s a vision, nothing more. Sweetling, please. I’m right here
for you. Your prince, your bastard boy. I’m here. No spirits. Just me.”

She started thrashing around violently. *Gods, she’s going to hurt herself.* That was something else Merys warned him of  “She could hurt herself, either by design or by accident. You may have to restrain her.” Visions of that awful night when she’d broken her fingers flooded his mind.

He grabbed her wrists, trying to render her stationary as gently as he could. This killed him. She cried out. “Stop it! Stop it!”

“Sansa! SANSA!” *Just hear me, please.*

“PLEASE!” She shut her eyes and tried to pull away. “PLEASE! LET ME GO!”

Jon’s instincts took over at once and he did as she asked, utterly horrified. Determination to reach her verbally gripped him. He couldn’t stomach holding her down like this.

“Sansa, Sweetling, I’m sorry,” Jon choked out, hating himself. “Are you alright? Please, Love, can you hear me?”

She sat up, gasping. “Jon, I saw Robb. He hates me. They all hate me.”

“Sansa, Robb wasn’t here. You hallucinated. Remember, Grand Maester Merys said it would happen.”

Jon had no idea they were in for something this bad. He struggled to maintain control of himself. Merys told him that when she began to recover, he must remain calm and remind her that not everything she saw was real. *Easier said than done.*

She shook her head, staring down at her lap. “He hated me so much.”

“No, Sansa,” Jon said, trying to console her, “Robby didn’t hate you. He loved you very much. You know that.”

“Do I?” She snorted. “Then why would my head conjure him up saying the things he did?”

“You’re sick, Sansa.” Jon reached out and petted her shoulder. She flinched away.

“He left me in King’s Landing at the mercy of the Lannisters and disinherited me. He said… he said he was so happy when I was married to the Imp because it gave him an excuse to nullify my claims to the North. He said the thought of me ruling Winterfell gave him nightmares. That I was too stupid and unworthy to inherit.”

“Sansa, that’s not true. Robb made that will simply to protect the North from the Lannisters, no other reason. He’d have done anything to bring you home.”

“Except trade Jaime Lannister for me,” she replied, “He was willing to send a hundred men to the Wall and defy thousands of years of tradition to name you prince.”

“He couldn’t anger his bannermen.”

“Not for the sake of protecting me, no. However, he was perfectly willing to sacrifice a quarter of his army in order to break his vow to the Freys and marry some random woman from the Crag. Jaime Lannister wasn’t worth his sister. Not even two of his sisters. But one night with some Westerlands Nobody was worth five thousand men and avenging the deaths of two Lannister boys he didn’t know was worth alienating half of the North.”
Jon’s jaw dropped. Her statements throbbed with bitter accuracy. It gutted him, knowing he couldn’t deny it. “Sansa…”

“I was his heir, Jon! We thought Bran and Rickon were dead! But he punished my mother for trying to exchange the Kingslayer for Arya and I. Meanwhile, he wedded and bedded some lowborn stranger knowing full well that possession of much of his army was dependent on him marrying one of Walder Frey’s daughters. While Jeyne Westerling warmed his bed, I was setting my bed on fire trying to hide my first flowering. And after I was told I had to strip for the Imp, Robb stripped me of my birthright. Robb never wanted me to touch the North. I was too stupid, too selfish, too pathetic. He said I was only ever good for one thing, and it wasn’t protecting and ruling our family’s territory. I’m a stupid, silly, useless brat and he couldn’t stomach me or the thought of me inheriting our father’s title. And everyone knew it, and everyone hated me. I couldn’t even protect my son, how could I ever be expected to protect the North? He knew I’d never be worthy or capable of doing anything but warming someone’s bed.”

Jon’s jaw dropped. Unlike her prior statements, these had no basis whatsoever. He tried a different tactic from empty reassurances. There were only so many ways he could say ‘that’s not true.’ But that wasn’t enough. *She needs reasons. She needs evidence. She needs something more.*

“Well, even as an illusion, that’s pretty rich, coming from Robb,” replied Jon. “Him saying that you’d be a poor ruler? That your rule would damage the North? That *you’re* only good for one thing? I think the actual facts suggest that it’s the other way around. Robb was literally called *The King Who Lost the North*, remember? And he earned that title.”

Jon considered his words and realized something. *I’m angry at Robb. I’m angry at my brother. Not out of jealousy for his privileged station in life. Not for everything he was given. I’m angry because he was so stupid. How many people suffered and died because of his poor decisions?*

Jon loved Robb. Since his brother’s death, Jon built him up in his head as this perfect icon of honor and valor. He’d been so ashamed of himself for envying Robb’s birthright and so heartbroken by his death. He’d been unable to stomach a thought or word against him out of a combination of grief, love, and guilt. Jon never confronted any of these things before.

But now Sansa sat before him, crying over a sense of her own personal inadequacy, calling herself all manner of awful things, imagining that her family hated her for her perceived faults, and conjuring vengeful ghosts from her subconscious. And that wasn’t right. Her self-image defied rationality and made him sick to his stomach.

*People call her a whore. She calls herself a whore. And it doesn’t matter what she accomplishes, or how may times I tell her that I love her. She sees herself as stupid, useless, and unworthy. But everything indicates that she’s anything but. I thought it was so obvious, but she doesn’t see it. And she’s got this miserable mindset and she’s been put in these terrible circumstances not just because some awful people hurt her, but because the people who were supposed to keep her safe failed her. And so she feels unworthy. And she’s being tormented. Robb’s gone. Stating some ugly truths can’t hurt him. But not voicing reality is hurting her.*

“Robb was a legend, and a great leader. He was the worthy heir to our father,” Sansa protested.

Jon wanted to agree with her, but now that he considered it all, he knew he couldn’t honestly do that. The facts didn’t support that estimation of who their brother was, just who they wished he was.

“Winterfell burned to the ground because Robb sent Theon Greyjoy back to Pyke with no means of insuring the turncloak’s loyalty. He left our baby brothers at Winterfell with next to no protection, and when our home was taken, he sent some bastard he didn’t even know to retake it because he
didn’t bother checking to make sure the man didn’t have a poor reputation. He lost a quarter of his army because he wished to bed a pretty stranger, and then he alienated yet more of his bannermen by executing Rickard Karstark. Robb’s rule ended with the North in the hands of a man who fed girls to his dogs.” Jon frowned, hating the words coming from his mouth and hating the truth of them even more. “Robb could have sent anyone to Winterfell, including one of his tested and loyal bannermen. He could have spared a minute to inquire about Ramsay’s reputation. By then there were plenty of people who knew the man was a monster. He didn’t.

“And Winterfell should have never been taken in the first place. Balon Greyjoy was the son of pirates who’d risen in rebellion years prior. Theon was his son and our hostage, not to mention a spoiled ponce who delighted in taking advantage of vulnerable young girls and throwing them away like spoiled fruit. And Robb sent him off to Pyke with no guards, no restraints, no means to keep him loyal. He left our baby brothers home with not nearly enough men to protect themselves and the Stark holdfasts. He neglected to tell his uncle of his plans to lure Ser Gregor Clegane north, losing himself another prized hostage. As you yourself pointed out, he lost a quarter of his army because he violated his marriage contract. Any decision that didn’t involve tactical maneuvers, Robb made the worst choice. Robb was good for one thing: winning battles. He was a mess at everything else. And who has been cleaning up after him since? You.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“I’m saying it because it’s true. You disposed of the Boltons and the Freys. You rebuilt Winterfell. When it was destroyed again, you started the process of rebuilding it again. Robb lost at least two heirs to the North. You created one. You rode into battle with no knowledge or skill for warfare, no northern bannermen at your side, and you still won. Since then, you actually assigned a regent to the North who isn’t a child or a psychopath. You’ve been reconstructing the treasury, you’ve created alliances, you’ve recreated the trade system, you’ve restored two major houses to their rightful seats of power, you’ve defended yourself in court and preserved the memory of your child, and you’ve exposed the activities of some of the worst criminals in recent history. You’re going to be the one who provides a future for two major Westeros dynasties, and by extension, the peace and security of the realm itself. You cannot tell me that someone who accomplishes all that isn’t intelligent or useful in a variety of ways.”

“I had help,” Sansa insisted.

“So you had help. Everyone who has ever accomplished anything had help. You had far less help than Robb did. Gods, Sansa, you have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“If I have nothing to be ashamed of, then why do I see the ghosts of my family returning to call me a fool and a traitor?”

“Because you’re sick, Sweetling. Illness rarely breeds reason.” He reached over and stroked the back of her head. He was so tired, and so upset. Once again, he felt powerless. Fury at those responsible overwhelmed him. But he tried to keep calm. “Once you’re better, you’ll be thinking more clearly, back to your old self. Try to sleep. You need your rest.”

“What if I don’t wake up?”

“Don’t say such a thing.” Please don’t. “You’re going to wake up. You’re going to wake up and feel better. And then we’re going to punish whoever hurt you and you’re going to marry me and we’re going to live many years together with lots of pretty babes.”

She planted the one side of her face on the pillow. “Jon… describe Winterfell to me. Please.”
He recounted memories of their home until he felt confident that she was asleep. He left Ghost with her, tugged on his shirt and boots, and hurried to the Grand Maester’s chambers. He found Merys passed out over one of his tables, his head next to a glass instrument filled with purple liquid. Jon frowned and leaned over, nudging the man’s shoulder. Merys jumped, eyes flying open.

“Oh! Your Grace!” he said, sitting up rapidly, staring at Jon. “My apologies! I’m just so…”

“Exhausted, yes.” Jon tried not to be annoyed with the man. Merys had been up the entire previous night, testing everything. Jon hadn’t slept much either. Everyone in the royal camp was red-eyed and aching, though Jon had lost his sense of exhaustion at Sansa’s outburst. “Any news?”

Merys collected himself. His eyes caught sight of the purple liquid, and he sat back. “Apparently, yes. I believe I know what substance they poisoned.”

“Well?”

“Her moon tea. They’ve used her moon tea.”

Jon closed his eyes. It made sense. That would be something very specific Sansa would definitely be taking regularly, something that her poisoners wouldn’t have to worry about Jon or Danaerys ingesting. His stomach lurched.

She wouldn’t have had to take it if I didn’t share her bed.

Logic told him that it didn’t matter, that whoever wanted her dead would have just slipped the substance into something else.

“What does that tell us?”

“Well, we can look up her provider, that may lead us to her killer. I will make the proper inquiries. We’d also have to question anyone who was on intimate enough terms with Lady Stark to handle the delivery and preparation.”

“Easy. Anais.” Jon frowned. This was telling him far less than he’d hoped. Bile rose in his throat at the thought of the bratty little servant, who still managed to elude them despite Ser Barristan’s best efforts. “Where is moon tea usually grown?”

“Easy. Anais.” Jon frowned. This was telling him far less than he’d hoped. Bile rose in his throat at the thought of the bratty little servant, who still managed to elude them despite Ser Barristan’s best efforts. “Where is moon tea usually grown?”

It can be grown almost anywhere. The herbs are very common. But that shouldn’t be a problem. We should still be able to track a provider.”

Jon shivered. He grew impatient. He needed someone to answer for this. Jon scowled at Merys. “Do it quickly. Also, I’d like you to see to Lady Stark, see if you can give her something to ease her mind. She’s hallucinating.”

“I feared as much. Those who’ve experienced trauma on her level are especially susceptible to such things. But I don’t want to use sweetsleep. It’ll only make her weaker.”

Jon shut his eyes, furious. “Is there nothing we can do?”

“Nothing more than what has already been advised, Your Grace,” Merys said, his eyes sad. “I’m very sorry. I worry for your well-being as well. Do not forget that you also need your rest.”

Jon turned on his heel. “I’ll rest when I know she’s safe and that the one who threatened her has been punished.”

He left before Merys could say another word, hurrying back to his chambers and his desk.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~
Sansa:

The sight of Tyrion Lannister’s hideous, scarred face at the end of her bed didn’t terrify her the way Lady Stoneheart or Robb had. He stared at her for a long while with his mismatched eyes. This didn’t bother her. During the short duration of their marriage, Tyrion looked at her a lot, but it ceased to terrify her before long. It quickly became clear that he meant no harm by it. Tyrion, aside from those rare awkward nights where he touched her in his sleep, made good on his promise not to lay a hand on her until she asked. Sometimes when he looked at her, he’d quickly follow it up with kind words. He’d tell her she was beautiful, awkwardly try to comfort her, ask after her well-being, or make some well-meaning offer to buy her something or show her his home.

Tyrion Lannister, she came to realize long after she’d seen him last, was not the monster she cast him as. For all of hideousness, for all of his awkwardness, even with that awful family, he’d been as good to her as he probably could have been. When news came of his death years ago, she’d actually shed a few tears for him. She lamented that they were ever married, but she knew that he deserved to be mourned. Sansa had felt some guilt over her past hatred of the man, the fact that she hadn’t been as kind as she could have been, but she’d made her peace with it all. So seeing him here was a surprise. 

She stared back and then said, “I know you’re not really here.”

Tyrion gave a sad smile and walked alongside the bed, clad in his Lannister red and gold. “You’ve learned to see fantasy for what it is, Little Wife, I’m glad of it. Many people never learn. But paltry, ugly, pathetic hallucination that I am, I hope you’ll indulge me a bit.”

Sansa reached over and helped him onto the bed. He sat by her and patted her on the shoulder. “That’s a girl. You didn’t even cringe. Kind of you. A far cry from how you used to receive me when I joined you in bed.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” replied Sansa.

“It’s funny, your choices in fear,” remarked Tyrion. “You saw that beloved brother of yours last night, that one you once saw as a savior, and he terrified you, as did your mother. But there—” he gestured to Ghost, laying by the side of the bed, “—is a great bloody wolf that shares your bed, and you help a hideous monster like me onto your pillows.”

“You’re not a monster. You were one of the only ones in your family who wasn’t a monster. I thought I’d made my peace with you, Tyrion. Why are you here?”

“No idea. But right now, you’re not entirely in your right mind. Perhaps some new issue has arisen which you’d have liked to discuss with me.”

“I already prayed for your soul, forgiven you for the situation we were in, and apologized for my behavior years ago.”

“Which was unnecessary. That last bit, I mean. Praying for my soul was very necessary, as I had my fair share of sins, and I’m sure your forgiveness did a lot for your peace of mind. But what were you apologizing for? Not giving me your maidenhead? Thank the gods you didn’t. And you were always sweet and dutiful. You were a scared little girl. I knew that. You owed me nothing.”

“No, I owed you kindness. That’s what you showed to me, in your own way.”

“I don’t consider not violating you kindness. It’s just basic humanity.”

“You protected me from Joffrey. You did. When he had me beaten and stripped after Oxcross, you stopped him and you took me to the Tower, you comforted me and offered me protection. The night
of our wedding, you risked much in preventing the bedding. And you didn’t just save me that. Earlier, when we were dancing, Joffrey threatened to rape me and to force me to be his mistress. I kept expecting every night to be ordered to his chambers. But I wasn’t, and I know I owe that to you in at least some small part. But I’ve thought this all over before. I’ve thanked you before, for all the good it did you.”

Tyrion gave that strange noise that would have been a snort if he still had a full nose. “Well, it’s sweet of you, anyways. Perhaps the reason I’m here isn’t personal on my end. Perhaps it doesn’t necessarily involve me, just you, but it’s some issue you feel I’d be qualified to advise you on. Or maybe I’m supposed to torment you.”

Sansa frowned. Her head and limbs were already killing her, and her stomach felt like all the seven hells. “I’d really rather you didn’t.”

“Don’t worry, if whatever dark little part of your mind conjuring these visions sent me to terrify you, it’ll find me as useful and motivated at such a task as my father found I was at forcing a little Lannister into you. I prefer to torment stupid, petty people like my sister or my cousin Lancel. And anyways, I figure looking at this face is torment enough.”

Sansa defiantly reached over and stuck a finger into that squishy hole where a nose once sat. “Faces don’t matter. I don’t care about that anymore. And besides, I’m pretty enough for both of us. Well, most of the time, anyways. Not today.”

He swatted her hand away and laughed. “I wish we’d have known each other under very different circumstances.”

“As do I, Lord Tyrion.” She smiled. “There are other things I would like to thank you for.”

“And that is?”

“You were kind to Jon at The Wall. You gave him good advice and you were his friend. And you helped Bran. Thank you.”

He smiled. “You’re welcome, Little Wife.”

“I am sorry you’re no longer with us,” she told him. “I mean, your death was convenient for me, but I took no pleasure in it. And I think the country would be better off if you were still here. I didn’t realize until much later what an asset you were to Westeros. It was truly a waste. If you were still alive, I’d nominate you for Hand.”

“I was good, wasn’t I? Too bad the people of Yunkai couldn’t see it before it was too late.”

“Tyrion?”

“Yes?”

“Who do you think poisoned me?” She’d been going over it all in her head for days. It made her headache worse. There was part of her that suspected that she may have come up with the solution without realizing it. Maybe this projection of Tyrion represented that part of her brain that knew. He’d always been clever.

“There are so many people who want you dead, Little Wife. But it has to go back quite a ways. You know that this started before anyone knew you were Jon’s mistress.”

She nodded. “Do you think it started before I was brought to court? Or was Anais their first
accomplice?"

Tyrion frowned. “Perhaps someone who wanted you dead but didn’t trust Coldwater and Moore to insure your execution?”

“It is likely someone from the Vale, then.”

“Or someone with connections there.”

Sansa threw her head back and closed her eyes, trying to figure this out through the pain in her head. When she opened them again to ask Tyrion another question, he’d vanished. She groaned and rubbed her temple. Bring him back. I had more to ask him. Her mind did not honor her wishes. For that she cursed it.

The oddest visit came later that day in the form of a woman crouching at her windowsill.

She was young and extremely pretty, with thick dark hair, rich dark eyes, an angular face and an athletic build. She wore thick wool and riding leathers. Strapped to her belt was the key to her identity: a skinny little sword.

“Arya?” Sansa asked, a little shocked. She supposed it wasn’t too strange to see her sister like this. She’d envisioned Robb older as well. The young woman stopped short and blinked.

“I didn’t think you’d recognize me,” she said, getting to her feet. “I don’t look like I did when we last saw each other.”

“You’re a beauty,” complimented Sansa.

She was, too. You could see it through the thicket of dark hair, the dirt, and the masculine clothing. Her eyes were expressive and exotic, her features more fitted to her face, her cheekbones high and her neck long. She moved with a feline grace now, and the smile that came to her face when she heard Sansa’s words was dazzling.

“Thank you. I don’t usually think about my face in those terms.”

“Arya, I’m sorry,” Sansa babbled, suddenly overwhelmed. To her, seeing Arya seemed a confirmation of her death. She needed to say all this before that happened. Even if this was just a vision. She needed to say it. “I’m sorry I lied to the king about your fight with Joffrey. I’m sorry I blamed you for Lady’s death. I’m sorry I was unkind to you about the capital and the prince and everything. I’m sorry I wasn’t a better sister. I’m sorry I laughed when Septa Mordane scolded you about your stitches. I’m sorry I tried to make you into a lady. I’m sorry–“

“Oh, shut up.” Arya rolled her eyes. “Honestly, Sansa, it’s been years. We were children. We’re both very different people now. If you’re going to apologize for everything, then I will have to as well. We don’t have time for that.”

Sansa pulled her knees toward her, hugged them, bowed her head and cried. Out of all the losses, Arya was a very special type of hurt. Not as bad as Eddie, Mother and Father, but still awful. At least after she’d killed Lady Stoneheart, she’d been able to bring what had been her mother’s bones back to Winterfell to bury between Father and Robb. She’d been able to honor Rickon and Eddie properly as well. But Arya… There had been no body, no bones, nothing. She couldn’t bring any part of her sister home, she couldn’t send her soul off the way Arya deserved. She had nowhere to pay her respects to her sister, and she couldn’t at least let her rest properly. She’d tried to deal with the pain by suppressing it, locking thoughts of her sister away in some dark corner of her mind. Sometimes, though, when Sansa walked down the streets of King’s Landing, if she saw a dark-haired young
woman in masculine clothing, she’d do a double-take. It was sort of like when she saw a little boy around Eddie’s age and she got that sensation in her chest like her heart was trying to strangle itself.

“Will I have time later?” she asked. *Maybe I’ll be allowed to make my amends once I’ve passed over.*

“Your time is up, daughter.”

Sansa looked up. The blood drained from her face. Petyr was now walking towards her, coming through the door behind Arya, a silver mockingbird pinned to his silk doublet. He glared, his eyes bloodshot and mad.

“No…” she whimpered, holding up her arms. “I’m not… Don’t call me that. You’re gone. I killed you.”

“Oh no, you could never do that. You may have stopped my heart, but you could never truly kill me, Sansa. In fact, you keep me alive, tucked away inside your head. You’re the reason I’ll never truly die.”

Arya looked behind her, confused. “What?”

“Leave me, Petyr,” Sansa told him. It was the thing she’d said to him when he came to her room that night and detailed his plans to promise Eddie to Shireen Baratheon. The night he’d raped her for the last time. The night she’d bludgeoned him to death.


At that, Baelish stepped back, looking perturbed. Sansa smiled. “I could bust your skull in with a candlestick, Petyr. Just imagine what Arya could do.”

“She’s not real, you foolish girl,” Baelish spat, but his eyes were on Arya, clearly nervous.

“No, and neither are you. You come from my head, and so I get to decide what happens. Arya, he’s behind you.”

Arya turned. “Fuck off, Littlefinger. You’ve never done well in altercations with Starks. This will be no different.”

She wasn’t quite looking directly at him, but Needle was unsheathed and pointed in his general direction. Sansa blinked and Arya lunged. Somehow, her blade found Petyr’s chest. Petyr gasped and spasmed, blood spilling from his mouth and chest. Arya pulled out her blade, then slashed him right up the middle like she was gutting a fish. Petyr fell back and vanished before he hit the floor. Arya turned around again, looking pleased.

“Let me wipe the blood from your blade,” Sansa offered, her heart rising. *Maybe she’s here to protect me. Maybe this means I’ll be going somewhere good.*

Arya hesitated, glancing awkwardly down at the sword. “You… you don’t want to get it on your nice clothes and sheets.”

Sansa glanced at her lamb’s wool shift. She’d been sweating through everything for the last couple of days. This one was fresh, but it would doubtless be dirtied again. And besides, none of this was real. But she didn’t want to tell Arya that. Tyrion had at least lived to adulthood. Arya died too soon, and besides, her sister always wanted to be a valiant warrior who rescued fair maidens. Sansa wanted to play along and give this apparition of her sister this little thing. *A fantasy for a fantasy. But I would*
like to think I’ve shown some support for her fighting before I died.

“I’ll probably throw up on everything within the hour, it’s no trouble.”

Arya gingerly walked over and sat down, laying Needle before her sister. Sansa smiled at it fondly.

“This is the blade Jon gave you, isn’t it?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Jon told me about it.” Jon talked about Arya more than she did. Sansa listened, regardless of how much it hurt to hear it. But Jon didn’t have any guilt concerning Arya, thus he was able to deal with his loss by speaking of it. And Sansa would not deny him his means of coping. “I know you both agreed not to tell me, but there’s no harm now that—”

She stopped herself. She’d almost said, ‘Now that you’re gone.’ But she wanted this Arya to think she’d lived to become a strong fighter. “—now that there’s no one for me to snitch to. Not that I would, not anymore.”

She wiped the blade off on her nightdress.

“That’s a nice shift. Are you sure you don’t want to ruin it?”

“I’ve gotten blood on my clothes before. I was the Red Wolf. That was the whole point.” For some reason, talking about this with Arya didn’t bother her so much. Perhaps because Arya wasn’t real. But also because she felt it might impress her sister to hear of it. She’ll know I can be fierce. And she always appreciated a good story about women who fought. Arya always complained that there weren’t enough stories of warrior women. I’m still no warrior, but I did fight. Let her have another story to enjoy. “I purposely rode into battle in white, and when it was over, the cloth was red.”

“I suppose in this case, having your ivory gowns stained red was acceptable to you.”

The ivory silk! Sansa had forgotten. “I overreacted to that.”

“No, I ruined your dress. I shouldn’t have. And I embarrassed you. It was stupid. We did lots of stupid things to each other when we were young. But we don’t have time for stupidity right now. Your life has been threatened.”

“My life is always threatened.” And now it’s over. Sansa was disappointed. Arya’s not here to lead me to the afterlife. So I may not go somewhere safe and happy after all. Or am I not to die right now? Sansa wasn’t sure. She felt so confused. Her head hurt. Her stomach hurt. Her heart hurt. She reached towards her bedside table and poured herself a cup of water. It did little to ease her pain, but the cold of it was nice on her tongue.

“Why aren’t you angrier? For once, Sansa, stop treating things like they’re meaningless! You should fight back.”

Sansa frowned. “Just because I don’t carry on and scream and lash out every time something bad happens to me doesn’t mean I’m not angry. I’m furious. But staying composed has saved me many times. My methods of survival are my own, and they’ve worked up until now. So I’d appreciate it if you respected that.”

“‘Until now’? So you’ve decided you’re certainly dead then?”

“I’m not sure. Please, Arya. I spoke to Tyrion earlier and I think that means I’ve done my fair share
of thinking for today. My head hurts. I can’t tell what’s happening right now. I keep seeing ghosts. It’s hard to know who is alive and who is dead when that happens.”

Arya stared at her for a long moment, clearly disturbed. “You’re not going to die, Sansa.”

Sansa cocked her head. She felt a bit of relief over this. **Maybe that’s why she’s here. But then, she’s from my own head, so this could just be my denial.** “Oh? So you’ve decided I’m certainly not dead then?”

“I’d know better than you,” Arya retorted. “I’ve had words with Death. Many, in fact.”

This stirred up a memory. She could hear her sister, ten years old, chatting animatedly to Father after dinner about her ‘Dancing Master.’ **“Syrio says that there’s only one god, Death, and you always tell him, ‘Not today.’”**

“Two.” Sansa’s lip curled. She wanted to share another memory with Arya.

“What?”

“You haven’t had many words with Death, you’ve had two. Maybe you repeated them many times, but it’s still only two words. There are only two words one can have with Death.” She was teasing her, but this was different. It wasn’t one of the mean-spirited jibes from their childhood.

Arya’s mouth fell open and her eyes became huge. At that moment, Sansa could see that wild little girl again. It was the same look she got when she’d returned from her Dancing Lessons, when she managed to conquer the boys by wrestling them to the ground, that same look she’d had when she first laid eyes on Nymeria. “I found out… There are other things you can say. But they have to be names.”

“Oh?”

“Your name… I have exchanged your name for someone else’s.”

“Have you? And who is this unfortunate soul?”

“If I tell you, you’ll be mad at me.”

Sansa lay back, looking up at her canopy. **This is silly. She’s a figment of my imaginations anyways.** “Just don’t name any Targaryens or Starks. We already have too few of those.”

“The person I killed… There were clues about whom they worked for. But I can’t analyze them properly. That’s why I’m here. Jon, the Queen, and Merys have the means to look into it properly, but I don’t. I need you to tell them that there’s a connection, tell them to look carefully. I’m still looking for whoever is behind the whole thing, but I can’t work as fast as I’d like. The others can make more progress than I can if they look properly.”

Sansa nodded lazily. This was all nonsense anyways. “I’ll tell them.”

“Sansa…”

“What?”

“You’re fucking our brother.”

Sansa sat up again, memories of the prior night chilling her blood. “Are you going to tell me how disgusting I am? How you’re all waiting to punish me for it?”
“What? Who? Who is going to punish you?”

Sansa frowned. “You and Mother and Father and Robb and Rickon. Yesterday, Mother was here to tell me I’m a traitorous whore. Robb paid me a visit in the middle of the night to tell me I’m a stupid, useless, worthless, obnoxious bitch. Both said I was a true Lannister, fucking my brother. That you’re all waiting to torture me. Robb told me that I made his life hell making him play Knights and Maidens with him. That you all secretly mocked and loathed me. And now you’re disgusted by my incestuous ways. He said he never got to enjoy the one thing I was ever good for, but now that I’m opening my legs to one brother he should be able to enjoy me in death. And then--"

“--You don’t need to go further.” Arya held up a hand, cringing. “That was a nightmare, Sansa. I’m not waiting to torture you in one of the Seven Hells. No one is. We used to mock you behind your back sometimes, but we did that with everyone. Robb didn’t hate you. Even I didn’t hate you most of the time. We all loved you. And you’re not just good for one thing. This isn’t about me hating you. I just… Jon’s my brother.”

“I don’t think of him that way.”

“Obviously.”

“He’s not our true brother, Arya.”

The girl spring to her feet. “He’s my true brother. I don’t care what his name is. I don’t care who his mother was, or what man pumped him into her. Jon was my brother. He knew me better than anyone, he loved me. He’s my brother. Don’t you ever say otherwise.”

Sansa frowned. “Fine. He was your brother. But you know I never had that same bond with him. He’s your brother. I won’t try to take that away from you. No one will. But he’s not a brother to me. My relationship with him isn’t about you, Arya. It was never about you. It’s about us and us alone. It doesn’t change how Jon loved you. I don’t feel I am any less your sister, and I doubt Jon has ceased to think of you in those same terms.”

“I just don’t see how he can see you in this way and continue to see me as a sister. Either he’s a Stark or he isn’t.”

“We’ve always been so different, Arya, I doubt it’s possible for anyone to think of us in the same terms. Jon is a Stark, but he’s more than that now. You don’t have to give up your favorite brother. Just accept that he’s changed. But I could make him happy, Arya. I know I could.”

Her sister stared. There was a knock on the door. Sansa looked over. When she looked back, Arya was gone.

Chapter End Notes

OH, BTW, I have tumblr now. My blog regarding this fanfic is called WendyNerd Writes. I'll be posting updates on my writing and discussing stuff there sometimes. I hope you enjoy!!
Chapter Summary

It ends with a kitty.

Chapter Notes

Some of the dialogue here is pretty far-fetched. Just thought I'd give a warning.

Chapter Eighteen: Body Language

Daenerys:

“You mean to keep me from my niece? I am the Lord of the Riverlands! I deserve to speak to my family!” Edmure Tully stood before the Iron Throne, shaking his fist at the royal dais, his face as red as his hair. “Lady Sansa is the only remaining child of my beloved sister Catelyn! She’s as much a Tully as she is a Stark!” Spittle flew from Lord Edmure’s mouth, getting caught in his ginger beard. “I have the right to see her!”

“Lady Stark is in no position to receive visitors at the moment, Lord Tully. She’s too ill.” Daenerys replied, her patience wearing thin.

“Too ill… She’s been poisoned! She was poisoned in your court!” Lord Tully then pointed to Jon. “While under this one’s care!”

This just infuriated Dany. Your niece just can’t and doesn’t wish to see you. Of all the times for you to stop being negligent…

The reasons for Lord Edmure’s sudden feelings of concern were standing on either side of him. To his right was Daynora Flint, to his left was Ser Rickard Locke. Lady Daynora, young, blonde, and corpulent, stepped forward, her face red.

“The North will not sit by while another of our favorite daughters is imprisoned by a Targaryen prince! Do you think just because of those lizards your aunt keeps that you’re free to violate our Lady?”

“MIND YOUR TONGUE, LADY FLINT!” Daenerys thundered, getting to her feet. “Let me remind you that it is treason to falsely accuse a member of the royal family of such a thing.”

Lady Flint did indeed step back, clearly recalling a past conflict between a Northerner and a Targaryen over a Stark girl, and remembering how that had ended. Daynora looked at her feet and chewed her lip before looking up again and maintaining a steadier tone.

“Well… Just because he’s claimed he’ll marry her doesn’t make this right. We all know what was found in the Small Council Chambers. The table was marked with evidence. And now when her safety’s been threatened under your watch, you’re locking our lady away!”
Daenerys seethed. The accusations were preposterous, of course. To accuse her nephew, who so loved that girl, of such a thing made her blood boil. The longer those two were together, the happier both of them became. She’d spoken to the Lady of Winterfell on numerous occasions, and when the subject of Jon came up, a certain light would come to her eyes, the look of a woman in love. And even if her nephew wasn’t so obviously, passionately in love with her, thought of him forcing himself on anyone was mad. Jon Targaryen was one the best young men she knew. He’d never harm an innocent, and he’d especially never, ever, violate anyone. To characterize his relationship with Sansa as rape was slander on a level of pure insanity. Nothing could possibly be further from the truth. Her nephew was currently sick with worry about his betrothed, and now this?

This was one of the reasons these people tried her patience. There was no consistency in their manners. Most of the time, they were falsely polite. But then they showed their true colors in the most irritating way possible.

“And therefore, your words are still treason,” countered the Dragon Queen. “My nephew is no raper, and we are not locking Lady Sansa away. She is merely in no fit state to see anyone. She’s asked that no visitors be brought to her at the moment.”

Lord Edmure sniffed. “A likely story. Sansa would not shut me out in such a crisis.”

*Right, because you two are so close,* she thought bitterly. She knew she had to tread carefully. She couldn’t afford to have Edmure Tully start an uprising with the Northmen. Daenerys sighed and looked back at her subjects.

This utterly baffled her. *Edmure Tully barely lifted a finger to help Sansa when she was arrested.* He’d sent a few men to make sure that the Lords of the Vale didn’t just fling her through the Moon Door without trial after she’d been taken to the Vale. But he’d still allowed her to be taken, apparently confident his niece would get a “fair trial” once she got to the Eyrie if she had some Tully protection. It had bought enough time for the royal family to get involved, but Edmure didn’t know that. He thought that once the Lords there saw a little Tully concern in the form of the guards he’d sent, they’d straighten up and give Sansa a true chance to defend herself in a court of law. And he continued to believe this even after Sansa had written to him herself trying to explain the direness of the situation.

It had been Lady Waynwood and the daughter of the Lord of the Gates who wrote to the crown themselves, begging for royal intervention. Lady Myranda seemed particularly nervous. Lord Edmure was wrong, apparently, in his confidence that Sansa had the backing of the Moon Gates, as apparently Lord Nestor Royce was among those who wanted Sansa convicted. As it turned out, ownership of the Moon Gates had been officially signed off on by Petyr Baelish, and Baelish’s death had called Royce’s position into question. Lord Moore supposedly promised to keep Lord Nestor as Lord of the Gates in exchange for Nestor’s support. Lady Myranda’s letter was sent in secret, against the wishes and without the knowledge of her father.

He only found out that his daughter had done so after the royal order to deliver Sansa to the capital arrived in the Vale and Myranda declared herself to be on the side of Sansa’s defense. The man supposedly promised her that she’d not return to his home if she went. The Gates ceased to be his
home after Lord Nestor was brought up on charges of conspiracy and fraud. Myranda became the new acting ruler of the Gates thanks to the support of her distant cousin, Lord Yohn of Runestone, and Lady Waynwood. Apparently, Lord Nestor and his son had some very interesting dealings with not only Littlefinger, but Coldwater and Moore as well.

When the Lady of Winterfell was brought to the capital for trial, the Lord of Riverrun had actually written to the crown, apologizing for the “bother” of having to deal with this case.

“While we’re grateful for your concern and interest, my queen, I feel that you may have overestimated the severity of this issue. I would never refuse the royal family’s kindness, but I worry you may be wasting your time, bringing Sansa to King’s Landing. There are a few disgruntled lords in the Vale, but the majority of them would never allow my niece to be thrown to the wolves, so to speak. Not only was my sister Lysa beloved in the Vale, but Sansa’s father Lord Eddard was raised there as a ward of the cherished Jon Arryn and made many a friend among the nobility of the region. Doubtless this whole trial thing is just something to placate some of the more tempestuous nobles of the region and maintain peace there. But there are too many powerful people there who love Sansa and her family to permit true harm coming to her, especially given my niece’s rank and position. Anya Waynwood of Ironoaks is among her allies, and I also heard that Sansa is close with the family who keeps the Gates of the Moon. Surely she is in no true danger.”

Daenerys looked up at Edmure Tully with suspicion. Could he----? Her eyes narrowed. There wouldn’t be any political advantages. The Riverlands will soon do well through its kinship with House Stark once more, and Sansa is the only Stark kin he has left. Such an act could put a great dent in both his position and his fortunes. And since Lysa and Robert Arryn’s deaths, she’s also the remaining kinship link he has to the Vale, though that counts for little now that Ser Harrold and little Lord Eddie Hadryng Stark are dead. Still... What of that wife of his?

Daenerys and Sansa often talked politics during the day. Sansa was one of the few members of the struggling, half-made version of a small council Daenerys currently had, and she had so far proven herself the most useful in helping the queen plan an actual full council, her suggestions far more varied, practical and well-founded than those of some of the others. Sansa had an encyclopedic knowledge of the various connections, characters, and histories of various nobles, and had recounted many of them to Daenerys, including some of her own. As it turned out, Sansa’s ties to the Vale did extend beyond the Hardyns, Tullys, and Arryns. She had cousins in a few houses, including Lord Nestor’s branch of House Royce, and House Waynwood. When she’d been on trial, these houses, with the exception of House Waynwood of Ironoaks, did not support her, but since they’d tried to regain her favor. Ironoaks was rising even further in influence in the Vale, and Myranda was now Lady of the Gates, and Sansa was on excellent terms with both. Other Houses she was kin to had since done everything in their power to regain favor with her, and House Royce of Runestone, unrelated, was also an ally. All of these connections came from personal friendships of Sansa’s and Stark blood. If she were to die, Edmure’s ties to the Vale would deteriorate considerably and he’d likely find himself far more isolated and far less wealthy. And, of course there were Sansa’s ties to the crown.

Edmure Tully is on famously strained terms with his niece, but on a political level, she’s too important for him to kill. If he wished to kill her, he’d want to wait until she at least had a couple of children. Eddie’s dead, so if Sansa were to perish, the majority of his connections would die with her. Still, the man has a history of disliking her, his beloved wife downright loathes her, he’s forever bitter about Lady Stoneheart, and it isn’t like the man is famous for his political savvy or wisdom. Almost everyone I’ve met has described him as “hot-headed.” His sisters made some infamously catastrophic political decisions as well. And even with Sansa dead, it’s not like the Tullys would ever go hungry if no one ever found out.
Her stomach turned and she took a deep breath, considering her options. *Lord Edmure probably wouldn’t be this bold if he didn’t have the Northmen behind him.* She turned her attention to Lady Flint and Ser Rickard. “As the representatives of families sworn to House Stark, you are entitled to audiences with your liege lady. If I were to permit you a short, quiet audience with Lady Stark on the conditions that you keep discreet and do not bother her, would that satisfy you?”

“What about me? I’m her uncle!” Edmure demanded.

“I will make a request of Lady Stark that she perhaps see you. But unlike her bannermen, you are not entitled to her time or presence, she is not obligated to you the way she is to Lady Flint and Ser Rickard. You will have to wait.” Dany looked at Flint and Locke. “Would this be acceptable to you? You can satisfy yourselves that she is not being held against her will or harmed by us in any way. But I insist that, beyond reporting to Lord Tully that Lady Stark is safe, you keep quiet about what you witnessed once you’re satisfied.”

Daenerys really didn’t want to do this, but she couldn’t afford an uproar in her court or in the North, especially when they still had an attempted murderer to catch.

Both Flint and Locke seemed to calm themselves. Lady Daynora spoke.

“That would be acceptable,” Lady Daynora conceded. “However, there are other requests on behalf of the North regarding Lady Stark.”

“Come forward, Lady Flint, and name some of these requests.”

The woman stepped in front of Lord Edmure. “The people of the North wish to have Lady Stark revisit the North again prior to her marriage to Prince Jon. We also wish, in the interests of honoring those of us who worship the Old Gods and are devoted to our traditions, that the Lady’s wedding to the Prince be in the traditions of the Old Religion, before a Heart Tree, at Winterfell. And while we know oaths have already been sworn regarding their betrothal legally and in the traditions of the Faith of the Seven, we insist that oaths also be made to the Old Gods in accordance with our traditions, before Northern witnesses so as to confirm your commitment as well as the crowns respect for our traditions. We want to make sure that our lady is honored before the Old Gods and the New. For dishonor to her is dishonor to the North, something we cannot abide by.

“We insist that an oath be sworn that the Prince will take no other wives aside from Lady Stark during her lifetime and that he signs a document promising to never lay any claim to the title of Warden of the North. We require assurance that our region will not just become some glorified new Targaryen holdfast. While we may have bent the knee to you, our independence is sacred. The Starks hold Winterfell, and we want that preserved. We also demand that Lady Stark from here on out spend an allotted amount of time each year in the North. We also want promises regarding the future heir to Winterfell. Not only do we wish the child to retain the name Stark and visit the North with the same frequency as his mother, but we also insist that, prior to his or her sixteenth name day, he or she spend at least four years fostered by a sworn House of the North.”

Daenerys’s heart sank. She couldn’t just make these vows outright. She expected that having Jon make oaths to marry Sansa, keep her as his only wife, and to never try to take the Warden of the North title from her would be no issue, nor would the promises about Sansa visiting the North. But the others… Even the wedding one was a problem, as the faith would demand a royal wedding in the Great Sept. And the others were just so intimate. She really didn’t want to promise to force Jon and Sansa to have one of their children fostered by someone else. That was for them to decide.

Dany glanced at Jon, feeling awful. She thought carefully before speaking. “I am willing to entertain and consider these terms, however, I cannot commit to any without consulting with both Prince Jon
and Lady Stark. I insist upon that not just for my family’s well-being, but also out respect for Lady Stark’s personal rights. I can guarantee you that some amount of these terms shall be honored. In the meantime, conditions for your audience with Lady Stark must be arranged.”

Ser Rodrick stepped forward now. “We want this settled quickly, Your Grace. Until it is, we insist upon a Northern guard for her.”

For the first time, Jon spoke. “I will honor that. My squire, Nathen Cerwyn, is a son of the North. I will assign him to be head of a guard of Northmen that shall watch over Lady Stark. If they are willing to swear an oath to protect the lady’s privacy, even from you, then members from your household chosen by you will be included in her guard from now on. However, I insist that while they guard Lady Stark, they stay under royal command to insure that my lady’s privacy is insured.”

“That is acceptable, but we insist upon daily meetings with them.”

“Fine.”

Ser Rodrick clenched his jaw. “There is that the matter of our lady’s honor, which you have threatened. We want an apology for any liberties you may have taken with her. We also want a vow that you shall not engage in intimate activities with our Lady until the night of your wedding. We want assurance that you have honored this. Furthermore, to make absolutely sure that you have no legal grounds to put her aside, we demand proof of consummation during the bedding. Since Lady Stark is not a maid and no blood shall be had, we want a Northern witness of our choosing. For the sake of the North, we must insure that this wedding isn’t just some farce. We want ironclad proof that our Lady has had her honor restored by being made your true bride. We will not allow you to besmirch her or defraud us by exploiting any possible grounds for annulment once you’re wed.”

That was it. Daenerys had had enough. She stood and glared down at the northman and woman. *One of them is going to be punished. As soon as I can reasonably manage.* “You are being very free with your demands. Not only are you overstepping your bounds with my nephew and I, but you are displaying complete disregard for the rights and privacy of your own Lady.”

“A number of marriages have been set aside in recent years on grounds of lack of consummation,” Lady Flint insisted. “Including one of Lady Sansa’s. Asha Greyjoy’s was another, and of course, Margaery Tyrell’s. We want security.”

Daenerys decided to stop being civil and raised her voice, giving Lady Daynora her most furious glare. “Let me remind you that minutes ago, you were making outrageous accusations that my nephew has abducted and raped Lady Stark. Such talk is treason, and the fact that I have yet to throw you in chains for it has been great mercy on my part. I can revoke that mercy whenever I wish.”

Before another word could be uttered, the doors to the throne room burst open. Ser Podrick Payne burst in, looking winded and shocked.

“Your Grace! Your Grace! Murder!”

Dany’s heart raced. *Sansa. Murder? Who?”*

Podrick stopped short before the dais, panting. “It’s… It’s… Ser Marq Piper. The body of Ser Marq Piper of Pinkmaiden was just found in the castle forge, all cut to bits.”

A collective gasp emanated through the court. The color drained from the face of Lord Edmure Tully, who sank to his knees. Daenerys’s eyes widened and she sank back onto the throne, clutching her chest. She’d liked Marq Piper. He was handsome and gallant and good with a lance, and very
charming. When the news that Sansa had been poisoned was first released, he’d immediately come forward and asked to help investigate, an offer that was accepted. Before that, he’d made for a pretty view at court, and he’d delighted Daenerys. She’d even considered taking him to her bed on more than one occasion. He was a flirt and a dandy, but extremely sweet and non-threatening. He’s close to the Tullys, too. Lord Edmure loved that man. Everyone knows it. It had been Ser Marq’s words that got him to court in the first place.

She didn’t think this death was a coincidence, either. Marq Piper had, by Sansa’s own account, offered his services to her in a variety of ways, and expressed wishes to keep her safe. And then mere days after news spreads of Sansa being poisoned, after he’d offered to investigate her attacker, he was dead.

Daenerys ordered everyone but Jon, Barristan, Podrick, Merys, and Lord Edmure to go back to their quarters at once. Then she and her party proceeded to the smithy.

Jon:

“Ser Gendry found him, leaning up against one of the forges that’s almost never used. And… it’s awful. His chest has got a great bloody hole in it, a big chunk ripped out. And his stomach and face and arms and legs are all cut up. And… it’s just… It’s strange.” Podrick was babbling, Jon was only half-listening.

They’d called him a raper. They said that he was raping and hurting Sansa, dishonoring her. They literally wanted to witness Jon insert himself inside her to make sure that he’d “restored her honor.”

Jon was more than happy to wed her at the Godwood at Winterfell. In fact, that was something he dreamt of. He still kept to the Old Gods and he so dearly wanted to see home again. Wedding her beneath the Heart Tree where their father brought them as children was a notion beyond wonderful. He wanted his family’s gods, and perhaps the spirits of their family themselves, to look on while he draped his cloak over Sansa’s shoulders. He wanted that presence, he wanted to feel they were smiling upon him and Sansa. And he’d happily swear betrothal agreements before witnesses and the heart tree. He was more than happy to have Sansa and their children visit the North. Anything that gave him an excuse to go home, anything that involved a family and Winterfell made him happy.

And of course their children would be Starks as well as Targaryens, of course whoever was to inherit Winterfell would spend time up North. They’d have to.

Being called Sansa’s raper sickened him, as did all the demands regarding their intimate life. Having the thing in the council chamber made public had already felt like a violation. But at least when they’d been in the chamber together, they’d been alone and they’d enjoyed themselves. It had been a beautiful moment for a few hours. But these people wanted to control and monitor their coupling now. Jon would happily abstain from Sansa’s bed for her benefit, or if she wanted him to. But she didn’t, and this wasn’t about her well-being.

Sansa even wanted him there now, when she was suffering as she was. They didn’t make love, of course, but she wanted him there at night. In this case, Jon wouldn’t be staying away because it made his lover happier, healthier, or in any way better off. He’d be doing it because some people who barely knew her demanded it. What happened between him and Sansa physically and emotionally belonged to them and no one else. Others had no right to interfere. That anyone else thought they had the right to tell him or his lover what to do with their bodies and when made him want to set them ablaze. So much of who they were already belonged to the realm. This shouldn’t.

And the insistence on witnessing the consummation of their marriage just made him want to throw up. It wasn’t unheard of in a wedding: the practice went back centuries, but it was in no way common. Most people today thought it was grotesque. The bedding ritual was already bad enough.
Jon had intended to protect Sansa from that. She was no stranger to beddings, no stranger to being stripped in public, and no stranger to having random men put their hands on her. It had taken her long enough to even let Jon see her naked or allow him the use of his hands while they made love. He couldn’t imagine how she would endure being stripped by strangers. But at least in ordinary beddings, after the couple was stripped and delivered to the chamber, the others left the room.

Having someone there watching them, though? Looking and watching specifically to see that intercourse took place? Jon could just imagine some beady-eyed, leering lord or lady peering over the bed at them, eyes fixed upon their abdomens, determined to see his cock enter Sansa’s cunny. Some person witnessing a closeness that should not involve anyone else, having an expression of love reduced to some political procedure designed for the satisfaction of someone else rather than their own.

Jon wasn’t sure making love would ever be the same if that happened. Sansa probably wouldn’t be able to even look at him, forced to endure some new manner of sexual violation once more, having the most intimate part of her life exploited, her body used for someone else’s satisfaction against her full consent once more. And Jon would be part of that.

And if that weren’t enough, there was the demand about a child of theirs being fostered for four years. Jon wasn’t completely opposed to having whichever of his children who would inherit Winterfell spending some time living up North at all. It was probably something they’d have eventually done anyways to make sure the heir to the North truly knew their domain. But having it demanded before their child was even born made it feel less like a prudent, dutiful, necessary move and more like their future baby was being stolen from them.

He didn’t want to see Sansa’s face when he reported that particular condition to her. And he never wanted to have to say good-bye to one of his children because some people demanded it. It didn’t seem fair. No doubt it would seem highly unfair to whomever that child was. The Northerners were demanding that the one to inherit Winterfell, just that one, would be the one sent to them. So what would their child think when they were being sent away to live with someone else while their parents and siblings stayed behind in King’s Landing? That they had to leave their family and the others didn’t? Would they feel less loved? Betrayed? Unwanted? Jon knew what it was like to be the unwanted sibling. He knew what it was like to be sent away. But at least he’d chosen to go to the Wall. But this child of his, whoever he or she was, this decision was being made before they even existed.

He’d just watched and listened as some people he barely knew accused him of raping the woman he loved, then demanded that they be allowed to control both of them in the most personal, intimate, and deep aspects of their lives. Like these people thought they had a right to all of this. Like he and Sansa weren’t people, but livestock. They wanted to tell them when and how to make love. They wanted to be allowed to watch and gawk and judge them as they coupled. They wanted to take their children away. They wanted to determine when, where, and how their child would be raised. They insisted they were entitled to all of these things. But apparently, he was the one guilty of violation.

It’s not happening. They can have their vows and wedding, but they’re not going to involve themselves in our fucking, or the fruits thereof. Sansa and I make love to and for each other, not for the eyes of others. It’s enough. I’m not going to allow her to be violated again. No one is taking our ability to love each other from us, and no one is going to force us to hand our children over.

He said nothing to Daenerys as they walked to the forge. Though he could feel her eyes upon him. He felt confidant that she’d support him on the bedding thing, and possibly the abstinence. The child-fostering she might feel more compelled to give in to. Jon didn’t want that. It wasn’t that he insisted on keeping every one of his offspring by his side until his death. He wasn’t an idiot. He knew that he
would not be having a normal family, that his children with Sansa would not be ordinary. He knew he and his family had to live in service of the realm, and that his life didn’t entirely belong to him. He’d accepted that long ago.

Jon also knew that his children would be inheriting an enormous empire that extended into two different continents. His first child would undoubtedly have to make numerous trips across the Narrow Sea to visit Meereen, Yunkai, Astapor, and Vaes Dothrak, and that quite a few of those trips likely wouldn’t be with him or Sansa. It wouldn’t do anyone, including his child any good to keep him or her close all their life. His child would be the greatest landowner in the world some day. Another child of his would control over half of this continent. Both would need to leave the nest.

Having a child leave him eventually wasn’t really the problem. All parents and children had to experience that eventually, even if it was to far lesser extremes than this. But that wasn’t why it upset him. That such a thing was demanded was the issue. The decisions for when, where, and how his family lived should, at least to some degree, belong to him and his family. Others were not entitled to determine the specifics. It seemed everyone was determined to take away every shred of autonomy and privacy he and his loved ones had left. He couldn’t let that happen. He shot Daenerys a dark look.

*I’m not taking this lying down, Aunt. I have quite a few thoughts on this, and I intend to share them with you in very explicit terms the second we’re done here. No, I’m not happy. No, I’m not alright. And no, this isn’t going to be easy for anyone. There are limits to even my sense of honor. A line has been crossed and I am not fine with that.*

She seemed to read him loud and clear, and to her credit, she seemed more than upset on his behalf. She actually looked quite angry. It gave Jon a little comfort. *The Mother of Dragons is on our side.* He wished he could talk to her about this now, though. Still, a courtier’s corpse called.

A few guards were gathered in one of the less-frequently used chambers of the smithy, with Ser Gendry the Bull standing back and staring off into space. The body was left as is, according to Ser Timmure, and when they all saw it, Jon found himself wishing otherwise. Missandei cried and turned away in horror. Lord Edmure vomited outright, and in truth, Jon had trouble not doing the same.

Most of Ser Marq’s armor was scattered on the ground, along with a number of his belongings. Ser Marq was upright, though, leaning against the side of a forge, his fine clothing stained with blood. Someone had clearly gone out of their way to disfigure him: his once handsome face was now full of holes and his mouth was actually cut wide open. Whoever did this apparently didn’t feel mutilation was enough to humiliate him, though. While Ser Marq was, for the most part, fully dressed, his cock was pulled out of his breeches, his hands arranged so it looked like he was clutching it and taking a piss.

But that wasn’t even the worst thing. No, the worst was his chest, which had a big, awful, bloody crater in the center, like something vicious had clawed into him from the outside.

Ser Timmure, looking visibly ill, stepped forward and looked at Daenerys. “You should speak with Ser Gendry, Your Grace. He’s got some things to say you all might find… interesting.”

Daenerys turned away then, a bit green. She pulled the weeping Missandei to her, comforting her, then looked at Podrick. “Take Lord Tully and the Mistress of Letters from here. Prince Jon, Ser Barristan and I shall question Ser Gendry in the yard. Merys, examine the body.”

Everyone did as told, with Ser Gendry mutely following them out into the till yard, taking a seat on the fence and determinedly staring at the ground.
Gendry Waters was someone Jon had mixed feelings about. The young man was quiet, solemn, brave, hard-working and ridiculously strong. He’d been knighted by Daenerys following the battle at the Wall, and she named him to the City Watch. Until recently, Jon had actually liked him a lot, believing he had a new potential friend, though there was something odd about the way the man looked at him sometimes. But Jon’s ability to ignore this had disappeared shortly after Sansa came to court.

Gendry gave her strange looks too, and there was something overly familiar sometimes in the way he addressed her. It was always “milady”, but whenever he looked at her, he’d smile eagerly, and Gendry almost never smiled otherwise. Sansa said he sometimes asked her questions about her childhood and Winterfell, and that he was always the first to volunteer to watch over her whenever she ventured out into the city. She considered him quite charming. Jon had been surprised, as Sansa normally didn’t find awkward solemnity charming, and there was always a common, less refined way to the way Waters expressed himself.

When Jon expressed this reply, she’d smiled, winked and said, “Well, he’s a tall, dark, quiet, sweet, brave, strong, good-looking, slightly morose bastard who seems very protective of me. I suppose I’ve developed a certain preference. Another man like that happens to be my favorite person in this world, and when I can’t be around said favorite, I suppose it gives me comfort to have another of his type around, even if that reminder is slightly less handsome.”

He knew that he should have just enjoyed the sweetness of that sentiment. She was essentially complimenting him, and he knew that she meant that she loved him so much that even briefly parted, she at least liked to have someone around that reminded her of him. But it bothered him that she’d called Waters sweet, brave, strong and good-looking. Jon was tall, but he was lean, whereas Gendry was a giant slab of muscle. And there was the fact that girls liked him, not to mention the man’s nickname--- “The Bull”. It suggested things that did not make Jon comfortable whatsoever.

Sansa said “The Bull” was “slightly less handsome”, but only “slightly” and honestly, Jon wondered if she meant that. Girls definitely liked Gendry a great deal, and he didn’t have a royal title to account for that. Once, during one of the warmer days, Gendry had been practicing and sweating like mad all day, and when training was declared over, he hadn’t even hesitated to rip his shirt off along with his armor, much to the shock and delight of a few on-looking maids and Loras Tyrell. Since then, a small crowd of ladies could be expected to gather to watch the yards on any day that was uncommonly warm. Jon found this funny until Sansa came to court and he’d spotted her watching the yards a couple of times.

And Waters seemed very interested in her, as well. After word had spread that Jon and Sansa were lovers, Gendry got into a couple of spats with other members of the City Watch, and supposedly, it was over Sansa. That infuriated Jon, as he’d been expressly forbidden by his lover to react to anything he’d heard and try to defend her honor. Jon couldn’t defend her for the sake of discretion, but Ser Gendry the Bull had given some sod a black eye for calling Sansa Jon’s whore.

At one point, Waters actually came to Jon and asked to be reassigned to Sansa’s personal guard. When Jon had asked why he’d ever want to leave behind his exalted and rare position as an officer of the gold cloaks just to take a less famed and well-paying position as a personal guard, Gendry had replied, “Well, she’s strong and all, but she’s not a warrior type, she’s prefers needles to swords, so I’d like to be her sword. I noticed she’s not always… happy… around men, but she seems fine around me. I’d do a good job, and I’d never forgive myself if that lady from Winterfell got hurt when I wasn’t around to protect her. I know I’m strong enough to do it, and I’d be very loyal and devoted to her.”

Jon had refused, mostly out of pettiness. He really wasn’t fond of the idea of “The Bull” offering
Sansa his comforts. And besides, Gendry seemed far too interested in Sansa, and he wasn’t exactly the most refined or proper of men.

Gendry had been very disappointed, and since then, things had been chilly between the two men. So when Daenerys commanded the guard to look up, Gendry seemed very determined not to catch Jon’s eyes.

“You found the body?” Daenerys asked.

“Aye, I did.”

“And what were you doing in the forge?” That was a good question. The one Gendry found Piper in was not one of the more used ones. In the winter, only a couple were actually used at a time, mainly ones closer to the armory, but this one was closer to the yard.

Gendry raised an elbow, showing a large split in the metal, exposing the joint. “My cowter was broken today while on patrol. Darrys, the smith who does our armor, he’s worthless. I used to be apprenticed to the best blacksmith in King’s Landing, and I’m still three times as good as Darrys is. Sometimes I do my own repairs. I miss the work, find it relaxing. That forge there, it’s not used most of the time, but when they need to do extra work, that’s the one they use. So its kept in good condition, and I wouldn’t be bothering nobody. I sometimes do repair work for the other men on the watch, you can ask them. And they know I do it there, too. I’d brought a pail of coal in, too. You can check.”

Daenerys nodded. “Very well. Did you see any sign of anyone else there?”

“Well, no… but I… Yes? Well, no. But I mean…”

“What do you mean?” Daenerys asked, impatient.

“I mean, I saw no sign that anyone else was there when I was there, not even any sign that anyone had left recently, though they must have, given how fresh the wounds were. But that person who killed him still left signs for me.”

“Signs?”

“That hole in his chest? The one that looked like someone had ripped chunks from him? I’ve seen wounds like that.” Gendry’s eyes hollowed out for a second, his body stiffened.

“Where?” Daenerys asked him, regaining his attention.

Waters swallowed. “I was at Harrenhal when the Lannisters held it during the War of the Five Kings. There, they had this man they called The Tickler. He’d question people, and he did this thing where he took the person they were questioning and tortue them with rats tearing through their chests. People he tortured came out looking just like Piper. Wouldn’t be surprised if you found a bunch of bloody rats somewhere.”

They all glanced at each other and shivered. Jon didn’t envy the person who might find those bloody rats. After along pause, Gendry began to speak again, his voice a croak.

“And there’s another thing, too. The way they had his… bits…out and his hands around it like he was taking a—relieving himself? I once had a conversation with someone where… well…” Gendry blushed then, “Taking your co-bits out and emptying yourself was the subject. And it’s sort of a --- what’s the word---memorable--- conversation I’ve had, and a private one with a very memorable person. So I mean, I wasn’t going to forget it.”
“You believe yourself to be a target in this?”

Gendry stared ahead again, clearly uneasy. “I think whoever killed him wanted it to be me who found him and me you talked to. And I think that the person, they were questioning him about something.”

He shook his head and then focused on Daenerys once more.

“They want you to look into it. They left other things, too. Timmure has one of them. This person left a doll on Piper’s shoulder. Not just that. I bet there isn’t one thing they left in there that they didn’t mean for you lot to find.”

Daenerys stared. Jon stared. He noticed Gendry’s eyes shifting oddly. Waters clearly was trying his best not to look at Jon specifically. But there was a temptation there. Jon’s stomach turned.

“What do you think it was that the murderer wanted to know?” Daenerys asked.

Gendry shrugged. “The person who knows that for sure isn’t here. But if I had to guess, I’d bet it has to do Lady Stark’s poisoning.”

“And why do you say that?” Jon asked. While the idea wasn’t at all out of the realm of possibility, it was a very specific thing to suspect.

Gendry shifted a bit. “Well, it was just put out that she’s been poisoned, and you know, that’s awful. It’s the worst thing I can think of someone doing recently. There are probably those who’d kill to find out who was involved.”

“Does anyone come to mind?” Daenerys asked, suspicious.

Jon stepped back, suddenly very uncomfortable. Does he mean me? Does he think it’s me? Jon certainly would kill to track down Sansa’s attackers, but this wasn’t his work. Why, if he suspected Piper, would he torture and murder him gruesomely and secretly and then leave his body out for people to find? Jon had all the resources in the world to interrogate and punish those who’d hurt his lover without necessarily doing anything illegal. He could have just had Piper arrested and tortured as part of the investigation if he wished, and had all of the evidence examined by Merys.

And this… even if Piper was involved, and Jon knew it, he wouldn’t be this gruesome or cruel. This was the work of someone who wanted to make a statement, and who had a seriously vicious drive. It was purposely sadistic. Jon wouldn’t go this far. And why the signs to Gendry? Why Gendry, of all people? And how would I know what “signs” to give the man anyways? And why confess all this in front of me? If I were the killer, then no doubt I’d be targeting him next, so why tell me that he knows it’s me? This man is not stupid, not at all, nor is he mad. He’d have to be made to openly antagonize a person he thinks did something like this.

“Well, I mean, I can think of people who care about Lady Stark, but no one I think did this. Not yet, anyways. But, if you please, I’d like to assist. Not just of this, but of Lady Stark’s problem.”

“That doesn’t involve you.” Jon replied immediately.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but I think it does now. I know you don’t like me, but…” Gendry’s blue eyes finally met his, and they were angry, “…But this isn’t about that. Someone else very much clearly wants me involved, and for a reason.”

“We’ve already had one man who volunteered to help. And now he may in fact have helped poison my betrothed.” Jon countered.
Gendry’s jaw tightened. “Maybe, but I’m not that man. And whatever you think of me, I care about Lady Stark. I want her safe. And someone else who cares about her, who probably knows more about what’s happened, wants me involved. So I reckon I should.”

Why? Why do you care so much? Jon was mystified. There was something in Gendry’s eyes, something that troubled Jon a great deal. Gendry looked angry and determined. Either he’s involved with the people who want to hurt Sansa, or he’s… Does he love her? Either way, it might help to keep him close.

Jon cleared his throat. “You seem very interested in my cousin. Even before this. So if I’m going to let you help, you’d best just tell me up front now. Is it because of love?”

Gendry swallowed, glanced around for a second, then spoke in a very choked voice.

“I--- I--- I do love your cousin, my prince. I admit it. I fell for that girl a while back. Even before I did, I knew that girl from Winterfell was special. And I’d do whatever it took to keep her safe. I’ve failed her once already, and I regret it. So even though I’m not fit to even think of her, I’d do anything to make up for my failure. I assure you, you’ll never have to worry about me with Lady Sansa. She’s yours, not mine, and I have no intention of changing that. I’m not a threat to you. But helping that lady is something I have to do.”

Daenerys and Barristan both gaped, and they turned wide eyes to Jon.

There were a few seconds of awkward silence. Then all of a sudden, a grey and white tabby cat ran up and pounced onto Gendry’s lap. The animal, dirty and skinny, rubbed its head against the knight’s stomach, then turned and looked at Jon with a fierce yellow stare.

Jon was used to cats. They were a common sight in the yards of the Red Keep, as the servants kept them to catch mice. But they rarely came anywhere near Jon, smelling Ghost on him. He was a bit surprised this one would come close enough, even if it was sitting on Gendry’s lap. Jon stepped back.

“Fine,” he said. “But I’m watching you. Do anything out of turn, and I’ll slice your head from your neck.”
The Life and Times of Sansa Stark

Chapter Summary

A doll is examined and the women of Dorne have a proposition.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Illyana for beta work!!!

I hope you guys like this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Nineteen: The Life and Times of Sansa Stark

Jon:

Jon held one of the handkerchiefs Sansa had made him over his nose. It was sprayed with a scent of cinnamon, mint, vanilla, and flowers. Sansa sprayed all of his handkerchiefs with one of her perfumes days ago so that Jon wouldn’t have to smell her sick and sweat when he visited her. Jon had been determined, for the sake of sensitivity and his lover’s ego, never to take advantage of this kindness. Sansa loathed to be anything less than clean and perfectly put together. While such a thing wasn’t exactly possible at the moment, Jon didn’t want to remind her of that by pressing perfumed cloth up to his nose when he entered her chamber.

But now he was definitely using it. Since Sansa wasn’t with him, there was no guilt to be had. He stood in Maester Merys’s office, watching the man hover over a small table at the center of the room. The doll found at the forge was at the center, lying face up like a corpse.

The actual corpse was in an adjoining chamber currently being drained of fluids. It was the reason why Jon was covering his nose. The chemicals Merys treated it with were awful, and the body wasn’t completely fresh. Jon tried everything he could not to focus on it. But looking at the toy didn’t bring much comfort.

The doll brought back a very uncomfortable memory. Sansa and Arya were often given beautiful, fancy dolls as girls----ones that Arya hated. But Sansa, until about age eight, loved dolls and collected them obsessively, especially porcelain ones from the south. On her sixth nameday, she’d gotten an incredible one from her grandfather Lord Hoster Tully. It had been bigger than most. It wasn’t just regular porcelain, but the very expensive, fancy sort that simply wasn’t made up north.

The toy had looked just like Sansa as well. It had big blue eyes with irises made of crystal, and the red hair that sprouted from its head was actual real human red hair, rather than just dyed horsehair. As if that weren’t enough, the thing came with a bunch of dresses of satin, silk, and even myrish lace that matched some of Sansa’s own dresses, and it even had a little necklace made of real silver. Apparently, the hair for it came from Lady Catelyn’s own head, and she’d been in on the gift. “My father gave fine, red-haired dolls meant to look like us to my sister and I when we were children as
well.”

The thing was so pretty and fine that even Arya was excited by it. Actually, everyone had a little bit of fascination with Sansa’s new friend, whom she’d called ‘Litsa,’ short for ‘Little Sansa.’ Even Jon and Robb had caught themselves staring at it a few times. For a couple of years, Sansa and Litsa were inseparable. Sansa made the doll little gowns to match every new one she got, placed her in a little bed by her own every night, and carried her around the castle constantly.

She let others play with Litsa, except Arya, who she was convinced would break her. Arya had angrily declared that when she got her own Tully doll, hers would be better because it wouldn’t be some ninny in delicate dresses who could be broken easily. She’d be a tough, strong doll that one could actually take outside and have adventures with and Sansa wouldn’t be allowed to play with her.

Arya’s sixth name day arrived, but a Tully doll like Sansa’s did not. Lord Hoster did send Arya a doll, but a wooden one without glass eyes or real hair or outfits that looked like Arya’s. The face wasn’t painted, just carved, and it wore leather armor. Its hair was just dark horse hair. Lady Catelyn said that it was because Arya could be so rough with things. And indeed, Arya had ruined a few fancy dolls before. “This one is less fancy, but less delicate as well. We thought it would suit you, though. I asked my father to give yours armor.”

Arya, actually, had been brought to tears. “I was going to love this one!”

Lady Catelyn had meant well, but apparently Arya took this as an insult. Sansa, Jeyne Poole, and a couple of other girls had laughed when they’d seen Arya’s doll. Jeyne made a remark about it looking more like a boy’s toy soldier instead of a girl’s toy. That wasn’t exactly an inaccurate statement. Jeyne had also said that at least it had been carved to have a horse face like Arya’s.

The youngest Stark girl had thrown the doll into the fire in anger. When Lady Catelyn and Lord Eddard scolded her for it, she’d run to her room. Jon had gone after her and found her crying into her pillow. She’d sat up, red-faced.

“She was going to be like me. The first one, so I could pretend I had a friend.”

He’d hugged her tight and told her that he was her friend. She’d replied that he wasn’t a girl. “It’s not the same. You and Robb have each other. Sansa has Jeyne and all the other girls. But the girls don’t want to play with me because I don’t like girl things, and the boys won’t play with me because I’m a girl. I just wanted to have a real little Arya that I could pretend was real. I can’t pretend a piece of wood is real.”

Ned and Lady Catelyn came in shortly after to talk to their daughter, sending Jon away. He’d gone to Sansa’s chambers and asked her to let Arya play with Litsa. She’d held off for a while. “I don’t want Arya to play with Litsa. She’ll ruin her. She ruins everything. She even ruined her own nameday.”

Jon pleaded with her to just let Arya have a little time with the doll. Robb came in and started arguing with her. The two boys yelled at Sansa for being selfish. She ended up calling Jon a bastard, Robb an idiot, and Arya a beast. Finally, Robb just up and grabbed the toy from his sister, tossing it to Jon and telling him to run while he held a screaming Sansa back. Jon hurried to bring the toy to Arya, coming to her chambers while Eddard was still there.
Arya had been thrilled. She declared that she wanted to tell Litsa some secrets, and asked to be left alone. She’d gotten her wish. The second Jon and Father stepped outside, however, Sansa had come running up, red faced and furious. “LITSA IS MINE! ARYA CAN’T HAVE HER. THAT’S MY DOLL! ARYA’S AN AWFUL MONSTER! I HATE HER!”

Father had glanced at Jon. “You took the doll against Sansa’s wishes?”

He remembered looking at the ground guiltily. “Robb took it. I just brought it here.”

Lord Eddard sighed wearily and looked at his older daughter. “Sansa, let your sister have this, just for a little while. Stop carrying on. You’re not being a lady,” Father had admonished.

“Arya is never a lady and she gets whatever she wants! I hate her and I hate you! GIVE ME BACK MY DOLL! Litsa is mine. I take care of her, and Jon took her without permission. And he gave her to Arya! Arya ruins EVERYTHING! She’s ugly and stupid and she doesn’t deserve to have pretty things!”

“That’s horrible, Sansa,” Father replied.

“You’re a stupid, nasty girl,” Jon remembered snarling at her.

“SHE CAN’T HAVE LITSA BACK! LITSA IS MINE NOW! I’M GOING TO PUT HER IN ARMOR AND HAVE ADVENTURES WITH HER!” Arya had shouted angrily through the door.

“YOU BETTER NOT! SHE’S A LADY! I HATE YOU!” Sansa screamed at the door.

“I HATE YOU!”

“That’s enough,” their father said. “If this doll is going to make you two fight like this, then neither of you can have her.”

“NO!” Both girls screamed. There was a rumbling from inside Arya’s room. Furious, Lord Eddard struggled against the door and managed to push it open, just as a crashing sound hit their ears. They got in the room to see that Arya had crushed Litsa’s porcelain head against the windowsill.

Immediately, both girls burst into tears. Arya started apologizing profusely and calling herself a beast.

“I didn’t mean to! Honest! I’m so sorry! Sansa, I’m so sorry!”

They’d tried to fix little Litsa, but they couldn’t return her to her original glory. Sansa didn’t speak to Robb, Jon, or Arya for weeks after that. Arya was made to do all Sansa’s chores for a moon, and Lady Catelyn sent to Lord Hoster for a replacement. But by the time it arrived, Sansa had given all her dolls away. She never played with one again. She and the other girls started excluding Arya more than ever, and Sansa began referring to Jon as a bastard on a more regular basis.

The doll on the table reminded him of Litsa for a number of reasons. This toy was obviously expensive and well-made. Jon could remember being shocked by just how beautiful and almost real looking Litsa had been. Even as a young boy, he’d admired that toy. It really did look like a miniature version of Sansa. When Sansa had played Knights and Maidens with him and Robb, she used to have Jon take Litsa as his maiden to rescue instead of her, and Jon hadn’t even really minded being the one who had to settle for a doll.

This doll was not Litsa. Its hair was brown, not red; its eyes green, not blue. It was far smaller than Litsa, as well. Small enough to be carried in a large pocket. This doll was made just as well, though; it was the white glossed porcelain Litsa had been, and its face was painted on with perhaps even more artistry. This one also seemed to open and close its eyes when you moved it, and it had real
The dress was pale blue satin, now torn open down the front, it’s cloth chest similarly ruined. Chunks of the doll’s hair was cut off as well. Inside the thing’s chest, they found little pockets of herbs. What was strangest was how the doll’s chest was destroyed. The tearing was unnecessary. The doll’s cloth and sawdust body in fact had an opening in the back that the killer easily could have used to extract the evidence. The person who destroyed this toy did it in anger.

That wasn’t all they’d found, either. Ser Marq kept a little pouch that hung from a long leather chord about his neck. Inside it were two locks of brown hair clipped in silver and packages of other herbs as well.

What Jon couldn’t understand was the doll. Why on earth would Ser Marq have a doll? The knight had no wife or children. He had no sisters. Perhaps the doll belongs to someone else? But then why would he have it? Maybe the killer just left it with him to lead to someone else? Is there another corpse we should be looking for?

Jon didn’t want any more bodies. Even Ser Marq’s body irked him. Though he was fairly sure the man was involved in Sansa’s poisoning somehow, he’d have liked to question the man himself. And every murder was just a new puzzle to solve, something to distract from his currently suffering lover. Jon spent every moment either investigating or visiting Sansa. This just gave him all new complicating dimensions to investigate. While Marq Piper’s death certainly could lead to clues, it still added distracting dimensions to this whole affair that he’d have to solve, ones which likely wouldn’t lead to anything that helped him find out who hurt Sansa. It would have been easier if whoever killed him maybe just set the man up to be caught, or gave Jon a tip or something. Now there was less time for him to comfort his lover.

Jon shifted uncomfortably. “Anything?”

Merys looked at him. “Prince Jon, you don’t need to be here if you don’t wish to be.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. However, before you leave, there are a couple of things I wanted to speak of. First of all, I’m absolutely sure the herbs we found, both in the pouch and in the doll, are indeed moon tea. There’s tansy, peppermint, and wormwood. But here’s what I don’t understand: why would Sansa be getting her moon tea from Marq Piper? She could have gotten it from me easily. It’s very easy to make, the herbs are very common, and I certainly know how to make it. If you might ask her, it may shed some light on this whole situation.”

Jon nodded. “I’ll ask her.”

Resisting the urge to stop over at Piper’s corpse to spit on it, he left the office in a hurry. He hadn’t seen Sansa since he’d left that morning to do the audiences with Daenerys. Gendry was currently being questioned further by Barristan. Jon had insisted on it before the former blacksmith went any further.

He hurried to Sansa’s chambers as quickly as he could, keeping his head down and trying to ignore the anxious gazes of every courtier he passed. Their eyes seemed to follow him. When he got to the door of the relatively private royal wing, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“My prince!”

Jon groaned and turned. Coming toward him were three women, two olive-skinned brunettes he
recognized, one a blue-eyed blond he didn’t. “Princess Arianne.”

Arianne Martell made him nervous, partly because he found her ridiculously attractive. Though she was six years older than him, she had an intoxicating beauty and spirit to her that made her young. Indeed, Arianne Martell was something like out of a fantasy Jon would have had in prior years. Not only was she extremely pretty with a body made for bedchambers, she looked very exotic, with her olive skin, dark eyes and thick dark hair. She was fierce, fiery, clever, strong, and powerful in her own right as well. When she moved, she moved with a sense of danger, power, and sensuality, and she stood out from the other women at court. And she spoke with this sense of confidence that Jon rarely experienced coming from women, even Daenerys.

Though she dressed in rich silks and velvets most of the time, her gowns tended to be far more revealing. When not outside, she often left her arms bare, exposing extremely toned muscles rippling beneath her skin. So even looking elegant and sparkling, one could easily get the impression that Arianne Martell could beat you to a bloody pulp if she wished. This was something Jon tended to find more attractive than perhaps he should.

The worst part was, he thought Arianne might find him genuinely attractive as well. Rumors were she had many lovers, and she had a certain type: tall, dark-haired, with preferences for duty and respect for strong women. While Jon usually dismissed the flirtations and signs of attraction from other women at court as insincere, he got the sneaking suspicion that Arianne genuinely wanted him. It wasn’t like with Margaery Tyrell, who winked and smiled and acted as unassuming and dainty as she could. When Arianne looked at him, he saw true fire in her eyes. She didn’t pretend to be sweet, she didn’t pretend to find him especially strong or impressive. She just gave him looks that said, ‘I’d like to make a conquest of you. I’d like to do filthy things with you.’

And yet, she hadn’t flirted with him outright the way many others had. She’d kept her distance to some degree. Sansa had had more interactions with Arianne than Jon had. Actually, most of the times Jon had spoken to Arianne had been in Sansa’s presence. Indeed, there was more to it than that even. Jon sometimes got the impression, from the way the Princess of Dorne acted, that she wanted Sansa just as much, if not more, than she wanted Jon.

That had its own highly shameful appeal. More than once, Jon had found himself in the midst of a dream involving the Princess of Dorne and his lover together. He’d woken from them thanks to Sansa, who’d found him hard and often finished him off while he struggled to only say her name and not utter anything that might sound like ‘Arianne.’

When the woman walked up now, he felt at a loss. He really didn’t want to think of her while the woman he loved was thrashing about in her bedchamber.

Arianne’s almond eyes were focused. “Prince Jon, I wished to speak with you on some important matters. I was wondering, have you met my cousin, Tyene Sand?”

Jon’s eyes widened at the name. The blond stepped forward and curtseyed. She was not as beautiful as Arianne or Lady Nym, but she was striking in how demure and girlish she appeared.

“Sand? As in—-?”

“One of my Uncle Oberyn’s daughters, yes.”

Jon hadn’t expected that. Tyene looked less Dornish than anyone he’d ever met, with her big blue eyes and platinum hair. They said all the Sand Snakes had Prince Oberyn’s eyes. For a second, Jon couldn’t see it in those blue orbs, but there was something highly focused and threatening upon second glance.
“Lady Tyene, a pleasure,” said Jon, quickly glancing at the dark-haired Lady Nym. The lack of resemblance between the two half-sisters wasn’t entirely unlike what he’d had with his own brothers. Tyene kept her eyes downcast in a modest manner and curtseyed.

“Your Grace, the honor is mine.”

“It is a delight to meet you, of course, however I am afraid I am----“

“Busy, we realize that,” Nym interrupted. “You’re trying to investigate the poisoning and Ser Marq’s murder. We understand. That’s why Tyene is here, though. She can be of particular help in Lady Stark’s case.”

Jon’s eyes widened. He stepped back right into the door. Princess Arianne and the Sand Snakes had a reputation for a reason. Tyene in particular, was infamously treacherous. He remembered the stories of how a miniature rebellion was conceived, ending in the maiming of poor then-Princess Myrcella. *I am not letting these women around Sansa.* But he couldn’t reject or resist them like he had with Gendry. Struggling to be polite as possible, he replied, “I appreciate your concern, ladies, but I think we have all the help we can use right now. I’m sorry, but I really must hurry. Urgent matters, you see.”

He bowed awkwardly. The Dornish women all glanced at each other, but politely accepted his dismissal. He hurried off, making a beeline for Sansa’s chambers.

Sam and Gilly both sat by his lover’s bedside, Gilly dabbing Sansa’s forehead with a cold compress and Sam taking her pulse. His lover was unconscious.

The Sand Snakes were forgotten when Jon saw her. He could barely stand it, looking at her like this. She gave little jerks and twitches, her eyes flinching every few seconds, her lower lip bruised from biting it too much. She uttered little whimpers and moans, her once lovely skin coated with sweat. Her complexion was ashen, her eyes sunken, and she looked thinner than ever. Jon was sure he’d met healthier-looking wights.

“How is she?” he asked, despite all the evidence before him.

“Better today, actually,” Sam told him. “Her heartbeat is stronger, she’s not throwing up so much. Gilly’s going to try and get her to eat again when she wakes up.”

“Any visions?” Jon asked walking to the side of the bed opposite from Sam and sitting down. He took Sansa’s unoccupied hand in his. As if sensing him, she clutched it so tight he was certain her bones would shatter.

“No waking ones, at least. I can’t speak for the ones she has when she’s asleep, though,” Gilly replied, looking despondent, her own eyes a bit sunken. Jon sighed.

“Gilly, Sam, go see your son.”

The two had been helping him nonstop for several days, barely seeing Little Sam. The boy was being looked after by court septas. The couple glanced at him anxiously.

“But… Who’s going to take care of the lady?” Gilly asked.

“I can manage for a little while. If I have to be called away, I’ll bring Satin in. Take a couple of hours.”

They left reluctantly, Gilly handing Jon the cold, wet rag and basin. Jon took several minutes wiping
her skin, absolutely heartbroken at what he was seeing.

_Not another_, he prayed, bowing his head and trying to fight back tears. _Please, not another. I can’t handle this. I can’t lose her too. Father is gone. Robb is gone. Arya and Rickon are gone. Maester Luwin, Old Nan, Jory, Ser Rodrick… Bran isn’t dead, but I’ll probably never see or speak to him again. Ygritte is gone. Lord Commander Mormont is gone. Maester Aemon is gone. Pyp and Grenn are gone. Haven’t I lost enough people? I’m barely twenty-three. Sansa’s not yet to her twentieth nameday. Gods, why bother returning her to me if you’re just going to take her away again? Is this some sort of joke?

Jon honestly had no idea what he’d do if Sansa died. There was only so much he could endure. People often said that some men lost the best parts of themselves when the woman they loved died. _Would the best part of me die with her?_

He felt like a child again, the way he had whenever he’d been reminded that he was a bastard, that he was motherless, that he’d never have a place in the world the way Robb or Sansa or Bran would. He was so scared, so lonely. Jon felt himself weaken, and he fell next to his sleeping lover, curling up against her frail form the way he’d always dreamt of curling up with the mother he never had.

“Don’t go,” he whispered into her matted hair. “Please don’t go. Not you too. Please, stay with me. This is where you belong. With me. Please, Sansa. We haven’t returned to Winterfell yet. You can’t go.”

There was a clattering at one of the windows. Jon looked over. Someone was trying to open it and get in.

It was like his blood had been replaced with liquid fire. Overcome with rage at whoever this was, he jumped to his feet. He couldn’t make out the figure, but whoever it was clearly saw him. Furious, Jon unsheathed Longclaw and rushed to the window. The figure, clad in a black cloak, was already fairly far off, moving with intense speed. Jon struggled through the window, managing to climb almost the entire way and then falling several feet onto the ground below. He took off after the figure, absolutely enraged. He was going to kill this person, whoever it was. He was going to cut them down bloody. He would… He would…

Sansa:

She woke to a chill. She opened her eyes. A window was open. No one was there. She shivered and struggled to get up and close it. Who in their right mind would leave her window open? She had a fever already. But when she tried to stand, she fell to the ground, banging her right knee. Sansa cried out, clutching her leg.

“Sweet Girl, did you hurt yourself?”

Sansa looked up. “Father?”

Ned Stark looked as he had right before the Kingslayer had attacked him: tall, imposing, healthy, streaks of grey in his beard. His dark eyes were so sad. Sansa held her arms out to him. He moved to pick her up and help her struggle back into bed.

“There’s a girl,” Ned said when she pulled herself in. He spotted her knee and bent down, giving it a little kiss. “Better?”

Sansa nodded and covered herself. “I was wondering when you’d come. Mother, Robb, and Arya already have. I saw Rickon yesterday morning. My son was here first. I even saw Petyr and Tyrion.
Where were you?"

Ned looked deep into her eyes, completely heartbroken. “I don’t know, Sweet Girl. But I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry I wasn’t there when you needed me.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you. I’m sorry I told the queen about your plans to leave. It was all my fault.”

“No, dear, it wasn’t. You were just a child. I should have never put you in a position like that. I should have never confessed what I knew to the queen. You were too young to leave home. You were taken advantage of. I should have seen it happening before it was too late.”

She bowed her head. “Are you ashamed of me?”

“No, Sweetling. I’m not. I could never be ashamed of you. I’m proud of you.”

“Truly?” she asked, surprised to hear this.

“Of course. Always.”

“I always wanted you to be proud of me.”

The lines about his eyes crinkled up. “I always wanted that myself.”

“I was always proud of you, Papa. Even when I had to pretend to be Petyr’s. I never forgot… not once.”

He smiled then. An Eddard Stark smile was a rare one. She tried to catalogue this one away into her memories. “You named your boy after me.”

“Of course I did. I always knew… my first boy would be an Eddard.”

He reached out and stroked her hair. “Sweet Girl…”

He started fading then. Sansa burst into tears. “No! Stay! Don’t go! Just a little longer, Papa!”

His smile fell from his face. Then his image fell from the air in front of her, and Sansa was clutching for nothing.

~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~

Jon:

Gendry had found him. The figure in black somehow managed to climb through a hole in the gate. Jon loudly demanded the thing be raised so he could chase after whoever it was. But the figure managed to disappear for good. Furious with himself, Jon wandered the city streets for hours, looking for any sign of a black figure.

The knight brought him back to the castle at sundown. Daenerys ordered him to his chambers, “Until you can start thinking clearly again.”

Satin was equally furious. He set up a bath for Jon, but refused to speak to him. Once the tub was filled, Satin was ready to leave the chamber, telling his master he’d call him when dinner was ready. “Your aunt doesn’t feel like dining with you tonight.”

Jon asked after Sansa. She was fine. She’d somehow bruised her knee, but she was fine.
“I spent the afternoon looking after her,” his steward informed him. “You stupid shit, you left a window open. You’re cracking up. You need to sleep tonight, and alone.”

Jon was exhausted and ashamed of himself. He bathed slowly, telling Satin to go look after Sansa some more for the night. He’d take care of himself. His steward took no issue with this and departed, telling him his dinner would be waiting for him in the solar by the time he was finished bathing.

But Jon ended up regretting the decision to dismiss his servant after Satin left and a beautiful, olive-skinned woman emerged from behind the curtains.

Jon stood up in the water and immediately regretted that as well, placing his hands over his privates at once. “What do you think you’re doing here? How did you get past my steward? The guards?”

Arianne gave a dismissive laugh. She swung her hips as she moved, looking like an image from one of Theon Greyjoy’s books about foreign courtesans, clad in red velvet. “Your men are fine, Prince Jon. Calm yourself, I’m not here to kill you. Or hurt your little paramour. Or seduce you.”

“As if you could,” he said through clenched teeth.

Arianne gave his crotch a very significant look. Jon sat in the water again, hands still covering his crotch. “You still haven’t answered my question. What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to convince you that I don’t want your paramour dead, Jon Targaryen. Now get clean, then get dressed, and we’ll have dinner.”

“I could have you ordered out of here.”

“You could, and then word would get out about me being in your bedchamber. I doubt that is something you want.” He watched her prance out of the chamber, then hung his head.

*We need new guards, soon,* he thought, scrubbing himself off miserably. Daenerys was going to be furious.

He put on multiple layers when he got out of the bath. When he entered his solar, he found a tray of food untouched upon his dining table. Arianne sat across from his place, and beside his tray was a collection of papers.

“What is this?” he asked, sitting down and glancing at the parchment.

“Proof that I don’t want your betrothed dead. It’s the new trade agreement between the North and Dorne. One which may very likely insure that I have enough water to restore my family’s summer retreat and keep the blood orange harvest going for another fifty years. Now, this entire agreement doesn’t go into effect until the contract is signed by both of us. It doesn’t become permanent until it’s approved of by at least four Northern Lords, but initial steps in the trade, the first seven years of this arrangement only depend on her signature.”

“So what’s to stop you from killing her once she’s signed her name?” Jon asked. “I’m sure you could manage to convince the other Lords to continue the trade agreement if it proves beneficial enough to both realms.”

“I could but that won’t mean a thing if it’s not approved by the original drafter of the agreement, that being Sansa. While her death outright wouldn’t put an end to it, she managed to slip something by me. The signature on this document has to correspond to the name and initials over various clauses in the contract. Sansa managed to initial this document, but never gave a full signature. Sansa presented the draft to me the day after your betrothal was announced. I initialed and signed it, and then gave it
to her to finalize with initials and signature. She sent it back with the clauses letter-marked, but no signature. Check what she put down.”

Jon shifted through the pages until he found the various clauses that required letter marking by the High Lords of the two respective regions. First there were the initials A.N.M--- Arianne Nymeros Martell. Next to that, written in Sansa’s elegant script were four letters: S. H. S. T.

_Sansa Hardyng Stark Targaryen._ Jon’s jaw dropped. _Gods, you brilliant girl._ It was absolutely ingenious, actually. Sansa wasn’t quite legally allowed to use the Targaryen name until she and Jon were married in a fully legitimate capacity, but their betrothal did allow her some privileges, including certain prepping for her role as future princess. While signing Targaryen to her name at this point would be illegal, since the document wasn’t fully legitimized yet, using the T as part of her mark on a document that wasn’t officially a state piece was. And this treaty would not be fully legitimate until Sansa signed it. She couldn’t establish this agreement under the state until after she and Jon were married and she was fully entitled to call herself a Targaryen. She’d basically strong-armed all of Dorne into supporting her as royal consort by writing a single letter.

“If Sansa never officially becomes your wife, then I will never, ever get my trade agreement. And let me tell you, this is something I want and need very much, Your Grace. Winter doesn’t just affect the northern regions. While Dorne doesn’t get snow, we are still hit hard by the season. We rely on trade. But when other regions are struggling to survive, the market for luxury foreign goods and blood oranges dries up quite a bit. Now, since the North is struggling anyways, they are happy to take our foreign foods. And it works well for them because even though they have next to no gold, they do have a ridiculous supply of a resource that is the most precious in Dorne--- fresh water. This agreement will insure that my people will never go thirsty. But if Sansa never gets to officially add Targaryen to her last name, this document means nothing.” Arianne swallowed. “Dorne doesn’t have many allies, or many foreign lords eager to work with us anymore beyond pre-established agreements. And now, my own future is tied to Sansa’s.”

The Princess leaned forward. “Not only do I need her to live long enough to marry you, but I need her to live long enough to give you children. She could potentially lose her rights to that name if you were forced to set her aside for lack of heirs. A change in name can threaten the security of this deal. If she goes, it could take another several years for me to find a deal this good. And the longer I go without something like this, the greater damage to my domains. So when I fucking offer you help in saving your betrothed and finding out which stupid shit did this, it’s genuine. This lunatic didn’t just threaten your happy little home life, Jon Targaryen, they’ve threatened the well-being and security of each and every Dornishman.”

Jon gaped. “I…. I…. Are you sure you can help?”

“There is no greater expert on poisons in this world than Tyene Sand. Five minutes examining your paramour and some chemical samples and she could probably find out twice as much as your Grand Maester. She’ll probably do more to save her, too. So if I were you, I’d agree to let us help you.”

Chapter End Notes

_I stole a line from Tori Amos's song "Winter", which is a song which always makes me think of Ned and his girls. I listened to it on repeat before writing this chapter. I hope you guys liked it._
Family

Chapter Summary

Reunions between uncles and nieces and bastards and former assassins

Chapter Notes

OMG!! Over 300 kudos!!! I'd like to thank all of you guys, and I want to of course thank my betas, Bluecochlid and Illyana. This story would be nothing without their help. Props to Illyana for editing this chapter!!! You all are the best!!!!

Sorry for the wait on this one-- I had a busy weekend and things have been crazy. This chapter is a bit shorter, but it's got lots I think you'll like. Including a whole new POV.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty: Family

Arya:

She didn’t go to the East Barracks to meet with him--- too risky. She’d possessed the cat from earlier to deliver him a message to meet with her at a corner of Rhaenys’s Hill, close enough to the dragons to be a place where people almost never went. She tried to ignore the stench of burning and the cries of the scaled beasts housed in the pit and focused.

Arya almost came with a different face. Her powers of transformation were more limited than they’d once been, but she still managed to change effectively enough. She couldn’t be Anais again--- everyone was on the lookout for her.

Sansa recognizing her true face created a risk in going as herself. It was a stupid, sentimental part of her that caused her to wear her real face to meet Gendry.

But then, it’s not like anyone is going to believe Sansa if she says she saw me. Sansa doesn’t even believe she really saw me. And Jon wouldn’t have seen my true face when he chased me earlier. I had Greta’s face and I was hooded. No one recognizes Arya Stark’s face now. People didn’t even recognize me years ago. Sansa only figured it was me because of Needle. That Sansa recognized such a thing was fairly impressive. She’d not exactly been lucid at that moment. Arya wasn’t a woman who was easily shocked, but seeing her sister hallucinate like that chilled her. Perfectly put-together Lady Sansa, disheveled and mad, speaking to people who aren’t there.

Any guilt over what she’d done to Piper disappeared the second she saw what his actions had reduced her sister to. Even after being arrested by Coldwater and Moore, Sansa still had her strength, her ability to fight back, she still had control of herself. But this… this just wasn’t fair.

Sansa always managed to weather any storm with her sanity intact. And Sansa had been through all sorts of trauma that would reduce most to a quivering mess. Yoren the Wandering Crow had spared
Arya the sight of her father’s head being cut from his shoulders, but no one spared Sansa that image. After that, Arya’s sister endured abuse by the people who’d killed their father, all while having to pretend to adore the boy who gave the order.

Arya could still remember her time as Mercy, going through the mummer’s farce, tortured by the idea of her sister being raped by the Imp. After that came Littlefinger’s abuse, the wars, losing her husband and her son. Arya had seen many a terrible thing in her time, but a good chunk of those horrible things she’d either helped cause or she’d been somebody else when it was done. And she’d still lost all sense of self for a large fraction of her life. Arya still struggled to cope with who she was, with the memories bumping around in her head, with the discovery that those memories did indeed belong to her.

But it seemed Sansa never lost the sense of who she was or where she was or what world she lived in. Arya found it a tad ironic, really. Sansa, the sister who had filled her head with songs of beauty and romance, managed to keep her head, her sense of reality better than her more level-headed sister. The younger Stark girl had found solace in retreating into the various personas she’d created while serving the House of Black and White. So much so that until a few moons ago, she hadn’t even remembered being Arya Stark.

Arya heard the testimony in court, hiding in the crowds as the handmaid Anais. She’d heard Sansa recount her trauma in more explicit detail, sometimes to Jon and sometimes she spoke in her sleep. Sansa never forgot any of it.

And the strangest part of it was that Sansa was an awful, awful killer. Arya could tell. Before sacrificing her identity to the House of Black and White, the younger Stark coped with the horrible things she saw by preparing herself to murder those who’d wronged her, and then murdering them. Even before she entered the House of Black and White, she’d managed to spill gallons of blood without remorse. Whether she cut their throats or arranged for the deaths of others through a second party, she’d never hesitated, and she’d never mourned them. Her sense of justice guarded her from any regret. Arya Stark was built with a killer instinct.

Sansa though… Sansa never had that. Arya saw it with Anais’s eyes, she’d heard it with Anais’s ears. She witnessed her mistress spill tears over Coldwater and Moore. Sansa confessed that she cried over killing Wallace Coldwater and Petyr Baelish, and wept for Joffrey as well. She hadn’t even murdered Joffrey. All these people who deserved death, who had done the very worst things to Arya’s sister; and yet, Sansa couldn’t stomach watching them die. She had no bloodlust to allow her to triumph in the deaths of her enemies. And the saddest part was that Sansa had in fact caused a lot of death, none of which she enjoyed. Arya was willing to bet her sister cried for every corpse she saw. That woman led a war campaign.

And yet, she’d managed to stand up in court and recount her various tragedies clearly and succinctly, explaining herself rationally, defending herself shrewdly, sounding every bit the most sane and put-together person in the room. The woman couldn’t even enjoy the defeat of those who wronged her. But she still held herself together.

But now, she was seeing people who weren’t there. Now, she was overcome by delusions. It was sick.

The person who poisoned Sansa robbed her of her strength, her agency, her autonomy. Such a deed could and would not go unpunished. So Arya swallowed any reservations she might have harbored over using the methods of the Tickler, and she’d tortured Piper. She’d made his death slow and agonizing. Not only did she ruin his pretty face, but she also found that doll he loved so much. She gutted the toy in front of him. He screamed louder for that thing than he had when she strapped the
rats to his chest. It was all very chilling, though not as chilling as watching her sister manically insist upon wiping Petyr Baelish’s blood from Needle.

Jon was disappointing her, too. Arya thought that maybe Marq Piper’s body would ease her brother’s obsession with finding Anais, but the City Watch was still searching everywhere for her. It made Arya’s investigation that much harder. And anyways, even if she were guilty of being in on the scheme, what would she possibly know that Marq Piper wouldn’t? He’d be closer to the conspirators than some maid. And she’d left Jon all the possible hints there. Did Jon really think whoever would go to the trouble of torturing and killing Piper and leaving a body and clues wouldn’t give them all the information Piper would possess and more?

*Of course he thinks that. He doesn’t know it’s you. Still, he’s paying too much attention to Anais and not enough to everything I left him.*

When Arya became Anais, she assumed the identity of a maid because she figured it was innocuous. No one would ever suspect some random lady’s maid of being dangerous. Of course, she had no idea Sansa was being poisoned at the time. She thought she’d protect Sansa from would-be assassins if she was close enough to keep an eye on her and that those assassins would come at her with blades. The more non-threatening she seemed, the easier it would be to protect Sansa. Of course, it ended up blowing up in her face completely.

*Stupid, stupid.* Arya couldn’t believe how blind she’d been, going to Marq Piper of all people for Sansa’s moon tea. When she’d encountered the knight, she’d thought he’d be a great help for discreet favors. He was a close friend of Edmure Tully, he appeared to want to be in Sansa’s good graces, he apparently wanted to protect her reputation and honor, and he didn’t seem very clever. So when Sansa had shyly come to Anais and asked her to find a way to procure moon tea for her without it getting back to the queen or Jon, Piper seemed a decent choice. He was close with their Tully uncle, so any interactions with him would never seem suspect, he wanted Sansa’s favor, he had the means to get it without fuss. She’d taken him for an aspiring suitor or savior of fair maidens. After all, he’d so eagerly asked to be of help to “the niece of Edmure Tully.”

She started realizing something was wrong a couple days before the betrothal announcement was made. At first, she thought her sister’s weakness had been her recovering from the trauma she’d experienced. But it took so long for her to recover. Then, like Jon, she suspected pregnancy. When Sansa wasn’t with child, Arya started investigating.

Marq Piper ended up being more resistant than Arya expected, but he had divulged a few things. He’d divulged no names, but apparently Sansa was being poisoned even before she’d arrived at court. Which meant the Vale had to be involved somehow.

Arya needed some testing done on that doll, testing she wasn’t capable of completing herself. She suspected that Myranda Royce might be involved. Myranda was a distant cousin to the Starks, she could end up benefitting from the death, and she was close to Sansa. Arya didn’t want to think that Myranda was involved, but there was motive. Her branch of the family could possibly inherit Winterfell if Sansa was gone. And now both Myranda’s father and brother were brought up on charges, leaving Myranda as head of that branch of House Royce. Of course, that inheritance wasn’t definite. There were other Stark cousins in the Vale… including, unfortunately, House Waynwood.

What she didn’t understand was why those women would help Sansa with her defense instead of letting Coldwater and Moore kill her. *Of course, if only one of them was involved, it might make sense.*

Sansa hadn’t named an heir to Winterfell, and until she did, there could be further conflict over who would succeed her. There were Stark cousins among the Royces, Waynwoods, Corbrays, and
Templetons. All of whom had more or less equal claims and would likely all fight like cats and dogs unless the matter was settled beforehand. Convincing her that they are true allies would make it much more likely for Sansa to name one of them her heir at some point. They save Sansa's life and Sansa names one of them heir to Winterfell as a reward. Randa Royce is a brunette like the doll, and Lady Waynwood has daughters. Either one of them could promise to make Piper future Lord of Winterfell through marriage.

Problem was, she lost access to the castle, so she couldn’t check Piper’s rooms for any signs of communication and find out exactly whom he was allied with. There were other possibilities, of course. Other people who wanted Sansa dead. But the nature of what she found on Piper’s person suggested a lover.

Which was why she needed access to Jon’s investigation and by extension, his resources.

But then, that’s why I got Gendry involved. Arya spotted her access point rounding the dragon pit, coming towards her. Their eyes met, and Arya, despite herself, felt her heart do strange things. Stop being a stupid girl.

She should know by now how meaningless appearances were. But for once, she couldn’t help but notice how good-looking Gendry was as he came towards her. His eyes were so blue, his hair was so thick, and his body was beyond well-formed.

But what Arya truly, truly liked about Gendry was the way he carried himself. There wasn’t a hint of the pretentious posturing that so many she grew up with affected. She’d spent her childhood worried about being married off to some spoiled, pompous idiot with delusions of grandeur, who thought being highborn and male made him better than others. Gendry had something rare--- humility.

At this point, the public knew of his Baratheon lineage. And now he was an officer of the City Watch, knighted by the queen herself, and highly respected. He’d risen far. But he didn’t act like he considered himself better than anyone else. He still did repairs for his comrades’ armor when Darrys decided to charge too much. He still repaired his own armor. He hadn’t forgotten who he was.

When he saw her, his eyes lit up and his face went red. Arya felt even more like a girl. Sansa’s words, “You’re a beauty”, came back to her. Others had made reference to her having a “pretty face” in years past as well. Arya never gave much thought to it. She’d been Arya Horseface for too long to take that seriously. Until Sansa said that about her, at least. And then Arya started to seriously wonder if she was. Gendry’s eyes seemed to confirm it, though.

Or maybe it’s just because it’s me. Gendry wasn’t exactly girl-obsessed. She knew he sometimes employed a whore from the city that he liked. But he rarely ever got distracted from his work, which was impressive, given how many silly ladies of the court liked to moon over him. But a pretty face wasn’t enough for him. Maybe he just looks at me like I’m beautiful because I am to him. He said he loves me. It could have nothing to do with what I actually look like. That just made things more special.

He stopped short a few feet from her. “I can’t believe it’s really you.”

Arya smiled. “Hello, Gendry. I missed you.”

“I—I hoped. Arya, I have to tell you, I’m so sorry. You were right. I never should have gone off with---“

Arya waved this aside. She really hated apologies, especially ones like this. She’d seen too much over the past several years to have any time for it. She’d been too many different people. There
wasn’t much time for this as it was. “Not now, Gendry. I don’t want to talk about all our regrets. How is my sister?”

Gendry looked disappointed, but he quickly focused. “Better. Were you the one Prince Jon caught breaking in?”

Arya sighed. “Yes. It was stupid.”

“It was.”

“I didn’t expect him to chase me as long as he did.” That truly shocked her, Jon’s singe-minded determination to grab her. Normally, Jon was more level-headed than that. She shook her head. Love drives people mad. She focused on Sansa, however. “But Sansa is better?”

Gendry nodded. “You’ve heard of Tyene Sand?”

Arya nodded. “Of course. The Sand Snakes of Dorne are famous everywhere. Lady Tyene’s knowledge of poisons is envied by the greatest assassins in the world.”

“She and her cousin are now assisting in the investigation. She’s also been giving something to Sansa to help her recover.”

Arya’s jaw dropped. “Has Jon agreed to this?”

“He has. It was the last thing he’s agreed to.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jon has been removed as head of the investigation,” Gendry said sadly. “As of yesterday, Ser Barristan is in charge. The queen feels less than confident in his abilities to handle all of this. He’s still involved, at least. The whole castle’s locked down. Unsullied are being brought in from the Wall, guards are around all members of the royal family.”

Arya sighed. I had a hand or two in that. “Any progress made in the investigation?”

“Houses Corbray, Waynwood, Templeton and Royce of the Gates are being investigated, as are Houses Tyrell, Tully, and Piper. It’s been determined that the poisoning started before she came to court.”

Arya nodded. I thought as much. There’s no way I’m going to be able to continue from the outside now. “Gendry, can you get me into the castle?”

His blue eyes widened. “I honestly doubt it, Arya. They’re not letting in any new, unknown faces. That’s how you’ve been operating, right? You ended up joining that assassin.”

“His order, at least.”

Gendry stepped back. “But then… How are you here now?”

“I was tested.” Arya frowned, remembering the kindly man’s orders. Your new target: Lady Hardyng, the Red Wolf. “I failed.”

She rubbed her eyes. “There’s only one thing to do, Gendry. Only one thing now.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
Jon:

Jon spent the last several days in the castle, confined to a newly limited role in the investigations. The whole court, though, was fairly confined due to new orders from the queen. No one was happy about it.

Daenerys still trusted him to oversee Sansa’s care, she wanted him kept as safe as possible. “For all we know, Nephew, that person at Sansa’s window could have been sent to hurt you as well. I can’t have you wandering the city.”

Jon protested, and Daenerys threatened to have him chained to his bedchamber wall if he did not comply. “I once chained Rhaegal and Viserion. I am in no way afraid to chain you.”

He and Barristan were butting heads over the direction the investigation was going as well. Barristan had ordered representatives from various houses of the Vale to come in, any of which might stand to inherit Winterfell upon Sansa’s death. He was now focusing all his attentions on the Vale. He’d even ordered Harry’s bastard girls be brought to court.

Jon, meanwhile, was increasingly convinced the Riverlands were involved, and that it went beyond Marq Piper. Piper had been one of the guards sent to the Vale by Edmure Tully when Sansa was arrested, and Barristan believed it was there that Piper got involved. But Jon was convinced the Tullys played a part.

“But why, Jon?” Barristan asked as the two took breakfast in Jon’s solar three days ago. “What is the motive?”

“Roslin. Roslin was the daughter of Walder Frey. I’m sure she’s involved.”

“I truly doubt Lady Tully would be capable of such a thing, not without her husband’s help. And Lord Edmure wouldn’t kill his own niece. No, the people of the Vale have more motive.”

To satisfy Jon, they tested the hair of the doll and the lock in Ser Marq’s locket against Roslin’s. But the hair, while similar in color, was too curly and fine to belong to Roslin Frey. That had satisfied Ser Barristan. It still didn’t satisfy Jon.

Lord Edmure and Lady Roslin had been outraged, though, by the suspicion. When the tests on Roslin’s hair came back negative, Daenerys had been caught up in trying to placate them, but Lord Edmure was having none of it.

So today, Jon decided to face his lover’s uncle and make amends. He put on a set of his finer clothing and called on the Tullys.

When Edmure saw him, he didn’t smile, he barely managed not to groan out loud. “My prince, what a pleasure.”

“Lord Edmure, I’d like to offer my sincerest apologies for the way everything has been handled thus far,” Jon said to him. “I wanted to make a peace offering and bring you to visit Sansa.”

Edmure’s eyes lit up. To Jon’s surprise, the man seemed legitimately excited and concerned.

“It’s about time,” he cried. “I’ve been worried sick.”

Jon could almost believe that. He waited for Edmure to prepare himself, and escorted the man to the royal wing.
“She’s sleeping now,” Jon informed him. “The poison is being drained out of her and it leaves her exhausted. So don’t be surprised if she’s not able to speak or respond to you. But you may sit by her bed for a short while.”

Edmure nodded. “I’m not expecting her to entertain me. I just want to make sure she’s still alive.”

Jon brought him to Sansa’s rooms. Gilly was sitting there, wiping Sansa’s brow. When Edmure saw his niece, he hurried over, tears welling up in his eyes. He knelt by her bed, grabbed one of Sansa’s hands, and buried his face in it.

Jon stepped back, shocked by this display of concern. Edmure Tully had, at best, shown apathy towards his niece in the past. Jon was sure his insistence on seeing her had been political posturing. But now the man was openly weeping for her like she was his own daughter.

Why? Why do you suddenly seem to care? Is this an act? You didn’t care a fig last time she was in danger. Jon hurried over and pulled Edmure away, quickly inspecting his hands. Despondent, Edmure let him, keeping his eyes glued to Sansa.

“It’s all my fault,” Edmure whimpered. “I should have protected her better. I owed it to Cat. I failed. But I thought… After I saw her again, I couldn’t…”

“Pull up a chair, Gilly, let Lord Edmure and I sit,” ordered Jon. The former wildling quickly did as she was bid, pulling two chairs to Sansa’s bedside, but not close enough for Edmure to touch his niece again. That had been agreed upon. Jon and Edmure sat, and Jon bid Gilly to go fetch Tyene Sand.

Edmure kept staring at Sansa. “She’s a beautiful thing, isn’t she?”

Jon looked at his lover, feeling miserable. Sansa looked a bit better than she had a few days ago. Tyene Sand had administered some new serum that was making the detoxing easier. Sansa’s sleep, at least, was less fitful now, and she didn’t sweat or vomit as much. It had been a couple of days since she’d had a vision as well.

“She is,” replied Jon, trying not to cry. When she is healthy and happy, she’s the most beautiful thing there is.

“A real Tully girl, whatever her name might be,” added Edmure. “She looks so much like her mother at that age. My older daughter, Minisa, you know, she’s another one. Another blue-eyed Riverrun redhead. When I look at Sansa, I can see my eldest girl, I can see my big sister.”

“You have three children, correct?” Jon asked. “There is Minisa, the eldest. And then there’s---”

“---Ambrose, aye.” Edmure said, nodding. “Little copy of his mother, though he’s got my eyes. The youngest is our girl Lynette, three years old. Just like her mother.”

Is that so? Jon’s eyes narrowed. “A brown-eyed brunette, eh?”

“Well, not just like her mother, I suppose. Her eyes are green, like both her grandmothers, her hair is a bit curlier. But other than that, she looks just like Roslin.”

I knew it. I knew it. Jon tried not to show his excitement. “I’m sure they’re very fine children.”

“Aye, the finest in the Seven Realms. They’re such a comfort to me. The moment I first looked into Minisa’s eyes, I knew… It’s hard to explain. It’s something one only really understands after you become a parent. It’s why I can never hold Roslin’s name against her, you know? She’s thrice given
me the greatest gift a person can ask for. Even locked up at Casterly Rock, after meeting my first, I was able to smile and laugh. It seemed that even with all the awful things that had happened, there was suddenly hope again. I remember when Catelyn released the Kingslayer and not being able to understand how she could do it. But gods, do I understand now.”

Edmure shook his head, then dropped it into his hands. “…Gods and I put her in chains for it! And now… Catelyn’s little girl… I held it against Sansa for years, killing Stoneheart. But if either of us did my sister wrong, it was me. I made her a prisoner for trying to save her daughter, then I failed to do enough to protect that very girl she traded everything for.”

“I failed to protect her as well,” Jon said, letting some of his sorrows out. He watched every move the Lord of Riverrun made. “I thought we were safe at last. We were so happy, you know. Before we knew about the poison, I thought maybe the reason Sansa wasn’t feeling well was because she might be with child.”

Edmure looked at him, red-eyed. “That would have been a wonderful thing.”

“I already planned to marry her, I assure you. The betrothal was arranged weeks before we announced it,” Jon assured the man. “And I was so thrilled. I wanted a little child who looked like her.”

“Eddie looked like her,” reflected Edmure. “They talk about how he resembled Harry because of the dimples. And Sansa always emphasized that because of the rumors, you know. But Eddie had so much of her in him. And Robb. He looked a lot like Robb as well. He had Robb’s curls.”

“One of our boys was going to be a Robb.” Jon frowned. He didn’t like saying ‘was’. Their Robb was still a possibility. But speaking of Sansa as if she were already gone would help up the guilt. ‘Guilt is a great motivator,’ he remembered Sansa telling him one evening. “Our first child has to have a Targaryen name, so I hoped for a girl first, one we could call Daenerys. But then, a Robb, Sansa and I decided. A new Robb Stark to inherit Winterfell.”

Edmure closed his eyes. “A beautiful dream.”

“And now it may be gone,” Jon replied. “Because of some monster. Edmure, if you know anything…”

“I don’t! I wish I did, but I don’t!”

“You were Marq Piper’s best friend…”

“I thought I was. But apparently not,” Edmure gritted his teeth. “If I had any idea…”

Jon sighed. He was doing his best to use every trick Sansa ever taught him, but this was excruciating. He searched Edmure’s face and found no sign of deceit. There’s nothing there. “I believe you. I’m sorry… I’m just so tired. I’m so angry. I truly am sorry. Let me make it up to you. While you’re stuck at court… I could have your girls brought to you. To be a comfort. To you and to Roslin.”

The man’s face softened. “That… That would be a great comfort, Your Grace. As you know, I have great trouble stomaching any place but Riverrun. But having them here would do much to ease our minds.”

“Let it be a surprise for your wife,” Jon replied. “I’ll have the arrangements made.”

Edmure nodded. “I thank you, Your Grace.”
There was a knock on the door. Jon went to open it and found Tyene Sand waiting there. He turned to Edmure. “Lord Tully, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave now.”

He got up reluctantly, muttering a good-bye to his niece before filing out with a bowed head. Once he was gone, Jon had Tyene check for any signs that Edmure may have slipped Sansa something when he touched her.

“Nothing,” Tyene said after performing some tests. Jon nodded.

“Alright, you’re dismissed.”

She hurried out, looking annoyed. Jon stayed with Sansa a few more minutes before Gilly returned to tell him that Gendry was waiting in his solar with a “very special guest.”

Jon sprang to his feet once more. Anais. Gendry found Anais. Barristan had all but given up searching for the girl, but Jon, determined to find her, assigned Gendry to the job. The Bull has made himself useful.

Jon entered his solar eagerly to find Gendry standing by the window with a female companion in breeches. Both had their backs to him. But when he entered they turned. The young woman did so slowly. Anais’s face didn’t greet him. Instead, it was a long, angular, extremely pretty young woman with a mess of dark hair and expressive grey eyes. A face that was unfamiliar and yet thoroughly unmistakable.

“Hello, brother.”

Chapter End Notes

Also, I’d like to make a note about a couple of things: These chapters are in third person, limited to the character the sections are profiling. The opinions and feelings expressed in the chapters are not necessarily my own. For instance, in this chapter, Arya reflects that Sansa always held on to her sense of identity and reality... She doesn't know much about Alayne, and she also doesn't know about Sansa being an unreliable narrator. Furthermore, her observations are limited to her own knowledge/experience. Even though she saw Sansa break her fingers, that was an emotional response and not a loss of her sense of reality. Or another example is Jon calling Arianne Martell clever last chapter. Arianne's crazy. But at that point, Jon familiarity with her was limited. Furthermore, while some things may not make sense plot or reflection-wise, there are still things to be clarified in upcoming chapters, especially regarding Arya and her backstory.

I hope you guys liked this one enough to forgive the shorter length.
Fire and Blood

Chapter Summary

Arya makes some introductions.

Chapter Notes

First chapter without a Jon or Sansa POV. I hope you like it.

Sorry for the waits.... You guys are probably going to have longer waits from now on. I've got a new job, and so I can't post them every day like I used to. But I'm trying. Thanks to Illyana for beta-ing.

Chapter Twenty-One: Fire and Blood

Arya:

The urge to pull him into her arms and kiss his cheek proved difficult to resist. By this point, Arya had seen his face dozens of times in the last couple of months, but this was different. For the first time in years, Jon was seeing her as herself. For the first time in years, Arya was looking at her brother without the thoughts of another confusing her.

Breaking free from the lack of identity she’d developed over the years with the Faceless Men came slowly. It started moons ago, at Winterfell. By that point, she’d been so far gone that when it was revealed that Lady Hardyng the Red Wolf was indeed Sansa Stark, she’d barely struggled with the idea of killing the woman. She knew the name “Sansa” meant something to someone. But she wasn’t that someone. She’d been Nina the Scullery Maid at the time. Nina had been at Winterfell for only a couple of days, looking for the most convenient way to “accidentally” kill the Red Wolf.

She’d come close when she’d heard news of what happened in Eddie’s nursery.

People shook their heads and lamented how, after only a few moons of peace following the death of Lord Baelish, Lady Stark had to kill again, how she had to suffer even more trauma. But no one could give her much comfort. Wallace Coldwater’s attack put the entire castle on high alert. They’d heard nothing from the surrounding territories, but Wallace’s attack did not bode well for the fortress. Surely Vale forces were on their way.

Upon learning that the Lady of Winterfell was now being treated for her wounds, Nina had taken advantage of the mania and snuck up to her chambers, hoping to slip the woman a poison. It was so much easier to get away with murdering a grieving woman. People always assumed they died of a broken heart.

When she’d entered the lady’s chamber, vial in hand, however, it was like she was instantly struck over the head.
Sansa was sitting up, her knees clutched to her chest, staring at the wall of her bedchamber, blue eyes wide. There were no signs of tears. The woman just stared, silently. She had an expression on her face like she couldn’t believe the world around her was real.

The Red Wolf slowly looked over at Nina, standing in the doorway. And then Arya remembered. *That’s no wolf. That’s my sister. That’s Sansa.*

She’d run away at once in confusion. She’d found herself in the godswood, struggling with her mask and her mind. *Nina. Greta. Mercy. Beth. Cat. Blind Girl. Nan. A girl. Arry. Arya. Sansa. Stark. Stark. Stark.* Eventually she collapsed by the heart tree. A few hours later, the mobs from the Vale arrived, destroying everything. Arya ended up wandering about the rampant destruction in a haze. She could hear the shouts, the screams, the flames, the crashing of crumbling walls, but the sounds were distant, as if she were listening to it all under water.

Arya found herself in the courtyard, and was almost trampled to death by a runaway horse. A pair of long, pale hands pulled her from the animal’s path.

Long, pale hands that happened to be attached to Sansa Stark.

“Hide, Nina,” hissed the Red Wolf. More shock. How was it that the Lady of Winterfell remembered the name of a simple scullery wench? She watched in awe as Sansa walked right out into the middle of all the destruction. Withdrawing a dagger from her belt she located Ser Tyman Coldwater, commander of the forces and younger brother of Lord Wallace, snuck up behind him, and pressed the blade to his throat. She whispered in his ear carefully. A few minutes later, Ser Tyman was barking orders for his men to, “Destroy the castle, steal the valuables, but spare the people.”

The residents of Winterfell were all ushered out into the courtyard, and Sansa yielded. She was knocked out cold and dragged away. Arya quickly counted the number of survivors. 66. Then she changed her face and followed the Vale forces. At an inn at the Neck, a stranger approached her and handed her a bundle. Inside was Needle. A warning.

Since then, she’d been protecting Sansa from a number of assassination attempts using a couple of false identities. But it became harder to maintain a false face, a false reality, a false mind. Arya broke in more and more as time went on.

When she’d been Anais, she’d done much of what she did whenever she assumed a disguise and gave herself a different mentality to go along with her new face. It was a necessary evil.

There were a number of attitudes and parts of the maid’s personality that Arya once scorned. As the little maid, she couldn’t be as fierce or fearless as she truly was when in the presence of anyone she didn’t intend to sacrifice to the Faceless God. She had to let Jon scare her, for instance. That night he drunkenly stormed into Sansa’s chambers like a damn fool. She’d wanted to let Arya take over and just knock him out with a blow to the head to get him out of there. But she had to be Anais, a simple maid. Jon was a prince now. And he was bigger than her, and Anais had that normal fear of people larger and of higher birth than her. So Anais had squeaked and done as he bid. She found more boldness as time went on, especially after that evening when Sansa told her she had permission to talk back to Jon.

Anais did care far more for social status, as well. Arya cared little for it even back in the days when she was the daughter of one of the greatest Houses of Westeros, addressed by so many as “my lady” even as she--- and her sister--- kept continuously insisting that she wasn’t, in fact, a lady. Arya never cared whether her playmates were the children of lords or the sons of butchers. Sansa’s attention to such things was always a point of contention between them. Sansa was almost never unkind, but she never failed to note that Jon was a bastard, she was easily charmed by people with titles and wealth,
and she always made sure to give the impression that she was of high birth. Her sister would never have made a friend of a scullery maid or a stonemason’s son. But to Arya, titles were usually fairly ridiculous and people were “Damon” or “Sara” before they were the “Lady of Karhold” or the “fisherman’s daughter.”

After joining the Faceless Men, her attention to caste dynamics sunk even further. King or cobbler, Valar Morghulis. The only difference it ever made was in the price of the sacrifice, and she never handled finances. Everyone ended the same way. She didn’t live a life of manners or hierarchy. There was the Faceless God, and there was the kindly man. All other ideas of status were inconsequential.

But Anais was a handmaiden of the court who had grown up in the capital her whole life, seeing many a lord and lady, making her living by observing and serving the various levels of nobility. Anais took pride in the fact that not only was she serving in the Royal Wing, but she served a woman who was Lady of Winterfell and the Eyrie, Warden of the North, a former queen AND cousin to the future king. Short of serving the queen, it was the highest honor a handmaiden could attain. And the queen preferred to be attended by Dothraki savages and Essosi women anyways. Anais wanted to be the very best maid she could be, because she knew that not only was Lady Stark a very, very important lady, but attending her meant that Anais would see many other very, very important people. And part of being the very best maid meant understanding how the court worked, and understanding meant caring about things like titles, birth, and wealth.

Preoccupation with keeping everything pretty and orderly for her mistress, caring about stuff like gowns and hair and jewelry came with the territory, as did proper manners. All of this Arya rejected from birth. It was Anais’s whole world.

Still, it actually hurt a bit, letting go of Anais. Though the maid wasn’t as strong as Arya, the younger Stark girl enjoyed being her. Anais might have been obsessed with neatness and fashion and titles, but she was no idiot. She was bold and she grew bolder as time went on. She had a fierceness of her own, and became less and less afraid of voicing her opinions. She was competent at her job and in her own way, strong. Even with this new identity, bits of Arya still came through.

Wearing Anais’s face and mind, she told herself that her disapproval of the relationship between Jon and Sansa was based on her mistress’s emotional well-being. She told herself that her devotion to Sansa based itself entirely in admiration. She kept reminding herself that these people were not her siblings. Disgust for the incest, a wounded sense that this tryst meant that Jon no longer saw Arya as a sister by extension of seeing Sansa in a very, very un-sibling-like manner proved the true source of her disapproval, but she tried to hide that even from herself.

So when Arya laid eyes on Jon before, as Anais, she swallowed any mentality of Jon being her beloved brother and instead forced herself to view him as the Prince of the Realm.

Now, she was Arya entirely. And Arya was looking at her brother.

It was bit like when she first appeared to Sansa as herself, and she was forced to acknowledge a number of new circumstances and emotions that came with interacting with the woman who was indeed her sister, not just her lady mistress, for the first time in years. Sansa was calling her Arya, she saw her as her sister, not her maid, and Arya was not in a subservient position. All their shared history came rushing back, all those complicated feelings, all the new circumstances. Arya couldn’t hide behind Anais anymore. When Sansa started apologizing to her for all of their childhood issues, Arya knew herself to be too overcome to handle everything being dragged out right then and there. It helped her to try and focus on the immediate present.

But even then, she couldn’t help bringing up her feelings on Sansa being Jon’s lover. Anais
disapproved based on puritanical social ideas. But to Arya, this wasn’t about some silly sexual hang-ups. Jon remained a brother to her. Sansa was still her sister. And now, her brother and sister were fucking. They planned on getting married. They wanted to have children together.

Any reunion between her and her siblings was going to be complicated. But this made it even more so.

Sansa told her that it wasn’t about her. That what she had with Jon didn’t affect or change what was between Jon and Arya. But the younger Stark still had so much difficulty swallowing that. The idea of Sansa of all people having some intimate, special, private relationship with Jon that didn’t have anything to do with Arya? It was like her family had been turned inside-out.

And besides, Sansa probably could only speak for herself. Arya hadn’t spoken to Jon yet.

And now, she’d seen both engage in something that clashed completely with Arya’s ability to view them simply as her siblings. Jon’s change in name and status, the revelations about his parentage, those were things she could accept. Jon didn’t choose any of that. It didn’t change who he was as a human being, it didn’t have to change anything about how he thought or felt about the Starks, it didn’t have to do anything to truly change that he was Arya’s brother.

But making love to Sansa certainly did.

And for the first time in years, her brother was seeing her. She would now have to be confronted with how he felt about her. With Sansa, it wasn’t the same. Sansa had no reason to ever stop viewing Arya as her sister. Jon was another matter. Arya was terrified of being forced to finally know for sure what this meant. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know. For the first time in a very long time, she felt afraid.

Jon stumbled back in shock, as if he were seeing a ghost. Ghost himself walked over to Arya and licked her hand.

“A---Arya?”

She nodded slowly, hardly able to believe it herself. “Jon, I’m back.”

Arya had no idea what to say to him. So much to say. Jon came towards her and raised his hand. Seven years of being a fugitive and assassin made her flinch. It took every bit of self-control she had to restrain the instincts that screamed for her to break the hand reaching towards her. Then he ruffled her hair.

“Little Sister.”

With that, her resolve to stay stoic and formal disappeared and she threw herself into his embrace, crying. He held her close to him, squeezing her tight. Arya sobbed. “I missed you so much.”

*Gods, have I.* For so long, she’d longed to see his face and hear his voice again. To have him ruffle her hair, smile, and call her ‘Little Sister’ once more. *Maybe Sansa was right, maybe it doesn’t matter. Maybe just because Sansa has changed for him, it doesn’t mean I have to.* As soon as she heard him say those words, she felt some of the weight disappear. There was something, something about him greeting her which made it seem easier.

*But then, Jon always made it easier for me to accept hard things.* When they were children, her brother was a constant source of comfort and consolation. When Arya cried over being ugly, Jon was there to dry her tears. When Arya was angry and frustrated over the demands that she be a lady like Sansa, Jon offered his sympathies. When Arya railed against how women were treated as
inferiors, Jon listened and cared. When Arya was teased by the other girls or scolded by Septa Mordane, Jon made her feel like she truly had someone who accepted her as she was.

And it wasn’t like Jon ever made her problems go away. Arya would still always be shoved into dresses and ordered to put down weapons and go sew. The Septa still scolded her for failing to curtsey properly or not getting her stitches neat or some such thing. Jeyne Poole still called her Arya Horseface. Arya was still told she had to be like her sister while also being reminded nonstop about how much she failed at it. She never woke up one morning to discover that her face had become as pretty as Sansa’s. She still didn’t fit in with the other girls, nor was she accepted by the boys. Women didn’t suddenly start to gain more rights.

All of those things she hated about her life and the world she lived in remained. But talking to Jon always managed to improve her mood regardless. He didn’t give her solutions, he just understood and accepted her like no one else. He gave her enough comfort and consolation to allow her some sanity and happiness despite everything wrong with her world. He made the problems seem less awful.

That hasn’t changed. The two of them held each other for several minutes before breaking away. Endearments were uttered, both tried to hold back tears and failed. For a while, there was a descent into pure joy and relief at seeing one another. Arya couldn’t remember the last time she felt this happy. Her big brother was with her again at last. So they both put off questions for as long as they could.

Inevitably, though, it had to come up. So after a decent duration of basking in the joy of their reunion, they began to make inquiries.

Jon stroked her face. “How?”

“It’s a long story.” Arya sighed. She wasn’t sure she was ready to tell him everything. “Such a long one.”

Jon nodded, understanding like always. “I can appreciate that. But why are you here now?”

“You wanted Gendry to find Anais. He did.”

Her brother’s brow furrowed. “What?”

Arya assumed Anais’s voice. “Yes, Your Grace.”

He gaped. “So all this time…?”

She nodded. “I’ve been looking after Sansa for a while.”

“How long?”

“Since her arrest.”

“How?”

“Are you familiar with the Faceless Men?”

Jon stepped back even further. “I’ve heard the name. Arya… is that where you’ve been?”

“It’s not so much a matter where I’ve been. It’s where many people have been.” She noted the confused look on his face. She had to admit, she got a little satisfaction from this. For their entire
lives, it was always Jon who knew everything and had to explain it to her. But now her brother was the one at a loss. Arya just wished she had time to display her superior knowledge and explain. “It’s complicated. The point is, I need this kept secret. The world isn’t exactly a safe place for Arya Stark at the moment. I’ve broken with the House of Black and White. They sent Needle back to me as a warning. It’s why I’ve been hiding.”

She saw the excitement on his face dampen considerably.

“Have they harmed you?”

“Not yet. But they could try. I have no intention of divulging any of their secrets, and I’ve yet to give any sign that I have any. However…” She looked at the ground nervously. “I may eventually need some support on that front. But not now. Now we discover who is hurting our sister.”


There was an uncomfortable pause. So much was unsaid. Their eyes met, and they came to a silent agreement to leave it that way for now. There was a warmth between them at the moment that could easily be ruined if they delved too deeply into that particular issue.

However, collaborating on investigating the threat to Sansa, focusing on working together to solve a crisis would do the opposite. They’d been thick as thieves as children, after all. Putting their heads together on this like old times was exactly the sort of thing that would make them both feel good about seeing each other.

And frankly, Sansa’s poisoning was a rather pressing issue. Talk immediately went to investigating.

Her brother glanced at the ground. “I believe it is Roslin Frey.”

Arya nodded. “A definite possibility. She has a motive, she has the means. Did you test the doll’s hair against hers?”

“Yes. Negative.”

Arya frowned, disappointed. “Well, then it’s not her.”

“Not necessarily. She has a little brown-haired daughter with green eyes.”

Arya’s eyes widened. “Truly?”

“I heard it from Edmure Tully himself. He doesn’t realize the implication of such a thing, of course. His mother had green eyes. But I believe…”

“A bastard?” Gendry asked, speaking up for the first time in several minutes. “But then… They couldn’t really be that stupid, could they?”

Arya began pacing back and forth. “Marq Piper probably could. Or Roslin. I don’t know much about her. It could be simply that Edmure is enough of an idiot for them to get away with this. But we need to look into the nobles from the Vale as well.”

“Barristan is doing that. Representatives from four different houses are being summoned to court,” Jon informed her.

“Could we have the girls brought to court?”

“I already have it arranged. Roslin doesn’t know. I’ve convinced Lord Edmure to bring his wife the
surprise comfort of a visit from their daughters.

Arya smiled at her brother. “Excellent work, Jon.”

“I’ve been known to have my brief moments of competence.” He kept staring at her. “I can’t believe it’s really you.”

“Neither can I, really.”

“I wish you hadn’t murdered Piper. You could have delivered him to me to question.”

She rolled her eyes. “You were hunting me down and I was already several steps ahead of you. I didn’t have the resources or access to the palace that would have allowed me to stage enough of a set up to both deliver him to you and provide grounds for suspicion in time. You have to follow a code that I’m exempt from. I could get the information from him far more quickly. I got everything from him that he was ever going to divulge, and I didn’t want to risk him getting close to Sansa again. I mean, you allowed him access to the case, for pity’s sake.”

There was an awkward pause.

“And besides, he deserved it,” Arya finally added.

Jon frowned. “You don’t know that you got everything.”

“I got more than you would have. Piper was my uncle’s best friend. If he’d been questioned by you, there was no way Uncle Edmure would have allowed you to go far enough to get the information you needed.”

Jon grunted. He sounded like he doubted this, but instead of arguing the point further, he merely conceded that what was done was done. “I don’t know if I can keep your presence here a secret from my aunt.”

Arya’s eyes narrowed. She’d taken a great risk in coming here and revealing herself to him already. “Would you at least be willing to try?”

“I’m always willing to try for you, Arya, if that’s what you want. But I don’t think I would be successful, considering how closely watched the entire palace is. And if I harbor you and she finds out, it could prove disastrous. I think everyone would be better off if Daenerys at least knows who you are. If it counts for anything, I do trust her. I’m sure she’d be willing to keep your identity a secret for my sake, and with her help, we could fashion a new identity for you that would allow you to continue to assist in the investigation.”

“I killed Marq Piper, I doubt she’ll want me in her court.” And she might probe me for secrets on the House of Black and White. I’ve already betrayed them enough.

“You killed a murderer. Or, an attempted one, anyways. I’m sure she’ll understand.”

“The queen wouldn’t hurt you,” Gendry agreed. “She’d want you protected for Jon.”

“And for the North.”

Arya looked up, shocked.

“You’re alive, meaning the North has an heiress presumptive should anything happen to Sansa,” Jon said. “If Sansa dies, Daenerys needs you to prevent a war for Northern Regency.”
The young woman stepped back, shocked by this declaration. Jon wasn’t speaking like the Jon she knew. He was speaking almost like Sansa. “I’ll not be someone’s cheap political prisoner.”

“I’m not asking you to be a prisoner. I’m asking you to come forward, be who you are, and help your family.” Jon sighed and rubbed his temple. “No one is saying you have to be a prisoner except you. You wish to help? Then stay.”

Arya calmed herself. “Fine, but only if you can promise me that I don’t have to divulge anything about the Faceless Men.”

“I promise.”

She shifted uncomfortably. This wasn’t what she expected Jon to be like, or what she expected of their reunion. She gazed into her brother’s eyes. He’d changed. And not just over the years. Even in the last couple of weeks, alterations took place. His eyes seemed darker, more haunted. Just beneath his solemn gaze, a flame seemed to burn.

Arya had no desire to argue the point further. She wanted them to go out and kill their enemies together, like she’d always dreamed. Something told her that Jon possessed similar interests now.

Jon came close and put a hand on her shoulder. “I have so many questions right now, Little Sister. Now is not the time for more questions. Now is the time for the two of us to burn our enemies.”

That wasn’t something she expected to hear from Jon. The calm, composed brother she once knew would never say something with quite that level of passion or poetry. He’d never been one for grand declarations, preferring to let actions speak for him when he was in a poor mood. But it was definitely something that delighted her.

Jon may still see me as his little sister, but he doesn’t still see me as a child. I’m his comrade in arms now. He’s not going to tease me, he’s not going to just hug me and pat me on the head. He is done pretending that he has to tell me which end to use. We’re done sitting on the practice yard fence and making fun of Theon Greyjoy’s jewelry. We’re done climbing trees. Now we fight together. We kill together. Like Father and Robert Baratheon. Arya nodded and grinned.

Let him make love and create life with Sansa. He’s going to make war and end lives with me. “We’ll rip them apart.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Daenerys:

Two hours of listening to Missandei recite edict drafts. Three hours answering letters from overseas. An hour and a half listening to Arther Butterwell drone on about court accounts. Three more hours taking petitions in the throne room. Daenerys stretched out onto the massage table in her bechamber, trying to make herself relax. Nearby, Nani, the eldest of her attendants newly arrived from Meereen, plucked at a harp. Missandei read some Valyrian poetry now. The hands of a third maid, Zora, began rubbing at her shoulders. Another hour of Missandei teaching me the Old Tongue.

She’d learned the language for the sake of the new Free Folk constituency in Westeros. A few years ago, all of those people were kept Beyond the Wall by the Night’s Watch. Then came the rise of the Night’s King and the King Beyond the Wall and the great migration. In principle, Daenerys was glad of it. The idea of confining thousands to a frozen wasteland because of where they were born went against her most cherished ideals. And Daenerys had always been passionate about bringing people together. She had the multicultural empire to prove it.
But with the Free Folk came a whole other group of people to deal with, an entirely new culture to integrate, new issues, and new complaints. And a new language to learn. The majority of the wildlings spoke only the Old Tongue.

Missandei did because Missandei learned languages as a hobby. During their time fighting the Night’s King beyond the Wall, her herald and translator picked it up. It took her all of a few moons to become fluent.

There were too many of the Folk for Daenerys not to learn. Mance Rayder had united tribes who had spent centuries tearing each other apart. At the most modest estimate, his followers numbered a hundred thousand. Part of his success with them came from learning their tongue and respecting their customs.

This sort of ingenuity made his fate even more tragic. The once brilliant leader was now a babbling lunatic fostered in the Gift. Knowing what she did of his history, Daenerys often wished the man still had his sanity so he could serve as the Free Folk’s government representative.

The relationship the Free Folk had with the rest of Westeros was tenuous. After Daenerys destroyed the Night’s King, an agreement was made: anyone who wished to immigrate south of the Wall could, provided they acknowledged House Targaryen as their sovereigns. They could elect their own Lords and the Gift, the Bolton lands, and the Karstark/Thenn lands were given as official settlements. Indeed, use of the Bolton and Gift territories were surrendered by Sansa as a gesture of her loyalty to House Targaryen long before Daenerys ever met her.

Instead of Mance Rayder, Daenerys had Sigorn of House Thenn, Magna Val, and Tormund Giantsbane. None of them were awful people, but they didn’t get along with one another easily and the Lords of the North weren’t too happy about them either.

Normally, Jon and Sansa handled many of the matters concerning the North and/or Free Folk. But, for obvious reasons, they weren’t able to devote as much time or attention to these affairs recently. Before long, it became clear to Dany that she’d neglected this section of her constituency. One of the ways she intended to rectify it was by learning their language.

The Old Tongue was harsh, like Dothraki. But unlike Dothraki, which was guttural and complicated, the Old Tongue was clanging and simplistic. So many of the words were practically indistinguishable from each other. Learning to tell the “Duhs” from the “Wuhs” and the “Wags” from the “Mags” was dull and maddening. With Dothraki, there were at least all these unique and multi-faceted consonant sounds and intricate syllables that made each word a fun little puzzle. It actually sounded like a language. To Daenerys, the Old Tongue sounded like a bunch of noise. If this is the Old Tongue, it’s no wonder we created so many new ones.

And it really did hurt her ears to hear it. Daenerys was no fool. She was fluent in the Common Tongue, Braavosi, Dothraki, and two different dialects of Valyrian. She even knew a little Ghiscari. But even an hour of hearing and trying to speak the Old Tongue made her head hurt.

Everything made her head hurt these days, really. The castle was in lock down to make sure whoever was behind poisoning Lady Stark wouldn’t escape and to make sure everyone was safe. It seemed everyone at court had a complaint to make regarding the situation.

The Northern Lords were constantly looking for new reasons to accuse the royal family of foul play and justify new demands. The Tullys were furious over being suspected. The Vale Lords had similar complaints, and were also impatient about a new Lord of the Eyrie being officially declared. The Martells, while being helpful with the investigation, were acting overly meddlesome regarding the betrothal between Jon and Sansa and they were antagonizing the Tyrells. House Tyrell was offended
that the Dornish were allowed to assist in the investigation and they weren’t, and they also considered the court lockdown a threat to commerce.

Even houses that weren’t at court were causing trouble. The Free Folk Houses, for instance, were angry that their chief links to court, Jon and Sansa, weren’t as engaged in their affairs lately. Magna Val wrote that she understood Lady Stark being ill, but didn’t understand why Prince Jon hadn’t written to her, Magnor Thenn, or Giantsbane in over a sennight.

Even the Iron Islanders had apparently chosen this time to make things more complicated. Their complaints concerned the Small Council, or what passed for it these days.

When Daenerys took King’s Landing, she’d had to do a complete overhaul of the government to clean out so much of the rubbish and corruption the Lannisters left in their wake. The Houses were in pieces, and so was the entire infrastructure of Westeros. On top of that, Daenerys hadn’t known these people at all. At the time, she didn’t even trust Jon much, so the assembling of the Small Council was still in progress.

As it now stood, the council officially consisted of Daenerys as Queen, Jon as unofficial Hand, Ser Barristan as Lord Commander of the King’s Guard/Lord General, Missandei as Mistress of Letters, Merys as Grand Maester, Sansa as advisor, and Arther Butterwell as Master of Coin. There was also an associate of the late Lord Varys, Chistan Waters, who served as Master of Whispers, but no one trusted him much. Every post was unofficial, temporary, and rather vague aside from Daenerys, Ser Barristan and Lord Butterwell, and the construction of the council was of great political importance.

As of now they had no Master of Ships, no official Master of Laws (Missandei, Sansa, and Ser Barristan tended to handle those matters between them), no official Hand, and no Master of Whispers they were comfortable with. New posts to handle the sheer scope of the empire had to be added to the standard line-up as well. And Daenerys had worked tirelessly with the council she already had to try and fill the spots.

Several weeks ago, the crown sent a missive to Pyke requesting that Rodrick Harlaw come to court to serve as Master of Ships. His liege lady and niece, Asha Greyjoy, wrote back that she couldn’t spare her uncle. She instead nominated another uncle, Victarion Greyjoy, for the post. Ser Barristan, Merys, and Jon were all for it, but Daenerys had misgivings which were strongly supported by Sansa and Butterwell. Barristan knew of Victarion’s piety and faith, and spoke highly of his experience. “Whatever god he worships, he worships well, and he reportedly lives a selfless life of piety. He’s been commanding ships for decades on end, and no one knows the sea like a Greyjoy.”

Merys agreed. But Daenerys had prior experience with the man and how he’d come to Essos intending to woo her while pretending he meant to represent his brother. Sansa considered the man an idiot and brought up how he wore full armor on a ship to prove his faith to his drowned god. Ser Barristan replied that it hadn’t hurt him yet.

“It would be an issue if he were to sink. But he hasn’t yet. Whatever you think of his beliefs, the man knows ships.”

Sansa and Butterwell argued that Lady Greyjoy only wanted him to serve in order to get him out of Pyke.

And that did seem to be at least somewhat true, as now Lady Greyjoy was writing further messages to court, demanding an answer as to why she hadn’t gotten an answer about her uncle and the council post. “Is House Greyjoy to be looked down upon even further? We are not the sort who are easily ignored.”
All this was going on, and a chunk of Daenerys’s council was missing. Jon was only half with her, emotionally compromised and preoccupied by his lover’s poisoning. Sansa was completely incapacitated. Ser Barristan had to not only investigate the assassination attempt, but also maintain further security on the even more locked down court.

The only solace Daenerys had was the knowledge that her Unsullied were due to arrive soon. She sighed. She missed Jorah, long dead. He’d at least provide her council and comfort.

She missed being loved like that. Daenerys knew she had love, truly she did. Missandei’s devotion was unending, the two were joined at the hip. Her herald was the sister Daenerys never had.

Ser Barristan certainly loved her, but Daenerys suspected a great deal of his love and devotion had as much or more to do with his sense of duty and honor than it did with her. Barristan would kill and die for her, but she doubted he understood her on an intimate level.

When it came to her nephew, well, Daenerys adored Jon. And she knew he cared for her as well. There was mutual admiration, respect, and affection between them. If Missandei was the sister Daenerys never had, then Jon was the brother she should have had. But their relationship was new and Daenerys suspected her nephew was at least a little afraid of her.

Others she believed to love her still lived. But Grey Worm, Daario, Irri, Jhiqui, Rakharo--- they were all across the Narrow Sea, helping to oversee her domains.

Jorah… Jorah was not only one of the few who knew her before she was Mother of Dragons, but he’d been the only one to truly understand who she’d once been and the importance of the Iron Throne. He knew where she came from, where she’d been, and where she wished to go on a level beyond anyone else Daenerys ever knew.

His betrayal still cut like a knife. Despite that, she knew he’d loved her deeply. Not just as a queen, liberator, or symbol like the others, but as a person. He was the first to believe in her. These days, everyone knew who and what she was because of her conquests and dragons and wealth. But Jorah saw what she was before any of it.

Even her dear Sun and Stars, he didn’t always understand her on that level. Even when he’d relented and became determined to win the Iron Throne, it was for their son, not her. She doubted it ever occurred to Drogo that the Stallion that Mounts the World might in fact be a mare. The man had never been gentle, either. He’d raped and pillaged without the slightest hesitance.

She yearned for Drogo constantly, but she knew if he were here, he’d be a disaster. Daenerys wanted so badly to avoid becoming a tyrant. She couldn’t imagine properly reconciling the ways of her husband with that of this court, these people. The nobles of Westeros already had trouble accepting her. She couldn’t imagine the level of revolts that would take place if Drogo were around.

She missed the comfort of many of her loved ones. Zora had skilled hands, but she was no Irri. There wasn’t that touch of intimacy there.

Regardless, I need to relax. I’ll go mad otherwise. Jon’s already losing it. We need at least one Targaryen keeping their sanity right now. Just forget the court for a moment. You’re surrounded by Dothraki girls now. Pretend you’re back in Drogo’s palace in Vaes Dothrak, just enjoying a nice, soothing evening after weeks of riding. You’re fine. The Kings’ chambers have red doors. There’s nothing and no one to trouble you. She groaned as Zora moved her way down her back, inhaling the jasmine incense burning nearby.

What I really need is a new paramour. That Daemon Sand is handsome, and they say the Dornish
are passionate. Hell, maybe I should look into that pretty steward of Jon’s. If he likes girls at all. Or
that knight Jon should like but doesn’t. Even if Ser Gendry is the son of the Usurper, he never knew
the man. Maybe it would ease my nephew’s mind if he knew there was someone to distract the
bastard from Sansa. It might be fun making someone of Baratheon blood scream my name. I could
justify it in the name of family vengeance. Besides, there has to be some reason they call him The
Bull. Gods, I miss Daario. If I’m honestly considering taking Robert Baratheon’s bastard to bed,
then I really must be desperate for---

This inner monologue was interrupted by a harsh pounding on the door. Daenerys wanted to cry
then. For the love of the Old Gods and the New…

A nervous looking knight came in, immediately blushing and looking away when he saw Daenerys’s
naked state.

Well, if it isn’t the Herald of All That is Awkward. “What is it, Ser Podrick?”

“I-it’s P-p-p-prince J-J-Jon, Y-y-y-your Grace,” said Ser Podrick, looking determinedly at the floor.
“H-he s-s-says he has an ur-urgent m-m-m-matter to d-discuss with y-you.”

Daenerys sat up at once, letting the thin blanket that covered her naked form fall.

Gods, Sansa… If she had to watch her nephew mourn, several people were going to die. Were the Martells trying to kill her after all?

She called for her robe and Nani hurried over, draping her in the violet silk. Missandei placed her
slippers on her feet. Daenerys hurried to her solar to find her nephew already standing in the middle
of the room, looking nervous. A few feet behind him was The Bull, looking nervous. To Jon’s right
was a pretty young woman with dark brown hair dressed in riding leathers. All three immediately
bowed.

To her relief, Jon didn’t look like his entire world had just ended. But before Daenerys could calm
herself, he spoke.

“Your Grace, pardon the interruption, but I felt it necessary that I make this introduction as soon as
possible,” he said, rising up.

“Oh?” Daenerys asked, examining the young woman curiously. She reminded the Dragon Queen of
someone.

“Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, I would like you to meet Arya of House Stark. My
sister.”

Daenerys’s eyes flashed. Not possible. Is it? “Arya Stark” just suddenly appearing at court when
her older sister’s life is threatened? Jon couldn’t be this stupid, could he? A million other thoughts
raced through her head. Her eyes flashed. She reached out to take the young woman by the chin and
examine her face. Jon’s supposed sister jumped back, grabbing Daenerys’s wrist in a steel grip.

“No! Arya!”

Jon, Podrick, the Bull and Dany’s handmaidens all charged forward. “Arya” released Daenerys at
once, making hurried apologies, her eyes wide as she was restrained by Zora and Podrick.

Daenerys rubbed her reddened wrist gingerly, marveling at the strength. That will leave a bruise.
With that strength, the only way Zora and Ser Podrick can be holding her back is if she’s letting
them. But this didn’t reassure Dany much. The Dragon Queen gritted her teeth and glared at Jon.
Chapter Summary

Jon receives good news but struggles with difficult decisions. An arrest is made. Arya sees Sansa.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bluecichlid for beta-ing!!!

This chapter was a rough one. I did some MAJOR edits, and I fixed a lot that was wrong. I hope you guys enjoy this, though.

Chapter Twenty-two: Mama is Gonna Keep Baby Cozy and Warm

Jon:

He watched with bated breath as Sansa sat next to her dressing table, head back, eyes open, surrounded by Merys and two Sand Snakes. Merys held Sansa’s right eye open. Sarella Sand, the famous Sphinx who’d technically completed a Maester’s chain but had never been allowed to claim it swabbed her eye carefully and handed the small patch of silk to her half-sister.

Tyene quickly placed the swab in one of the multiple glass dishes she had arranged on the dressing table, each filled with a different color liquid. The green chemical she placed the swab in fizzled slightly upon contact. Tyene smiled.

“It’s fair to say you’re almost completely purged.”

Jon didn’t want to speak too soon. He allowed Sansa to ask the all-important question. “So I’m definitely going to live?”

“I can’t be entirely certain. While the poison is all but gone, you’re still very, very weak. Unless you were to become re-infected with something else, or endure any great injury or shock, you should be fine. All you need to do is maintain a safe, clean, calm environment while you regain your strength, and you should be fine,” Sarella replied.

Jon’s whole being seemed to grow high off of the relief this news brought. There was only one problem. “You say no great shocks?”

“None.”

Jon nodded, trying to hide some of his disappointment. Sorry, Little Sister. You’re going to have to remain under guard for a while. After the altercation with Daenerys, the queen was fairly sure that Arya had to be a fraud. “She wouldn’t be the first false Arya, Jon!” Daenerys had cried out.

“There’s something not right about this. Too much time has passed, and she only shows up now that Arya would be the prime candidate to claim Winterfell? No. It’s a trick.” Arya was currently held in
a small set of apartments in the royal wing under heavy guard. His aunt insisted that she wouldn’t believe Arya to be Arya until Sansa was convinced as well. Jon, for his part, was furious with his aunt for this. But it seemed revealing their sister’s identity to her would have to wait. Still… “How long will it take for her to grow strong again?”

Sarella’s eyes narrowed. “If we could speak in the solar, My Prince?”

He nodded and left with her. Once they were separate from the others, Sarella turned her snake eyes upon him. “You cannot couple with her for at least a tennight.”

Jon frowned. While this was useful information, he resented the assumption that such a matter was his first priority. “That was not what I meant.”

“Sure.”

He glared. “It truly wasn’t, Mistress Sarella. Believe it or not, I have interests regarding my betrothed that involve activity outside the bedchamber.”

“Yes, we all know about the council room.”

Jon glared even harder. “My Lady Sansa has far-reaching responsibilities, as you very well know. She’s extremely devoted to overseeing the wellbeing of her people in the North. There are a number of affairs she sees to regularly, some of which involve you and the land you hail from. As hard as it might be for you to understand, I do in fact take a great deal of interest in my lady’s political career. It is my duty not only as her future husband, but also as Prince of the Seven Realms, one of which happens to be the realm she’s Warden of. So if you would please stop treating me like an over-eager green boy, I’d very much appreciate it.”

Sarella gaped. “Very well, what were you referring to?”

“A number of matters. You say she cannot be under too much pressure. It’s a hard thing to avoid when one is a high-powered state official. I assure you that Lady Stark will want to go back to work as soon as possible, I want to know when it will be safe for her to do so.” Also, I need to know when it will be safe to tell her that our sister is still alive. And has been masquerading as her lady’s maid for many a moon. That will undoubtedly prove quite a shock.

But no one could know about that yet. So Jon added something different.

“Also, if the perpetrator of these vile acts against her prove to be… unexpected, I wouldn’t want to risk her life revealing our poisoner’s identity to her.”

“If the news comes, then wait a sennight to tell her. By then her system should be stable enough.”

Jon made a mental note to get second and third opinions for Merys and Sam. He nodded and returned to the bedchamber. He helped Sansa up from her chair and carried her to bed, smiling at her. Though her skin was pale and yellowed, though her hair was thin and sweat-tinged, she never looked more lovely to him. She’s going to live. She’s going to be fine.

Merys gave him a full report that lined up Sarella’s perfectly. Tyene collected her instruments and samples, and the others departed. Once they were gone, Jon crawled into bed with her, pulling her into his lap. Sansa wrapped her arms around his neck and rested against him.

“What’s going to be fine.”

“Do we know who it is yet?” she asked.

“I have a very strong suspicion in one area. We just need to confirm a few things before we begin
making arrests.” The Tully sisters were due to arrive in three days.

“Please tell me it’s not Anya or Randa.”

“I don’t think it is.” Jon wouldn’t be able to stand it if he were wrong. *If it’s one of them, Sansa’s heart will break, I know it. Please let it be Roslin. Please let me be right.*

He stroked her hair. She felt like a large ragdoll in his arms. Much of that lush, warm flesh he’d taken comfort in was gone after only a few weeks. But at least the “ghosts”, as Sansa called them, were gone. Arya told him of a chilling encounter she’d had with Sansa where his betrothed mistook Arya for a hallucination and envisioned Petyr Baelish there with them.

“She insisted on wiping his blood off of Needle with her night dress. I found it hard to play along at that point,” Arya informed him from her fancy cell as she ate her lunch.

Jon was currently keeping Needle in his quarters. Arya wasn’t allowed weapons of any kind. She’d even been forced to put on a lady’s kirtle. Not that it stopped her from getting out, as it were. Her warging skills now far surpassed Jon. Often, when he visited her, he found her eyes white and her mind gone. She used a number of animals to watch the Tullys. Lady Roslin had a small dog, Queenie, that Arya enjoyed warging into. Her aunt had already been overheard complaining about the creature biting her.

Jon didn’t like inhabiting the minds of animals that were not Ghost. He found it more difficult to return to himself when he did. Arya, however, after years of being without Nymeria, experienced no issues. Arya insisted the direwolf was still alive somewhere, but she wasn’t sure where. “We’ll see each other again someday, soon. I know it.”

Jon and Arya had spoken well into the night before he departed for Sansa’s chambers to sleep next to her. He’d almost told her then, but she’d been in a deep, peaceful slumber he didn’t dare disturb.

Two days passed since Arya returned, and now he knew for sure he’d have to wait even longer to tell her. It killed him, keeping this a secret and keeping Arya locked up. His sister had apologized profusely for her tussle with Daenerys, but it did little good. His aunt still suspected Arya to be a fake, despite Jon’s protests. “She wouldn’t be the first false Arya Stark. I want two family members to verify her, two who knew her. Lord Tully doesn’t count. If both you and Sansa say she’s real, then I’ll be willing to believe it.”

Even behind locked doors, Arya still proved a great aid to Jon. He knew that Roslin had no idea the children were coming. Arya had made a few visits to the Martell chambers as well. Both families suspected the other of being behind this.

Getting to the Vale contacts was trickier. Ser Barristan ordered that his “guests” be allowed no pets, no riding, no contact with animals whatsoever once they arrived at the keep. He’d cast Jon a warning look when he announced this order. The man was no fool. It became very clear. *You may investigate your end, Young Man. Leave me to mine.*

Jon was somewhat happy for it. After everything that took place, he’d have loathed being forced to question and investigate people like Anya Waynwood and Randa Royce. The Corbrays and Templetons were no issue. But Sansa’s friends? He didn’t want it to be them. Not after everything he’d witnessed.

*She doesn’t need another betrayal.* They were the Queensguard’s prime suspects. The Lord Commander even ordered a number of Vale Lords and ladies, including Anaya and Randa, to court. Jon felt it unnecessary.
But if Barristan was right, then either woman would find her end slow and painful. He’d have Rhaegal cook them slowly. But he knew that if it were one of those two women, it would only bring more pain to his betrothed. He doubted she’d be able to trust anyone again if it turned out to be Anya or Randa.

Sansa cried and shook when we killed Coldwater and Moore. How could she possibly stand to watch one of her oldest friends burn? Sansa had in fact made an interesting, heart-breaking request of Jon weeks ago, after the betrothal contract was signed. She’d wanted Anya Waynwood to be the one who delivered her at their wedding. “I’ve rather soured on Father figures. The only one I had worth anything to me died when I was twelve. Joffrey delivered me at my first wedding. Petyr delivered me at my second. Anya was like a mother to me. And I married her ward. Surely it can be arranged.”

He didn’t want to suspect them. He didn’t want to entertain the idea of them being candidates for dragon fire. He’d leave that to Barristan.

Not that investigating Roslin was entirely comfortable. The idea of using a young girl as evidence turned his stomach. I could end up destroying that child’s life if I’m right. He bore the girl no ill will whatsoever. The child was innocent. But he also knew that if Roslin was guilty, her possible bastard was the sure way to prove it. Lord Edmure adored his wife, and there was no way he’d sit back and let her be prosecuted unless there was iron-clad proof that Roslin was keeping secrets with Piper.

Jon would see to the girl’s welfare, if his suspicions proved correct. It would be the least he could do. But will it be enough? This girl will go from the daughter of one of the greatest houses in Westeros to the bastard progeny of adulterous criminals in one fell swoop. Her life will be torn apart. How will you live with yourself, Jon Snow?

He looked at Sansa’s sweet face. With her skin as it was, he could make out the small blue and red blood vessels on her eyelids and even her cheeks. She looked almost like a corpse. But she’s not a corpse. She’s going to be all right. He’d do anything for her. That doesn’t mean I’ll like it, though.

Whatever that can be done to protect the girl will be done, he insisted to himself. And I have to do this. Someone has not only threatened the woman I love, but they’ve threatened the stability of this kingdom. Still, building justice upon the tears of children… A family will be torn apart.

His family was torn apart, once. And he was only now starting to rebuild one. Someone had threatened that. Someone needed to pay. The problem was, whenever justice was taken, it was never the criminals and victims alone who seemed to be hurt.

If Roslin Frey Tully was behind the poison, then she’d not be the only one who would suffer. Her children would grow up motherless. Edmure would be publicly humiliated and shamed. Any legitimate children of Roslin’s would have black marks on their reputation. The boy, if he was a child of Edmure’s, would probably suffer the least, as he’d remain heir to Riverrun and be saved on that account, but his connection to an adulteress who tried to murder her good-niece would undoubtedly damage him in a number of ways. For the eldest girl, even though she was certainly Edmure’s, would suffer more. Her marriage prospects would sink thanks to her lineage, and there was no doubt her relationship with her father would suffer.

The youngest, though, would suffer the most. She’d be stripped of her name, identity, wealth, family, and legitimacy. She’d become a piece of evidence. She’d not only be a motherless bastard, but a motherless bastard girl. No banners. No swords. Just a life of being the testament to her mother’s crimes. She’d lose everything at age three.

But it wasn’t like others wouldn’t suffer if it was anyone else. If it turned out to be Anya… Jon
wasn’t sure what would happen.

The woman was a powerhouse in the Vale. And not even by virtue of her wealth. Indeed, House Waynwood was an old, powerful house, but not a rich one. Most of their money went to fostering various noble orphans and bastards. It was known in the Vale that if you were worried about your children becoming parentless, you sent them to Anya Waynwood.

Many people wondered why Anya Waynwood was named Harrold Harddyng’s guardian instead of Jon Arryn. She was more closely related to him, sure, but Harrold was Lord Arryn’s heir until his son Robin was born. The truth was, after Lady Lysa took over, the Eyrie became a less welcome place for other people’s children. So Ironoaks became the new, popular destination for children who required fostering.

Unlike various other opportunistic noble guardians, Lady Waynwood wasn’t going to steal from your family’s treasury or exploit your child’s wealth. She would not abuse or exploit her wards. She made sure every child in her care was educated, nourished, and well-attended. Indeed, many of the current lords and ladies of the Vale had spent time fostered by Lady Anya. She was a guardian in the same manner as Jon Arryn was before he married Lysa.

Many, many people looked to Lady Waynwood as a substitute mother/grandmother figure. Sansa was one. Others included Dara and Lycelle, Harry’s bastards. Mya Stone was another. If Lady Waynwood was the one who hurt Sansa, a number of children would lose their primary care-giver and countless hearts would be broken.

If Myranda Royce was arrested, that would be the ultimate end of that branch of House Royce. The Gates of the Moon would be without a clear Lord, and that would lead to further upheaval. Now that the Eyrie had no clear owner, the Gates were the center of the Vale’s government. Two of the biggest, most important strongholds in the east would be without caretakers, and fighting would break out over ownership of both.

Jon wasn’t entirely familiar with the politics surrounding the Templetons and Corbrays, but he was sure that more would suffer if they were involved.

Other options were the Tyrells, he supposed. He didn’t consider them major suspects. Unless, of course, they were really that desperate to make Margaery princess. But this seemed unlikely. For one thing, most of them were imprisoned when the poison was likely first administered, unless it was Garlan or Willas who engineered it. But still, how? What connections do they have to the Vale? And why then? There was no way anyone would have pegged Sansa for a future royal consort at the time. And then why court her? Unless it’s less to do with the betrothal and more to do with something else…

Jon glanced at his betrothed. “Sweetling…”

“Yes?” she asked, looking up at him.

“Do you… Do you know anything about the Tyrells? I mean, anything that could hurt them? If you do, you don’t have to tell me what it is. But if you have any information that they’d fear you divulging…”

“So they’re your prime suspects then?” she replied, her eyes wide.

“No, actually. But I was considering alternate options. So tell me, is there anything you know about them that could cause them to wish you harm?”
“Nothing that I can think of. Nothing that goes back far enough that would explain them trying to poison me when this all started. Everything I knew about them is public knowledge. I gave any and all secrets away at their trial. The only thing I knew of that could ever damage was their arrangements to have me marry Willas. But that wasn’t illegal, and the only people who would want to hurt them for it found out years ago and are gone now besides. Lady Olenna was already dead when I was arrested, so I didn’t have anything that could implicate any living Tyrell. And besides, I already told the court everything. Why continue to poison me afterwards after? They weren’t harmed by my testimony.”

But Sansa’s eyes narrowed. “Unless they intend to marry Willas or Margaery off to whoever would inherit Winterfell after me.”

Jon frowned. “Do you think they could have engineered a smokescreen?”

“I don’t know. Possibly. But just because it’s possible doesn’t mean it’s definite. Still… Look into their contacts. This could go beyond just one region. There are two marriageable Tyrells, after all. With Eddie and I gone, that left a plethora of marriageable heirs to both the Eyrie and Winterfell. By setting up the right betrothals, the Tyrells could have put themselves in power in two different regions. Or possibly more. If there were female heirs to Winterfell and the Eyrie, and you were a bachelor… Well, all they’d need to do is convince someone to take Loras and…”

“They’d have footholds in the Eyrie, the North, and in the royal family.” Jon sat up. “Sweetling, I’m going to go have a talk with Ser Barristan.”

Sansa moved so he could get up. “Alright, but don’t get too excited just yet. Just because such a thing is possible doesn’t mean it’s the truth. Tread carefully, Jon. Don’t make new enemies where you could use friends.”

Jon nodded. “I’ll be careful, Sweetling. In the meantime, you rest up. Get better.”

He bent over and gave her a kiss before running off.

Jon found Barristan in his quarters, going over the Stark genealogies at his desk. He sighed wearily when Jon entered and stood. “How may I help you, My Prince?”

Jon quickly explained his idea to the Lord Commander, whose eyes widened with every passing moment. Then he sat back down again. “I’ll get Waters to look in on their correspondence. If the Tyrells have been courting marriage prospects with House Moore or any other possible heir, we’ll have enough to investigate them openly. House Moore, though, did have a contract with the Coldwaters, remember? Lord Rhys’s eldest daughter was to marry Wallace.”

Jon frowned. “It doesn’t mean—-”

“No, it’s still very possible that the Tyrells might have pursued such a thing regardless. They better than anyone know that betrothals can be broken. And I wouldn’t put it past Moore to play such a game.” Barristan sighed. “And the slow-acting, multiple-dose nature of the poison does suggest that the person behind it could have been looking out for various options. It gave them plenty of time and means to end the plot if they managed to convince Sansa to marry Willas. It’s the sort of clever plot they’d engage in. But we have no evidence of anything yet. I’ll look into it, though.”

Jon smiled and nodded. “Thank you, Lord Commander, for listening.”

The old man nodded. “Anything else?”

“No, thank you. I will see you soon.” Jon departed, his smile falling from his face as he left. He
made perfect time to Arya’s current residence: a rather roomy and comfortable chamber. Two guards stood next to the bed, where Arya lay on her stomach, seemingly asleep. Jon told them to wait outside. Once they left, he turned his sister over and found, to his lack of surprise that her eyes were open and completely white. He called her name a couple of times, and a few seconds later, she was back. She sat up and smiled at him.

“I made Queenie snap at Roslin again. My dear aunt is going mad, by the way. She paces. She’s terrified. And she weeps for Piper.”

“There’s someone else I’d like you to look into,” Jon told her. “Is there any way you might gain access to the Tyrells? There’s a possibility they could be involved.”

“Do they have any pets?”
Jon frowned. “I’m not sure. I could look into it.”

His sister rubbed her head. “If not, I could try mice. Is Sansa going to identify me soon?”

Jon bit his lip. “I was told that right now, she’s in no condition to handle serious shock. Her health—”

Arya sighed. “No, no… I understand. It’s frustrating, though. Still, I suppose I got myself into this mess, didn’t I?”

“I could talk to Daenerys again.”

“She thinks your mind is addled. It wouldn’t do any good. How soon until Sansa’s strong enough?”

“A few days.”

“Well then, I’ll spend those few days as one animal or another.” Arya groaned. “This situation is ridiculous.”

“Yes,” replied Jon, “It truly is.”

Five days later, there was no going back. Searches of Piper’s quarters at Maidenpool and Riverrun uncovered stashes of letters between Roslin and Piper. Several were in code, and once transcribed, Lynette Tully was clearly claimed as Ser Marq’s bastard. The child’s hair tested positive as the hair on the doll. The girl had Piper’s eyes.

Jon marched down the halls of the red keep, Ser Barristan by his side and guards flanking them. The results had just come in, and Jon couldn’t waste any more time. The Tullys were already getting nervous, and there was no doubt in his mind that Roslin was starting to suspect. According to Arya, the arrival of her girls had raised some red flags. They had to work quickly.

Jon took a deep breath before he knocked upon the Tully’s door. A page in the Riverrun livery answered, the boy’s eyes widening when he saw the collection of guards accompanying the prince.

“Y-your Grace?”

“Bring the Tullys to their solar.” Ser Barristan, standing by Jon’s side, ordered. The party charged in. The page hurried to the Tullys’ inner chambers.

“My Lord! My Lady! Urgent business!”
Jon could hear Lord Edmure barking out a protest. Frowning, he motioned for the guards to enter the family's inner sanctum. There was more shouting as Lord Edmure and Lady Roslin were dragged out into the solar.

“What is the meaning of this?” Edmure demanded, red-faced. Roslin looked angry and petrified.

“Lord Edmure, go fetch your youngest, Lynette,” Ser Barristan ordered.

“Lyne— You can’t possibly expect me to bring my little girl to you like a common criminal!”

“We can have one of our men do it instead, if you wish,” the Lord Commander replied.

Edmure cursed and went back to the inner chambers, Podrick following him. Jon and Barristan turned to Lady Roslin, who seemed to be shrinking under her heavy silks.

Jon glared at the woman, loathing every inch of her. He hated her for what she’d done to Sansa. He hated her for what her family had done to his. He hated her for betraying her family. He hated her for endangering her child. He hated her for making him drag a little girl from her family’s chambers.

Jon let Barristan speak.

“Roslin Frey Tully, Lady of Riverrun, by order of Their Graces Queen Daenerys Stormborn and Prince Jon of House Targaryen, you are under arrest for conspiracy to murder Sansa Hardyng Stark, Lady of Winterfell and the Eyrie and Warden of the North, adultery, and fraud.”

Roslin was dragged away.

“YOU CAN’T DO THIS TO ME! I’M ROSLIN FREY TULLY, LADY OF RIVERRUN! MY HUSBAND IS LORD PARAMOUNT OF THE TRIDENT! I AM THE WIFE OF A HIGH LORD! I AM MOTHER TO THE NEXT LORD OF THE RIVERLANDS! YOU CAN’T! YOU CAN’T!”

Her cries died away and were quickly replaced Lynette Tully’s approaching ones, as Edmure carried his daughter to the solar. A teary-eyed, curly-topped little girl appeared, clutching Edmure’s neck. Jon felt his heart break. It was undeniable though. Brown curls. Green eyes he’d seen on a man now dead.

Jon didn’t want to be here, but he knew he had to be. He was the one who was responsible for this arrest. Honor dictated that he at least look the child he was dooming in the eye when he did it.

“Tell me now, what is happening?” Edmure demanded. “Where is Roslin?”

Jon looked at the man, saying nothing. His stomach twisted as Edmure put it together.

“No…” Edmure cried out, “It’s not true. There’s some mistake… My wife… She’d never…

Tears built up in his Tully blue eyes.

Hating himself, Jon stepped towards the Lord of Riverrun. “Lord Edmure, I’m afraid we’re going to have to take Lynette as well.”

Edmure pulled back as his daughter screamed. “No, you can’t do that. She’s only three! She’s innocent. You can’t arrest a three year old.”

“She’s not under arrest, she won’t be taken to a cell. But she needs to be put under royal custody.”

“No, you can’t do this! Why?”
Jon sighed and pulled from his pocket the doll they’d found on Marq Piper. “Lady Lynette, do you recognize this?”

The child looked at the toy, horrified. “NOOOO! WHAT DID YOU DO TO LITTLE LYNNIE?”

_Little Lynnie._ Jon kept his face impassive. “This is yours, then?”

“No! Not anymore! She belongs to Uncle Marq now! I gave her to him when he left home.”

Edmure’s eyes narrowed. “Lynette, why would you—-“

“Because he’s Mama’s friend and he loves me!”

Edmure froze then. Jon watched as the realization slowly descended upon the Lord of Riverrun. The man started gasping.

“No…” He choked out. “Please… No…”

“I’m sorry, Lord Edmure. We can show you the evidence, if you wish. You may visit Lynette, even stay with her. I assure you, we will keep her safe and comfortable. She’s in no danger. But she must come with us.”

Edmure started to sway. He lost his grip on the child. Jon grabbed her then. She kicked and screamed, beating her tiny fists against his chest. Loathing himself, Jon secured her arms and pulled her tightly to him. “I’m sorry, Sweet Girl.”

The little girl continued to scream and cry. Jon sighed. “Ser Barristan, let’s relocate all the Tullys to the royal wing and keep them under guard there. We can bring Lord Edmure over once he’s woken.”

“What about the sister?”

“Go ask her, but I’d rather we didn’t.” Jon didn’t feel like traumatizing more children than he had to at that moment. Barristan hurried away as Jon tried to soothe the crying Lynette. The knight quickly returned.

“She won’t come out from under her bed.”

“We can bring her when her father wakes, then. Have the septa come, though.”

He didn’t want to take Lynette away. He knew that was just going to make this more traumatic. But they couldn’t trust the little bastard alone with Edmure. The man could try to escape with her. Or even harm her once the reality of the situation fully set in. The little girl simply wasn’t safe out of royal custody.

“Lynette….”

“Lady Lynette!” The child replied breathlessly. “My Mama told me I’m the daughter of a high house. I’m a lady! She also told me you’re a bastard!”

Jon ignored the irony of this. “Lady Lynette, I’m sorry for this. We’re going to take care of you and your daddy, I promise. But you have to come with us, alright? No one is going to hurt you. If you like, we can take some of your things with us.”

“Where are we going?” she cried out, afraid.
“We’re going to some rooms in the royal wing. There waiting for you is a septa and a maid and a nice, warm bed. And lots of guards to keep you safe. Your father and sister can join you in the morning. You’ll see them then.”

“But what about Mama?”

“Your mother… your mother did a bad thing. She needs to go away for a while.”

The child sniffed and began to cry quietly. Jon felt gutted. “Come on, Sweet Lady.”

He had no idea what to say to her, how to comfort her. She asked for her doll in a blue dress, her blanket, and her stuffed bunny. Jon had a guard fetch the items and then brought the little girl to the royal wing, delivering her to the princess chamber he’d arranged to shelter her in. Loathing himself, he hurried away to Sansa’s rooms and threw himself into her bed.

His lover woke at once. “Jon… Are you… are you alright?”

Jon stared at the mural of the Wall. “I just did something awful. I separated a child from its mother… Again.”

She gasped. Sansa knew about Gilly, Little Sam, and Mance Rayder’s son. He’d told her everything about what took place at the Wall. But even on the night he’d told her of it, he’d noted a wounded look in her eyes when she’d learned that he’d forced a mother to say farewell to her son. She’d understood his reasons, but it had been there… that glimmer of pain.

“Did you… did you have good reason?”

Jon shivered. It was five days from when Sarella Sand told him to wait a sennight to divulge any shocking news. He noted this. “I had good reason, Sansa. I did. But I’m not sure that makes it alright. There’s a little girl frightened and alone and motherless now. I ordered her mother taken from her.”

Is this what being a ruler is? Tearing children from the bosoms of their mothers? This time, Jon was the one who threw up.

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Sansa:

The young woman stood by her bed quietly. Sansa looked her up and down, taking in every detail. The messy dark hair. The worn out and stained riding leathers. The long, angular face. The dark grey eyes.

Then she looked over at Nathen Cerwyn, Jon’s homely squire and the current captain of her guard. “Are you sure I’m not just having visions again?”

“Yes, My Lady.” Cerwyn responded.

“And you say she attacked the queen?”

“Well, she grabbed the queen’s wrist and bruised it.”

“She was grabbing for me! I didn’t mean to! It’s a reflex!”

“Nathen, tell the queen that this is definitely my sister. Arya never could make it long as a member of the court without attacking a member of the royal family.”
Arya gave a nervous smile, one Sansa wished she could return. She wanted to embrace her sister, rejoice in their reunion, squeal and jump up and down. But she was too weak, too exhausted. And this incident with Daenerys just created a new problem for her.

She called Ghost to jump on her bed, and winced as she felt the animal’s weight descend on the furniture. “Lord Nathen, you may go and tell her. I have my prince’s wolf to protect me.”

He withdrew reluctantly, leaving the two sisters alone. Sansa stared for several seconds, hardly able to believe it. As if that weren’t enough, her sister proceeded to hurry over, give an awkward little curtsey, then kiss her sweetly on both cheeks. “I’m sorry I caused trouble, Sansa. I beg your pardon.”

*Maybe this isn’t Arya, then.* Sansa’s mouth opened in surprise. “What are you doing?”

“I’m kissing you and begging your pardons like a lady. I always felt I should, if we ever saw each other again. Don’t you like it?”

Sansa snorted. “Why didn’t you do it last time?”

Arya withdrew, looking surprised. “You mean you---“

*Of course I know. Now. Petyr wasn’t real, but you were, weren’t you? Why did you play along?”*

“I heard about your symptoms. I didn’t want to provide too much of a shock.”

Sansa felt genuinely touched by this. Never before had she witnessed her sister act so thoughtful, so considerate of her. *Kissing me like a lady and playing along with my delusions. She’s changed.* Sansa looked deep in her sister’s eyes and noted a haunted coldness to them. *Though I doubt all those changes are for the better.*

Despite this observation, Sansa moved over, patting the space in bed beside her. Arya hesitated before taking a seat and speaking again.

“It’s not too much of a shock, seeing me again, is it? I mean, knowing that I’m real this time?”

“I’ll admit it’s rather jarring. But I think since this one is more than welcome, I can manage it.” Sansa rubbed her temple. All sorts of revelations were made today. Jon came in and told her Roslin Tully was her poisoner. He’d told her everything about the case, finally divulging the detail of the child-mother separation that plagued him. It was a bit of a relief, knowing these things, but definitely a shock as well. She’d wanted at once to have her uncle and his children summoned so she could offer her comforts. That was when Jon told her about Arya.

She reached out and stroked Arya’s hair, barely able to believe her to be real. Both sisters stared at each other in silence. Tears fell from both sets of eyes.

“I’m so glad you’re back, Little Sister,” Sansa said, not even beginning to be able to describe her joy, “Please tell me you’re back for good.”

Arya nodded. “I am, Sansa. Truly I am. I am back and I am going to keep you safe. Promise me you’ll let me be your guard. I’ll never be a lady, but I can protect you. You and Jon and all of those babies you’ll have.”

Sansa smiled in spite of herself. “And Winterfell?”

“And Winterfell.”
They embraced.

“Let us protect each other.” Sansa murmured.
Parental Morality

Chapter Summary

Jon asks questions of Roslin and himself. And then things get crazy.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bluecichlid and Illyana for editing!!!

I just have to say, guys, the comments for last chapter got tits-out awesome. Your feedback gave me so much to think about and this is so much damn fun.

Chapter Twenty-three: Parental Morality

Jon:

He tried not to roll his eyes at the various pieces of religious artwork he and Arya passed while walking down the dark hall of the Great Sept. Depictions of the Seven and various important historical moments in the history of the Faith lined the walls. The Mother surrounded by babes representing all of mankind. Baelor I standing atop Visenya’s Hill ordering the construction of the Great Sept. The battles of the Faith Militant. The Warrior brandishing a gleaming sword.

Throughout his life, Jon heard numerous people refer to the Old Gods as relics, both followers of the Seven and the cult of the Lord of Light. The Fire God’s cult was driven out of Westeros when Daenerys returned, putting Melisandre to her own brand of flames. It was ironic, because the second Daenerys arrived, the Red Witch had gotten on her knees, proclaiming Jon’s aunt as the true chosen one. The Dragon Queen was less interested in that and more interested in the woman’s apparent willingness to throw babies to the flames. She wanted no part of Melisandre’s magic.

The Lord of Light ridiculousness was gone, but the Faith of the Seven remained, though it didn’t feel much like a viable spiritual path to Jon. He’d never cared much for Lady Catelyn’s southern Gods with their elaborate rituals, invasive rules, and hierarchy. To him, the “Faith” seemed less like a faith at all and more like a political institution the same as any other.

Coming to the Great Sept, for him, was always unpleasant. And really, he didn’t have that many good memories to associate with the Seven as it was. This was the place where the man he called father was executed, after all. A Sept was built at Winterfell for Lady Catelyn, who raised her children to observe her Gods as well as the Old ones. But Jon had never been included in that. He always associated the Seven with the woman who resented and rejected him his entire life. Even after he left Winterfell, religious differences were just another thing that set him apart from his peers, almost all of whom followed the Seven. Up until Sam came along, Jon was forced to look forward to having to say his vows alone.

Things hadn’t really improved much since he became prince. Daenerys, in the interest of keeping the Faith happy and ingratiating herself politically with Westeros, swore herself to The Faith of the
Seven. It was a good move on every level. One of the greatest problems Stannis had was the resistance he inspired thanks to his religious mania and association with Melisandre. Daenerys, with her Unsullied and Dothraki, already seemed foreign enough. She needed the acceptance of the Faith in order to strengthen her support in Westeros.

While Dany did make sure to attend services twice a week and say all the proper prayers and confer with the Faith, she wasn’t really at all religious in her heart. It was purely political posturing. Her spiritual beliefs seemed ambiguous at best.

“When among my Khalasaar, I worship the Great Stallion. When in Slaver’s Bay, I worship the Sun and Moon. In other places, I worship the Seven. When we went beyond the Wall, I visited a couple of Heart Trees. If I go North again, I will do so once more. If I ever venture to the Iron Islands, I’ll pay some tribute to the Drowned God. I believe there is some kind of higher force in the world, even several, all of whom are capable of various wonders and mysteries. I can’t control them, nor do I presume to think I could ever properly evaluate them. So modes of worship really don’t matter to me.”

Jon still worshipped the Old Gods. While he’d been brought back with Melisandre’s magic, in the name of the Lord of Light, he saw that woman for what she was. Her magic was just that: magic. And almost every religion had sorcerers of their own who could commit any number of wonders. The Old Gods were what he believed in, they gave him a connection to Bran, and they didn’t play politics.

He’d not sworn himself to the Seven like Daenerys had, and that was a source of discomfort for the Faith, Daenerys, and Jon. While this circumstance was tolerated by the Faith, it didn’t stop them from dropping continuous hints. The only reasons outright threats hadn’t been made were because Jon wasn’t King, and with Daenerys being younger than him, it seemed unlikely he’d outlive her and sit on the throne. They’d begrudgingly settled for promises that his children would, in fact, be raised with the Seven, and assurances that the Faith would remain the official religion of Westeros.

He imagined that eventually, he was going to have to give in and say a few words to declare himself a follower. But he was going to hold out for as long as he could. While he could practice both religions, as the Stark children had, he still didn’t feel wholly comfortable with the idea of giving himself— if only in word— to another religion. Being around all the pomp and pageantry of the Faith in general made him uncomfortable as it was. He didn’t feel like wealth and politics should mix with spirituality.

Today’s business in the Sept didn’t make him too happy, either. Four days had passed since Roslin Frey’s arrest. Since then, they’d questioned her under the supervision of the High Septon, getting nowhere. The self-righteous pontiff had proved a great hindrance in Roslin’s interrogation, sometimes seemingly on purpose.

But after four days of yielding nothing, Ser Barristan and Daenerys finally put their feet down. Jon and Arya would now have the dubious pleasure of being allowed access to the subject without the Septon there.

When they got to the door of the old man’s office, the pontiff regarded them with suspicious eyes. “Are you sure you don’t require—?”

“We’re sure,” Jon replied simply, brushing past the man and pushing the door open. Arya followed and closed the door behind them right in the man’s face, bolting it.

Roslin was shackled to a chair in the center of the large room. The siblings circled her slowly, Arya’s eyes glinting. Roslin stared at her lap, clad in a ragged old shift. She appeared thin, exhausted,
bedraggled, and miserable. She shook from cold and fear alike. *I’ve seen worse.*

“Your daughter cries for you,” Jon informed her. “She cries for you, her papa, and for answers.”

Roslin looked up slowly, her eyes sunken. “You took me from her.”

“No,” Jon growled, coming closer. He stared into Roslin’s eyes, disgusted. Edmure wouldn’t visit Lynette, or let Minisa visit her.

Over the last four days, Jon had made multiple attempts to visit the child. Every time he entered her chamber, Lynette screamed and cried about dragons eating her mother and coming to eat her. By all accounts, she spent most of her time crying into her septa’s skirts.

“You did this. You could have lived out your days as Lady of Riverrun, you and your children happy and content. No one would have ever had to know about you and Piper, about Lynette. You chose to blow this wide open when you decided to poison my lady. On top of that, you involved the father of your bastard, leading us to the truth about your daughter. This is your fault, Lady Roslin. You chose to risk the well-being of your family.”

“My family?” Roslin snorted. “Your whore killed my family! My father, my brothers, my sisters… She hung them from the bridge of the Twins and destroyed my home.”

“Your father murdered our brother and mother!” Arya growled, reaching out and yanking Roslin by the hair. The Lady of Riverrun shrieked but Arya shouted over her. “They betrayed every law our people hold dear--- they broke their vows, they desecrated their home, and they murdered their king. They enabled the Boltons to take over the North, leading to the deaths of *thousands.* They threw my mother’s body in a river, and they tore off my brother’s head and sewed the head of his direwolf onto his neck!”

“You brother broke his vow! He broke his vow to my father and to me! Were we supposed to just *take* that?” Roslin cried out.

“You lot already withdrew your forces, and Robb gave you my uncle to regain your favor,” Arya snarled, put her lips close to Roslin’s ear. “He went to you to make amends.”

“He went back to us to scrape and beg for our support in his war. One which already claimed the life of my eldest brother. He was a traitor and an oathbreaker.”

Arya slapped Roslin, hard. She almost did it again, but Jon stopped her. He grabbed Roslin by the chin.

“Sansa took justice for her family and her people. Your family deserved what they got. Not only did they ruthlessly slaughter and desecrate the bodies of her loved ones, they violated one of the most sacred customs of our people. They slaughtered people they broke bread with. They signed their own death warrant, destroyed your home the second they decided to murder our brother.”

“You brother?” Roslin laughed. “So I guess the Whore of Winterfell is truly fucking her brother, then.”

Jon almost hit her. Instead, he released her head and walked a few feet away, trying to regain some composure.

“It’s pretty rich for you to call my sister a whore while your bastard sits in the Red Keep,” Arya remarked.
“Lady Stark has been accused of adultery and far more.”

Jon spun around and glared at her. He was not going to stand to hear this woman speak of Sansa like that. “False and unfair accusations. Lady Stark has been cleared on all criminal charges. She was the victim of rape and slander. You, however… I read some of your letters to Ser Marq. It sounded like your relationship was more than consensual.”

“Any relationship I may or may not have had with Marq Piper would have been consensual. But I’ve never consented to anything as indecent as fucking my brother.”

He seethed. “Neither has Sansa.”

Roslin threw her head back and laughed. “Ah, yes, King Robb—“ She spoke that title with a sneer, “----and Lady Arya remain your brother and sister. But, conveniently, your whore does not. But you once called each other sister and brother, and regardless of your lineage, you are cousins. Then there was the time she was with her uncle by marriage, a man she also called Father---“

Jon began to shake. “Rape.”

“So she claims. It’s so easy to claim innocence after the fact if you’re properly connected. Your whore got to put it on record that her relationship was forced thanks to her family connections to the crown. But to this day, my own innocence in the deaths of Robb and Catelyn Stark is forever questioned. Never mind that I was a scared young girl threatened and sold off to a man I had never met, already jilted once. It’s so easy for the whore to take the High Road, isn’t it? She slaughtered my family in the name of justice. Never mind that at my wedding, she lost a mother and one brother. I lost a parent and over a dozen siblings. Never mind that what remains of my family now must practically beg on the streets. Never mind that my House and the home I grew up in was completely destroyed.”

“My lady’s losses---“

“Didn’t even come close to my own, and the majority of them didn’t come at the hands of my family. The Greyjoys and Boltons sacked and burned Winterfell, and they were the ones who sent Bran and Rickon Stark from their homes towards the paths that led to Rickon’s death and Bran’s change. White Walkers killed Rickon Stark on Skaagos. The Lannisters killed her father and drove Lady Arya off. The Vale lords destroyed Winterfell again and Wallace Coldwater killed Eddie Stark. But Asha Greyoy sits pretty ruling the Iron Isles, Casterly Rock still stands and still has a Lannister lord, and no one has wiped out or destroyed Houses Moore or Coldwater.”

“Other Freys remain,” replied Jon, though his stomach turned. He didn’t like what Roslin was saying, not at all. There was this logic to it that scared him. There was something inconsistent about the level of punishment each offending house had suffered. How much of that was Sansa’s fault, Jon couldn’t say for sure. But the notion bothered him. Still, it doesn’t change the fact that she’s a criminal. “There are more Freys left than Lannisters, Moores, or Coldwaters. The Boltons and White Walkers are entirely gone.”

“Aye, but House Frey is gone from the nobility. The Twins are gone. House Bolton did more damage to the Starks than House Frey, but the Dreadfort stands.”

“As a wildling settlement. Winterfell is gone.”

“Not by any action of any kin of mine.”

Jon seethed. “The brothers Sansa hung were all accomplices in the Red Wedding or soldiers who
held Riverrun hostage. It was war. She at least had the decency to kill them on the battlefield or in
execution. Not at a wedding after she’d broken bread with them.”

“Robb—“

“Enough! This is not about the grievances of House Frey!” He glared at her. “This is about your
crimes, Lady Roslin. You tried to kill my lady after declaring peace. Like father, like daughter.”

Roslin glared. “I admit to nothing.”

Arya walked over to Jon, bowing her head. “Let me, Jon… She’ll be singing like a bird after five
minutes.”

Jon brushed his sister aside and walked close to Roslin once more. “We’ve been gentle with you thus
far, Roslin Frey. That can change. If you relent now, things will go much easier for you and for your
children.”

The woman glared. “If you lay a hand on them…”

“No, I won’t hurt them. I don’t hurt children. But that doesn’t mean someone else won’t. Edmure has
already accepted that Lynette isn’t his. He hasn’t visited her once since your arrest. We’ve been
keeping her safe. But she’s suffering. The sooner you confess, though, the sooner we can give her
some answers. The sooner you may be able to see her again. Her and Minisa. Both miss their
mother. I bet your son does too. Maybe we could arrange to bring him to court to say good-bye to
you.”

Roslin closed her eyes. She seemed to be struggling. Jon sighed.

“If you tell me, I promise I’ll make sure Lynette is taken care of. I can find her a good home, make
sure she’s fed and sheltered and loved. I’ll even supply her a dowry so she can make a decent match
when she’s older. Just confess, Roslin. Tell me everything. Tell me how you did it. Tell me who you
worked with. Tell me everything, and your daughter can have a future.”

The truth was, he intended on doing all of that anyways. He’d already drafted the paperwork with
Missandei to make little Lynette Rivers his ward if the court established her illegitimacy. He intended
to have her fostered at Dragonstone if she wasn’t welcome at Pinkmaiden, and marry her to a knight
when she grew up. But Roslin didn’t need to know that.

He waited several seconds. Roslin was still silent. Honestly, Woman! You won’t even confess for the
sake of your child?!

Jon lost his patience. He turned away from her and looked at Arya. “Start slow.”

Arya unsheathed Needle. Jon forced himself to watch as Roslin Frey’s blood began to drip down her
forearms. He forced himself to listen to her screams. For several minutes, there were just howls of
pain as Arya made deep cuts into Roslin’s flesh. Finally Jon couldn’t take it anymore. He hurried
over and yanked Needle from his sister’s grip. He who passes the sentence…

He bent over Roslin and glared at her. “Look at me, Roslin Frey.”

Her brown eyes opened. Her nose was red and dripping. Jon loathed the sight of her.

This wasn’t just about Sansa, it was about everyone. It was about Roslin’s children. Little Lynette
especially would never have the life she deserved. Not only would she be reduced to bastard status,
but she’d have to live out her life with the knowledge that she was the result of her mother’s crimes.
It wasn’t just that Roslin had poisoned Sansa. That she’d do it in a manner that not only implicated
her lover but could also threaten to expose the truth about her daughter, who had done nothing
wrong, infuriated him. Roslin could have used someone else. She could have spared the father of her child—and, by extension, all her children and her husband—the exposure of this awful secret. If she’d involved anyone else, no one would have ever had to know about the affair or Lynette’s true heritage. Her daughter could have continued to live a good life. Her husband could have been spared heartbreak. Her children could have been spared shame. Her lover could have been spared death. But for all of Roslin’s angry talk of revenge for her family, she seemed more than happy to risk the lives and well-being of her remaining loved ones.

Now, three children would go motherless, one outright orphaned, and all three would have to bear the shame of their mother being an adulterous felon. Her husband would have to bear the heartbreak and humiliation of all of this as well. No doubt the relationship he had with all his children would suffer. As if enough trauma hadn’t come to the Tullys of Riverrun.

And then, there were Marq Piper’s loved ones. The Lord and Lady of Pinkmaiden had lost a son. The other Pipers lost a brother, nephew, cousin… Edmure Tully lost his best friend. No doubt the reputation of Pinkmaiden would forever be sullied by this. Edmure’s reputation and that of his children would be dealt a horrible blow as well.

And that poor Little Lynette, now an orphan bastard like Myrcella Waters. Sansa had told him of poor Myrcella. Once a princess, now the disfigured, unwanted bastard product of the incest between her parents, her mother now considered one of the greatest villains in Westerosi history. She was kept in comfort and safety by Trystane Martell who, despite being promised to another still adored his former betrothed. According to the Sand Snakes, though, the girl never ventured beyond the grounds of Sunspear, for in the streets she was followed by whispers and shouts of “Bastard!”, “Monster!” and other insults. People either showed her disgust or ignored her completely. The girl had almost no friends left in the world. If it weren’t for Trystane, she’d be dead or begging on the streets.

And Jon felt that a similar fate was possible for Little Lynette. Regardless of her innocence, the child was a bastard now, her parentage now tied to one House that was no longer recognized and another that was shamed in part by her very existence. She could very likely be more friendless than poor Myrcella.

Jon, at least, had been openly acknowledged by the high lord he’d thought sired him, a man who loved him and treated him like a son. He’d still been raised at Winterfell among his siblings, given the very best education, resources, and comforts. While he’d certainly been disadvantaged in comparison to his brothers, and though he had suffered, he’d still had a very privileged upbringing. He’d had at least one loving parental figure in Ned Stark, his brothers and sisters cared for him, as did the household of Winterfell. He’d spent every night in a warm, comfortable bed with a full belly. He was trained by a master swordsman in combat and by a Maester in academics the same as Robb, heir to the largest region in Westeros. He’d been claimed, he’d been loved, he’d had resources and bonds.

Lynette, though… She could end up dying alone, in abject poverty. And there was no Wall for her to go to.

That was the life her mother could have potentially given her with this action.

The thing was, this even went beyond the Tullys, the Starks, the Targaryens, and the Pipers. Until Arya showed up, Sansa was without an heir. If she had died, who knew what sort of chaos would engulf not just the North, but the entire kingdom. Various houses would take up arms against each other over who would inherit the North. Beyond that conflict, Sansa had been in Jon’s custody. As Lady Flint had made perfectly clear, there was no way the North was going to take kindly to a
trueborn daughter of Winterfell sharing the bed of a Targaryen prince and then dying in his custody.

While Roslin clearly hadn’t been able to anticipate the fallout regarding Jon’s relationship to Sansa, she had begun this entire scheme after Eddie’s death. So she’d still risked the security of the North and possibly the Vale through all of this. Maybe she hadn’t considered that, but it was really no excuse. She’d still risked thousands of lives for petty revenge.

And she wouldn’t even consider the well-being of her own children in the way she went about it. Jon felt his blood boil. At least Cersei Lannister showed love for her children. At least some of her actions could be argued as being in the interests of protecting Joffrey, Tommen, and Myrcella. But what would Roslin Frey’s actions have done for Minisa, Ambrose, or Lynette? Killing Sansa would never have done them any good, protected them in any way. In fact, it just put them in more danger.

He couldn’t understand how any parent could do that. Eddard Stark was not his blood father, but even he’d sacrificed his honor and given Jon up to the Wall in order to keep him safe from any would-be Targaryen killers. Jon had carried a little resentment with him after he arrived at the Wall and saw what it was, feeling that his father had willingly abandoned him there, cast him away. But once he learned of his parentage, he’d more than understood. Robert Baratheon was obsessed with wiping out every last Targaryen. Even if he had somehow found out who Jon’s true father was, he’d not have been able to touch him once he’d taken his vows for the very same reason he couldn’t harm Maester Aemon. By sending him to the Wall, Eddard Stark sent Jon to the one place where Robert Baratheon would never be able to touch him. And he did this, despite Jon not being his true son, despite realizing the hardship he was subjecting his nephew to, despite possibly anticipating the resentment Jon would feel towards him. He’d done it all to keep Jon alive.

Eddard had also falsely confessed to treason and sacrificed his honor further to protect Sansa and Arya. He lied, subjected himself to Joffrey’s mercy, and surrendered himself to his enemies, all to protect the girls, not to mention the boys at home. Catelyn Stark, for all her devastating mistakes and her viciousness towards Jon, had sacrificed and braved countless things to protect her children. She’d fought off an assassin to protect Bran. She had ventured into the capital and conspired under the nose of the queen, then antagonized the most powerful house in the realm and traveled across country to protect him further. She continued to travel through war zones across the country to keep her children safe, to work on Robb’s behalf so he could win the war and get her daughters home. She gave up the kingslayer and sacrificed her freedom to get the girls back. In the end, she died crying, pleading, and offering herself up in exchange for Robb’s life.

Then there was Sansa, who lost her son, who had charged into his nursery toward his murderer, risking her life against overwhelming odds to maybe, possibly save his life. Who killed Wallace Coldwater despite the man being twice her size. Sansa, who had broken ties with Petyr Baelish, endured numerous abuses at his hands, violent rape, and finally killed him in the interest of keeping Eddie safe. Sansa, who, even after her son was lost, kept fighting for him, braving the court and never giving up, if only to insure that his name, honor, memory, and place in history was preserved. Who cried for her son routinely. Who so greatly feared never being able to have another child that she literally asked about risks to her fertility after being poisoned before she asked about her own suffering. Who looked ashamed and miserable when she told Jon that she was not, in fact, unexpectedly pregnant.

And Jon… Jon never thought he’d ever have children. He always thought he’d be a bastard at the Wall, service and duty his only wife and mistress, his brothers his only family. A giant wall of ice the closest thing he’d ever come close to nurturing. And now, he was going to have children. He’d experience that great joy and overwhelming love Eddard and Catelyn knew. He was not yet a father, but he knew that he’d be madly, painfully in love with his offspring. They were people who didn’t even exist yet, but he still knew that he’d do anything for them, anything at all.
But Roslin Frey endangers the children she actually has for revenge and dishonor. Even if she was never discovered, who is to say the wars that could have resulted wouldn’t have claimed the lives of her son and daughters? Was it really worth the risk to leave them motherless or in danger to kill Sansa, who posed no threat to them? And even now, she won’t confess when the future of her youngest has been offered to her. And she shows no remorse, none at all. She seems to think herself righteous.

Every moment he looked at her made him angrier, more disgusted.

“Tell me about the poison, or I will skewer your hand.”

She sniffed. Then she spat at him. “Bastard.”

Jon grabbed the fingers of her left hand, laid the limb flat, and plunged Needle into her palm. Roslin howled.

Jon twisted the blade. “What?”

“ENOUGH!!!”

He stopped twisting.

Roslin sighed. “I did it… I took my chance when she was arrested. I wanted to make absolutely sure she died, and I didn’t want it being traced back to me. I wanted to make it look natural. I learned about Slow Strangler in the Riverrun library. When Sansa was arrested, I convinced Edmure that it was no great danger, and I told him to send some men to watch over her, and that it would be enough. I had him send Marq to lead them. I put the poisons in one of Lynette’s dolls and gave it to Marq as a keepsake. He began slipping it into her food at the Vale.”

“And after?”

“I told him to get close to the wolf whore once I learned she’d be acquitted. I told him to charm her, gain her trust, seduce her if need be. He started taking some meals with her, but only managed to spike her food on those rare occasions. When her stupid servant came to him asking him to acquire moon tea for her, we seized our chance.”

Arya marched over and struck Roslin once more. Jon frowned.

“Piper was your lover, then?”

“Yes.”

“And the reason you chose Lynette’s doll…”?

“To manipulate him. You guessed right. Lynette’s his.” Roslin moaned.

Jon stared. “Was there anyone else involved?”

“A few servants. That other maid you had with her at first…”

“Karlet?”

“Yes.”

“Anyone else?”
“Marq paid off a couple of Vale guards so they’d let him handle her food. I don’t know who they are. Marq’s squire also knew of it.”

Jon nodded. They already had Amos Piper in chains. He’d already talked.

“Any other houses?”

“No…”

Jon stood up and pulled Needle from Roslin’s hand. He grabbed some gauze from the table nearby and put pressure on the woman’s wound. “We’re going to bring in a confession and you will sign it. You’ll stay imprisoned while we investigate further. You’ll be called in for questioning again. If we discover that you’re protecting any accomplices, there will be consequences. So if there were any others involved, I suggest you tell us now. This is your last chance.”

Roslin shook her head. “Edmure didn’t know a thing. Nor did Marq’s father. We kept this to ourselves. I pawned several of the presents my husband gave me to pay for the poison to be shipped from Lys. A group called The Apothecary makes it. The ship that transported it had no idea what they were bringing us. There’s nothing else, I swear.”

Jon looked at Arya. “Bring the Septon and the confession in. Make sure she signs it. I---- I need to go back to the palace.”

His sister nodded and came over to hold the gauze down on Roslin’s wound. Jon bolted out. He passed by the people of the sept, making his way outside to his waiting litter and guards. Once he got back to the palace, he swiftly made his way to his quarters without a word. Once inside his solar, alone, he pounded a fist against a wall. *I helped torture someone. I drove the blade into her hand, and then I twisted it. I made her scream. I’m one of those men who abuses women now. It’s what I am. I’m a monster.*

Satin walked in at that moment. “Jon, they—“

“How, Satin,” he ordered, not looking at his steward.

“Jon, what’s wrong?” Satin’s voice sounded immediately concerned.

“I told you, out.”

Jon heard some footsteps. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder. “Jon, pl—— “

He spun around, throwing Satin off him. “I TOLD YOU. LEAVE.”

Satin gave him a terrified look and fled. Jon found that he now loathed himself even more.

Cursing his impulses, Jon went to his bedchamber and looked in the mirror. He looked the same. The same grey eyes stared back at him. The same thick dark curls sat atop his head. The same silvery scars marked his eyebrow. The same burns covered his right hand. He stared and stared, for how long he didn’t know.

*I’m a man who separates children from their mothers, who mistreats his servants and friends, who tortures women and scares little girls. How is any of that possible? Why is this happening? All I wanted was justice for Sansa and now… Now what? Why is that no matter how hard I try to do the right thing, I always end up hurting someone?*

He threw a fist into the glass, shattering it. His hand was cut. Cursing, Jon clutched it and looked for
something to mop it up. He spotted a length of cloth sitting on the chest at the end of the bed, grabbed it, and quickly covered his bleeding fist. It was only then that he realized that the garment was the fine damask shirt Sansa gave him that night that seemed so long ago.

He watched as spots of blood blotted the Targaryen red of the silk, turning little bits of it darker. At once, Jon threw the shirt away before he could stain it any worse. He yanked his wardrobe open, cursing, and pulled one of his handkerchiefs from his pocket. The white linen slowly began to match the color of the wolves which danced across the surface. Margaery’s words echoed in his head.

“She rode in with her vanguard during her first battle at Maidenpool, wearing Stark white. But when the battle was over, she went and stood before her men, and her cloak and surcoat were completely stained with blood. Red clothes, red hair, blood everywhere. From then on she became the Red Wolf.”

My blood is part wolf, part dragon. Part fire, part ice, he thought, and now I’m staining that pure, white, snowy Stark part of me. All for my red wolf.

There was a knock on the door.

“It’s me,” called the voice he expected to hear the least.

Jon hurried over and yanked the door open. Sure enough, Sansa stood there, looking weak, her blue silk dressing gown hanging off of her thin frame.

“Sansa, what are you doing out of bed?”

“What did you do to your hand?” she asked, her eyes widening at the sight of his fist. She grabbed it and stumbled into the room.

“What are you doing out of bed?” he asked again.

“Arya came and told me what happened,” Sansa said. “I wanted to come and see you.”

She started wiping his hand with one of her one handkerchiefs, and called for Gilly. The wildling girl appeared and Sansa told her to fetch soap, water, bandages, needles, and thread. Jon pulled his betrothed to the bed, not at all liking how shaky her stance was.

“You shouldn’t be out of bed.”

“You shouldn’t be punching mirrors,” Sansa replied, glancing over at the ruined glass. “You’ve hurt yourself. You’re going to need a couple of stitches.”

“Sansa…”

“Jon. Arya said you went into a rage, stabbed Roslin Frey in the hand, then bolted from the sept. Then I hear from Satin that you almost struck him. I come in here to find that you’ve cut your hand open from punching your mirror. You are not alright. I had Gilly and Ghost help me here. I can walk a little. I am your lady and I will tend to you. Now shut up and tell me what is wrong.”

She said this all while inspecting his hand carefully. Jon stared at her. Her dressing gown had fallen open, and some blood had dripped onto her white wool nightgown. She pressed her kerchief and his to his hand, putting pressure on it and trying to stop the bleeding.

“I hurt her, Sansa. I purposely made her scream and bleed. I’ve ruined the life of that little girl of hers. I don’t know how I can live with myself.”
Sansa looked at him, her blue eyes wide. “You did it because you had to, Jon. You did it to protect me. And not just me. The kingdom as well. You did it because you’re a leader. And leaders sometimes have to do awful, awful things to protect others. You’ve killed before.”

“That was war. This was torture.”

“The war hasn’t ended, Jon. Just because the armies have been sent home doesn’t mean we’re done fighting. That’s the point. We sometimes have to do these things so that when we send the armies home, we don’t have to call them back to arms immediately after. If Roslin succeeded, chaos could have broken out in the North, in the Vale, possibly all over the kingdom. Everything we’ve fought for would have been destroyed. But she didn’t, and we have to punish her now so that no one tries anything like that again. Maybe the wars end for the common soldier, but for us, they never do.”

“That just sounds like something we say so we can sleep at night.”

“That doesn’t make it untrue.”

Gilly hurried in with the supplies and Sansa began cleaning his cuts. She had Gilly hold out Jon’s hand, took the needle and thread, and began stitching. Jon flinched and yelped. Sansa shushed him. “You’ve had worse.”

Jon looked at Gilly and frowned. “I’m sorry I made you leave Little Sam behind.”

Sam’s wife stared at him, her eyes huge. She gaped for a minute, then sighed. “I—I understand why you did it. And Sam was alright. I---- I have my son back. Hard as it was, I---- I saved another child, and my own boy was kept safe. I saw him again, and I reckon it wouldn’t have happened without any help from you. And I know… Sam and I have a nice life now. Our children will have nice lives. So I forgive you for it.”

“Thank you, Gilly.” And if it hadn’t worked out, would you forgive me then?

She nodded.

Jon looked at his hand again, watching as Sansa’s needle pulled through the burnt flesh. New scars. As if the hand wasn’t ugly enough already. Roslin Frey’s hand will be scarred too. If she even lives long enough for the wound to heal. My hand was burned then cut. Her hand shall be cut, then burned. This thought gave him no comfort.

Sansa finished fixing his hand. Jon paused to admire her work. “You’re quite good at that.”

“I used to fix wounds while on campaign,” she replied simply. “Gilly, why don’t you go back to your husband? You said you hadn’t seen him all day, him or the boy. I’m sure Jon and I can take care of each other for the rest of the night.”

The wildling girl nodded and backed out of the room. When she was gone, Sansa bent down and kissed his wounds. She shook a little, still weak. Jon pulled her to him and laid her down on the bed. “Rest a bit.”

She nodded. “Rest with me.”

He lay down next to her. “Are you cold?”

Sansa shook her head. “Jon… I meant what I said. Sometimes, we have to do things to protect our own.”
He reached out and stroked her hair. Her presence always had a calming effect on him, but part of him remained troubled. She sounded so certain, how? Her own mother had done a number of things to protect her children that only resulted in endangering them further. And he didn’t like the idea of perpetuating brutality in the name of protecting his family. “I know. I just… I thought I could just deal with this and feel nothing. But I don’t feel like I’m on the side of justice. Whatever Roslin did… It…”

“It’s not the fault of Little Lynette. I know.”

Jon’s stomach turned. “She called the doll we found Little Lynnie. Edmure won’t go see her. She’s all alone.”

Sansa’s face fell. “I’m so sorry, Jon.”

“I took her from Edmure’s arms. And he’ll probably never hold her again. She cries for her parents. I just… I just can’t… I keep telling myself that I have to do this. But I know it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter how well I provide for her, where I send her to be taken care of, how good a match I arrange for her eventually. She’s still made a bastard, still abandoned by her father, never to see her mother again, she’s lost her name, her identity, her family… And I’m behind it.”

“No, Jon. This happened because of her mother, not you. You’re only doing what is necessary. Maybe if you made some arrangements, you’d feel—”

“No. The paperwork is already drafted. Everything is prepared for her to be fostered at Dragonstone as my ward if we can’t send her to Riverrun or Pinkmaiden. I’ve done everything I can to make sure she comes out of this with the best options available. But it doesn’t matter. I can’t replace the life I’ve ruined for her. It doesn’t change the fact that I’m the monster who destroyed her family.”

“You—- you’re making her your ward?”

“You won’t have to do anything, I plan on sending her to Dragonstone. I know you wouldn’t want her around given who her mother is. I just need her taken care of. I need to make sure she’s—-”

Sansa leaned forward and kissed him deeply. Jon stared, shocked as she pulled away.

“Jon Snow Targaryen,” she said, tears in her eyes, “You are the very best man I’ve ever known. You are not a monster. You are kind, brave, good, and gentle. I love you.”

The tears started to fall and she sobbed. “… I love you so much. Maybe I don’t say it enough, though I doubt I could. But I do. I love you.”

He didn’t feel worthy of it at that moment. “…Why?”

“Because you’re the type of man who, after arresting the woman responsible for endangering your family, would make provisions so that her bastard daughter can have a home and future. Because even after everything you’ve seen, all the wars and bloodshed and loss, you still can’t turn a blind eye to collateral damage. Because you’re all the best parts of those I’ve loved and lost made flesh. Because years and years ago, I gave up on spending my life with a man I’d fallen in love with. I gave up on everything I’d ever truly wanted, and you’re giving it to me. Because you’re my hero.”

“Sansa…” He wasn’t sure what to say. On one hand, he was overcome. Knowing he was that to her, that he made her feel this way was beautiful. On the other hand, he felt all the more unworthy of this. “… Sansa, I stabbed Roslin Frey right through the hand and I twisted the blade.”

She shivered. “I know, Jon. But… But you did it for me. You took no pleasure in it, and I’m sure
you did so only when you thought it was absolutely necessary. You were trying to get her to talk for four days. I’m sure you tried every other tactic.”

“I hated her, Sansa. I hated her so much.”

“Jon… You’ve hurt people before. You’ve killed.”

“Armed men and women during war, in a fight for survival. Roslin was an unarmed woman shackled to a chair who posed no threat to me. During peacetime.”

“Jon, she threatened me and she could have brought war. She could have been protecting some extremely dangerous people. You were protecting me. You were doing what you felt was necessary.”

“But I wasn’t thinking about that when I did it. I just thought about how much I hated her, how angry I was. And she was still unarmed. She was chained and bleeding.”

She rubbed his shoulder. “Your emotions gave you the strength to do what was necessary, Jon. Regardless of whether or not you were thinking of that at that very moment, you still intended to protect the ones you love. It was still in service to your family and your realm. I’m sure you’ve executed people who have been restrained.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Why?”

He stared at her, shocked. “Sansa, it’s different in times of war… active war.”

“Is it? Because to me it sounds like that’s something people tell themselves so they can sleep at night, so they can feel honorable about killing or hurting someone. Like I said, we’re always at war so that the majority of the people in this country don’t have to be. If Roslin had slit my throat when I had lain siege to the Twins, would that have made her killing me any better than if she’d succeeded in poisoning me? No. In fact, it would have been worse, because then I’d never have wiped out the Boltons.

“Whether by poison or blade, it’s still a life ended. When it’s during a war, you tell yourself it’s more justified even though that tends to involve far more collateral damage. Violence is violence and while some acts of it are more justified than others, the true morality of it doesn’t always live up to popular opinion. You gave a criminal would-be murderess a non-lethal wound in order to protect me. You didn’t draw out hours of unnecessary torture simply for pleasure, you didn’t harm an innocent. You stopped the second you had to. You tried to avoid doing it. She gave you little to no choice. I bet you even warned her what you planned to do if she didn’t speak.”

“Yes,” he admitted, “But that doesn’t make it right. I just…”

“Something else about this is bothering you.”

He frowned. “Roslin said some things… About you and her family and…”

Jon proceeded to tell her about Roslin’s observations about how her family was punished versus families who had done far more to hurt the Starks. It killed him to repeat it, and it killed him even more to admit to the fact that part of what she said made sense. “Sansa, you destroyed the castle at the Twins but… You didn’t destroy Dreadfort, why?”

She frowned. “The Twins was expendable. The Dreadfort was not. The North was in far worse
shape, with too many holdfasts destroyed or damaged. The Riverlands weren’t half as run down as
the North. The holdfasts that remained there were closer to one another and in better shape.
Everything in the North is so spread out and the region had endured not only the Boltons terrorizing
everything, but also the Ironborn sieges. And it’s a highly rural region anyways. Any and every
shelter there had to be preserved, especially one as large and secure as Dreadfort, and we needed the
fortress given how well maintained it was and its location that far North in the wake of the White
Walkers. The Twins wasn’t valuable to me except as a source of treasure to loot, a patch of land, the
bridge, and raw materials. Destroying it sent exactly the right message, and breaking it down gave
me plenty of resources and raw materials.

“The Dreadfort was valuable to me intact, not only as a source of shelter and refuge during the
winter and wars, but also as a political asset. The Twins were in the Riverlands, so it meant I could
lose control of it when Edmure returned to Riverrun. But I was Lord Paramount of the North by
right, so I would always be able to do whatever I wished with the Dreadfort. I ruled over it while
Winterfell was rebuilt, and it served my purposes and sent the right message. It was a big, strong,
well-secured fortress with a fearsome reputation and it was mine to give away. Giving it to Daenerys
for the Wildlings gave me the means to prove myself a loyal subject rather than a rival and keep
myself and my son safe.”

Jon frowned. “It doesn’t seem like a very consistent mode of justice.”

“Necessity and common good take precedence over that during desperate times. Maybe that’s not
fair to the Freys or the Boltons, but equivalent justice is only worth it when it actually benefits people
en mass. I’d rather make a decision that’s right for my subjects, my family, and myself than the one
that seems fair to Roslin Frey.”

She pressed her fingers to her temple and groaned. Jon’s heart quickened. He’d been so caught up in
this conversation that he’d forgotten how exhausted she had to be. For the last hour or so, she’d
seemed like the Sansa he knew before the poison: strong, intelligent, articulate. It wasn’t the manic,
confused, terrified, weak ramblings she’d uttered over the last few days. It made it hard to remember
she was still so sick and frail.

He pulled her to him and stroked her head. “Are you alright? Do you want me to fetch you
something? Should I call Merys?”

Sansa shook her head. “No, just a headache.”

“I should take you back to your chambers.”

“No, please…” She looked up at him, suddenly seeming desperate. “I’ve been stuck in that bed, that
room, for weeks. I feel so weak there, I feel useless, I feel like a prisoner. I went mad in there, and I
feel like if I spend another night in that bed, I’ll stay that way. Let me stay here tonight and pretend
I’m already strong again.”

He suddenly saw her as that little girl again, shivering in her night shift at Jon and Robb’s
bedchamber door. “The thunder scares me. I feel alone and afraid and I have bad dreams. Please
let me sleep with you tonight.” Jon stroked her face. “You’re always strong, Sansa. Always. But if
you want to stay here, that’s fine. When have I ever denied you a place in my bed?”

She gave a weak, choking laugh. “Never. Not even when we were children. Even when Robb said
no, I knew I could always go to you. I know it’s silly, but I’ve just spent so much time in that room,
feeling sick and seeing ghosts. It’s always either frightening or painfully dull.”

“I understand.” Jon whistled for Ghost, who quickly trotted into the room. He pulled back the
bedclothes and tucked her in. He watched her fall asleep but stayed awake, still troubled. Sansa had given him a little peace of mind, but he still didn’t feel right.

Something has changed. He knew that when he put that blade through Roslin Frey’s hand, he’d crossed some sort of line. And none of Sansa’s rationalizing, none of the justification could put him on the other side of it. He knew he’d done it partly because Roslin wouldn’t relent, partly to help those he loved, and partly because he felt wrong letting Arya do it for him. But he’d also done it because he hated her. And that part just didn’t sit right with him. My motivations weren’t entirely pure. I didn’t do it just for the good of others, or for the sake of personal accountability. I did it because I hate that woman. I wanted her to feel pain. I wanted her to bleed and scream. Even if she deserved to… I shouldn’t desire someone else’s pain.

Once he’d actually done it, he’d hated the act and himself. He took no pleasure from it. But he’d still wanted it. Just like I wanted to kill Stafford Pryor in the throne room.

A horrible thought struck him. Both times, it was someone who hurt Sansa. He looked at her peaceful, sleeping face, his blood turning to ice. In the moment he wanted to hurt Roslin, his thoughts were primarily concerned with Roslin’s children, but still, Sansa did play a part. And the whole situation was brought about because of the crime Roslin committed against his lover.

I’m changing, and I’m not sure… He didn’t want to think that his lover was causing him to lose his honor. Jon had no intention of following in the footsteps of the man who sired him, starting wars and going mad out of passion for a woman. But his aunt’s words the night of his fight with Pryor came back to him. “Blood of the dragon, Nephew.” His stomach turned. Am I changing because of the dragon, or because of the wolf?

He was interrupted from his thoughts by a loud knock on the door of his solar. Confused, Jon made his way through to the hall door and opened it. Sam stood before him, looking quite odd. His eyes twitched in various directions, at Jon, at the floor, at the walls.

“Sam? Come in,” Jon said, backing away. His best friend’s presence here at this time was odd, but Jon had already offended one old friend today. He’d welcome this one.

Sam hesitated before stepping in. In his hands, he clutched a glass bottle of milky white liquid.

“H-hullo, My Prince,” Sam gave a deep, ridiculous bow.

Jon’s eyes narrowed. Sam only addressed him by title in public. And he would never be inarticulate enough to say ‘Hullo’ instead of ‘Hello.’ And he didn’t bow like that either, not even to Daenerys.

“Are you alright?” Jon asked, disturbed.

“Oh, fine, fine!” Sam said, plastering a big, fake smile on his face that didn’t reach his eyes. He kept glancing at the windows and doors. Jon’s blood froze.

“Good…. What brings you here?”

“Well, Gilly told me that Sansa was here. So I brought this.” Sam held up the glass potion. “It’s the purging serum. From Tyene….”

There was a pause and Jon started trying to sum up their surroundings as soon as possible.

“… You know, the Sand Snake. It’s for purging the last of the poison out of Sansa.”

Jon stared at his friend’s panicked face, trying to send a silent signal that he understood. Trying to
keep a casual tone, he reached for the bottle and took it from Sam’s shaking hands. Pretend things are normal. “It was nice of you to bring it.”

“Tyene was too busy to bring it tonight. And… and she said that she thought you always looked at her funny, anyways. She thought you might feel more comfortable if I brought it to you, since you always seem to think she’s up to something treacherous.”

Gods, who is it? What do they have on you? Do they have Gilly? Little Sam? His friend was doing this surprisingly well, actually. Jon would wonder why Tyene wasn’t bringing it, and that sounded like exactly the sort of reason the Sand Snake would give for sending Sam. Sam was doing an excellent job of pretending to try and convince Jon things were normal. Only someone who knew them well enough could tell what was happening from a distance. Jon glanced at the bottle. The liquid inside was slightly yellowish, similar enough in color to the off-white substance Tyene usually administered to fool someone who hadn’t seen bottles of the serum several times a day for over a week. Unless one witnessed multiple doses, like Jon, one wouldn’t tell that it had been tampered with. If Sam’s speech and mannerisms wouldn’t have clued him in, the color of the liquid would. Gods, Sam, you’re a genius.

“Well, she’s a perceptive woman, even if she is a snake,” Jon tossed the serum in his hands, trying to seem as casual and nonchalant as possible. A tip-off to Sam that he got it. His best friend knew Jon would never act like this about Sansa’s treatment. “I can give it to her.”

“Tyene says I need to watch to make sure she drinks it properly.” Sam glared at him. Stall, Jon, please.

“Alright, but I--- um---- Sansa is… She’s making herself decent,” Jon blushed as he said the words. Everyone at court knows about us. Whoever is watching would probably believe the implication that she’s naked in my bedchamber. I suppose it’s the violation of our privacy to the rescue. “She’ll be out in a moment, I’m sure. You know how she is, always wanting to look her best for any visitors. She’d be mortified if you saw her the slightest bit disheveled now that she’s better.”

Sam gave him a look. Alright, you’re bordering on overselling it, Jon. Rein it in.

He sighed and walked over to his small dining table. “While we’re waiting, care to take a drink with me?”

He had some ale and wine in a small larder he kept by the window. It was a suggestion of Sansa’s, who insisted he had to be prepared to entertain guests. Jon set the serum down on the table and hurried over to the small cabinet.

Jon pulled out two cups. As he reached for the Dornish Red, he surreptitiously grabbed the dagger he kept in there. The larder was stocked to accommodate guests both welcome and unwelcome. That was a suggestion of Arya’s.

He managed to slip the blade up his sleeve and pulled the bottle out. A chill running down his spine, he went to sit, poured their cups, then sipped and threw his head back like he was savoring it. Really, he intended to check the bedchamber through his pet’s eyes.

He was on the soft bed, in the nice red room. He felt a kick to his side. It was fine. Just the pretty, sweet-smelling, red-furred mate turning over in her sleep. He looked around. He sniffed. He heard, saw, and smelled nothing. Nothing except the cinnamon and lemons and leather and… wait… was that something spicy? Definitely a spicy smell coming from… Oh no, nothing to worry about. He felt calm and sleepy and it was time to…
Ghost lost consciousness. A second later, Jon was back in his seat. It took him a couple of seconds to
get over the disorientation. Some of Ghost’s wooziness had crossed over. *Not good.* The sounds of
rumbling in the distance helped bring him back. The second he remembered, who, what, and where
he was, he stood. He moved towards the bedchamber, trying to seem calm. Before he could make it
there, though, the door to the hall and the door to his bedchamber burst open simultaneously. From
the hall charged in Arya, Barristan, Gendry, and a host of other guards. From the bedchamber came
Arienne Martell, Sansa, and Nym and Tyene Sand. Tyene and Arianne held Sansa up between them.

*How did they---?*

He became distracted once Nym began throwing knives in Sam’s direction. Jon immediately jumped
in their path to block them, managing to counter one of them just in time with his own blade.
Another sliced his cheek. A third flew past him entirely. Jon didn’t even remember seeing the third
one. He charged forward, furious.

“*STAY AWAY FROM MY FAMILY, YOU DORNISH VIPER CUNTS!*” Arya screamed,
charging towards them as well. Arya and Jon sped forward, out for Martell blood.

It seemed there was shouting all at once: from Sam, from Jon, from Arienne and the Sand Snakes,
even from Sansa.
Chapter Summary

The Sand Snakes get into trouble, Arya gets to play and monologue, and Sansa evaluates snow.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to my beta, BlueCichlid

Chapter Twenty-four: Cloak and Daggers

Jon:

In a flash, he saw that in Nym’s hand was yet another small throwing knife.

Jon tried to grab Arya, but he wasn’t quick enough. Arya was quick enough for him, but not quite fast enough to completely avoid Lady Nym’s blades. It grazed her ear.

Arya cursed, clutching the left side of her head. Jon bolted to grab her as Tyene shouted for Nym to stop. “That’s the prince’s sister!”

Guards brushed past Jon and Arya, charging towards the Martell women. Both Nym and Arianne seemed poised to attack again, but Tyene cried for them to just surrender. The three women relented quickly and let the guards grab them, Barristan actually picking Sansa up gently, bridal-style.

Assured that his lover was safe, Jon felt his older brother instincts take over and he inspected Arya’s wound. Parts of the flesh were broken, but not deeply. Deep enough to bring about plenty of blood, but not enough to cause serious damage. Jon reached for a handkerchief, but then he remembered he’d used it to mop up his hand. He cursed himself for the stupid wound.

“Arya!” Gendry hurried over and pulled Jon’s sister to him, looking terrified. “Are you… are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Gendry, you bull-brain,” Arya snapped, still clutching her ear, “I just got nicked.”

The knight immediately pulled out a black and yellow kerchief. He helped Arya mop up the blood.

Arianne, meanwhile, was crying out in protest. “It’s not what you think! We weren’t here to hurt the prince or the lady! We’re here to protect them! Someone came to poison her!”

“All right!” Nym said, gesturing towards Sam with yet another blade, which the guard holding her quickly snatched away. All three women were quickly patted down and a number of weapons were confiscated from each of them. Groaning, Nym pointed to the bottle on the table. “That’s a bottle of Tyene’s purging serum, but it’s been laced with something. He was the one trying to––”
“I didn’t! I was forced!” Sam yelped. “You have to catch him, now! Before he—–”

Ser Barristan immediately gave an order for a full search of the grounds. “The castle is to let no one out or in, gentlemen. We have a seriously dangerous assassin on castle grounds. Timmer, Derrick, send word. I want the whole castle looking for—–”

“Lyn… Lyn Corbray.” Sam said quietly. He began to cry. “He…. He’s taken Little Sam “

Jon’s blood froze. No, not Sam. Not the Little Monster. No… He at once hurried over to his crying friend.

His crying, bleeding friend as it turned out. One of Nym’s blades had gone right through his shoulder. Jon called out for Merys and tried to stop the blood, mopping it up with a nearby tablecloth.

“Jon…..” Sam said, clearly horrified. “Jon, he’s… he’s got my boy. We have to find my son.”

“It’s going to be fine, we’ll find him, Sam. I promise.” Jon held back tears. Gods, what if it’s already too late?

Remaining guards were dispersing as Barristan shouted orders. The ones holding the Martells started pulling them towards the door.

“No! Listen to us! We’re—–”

“Listen to us or the fat one dies! My blades are poisoned!”

Sam gave a loud gasp. Jon looked over at the Sand Snakes, furious. He was ready to slice all three Martell women open, politics be damned.

“It’s true!” Tyene said quickly. “And I know how to save him! But you must listen to us!”

“Listen to them, Jon!” Arya cried out.

Jon cursed and clutched his face. Three of us are cut.

Barristan set Sansa down on a nearby chair and grabbed Tyene, quickly taking one of the blades his man had seized from Nym and pressing it to Tyene’s throat. He ordered the men to do the same to the other Martells.

“You will not try anything underhanded, Snake,” he growled, “Or you, your cousin, and all your sisters will die by the same poison. So make sure you fix him properly.”

Tyene glared at Barristan. “What’s to keep you from doing that after I’ve helped him?”

“What’s to keep the Dragon Queen from throwing you to the dragons for attacking her only heir if you don’t?”

“Jon, promise to listen to them!” Sansa insisted, “They slipped into the bedchamber! If they meant to kill me, they would have done it already!”

“You have my word! You can defend yourselves,” Jon said. “On my honor as a prince and a Targaryen.”

Tyene sighed.
“Reach into my bodice,” she instructed Barristan, “Take the red vial. Pour most of it into Tarly’s wounds. Don’t pull the blade out when you do it, the anti-venom will neutralize the poison on it already, and the bloodflow is already partly restricted by the pressure, so keeping it in will kill the poison before it spreads too much. Dab a little on the others’ wounds, or they might not heal properly.”

Barristan nodded to another man who, looking uncomfortable, did as Tyene instructed. Gendry came over and absorbed some of the liquid onto his kerchief, applying it to Arya’s ear. Jon hurried over as well, dabbing a little onto his face and bring the rest of the bottle over to Sam. He poured it over the wound, careful not to spill or waste any.

Sam took deep breaths, keeping his eyes closed. “My boy, Jon… And… Is Gilly safe? Make sure Gilly is alright…”

“I’ve told them already to get your wife.”

“Good…” Sam glanced up at Jon. “It didn’t hit a major artery. I should be fine. Find my boy.”

Jon relaxed slightly. “Ever the attentive novice, Sam.”

“Find my boy, Jon.”

Sansa came over, shaking slightly and looking over at Barristan. “We must find him. If… If he’s the one I’m thinking of…”

“I know pretty much every passage in the Keep,” Nym offered then, looking alarmed, “My Aunt Elia, when she was princess consort, she explored and discovered secrets to this Keep that even the best of the Kingsguard didn’t know. She made special maps and gave the information to my father. We know the passages better than anyone. It’s how we got in here. We can help find the boy. There’s no way some Vale knight has any hiding places that we couldn’t find. My sisters and I, we’ll all help find the boy.”

“You can keep Tyene and I if you are worried about them trying anything,” Arianne offered.

_Arya knows some of the Keep’s secrets as well._ Jon looked over at his sister, who was sitting on the floor off to the side with her back against a practice dummy. She had her head back as Gendry clutched the kerchief to her ear and supported her body, her eyes completely white. _Already on it._

He sighed. “Fine. But you will take some guards with you.”

Ser Barristan nodded. “Waters, Denlon, follow Lady Nym and get more men to join you.”

Sansa walked over to Arya’s side and took Gendry’s kerchief from him. “I’ll watch her.”

Gendry nodded and followed Nym and Denlon out the door. Merys came in shortly after with a couple of assistants, some first aid supplies and a stretcher. Jon helped them load Sam and began to follow them out when Arianne shouted.

“You gave your word you’d listen to us, Prince Jon! I am Princess of Dorne, you cannot just haul me off to a cell!”

“L-listen to her,” Sam said, “I-I’ll be fine.”

“I’m not leaving you alone.”
There was another knock and a shaking, crying Gilly was brought in with more men in armor, Satin at their heels. Jon’s heart broke for her. She hurried to Sam’s side, fussing over him and babbling over her husband and son.

“My wife will be with me, Jon. You gave your word. You gave your word as prince. That means something.”

Jon told Merys to see to Sam himself. The man protested due to Jon’s need for stitches. Sansa offered to help one of his assistants. “I already stitched up Jon’s hand tonight. I’ve handled worse wounds in war zones.”

“I can also help,” added Satin.

Merys examined Jon’s hand and looked impressed. “Fine, Steffan, you help the Lady see to the prince and his sister.”

Gilly, Merys, and the other assistant hurried out with Sam and the guards Gilly had come with. Jon shouted orders for the Tarlys to be looked after carefully, and gave his friends his condolences.

Jon and Satin went to carry Arya over to Jon’s seat, while Steffan, Merys’s young, dark-haired assistant helped Sansa over. She sat in the middle of the wooden furniture piece, between Arya and Jon, who was instructed to sit as Steffan examined his cut and cleaned it. Jon tried not to move his face too much as Steffan brought out the needle and thread. Arianne and Tyene were brought closer so they could speak. But before they could, Daenerys burst in with a group of men, violet eyes practically ablaze, moving so fast her silver hair was flying out behind her, brandishing a Dothraki arakh. Jon jumped, from that and Steffan’s needle plunging into his cheek. Steffan cursed and almost dropped the instrument.

Jon recognized most of the men behind her: thin, muscled, dark-skinned, scarred, eyes completely focused. They wore black armor emblazoned with the Targaryen sigil. More and more men like this were seen daily in the Red Keep. Unsullied. Arianne and Tyene better speak quickly and well.

There was one man who was definitely not an Unsullied with them as well. If his size, obvious display of emotion and the fact that he was being held by two of Dany’s eunuch soldiers wasn’t enough of an indicator, there was also the fact that the very, very naked man’s cock and balls were very, very visible. It was especially hard not to notice considering that one of the eunuchs was holding a blade over the shaking prisoner’s flaccid genitals as securing as the one held to his neck. The man struggled against the arms that held him and whimpered through his gag.

Jon recognized the man. Daemon Sand, the blond, handsome Dornishman that Daenerys had been flirting with for a few weeks. I’m willing to bet it wasn’t the Unsullied who removed his clothes, then. On second thought, no. His aunt’s bedroom activities were none of his concern, and he didn’t really want to think about them. It’s too bad, though. She could use someone.

Dany brandished the arakh towards Arianne, pressing the tip to her neck. “Honestly, Princess, did you think this would end well for you?”

Jon could barely even feel Steffan’s needle.

Arianne remained still and looked Daenerys in the eye. “Saving the life of your heir’s intended? Yes.”

Dany scoffed. “Saving her life? By breaking into my nephew’s chambers?”

“We’d already checked her chambers and she wasn’t there. This was the next logical place.
Someone was coming to poison her.” Arianne told her.

Tyene nodded and spoke. “A short while ago, Sarella and I returned to our chambers and discovered that some of the purging serum we prepared for Lady Stark was gone. We had thirteen bottles when we had left the room last, we came back to twelve. No one else makes or delivers it to her but us, and I found that some of my Golden Gutter was taken as well. We instantly realized what must have happened and we hurried to the royal wing to try and prevent her being poisoned again. We swear it.”

“Believe it or not, Lady Tyene, your words don’t count for much,” replied Daenerys.

“Sam came in with a bottle of the serum,” Jon said, “He kept giving me signals, and the color of the serum was different, more yellow. He says Lyn Corbray is holding his son hostage and forced him to try and kill Sansa.”

“Your Grace,” Sansa said nervously, “Princess Arianne, Lady Tyene, and Lady Nym all entered Jon’s bedchamber without anyone knowing and had me alone. They’d even sedated Ghost. They could have slit my throat right then and there if they wanted to kill us.”

“We don’t,” Arianne insisted, “If we wanted either of them dead, we would have killed them by now. We have every reason to want to keep them alive. We broke into Jon’s rooms by passage because it was the quickest and easiest way to get in, take whoever the assassin was by surprise, and save them.”

“Why not alert the guard, then?”

Arianne frowned. “Actually, we sent my cousin Loreza to do that. But we also worried that since the person who stole Tyene’s things was obviously trying to frame us, that if we reported it we’d be under suspicion. However, if we personally saved the lady---”

“Right, because breaking into royal quarters certainly doesn’t put you under suspicion,” Daenerys deadpanned. “Or wounding my nephew and his sister.”

Arianne reddened. “That wasn’t supposed to happen. The blades were meant for Tarly, who we thought was guilty. Lady Arya and the men started attacking us all at once. But I held Nym back as quickly as I could.”

Jon looked heavenward. Seriously?

“Princess, you should have told the guards,” said Sansa quietly.

“Well, we weren’t even completely sure we could trust them. Whoever took my things could have easily been a guard to have gained access to my chambers, and to gain access to the royal wing. And frankly, we figured we’d probably get here more quickly, given our knowledge of the castle passages,” Tyene replied. “Also, I know more about poisons than anyone.”

She glanced at Barristan. “Reach into my bodice and take out the pink vial.”

Barristan hesitated, looking embarrassed, but he nodded to one of the Unsullied, who did it. Tyene sighed.

“I carry antidotes to various poisons with me everywhere in case I or someone I care about is ever dosed. Golden Gutter is very rare and quick-acting and the antidote is hard to make. Chances are I had the only dose of it in the Keep, and there’s no way Merys could have crafted it in time to save her.”
“And why should I believe this nonsense?” Daenerys replied.

Tyene sighed. “Someone bring the serum bottle here. I’ll drink it. Start doubling over in pain as it starts to wage war on my insides, and then you feed me what’s in the pink vial, and I’ll be injured and bedridden for a couple of days, but I’ll recover.”

Daenerys’s eyes narrowed. “No. I don’t trust you. I’ve heard of your art in building up a tolerance to various poisons, Lady Tyene. For all I know, the chemical would have no affect on you. Green Flea, bring me the bottle.”

“Your Grace, no!” Steffan cried out.

Daenerys rolled her eyes as Green Flea brought her the bottle. “I’m not going to take it myself, Boy, honestly.”

She opened the bottle and looked around the room. “Someone else can take it. And if they die… Well, I doubt you have a tolerance for fire.”

Green Flea stepped forward. “I will take it, My Queen. It would be an honor to die in service to Daenerys Stormborn.”

Dany hesitated. She glanced at Daemon Sand. “If she is lying, you must have had something to do with this, so I imagine you’d have the same tolerance she does. I bet you lot all train your bodies to resist these sorts of things. So while I’d prefer to risk a possible collaborator, I imagine that such a thing wouldn’t really prove anything.”

She sighed and glared at Tyene. “If you are lying, and my man dies, everything you hold dear will die with him.”

The blond didn’t move. Daenerys handed Green Flea the bottle. All of Jon’s nerves stood on end. He felt Sansa turn away and shudder.

Green Flea took the bottle and downed it all without a moment’s hesitance. Three seconds later, he was starting to shake. His hands went to his stomach.

“Give him the antidote!” Daenerys cried, looking terrified. Jon understood her fear. It took a lot to make an Unsullied shake. The vial was quickly uncorked and held to Green Flea’s lips. One of his fellow eunuchs pulled his lips open, tilted his head back, and poured the liquid down his throat. Green Flea managed to swallow. A few seconds later, the shaking stopped and the man straightened up as if nothing had happened.

Daenerys kissed his forehead, looking scared and angry with herself. She said a few words in Valyrian, and another Unsullied led him away. There was silence as they watched him go. Then Daenerys turned back to the Martells.

“And then, so you had an antidote. But it’s still hard to believe this when you harmed the heirs to the Empire and the North.”

“A misstep, Your Grace. We honestly meant to protect. We honestly don’t want any Stark or Targaryen dead. If we did… We’ve been treating Lady Stark for some time now. We’ve had a million opportunities. Why do it this way when we could get caught? We felt personally saving your nephew’s paramour might prove our loyalty,” Arianne said.

“My Queen, they’re helping us find Corbray and Sam’s son.” Jon said, actually ready to believe this. Arianne Martell and her cousins were known for embarking on reckless schemes, after all. He was
also desperate to use whatever means necessary to find Little Sam.

“Your rooms will be searched, you will be placed under guard until the investigation of Lady Stark’s poisoning is complete, and you will give all the secrets you know of the castle to Ser Barristan and myself. If and when we are satisfied that you have revealed everything, I will discuss terms for future consequences. This was a poor move. You will not die for it, but you will not profit from it either.”

Arianne and Tyene nodded, looking annoyed but resigned.

“We thank you for your mercy, Your Grace.”

“Don’t thank me yet, Princess,” Daenerys replied, “We’re still going to look into this. And I must ask—“

Daenerys gestured over to Daemon Sand, still squirming. “—Was this one involved in… whatever you were planning?”

“No, Your Grace.” Arianne said, glancing at Daemon nervously.

Daenerys groaned, reddening. “Dead Dirt, return Ser Daemon’s clothes to him and escort him back to his quarters safely. We’ll watch him as well, but he’s free. Princess Arianne, Lady Tyene, you are also dismissed. The other Sand Snakes are to return to their quarters once they’re done assisting in the search as well.”

Daenerys then noticed Arya, still white-eyed. “What is happening with her?”

“She’s—“ Jon searched his mind for an explanation. He’d been keeping Arya’s ability to warg a secret due to the conflict that took place between her and Daenerys.

“Oh Gods, she’s like you, isn’t she?” Daenerys rubbed her temple in frustration. “Another skin-changer. Are all the Starks like this?”

“No, I’m not. At least, I’ve never done it before,” Sansa said, “Jon and my siblings only learned how to do it through their direwolves. Mine was killed before I ever developed the ability.”

“I assume she’s looking for Tarly’s child?”

“I guess.” Jon shrugged. “She’s fine, though. We just need to protect her body while she’s gone.”

Barristan glared and Jon didn’t look at him. He knew the man was angry. Jon’s mind raced as he tried to process everything that had happened. Someone else tried to kill Sansa. Roslin must have lied. Corbray was another accomplice. Who else? He fumed.

Daenerys tried to relax. “Alright, we need to take all the Cobrays hostage. I assume a full search is in progress?”

“Yes, Your Grace, and I’ve already given the order for Lord Lyonel and Ser Lucas to be taken into custody. They’re probably being questioned as we speak.”

Jon stood. “I want it merciless, Ser Barristan. And wake Lady Roslin. It’s time we all had another talk.”

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Arya:
Daenerys had given her a nice little chamber in the cellar of the Red Keep for this. The only light came from torches. The floor was coated with straw so that her footsteps were quiet, and to absorb any fallen blood. There were a number of cats crawling around. Arya liked cats. They were clever and quick. And when she was in the dark, well, she could enter them and see with their eyes.

The room was mostly empty, saved for a small rack of special instruments and a couple of chairs. One was metal, nailed to the floor in the center of the room, with a removable seat. Another was just a simple wooden seat for her.

Sarella Sand had found Young Samwell Tarly tied up and gagged in a tunnel underneath near the lower baths. She brought the hysterical child back to his equally hysterical parents. When Arya saw him, he was crying and whimpering, wrapped in a blanket.

“He stole me like a girl. I kept telling him he couldn’t because I’m not a girl. He said that when he came back, he was going to treat me like a wife, girl or no,” Little Sam cried.

Sarella, Sam, and Marys all examined him. Little Sam insisted that Lyn hadn’t raped him ----“Yet”, and the examination did seem to line up with that claim. But Corbray had given his face and stomach a few bruises.

They ended up finding Corbray trying to steal a horse from the stables. Now he was tied up on the floor, naked, face-down in Arya’s new chamber.

“I’ll shove that stick up your bunghole and fuck you bloody!”

Arya really, really hated rapers. And she hated child-rapers even more. When she was with the Faceless Men, she was always especially enthusiastic about taking out the people who hurt the young.

Arya walked towards Corbray, clutching Needle in her fist, silent as a shadow, then jammed her foot down on his arm, hard. She then kicked him onto his side. He sneered up at her.

“Ugly cunt.”

“As if a man with your preferences would ever be able to tell a good-looking woman from an ugly one,” replied Arya, shrugging, “Apparently, you’re too busy looking at the boys.”

“Fuck you.”

“Oh, I doubt that’s something you’re interested in,” taunted Arya. She dragged Needle’s tip down the man’s chest.

She increased the pressure on the blade and began to draw blood. Then she moved the point to his face. “My sister’s told me a lot about you. Apparently, you’re quite the vain one. Well, there won’t be much to be vain about when I’m through with you. But I’ll make you look in a mirror regardless. And I’ll enjoy it.”

Corbray began to shake. Arya grinned.

“You know, I spent time as a boy myself. Not literally, of course. But when I was younger, before my teats and hips began to sprout up, I used to disguise myself as a boy. I was Arry the orphan boy. Sometimes they called me Lumpyhead, because, see, when I escaped from King’s Landing, the man who got me out chopped off all my hair. He didn’t do a good job, so my head looked lumpy. I traveled a lot. Met a lot of people. Some of them liked me too much, as a boy or a girl. I never liked them back.”
She withdrew Needle and then gave him a swift kick to the stomach. Corbray recoiled, cried out in pain, and sputtered. Arya then directed another kick to his groin. More cries. She grinned and forced him on his back. She stood over him, planting her feet on either side.

“One man once threatened to shove a stick up my arse and fuck me with it until I bled. Rorge was his name. I took this blade and plunged it into his heart. I was ten. At ten, I had already personally killed about a half-dozen men. Even the Hound, Sandor Clegane thought I was dangerous. I’m seventeen now. How dangerous do you imagine I am at this point?”

She shaved a piece of flesh off his chin. Corbray screamed and cried. Arya bent over, putting her face inches from him. “I’m very dangerous. I hurt and kill very easily. I’m not afraid of it, see. Even before I was a boy, I was never afraid of the sorts of things girls were supposed to be afraid of. I wanted to be a strong, powerful warrior. I wanted to be a hero like Aemon the Dragonknight or Ser Ryam Redwyne or Queen Nymeria of the Rhoynar. But see, that never happened for me. My mother and father wouldn’t let me learn to fight. And by the time I actually was allowed to hold a blade, my family was torn apart and I became a fugitive. I was flung into the dark, scary world, and I ran from people who wanted to hurt and kill and rape me. I stole and killed to live and eat and stay safe, to defend my friends. I saw and survived things that even some of the most hardened warriors wouldn’t believe. I even spoke to the dead. I’ve worn the flesh of my enemies.”

Arya cocked her head. “You see, I always knew I’d never be a lady. I wasn’t built for it. Sure, I had the right parents and the right bits between my legs that meant people had to call me ‘My Lady’ and try to make me into one. But even before I had to flee for my life from the capital, I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t sew or sing or dress right. I couldn’t curtsey. So I was never going to be gentle and sweet and ladylike. Not like my sister. And because of people like you, I didn’t become a hero, either. My brother Jon, he’s a hero. He can’t even make a hole in a murderer’s hand without hating himself. He rides on the backs of dragons, he saved the Wall, he helped the Dragon Queen destroy the White Walkers. And my sister, she’s a lady. She doesn’t like the sight of people in pain, she sings and sews, she’s very pretty and has perfect manners. But I’m not my brother. I’m not my sister. I’m not a lady, I’m not a hero. I’m not nice. I’m a very, very dangerous person who can happily rip out a man’s guts and smile as he screams.”

She plunged Needle into Corbray’s shoulder, angling the blade diagonally once it was in and digging out the flesh with it. Corbray screamed. Arya grew annoyed with this.

“I don’t want you screaming right now. I want to finish speaking.” She sighed and withdrew the blade. “I’ll plunge it back in if you don’t shut up and let me finish.”

The knight shut his mouth.

“Good. Now, as I was saying, I’m a really nasty sort. But I’m not heartless. Even though I can do unspeakable things, there are some things I still hold precious. You see, I in fact happen to love two people in this world very, very much.” She stepped over Corbray and began to pace. “I love my brother and sister. They’re my only family. My father, mother and brothers are all gone. And loving the ones I have left is really the only good, pure feelings I am capable of anymore. I love them fiercely. I love them so much, I even accept the fact that they’re fucking each other. As long as they’re alive and happy and healthy, I can accept anything. I can deal with anything. Knowing they’re alive allows me to feel like I’m not just some vicious animal. So when someone threatens them, well----“

She ran and jumped down, hard, landing her feet upon Corbray’s kneecaps. He howled and she bent over. “That’s when the animal comes back. We’re wolves, Corbray, and right now, you’re alone with the most vicious bitch of them all. So if I were you, I would talk. Because this is the
preliminary. This is what you get before you’ve even managed to refuse me answers. So now is the
time to tell me.”

Corbray took a deep, shuddering breath. He whimpered for several more seconds and Arya dug in
her heel. Then he began to speak. “I got involved with Roslin when I learned of Coldwater and
Moore’s plans to sack the Vale. She was the one who arranged to sneak their forces up the Neck, she
even gave arranged for ships to bring them into White Harbor. It’s how they got to the North so
easily. I arranged for the Vale Lords to accept the Riverlands guards that came with Sansa. Roslin
knew Edmure wouldn’t be convinced to do absolutely nothing, so she settled for making Piper a
guard in case the Vale Lords failed. I also made sure Piper and only Piper had special access to her.”

“Why?”

“I was in Littlefinger’s pocket,” Corbray gasped, “Stark knew things about me. And I am a
descendent of Edwyle Stark.”

“Your brother would inherit ahead of you.”

“Not a problem if I killed him. Roslin promised to get Edmure to support me as Lord of the North if I
helped her get rid of your sister.”

“Why did she protect you?”

“We both have secrets on one another. She knew about my ambitions, I knew about her hand in
helping the Vale Lords get to Winterfell. She helped them get into the North, even shipped them
some supplies. She protected me because she realize that exactly this would happen if she didn’t. She
knew I’d speak.”

“Who else was involved?”

“Piper, a couple of servants… That’s all I know, I SWEAR!”

She shaved some skin from his cheek. “I don’t believe you.”

“I SWEAR IT! I mean, Coldwater and Moore were involved in some of the arrangements to get
them to Winterfell, but I kept the poison a secret from everyone. I couldn’t risk those Waynwood and
Royce bitches finding out.”

“What about your brothers?” She stuck Needle back into the hole in his shoulder. Corbray howled.

“ALRIGHT! ALRIGHT! LUCAS! LUCAS KNEW!”

She withdrew Needle. “Lucas? Your younger brother?”

“I--- I--- I WOULD GIVE HEART’S HOME TO LUCAS ONCE I TOOK WINTERFELL!”

“And what did Lucas do?”

“LUCAS HAD ACCESS TO THE EYRIE TREASURY AND HAD THE MERCHANT
CONTACTS. HE HELPED PAWN ROSLIN’S THINGS, ARRANGED FOR THE POISON
TO BE BOUGHT AND DELIVERED, AND HELPED FUND THE OPERATION.”

“How?”

“MOORE WAS ALREADY STEALING GOLD, SO WE JUST SLIPPED OUR OWN
EXPENSES IN WITH HIS.”
“How did he make the contacts?” Arya started carving little designs into his chest.

“HE’S… HE’S….”

“What?”

“HE’S FUCKING LYONEL’S WIFE.”

“So Lady Corbray was involved as well?”

“She… she… she… I made Lucas keep her in the dark about what we were doing. He told her that we needed the contacts for any coming conflict if the families started fighting over Winterfell.”

“Did she know you intended to kill Lyonel?”

“NO. SHE THOUGHT WE WERE GOING TO MAKE HER LADY OF WINTERFELL ONCE STARK WAS EXECUTED.”

“And did she know about your dealings with Coldwater and Moore, gaining passage to White Harbor?”

“I DON’T KNOW. SHE MAY HAVE GUESSED.”

Arya shook her head. “Alright then. Thank you.”

She pulled herself away from Corbray and wiped his blood off of Needle with her shirt. “A maester’s assistant will be down soon to make sure you don’t die before I’m back tomorrow. I’ll have more questions. And if you don’t give me the answers I want, I’ll pound away at your cock and balls until they’re black with blood and then cut them off and show them to you. Have a nice evening.”

~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~

Sansa:

The Tarlys were all being kept in the royal apartments, under heavy guard, as was every close member of the royal household. Sansa was escorted everywhere by four Unsullied in addition to her Northern guards.

She was strong enough to move now. It had been a week since the Corbray attack. She couldn’t take too many outings without tiring herself, but if she took it easy, she was fine. Everything she ate and drank was tasted. Everyone she visited with was recorded. Everyone who came into her presence was noted.

The Corbrays sat in cells, as did Roslin Frey, Amos Piper, and various servants. The Martells were more or less under house arrest and would be until the investigation was wrapped up and the Corbray and Frey trials were complete. Jon still wasn’t satisfied.

Sam and Gilly stayed in their chambers with Little Sam, who clung to his parents’ clothing, jumped at every sudden noise, and was afraid to speak to anyone, especially any men who weren’t his father. He even hid from Jon. Being in the dark made him scream and cry and wet his pants. Being touched, even sometimes by his own parents, made him recoil like he was in pain. When it wasn’t Gilly or Sam, he’d cry out. He kept asking people to confirm that he was, in fact, a boy, and would sometimes check his pants with the same goal.
Sansa could barely stand to look Gilly or Sam in the eye after what happened. She forced herself to, though. She’d had a little boy she’d loved. And while thankfully Little Sam had been spared both rape and death, the danger was there, and the trauma. Sansa hadn’t had a sympathetic mother to speak to when Eddie was lost, and there were certain things only mothers could understand. She’d pined for someone who understood the idea of losing one’s son at the time. She’d gone without. But she couldn’t let Gilly do the same.

So though her stomach turned when she spoke to the woman, she did it nonetheless. She sat with Sam. She sat with the boy. She listened, she comforted. She hated every minute of it. Every terrible minute brought back terrible memories.

“I remember back before Sam… At the Keep. I grew up always knowing I was my father’s wife,” Gilly cried, “That my father would have me someday. And he’d put a baby in me, and if it was a boy, he’d want to put it out for the White Walkers. If it was a girl, she’d be raised to be his wife like her mother, grandmother, and sisters. I saw my sisters forced to let their babies either be taken by monsters or raped. I grew up and I kept thinking, ‘Not me, if I have a baby, boy or girl, I won’t let him do as he likes. No monster’s going to take or rape my babes. I won’t let it happen. It’ll be different for mine.’ When Sam was born and we got away, I was so happy. I thought, ‘I did it, I spared my baby. I protected him. I didn’t fail.’ And now that… that… he almost…”

“I feel like the worst mother,” Gilly sobbed, sitting on her bed and crying into the bedclothes. “I failed. I should have been watching him. I should never have let him out of my sight. He was crying for me in that tunnel and I wasn’t there.”

Sansa told her she couldn’t have known, that it was impossible for her to be there every moment. That sometimes things happened that you couldn’t control. All the things she’d told herself for months. But this time, when she said that the mother of the child wasn’t to blame, she meant it.

*It’s my fault. I should have realized what Corbray was.* When Petyr had said Ser Lyn liked boys, at the time Sansa had thought he meant “boys” in the way people referred to Sansa as a “girl” sometimes. Young males, yes, but not *that* young. Sansa had seen the “boys” of Petyr’s brothels before. She never saw a boy younger than her there. People called them “boys”, but they were sexually mature, almost men grown. Not children of six. That’s what she thought Petyr had meant when he talked about “supplying” Corbray.

Not that she’d ever given it much thought to begin with. Petyr would tell her so many terrible things, many of them Sansa tried to forget with varying success. Not the important stuff, but little details. Little details that were all starting to come back to her now. Like about the man who liked fresh corpses. Or the threats he made about “unprofitable” girls.

Sometimes, Sansa remembered things out of the blue that she was sure not have known before. There were so many things had happened in her life that she’d rearranged in her head, or changed. Sansa hadn’t thought about Lyn Corbray since her arrest, and she didn’t remember ever recalling the thing Petyr said about the boys.

But what happened had opened up all sorts of new, awful memories. Corbray’s arrest had reminded her of what Petyr told her. Which in turn made her wonder why she never addressed the fact that Lyn Corbray was a child-raper. Then she remembered what she’d thought when he talked about “boys.” Then she remembered why she thought the “boys” were in fact not little children. *Because I saw the “boys” Petyr tended to supply.*

*And the reason for that was because I was at the brothels.*

She’d actually blocked out most of the brothel visits. She’d only remembered going to a couple
Littlefinger owned in the Riverlands and the North to be hidden. But now she recalled more. She remembered the “lessons” with some of the girls to learn to “please her husband”… and “Father.”

Now she remembered literally being whored out to a couple of hesitant lords during the campaign, at their castles. Petyr had her bed them, and if they still held out, they’d threaten to accuse the man of rape.

Sansa mulled this over in her head as she sat in bed, needle, thread, silk and lace in hand. She’d ordered the material for her maiden cloak weeks ago, just before they’d found out about the poison. She’d been so excited, consumed by determination that it be as beautiful and perfect as possible. Ivory silk from Pentos. Cloth of Silver from Lys. Silver and white Myrish lace---- custom made to look like snowflakes. The very smallest crystal beads. It had all arrived six days ago, and when her head ached too much for her to go over letters and documents, she worked on the cloak. But she didn’t feel all that excited about it anymore.

She worked furiously, of course. She stitched on the little translucent beads here and there---- just enough to make it sparkle without being overpowering or tacky. The lace she had came in both ribbons and also in patches. But she wasn’t satisfied with the patches, pretty as they were. They all looked the same.

Every snowflake must be different, she told herself as she wove the silver thread through the white silk. The Myrish lacemakers don’t understand that. But when do they ever see true snow in Myr?

So she was altering each one, she didn’t have time to make all new individual pieces. That would take weeks and even if the patches weren’t all entirely different, they were still very pretty. Her hand was delicate enough to alter the foreign lace. And anyways, she’d spent a good deal of coin on the pieces as it was. It would be too much of a waste to do away with them altogether.

It has to truly look like snow falling. She told herself, trying to think of anything but Little Sam Tarly hiding under his parents’ bed. Of anything but Eddie’s crushed skull. Of anything but nursing her son at Flint’s Finger before going to some random hall to fuck Rickard Flint so he’d swear fealty to her as Queen in the North while Petyr watched from the shadows.

Snow. Snow. It has to look like snow. Pure, perfect, white, beautiful.

The cloak was starting to look exactly as she wanted it. Perfect. White. Pure. Innocent. Beautiful. So I can fool them all.

Eddie had been the last pure, perfect, part of her. The best of her. He was gone. His curly head crushed under iron-clad hands.

Why would anyone ever want to hurt a child? Want to despoil them? Little Sam now has to know how ugly the world is. Why couldn’t he just be allowed to keep his innocence? Why did he have to know that someone would want to hurt him like that? I didn’t know until I was twelve. He’s half that age. Couldn’t he at least have gotten twelve measly years?

How long will my children have? Can I keep my children safe for longer than six years? Can I give them innocence? I have to. I have to give them that. They need to feel happy and pure and innocent like snow. Like fresh snow. Perfect. My little snowflakes. I have to make something good. Something that’ll last. Something new and beautiful and different. It has to be different. I can make something beautiful. I have to…

She looked down at the silver lace snowflake in her hand. I need this just right. I almost have it where I want it, really. I’m almost there. Gilly’s almost there. Little Sam isn’t dead. He can live on if
everyone does right by him. If he’s taken care of. She’s a good mother, Sam’s a good father. If they’re helped, if no one messes up again, Little Sam should recover. He’s still good and pure. He can be helped. Someone can stitch him up right again. And nothing will ever have to happen to the other babes Gilly has, the other children. They’ll have more babies, too, who will be fine. Their babies will be fine. And my babes with Jon will be fine. And this snowflake will look exactly as it should----

There was a bump just outside the door and Sansa nearly jumped out of her skin. She pricked herself, drawing blood on her right thumb. *Not on the silk!*

The doorknob turned and Sansa almost swore.

“WAIT!” she cried out as the door began to open. She put the needle aside, folded up the silk, wrapped it in the special gauze covering she had for it, placed it in her sewing basket and slipped it under the bed.

“Can I come in now?” Jon asked, sounding glum and a little irritated.

Sansa sighed. She and Jon had reached a level of intimacy where they felt fully comfortable entering each other’s chambers unannounced, though he was more comfortable doing it to her than she was to him. At this point, their servants knew just to let them pass. Though their wedding was moons away, they already felt married.

And Sansa loved that. She truly did. The problem was that Jon would try to just waltz into her room sometimes when she was stitching her maiden cloak. And seeing the bride’s cloak before a wedding was bad luck. Sansa didn’t need bad luck.

“Come in!” She stood up and got back into bed as Jon walked in, looking miserable.

“I swear to the Old Gods and New, Sansa,” He said as he fell onto the bed, still in his boots and riding leathers. “If I have to see one more child cry and hide away… Absolutely miserable.”

He still had the leather cap on his head, too. Sansa ripped it off his head and started smacking him with it. She was so, so angry with him at that moment.

He pulled away, alarmed. “What… what’s… what did I do?”

“Oh, is it *miserable* for you, Jon? I’m so sorry. I mean, it’s not like you’re currently surrounded by people who have all had their families threatened recently or anything. It’s not like your best friends just had their child kidnapped and nearly raped.

“I’m so sorry that a couple of little children don’t like you. After that boy was almost molested and that girl just had her family life torn apart, they should really make an effort to get to know you better and be a bit more respectful of your feelings. I mean, all of us who have endured molestation and kidnapping and the loss of our children should really be happy for Prince Jon. How *miserable* you must be.”

He winced, honestly hurt. “I wasn’t talking about myself. I meant for them.”

She stopped hitting him. Her arms fell. “Oh…”

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry,” she glanced down, “I just…”
“You’re angry.”

“Yes.”

“So am I.” Jon looked down at the bedspread. “I went out to the practice yard and destroyed one of the practice dummies. Then I took Rhaegal out.”

“Where is Arya?”

“I’m not sure. She’s probably either out with Gendry or…”

“I thought Daenerys cut her off from the Corbrays.” After two days in Arya’s playroom, everything had been divulged. Now, Lyn was recuperating so he’d be fit to stand trial. Lady Corbray and Ser Lucas only had to take one look at the man before they revealed everything. Arya wasn’t allowed any more suspects. Sansa had heard what had been done, and while she had no sympathy for Ser Lyn, she feared for her sister.

“No, I meant that she’s probably warging.”

Sansa shuddered. “She does that too much, Jon. It’s not healthy.”

Sansa wasn’t sure how to deal with Arya. No one was. Even Jon seemed afraid.

“I know, but she won’t listen to me. And she won’t speak to me about it. Can you…?”

“I’ll try.” Again.
Discussions Concerning Balerion

Chapter Summary

Jon and Sansa indulge in some dirty talk, and their talk with Daenerys after causes some discomfort.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bluecichlid for beta work.

We get back to some Jon/Sansa loving, thank god. I missed writing sex. Also, some stuff arises politically.

Next chapter will be very Arya-based.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Five: Discussions Concerning Balerion

The thought came to her before dawn. *Jon and I haven’t made love since the council chamber.*

Sansa was almost at complete strength now. While she grew weary and had to take breaks, she was back on a full schedule. She made her first public appearance since her confinement four days ago, hearing petitions with Daenerys, Barristan, and Jon in the throne room. Before that she was already taking private meetings.

Yesterday, she’d gone over some new council candidates, answered letters, met with Daenerys and Jon regarding the wildlings, took lunch with the Tyrells, confirmed all financial edicts regarding the North, took tea with Anya and Randa to confer on the upcoming Frey trial and the selection process for the new lord of the Eyrie, worked on her maiden cloak, and took dinner with Jon and Daenerys.

Today, she had a fairly full afternoon and a quiet morning planned. She had to go over testimony with Barristan, have a meeting about council selections, finalize marriage agreements, plan her upcoming progresses both North and in Essos, and begin in earnest regarding the multiple weddings she and Jon had to stage in order to satisfy each major section of the empire.

Sansa felt pleased, back in full form. Except for one thing. She’d felt like that some part of her day was still missing… It took waking to the sensation of Jon’s cock poking her in the hip and a telltale ache in her loins for her to realize what it was.

*I’ve been more than healthy enough to make love for over a week now. Why hasn’t he initiated anything?* Her stomach sank.

Sansa jumped out of bed and ran to her dressing table, opening a drawer and finding the store of mint leaves she kept to freshen her breath. Sansa slipped off her nightgown, pulling on her dressing gown
instead. She paused to examine her reflection, clipped one of her hairpieces in, and ran a comb through it all. She heard Jon groan and turn over, and quickly scurried back to bed.

He was on his back now, and Sansa knelt beside her lover. She observed him for a few moments. The cut on his face was healing, slowly. The stitches would leave a scar, but Sansa didn’t mind. Scars looked well on her husband-to-be. It wasn’t like he lacked a nose, like Tyrion had.

It was a sad thing to see that beautiful, clear skin of his marked so. Jon had excellent skin: Stark skin. The Starks were fair but clear complexioned. Physically, Sansa took after her mother in almost every way but one. When Lady Catelyn went through her early teens, when she was pregnant, under great stress, or her moon blood was upon her, she broke out in spots.

Robb, unfortunately, had the same issue, as did Uncle Edmure. He had awful acne for about two years, at age twelve and thirteen. Sansa always feared she’d end up the same way. But somehow, she’d never had the same sort of problems her brother suffered.

Jon never broke out, either. She also remembered that whenever she’d watch Robb and worry about breaking out like him that she’d look at Jon and hope for his skin instead. It was always so clear, smooth and perfect.

Now, his right hand and arm were stained with the burns he’d sustained saving Lord Commander Mormont from that White Walker. Little silvery scars decorated his left eye, a souvenir from an eagle sent to attack him from some savage wildling warg. More larges ones marked his neck, belly and chest from where the night’s watchmen had killed him. And now he would gain another, courtesy of Nym Sand’s blade.

Too many scars. His were beautiful in their own way, though. On him they shone silver, like comets shooting across a creamy sky. Sansa didn’t mind their appearance at all. It’s the pain behind them that bothers me.

She wanted to give him a beautiful, lovely life free of any more of that pain. He lived a life of pain and his brothers killed him. But he was brought back to life, and this one should be of beauty, happiness, and pleasure. She wanted to make him happy and make more happy people with him.

Jon and Daenerys kept saying this was a new age, and Sansa hoped they were right. The “old age” she’d been born in had always been either awful or dull. She wanted a world made new, the sort of world her family deserved.

Sansa wanted to be a part of that new world, and be one of the beautiful, wonderful things in it. She always wanted to be beautiful for Jon. Weeks of throwing up, sweating, and hallucinating in front of him, though, made her worry that her chances of that happening were ruined. Maybe I can make him want me again.

She bent over him and opened her robe, letting her breasts fall out. Placing each hand on either side of his head, she hovered over her lover, letting her nipples brush his cheeks, nose, lips, and beard. Sansa stifled a giggle as his face twitched. His eyes fluttered open. Both of them smiled.

“If I am to wake like this every morning,” Jon remarked, his voice still a little hazy, “Then I’ve made an excellent match indeed.”

He latched onto her left breast and sucked. Sansa gasped, her lower belly gathering in a tight coil.

“You haven’t made the match yet,” she said roughly, pulling herself back. Her breast exited his mouth, leaving him pouting. “So I suppose you aren’t ready for the multitude of ways I could wake
She pulled away and began to close her robe. Jon sat up and cleared his throat, suddenly very much awake.

“Multitude?”

She threw her head back and laughed, turning away from him but looking back, her legs folded under her. Sansa pulled a ribbon from her pocket and gathered her hair, real and fake, over one shoulder to expose her neck, weaving the hair into a braid.

“Aye,” she said, casting him a sultry look. “A multitude, if you wish to learn them.”

“I wish that very much,” he said hoarsely, his gaze heated. Sansa felt a bolt of energy rise within her. That twitching in her core seemed to spread, seeing him look at her like that.

“And you wish to learn them from me, then?”

“Who else?”

“Someone pure and untouched, perhaps? Some sweet noble virgin with perfect teats?”

“I don’t want any sweet noble virgins. Only you. You’re sweet, and you’re pure. Pure-hearted,” He came towards her, wrapping his arms about her and pulling her robe apart again, cupping her breasts. “And you’re strong and clever and shrewd and brave. My brilliant, brave beauty who conquers castles, courts, kingdoms, plots, and poisons.”

He grabbed the sides of her arms and turned her around firmly, his gaze burning through her. A hungry smirk played at his lips. “Can some random sweet noble virgin claim that?”

“N-no.”

“No. And I doubt they could teach me all that you can teach me. About all the pleasurable ways to wake, and many other things. And as for your teats…” Jon dipped his head down and latched onto one again, taking one in his lips and sucking. Sansa felt her nipples harden as Jon lavished attention on each one before lifting his head. “They’re heaven.”

“Blasphemy,” she whimpered, loving this.

“No, I think the High Septon himself would have to agree if he saw you like this. But he hasn’t, which is why I’ve got the advantage. I’ve found the seven heavens the Faith is always blathering on about right here.”

“I have two breasts, not seven,” she replied with a giggle.

He took both of them in his hands. “Well, the bosom only counts as one.”

“Mmmm…. And the others?” This interested her. She loved hearing him speak like this. Jon wasn’t a man of many words, though he was more talkative with her than he was with most. And in bed, he babbled like mad. It never failed to be endearing. Right now, what she needed was to hear extended praise from her normally soft-spoken lover.

He leaned in then and kissed her braid. “There is also that fire-kissed hair of yours.”

“Two.” She counted, blushing.
Then he laid a sweet kiss upon her lips. As he pulled away. Sansa shivered and leaned in, wanting more of his lips. But he leaned back and cupped her face, smiling. “There is that exquisite face, with that white skin and pink lips and those big blue eyes.”

“Three.” She wondered if he’d really thought this through. It was fun watching him struggling to find seven places to lavish attention on. Jon was the first to admit he was no poet. But watching him try was quite appealing. Knowing that he may have had such thoughts helped to slay her insecurities one by one.

It proved more than stimulating in addition to being affirming. Sansa no longer had much love or use for the pretty words, poems, and songs she’d loved and craved from courtiers and singers as a girl. Not after years of the hollowness of those romantic ditties and cloying flatteries being proven false to her in the most extreme of ways.

But there was still a part of her that loved words, praise, and expressions of love and passion. Right now, that part of her was possessing her entire being and burning to hear Jon’s words. These were not the proclamations of a court troubadour or courtier motivated to flatter a lady’s ego by custom, profit, or any other form of selfish intent. These were the raw, honest statements of a man who loved her. He meant what he said and lacked any sort of pretense, not trying to whitewash or manipulate his thoughts via flowery wordplay.

Sansa arched her back and pressed herself against him, her entire being alight with a fiery need to touch him. She loved feeling the hard warmth of his body against hers. She just wished he didn’t have his tunic on so she could feel her bare skin up against his, rub her breasts against the bare planes of his chest and the coarse dark hair that decorated it.

He grinned, then burrowed his face in her neck. “Your neck. Your long neck that holds up that lovely head of yours.”

“Four.”

He reached down and gripped her arse roughly. “There is this soft little piece of you. I love it. I don’t get to see it enough, hidden under all of those skirts you wear. But I love how soft it is. I love grabbing it when I make love to you.”

“Five.” She squealed. She loved it when he grabbed her arse, and frankly, she liked grabbing his. She’d thought such pleasure odd and depraved. But apparently, Jon had similar interests, so it seemed less shameful all of a sudden. “Keep talking Jon, please…”

His fingers scurried down her arse to her thighs, which he then stroked with his fingertips, conjuring shivers from the Lady of Winterfell. “There are the legs, longer than the Kingsroad. Legs I’d gladly have wrapped around me for the rest of my life. Legs I always want to see. Or be between.”

“S-six.” She shuddered, knowing what was next.

But Jon pulled away then. Sansa almost yelped from the sudden lack of contact. He smiled at her wickedly.

“Then there’s what’s between them,” he said, his eyes zeroing in between her legs with relish. He even pointed, though a couple lengths of white silk from her still partially fastened robe blocked it from view. “I bet it’s wetter than the Trident right there.”

Sansa could actually feel her arousal running down her inner thighs. “I—I—“

“Wetter than the Trident, and yet, still kissed by fire. And just as hot,” he said huskily. “Pull that
thing off. Show me. Please, show me your soaking, burning cunt...”

Sansa yelped to hear him speak so. But it ignited something within her. Feeling like a blushing maid, she lowered her shaking hands, undid the belt on her robe, and pulled the garment off, baring herself to him.

She’d been naked before him a thousand times now, but this was somehow different. Sansa felt like it was the first time. There existed an immense vulnerability, but for the first time, it wasn’t one that bothered her. Indeed, she almost delighted in feeling so exposed before him.

It was safe, yet free. She felt pure, yet wicked. She felt strong, yet very feminine.

She saw the knob on his throat bob as he swallowed. “A-and that’s seven. Gods, I could live and die by that sweet little cunny.”

Sansa felt herself ache for him. His touch. His smell. His body against hers. His mouth. His cock. But when he moved towards her, she pushed him away. He whined, but withdrew. And she smiled. *Jon will always move away if I push him, if I say no.*

But she wasn’t saying no to him. “If you want to enjoy my heavenly delights, My Prince, you’ll have to share your own.”

She wanted to do for him what he just did for her. She wanted to catalogue all the most beautiful parts of him and make him feel the way she did.

He reached for the hem of his shirt. “I’m afraid I have nothing that can compare, My Lady. My own attributes are only of this earthly realm. I’m no beauty. Just a poor bastard. No heavens for me.”

But he pulled his tunic off. When he reached for his smallclothes, Sansa stopped him again.

“I’d disagree with you, Jon Snow,” she said, grinning wickedly. She came closer to him, earning a groan, and reached for his hair. “There are these soft, thick shackles which I love to run my fingers through.”

“One.” He gasped.

She cupped his cheeks. “There is this handsome face. Those dark, rich, deep eyes that always make me feel like you can see my soul. Those cheekbones,” she said, running her thumbs along them before moving to his lips, “And this wonderful mouth that makes me squirm whenever I think about it.”

“Two.” Jon now squirmed a bit himself. Sansa could feel his cloth-restrained hardness poke her hip.

She stroked the broad planes of his shoulders and ran her fingers down the rest of his firm upper limbs. “These big, strong, muscled shoulders and big, strong arms that hold me so gently, but so firmly.”

“Three.” His cheeks were a little red.

She moved to his chest and traveled to his navel, stroking, kissing, grabbing at certain erogenous zones. He shivered and shook. Sansa grinned. She wanted him to feel good, she wanted him to feel as good about himself as he’d just made Sansa feel.

“Your torso. I love your chest and stomach. I love how strong they are. I love those little silvery scars and I love the coarse hair you have. I love running my hands over your form, I love rest my head on
it. Your body reminds me I’m with a true man. A man who loves me and can protect me. Someone strong and powerful.”

“Four.”

Then she threaded her fingers through his, pulling his hands up over his head and leaning forward and kissing him deep before pulling back from him, gasping. “I-I love your hands and fingers. I love how they touch me. I love how they move. I love the wicked things you do with them. I love thinking about what they do to me.”

“Gods, Sansa,” Jon gasped, “Five.”

She pulled her hands away, reached around, and grabbed his arse then, just as rough as he grabbed hers. “I love this arse of yours. It’s perfect.”

“SIX.”

She repositioned herself so his cock was pressed between her legs, rubbing her slickness against the fabric of his smallclothes. She reached between them, and gave it a little stroke, feeling it twitch. Jon groaned. Sansa pulled away then, delighting the way he appeared downright pained by the sudden loss of contact.

“Then there’s Balerion,” she said, “Your--- your cock. Take off your smallclothes and show me. I want to see how much you want me, how hard it is.”

He scrambled to undo his underthings, parting the laces and springing his manhood free and yanking the garment off before kneeling in front of her again. Sansa shivered.

“You know, yours is the best I’ve had or seen, or could even imagine,” she said, meaning it. She’d told men before that she’d liked their cocks, praised them. All men took pride in their manhood. But unlike with Petyr or Harry, talking about it wasn’t something that was demanded of her, or something she felt obligated to do in order to manipulate someone. She honestly meant it now. And she wanted to tell him just for the sake of making him feel good.

Jon grinned. “Seven?”

“Oh yes, definitely seven,” she said, her eyes zeroing in on it. Balerion stood out proudly from its patch of dark curls. It was a pretty member, the first one she’d ever seen that she actually truly enjoyed looking at. “Balerion’s big—” he grunted at this and she smiled, “—but not monstrous or awful. He fits me, and he’s got a master who knows how to use him. And I don’t just love looking at him. I love taking him inside my cunny. I even enjoy sucking on him.”

“Gods, Sansa!” He looked desperate now.

“I do, Jon,” she said, enjoying this game, enjoying the filthiness of her words. It shocked her, actually, to hear her speak this way willingly, but it excited her. “I love your cock. And I love that he’s all mine.”

“All yours,” he said gruffly, “Now get your perfect arse over here and show it some love. It’s gone long enough without you.”

“I can see that,” she replied tartly. He gave her a slight smile despite his yearning gaze.

“You’re a wicked thing.”
One of the things she loved about this moment was that he made no move to grab her. There was no sign of resentment or ill will. He was clearly desperate for some gratification, but Sansa was sure she could put her robe back on and end this right now if she wished. Jon would pout and be dreadfully disappointed and more than a little frustrated, and leave to finish himself off or even bathe in cold water to quell his passion. He might be a little put out that she’d put him in such a state only to spurn his advances, but he’d never try to make her feel like she was obligated to do something for him.

She grinned grabbed his shoulders, and pushed him onto his back. She grabbed the belt for her robe and tied his hands up above his head. “Like the first time,” she said huskily.

“I love you.” He choked.

“Don’t come until I say,” she instructed.

“As my lady wishes.”

She impaled herself on him and watched in delight as he shook and cried out. Jon bit his lip and Sansa leaned down to kiss him deep as she rode him. For a while their tongues wrestled with one another. Sansa loved the taste of his mouth. Even though it was morning and his breath was a bit sour, it was Jon’s version of sour. She didn’t care. It gave her a little thrill. And knowing his breath was stale made her feel less self-conscious.

When they had to pull away for air, Sansa took his lower lip between her teeth, sucked it, nibbled, then pulled away, leaving his mouth delightfully bruised. He stared up at her with reverent eyes. And her heart burst.

*That night in the council chamber could have been the last time,* she realized. *If I had died... All the things I would have never said to him, that I haven’t said to him. About how I love him, about I how I love to make love to him. I left so many things unsaid with so many others.*

Sansa would not make that mistake again. *Not with Jon.*

“Jon, I love you so much,” she babbled as she rode him, feeling the pressure build within her, “I love how you make me feel. I love how I make you feel. I---“

“I love you, Sansa.”

She stopped him with a finger to his lips.

“Please, Jon, let me tell you all I can tell you before I peak,” she said, tears building up in the corners of her eyes, “I love your smiles, I love your joy, I love your heart, I love your eyes, I love your strength, I love your mind, I love your soul. I love how you listen. I love your goodness. I love your darkness and weakness. I love your scars. I love your brilliance, and I love your failings. I, oh---“

She was getting close.

“I love your cock inside me. I love it when you come, when you find your release. I love giving that to you. I love giving *me* to you. I wish I could give you more and I----oh, oh!” He’d done something, hit something within her with a shift of his hips. “Oh! Oooohhhhhh! JON!”

She found her release then, quivering around him. She threw her head back for a second, letting it wash through her. When she recovered and looked down, she could see Jon’s eyes shut tight, his lower lip between his teeth. He seemed to be measuring his breathing.

*He’s trying not to come. Because I haven’t given him permission yet. What other man would do such*
a thing? She actually let tears fall now. She loved him so much.

She lifted herself off of him, missing the feeling of him there. But she got over that and scooted down his body so she became face to face with Balerion. Her dragon was almost purple now with need. “Tell me how good it feels and come when I twist your nipple.”

And then she engulfed his cock in her mouth, taking as much of him in as she possibly good. Jon cried out in wild pleasure. “OH GODS SANSA!”

She hummed, holding his hips down and loving the taste of him. She didn’t mind the pressure on her throat muscles, she loved being filled with him. She loved watching him go mad like this. His face was twisting, desperate. Tears were building up in his eyes. All for me.

“Oh, gods, Sansa…. So… so good,” He said through clenched teeth. “You’re perfect, my wonderful, gorgeous girl. Your cunt is so hot and tight and slick and your mouth is so warm and sweet and clever. My cock feels like it’s being worshipped by the gods themselves. In your cunt, in your mouth… Like the Old Gods and New… Oh Gods… That clever little tongue… Love you… Brilliant, beautiful girl with her clever tongue… Love that clever mouth… Love that wet, burning cunt… Love you so much… OH GODS… Let me come, Sweetling, please. It’s too good. I can’t take anymore. OH! Sansaaaaa…”

Her heart soaring, she reached up and twisted his nipple.

“OH GODS!!!!! SANSAAAAAA!!!!!!!”

She pulled her head back, and he came with a powerful gush. Most got in her mouth, some got on her chin and the sides of her lips. The Lady of Winterfell lifted her head so he could see, even opening her mouth a little.

Sansa knew it was filthy, but she wanted him to see. She wanted him to see her taking him in and letting herself be wet with him, wearing him proudly and swallowing him whole. After noting how his eyes flashed when she opened her mouth, she swallowed some and licked the rest from the outside of her mouth.

Putting the salty liquid to the side of her mouth, she spoke. “May I kiss you?”

Jon had done a similar thing with her many times before, licking her cunt and drinking her fluids, then kissing her deep so she could taste herself on him. She wanted to do something like that now. It was a strange urge, but one that seized every inch of her. The thought of sharing an experience of hers with him in a manner so similar to what he did when he brought her pleasure set her nerves ablaze. It was so filthy, so improper, but she couldn’t resist asking. And, most importantly, she wasn’t afraid to ask.

“Yes…” He whispered.

She descended upon him, kissing him with and open mouth. They merged tongues and he accepted this whole-heartedly, tasting himself. My brave man.

They kissed for what felt like forever before finally having to break away. Sansa’s body was abuzz. Sighing in satisfaction, she calmly relaxed against him for a couple of seconds, then reluctantly sat up, untied him and started moving away.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Jon inquired with a growl, wrapping his hands around her waist. Sansa looked at him in shock.
“But we’re finished...”

“I don’t think so, do you? I didn’t get to use my mouth. Or is my lady bored with my tongue?”

She squealed. “Never.”

And with that, Jon pounced on her, pushing her onto her back, pulling her legs apart and planting his face in her crotch. He licked her wildly until she became a quivering wreck, crying out and shaking with the force of her pleasure, squirming and gripping the pillows. When she slammed her eyes shut, he pulled away, causing her to cry out in protest.

“Look at me,” he said hoarsely. “Look at me when I lick your cunt. I want you to watch me as I make you come apart. You close your eyes, I pull away. I don’t lick you unless I get to see those beautiful blue eyes staring at me while I do.”

Sansa whimpered, but held his gaze. He smirked, lowering his mouth to her, not once tearing his deep, dark eyes from her as he bent down again to lick her cunt. She gasped, watching him. All of a sudden, he was less ferocious and more methodical, showing off.

Jon parted her lower lips with his fingers and Sansa could just see the tip of her pink nub poking out, as if reaching for that wonderful mouth. She tried bucking her hips, but he held her down.

He even parted the hood of her nub then, leaving the core bead of pleasure fully exposed before he stuck out his tongue and prodded it with the tip. Sansa practically shrieked, struggling not to look away or close her eyes. It was sharp, like her whole body was a lute string pulled too tight, and Jon’s tongue was a harsh strum, about to cause that string to break.

Jon kept strumming, but with more generous licks. It was equal parts agonizing and blissful as he increased pressure and speed. Sansa struggled to keep her eyes open. She absolutely adored the intent, heated, loving look he was giving her. Those were eyes that begged her to let him worship her, to watch as he did. He wanted her to see and know just how much he wanted to bring her joy, watch him as he achieved that end. Watch how much I love you. Watch how much I want you to feel good.

She threaded her fingers through his lovely hair and held on. She held on to him, to his gaze, to his head, to his soul, to his heart. When she peaked, it was like a bolt of lightning struck her. She watched his beautiful eyes, his beautiful heart the entire time, even as her vision got blurry, she forced herself not to close her eyes. They rolled back a bit, though. She couldn’t stop that as she lost full control.

It took several seconds for her to come down. When she did, she looked to see Jon’s head resting there, his eyes ablaze. He gave her vulva a little kiss, then climbed up her form.

“Did that feel good, Sweet Girl? Did you like that?”

“I loved it. I always love it,” she gasped.

“The way you moved and shook, the way you cried out...” He groaned. “Perfection.”

“You’re perfection, My Prince.”

“I’m not your prince. I’m your bastard boy,” he grunted, “You’re my lady, and I’m your bastard boy.”

“With the black curls and the white wolf.” She giggled.
“Aye.”

“And why can’t you be my prince then, when we’re in here?”

“Because I like being the bastard boy when I’m with you. It makes me feel powerful,” he replied. He rocked his hips against her. To her shock, he was hard once more. So soon? “Let me make love to you again, please, My Lady. Let me come inside you.”

Feeling a bit powerful herself, Sansa gleefully opened her legs. “Fuck me, bastard boy, please. Fuck your lady, Jon Snow.”

He sheathed himself in her gently. They kissed softly, sweetly, as he rocked into her.

“I may not last long,” he told her. She kissed him and whispered in his ear.

“Talk to me, Jon Snow,” she whispered, “Tell me how you love me. Tell me how you want me. Tell me what you want to do to me. Make me come with your words.”

“You want to hear your beloved bastard boy tell you how he loves you?” Jon asked, breathing heavily as he moved above and within her. “Your bastard boy loves your heart and soul. When I’m with you, it’s like we never left home. It’s like an eternal summer. Not just when we’re coupling, but when I hear you speak, when I see you smile, when I touch your hair or hold your hand… And you’re all mine and I’m all yours.”

She squeezed him to her so tight she worried she might hurt him. She didn’t come, but she felt fantastic. Her peak this time was emotional, not physical. Jon spilled within her not with a shout, but with a moan and a sigh, his body freezing as his seed exploded within her. Sansa’s toes curled at the sensation.

As they both relaxed, falling into a delightfully tangled pile in the sheets, Sansa relished the dull, sweet hum that echoed through every nerve. She relished him, draping herself across his chest and resting her head on his shoulder.

He smiled down at her, his eyes less like flames and more like smoldering coals. “You’re an adventurous woman, Sansa Stark.”

She snorted. That was not a word ever used to describe her. She said so.

Jon laughed. “Well, maybe not out there. But in here. You seem to become more daring once you’re out of your precious silks.”

“I’m only adventurous when I’m with you. I’m the sensible one. You’re just a bad influence.”

“Well, I suppose I wouldn’t be the first Targaryen prince to lead a Stark lady astray,” he replied, nuzzling her forehead and kissing it gently.

“I thought you weren’t a prince in here. I thought you were Jon Snow the bastard boy.”

“Mmmm. Maybe I’m changing as well.”

“Jon…”

“Hmm?”

Sansa glanced up at him, one of the things he’d said flashing into her mind. “You said that being my bastard boy made you feel powerful. As opposed to being my prince? How exactly does that work?”
“I imagine that it would be easier for a prince to find his way into a lady’s bed. But for a bastard boy to be granted the favors of such a great lady as yourself, well, there must be something special about him.”

“Oh, there is,” she giggled, nuzzling his neck. “Your wickedness.”

“My wickedness, eh?”

“Yes. The words you say and the thing you do with your mouth…”

He laughed then. “As I recall, your mouth was fairly active as well, My Lady. In fact, I had to pull you back into bed to use my own.”

“You’re always so eager to do it, though,” she said, “Sometimes, I swear, getting you to surface is a battle.”

“It’s because you taste so good. And I love how you squirm when I do it. I find that very gratifying as well. The Boltons, Freys, and Lannisters couldn’t take down the Red Wolf. But I can reduce her to pieces with just a few licks.”

“You’re one to talk. You battled the assembled forces of the Wildlings, killed White Walkers and battled the Night’s King. You came back from the dead and you ride dragons. The great dragon prince, the former Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. Heir to the Targaryen Empire. And all I have to do is put my mouth to you, and you’re begging me for mercy.”

“Hmmm, maybe we should tell the world. No more need for armies and swords. The best way to conquer is in the bedroom, not the battlefield,” he replied.

“Indeed. Not to mention a kinder way as well. But then, not all lovers are as good at it as we are.”

“No. A pity, that.” He glanced downward for a second. “You are a sweeter lover than most, with your sweet words that go along with that lovely form.”

“You had some sweet words of your own.” She reminded him.

“Aye, but what else was there to say? I meant every one of them, and I had to say them. But you were kind to try and match mine, sweet.”

“I wasn’t just trying to match what you said,” she replied crossly. “I meant every word.”

He looked like he doubted this. Sansa frowned.

“Why wouldn’t I mean it?”

He shrugged and gave a nervous chuckle, blushing a bit. “You never… I mean, I’m no fair, golden-haired knight. I’m all marked up and hairy and dark and—–”

“—Strong and handsome,” she interrupted, her eyes wide. This never occurred to her before. She’d never met a truly handsome man who was unaware of his appearance. That any man could be insecure of such a thing never occurred to her. It was always women who felt the pressure to be beautiful, in her experience. It was never a great concern for the men she knew of. “Jon… you’re beautiful.”

He snorted.

She frowned and sat up. “But you are! You’re very handsome!”
“No, Jaime Lannister, Robb, Loras Tyrell, they were---”

“They were and so are you. Just because you’re not golden and fair doesn’t mean… Do you think I’d be sharing your bed if I didn’t find you desirable?”

“No, but I figured you liked me for other reasons. Not looks. You always liked men who looked like golden heroes. I thought what I looked like was just something you tolerated in favor of other things.”

Sansa didn’t like this at all. And she wouldn’t let her lover go another moment thinking this way about himself. Not after he’d just set her own mind at ease so beautifully. Sansa sat up and straddled his stomach, looking down at him sternly.

“Jon Snow Targaryen, you are one of the best-looking men in the kingdoms. You don’t need golden hair or blue-green eyes. You don’t need to be fair or fancy. You’re dark and beautiful and tall and lovely. There isn’t one part of you that is ill-formed. Girls would want you even if you weren’t a prince. They’d still love your pretty eyes and pretty hair and cheekbones and mouth and muscles…”

“If I hadn’t thought you were my brother when I was a girl, I’d have probably been half in love with you. There were girls at Winterfell who were. I used to overhear them arguing about whether you were better looking than Robb or not. And now I’m the envy of every woman at court for having you in my bed. Gods, the way Arianne Martell looks at you alone…”

Jon snorted. “I have a feeling Arianne likes everyone. She likes you, too. More than she likes me.”

“She doesn’t like everyone, even if she does like me. She’s princess of Dorne. Only the best-looking men catch her eye. You are one of them. And it isn’t just her. Sometimes I’m driven mad with jealousy when I see the way some women look at you.”

He began going very red. Sansa smiled and curled herself up against him, settling her core against his crotch and stroking his shoulders. “And sometimes when I look at you, I’m driven mad with lust. It can be quite distracting, you know.”

Jon snorted. “You’re one to talk, Lady Stark. Do you know how badly I’ve ached over the last few weeks?”

“You could have had me again sooner. Why didn’t you?”

“I wished to wait until you felt well enough, until you felt ready. So I waited for you to make a move.”

“Oh,” she said, her cheeks reddening. Thank the Gods! “I thought…”

“What?” Concern flashed across his face.

“I thought maybe you didn’t want me anymore. I’ve become so thin, and you saw me all sickly and filthy. I thought my allure was gone.”

He frowned, grabbed her face, and kissed her deep. When they pulled apart, he said, “Never. Never ever. You’re beautiful, Sansa. Always. You’re beautiful thin, you’re beautiful sick, you’re beautiful now, you were beautiful as a child, and you’ll be beautiful fifty years from now. I could spend my whole life fucking you. I’ve been desperate to get back inside you. You’re radiant, body and soul.”

As if to confirm his words, his cock twitched between her legs.
Jon:

_So soft_, he thought as he cradled her in his arms, kissing her mouth and slowly moving in and out of her cunny. He stroked her hair and neck, his mouth refusing to leave hers. They weren’t speaking now, just absorbing each other. _Warm and soft and sweet and wet and lovely and perfect._

Never had he known such perfect, blissful contentment. His love-making with Ygritte was often hurried, desperate, and even confusing. He’d been just a boy then, plagued by insecurities and inexperience, grasping and trying to find her breasts and cunt beneath the furs. In the cave, it had been easier, clearer. But even then there was so much confusion, not knowing what he was, or where his honor had gone. He’d felt lost.

_You know nothing, Jon Snow._

Ygritte had taught him some, Val had taught him more. With Ygritte, there were constant arguments. There’d been the shame. Most of the time, they were like mad, desperate, rutting dogs.

With Val, it was a full-on fight. He’d taken her for the first time shortly after he’d been brought back, filled with a strange mania. After that, he’d tried to resist and failed. She’d come to him whenever she wanted him, enter his room, shed her clothes, and ride him. They’d claw at each other, fuck like wild beasts, say little, and she’d leave him shocked and winded, gaping and spent. The things she’d do would blow his mind. She’d wrestle with him, shove her fingers up his arse, slap his face, spank his backside like he was a child, even have him fuck her back end. A few times, she’d tied him up, far less gently than Sansa did with her silk scarves. Jon had loved every minute of it, loved all the things he’d done with Val, though he’d be overcome with shock and shame afterwards.

He’d always felt like he was being used. He’d been madly in love with the wildling, but never did he get the impression that such feelings were mutual. Sometimes, he’d try to tell her when they were together, but she’d shove her hand in or over his mouth.

This, however, with Sansa… There was something strangely nurturing about their coupling. He felt like they were both taking care of one another. He didn’t worry about not being enough for her, he didn’t worry about being unable to please her, and he didn’t feel like she didn’t love him.

There was playfulness, and they could be primal and aggressive, but there was a sense of security, of safety, of sweetness that he’d never experienced before. He felt he belonged inside her. He knew who he was when he was with her, and there was nothing he had to hide, nothing he couldn’t say.

There were no orders, just guidance. There were no secrets. He’d never felt more naked than he had with her, but it wasn’t shameful or scary. It just felt natural.

_This is love._ He nibbled her lip. She sighed and shuddered against him and ran her foot along his calf.

She shuddered again, the walls of her cunt tightening around him as he devoured her mouth. That soaking juncture between their thighs became even wetter. Those blue eyes stared into his, looking like a summer sky. Jon released himself and remained inside of her after he was spent.

They lay like that, clutching each other. There was this easy silence as sunlight began to peek in through the lattice stone and stained glass. Jon quietly cursed it. He didn’t want this night to end.

He didn’t want the day to start, either. He had to work. But he tried to savor the moment.
Their reverie, though, was eventually interrupted with a jolt when Nani, Sansa’s new Dothraki Lady’s Maid, burst in. Dany had recently insisted that Sansa’s servants be from among her Dothraki staff for a while. She wanted some whose loyalty they could depend on, people who had bled for House Targaryen, people with no possible ties to any of the houses of Westeros. So, Nani was the replacement for Gilly while the wildling was recuperating with her family.

Jon and Sansa sprung apart, Jon trying not to groan as his cock slipped out of her. He hurried to cover himself and his lover did the same.

Nani’s almond eyes surveyed them without shame as she hurried to light more candles. According to Daenerys, the Dothraki possessed no concept of bodily shame, privacy, or modesty. They gladly made love outside for everyone to see. She smiled.

“Why do you stop?” The maid asked, her voice heavily accented. “All the world waits eagerly for a new khalakka.”

Jon’s face reddened even further. “Out!”

“The sun has risen and the lady’s bath is ready. You both must rise. But finish first.”

“Out!” Sansa cried, annoyed. The maid hurried away, but not before advising Sansa to stay on her back after Jon had finished to let his seed settle.

Jon stared at his lap. “I will talk to Daenerys about her maids. They’ve seen her in various… compromising positions. But I will speak to my aunt.”

“See if you can talk to her about getting a lock on my door as well,” she muttered, covering her face. “You should go. We both have duties to see to.”

Jon reluctantly got up. He didn’t bother with his smallclothes. He found his breeches and pulled them on. Never had he hated a garment more. He tugged on his tunic and doublet and stuffed his smallclothes in a pocket before leaning down to kiss his lover, who lay back on the bed.

When he pulled away, he kept looking at her. She was a vision. Naked and sweet, her red hair splayed all around her head like rays of light during sundown, her porcelain skin so white, the blue of her eyes and the pink of her lips and nipples. She was finally gaining some weight, and there was a glow about her.

Jon groaned. “How am I to get anything done today if this is my last image of you?”

She pulled one of the white linen sheets over her head. “There. Now go and be prince of the realm. The sooner you leave, the sooner you can return.”

Jon exited the room. Nani and a couple of other Dothraki girls waited in the solar with pails of water and a copper tub. They bowed when they saw him, grinning.

He hurried out and back to his own apartments, where Satin waited with a bath. Jon got in reluctantly, not wishing to remove the scent of his lover from his skin.

His steward wrinkled his nose when he saw his master and eagerly handed him some soap and a washcloth. “What?” Jon asked, annoyed.

“You had a fine night, didn’t you?”

Jon looked heavenward. No doubt his friend would hear all about it from Nani.
“Excellent,” he said, his voice low. “And also, none of your business.”

Satin shrugged. “The queen wants you to take breakfast with her.”

Jon nodded. He finished cleaning himself, hurried into some suitable clothes, and went to Dany’s apartments, followed by her Unsullied guards. His aunt was pacing around the dining table, dressed in lavender silk, a folded piece of paper in hand. Three plates were assembled, laden with eggs, baked apples, and sausage links. She bid him to sit, which he did, and she threw the paper in his lap.

“Read this, we await your lady,” Daenerys said simply, looking worried.

Jon scanned the letter, which bore the seal of House Mormont. Apparently, the wildling were making trouble for surrounding territories, with a number of men having “stolen” common women and certain areas being over-hunted.

*Objections have also been raised by a couple of the Wildling representatives regarding upcoming economic decisions here. They claim they are not being recognized or represented in the construction and enforcement of tax and trade guidelines. They are hesitant to cooperate with me as regent, and say that the royal family and House Stark have begun to neglect them.*

Jon groaned. He maintained a regular, personal correspondence with House Giantsbane, Val, and House Thenn, and he and Sansa usually handled the affairs of the Free Folk. However, the recent calamities had put those issues to the side.

“I gave these people every option,” Dany complained furiously, “I gave them three keeps of their own with an enormous chunk of the North to settle in. I allowed them to pick their own lords and ladies or magnars and magnas or whatever they’re called. I gave them the option as to whether they wished to be my subjects or remain out of our domains. I gave them aid and I destroyed the forces that drove them from their homes. And now this?”

“The Free Folk view choosing their leaders as a right, not a privilege. They view their claim to lands below the Wall the same way,” he replied. “In their mind, they see few reasons to be grateful to you. They feel that they’ve repaid the debt with the Night’s King by offering you their fealty in the first place.”

Before his aunt could respond, a page entered and announced Sansa. His lover entered draped in white silk, her hair in the Northern style. Jon handed her the letter and pulled out her chair for her. Sansa read it in seconds.

“A wildling lord will have to be brought to court,” Sansa said, setting the paper aside and starting to cut up her apples. “We should bring one or two here, and provide most of their household, of course. Jon and I can take personal audiences with them. They might appreciate an invitation to the wedding as a compliment as well. It would serve well to remind them of who they’re dealing with.”

“I figured as much,” Dany said, nodding. “So the Thenns then?”

“No,” Jon said at once, “We’ve conducted a great deal of our business through them. The Thenns are already seen as not being full wildlings. They had lords even before they’d joined the realm, and Sigorn’s wife is a Karstark. To convince them that we’re taking them seriously, we’ll need to bring in someone less gentrified.”

“Tormund Giantsbane then?” Sansa asked.

Jon cringed. “Magnar Tormund… isn’t the sort you’d want at court. Especially at a wedding.”
“I haven’t met him personally,” Sansa remarked, “Though he seemed pleasant enough in his letters.”

“That’s because he’s not the one actually writing them,” Jon replied, “He has a scribe who does it. The letters you receive tend to be edited down from what was dictated.”

Jon, however, received the less altered versions of Tormund’s words. While they were always fun to read, they usually had to be burnt immediately after. Jon took a mouthful of sausage and swallowed. “The Magna Val would be more suitable. She has experience with our customs as a result of her time as Stannis and Selyse’s captive. She’s less likely to offend the entire court if we bring her.”

Eyes blue and violet were narrowed at him. Jon swallowed another mouthful of egg. “What?”

“The Lady Val? Are you sure we want her at court?” Daenerys asked.

*Not a lady.* “She’s really the best one. We can’t have Tormund coming here. The lords of these realms already have enough trouble accepting the presence of Free Folk below the Wall. If Tormund comes in, it’ll just make integrating them more difficult. And the Free Folk will not be happy or satisfied if we’re seen to deal with the Thenns exclusively. Besides, Lady Alys is with child and will be approaching full term by the time the wedding happens.”

It all seemed very obvious to him who it should be. The glances his aunt and bride-to-be exchanged confused him.

“Lady Stark, these are your bannermen. You have final approval,” Daenerys said.

“No, he’s right.” Sansa sighed. “The Lady Val is the only one.”

Jon detected some misgivings in her tone. He reached over and squeezed her hand. “Magna. She’s no lady. You’re a lady. My lady.”

Sansa pulled her hand away and continued to eat, focusing on her food. Jon’s stomach sank. Before he could speak, however, his aunt did.

“Considering the danger present in the North at the moment, we’re going to have to delay your progress there,” Daenerys told them, “The godswood wedding will have to take place here. The recent dangers have only reinforced how delicate the matter of succession has become. I can’t have my only heir and the future mother of his children going North while the Wildlings are providing new hostilities in addition to every other mess there.”

“The Northern lords won’t like that, they’ll want a Stark presence,” Sansa responded doubtfully.

“And we’ll provide them one, now that we have another Stark. Your sister Arya should suffice. Sending her north to serve as Winterfell’s castellan should appease them for a bit longer.”

Jon and Sansa exchanged looks. Arya definitely didn’t belong at court, but they were both concerned about her state of mind.

“I’m not sure she’s fit---”

“---We’ll have a fair staff and some caretakers to watch over her as well, of course.” Daenerys interjected. “I’m sure if we leave the Northern regency to the Lady Mormont, and perhaps had one of her daughter accompany your sister, a disaster could be avoided. I realize the arrangement isn’t ideal, but both of you have already been endangered in King’s Landing. That whole region is barely under control, there is the weather, secessionist sentiment is still too prevalent, and now there are the wildlings as well. And Winterfell isn’t even close to being whole again.”
Sansa sighed. “Very well, but I don’t think my bannermen will be happy about the change in wedding location.”

“We’ll have to give them something else. I know that witnesses to the consummation are off the table, but would you two be willing to agree to a bedding ceremony at the very least?”

Jon’s blood froze. “Absolutely not!”

“My prince, it’s alright,” Sansa said, patting him on the arm.

“No, I won’t let you be shamed like that,” he insisted. “You’ve been dealt enough indignities—“

“—I believe it is up to me to decide what I count as an indignity towards my person. If you are uncomfortable being stripped, then I will decline on those grounds. But I will not have you making the decision on what happens to my body for me. I have gone through a bedding before, and I am willing to endure another for the sake of the realm.”

He frowned. “Are you---- Are you sure?”

Sansa closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Yes. This will hardly be the worst thing I’ve had to endure.”

*Brave girl.* He took her hand in his again.

“You have my gratitude, Lady Stark,” his aunt said, “And speaking of beddings, there is another thing I’d like to address.”

Jon and Sansa looked at Dany, whose cheeks turned a bit pink. “The wedding is scheduled to take place in two and a half moons. And I thought, since everything is finalized… If you two wished to… get a head start regarding your family life, I’d fully support it.”

Jon reddened. “Aunt, I’m not sure.”

“You don’t have to, of course. But you do have my permission. Another Targaryen and another Stark are needed, and with the progresses being rearranged, there will be a limited amount of time you’ll have to enjoy your married life before I have to send you across the Narrow Sea. If you start early, you both can proceed to Dragonstone after the wedding, and have the child there." She glanced at Sansa, "The sooner your first child is born, the sooner I’ll feel more secure letting you go on progress North and to Essos. It’ll help, I imagine. Both you and Jon need to be accepted by the Dothraki and Slaver’s Bay, and they’ll probably feel more comfortable accepting you once you’ve already born him one healthy child.”

Jon frowned. There was one part of this arrangement that he definitely did not like. “Dany, do you intend for us to bring our child across the Narrow Sea with us?”

Daenerys shifted uncomfortably. “The newborn heir to the Empire? I cannot see that child going across the sea or going north of The Neck during winter.”

“And I cannot see either of us being separated from our first child during the first year of his or her life. Either we start early and the progresses are delayed until we can take our son or daughter with us, or we delay having children until both progresses are complete.”

Daenerys hesitated. “I could maybe agree to let you take or have your child overseas, if we were to rearrange the order of the progresses. But I’d insist upon you taking Rhaegal and far more men with you. But I cannot allow all of my heirs to go North during winter. In Essos, at least, it’s warm. The
North will have to be delayed until your second child is born.”

“We could make a small trip North, maybe as far as Winterfell without the stops of a full progress some time after our first is born. It would take less than two moons if we were careful,” Sansa mused. “Less than a moon if we traveled by dragon. We could return from Pentos to Dragonstone, leave our prince or princess there, sail to White Harbor, fly to Winterfell, spend a few days there for appearance’s sake, and then return to Dragonstone. We wouldn’t be separated for more than a moon. By then our babe would be around six moons old. I had to be separated from Eddie for six weeks when he was that age.”

Jon stared at Sansa, shocked. “You’d really be willing to leave our new babe?”

“I’ve had to do it before. I left Eddie in the Riverlands for a time while I first invaded the North. I couldn’t afford venturing in there with him while we lacked decent strongholds. The Boltons were in power, remember? If you wish, Jon, I could make the trip to Winterfell alone and you could stay with the babe in Dragonstone.”

His stomach sank. Is she asking me to choose between Winterfell and my own babe? How can someone who was so soft this morning be this hard now? Seeing Winterfell again was something he’d yearned for since he left for the Wall. It hadn’t been fully constructed when Daenerys and he made their way down the Kingsroad. Something inside him burned. “I--- I---”

He stood. “I have to think about this,” Jon said, swallowing hard.

“What’s to think about?” Dany asked. “It sounds like a fair plan to me.”

Jon glared at his aunt, hating her at that moment. Hating her and her entire blasted empire for making him consider this. I should not have to plan my family life like a battle. The war is supposed to be over. “I need to be alone. Excuse me.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all liked this. I enjoyed writing it. I hope some of the political stuff made sense. Poor Jon. Being a prince can be a real pain in the ass. :)
Margaery consults Sansa and meets Arya. Jon gets an opinion from Margaery. Arya deals with some identity issues and makes some moves on Gendry. Jon makes some preparations with Ser Barristan.

Chapter Notes

First, thanks to Bluecichlid for her beta work

This is mostly an Arya-centric chapter, though I start with our very first Margaery POV. I'm pretty excited about this one. I wanted to establish a lot about certain mindsets and characters. I wanted to flesh out Margaery, explore a bit more with Arya and establish some things about their relationships. Arya may seem a bit immature in this chapter, I will say that there is a reason for that. Also, we have some Ser Barristan the Badass by popular request, and because he's a good character who helps flesh out some other things and serve the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-six: Ladies

Margaery:

It was hard to smile with her teeth chattering so. She was fairly sure that if she spat, an ice cube would hit the ground. She’d given orders for fresh, dry firewood to be sent to the childrens’ homes in the poorer areas of the city,. Woollen clothing was being provided by Lady Stark.

It was too cold a day to do nothing. Unfortunately, nothing seemed to be what many of her fellow courtiers were content with at the moment. There was one person, however, she could trust not to waste a moment. She went to Sansa with a proposition.

“We need to start a collection,” she told her, shivering as she brought a cup of mulled wine to her lips. “How many furs have been discarded by spoiled lordlings and ladies since the winter began?”

“Too many,” Sansa mused, dressed in fewer layers than most of the court. The Stark blood certainly seemed to give her a greater tolerance to the cold than most, as she didn't shiver much in this cold. “While it may fund my own coffers and keep the fur trappers up north in business, it's a hideous waste.”

“All the more reason for us to start a drive. Have the people of this court donate the furs they don’t want anymore,” replied Margaery, “If people wish to put their coin towards new clothes now that it’s no longer going to the wars, fine. But their old things are still good. Winter is still here, warm clothing is needed more than ever, especially by those less fortunate.”
Her friend nodded. “An excellent proposition, of course. Daenerys would want to be involved as well.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me. She’s involved herself with half the known world.” Margaery arched a brow, “I could draw up a plan for you to present to her. I know you’re already so busy with everything else.”

She’d make sure to have the Tyrell sigil stamped on the parchment so there’d be no secret as to who had masterminded the enterprise.

“I am busy. I know you have your own affairs to attend to, but I am just so overwhelmed. I think I’d feel better if you were to present it with me.”

Margaery smirked. Clever girl. When did that happen? It was a good move--- it would reassure Margaery that she’d get credit and further repair the bond between them, and it would also help remind the queen of just how affective Sansa was at establishing and building alliances with the high Houses of Westeros.

“I’d be thrilled, of course.”

Margaery had other purposes in her visit, though. “Tell me, how is your sister faring? I don’t think I’ve seen her much at court.”

“Better than she was before. But she spends more time in the yards than the walls of the keep. I’m expecting her for lunch, though. She needs to start being trained for her duties overseeing our family’s holdings.”

“She would require guidance, I imagine,” Margaery sighed, “It’s truly a shame that her circumstances dragged her away from a proper education. At least when Willas was crippled, he could still devote himself to learning the disciplines of a ruler. The fact that he’s so well learned has allowed my family to travel without worry, knowing Highgarden is in my sweet brother’s capable hands.”

Sansa’s eyes flickered. “Aye, it must be a comfort. Arya was always a brilliant girl but, as you say, her education was derailed. And she is such a wild, willful type. I’m not even sure she’ll want to accept this. She’s not the type to accept things being arranged for her. I can only hope she’s open to things being arranged with her.”

Margaery took note of this. “May I meet her when she comes?”

“Of course. I plan on sending Ser Gendry to fetch her. She’s very attached to him, you know.”

“Hopefully not too attached. I know you wouldn’t want some bastard taking advantage of your sister now that you finally have her back.”

“Oh, I don’t worry about Arya in that area. She can take care of herself. And anyone who might wish to take advantage of her,” Sansa smiled, “I would like you two to meet, though. She could use some more friends at court.”

The infamous Lady Arya did eventually arrive, dressed like an average sellsword and glaring at Margaery suspiciously. But the Maid of Highgarden noted that this wasn’t the venomous look akin to what she’d seen from Cersei Lannister. The way the young she-wolf shifted her weight in her sister’s direction indicated a fierce need to protect. There was an air of loneliness there, judging by the way she occasionally glanced at Ser Gendry. This one does in fact want friends. Her enemies are made from fear, not hatred.
Margaery actually found herself pitying Arya in a way similar to how she once pitied her elder sister. The same sadness and fear lurked behind those grey eyes. Sansa had once hid hers with frigid courtesy. Arya masked her own with aggression. But it was the same emotion at the root.

Still, Arya was no Sansa, that was clear. As Margaery left her friend’s apartments, her stomach sank. *This girl would never want Willas. And she’s not the type to be forced.* Willas was smart and good, with an excellent sense of humor, easy-going nature, and a remarkable maturity and hold on his emotions rarely mastered. The younger Stark was all passion, ferocity, paranoia and energy. Even if she was as brilliant as Sansa claimed, she wasn’t the type who would want to share that brilliance over a quiet walk in the garden.

It bothered Margaery on a level that was political. A match with a Stark would be perfect strategically. Allying oneself with the largest landholders in Westeros would be the one thing that could keep House Tyrell among the strongest houses in the country. The Stark name was older than any other, and though the North was a disaster now, it had thousands of miles of land and all the potential that went along with that. Margaery did not intend for her family to suffer the same fate as Houses Baratheon and Lannister. Their significance would endure. The Starks had ruled most of the continent since the time of the First Men and still did now, despite it all. A mix with their bloodline held incredible potential.

But a match with *Arya* Stark would obviously be a disaster. Margaery saw that after only a few minutes of observation. *No, it would not work out for us.* She’d rant and rave against marrying Willas. And if she didn’t manage to run away and disappear for good before the wedding, she’d probably murder him by the time their first child was born. She’d probably geld him on the wedding night. *If Willas would be foolish enough to touch her.* Knowing her brother, he’d probably abstain and spend countless, fruitless years trying to turn Arya’s heart about-face and end up dying childless and miserable.

But it bothered her on a personal level as well. Margaery wanted to see her brother happy and settled. Willas was at heart a nurturer. One only needed to watch him with his animals to see that. And he was lonely. The accident had restricted his mobility, barring him from many social activities popular with aristocratic young men. He had a particular affinity for female company though--- not merely in the way common to most men. He actually preferred them as friends. He was one of the few Margaery knew who could look at a lady and not just see a pair of teats. It was one of the reasons their grandmother--- who disliked most people and men in particular--- maintained an affection for Willas almost equal to that she had for Margaery.

*Sansa would have made him an excellent wife.* Willas would have adored and doted upon the naïve, sad, sweet, pretty girl she’d once been. He’d respect, admire, and be thrilled by the intelligent, powerful woman she’d become. He’d be more than happy to kiss away her tears, listen to her hopes and dreams, and love her.

Willas would probably like Arya, too. Even the part of him that would be terrified by her would like her. But Arya wouldn’t like him. At least not enough to want to marry him. Her brother deserved better than to be put into such a situation.

*We’ll have to wait a generation.* She thought sadly. She’d find her brother a good wife. They’d have lovely children, and Margaery would do everything in her power to encourage their lovely children to grow close to the royal children Sansa and Prince Jon would produce. Until then, she’d make herself an invaluable and beloved friend of every Stark and Targaryen she could.

*I’d have been miserable with that sullen Northerner anyways.* She didn’t dislike Prince Jon. There were actually quite a few things she liked about him--- he was a good man, a good man to a fault in
the manner of his uncle. He obviously cared deeply for Sansa. He didn’t automatically look down on anyone with a pair of breasts. If she’d married him, Margaery was sure she’d never have to worry about him harming her, dismissing her, or dishonoring her.

But drawing words from him was like trying to draw water from a Dornish sandpit. He treated every conversation like a chore, and only offered up enthusiasm for anything begrudgingly. He wasn’t stupid, but he wasn’t a glittering personality, either. He embodied the sullen Northerners her grandmother used to complain about perfectly.

*Men that pretty have no business frowning so much. Especially ones as privileged as him.* Jon Targaryen had every advantage in the world, and yet he still scowled and moped. It annoyed Margaery. She found it downright ungrateful. She had no interest in spending her life with a dour old man trapped in a young man’s body.

As if on cue, that same dour-faced prince turned a corner then. He stopped short upon seeing her, and his eyes narrowed. “Lady Margaery, what brings you to the royal apartments?”

He’d been regarding her with newly concentrated suspicion ever since the bit with the handkerchiefs. Margaery realized now how stupid it was--- she’d accomplished nothing with that. But still, she found it quite rich that her prince looked at her like this after Arianne Martell had charged into his apartments. *Sansa got over it. Why can’t he?*

“I was visiting your lady, Your Grace.”

“I see.” He frowned, as if he didn’t believe it. “Speaking of whom, I was wondering if I could speak to you on a matter that concerns her.”

“I am at your service, My Prince.” Margaery smiled and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Every time she saw Jon Targaryen these days, he made a point of making some sort of show as to just how devoted he was to his lady, how his heart beat only for her. Sometimes he made a grand gesture with the wrist that bore the favor she gave him the night he fought Stafford Pryor, sometimes he pulled out those red wolf handkerchiefs she made him for no reason, he made sure to mention, ‘My Lady Sansa’ at every opportunity…*At this point, he might as well just walk around wrapped in a Stark banner and wear a leather collar engraved with the words, ‘Property of Sansa Stark’.*

“Please, come to my solar, I want to show you something.”

He offered her his arm which, once again, had Sansa’s favor tied to his wrist. He led her to his solar, where his steward waited.

“Satin, could you please go fetch the wedding chest?” Jon asked his servant as he went to pour some drinks. His servant ran off and Jon passed Margaery a cup, bidding her to sit down. “You’re one of Sansa’s oldest friends, and a fashionable woman. I was hoping to get your opinion. I’ve ordered the marriage cloak, but I want to make sure it’ll be something she’d like.”

“I get it already. Margaery noted a slight tremor in his hand, though, and her heart warmed a little. *Maybe he’s making a bit of a display, but part of this is sincere.*

Satin brought out the chest and Margaery set her cup aside, scurrying over. Jon carefully pulled the garment out. Margaery found herself impressed. Red gilt Targaryen dragons were embroidered on black velvet, black fur sat at the collar, diamond-cut rubies were embroidered along the hem. Only one thing confused her.

“Why the blue?” She asked, thumbing the satin internal lining. It was pretty, but it didn’t make much
“It’s the color of Daenerys’s khalasaar.”

Margaery made note of that. “It’s lovely. It’ll match her eyes as well. She’ll probably squeal like a little girl when she sees it. She’ll never want to take it off.”

He let out a deep breath and actually smiled a little. “Good. I want to make her happy.”

She stood up and put a hand on his wrist. “My Prince, I can assure you that you already do.”

It was true. The past few moons had been the happiest Margaery had ever seen her friend. Of course, that wasn’t hard as before the poor girl had been the captive of the people who had killed her father. She leaned forward, wishing to reassure the prince. “I’ve known Sansa a long time. I’ve seen enough of her smiles to know the true ones from the false ones. When she looks at you, her smiles are real. You offer her everything she could ever want.”

She pulled away then and helped his servant refold the cloak. “And for the record, Prince Jon, she’s ready to give you everything you could ever want as well. SO if I were you, I wouldn’t endanger that, because there are a thousand good men out there who would be happy to dry any tears she might cry over you.”

She fixed him with a steady gaze and bobbed a curtsey. “If you’ll excuse me, Your Grace.”

She exited the Prince’s rooms smiling to herself. I’m going to be the biggest champion of this marriage possible, she decided. House Tyrell will keep close to these two as much as they can.

In the meantime… She’d have that spot on the council Jon offered her and find herself a match with deep enough pockets to fund her ambitions. Court life cost coin, and Margaery did not intend to rely on House Tyrell forever. She had to be careful, though. Money wasn’t enough and after marrying three kings, she couldn’t afford too great a loss in status. It would send the wrong message. Well, Edmure Tully is soon to be a widower.

She liked the idea of governing the Riverlands anyways. Most of the trade in Westeros relied on their lands. She’d do brilliantly managing that. Edmure Tully was such a fool, she’d have no issues ruling that area through him. The Blackfish might prove a challenge, but he wouldn’t live forever and Margaery was sure she could work with him.

A match with Edmure would give her the necessary connections to the crown and the Starks, she’d be raising the next Lord of the Riverlands once that miserable idiot Roslin Frey was gone, and she wouldn’t have to worry about the pressures of producing multiple heirs. Sansa can have that.

That had always been the part of the queenship deal that Margaery loathed the most. She tended to find it maddening that with all her talents, her entire fate would end up being determined by how well she reproduced. It was insulting. If she married a man who already had a trueborn son and a daughter, however…

Sansa’s good, but she’ll be so occupied with popping out as many little Targaryens as possible, she won’t have time to challenge me to such a great extent anymore. She can have her crown and yammering brats sucking at her teats and tearing her body apart.

Margaery liked children, but usually only once they were old enough to speak, read and wipe their arses. Infants frankly terrified her. They were just so painfully dependent on everyone else. She’d resigned herself to a fate of having to produce them long ago, but if she had a husband who already had two children… She’d probably only have to produce one or two of her own.
The Maid of Highgarden went back to her room and began searching her wardrobe for anything and everything she had in blue. She’d look well in Tully colors. She’d keep a close eye on Arther Butterwell as well. If she married Edmure, Butterwell would become her bannerman, making it easier for her to manipulate his place on the council. As Littlefinger had proved, Master of Coin could be a very advantageous position indeed.

Arya:

She paced in her fancy solar, occasionally pausing to hurl a knife at the map of Westeros against the far wall. It was far too cold to venture outdoors today, and she had little occupy herself with. Normally, she’d wander the Red Keep, but things at court were becoming uncomfortable.

She’d thought life here wouldn’t be so hard and isolating as it had been when she was a child. These days, there were a number of women who roamed the halls of King’s Landing in breeches and in some cases even armor. There was a woman in the Queensguard now, Brienne of Tarth, who wore the same armor as the men of the order. Ladies were allowed breeches and leather as long as they wore formal surcoats over their jerkins and still wore gowns to formal engagements. A change made to accommodate women like Brienne of Tarth, who had more than earned her place on the Queensguard during the wars. There were women who fought in the yards as well.

And yet she still felt everywhere she went, that she was either too welcome or completely unwelcome. Various gentlemen of the court were overly-friendly, whilst a number of the women---even those who fought like Naranell Blackwood -- seemed to regard her as a curiosity. There were times when Arya was outright barred from certain areas of the castle for “inappropriate conduct”, even when she was at her most polite. She either had simpering flirts following her wherever she went or people turning up their noses at her. When she’d complained, apparently Sansa had tried to do something about it. However, by then it was clear that those who were suddenly offering her welcome didn’t do it willingly. Arya had no interest in their false courtesies.

She had few friends at court. There were, of course, Jon and Sansa and Gendry, and also Lady Brienne, who seemed to take a vested interest in her, and Elia Sand also seemed friendly. But the Sand Snake was now banished from court and everyone else was constantly occupied by various duties. Arya had yet to be given any of her own.

There was a knock on her door and Arya grinned when Gendry entered, looking rather smart in his gold cloak and armor. Perhaps he’s ready to finally give in.

Arya had been trying to get him into bed for weeks.

The problem was, for all of Gendry’s expressions of devotion, he’d not made any move whatsoever. Oh, he’d courted with her in his own way, which seemed to be a combination of timid sweetness, traditional flirtation, and indulging their personal interests. He’d become her most frequent fighting partner and though he showed her the credit of not holding back, the same could not be said outside the tiltyard.

Shortly after she’d been released from house arrest, he’d approached her, shyly handing her a note. In nearly illegible writing was a request to begin calling on her socially, with promises to seek permission from Sansa and Jon first before he did so. She’d found him at once and told him that under no circumstances was he to ask Sansa and Jon anything, that who called upon her was her decision as a free woman and that if he thought she was willing to let her brother or sister make any decisions for her, he had no business speaking to her ever again. He agreed. Then they went to a tavern and drank for four hours.

The two had great fun together. The only problem was that aside from a few kisses, Gendry had yet
to allow them to become physically intimate. He wanted to do the honorable thing. It was horrible. Arya felt that after all these years of seeing so many awful things, she deserved to see him naked. She'd observed him sometimes in the practice yard on warm days, when he removed his shirt. That one half was glorious enough on their own. He was one of the few people not of Essosi or Rhynish descent that she'd seen maintain a bronzed skin tone in these winter years. And every inch of him was hard muscle that she enjoyed going up against in a fight. So she knew encountering those same muscles in the bedroom had to be just as much fun. And yet he denied her that particular pleasure thus far.

She was wearing him down slowly, though. When he entered, she smiled and put the blades aside, walking up to him and threading her arms around his waist.

“Morning, Ser Gendry,” she said, standing up on her tip-toes to kiss him. He let her.

“Young sister requests that you take lunch in her solar and spend the afternoon with her,” he announced, smiling. “I’m to ask that you make yourself presentable, and then escort you to her quarters.”

Arya groaned. She loved Sansa, she truly did. She would kill for her, die for her, even play along with awkward hallucinations for her. But Arya wasn’t exactly sure she liked her. Anais had liked her immensely, but every day more and more of that girl’s memories were fading away, as were the memories of all her former faces now that she was officially broken from the House of Black and White. It seemed that entire chunk of her life was slowly fading. Every day, she felt more and more like that twelve year old girl who had arrived in Braavos, eager to find her place among the legendary assassins.

Arya imagined now that everyone knew that she’d been Anais, things would be awkward. They were already awkward as Hell with Jon’s steward, who Anais had engaged in a number of trysts.

She was forgetting what she learned of Sansa as Anais more and more, and frankly, what was left and what she saw these days didn’t really appeal much to Arya. She admired her sister for persevering through everything, and knew she worked hard for her people and for the realm. But it was still clear that Sansa and Arya were vastly different people.

Sansa, despite having been the Red Wolf, despite everything she’d been through, remained ladylike and dainty to a fault. She seemed to have purposely abandoned all that fierceness and strength that had gotten her through the wars, shedding her steel to return to silly silks.

Instead of spending her time keeping herself strong through exercise and fight practice or exploring, she preferred chatter and polite meals with fancy rich girls like Margaery Tyrell and gossiping harpies like Myranda Royce, who’d returned to the Vale on Ser Barristan’s orders. She poured herself into wedding plans with a heavy fervor as well. Whenever Arya entered her sister’s chambers she found herself surrounded by fabric swatches, flowers, lists of food and decorations and guests… As if Sansa wasn’t a leader and was just some random lovesick bride. She’d turned in her swords for needles, spending many an hour stitching away.

Arya didn’t get it. Everyone knew now that Sansa could be strong, so why was she abandoning that for silly indulgences? Her sister could do better and it frustrated her to no end.

But the worst was how Sansa seemed so ready to smile and play nice with people who had once stood by as Sansa and her family were attacked or even actively harmed them. A number of Lords of the Vale who had supported Coldwater and Moore received kind words from the woman they’d once referred to as the Whore of Winterfell. She even sometimes met with Randyll Tarly, that cruel father of Jon’s best friend Sam who had disowned the citadel novice.
She’d also taken multiple meetings with the Martells and the Sand Snakes who still remained at court despite the episode in Jon’s apartments. Maybe the Dornish hadn’t been trying to kill her, but Arya still didn’t trust them and didn’t understand why Sansa trusted them either.

And the Tyrells, who had been so quick to ally themselves with the Lannisters after Renly Baratheon died. Margaery Tyrell had even married both Joffrey and Tommen. And yet you’d think she and Sansa were the best of friends.

Arianne Martell, meanwhile, another good friend, still fostered the last remaining member of that family, that stupid former princess Myrcella, at Sunspear. To Arya, associating with them was mad.

Arya knew for a fact that Sansa had rode with her vanguard and emerged from multiple battles wearing the blood of her enemies. There were kings of legend who couldn’t say the same. She’d won more battles than even Robb. She’d destroyed Houses Frey and Bolton. She’d bludgeoned a man to death with a candlestick.

And now, Sansa walked the halls in silk and myrish lace, laughing at jokes that weren’t funny, smiling at people who would have once happily seen her dead. A woman who once impaled a man’s skull on a fire poker now fluttered her eyelashes while simpering idiots opened doors and pulled out chairs for her, as if she couldn’t do those things for herself.

Not only did it frustrate Arya to no end to see it, but it wasn’t just making her feel frustrated towards Sansa, either. It was making her judge Jon a bit, too.

It was clear to anyone who saw them together, that her brother was absolutely, hopelessly in love. Never had Arya seen her brother smile so much as he did when he was with their sister. And he seemed to adore all her silly lady things.

Jon seemed less like that sullen, snarky outsider who saw through all the bollocks and valued strengths and wits in girls over prettiness and daintiness when he was with Sansa. When they walked together, he practically beamed---- as much as Jon could ever beam--- when he led Sansa down the halls on his arm. He jumped at every chance to open doors, pull out chairs, and carry things for her, and treat her like some helpless damsel. He carried around white linen handkerchiefs that she made even though they constantly got dirty and weren’t practical, some of which were even scented with Sansa’s stupid perfumes.

When Sansa wasn’t around, he was a bit more like his old self. But when she entered a room, he was quick to rush to her side and stare at her like a puppy.

It made Arya want to gag. She didn’t like Sansa acting like a delicate snowflake, and she didn’t like Jon treating her like one. Both were better than that. Neither should have to act like run of the mill romantic fools.

But Sansa seemed to insist upon it constantly and it drove Arya mad. So she avoided her sister. She worried that if she spent too much time with the woman, she’d end up saying something and hurting her feelings. Arya didn’t crave strife with Sansa, so she avoided it, and, by extension, her sister, as much as possible.

Also, Sansa still spent her time on the most boring activities as it was.

The idea of spending a whole afternoon prattling away with Margaery Tyrell and Randa Royce about Ser Something-or-other flirting with Lady So-and-so while stitching threads into silk and eating lemon cakes sounded like torture.
“Must I?” She asked Gendry.

“Lady Stark says she feels guilty, that she’s been neglecting you,” her would-be lover replied.

“Neglecting me?” That was ludicrous. Sansa asked after her ever day, had seen that Arya was given comfortable lodgings, and made sure her every want and need was seen to. She also kept asking annoying, invasive questions. Arya wished her sister would neglect her.

Gendry shrugged. “Go spend the day with her. Your sister is under a lot of pressure at the moment. She misses you.”

Arya quirked a brow. “Promise to spend the evening with me here.”

A slight smile spread across his face. “Gladly.”

Arya grinned. “Alright. Let me get dressed and you may escort me.”

She hurried to her bedchamber and put on her best trousers—the ones without any patches or tears, and a lamb’s wool shirt that Sansa gave her when they were first reunited. She braided her hair as best she could, pinning it up into a bun with the help of Sera, a lady’s maid that had been hired for her, and washed her face and hands.

When she returned to the solar, Gendry offered her his arm. Arya rolled her eyes and ignored him. As they made their way from the high nobles’ wing to the royal apartments, a couple of young men tried to catch her attention, but she dismissed them, enjoying their affronted expressions.

When she got to her sister’s door, however, she did check herself, smoothing out her tunic. Gendry entered before her, and announced her via the idiotic customs.

“Your sister, the Lady Arya, to see you, Lady Stark.”

It was so odd, being called “Lady Arya” again, and even odder to hear her sister spoken of as “Lady Stark”. To Arya, Lady Stark was their mother.

She entered her sister’s solar to find her sitting by the window with Margery Tyrell. When she arrived, both rose, with Sansa’s other guest curtseying. It took a harsh look from Sansa to remind Arya that she was now expected to do the same.

She did, frowning and feeling awkward.

The ladies in their silks looked like a couple of butterflies, and they giggled and chattered sweetly. It reminded Arya so much of days past, watching her sister converse similarly with the Poole and Cassel girls. Those conversations Arya never felt welcome to join, the ones which took place before her sister had discovered her nerves and still believed she could be a damsel from a story. Observing her thus made it so hard to remember that neither Arya nor Sansa were still the girls they were back then. Sansa back then would have idolized this woman, in her bright silks and brocade. She probably would have wished to have her as a sister over me. They seemed to speak like sisters, in an intimate, cheerful way that Arya couldn't really recall Sansa speaking to her.

She even looked impressed with Margaery, her blue eyes lighting up. Gods, Sansa. You've won wars and built castles. Why do you seem so interested in her?

Arya didn’t like how Margaery looked at her with her penetrating dark brown irises. It wasn't as bad as the dismissive, mocking looks Arya had received from some others, but she knew a calculating eye when she saw one.
“It is an honor to meet you, Lady Arya,” Margaery said with a dazzling smile. The Maid of Highgarden walked towards her with an affected yet seemingly effortless bounce in her step. “I’ve heard so much about you. You’re practically a legend at court now.”

“As are you, Lady Margaery,” Arya replied, struggling to control her reflexes as Margaery grabbed her hand like a dear sister.

“Hardly. I can’t exactly compete with the first person at court who had the courage to call Arianne Martell---” Margaery spared Sansa a quick glance. Her sister seemed unamused, which the lady clearly noted “---well, anyways, it is a delight to meet you nonetheless.”

Margaery cupped Arya’s chin gently, smiling at both Stark sisters.

“I see you’re not the only beauty from Winterfell, Sansa. Any more faces like this, and the Starks’ reputation will not be for their austerity anymore, I assure you.” Margaery winked at Sansa, who pursed her lips, obviously trying not to smile. “Thank god there aren’t any more of you, or all of the eligible men in the realm will be abandoning the court to go North. The rest of us will be left with nothing.”

Arya pulled her face away. “You can have the eligible men. If they come North, I’ll send them right back to you.”

Margaery laughed, her eyes now dancing with mischief. “Oh, I can tell already that knowing you will be a delight. Unfortunately, our acquaintance will have to be nurtured further at another time. My mother is expecting me. If you’ll excuse me.”

She bobbed another curtsey and hurried away. Arya watched her retreating back with wide eyes before turning back to her sister.

“Are you two… friends?”

Sansa smiled and looked at Gendry, “Ser, if you will go tell Nani to bring lunch? Mistress Cyron is to join us in about an hour as well.”

“Yes, My Lady.” He bowed and exited. Arya almost tried to stop him. The idea of being alone with Sansa felt… awkward.

Sansa smiled at her and patted the place next to her on the plush red satin window seat on which she sat, the same place recently vacated by Margaery. Arya came over but sat stiffly as her sister scooted closer to her, laying a hand on her arm as she spoke.

“To answer your question, Arya, yes, Lady Margaery and I are friends. I like to make friends with whoever I can,” said Sansa, giving Arya a respectful nod and a appreciative smile, "A virtuous habit I learned from you, in fact.”

Arya couldn’t think of anyone in the world who had fewer friends than she did. “What do you mean?”

“Well when we were young, you’d make friends with anyone--- cobbler, smiths, tavern wenches, singers. I like to follow that example now that I’m older and wise enough to fully appreciate the value in it.”

“But you’re Lord Paramount of the North. Father always said being a Lord meant you were father to all your subjects, but that you couldn’t be their friend.”
“Father was wrong.”

Arya’s jaw dropped. Her sister said this so simply, so flippantly, as if it were nothing. Father was wrong. The idea of anyone—save for perhaps their mother—questioning or challenging the words or judgment of Eddard Stark was mind-blowing. “How can you say that?”

“Because it’s true. Father didn’t know everything. There were many things he didn’t understand,” Sansa sighed, “I loved Father, but he wasn’t perfect. No one is.”

Sansa glanced at her and frowned. “I’ve upset you, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine,” Arya looked at her lap. “Of course Father wasn’t perfect. I—I know that.”

“I’ve been neglecting you,” her sister said, taking her hand. Arya looked up at her, confused. Sansa frowned. “I’m sorry for that. I should have spent more time with you after I recovered. It’s just ever since I’ve been out of bed I’ve been so busy and—“

“—I can take care of myself.” Arya insisted. Sansa’s left brow went up.

“I know you can take care of yourself in a fight, or in the woods, or in the ghettos, or in Braavos, or in any number of dangerous situations. I’m not sure you’re equipped to properly handle this one in particular, though.” Sansa gestured then to Arya’s clothing. “I mean, you’re not even dressed properly.”

Arya pulled away. Oh Gods, here it comes. She’s going to try and put me in gowns of velvet and satin and other ridiculous things. “I’m dressed fine.”

“No, you’re not. You’re dressed like a common foot soldier. Why do you think you’ve been barred from parts of the castle? You don’t have anything that fits the dress code. And I know you’ve been disrespected. That’s because people look at you and don’t recognize you. They take you for some dockworker’s wife, not a trueborn daughter of House Stark. It’s a miracle you haven’t been barred from the Keep yet.”

Arya recalled something similar happening in her childhood. “I’m not a boy, I’m a girl! My father is Hand of the King! I’m Arya Stark, of Winterfell!” She shifted uncomfortably.

The door opened and a couple of Dothraki girls entered carrying trays of roast mutton, brown bread, and asparagus. Sansa smiled and thanked both girls before nodding to the taller one. “If you would both go bring in the chest I have for my sister?”

“Chest?” Arya asked as she and her sister went to sit before their meal.

“I have some presents for you.”

Arya tried not to roll her eyes. She could see them now: shimmering lengths of samite and satin, flowing skirts impossible to run in, fringed sleeves and lace ruffles. She faked a smile. “Presents, may I see them now?”

She’d try to get some of the juice from the meat being laid out on at least one of the garments. That would be a start. If she destroyed enough, Sansa might give up.

Her sister nodded and grinned. The Dothraki girls carried in a large chest of painted wood with latches shaped like direwolf heads. Sansa and Arya hurried over and the her sister’s long, elegant fingers seemed to dance about the latches as she opened it.
There was an array of fine fabric, but it wasn’t quite what Arya expected. Sansa lifted one garment: a long doublet of dove grey lamb’s wool lined with white velvet. It actually resembled something she’d once seen Robb wear at the banquet at Winterfell for King Robert. It was cut in the style of some of the garments worn by ladies like Elia Sand: tailored for a woman’s body, but obviously meant to be worn with trousers.

“All of these are rough cuts, I made an estimate of your measurements already. Mistress Cyron is going to make all the alterations so it’s perfect, but you need to wear Stark colors and you have to be dressed like a lady. I want you to wear this when you’re exploring the castle from now on, alright? I’ve got a couple of jerkins for you, and a couple shirts for you to wear in the yards, but this is your court wear from now on. I will not have a member of my house looking like a street urchin. Just because you’re allergic to gowns doesn’t mean you have to be allergic to taste.”

Arya gaped as she took the doublet in hand. When she turned it around, she saw to her delight that a terrifying looking direwolf had been stitched onto the back in dark grey thread.

“Sansa… I like this!”

“Good, you may wear it to my wedding reception. You’ll have to wear a dress to the ceremony, however. The Sept requires that the women wear gowns.”

“But you’re not going to make me wear a dress any other time?”

Sansa rolled her eyes. “Arya, I’m Warden of the North and I’m currently planning the most important wedding in recent history. I don’t have time to force you into gowns. You refused to wear them when we were young and I honestly doubt that has changed. Just promise me you’ll take care of what I give you. Our income is still quite limited and not many tailors and seamstresses make athletic clothing for women.”

Arya smirked. I guess I won’t be staining anything. She made a show of neatly folding the doublet and placing it back with her other new things before they went to eat again.

The mutton was delicious, and Arya made a comment to that affect. Sansa smiled.

“Jon won’t eat it. Back at the Wall, it was what they had constantly. He loathes it now.”

“More for us.”

Sansa bit her lip then. Arya cocked her head. “Is there something you wanted to tell me?”

“Arya, are you happy at court?”

“Not particularly. It can get rather boring.”

“Would you like to return to Winterfell?”

“There is no Winterfell. The Vale Lords tore it down.” I saw it happen. But Sansa didn’t need to know that.

“It’s being rebuilt. I would like someone I trust to oversee its further reconstruction and serve as castellan. I’ll be required to go on progress with Jon to Essos to be presented to the overseas domains, and after that I’ll be princess of the empire and I’m a member of the Small Council. I will need to spend most of my time in King’s Landing. And there must always be a Stark in Winterfell. Aside from me, you’re the last Stark.”
Arya’s cheeks reddened. This was never a fate she’d envisioned for herself. For the first half of her life she’d been told she’d be the lady of some lord, and for the second half, her fate was bringing death to others. Being acting Warden of Winterfell though? That was supposed to be the future Bran would have whenever duty would call Robb away. That was a fate for the brothers she envied, not a sister.

And Sansa was giving it to her. *Gods, why doesn’t she just give me *Ice* while she’s at it?* Arya actually had no idea what had happened to her father's sword, but with the way her sister was acting, so giddily trying to show her every kindness, she half expected her sister to suddenly conjure the blade from thin air and hand it to her.

“I’d be happy to.”

Sansa grinned. “Good. You’d leave right after the wedding, just as Jon and I leave for Dragonstone. I will want your sworn service, and you are to report to me daily so I might instruct you on how to perform your duties properly. And you must promise me, Arya, that there shall be no secrets between us.”

“I---“

Sansa turned a piercing blue gaze upon her sister. “I mean it, Arya. I’m trusting you with our birthright, with our family home and legacy, our lands, our people, and everything I’ve spent the last five years building. If I’m to do that, I must know everything.”

Arya’s fork fell with a loud clatter. She bolted from the room.

*Promises were made. My life is in danger. They could be watching. Watching at any moment.*

Sansa didn’t follow her. She sent her precious Mistress Cyron to Arya’s chambers to measure her exactly. A message came that she was expected to take tea with her sister the next afternoon after the Frey/Corbray hearings. That night, the chest of clothes, newly altered so they fit like a second skin, arrived as well.

Arya slipped on a grey shirt, her fancy new doublet and a set of grey lamb’s wool breeches. Soft brown leather boots were also provided. She stepped in front of the mirror in them, analyzing her reflection. *I look like a lord. I look like Father.*

She actually couldn’t remember wearing her father wearing something *quite* this fine. Even when the king came to visit, he hadn’t dressed this fine at the banquet. Her father never dressed quite like he was one of the greatest lords of the kingdom. *But he was. He was Warden of the North. I’m not a great lord. So why should I wear something like this?*

She’d worn velvet at that banquet. Grey velvet at her mother, sister, and septa’s insistence. Sansa had silks---first ivory, which Arya destroyed, and then blue. Sansa always had fancy clothes ready.

Arya closed her eyes and tried to imagine herself sitting in her father’s chair, receiving visitors, answering petitions, ordering servants as she’d seen her parents do in her childhood. But her childhood seemed like a lifetime ago.

She’d always run about, exploring the woods, wrestling with her brothers, collecting interesting rocks and flowers, playing tricks on her sister and avoiding Septa Mordane. She didn’t do much observing of her parents official duties. She was good at figures and keeping ledgers and excelled at her lessons, but she wasn’t Robb. She’d been a girl. She was never expected to stand back and observe her father give audiences or take meetings with his bannermen the way Robb was. Even
Theon Greyjoy was expected there. He’d served as Father’s squire and was heir to Pyke and thus had to learn a lord’s responsibilities.

*Even Bran witnessed an execution.*

The weight of everything she didn’t know and didn’t understand seemed to be carried in this piece of clothing. *I can kill. I can torture. I can be an animal. What else can I do?*

There was a knock on the door and without thinking Arya went to open it. Gendry stood there, holding a tankard of ale. Arya ushered him in gratefully. Gendry stared at her for a long moment.

“What?” she asked, a little perturbed.

“You look… very… lovely.”

Arya glanced down at her doublet and reddened. *Right. Nice clothes.* She supposed her shape was more apparent in this tailored garb than the ill-fitting garb she usually had on. Of course, most of those things hadn’t even been made for her, much of it stolen off of clotheslines or donated by charitable smallfolk during her turns as a fugitive.

These clothes were made for her. The color of them brought out the metallic sheen of her eyes and the rich warmth of her brown hair and the cut highlighted the narrowness of her waist.

*There is something else I know how to do.*

She walked over to him, took the tankard, and gestured to the small sofa by the fire. “Sit.”

He did as he was told, thankfully. Arya went to pour cups for them, turning away as she did. She unlaced the front of her doublet and tunic, so that her cleavage was visible. When she turned, cups in hand, Gendry gasped and gripped his gold cloak. “My Lady…”

“I’m. Not. A lady.” She downed both cups of ale, tossed them aside, and marched over to him. He moved to get up, but she pounced into his lap before he could. She gripped his jaw, pinching his face. “Look at me. Look at my face. I’m not a lady, understand? I’m not your lady. I’m not anyone’s lady. I’m Arya. I belong to me.”

He pulled his head back. “Yes, you belong to you. But you *are* a lady.”

“No!” Arya pulled the doublet off, then her tunic. She watched Gendry’s eyes widen at the sight of her and felt her nethers twitch. She ground herself against his iron-clad lap, silently cursing his tasset, along with every other piece of armor and clothing he wore. “I’m not. Do I act like a lady? Do I look like a lady?”

Arya knew she wasn’t a lady. It was one of the few things she did know. No matter what her name was, or how she was dressed up. She wasn’t a lady. She couldn’t be.

“Arya, please stop.” He looked pained. She didn't understand why. There was a fire behind those crystal blue eyes, she wanted it to rage, not just glimmer.

“No,” she growled. “I want you inside me.”

“Please… Arya… I’m begging you…” He whimpered now. It was hard to make Gendry whimper. Arya felt a sense of accomplishment.

She tugged at his hair. “Shut up, Gendry. Just---“
“No!” He pushed her off his lap, forcing her to land at the other side of the sofa and sprung to his feet, his face red.

Arya was shocked, hurt. How could he…? Gods, no. She didn’t want Gendry to be another Jon, another man who pretended to appreciate ferocity and strength in a woman, but at the end of the day still really just wanted another pliant, pretty, simpering…

“So I was wrong then,” she snarled, trying not to cry, “You really were speaking of Sansa.”

He shook, but his brows furrowed in confusion. “Wh-what?”

“I do love your cousin, my prince. I admit it. I fell for that girl a while back. Even before I did, I knew that girl from Winterfell was special,” Arya said in a mocking tone, “I thought you were just playing my brother for a fool, but I was wrong. You want Sansa, and since you can’t have her, you really just want the next best thing. You never wanted me. You just wanted a sister you could try to mold into some copy. You want the sweet Lady Stark. But I’m not my sister. I’ll never be my sister.”

“I don’t want your sister!” He looked appalled, and he kept shaking. “I just… Arya…”

“What?!”

“I…” He glanced away nervously and turned away, nervously pulling at his armor. She watched, open-mouthed, as each metal piece fell from his form and hit the ground with a clang. It created a bit of a din by the time he finished and turned to her in his linen breeches and tunic. He’d been sweating, judging by the way the cloth was plaster to his skin. She could see the outline of his chest, which expanded and deflated with each deep breath. “I don’t want to be a bull anymore than you want to be a lady. Don’t want to be mounted like one.”

Her eyes widened and her cheeks reddened. She put her arms over her breasts and tried not to look at the clear outline of his cock straining against his breeches. He stepped towards her and an instinct took over: one new and completely different than any of the ones Arya had spent the last several years honing. She lay back on the sofa. Gendry smiled and walked over, pulling his tunic off. He crouched over he and kissed her deeply, climbing atop her.

She tasted his tongue, smelled his sweat, and melted a bit. They broke away for breath and stared at each other. Then they laughed. Their hands went for the lacings on each others’ breeches. They kicked their boots off and Arya lifted her hips so Gendry could slip the trousers down her body. Once the cloth was off, he stroked up her calves, thighs and hips, sending little shivers up her form. They giggled like children and peppered little kisses over each other’s faces and necks. She licked his neck. He tasted like salt and earth. Tiny, thick hairs, fighting back against a morning shave, bristled against her tongue.

His hands were everywhere, on her teats, on her legs, on her waist, on her arse and hips. They were surprisingly gentle, for such a big man. Gentle, careful, and nimble, as if he were crafting one of his ornate pieces of armor. As he got closer and closer to what was between her legs, she shivered and squirmed more and more. She reached for his cock. He stilled.

“Gentle, Love.”

She wanted to be gentle. She truly did. For once, she was going to try and have a soft hand. I can do that. I know I can. She bit her lip and stroked him. His cock, thick and hard as steel, seemed to pulse within her hand. He shivered. His hands reached her sex and with the careful, nimble fingers of an artist, he found her nub and entrance simultaneously. He rubbed at her nub with his thumb and
pushed his middle finger within her. Arya arched her back and her breath caught. He inserted a second finger. His thumb circled and pushed at her nub.

For the first time in years, Arya lost control. She shook and cried out. Gods, he’s rung my bell. She intended to keep being rung, so when she came down, she wrapped her legs around his hips. “Now, Gendry.”

He slipped into her. She doubted she could feel more heat even if they were fucking in one of his smithies. They molded themselves to one another, a tangle of limbs, gasps, sweat, smiles and pleasure. Both of them were hard muscle, but it seemed in that moment that they’d found the last soft parts of one another.

“I love you.”

It slipped out of her mouth without a thought. She hadn’t even considered saying such a thing. She didn’t even know it until that moment. Once she said it, it terrified her. She’d heard him offer similar sentiments to her, but that didn’t mean she considered herself capable of doing the same. The worst part was that she believed she might actually mean it.

He groaned then, loudly, and began thrusting more forcefully. “Love… you…”

That terror left as quickly as it came, slipping from her like the words that conjured them. A great deal of tension seemed to dissipate overall. Her whole body seemed to dissolve. The bell rung once more.

He finished within her with a gasp and a shudder. His weight fell upon her, and Arya smirked. Another girl would feel crushed under it. Gendry will never crush me. Even if could, he wouldn’t.

They lay there in silence for several seconds before he murmured something.

“What?” She asked, her eyes closed.

“Did you mean it?”

“What?”

“I love you’. Did you mean it?”

“Shut up.” Maybe he didn't mean it when he said it. Maybe she could convince him it was something she'd just uttered in the moment of passion. People often said insane things when they were abed.

“Please, Arya.”

“Fine. Yes.” She groaned. Don't you dare think that means you can take this for granted. Gendry already called her a lady too often. She didn't want him thinking of her just as his Lady Love now. For all she knew, that was how it happened with Jon and Sansa. He saw her be fierce, they admitted they loved one another, and then he decided that it meant he had to treat her like bloody Jonquil. She was NOT going to let her and Gendry end up like the run-of-the-mill, ridiculous romantic fools her siblings had become. So she sneered at him as she asked, "Happy?"

“Just wanted to be sure. None of the other girls did. Treated me like an animal.”

And then her heart ached for him. There were a lot of girls who stared at him like a piece of meat. It was something Arya had been guilty of herself, though she looked at him as a lot of other things as well at least. It was one thing to admire physicality. It was another to see nothing else. As someone
who had been the target of such attention, she could relate. Right now, she felt his very lonely heart beating against her chest. *He wants mine to join his. So do I.* She kissed his forehead. “I’m sorry.”

“I’d just rather be a man. A good man. A true knight.”

“Most true knights aren’t good men.”

“Yes they are. I mean true knights. Like Ser Barristan and Brienne.”

Arya rolled her eyes. “Fine, Gendry, you’re a true knight. But I don’t have to be your lady.”

He snorted and burrowed his face in her hair. “As m—“

The door opened and there was a shriek. Gendry and Arya sprung apart. Sansa stood in the doorway of the solar, eyes wide. Nani stood next to her, but quickly moved to run over to them, looking far less scandalized than her mistress. The maid grabbed some of the clothing off the floor, folding it as if nothing were amiss.

Sansa, though, looked shocked and horrified for the both of them. A second later, she was charging towards them as well. Arya and Gendry both gulped and tried to cover themselves. In seconds, Gendry was yelping in pain as Sansa yanked at one of his ears, pulling him off the sofa roughly.

“You dare---! My sister!”

Sansa was gone. The Red Wolf had returned.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jon:

“The Magna Val is a dangerous woman, and she is not one who likes to feel like a captive,” he explained calmly to the Ser Barristan. They sat in his chambers, enjoying some Dornish Sour and a quiet evening. Daenerys had retired early, asking Podrick Payne to escort her back to her rooms. Sansa had gone off to Arya’s rooms after complaining that she’d made “a complete debacle” of trying to speak to her and wanted to make amends. Jon chose this time to speak on the sensitive topic of his former lover. “So she shouldn’t feel like one. Keep your distance. But at the same time---”

There was an awkward pause.

“---At the same time?” Barristan prompted him with a bemused look. Jon took a deep breath.

“Unless she’s with her liege lady, don’t let her into the royal wing. In fact, make sure special care is taken so she doesn’t ever find her way into my chambers.”

The old man fixed him with a steady look. “Your Grace, I will do as you ask. However, I request that you not expect myself or any member of the Queensguard as to act as a buffer for your own weaknesses or lusts. *Should* the lady—“

“---Magna---“ Jon regretted this correction the second he saw the expression on Barristan’s face and lowered his eyes contritely.

“Should the Magna find herself alone with you, it will be your decision in the end if you succumb to any temptations. I will not have my people blamed for your sins.”

“That’s not----“
“Let me assure you, My Prince. The only buffer you can expect from me are these words: If you dishonor your bride to be, I will spend the rest of my years reminding you of the grievousness of such a misdeed. I had to comfort your father’s wife when he first ran off with your mother. I don’t intend to see you repeat the mistakes of Rhaegar Targaryen. I expect better of his son.”

“As well you should, Ser Barristan.” Jon gritted his teeth. On one hand, he resented this assumption that he was some lust-filled greenboy willing to shame the woman he loved. On the other hand…

*He expects me to be better than my father.* Since Daenerys had returned, the popular sentiment regarding Rhaegar Targaryen had warmed considerably. During his childhood, Rhaegar had been the dashing but ultimately evil monster who had kidnapped and raped Lyanna Stark. When Dany returned, the story of his father had been of the torrid, impulsive, passionate love affair between the Stark maiden and “the Last Dragon” that ultimately produced the Heir to Dragons.

Epithets like “The Silver Prince” were repeated. Songs emphasizing his strength, talents, looks, and courage were sung as if no one ever once had reason to resent him. People seeking to curry favor with Jon often spoke of him in glowing terms, purposely and favorably comparing him to “The Prince Who Bled Rubies.”

The people who thought comparing Jon to Rhaegar would please their prince were fools. Even if the tryst between Rhaegar and Lyanna was consensual, Jon didn’t have the highest respect for what took place. It still ended in the suffering and death of countless innocents, including Jon’s mother, siblings, and uncle. It still almost ended the Targaryen dynasty. It still resulted in both Daenerys and Jon suffering difficult upbringings filled with feelings of displacement and confusion regarding their identities.

Maybe Rhaegar had been bold and strong and brave. Maybe he wasn’t the complete monster his father was. But he’d still abandoned his family and taken advantage of a young woman promised to another.

Barristan Selmy was a man of unquestionable honor, who never left any question that he was fully deserving of the legends attached to him. He had served Jon’s grandfather and known Rhaegar intimately. Hearing him say that he expected Jon to be better than the lauded, legendary Dragon Prince warmed his heart. In a place where Jon was inundated with insincere, empty, and self-serving compliments, this statement held a special significance that was simultaneously affirming and humbling.

*He’s the first person I’ve heard in over a year to have the nerve to acknowledge that Rhaegar Targaryen wasn’t perfect, that someone could do better than him. People at court usually don’t even dare to suggest that Dany of all people could be superior to my supposedly perfect sire. And he’s willing to use a dangerous, painful truth to warn me.* Jon leaned back a second, appreciating this man to a far greater degree than he had just moments earlier. I *can and should speak to this man with trust.*

Jon always knew that Ser Barristan was a good man, but not until this moment had the significance and truth of what that meant been impressed upon him. Jon hadn’t felt quite like this speaking to anyone since Maester Aemon. Since the blind maester's death, Jon hadn’t really had a conversation with an older male mentor he felt he could trust intimately on this level, one whose good opinion meant the world. Jon wondered why he hadn’t felt this way since.

“I have no intention whatsoever of dishonoring My Lady, Ser Barristan,” Jon told him, speaking with an earnestness he usually had to abandon when holding conversation at court but dearly missed employing “I am not my father. I do not ask that you keep the Magna Val from my rooms to guard me from temptation. That is my own duty. I ask it of you in order to protect my lady’s feelings. I
wish to do whatever is in my power to maintain her peace of mind. Even though I have no intention of anything illicit transpiring, I do worry about what sort of message it might send if Val were to find her way into my chambers. I want to avoid any possible misunderstandings that could cause my Lady distress.”

Barristan sipped his wine. “Fair enough. I suppose recent events would give you cause for concern regarding wild women forcing themselves into your apartments. I apologize for it. You needn’t worry this time, however.”

Jon hesitated then. “There’s another thing. Erm… shortly before the Magna’s arrival, Lady Stark will be taking up residence in my apartments. So her guard will be assisting you.”

Ser Barristan frowned. He knew, just like everyone else at court, that Jon and Sansa already coupled regularly. This had never been outright addressed, though Jon always got the feeling that the Lord Commander disapproved. More than once he’d been subject to a couple of stern looks when the old man spotted Sansa or Jon leaving the other’s apartments early morning.

Jon yearned for the man to finally say something, to tell him he was doing wrong. He yearned to be reprimanded by someone. With all of the scorn his lover had to endure, Jon felt responsible, he felt he deserved some of his own. Even if it was only to have a chance to defend them both. Even if only to assuage some of his own guilt.

“I see…” Was all Barristan said.

“Is that it? Don’t you have any comments?” Jon knew for a fact that Barristan had voiced disapproval to Daenerys about some of her affairs. Why am I exempt?

“Her father and the man that raised you were one and the same. So you know better than anyone what an honorable man he was. Eddard Stark sacrificed his honor and his life for his daughter. You will honor his memory by giving her the respect and love she deserves.”

“This arrangement is as much her wish as it is mine, I assure you.” It was true, too. Jon had suggested that he move to her chambers in order to offer her reassurance that nothing, nothing at was going to happen between him and Val. Sansa suggested his rooms instead, as she was sick of sleeping in her own anyways. “Besides, you already broke a mirror in your own rooms, I’ll not have you destroying any of the pretty things in mine.”

She also pointed out another benefit to their arrangement: “It will prove far more convenient and allow us more time to spend working on that little project Daenerys gave us.”

Barristan sighed. “I believe it, My Prince. Just promise me your cloak will eventually find a place upon her shoulders.”

“You can see the cloak, if it would please you. Margaery Tyrell assures me that it is lovely.”

Barristan snorted and for a second it seemed he might make a joke. But they were interrupted by a loud knock on the solar door. Jon bid them to enter. In ran Arya, looking miserable, her clothes looking like she’d just yanked them on.

“Jon, she’s going to send him away!”

“Who?”

“Gendry! She’s saying he’ll be exiled from court! Don’t let her!”
“What? Why?” Sansa had always liked Gendry, and the knight was a good man.

“Because… because…”

“Because he’s taken liberties with our sister, Jon.” Sansa appeared in the doorway, looking furious. Both sisters glared at each other. Jon’s heart sank as he saw that easy peace between his sister and lover had come to a nasty end.

Chapter End Notes

So... Gendry and Arya got it on... This one was a bit hard for me to write, I admit, because I have some real difficulty envisioning Arya as an adult. I know Maisie Williams is of age and Arya's already been faced with some sexually-themed situations in canon, but part of it is just how young they purposely make her look in the show. They do everything in their power to make her look as thirteen as possible. And I know Sansa's only supposed to be fourteen and that there isn't a huge age difference between Sophie Turner and Maisie Williams. However, while the show people do a pretty great job aging down bambi-eyed Maisie, Sophie Turner just straight up looks like a young adult and she's got the height of a WNBA player. That, coupled with just how explicitly sexualized Sansa's storylines tend to be, make it a lot easier to reconcile her in sexual situations than it would with Arya, who I have much a much easier time putting in violent and gory situations than any other character in this fic, even badasses like Jon and Barristan. This fic is far more book based, but the images of the actors playing the characters do play a big part in how I visualize things. So I had a bit of an issue writing this. I mean, even in the Mercy chapters, Arya doesn't even act sexual while she's luring a target who she knows intends to pork her. Arya is a young adult in this and not a virgin or anything, but I still have this kid vision of her, because to me Maisie Williams and Arya look young and fit far more into the violence end of the adult spectrum while the sexual side seems kind of alien. You'll notice there's a lot of focusing more on Gendry's physicality than hers, more of a female gaze here, whereas with prior Sansa/Jon scenes, it's a bit more egalitarian.

However, I should note that said discomfort isn't why Arya seems kind of immature here. That is a story-based thing.

Next up: Roslin and the Corbrays are brought to court.
Lamentation

Chapter Summary

Dany deals with politics and stress. Roslin goes on trial. Jon tries to stay true to the North, but a bad move brings out the dragon's flame.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bluecichlid for beta-ing

So, some pretty crazy stuff happened in last chapter's comments---- for the record, I am happy to accept legit criticism and will even agree with a lot of it. If I disagree, I'll argue, but I'm happy for feedback of all kinds as long as it is fair. But personal attacks are not tolerated. Nor is harassing other commenters across social media. Seriously guys, be nice to each other.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Lamentation

Daenerys:

“FUCK THE OLD TONGUE!” She shouted that morning after trying to repeat the proper way to say, “Greetings, you are welcome to my home, My Lord” in the Wildling Language for a quarter hour straight. She managed to terrify Missandei. Rarely, did she ever lash out at Missandei.

Dany was not feeling well.

While Sansa’s survival proved a great relief, the stress that came with that was quickly replaced by the trouble with the wildlings and the issues with the Martells. It seemed the second one problem was resolved, two sprung up to take its place.

Reconciling various cultures was difficult, and Dany had firsthand experience with how much the clash of different viewpoints and ways of living could complicate things. It was for that reason she was so angry with herself for neglecting matters with the Free Folk. The men were “stealing” women, an act that the wildlings saw as jolly courtship and an honorable test of strength and one the rest of the world saw as kidnapping and rape. Their belief in their “rights” to all land they stood on also led to them killing game upon lands not assigned to them--- simple hunting by their standards and poaching to those who grew up below the Wall.

Everyone was angry, everyone was hurt, and it was just another problem to add to the already downtrodden North. And of course, even the efforts to repair some of the problems up there created new ones, as the Wildling Lords felt that the measures Sansa was prepared to take in order to repair the economy of the region were being inflicted upon them without consideration for their needs and desires. The fact that Jon and Sansa had been torn from their regular correspondence with the Free Folk lords by recent events hadn’t helped to assuage this fear.
The invitation given to the Magna Val was received with courtesy, though, taken as the sign of good faith it was meant as. While Daenerys would have preferred the visiting Lord not be one her nephew had previously engaged in liaisons with, it was a political necessity. According to all reports, the invitation had calmed the Free Folk down a bit.

Still, the peace depended on how that well that visit went. And to complicate matters, Tormund Giantsbane had written wondering why he hadn’t gotten a personal invitation to the wedding when Val and the Thenns had.

A mass invitation had actually been sent to all of the heads of the Northern noble houses which included Giantsbane. The “personal invitation” that had gone to the Thenns had actually just been a letter from Jon to Alys Karstark Thenn that mentioned the wedding.

Jon had purposely avoided speaking of the wedding to Tormund in his letters to him, hoping not to encourage the wildling to come. According to Jon, the man was brave, strong, and generally good-natured, but crude. His favorite topics of conversation included fucking, cracking skulls, and unsanitary bodily functions.

There was already enough animosity and prejudice between the Free Folk and the original citizens of Westeros. They didn’t need Tormund making things worse by showing up to court howling about various animals and the size of the cock he’d fucked them with. But she had no idea how make him happy without encouraging him to come.

Then, there was the recent cold snap leaving the majority of the Seven Kingdoms outright miserable. Even King’s Landing was frigid.

In addition to that, there’d been the matter of the Martells. The combination of Princess Arianne and the Sand Snakes had proven too much to handle. Breaking into Jon’s apartments was too grievous a breach of conduct for Dany to ignore. And Arianne was too dangerous to simply let loose. So, an agreement was being drafted. Princess Arianne was still welcome to go to and from court as she pleased, but the six eldest of her infamous cousins were to be banished until further notice. The two youngest, Loreza and Dorea, were “invited” to become Daenerys’s wards.

This had not gone over well.

It had been an idea of Dany’s and perhaps not her best. The second she spoke of it to Arianne and Lady Nym, they acted infuriated. Negotiations were still ongoing, and Daenerys was exhausted already, but determined not to back down. The truth was, the Martells had been among the first to back her when she arrived to Westeros, and she owed them much. But she couldn’t allow them to run rampant this way. She’d given Arianne Martell enough as it was. She’d promised to hold off on finalizing anything to placate them. The Princess was now demanding that her “new friend” Sansa Stark get involved. Dany promised to involve their “dear friend” as soon as the Frey trial was complete.

Also, the Greyjoys were making noise about being shut out of court life. Overseas was proving problematic as well. Astapor and Yunkai were feuding, something about a spice shipment, and there were apparently abuses shown to a number of the performers in the fighter pits of Meereen.

That afternoon, she’d been near crying with frustration. Zora gave her the oddest advice then: “Khaleesi, you should ask Ser Podrick to attend you this evening.”

She’d laughed at this and downed a couple cups of wine. She wasn’t a big drinker, but yesterday, she felt she needed to be. But then at dinner, as she drank some more, she noticed Zora pushing the young, nervous Westerlands knight near her more and more and thought, Why not?
Daemon Sand had ended in disaster, but she had no reason to suspect Podrick of anything. So she rolled her eyes and let him escort her back to her bedchamber.

It was the best drunken decision she’d ever made. Daenerys had shared the beds of men, women, Andal, Rhoynar, Dothraki, Volanti, Meereenese, Tyroshi… She’d slept with khals, sellswords, whores of both sexes, knights, and even spent a couple nights in the legendary pleasure houses of Lys. This boy, though…

He’d never been a whore. He’d never been trained. But not only did he have a cock that was clearly crafted by the gods, he also had the most incredible instincts for using it as well as his hands and mouth.

Ser Podrick had acted nervous at first, when she’d asked him. He’d even asked her if this “was a test.”

“No, Ser, it isn’t,” she’d replied, sitting at the end of her bed and surveying the dark-haired youth. He wasn’t bad-looking at all, he was even a bit handsome. That was overshadowed by his awkwardness. But once one took a long, hard look at him, the thick hair, soft skin, cheekbones, and soulful eyes became apparent. “Or maybe it is. A test of just how good you are.”

“I’m not good at anything, My Queen, I just… I just like to… to…”

“To…?”

He gulped and looked down. “I like to please people who deserve it.”

“I see.” She smirked and rolled her eyes. “Well, it’s been implied that you possess that particular skill. But if you don’t wish to employ it now…”

“I would love to but… I’m not worthy of it, My Queen. You could have any, any gentleman at all. You’re the ruler of half the world I’m just…”

“The one I’ve chosen to join me this evening,” Daenerys sighed, not in the mood to coax some nervous little greenboy and more than a little furious with herself for giving into this stupid suggestion. She felt like an idiot. “But no matter. You may leave.”

She fell onto her back and closed her eyes, rubbing her temples. She couldn’t believe how much of an arse she’d just made of herself.

I’m better than this. Podrick Payne of all people. I’m losing my hold on things.

And then she felt a warm, comforting pressure on her calf. Her eyes fluttered open and she looked. Ser Podrick was on one knee at the end of the bed, his head near where her lower legs hung off the edge. He was unbuckling her boot. As he started tugging it down with one hand, he massaged her calf muscle with the other and kissed her knee gently. His hands were as skilled as Zora’s.

Dany moaned, loving the sensation, and closed her eyes again. He repeated the action with her other leg once the first boot was off, and then began rubbing her feet. This continued for a few seconds before he nervously spoke. “If I may remove my armor, Your Grace.”

She just nodded. There was some clanging, and then some odd scurrying. She looked over again and saw he was putting his garments neatly in a corner. It was adorable. Then he came over and began rubbing her feet again, dressed only in his tunic and trousers.

“Take off the rest,” she murmured. He did so, and to her amusement he folded each piece, even his smallclothes, and put them in a neat pile before resuming his task. She surveyed him, her eyes nearly
closed. He was in excellent shape, as was expected of a young knight, and her was clearly aching for her. But he just slowly worked his hands up her legs, moving under her skirts.

“Your Grace, if you could turn over?”

“Why?” She asked, a bit suspicious.

“Well, I mean, you spent four hours today sitting on the Iron Throne. I imagine your… well… that seat doesn’t really look all that comfortable. I thought maybe…”

She snorted with appreciation, thoroughly charmed. Yes, the Iron Throne was a literal pain in the arse and very few people appreciated that to the proper extent. Charmed, she turned over. He rubbed her backside through her smallclothes until she gave him permission to remove them.

Before long, the ache in her backside felt thoroughly soothed, but another ache had appeared in its place. She flipped over again and smirked at him. His eyes flashed.

“If… if I may say so, Your Grace, you’re really very beautiful. I know people tell you that all the time, and you probably already know but… You are. I’d think so even if you weren’t queen. I’d never seen a girl with violet eyes before you. I… I like looking at them.”

She laughed. “I’m glad you do. I wasn’t aware of it, you never look me in the eye.”

“I’m afraid to.”

She sat up again and reached for him, stroking his shoulder. “Don’t be.”

Then she kissed him. Their mouths danced together and he clutched her head, stroking her hair and cheek. She ran her fingers through his hair and her hands down his body. His hands traveled downwards as well, gently unlacing her silk gown. Then, once her gown was open and her shift was parted as well, his head traveled down… down… down…

He made her come for the first time with his head between her legs and his hands at her breasts. Then his fingers played with her sex and gave her a second peak. After that, she grabbed him by the shoulders, threw him on his back and honored her title of Khaleesi by riding him. He guided her hips with his hands and angled himself just so. By the end she was practically crying. She found her third release and collapsed a bit. Podrick gently rolled them over so he was atop her and when he erupted within her, she erupted again for the fourth time.

He fell beside her, stroking her arms and kissing her face and neck. She curled into him, and he embraced her warmly. Her whole body vibrated against him in a way that would have been embarrassing if she could even focus well enough to feel shame.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” he whispered, “You were lovely. That was… that was perfect.”

“It was,” she agreed.

“May I… May I stay here for the night?”

She laughed again and they slipped under the covers. He cradled her to him and told her she was sweet, wonderful, and glorious.

Daenerys woke with a new confidence. She turned to him in the morning and pressed a kiss to his lips. His eyes fluttered open and he grinned.
“It wasn’t just a dream!”

She glided into the throne room that morning feeling quite sated. The recent cold didn’t even bother her so much. She fixed her nephew with a great smile as she sat down for the trial, and beamed at the assembled court.

Less happy was the Lady Tully, brought in covered in a heavy cloak of grey cloth, her hair a mess, her body frail, her eyes red. She stared at the ground as Missandei read out the charges.


“How do you answer to these charges, Lady Roslin?” Daenerys asked.

No answer. Roslin just looked at the ground. Daenerys felt her good mood sour.

“How do you answer to these charges, Lady Roslin?”

Still nothing. Daenerys sighed, impatient.

“Lady Roslin, if you do not speak now, it shall be taken as an admission of guilt.”

The woman finally looked up. “I confess to trying to kill a woman responsible for the deaths of many others. I confess to loving a man who was not the one I married. You have my confession to everything. What more could you people want?”

Daenerys snorted. So she’s playing the martyr then? Hilarious.

“Well, you confessed to your crimes to an extent. However, you did not admit to your involvement with the Corbrays or with the invasion and second sacking of Winterfell by the Vale Lords.”

“Do you need me to?”

Daenerys gasped and her eyes widened. She couldn’t believe the nerve of this woman. After everything she’d done, she had the nerve to disrespect this court? This was a woman who had broken the heart of her husband, ruined the lives of her children, risked the stability of the realm for petty revenge, and conspired with child rapers. If she had no interest in defending herself, she had no right to act defiant.

Gritting her teeth, Dany replied, “If we are to avoid the presentation of evidence, then yes. You may admit your guilt, or we can proceed to an examination of the facts surrounding your case.”

“Fine. I’ve confessed enough to ruin the life of my daughter already. I’m clearly going to die no matter what. What do I have left? It’s all true. Every bit of it.”

Every eye in the throne room went to Edmure Tully, who stood at the foot of the dais, looking at Roslin with miserable disbelief.

“How could you?” He called out, his voice hoarse. “I loved you! I gave you everything!”

Dany didn’t reprimand him for this outburst. She was wondering the same thing.,

Roslin fixed him with a steady glare. “I grew up being looked down upon by everyone. I was a non-
entity in a sea of sisters and nieces, confined to the Crossing and treated like a piece of chattle. I listened to my father rant and rave about how despite our House’s centuries of history, everyone, especially the Tullys looked down upon us. When people did bother to look at me, they sneered at me for being the daughter of Lord Frey. There were a few things in my life which gave me comfort throughout my childhood. The first was the fact that as the prettiest of the unloved Frey girls, I could be sold for the best price. Being sold was never appealing, but knowing I was at least the girl with the highest prospects gave me something. There were two other things, though. One was a brother, a beloved brother. Stevron. Stevron was a father to me. He read me stories and sang me to sleep at night. He bought me my first lute. And then there was my nephew, Ryman, who wasn’t as clever, but he was always sweet to me. They were the ones who treated me as more than a piece of chattle.”

She took a deep breath. “I was told growing up that all the other Houses looked down on us. But perhaps I would be able to make a match with a well-to-do Lord, even the heir to a proper seat in the Riverlands or the Reach. Father used to say that ‘At least Rosanne might be able to snag us some coin when I sell her off.’ He called me lots of things--- Rosanne, Rozzie, Rosaleen. He didn’t even know my name.”

Daenerys’s stomach sank. The room suddenly seemed even colder. No one said a word. Everyone stared.

“So when I was sixteen, I hear for the first time that my days of being looked down upon are over. The legendary Starks of the North and the Tullys of Riverrun need us. I’m not going to be sold off to some minor lordling with some decent coin. My family will fight in a glorious war and a new kingdom is to be built by a new young king. And I will be his queen. Already, Robb Stark was becoming a legend as a warrior, the valiant young wolf fighting to protect his family, crowned by his bannermen who shouted his name. My brother Stevron left to fight for him, promising to do his best to protect the young man who would make me his bride. ‘I’m going to come back, Roslin, and I’ll be a hero. I’ll fight to come back to you and make you a queen.’ I knew then that no one would ever, ever forget my name again.

“I watched as hundreds, thousands of men from my father’s household and lands, men I’d grown up with, left the Crossing. And I knew I’d miss them. But it would be worth it. I dreamed that my brother would come home and walk me down the aisle of my father’s sept. Everyone after the war would know him for the great man Stevron could be instead of just seeing him as the grasping son of my weasel of a father and I’d be a queen. House Frey would prove itself, and I’d be married to the Young Wolf and I’d live a happy life far, far away from my father, never to be just another anonymous girl again.”

Roslin started to shake more violently. She turned to look at Sansa then, who stood on the other side of the royal dais. “And do you know what happened? My brother… my sweet brother Stevron, one of two people in all the world to ever truly see me as more than just a pretty non-entity for the marriage market, died. He died from a wound he gained from the Battle of Oxcross. In your brother’s war. And how did your brother repay this sacrifice? By spitting in the face of my family once more and marrying some lowborn whore from the Crag. Apparently, my brother’s life, the lives of all the men who had died for him wasn’t worth enough for him to keep his promises. And then he had the nerve to come crawling back and asking us to lay down more lives for his crown and his war.

“I was offered his uncle as a consolation prize. For the record, I begged… begged my father, brothers, and nephews not to go through with it. I didn’t want to be the bride of the Red Wedding. I was terrified.” She looked at Edmure. “When you first saw me, it wasn’t joy, or excitement, or recognition. It was relief. You were relieved that I was pretty. So relieved you didn’t even seem to notice how scared I was. And you kept stroking me like I was a puppy. And I kept trying,
trying to give you some sort of message. That day, I didn’t just meet you, either. I met your nephew, the famous King in the North. I met your sister, too. I met the man my brother had died for and the woman who had arranged my jilting. I overheard your sister at one point. She expressed worry I might not be fit for bearing children, as ‘Rosby stock’, as she called it, weren’t known for being strong child bearers. Never mind that my mother gave my father five children before she died. And at one point, I danced with your nephew. He looked almost exactly like you. Younger, a bit better looking, but just like you. He treated every moment at our wedding like a brutal slog he had to suffer through. I hear him make a remark about how Ryman was thick-skulled.

“I didn’t wish anyone ill. After the wedding, after it was discovered that I was pregnant with Minisa, I prayed she’d be a girl so that they wouldn’t use the birth of a son as an opportunity to kill you and take over Riverrun for good. After we wed, I was back as my father’s prized chattel. And then, when I was returned to you, I had to look at your face every day and see the blame. See the betrayal. I also got to hear and see constant reminders every day of just how grateful I should be for the fact that you were willing to forgive me and love me despite all of the deeds done by others. And maybe you adored my prettiness, and you liked the children I gave you, and you gave me many pretty things. But you treated your affection as a favor. And you knew nothing about me.”

“That’s not true!” Edmure protested.

“What’s my favorite song, Edmure?”

“Florian and Jonquil!”

“The Dance of Naerys and Aemon!” Roslin scowled. “I played it a thousand times, sang it a thousand times, told you a thousand times. You’ve always treated me like a pet, not a wife. And then… And then…”

She looked at Sansa again. “This whore murdered my brothers and nephews! She destroyed my childhood home and my family name! She killed my sweet nephew Ryman! And yet you, my dear husband expected me to smile and curtsey to her! Call her Queen in the North! I was supposed to be Queen in the North! My brother died for it!”

She glared around at them all. “So that’s why, you stupid shits. Now let me say good-bye to my children and you can do what you’ve all been desperate to do and roast me alive.”

“No.”

This came from a very unexpected place. It was Jon who spoke now. He shook slightly as he stared down a Roslin, his expression unreadable.

“Your Grace,” he said, still looking at the Lady of Riverrun, “If I may…”

“You may, nephew.” Dany would give him this. She sat back, completely at a loss.

“Lady Roslin, you will not be given to the dragons. Per your confession, you are found guilty and are sentenced to die, but I will not see you burnt,” Jon announced. “Your son is due to arrive at court in two days. When he does, you will have one final day to spend with your children. The morning after, your two eldest will depart for Riverrun, your youngest will be sent to Dragonstone to be fostered, and you will be brought to the Great Sept of Baelor where I shall cut your head from your shoulders. That is… if I have permission from my aunt the queen.”

Now, all eyes were on her. Daenerys sighed and nodded. “It shall be so.”

“There are conditions, however,” Jon said, his lips pursed. He turned a deep glare upon Roslin.
“First, you will offer testimony, true testimony in the cases of Lyn and Lucas Corbray. Second, you are to confess your crimes to your children. Three letters are to be written, signed and sealed by you confessing to what you have done. You will make no justifications, no excuses. There will be no lies or omissions, no blame thrown at anyone. Just the truth of what you did. These documents will be sealed away and given to your children when they are old enough to cope with this information. And just before you die, you will give them some manner of explanation. You will tell them you hurt people, and that you have to leave them because of it. You will admit your fault in this to them. To Ambrose. To Minisa. To Lynette. Can you accept these terms?”

“I can.”

“If you violate them, Lady Roslin, you will be subjected to a Penance Walk and death by dragonfire,” he warned.

She nodded. “I understand.”

Daenerys shook somewhat, shocked by her nephew’s restraint. “Lady Roslin, you are dismissed. You will be returned to the Sept to await execution. Out of respect for your confession, more comfortable accommodations will be provided for you. Court is dismissed for an hour.”

People began to move. Dany began to stand, suddenly very tired again.

“Wait!”

It was Sansa who spoke now. Everyone stopped. Sansa took a deep breath.

“I was the wronged party in this affair, don’t I deserve a say?”

Dany sat back down. “Lady Stark.”

“There is one thing I want as well before Lady Roslin is given her merciful send-off,” Sansa proclaimed, “Years ago, my Uncle Edmure gave her a gift from Riverrun’s treasury. A gift that Lady Roslin has worn with pride since. A set of pearl hair clips. Pearl hair clips that once belonged to my mother. I want Lady Roslin to surrender them to me personally, in public. Furthermore, I want all the gifts my Uncle Edmure gave her since pawned and I want the funds from that put towards the Stark treasury.”

That sounded more than fair to Daenerys. However, that property wasn’t technically hers to give. She looked at Edmure, trying not to show her utter contempt for the man. Gods, he gave that whore Catelyn Stark’s jewelry? “Lord Tully? Aside from the clips… all those things are technically yours.”

Edmure was now gaping at Sansa. “O-of course. Yes. Everything. I don’t want it. Any of it.”

He looked at his wife then, his face consumed with utter loathing and fury. “She can hand over all the things she brought with her to court as well. Right here. In the throne room. In front of everyone. In fact, I want it done now. Let this…. This whore surrender her baubles to you now, before the whole court. I want it all gone from my presence immediately. Every trace of her aside from Minisa and Ambrose will make me sick anyways. This harlot helped destroy the home you rebuilt, she can personally pay to help you rebuild it once more.”

This was too good. Suddenly re-energized, Dany smiled. “That’s an excellent idea. Forget court being dismissed. Have the guards go to the Tullys’ chambers. All of Lady Roslin’s things shall be delivered to the throne room and officially surrendered to Lady Stark.”
He’d entered the throne room with a heavy heart and an aching head. Sansa and Arya were at each other’s throats over Gendry. Sansa claimed that their sister was being seduced. Arya said that she was the one doing the seducing.

The two spent two hours yelling at one another before they were both too exhausted to keep going. Arya insisted that Gendry hadn’t hurt her. She said she loved him.

“And you know he loves me! He protected Sansa for me! This isn’t fair! You two aren’t married and you fuck like mad!”

Jon honestly couldn’t argue with his sister on this. Actually, this development provided him with immense relief. I can like Gendry again.

A temporary agreement had been reached: Gendry would stay at court, but he couldn’t see Arya without an escort. His sister was furious with him for this. Jon just didn’t know how to handle the situation without knowing all the details.

There was too much going on. It had been the eve of the Frey hearing. Jon couldn’t resolve everything.

He now looked down upon Roslin Frey with utter confusion. He hated her, he did. He knew she had to die. But at the same time… The story she told chilled him. A scared young woman on trial who had lived through her family and home being destroyed. A woman who had lost everything at a young age and forced into a loveless marriage to survive. For a second, when he looked at her, he saw Sansa standing there in her place.

Lynette still cried for her mother. Maybe that was what made him want to show Roslin mercy. It wasn’t pity for Roslin, but for that girl. He didn’t want that child going to bed every night for the rest of her life knowing for sure that her mother had been eaten by dragons.

Remember what your father taught you. Eddard Stark would have shown this woman some mercy. Jon wanted to honor that. He was going to officially carry that name once he was wed. He wanted to honor what being a Stark meant. I will be the man Eddard Stark raised.

There was still a part of him that ached to see the woman humbled, though, so the prospect of her handing over her precious things to Sansa did please him.

Really, he wanted this all over, though. At this point, Roslin wasn’t even the one he hated the most in this situation. That honor went to Lyn Corbray.

But, as guards began to cart in all the various things from the Tullys’ chambers, Jon’s sympathy for Roslin began to wane a bit. The amount of ridiculous things brought in was obscene. It took twenty guards three trips to bring it all in.

There were chests full of ornate silk, brocade, and velvet gowns. Enough thick, fine furs to fill an entire wardrobe on their own. A half-dozen bottles of exotic perfumes with crystal stoppers. Enough scarves to fill an entire chest. Two different sets of virginals, one which was inlaid with mother of pearl, and a harp. All sorts of ridiculously ornamented paraphernalia---- gilded hand mirrors, brushes, embroidery hoops, thimbles and even a dog collar studded with blue topaz. Satin and silk pillows and linens. Several casks of jewels. An ornamented porcelain bath tub with gold fixtures was even brought in and that was filled with bottles of expensive oils. It took six men just to carry that alone.

There was a small mountain of things there by the time they were finished. It turned Jon’s stomach.
God’s above. And that’s just what she brought for this trip. How much more is waiting back at Riverrun? Jon found himself loathing both the Tullys for such an obscene display of wealth. Winter has been going strong for five years. War ravaged this country. Smallfolk resorted to eating straw and leather to survive. But these people bought shoes with gem-studded heels.

Jon had seen wealth before, true wealth. He’d grown up with true wealth. The Starks had been by no means poor. Jon could remember looking at some of the fancy silk dresses Sansa was given, he could remember watching her on her eleventh Name Day, when she’d received a gold necklace from her parents. He’d thought it was a bit much, especially for an eleven year old. He’d considered her spoiled.

Now he almost had to laugh at that. Jon tried to imagine his father giving Lady Catelyn this much over an entire lifetime, let alone six years. Lord Stark adored his wife. Jon tried to imagine giving Sansa this much. But if I were to make such an obscene display of extravagance, she’d probably be disgusted. She wouldn’t be the woman I love if she were willing to accept it from me. Gods, she had issues with me even paying for her food.

Even the Tyrells were wrinkling their nose at this. They were the richest family in the realm.

Jon leaned over to Daenerys. “Have you ever seen such an obscene pile in one place?”

“I’ve seen worse,” she whispered back, “Gifts from Drogo’s khalasaar and other guests for my wedding. Offerings from cities to prevent me from sacking them. The difference was that those were gifts from entire cities. This all came from one idiot.”

One of the things that struck Jon as well was that for all the money that had obviously been spent on this woman, so many of the things displayed here weren’t even very attractive to the eye. Some were legitimately beautiful. But the bathtub, the gilded mirror and brush set, some of the ornaments, were just garish and ugly.

But they could do very well to help rebuild Winterfell. There is a small fortune here alone. There’d likely be enough left over to rebuild some outlying holdfasts and provide a dowry for Arya once the rest of it was gathered from Riverrun.

Ser Timmure came forward then with a gilded box and handed it to Lady Roslin. The woman shook as she took it.

“You may proceed,” Daenerys said with pursed lips.

Sansa walked towards the prisoner’s platform, her skirts rustling as she moved. One could actually hear them, so silent was the room otherwise. Jon leaned forward.

His betrothed wore that red and white diamond patterned dress. The Hardyng colors. An odd, primal part of him resented that dress, wishing to stain every white inch of it black. He didn’t like the idea of Sansa facing her moments of triumph dressed as Harry Hardyng’s wife.

Sansa reached out her hands. “Lady Roslin?”

The Frey woman bowed her head. “I cede to you all my material possessions as payment for the harm I have done to you, Lady Sansa.”

Her hands shook as she lifted the lid of the box. The famous clips rested upon blue velvet.

Jon had seen them before. He’d grown up watching Catelyn Tully wear them. They were for formal occasions, as Lady Catelyn wasn’t one for ostentatious jewels. Lord Eddard had given them to her.
He gave her gifts whenever she gave him a child. Each one had been special. Jon could recall them speaking of it. When Eddard came home from the war to find baby Robb waiting for him, he’d gotten her a sable cloak. Arya’s gift was an ornate carving of the Starks and their three children by the Heart Tree. Bran resulted in a painting of Riverrun. Rickon resulted in an illuminated book of legends. The pearl clips were the Sansa gift.

He saw his lover’s hands shake as she picked them up. Gently, she began to pin back her red hair with them.

“You…”

Roslin’s hoarse voice made Sansa pause. The Frey woman took a lock of her long brown hair in her hand and twisted it round her finger. She cleared her throat then, smirked, and spoke.

“You look very much like your older brother. The one you’re not fucking.”

And then she spat. Roslin Frey spat right in Sansa’s face.

The room erupted in shouts from all sides by various courtiers. Daenerys herself was screaming in Dothraki, on her feet. The torches seemed to burn brighter.

But no one erupted like Jon. He was sick of Roslin Frey now. Thoroughly sick of her. Now, he was going to take more from her than her worthless life or her ugly baubles. No, that wasn’t enough. Before she died, she’d lose her pride as well.

In an instant, he was suddenly right next to the woman. In one hand, he yanked her head back by her long brown hair. In the other hand, he held Longclaw, unsheathed and recently sharpened.

“Jon!”

His pity had been replaced with thoughts of the fruits of Roslin Frey’s labors.

“You’re a liar. You’re not Robb. Robb would never say such things. Robb loved me.”

“No! No!”

“Stop it! Stop it!”

And then he’d put his hands on her, and she’d begged him to release her. He could see her now, squirming away from him in bed, envisioning her brother trying to rape her in his place.

He could see Sam’s terrified eyes as he bled from Lady Nym’s wound, speaking of Lady Roslin’s collaborator. “Jon, he’s… he got my boy. We have to find my son.”

He saw Little Sam hiding under his parent’s bed, pissing his pants.

He saw Little Lynette crying and spitting at him. He saw that ruined doll.

Then he glanced over at Sansa, with Roslin Frey’s spittle on her cheek. He looked back at Roslin. *The whole city will spit upon her.*

A second later, Roslin’s hair was gone, severed with a stroke of his arm. He’d sliced it off within an inch from her scalp. Over two feet of hair clutched in an angry fist raised before her eyes.

“A bit of aid to the Septas, to reduce their labors when they come to shave you.”
Chapter End Notes

Time to set your Jon breakdown clocks.
Sansa thinks on her past, Roslin, and religion. The Stark sisters have a fight. Jon gets a visitor.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bluecichlid for her excellent beta-work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: See Eddie Again

Sansa:

*I'm an awful woman*, she thought as she washed her face with a basin at her dressing table back in the Aenys chambers.

She was moving into Jon’s apartments at the moment, some of her things having already been delivered that morning. But she still needed a space for herself. Jon’s rooms, though spacious and well-furnished, didn’t quite suit all of her womanly needs. Both the Aenys and Maegor chambers had been built for men, but the designs of the Aenys rooms had sheltered far more female inhabitants since and were thus furnished accordingly whereas the Maegor chambers were decidedly male-oriented.

And while she wouldn’t be sleeping in the Aenys bed every night anymore, the solar was still a perfect place to take meetings—vastly preferable to Jon’s severe accommodations.

They both needed their own space anyways. They did take separate meetings and perform separate duties that would necessitate more than one solar. On a personal level, Sansa needed her apartments as well. Both of them required their own space to do their work, have some alone time, and process things apart from one another. There was also something to be said for maintaining a mystique and degree of separation even from one’s other half.

And Sansa just couldn’t imagine conducting her business in Jon’s rooms full time. First, there were simply things they needed to do separately. Most of her work involved taking meetings and drafting paperwork. Jon used his solar for business and personal affairs. His rooms were built to accommodate the interests and duties of a person prone to the combative arts. There were weapons, maintenance paraphernalia, military maps, even a training dummy in there. Jon made use of this. Oftentimes he spent many an hour making use of the practice equipment in his solar.

Sansa honestly didn’t want to end up trying to entertain and negotiate with Tytos Hill, Lady Flint, and the Hightowers while Jon sat off to the side, taking a whetstone to Longclaw.

And even if he wasn’t there, Sansa’s whole aim and method was non-threatening and upscale charm,
feminine comfort, and benevolent negotiation. She did her best work when convincing people they
didn’t need to be on their guard, that she was just a pretty, charming, traditional sort of lady. That
was harder to accomplish in a room that had war axes hanging from the walls.

Also, with moments like now Sansa had to be alone with her thoughts. Right now she was utterly
conflicted.

The trial in the throne room proved emotionally draining: Roslin’s rant a mere fraction of the trauma,
but potent nonetheless. The part about losing a beloved big brother hit home in more ways than
Sansa wanted to think about. Hearing her speak of Robb that way hurt as well. Then there was the
discomfort that came with all things Frey-related.

The presentation of Roslin’s finery was less triumphant than one would expect. As containers of
gaudy luxury items were brought in, Sansa became embarrassed. Honestly, how could her uncle be
so stupid, so thoughtless, so pathetic? She knew Roslin liked to ply him for gifts at every
opportunity, but she’d had no idea of the extent of their indulgence.

The Trident areas were probably second only to the North in the levels of destruction. It had been the
center of the kingdom and so much conflict for so long, damaged to the same level as the
Stormlands, Northern Westerlands, and the Crownlands.

Since her arrest, Sansa had been frantic about her own domains. During her brief time as Queen in
the North and time as Lady, she’d worked tirelessly to help repair the damage brought on by the
winter, the wars, and the Bolton regime. Lord Roose had warded off a large chunk of the Ironborn,
but done next to nothing for his people aside from that. And the things he’d let his bastard get away
with were shocking.

Not only were countless holdfasts, villages, and roads destroyed, not only were people starving and
freezing to death in the winter, not only were there the decimating effects of the White Walker
invasions and Ironborn sieges, but things had been chaotic for other reasons. Along with the
destruction of many holdfasts came the destruction of glass gardens, causing the food supply in the
North, and the region’s ability to cope with the seasons to go haywire.

Then there was the fact that the sub-regions were divided in various factions. Secessionist sympathies
were still popular. Also, very few of the people had much confidence in the nobility and resisted their
authority.

And it wasn’t a surprise. Sansa certainly didn’t blame them. Their sons had been yanked away to
fight in various wars, the conflicts had robbed numerous people of their homes, means, and rights.
The inter-conflicts between various houses had turned the entire region asunder. And on top of it all,
there was the Bolton rule. While the common folk were struggling to survive, they also had to
contend with people like Ramsay Bolton stealing their daughters so he could hunt them down like
animals.

She’d been making some headway providing stability to the North once she’d taken control. With
the end of the Bolton regime and a Stark in Winterfell again at last, there was at least some unity
again. And Sansa brought with her support and aid from the Vale, at least initially. Not only did she
rebuild Winterfell, but she and Petyr had also made great steps in giving the North its economy back.
Petyr knew business well and was incredible at repairing and reorganizing infrastructures, and he
was also excellent at making money. He’d taught Sansa a great deal about not only politics and
statecraft, but economics and business. Sure, he’d plunged the Baratheons into debt, but he’d done
marvelous work with the Vale and the North and he knew how to make things flourish when he
actually cared about what he was doing.
Even after Petyr died, Sansa had continued making progress there using what she’d learned from him. The problem was, the North had needed a solid figurehead and leader organizing and planning everything. And at the time, Sansa felt she had no one to trust, so she had to do much of it on her own. She’d been at a very critical juncture when she’d been arrested. Once she was literally stolen away from the North, it all fell apart.

So her whole domain struggled. It horrified her. So many empty bellies, so many mothers’ tears, so many scared children, so many ruined lives.

So how any Lord Paramount could justify spending that much money on unnecessary, everyday luxuries mystified her.

It wasn’t as if Sansa opposed luxury, far from it. She had a new wardrobe filled with silks, samites, velvets, satins, and lace. She slept on a lush feather bed. She ate lemon cakes and drank Dornish wine. She took baths with rose oil.

At least, she did now that she was at court.

But when she’d been ruling the North in Winterfell, all her coin either went to either her people and lands, or making more money to spend on them. She’d had a few fine gowns for public appearances, but all her personal possessions were either handmade or inherited. She wore basic wool kirtles most of the time, and her finer things were ones she’d had for years that she tried to keep un-shabby. Her food was simple fare, she took care to waste nothing and live as simply as she could. She’d even pawned a number of her jewels. Once she’d left the Vale and seen the extent of her peoples’ suffering, she’d dispensed with most finery.

At court, one couldn’t exactly get away with that level of frugality and maintain the respect and prestige needed to operate at a competent level politically. She was Lord Paramount of the North and she needed the other lords and ladies to respect her. If one of the highest-ranking women at court hosted the Warden of the South wearing basic wool and serving cheap wine, she was easily undermined and seen as vulnerable. People were already resistant to taking a woman, especially a woman as young as her, seriously. Appearing poor would only exacerbate the problem.

Also, Jon’s resources were what she used. While she definitely had qualms taking money from his purse, her betrothed did in fact spend a great deal on his smallfolk—according to all reports, his own smallfolk of Dragonstone and the adjacent regions were among some of the most well-cared for, and an enormous chunk of his income already went to overall aid for the people of the kingdom.

The rest of his gold had been piling up anyways. Furthermore, a number of the things she’d been provided with as part of his household—-the rooms and furniture contained, the income for her personal staff—had already been paid for regardless of whether she used them or not. Her servants had all already been on the royal payroll, and the rooms and furniture had been around for years, assembled long ago and really doing nothing recently.

And even so, she tried to restrict her spending as much as she could. Her initial wardrobe order had been minimal for a woman of her rank. Jon had actually argued with her until she agreed to indulge her sartorial needs a bit more. She kept a very limited staff, and she devoted most of her personal allowance to business expenses, wedding costs, and charity work.

She had only a couple of indulgences—some special creams for her skin, rose oil for her bath, special hair soap from Lys, and the occasional treat for personal meals. But when she wasn’t entertaining, she relied mostly on simple fare and affordable beverages.

Nearly every extravagance she indulged in had some greater purpose—-to project an elegant image
to her peers at court to maintain the dignity and respect of the Starks and the North, to entertain and therefore negotiate effectively with fellow courtiers, and to hide any sign of vulnerability and remind everyone of her status and connections both future and current.

She had to impress the wealthy and powerful, plan a wedding. Sansa had to make sure nobody forgot who she was: Lady of Winterfell and Warden of the North or who she was going to be: Princess of the Empire.

But Roslin Frey didn’t spend her life in King’s Landing with the Tyrells and Martells.

Edmure and Roslin were the masters of the court back at Riverrun. The standards there were entirely determined by their own whims. All the people they met with, aside from the occasional foreign visitors, were people of lower status --- bannermen and smallfolk they didn’t need to impress. They didn’t have to be in the public eye to the same degree as a King’s Landing Courtier of Sansa’s status, or represent their domains to the richest and most powerful people in the realm constantly. They weren’t expected to play national politics most of the time, nor were their public lives about to be expanded to include not just their own domains, but the entire two-continent spanning Targaryen Empire.

Sansa was willing to stake her life that her own personal expenses didn’t even approach what Roslin Frey’s did.

Sansa was a future princess, former queen and active member of the court of King’s Landing. She still strove to spend as little money as possible on things she didn’t need, nor would she ever think on devoting any of the Northern or Stark treasury on unnecessary luxury--- even if the Stark fortune wasn’t as depleted as it was, she’d still stay frugal.

Meanwhile, Roslin Frey Tully, Lady of Riverrun by marriage, regent of nothing, resident of a far more isolated castle and lands that had been ravaged by winter and war, had an all new luxury bath tub with gold fixtures and diamonds the size of her small toe.

No one was going to see her gold-furnished bathtub. It was useless luxury for the sake of useless luxury.

While people were starving.

So much gold spent on things that don’t matter.

The return of the clips had offered momentary respite, but that ended with Roslin’s rebuttal. Sansa had already been humiliated and undermined in front of the court enough. And then for her to accuse her of incest… Bringing up Robb in that context turned her stomach as well, considering the nightmare she’d had--- one brought about because of Roslin’s machinations.

Then there was the final sentencing Roslin had earned with her outburst. Having her hair cut off right there, and the prospect of the Penance Walk…

Sansa knew what a Penance Walk was.

Originally, it had been a punishment designed exclusively for women, made to degrade and punish them for sins like whoring and adultery. Her septa warned her about Penance Walks whenever she was given lessons about preserving her virtue and not making wanton displays.

The woman in question would be stripped naked and often shaved from head to toe before being forced to walk through the gathering crowds. There were other little variations.
There was a story of Tywin Lannister who, after his father died, forced Lord Tytos’s mistress to strip naked, walk the streets of Lannisport, and tell every man she met that she was a harlot and a thief.

When Daenerys took over and learned of the practice, she augmented the rules regarding it. It was only to be given to the most severe of crimes (whoring not counted among them), and men as well as women were subjected to a Walk. Coldwater and Moore had been among those sentenced.

But everyone knew it wasn’t the same. Everyone knew that the Walk of a man was never attended by the same volume of people as when it was a woman. People averted their eyes for men. For women, there were the customary leers and shouts of “WHORE!”

When she’d been imprisoned in the Great Sept, she’d heard all the stories. Cersei Lannister herself had been subjected to one. Even being the queen hadn’t protected her, the septas and septons of the Sept delighted in informing her.

“When stripped of her silks and golden hair, with her sin laid out for all to see, even the lowest man did not hesitate to call her for what she was. They saw the marks from bearing the monster spawn of her incest and the way her bosom fell heavy. They saw the sagging of her skin and the unshapely parts of her that she tried to alter and disguise with her rich gowns.”

Cersei Lannister’s sins had nothing to do with what her body looked like. Some of the things she’d done with her body were sinful, but that wasn’t visible to the eye. Sansa had marks on her belly from carrying Eddie, and he’d been the trueborn son of her legal and proper husband, conceived within wedlock from the seed of a man not remotely related to her. Sin didn’t conjure those marks. The rapid bodily alterations that came with being a woman did.

But that was the point, really. As the High Sparrow had ominously informed her, part of the crime was in fact being a woman.

“It is the wickedness and weakness of your natures. All your hearts are wanton. Your only power comes from your wiles and beauty, and thus your power must be turned into your shame for you to gain a truly pure spirit.”

They’d wanted her to do a Walk before her trial. The High Sparrow came to her with the proposition. She’d been offered support from the Faith and good words with the queen if she would do it.

“It would be good for your soul if you willingly submitted yourself to be reminded of what you are. This misfortune came upon you because of your pride, your vanity, your lust for power. You gained your false crown through seduction, deceit and lies. The Seven took your son for it, your home, your crown. You must accept this and make yourself humble. You believed you had the right to despoil the name of your family, to assume power over the North and call yourself a Queen. You used what you had, your charms, to those ends. But we had even a true queen submit herself to this, and she was faced with the truth of what she was when her power and illusions were stripped from her. It is the only way you can be cleansed of your crimes and wantonness. Your only salvation shall come when you expose and face what you truly are.”

At times, she’d tearfully protested that she’d been used, that Petyr had coerced and raped her.

“He would not have touched you if you had been truly pure. You invited his attentions, accepted his charity, and cooperated with his schemes. And for that you gave yourself to him. You were too tempted by what he could offer you and thus you invited him to do as he wished. The wantonness ingrained in you was laid bare when you were offered wealth and power, and for that his passions were inflamed enough to take you. Every woman forced is willing on some level, or else the true
purity of their souls would repel any attempts upon them utterly. The truly virtuous are not dealt the 
tragedy of rape, for they do not invite such base attentions or inspire such lusts. He used you because 
you drew him in and allowed him to. You wanted him to want you, you liked that he was desperate 
for your pretty body and face, and you used that. Thus, what happened was inevitable. The harlot 
within you who so delights in her wiles and beauty drew Baelish and all your misfortune to you. The 
only way to shed her is by performing the Walk so all might see your beauty for the illusion it is and 
see your shame and true baseness laid bare. You are wanton, Lady Sansa. And until you 
acknowledge it, you will continue on your path of sin and misery. Let us save you. Let the unaltered 
eyes of the city save you. Let your shame kill the whore."

Just hearing that had nearly destroyed her. The words haunted her. She knew on a conscious level 
they were wrong. They were twisted. They were insane. She was not Cersei Lannister. Her son had 
already been taken from her and she was innocent of what she was accused of. She shouldn’t have to 
walk naked through the streets.

She knew that. She did.

But in the back of her mind, she saw herself on her knees for Petyr Baelish. She saw herself leaning 
over in that low-cut gown trying not to breathe as her image was committed to canvas. She saw 
herself enticing Lord Flint to back her claim to the winter crown by lifting her skirts. She saw Robb 
in her bed, telling her exactly what she was good for.

Even being told she deserved the humiliation tormented her. She wouldn’t wish the actual deed upon 
anyone.

Not even Roslin Frey.

Sansa was at least partially to blame for this. She hadn’t needed to put the clips on in front of Roslin. 
She’d wanted to goad the woman a bit. It just made her so angry, hearing Roslin Frey speak like that. 
Everyone suffered in the war, everyone lost people. Her suffering is nothing to what so many others 
endured. And judging by how she’d lived since, the aftermath of the war was next to nothing. And 
seeing all those ridiculous things piled up…

She couldn’t help it. She’d suffered so much at this woman’s hands. Roslin had at least been partially 
involved with the Vale sacking of Winterfell. Sansa’s son had died. Winterfell had been crushed to 
the ground again. The North was left in chaos once more. Sansa had almost died and gone through 
horrible pains as the result of Roslin’s poison. And yet this woman felt justified in complaining and 
crying about all the slights she’d suffered.

The woman had been goading her for years as it was. Those clips belonged to her mother, given to 
her to celebrate Sansa’s existence. Given to her with Lord Eddard’s first proclamation of love.

Sansa had loved those clips, too. They’d been her favorite of her mother’s things, the little treat her 
mother allowed her on her name days from age eight. Roslin Frey wore them as a trophy.

They should have been hers the second Lady Catelyn died anyways. Lady Stark’s jewels were 
meant to be divided between the Stark treasury and her daughters anyways. It was tradition. And the 
pearl clips were meant to be left to her. Of course, most of Lady Stark’s jewels were lost in the 
sackings of Winterfell, stolen, melted down, or pawned by the Boltons and Vale Lords. A few, the 
ones she’d taken with her on the war campaign had ended up in Riverrun after the Red Wedding. 
The pearl clips were among those.

Edmure, without thinking, had given them to Roslin. But Lady Catelyn had promised them to her 
daughter. Sansa had thought they were lost until she met Roslin for the first time. When she’d
informed her uncle of the situation, he’d brushed it aside.

“My wife has been through enough, allow her these baubles. You’ve already allowed Littlefinger to take authority of the Trident, now you’re going to rip the jewels from my wife as well?”

Once Roslin found out about whom they’d belonged to, she never could resist wearing them every time she saw Sansa.

So yes, Sansa wanted to rub it in Roslin’s face a bit and decided to put them on in front of her. A little gesture of victory she didn’t need necessarily but desperately wanted.

She’d underestimated Roslin’s pride and stupidity. She expected a dirty look, she expected that Roslin’s last words might be laced with foul insults in her direction. Sansa never imagined the woman would actually be enough of a fool to spit in her niece’s face right there in front of the court while she still had something to lose.

Sansa had also underestimated Jon’s fury. Her lover had almost always been this cold, even-tempered, downright solemn man in the vein of her father. Sometimes her betrothed acted so immovable and calm it was downright odd. And even when he did get angry, normally he responded with a fairly even temper—cold looks, sarcastic words, a rough tone to his voice.

But it was clear now what was enough to anger Jon enough to provoke an outburst from him. Jon had told her of what led to his men stabbing him— he wanted to go to confront Ramsay Bolton after he’d received a letter from the bastard, and he’d believed Arya was truly that monster’s bride.

He’d also almost abandoned the Watch once when news of her father’s execution, and he’d brawled with Alliser Thorne when the man had mocked Lord Eddard.

He’d had an outburst with Roslin, he’d lost his temper and threatened Stafford Pryor. In the throne room one day during her trial, he’d had to be restrained by the Queensguard after Moore had suggested Sansa had killed her son.

There was also the confrontation they’d had about the Tyrells, but Sansa didn’t count that. He’d been drunk, and even then he didn’t think to raise a hand to anyone, he’d just been nasty and loud.

Insulting or threatening Starks, and Sansa especially, was clearly his breaking point. Sansa wondered vaguely if he’d have the same reaction to someone doing something to Daenerys. But no one these days dared to cross the Dragon Queen, so there was no way of telling.

I should not have underestimated his temper here. He already loathed Roslin for what she’d done to me and her family. Just because he offered her mercy doesn’t mean he wasn’t reaching his limit. I’ve seen him almost kill a man for calling me a whore. Is it really that surprising that he’d want to burn and humiliate Roslin Frey after she added spittle in my face to her list of abuses?

She shouldn’t have risked provoking Roslin on those grounds alone.

But she had, and the results shook her.

She’d told Damon Coldwater that she’d happily watch him die by dragon fire a hundred thousand times even though it wouldn’t bring Eddie back.

It was a grand proclamation she’d made to inform everyone present that she was fierce and unyielding. It was a warning to anyone who might try to harm her. Do not cross Sansa Stark. She will see you burn a hundred thousand times just for those ends alone.
A lie meant to protect herself and others. Seeing Coldwater and Moore go into the flames once was enough.

She’d seen enough misery and death to last a lifetime. Even when her anger was at its zenith and the wounds inflicted upon her were fresh, watching yet more suffering never gave her much satisfaction.

Roslin did have to die. Roslin, the Corbrays, various others… They all had to suffer and die. It didn’t make the Walk of Shame any more valid.

She didn’t like the idea of Jon wishing that sort of punishment on anyone. She didn’t like to think of him meaning anyone any harm. Even though she knew he was capable of it.

But that might not even the greatest source of her guilt. Despite being dismayed by what Roslin Frey faced now, there was a part of her that was thrilled by Jon’s aggression.

She’d felt a bit of that same thrill that night in the throne room with Pryor as well. Something about seeing her normally implacable lover grow angry enough to forget himself and lash out in violence for her made her insides do funny things.

It was true that she enjoyed watching him in the training yard, sparring. Sansa was not a fan of fighting, but she adored seeing how strong, quick and skilled he was. In training there was little to no real danger, and Jon was among friends. No one was being seriously hurt, they were just having fun and improving their skill. It didn’t have the same danger or pain element that other instances of aggression did.

Seeing the man she was meant to marry move like that excited her, and she felt no shame from it. However, he definitely wanted to hurt Pryor and Roslin.

Sansa knew she would not enjoy watching Jon fight anyone for real. Even the thought of him raising a sword to some wildling back at the Wall made her ill. She knew that when he told her of all his various violent brawls and victories that what she should feel was pride and excitement, but she couldn’t. She was excited and proud of him when he bested men in casual situations, but not in true fights. The pain of it all, his pain and the pain he inflicted….

She knew why all that happened. He’d shed blood for the same reasons she had: to survive and defend others. But she still didn’t like it.

Jon was gentle and kind and good. He fed hungry people, taught the young men of the court to fight with absolute patience, smiled and joked with his servants, doted on his friends, took care of children he pitied, and loved and respected the women in his life. He brought her winter roses, stroked her hair and skin, kissed her sweetly, told her all the time how beautiful and good and smart she was, and listened to all her hopes and fears. He spoke in that soft, sweet voice and his smiles reached his eyes.

The idea of him hurting anyone didn’t sit well with her normally. She just couldn’t reconcile it with the man she knew and loved.

Sansa did know that was stupid. She’d seen and experienced enough of the world that even the best and most charming people could kill. She’d killed, even though she had no stomach or skill for it. It was a necessary part of life for so many. There had been a war. He was trained all his life for combat and had enormous responsibilities. Jon, the man who called her Sweetling, kissed away her tears, and couldn’t handle the idea of being separated from his future babes … she couldn’t see him as a man who could drive an axe into a man’s skull. Of course, he had. Jon had stabbed, shot, bludgeoned, skewered, decapitated and even burned dozens of human beings.
He had to.

Anyone could be a killer. The world is built by killers, she recalled bitterly as she washed her face. The face I’m looking at right now is one of a killer. Jon is a killer, and unlike me, he’s actually good at it.

Normally, being confronted with these hard truths brought her nothing but displeasure. And yes, she was horrified and scared when she saw her precious lover threaten Stafford Pryor and slice Roslin Frey’s hair from her head.

But seeing him hurt people or want to in this context actually aroused her a bit at the same time.

It was sick, she knew. And she certainly didn’t want to see it again. But still…

Knowing that someone could be provoked to violence for her sake had its appeal.

She could not forget what she’d suffered in the Red Keep. To this day, Sansa could remember how no one even spoke up to defend her when Joffrey had her beaten. She could still remember being a scared little girl in the throne room, crying as Joffrey aimed his crossbow at her and ordered her stripped and beaten.

I was a girl of twelve. Joffrey wanted me beaten bloody. There were crowds. People laughed when my bodice was ripped and they saw my breasts. The only person to tell him no was The Imp. But before Tyrion came, people laughed.

She still saw some of those people, those people who had stood by and laughed. The other day, she’d had a meeting with Clarrane Swift of Cornfield about donating mining equipment to some of the silver collectors outside White Harbor. He kept looking at her breasts. He’d been one of the people there that day.

Many, many times, Joffrey had her beaten and no one spoke out. She’d been friendless. People watched a little girl get beaten, and they’d just leer and laugh, with no interest in defending her. She could be humiliated and made bedridden by the wounds, left bleeding and nearly unconscious without anyone saying a thing.

Even her Florian ended up being ruled by gold and drunkenness.

But now she had a man eager to carve a man to pieces for calling her a whore. Who unsheathed his blade when someone spit in her face. Part of her loved it.

Maybe I’m just selfish and awful, only against violence when it isn’t in my interests. I’m a hypocrite.

A knock on the door interrupted her ruminations. Nani announced Arya and said the tea was already laid out. Sighing, the Lady of Winterfell entered her solar. Arya arrived, still in the new doublet Sansa had gotten her, the one she’d worn to court. The two sisters just stared for a moment before sitting down to nibble upon their miniature sandwiches and glower a bit over the rims of their cups. Arya ate like the urchins that Sansa and Margaery encountered on their trips to the children’s homes of King’s Landing.

Still, it wasn’t a display that could compete with what she’d witnessed last night. Seeing Arya wrapped up in Ser Gendry Waters practically made her ill. Sansa knew that her sister had an affection for the former blacksmith, but she didn’t think Arya would be so easily seduced.

Sansa blamed herself, though. She’d always liked Ser Gendry, and she knew for a fact that she was not alone in this. All the women of the court liked Ser Gendry. They fawned over and flirted with
him nonstop. She’d sometimes seen him flirt back. They called him The Bull. He was the son of Robert Baratheon. He had a reputation.

But she thought Arya of all people wouldn’t fall prey to this. Arya was impulsive in many, many ways, but Sansa never imagined she was the sort to throw herself at a man. Sansa was sure her sister was the sort who really didn’t care for or have a use for men. She’d even suspected, given Arya’s other proclivities, that she might prefer the company of other women, the way Obella Sand and Lorelle Mormont allegedly did.

She’d actually hoped for it, in fact. Arya needed more feminine influences in her life and while she did expect Arya to eventually have children, she’d never have to worry about her sister producing bastards if her preferences steered away from men.

Her sister could marry and produced heirs with a husband she’d otherwise ignore and keep some lady she liked as her true companion. There were a couple of noblewomen with that sort of arrangement, and she thought such a concept might make her sister more agreeable to a political match in the long run. Women tended to be more flexible about these things and her having female lovers, as long as it was somewhat discreet, could prove less scandalous than some lowborn male lover siring bastards on her that looked nothing like whatever husband she’d have to take.

But no, apparently Arya was more than interested in men on a carnal level. She appeared very, very happy to have Ser Gendry on top of her before Sansa had pulled him off. And what really got her was that the man was on top of her sister at all. Sansa had never given much thought to her sister’s bedroom habits, but it seemed highly uncharacteristic of Arya to ever be on the bottom of any situation. She had to have been manipulated.

Sansa took a deep breath. “Arya, I know you’re upset with me about Ser Gendry.”

“I am and I should be. It’s not fair. He didn’t do anything wrong!”

The Lady of Winterfell snorted. “Oh really? So I suppose he was naked on top of you by accident?”

“No, he was naked on top of me because we both wanted him to be. A few minutes beforehand, he was inside of me as well!”

Sansa tried not to gag. “That is unacceptable! You’re a lady and---“

“I’m not a lady! But you are and I know you let Jon get on top of you almost every night.”

Blood rushed to her face. “That’s different!”

“Why?”

There was a pause. “We-we’re to be married.”

“I know just as well as you do that you two were sharing a bed long before you were due to wed,” Arya replied, smirking, “I was your ladies’ maid, remember?”

“We… we…”

“That’s not why you think there’s a difference. You think it’s fine to let Jon do as likes with you because he’s a prince. And Gendry’s low-born, so it’s not alright.”

“I don’t care that Gendry’s low-born!” Sansa replied. “It’s not his common blood that’s the problem!”
“So it’s because he’s a bastard then, is it? Only you’re with a Snow now, so why can’t I have my Waters?”

“It’s not that either!”

“Alright then, so you agree, you have no good reason to be angry about this.”

“I do. You’re my sister.”

“And you’re mine. Does that mean I’m allowed to attack Jon and force you both to have an escort? I’ve gathered your dirty sheets, Sansa. I know what you’ve done.”

Sansa wanted to slap her sister. “You’re a young girl.”

“But I’m not! I’m only two years younger than you. And I’m no maid. I’m willing to bet I’ve had more men than you have.”

“Arya!”

“Sansa!” Her tone was mocking.

“I’m Head of our House and I’m responsible for you. I can’t have you being seduced by random members of the City Watch.”

“I wasn’t the one who was seduced and regardless, Gendry’s not some random member of the City Watch. He loves me!”

Sansa groaned. “Arya, what do you know of love?”

“I know that someone who loves you would be willing to try and protect what you care about even when they think you’re dead. Gendry always escorted you everywhere in the city and watched over you, he tried to join your personal guard and did everything he could to try and protect you. And he did it because you were my sister. He thought I was gone, and you were all that was left of me, so he watched over you.”

Sansa dropped her sandwich. There was another long, awkward silence. Arya smiled in triumph.

Sansa’s stomach sank and she trembled. Oh Gods, why? She felt awful now.

“Arya… you can’t be with Ser Gendry.”

“Because of his low birth.”

“His high birth is as much a problem as his common heritage,” Sansa replied, “Possibly more. Arya, he’s Robert Baratheon’s son.”

“So?”

Sansa almost laughed. Oh, honestly. How can she not understand this? Then she chastised herself for that question. Because she’s not a courtier.

Sansa decided to start with some of the personal aspects of this. “Arya, you remember what his father was like. The way he was with women.”

“And you think Gendry’s the same way?” Arya snorted.
“He does have a reputation.”

“Yes, girls like him and try to get him into bed. And sometimes he has joined them. It’s not the same, though. He doesn’t try to get those girls to like him. And they didn’t love him and he didn’t love them. And he never hurt any of them or used them.”

“How do you know?”

“He wouldn’t. If he bedded a girl and didn’t love them, he’d be honest. I know him. I’ve known him for years.”

“You knew him a lifetime ago.”

“And I know him now. And he hasn’t even been with as many girls as they say.”

“And you know this how? Has he told you that?”

“Yes, and I believe him. He wouldn’t lie. And if he wanted to lie, he’d just tell me he hadn’t been with anyone. But he’s honest.”

Sansa shook her head. “Arya, this is court. No one here is honest.”

“So then you think Jon is a liar too then?”

“This isn’t about Jon. This is about you.”

“It’s about Gendry and I. And it’s also not about you.”

“It is. I’m head of House Stark. Your welfare and reputation are my business.”

“So that’s what you’re worried about? Sansa, neither of us have a sparkling reputation. I am already practically a pariah. I’ve slaughtered people and everyone knows it. Being with Gendry can’t damage me at this point. There is no more damage that can possibly be done.”

“Arya, haven’t you even considered the political ramifications of this?”

“No, and I don’t want to. I want no part of it. Politics killed our father.”

“Being bad at politics killed our father. That, and that monster who called himself a Baratheon. But your Ser Gendry has more Baratheon blood than Joffrey ever did.”

“He’s not like King Robert!”

“Even if he isn’t, that’s not the point. He’s still got that man’s blood. He looks like a young Robert Baratheon. The second our father saw his face he knew whose son he was.”

“So?”

“How old is Gendry now?”

“One and Twenty.”

“One and Twenty. He was born in 284. Arya, what happened a year prior to that?”

It was her sister’s turn to drop her food. She glared. “You’re being stupid.”

“I’m being stupid? I’m being stupid thinking that perhaps a member of House Stark engaging in an
affair with the natural son and lookalike of the man who usurped the father of our current queen, a queen popularly known as the Mother of Dragons, might not go over well?”

“If Daenerys cared, she’d have roasted Gendry alive when she took the throne.”

“She didn’t because she thinks Ser Gendry is humble and unambitious. But that’s a hard belief to justify if he’s seducing the heir presumptive to the entire North.”

“So what? Gendry’s a bastard and Daenerys has her dragons.”

“King Aerys had thousands of jars of wildfire.”

“The queen is not her father.”

“No, but she has more than a few reasons to hate those of Baratheon blood and be suspicious of any possible plots to usurp her. I am to be Jon’s princess.”

“And you think my relationship with Gendry is going to put an end to that?”

“The contracts are signed. I am going to be married to Jon. And I’d like my married life to be as pleasant as possible. I have a good relationship with Daenerys. I have done everything in my power to protect the Stark name and prove our House loyal to her. I don’t want that jeopardized. The Starks have had enough enemies. We don’t need to encourage any trouble with the Mother of Dragons.”

“Why should it cause trouble? If Daenerys likes you so much than surely she can’t think you’d rebel against her because I love Gendry. No one knew I was alive until recently anyways, and everyone knows how much you love Jon.”

“Our Aunt Lyanna may have loved Rhaegar Targaryen. She had a dangerous brother. I have a dangerous sister who has already attacked our queen once.”

Arya stood, shoving her plate and cup over. Tea splashed and ran over the surface of the table, soaking the white silk cloth that covered it a dull brown.

“This isn’t fair, Sansa. You don’t even know that the queen would think that way. And even if she did…”

“…She might not act on those suspicions? But she’d still have them, and it could still damage us even if her reaction isn’t an outright violent one. I’m trying to protect you, Arya—“

“---No, you’re trying to protect yourself! Your pathetic, stupid hopes and dreams of being a pretty princess from a song! Your power! You don’t care a thing about me! You never did! All you ever cared about was whether I embarrassed you in front of your precious prince and queen! That hasn’t changed!” Arya glared and continued.

“And you know what? I think you’re the one who doesn’t know anything of love. You’ve never loved anyone but yourself. You’re telling yourself you’re in love now because you’re in love with the idea of being a princess, marrying a prince. You thought you loved Joffrey once, too. A prince, just like Jon.”

Sansa stood then, shaking. “You… dare…”

“I dare because it’s true. You were so desperate to be some prince’s wife back then, you ignored the fact that he was a monster. You saw how he treated you, Mycah and I, and you conveniently forgot what happened. Mycah and Lady were killed because of him. But you lied to yourself and kept
convincing yourself that you loved him and that he was really kind and perfect. You blocked out the
fact that he was evil and vicious so you could be his princess. And now you’re conveniently ignoring
and blocking out the fact that Jon is our brother so you can be his. It’s downright chilling, really.
Joffrey was a Lannister, so were you. And now you’re fucking a brother and grasping for power.
Desperate to have your prince, just like when you were eleven. Willing to sacrifice my happiness so
you can have your happy ending. It’s all the same. All of it.”

Arya was panting, spittle flying as she yelled, fists clenched at her side. When she was done, Sansa
looked at her and let her see the tears.


Her sister’s glare began to dissolve into a look of horrified regret. She stepped back once, then took
several steps in the other direction, coming towards her sister.

“Sansa… I…”

She backed away. “It’s all the same, is it? Jon is a prince, just like Joffrey. He’s just like Joffrey.
That’s what you think. And I’ve never loved anyone but myself. No one. Sure, I had a son, but I
only ever loved myself.”

“Sansa, I’m so sorr——“

Sansa didn’t want to hear Arya’s apologies. “You say it’s all the same? Jon. Just like Joffrey. That’s
interesting. You know, I’ve never known Jon to take pleasure in hurting people. How much pleasure
did you get out of slicing up Lyn Corbray?”

Arya paled. Sansa smirked.

“You spend hours upon hours every day warging, Arya. And do you know why? You belong there
because you’re an animal. You’re a beast, a monster. I bet you’ve even killed more men than Joffrey.
I bet you enjoyed every minute of it. Maybe I should send you back to the House of Black and
White. Would that prove that I care about your happiness? You were probably very happy killing for
them.”

She wanted to hurt Arya. She wanted to be as mean, as cruel as her sister was to her. Already she
could feel herself recoiling from her own words, but once she started she couldn’t stop.

“It’s so easy to accuse me of not caring about you, isn’t it? If I don’t care about you, then it’s alright
for you to not care about me. You have to explain it to yourself somehow, don’t you? I bet you’d
happily slice my neck open if your Faceless Men told you to. Why don’t you do it now? There will
be one less heartless, power-hungry Lannister in the world. Jon won’t mind. After all, he’s just like
Joffrey. And I could see my boy again.”

That last bit wasn’t supposed to ever leave her lips. She wasn’t even aware of it until it was said. It
was a sentence she was familiar with, but not one she ever meant to say aloud. It was a thought that
came to mind frequently. The thought was a dark, hulking companion that crept around her head.

She had many of these dark little mind-shadows that had infested her mind like members of Joffrey’s
Kingsguard, ready to strike her whenever she didn’t keep her feelings in check.

Ones like the image of her father’s head on a pike. The sniggers of the crowds as she was stripped
and beaten. The fear of rotting beneath a headstone emblazoned with the name Sansa Lannister. The
self-loathing that blamed her for Petyr’s cock inside her. The word ‘whore’ whispered in the voices
didn’t protect my son. I’m a stupid girl. I’m a whore. I’m the reason Father died. Everyone hates me.

If I die, I might see Eddie again.

That one appeared upon his death. It crept around her head and screamed at her at various moments. When he died. When Winterfell was sacked again. When she wasted away in the Sky Cell. When she sat in the Great Sept. When she was brought before the court. When she’d learned of the poison. When she’d gone through the illness that purged her body of it.

If I die, I might see Eddie again.

Sometimes it shouted out at her during moments when she wasn’t even in immediate danger.

That night in the Dragon Pit when Coldwater and Moore died was one. She hadn’t been all that afraid of the dragons at first. She’d been eager to see them. She’d gone to the edge of the balcony above the pit to get a better look. Ser Barristan warned her to be careful, that she might fall in. She thought that if she did, she’d die. If I die, I might see Eddie again.

This thought sometimes had a little companion of its own. A little follow-up that sometimes added, He’d not want to see you, the Mother who failed to keep him alive.

That thought sometimes kept her alive.

She could never, ever tell anyone this. It was too horrifying. No one could know. She wouldn’t inflict her awful little thoughts upon anyone else. And besides, it was stupid. It was unjustifiable. It was melodramatic. She should be happy to be alive. She was lucky.

If Jon knew, he’d probably go mad. She couldn’t bear to see the look on his face if he knew.

I’d never forgive myself. There are already so many things I will never forgive myself for.

Arya started to cry.

And here’s another one.

“I didn’t mean it,” Sansa said quickly, “I didn’t mean it, Arya, any of it. I’m so sorry.”

“I wouldn’t kill you, Sansa. I couldn’t. But you were right about the rest.”

“No, no I wasn’t. I wasn’t Arya. I wasn’t right. It was all stupid nonsense I just made up to hurt you.”

“What I said was stupid nonsense made up to hurt you. I didn’t mean it. I was just so mad. But what you said--- It’s true, I’m a beast. And I try to justify how much I hate the world by thinking the world hates me back. And I enjoyed hurting Lyn Corbray. I traveled across the Narrow Sea to become a killer. I’ve killed too many people to count and felt nothing. Or I’ve felt good. I feel at home in the skin of an animal. But… but…” Arya sniffed and stared deeply at Sansa. “I’d never take your life.”

“I know.” Sansa stepped forward and pulled Arya into a hug. “I know you wouldn’t. I’m not scared of you, Arya. I’m not. I don’t really think you’d harm me. I didn’t mean it.”

“Did you mean that last bit? About Eddie?”

Sansa stiffened. For some reason, her carefully crafted and incredible capacity for lying was failing her. “I… I don’t know. Sometimes I do. Please don’t tell Jon. Don’t tell anyone. Please, Arya.”
“I won’t,” Arya promised. “I won’t tell anyone, not ever. I won’t tell a soul. I can keep a secret, I promise. I’ll keep yours.”

Sansa loved her for that. She told her so.

“I love you too. And you’re not a Lannister. I know you love Jon, truly. I know it. Everyone knows it. You two are so obvious about it.”

They stopped and looked at each other. The corners of their mouths slowly began to creep upwards. Arya kept speaking.

“You two are ridiculous. You’re complete idiots about it, acting like you’re in one of those stupid songs you used to like.”

Sansa giggled despite herself. Her emotions were everywhere. Arya pulled away then and looked her in the eye.

“But you are in a song, aren’t you?”

Yes. She thought with surprise. That’s exactly what it’s like. A song or a story. “When I’m with him, yes.”

“Sansa… I’m in a song too. I have my own song. With Gendry. Maybe it’s not a tune you’d like, but it’s ours. Don’t take that away from me, please.”

Life is not a song. I’ve learned that, to my sorrow. Arya’s had enough sorrow.

Sansa sighed. “Stay discreet, drink your moon tea. I’ll try to speak to the queen about it if I need to. I may have to create a couple of Targaryens before it’ll be safe for her to know. But you may have him for now. Maybe for longer. I’ll try for you, but don’t expect it to last forever. It may end.”

Arya nodded. “Thank you.”

“Please, though, be careful. This is a very different sort of battlefield, Arya. Not the sort you’re used to. And if there’s one thing people here know how to do, it’s use a woman’s love against her.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jon:

His seat by the window offered a lovely view of the falling snow. The only sounds in his solar were Ghost’s breathing as the beast lay at Jon’s feet and the occasional squeak from the polish-soaked rag the prince rubbed against Longclaw’s length.

It wasn’t necessary. He’d already given his blade all the attention it required the night before and Valyrian steel didn’t need frequent polishing. But he was so pleased with his weapon for slicing away Roslin Frey’s hair so finely that he wanted to show it some love. And it was something to do until the Corbray hearing that afternoon.

The High Sparrow himself came to see him in his rooms, treading in with silent steps. His white wool robe hung to his feet, his white beard to his waist. His smile was rigid. It made the lines on his face even deeper. He was such a small man. But he has a will of iron, they say.

Jon rose reluctantly and bowed, as was expected. “Your High Holiness, my apologies, my manservant apparently failed to announce you.”
“I would not have him announce me, Your Grace,” the Old Man said, “His lips have been too occupied with other activities to speak my title.”

Jon didn’t like this man. They said he eschewed the usual profligacy of his office with his simple attire in contrast to the rich robes worn by his predecessors. They said he wandered from village to village doing good works before his election. Jon could respect that. It didn’t mean he had to respect anything else, such as his busy-body personality, the way he always seemed to look for a reason to look down upon others, or the glee he always seemed to take in shaming others.

Crinkled grey eyes swept the chambers. They narrowed on a few things, among them Ghost.

“Is there something you wanted to speak to me about?” Jon asked, choosing to ignore the comment about Satin. He wasn’t going to give this man the satisfaction.

“I wanted to offer my respect and praise to you, My Prince.”

And what do you want in return? “For what exactly?”

“For your decision to submit the harlot Roslin Frey to the Faith’s customs. Your deference to our cleansing ritual showed great promise and wisdom. I am glad you have shown such respect to our order.”

“The Penance Walk? Many a convict has faced it before.”

“Too many, actually.”

“I thought you regarded the sentencing as one of great promise and wisdom.”

“Yes, because in this case, it came from the right person, and was sentenced to the right person.”

“You believe our prior convicts improperly judged?”

“I would not question the Queen’s judgment. I would never say she put anyone to the flames who did not deserve it.” The old man paused, pretending to hesitate, “I don’t speak of the judgment, I speak of the sentencing.”


“The Walk of Shame was created with a very specific purpose: to rob harlots of their pride, vanity, and power. A number of people who are not harlots have been sentenced to it nonetheless. Whether they deserved to die or not does not determine that their crimes qualified them for the Walk. The queen has sentenced many men to it, and while I am bound to submit to her rule, it doesn’t change the fact that the Walk was not created for the purpose of punishing men.”

Jon snorted. “It’s been altered—–“

“—–to punish anyone of any severe crime, yes. That does not make it natural. But in this case, I am at least glad that it’s to be used properly. I’m just surprised that you were the one to do it. Sometimes things can come from the most unexpected places and in this case, a proper understanding of the Faith’s customs came from a non-believer…?”

The last inflection made it sound like a question. Jon frowned.

“I have many beliefs, Your Holiness.”

The pontiff lowered his eyes, then cast them elsewhere. They fell upon a chest by the bedchamber
door. “You do have a belief in sin, though, yes?”

“Aye. Sin exists.” I just see it differently than you.

The old man strode near the chest and gestured towards it. “How interesting… Those are Stark Direwolves on the latches, correct?”

Jon made a point to stroke Ghost’s ears. “I like wolves. I was raised at Winterfell.”

“Funny how all your other possessions are decorated with dragons, then.”

Jon held up Longclaw, the white wolf’s head on the hilt glinting along with the steel blade.

The Septon looked unimpressed. “I heard that blade was given to you many years ago. The chest looks new, though. Have you found your inclinations regarding your heritage changing as of late?”

Fine, you win. “Not at all. The chest is not mine, though. It is Lady Stark’s.”

“Ah, I see!” The High Septon then reached over and unlatched the case. Jon stood.

“I do not believe I gave you permission to touch----“

“They are not your things, though, are they? Did you pay for them?”

The High Septon knew the answer to that. Jon knew he knew. And the High Septon knew that Jon knew. The prince glared. The old man held up a hand.

“I mean no harm, My Prince. And besides, the Lady Sansa is a follower of the Faith. Surely she’d never wish to hide anything from the High Septon.” He began lifting the lid.

“That is for her to determine. Remove your hands.”

The old man did so. “I meant no offense, Your Grace. But I must ask, what is a chest of Lady Stark’s things doing in your apartments?”

“She is to be my wife in two moons’ time. Some of her things are being transported here in preparation for when she moves to my rooms.”

“She must have a great, great many lovely things if she needs to start moving them two moons before the wedding.”

Now Ghost stood. He bared his teeth. Jon smiled.

“High Septon, I have a confession to make.”

“To me? I thought you were a follower of the Old Gods.”

“I am, I assure you. But that is not the point. Like Roslin Frey’s sentence, this confession is not motivated by religion. This is motivated purely by my belief in the truth. I sentenced Roslin Frey to the Penance Walk and burning because she insulted my lady. It was a grave error on her part, and, unfortunately, a common one. Wallace Coldwater and Rhys Moore also insulted Lady Stark. It’s too bad some people just can’t learn from what happened to them.”

Ghost began walking towards the High Sparrow. The pontiff glared.

“Your pet, My Prince.”
“Not a pet, a friend. Direwolves, much like dragons, can be vicious creatures if they’re provoked. And sometimes, people provoke them. I can’t imagine why.”

“Sometimes beasts mistake attempts to help for something sinister.”

“What help do you wish to give, High Septon?”

“I wish to help your soul, My Prince. I believed you might be open to it. But apparently, we’re both guilty of poor judgment here.”

“Indeed we are, High Septon. I may have made a poor judgment in my sentencing as well. I made it without a full understanding of the punishment. I think I will consult my wife to be and aunt on the matter. As you say, Lady Stark is a follower of the Seven. My aunt is as well. The counsel of wise followers is required. I shall seek it. Tell the septas not to shave Lady Tully just yet. Go and tell them now.”

“I will. But before I do, I feel I should remind you: you are indeed going to be married in two moons’ time. In the Great Sept, where all legitimate royal weddings take place. I hope you shall enter it with a clean soul.”

“I intend to. Do you?”

The old man backed out of the room, glowering. Jon’s stomach twisted in on itself once he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

As always, comments are appreciated!
Chapter Summary

Sam has a moment. Some solutions are created. Sansa takes care of her Targaryens. Names are discussed.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bluecichlid for her help!

Okay so this chapter is mostly set-up and fall out. Wrapping up some things, preparing for others. Some fun political dynamics are at play here. I really enjoyed writing Sansa's conversation with Daenerys, but I have some worries about that I'll address in my end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Taking Care

Jon:

Sam being brought before the court to testify against Lyn Corbray proved one of the most interesting parts of the proceedings. His friend was not a bold person, and he didn’t like much attention. When he entered the witness’s box, he had to squeeze himself a bit through the entrance, conjuring snickers from the crowd which Jon silenced with a dark look.

After he was in, the box seemed to swallow Sam up as he spoke, tears in his eyes as he recounted how Ser Lyn had come to him.

“He grabbed me by the collar and started describing my boy to me in details…. Details most people shouldn’t know about,” he said, holding Daenerys’s gaze in his. “And he said that he’d become intimately acquainted with my child’s insides if I didn’t cooperate. Then he showed my one of Little Sam’s gloves to prove he had him.”

There was a collective shudder, even more pronounced than the one that had filled the room when Corbray’s mutilated face appeared, gruesome as anything Jon had ever seen.

“And then?” Dany asked after a pause.

“I did as he asked, saying I had to get Lady Stark’s tonic from Lady Tyene and her sister Sarella. I could make it myself, but I didn’t tell him that. I wanted to get it from them because I figured they’d notice one missing. And I picked a poison--- I studied poison at the Citadel--- that I knew would discolor the serum just enough to arouse suspicion in someone who had seen much of it like Prince Jon or Lady Stark, but not enough for someone as unfamiliar as Ser Lyn to notice. Then I brought the serum to Lady Stark’s chambers, but she wasn’t there, so I brought it to Prince Jon.”
Jon burned with pride, though. *Sam, you’re a bloody genius.* He loved Sam so much at that moment, feeling proud to know him. *Brave and brilliant. Always.*

Daenerys questioned Sam a little further before speaking. “Master Samwell Tarly, on behalf of my family, I thank you for your ingenuity and courage in this matter. You may have saved the Warden of the North.”

“I-it was my pleasure, Your Grace.”

Jon couldn’t help sparing Randyll Tarly a glance. The Lord of Horn Hill stood near the Tyrells in the sixth row of the left aisle. His eyes were narrowed at his son, his mouth a thin line.

Jon wished at that moment that Gilly could see, but the wildling woman was back in her apartments with Little Sam. He knew she’d be beaming like mad. And it would have been nice for Little Sam to see his father at this moment as well. Sam was a bright red, but he looked happy as he withdrew from the court.

The best part was how Randyll Tarly’s eyes followed him, and yet Sam didn’t even spare the man a look as he swept out of the throne room.

The rest of the occasion was decidedly less triumphant. Jon tried not to grow ill as the accounts were given.

*All this work, all this effort and strategy to kill Sansa.* Jon tried to contain his disbelief, knowing that objectively, it was irrational. His lover was a powerful woman in a prominent position who had fought a war and been involved in countless political intrigues. She’d been associated with a number of highly unsavory people and engaged in some not-so-altruistic actions to survive. And she was a target simply by virtue of her birth. There were many people who would have much to gain from her death. Sometimes, though, it was hard to remember that, hard to keep these things about his lover in mind. To him, she was the sweet, kind presence in his life that guided and loved him. Not the type of person anyone would ever want to kill.

Daenerys eventually had enough as well and declared a recess, rubbing her temple as the people filed out. Jon offered her his arm as they stepped down from the royal dais. Sansa joined them a second later, taking his other arm. But she begged Dany’s pardon.

“If you please, I was hoping to take dinner with my sister this evening.”

“Of course, Lady Stark, go.”

Jon and Dany went to take their meal, but neither felt like eating much despite the rich array of venison, spiced potatoes and olives that waited for them in the dining room. Mostly they just drank.

About halfway through the meal, Jon brought up the High Septon’s visit. “Dany, I don’t want to go back on my word, but I didn’t understand the full implications of such a punishment. We didn’t really have them up North.”

“We’ve changed the details a bit, though.”

“I’m not sure that erases the true meaning. It seems to me it still has a very different connotation and context when it is done to a woman, even if we’ve opened up the punishment for men as well. Perhaps it should be done away with altogether.”

“This morning you were bursting with fury towards Roslin Frey, now you want to remove half her punishment.”
“It’s not about her. It’s about what this all means. What message it sends.”

“You should discuss this with the injured party, though I see what you mean.” Dany sighed. “I suppose it still has some rather problematic issues. I try not to interfere with the Faith too much, though. They are powerful. You should tread lightly around the High Sparrow.”

“I don’t like him.”

“Neither do I, but there isn’t much to be done about him at the moment. The majority of the realm follows the Faith of the Seven. And he has a good reputation, particularly with the common folk.”

He groaned, not needing Daenerys to explain to him what that meant. It was all so complicated.

Eddard Stark always made it seem so simple. If someone committed a crime, the punishment was given out based on severity. A swift swing of the blade reserved for the worst criminals. But now that Jon thought about it, he couldn’t remember his father dealing with conspiracies on this level up North. When he did reach this level of intrigue, it killed him.

There were never any penance walks or complications with the Faith up north either. Most of their people worshipped the Old Gods, and the Old Gods didn’t come with politics, rules, and special punishments.

*What if I’m as poorly equipped to handle this as he was?*

He wanted to be the man Ned Stark raised, but that seemed to become more and more impossible with every day.

Jon asked to be excused. He fetched a couple of his heavier furs and a lantern and ventured into the Godswood with Ghost, making sure Satin knew where he was going. The air was chilled, but he didn’t really feel it much. He only grabbed the furs because he knew that if his aunt and betrothed knew he’d ventured out into the cold without them they’d lose their minds.

He knelt before the face of the tree and put his fingertips to the trunk. Sometimes, he swore he could hear Bran’s voice when he did this.

“Jon.”

He didn’t imagine it was Bran’s voice this time.

Jon looked up and imagined he could see that solemn, lined face that had sent him to the Wall all those years ago.

“Father. Or should I even call you that?” He asked the face of Eddard Stark, even while knowing what he saw wasn’t truly real. The weirwood was just being what he needed it to be at the moment. This was wear he voiced his problems and spoke to his ancestors. Right now, he needed Eddard Stark in that tree to ease his thoughts. So that was the face he saw in the bark.

“If it brings you comfort. I always thought of you as my son. You were as dear to me as any of my children.”

“But I’m *not* your son.”

“You’re as much my son as your friend Sam’s boy is his.”

Jon sighed. “I can’t be anymore though. Everyone knows that. I wish I could, but I can’t. I’m not
even sure I can be the man you wanted to raise.”

“Why? Because you call yourself Targaryen now?”

“Because of the place that name has brought me. I can’t live by your rules here. Your rules killed you.”

“Joffrey Baratheon and Illyn Payne killed me.”

Jon shook his head. “No, that’s too easy. You know what happened. Don’t pretend otherwise. It never would have happened if you hadn’t been so…”

“So what?”

“Telling Cersei Lannister what you knew? Really?”

“It was the honorable thing.”

“Exactly. And because of the honorable thing, she was able to kill Robert before the truth was revealed, put her son on the Iron Throne, and throw you in chains for being a traitor. Which led to Joffrey and Illyn Payne cutting off your head. This prompted Robb to ride into the war that killed him, Arya to escape the capital and embark on the journey that turned her into a half-mad killer, Sansa to be imprisoned, exploited and brutalized first by the Lannisters and then by Littlefinger, Bran and Rickon to be lost, and the North to descend into ruin.” Jon swallowed, his heart breaking. He hated saying this. He hated thinking this. But it had to be said.

“So you see, Father, that fails to hold much weight. Your code, your absolutes, they can’t work here. I can’t follow them. I can’t let that code bring me to my death. There is too much depending on me staying alive. I don’t have the luxury of being willing to die for your principles.”

“Jon, I raised you—“

“You raised me, and I left your household still a boy. I can’t be that boy you raised anymore. I am a man now who lives in a completely different world than the one you raised me for. So I’m sorry, I can’t live by your code.”

“Then you must make one for yourself. It doesn’t have to be mine. But make it one that at least bases itself on some of the values I taught you. You don’t have to be the man I was. Just be a good one.”

Jon blinked. Eddard Stark was gone. He hadn’t been there really, probably. Jon removed his hand from the trunk of the tree, sat down, and buried his head in his hands.

What in the Seven Hells will make me a good man, though?

He didn’t know if he could stomach that question at the moment. He looked at Ghost.

Then he was Ghost. And he ran. He ran through the trees, relishing the freedom of it, leaving his body behind. Leaving it all behind.

Snow soaks the fur on his paws. He could smell everything: the wood of the trees, the clay, metal, and stone of the castle, the waste from the sewers, the spices and food from the kitchens. He got lost for a while and doesn’t care. He wanted to be lost.

But he could hear a voice calling his name. Jon reluctantly closed his third eye and found himself back at the Heart Tree again. Satin stood over him and extended his hand.
“It’s late,” his steward informed him, looking thoroughly unhappy to be out in the cold this late. “Lady Stark says it’s time for you to return. She ordered me to come fetch you.”

Jon nodded, his mood calmed by his excursion as Ghost, as it always was. He almost laughed at his steward’s words.

“I suppose you’re taking your orders from her now?”

“I’m your steward, and before long I’ll be hers as well,” Satin replied, shrugging, “And I’m happy to do it. It’s a great relief, not having to manage you alone anymore.”

Jon snorted and followed his manservant back to his apartments. Sansa waited there, dressed in her white silk dressing gown. Drying cloth in hand, she helped him out of his wet furs, handing them off to Satin and dismissing the servant.

She began toweling his hair dry. “A hot bath is waiting for you in the bedchamber. We can’t have you catching a fever.”

The way she went about leading him back to the room and helping him out of his wet things was so casual and natural. Normally, he hated being fussied over but this… this was lovely. She unlaced his jerkin and doublet as he stepped out of his boots. She pulled the garments away and folded them, placing on them atop his wardrobe as Jon removed his trousers, under-things, and socks. She took them from him and he stepped into the copper tub.

The hot water felt amazing. Jon groaned as it enveloped his skin. As he adjusted to the sensation, he watched his lover carefully put away his things, folding his trousers and tunic and putting them next to his doublet, throwing his socks and smallclothes in the bin where such things were normally kept. All her movements were delicate, but direct.

She’s taking care of me. His heart ached.

“Where’s Ghost?” She asked.

“I went running in his head, he’s fine. We kept to the castle grounds. He’s probably making his way back now.”

Sansa calmly grabbed some soap and a washrag from a side tables, pushed her sleeves back and came over. She dipped her hands below the surface of the water and lathered the cloth up to wash him. Jon hadn’t been this tended to by a woman since he was a child, being looked after by Old Nan. He felt very at home at that moment.

And she did this like it was nothing, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

She probably doesn’t even realize just how much she’s doing for me at this moment.

When she reached over, he took the soap and cloth from her hand, then kissed her wrists tenderly, inhaling her perfume and sighing. He felt so safe. His worries, his confusion, his fear seemed to melt away.

“I know things are difficult for you right now,” she said softly, stroking his face, “But it will get easier. Daenerys told me you are having misgivings about the Penance Walk.”

Jon swallowed. “When did she tell you that?

“When Satin told me where you’d gone, I guessed you might be troubled. Why else would you seek
out the godswood this late at night? So I went to Daenerys and asked if she noticed anything at
dinner. She told me what you said.”

I’m loved. He smiled a little and kissed her wrist again. “You’re sweet.”

“I… I made a suggestion. She could walk the streets covered. She’d still face the eyes of the crowds,
she’d still walk to her execution, but it wouldn’t… She wouldn’t be shamed for her body. That
Walk… it tends to affect women more because more people come out to gawk and leer when it’s a
naked woman. But if she’s clothed, it should be fairer. There won’t be the same level of leering. It
won’t be about any sort of carnality.”

That made his heart feel more at rest. He smiled up at her. “That would be better. Much better. I
spoke to the High Sparrow today. He spoke of it in this way… I didn’t realize what it all meant. It’s
vile. It would be less so if it wasn’t so focused on…”

“A woman’s naked body?”

“Yes.”

She bent down then and kissed him deep. Then she pulled back and cupped his cheek, eyes shining.
“Jon Targaryen, you are such a good man it hurts sometimes.”

His jaw dropped. Before he could stop himself, he found himself asking, “How do you do that?”

Her blue eyes widened. “What?”

“You’re just so… you’re so bloody lovely. I just… I can’t…” He gasped and looked at the surface of
the water. “It’s ridiculous. You seem to just know exactly what I need, and say exactly the right
thing. I mean, what is it like to be you? Be so good and brilliant and perfect?”

“I’m not perfect, Jon. No one is.”

“I don’t mean you’re flawless but——” Jon groaned. “Do you know what I was agonizing over in the
godswood? Trying to be a good man, wondering if I could be. And then I come in here, and you just
put me in a warm bath and take care of me better than anyone ever has. You come up with a solution
to my current issue, which you understand so perfectly it’s almost like you can read my thoughts.
Then you tell me I’m a good man.”

His eyes narrowed at her then, just trying to understand. She looked at him with wide-eyed
innocence and a bit of surprise, as if she didn’t really understand why he was even speaking of it.

“Well you are a good man. You’re one of the best.”

“You really have no idea, do you? You don’t get it. It just comes so naturally to you, being so good
for me?”

“I’m in love with you, Jon. And at this point, you’ve told me everything, so I know you on an
intimate level. I know you and I love you. So yes, I’m going to take care of you and do whatever I
can to help you. When I was sick, you held my hair back as I threw up, comforted me, and did
everything in your power to protect me. And you didn’t have to think about it either. That’s what
people in love do, when they’re doing it right.”

He smiled. “I love you.”

She smiled back. “I know. And I love you. Now scrub yourself off while I wash your hair.”
When he got out, she toweled him off again and brought him a new tunic and his dressing gown. Once he was dressed, he scooped her up, conjuring a squeal and then peppered her face with kisses as he carried her to bed. They burrowed under the covers together. He fell asleep with his face burrowed in her neck.

Jon woke to find the room much warmer than it had been. He stepped out of bed, pissed into the chamber pot, went to the solar. Ghost was there, lying by the fire as if he’d never been gone. Jon smiled and called for Satin. When the young man arrived, he helped his steward remove the tub from the bedchamber as quietly as possible and asked for breakfast and a couple of basins of water to be brought.

When he returned to their room, he spotted Sansa’s eyes fluttering open and rejoined her in bed.

“Good morning, Lady Stark,” he murmured, pulling her into his lap, wrapping his arms around her and kissing her cheek. “How are you feeling?”

“Cozy.” She said with a smile, nuzzling him. “And you, Prince Jon?”

“The same.”

Then she giggled.

“What is it?”

“I just realized… When we marry… You’re going to be a Stark and my consort. You’ll be Lord Jon Stark. Lord of Winterfell.”

“And you’re going to be Princess Sansa Targaryen, Lady of Dragonstone,” he said that last bit in a mockingly grand voice, then ran his lips along her hair, “Will you like that?”

She laughed louder then. “I’ve always wanted to be a princess.”

“I think it sounds very nice. Sansa Targaryen. It’s a pretty name, very musical.” An old conversation came to mind. Sansa had told him that girls liked being told their names were pretty. He smiled a bit at this memory. But in this case, it wasn’t him just saying it because she was a girl. ‘Sansa Targaryen’ was a lovely name.

“Jon Stark is more musical. Nothing rhymes with Targaryen. But Stark… Bark, dark, lark, park, hark, mark, shark….”

“Shark? Are they going to write a song about me with a shark?” He smiled at the idea. The image was downright comical.

“They might say you’re deadly as a shark. Jon Stark, fierce as a shark.”

He’d almost been Jon Stark before. He could still remember Stannis’s Baratheons hard face and voice offering it to him. Jon Stark, Lord of Winterfell. He preferred it coming from this particular source. Lovelier face, melodic voice, and no guilt attached to it. A far easier offer to accept. Jon chuckled.

“I like that.” He squeezed her. “Almost as much as I like you.”

“I’m glad you like me. At this point, it would be awkward if you didn’t.”

He snorted. And then he had a thought. “You will be Lady of Dragonstone, though. I’d like to take you to see it before the wedding. We could fly Rhaegal out, stay there for a few days.”
Jon actually had a great deal of affection for that castle. He’d yet to take up extended formal residence of it, but he’d stayed there for about a sennight after Daenerys ceded him the title. The island itself was dreary, but the artistry of the castle was undeniable and the deposits of glass that lay within the ground were breathtaking. Every structure was shaped like a dragon, and the views of the ocean were wonderful. Stannis Baratheon may have resented it, but Jon felt a strong connection to the fortress.

Some called it dark, dreary, and strange. Jon thought it was a place that suited him. It certainly suited him better than King’s Landing.

And they deserved time away. It would be lovely, too. He could show her the dragonglass deposits and the towers. They’d be away from the court for a while.

Sansa groaned. “We can’t, Jon. You know that.”

I do. And I wish Ygritte had been right about me right now.

He kissed her, feeling more than a little depressed about it all. She gradually turned in his lap and poked his nose.

“I’ve got an idea,” she murmured to him. “You skip the practice yard today, I’ll put my letter writing off until this evening. We can take breakfast, and then get to work on Daenerys’s project.”

Jon’s eyes widened. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “I’m recovering more quickly than I expected and… I want us to have as much to look forward to as possible.”

He kissed her deep. “Alright then. Shall we begin now?”

She pushed herself off of him. “Not yet. I have to take care of a few things. Look away.”

He groaned and planted his face in the pillows as his lover went to piss and chew mint leaves. Nani and Satin both arrived not long after with wash basins and various grooming instruments. Jon informed them that they’d eat in their dressing gowns and bath and dress later that day, trying to ignore the significant looks Satin and Nani exchanged.

When they ate in the solar, Jon made sure Sansa got plenty to eat. He watched her carefully. She spoke as if nothing were happening.

“I’ve spoken to Arya.”

“Oh?” Jon asked, relieved. He loathed strife existing between his sister and lover. “Has everything been resolved?”

“I explained my issues with Gendry to her. She’s smitten with him, however. I told her she had to be discreet.”

Jon’s eyes widened. He was surprised Sansa was willing to accept this. She’d been so angry before.

“You’re permitting this?”

“I am. For now. I’ve decided that the easiest way to handle this is by letting this run its course. I’ve made Arya no promises, and she’s still quite young. I think once the full extent of her responsibilities is pressed upon her, she’ll have far less time for puppy love and far more understanding of why Gendry is not a viable long-time partner for her.”
He blinked several times. “And if she doesn’t?”

“If she doesn’t come to that understanding on her own, I will help her to it. But right now, I have too much on my plate to engage Arya in a battle. And anyways, with her mental state being what it is, I think this might be good for her. The indulgence of one’s heart can do wonders for one’s mind and body.” She gave him a small smile and Jon felt his heart jump a little.

Still, he was surprised by how casual she was being about this. He decided not to probe further, however. This casual contentment was far easier than the anger she displayed two nights prior, and he had a feeling she didn’t want him to push the subject. The matter is not resolved. But it is temporarily treated.

“Speaking of Arya, I want her to gain a mentor. A woman, someone noble, well-mannered, and good, but with some of the same interests. Someone who can practice swordplay, curteys, and statecraft with her. At first I wanted one of the Sand Snakes, but that is no longer an option. I thought maybe Brienne of Tarth. She loyally served our mother and has a vested interest in both of us. But while she’s honorable and a fierce warrior, I’ve never seen her display any talent for politics. And she’s queensguard, so she can’t follow Arya up North. What do you think?”

“It’s a good idea, and I may have just the person for you,” he answered, pleased. He’d actually had the same idea and given it some thought. “We should have Lyra Mormont come to court. She wears her armor as well as she wears her silks, much like her late elder sister. She’s northern, loyal to the Starks, intelligent, and she has done much to help her mother govern the North in your absence.”

He’d met Lyra Mormont during the battles with the White Walkers, when the young She-Bear had come with troops to support the Targaryens. He’d admired her immensely. She’d reminded Jon of her uncle in more ways than one, showing a shockingly cool head in battle despite the outright peril. She’d be an excellent influence on Arya.

Sansa smiled. “That sounds perfect. I’ll write to her.”

Jon smiled, happy to have helped. They finished their meal quickly. As they spoke, Sansa kept nudging his foot with hers and leaning forward. Her bedrobe and nightrail were both fairly low-cut, giving Jon a fair view of her breasts whenever she was positioned properly. He could tell by the look in her eyes that she knew perfectly well what she was doing. To make it worse, she kept playing with this loose tendril of red hair, twirling it around her finger. Jon finished eating quickly, having Satin and Nani clear the table and leave before striding over to his bride to be, stepping behind her to pull out her chair.

She rose elegantly and Jon reached around, pulling her to him and grabbing her breasts. The silk of her bedrobe was soft, much like the skin it encased. He wanted to be rid of the fabric, though. But he held himself back, instead choosing to pinch her nipples through the cloth so they hardened. He dipped his head low to kiss her neck.

Sansa moaned, leaning her head back. “Don’t attack me too passionately, Your Grace, or you’ll leave marks.”

He reluctantly pulled his mouth away, already missing the smooth, warm taste of her skin. He satisfied himself by licking the nape of her neck and kissing that lock of hair she’s been playing with earlier. He reached up and pulled the satin ribbon that held most of her hair in place. It cascaded about her shoulders in a river of red, some of the strands teasing his face as they dropped.

“With your permission, My Lady,” he purred into her ear, “I’d like to fuck you on this table.”
Her breath caught. “Is that how a prince treats his lady?”

He could tell by her tone that she was teasing. “No. But it’s how a filthy bastard boy like me does.”

“Oh, but I’m to marry a prince.”

“Well then, My Lady,” Jon replied, reaching down to pull her skirts up, “We’d best do this before this prince of yours returns.”

She giggled and slowly bent over, smiling seductively over her shoulder and spreading her legs. Jon groaned and hiked her skirts over her hips, exposing her stocking-clad legs and covered backside. He almost growled when he saw her smallclothes, the ghost of her red curls appearing through the white linen. He reached down and tore them off, conjuring a delighted little shriek from his lover, now exposed.

The sight of her red and pink lower lips made him ache. Then she gave her hips an eager little wiggle that proved too much for him. Jon yanked his own clothes off and ran a finger along the part between her cunny’s lips, feeling the moisture there. Sansa groaned.

“Hurry, Snow,” she growled.

He didn’t need to be told twice. Jon parted her lips with his fingers and slid himself in, moaning at being encased in her hot, soaking, white heat. At first he thrust in and out slowly, until she was demanding he go harder and faster. As he followed his lady’s orders, he pulled her up so her back was against his chest, lifting one of her legs up and settling her bent knee on the edge of the table so he had greater access to her.

She turned her head and he kissed her sweet mouth, thrusting in and out of her with increased intensity and speed.

“I love you, you wonderful girl,” he whispered to her when they broke away for breath.

Not being able to spare another moment without full access to her, Jon pulled her robe open and then tore her nightrail, gripping at her bare breasts. She moaned and met his thrusts, finally shuddering against him.

When he spilled his seed inside of her, coming with a mad, wild gush, he clutched her to him like he’d waste away without her. Slowly, she turned.

Jon’s ability to think coherently returned to him. He saw the torn lamb’s wool of her nightrail and his stomach sank. *Too much, you idiot. What if you harmed her? What if you scared her?* Jon searched her face for any sign of fear or pain. Sansa just looked dazed.

Jon picked her up as gently as he could. She didn’t resist, wrapping her arms about his neck. Jon sighed and cradled her to him, then carried her to the bedchamber. He lay her down, a bit anxious. She looked up and held out her arms to him. “Come here, Jon Snow.”

Jon kissed her softly, cuddling up next to her. “I could spend my whole life with you.”

She smiled. “You will.”

“I know.” He grinned, suddenly happy Ygritte hadn’t been right about him.

But his smile fell when he noticed how swollen her lips were. He hesitated. “Did you like that? I wasn’t too rough, was I?”
“I’d have told you if you were,” she informed him, stroking his face. “It needn’t always be perfectly gentle. You love me, I feel it either way. And you’d never want to hurt me, so I won’t let you. I promise.”

He smiled again, believing her. Feeling more assured--- Sansa wouldn’t lie to him about this--- he walked his fingers down her front, then stroked her belly. “I’m glad. I don’t want you to ever feel like you’re obligated to---”

She sat up slightly, grabbed his chin, and looked him right in the eye. “Jon, listen to me. If there is one thing I know, it’s what it feels like to be with someone who doesn’t care how I feel or what I want. You said you don’t want my rapers between the sheets with us. They’re not. I know what you feel for me. And I do not ever feel obligated to do anything I don’t want to with you. I left that behind in the godswood. Everything that has passed between us since, I’ve wanted. And I will tell you if you ever start doing something I don’t like. Because I know you’ll listen. This is a safe place for us.”

He nodded. “The only safe place, I fear.”

Because Jon did feel that way. Only when he was alone with her did he feel like he could drop his guard completely. He kissed her again, inhaling her sweet scent. Then he glanced at her belly.

“Do you think we did it this time?” He asked, drawing little circles on her skin with his finger.

“Maybe.” She smiled and looked down. “Of course, we’ll want to keep going as much as possible to make absolutely sure.”

He grinned. “Definitely. So you’d best be prepared, Woman. Your Prince needs an heir. I’ll be on you night and day now, trying to make that belly grow big. I want my Dany-Robb.”

She cackled beautifully, and then stopped. “Jon, about the names…”

His face fell. “You don’t like them?”

“Well, if the first one is a boy… We’ll have to give our first a Targaryen name, won’t we? You said you wanted our Robb to rule Winterfell, after all.”

Jon frowned. “Yes, I suppose that’s true. So then what for a boy?”

“Well, let’s see…. We obviously don’t want to go with Aerys. But there is Aegon, Baelor, Viserys, Jahaerys, Aemon, Daemon, and Rhaegar. I thought maybe Rhaegar for your father or Aemon for that Maester at the Wall that you loved.”

He shook a little, picturing the old man then. He closed his eyes, then managed to smile before opening them again. “Aemon. If I’m to sire the next king of Westeros, I want him to be as wise and kind as our Maester. He was more a father to me than Rhaegar Targaryen anyways.”

“Alright and a girl----“

Jon pouted. “No. We’re having Daenerys Targaryen Second of Her Name.”

Sansa giggled. “Of course, but we can’t call her Dany. Our current queen is a Dany; it’ll get confusing. I want to call our Daenerys ‘Naerys’ for short.”

“For Queen Naerys? The one who loved the Dragonknight?”
Sansa nodded. “This Naerys will live a happier life, though. The songs about her will be joyous.”

Jon smiled. *There she is.* He loved the woman Sansa had become, but one of his greatest joys was glimpsing bits of that romantic young girl he once knew. “Alright then. Aemon or Naerys.”

He realized then the significance of that. *Aemon and Naerys. She'll be carrying a song in her belly.*

Sansa:

They’d made love two more times before they had to put on some undergarments and call their servants in. Jon begged her to let him watch her bathe. She indulged him, feeling his eyes upon her and blushing as she washed her hair. Nani towel-dried her red locks as Jon dressed.

For the day, Sansa chose a gown of blue silk, pairing it with the Martell necklace. The red of the ruby stood out violently in contrast to the other colors.

As it needed to.

She added the pearl hair clips as well. They didn’t quite match the necklace in terms of opacity of the stones, but the settings were silver, so they passed. They served as excellent symbols now in their own right. Excellent trophies she’d taken from the hands of her enemy.

She ran to Daenerys’s apartments, the heat of Jon’s gaze being a bit too much for her. She didn’t often go through so much of her morning routine in front of him. Sansa liked just appearing before him all done up and see the way his eyes flickered. There was something fun about maintaining the illusion that she could just magically make herself look like a piece of art with a snap of her fingers.

But then, having him watch her prepare also had its advantages. When she just appeared before him completely groomed, gowned, and adorned, his gaze erupted into a beautiful blaze of adoration, lust, and awe. As he watched the actual process, though, she saw that same blaze come to life through a slow but steady burn.

And that had an appeal.

Too much of one, really. She needed to get things done today. That wouldn't happen if she couldn't tear herself away from him.

She found her monarch sitting at her desk, scratching at a long array of columns with her quill. Sansa waited while Dany finished with the page she was on before the queen turned to her.

“Sorry, some things regarding household accounts. Do you have any solutions for me regarding the Martell issue?”

Sansa felt her heart go out to her queen, who was visibly tired. *But she has plenty of people offering her honeyed words and sympathies. Fewer people offer her solutions. Those probably give her more comfort.*

“Ellaria Sand, bastard daughter of Lord Harmon Uller, paramour to Oberyn Martell the Red Viper, and mother to the four youngest Sand Snakes, including the two you proposed fostering. Give her an extended invitation to court so that she can come and go and see her daughters as she pleases. No one can accuse you of being a tyrant if you allow those girls to see their mother.”

“She mothered four Sand Snakes, including Elia. I don’t see how she’s going to be a calming
presence at court.”

“What I know of her, I learned mostly from Petyr Baelish and the Snakes themselves. She isn’t a Sand Snake. According to some of Littlfinger’s reports, she actually helped keep the Snakes at bay after the death of Oberyn Martell. I do know that she watched her lover die and left court without incident. After that she restrained her youngest girls by taking them to the home of her father. Prince Doran trusted her, and she has been described by many as having a gentle heart.”

“How did Baelish come by this information?”

“Oh, he had almost as many spies as Varys. He had eyes almost everywhere, on almost everyone. I sometimes used to write his letters for him.”

Daenerys hesitated. Sansa could see that look in her eyes, that same guilty look that came to everyone’s eyes whenever the topic of Petyr Baelish was brought up in front of Sansa. The Lady of Winterfell ignored it and just shrugged. “It is your decision, Your Grace. I am merely trying to help, give you my best council.”

You should have never made such a demand in the first place. Sansa could see from Dany’s eyes that the queen knew it. It was enough to infuriate the Martells and at the same time, the dragon queen couldn’t back down without looking weak. Thankfully enough, Daenerys had possessed the good sense to stall and not send the other Snakes from court or demand the younger ones make their way to King’s Landing just yet, allowing time for a solution to be created. That’s where I come in. Someone has to put out the dragon fire. She knows I can do it.

It wasn’t a job she resented. It would, after all, keep her valuable to this regime even after her womb bore its last fruit. Sansa had no intention of becoming mere breeding stock.

She was actually happy for this little hiccup. It wasn’t enough of an error to be an instant, Cersei-Lannister-esque war-causing powder keg, but enough to put the realm on edge and required the type of cool diplomacy that Sansa excelled at. It was good for her, a chance to prove her worth and skill in these affairs to an even greater extent than she had already. She saw Daenerys’s lip curl and kept a neutral expression.

“You should have never made such a demand in the first place. Sansa could see from Dany’s eyes that the queen knew it. It was enough to infuriate the Martells and at the same time, the dragon queen couldn’t back down without looking weak. Thankfully enough, Daenerys had possessed the good sense to stall and not send the other Snakes from court or demand the younger ones make their way to King’s Landing just yet, allowing time for a solution to be created. That’s where I come in. Someone has to put out the dragon fire. She knows I can do it.

Sansa nodded. Of course she wasn’t planning to betray Daenerys. Only a fool would go behind the back of a woman who so frequently left fires in her wake. Sansa was no fool.

“I will do as you ask and keep you informed regarding all the new developments. Are you going to
present the terms with me?” It would be better for everyone’s sake if Daenerys didn’t.

There was resentment now between the queen and the princess, and Sansa wasn’t sure she could trust Arianne to conduct herself respectfully enough to not cross another line. And Dany couldn’t be openly disrespected without retaliating.

But peace with the Martells also depended on this being handled delicately. There were simply certain situations where Daenerys couldn’t afford to be as delicate as she would like. She had a reputation for ferocity and gravitas to maintain. She had to be the fire-breathing Mother of Dragons, acceptance of her as the first Queen Regnant in a male-biased court depended on her never being seen as willing to suffer disrespect or take slights lightly. She needed to be a dragon to rule effectively.

Sansa, on the other hand, depended on an almost opposite approach. Her own needs in regards to image and reputation depended on her having a cool head, a gentle and accommodating disposition, and a sweetly feminine manner. She could afford to be the one who suffered and forgave insults and leaned more towards compromise. The “easy” one.

Neither image projected by Sansa and Daenerys were completely fair or accurate to who they were as people. Dany did have to be the Queen of Fire and Blood, but the truth was she had a very gentle heart and a deeply sympathetic nature. The problem was she had to operate in an arena where people were already hostile to her authority and looked for any sign of weakness to exploit. While she could afford to compromise and did so happily if the cause was just, she couldn’t be seen to swallow petty insults or give up too much. She had to be terrifying, as terrifying and invincible as Aegon the Conqueror himself.

She couldn’t do that if she was seen putting up with insulting follies from people like Arianne Martell. So often, Daenerys had to ignore, go against, or mask her softer side.

Sansa, meanwhile, thrived on appearing as gentle and unthreatening as possible. People had to feel safe with her. They were easier to manipulate that way. Sansa could in fact be fierce and dangerous, but she was in a position where being accommodating and being seen as a sweet, delicate snowflake was key to success and survival.

It did work beautifully, though. Sansa could be the one seen as the tempering influence upon the firey Targaryen royals this way. She could be the one to go to Princess Arianne with these new terms, make it seem like Daenerys was being less compromising than she actually was, and make peace without Daenerys looking weak. It just made Dany seem wise enough to listen to a supposedly more level-headed counselor and made Sansa look influential and gentle enough to calm the queen’s passions and intercede successfully on behalf of the courtiers.

A fine dynamic both of them were aware of.

But to maintain that, they couldn’t suffer Daenerys being insulted to her face by a loose cannon like Arianne Martell.

Dany’s left brow went up. “No, I’m weary of speaking to that madwoman. And I’m pretty sure she’s weary of me as well. Just keep me up to date and don’t do anything major without my approval.”

Sansa smiled. “Yes, Your Grace. But there is something else to consider. In regards to the Tyrells…”

“Yes?”

“To balance the blow of all this, I thought we might offer one a place on the council. If I had my
choice, it would be Margaery. But we have to worry about not offending Lord Mace. He’s still head of the House and Warden of the South. Being passed over for his daughter would be seen as a slight.”

Daenerys groaned. “Right, I keep forgetting about that spat between those two parties. Lord Mace is such an oaf, though. Didn’t you tell me that even his mother—”

“—Referred to him as the Lord Oaf of Highgarden, yes,” Sansa tried not to smile at the memory. She dearly wished she’d known the Queen of Thorn after she’d learned to appreciate the woman properly. She’d been shocked and scared by the things Lady Olenna said when she was a girl. Now when she looked back on them, she couldn’t help laughing. She may have been a cold, calculating shrew, but she was an amusing one at least. Queen Cersei was humorless. Lady Olenna was not. “She considered most of her family, including her husband, son, good-daughter and a number of her grandchildren to be fools. Margaery and Willas, I believe, were rare exceptions.”

“Do you know what Lord Mace actually said to me the other day?”

If Sansa had to guess, it was some manner of tactless attempted compliment. “What?”

“I spoke of Meereen, and he said that my control of that city was inevitable. ‘After all, all you had to do was turn those exquisite violet eyes upon them. Faced with such beauty, what choice did any of them have but to obey Your Grace’s every whim?’” Daenerys snorted and looked at Sansa, clearly affronted.

“As if it were that easy,” Dany continued in a bitter tone, “As if I didn’t become queen through anything but flirtation. As if ending the bondage of thousands was a mere whim. Forget the armies I’d amassed, the dragons, the loyalty I inspired, and the freedom I promised those people. And implying that none of the Meereenese had any choice but to obey me? I took that city with the intent to insure the freedom of every person there. They knew it, too. That was the whole point. But no, apparently instead of conquering that city, freeing thousands from bondage, and learning to rule it through my own skill and strengths, I made everyone there my slave by batting my eyelashes at them. It was just that easy.”

The troubles in Meereen had almost destroyed everything Daenerys had ever worked for. It was easily the greatest debacle, learning experience, and struggle of her career. She’d ended up a prisoner of a rival khal who despised her and lost control of her dragons before she’d finally regained control of Slaver’s Bay. Countless people had died, and Daenerys had almost been one of them thanks to all the obstacles she’d encountered and the mistakes she’d made there. That had been what taught her to be the queen she was now.

Lord Oaf of Highgarden. Sansa sighed. “It’s typical of men like him to think that all any woman wants to hear are words that speak in absolute reverence to her appearance.”

“Typical of fools, you mean.”

Yes. Sansa let her face say it for her. “Well, he’s proud—”

“—Of what?”

“His position and prestige, among other things,” Sansa bit her lip. “And it does make him look a fool. Lord of Highgarden, Warden of the South, and he’s outranked by his daughter?”

Sansa pursed her lips. Daenerys sighed.

“What of Lord Willas, his eldest son? He’s known as an intelligent sort. Willas and Margaery on the
council and Loras on the guard. We’d be offering exalted positions to three of his children. Lord Mace wouldn’t be able to object to that.”

“It would go even easier if we could find a way to convince Lord Mace that he’s personally needed back at Highgarden. But I might be able to work something out with Margaery regarding that. I know she is eager for an official position on the council. If we can’t arrange for Willas, Ser Garlan might be a fine alternative. He’s sensible.”

Daenerys nodded. “Alright. And arrange for a couple of little Tyrell cousins to help your sister carry your train during the wedding or something. The Sand Snakes can carry some flowers or something.”

“I’ll go discuss it with them.” Sansa smiled. She’d have a busy afternoon. “The Magna Val is due to arrive the day after Lady Roslin and Corbrays are due to be executed. With her will be Lady Lyra Mormont of Bear Island, who I hope will help me tutor my sister in her duties towards the North.”

Daenerys nodded. “Excellent. When you’re through with the Tyrells and Martells, I’d like you to look back into the Greyjoy situation. It seems Asha and her dear Uncle Victorion intend to be among our guests.”

Sansa’s stomach sunk. She did not mix well with the Greyjoys. Having Asha there would not be pretty or enjoyable. I’ll have to keep her from Arya. I don’t want to even begin to imagine what sort of influence Asha could end up being on my sister.

“I do have some good news, though.” Daenerys smiled at her. “Your wedding is falling under budget. You’ve gotten some excellent material contacts.”

Sansa nodded. Another side-effect of being the protégé of a well-connected business prodigy. She always got excellent deals on fabric and spices. Petyr would sometimes host various merchants at the Eyrie, Gates of the Moon, and Winterfell. Sansa would be the charming hostess.

She was glad, though. She’d hoped to keep things as frugal as possible, but wasn’t completely solid on the numbers.

The Lady of Winterfell curtsied. “I try, Your Grace. I’ll go draw up the paperwork for the Martells. I take tea with them mid-afternoon, where I can present this. I do have lunch with the Tyrells in a quarter hour, so I’ll speak to them.”

Dany nodded, looking more than a little relieved. “Excellent. Thank you, Lady Sansa.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so the Dany/Sansa scene. Here is what I worried about:

hope the conversation between Sansa and Daenerys wasn't too one-sided. I wanted them to come up with a number of ideas together. Sansa has a lot of the basis for good ideas and how to handle things because of her connections and experience, but Daenerys is supposed to have enough suggestions and input for these matters to serve as a proper collaborator. She's smart, but she still doesn't know the court/kingdom the way Sansa does and has certain limitations. But she's still excellent at her job and can still contribute effectively despite her limited experience in these matters. I also wanted to
explore the new political dynamic that has arisen between them in a way that makes them both seem competent, valuable, and intelligent. I wanted to show that Sansa definitely earns her keep, but not to the point where she's smarter or necessarily better than Daenerys. I don't want that to be overpowering. Sansa can just handle some things better because of circumstances, connections, experience, and position. And Dany trusts her and is smart enough to see how useful she is, while also being independently intelligent enough to contribute her own ideas and grasp things.

So yeah, I hope it wasn't too one-sided, but if you think it is, I understand.
Meetings with Ladies, a Prince, and a Magna

Chapter Summary

Sansa takes meetings. Margaery wants to help with the wedding, Arianne with the bedding, and there's an early arrival.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bluecichlid for beta work :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty: Meetings with Ladies, a Prince, and a Magna

Sansa:

Before lunch, she hurried to switch her necklace to one less ostentatious than the Martell one, for Margaery’s benefit.

“I can invent a problem that requires the presence and attention of the official Lord of the Reach. Nothing truly damaging, of course. Just enough to convince my father that the Reach cannot survive long without him at Highgarden. I’ll write to Willas about it,” Margaery Tyrell said, sipping her Arbor Gold delicately and smiling. The two were taking their meal in one of the finer private dining chambers. Behind Margaery loomed an exquisite painting of Daeron the Young Dragon.

“It won’t be too much bother?” Sansa asked after swallowing a mouthful of potted hare and wiping her mouth. “Your brother, traveling to the capital?”

“Oh, he’ll be heartbroken to leave his puppies and birds behind, to be sure. And he’ll have to travel by wheelhouse--- riding for extended periods puts too much strain on the leg. He can still feel it, you know, he just can’t use it properly. But he’ll be eager to come to the capital. He’s craved an opportunity like this for a good long while. He wants to see the library, among other things. And it’s time he left the shadows as it is. He will be Lord of the Reach, after all. And he needs to find a wife.”

Sansa nodded, pleased. “I will be very happy to meet him.”

“What official capacity would you have him serve in?”

“The queen has not spoken of it. The only people who have official titles are Barristan, Missandei, Merys, Drystan Waters, and Arther Butterwell.”

Margaery already knew this. Her lips curled. “So the position of Hand is still open?”

Sansa cast her a warning look. Margaery sighed.

“Alright then, we can wait. I’ll do what needs to be done in the meantime to convince my father that allowing me to serve is his own idea. If you could arrange a couple of private meetings for myself
and Daenerys, it would help. I could convince him that the queen and I are bosom companions. And allow me credit for getting Loras on the Queensguard.”

“That can be arranged.”

“Arya is carrying your train at the wedding, yes?”

“Arya and Myranda Royce.”

“What an honor. I’m sure it’s a beautiful dress.”

Sansa smiled. “Yes. With a very sizeable train as well. Perhaps you could help them with their burden.”

“I would be overjoyed,” Margaery grinned. “I imagine I have a more delicate hand than those two. Are you going to be crowned?”

Sansa nodded.

“Who is the squire who will be holding the coronet?”

“No one yet, but I thought perhaps your cousin Luthor might be available? Jon already has a squire, but I’m fairly sure he’ll have other duties.”

“He’d be thrilled, I’m sure.”

Sansa swallowed. “I should tell you, Margaery, in order to smooth things over with the Martells, the youngest Sand Snakes may be involved in the ceremony--- small roles. Flower carriers, most like.”

Margaery rolled her eyes. “A non-issue. Just keep them far away from the Tyrell table. And please, for the love of the Seven, don’t wear that damned sun necklace.”

Sansa snorted. “I wasn’t planning to.”

Margaery leaned forward then, smirking slightly. “You know, I’ve seen your wedding cloak. Jon showed it to me.”

“What?!” This shocked her.

“He wanted to make absolutely sure it was something you’d like. So he asked me for my opinion.”

Sansa took a deep breath. Honestly, it’s Jon. Not Harry. Jon can have a woman in his chambers for reasons that have nothing to do with infidelity. She plastered an eager look on her face. “…And? Is it pretty?”

Margaery nodded. “He managed not to make a complete cock-up of it. I was surprised. Truly lovely. A bride could not hope for a finer cloak. There’s blue on it. Jon said it was for the queen’s khalasaar. I’m positive he really just had it added to match your eyes.”

Sansa reddened, suddenly quite pleased. “Would you like to see my Maiden’s cloak?”

The Maid of Highgarden nodded, looking excited. Sansa had Nani run to fetch it. When it arrived, Margaery gave her the biggest compliment she was capable of: a look of pure envy.

“It’s exquisite, Sansa!” She said, fingering the Myrish lace snowflakes. “You’ll look like winter itself. Gods, you’ll glitter! How much of this did you do yourself?”
“Enough,” Sansa replied.

The soft smile at Margaery’s lips pleased her. “And your jewels?”

“Not completely settled yet. My mother’s clips will be involved, and I require some wolf-themed pieces. I have an idea for some hair ornaments. I want it to look like I have snowflakes falling and melting in my hair.”

“Allow me to help you with this. I’ve been a royal bride three times. I know this.”

Sansa considered Margaery for a second. Making a note to have everything the Maid of Highgarden brought her inspected thoroughly, she nodded. “Thank you.”

She departed from lunch feeling fairly proud of herself. She needed that boost of confidence to deal with her next guests. Once again, she swapped necklaces to the ruby sun given to her by Princess Arianne. The Dornish princess received her in her apartments in the High Nobles’ wing.

When Sansa arrived, it was almost like she was stepping into another land entirely. A giant fire was burning in the princess’s solar, with incense lit on a number of tables. The room felt warmer and smelled richer than any other place in the Keep. The rooms also seemed cleaner, not just polished but all around fresher in some way. Princess Arianne had brought her own furnishings of dark polished wood with slight gold accents, and her own rich tapestries in shimmering jewel tones.

Lady Tyene sat in a corner, embroidering and looking complacent, but her blue viper eyes followed Sansa’s every movement. Arianne reclined upon a plush divan, her curves outlined by her red and gold brocade gown.

Sansa stiffened slightly, unused to this heat and dressed for the cooler surrounding climate. When she stepped in, Arianne slowly rose and came towards her, pulling her to her and kissing her cheek.

“Thank the Mother! My dear Lady Stark, we’ve been frantic. Please tell me you’ve gotten the queen to see sense!”

“I’ve spoken to her on your behalf,” Sansa replied neutrally.

Arianne ushered Sansa to a seat eagerly. “And?”

“I wasn’t able to get her to give up Loreza and Dorea, however, she is open to their mother being with them at court whenever she wishes. She’s also willing to promise not to force them into any marriage arrangements.”

“How magnanimous.” Arianne rolled her eyes. Sansa sighed and pretended to appreciate the sarcasm.

You broke into her only heir’s apartments with your cousin throwing knives. One got Jon in the face. Another nicked Arya. You put a good man in surgery. You’re lucky she didn’t roast you alive.

“The queen can be… difficult. She has led a harsh life and met more than a few harsh people. But I can assure you, she would not hurt your cousins. They’d be given a comfortable, safe environment in the capital.”

Arianne gave Sansa a significant look. You know as well as I do that there is no such thing. “Is such a thing possible for a member of my family? I’ve lost relatives to this place before.”

“As have I. To Targaryens and Lannisters alike. Queen Daenerys is fierce, but she is no Lannister.”
If she were, Nym would no longer have both of her hands. Or she’d be dead. “She has to maintain control of her court, and she can’t be seen to show too much favor to your house. Perhaps… perhaps if the girls were allowed some staff from their grandfather’s household to accompany them?”

Arianne snorted. “How would that help?”

Sansa kept herself from smiling and moved in for the kill. “They’d be far less lonely, even when their mother wouldn’t be around. Sometimes a familiar face can be the greatest comfort. I was a hostage of King’s Landing once, and one of my greatest pains was having no one from my home around. I would not have the girls suffer the same. I owe you and your cousins my life, and I will do everything in my power to look after them. I am trying to think of them and do whatever is possible to lend you all some comfort. You must believe me.”

“Oh, I believe you, Lady Stark. Everyone knows you have a gentle heart. You had enough kindness in you to remember Myrcella. I do not think you’d ever neglect Dorea and Loreza. And you’re a friend to Dorne. I just---"

A flicker came to Arianne’s eyes and once again, Sansa had to struggle not to smile. There we go.

“What?” She asked.

“If you were the one holding them, I’d feel far more comfortable. If I had to give them up to anyone, I’d rather have it be the kind She-wolf than a ruthless Dragon.”

Sansa paused. “You trespassed on Targaryen property. House Targaryen are the ones wronged.”

“You are to be a Targaryen. We’ve established that,” Arianne replied with an ironic arch of her brow. This time, Sansa did smile, though she cast her eyes down modestly and folded her hands in her lap.

“But I am not of the blood of the Dragon. My betrothed is.” Sansa then pretended to come up with Daenerys’s idea. “However… If it were Jon, then the girls would automatically become my wards upon our wedding. If you wish, I could try to convince them---“

When she looked up again, she saw to her satisfaction that she’d given Arianne exactly what she wanted. It was clear that the Dornish Princess believed she’d lured Sansa onto the same page she was on. But I’m far ahead. Arianne didn’t need to know that. I’m just the sweet she-wolf who only bares her fangs to protect cubs. I’m just the gentle snowflake that cools the fire in the dragon’s blood.

“Jon might be a little hesitant. He’d feel a bit odd, I imagine. He’s always afraid of accidentally usurping Daenerys’s responsibilities.”

“I’m sure you can find a way to convince him. It’s not hard to get what you want from a man who loves you. Make the both of you as happy as possible, and you can probably talk him into believing it snows in Dorne.”

“Oh, I don’t think I could ever control my prince to such a degree,” she blushed modestly. “I like to think I always make him happy, but I’m no puppetmaster.”

“There are things one can do to make a man a little extra malleable. Just because you give him your love doesn’t mean you still can’t use it. You’ve given yourself, not lost yourself, after all.”

Sansa pretended she was still thirteen. The direction this conversation had gone intrigued her. Arianne was a famed seductress. It couldn’t hurt to learn some of her secrets. See if she has any that
I’ve yet to learn already. “You think I should withhold my affection until he says yes?”

Arianne snorted. “Oh no, Sweet Girl. Don’t deprive yourself. There’s no need for anyone to suffer here. Unless you want to go without…?”

Sansa pretended she was cornered. “I—I mean, I---” Then she blushed. “I don’t wish to--- I always want him to feel loved.”

*Give some false resistance, or she’ll be suspicious.*

Arianne glanced over at Tyene. Sansa pretended not to notice the looks they exchanged.

“What about you? Does the prince not make you feel… loved?”

Sansa glanced at Tyene nervously. “I---”

She didn’t want a woman who had mastered the art of feigning docility and employed big blue eyes watching this interaction too closely. Arianne noted the look and smiled sadly.

“Shall this stay just between us two?”

Sansa knew there was no way that was possible. But it would help to put some more distance between her and Tyene’s gaze. “Princess Arianne, Lady Tyene, I mean no offense but I---”

“No, I do not think this conversation is for my ears,” Tyene replied sweetly, rising, “I am a maiden, and I wish to keep my ears clean. The Seven Pointed Star says the preservation of virtue comes with the avoidance of temptation. A maiden’s ears are not fit for the intimate discussions of a woman who has been wed and another who… well, anyways. I shall depart.”

Sansa nodded nervously as Tyene curtsied and disappeared through the doorway to Sansa’s left. When she was gone, Arianne sat up and patted the seat next to her. The Lady of Winterfell nervously took a seat to Arianne’s right, her back to the door Tyene had used.

Her cheeks red and her eyes big, she assumed the perfect posture of a sweet young thing looking to an older, wiser, more experienced woman for advice. *Let her believe she’s my carnal mentor. I wish I could do the same. She’d have been a better one than Petyr.*

Arianne Martell probably would be an excellent guide to this sort of thing. And it was clear to Sansa that feigning inexperience to Arianne would be more than possible. The Dornish Princess knew Sansa was no maid, that she’d been used by men and wedded and bedded. But it was easy to convince the woman that Sansa didn’t know much of taking her pleasure or being aggressive on a sexual level.

Dorne was known for being more liberated, and it was clear from the way Arianne often acted towards ladies north of the Marches that she considered most of them pitiable sexual objects, innocent and frightened of their own sexuality, highly repressed and subject entirely to the whims and skills of the men who claimed them without any understanding as to how they might be proactive in the bedroom. Virgins in mind, if not in body. Victims of sex rather than wielders of it.

She obviously thought the same of Sansa. The Lady of Winterfell could see it in the woman’s eyes. *Poor, exploited victim. No concept of how she might seek power and pleasure between the sheets. Only ever the object of lust. Completely unaware that she can be an active sexual agent capable of more than spreading her legs, submitting, and enduring the attentions of men. Probably only ever finding any pleasure of her own by happy accident. She needs the expertise only an empowered Dornish woman like myself can give her.*
Arianne eagerly moved close to her with all the affection and manner of a knowledgeable and bold older sister. “Now tell me, does your prince make you feel good?”

“Oh, of course!” Sansa said with obviously faked naïveté, her blue eyes absurdly wide and round. She made a show of trying to appear as if she wanted to escape. “He’s the first man I’ve been with who truly treats me like I’m loved. Not just used. He’s so attentive, kind, and gallant. He kisses me softly, calls me ‘Sweetling’, always tells me he loves me, and he has winter roses sent in—“

Arianne nudged her arm. “---That’s not what I’m talking about and you know it. Don’t be coy, Lady Sansa. You know what I mean.”

_Honestly, woman, what makes you think I’d actually want to volunteer this information? Haven’t I already volunteered enough?_ Sansa honestly didn’t know what made Arianne so sure that their relationship had reached this level. Arianne had heard the testimony at court, which had been vague but enough to explain that she’d been subjected to some exotic acts. It was clear the woman didn’t think her cabale of anything but being used at this point. _Regardless, it’s useful._ “I do, but…”

“Who am I going to tell? You know I’d be stupid at this point to make an enemy of you. Clever girl that you are, you’ve insured my loyalty through practical means. If anything, trust my confidence for those reasons alone. But believe it or not, I do in fact like you, Lady Stark,” Arianne smiled and patted her on the knee, “Quite a lot.”

_Ah._ Sansa couldn’t believe she hadn’t seen it before. Arianne wanted to seduce her. _She’s used that before to gain leverage. And even Jon noticed that she likes me._ Sansa just hadn’t picked up on how overt the Princess’s interest was until this moment. _But if even Jon picked up on it, why hadn’t I?_

But then, Sansa did sometimes like to ignore the lustful gazes she often received. She’d been the target of too many from too young an age for her to acknowledge most of it without going insane. She knew on some level it was there, but avoided that knowledge as best she could. After years of being Petyr’s plaything, it made her feel better to pretend that lust was only present when she purposely provoked it.

So she’d so far attributed all of Arianne’s overt friendliness and familiarity purely to her heritage. But it was fairly clear at this point that there was more at play than cultural differences.

_She wants to lay claim to the sweet, pretty northern damsel. She wants to be the one to take the Red Wolf to bed and teach her to howl in pleasure instead of pain. Arianne Martell wants to be my knight in velvet armor._ It was actually rather sweet, in an odd way. _It could be useful._

She had to play this properly. Sansa had no intention of being unfaithful to Jon, or ending up one of Arianne’s bedroom slaves. Her body had been used to control her before. That would not happen again. Sansa knew Arianne was no Petyr Baelish, but her objectives were not entirely pure either. _She’d want more from me than just my cunny. Even if she’d be a kind lover, I doubt she’d be a selfless one._

Sansa gave a muted shudder. “Well, alright… I suppose that’s true. I don’t _mean_ anything by it, I just—”

“You’ve been protecting yourself like the clever girl that you are. I understand. But just because you know how to play politics doesn’t mean you know _everything._ I’m not trying to use you, Sweetling. I’m not looking to put a knife in your back.”

_No, you’re looking to put your fingers between my legs._ Sansa nodded. “Alright, promise I can trust you?”
“Better than you can trust most of the people around here. I’d gain nothing from betraying your confidence, Sweetling. I’d gain everything just by having it. So go on, tell me.”

Sansa but her lip and suppressed a giggle. “He makes me feel good.”

Arianne’s eyes widened. “Good?”

“Good. I enjoy sharing his bed the way I never enjoyed Harry’s. Or, or Petyr.”

There was an awkward pause and Sansa quickly moved on to continue. “With Harry, I would just lay back and endure it, do my duty whenever he wanted me, but---” Sansa let a conspiratorial little light come to her eyes and she grinned wickedly. “---With Jon, sometimes I don’t want to wait for him to come to me. Sometimes, I actually want him enough that I initiate things. And not because I’m trying to get anything from him. I just want him. I just want him to do things to me, so I go to him.”

Both of them laughed together. But Sansa tried to hold hers back a little, because the patronizing, pitying look in Arianne’s eyes at hearing this was just hysterical to her. The Dornish princess clearly did believe Sansa was innocent enough to think this was a big deal.

Really, Sansa wasn’t even telling this woman anything incriminating. Everyone and their bannermen knew Jon and Sansa shared a bed, and Sansa had told Arianne herself already. All Sansa needed to do was convince the woman she was actually divulging new information. And that was easy.

Arianne smirked. “And what sort of things does he do?”

Sansa had anticipated this question. But still, hearing it conjured a little surge of jealousy. She had no intention of encouraging Arianne in any way. She’d seen how the Princess of Dorne looked at him. So she carefully calculated her response so that she was convincing about Jon being a decent lover, but not spectacular or unique enough to excite someone like Arianne.

“Well, he kisses so sweetly, and he uses his tongue—“

“On your mouth?”

“N-not just on my mouth,” Sansa gave a coy smile. Arianne leaned forward eagerly and the Lady of Winterfell continued. “On my neck and face and shoulders and arms too. Sometimes even on my… my bosom. And when he kisses my mouth, he doesn’t just smother me. Harry used to practically suffocate me. Jon doesn’t do that. He takes his time and doesn’t go too hard. And you know, he strokes me.”

“Strokes you?”

“Yes, everywhere. His hands are so gentle. And sometimes he strokes me between my legs so I reach my pleasure before he’s even… well, you know. It’s very nice.” She looked at her lap, pretending to be utterly ashamed of herself.

“That’s nice of him.” Arianne couldn’t have sounded more bored. But she kept on. “And when you-—?”

“Oh, that’s nice too! He doesn’t just stick it in, you know. Harry always made me feel like I was being skewered repeatedly, while on a runaway horse. He’d just go in and out, then freeze, grunt, and fall on top of me. Jon’s careful and he looks at me when he does it, and takes his time. I never feel any pain. I just feel full.” She gave a sigh. “It’s lovely.”
She really wished she could be free to do her lover justice. There was a part of her that yearned to tell everyone. To speak freely of how his voice got rough and he’d say the sweetest or most thrilling things, how he liked saying what he intended to do before he did it in order to get her worked up while making sure she was fine with it, how adventurous and energetic he was, how good he was at finding that spot inside her that made her toes curl, how he was so strong he could just move her around like it was nothing, how he always seemed to worship her body, how much he delighted in her pleasure, how good he was with his hands, the way he let her tie him up sometimes, that thing he did with his mouth, how pretty his cock was. This was not the time, place, or person. Arianne already liked Jon too much as it was.

“Anything else?”

“He holds me afterwards. That’s lovely too. He holds me and tells me he loves me. Then we fall asleep.”

Arianne looked disappointed. Sansa could practically hear her thoughts. *So nothing fun or wild, really. Just enough to please the innocent little lady. I’d wager she’s never even ridden him.*

The Princess of Dorne smiled, though. “Well, that just sounds… lovely. And you know, Sansa, there are other things you can do. With just a bit of skill and effort, you could do things that would bring your prince to his knees.”

*It takes skill and effort to get him off his knees most of the time.* Sansa was honestly surprised more by the encounters where he didn’t end up licking her cunny. They were rarer. “Like what?”

“You never did anything else besides---?”

Sansa’s breath caught and her face clouded. “Yes. But I didn’t like them. Sometimes I’d be forced to---”

Arianne stopped her then. “Oh, Sweet Girl. Your prince would never force you. Some of those other things though, they don’t have to be bad. If you’re in control, they can be quite nice. Or you don’t even have to do them. There are… other things you can do to make a man yours without even touching him. Sometimes, just the sight of you can be enough. So play around with what he sees. You know what? I’m going to get you something. I’ll have it made and sent to your rooms. Use it tonight. You’ll see what I mean. Just use it, and you’ll have him begging you.”

“A-alright.”

Arianne smiled, then reached up and stroked Sansa’s hair. “Trust me, Sweetling. This is something I know.”

Sansa almost laughed at the way the events of her day kept repeating themselves.

She left Arianne’s rooms feeling very heated and more than a little aroused. When she returned to Jon’s apartments, she was disappointed to find them empty. She got to her letter writing, trying to distract herself. She met with the queen briefly to update her, gave the messages she wrote to Merys to be sent, and then ended up back in Jon’s solar, looking over lists of council candidates and trying to put what happened out of her mind.

Jon eventually returned, dressed in his dragon leathers, pulling his cap off when he came in. He smiled at her when he saw her, coming over to the table and kissing her on the head. “How did things go today? Did you and Dany fix things with the Martells? Is everything settled?”

“We’re going to be the official guardians of Dorea and Loreza Sand.”
“That sounds fine.”

“Thatir mother will be allowed to visit as much as she wants, and their staff will include some members of their grandfather’s household.”

Jon nodded. “It will be a comfort to them, no doubt. Did you send a letter to the Mormonts?”

“I did. How was Rhaegal today?” Sansa stood up and handed Jon a handkerchief to wipe his face before helping him remove his coat and jerkin.

“Wonderful. We’re becoming far closer,” Jon smiled, “I looked over some of the accounts today too. Supplies to the North are being transported on schedule. I’m thinking of mining more of the Dragonglass deposits at Dragonstone within the year. Also, Jon Connington is coming to court, as is Davos Seaworth.”

“Asha and Victarion Greyjoy are as well,” Sansa said, trying to ignore his smell, “Playing nice with them should prove… interesting. We’re going to have the Great Sept packed, so we’ll have to try and appease the High Sparrow as well. Does he know of the changes to the walk?”

Jon grimaced. “He’s been informed, apparently he’s not happy.”

Sansa sighed. “I will go speak to him. In the meantime, Margaery is going to help Randa and Arya carry my train, and she’s going to help me select my jewels.”

“She’s been a royal bride three times. She’s uniquely qualified. Any news on the Tyrell council positions?”

“Margaery and Willas plan to arrange for Lord Mace to return to Highgarden. We could very well get both of his more gifted children on the council, and Loras will be on the Queensguard. And, by the way, our wedding is coming in under budget.”

“Excellent.”

Sansa took Jon’s coat and jerkin and started towards the bedchamber to put them away. As she began to walk off, she turned her head and oh-so-casually said, “Oh, and Arianne Martell is trying to seduce me.”

Jon, who had been leaning over the table to look over her council candidate list and notes, suddenly straightened up. “Wh-what?”

“Arianne Martell wants me in her bed. She wants to teach me some of her secrets as well. Apparently she’s having one of them sent over this evening. If a parcel from her arrives today, it’s for me. I thought you should know.”

She hurried to the bedchamber, putting Jon’s things away if nothing were amiss. He ran in after her and looked at her with wide eyes. “Say that again.”

“Arianne Martell is trying to seduce me. And she wants to make a sort of carnal protégé of me. She’s sending me something this evening that will supposedly bring you to your knees.”

And he promptly dropped to his knees. Sansa could see his cock hardening against his breeches and she tried not to smile. “Oh, have I made you jealous? Please don’t be angry. I’ve just worked to make peace—“

“---What did you do?”
“We just talked, Jon. I promise you, we only spoke. You’re not angry?”

“Angry--- I---”

Sansa walked over to him with delicate, practiced steps. She walked over and cupped his cheeks, forcing him to look up at her. “You don’t seem angry. Why? I thought you didn’t like it when people looked at me like that.”

“I---I---”

“Or is it just men you don’t like?” Sansa stroked his cheek and Jon swallowed. She wagged her finger at him. “Do you like the idea of me with another woman? Hmm? Does the thought of me tangled up in the Princess of Dorne make my bastard boy’s cock jump for joy? Have you thought about it before?”

“Sansa…” He groaned.

“I’m not sure if I like you thinking about other women that way. It makes me jealous. Am I not enough for you?”

“No! I mean--- This isn’t fair!” He whined. “I’d never--- You’re my--- I’m loyal to you, I swear it. I’d never, ever stray. I don’t want to. I’d rather face the Others again than dishonor you, I swear it… By the Old Gods and New, Sansa… I…. I…”

Then he saw the look on her face and frowned. “You’re playing with me, aren’t you?”

“A little.” She continued to stroke his face. “You’re my favorite thing to play with.”

“You’re cruel.”

“And you love me for it, Jon Snow.”

He groaned and began burying his face in her belly. She cradled his head lovingly for a few moments, then gripped his hair hard and pulled him back, forcing him to look up at her. He hissed slightly. She grinned.

“Last night and today I helped you out of your things. It is not a lady’s duty to serve you, Jon Snow. I would like some service in return. Get me out my stockings and smallclothes. And the slippers. They are pinching my feet.”

He lifted her skirts carefully and his head disappeared. His hands gripped an ankle, sending tingles up her form as he helped her step out of one shoe, then another. In an adorable little gesture, he picked them up and set them aside at the edge of her skirt neatly. Jon’s hands began to climb, leaving little ripples of sensation with every bit of contact.

She could feel his breath on her inner thighs, deep pants. She tried not to lose her balance--- a difficult objective. His fingers teased the edges of her stockings before untying the ribbons there and slowly rolling them down. When they reached her ankles, she stepped out of them, one by one. Jon stuffed them in her shoes.

Then he tore her smallclothes off with his mouth. She almost lost full control at that, but struggled to contain it as he set to work licking at her. “Jon, stop.”

She could hear a groan from beneath her skirts, but he surfaced, his face already a bit wet. It took her a second to remember where she was. Sansa cleared her throat. “Where are my pantalets?”
He glanced downwards, then reluctantly reach underneath her dress, withdrawing with torn fabric in an open palm.

“You ruined them. Why did you do that? I told you to remove them, not destroy them.”

“Because I wanted to tear them off with my teeth. They needed to be gone.”

“Well, they’re gone now. And I need new underthings. That was very wrong, Jon Snow. You shouldn’t destroy a lady’s nice things.”

“These,” he said, holding them up between his thumb and forefinger, “Are not nice things. They’re awful things that hide away something wonderful.”

“They’re necessary. And you’re a bastard for ruining them. How am I supposed to trust you to remove my clothing for the rest of my life if you can’t even remove a set of smallclothes properly? You need to learn to be delicate.”

He grinned. “You’re being very commanding right now.”

She smiled. “Go sit on the bed. Take off your chaps, but keep your trousers on. Sit up straight. You’re going to help me out of my things and do it properly.”

When he removed his chaps, she took them and folded them neatly, stuffing them in his wardrobe with his other leathers. Sansa put herself inches from him a few seconds later, raised her arms, and pointed to the laces on the right seam of her gown. “Delicately.”

A strangled noise came from the bottom of his throat. His shaking fingers went to the laces. Sansa watched as the bump on his throat went up and down. Giving into an urge, she bent her head and kissed it, sucked at it, and nibbled the skin of his neck. He shook and groaned. She smiled and whispered into his ear, “Delicately, Jon Snow.”

Before long the laces were untied and Sansa pulled away, handing one end of the now open gown and turning so it came off in Jon’s hand. He barely seemed to notice, his eyes on her. When she cleared her throat, he rose and ran to hang it before coming back, and moving to wrap his arms about her. She made him sit again. “And the shift.”

The shift was removed in much the same way, and she was naked before him. She stood, smiling as he set the thin length of fabric aside upon the bedspread. He reached for her, she pulled away. He moved. So did she. A little game. He pouted.

“Gods, Woman, please stop torturing me,” Jon groaned. “I’m sorry for your smallclothes. Just—”

She danced out of reach again and moved to the side of the bed before descending to lay on her back against the pillows. She stared at him, sitting at the end of the bed, looking at her longingly. “Strip.”

With every piece of clothing that fell to the ground, she spread her legs a bit wider, eager for him to see how wet she was. His restraint, especially given how hard he was, impressed her to no end. Looking him up and down, she smiled.

“You should spend more time undressed.”

He blushed. She grinned. “Lick me until I come.”

“Delicately?” He asked, climbing onto the bed, crawling towards her.
“You have a clever tongue. No need for a smart mouth.”

He had her bucking against his mouth before long, seized by the sensation of it all. She’d never get enough of what he could do with his mouth. And one of the things she really liked was seeing his eyes look up at her, all sweet and adoring. When she came down from her peak, her skin still vibrating pleasantly, she pulled him up to kiss her mouth. The scratch of his beard was heavenly mingled with the softness of his lips.

She got lost so easily with him, and she rarely, if ever, wanted to be found. She just wanted to find him. The head of his cock prodded her soaking entrance, but before he could take her, she grabbed his shoulders and forced him onto his back, only then impaling herself on him. Both of them cried out. *Ah, filled.*

There was something heartbreakingly complete about how she felt with him inside her. He gripped her hips as she moved, his fingers tight on her flesh. Her hands went to his chest, pushing against him as she went up and down. He gasped and grunted, she moaned.

One of his hands slipped between her legs and he pinched her nub. “You’d better peak soon, My Lady.”

She cried out at the sensation, her eyes rolling back. “Very, very close.”

And she was very, very close, and it all hit her with a screech and a bang. He followed her quickly, the warm gush of his seed a kind but firm call back to reality for her. She wilted on top of him, very, very happy with the world at that moment.

The last thing she remembered before drifting off to sleep was laying a hand along the side of his head and thinking, *All mine.*

Coming out of said sleep was less pleasant. Her shoulder was being nudged in a rather ungentle manner.

“Both of you! Up! Up now!”

Sansa pulled herself up and remembered where she was. Nani stood over her, dark eyes sharp.

*Oh Gods, and once again, he’s still inside of me.*

Jon woke as Sansa hissed at her maid. “Nani! This is highly improper!”

“The Free Folk woman has arrived!” Nani informed her. “She waits in your solar!”

“What?” Jon asked as he stirred into consciousness. When he saw the maid, he sat up as well. “Out!”

Sansa was shocked. She hadn’t expected Val to get to the city for another couple of days. She looked at Jon in confusion as Nani scurried out reluctantly. “She says Val is here. How did she get here so quickly?”

“Val was always an excellent rider. I’m not surprised she got here ahead of schedule,” he said, rubbing his forehead.

The Lady of Winterfell groaned. She hadn’t planned on this at all. During winter, people arrived at their destinations late, not early. Val’s chambers and staff were not yet ready. As Lady of the North, it was her duty to receive her at once… not a duty she was exactly in the best state for at the moment.
Sansa pulled away, suddenly quite panicked. She was a mess, and she couldn’t keep this woman waiting too long. She ran to grab Jon’s trousers from the floor and threw them to him. “Put them on. I need Nani to help me ready myself.

She glanced anxiously at herself in the mirror. She had bruised lips, her hair was mess, and she was still sweaty. She looked more debauched than the most popular slattern on the Street of Silk.

Her plan for meeting the famed “Wildling Princess” and Jon’s former lover had involved her looking immaculate. That was not a word that could be used to describe her appearance at this moment. There were two words that were always used to describe Val: fierce and beautiful. More than one song had been sung in the North regarding her looks. They said her hair was pale gold and her lips were like ripe strawberries.

She called Nani back in and scrambled to find a suitable dress. Luckily, the Dothraki girl already had soap and a basin of water prepared for her to clean herself. Once she was stuffed into some suitable undergarments, Satin was brought in to help Jon wash and dress.

“What should I know?” Sansa asked her intended as Nani combed her hair into submission.

“She’s rather brusque, but good-humored. She may make some bold statements,” Jon said, pulling on one of his older grey wool doublets. “Don’t expect her to defer to you like your other bannermen. Don’t call her a lady, either.”

He wasn’t putting on the finer garments she’d made for him over the last several moons. It annoyed her. Perhaps to make up for his plain attire, Sansa selected a more ornate dress of emerald velvet trimmed with white lace. She had Nani put the pearl clips in her hair, and fastened a Stark direwolf brooch to the center of her neckline. The end result was a rougher one than she wanted, but it would have to do.

_The woman is a wildling, what will she care? Seeing a dress that doesn’t have patches will impress her._ She glanced at Jon. “You have that chain I got you?”

“Yes, why?”

“Would you like to wear it?”

He hesitated and grimaced. “I---“

“Nevermind.” She frowned, unhappy with his attire. She’d thought he’d grown accustomed to the clothing she’d gotten for him. _It must be for her benefit._ That just made her feel worse.

He at least pulled on his new boots. Sansa had Nani apply one of her scents to her neck. Satin got Jon’s hair in order and plain, watch-esque attire aside, he looked fine. Sansa took his arm and they made for the Aenys chambers.

The first sight of Val she got was of the back of her golden head. The Wildling woman was of a height with her, broad-shouldered, and athletic, her figure outlined well by the fitted leathers she wore. A pile of furs sat upon one of the dining chairs while their owner stood by the window overlooking the view.

She turned slowly but lithely, allowing herself to be viewed properly.

Her lips were indeed like ripe strawberries, further reddened by the cold, which had also brightened her eyes. The eyes were not only large but a sparkling blue-green the exact color of the ocean depicted in one of the Aenys chambers’ paintings of a beach in Old Valyria. Her profile,
cheekbones, and jawline were all exquisite, and her skin was like fresh milk.

Sansa gripped Jon’s arm more tightly. *Every head at court will turn when she walks by.* King’s Landing had no shortage of beautiful women, but this face was special even by those standards. Even in her rough clothing, it was apparent that this woman was lovely.

And yes, danger leaked from every pore. The confident way she stood, the piercing nature of her eyes, the catlike grace with which she moved, the broadness of her shoulders… She didn’t even need the breeches or the blades strapped to her belt.

Sansa understood why people insisted on calling her a Wildling Princess. It just seemed so appropriate.

Keeping her composure, Sansa walked up to the woman and bobbed her head in greeting, extending her hand. “Magna Val. You are welcome to court.”

Val gave a swift nod and ignored the hand. “Thank you, Lady Sansa.”

She looked past the Lady of Winterfell then, over at Jon, who stood back a bit. Her face broke into a dazzling smile.

“Well, if it isn’t Lord Jon Snow,” Val said, striding over to Sansa’s intended with confident steps, “Although I suppose now it’s *Prince*, though you’re still dressed like a crow.”

*He’s not supposed to be, and don’t call him that.* Sansa’s stomach sank as she watched Jon bow nervously.

“It’s Prince Jon of the House Targaryen,” Sansa said, walking over to them both to retake her intended’s arm, “Not Jon Snow. And he’s not a crow. He’s a dragon.”

“I’ve seen the dragons, My Lady. If he’s one, where are his wings? His scales? I can assure you, he has none.”

There was a little wiggle of her pale brows that Sansa did not appreciate. “He doesn’t have feathers or a beak, either.”

The words were out of her mouth before she realized it. There was an awkward pause, then Val burst into laughter.

“Well, you’ve got me there, My Lady.” Val patted her on the shoulder. “Fair enough. But he did spend more than a little time inside that great beast of his. I’d say more than anything, he’s a wolf.”

This pleased her. “He will be, anyways. Soon enough.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so this chapter is a bit of wrap-up like the last, but a big thing is coming.
Jon, Giantsbane, and Things with Wings

Chapter Summary

Some unexpected guests arrive, and Roslin is executed

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bluecichlid for beta-work :)

Chapter Thirty-one: Jon, Giantsbane, and Things With Wings

Jon:

Not a bit changed. But then, why should she? She survived the wars as she was and became the leader of the Dreadfort as she was. All that has changed is her title. He couldn’t help but smile a bit at seeing Val in her leathers, walking with that assured gait, her pale-gold hair still in that same long braid.

Sansa smiled too. But as she herself would say, hers did not meet her eyes. She pretended well enough not to be bothered by Val’s lack of deference, well enough to fool anyone who didn’t know her on a deeply intimate level.

“It’s Prince Jon of the House Targaryen,” she walked over and took Jon’s arm with a possessive grip he found appealing. Her tone was sunny and she beamed a bit, speaking his title with friendly pride. She even giggled a bit. “Not Jon Snow. And he’s not a crow. He’s a dragon.”

She sounded every bit the lovesick girl, chattering away and boasting. Jon had heard her speak this way before, back it seemed a lifetime ago, to Beth Cassel and Jeyne Poole. “Crown Prince Joffrey Baratheon, future King of the Seven Kingdoms. Not just a stag, but a golden lion as well.” It was amazing sometimes how his lover could so easily play the sweet, silly girl sometimes. The strangest of weapons. But why wield it here?

Sometimes it wasn’t a weapon though, it was armor. “Courtesy is a lady’s armor.” Sansa was fond of saying. But false silliness was a set of plate she also wore. It was a curious thing about his lover: making others underestimate her always seemed to feed her ego and make her feel more secure.

He could understand Sansa wanting some security. Val was a threatening figure. The way the glimmer of candlelight danced upon her skin against the darkness of this winter’s evening certainly didn’t help things. Blades of various sizes were strapped to her belt, and she was strong and lithe.

But Jon knew it wasn’t that which Sansa feared. She endured many a blow before, given birth and faced down armies. Physical pain was not something that affected her much anymore.

Losing what she loved, however, terrified her. Her skin was steel, but her heart was porcelain. Porcelain that had already been shattered and mended many times. There were only so many breaks
it could handle before it became irreparable dust.

So he tried to ignore the way Val’s eyes glinted and her brows moved as she said, “I’ve seen the dragons, My Lady. If he’s one, where are his wings? His scales? I can assure you, he has none.”

He choked back laughter. He would not laugh at her jokes. He would not. At least not out loud.

“He doesn’t have feathers or a beak, either,” replied his intended in a tart tone. Jon wished to laugh at this too, but resisted at first until Val managed to toss her head and chuckle. He ignored the music of that sound.

“You’ve got me there, My Lady.” Val gave Sansa’s shoulder a pat that was appreciative, but not exactly appreciated in return. “Fair enough. But he did spend more than a little time inside that great beast of his. I’d say more than anything, he’s a wolf.”

*Don’t let Daenerys hear you say that.*

Now Sansa’s smile reached her eyes. “He will be, anyways. Soon enough.”

Jon gave her hand a little squeeze. “I would remind you both that despite certain reports, I am, in fact, a man. If you find that to be a disappointment, I apologize.”

“I do, actually,” Val replied, “Men tend to be less kind than your wolf.”

“My prince manages to be the exception, thank the Gods. A kinder, gentler man I’ve yet to meet.” She smiled at him sweetly. Though there were still affectations to her gestures, this smile reached her eyes. She moved closer to him and clung to his arm.

The Magna noted the body language. “Good to hear it. He’d have to be, to tend to such a sweet, delicate lady like yourself.”

Val always possessed a knack for jests. But this was the funniest thing Jon had ever heard her say. For a moment, he wondered if that was intentional. But he saw the way the Magna’s eyes took in his intended’s braids, velvet gown, and the slenderness of her limbs and he knew the wildling meant what she said.

*Congratulations, Sweetling,* Jon thought as he glanced at his lover appreciatively, *the Red Wolf is playing the Wildling Princess.*

She knew it, too. It was ever so slight, but Sansa seemed to relax. “I thank you for your kind words, Magna Val. You are of course welcome to court. I am afraid, though, that we were not expecting you so soon, so you may find your staff a bit lacking. I will seek to rectify this as soon as I possibly can.”

Val waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, now, don’t you fret. I’m no dainty southron lady. I do not require fussing over. I’ve ridden a blind horse through the wight-ridden wastes beyond the Wall and dragged old Tormund Giantsbane back to Castle Black kicking and screaming. Just be ready to discuss your new trade laws at some point and we’ll be square. You’ve already got to prepare yourself to be wedded to this sorry bastard, no need for you to waste your time trying to find me someone to comb my hair when I can do it myself. As it is, I only brought a couple bags of things.”

“Oh, dear. Well, I imagine getting here this quickly required light packing, but I’ll try to provide.”

“No, not at all. As I said, I don’t need all your fancy odds and ends.”
Sansa’s mouth twitched. “I see, well, if you do find yourself in need of something, do not hesitate to ask. It is my duty as your liege to see that you have everything necessary to thrive at court. I will have Nathen Cerwyn escort you to your chambers and arrange for an audience with the queen tomorrow.”

Val blanched. She glanced at Jon. “Does this one have a beard?”

“Cerwyn quite properly keeps himself clean-shaven. At five-and-ten, he is not quite yet mature enough to grow a proper beard,” laughed Sansa, clearly oblivious.

Jon felt a bit of offense on Dany’s behalf, but the memory that came with this discussion warmed his heart regardless. “Daenerys is as different from Selyse as night to day. In ways that go far beyond hair, I assure you.”

Sansa’s cheeks reddened at her mistake. “Our queen has a loveliness beyond measure.”

“I’m sure you’d never say it if it weren’t true. The honesty of good ladies like yourself is well known.”

There was another awkward pause. Jon frowned. “Val…”

Sansa cut in. “I have no reason to lie about this, Magna. Before her dragons were hatched, the greatest of all the Dothraki Khals pledged his men and holdings to seize the Iron Throne for her out of love. The Dothraki are many things, romantic is not normally one of them. Her beauty is one of the few tales about her that has not been exaggerated.”

Val’s eyes widened and she smirked. “I meant no offense, My Lady. I’m sure your queen is a wonder to behold.”

“I’m sure you’d never say that if you didn’t mean it,” Sansa replied. “The candor of Free Folk like yourself is well-known.”

Val’s jaw dropped. Another awkward pause. Then she grinned and cackled. Her blue-green eyes glinted and she glanced at Jon. “I like her. Tormund will adore her.”

His blood went cold. “Tormund? He’s---“

“He’s coming, aye. An official invitation was given to all the heads of Houses in the North. Our Lady is to be wed! I told the old beast that he’s to behave himself, or I’d finish the job of his beloved bear and remove the rest of that cock he’s so proud of. So don’t you worry, Prince Dragon-wolf. I’ll contain the Giantsbane.”

If anyone could do such a thing, it would be Val, but Jon’s stomach sank. Even her standards were laxer than the court’s. He could just imagine the old bag of wind at the wedding banquet, leaving Mace Tyrell apoplectic. “Yer a flower? What man chooses to be a flower? One whose cock is as soft as yer belly. Not a surprise. Yer teats are bigger than me daughter Munda’s, so I suppose it fits that yer symbol is one only a girl would pick.”

*And the bedding…* Jon stepped forward and shifted himself in front of Sansa protectively. “If he lays a hand on anyone, he loses it. Women are not stolen here. He shall mind his tongue as well. His talk will only reach a certain height. Dragons will always fly higher.”

A soft hand gripped his wrist from behind. “Jon…”

But he held firm, ignoring his wife-to-be and gazing deep into the Magna’s eyes. “I mean it, Val.
I’ve read the reports. His folk have received more complaints than yours and the Thenns combined. He’s to contain the size of his retinue as well.”

“Oh, he won’t harm a fire-kissed hair on your lady’s head.”

“He won’t harm a hair on anyone’s head. This is King’s Landing, not Mance Rayder’s tent. If he makes the wrong move, it likely won’t even be me he has to worry about. People can die at the weddings arranged here. And they are never kind deaths. It’s not just for our sake that I say so. It’s for his as well. Yours, too. And the Free Folk in general.”

“A threat?”

“A warning.” He shut his eyes. “Val, we asked you to come for a reason. You. Not Tormund. People operate differently here. I can trust you to handle yourself. But him?”

“The man’s a beast, Jon. Hearty as he ever was.”

“You don’t need a blade or a strong arm to kill a man. Not down here,” Jon looked at his betrothed. “Tell her about Joffrey.”

“King Joffrey died at his wedding. He was strangled to death.” Sansa said quietly.

“No one is going to be able to get their hands——”

“——By poison in his wine.”

Val’s eyes widened. “Oh. I see.”

“Even a man who beds bears and suckles at giants must breathe.” Jon said, sighing.

“And you think someone would want to poison Tormund?”

“My point is that there are a thousand ways for disaster to strike here if you don’t handle things delicately. Tormund Giantsbane is not a delicate man. He’s safer north of the Wall than in the Red Keep.”

“I will help you handle him.” Sansa said. Both Jon and Val looked at her.

“My Lady,” Val said, trying to keep her tone even, “Tormund Giantsbane is not really the sort of man a lady like yourself handles. He’s——”

“A man of tall tales, by his own account. I have tales of my own. If he’s as irreverent as you say, I shall teach him the value of behaving otherwise.”

She slipped her arm around Jon’s once more. “I am weary, My Love. And if I am, then my vassal must be exhausted. When is Magnar Giantsbane to arrive?”

“Tomorrow or the day after.” Val replied.

Sansa hissed. “He cannot go to the High Nobles’ Wing.”

“He’ll kip under a large tree if you want. He’s not picky. Just keep a cup in his hand.”

“We’ll put him in guards’ quarters.” Jon said, frowning. It was deep enough in the Holdfast for them to keep an eye on him, and the majority of the keep’s security. That section also had its own drinking hall, which the Thunderfist would enjoy.
He’d warn Barristan in advance. Brienne of Tarth would make for a good personal guard for the man, if he didn’t fall in love with her immediately. The man liked his big, fierce women. Jon imagined Tormund trying to steal Brienne of Tarth... It made the idea of the wildling raider coming seem almost exciting. He’d pay a hundred gold dragons to see that.

The Wildling’s shoulders gave a heavy shrug. “It sounds fine.”

“Shall we retire, then?” Sansa asked. “Jon and I shall help escort you to your chambers.”

“Oh, am I to have an armed guard again?”

“If you require one.”

Jon snorted. “She’s not asking about her own protection.”

His lover’s eyes dropped. “Oh. Well then, no, Magna Val, you will not. I just thought we might escort you for the sake of courtesy.”

“You’re a darling. But I’ll be fine with the smooth-faced Cerwyn boy. I’m afraid I’m not fit company for you this evening, My Lady. Besides, your maid told me you two are quite busy ‘making a khalakka’, whatever that means. I wouldn’t want to take away any more of your time than is necessary.”

Sansa’s face went almost a red as her hair. Jon’s did likewise. Val seemed to catch this as she grabbed her furs and made for the door, for she began to giggle. Nathen Cerwyn was outside the apartments, having been summoned. When he saw Val, the boy gaped, exposing his crooked teeth. “M-my Lady Val?”

“I’m no lady, Boy. I’m a Magna,” replied the Wildling, taking the arm that was offered to her reluctantly. Her eyes zeroed in on the spots on his face. She glanced at Jon.

“Not so smooth, then.” But she smiled kindly at the young man. “Now, bring me to my fancy rooms, Boy. We must allow our prince and his lady to make a khalakka. Good evening.”

Once Val and Nathen were out of earshot, Sansa turned to Jon and looked at him crossly. “I thought you spoke to Daenerys about Nani.”

“I did!” Jon insisted. “She says Dothraki are a willful sort, and that she won’t see the issue as long as she’s doing her job.”

Sansa scowled. “This is why I need to pick my own staff.”

“I’ll speak to Nani myself.” He groaned. “What did you think of Val?”

“She’s very lovely.”

**Lovely and lonely and lethal.** But Jon knew a trap when he saw one. “She’s a fine sort. I think she appreciated your wits. And you didn’t once call her ‘Lady.’ She does not easily take to high-born kneelers, but I think you’ve won her over. I’m proud of you.”

He meant that, too. Sansa made things like this so much easier, with her observant nature and polished charm. Though Jon had fine manners as a result of his upbringing, he didn’t have that natural charisma and knack for picking up on social cues and emotions that his intended did. She could read people wonderfully, and play them just as well. Jon struggled with words, but she did not.
She knew what to say in most situations.

It was a relief, because Jon’s knack for playing people and reading their layered words wasn’t finely tuned. Everyone said he had a sullen nature to him. He found many social interactions awkward and difficult to navigate properly. Dealing with courtiers had always been a nightmare, and he’d often given the impression of being standoffish and/or stupid. Having Sansa on his arm made it easier to relax and understand what was happening during various encounters. It took the pressure off of him to perform.

She’d worked her magic on Val, it seemed. The Magna liked friendliness, but she also despised weakness. Sansa had appeared sweet and kind, but with enough sass to impress the Magna. It just made things easier for everyone if those two liked one another. It set Jon’s mind at ease, not just about Val but even Tormund. There was a part of him that did have confidence in her to handle him.

_Not that I will be leaving those two alone in a room together at any point._ Tormund would be an issue, there was no doubt. There was a part of him that yearned to see the old man again, but not in this environment. Sansa might be able to make him see the value in good behavior, but Jon would make the man see the value in it as well.

A quiet moment came, and their fingers intertwined. She rested her head on his shoulder, deep in thought. “I have to go to the Great Sept tomorrow. Preferably before Magnar Giantsbane might arrive. I’ll be going early morning.”

“Would you like me to accompany you?”

“No, if the Magnar arrives early, I’d like at least one of us to be on hand to greet him. I have to go to the Sept and talking things over with the Sparrow before Roslin is executed. And that’s two days from now.”

“I’ve told Daenerys of his objections. She might wish to go with you.” _And he fears her. I’m not so sure he fears you. But he would not try a thing if Dany were with you._

“I’ll go request it of our queen,” she kissed his cheek and moved away. “I’ll return soon.”

+_+ +_+ +_+

The Horn-Blower did indeed arrive early, a while after Sansa and Daenerys departed in their litters for the Great Sept. Jon, Val, and Arya met him outside the east gate. His sister leaned forward eagerly as Tormund rode in, two men flanking him. Jon smiled at her fondly, remembering her excitement upon the arrival of King Robert and his court to Winterfell.

She’d already struck up a rapport with Val, and had asked Jon if she could be there to meet the rest of the Free Folk. “Sansa says I should, anyways.”

As the gates closed behind the Giantsbane party, Jon glimpsed some crowds gathering to watch after them. Not surprising, as the Magnar and his men were quite a sight in their bushy furs and oddly shaped helms. The Magnar had taken a horn and tankard as his sigil, and horns stuck out from his helm now. He gulped down some mead from his drinkskin as he rode in.

“AH! THERE BE OUR BEAUTIOUS MAGNA! AND MY PERSONAL FAVORITE CROW-GO-BACK-OVER!” He cried as he stopped his horse. When he dismounted, a couple of attendants hurried over to tend to his stead with brushes and water, He waved them away. “Honestly, lads, she’s a mare, not a woman! No need to be brushin’ her hair like one of yer kneeler ladies!”

The men behind him dismounted and lowered their hoods, revealing themselves as Torregg and Ryk.
Tormund bounded over and laid a great wet kiss on Val’s cheek. “How be you, Girl?”

“Quite well, I got in last night.”

Tormund nodded and looked to Jon. “And you, you bastard? I see you’ve added a bit more to your dull crow’s black.”

Jon had on one of his red lamb’s wool doublets underneath his black velvet cloak and black wool jerkin. The skirt of the doublet went midway down his thigh, clearly visible. “A dragon’s red, Magnar.”

“HAR! Magnar! Oh, we’ve all become very grand, haven’t we? Are you going to curtsy to us next?”

“As if I’d bend my neck before a scoundrel like yourself,” replied Jon with a smile.

“Scoundrel he says! Me!” He laughed and clapped Jon on the shoulder, the force of his hand so great it that the prince’s knees buckled. He watched as the man’s eyes went to Arya then, and his voice lowered.

“Those’re Stark wolves on yer fine clothes,” he said, suddenly far more sober and careful, glancing at Val a couple times. “I suppose you must be the Lady Stark. Well, you’re a sweet sight. Far too sweet for the likes of this Bastard. Bet he’s on his knees every night thanking the Gods a sorry shit like him landed a beauty like you.”

Jon felt a wave of nausea roll over him and it was clear from Arya’s face she felt the same way.

“Wrong Stark!” She barked, stepping back and wrinkling her nose. “I’m not Sansa. I’m the sister, Arya.”

Tormund stopped short and looked back and forth between the two of them. “Wait, his sister or hers?”

“Sister of my heart,” Jon said quickly. “Sister to Sansa in flesh. She’s the daughter of Lord Eddard Stark, who raised me. Not my betrothed.”

“Ah! Well, my apologies, Dearie,” he said to Arya, “Though you are a lovely thing. Bet yer fiercer than an angry giant, too. Make a fine spearwife, you would.”

Arya grinned then, obviously pleased. Tormund turned to Jon again.

“So where is the famous Lady Stark then? Hiding her away, are you, Lad? I don’t blame ya. But I promised the Magna Val here I wouldn’t steal her away no matter how much she might beg. I’ll keep me promise to keep me cock.”

“My Lady had urgent business elsewhere. She will be receiving you upon her return.”

“Har! Doesn’t she know I’m the meaning of ‘urgent business’? Well, no matter. Bring me to the mead. I hear it’s quite fine down in these parts, and I’ve a mighty thirst.”

You’re the meaning of ‘mighty thirst.’ But he led him into the castle happily. As they walked down the halls, everyone looked at the Giantsbane party and the Giantsbane party looked at everyone and everything.

“When do we get to see the dragons again?” Ryk inquired.
“And the dragon queen?” Toregg added.

“Don’t you be getting any ideas, Boy,” Tormund thundered. “You go near that woman, and yer cock’ll be burned right off. Yer always aiming too high. Got a face like a cat’s arsehole, you’ve no business gaping at the Bride of Fire.”

Toregg and Tormund had met Daenerys before, at the Wall. Tormund had been the first new Magnar named, and he’d reluctantly been among the first to bend the knee. He later joked that he only did it to get a look between her legs, something that eventually got back to Dany, who’d responded by threatening to burn his beard off.

“I’d be happy to take you to the dragon pit this evening, if you wish,” Jon said.

“I’d like to see that wolf of yours again, as well,” Tormund replied. “Where’d Ghost be?”

“In my chambers. I have wine there as well, if you’d like to wait for My Lady Sansa there.”

“Yes, let’s see yer fancy quarters then. Bet you’ve got gem-encrusted chamber pots.”

He ended up pleasing Tormund and his party a great deal, actually. The men hurried to try out some of the weapons on Jon’s wall and drink their fill of his wine.

With a shout of, “There ya are, ya great bloody beast!” Tormund wrestled with Ghost as Val sat back and watched in amusement. Jon ended up giving the guards leave to allow her into his solar, using Arya as a voucher. Sansa would have nothing to worry about with Arya there, after all. His sister, meanwhile, was speaking eagerly with Ryk and Toregg, Jon joining them.

“Jon’s riding the dragons now,” she informed them as they both examined an antique battle-axe.

“He’s riding Rhaegal, the green one. The black one, Drogon, he’s Daenerys’s primary mount. The third, Viserion, he’s going to Jon and Sansa’s first child.”

“Have you ridden one, Arra?” Ryk inquired.

“Arya. And no, I haven’t. Only Targaryens are allowed.” She sighed regretfully. “I’d love it, though.”

“I’ll take you on Rhaegal some day,” Jon promised her, ruffling her hair. “You’ll fly as high as Queen Visenya ever did.”

“Visenya rode Vagar three hundred years ago,” Arya informed their guests with a grin, “One of the greatest warriors this country has ever known. She took an arrow to the shoulder on the Field of Fire and carried Valyrian steel.”

“Like Jon’s blade. Give us a look, Man. Come on,” Ryk urged him. Jon unsheathed Longclaw reluctantly only after Arya urged him as well, raising it up to reflect the light in the room. He put it away quickly once the others got a look.

“Just how I remember it,” Ryk remarked with a grin, “Though you were ever-eager to show it before. Always whippin’ it out, this one was.”

“I was not,” Jon protested, thinking back to his days as the Crow-Come-Over.

“You did, Lad,” Tormund insisted, pushing Ghost off him and coming forward eagerly. “Sharpening it more than Valyrian steel would ever need, polishing it too. To make up for how little you used yer member, if you ask me. You put it away a bit more often after Ygritte finally got under yer breeches
though, if I remember correctly.”

Everyone but Jon howled in laughter. He blushed and looked down, stepping back.

“Ah, the prince is blushing like a maid! I suppose some things never change!”

“You should have seen him when I got my hands on him,” Val added, “Red as his fancy shirt, he was.”

More laughter, Tormund’s ever the loudest. Then suddenly, his great bellow stopped short, cutting the noise in the room by two thirds. For the first time Jon could remember, the Husband of Bears actually whispered. “Buggering Hell.”

Jon looked up to see Tormund staring at the door. The laughter died down and Toregg and Ryk followed suit. Jon looked.

His wife-to-be had entered, hands folded in front of her. A blue cloak lined in white fur was over her shoulders, clasped with a silver direwolf. Her waves of auburn hair tumbled delicately over her lowered hood. Underneath the cloak was a gown of grey and blue samite and white damask, belted with silver. Her blue eyes were bright and large, her lips and cheeks red from the cold.

Blue eyes danced from one person to the next. She saw Ryk and Toregg with the battle axe, their horned helms askew. Arya clutched Needle, her hair mussed from Jon’s hand. She looked at everyone with a confused expression. Val sat back, cup in hand, smirking. Tormund stood in the center of the room, immense and sweating, plenty of Ghost’s fur coating his clothes. Jon slouched but quickly straightened his back.

She smiled as brightly as she would when receiving the highest lords and ladies. Then she curtsied. Everyone bowed in return.

Jon smirked at the expressions on the other men’s faces. All red-headed women were considered great beauties among the Free Folk. But Sansa would be lovely with hair of black, brown, or yellow. Her face was as exquisite as Val’s, her figure as elegant, her eyes as fetching, and she held herself with enough grace to convey strength. Val was considered beautiful by all, but she didn’t have the added benefit of Fire-kissed hair. Sansa did. Thus it truly wasn’t too great a shock that the men from Beyond the Wall would be staring.

Though it wasn’t a shock, Jon did feel a surge of pride. He came towards her to help her with her cloak, setting it aside in a nearby chair and taking her arm.

“My Lady, may I present to you Longspear Ryk, Toregg the Tall, and, of course, Toregg’s father, Magnar Tormund Giantsbane.” All three men bowed again as Jon said their names, hurrying over. Toregg and Ryk had left the axe on the ground in their eagerness.

“No, give me the right styles, Lad,” Tormund said in a hoarse voice, thrusting his chest out.

“My apologies, this is Tormund Giantsbane, Magnar of the Gift, the Tall-Talker, Horn-blower, Breaker of Ice. Tormund Thunderfist, Husband to Bears, Mead-King of Ruddy Hall, Speaker to Gods and Father of Hosts.” Jon rattled off, fondly remembering Mance Rayder doing the same once. Jon had become an old hat at remembering titles, what with the roster both he and Daenerys had.

“At yer service, My Lady.”

“Magnar Tormund, this is Sansa of the House Stark and the House Hardyng, Lady of Winterfell, Lady of the Eyrie, and Warden of the North.”
Val snorted at that last title, but the men did not. Sansa held out her hand and the Giantsbane laid a big, wet kiss on the back.

“As I hear you Southron ladies like it,” he said with a wink. Sansa slowly pulled her hand back, her white glove now stained with his spittle. If she was bothered by it, she gave no sign.

“I am pleased to see you took note of some of our customs before arriving at court, Magnar,” Sansa replied, “It speaks of great wisdom.”

The color that went to the man’s cheeks was one of the funniest things Jon had seen in his life. *Now who’s the blushing maid, Thunderfist?*

Arya rolled her eyes in the background as she re-mounted the battle axe the wildlings had abandoned. Jon winked at her. She threw her hands up in annoyance. He could swear he could hear her mentally declaring every man in the world an idiot.

Sansa seemed to notice Arya as well, for she gestured towards her. “I hope my dear sister has been doing her part to help my prince keep you entertained.”

“Oh, aye,” Ryk grinned appreciatively at the younger Stark, “She was telling us all about that old queen of yours, Visenya.”

Sansa nodded to Arya. “If you think she knows a great deal about Visenya, ask her about Nymeria of the Rhoynar. My sister has a great deal of affection for warrior queens. She could write a book on them.”

There was a small look of appreciation between the two sisters.

“Are we drinking?” Sansa asked. Val stood to pour her a cup. His intended received it with a grateful tilt of her head and took a larger sip than was usual for her. Jon’s eyes narrowed at that. She seemed to note this and blushed, setting the cup aside.

“Shall we talk trade?” She inquired brightly, surreptitiously balling up her fists under her sleeves and removing her gloves.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

“Ride a dragon as you were meant to, Jon. For you are one of the last.” Daenerys had whispered to him when they’d entered the dragonpit. "It is who you were meant to be."

*I am a Targaryen. That means something. The legacy of our family, and with it the stability of the realm continues with my line and I. I can’t be lacking. I can’t be the Aenys to Daenerys’s Aegon. With an Aenys comes the need for a Maegor the Cruel. I am the heir to the Bride of Fire, the blood of the dragon. I cannot live by Eddard Stark’s code. He wielded Ice. The Targaryens are fire and blood. You passed the sentence. You do not have Stannis Baratheon’s flaming sword. You have fire and blood, blood of the dragon.*

*If Daenerys dies and you’re not ready, what then? She can’t be the only dragon. You must. You must do this. You passed the sentence. You must be willing to use your dragon fire and dragon blood.*

Jon sat upon Rhaegal’s back, circling the pit. Drogon and Daenerys were flying a bit higher. Viserion, cowed by his larger, fiercer siblings and the people riding them, remained below. Sansa and Arya stood upon the highest dais with Ser Barristan and Brienne of Tarth.
Roslin Frey was half-carried into the Dragonpit by a couple of disgusted looking septas. All her hair was shorn, and she wore nothing but a white woolen robe and a bandage around the hand that Jon had skewered. She didn’t even have sandals. Her feet bled.

She looked like a baby bird with its beak cut off, enchanted to a woman’s size. The job Longclaw started had been completed and a milky-white scalp was now revealed to the world. Her lips were purple from the cold, and the tears frosted to her cheeks. Here and there were smudges and splashes from refuse that she’d either stepped in or had had flung at her.

Jon’s mind went back to when he’d first met the Lady of Riverrun. She’d received Daenerys and Jon eagerly upon their arrival, her smile as bright as the diamonds that had glittered on her throat.

All her diamonds are gone. Her diamonds, pearls, rubies, sapphires, emeralds. All her jewels and silks now stored away in Maegor’s Holdfast to be pawned off for building supplies. Only a few things would remain. All of the jewels that had belonged to Catelyn Tully Stark were to be divided up between Sansa and Arya. This morning, before Roslin’s two eldest were sent from court, Sansa had walked them and their little sister through Roslin’s things for them to choose keepsakes.

Minisa and Ambrose Tully were now heading north in a wheelhouse. Jon had only gotten quick looks at them while they were here. Edmure had been right: Minisa looked so much like Sansa it was chilling. Ambrose did indeed have Edmure’s eyes, the Tully blue of them standing out even more bloodshot.

Roslin was brought forward. Jon looked up at Daenerys, who nodded to him. The prince cleared his throat and cried out. “Lady Roslin Frey Tully, Lady of Riverrun, you have been found guilty of attempted murder, conspiracy, treason, and fraud.”

His voice rang out louder than he could have ever imagined, echoing through the dome of the dragon pit. He was used to having a small voice. The volume at which he proclaimed his new titles seems to shake the structure. Whose voice is that?

“For this, I, Jon of House Targaryen, Prince of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Prince of the Seven Realms of Westeros, Prince of Meereen and Slaver’s Bay, Khalakka of the Great Grass Sea and Lord of Dragonstone, do hereby sentence you to die by dragonfire. Do you have any last words?”

Screams, insults, and curses were expected. Instead, Roslin opened her mouth and from it came an eerily melodic sound. “And who are you the proud lord said, that I must bow so low? Only a cat of a different coat. That’s all the truth I know. In a coat of gold or a coat of red, the lion still has claws. And mine are long and sharp, my lord. As long and sharp as yours. And so he spoke, and so he spoke, the lord of Castamere. But now the rains weep o’er his hall with no one there to hear. Yes now the rains weep o’er his hall. With no soul left to hear.”

This song? The song of a House destroyed? Is that what I’m doing? House Frey was gone before this. And it was Sansa that destroyed it. This... She’s calling Sansa a Lannister. She’s calling us all Lannisters. His blood boiled. She’s goading us once more. With the song they played at the Red Wedding. She’s casting us as Tywin Lannister. Oh, we’re no Lannisters girl. I’m a Targaryen, and I’m here to prove it.

“Rhaegal, Dracarys,” Jon muttered. Roslin’s singing turned to screams. Jon could feel the heat. It seared. Rhaegal and Drogon swooped down, snapping at the corpse. Rhaegal got the first bite, but Drogon forced the larger half, still hanging out from Rhaegal’s jaws, into his own mouth immediately. Jon snapped his whip and commanded Rhaegal to heel in order to avoid a fight.

It was so strange. Roslin had gone from this colorful, confidant, scheming menace glimmering in her jewels, to this pale, bald, white-robed, cowed captive, and seconds later, her whole form was burnt
black. None of her was at all decipherable. She was just a charred form. And moments later, she was broken into pieces. Then gone. Completely. Just like that. Lynette Rivers cried about dragons eating her mother. And I rode one of the dragons that did it. I gave the order for her death.

Lyn and Lucas Corbray were next. Jon pulled Rhaegal upwards. He hadn’t sentenced them, but Daenerys was eager to ride Drogon as they were charred. He watched from above as his aunt and her favorite mount flew over the brothers. They also sang the song. They also burned.

Jon and Rhaegal descended slowly, and the corpses, looking eerily similar to the one that came before, were shared by the two flying beasts.

Lyn and Lucas Corbray had been strong, powerful men. But once the flames got them, they were screaming, then silent, and just black sets of limbs. *We all look the same when we burn. We all die.*

He knew just the initial feel of flames. As he watched them die, he kept clenching his burnt hand. It amazed him sometimes how quickly fire could work. The pain in his arm had been among the worst things he’d ever felt. But he hadn’t lost it. He hadn’t burned to death. *But even a relatively quick death by dragonfire had to seem much longer to the person suffering it.*

None of the people they executed took as long to go as poor Quentyn Martell, the poor Prince of Dorne who had died after foolishly trying to tame Rhaegal for himself. They say it took him three days to die, living in horrible agony during that time. They said his eyes boiled and burst out of his skull and just left pus-filled holes. He’d been charred to a crisp, but he lingered.

_The beast who did that is the one I currently ride. She can't be controlled by anyone but a Targaryen. I wield a creature that reduces people and so much more to crisps. Is that who I am supposed to be?_

Daenerys and Jon lowered their mounts and alighted from them onto the high dais, one at a time. Jon patted the great green lizard on her emerald-scaled neck and the creature gave the dragon equivalent of a purr in response, stretching and shuddering pleasantly at the sensation as a number of attendants came forward to help remove the saddle.

Jon patted her gently and sent her back down into the pit, Drogon flying after her. Daenerys came up behind him and patted him on the shoulder. “That was excellent, Jon. Look around at everyone.”

He did so, staring at the crowds on the lower perches. They stared up at the Targaryens with their eyes wide and mouths agape. Many cheered, and cries of awe and enthusiasm could be heard from outside the pit as well.

Jon saw people respond to his aunt this way enough times. A fascinating mix of fear, love, and respect that overwhelmed so many. People sometimes cheered for him as well, when he rode or walked through the streets or on certain special occasions. Shouts of “Hail to the Prince!” and the like. But there was never any level of genuine regard in these cries. He was heir to Daenerys, yes, but she was on a different level.

People cheered for Jon because he was royal and didn’t make their lives more difficult. They shouted enthusiasm for him because of his connections and name, not his person. They cried for the prince, the son of Prince Rhaegar, the nephew of Queen Daenerys. They didn’t really think much of who he truly was or cared. People actually adored and feared Daenerys. They knew who she was, and she got the respect. She was the Mother of Dragons and Breaker of Chains. She was the Bride of Fire. Her name and abilities were known and well-regarded by the crowds. She inspired the awe.

But now, it wasn’t just Daenerys people were staring at. They set their eyes upon Jon as if they were
seeing him for the first time. Mingled with the cries of “Mhysa!”, “Mother of Dragons!” and “Daenerys!” came shouts of “Prince Jon!” and “Heir to Dragons!”

**Heir to Dragons.** He blinked, feeling a bit nervous and overwhelmed. It was so hot in the pit. All these people were clapping and cheering for him, because he gave an order for a woman to be burnt alive.

**Rhaegal did most of the work for me.** Daenerys insisted that he had to learn to kill by dragonfire. It happened a few days ago, when Jon mentioned his father’s credo that the man who passes the sentence must swing the sword. “A tough thing to do with dragons,” he’d lamented.

Daenerys had seized upon this, her eyes gleaming. “We shall not have you swing a blade, but you shall help bring about the death. We can have you ride Rhaegal and give the command for her to kill.”

He’d protested at first, not even sure how such a thing would work. There were three dragons and thus far he’d only gotten full control of Rhaegal. He didn’t even see the point. Daenerys insisted she had the means to make it happen. She’d ride Drogon and burn the Corbrays, and Viserion would be ordered to stay back. But Jon would command Rhaegal to take Roslin Frey first.

“We have to show the people that you’re capable of controlling them. They need to learn to respect you as a dragon and a dragon rider. You’ll be able to honor your father’s words, but also in our way.”

He’d protested that it was the same, as Rhaegal would be the one dealing the death. But Sansa disagreed. “You’ve had Ghost kill for you, yes?”

“Yes, but for survival.” _And many times I was inside Ghost when it happened._

She sighed. “Well, I know Robb once had Grey Wind bite off Greatjon Umber’s fingers, and that wasn’t for survival. It was to get him to obey. Lord Umber hadn’t threatened Robb’s life, just his authority. If Robb can have Grey Wind bring his bannermen to heel for him, I don’t see why you can’t use Rhaegal to execute Lady Roslin. And besides, you sentenced them all to Penance Walks, but you’re not going to be the one shaving them or forcing them to make their way through the cities. A man must honor his sentence, and you sentenced them to burn, not to a beheading.”

“And you can’t change the sentence now more than you already have,” Daenerys agreed, “Especially since so many other convicts have burned already by the orders of our House. Remember, you’re not just representing yourself, you’re representing House Targaryen. I will not have it said that the Targaryens dispense justice inconsistently for no good reason.”

He hadn’t been able to argue with the logic, and he supposed it was the closest he could get to swinging the sword. _I am heir to dragons. Commanding the dragon must be somewhat equivalent to swinging the sword._

**Father had no dragons. He was no dragon. I have to make my own code. I am not condemning anyone in ignorance. I know what it is to burn.** Something about this, though, didn’t quite sit right with him. Roslin had to burn. _I am no Stannis, I have no flaming blade._ The enemies of the Targaryens had to be handled with fire and blood. He had no guide beyond Daenerys.

Eventually, a time might have come where he’d have to use the dragons to kill more than just wights. And if not him, his children, most likely. The dragons would outlive him and Daenerys, as would his progeny. It would fall to him to teach his heirs to ride and command. And they would one day likely be forced to cry “Dracarys” and use fire to kill. _I cannot ask my children to kill, ride, and honor our
family’s words if I cannot bring myself to do it. This was the right thing for me to do. I do not wield Ice. Ice is not mine to wield anymore than Winterfell is mine to rule. I never shall. I ride upon the back of a dragon, as is my right and duty. My duties are not Father’s.

He’d commanded other men to kill for him before. He couldn’t deal every death he ordered with his own hand.

Jon flexed his burnt hand once more before raising it tentatively to wave. The hand hurt, but he waved regardless. The crowds cheered louder. *Gods, why do they cheer so loud? Three people just died horribly. And it’s so hot. How do they look so excited?*

Long ago, Jon had outgrown overblown, childish fantasies of earning glory, honor, and fame through some magical act of heroism like a knight from a song. Being Ser Ryman Redwyne, Aemon the Dragonknight, Florian the Fool, or the Young Dragon was the game of young boys playing at war. The songs altered or exaggerated the facts to make things sound better, or lied outright. Daeron the Young Dragon’s conquest of Dorne cost thousands of lives. His Silver Prince father had almost destroyed the Targaryens for the sake of his adultery. *Life is not a song.* No one ever spoke of the sacrifices, sins, or crises of faith.

Still, Jon had hoped that if he were to ever do something that would gain him any acknowledgment by the public, that it would at least be something a bit less brutal than… this. He might not be a full, true Stark, but gaining acclaim for something along the lines of what, say, Brandon the Builder accomplished. Or simply being known as the Rhaenys or Visenya to Daenerys’s Aegon wasn’t bad. Daenerys was immortalized and given nearly all the credit for the defeat of the Night’s King, but Jon had still ridden alongside her. If he was to be remembered for that, it wouldn’t bother him.

Having this be what brought Jon Targaryen out of the shadows gave him no pleasure. *It’s cooler in the shadows. It’s too hot out here. I can feel the heat of their breath as they cheer as surely as I felt Rhaegal’s.*

Not that Jon wanted to be noticed all that much anyways. He’d always been happy to let Daenerys be the one adored by the crowds. She was good at it. Jon liked being a leader, a fighter, and policy-maker. But he was no performer.

Daenerys insisted that he had to be noticed, at least a bit. It was part of her motivation for having Jon do this in the first place. “You have to be known for who YOU are. The people need to know Jon Targaryen. Not the son of Prince Rhaegar or the nephew of Queen Daenerys. They have to know Jon Targaryen, Prince of the Empire.”

*Here’s your prince,* he thought bitterly as he waved. He felt so out of sorts, taking on this much attention. Jon had never been molded to be looked at, not by nature or nurture.

He was born without the striking looks or natural charisma that Rhaegar, Robb, Dany and Sansa all possessed in spades. His eyes were a dark grey rather than a glittering, rare violet. His hair a deep brown-black, not a fiery auburn. He had a sullen manner, nor did he speak with ornate words or obvious gravitas. He’d been raised a bastard, put to the side table during the most grand of banquets, destined for the Wall, bereft of a true name, nothing to inherit, and better off if he didn’t draw attention to himself. He wasn’t equipped to please crowds. People said he had a sullen face, many at court thought him lack-witted.

Acclaim was not something Jon wanted or needed in his life. It was a fickle reward too often bestowed upon men who died too early, men who didn’t deserve it, or both. He’d rather live a long life of good service and personal fulfillment than a short one of “glorious” battle and ear-splitting crowds that would serve as the basis of lies to be told throughout the upcoming centuries.
But part of doing his duty as prince was being known, so he endured the stares, cheers, and guilt.

Swallowing the anger was more difficult, though.

*I held strong at the Battle of Castle Black, commanding the men and boys there against thousands of Wildlings, scores of giants and mammoths, and the greatest fire the North had ever seen. I lost friends and a lover there. I was but five-and-ten, calling for shots to be fired as my leg throbbed in agony from Ygritte’s arrow. I commanded the defenses for days on end. Later, I found her pierced as well, and dying.*

He’d been a man of the Night’s Watch then. *I shall wear no crowns and win no glory.* He didn’t really want glory, but it bothered him. *So many good people died in that battle, never to be remembered. But I say a simple word to have Rhaegal burn a single woman alive, and the crowds cheer.*

People these days didn’t really speak of the Battle of Castle Black. It was an affair of the now-gone Night’s Watch in their final, dying years. It was a political liability. The Free Folk who had fought had now officially crossed that border Jon had fought to defend on the queen’s invitation. That Battle was now an uncomfortable fact of recent history that no one wanted to mention, like the abduction of Lyanna Stark, the fact that Sansa had once declared herself Queen in the North, or the madness of King Aerys.

People ignored the Watch even when it existed. A lack of glory was part of the point, but in those years it had reached the level of outright neglect. The Watch had been at its weakest during the time when it was threatened the most. But no one spoke of it.

Instead they cheered for Prince Jon for setting Roslin Frey aflame. Maester Aemon, Qhorin Halfhand, and Donal Noye were all but completely forgotten. Jeor Mormont as well. People cheered for Joffrey Baratheon when some of those men were dying.


The crowds cheered for Daenerys, but there was no crime there. Daenerys brought dragons back from the dead, she restored her House, she was beautiful, she had an impressive war record, she killed the Night’s King, she freed hundreds of thousands from slavery and put an end to the civil wars. People cheered for that.

Sansa was often cheered. For her charity work, for restoring her House, for her beauty, for her victories in battle, for her slaying of the Boltons, for the good memory of her beloved immediate family. No crime there either.

Jon was cheered for executing a woman by dragonfire.

*I do need to be noticed, acknowledged. But why must they do it for this? Are they doing it out of love or fear? Jon wasn’t sure which answer was worse. He didn’t want to be feared, but he also couldn’t reconcile the idea that he ruled a people who would love him for this of all things.*

“Prince Jon! Prince Jon!” The crowds roared. It sounded like thousands of ravens squawking. “*Snow! Snow!*”

*Damn bird. Damn, bloody bird. Waking me. Won’t let me sleep. Why won’t it shut up? My sleep is fitful, and I hear the raven through the moon already. But I need it all the same. I’ll go mad if I don’t sleep. Mad as my grandfather. When a Targaryen is born, the gods flip a coin….* I need my sleep.
Or I will be mad, not great. The damn raven needs to shut its beak. Snow... Snow... I cannot be Snow anymore. I'm not Snow anymore. Not a crow, not a snow. You're wrong, you stupid, bloody bird. So shut up.

The birds would not shut up. Jon’s hands fell and he covered his ears. He could still hear the squawking. “Snow! Snow!”

“Jon?”

Aye, that’s the other name, Bird. I suppose you got tired of saying ‘Snow.’ ‘Targaryen’ is too much for you. The best you could ever manage was ‘Kettle’. So shut your beak. Gods, why are there so many of you? Are the Others coming? We killed them all. I killed you, Raven.

“JON!”

He saw a woman with hair kissed by fire running towards him. “Ygritte?”

Her mouth fell open and she bent over him, looking dismayed. She wasn’t smiling at all, but she was still beautiful. Her eyes were not too far apart, but a perfect distance from one another. And their color was a deep, jewel-tone blue, without a hint of grey in them. Her teeth were straight, not crooked. Her nose was narrow and elegant, not pug-like. Her face was angular, not round. Her red hair was neatly folded into elegant braids underneath a leather hood, not a tangle. She didn’t need to smile to be beautiful because her lips were so full and shaped so elegantly that her pouts were as much a delight as her perfect teeth.

“No, wait, you’re not Ygritte,” he said, blinking, “Of course you’re not. She’s dead and gone, and Jon Snow loved her. But you’re Sansa, and I’m not a Snow. I’m Jon Targaryen. The birds are wrong. I’m a Targaryen. I ride dragons and bed my sister.”

“Jon! This—“ Tears welled up in her eyes. He reached up to wipe the first that fell. Why do I need to reach up so much to do that? Sansa’s shorter than I am. Only by a little, but still shorter. Why am I reaching above myself?

“No, wait, don’t cry,” he said to her, upset with himself, “You’ve done too much of that. I don’t just bed you, I love you too. More than anyone or anything in this world. I love you, Sweet Sister. The Frey bitch tried to take you away, but I’ve burned her. I love you. And I want to see you in black and red. I hate when you wear red and white. That Hardyng shit didn’t deserve you. You’ll be mine now, and you’ll have my babes.”

He patted her belly. “Aemon and Naerys, remember? Can you keep the birds away? The ravens. And the High Sparrow, too. Bloody birds. Why all the birds? You were the little bird, and my brothers and I were crows. The rest can all jump down the dragon pit. The ravens, the High Sparrow, that shit young falcon you married, and especially the mockingbirds. They all need to jump in the pit with Roslin and the Corbrays to get roasted. Tell Daenerys to make them do it. The woman can hatch dragons, build empires and break chains. She can get rid of some bloody birds.”

“Jon, listen to me, please…”

He grabbed her wrist then. “No, Sansa, listen to me. I know this. You may know all about court and manners, but this is what I know. The ravens need to be gone. Too many ravens, and the Others come. We killed the Others. They shouldn’t be coming back. So just kill the bloody ravens. I need my sleep. They won’t stop calling me Snow. Only you can call me that. Tell them. And then tell Daenerys to make them jump down the Dragonpit. I need my sleep or I’ll go mad.”
And then everything was silent.
Arya reacts to Jon losing his mind, has a moment with Daenerys, and makes a request of Gendry. Jon talks with both Stark women, having a more successful heart-to-heart with one.

Chapter Notes

First of all, sorry about this delay. I've been sick and had some family drama.

Second, thanks to Bluecichlid who freaking SAVED this chapter.

Third, this one is angsty. Which I think you may have expected.

Chapter Thirty-two: Identity, Part II

Arya:

Sometimes, in Arya’s old line of work, rendering a person unconscious without harming them became necessary. As an assassin, she’d never been a great fan of collateral damage, and avoided it whenever possible. This sometimes became a point of contention.

Other assassins might comment to her on her choice not to kill anyone outside of her target. “Valar Morghulis.”

But Arya rarely ever killed anyone she wasn’t ordered to. Oh, when there was no other choice, she’d leave more than one body. But when it could be avoided -- Valar Morghulis -- but not at that exact moment.

Sometimes, specific orders came in saying that certain folk had to be kept alive. Sometimes, those certain folk might witness too much. That had to be dealt with.

She couldn’t remember specific instances of when she’d non-lethally incapacitated someone anymore, but she did remember that she did it. She also remembered how and why. Her prior assignments and their details didn’t show up quite easily in her head anymore. However, she did retain enough to know that there was a reason she kept Belladonna on her.

Thank the Gods for it.

She’d stood there, on the dais, while people cheered, watching as Jon and Daenerys waved to them. It was odd, really, hearing people cry for Jon with such enthusiasm.

Arya had visited more than a few taverns, walked the city more than a few times. She’d been back as Arya for several weeks, and before that she was Anais for a few moons. She knew the city. Enthusiasm and esteem for Daenerys was widespread. People spoke of her in both loud, glowing
terms and foreboding whispers.

She was one of the few high profile women in the capital who wasn’t constantly the subject of vulgar jokes. Every other well-known lady never had her name mentioned in a tavern without some drunks enthusiastically joking about her cunt or teats.

Sansa could act a lady all she liked, but that didn’t stop tavern patrons from speculating if “the rushes matched the curtains” when her name came up deep into the night after a few pints of ale. With Margaery Tyrell, a common joke was how she could only reach her peak while riding a man sitting on the Iron Throne.

And even some men weren’t spared crude humor. Arya had heard more than a few jabs in Jon’s direction, about how he didn’t visit brothels, was a member of the Night’s Watch, and often frowned. “Bet we’ll see more smiles from him now that Lady Stark’s stripped him of his maidenhead.”

But with Dany, if anyone did end up saying anything, they would get dirty looks, out of both reverence and fear. The Mother of Dragons was both sacred and a bit too scary to joke about.

Yes, she was terrifying, strange, and she’d killed. But better a dragon who could breathe without flames than a lioness who didn’t know when to put away her claws.

And anyone who spoke ill of her was the greatest of all fools. If the dragon flame didn’t get to them, the furious mobs would first.

When she went into the streets, people often went mad with excitement, almost riotous. If an order was given for people to stand back, they knew better than to argue. But their cries of “ALL HAIL THE QUEEN!” “DAENERYS!” “THE STORMBORN QUEEN!” “BLESSINGS TO THE MOTHER OF DRAGONS!” never had to be prompted or exaggerated.

Jon, on the other hand…

Arya had seen him appear publicly, and though he was never greeted with any sign of hostility or dead silence, people didn’t exactly lose themselves. A few shouts of “Blessings to the Prince” and his name were common, and he was often greeted with smiles, but he could easily make his way through the city without too much bother. He was liked well enough, but not adored.

But one wouldn’t have known it that night in the dragon pit. People in and out of the dome were shouting his name as loud as they shouted Daenerys’s. When he waved, the crowd in the pit got louder.

And he stood and waved, even smiled slightly, though the expression looked more than a little forced. Daenerys and Sansa were both beaming to see him received so warmly.

Even Arya couldn’t help feeling a bit proud of her big brother at that moment. There was a thrill from seeing him ride Rhaegal. He’d looked very impressive. Not just because of the dragon, but because he seemed so very in control. A triumphant moment seized Arya. At Winterfell, he’d so often been ignored or dismissed. Now, people were chanting his name.

She still intended to tease him for grinning like a fool and preening like a peacock, but she was also proud.

But then he put his hands to his ears. Then he began to stumble for no reason. Sansa had run to him, grabbing him before he fell. Arya was right behind her, grabbing him from behind. And he’d started babbling like a mad man, his face red and scared.
He started thrashing and speaking of White Walkers and ravens, grabbing Sansa’s wrist tightly. Arya thought quickly and grabbed the vial of Belladonna from inside her shirt, sedating him by holding the uncorked vial under his nose. He fell back into her arms as Daenerys ordered the crowds away.

They put him in Sansa’s litter. Arya’s sister sobbed over him while they made their way back to the Red Keep. Once there, Merys was waiting for them. Jon stirred as they got there, asking in a panicked voice what happened.

The last thing he remembered was heading to the dragon pit to execute Roslin and the Corbrays.

“Did we lose control of the dragons?” He’d ranted in a haze, “Is the city safe? Where’s Sansa? The queen? Arya?”

They managed to calm him down a bit, but Merys wanted to give him Sweetsleep. Sansa refused.

“No, Arya’s already given him something… He’s in a bad way, I won’t addle his mind further.”

“Sansa, he’ll be fine,” Arya had replied, rolling her eyes, “It was just Belladonna. You—”

“Don’t tell me how to treat my intended, Arya,” she’d replied, glaring at her from Jon’s bedside, “What you did was utterly reckless. I will not have him stuffed with herbs and such.”

Arya was about to retort, but Daenerys held up a hand and gave her a look of warning.

“Herbs?” Jon murmured, still quite disoriented. “Am I sick? I think I may be sick. I feel odd.”

Then he sat up, grabbed Sansa’s hand, and stared at her wrist, which was starting to bruise from earlier. “Who did that? I’ll kill ‘im!”

“What did you do?” Sansa hissed at her sister. Arya stepped back.

“It’ll wear off, I promise!”

“If it’s Belladonna, then he should be fine after a while,” Daenerys reassured the Lady of Winterfell. “I’m sure Arya wouldn’t do anything that could hurt him.”

“Lady Stark, if you wish, we won’t give him any sweetsleep, but for safety’s sake, I’d like to leave a bottle with you.” Merys said.

“I’d rather you do your job and tell me what’s wrong with him,” Sansa snapped at him.

“He’s trying, Sansa,” Arya told her, cross. “Stop being so difficult.”

“Shut up, Arya!”

“Hey!” Jon sat up and put his hand on Sansa’s shoulder. “Stop yelling at her. Why are you yelling at her? You’re the one wearing her clothes.”

Sansa was not, in fact, wearing Arya’s clothes, but the leathers she had for the dragon pit which resembled something Arya would wear. Sansa so rarely wore leather that it was an easy mistake for an addled mind to make.

He snaked a hand along Sansa’s chest, grabbing at the laces on the leather jerkin she was wearing. “Why are you wearing that? Here, why don’t you take them off? Give Arya her clothes back.”

She yanked his hand away, scowling. Jon gave Arya an apologetic look. “Sorry, Little Sister, I
Dany stepped forward. “Sansa, why don’t you let Merys take a blood sample and examine Jon a bit more? We can all wait outside. You could use a drink.”

“Merys can do as he likes, but I’m staying with Jon,” she insisted.

“Yes, give Arya her clothes back, and stay with me.”

Arya rolled her eyes and looked at Merys. “Will he live?”

Merys got close to Jon, giving him a second look over. “Oh, yes, I’ve seen evidence of nothing life-threatening. We’ll know more once he’s recovered from the Belladonna. But I would like to see the compound you used and run some tests.”

Arya pulled it from her jerkin and handed it to him. He held it up to the light. “It looks normal. I’d like to run some tests, but the prince should be fine. Did he have anything to drink before the execution?”

Sansa shook her head, “He doesn’t like to drink before he rides.”

“Has he seemed particularly troubled, recently?”

This time, the Lady of Winterfell nodded. “He’s been going to the godswood at night, and he’s been under a great deal of pressure.”

The master nodded. “Well, I see no sign of any life-threatening ailment, though I will have to look at his blood. But it may have been just a crisis of the nerves. If so, he’s going to require some rest time. Rest and recreation. Sometimes the worst ailments aren’t physical, but they can be treated.”

“Take a couple of days off, both of you,” Daenerys said, rubbing her temple. “I hadn’t realized--- He needs some peace before he loses his mind for good. It isn’t too late, is it?”

They all looked at Merys anxiously. He held up his arms.

“Please, Your Grace, calm yourself. No, I don’t think it’s ‘too late’. The prince needs some rest and relaxation. I’ll give him a full exam tomorrow morning, and he’ll need to speak with someone. But I think he’ll be fine, provided that he receives proper care.”

Arya gave a great sigh of relief. Seeing Jon go to pieces like that had chilled her to the bone. If there was one person in her life she’d imagine would be completely resistant to going mad, it was Jon. Jon was rational and even-tempered. He didn’t have outbursts. Her big brother was strong and brave and smart. He could handle anything.

But now he was acting a fool, completely lost. And Arya had been forced to knock him out. She hated that. She hated that she had to attack Jon. She hated seeing him like this. She hated doubting his sanity.

She hated not being the one he was reaching for first. She hated feeling powerless to help him. She hated wondering if she’d made things worse. Sansa seemed to think so.

What’s my place here? What do I do? She honestly didn’t know. Should I leave? Stay? How do I help? She knew instinctively that no one in this room had time for these questions, but she looked around for a sign from any of them. They all just concentrated on Jon as Merys took a blood sample. Arya tried to do the same, but it gutted her. She was not the sort of person who was content to just
stand by in a situation like this, doing nothing. This was her brother.

_The enemy is inside his head. I can’t fight his head._ There was no one to fight, no one to target. There was a part of her that hoped that he’d been drugged. That she could handle. She could find whoever did it and punish them, like she had with Sansa. She couldn’t do anything if it were truly just mental strain. She couldn’t change the past, she couldn’t kill enemies already dead, she couldn’t mold his mind to her whims.

She wanted to smack him in the head until it started working properly. But she knew that was no solution. And she wished it was. She just wanted to fight him better.

It took her a while to realize she was shaking. Daenerys put a hand on her shoulder. Arya looked at the queen, shocked. Daenerys Targaryen didn’t exactly hold Arya in the highest regard, and there was a good reason why the queen would never want to lay a hand on Arya again. But she gave the younger Stark girl a look of sympathy before speaking. “Why don’t Lady Arya and I leave you be for now? I’ll return shortly to check up on things.”

“I don’t---“ Arya began. But Daenerys held up another hand for silence.

“I am your queen, Lady Arya.”

She sighed and followed the dragon queen out to Jon’s solar. Daenerys walked over to Jon’s wine cabinet, pulled out a bottle of Dornish sour, and poured two cups, handing one to her. Arya didn’t drink.

“I should be in there.”

“What?”

Arya’s eyes widened. “He’s… He’s my brother!”

“And my nephew and heir. And there is nothing I can do for him currently whilst in that room. A bunch of people chattering all around him is not going to help soothe his mind. And you were about to lose it. It would help no one if there were two mentally unsound people in that room. What were you going to do for him?”

Arya stopped. “Isn’t being there for him enough?”

“Jon isn’t in a state to register that sort of thing. Oh, and for the record, knocking him out? I appreciate that you intervened. Sansa’s just upset. She’s quite sensitive when it comes to anything involving herbs and poisons. Robert Arryn was killed through an overdose of a sedative.”

Wine entered Arya’s mouth. She gulped it down heavily, needing something to dull her feelings. “I didn’t know what else to do without injuring him. But I knew he needed to be restrained. He was mad, and afraid. We had to get him out of there. And he was holding Sansa’s wrist so tightly. I worried he might hurt her. He’d never forgive himself if he did. I don’t have the strength to physically hold him indefinitely, and the Belladonna was the only means I had of knocking him out without hurting him.”

Daenerys nodded. “I understand. I’m sorry you have to see this.”

“I’ve seen men go mad before.”

“But not him.”
Arya turned away, very uncomfortable. Her queen was an enigma. Arya had no idea how to respond to this situation. The Dragon Queen had no love for her, and Arya wasn’t sure how much love she had for Jon, either. Daenerys identified him as her nephew and heir. Arya wasn’t sure which was more important to her. One did not become as powerful as Daenerys Targaryen by indulging in sentimentality or easy affection. She could trust that this woman did not want Jon dead, but what interest could she possibly have in trying to comfort Arya? We’re not friends. We both know this. Why is she ignoring that? “No. Not him.”

“Let me make a suggestion: go back to your rooms and try to get some sleep. Find someone to talk to. I will send someone if there are any developments.”

Arya finished her wine and nodded, casting one last reluctant look at the bedchamber door before departing. *I’m not welcome or useful here. Arya Underfoot once again.*

In her chambers, she found Gendry waiting for her, ready to pour her some wine. They sat down together on the sofa, his arm around her, her head on his chest. They watched the fire for a while. After several minutes, he asked if she was alright.

“I don’t belong here,” she whispered. “I can’t make madness yield. I can’t coat my tongue with honey. I can’t pretend I’m not a fighter.”

“Your brother and sister love you,” he told her, “You always have a place when there are people who love you. Jon will be alright. You Starks are made of steel.”

“Steel can melt,” she reminded him. *Especially when it’s surrounded by dragonfire.*

“It’s hard again after it cools. It always cools again. Trust me on this.”

For the first time that evening, Arya managed to smile. She looked up and laid a small kiss on his chin. “Will you go to Winterfell with me, after the wedding?”

“Is that what Milady wants?”

“It’s what I want.”

“I’d like to… I’ll have to see.”

She nodded off eventually and dreamt of snowy woods and hunting rabbits... tearing them apart with her teeth. She dreamt of smelling their blood on her muzzle and drinking from a near frozen stream. Out there, she wasn’t Underfoot, she wasn’t afraid, she wasn’t confused. She knew who she was.

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Jon:

The throne room was empty, but for him. It was so cold. He cried out that it was too cold, and heard squawking. His hand felt hot suddenly. Jon looked down. His right arm was on fire. The flames spread. Soon, every inch of him burned. There was a flutter of wings. Then more and more. Birds circled him: ravens, mockingbirds, falcons.

“Snow. Snow,” they cried.

Jon cried for help, trying to get to the door. The birds followed him. “Snow. Snow.”

“Someone! Help!” The world began to shake.
He wasn’t burning, but he was being shaken. He was in bed. Jon could feel the mattress under him. He opened his eyes. Sansa was crouched over him shaking him awake.

“Oh, thank the Gods.” She embraced him then. “Are you alright?”

His head hurt. He groaned. “Yes, I’m fine, I---“

Memories of the evening before returned. Ravens. Why did I see ravens?

“What happened?” He asked, feeling disoriented. Sansa pulled away, her lower lip quivering.

“You… you had an… episode last night. In the dragon pit. You started crying about ravens and the Others.”

“I was seeing things,” he said, leaning forward, remembering. “I don’t know what happened but… I was angry. I was angry that people were cheering for me for killing Roslin. And then I saw them all turn into ravens, calling me ‘Snow.’ I was so upset.”

She rubbed his shoulder. “Arya knocked you out and Merys sampled your blood and examined you. You weren’t drugged until Arya put some Belladonna under your nose. But… Gods, Jon. I had no idea you were so troubled.”

“Neither did I. Did I scare you? I’m sorry.”

“That’s not what you should be worried about at this moment. Dany’s giving us a couple of days to ourselves. You need to worry about you.” She stroked and cupped his face, staring into his eyes. “I’m worried about you. I need you to tell me what’s wrong. Tell me your troubles.”

Jon didn’t know where to start. He said so.

Sansa bit her lip. “You said you were angry.”

He nodded. “I was angry because people were cheering for me for roasting an unarmed woman alive. As if that was some great deed. And I couldn’t help but be bothered by it. You know I’ve led men in battle, I’ve done things to protect this realm. I was prepared to give my life for it. But now, the only time people care about anything I’ve done, it’s when I set someone on fire. It was perverse. Why would they cheer for that?”

“The spectacle,” Sansa lamented. “They saw their prince ride a dragon, set a traitor aflame. They’d never seen you that way before. It was an impressive image, a new one. You have to understand, Jon, there’s a certain mania, a certain bloodlust that often comes from crowds.”

“Filthy mobs.” He remarked bitterly. Sansa sighed.

“These people have all suffered tremendously. The things these people have endured bring out the darkness in them, in everyone. You know this.”

“They didn’t seem very dark then. They cheered.”

“Symbolism, Jon. Before, not only were there wars and famine, there was confusion. For a long time, no one knew who the true king was, no one knew what the borders were. Many still considered Robert Baratheon a usurper, and even if he wasn’t, who was his heir? Was it his son Joffrey? Or were the rumors true? Did the crown rightfully belong to Stannis? Or should they
support Renly, who was so loved? Were all Northerners their enemy now that Eddard Stark’s son had declared himself a king? If Stannis was the rightful king, how could they trust him when he was so intent on sacking the city?”

“What does that have to do with this?”

“For so long, the kings were the Targaryens. So much of what this country knows comes from the songs and stories of Targaryens gloriously taking down their enemies on the backs of dragons. Now, they know who their ruler is, and they know how the line is to continue. The wars are over and though they’re still scarred by them, at least now they know whom to follow. And seeing a man of House Targaryen destroy an enemy like something straight out of a glorious history reinforces that yes, the wars are over, we know who we are as a people, and we can trust those in charge to keep us safe. Not only did their prince destroy an enemy, he displayed control over the most fearsome beast known to man. It’s reassurance. And caught up in the crowds, the implications of certain things you see are hard to discern.”

Jon shifted uncomfortably. “That doesn’t make this much easier, Sansa. I don’t want the reassurance I offer people to come in the form of death. I know you think it’s all violence but… This should not be what I’m recognized for.”

“You’ll be recognized for other things, Jon. You already are, in many ways.”

“I kept thinking about how all the people who have protected the realm, all the good men who died, to go unremembered. I saw men die at the Wall in service to this kingdom, and no one knows who they are. As they died, these same crowds were probably cheering for Joffrey, just as they were now cheering for me.”

“You are not Joffrey, or anything like him. And for the record, that didn’t happen as much as you probably imagine. Joffrey spent most of his time in the Keep, away from the crowds. When he was in public, he wasn’t exactly greeted with overwhelming love. After Margaery showed up and worked her magic, the crowds became far kinder to him,” She swallowed and continued, “But before, he was afraid to exit his castle and when he did, he stayed in his litter. People hated him. He incited riots. They threw dung at him and called him a bastard and a monster. They hailed every king but him--- Stannis, Renly, Robb.”

“They threw dung at him?” Jon managed to smile, the image of a furious Joffrey with shit caked in his golden hair as people cried his brother’s name cheering him.

“They’d have done much more to him and the rest of us if it weren’t for the guards. They were starving, and after the dung was thrown, Joffrey suggested they eat their dead if they were so hungry. He ordered The Hound to hunt them down.”

His smile fell. “Gods.”

“Last night, no one meant you any harm. They weren’t interested in hurting any innocents. Roslin was no innocent. You’re not Joffrey. You did your duty to your family and the realm. One of the most difficult duties for a good man, but you did it regardless. And as for those men who died at the Wall, unremembered… I can’t help you with that. Anything you could have done to keep people alive up there, you did. But you’re a man, not a God. Not even a prince can command the forces of life and death. And there’s only so much one can do to make sure they’re remembered. The world is an unjust place. The only thing you can do in the face of it is act justly yourself. And you do, Jon.”

He hung his head. She stroked his face some more.
“Other things trouble you. Last night you said some things… You talked about ravens calling you ‘Snow’. You still feel like a Snow? You shouldn’t. You’re Jon Targaryen, that’s who those people cheered for. Snow’s just a bed name now. Those ravens didn’t exist.”

“I don’t know who Jon Targaryen is. I know he’s a bunch of words and titles. But I’m not a bunch of words and titles. I’m a man.”

“Jon Snow was a boy.”

His stomach lurched. Jon felt afraid at that moment. He didn’t want to think on this. Jon reached for her.

“Your bastard boy?” He spoke in a teasing, playful voice, gripping the sides of her waist.

Sansa pulled away. “This is not the time, Jon, we need to discuss this. You’re having breakdowns over it. Last night, you envisioned the crowds as ravens calling you Snow and referred to me as your sister. You even used it as a point of reference when insisting that you were a Targaryen, riding a dragon and bedding your sister.”

He cringed. “I said that? Sansa, I don’t—–“

“—Some part of you does.”

A pin dropping could have been heard in the silence that followed that statement. Jon shook his head, then looked at his wife-to-be. Her legs were folded under her, her hands folded neatly in her lap, her hair in an elegant braid. She was fully dressed in a lavender gown, and her blue eyes were steady. When he looked at her, his feelings were very specific. He pictured Arya there in her place. It was almost impossible.

When he looked at Arya, he noticed whether she was smiling or not, looked for indicators of her mood and health. He anticipated hearing whatever sort of funny things she might come up with, would think about when they’d both be available to go train in the yards. He worried about the state of her mind, about her history. He felt protective of her, and he adored her, his fierce little sister who didn’t fit in.

When he looked at Sansa, he saw something different. He felt protective of her, and he did worry about her. But he also felt lightheaded and strange. There was a certain physical urge that took him. He couldn’t help noting the curves of her body, the length of her neck, the smell of her hair, the music of her voice. He couldn’t help but be amazed by her, consumed by her. There wasn’t much that she did that didn’t heat his blood or make him sigh. There wasn’t a part of her that didn’t make him yearn.

Thinking of Arya in such a context made him want to vomit. As far as he was concerned, Arya might as well be a completely different species from her sister. That he could think of them in the same way just mystified him.

“I can’t imagine which part. My memories, maybe? But who I am now, who you are now... We’re many things to each other. But we’re not siblings. It was mania, Sansa.”

“I don’t know. Maybe the part of you who doesn’t know who Jon Targaryen is still clings to Jon Snow, still thinks of me as a sister.”

“You never had a close sibling relationship with Jon Snow,” he replied, growing weary of this conversation. “Please, Sansa, don’t think on it. I don’t think of you that way, not truly. There is nothing brotherly about my feelings for you.”
He reached for her again, eager to prove it, as he usually was. She shifted away once more. “Jon, please. You broke down last night.”

“I don’t want to think about breaking down last night. Last night was awful. I’d rather think about you.”

“In black and red?”

“What?”

“Another thing you said. How you hate to see me in red and white. You want me in black and red.”

He grimaced. This was not a thing he ever wanted her to know about, as it was irrational and more than a little embarrassing. “It’s just something stupid… Thinking of you as Harrold Hardyng’s wife bothers me.”

“But I was Harrold Hardyng’s wife. I’m his widow.”

“I know, and he didn’t deserve you. Harry gave you a son and an army and treated you like dirt. Every time I see you in his colors, I’m reminded of yet another man who used you. He was married to you, and didn’t recognize what that meant well enough to learn anything about you or stay faithful. To me, that’s just… It’s awful. And you belong in my colors. Is it so wrong that I want to see you as mine, not anyone else’s?”

“I am yours. No one else’s. Harry… Harry was a means to an end. I wasn’t even hurt, knowing about the whores. He wasn’t important to me in that way. You, though… I’ve never felt anything for anyone like what I feel for you. But you… you can mistake me for anyone. A sister. A wildling… You called me Ygritte.”

Jon’s mouth went dry. “Mania, Sansa. I swear it.”

She sniffed and looked at her lap. “I hope so. Jon… You were so upset last night. You thought ravens were screaming your name and the Others were coming. I didn’t know what to do to help you. I still don’t. I couldn’t hunt down birds that weren’t there. I can’t slay the Others, they’re dead. I’m trying to ease your mind, and you’re grabbing for my body. I don’t know what to do.”

Grief and self-loathing hit him. This was not the time. “It won’t happen again, I promise. The mania, I mean.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep. You can’t control things like that. And if it happens again, it happens again. I’m not looking for promises. I’m looking to help you. Just… just tell me, Jon. I want to know what truly troubles you. I just want to help you.”

“Unless you can change the past and the world around us, you can’t do much more. You can’t change the fact that all sorts of awful things have followed us. You can’t change the fact that our loved ones died, that the wars came and killed good people. You can’t change the fact that I grew up a bastard, or that I’m a prince now. You can make my burdens lighter, help me become better equipped to deal with my new life and responsibilities, and comfort me when I’m troubled. And you already do all of that. There is nothing more I can possibly ask of you, and I don’t want to. I don’t need to.” It’s why I love you so much.

“There’s something I can do to help you now, Jon.”

He sighed. “You say we have a couple of days free of duty or obligation? Help me enjoy them. If I’m still troubled afterwards, we’ll speak some more.”
“Very well,” she said with a deep breath. “You wish to enjoy yourself?”

“Is that so hard for you to believe?”

“You once went to the Wall on purpose. It truly isn’t.”

“Very funny.” It actually was, but he pouted anyways, “Please, Sweetling, just… I don’t need questions at this moment. Let me enjoy my day with you.”

“You think you’ll feel better if you’re not thinking on these things, then?”

“I think I would. I could use some relief from deep thoughts.”

“I just want you to feel better. Very well. Whatever you need. Distractions then.” She swallowed heavily and her fingers went to the laces on her gown.

Jon reached out and stopped her. *Sweet girl, that isn’t needed for me to enjoy you.* He already felt awful about what transpired just a few minutes ago. The last thing he wanted was her believing that warming his bed was the only relief she offered him. If he’d sent that message, he’d erred grievously.

“Later. There are other things we can do.”

“Most of the things you enjoy don’t really involve me. I’m no fighter, no hunter… I mean, I know the basics of falconry, but it’s been so long.”

He frowned. “Come now, Sweetling. There are other things.”

“Like?”

“There’s that game people are always playing. Cyvasse? You have a set, don’t you? Teach me to play. We can go riding later, maybe visit the dragons.”

She brightened. “Would you take me out on Rhaegal?”

Jon hesitated. “I’ve never ridden with anyone but Dany. I’m not sure it would be safe.”

“Oh.”

He reached out and kissed her forehead. “Someday, when I’m more skilled with her. I’ll show you King’s Landing the way the birds see it.”

She kissed him on the forehead. “Alright. Cyvasse, then.”

“Would you like to go out into the city as well?”

Her smile faltered. “I’m not sure if you should be around crowds at this moment. Why don’t we… why don’t we keep to our section of the castle for a while? The last thing either of us need is more excitement.”

They ended up taking lunch with Arya in the solar. She greeted Jon with a hug and a kiss. “Are you alright? I was so worried.”

“I’m feeling better than I was. I’m sorry to have worried you.” He inspected his sister. She had bags under her reddened eyes. His heart sank and he gave her an extra squeeze. “Truly, Arya, I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t worry about me. It’s you I’m concerned with.”
Sansa cleared her throat and excused herself after lunch, leaving brother and sister alone. There was an awkward silence for several minutes before Arya broke it.

“You think the Others are back?”

He shook his head. “No. And I know there weren’t actually any ravens there.”

“But you saw them anyways.”

“Yes. I saw them. I heard them. All calling me Snow.”

She hung her head in her hands. “Well, you’re not a Snow anymore, you stupid shit. How is it that you feel like a Snow when you just literally hopped off a dragon?”

Despite the gravity of the question, there was levity. Insults like ‘stupid shit’ always sounded fantastic from his sister. “Maybe I didn’t want to feel like a Targaryen at that moment.”

“Then the ravens should have been welcome.”

“A raven woke me up too damn often for that to ever happen.” More silence. Arya didn’t seem amused. She stared at her cup. After a while, Jon’s curiosity got the better of him. “Do you… do you ever see things that aren’t there?”

She shook her head. “My problem isn’t that. My problem is that I keep forgetting things. All those years I spent among the Faceless Men… It’s vanishing. I’m losing it. Details. Events. People. I know that time has passed and things have happened, but I keep forgetting more and more of what those things are.”

His heart rose in his throat. He leaned forward and took his sister’s hand. “Do you think it’s some sort of magic they’re doing?”

She swallowed. “I don’t know. I can’t even recall if they ever really used magic. It’s all so fuzzy. Maybe? It would make sense, wouldn’t it? I’ve left them, and they don’t want me to spill their secrets. But if so, why not just kill me? They’ve never been shy about such things.”

He got up and rounded the table, pulling Arya to him. “I won’t let them, you hear? I won’t.”

“That’s not what I’m afraid of. I’m afraid of going mad, Jon. What if I wake up tomorrow morning not knowing where I am? The last five years, completely gone? For all I know, tomorrow morning I could open my eyes and be wondering why I’m not on a ship to Braavos. Wondering why I’m older and bigger, why I’m in King’s Landing. Jon… I don’t know who I am anymore.”

He looked at her sadly. “I’m not sure I do, either.”

She pulled away. “I have to find Nymeria, Jon. I know she’s out there somewhere. In my dreams, I’m her. If I find her, I can… I can find myself.”

He froze. This was not good. How can you tell her no? He hesitated. “Arya…”

She pulled away at once, glaring. “You’re going to tell me no. You’re going to tell me that I have to go back to Winterfell and be Sansa’s castellan. You’re going to say it’s my duty as a Stark. But how am I supposed to be a Stark without my wolf?”

“People have managed before, and Arya… Finding Nymeria won’t give you those years back. I feel as if you’re looking for an answer you may not find. You haven’t seen her in seven years. You don’t
know where she is. But Winterfell... Winterfell is right where it always was. Returning there could give you some of the answers you need.”

She looked like she was about to say something, but stopped herself. She looked at Ghost then, her eyes steady. “It doesn’t seem like a place of answers, just like a place that didn’t have as many questions. Life seemed so much simpler there. But now that I know it isn’t, how can I ever feel that same assurance again?”

“Because it’s your home.”

“I left Winterfell when I was nine. I’m seventeen. And I was a daughter of Winterfell, not a son. I was always meant to leave.”

“Apparently, you weren’t.”

She shook her head. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ll know who I am if I find my wolf.”

Jon made a point then to look over at Ghost, lying by the fire. “I’ve got mine, and I still am not sure who I am. I have my wolf, and I have a dragon. And I’m caught between families, names, and… everything.”

She bit her lip. “This… this isn’t the time. Are you--- are you sure you’re alright? You’re acting like you’re fine, but it’s hard to tell with you. You always hide, with those dark looks. You can’t tell if you’re truly that dour. You frown almost as much as Father did.”

That made him smile. “I always did have much of the North in me. So did you,” he reached over and cupped her cheek, “You belong there. Go, and your wolf will find you.”

“And you? You’ve got your wolf. You’ve got your dragon. You’ve got your mate. I don’t understand why you feel so confused. Just because you might be a Snow doesn’t mean you can’t be a dragon. You were a prince all the time you were a bastard and didn’t know it, but you were one all the same. You can be all sorts of things, all sorts of people. I would know.”

And has that served you well? He glanced at the ground. “I don’t know. I’m not so talented as you.”

She snickered. “Maybe not. But who is?”

He laughed and reached up to muss her hair. “Do you have any idea how much I’ve missed you?”

“I might. I’ll miss you when I go to Winterfell as well. I’d rather have us all there. You and Sansa could fill the place with your babies, like Mother and Father. It would be just like home.”

His heart ached. “There’s no dragonpit in the North. My duties are here. Starks go where duty takes them. Being a Targaryen means my place is here, and being a Stark means I go where I’m needed.”

“And once you’re married you’ll be a Stark in name,” she smiled, “You’ve got plenty of names and titles. Just because some stupid birds keep obsessing over ‘Snow’ doesn’t mean you should. What’s ‘Snow’ to Jon Stark Targaryen, Prince of this and that and the other thing and Khalakka of whatever and Lord of everything else? One word among dozens. You’re not a bastard anymore. Sansa would never deign to marry a bastard.”

“Sometimes I think I’ll wake up some morning to find her gone, having come to her senses,” he joked.
“Oh no, not her. She does her duty. And so will I.” She took a deep breath. “And you… you always do. If anything, that should remind you of who you are. Jon the Dutiful. Maybe that’s what the historians will call you.”

He laughed. “It’s not always a bad thing to do your duty. Last night was a harder one than most but… You’re right. I do my duty… I find myself.”

*It’s not a bad thing to consider. I’m doing my duty, so I must be me. That’s remained more constant than my own name. It wasn’t a bad thing to consider. He ruffled Arya’s hair once more. “Thank you, Sweet Sister.”*

She wrinkled her nose. “Please, whatever you do, don’t call me that. Ever.”
Chapter Thirty-three: Jon the Dutiful

Sansa:

When she left Jon and Arya alone after lunch, she’d decided to use that time to wash and see to a few needs. Jon seemed afraid to speak to her plainly at the moment, and she hoped maybe he’d open up a bit more to Arya. Jon practiced caution about worrying Sansa too much since the poison, and she feared his concern for her might get in the way of his willingness to open up. He needed to speak to someone. Even if I’m not that person.

As much as Sansa hated to admit it, there was a certain bond that Jon and Arya had that she’d never succeed in replicating. They were close as children. In fact, Sansa wasn’t sure there was anyone Arya felt closer to than Jon. And Jon… Well, Robb had likely been his best friend, but he always had a very special attachment to Arya.

Both grew up outsiders in their own way. Robb and Sansa had been the perfect model noble children. Robb was the honorable, handsome, responsible and dashing eldest son and heir. Sansa was the courteous, dutiful, talented, beautiful daughter and lady. Jon was the bastard and Arya was the wild rebel. They connected over that in a way Robb and Sansa could not.

And besides, there were certain things one felt more comfortable working out with a close friend or sibling than one would with a lover. Sansa understood that. There were things she still discussed with Randa before bringing up with Jon. Not because she wished to keep secrets from him, but because she wasn’t yet sure how she felt. Everyone possessed limitations in their understanding of certain things, after all. There were matters Randa was better equipped to “work out” than Jon.

There were some things Arya would understand better than Sansa could. And that special understanding might be what Jon needed.

Sansa forced herself to put her own ego aside to get him to speak to someone.

So after she left them, she took the time to indulge in a nice bath and have her maids see to a few
special cosmetic needs. Needs like removing the hair from under her arms, plucking her brows, and inspecting herself for any signs of nits or fleas. She took a nicer bath than the quick ones she was used to: imbuing the water with lavender oil, rose water, and a little milk to soften her skin. It was a mixture recommended by Daenerys.

Sansa needed to relax as it was. She’d been up all night with Jon, and she feared her worry might upset him. In fact, she knew it was. He’d seemed very self-conscious all morning over the cysasse board, not to mention guilty. She wanted to be serene enough so as not to upset him. She’d already expressed herself enough for him to know she worried. But she wanted to give him a couple of days of peace of mind to recover from his breakdown.

Jon had a hard time relaxing if he felt she wasn’t. It was a mutual thing between them.

*And besides,* she thought dreamily as she rolled her head back, enjoying the warmth of the water, *it’s better for everyone if I just take care of myself a little. I do need some relief.*

One of the good things about having Dothraki maids was that as women who spent most of their lives on horseback, they knew quite a bit about soothing a person post-struggle. Nani had an attendant with her: Lyrr, who played the harp. Nani had lit some incense and rubbed Sansa’s neck. The room smelled like lavender, vanilla, and almonds. The candles were sparse so as not to put strain on the eyes.

Sansa felt a little guilt about indulging herself after Jon’s breakdown. But she felt it *was* necessary to give him and Arya some time alone. And frankly, if she didn’t help herself she’d have a breakdown of her own. Better to use time they needed apart to see to her own needs than waste it just making herself more worried and jumpy.

*After everything, I deserve this.* Even Daenerys indulged herself. She insisted she’d go mad if she didn’t. *A person in power owes it to their people to keep themselves from going mad.*

Sansa knew that after last night, she wasn’t going to be able to clear her mind of her lover’s issues. But to keep herself calm, she tried to think more on possible solutions than all the negatives. *You want to help him? Think on how you might do that.*

The Lady of Winterfell opened her eyes and caressed the skin on her right arm, slicked with oil. She could already feel the chapped flesh of her elbow softening a bit.

*This could be a start.* Elements of the stubborn Night’s Watchman lingered in her intended and made him avoid indulgence at all cost. There was a part of Sansa that loved him for it: he was no spoiled, pampered dandy.

Some of that was the North in him. Their people were less prone to luxury and indulgence than southerners.

*But even Father enjoyed good wine,* Sansa remembered. Lady Catelyn sometimes teased him for liking a good Dornish Red more than he’d ever be willing to admit. Lord Eddard was no drunk, but he definitely savored his spirits. Lord Eddard also enjoyed scent. He never admitted it, but once Sansa found a bottle of cologne in his chambers that he in fact wore daily, and he brought a vial of Lady Catelyn’s perfume with him to spread on his pillows wherever he went. One of the things he hated about King’s Landing the most was the stench. He never said a word, but when they arrived at the Tower of the Hand, he ordered everything be cleaned and often walked the city or yards trying his hardest not to wrinkle his nose.

Robb was no dandy, but he liked his silver Direwolf cloak pins, his finely-etched sheath, and his
tailored clothing. He visited the brothels in Wintertown a couple of times a week, and from his
fourteenth Name Day, he enjoyed joining Theon for a drunken evening whenever he could get away
with it. When he hunted, he tended to prefer the good furs to the meat, and he enjoyed honey cakes
as much as Sansa enjoyed lemon ones.

So even for a Northerner, Jon could be a bit repressed. Robb might have joined Theon in the brothels
and taverns, but Jon only went once or twice, and the boys practically dragged him. He happily took
Robb’s hand-me-downs without complaint, and never showed any interest in jewelry. The only fine
metal he cared about was in a blade. Sometimes he drank to excess, but mostly out of that thirst for
experience that young boys were prone to, and Sansa could count on one hand how many times that
actually happened. Jon preferred spicier foods to sweets, but never overate or indulged on that
ground. He was always skinny as a rail as a young man. He enjoyed games and fighting and
hunting, but was always so serious about it, one could never tell it was meant to be revelry.

And even as a prince, he denied himself. He only dressed well now to please Sansa, but otherwise
lived simply. He didn’t like being waited on, he filled his belly with simple fare, and the only times
he ever drank too much was after severe emotional trauma, or the night of their betrothal banquet. He
didn’t go hunting anymore, he fought to train others and keep himself in proper form, and he worked
constantly.

_He likes what we do in bed at the very least._ But even in that regard, he’d denied himself in between
Ygritte, Val, and Sansa. Jon had two approaches to sex: celibacy or monogamy. _Odd habits for a
healthy young man of his status._ While he definitely enjoyed himself, there was a certain level of
restraint in how he made love; restraint that Sansa was eternally grateful for. He liked doing his duty
there, too.

_He could stand some more indulgence in his life._ It might help. He didn’t have to be a Robert
Baratheon or Theon Greyjoy, but some more material comforts in his life might help with the stress.
The last thing Sansa wanted was for Jon to work himself mad or cut years off his life living like he
was still at the Wall. It was said that when Targaryens were born, the gods flipped a coin: one side
greatness, the other madness. Daenerys so far kept her peace of mind despite being the daughter of
Mad King Aerys. Sansa didn’t want Jon becoming the secular equivalent of Baelor the Blessed.

*If his breakdown comes in the form of him hearing birds cry “Snow!” at him, then it can’t hurt to
help him feel a bit more like a prince._ A bath like this one wouldn’t hurt. Jon tended to be kinder to
luxury when it made Sansa happy. _I might be able to coax him into indulging himself a little for the
next couple of days._

Her eyes opened and she looked around the room. Her eyes fell upon a parcel by her bed. The
Martell “weapon.”

Arianne’s little gift arrived days prior, and the second Sansa opened the parcel, she closed it again
out of embarrassment. She didn’t dare let Jon see, not that he’d probably realize what they were if he
did.

The contents of Arianne’s parcel had obviously been meant for herself originally, though they were
clearly brand new. The silk of them was orange with red satin ribbons for ties and yellow-gold
accents. Smallclothes quite different than the ones she usually wore and not meant for practicality.
The pantalets were a length of silk fastened and held up by red ribbons that tied at the sides. The
breast band looked as if it had been designed by someone more prone to constructing buildings than
clothing.

Normally, Sansa just held her breasts up with a simple length of cloth under her chemise. But this…
The gold on them were not threads or chords. They were solid curved wires clearly designed to go
under each breast. The band was fastened in the front and the shoulders by yet more ribbons. The silk that was supposed to cover her was in fact near transparent.

She couldn’t wear them. There wasn’t quite enough fabric, and wearing orange always made her skin look yellowish. She’d put them away in her old chambers like a dirty secret. But now…

*It’s not like it’ll require much fabric to make the necessary alterations.* She actually had some printed silk that was perfect for this. When she got out of the tub, she had Lyrri go fetch some of her better gowns. When they were presented, her eyes fell upon the red and white diamond silk. The Hardyng dress.

It had been a useful garment when she was fighting to be recognized as Harry’s true wife. But now…

Harry Hardyng. It was odd how little she thought of him, not that she particularly wanted to. As she’d told Jon, he was a means to an end. He’d given her Eddie, and for that she’d always have a place in her heart for him, but there wasn’t much else to be fond of.

*He’d been handsome, at least.* And he had been, with his twinkling blue eyes, dimples, and thick hair. Some called him strong and while it was true his arms were sturdy and his energy considerable, he was in fact quite weak. Harry lacked wits and endurance. While his level of self-confidence and bloodlust allowed him to ride into battle, he couldn’t stand not being catered to and was easily manipulated. He thought nothing about making blood spurt from a man’s neck, but moonblood made him avoid his wife. He’d ridden away when she was on her birthing bed as well, only to return two days after the fact

Handsome he might have been, but in another fifteen to twenty years, he’d have become fat and red-faced like Mace Tyrell and Robert Baratheon. Harry liked his food and drink, he liked his luxuries, he liked to spend money. He wasn’t cruel, but he could be jealous and insensitive.

He was a selfish, spoiled, painfully superficial boy. *A knight of summer.*

When Harry had first met Alayne Stone, he’d gotten her into a corner of a dark corridor and tried to take her right then and there. She’d refused, insisting they wait until their wedding night. He’d argued that, “As lovely as you are, Sweetling, you are a bastard. I cannot wed you. I’m to inherit all of the Vale. But I can give you my heart, if not my hand.”

Harry didn’t know the difference between his heart and his cock. *Not a clever man.*

Alayne Stone had run away in pretty tears and then spent a couple of days out of sight, looking after Lord Robert, taking lessons with her ‘father’, play-acting to Randa, and pretending to be heartbroken. Word got around that she was shutting herself up in her room, immobile from heartbreak. Petyr raised a big fuss about Harry daring to insult his daughter’s precious honor and shatter her gentle heart.

The day Baelish’s bastard emerged she had on a new low-cut gown of blue lamb’s wool that made her eyes pop. She made a big show of doting on Lord Robert and her own bustline, sang for the court at the Moon Gates in her sweetest voice, and acted like the perfect submissive maiden. Petyr presented the portrait of her the evening the Waynwood-Hardyng party was due to leave. Harry’s formal request for her hand came three days later.

Dealing with him always bored her. She always had to be Alayne, even after he knew her to be Sansa. She had to act like that stupid girl she’d once been. She had to flatter and cater to him as much as she had with Lord Robert.
And part of her did sort of hate Harry. There was the way he treated her like she was his property, a servant, a whore, or some combination of those three things. There was the way he acted so jealously when it came to other men while being completely blind to the one who raped her regularly.

She could remember having conversations with Daven Fenn or Jarmy Lake and Harry grabbing her wrist, pulling her away, and muttering that she’d best watch herself. “Just because you still call yourself Stark doesn’t mean you can forget that you’re Lady Hardyng. Your flirting days are over. I’ve given an army for you, you have no business consorting with these simpering sods.”

He liked her to promise that she was his and only his when he fucked her. “No one else gets to have you. Ever. Mine. All mine. Tell me. Tell me you’re mine.”

“Yours… All… Yours…”

Petyr found it hysterical.

Harry could be sweet on occasion, though. He’d loved Eddie, showing the boy off proudly and doting on him whenever his nappy wasn’t full. He bought Sansa gifts and could say some kind things. He often seemed quite besotted with the girl he thought he’d married. He never hit her.

But she’d acquired higher standards than ‘Never being beaten’ since Harry. Harry was gone, dead.

*I don’t need him anymore. The best part of him is gone. All of him is gone.* That wasn’t the best thought. Eddie was gone.

Eddie preferred being a Stark to being a Hardyng as it was. He even liked being a Tully more. He’d been born at Riverrun, and liked the fact that the last King in the North, his Uncle Robb, had been born there as well. Eddie used to run around and call out, “PRINCE IN THE NORTH!” and “KING IN THE NORTH!” Sometimes, when prompted by his father, he’d offer, “LORD OF THE EYRIE TOO!”

He never had much interest in the Eyrie. “How are all my friends going to come and see me if I live in a castle up a big mountain? No! That’s not very nice. The last little Lord there was sick all of the time. You said so! I want to be a strong boy like my father and uncles. When I’m in the Vale, I’d rather stay at Ironoaks with Aunt Anya or the Gates with Aunt Randa.”

There was far more of his uncles in him than his father. Eddie was obsessed with having a direwolf someday. He couldn’t wait to meet his Uncle Jon the prince and Ghost so he’d know what to do with a direwolf when he got one. Eddie wanted to name his own Red Wind in honor of his Uncle Robb and his mother.

Strangely enough, these things rarely bothered Harry. He wasn’t nearly as possessive over his son as he was with Sansa. He was always proud of himself for siring a prince. He liked the esteem it brought him in the North. He hadn’t taken the Stark name, but he took no issue with his son carrying it.

*If Eddie had lived… Gods, he’d have loved Jon.* Eddie was already very excited about Jon. Word had gotten back to them: Jon became Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch and came back from the dead. He fought White Walkers. Later, he was a prince. Eddie found all of this very impressive. “We’re both princes, Mama!”

Jon would have loved Eddie. There was all of Bran’s sweetness, Robb’s strength and good nature, Arya’s mischief, and Rickon’s energy in that boy. Sansa could just picture the two of them in the training yards together, messing with practice swords, Jon teaching him moves the way he taught the
other young men of the court. Eddie could have been Jon’s squire when he got older. When they returned to Winterfell, they could have swum in the moat and pools of the Godswood together.

She faltered for a second. *You won’t ever get Eddie back. But you will have more children. They won’t replace him, but they’ll have the father and the life your first could have had. Eddie would be happy to see that.*

She shook her head and asked the girls to excuse her for a moment. After a good cry, she let them back in. Sansa wanted children again. She picked the Hardyng dress, then asked for Sorri to fetch her sewing kit and the new silk with the pattern of red wolves. As she put needle to thread, she reminded herself that there were good things in her life and even better things to come.

*I’m going to have a good evening.*

She spent a couple hours at her project before it was completed. It gave her time to get her mind off what she’d lost and focus on what she had to gain. After that, she spread some aloe cream on her skin, checked her hair, and dressed to return to her lover.

Thuds hit her ears as she approached his solar, and when she entered, she found Jon and Arya laughing. On the far wall, a map of the Riverlands and the North had several blades sticking out of it, as well as a number of punctures.

“Maidenpool!” Arya cried, throwing a knife. It hit the seat of House Mooten dead center. She stepped back and allowed Jon to take aim.

“Deepwood Motte!” His blade landed about half an inch above Torren’s Square.

Arya cackled. “You’re *hopeless.*”

He sighed good-naturedly and shrugged. “I’m better with a larger blade. It’s been harder to aim since my hand burned.”

“Excuses! You’re just an awful marksman. Queen’s Crown!”

The dagger hit the target perfectly. Sansa cleared her throat. Both stopped short and looked at the ground guiltily.

“We were just---”

“Playing, I understand,” she smiled at them, trying to ignore the fact that the map they’d ruined was a century old. She wasn’t too crazy about Jon handling knives after his episode either, especially given his obvious lack of skill with them. But she didn’t want to ruin this moment of happiness. He had been smiling, and she wanted him smiling as much as possible.

The Lady of Winterfell walked over to the map and yanked the knife Jon had just thrown from the wall, then walked back to where her sister and lover were standing. Jon reached for it, but she pulled it, and the other blade he held, away from him. She turned to face the map, took a deep breath, and focused.

“Deepwood Motte.” She threw it. The angle was askew, it wasn’t as securely embedded as Arya’s efforts, and the blade ever so slightly to the right of its intended target. But it was better than Jon’s attempt. She took another deep breath. “Dreadfort.”

The second was more securely embedded in the wall, but still off. Sansa reached behind her. “Arya, another.”
She took the steel in hand, swallowed, and called out, “The Twins.”

The best of the three. It hit the mark, was secure, though the angle was still a bit off. Sansa turned to her lover and her sister. Their mouths and eyes were wide open.

“I was too weak to carry a sword or spear or axe. I’d just given birth,” she explained, “And I didn’t feel comfortable shooting arrows from atop a horse. Daggers, though, to me were like sharp kitchen knives. It was the one thing I could do semi-competently. They were lightweight and easy to conceal and I didn’t have to go outdoors or change into armor or leathers to practice. I could wear a gown and use them. It was a great way to deal with frustration sometimes. And I could multi-task. I remember being at the Bloody Gate, nursing Eddie after an argument with Harry and just hurling one blade after another at a Hardyng banner on the wall. Having a child at your breast requires you to practice with both hands, one at a time.”

They kept staring. Sansa rolled her eyes and glanced back at the map critically. Her hits were not as good at a second glance. The angles were really very off, and even the one at the Twins hadn’t hit perfectly. They were an unimpressive sight next to Arya’s immaculate throws.

“Those were all with my right hand, though,” she observed, “I’m really very rusty. It’s been ages.”

She glanced at Jon’s hands. “Your gloves.”

“Wh-what?”

“You’re wearing leather gloves,” she rolled her eyes, “You can’t get a proper grip with them. If you’re going to hurl daggers, wear suede. It’s more secure. I’ll make you some. We can work on improving together.”

“Arya…” Jon said, his voice choked. “I… I need you to leave. Right now.”

For once, their sister didn’t argue. She backed out, eyes still huge. Sansa grinned and met her lover’s eyes.

~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~

Jon:

I love you. I love you I love you I love you.

The moment he saw her enter the solar, he’d been a bit thrilled with her. The Hardyng dress she wore had the opposite of its usual effect on him. He’d never been particularly proud of that base part of him that resented the Hardyng sigil or Sansa’s last marriage. The second the thoughts first entered his head, he’d been ashamed of them. It was stupid and insulting.

Now that Sansa knew, he felt even more ashamed. Having her show up wearing those colors right after learning that he had some pathetic, possessive prejudice against them displayed a nerve he found delightful.

And then she began throwing knives.

She looked far better doing it than Nymeria Sand. And Nymeria Sand wasn’t a bad looking woman.

He grabbed his wife-to-be and pulled her to him, pressing his lips to hers and meeting her tongue with his. He ran his fingers through her fire-kissed hair, loving the way it danced through his fingers, a cool softness in contrast to the heat of her full, sweet mouth.
Jon adored her mouth. He loved all of her, but he sometimes felt he could have fallen for her mouth alone. He loved the pink color that darkened to red when she was kissed enough. He loved the plumpness of her lower lip and the defined bow of her upper one. He loved how they parted in surprise or even when she was simply concentrating. He loved how sweet her voice was. He loved how her mouth could never stay put when she smiled, growing wider and narrower, back and forth. Everything Sansa did with her mouth, she did with glittering skill and elegance, whether it was smiling, speaking, kissing… and other activities. He moaned against her and kissed her for as long as he could.

When they parted for breath, he pressed his forehead to hers and looked her dead in the eyes. “I love you.”

She gripped the sides of his face and grinned. “I love you. I love you like I’ve never loved anyone. And I want you to tear this dress off of me.”

He stopped and stepped back. “Sansa…”

The urge to do exactly as she asked was almost overpowering, but the circumstances of her request gutted him. He didn’t want to ruin her clothes. He didn’t want to grow violent with her or ruin some remnant of her prior marriage. He didn’t want his petty jealousies to characterize a moment of intimacy.

“No, Jon, please. I want you to. I really, really want you to.”

“But your nice silk---“

“The scraps can be made into bandages. It needn’t go to waste. Just tear it off.”

“Why? To make me happy?”

“To make us both happy. Harry was a shit I didn’t love who treated me like property. The only good thing he ever produced was our son, and our son was a Stark. Harry was a jealous man who liked to put me in his colors to mark what he thought was his territory and grew angry whenever I spoke to another man. So I want you to tear his colors off of me and fuck me.”

Perhaps it was his cock thinking for him, but he found this a perfectly acceptable excuse to do exactly as she asked. His hands clutched the front of her bodice.

The fabric came apart with a satisfying sound. The gown was already low-cut, and from the neckline to the waist it was now split apart, the two ends hanging over.

Eagerness gripped him when he went to survey the result. Jon expected the now wonderfully familiar sight of her bare breasts to greet him. It did not, but what did hit his eyes was fascinating enough to almost make up for it.

Sansa generally wore chemise, smallclothes, stockings, a girdle and a modest breast band under her gowns. But what she had on now was quite different from what he was used to seeing. There was no girdle, no chemise and her breast band was not the slip of modestly tied linen he was used to.

Instead, black silk patterned with red attached to two golden bands greeted them. The gold bands seemed to push her breasts higher than usual. Red ribbons held the fabric in place, tying at the front and fastened to her shoulders. The silk had red symbols on them. When he peered closer, he saw them to be wolves.

He went as red as the wolves on her smallclothes. Targaryen black and red. But the red is in the
shape of wolves. Always wolves.

“That’s… That’s very pretty.”

“I believe you have a task to complete, My Prince,” she replied, a brow arched, “You’ll get to see more pretty things if you manage.”

It felt far too hot in the solar then. Far, far too hot. Jon planted his lips on hers, willing her backwards as he unlaced his jerkin and shirts and kicked off his boots. Sansa hit the nearby sofa and fell back with a squeal. When he began to get on his knees to become eye-level with her, she stopped him, and reached forward to palm him through his trousers. He threw his head back for a second and gasped, her touch caressing him like a sweet flame. She reached over with another hand and gave him a light smack on the hip.

Jon looked down at her, wide-eyed. His wife to be looked like absolute heaven, wanton and sweet, her hair rumpled and mussed, her lips bruised, her skin flush. Her eyes were on him, as heated as every other part of her, little blue flames for irises. Despite her deep breaths, she smirked and maintained an air of confidence. “A task, Jon Snow.”

He pulled his unlaced shirts off and then reached down to her right arm, extended towards him, her palm and fingers still upon his cloth-bound cock, which was more or less pulsing against the blasted fabric. The sleeves of her gown had long points, and the inner seam of them was pointed inward at the cuff. Jon ran his thumb over the blue veins of her wrist before taking the end of the seam in hand and splitting it apart. He yanked it away all the way up to her shoulder so the fabric hung off like a curtain, then attended to the other side.

Each ripping sound had the most wonderful affect on him. Gods, I’ll never be able to hear fabric tear again without growing as hard as steel. He didn’t really care at the moment. Sansa was unlacing his trousers. Before she loosened the laces and spring him free, however, she paused and looked off to the side. Come on, Sweet Girl. Let Balerion fly.

“Ghost,” she said, causing Jon to almost jump. He’d forgotten the beast was even in the room. But the direwolf was, lying by the hall door, his ears perking up at the sound of Sansa’s voice. “Bedchamber.”

The Direwolf heaved himself up and padded towards the bedchamber door, disappearing without a sound. Jon chuckled. “You have him well trained, My Lady.”

“Well, he’s a part of you.”

Jon was so happy to hear her speak like this. She was being playful. She was treating him normally. He needed that. He played right back. “Oh, so I’m your pet, am I? Your tamed little creature?”

“Don’t you have something to do? I’m still wearing Harry’s colors.”

He promptly tore the shoulders of her gown, causing the entire upper half to drop around her waist, leaving her upper torso visible. With the lengths of cloth in pieces around her like that, she looked like she was rising out of a red and white flower, like some sort of fairy.

Jon paused to admire his handiwork, and then saw the smirk on her face. Gods, I am trained. Before he could consider the implications of this, his laces were pulled apart and Balerion was free.

Delicate fingers danced over his hips and pulled his trousers down. Hating breeches more than anything in the world at that moment, Jon kicked the garment off as they fell around his ankles. Sansa brought her hands back up again slowly, stroking the planes of his calves, knees, and thighs.
Blue eyes caressed him as much as her fingers did. Jon loved the way she looked at him. Sansa viewed him without shame or fear, letting her desire run wild across her features. It was one of the things she had in common with his past lovers. She wasn’t afraid to look at him in the same way he’d look at her. She didn’t conceal her appreciation.

There was something so richly appealing about having someone lust for him like this. The boy Jon Snow was cowed by it all those years ago, when it was Ygritte who flaunted her desire for him. It frustrated him then. It wasn’t just the vows, it was his own boyish inexperience and fear. Like it was some sort of trap.

Part of it, he knew, was the circumstances surrounding each respective relationship. When he was with Ygritte, he still was beholden to vows and struggled with his loyalties. His relationship with her was fraught with guilt and inexperience. He was never supposed to take a woman, let alone a wildling one.

With Sansa, the opposite was now true. He now held lands, he had to take a wife and father children. And, specifically, he was expected to give his hand, hold lands, and father children with the woman before him. His oaths were to the throne and to her now. He was expected to couple with her, that was his clear duty. He was to couple with her even before they were wed. Even his queen encouraged it, as embarrassing as that was.

But even if the situations weren’t so drastically at odds with one another, he knew he preferred Sansa’s method of displaying her regard for him. The restraint in public communicated the desire but left room for true intimacy. Every one of their physical encounters felt like that time in the cave for him.

Of course, while neither Ygritte nor Sansa concealed their desire for him, Ygritte had gone about showing her own wants in a far different manner. She followed him around, planted her furs beside him, pulled him close to her in the night, and openly propositioned him and got physical with him in front of others. Before they’d actually coupled, she’d spoken of getting naked together loudly, coupling loudly, in front of the entire camp to hear. After they knew each other conjugally, she cheerfully groped, kissed, and grinded against him. There was hardly ever any privacy with her. Most of their coupleings took place underneath furs, surrounded by the other members of their raiding party. Crude jokes were sometimes made, as were threats to throw water over them if they didn’t hurry. The only time they ever got any real privacy was in the cave. Ygritte never cared. She was a wildling, heart and soul.

Sansa, though… Once she was officially declared as his lady, she did not pretend otherwise. It was immensely sweet, in fact, to have her on his arm when they walked down the halls of the Red Keep, to wear her favor, hold her hand and kiss her for the whole court to see. The way she spoke of her excitement for the wedding and her love for him openly made him feel proud and special.

Ygritte’s public displays often embarrassed him. He didn’t come from her wildling world where it was commonplace to couple in public and talk about your cock the way one spoke of the weather. It made him blush like a maid.

Sansa’s own exhibitions, to him, showed just as much desire as any of Ygritte’s, but in a way that preserved a certain propriety and intimacy. Instead of making him blush, it just made him swell with pride to lead her down the halls and hold her hand as they received petitions in the throne room or sat in one of the banquet halls.

Ygritte’s wants were always shared with and picked apart by the world. But Sansa’s own feelings were just theirs to keep.
When she looked at him now, there was as much open lust on her face as he’d ever seen on Ygritte. She seemed almost as engrossed by him as he was with her.

*There is nothing sweeter than being with a woman who plainly wants you as much as you want her. And she does want me, maybe even in spite of herself.* Sansa made him feel wanted and valued in a way he’d never before known. Her desire for him encompassed every area: emotional, mental, physical, spiritual. And it wasn’t just desire, it was also need. She was the only thing in his life that had ever made him feel so entirely welcome.

And when she saw his cock, her smile grew even wider. *That’s just... Gods above.*

He’d be a puddle if he didn’t control himself at least a little. He cupped her chin. “Do you like that, Sweet Girl? You like seeing how much sway you have over me? You like seeing how hard I get for you?”

The glimmer in her eyes told him that yes, she certainly did. She smirked a little.

“You’re a power hungry thing,” he teased, “A bloody tyrant, is what you are. Ruling every bit of us with your iron fist. Never failing to issue your commands.”

She stood then. The remains of her gown fell to the floor. Upon her abdomen a set of pantalets matching her breast band hung, held oh-so-delicately together with crimson ribbons on each hip. Her feet were still encased in a set of black slippers. Stockings were noticeably absent.

A second later she was pressed up against him, her lips on his neck, pressing soft kisses until they reached his left ear. Her breath tickled his skin and hair as she bent her head to whisper. “I don’t need to command. I can get what I want without a word.”

“If you want something, Sweetling, you have to take it.”

She threw her head back and laughed. “Not with you, you’d give it to me regardless.”

“How do you know?”

She backed away then, moving away from the couch. He shuddered from the lack of contact, missing her already. Sansa glided over to the area by the fire, standing before the flame and grinning to him as she stepped nimbly from her slippers. The flames behind her cast a glow and breathtaking aura about her. While the distance between them came with the near devastating side-affect of not having her against him, there was an advantage. He could admire the image of her more fully from this perspective. Every inch of her was easily seen, her entire shape.

Sansa looked like desire itself, like some sort of shrine to sensuality. She’d put on a fair amount of weight since her recovery, lending soft curves to places where harsh angles once existed. There was more there to fill his hands, more to feel and taste. Her breasts were fuller, her hips rounder, there was more of a curve to her backside, more strength and vitality to her form overall, and it was easier to admire the narrowness of her waist.

His wife-to-be always looked lovely in her fine gowns, but so much was often concealed in them. There was something to appreciate there, as it gave him much to look forward to when the dresses came off. But still, he often missed being able to make out the exact shape of her arse or the natural sway of her breasts.

Such things were easier to make out now that she was only in these little cloth constructions. The silk concealing just enough to add that tempting layer of mystery. Being just a breath away from what one wanted most was always the most exciting moment, after all. Still, she was so exposed in a new
way.

She was subjecting herself to judgment, taking a risk. She couldn’t stand before him, dressed like this by her own volition, and claim there was anything in her intent that was chaste or accidental.

These garments were made especially for this purpose, especially for him. Never had Sansa been so forward in preparing herself for pure carnal activity. It brought a new, calculated focus to her sexuality. This wasn’t just her giving in to a moment of lust. This was the fruit of a pre-planned seduction, one she wanted to be aware. She wanted him enough to assert her desire to tempt and expose herself to him before the fact. This was a part of her life she anticipated and put thought and effort into.

Also, they were black and red. The Targaryen colors, imbued with the wolves to retain her identity. An open declaration that she saw herself as his and vice-versa.

She’d really put quite a bit of effort into making him as hard and mad for her as possible, and she wanted him to know it.

Sansa was exposing herself shamelessly, scandalously in a way completely alien to her usual proper lady persona. These were not the undergarments of a lady. An idiot with no eye for beauty or joy in their life might say she looked and conducted herself like a whore at this very moment. But then, so many were so painfully ignorant of what it meant to be a good lover.

Jon’s lover ran her fingers over her belly, then stroked upwards to her breasts and shoulders. “I know because I know you. I know that I could just let you do as you wish, I could have you be the one telling me what to do, initiating everything, taking all the action, and I’d still get everything I want. You couldn’t deny me, couldn’t just use me, couldn’t touch me in any way I wouldn’t want no matter what. Maybe I do have you trained, or maybe you’ve just proven yourself both trustworthy and a talented lover. But I don’t even need to say a word to get what I want. I’ve conquered you for good. My claim goes without saying.”

He stepped forward. “I like it when you tell me what you want.”

“Well, maybe it’s time for you to do some of the talking, My Prince. I might like it as well. I’ve never liked it in a man before, but you’re special. And maybe I’d like to be pleased tonight without having to take on the burdens of leadership.” She licked her lips. “So you tell me what you want, and I’ll do it. You do as you wish. You make the plans. You take the lead.”

“And…. And if you’re unwilling?”

“Well, I’ll remind you what a bastard you are and call you Jon Snow. But until then, well, I’ll follow My Prince’s wishes. I’ve never been to bed with a prince before. Let’s see how we both like it.”

He took a deep breath, oddly humbled by this. There was an expression of trust here, even more poignant given the events of the night before. “I can trust you with me. I can trust you to behave like a sane man. I saw what happened last night, but I don’t think of you as a madman. I still see you as the man I love.”

There is no way she can understand how much that means to me. Because he was afraid, afraid of being defined by that horrible moment. Of everyone having seen that vulnerability, and treating him different forevermore because of it. He didn’t want to be a lunatic. He just wanted to be a man. A man that someone like Sansa, who had so many reasons to hold people at arm’s length, could trust. And she was giving him that right now. She’d had her body exploited so many times. But now she looked him straight in the eye after one of his worst moments and was saying, “Do as you like, I’m
here for you.”

Jon took a deep, shuddering breath, then walked over near her and sat down on a sofa in front of her.

As much as his cock was absolutely straining, he wanted to savor this moment, savor her. He stared for a moment, just loving her. She stared back with kind eyes.

Every inch of her was kind and inviting. He wanted to just bury himself inside her. But he didn’t. Instead he smiled as he observed the garments she wore. The way the fabric was condensed, so tightly stitched, suggested they were very newly made. The stitches were fine enough that he guessed they were done by Sansa. _She put all this effort into appearing like this for me._ He felt it would be ungrateful not to appreciate it fully. Something occurred to him, though.

“The other night, you said Arianne Martell was sending you some ‘weapon’?”

Sansa grinned. “The drastically altered form of her gift to me, Your Grace. I replaced the fabric today.”

Jon licked his lips and stroked the fabric on her breasts, giving her a playful, smug look. “So you spent the afternoon making scandalous Dornish undergarments to display yourself in. And you came to my rooms without stockings or chemise.”

“Yes,” she told him boldly, “I did. I wanted this to be the first thing you saw when you tore my gown from me, and I didn’t want you distracted by my stockings or anything. So I came to you bare-legged.”

He groaned. “You’re a fine temptress.”

“I am. But a man in love is easy to tempt.”

“Fair enough. But you just keep going out of your way to come up with new methods for it, don’t you?”

“It pleases me to.”

“Apparently.” Then his smirk faltered a bit. He didn’t want to tease her too much. “These things you’re wearing. They’re lovely. You’re lovely in them.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

He hesitated then and looked into her eyes. Her expression was encouraging. Jon smirked again and then gave her a slight nudge back. She took several steps away. Jon kept his smile. “Why don’t you turn around so I can see them fully?”

Jon wanted a better look at her arse. Sansa smiled coyly and turned slowly. Sure enough, the image was utterly glorious, a heart-shaped pillow above her long legs. When she had her back to him, she wiggled her hips and Jon groaned. “Not shy, are you?”

She turned to face him again. “Not with you.”

“You’re beautiful,” he told her, losing his composure a bit once more. His heart swelled. “I love you.”

“I love you, Jon.”

“Come here.”
Confidence imbued her every step toward him. Jon pulled his knees apart. “Part your legs. Stand over my knee.”

She did so, her core hovering over his upper left thigh. He smiled at her wolfishly and reached up for the ribbons between her breasts.

“I know you love me,” he murmured, untying the bow in the middle so her breast band fell open. The dark rose of her hardened nipples greeted him. He quickly pulled the bows from her shoulders as well so the whole thing fell off before cupping her teats and circling and teasing them with his thumbs. The soft, firm flesh he gripped was pure heaven. Sansa gasped and arched against his hands, her eyes fluttering closed. He almost lost it there.

“You know how I know? Because the tips of these pretty teats of yours are almost as hard as Balerion.”

“Mmmmhmmm.” She nodded, straining a bit now. She seemed every bit as desperate as he felt.

Jon glanced down, still teasing her breasts. He could see the silk of her pantalets molding to her mound, secured by a wetness that was now starting to drip down her inner thighs. The prince licked his lips.

“And if that weren’t enough, there’s this,” he let his hands fall, stroking her sides as they descended to rest upon her hips, squeezing them a bit. “What do we have here?”

He grabbed the ends of a bow in each hand, and the ribbons gave way, the fabric falling from her, leaving her utterly exposed to him. The sight of those fiery red curls almost made him lose it there. Jon took a second to inhale the scent of it, warm and deep and musky and perfect.

The prince pulled back then, and adopted a more stoic tone, pretending he had control.

“There’s been a bit of a spill upon your thighs,” he observed, “Let me see where it comes from.” Jon hooked his hand behind one of her knees, propping her foot up on the seat so her legs were parted more and she was exposed. A bit of pink peeked out from the thatch of red curls. Jon leaned forward and began kissing her thighs, licking up the wetness that accumulated there. The taste was thick and sweet and wonderfully familiar. Sansa groaned and bucked against him.

“I can’t locate the source of the flow, but I’m enjoying the products of it,” he muttered, “I may spend all night lapping at your thighs.”

“My Prince…”

Jon looked up. Sansa was whimpering, but the look in her eyes and her ability to address him by title indicated not only she was still active in this, but that she knew exactly where he was going with this. She didn’t seem to mind the direction too much.

“My Lady? Is there something you want?” Jon asked her with affected innocence. “If you want it, tell me.”

She looked down at him and smirked. *Oh, I know what you’re on about, Jon.* He laughed. He wasn’t going to force her to say it out loud first. So he gave in and spoke the words himself.

“Does My Lady want me to lick that dripping, hungry cunt of hers?” He gave her pubic hair a little tug. She yelped.

“Yes.” She hissed.
“Hmmm…” He parted her lower lips with his fingers. It opened like a flower blooming. Her nub stuck out proudly. It took every ounce of self-control he had not to latch his mouth onto it. “First, I think, I’ll have you earn it. You’ll come for me once, then you get my mouth.”

He grabbed her cunt roughly, conjuring another cry, and began circling her nub with his thumb. Her breath caught. She whimpered like mad, her body shaking. Jon grinned and extended his other fingers to her entrance, hooking his middle and ring fingers inside her and fucking her with them. She bucked against his hand shamelessly.

“Oh…. Oh…. Oh, Jon….”

“You like that, Sweet Girl?” He increased his speed and intensity. She was coming apart in front of him immaculately.

“Oh… yes…” She whimpered. “More… More, Jon….”

He increased the pressure on her nub as well, watching as she became more and more unhinged. She shuddered and moaned until finally, with a shout, she fell forward, gripping his shoulders for balance. Her insides pulsed around his hand and soaked it to the wrist. She gasped, her hair falling in her face like a curtain.

Jon couldn’t have that. He reached up and put her hair behind her ears so he could see that lovely, flushed face. She slowly recovered and when her eyes fluttered open, he brought his soaked hand to his mouth and licked it.

“Gods,” they said in unison.

He grinned at her and gave her not even a second before seizing her hips, yanking her forward, and burying his face between her legs.

“GODS, JON!” She tangled her hands in his hair, pulling so hard he was sure at least some would come out. No matter, she can pull and yank as she likes. There’s no mercy. The taste of her was too good. Tart and sweet and warm and lovely. He buried his fingers within her again as he licked, sucked, and kissed her. She seemed to lose all muscle control, but she made up for that in how loud she screamed. After a couple of minutes, Jon’s beard was soaked.

She actually stumbled and nearly fell upon her second peak. Jon caught her, pulling her shaking form into his lap. His cock was in absolute agony by this point. But he’d wait for her to recover before he satisfied his need. The heat of her core was so close, though. All his reserve was required to keep him from bucking his hips and sheathing himself in her.

Instead, he repositioned them, laying her down on the sofa gently, propping her shoulders and neck up against a couple of pillows like she was a doll. She smiled up at him, her love clear in her eyes.

“I love you, Sansa Stark,” he told her, “I love you and I’m going to make love to you and fill you up with my seed. Would you like that?”

“Yes,” she replied, “I want you inside of me, My Prince.”

She draped one long leg over the edge of the seat so she was splayed before him, and lifted her hips. “Come inside me. Take me.”

Further encouragement was not required. The prince joined himself with her with a deep, desperate thrust. The sensation of her warm, powerful inner walls swallowing him up conjured a gasp from him.
He’d been inside her a hundred times by now. *And yet this always feels new.*

Jon would never get used to this. He’d never get used to her tight, slick heat. He’d never get used to the feeling of her soft, lovely flesh filling his hands. He’d never get used to the sounds she made, or the way she threw her head back, or the way her blue eyes seemed to glow when they met his. He’d never get used to the way her hips rolled to meeting his eagerly, or how she clung to him. He’d never get used to her bite his neck, gripping his hair or clawing at his back.

If he ever got used to it, he’d know himself to be truly mad. He’d lose himself, and he only ever wanted to lose himself to her.

Sansa hooked her arms around his neck and nibbled at his ear before whispering, “Gods, yes, perfect. Take me, My Love. So good. So very good. Fill me up. You’re the best, the very best.”

Jon groaned, angled his hips a bit more, and gave a particularly hard thrust. Sansa cried out.

He grunted. “Good?”

“Yes!” She shouted before quieting herself to a whimper. “More, more like that. Oh, Gods, JOOONNN…”

He gripped her sides tightly as she vibrated and clenched around him.

“GODS SANSA!”

Jon allowed himself release then, spilling within her so hard he lost all sense for a few seconds and falling on top of her in a sweaty haze.

It took a while to regain his control. When he did, he pushed himself up a bit and stared down at her, watching her face. She smiled, her eyes closed, as if she were having a lovely dream. Jon couldn’t help himself. He planted a chaste little kiss upon her cheek. She giggled.

“How would you know? All you’ve had before me were wildlings. A prince should praise his lady.”

“You were wonderful,” he had dozens of other adjectives he could use, like *breathtaking, perfect,* and *devastatingly beautiful.* But he worried if he started, he’d never stop. “And you? Did My Lady find her prince… satisfactory?”

She grinned. “Yes. It’s like I said, I got everything I wanted, and I didn’t even have to ask.”

*Is that true?* She had voiced her desires. *She didn’t say a thing without prompting. And it wasn’t like she had to anyways. I was planning to do all of those things regardless.* “I suppose you do have me well-trained.”

“Well, more than anything else, princes should be well-trained. Otherwise they become spoiled, stupid, lazy, entitled, and vain. That doesn’t do the kingdoms or the ladies in their beds any good. A prince must anticipate and fulfill the needs of his people. I am glad to say you anticipated and fulfilled the needs of this particular subject quite well.”
Feeling proud of himself, he began to rise. Sansa proceeded to hook her legs around his hips and yank him back into place. “You’re staying right here.”

“You’re insatiable.”

“I’m enjoying myself,” was her retort. She pulled his head down as well so he rested atop her completely, “Stay here and relax with me for a little while. There are no enemies to vanquish, no wars to fight, no treaties to sign, no petitions to hear, no courtiers to receive, no speeches to make, no council meetings to attend. Your only duty right now is to yourself and to me.”

“I always do my duty.” He nestled his head in her hair, stroking a lock of it between his fingers. “I’m not too heavy for you?”

His lover snorted at this. “You don’t think I’m strong enough to take you? Have you not been paying attention for the last several moons?”

Jon pinched her nipple. Already, he could feel his cock twitching back to life.

Judging by the smug smile spread across her face, Sansa could feel it too. Her grip grew tighter and she murmured for him to sit up. He did so, his wife-to-be straddling his lap with him still inside her. She rocked her hips against him, stirring his loins back to life fully. Jon latched his mouth onto her nipple, cupping another in one hand and keeping the other hand on her hip.

So. Bloody. Beautiful. This time it was gentler, the two of them staring into one another’s eyes as they made love. When they finished, they sat still for several moments, cuddling.

“Just think,” Sansa murmured into his neck, “After the wedding, we’ll have months of this at Dragonstone.”

“Until you’re far enough into your term that we have to stop making love,” he replied, “When does that point come again?”

“Birth,” she murmured. He chuckled.

“A few maesters might disagree, Love.”

“The maesters can hang themselves with their own chains.”

Jon leaned back, surveyed her belly, and gave it a little pat. “What do you think? Have we put one in there yet?”

“Let’s see… I last bled a fortnight ago, I last took moon tea about five days ago. I suppose it’s possible,” she said thoughtfully, “But it may be too early for me to know. When I start to suspect, I’ll tell you.”

She pinched his cheek again. “Don’t get over-eager, though. It might take a while. I’ve only just regained my health. But I think it could happen soon, if it hasn’t happened yet. I’ve put a bit of weight on. That helps.”

He gripped her arse eagerly. “In more ways than one.”

“Oh, is that what you want? A plump wife?” She leaned down, rubbing her nose against this affectionately and giggling, “A round little dumpling in a dress? Shall I stuff myself full of lemon cakes until I look like Leona Manderly to please my husband?”
He snorted. “I want a tall, lovely Red Wolf in a dress for my wife. You’re going to be all sorts of shapes over the next several decades. You’ll swell and shrink as you need to.”

His hands found her hips once more, lifting her up a bit so he could kiss her belly. “Just stay strong.”

_Because I’m not sure I could bear it if I saw you so sick and weak again._ He set her down.

Sansa stroked his cheek. “What’s wrong, Jon Snow?”

“Nothing, I was just thinking I wouldn’t like to see you as thin as you were when you were sick.”

“Gods be good, I won’t be. Don’t worry yourself over that. It’s passed. I’m healthier, stronger, plumper,” she planted one hand on its prior place on her arse and had him squeeze. “See?”

“Yes.”

She cupped his face then, kissed him sweetly, then pulled away, peering into his eyes. “Don’t let your mind dwell on these dark thoughts. We have so much to be grateful for. Think of how much we’ve survived, how much we have to look forward to, all the good things we already have. If you have to cry, if you have to rage, do so, but don’t hold it all in. Don’t shut people out.”

“Sansa…”

“What?”

He glanced down, thinking of all the things he didn’t know, all the mistakes he’d made. _Don’t shut people out. How many times did I do that and cause disasters as a result? Even when I didn’t mean to do it, I would._ This bothered him immensely. Sansa knew about these things, though. “Do you think… Do you think I’m… Am I adequate? As a prince, I mean. I’m not rubbish? I know I’m not my father, and I’m not talented with charm or words but—-”

Sansa snorted. “Jon, honestly. You worry you fail as a prince because you’re not like your father?”

“I mean Rhaegar.” Eddard Stark was a fantastic man, but he was no prince, no politician. He’d been killed as much by his own lack of political instincts as anything.

“I know. For pity’s sake, Jon—-“ She glanced around and then hushed her voice, “I know we’re all supposed to idolize him because of Daenerys. And by all accounts, he was handsome, brave, strong, talented, charming, clever—-”

“And people think I’m simple-minded, strange, dull, and cold——”

Sansa rolled her eyes. “Idiots who think speech equals thought do not have valid opinions. Do you know how many times I’ve been called stupid and simple-minded and boring? Many, many, many times. Just because you don’t spout every thought that comes to your head does not make it empty. Daenerys is a smart woman and she trusts you to help her govern. She would not trust a simpleton in such a manner. And you’re one of the warmest people I know. And as to—-”

She swallowed. “As to the man that sired you. Maybe he was all of those nice things people say about him. But he still almost destroyed the kingdoms and his House when he took your mother. That, to me, is not a thing a good prince would do. Rhaegar helped to almost destroy House Targaryen and the Seven Realms. You’re giving it a future in more ways than just siring heirs. You’re brave, you’re strong, you’ve got self-control, you’re smart, and you’re one of the few people of means in this world who isn’t tied up in prejudice and is willing to embrace progress. Yes, you have a few rough edges, so do we all. But you’re learning. Most aren’t even willing to learn.”
Jon took a deep breath. He was relieved to hear her speak this way. So few people were willing to admit Rhaegar Targaryen wasn’t perfect. *At least I’m clever enough to marry someone with enough sense to see the truth. I’ve got her by my side, if anything. And Dany. And Arya. It’s not hopeless.* “I don’t want to ruin everything by turning people away. And I don’t have much charm or any fancy skills. I can’t delight people by singing or playing or….”

“I can sing, play the high harp, and the bells. I’m the only person I know who is able to maintain friendships with the Princess of Dorne and the Maid of Highgarden simultaneously. I talked Joffrey Baratheon out of murder. I can handle people, if you struggle so. But honestly Jon,” she smiled at him, “You have so much goodness in you. You have a kind heart. When people see that--- and you’ve never been very good at hiding it--- they come to love or at least respect you.”

“Alliser Thorne didn’t.”

“Everything I’ve heard of Alliser Thorne indicates that he was a vile old goat. He was probably jealous of you. He was by all accounts prone to extreme bitterness.”

“Sansa, I saw crows that weren’t there last night. I broke down in front of the court. They say Targaryens become great or they go mad. What if I’m one of the mad ones?” He shook then. “What if it all comes apart because of me? I’m not even sure who I am, really. What if I end up a monster like my grandfather?”

Sansa sighed and embraced him, clutching his head to her breast. “Listen to me: you’re wonderful. You’re the man I love, and I believe in you. You’re not mad. You’re just not well at the moment. Surrendering yourself after one issue will help no one. They say a thousand things about your family. They say Daenerys bathes in the blood of virgins. They say Baelor the Blessed walked in a pit of vipers but was so holy that their venom couldn’t touch him. They say you’re all completely fireproof.

“You will go mad if you obsess over matters like prophecies and rumora. One of the things I have noticed about these Targaryens who lose their minds is that they become obsessed with sayings and prophecies about their family, self-reproach, or self-indulgence. Aerys and Rhaegar were both obsessed with the Prince who was Promised. Baelor the Blessed was so obsessed with staying chaste that he starved himself to death to rid himself of lustful thoughts. Aegon the Unworthy was obsessed with bedding everything with a pulse and caused the Blackfyre Rebellion. You don’t have a problem with self-indulgence. So avoid self-loathing and prophecies. Keep living, do your duty, and look to the future. You have people who love you. If anything, let that keep you sane.”

Jon pulled her close again and buried his head in her bosom once more. He felt so safe like this. Several minutes passed as he processed her words. “Arya says doing my duty will help me remember who I am.”

“We can start there. One of your duties is to stay sane. And right now, your duties are to me,” she squeezed him and tapped him on the shoulder. “Carry me to the bedchamber, and we’ll pull our robes on. Take a bath with me, and we’ll have dinner. We have at least another day where your only duty is to me.”

_The very best duty I have._ Jon smirked and lifted her up. He paused to gather her scandalous smallclothes from the floor before marching towards the bedchamber. She was soft and pliant in his arms. He could feel the warmth of her, and she smelled so sweet. *Gods, how could I have ever been so stupid as to swear to abstain from something like this? If I had known... You knew nothing, Jon Snow. “My only duty is to you, eh? Well then prepare yourself, Woman. I will do that duty most enthusiastically. You won’t be able to walk right for a week.”*

“I always walk right. I’m a lady. Even when heavily pregnant, I walked with grace,” she retorted,
sticking her nose in the air. Jon laughed.

“Of course you did.”

“I did. Everyone said so.”

“Was this before or after you were crowned?”

She gave him a light smack on the head. “Don’t be cruel.”

Despite his cruelty, they did their duties as many times as humanly possible over the following thirty-six hours. Putting their clothes back on after their seclusion proved a painful ordeal.

Daenerys insisted Jon continue his rest for another several days, not allowing him to go near a court document, council meeting, petition meeting, or really anything. Sansa had to return to her duties, but Jon was confined to rest and recreation.

For the first few days, it wasn’t so bad despite the guilt. The others had to take on extra work with him gone. When he emerged from his rooms, he was greeted by numerous well-wishers and people wishing to express their concern. He received them as graciously as he could, wishing he didn’t have to suspect the kindness of practically every man and woman at court.

It proved a bit too much, really, and he kept to his rooms for a bit longer after that. When out and about, he could feel their calculating eyes upon him at all times. People spoke in hushed tones around him, as if they thought he’d shatter like a glass if they spoke too loudly. When he ventured into the training yard, the other men handled him with kid gloves. Only Arya would make a decent effort at striking at him.

He grew impatient, desperately wishing to feel useful. Sansa heard his frustrations and resolved to make things easier. She accompanied him in public, fending off some of the more annoying courtiers and generally encouraging pleasantness.

About a week after she’d gotten back to work, she presented him with some new suede gloves with white wolves and green dragons stitched onto the cuffs. They went out into the training yard together, and as she proposed, they practiced throwing knives. It became clear before long that Sansa didn’t have much enthusiasm for practicing out in the cold and mud. She said not a word, but he could tell by her face.

“We could do this inside,” he offered her one afternoon.

“No, you need fresh air, you want to prove to the others you’re still strong, and you’re more comfortable out here. We’re doing this here. Don’t worry about me.”

Afterwards, her hands would end up to cold for her to properly hold a needle. Seeing this bothered him enough to try harder to rid himself of his free afternoons so she wouldn’t feel obligated to accompany him. Jon begged his aunt for something to do. “I’m ready to go mad from boredom!”

She allowed him some paperwork and some quiet meetings, gradually increasing the workload for a fortnight. Eventually, she allowed him to attend council meetings.

_The good news is, I’m still madly in love_, he thought his first afternoon back as the temporary Small Council sat going over accounts. Arther Butterwell, a kind and enterprising but rather pedantic man, droned on. Jon eyed his bride to be, who appeared to be paying rapt attention despite her lack of esteem for figures. She teased him for looking uninterested at the meeting afterwards before hurrying off to go prepare for Lyra Mormont’s upcoming arrival.
Jon watched her scurry away and his stomach sank. Guilt overtook him. She was working herself very hard, and it obviously was starting to affect her. Every so often, she complained about new aches and pains.

And yet, this didn’t stop her from attending to him. She remained highly enthusiastic in bedding him, or she pretended to be. It actually made him wonder if it was for his sake. She’d been wonderful, and deserved better.

*I have a reduced workload, I should take advantage of it.* He went to visit the court goldsmith.

Chapter End Notes

BTW: If you haven’t checked my tumblr.... You guys win. Val/Arianne is happening as soon as I school myself on how to better craft some Magna-on-Princess action. It was originally going to Val/Dany. But hey, I like our favorite dragon queen with Pod. But if anyone has any help they can give me on writing some sapphic sex, I'd very much appreciate it.
Chapter Thirty-four: Growing Wrong.

Margaery:

_Gods, kill me now_, Margaery thought as she sat in her mother’s solar. Her cousins of the lower bush were entrusted to her care today. The girls weren’t even supposed to be with her. Her mother, Lady Alerie, was their official escort now that Lady Olenna was gone. But her mother claimed a great migraine today and thus Margaery was stuck with Leona, Ollara, and Alenna.

The three were with her in a sewing circle, stitching “Growing Strong” emblems into their silk and chattering about “The Stark Woman.”

The eldest of the current crop of Tyrell maids was Leona. She was a slimmer, far prettier, and even more painfully dense version of her older cousin, Magga: loud and obsessed with being kissed. At fifteen, Leona was a rose in full bloom with perfect skin, bow-shaped lips, deep blue eyes, long lashes, and chestnut curls.

She was the leader of the trio in all respects. Ollara and Alenna were eleven and ten and did all their cousin told them.

“That Wolf Woman has performed some sort of warging magic upon him, and stolen him from me,” Leona cried. “The wedding is only a moon away. What am I to do?”

Leona believed that she and Prince Jon were meant to be together. He’d danced with her at the Queen’s coronation, where he seemed ‘sweet and shy and nervous’ around her and called her ‘a pretty girl.’ After that, he’d sometimes nod to her when she passed him in the Keep. He once saved her from his Direwolf, Ghost, who had petrified her when she was sneaking around the godswood to get a better look at her prince. Supposedly, it was just like a song, and he even gave her one of his handkerchiefs to wipe her tears. He remembered her name as well.

“Obviously, the prince had, for me, at the very least a warm and particular regard, and most likely true passion. But the Whore of Winterfell stole him from me. And now she’s sapping the strength and sanity from him.”
Ollara and Alenna, being ten and eleven, believed all this. While Margaery didn’t consider Sansa responsible for the prince’s fragile state, it was true enough that the man wasn’t doing well. Even these twits can see it.

After the prince’s breakdown, he’d stayed in his quarters for days. Once he emerged, however, it was clear that whatever happened to him in the Dragon Pit had had some lasting effects. When he appeared at court, he seemed agitated and even a bit unresponsive. Sometimes, when someone said his name and/or title, he blinked and looked at them in confusion, as if he had no idea who they were speaking to.

His walk had become far shakier, and his skin rather ashen. He seemed to fear anyone who wasn’t his aunt, sister, lover, steward, Ser Barristan, or Missandei. Prince Jon had always been a bit surly and standoffish, but he’d never been so outwardly nervous around others as he was now.

It was clear often when he was in public that his mind wandered, and he’d sometimes act startled when someone prompted him out of one of his dazes.

Everyone worried for him. But the last thing Margaery wanted to listen to was her idiot cousin make this sad state of affairs all about her hopeless crush.

“Leona, the prince doesn’t even know you. You danced one dance with him, and then you were sent to bed shortly after. The only way he’d possibly remember you would be as that stupid girl who was sneaking around the godswood,” Margaery snapped, shoving her needle into her embroidery hoop.

“Come now Margaery,” replied Leona, rolling her eyes, “We both know that when a man saves a fair maiden from great danger, a bond is created. He gave me his kerchief and remembered my name. One must read the signs.”

Leona considered herself a great master of intrigue. She was just lucky that this wasn’t Cersei Lannister’s court anymore and that she kept her “intrigue” to manipulating some low-level crushes and courtships.

Margaery stood and set her embroidery hoop aside. The other three rose as well, looking confused.

“Are you unwell, cousin?” Alenna asked, her eyes pitying. Most of Margaery’s cousins looked at her with pity these days. They thought she didn’t know that they called her the ‘Old Maid of Highgarden’ behind her back.

“Quite well, but I have an errand.” One that could be postponed, but Margaery couldn’t stand to listen to this anymore. If she had to deal with her cousins, she’d rather have them distracted with shiny objects. “I have trinkets to select.”

As expected, the three looked at one another with glee. They enthusiastically fell in line with Margaery to accompany her to the goldsmith.

Jason Waters: an old, wizened man with weak knees who had been around since the Mad King. Because of his frail state, he set up a showroom of his wares as an alternative to moving about the castle to visit prospective patrons. The fact that anyone was willing to cooperate with this was a testament to how grievously beholden to tradition many could be. Margaery was certain that Daenerys kept the man at his post simply for knowing her father and eldest brother.

And he has the good sense to sing their praises. But not the good sense to simply employ a courier. They said that though the old man’s knees were weak, his eyes were as sharp as ever. He guarded what he had to sell jealously.
So here she was, Tyrell cousins in her wake, leaning over velvet-lined displays of necklaces.

Rubies, diamonds, sapphires and opals large as gold dragons were presented to her. *Oh, honestly.*

“No, unacceptable,” she said, shaking her head. “Don’t you have anything a bit more… restrained?”

Waters, his bald head shining as bright as his wares, grunted. “My Lady, you said that this was for a historic occasion, the grandest of affairs, and that the pieces must be the sort to make a positive mark on history.”

“Yes, a positive one, not a garish one,” Margaery replied, rolling her eyes. Her grandmother always told her that no woman under fifty should ever wear stones bigger than one’s fingernail. Especially not on a necklace. *It weighs down the neck and creates crooked posture, adding years to you. If you have a young face, you don’t need giant stones as a distraction.*

“In the midst of winter, no one has any business wearing stones this big. Where did you find such enormous diamonds anyways?”

“Our mines north of the Wall.”

They all turned. A blonde beauty in trousers and a fitted woman’s doublet strode in, her blue lamb’s wool cloak pinned to her with a bronze rune brooch. Margaery’s eyes narrowed. The rune was a sigil, a wildling sigil. She smiled and curtsied. “Magna Val. What an honor to meet you at last. I am Margaery, of House Tyrell, and these are my cousins, Leona, Alenna, and Ollara.”

The girls were fascinated, afraid, and a little disgusted. Val was indifferent to them. Margaery didn’t blame her.

“My ladies,” replied Val, her eyes only on Margaery. “Excuse me for interrupting.”

“Not at all, we were just perusing some options for the wedding. You said that these come from the Wildling Mines?”


That was how the Wildlings referred to their territories Beyond the Wall, the ones outside official Targaryen control. The Free Lands, the Free Mines, and they still called themselves The Free Folk, even the ones who had settled south of the Wall. A number of these “Free Lands” were indeed still controlled by settled Wildling Landowners, domains they got to maintain outside of the control of the Empire. These complicated distinctions were ones they were adamant about, and had caused Sansa no small amount of trouble in her new economic policies for The North.

It was one of the reasons why Val and Magnar Giantsbane were now at court. The Lady of Winterfell neglected to make special tax clauses to address goods that were officially produced by Houses under her control, transported over Northern Lands, but gathered and/or manufactured on lands technically outside her domains. The gold and jewels from the Free mines were among these goods.

“Are you not pleased with them?” Val inquired, glancing over at the selections Waters had presented. “Are the stones somehow distasteful to Southerners?”

“Oh, no, that’s not it at all,” Margaery explained hastily. “The stones themselves are very impressive. It’s just that the designs of the pieces here are wrong for what I’m looking for.”
Val picked up one of the necklaces, a gold woven thing with rubies the size of Margaery’s small toe. “What don’t you like about these?”

She seemed genuinely curious. Margaery turned and leaned in.

“Well, for one thing, while the quality and clarity of the gems are wonderful, the cut of them is too big. Such big individual stones aren’t right for a young woman, and it’s a crass display of wealth during a time where there isn’t plenty,” Margaery sighed, “And it also doesn’t allow for much intricacy in the jewelry. Smaller stones can be used to craft more interesting designs.”

“I can understand not wanting to send the wrong message, but why the objections to the style? Big stones glitter and shine, after all.”

“Yes but… There’s a certain artistry one must consider. It’s not just about shine or wealth or size. It’s about taste and a certain expression of personality. You can send so many messages with more intricate pieces. Also, no one wants their neck weighed down too much.”

“You ladies here do have dainty necks,” observed Val. “But I have noticed that style can differ wildly below the Wall.”

“Yes, but not all style is equal. And a lot of that has to do with culture and background as well.”

“Examples?”

_I suppose all us southerners look alike to her._ Margaery tried not to scowl. “Well, for instance…”

She picked up one of the truly attractive necklaces, gems of multiple colors interwoven from delicate strands of white-gold. “This is something that would be popular in The Reach. The gold is a Tyrell color, the delicacy of the design is not unlike a flower stem or vine, and the stones almost look like little fruit or flowers. And the colors are bright. We’re a region known for our wealth, gaiety, fruit and flowers.”

Then she pointed to the ruby necklace Val held. “That, on the other hand, is pure Dorne. They’re firey, hot-blooded, live in the desert, and they’re indulgent. So big stones speak to their extravagance. The combined gold and red are not only Martell colors, but also remind one of heat and fire, and the circular shape of the rubies make them look like blood oranges, a popular export of theirs.”

“And what of the North, Lady Margaery?”

Everyone in the room practically jumped and spun around. Prince Jon stood at the doorway, leaning back, his dark eyes watching intently. He gave a shallow bow, still staring straight at them, as if afraid to show his neck.

Waters bowed, and all but Val curtsied with cries of, “Your Grace!” Leona smoothed out her gown and puckered her lips, her blue eyes fixed upon Jon like a dog eyeing a raw steak.

The prince cleared his throat. “I’m sorry to startle you, forgive me.”

Before Margaery could speak, her cousin stepped forward. “Oh, it’s no bother, My Prince! It’s such a pleasure to see you again, startled or not. And you? Are you well today?”

It took every ounce of Margaery’s nerve not to yank the stupid girl back by the hair. The prince seemed a bit perplexed by Leona’s forwardness. He hesitated for a second, then parted his lips in a disturbing way that Margaery suspected was meant as a smile.
“I’m quite well, Lady… Leona?”

A squeak came from the base of the girl’s throat. She glanced at Margaery with a smile. “See? He remembers me!” “I’m so very glad to hear it. You’ve been in my prayers, and I see the Seven have been good enough to listen.”

*He worships the Old Gods, you moron. That’s why he was in the godswood!* But Leona clearly wasn’t thinking about that. She was probably imagining that the Prince’s love caused him to remember her name and reach out to his true love through the haze of the evil northern warg-witch’s magic.

Jon swallowed heavily. “I thank you for your prayers, My Lady. You are kind to think of me.”

Before her cousin could do more damage, Margaery stepped forward. “Your Grace has been in the prayers of every person in the city, I’m sure. We all pray for the welfare of the royal family, as is our duty. And as for the North...”

The prince chuckled. “I thought I might listen in on your instruction to the Magna here so I might learn something myself.”

“Not very princely to eavesdrop, is it? I thought you southerners were all supposed to be about pretty manners,” remarked the Magna. Jon came forward, blushing, and the Wildling Woman clapped him on the shoulder with a surprising familiarity. To Margaery’s surprise, the prince seemed to relax at the contact the way he relaxed when one of his other confidantes touched or spoke to him.

“My apologies, Val. Perhaps my time among the Free Folk has damaged me beyond repair. Don’t think ill of me for it, though. I couldn’t bear to suffer your scorn.” He sounded like he truly meant that, his tone a bit too desperate to sound like formal courtesy or a joking exaggeration.

Margaery’s eyes narrowed, not at all liking how the prince accepted these easy attentions. He leaned in towards the Wildling, smiling a true smile this time. *They’ve fucked.*

Leona was clearly distressed by this sight, and the other girls gave her sympathetic looks.

Margaery spoke again, eager to prevent any further awkwardness. She plastered a great big grin on her face and stepped closer to the Prince and Magna. Jon stepped back slightly. Margaery ignored this. “I take no issue with giving you advice as well, Your Grace. There is no need to eavesdrop. My expertise is always yours to take advantage of. When it comes to the North, well, they tend more towards plain, unadorned pieces.”

“Margaery!” Leona piped up, “That’s not very nice.”

“Is it not?” Jon asked, “It’s accurate. We’re an austere folk. Many of our women are very tough and untraditional. Lady Margaery is right, as ever.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. Tell me, what brings you here today?”

“I wish to select something for someone special.”

Margaery’s eyes narrowed. He couldn’t be thinking to select Sansa’s wedding jewels, could he? *Calm yourself, just because you managed to order a marriage cloak without botching it doesn’t mean you’re ready to select the jewels as well. That’s my job at the moment. That and getting my father to Highgarden. Both are well underway and I won’t have you mucking it up. “For what occasion?”*
“Nothing in particular. Just a token of affection to a particularly sweet, elegant lady that I hold in high esteem. As you say, we Northerners tend to be a bit simple, so I thought this might be a fine surprise.”

“Well, none of these are what you’re looking for,” Margaery informed him, gesturing to the selection before them. Sansa abhorred giant gemstones. A few men she never cared for—Joffrey, Harry—gave her giant rocks as gifts. Her tastes were in fact quite similar to Margaery’s.

“Do you often buy baubles for this lady?” Leona asked. Even Alenna and Olarra looked shocked by this question. Jon looked at her in surprise.

“Leona!” Margaery said, furious. “That is none of your business! Honestly, what has gotten into you?”

Her cousin was chastened then, backing up and blushing, her face near tears. “I’m so sorry, I—I meant no offense.”

“It’s no problem,” Jon said quickly, eyeing Leona nervously. He flinched at the water welling up in her blue eyes. “Lady Leona did not offend me.”

_She should. She would if you knew her better._ “It was highly impolite and unbecoming of a Tyrell and a lady. She ought to be filling her head with important matters, not seeking out gossip.”

Leona began to sniff.

“Honestly, Lady Margaery, it’s fine,” Jon glanced at her, annoyed, then stepped towards Leona. His voice became somewhat panicked. “Please, Lady Leona, you did not offend. There’s no need to cry.”

_I feel like crying right now._ This was so unbelievably embarrassing. Margaery could just imagine what the Magna had to be thinking. She didn’t dare look at her face. To Margaery’s horror, Jon reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. _Oh, honestly. You’d think after what happened to me, he’d know better._

“Here, dry your eyes.” He said before she could intervene. Leona’s eyes flashed and she took it, her tears already stopping the waterworks as she dabbed her eyes.

“Oh, thank you, My Prince. It’s so gallant of you. I’m sorry, I’m silly.”

Margaery caught Jon’s eye and frowned. Comprehension dawned upon his features. He started to shake slightly and quickly reached out his hand. “Please g---- Let me put that away for you.”

Leona hesitated. “Oh no, Your Grace, I’ve dirtied it. I should----” She quieted when she saw the look in Margaery’s eyes and surrendered the cloth reluctantly, once again murmuring her compliments. Jon buried it into a pocket hastily and turned away from Leona sharply.

There was an awkward pause before Margaery brightened again. “So, something for a lady?”

“Erm, yes. Actually, it’s fortunate you’re here,” Jon replied eagerly, “Because I was actually thinking of something rose themed.”

_Oh Gods, he just had to say that, didn’t he?_ Leona almost jumped out of her skin.

Margaery beckoned him over and looked at Waters. “Ser, bring some of your better wreaths.” She glanced at Jon. “Why roses?”
“They’ve got a special significance. But I’d like them to be blue.”

Leona stepped up again. “To bring out her eyes?”

Jon offered her a shaky smile. “Well, actually, yes, now that you mention it. Clever girl.”

Leona blushed some more. “Well, I think blue roses sound lovely. What a fine idea. What made you think of it?”

“It’s nothing I can claim credit for. They’re a specialty of the North. Winter roses, they grow there.”

“There’s many a tale about them, they figure heavily into customs of the North. There’s a fine tale of Bael the Bard,” Val cut in. Leona looked a little annoyed by this interruption, but Jon looked grateful, shrinking back behind the Magna like she was his champion.

“I haven’t heard that story,” Leona stated, trying to look behind Val.

“I think the Wildlings probably tell it best,” Jon said, obviously wishing to avoid this conversation.

Waters looked at him. “My prince, I’m afraid I don’t have much in the way of blue roses, but the gem studded ones I have can be altered. If you wish, I can bring out what I have in roses, and them swap the gems out from whatever style you choose.”

“That’s fine.”

Water bowed and disappeared from the room. Leona spoke again.

“So, who was Bael the Bard?”

Jon glanced at the Wildling Lady. “Val?”

The blonde stepped forward, grinning. “Bael the Bard was a great raider and minstrel of the Free Folk centuries ago. He succeeded in many daring acts. His most famous achievement, though, came when he managed to sneak into Winterfell and play for the Lord of Winterfell of the time…”

Val continued the tale. Margaery, already knowing it, put her hand on Jon’s elbow and pulled him aside as Waters rushed back in with a mound of black velvet. He placed the mound on the table and unfolded it, revealing an array of rose-themed pieces.

“What blue stones do you think you’d want?” Margaery asked him, surveying the selection.

“I’m not sure. Topaz, maybe?”

Margaery wrinkled her nose. “No, too dull. You’ll want something that really catches the eye.”

“Opals?”

“Cut small enough to stud fixtures like these, you’re unlikely to get the color you want,” Waters informed him, “But an opaque stone might be nice. Moonstoones, perhaps?

“No!” Margaery said at once. “No, you don’t want those at all.” She swallowed and looked at Jon. “Another prince gave her moonstones once. She wore them to keep him happy, and then she wore them to her first wedding.”

Jon nodded, his face darkening. “Maybe sapphires?”
“Sapphires or aquamarines,” Margaery agreed. She picked up a bauble that caught her eye. It was an absolute delight, a delicate wreath designed to look like roses on a diamond studded vine, the blooms and buds pink rubies and the leaves emeralds. When she looked at works of art like the one in her hand, she was reminded why Waters had lasted so long at court.

“This is perfect. And the band is stiff, so it will always be eye-catching. She can wear something like this, too. Sansa’s neck is very, very long. Sometimes, certain necklaces can make her look a bit awkward. This would call attention to her neck, but without exaggerating the length to an unflattering degree. And it’s wide enough that she could fit it around a high collar. The bands are slim and the stones small enough not to seem gaudy. Instead it’s artistic and intricate. It’s eye-catching for all of the right reasons.”

“It’s lovely,” he glanced at Waters. “You have diamonds on the stems. White stems.”

“An artistic, fanciful choice, Your Grace. And it looked better with such pale rubies. But they can be replaced with emeralds, peridots, or jade for something more realistic.”

“No, actually, it gives me an idea. The leaves. Could you make them red? Like a weirwood.”

“Oh, she’d like that very much,” Margaery smiled, somewhat impressed.

He beamed, obviously pleased with himself. The prince seemed to relax. Every so often, he glanced to the side at her cousins, but when his eyes were on her, his posture became slightly less stiff.

“But if you’re going with stones, then you should make the blooms sapphires. A blue as light as aquamarine would look awkward against red,” Margaery continued, pretending not to notice anything was amiss.

The others came over then, Val having finished her tale. Leona ran up eagerly. “Oh, what a beautiful necklace!”

Jon stepped back then. “Uh, yes. You know… I’ll take it. Definitely. Yes.” He looked at Waters. “How quickly can you have it finished?”

“It’ll take a sennight, I’m afraid. With your wedding approaching, Prince Jon, I have many orders to fulfill. But I’ll work as fast as possible.”

The Prince smiled and nodded. “Very well. If you could send the bill to my apartments?”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Waters began wrapping everything up. Jon left as quickly as he came. The Magna asked for some advice regarding Dornish wear and selected a bracelet before departing.

Margaery went over the designs of the hair net she ordered for Sansa when they were gone. Leona cast her betrayed looks the entire time. When the Tyrell part got back to their chambers, Leona sighed. “I don’t even see why you’re helping that woman with her wedding, Margaery. At this point, even you must see that the prince is truly in love with me.”

“He just finished ordering Sansa Stark several dozen carats worth of gems, and you think he’s in love with you?”

“He got a rose necklace to match blue eyes. Obviously, he was truly thinking of me. I’m a blue-eyed rose. And he decided to get it when I said it was lovely.”

Margaery wanted to slap her. “Lady Stark also has blue eyes. And she wears blue winter roses regularly and keeps them in her chambers. She wore one in her hair the night their betrothal was
announced. Blue roses are the official flower of the North and there are legends surrounding them. Furthermore, they were the flowers beloved by his mother, another Stark who was the lover of a Targaryen prince. You’re an idiot.”

“But he acted so kind and nervous around me.”

“He acts kind and nervous to practically everyone. Except the people who insult his lady.”

Leona’s lip quivered. “He offered me his handkerchief!”

“He gave me one once as well. The only difference was, with you, he snatched it back again immediately. And if you say one more word about this, I will have you sent from court. Permanently. I swear it, Leona. Your display today was unseemly, and if our fathers were to hear of it, you’d be beaten and banned from ever setting foot outside of the Reach again.”

“I’d run away if they did. I’m in love!”

“No, you’re a fool. The biggest fool in our family. You’re not in love. You don’t even know anything about him.”

“I do! He’s handsome and tall and…”

Margaery rolled her eyes. “What is his wolf called?”

Leona stopped. “What?”

“What is his wolf called?” This wasn’t even obscure information.

“I—I—” Leona glared. “You’re only saying this because you’re jealous! I’m young and beautiful. You’re an old maid!”

The other girls gasped at this. Margaery gave Leona a hard stare. The girl stepped forward with her nerves aflame.

“You’re an old maid who no one cares about anymore. You’re two-and-twenty, with no husband, not even betrothed. You wed three kings, one a degenerate, the other two bastards born of incest, one of them a small boy. And yet you’re still without a husband or child, while your younger, lower-born cousins have both. You’ll be as old as Grandmother Olenna, but without anything to show for it. You’re no Rose of Highgarden. You’re a weed, trying to keep us younger, prettier maidens from growing strong. And no one will ever, ever want you.”

Margaery closed her eyes and shuddered. She was ready to beat the girl bloody for the comment about Renly alone. Insulting Renly on those grounds was also pretty much an insult to Loras as well. Olarra and Alenna gasped and hurried over, quick to offer comforting words.

She shoved them away. “Get out! All of you!”

The younger ones scurried away, but Leona did not. She stood there, looking nervous.

“M-Margaery, I’m sorry. Please don’t—”

Margaery glared at the stupid girl. “You know what, Leona? Since you seem to know everything, why don’t you just go off and tell Prince Jon how you feel? I’m sure we’d love to see how that works out for you. I know I would. After all, you wouldn’t want to end up a helpless old maid like me.”
Leona opened and closed her mouth several times. Then she bolted. Margaery scowled and grabbed her embroidery hoop. She managed to make about five stitches when it hit her. She sprung up in her seat, panicked, and sped off to the royal apartments.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jon:

The days were warmer, and he could see everything. He could smell the dirt beneath his paws, no longer blocked by snow. He was beginning to shed his coat a little, his white fur falling to the ground as he ran.

Pure freedom came in these moments, but he was called back almost the second he found it with a cry for him.

Jon closed his regular eyes along with the third as he jolted back into his body. *I can’t have been too long, can I?* It was agreed for the purpose of his safety in the aftermath of his episode. He could spend three-quarters of an hour in the Godswood alone before he had to send word that he was fine or return. Daenerys, Sansa, and even Arya insisted upon it. In case he had another breakdown, they couldn’t risk him being unattended for too long. But he hadn’t thought he’d been gone that long.

*It can’t be night already. Why does my mouth feel strange? Why is my neck cold?* His lips felt oddly wet, and the inside of his mouth tasted odd. Too sugary. Like honey. And he’d worn a high collar today.

When he opened his eyes, he saw that it certainly wasn’t nighttime yet. When he looked down, he saw that his jerkin had been pulled open and his shirt underneath was rumpled. No----ripped. His shirt was ripped. Sansa wouldn’t be happy. She’d made that shirt. *Why is my shirt ripped? I should not be able to see my chest hair.* He looked up.

No surly guards or servants stood over him. Instead, that silly cousin of Margaery’s-- Leona. Too close to Lyanna to forget.—knelt before him, her blue eyes huge. She was much too close. He could almost feel her breath.

Jon shivered in a way that had nothing to do with the cold and recoiled a bit.

_Honestly, a silly little girl scares you? _For Leona Tyrell was a silly little girl. Sillier than most, really. A child born in summer and kept so warm and closed off during the winter that it might as well have not existed to her. She’d likely never slept upon anything but a feather bed. Her safety and virtue so carefully guarded by the warmth of the Reach and the wealth of her family that she had no knowledge of just how harsh the world could be.

Leona was a child of the “lower bush” as some joked, the youngest daughter of the youngest son of a youngest son. Officially too unimportant to carefully educate in the manner of a Willas or a Margaery, but carefully pampered and protected to keep her in full bloom.

There were dozens of Tyrells, Sansa told him. *All carefully and jealously guarded for the sake of family name and reputation, and as reserve. The Tyrells, for all their largesse and wealth, do not waste resources. Strength comes in numbers, even if those numbers consist of many silly knights of summer and empty-headed lady-lasses.*

Jon could actually remember Leona for a few reasons. One, her name was so similar to Lyanna’s.

Two, despite her lower birth, she seemed to be carefully cultivated by her family now that she was a maid. She was among the main three attendants to Lady Alerie, brought to court and carefully
pushed to prominence. While the flowers of the main bush were in prison, Lady Leona was made to chatter and flirt at court. During the coronation celebrations, she’d been practically shoved into Jon’s arms for a dance by her grandfather. She’d looked excited enough, but Jon couldn’t help but be reminded of the tale Alys Karstark had told him of being brought to Winterfell as a young girl and expected to charm Robb into a match. She’d been six and Lady Leona was years older but… She’d had this dreamy, silly look in her eyes that spoke of someone much younger. It reminded him uncomfortably of Sansa as a girl. *She’d been one-and-ten when she was promised to Joffrey.*

The third reason he remembered her was an incident that took place a few moons ago. He was in the godswood by the heart tree, when he’d heard a shriek. He’d discovered Lady Leona backed against a tree a little ways off. Ghost stood before her, staring at her with his red eyes, clearly suspicious of her fear. Jon called off his wolf and escorted the shaking young lady back to her family.

Sansa made mention of her a couple of times. He knew she took note of everyone, but she didn’t repeat all the information she had catalogued inside that head of hers. She only really brought them up if they distinguished themselves in some way. Darris Lannister, despite being only four-and-ten, was clever in a way that reminded her of Tyrion. Sarya Jast was exceptionally charming and beautiful. Andrew Wydman was going to be one of the greatest knights in the Vale.

Lady Leona, she’d mentioned as well. “She’s very taken with you and makes no secret of it.”

He’d not noticed, but then, he didn’t spend as much time with the young women of the court as his betrothed. Apparently, before the nature of Jon and Sansa’s relationship became public knowledge, Lady Leona had drowned Sansa with questions about Jon and openly resented Margaery.

When he encountered her today in the goldsmith’s gallery, it became all too clear that Sansa was right. The young woman had gotten closer to him than he felt comfortable with, and even Jon noticed how she flirted.

These days, Jon tended to become shaken when around unfamiliar courtiers unless he had someone by his side he trusted. Sansa’s presence was the most calming, the one which actually seemed to make all his other fears go away. When the people of the court got too close and seemed too eager, his fear jumped several levels. Despite what Sansa said, he couldn’t fully put away his disturbed feelings about how they’d cheered when Roslin burned.

He’d gradually improved, enough that he’d felt confident enough heading to Waters’ quarters alone. But he hadn’t expected some girl to get so close to him and touch him and such. He had a handle on himself fair enough to stay composed and consider Val and even Margaery as comforting company, but the flagrant way Lady Leona reached out still bothered him. That he’d been stupid enough to hand her his handkerchief—something he should have been wary of, especially given that Margaery was in the room—just made things worse. The Maid of Highgarden had in fact helped him there, giving him a silent reminder, a display of concern and humility on her part that endeared her to him. It took personal strength and consideration to look at a person basically saying, *Hey! Remember that completely idiotic and underhanded stunt I pulled? Well, allow me to keep you from falling into the same trap once more.* But she’d been willing to do it out of the best interests of others.

Indeed, it seemed once Margaery came to accept that Jon and Sansa were happening, she’d improved considerably and had become an invaluable asset to the royal family as a whole. She was crafting a plan to remove Lord Mace and help them acquire more competent members of her family on the council. Sure, this plan benefitted her, but Jon didn’t mind so much. She was still helping them and keeping the matter under wraps. She was also helping Sansa with the wedding, a greater comfort than Jon had appreciated at first until he was confronted with the sheer magnitude of such an
enterprise. She also did enough personal public service to make life easier for pretty much everyone. While her friendship with Sansa didn’t come without strings, Jon suspected some genuine affection there.

Margaery Tyrell would never be capable of doing anything out of pure altruism. But she was well disposed enough to prefer kind actions to unkind ones in getting what she wanted, even if she was afraid of employing neither. And she was capable of good intent and true affection on some level. Ulterior motives would always exist, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t be accompanied by genuinely good ones as well.

But now, Jon was alone save for Lady Leona. Ghost was in fact far off, running through the far ends of the woods. Jon was sitting up against the Heart Tree, feeling quite exposed. He always felt disorientation after leaving Ghost’s body, and he was sensitive about others seeing him warg. There was the vulnerability--- he couldn’t protect himself while out of his body. But there was also the suspicion that came with it. People still didn’t like wargs.

That this young woman would come this close to him while he was out of his body raised many red flags. His first instinct was to grab for Longclaw’s hilt. While Lady Leona appeared only a soft little maid, appearances could be deceiving. Jon knew enough that drawing a blade before the sixteen-year-old niece of the Warden of the South would be an idiot move. Still… He flexed his burnt hand and felt bile rise in his stomach.

*She won’t kill me,* he reminded himself. Jon knew that he was never entirely safe, but no one would risk killing him while he was the sole means of producing future dragon riders. *And if she meant to abduct me for whatever reason, she’d have brought more people with her.* Jon glanced around nervously for any sign that other might be hiding in the trees or bushes. He saw no strange movements, heard no twigs snapping underfoot… Everything seemed otherwise peaceful.

“It’s alright,” Lady Leona whispered, “There’s no one here. You’re safe.”

Jon saw her hand move towards him and stood at once, flabbergasted.

Jon was fresh off the Wall when he first came to court, used to men clapping him on the back and coming near him, even grabbing him. In open war, there was no room for formal distance. During less fraught times, there was more of that maintained, but he was still used to regular bodily contact.

At court, however, things were completely altered. People maintained a carefully measured distance from anyone save their kin. This was especially true for royalty. Aside from kisses to the hand and escorting ladies here and there on his arm, Jon simply didn’t feel the touch of others from anyone but his aunt, Sansa, Arya, Sam, Satin, or Merys. And he’d sort of gotten used to that. Even the arrival of the Free Folk gave him some slight surprise, with their forward ways. It just wasn’t the norm for courtiers to enter the personal space of their prince.

Once, Jon disliked this immensely, seeing it as a degrading and shallow display of elitism and dominance. But after his episode, he came to respect and appreciate it far more. He needed space both literally and figuratively from the grasping opportunists that made up the court. To have some random girl he barely knew try to touch him without permission turned his stomach. And considering that distance was indeed a construct of this court and a rule of etiquette she’d doubtless been coached in, it made this all the more suspect.

“My Lady,” Jon said, struggling to keep his manners. *She could just be a stupid girl. “If you please, I__”*

“Please, My Prince, you needn’t be afraid. It’s only me, your Leona.”
My what? Oh, right, her name. It sounded so alien proceeded by that adjective. “Lady Leona, I have no claim upon you.”

“Just because you have not formally made one, doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. You have my heart, Your Grace.”

Oh, Seven Hells. No. No no no. “Give it someone else!”

“It’s not mine to give anymore,” she smiled.

“Of course it is. Please, Lady Leona. This is—“

“You’re going to tell me I’d be better off giving it to someone else. I know you care so much for my happiness. You think I’m wasted, as you’re bound to Sansa Stark. But I won’t give up on you. It’s not too late. For you, or for us. I know it. She may have you in her grip, but the shackles are not upon your wrists yet. We still have a chance. I’m here to fight for you. Please, you must see the truth. I know you must. We can still be together. Just cast that Wolf-witch aside. You can do it, I know you can. I’ll help you.”

She’s absolutely mad. She’s madder than I am. Jon stepped back. A twinge of pity for this young woman hit him when he saw her flinch at his movement. He managed to resist the urge to move further away from her. She is not well. And she’s just a girl. Jon tried his best to assume a gentle tone. “Lady Leona, please. You don’t understand. I’m sorry, but you’re not the one I—–”

“But I could and should be, you know it!” She insisted. “I’m pure and untouched. I’m kind and sinless. I’m still very young, a maiden flowered. A true maiden. I don’t charge into battle and soak myself in blood. I don’t bed every man I meet. I don’t grab for power and force myself into matters that are unfit for a woman, barging my way into council meetings and trying to control the kingdom. I am virtuous and I know my place. I wouldn’t spend the years trying to meddle in matters of state, challenging your authority, or telling you what to do. I’ve seen her do it, too. I’ve seen how she sometimes questions or lectures you. I would never do such a thing. I’d be sweet to you, truly sweet. And I’d give you many sons and devote every moment of every day to pleasing you and you alone. I’d be good and loving and loyal and obedient, a proper wife.”

Well, if there are Seven Hells, she’s just described one of them.

It bothered him that she couldn’t guess how unappealing her offer was. Jon surrounded himself with women like Daenerys Targaryen, Sansa Stark, Arya Stark, Brienne of Tarth, Missandei, Val and even Margaery Tyrell. His first two lovers had been Wildling Spearwives. How anyone paying the slightest bit of attention could imagine he had any interest in a “proper” lady wife mystified him.

He gaped at her for a second, almost hypnotized by the level of delusion before him. What world does this girl live in? It was downright fascinating. He actually felt a bit impressed. This girl turned a lack of awareness into an art.

Jon shivered and frowned. “Lady Leona, the Lady Sansa—–”

“Is not the woman who loves you. I am.”

He saw the pucker of her lips and jumped out of the way. But she lunged after him. Jon shook, and his mind became frazzled all of a sudden. He couldn’t think straight. Before he knew it, he was backed up against the trunk of the Heart Tree. Leona Tyrell came much too close, and then her body was pushed against his, her hand slipping down his chest and stomach, and her lips were pressed to his—–.
He only seemed to return to reality when he felt free of her weight. Jon blinked, there was screaming. The person screaming was Leona, now on the ground, being dragged by her hair off of Jon by Margaery Tyrell.

“You stupid little hussy!” Margaery yelled, looking murderous. A second later, Sansa was at his side, cupping his cheeks, tears in her eyes

“Jon, My Love, are you alright?”

*Oh Gods. She just... She must have seen us. She saw Leona’s lips on mine.* Jon wanted the ground to swallow him up.

“HE’S NOT YOUR LOVE, HE’S MINE!” Leona screamed.

Sansa ignored her. “Jon, can you hear me?”

“Yes,” he choked out. He sank down then, pulling his knees to his chest and hugging them. His skin crawled.

“Jon, listen to me. Right now, it’s just you, Margaery, Leona, and myself. Guards are running over now. There are no birds or ravens. No White Walkers. We’re in the Godswood. You’re safe. Tell me your name.”


“And who am I?”

“Sansa Hardyng Stark, Lady of Winterfell, Lady of the Eyrie, Warden of the North, advisor to Queen Daenerys. My betrothed.”

“And what do I look like?”

“You’re a red-haired, blue-eyed woman.”

“Good. I’m a woman, not a bird. You don’t see any ravens, do you? You can’t hear any?”

“No. Everything is clear. I’m not seeing things.”

“Okay, Jon, just keep reminding yourself. No birds. No Others. We’re fine. You’re safe.”

“DON’T LISTEN TO HER, JON! SHE’S TRICKING YOU! SHE’S JUST ANOTHER CERSEI LANNISTER!”

Jon could hear the pounding of feet coming closer. Sansa grabbed him under his arms and yanked him up. “Stay up,” she whispered, “Please, Jon, I need you to try and appear calm for a second. Please. I’m sorry. Just... Pretend you’re somewhere else.”

She clutched his hand tightly and turned to the approaching guards. Gendry was among them. He spoke.

“What is going on?”

“This young woman threw herself at the prince.”
“That’s--- MMPH!” Leona was silenced by Margaery covering her mouth. The Maid of Highgarden looked at the men brightly.

“Yes, the Lady Stark and I were passing by when we saw it. My cousin Leona threw herself onto His Grace, invading the privacy of his royal person. At first, he tried to reject her gently, but due to her persistence he had to push her away. We hurried over and I pulled her away for good. I’m not being as gallant as His Grace, I’m afraid, but sometimes it’s necessary.”

Gendry looked at Jon. “Is this what happened, My Prince?”

Jon nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

Sansa stepped forward. “I think it is best if Lady Leona was confined to her chambers.”

She glared down at Leona with cold, loathing eyes. The girl recoiled slightly. Then Sansa looked at Margaery.

“I trust you’ll see to it that she’s removed from court?”

“Oh yes, she’ll be disciplined thoroughly,” Margaery looked at Jon. “I’m so sorry, Your Grace. I tried to stop her. She’s a silly little girl who was convinced of an affection that didn’t exist. I tried to tell her otherwise. She wouldn’t listen. But I had no idea she’d go this far.”

Jon nodded again. “Just… just take her away.”

Sansa squeezed his hand. Margaery and some of the guards dragged Leona off. Gendry and another man remained, but Sansa asked them for some privacy and they departed.

She turned to him. “Are--- are you alright?”

He shook. “No… No, I’m not, Sansa. And I don’t know why. She’s just a stupid girl. How am I so shaken? Have I become that weak?”

Sansa shook her head. “No, Jon. You’re just sick. Weakened, but not weak. Everyone is vulnerable when they’re ill.”

“Sansa… I was inside Ghost. I think she may have kissed me while I was warging.” He rubbed his lips. It felt so wrong. His lips didn’t even feel like his anymore. Like someone had torn his off and replaced them with the mouth of a stranger. He’d tasted honey on his tongue when he’d come back to his body, and then again when Leona kissed him. She’d stuck her tongue in his mouth. Jon wanted a new mouth. A fresh one. He wanted any other mouth than this one.

A mad fire settled in Sansa’s eyes. She began to shake, a fist clenched.

“I’ll--- I’ll---”

Jon felt a horrible surge in his belly. He doubled over and spilled the contents of his stomach onto the ground. Even the sour vomit in his mouth tasted better than the honey.

In a perverse way, he was happy to be throwing up. part of him felt wrong and out of place. Getting at least something out gave him relief.

Less comforting was Sansa doubling over and vomiting as well. He stared in shock. Once she was finished, however, she straightened up at once and acted as if nothing had happened.

“Jon, let’s go back to the rooms. Now. I’ll have a bath brought for you. We’ll go back the long way.
You don’t have to see anyone if you don’t want to. Do you want me around?”

He nodded. “Don’t hate me, please. I’m so sorry.”

“No! You were attacked! You have nothing to feel sorry for.”

He couldn’t have been attacked. “She’s a head shorter than me, several stone lighter. I’m a trained fighter, a grown man. There is no way she could have… Part of me must have…”

“Part of you did not. She forced herself on you.”

He actually cackled at this. “Sansa, I’m a man. She’s a girl.”

“Actually, you were a wolf at the time. You were vulnerable. You weren’t in control of your body. She took advantage of you.”

“No… she couldn’t have.”

“She could and she did. You thinking she couldn’t have is one of the reasons why she could. Jon, you’re not well. You’re sick. And you were warging. You were in shock afterwards. You recently had a breakdown. You’re not in your usual state. Even men are susceptible to such things. It’s not common, but it’s possible.”

He glared at her. “Stop lying. Stop pretending that this is something different. You know better. You know that this couldn’t happen to me. You know whom it really happens to. Girls don’t overpower men this way. This doesn’t happen. It’s the other way around. I wasn’t drunk. I wasn’t immobile. Not the second time, anyways. And I’m not weak.”

I’m not. I was not violated by a little girl. This couldn’t have happened. “How can you of all people actually think this was anything other than what it was? A grown man and a young woman alone in the godswood. They kiss. You know what happened. You saw my lips on hers.”

“I saw her backing you against a tree, shoving her mouth against you while you shook and the color drained from your face.” Her blue eyes became watery.

No. “Maybe I wanted it, Sansa. Did you ever think of that?” Why won’t you just acknowledge that I betrayed you? “Leona’s no monster. She’s a comely thing. Big blue eyes, soft hair, nice teats. Very, very young. And pure and yielding.”

Sansa’s eyes shut tight and she cringed. “Just because she’s a young woman doesn’t mean she’s yielding. Just because she’s a virgin doesn’t mean she’s pure. Even if you do like her eyes or her body, you would never want it enough to hurt me.”

“Maybe I wasn’t thinking about you.”

When the words flew out of his mouth, he knew that they weren’t true. He had thought of her. He’d been thinking about all the reasons she was appealing and all the reasons Leona wasn’t. He’d been trying to handle things delicately and keep control of himself, not let his fears and instincts overwhelm him, distract himself from what was happening and…

Jon covered his face and turned away. “You should leave me forever. A man weak enough to let this happen is unworthy of you.”

“You didn’t let anything happen, Jon. Please, please understand this. I know. I know this. It’s not your fault. Sometimes people do things and you can’t control it. Please. I understand. You’re feeling
everything I felt when it happened to me.”

“Sansa, you were raped.” She couldn’t possibly be treating these two situations as equivalent. Everything Leona managed, Petyr had gone so far. He did things to her body that were unspeakable. He did them multiple times.

“I was. And this… this is similar. You know Petyr didn’t just rape me outright. He started with kisses. It so often starts with, or involves kisses. Joffrey kissed me. A bard who would have forced himself on me if it weren’t for the intervention of another kissed me. I got many, many unwanted kisses before I was ever penetrated. Even Tyrion kissed me and touched me. And he was a dwarf, no fighter, not even healthy. He was drunk, small, weak, poorly formed and I was tall and healthy and sober. But I still felt the same when he touched me and kissed me. Wondering what I’d done to deserve it. And you try to tell yourself that’s all there is, and that you have no business feeling violated or bad about it because you haven’t been raped yet. You should feel grateful that you weren’t raped. That you owe something to someone else because of what happened. And you feel like you must have deserved it, or asked for it somehow. It must be my fault. Things like this don’t happen to me. This is the sort of thing that is done to poor young girls by giant monstrous men. Young ladies don’t do it to strong men. Sickly dwarves don’t do it to tall, strong young women. So it must be something else. It’s got to be what’s wrong with me.”

Jon looked at her. She stood before him, looking him dead in the eyes, refusing to look away. He grunted. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

She scoffed. “There is plenty wrong with me. I don’t want you going through what I went through, feeling what I felt. So please, please Jon. Don’t blame yourself. If only for me, just try to see what this was: a stupid, selfish little bitch who tried to force her affections on you. It’ll take some time for you to fully accept, but at least keep that in mind. Know that you have to reject the other ideas. They’re lies.”

Jon shook. “I saw Leona earlier today. She cried. I gave her a handkerchief to wipe her eyes with. When I realized what I’d done, I took it back but--- Do you think that’s it? That’s why she thought she should----”

“No. Margaery spent all afternoon with her trying to tell her nothing was going on between you two. Leona wouldn’t listen and ran off. Margaery came and told me what happened and she worried Leona might do something insane. She knew you weren’t feeling well and that this was the last thing you needed. She did everything she could to tell her cousin it was nothing. But Leona believed exactly what she wanted to believe. Nothing you or anyone else could have done or not done would make her think any different. It’s not about you or anything you did. It was about her own selfish desire and refusal to believe she was wrong or couldn’t have whatever she wanted. She thinks the reason we’re together is because I cast a spell on you. If you had spat in her face today and called her an ugly slut, she’d have been convinced it was because I enchanted you to hate her out of jealousy over your true love for her.”

Sansa laid a gentle hand on his arm and they made their way towards the keep.

“This is my fault,” she murmured, “We should have never allowed you in the godswood alone in your current state.”

“No. If it’s not my fault, it’s not yours, either.” He hung his head. “I want to… I want to break something.”

“That’s understandable. I’d like to break Leona Tyrell’s teeth.”
When they got back, Jon washed his mouth out with mint, sage, and water twice. A bath was called and he scrubbed away at himself, still not feeling quite right. He couldn’t stand the world around him. A few minutes into his bath, he found inside Ghost once more, feeling better looking through the eyes of his wolf.
Chapter Thirty-five: Khalakkis

Jon:

Four days had passed since the incident in the godswood. Leona was exiled from court in disgrace. Mace Tyrell had uttered a thousand apologies. He was now planning to leave for Highgarden after the wedding. Jon felt afraid of everyone. He couldn’t stop bathing. And for some chilling reason, he also couldn’t stop slipping into his direwolf’s head.

It was pitch black, his body was in bed, his mind in Ghost. But he’d been jolted back by a pressure on his arm. It was so much easier for him to be pulled back into his body by touch these days. When he returned, he looked over and saw that Sansa had turned over and pressed herself against him in her sleep.

This action shook him somewhat, but he considered it his fault. After what happened, she’d offered to sleep in her old bed again. This wounded him. She didn’t want me now.

She’d reassured him that this wasn’t the case, and that she’d do whatever he wanted. He insisted he wanted her in bed with him.

And then he didn’t touch her for three days. She didn’t make any complaints, or show any sign that she minded, and if anything, that was worse. It made him think, once more, that her attraction to him was gone.

Jon attempted to initiate something a couple of times in the days following the incident in the godswood. Sansa acted willing enough, but the second she touched him, he’d wilt.
Jon looked at her at that moment, lying there beside him. She looked so, so sweet and lovely. She wore a blue lamb’s wool nightgown, and her hair was all loose and wild, teasing her face and neck. It was becoming thicker every day, and she was wearing less voluminous hair-pieces these day. Her health had returned, she’d put on weight and now that she was healthy again, she had this glow about her.

Every day, she grew more and more lovely. Jon hadn’t even known such a thing was possible. And everyone noticed, too. These were not just the usual compliments. The other day, he’d overheard a couple of Lords discussing it in the stables, saying how ridiculously lucky Jon was to have someone who looked like that in his bed. “As if being the prince of a fucking empire and having a dragon and a direwolf wasn’t enough. He’s got that luscious redhead warming his bed as well. I’d never leave my bedchamber if I had that waiting for me.”

She drove more than a few people to distraction. Two days ago at dinner, even Daenerys was staring. When Jon caught his aunt’s eye, the queen looked at her lap guiltily.

Even Loras Tyrell seemed to be genuine when he offered his compliments to her. Of course, being Loras, when he did so there wasn’t the slightest hint of sexual interest in his manner. He didn’t look at her the way he sometimes looked at Gendry. But he did look at her the way he looked at a favorite new gilded suit of armor or silk doublet.

And Gods, was there a part of Jon that wanted her like mad. So, so badly. But every time he touched her, it seemed his strength died away and he wilted.

Jon thought of those two lords who envied him, and how they’d spit on him if they knew. “Chickenshit, stupid bastard gets to have Sansa bloody Stark in his bed and can’t even touch her. Is he a man or a little girl?”

What kind of man can’t touch his lady? What man who likes girls, anyways? Why can’t I just...? I have a duty to share her bed.

His cock was half-hard. And he wanted so badly to see her throw her head back and moan his name. Jon wanted inside her. What is holding you back, you stupid shit?

She’s asleep.

Wake her up. You’re using that as an excuse.

Jon cleared his throat and spoke. “Sansa...”

She barely reacted. Jon spoke louder. “Sansa...”

He reached out and nudged her arm. She stirred a little.

“Sansa,” he said loudly, forcing his voice to sound a bit more firm. He nudged her arm again. “Sansa, wake up.”

Her eyes opened and she sat up, rubbing her temple. “Wh-what? Jon, what is it?”

The prince cleared his throat. “Come here, I want you. I want you right now.”

She blinked a couple of times. “I-- Alright. Are you sure?”

His stomach sank. “You don’t---”
“---No! I do! I just want to make sure you’re alright.”

“I’m not,” he replied. He reached out and grabbed her hand. She gasped. But he didn’t feel any recoil for once. He grinned and pulled her hand to his manhood. “But I’ll be fine once we take care of this.”

“Oh, I see.” She smiled slightly, and nervously palmed him. Jon groaned. It felt nice. He stiffened further. Sansa leaned over then and pressed her lips to his. Jon turned his head, pulling his mouth from hers, a chill going up his spine. He tried to suppress it.

Sansa withdrew her mouth, looking a little disappointed. “I’m sorry. Should I not touch your chest, either?”

Jon burned red. “I… I should keep my shirt on.”

This is humiliating. Jon began to feel himself soften. No. “Sansa, I---“

“Do you want to stop?”

“No!”

She knelt beside him and reached for the hem of her nightgown and pulled it up over her head, leaving herself in all her naked glory. And it was truly glorious. She resumed touching him, and took another of his hands in hers, placing it on her breast. “Come on, Jon Snow.”

Gradually, he hardened again. Sansa leaned over once more and whispered in his ear. “How do you want me?”

Every single way possible. Jon cleared his throat. “I… I… I want you on your back.”

What followed was one of the most lackluster experiences Jon ever had in bed with his wife-to-be.

Jon climbed over her and she looked up at him with kind eyes. He slipped inside and reveled in her heat. Before he knew it, he was spending within her. It was only when he fallen to the side that he realized how calm she seemed. She hadn’t come.

Miserable, he asked for her forgiveness. She responded that there was nothing to forgive and embraced him, petting his hair and shushing him.

“Let me use my tongue,” he said.

“Jon, you don’t need to---“

“I want to, please Sansa. Please.”

“Well--- Alright.”

She ended up arching her back and crying his name, telling him how very good he was, saying she loved him. She’d gushed for him and then thanked him when he was finished. He thanked her in return.

Overall the experience was odd, and it didn’t quite feel like them. It actually felt more like some of his earlier experiences with Ygritte: awkward, fumbling, him spending earlier. It didn’t wash away his bad feelings, but he felt better knowing that he at least managed to finish with her this time. But a piece of him still seemed broken. He went to sleep angry.
He felt that anger flow out of him the next day as his jaws sank into the body of a rabbit. The blood felt like it was washing something away. He was killing something. He felt powerful. The blood flowed down his throat. It was beautiful.

When Sansa pulled him back to reality, his anger returned. He glared at her. She’d touched him while he was away. The water in the tub was cold now. He apparently couldn’t make her come with anything but his mouth.

“Why did you do that?”

“You’ll catch cold if you stay in there much longer. I waited as long as I could.”

Jon scowled. He was killing something a moment ago. He wasn’t in his weak body. He was somewhere else, away from this filthy, disgusting place. Jon stood up. He was already a couple inches taller than Sansa, but the elevated tub gave him that extra couple of inches which enabled him to truly look down upon her. His eyes narrowed.

She stared back at him determinedly. “Don’t give me that look. Do you want to get sick?”

“Don’t treat me like you’re my mother. I can handle it,” he retorted. “You think I’m so weak that a little cold can hurt me?”

Sansa hesitated. “No. You’re strong, Jon. I just want to keep you that way.”

“I’m strong when I’m Ghost. You should just let me stay with him.” *Direwolves aren’t overpowered.* Jon knew that he was being ridiculous, but he couldn’t stop himself. His fury had to go somewhere, and he no longer had a rabbit in his mouth.

“For hours on end? No.”

“If I wish it, then why shouldn’t I?” He really had no idea why he was arguing with her. Sansa hadn’t done anything wrong. He just didn’t want to leave the head of his direwolf. He resented having that peace robbed from him.

“Because you can’t just do whatever you want. You’re a prince and you’re going to be a husband and father. That involves things a direwolf isn’t capable of. Get out of the tub.”

She reached for him, he pulled away. “Don’t touch me.”

Sansa sighed. “I’m sorry. Please, Jon. Get out of the tub.”

*Gods, what the hell is wrong with you?* He really, really felt inadequate at this moment. Being naked here with her, pulling away from her touching him just made him feel worse. Last night made him feel worse every time he thought about it. And he felt like he was being mothered, which wasn’t acceptable at all. *She’s not my bloody mother. She’s my lover.* He felt like such a child. *Well, I’m acting like one, aren’t I?*

He tried to calm himself and took a deep breath. “The cold water doesn’t bother me. I froze up at the Wall. I can stay in for a couple more minutes.”

Her face started twitching. “No, Jon,” she said in a suddenly choked voice. “Get out now.”

“I---“
Sansa bent over the rim of the tub then and threw up into the water. Jon got out at once, and grabbed at her hair to get it out of the way, horrified.

“Oh, Gods, I’m sorry.” The sour smell hit him and he tried his best not to wrinkle his nose. Brownish chunks floated across the water. “You’re sick. Shall I call Merys?”

Sansa shook her head, wrinkling her face. “I’ve already spoken to Merys. He’s examined me and knows what’s wrong. I went to him yesterday.”

“Well, you weren’t throwing up yesterday. You are now. Go back.”

“I was, actually. I just didn’t do it in front of you. Don’t worry, this isn’t a problem.”

“Sansa, it obviously is.”

“No, it’s just uncomfortable. Nothing dangerous.” She leaned away from the tub and pulled a kerchief from her pocket, wiping her mouth. “It only comes a couple times a day.”

“Merys needs to know,” Jon insisted.

“Merys already does.”

“Well? What does he say?”

Sansa hesitated.

The blood drained from his face. “Oh Gods. Not again. Who did this to you? Please, Sansa, you have to tell me.”

She stepped back and bit her lip. “It’s not what you’re thinking. But I suppose I have to tell you or you’ll worry. Gods, I’d have liked this to happen on a nicer day.” Sansa took a deep breath. “Jon, you did this to me.”

His first impulse was to demand answers. But then the answer just appeared in his head. He stepped back.

“Are… are you sure?”

“Almost completely sure. Merys says we won’t be certain for another moon but I know my body. My breasts hurt. I haven’t bled. I have cramps. I’m throwing up. I can smell everything, and I tire more easily.”

All the anger, the resentment, the negativity was forgotten. The room seemed brighter. He couldn’t smell her vomit anymore. He felt his heart rise in his throat and tears prick his eyes.

Jon fell to his knees and kissed her belly, staring at it in wonder. *Finally, you’re coming. You’re really coming.* Jon looked up at his lover, grinning. Her own face lit up. She reached down and ran her fingers through his hair.

“I take it you’re happy?” She asked.

“Happy…” That word didn’t seem like it did what he was feeling at this moment any justice. “Better than that. I feel better than happy. I’m…”

“…Elated?”
He laughed. “Yes. Gods, yes. We did it!”

“We did, didn’t we?” She giggled. “I’ve got your little Khalakka or Khalakki riding inside me.”

He stood up and cupped her face. “Our little Khalakka or Khalakki.”

And he kissed her. It was an instant action, one that he didn’t even think about. It just happened. He didn’t even mind the vomit.

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Daenerys:

No one else wanted to come out and greet the Ironborn. Daenerys didn’t either. But someone had to.

They arrived by sea, of course, sailing towards Blackwater Bay with more ships than was needed. Three, in fact. Two more than necessary. Word had come beforehand from Sunspear that such a thing was taking place. Thus Dany decided to nip this in the bud.

So she took Viserion out and flew to meet them, finding them about ten miles outside the bay. Black sails greeted her eyes. The ones in the middle and to the right had the basic golden krakens of House Greyjoy. The third had the golden kraken clutching a golden axe in its tentacles. It all looked very fearsome.

Daenerys laughed. She liked fearsome things when in a good mood. And she was definitely in a good mood. The issues in Meereen were dealt with, the wildlings were proving less troublesome than she had anticipated, and the six eldest Sand Snakes were gone from court. Ellaria Sand and her youngest daughters were on their way.

And then there’s the step towards the security of my entire empire and family line. That too.

Daenerys grinned every time she thought about it. The babe came exactly when he or she was needed. Jon was recovering a bit despite what happened with that young Tyrell wench. Sansa was glowing and healthy. Everyone had much to look forward to. A new Targaryen babe at last.

Jon and Sansa brought her the news a few days ago. She was the fourth to know. First were Sansa and Merys, then Jon, then her. Arya was then informed, and Missandei and Barristan knew now as well. They didn’t feel safe sharing their joy further yet.

But they’d had a jolly little celebration in Dany’s apartments, passing around cakes and cider. Missandei and Sansa sang and played. Arya and Daenerys managed to get along, dancing together. Dany danced with everyone that night, even Jon joined her for a song. Everyone rubbed Sansa’s belly for luck. Arya recounted all the thrilling stories she planned on telling her niece or nephew and declared that whatever the child was, it would be a water dancer. By the time they went to bed, they were all weak from laughter.

When she’d gone to bed, she’d cried a little as well, rubbing her own belly, knowing no one else would do it. But by morning she dried her tears and greeted the world with a smile.

I do have my children, and I have not failed my people.

Daenerys called out to Viserion, “See that, Boy? That’s the sign of the man who wanted to control you.”

The gorgeous creature shrieked in response and Daenerys patted his cream-colored neck affectionately. Drogon and Rhaegal were full of lust and anger, but Viserion was her sweet boy.
Bringing him to heel was easier than with his siblings, and out of the three, she could control him the easiest even when not on his back. He was smarter, too. Basically the antithesis of the man he was named for.

Missandei sat behind her, gripping Dany’s sides so hard that the Dragon Queen was sure she’d have a couple of bruises before this day was over. The girl was petrified of this sort of travel, but she was also one of the few people in this world Dany trusted to ride with her.

They were perched high enough that Viserion would blend into the clouds around him, but not high enough not to see the ships themselves. Daenerys enjoyed the advantage.

“We’re going low,” she informed her. “Time to meet the squids.”

“Y-yes, Khaleesi. O-of c-course.”

And they shot down like a flying arrow.

Daenerys made a point of flying down to the vessel on the right. She had Viserion settle himself, the tip of his snout next to the boat. He snorted and the vessel almost tipped over. Dany laughed and waited for it to settle. Her sweet boy spread one wing, laying it mostly flat, but angling it enough to created a ramp. Daenerys unstrapped herself and Missandei, helping her servant climb Viserion’s wing up to the edge of the boat. She climbed to the top of the edge, and jumped down daintily.

A few of the men stepped towards her, calling her name, but Daenerys ignored them to help Missandei over the rim, taking her by the waist and setting her down. She felt a hand on her elbow and Dany whipped her head around and glared at the grizzled sailor. He opened his mouth and revealed missing teeth.

“You dare lay a hand on the Khaleesi?” Missandei smacked his wrist. Furious, the ironborn lifted his arm as if to strike her, but was stopped when Viserion raised his head. The force of his movement caused more waves, shaking the boat. The pirate backed away, color draining from his face.

Daenerys looked around at all of them, sizing each up. Some looked richer than others, some were well groomed and handsome. Some were outright hideous. Most were large and hulking. The ship stank. Of vomit and salt and rot.

She did not need to wrinkle her nose or glare. Missandei stepped forward.

“You all have the honor of the presence of Her Grace Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, First of Her Name, the Unburnt, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lady of the Seven Kingdoms, Queen of Meereen, Queen of Slaver’s Bay, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Princess of Dragonstone, Breaker of Chains, Protector of the Realm and Mother of Dragons. You may kneel.”

Jon’s right, Dany reflected, I really do need to work on tightening up my titles.

The men glanced at each other. Dany glanced at Viserion. Her dragon cocked his head. The men fell to their knees.

The Ironborn have too much pride. Pride they have not earned. Daenerys didn’t like the Greyjoy words: “We Do Not Sow”. She did not like their people’s preference for “the iron price”. She did not like how eager they were to pay it. She did not like how they treated their miners: the one group of people who actually produced something. She did not like the concept of salt wives.

She did not like how quick the Ironborn were to declare themselves kings. With every new regime
came a rebellion from them. They rose up when Robert Baratheon took the throne and they threw a
crown into the ring when the man died and Joffrey was declared a son of incest. They’d absolutely
ravaged the North and terrorized areas of the Reach and Riverlands as well. A third of the cleanup
Sansa now dealt with she owed to the Ironborn.

Thus far, neither Asha Greyjoy nor her Uncle Victarion had assumed a driftwood crown. Daenerys
and Drogon nearly burned Victarion Greyjoy alive. They ended up just taking his arm. He’d
returned to Pyke with fewer ships than he came with. His niece saved him from his brother’s wrath.

She had no interest in dealing with Ironborn revolts. She’d have preferred to let Asha Greyjoy have
her stupid driftwood crown and ignore her entirely. But it would have made Dany look weak, and it
would make it that much harder to keep them in check.

“You may rise. Let your commander come forward.”

The men got to their feet, looking furious. One of them, enormous, with a giant brown beard and one
eye, stepped forward and kissed her hand when she extended it.

“My Queen,” he said in a voice gentler than one would expect of a person of his stature. “We were
not expected to be graced with your presence out on the water.”

“I was not expecting two Greyjoys to require three ships to transport them. Who are you?”

“Terren Volmark, Your Grace, Captain of the Bladefin.”

“And who is the one who just grabbed me?”

“Basel Pyke, a crewman.”

“He will not be coming ashore.”

“Understood.”

“The other two ships are the—-“

“Black Wind and the Iron Victory. The first is My Lady Asha’s favorite, the second the flagship of
her Uncle Victarion Greyjoy.”

“I flew out here. Are they not coming to greet me?”

“They are, I’m sure.”

A loud thump hit their ears as if on cue: a gangplank extended from the Black Wind to the Bladefin.
The Bladefin’s crew parted and a tall, dark-haired woman in leathers and cape climbed aboard
followed by four men.

Asha Greyjoy, twenty-nine, was a woman who didn’t mind making a strong impression. Her
masculine dress and bearing would be enough to do that for her, but upon her shoulders was a large
shoulder plate of copper shaped to look like the tentacles of a kraken embracing her. The garment
was a stark contrast to the rest of her clothing, which was basic leather and aged wool. She did not
seem like the type to indulge in finery. But this creation wasn’t about how it glittered in the sun.

The kraken cape-holder was taken from her Uncle Euron the day she took the Iron Islands back from
him. It was a famous story. He’d charged at her with a spear, the tale went, saying she was too weak
to carry the weight of governing the Iron Islands upon her shoulders. She’d pulled a dagger from
between her breasts, and flung it so that it lodged into Euron’s smiling eye. She finished him off with her axe, then took his shoulder guard and cape. The garments and her lands were officially bought with the iron price.

The metal had been reforged to fit her narrower shoulders. Asha refused to dispense with any of the metal, or, by extension, any of the weight. The tentacles were just made longer instead, coiling down her back and over her chest.

Asha knelt, but kept her chin up and she kept her eyes--- the dark blue of the sea at dusk--- upon Daenerys. “My Queen.”

Dany knew better than to ask this woman to kiss her hand, so she didn’t. She bid Asha to rise.

“Lady Greyjoy. You are of course welcome to King’s Landing. I understand your Uncle Victarion is joining you?”

“Yes, Your Grace, he is on his way now.”

“Tell me, is there a reason you felt the need to bring three ships into my harbor?”

“The Bladefin has goods for transport.”

“Ah, trade. An interesting vocation for a vessel called The Bladefin. Obviously, such cargo could not be transported on one of your ships. Indeed, I’m surprised that you required more than one, even.”

“We’ve had a boom in ore production this year, Your Grace. And my own vessel is not quite equipped to properly handle passage of such material. As to my uncle… he prefers to stay aboard The Iron Victory. Ships to us are like children, Your Grace.”

“I see. Did you bring Rodrick and Tristen with you?” Rodrick and Tristen, one and two respectively, were Asha Greyjoy’s sons. There was still some debate over whether they deserved to go by ‘Greyjoy’ or ‘Pyke’, as the identity of their father was unknown and Asha had driven an axe through the skull of the last man who tried to call himself her husband.

Asha’s cold blue eyes flashed at the mention of her children and her mouth tightened. “They were too young to make the journey, Your Grace. They’re born to sail, but not quite yet. Black Wind was born in the sea.”

More thumps. The hulking figure of Victarion Greyjoy appeared, his graying hair covered by a kraken helmet. Unlike his niece, he wore full plate. Despite his missing arm, the man was as imposing as ever: a mountain of metal and darkness. If Dany hadn’t known any better, she’d have sworn Ser Robert Strong, that freak creation of Cersei Lannister’s, was back from the dead. If anything the lack of arm made him seem more impressive, for he held himself with the same amount of pride as he ever did.

Dany almost stepped back when he came closer. Despite their history, there was no doubt that this man was intimidating. **But so am I, and so is my dragon. I am a small woman, and I still took this one’s arm. I can burn off more bits, make him smaller if he tries anything. I am the blood of the dragon.**

Instead, she stepped forward. She loathed things that frightened her, and she turned her fear to anger. “You haven’t knelt.”

Victarion glowered beneath his helm. When Asha glared at him, he glared back. Dany glanced back at Viserion again, who shifted slightly.
Fuming, Victarion slowly sunk to the ground.

Dany chose to leave him there and looked at Asha. “My Lady, you and your uncle are here to attend the royal wedding, correct?”

“Partially, yes.”

“And who is getting married?”

“Your nephew the Prince Jon and the Lady Sansa Hardyng,” Victarion interrupted.

Dany glared down at him. “I did not ask you, and that was for a reason. You gave the wrong answer I would have expected.”

She looked back at Asha. “Who is getting married?”

“Prince Jon and the Lady Sansa——” Asha frowned.

“She has a House name, more than one, in fact. Lady Sansa——?”

“Stark.”

“Stark. Of Winterfell. Starks of Winterfell have reason to fear the approach of more Ironborn ships than anticipated.”

“A small party by our standards.” Asha looked more livid than Dany at this point. Her glare became ever more pronounced. The dragon queen glanced around. *I’m already challenging her authority. Doing so in front of her men further would be a misstep.*

“I see.” Dany hesitated. *I’m about to go too far. This was a mistake.* She didn’t fear for her life, but she had a feeling that speaking out of anger would prove a great blunder. Daenerys cleared her throat. “In order to assure your ladyship of the warm welcome you are due, I would like to escort you to the harbor.”

“You do me a great honor, Your Grace.”

Dany nodded shortly. “Viserion, Missandei and I will fly overhead as you sail in. Anyone who wishes to exit their ship must leave behind any large weapons——” Dany eyed Victarion’s war axe, strapped to his back. “A group of City Watch shall escort you to the Red Keep. How many personal attendants will you be bringing with you?”

“Eight. Five for myself, three for my uncle. All of our servants double as guards.”

“Very well. Quarters have been arranged for you, of course.”

Dany rode over them as promised as they came into the city. When they docked, she came down to the ground and had her and Missandei ride on horseback along with the Greyjoys and the City Guards who had come to meet them. Viserion kept overhead, casting a great shadow over the roads they traveled.

As they rode through the city, the crowds offered Dany their usual cheers while glaring bloody murder at that Ironborn.

*They’d throw dung and rotting food at them if I wasn’t here.* Any Ironborn were not going to be a popular sight outside of their own domains. Though King’s Landing wasn’t a target, horror stories of what their raids had brought down upon other lands were still well-known.
The more recent raids conducted during the War of the Five Kings did them no favors, either. The North was the hardest hit, and another region that suffered was, of course, The Reach.

Even during the wars, it was said that during their more furious moods, the people of King’s Landing would shout for King Robb. Lady Asha’s brother betrayed King Robb. Many blamed him for the deaths of Bran and Rickon Stark.

During the wars, Margaery Tyrell and her House were great favorites of the people. Since her return, Sansa had done the same for herself. She and Margaery often collaborated on a number of charitable projects, visiting children’s homes, distributing bread, donating clothing, patronizing local businesses. People already referred to Sansa as their princess, the Winter Princess. Margaery prudently refused to allow anyone to even mention the word ‘queen’ in connection to her name, so the people settled for the Rose of Highgarden.

And the Ironborn had pillaged the lands of the Winter Princess and the Highgarden Rose. They might as well be White Walkers, with how much bile they inspired. Only love for the Dragon Queen could keep the crowds from becoming mobs at the very sight of them.

Victarion Greyjoy wasn’t making things much easier, with his kraken helmet and glaring eyes. *Thank the Gods he had to keep his great bloody axe on the ship*, Dany thought, *Even if he’s too lack-witted to appreciate it.*

Asha, however, had the good sense not to show any anger or distress, merely keeping her eyes upon the Red Keep up ahead. Dany sighed and rode up close to the woman.

“Is this your first time in the capital, Lady Greyjoy?”

Asha snorted. “Aye. We Iron Islanders don’t much like getting involved in greenland matters.”

*Unless it involves killing our people or stealing our property.* Dany swallowed that, though. She’d not been personally damaged by their raids. Enough people she cared about had, but it wouldn’t serve her people to speak their grievances for them at this moment. “What made you come now?”

“Our method of non-involvement hasn’t exactly served us well.”

“That’s never prompted you to involve yourselves before.”

“We were poorer for it. We cannot afford to grow much poorer than we are now. Though many of my people, including my uncle, might protest.”

“Do they?”

Asha nodded. “They often remind me of my family’s words, as if I have forgotten. But to me, they’re the ones who have betrayed those words more than anyone. They’ve sown quite a bit. And what we’ve reaped from that hasn’t been pleasant. I lost three brothers and almost lost my life, my home, my people, and my ships. Everything that made me a Greyjoy. I saw what happened to my brother Theon after he chose to reap Winterfell. All to impress the same sentiment my uncle espouses. Do you know what happened to Theon?”

Daenerys swallowed. “I’ve heard rumors.”

“I don’t like gossip. I’m Ironborn. I like stating things as is. So let me tell you. When my brother returned to Pyke from the Starks, he was tall, handsome, confident, and proud. He was a shit and a bit of a fool, but not nearly as weak as some would claim. Despite how pampered he was, he’d been battle-hardened, and he had great nerve and skill in combat. He was defined by his bow, his smile,
and his cock. My father sent him off to betray the Starks to prove himself a Greyjoy. Greyjoys are meant to be bold and rebellious. Theon wished to prove himself the boldest of us all, so he took Winterfell with just a few dozen men, all to prove something to our father. Be as Greyjoy as possible.”

Asha looked at Daenerys then. “I begged him to come home. But he couldn’t stand to be seen as weak or craven by abandoning the fortress. When I saw him again after that, I didn’t recognize him. My brother was twenty. He looked about five and sixty. His black hair was straw. That gleaming, shit-eating smile of his had become only a half-set of broken, yellow teeth. He couldn’t balance or hold a bow because of his missing fingers and toes. He’d been gelded, and he could barely remember his name. I was the only one left who seemed at all interested in him staying alive. When Stannis Baratheon’s sword fell, Theon--- proud, fierce Theon--- went with tears of joy.”

Asha looked back at the Red Keep. “Proving to some idiots that I’m ready to cut people up or shut them out won’t help the Greyjoys thrive. Almost all the Greyjoys are gone. My father’s and uncles’ rebellions almost destroyed all of us. All my brothers were lost. Countless other men as well. We’ve infuriated every other person in Westeros, and we don’t have the means to keep going like we were. Between Euron, Victarion, and my father, it’s amazing there are any of us left. My father wasn’t the wisest of men, but he was right when he said that bending the knee at least gives you the chance to rise once more. When you’re dead, you stay down. Our strength comes from our ships, and your dragons could easily set all our fleet ablaze. I have two boys, I value my sons more than my father valued his. My people, my lands, my children, my ships, and what is left of my family, for better or worse, are what make me Ironborn. I intend to keep those things. If it means I have to set foot upon green land, bow to you and talk pretty to some pampered, soft lordlings, I’m willing to do it.”

“I’m happy to hear that,” Daenerys replied with wide eyes. She knew Asha was somewhat reasonable before, but she’d underestimated the woman’s restraint.

Asha gave her a significant look. “There are not many on the Isles who think the way I do. They only obey me because they know I’m strong.”

Daenerys thought back to Khal Drogo’s khalasaar and shivered. She glanced behind her at Victarion Greyjoy. His look was predatory. Every inch of him screamed, “I want to fuck you until you’re screaming my name and then slit your throat.” Daenerys knew that look so very, very well. She wasn’t sure if it was for her benefit, or Asha’s.

He considers himself gelded. If he acts on those dirty looks, he’ll find out what that’s really like. Dany tried her hardest to communicate that with a look before directing her attention back to the woman beside her. This… This is an issue.

It was clear what Asha was telling her: I’m reasonable. I’m the only one who can keep these madmen in check. Madmen like the one behind us. Not respecting me will result in someone like that causing a great deal of trouble for you. Disrespecting me will cost you blood.

They said that Victarion Greyjoy was nothing compared to his brother Euron. Euron’s deeds were the sort of things spoken of only in hushed tones, often compared to the crimes of Ramsay Bolton. Victarion, by contrast, was seen as the more honorable, traditional, obedient, and righteous brother, pious and brave. But Dany didn’t like him whatsoever. If that’s the “good” Greyjoy… Gods above.

If Asha suffered too many insults, her reputation, the source of her power, would come crashing down. She couldn’t afford to take many insults. But there are so many here so eager to insult her, at the very least. So why in Seven Hells did she come here?

Dany tried to phrase this question in more diplomatic terms.
Asha frowned. “My uncle Rodrick is one of the few men I trust. I can’t afford to go without him. But if I turned down the chance for an Iron Islander to sit on the Small Council, I’d be seen as selling my people short. Victarion has accused me of not showing family loyalty in the past. When I didn’t get an answer regarding his candidacy, it was seen as an insult. I had to prove to my people that I’m not afraid of the Dragon Queen.”

_Oh, Gods above._ Daenerys went red. “I apologize for the delay. There’s been debate among my current advisors regarding your uncle. And we’ve had to deal with a number of crises.”

Asha looked like she didn’t consider this a fair excuse.

_We’ve neglected this._ Dany’s stomach sank.

~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~

Val:

One of Mance’s favorite songs to sing had always been ‘The Dornishman’s Wife.’ Val had never understood the appeal of the situation. The Dornish were supposedly hot-blooded kneelers. Why would taking one of their wives be worth the violence? The man in the story to her seemed a complete fool. The sort who literally had only a cock to think with. What made some kneeler’s wife so special? And why not the Riverlander’s wife? Or the Ironborn’s wife?

A few days earlier, she’d walked into Lady Stark’s solar, saw Arianne Martell, and understood completely.

Arianne Martell was a proper princess, it seemed. Many called Val a princess, though she hadn’t understood what that really meant. And she’d seen that hideous Greyscale abomination of the Baratheons. And Lady Stark was soon to become a princess when she married Jon … but Arianne.

Arianne was exactly the sort of princess Val would like to be. She was just as fine looking as Jon’s woman, in Val’s mind. Perhaps even lovelier. And she held herself with a confidence and moved with a fluidity that Val rarely if ever saw in kneeler types. But this was no kneeler. Arianne was very powerful in her own right. She didn’t have to ask anyone for anything the way other women around here did. She had everything she wanted, and anything she didn’t have, she took.

And her voice was very strong and loud, thundering out of what was actually a fairly petite frame. She didn’t seem afraid of her body, or anything, really. And the _heat_. Being near her was like being near a fire. The desert seemed to follow her.

There was the deep olive tone to her skin, which was so lovely and unfamiliar. There were her big almond eyes that seemed to absorb the world around her. There was the curtain of thick, dark hair. And her _teats_. They were gorgeous, Arianne knew it, and she was unashamed of this.

Looking at her, Val had to know two things: Were her nipples a darker brown than the rest of her, and did her cunt taste like the blood oranges she’d brought to Lady Stark’s solar. Val would go mad if she didn’t find out.

Luckily, Arianne had given her some looks that indicated interest.

Val wanted to meet this woman halfway in approaching her. She’d promised Jon no outright stealing of women. And Arianne was clearly a woman of culture, one completely different from what the wildling was used to. She couldn’t just tear the Dornish princess from her bed in the middle of the night. Not without preamble. The wildling had to at least try to treat her princess like a lady.
She’d actually gone to Jon. There was a part of her that was mortified about asking Jon Snow — Targaryen — about anything concerning love and sex. He’d been nothing when Val took him. Good with his tongue but still painfully inexperienced.

But, the fact was, he’d gotten Lady Stark into his bed. Lady Stark was the laziest lady who ever ladied. She pissed rosewater, farted perfume, and shit diamonds. Even when she threw knives, she managed to look like a fucking butterfly.

So even if Jon had practically been a maid when he’d first entered Val’s bed, he obviously knew something about southern-style mating.

When Val went to him and asked him how he charmed his woman, he’d blushed. “You’ll think I’ve become very silly and stupid.”

“I thought you were that way to begin with. Go on. Tell me how you got your southern lady to love you.”

“Ah, has the wildling princess gone soft? Have you developed a girlish taste for romance in the last few years?”

“Maybe I have. Or maybe I just want to know what to expect in case some of your southern lordlings decide to come a-calling.”

He frowned. “Well, alright. But my relationship with Sansa… It wasn’t completely conventional, I suppose.”

“Well, nothing with me will end up being completely conventional either. Just spit it out, Jon.”

He snorted. “Well… I just sort of… I helped her. But you know… I don’t think what happened with us will happen with you. In most cases, when a gentleman wants to pursue a lady, he does a number of things. He might write her some poetry, or send her letters, or give her gifts.”

“What kind of gifts?”

“I don’t know. Flowers or silks or even jewelry. I give Sansa winter roses.”

Val didn’t have winter roses. And she didn’t think that would really work for a desert lady. So she decided to go with jewelry. Luckily, when she went to the goldsmith, that snobby Tyrell woman knew all about what sort of jewels different southerners liked. Val ended up getting a gold bracelet with pink stones.

Val hadn’t much cared for the Tyrells. The older one was clever in most respects but she clearly didn’t think much of the Dornish, which was stupid. The others had no brains to speak of in any area.

The bracelet was sent off to Arianne with a letter asking her if she would like to be stolen from the gardens by a true wildling princess.

A return message came. The word ‘No’ was scrawled at the top.

That little word was almost a death sentence to Val’s sanity. But thankfully, there were other things written.

I’d rather wait for you in my solar. Take me from there to the gardens.
Val didn’t think the gardens were cold at all. Even the snow was melting. But this was a princess she was dealing with. A real one.

Deciding she wanted the journey to be quick, Val chose to avoid all the halls and prying eyes and instead enter Arianne’s rooms by scaling the outside walls of the red keep and coming in through the balcony.

Her princess waited for her lying on a divan majestically, covered in furs. “Do I look like a proper wildling, Magna Val?”

“No, but I’ll make a proper wildling of you before the night is over, Princess Arianne.” Val pulled out a knife and pointed it at her. “Now come quietly.”

“Only in one sense of the word,” replied the Dornish princess, holding her arms up in surrender.

_Gods above, if I’m not careful, I’ll be a Dornishman’s wife before the week is out. Or woman. Yep. Definitely woman._ Arianne was a sharp contrast to her voice and opinions: small and soft. Val lifted her easily and slung her over her shoulder. The princess had a great, full laugh. She seemed completely unafraid as they descended down Val’s rope into the gardens below. The princess’s chambers overlooked a hedge maze. Val had a pile of furs waiting for them in one of the pockets of it. As she carried Arianne to their destination, the Dornish Princess grabbed her arse and whispered various things in her ear.

“I’ll lock you away in a dungeon in Sunspear for this if you’re lucky.”

“I’ll make you cream your breeches until it snows in Dorne.”

“Is your cunt as golden as your hair?”

“I want you to cut my dress off of me.”

This was a princess she was dealing with. A real one. Val had to obey.

So she found the pile of furs, threw the Dornish princess atop them, pulled out her knife, and began her work. She kissed her first, though. They were both almost ladies, after all. Tongues danced together beautifully before Val remembered her command.

_Underneath Arianne’s ridiculous furs was almost half a dress. Amber colored satin that was tied up around her neck. Val cut the halter of it, then sliced down the neckline so the garment fell open._

“Your nipples are brown!”

And there was that full-throated laughter again. Val lapped at her like a famished newborn, biting down just a little to make Arianne cry out and arch her back. Eventually, the princess grabbed Val by the shoulders and flipped them over. Grinning wickedly, Arianne reached down and yanked the blade from Val’s grip.

“Let’s see what color yours are.”

There was a tearing sound. Once Val’s tunic and jerkin were gone, the tip of her knife pressed lightly against her skin. The cold of it sent a shockwave and she gasped.

“Pink, I see.” Arianne stroked Val’s breasts with the side of the blade. “I wonder what else is pink.” She put the blade between her teeth and gripped the waistline of Val’s breeches, pulling them down.
She spit the knife out when her partner was laid bare. “What do you know? Pink and gold.”

Arianne held up the wrist upon which Val’s gift hung. “Were you trying to tell me something, Magna?”

Val grinned wickedly in response. “I’m not one for subtlety, I’ll admit.”

Arianne worked her nub like it was an instrument. And really, she made Val’s whole body her instrument. Before long, the wildling was definitely making some interesting sounds.

After she’d made the wildling come once, Arianne climbed on top of Val, getting on all fours and turning so her cunt was inches from the wildling’s face. The Dornish princess grinned at her. “I should warn you. I’m highly competitive.”

“So am I, Southerner.”

Arianne, it turned out, did not taste like a blood orange. She tasted like a pomegranate. This was not a problem.

What was a problem was that the woman was too bloody talented. She made Val’s mind go blank so many times that the peak count soon was lost.

The Magna was not to be outdone, though. She made sure that by the end of the night, she felt like her mouth had been doused in Dornish wine.

To her satisfaction, her princess did end up as boneless as she by the time they were done, finally collapsing atop her and barley having the strength to pull herself so the two were face to face once more.

*I’ve definitely been in Dorne. Gods know, it’s hot enough.*

They cuddled a bit in the furs. Before long, though, Arianne sighed. “We have to go back before the sun rises, Sweetling, or we’ll have a lot to explain.”

Val groaned. “Fine. I suppose even a trip to the fabulous Water Gardens has to end at some point.”

Arianne threw her majestic black tresses back and cackled. “You’re an absolute delight.”

The two wrapped themselves in the furs and scrambled back to the Keep, parting with a kiss and a promise from Arianne that Val was always welcome to enjoy the Water Gardens. Val grinned. *Best Promise. Ever.*
Tension

Chapter Summary

Arya puts on a dress and reflects on the generation that came before. Sansa plays the Game of Thrones in the lead up to the wedding and is a dick to Jon.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Blue for her beta-work. Thanks to my commenters.

Okay... Next chapter comes the wedding. Also an almost foursome.

Chapter Thirty-six: Tension

Arya:

*I’m going to trip on a silk skirt someday and break my neck and that’s how I’ll die*, she thought sourly. *After surviving the Faceless Men, the capital, Harrenhal, the Hound, being on the run from the Lannisters, the Brotherhood, the cutthroats… It’ll be a fucking skirt that does me in. I just know it.*

Arya never knew triumph in skirts. She knew embarrassment and self-loathing.

She stood on a platform before a full-length mirror in the Aenys chambers, covered in silvery velvet. A seamstress knelt at her feet.

Arya tried not to scowl, but it was hard. Dresses were only tolerable to her when she was someone else. But as Arya, they terrified her. During her childhood, she’d been forced into them constantly and always proved a fierce disappointment to everyone around her.

She could remember, as a girl, being fitted for new dresses, or wearing them in front of company. Arya and Sansa always got new gowns around the same time. Sansa loved it, of course, but Arya dreaded every fitting. She could never stand still during fittings. Inevitably, a cross seamstress would prick her with a pin, or her mother or Septa Mordane would scold her about staying still.

And if there was anything Arya hated, it was being the sister no one cared for. By age six, she took notice of certain things. When they had company at Winterfell, the Stark children were always presented in order of age. Robb would follow behind Mother and Father, sometimes with Sansa on his arm, or sometimes with their sister just behind him.

Company would always grin when they saw Robb and Sansa. Her older siblings were the type of people made to be presented. Robb was a handsome boy and Sansa was exquisite, and the two of them were always so well-behaved and elegant. When they walked in, people were delighted by them, and then they’d eagerly look for the next Stark child to enter.

And Arya would walk in, and the disappointment was clear. Sometimes she’d get looks that were
downright confused, as if the visitors thought there was some mistake and were wondering how some random horse-faced servant whelp had gotten into a highborn girl’s gown and slipped within the ranks of the Stark children. And then they looked at her with pity.

Robb and Sansa would glide in, do their bows and curtseys. Then Arya would tumble in. Skinny, awkward, and uncomfortable. More than a couple of times when she was very young, she’d tripped on her skirts on the way into the Great Hall. And then she’d hear about how Sansa mastered the perfect curtsey at age three.

Every new gown meant another opportunity for Arya to disappoint others and humiliate herself.

Jeyne Poole would grumble sometimes when she saw Arya in her newest silks or velvets. Jeyne got Sansa’s hand-me-downs, and the girl loved pretty clothes. More than once the steward’s daughter would complain how pretty new dresses were wasted on Arya, who always just ended up looking like the horseface she was. Sansa usually refrained from that, but when a fitting took place, she did give her sister more than a few looks that basically said: Well, that’s more for her to ruin.

There would be the odd occasion where Arya almost got excited for a new dress. She’d get her hopes up that maybe this time, the dress would do something to make her pretty. Maybe this color or that style would bring something special out in her, or maybe it would turn out that she’d grown into her looks at last, and all she needed was a properly fitted new gown to prove it.

By age nine, she’d trained herself not to hope for something that would never, ever happen.

If the other ladies in the room noticed her discomfort, they gave no sign. Most of Sansa’s wedding retinue was here: Anya Waynwood sat behind a cackling Randa Royce, braiding the Lady of the Gates’ hair, her eyes narrowed in concentration. Randa, in a grey velvet identical to Arya’s, sat beside Margaery Tyrell, who was clad the same way. Both women had cups of summerwine in hand and were discussing Arya’s Uncle Edmure. Sansa, dressed in her bridal underthings and her bedrobe, spoke with Queen Daenerys and the sultry looking Ellaria Sand in a hushed tone, their heads bent towards each other. All three women had their eyes on the two youngest Sand Snakes, sitting on the ground and whispering to each other as they weaved garlands of blue roses with Missandei, who was pretending not to understand the Braavosi the two were speaking in conspiratorial tones, clearly believing any foreign tongue was safe. Arya chose to follow Missandei’s lead. She wasn’t close enough to them to make out every word as it was. And her Braavosi had grown fuzzier since she’d left the Faceless Men.

Arianne Martell was supposed to be there, but she’d been called away on some urgent business. That actually cheered Arya a bit, as things were still awkward between her and the Dornish princess. More disappointing was the fact that Magna Val had also declined an invitation.

Two people in the room seemed to be observing Arya. One was Brienne of Tarth, who actually showed some signs of worry when their eyes met. But Brienne was no lady. She was a knight of the Queensguard. The other was Lyra Mormont, who didn’t seem worried about Arya at all, merely contemplative.

That just made Arya even more nervous. Is she happy with me or not?

Lyra Mormont’s mouth rarely made a full smile. At best you’d get one corner turned up in amusement. When you looked into her brown eyes, you instantly understood why. She had that haunted look that Jon, Arya, Daenerys, Missandei, Ser Barristan and so many others had. That look that Sansa succeeded in hiding most of the time when she had her guard up. The look of someone who had seen too many things that she wished she hadn’t.
The look of a true soldier. When Arya saw Lyra Mormont’s eyes, she knew that this wasn’t a woman to be trifled with.

Not that looking at Lyra or speaking to her proved a miserable experience by any means. The woman was scarred, but not defeated. She possessed an energy that matched Arya’s and a cynical but oddly humorous outlook that appealed to the younger Stark.

Which was good, because Arya could tell that if not for the sharp little quips Lyra made when facing her in the practice yard, pouring over the ledgers, or giving instructions, the two might not get along.

Lyra lived by a strict mode of discipline. While Arya had stayed at the castle as herself, she’d been given considerable freedom. She ate when she wished, woke when she wished, did as she wished. But Lyra Mormont was now waking Arya at the crack of dawn every morning to go practice with her swords and run laps around the gardens of the Red Keep. She’d given Arya instructions to restrict her diet more to foods she could only eat in the North, and often kept the younger Stark indoors all afternoon and evening going over facts about the northern lands.

“The Manderlys have silver. Too much silver,” Lyra said to her the evening before, “Enough silver to make themselves too fat to sit a horse. But now they feel threatened by the Wildling mines and have to price their own metals lower, so they probably won’t be able to afford being as gluttonous. The problem, though, is that the Manderlys’ silver is taxed more than the Wildlings’ because theirs is mined in the empire. So how do we keep White Harbor from becoming completely destitute?”

“It’s a harbor,” Arya replied, “They should focus more on bringing in goods, enforce their own new private taxes in their docks. Especially considering it’s winter. And they should work with the Wildlings directly. The Free Folk’s silver might be cheaper to mine, but it comes all the way from beyond the Wall. White Harbor is further south and their goods are easier to transport. If they focused more on that, and worked with the wildlings directly to make silver transport easier for them, they’d stay the center of the silver trade in the North.”

The She-Bear nodded. “You’re really quite the sharp one, Stark.”

Lyra didn’t hesitate to congratulate Arya for her successes. It was another thing that made their time together enjoyable.

And yet, Arya still wasn’t sure she measured up. With every new thing she learned, the more painfully aware of her own ignorance she became. She hadn’t been tutored in matters of trade or state as a child, never prepared for leadership the way her brothers were. And it terrified her now. In a little over a week she’d be departing for Winterfell to serve as Sansa’s castellan. What if I ruin everything?

Sansa always used to say she ruined everything. She hadn’t said it since they were children, but Arya had lost most of the time that had taken place since they were children. Those words seemed fresh to her. So did the wounds that came with them.

Lyra, her mother and sisters were all brilliant and well educated. They’d been taking care of the North for a long time. Sansa trusted them. Arya wasn’t sure her sister trusted her. Worse, Arya was fairly sure she wasn’t really worthy of said trust.

When Lyra looks at me, does she just see a mad, unpolished, ignorant girl who is trying to take her family’s place through birth alone? Arya wanted to think Lyra truly liked her. But such things could be so hard to determine. If King’s Landing taught her anything, it was that kind looks didn’t guarantee kind thoughts.
Gods, I never cared about making people like me before. But Arya knew that was a lie. She had cared about what certain people thought of her. Lyra Mormont was now among that number. And with her came the entirety of the North.

“Very good, My Lady, I think we’ve got it.”

It seemed every ear in the room was attuned to the seamstress’s voice, because every voice quieted and then every eye was on Arya. Smiles surrounded her.

Compliments came from all sides. Arya kept her focus on her sister and Lyra. The corner of Lyra’s mouth went up and she gave an encouraging little nod. Sansa, meanwhile, was grinning.

“I cannot get over how lovely you’ve gotten,” The bride-to-be said, her blue eyes wide.

Arya allowed this to cheer her a little, but then, Sansa was so good at lying now. She could just be trying to be nice.

Arya glanced down at the dress. The sleeves are almost as long as the skirts, she realized with a panic, What if I trip over them?

Very nervously, she stepped off of the platform and walked into the center of the area where the women were gathered. The others bid her to turn. Arya did so, very slowly. She watched her hems with a suspicious eye.

“Arya, you should keep your head up,” Sansa said to her, getting up and walking towards her, her tone encouraging, “No need to stare at your feet. You’re a Stark. Show some pride.”

It was clear Sansa meant the words kindly, but Arya flinched. She felt so stupid. What is wrong with me? Why am I afraid of hems and my sister? Arya looked at Sansa, who grinned.

“This color really makes your eyes gleam, you know?.”

“She looks like Jon,” remarked the queen, her eyes narrowed. “Jon, if he were a woman.”

“She looks like our father,” replied Sansa, reaching up to brush some stray hair from Arya’s face affectionately.

“Father used to say I reminded him of Lyanna,” Arya interjected. It was a sweet memory of Lord Eddard, the first time she could remember anyone saying she could be beautiful.

Sansa froze, cleared her throat, and then turned away. “Well, anyways, you look nice.”

Arya then noticed the Sands in the room. Every single one of them had tensed up and Arya cringed. Stupid. Stupid. I shouldn’t have mentioned her name. Arya hadn’t even thought about the implications of it.

Lyanna Stark’s name wasn’t mentioned much at court, especially not in front of anyone connected to the Martells. Never had a mother of a prince been so conveniently ignored as Lady Lyanna. Another Stark girl was with the Targaryen heir now. It was better for everyone if her name stayed buried in the Stark crypts with the rest of her. It made Arya sad and angry to think on it sometimes, but no one was comfortable talking about it.

Loreza and Dorea Sand turned their viper eyes upon Arya, looking furious. Loreza was now tearing petals from her blue rose. Arya glared back. I’m not afraid of you. Ellaria Sand rose and walked over, her face unreadable.
Then she placed a hand on Arya’s shoulder. “I think you’re just like yourself, Lady Arya. Your sister is right, you should be proud. You’re a very singular sort, and a woman is at her loveliest when she shows pride in what makes her unique. You have moonlight in your eyes. Show the world that.”

Ellaria gave Arya a small smile with tense eyes, then looked at her daughters, who drew back slightly. Sansa cleared her throat once more.

“Dorea, Loreza, maybe you should wear the blue roses, yes? Wear them so we can see how they’ll look with your dresses. Oh, but Sweetling,” Sansa hurried over to the youngest. “Yours is mussed. Here, I’ll help you make another.”

Sansa took some roses from a nearby vase, de-thorned them, and wove them into a delicate garland, which she placed upon Loreza’s dark brow. “There. Perfect.”

Arya looked away. She hated being reminded of how people ignored Lyanna. Lyanna deserved to be remembered, not hidden away like some ugly secret.

But these days, the Targaryens, Martells and Starks all had to be allies in order to keep the kingdom stable. Elia Martell and her two children were brutally murdered because of what happened. The Targaryens were almost completely wiped out. Brandon and Rickard Stark died. If Lyanna was a willing captive, then that made Arya and Sansa’s uncle and grandfather traitors and cast Stark women as temptresses. If she wasn’t, then Rhaegar was a rapist and the near-destruction of Daenerys’s family seemed deserved. And either way, Lyanna was still the woman who Rhaegar left his wife for, the action that finally drove the kingdom into open rebellion. Thus, no one could mention Lyanna without making everything painfully uncomfortable.

Once again, Jon could never, ever talk about his mother. He wouldn’t even speak of it to Arya. She’d brought it up once, and he’d gone silent, as if she’d said nothing.

Lyanna Stark wasn’t nothing. She was a person. She lived and loved. She was the Knight of the Laughing Tree. Arya wanted to be able to think of that story with nothing but excitement and pride, the way she thought about Visenya Targaryen, Nymeria of the Rhoynar, and Xanda Qo. But she couldn’t. Because while her aunt had been strong and daring enough to fight in a tourney herself, she’d also been whisked away by Rhaegar Targaryen and become the scapegoat of a devastating war.

Arya remembered what Father has said. “Beautiful and willful and dead before her time.”

That entire generation, it seemed, was dead before their time.

Arya glanced at Lyra Mormont, who just shook her head sadly. Her sister was named for Lyanna. That same Lyanna once declared that the Mormonts would never recognize any monarch but one called Stark. Arya’s stomach turned as she wondered what her father’s generation had wrought.

Sansa:

She’d taken the wildlings into Jon’s solar for negotiations. The art and finery of the Aenys chambers would never impress them the way Jon’s weaponry did. But as they sat at the dining table, Sansa began to regret it when she saw how Toregg constantly lost focus, distracted by the blades mounted on the wall. Tormund, at least, was paying attention.

Arya sat to Sansa’s right, Lyra Mormont to her left. The two, along with a host of new guards, had become her shadow recently. Lyra was a tall, dark-haired, stocky young woman with a hard-set jaw
who took her duties quite seriously. As Jon predicted, Arya took to her at once, and the Mormont daughter proved a calming influence upon the younger Stark.

Officially, Arya and Lyra shadowed her to learn to conduct the affairs of the North through observation. But judging by the fierce looks Arya gave and the way she moved, as if on high alert, she also considered herself Sansa’s personal bodyguard.

*Not necessarily a bad thing, given all the people congregating to air grievances and play with their power.* It seemed every player in Westeros was in the Red Keep now. Everyone ready to negotiate, fight, arrange marriages, betray, debate, and beg. No one got a moment’s peace anymore. It reminded her of how Tyrion was always running about, staying up all night and receiving people in the days leading up to Joffrey and Margaery’s wedding. No one attended that event to celebrate young love. Sansa wasn’t naïve enough to think this was any different.

Across from them sat all four of the wildlings that had come to court. Sansa forced herself not to feel intimidated.

“This is non-negotiable, Magnar Giantsbane. No more lasses are to be stolen. You may do it with your own women, you may do it beyond the Wall. You may *not* do it to the maidens of Westeros.”

“What about the ones that *wish* to be stolen?”

Sansa sighed and cradled her forehead. “Your men may take it up with the girls’ fathers. In our lands, taking a woman without the consent of her father is---“

“What in the bloody hell does the lass’s father have to do with it? Do you think this stupid shit---“

Tormund gestured to Ryk, “Got my permission before he stole my Munda? No. But I’ve got a happy daughter and two fine grandchildren now. A strong boy who will be a great warrior someday, and a girl who will probably be able to break his arms even after he becomes a great warrior. Munda took him to husband, and they’ve got a fine, proud family.”

“I’m sure your grandchildren are beautiful, Magnar---“

“---Only to their parents, I’m afraid---“

“---But that isn’t the point. That isn’t how we do things here. It’s… uncouth.”

She tried to sound as diplomatic as possible, but judging by the flicker in Tormund’s eyes, it hadn’t worked.

“I’ve never heard that word, My Lady, and I don’t know what it means. But I can guess. I’m guessing that’s some pretty, boot-licking term for ‘nasty.’ But I wouldn’t be casting a harsh eye on our ways. You’re marrying a man just as guilty of them as any of us.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Jon. He stole a girl. He almost killed her. Then he took her. Eventually, he betrayed her. In the end, one of his friends did her in. To us, that’s a far nastier way to treat a woman than a bit of grabbing and rolling in the grass.”

Sansa’s mouth went dry. “You mean Ygritte?”

“Aye.”

Sansa frowned. “Jon had to do his duty to the Watch. They were the ones he swore an oath to.”
“An oath he broke with Ygritte. Shows how much those oaths you kneelers are always talking about are worth.”

Sansa’s eyes clouded over. “You swore a few oaths, Magnar. I hope you’re not implying anything.”

“No, My Lady. I didn’t mean that,” Tormund shook his head and grunted. “I just take issue with you lot looking down on us.”

*I’m your liege. That is my right.* But she didn’t say that. “That isn’t the issue. The issue is that these families feel violated, these girls are terrified, the parents are furious, and the homes feel dishonored. Your people made a decision to settle here. We’ve granted you land and the rights of any northman as long as you obey our laws. To you, maybe your practice is just ‘a bit of grabbing and rolling in the grass’, but our people don’t see it that way. Our maids don’t want to be stolen. And even if they do… there are serious consequences for maids who are taken prior to their wedding day. If one of your men wants one of our women, he must do right by her according to our laws.”

“Tormund, at the end of the day, they’re scaring girls,” insisted Val. Tormund looked at her with no small level of hurt, but Sansa felt grateful.

“Well, what are we to do? Most of the women in our settlements are of our own villages. Would you have us produce cursed children?”

Sansa shifted uncomfortably. *He considers unions between people of the same village cursed, what does he think of Jon and I?*

Tormund gave no sign thus far that he objected to or judged Sansa or Jon for their union. But this made Sansa wonder. *Perhaps he’s not so outspoken as he’d have us believe.* Jon and Sansa not only grew up in the same town, but in the same castle, raised as half-siblings. And though they were not brother and sister, they were still cousins. Such unions were not at all unheard of in Westeros. *Tywin and Joanna Lannister were first cousins. I was almost wed to Robert Arryn.* Sansa wasn’t even the first Stark or even the first Sansa Stark to wed a close relation. Her namesake had wed her half-uncle, Jonnel. The Starks worshipped the old gods, as did many of the free folk, including Tormund. The old gods condemned incest, but that was interpreted as marriage between siblings, full uncles, and/or parents and children. Cousins were not taboo. *But apparently the Free Folk’s definition of incest goes much, much farther. Beyond just blood alone.*

*I wish Jon were here. He knows these people.*

Back before Sansa realized the truth of her feelings for Jon, when she'd viewed him as a political target, his experience with the wildlings was something she considered. The Free Folk were part of her constituency and therefore primarily her responsibility as Warden of the North. Unfortunately she knew next to nothing about them. Sansa had little to no intention of taking another husband who couldn't aid in her rule. It was one thing when she wed Harry and her primary concern was the war. Harry could fight, and she had Petyr to help with political matters. But now the armies were sent home, Petyr was gone, and the realm had altered drastically.

Jon’s value as a political match went beyond rank and title. Whatever his name and blood might be, he was of the North, knew it, and had unique experience. He'd been the one who actually arranged the initial alliances with the wildlings. He'd lived as one of them. Out of all the “southerners”, he was the one the Free Folk felt anything resembling trust towards.

But Jon wasn’t here to help her at the moment. He was meeting with the Queensguard about security. With the court filling up for the wedding and the future monarch of the Targaryen empire growing in
Sansa’s belly, things were more tense than ever. Everywhere Sansa went, she now had six guards to accompany her. Three followed her in plain sight, and three kept a distance but watched from afar. Even when in her solar receiving visitors, Brienne of Tarth stood ten feet away, hand inches from the hilt of her sword.

Sansa glanced at Arya. Her sister had a natural rapport with the Wildlings. Arya caught her eye and leaned forward.

“Your children won’t be cursed. People of the same village wed all of the time in Westeros and produce fine children. Our queen is the result of sibling marriage.”

Sansa tried not to cringe and failed. *Did you have to add that last bit?*

And then Arya continued. “And she got you to kneel. So what does that make you?”

There was a long, horrifying pause. Then Tormund burst into laughter.

“A sorry son-of-a-grumpkin.” Tormund grunted. “Fine. I’ll do what I can to alter the stealing. Breaking it to the boys won’t be easy, but we’ll see what we can do. I might be able to cut down on the hunting as well, if you can grant my men pardons for what happened until now. I’ll try to have the boys who’ve stolen offer to wed the girls.”

Sansa took a deep breath and nodded. “Thank you.”

“But I don’t want the girls’ fathers involved. The boys’ll make the offers to the girls privately. No father has any business dictating what goes on between their girls’ furs. It’s vile. I might be able to stomach people from the same village sharing blankets. But I will not stand for the men who live on any lands of mine taking that much interest in their children’s bedding.” Tormund shuddered. “There are limits to what I can stand. Mothers and fathers peering between the sheets of their sons and daughters go far beyond that.”

“Parents traditionally arrange marriages below the Wall.”

“And our men traditionally steal their women. You can do as you like elsewhere. But you made me Magnar of my own lands. And I’ve heard stories of what those Umbers are allowed to do. You won’t deny me this, Lady Stark.”

Sansa sighed. “Very well… anything within your domains. As is your right.”

Tormund nodded. “Good.”

The Lady of Winterfell felt exhausted. “I apologize for any problems you’ve experienced, Magnar. These details should have been ironed out months ago.”

“Yeah, but between the winter, the end of the war, you being dragged away, Winterfell and everything, everyone went to shit at once, didn’t it? I’m not interested in stinkin’ up yer privy any further. I’ll bring my folk to heel a bit. If they want to live as they did, they can live where they did. No wights are up there anymore driving them out.” Sansa noticed the man’s accent had returned.

Sansa nodded and closed her eyes. “Thank you, Magnar. I’ll have paperwork drawn up and we’ll sign it on the morrow.” Sansa stood and extended her hand. “But aside from that, I hope you’ll enjoy your remaining time at the capital and use my wedding to indulge yourselves shamelessly--- short of any woman theft, of course.”

The Magnar cackled and shook her hand. “Fair enough, but I should warn you--- you’ll be regretting
those words. By the end of the week we’ll have turned all yer spirits to piss.”

Sansa laughed and blushed. “As you say. Good thing I have friends in Dorne to supply more wine if we need it.”

Speaking of piss… Sansa filed the wildlings out as soon as she decently could, then excused herself for a second to fill her chamber pot. As she did, she stared longingly at the bed. What she wanted more than anything at that moment was crawl into it, maybe curl up alongside Jon or Ghost or both of them, and just sleep the day away. Dragonstone. Soon you’ll be at Dragonstone and you may have many a lazy afternoon.

She sighed and pulled herself from her bedchamber and headed to the Small Council Chamber. She was the last to arrive, her usual seat beside Jon empty as always. Ser Barristan sat across from her, looking exhausted. Missandei was on Dany’s left, Jon on Dany’s right. But on Sansa’s other side was not Lord Butterwell, as was the custom. Instead, Merys sat there, Butterwell taking Merys’s usual place alongside Drystan Waters, Master of Whispers, on the other side of the table.

When Sansa saw that, she felt a bit worried. *It’s a bit too obvious, isn’t it?* She was already convinced that Waters had to know already. While she wasn’t sure the new Master of Whispers was as proficient as his predecessor, he wouldn’t necessarily have to be to know about Sansa.

Waters gave her an invasive look, but that meant little. Waters always gave her looks like that. He looked at everyone like he was undressing them with his green eyes. Every time Sansa looked at him, she found herself missing the eunuch. But Varys had disappeared years ago. Dany knew where he was, but she refused to say a word.

Dany cleared her throat. “We need to discuss the Ironborn.”

“I withdraw my support for Victarion Greyjoy,” Barristan said at once, “I cannot in good conscience allow that man to stay in the Red Keep for any period surpassing a few weeks. The man looks at everything with resentment, you most of all, Your Grace. I apologize for ever supporting such an idea.”

“I am in complete agreement,” Jon replied sadly.

“As am I.” Merys added.

*Oh, thank the Gods.* Sansa couldn’t stomach the idea from the beginning. Victarion Greyjoy had served his brother Euron. He’d tried to take Dany as a wife and take her dragons as his steeds. He was a religious maniac.

“I am glad to hear it. I don’t want him on our council either,” Dany said, “But we need to show the Iron Islands some manner of acknowledgment. The only way to keep them under control is by keeping Lady Asha in power. And if she is seen as allowing the Islands to be overlooked, she will be overthrown. So we need to find an alternative, and quickly.”

“Find some resource they’re in desperate need of and find a way to supply it to them,” Merys said, shrugging. “If they see Lady Asha is providing them with much-needed nourishment---“

“The Ironborn are not the sort to really appreciate nourishment. They only appreciate what they can steal,” Sansa grumbled. *Iron bloody price.*

“Asha Greyjoy has two sons, right?” Jon asked.

“Yes. She’s declared them legitimate, though their father is officially unknown and she is unwed.
But there is some debate regarding their true name,” Barristan replied.

“We should declare them legitimate, for one thing. That would show that we have enough concern for preserving their line to keep it going,” Jon said. “And then we’ll promise to make them a good match down the line. Something far better than what a Greyjoy might expect. Especially one of dubious parentage.”

“A Greyjoy once thought he’d marry our queen,” Sansa pointed out. “I doubt we could find a match that could truly dazzle them enough to silence their people’s grievances.”

“They’ve all been humbled significantly since then. They can’t be expecting much at this point.”

Sansa wasn’t sure. Theon Greyjoy had been their family’s hostage and he’d come on the heels of another “humbling” experience for his family. Sansa pointed this out. “There were times when he’d said things that suggested a belief that one day, I’d be his to wed.”

Jon winced. “What about Asha herself then? Someone of technically lesser rank so she might maintain her name, but rich enough for it to be advantageous.”

“What about Victarion?” Butterwell suggested. “We could find a wife for him.”

“Oh, I don’t think you’d want that,” Waters interjected, “He beat his last wife to death for the crime of being raped by his brother.”

There was a long, awkward silence. Jon took a deep breath.

“Surely we can execute him for that.”

“No, we can’t. Too long ago, and it wasn’t a crime in Pyke. It’s an Ironborn tradition: killing women for being unfaithful. Rape or no rape. The Ironborn would consider it an assault on their customs. And if we executed him for that, we’d have to kill far more. It could bring about a war,” lamented Waters.

Sansa tried to think of something… anything that might work. The only thing she could think of was murdering Victarion Greyjoy. *Surely he could probably get himself murdered for us. Madman that he is.*

Jon looked at Waters. “Get us every single detail on the Greyjoys over the last few generations. Balon and his siblings. Asha and hers. Asha’s sons. Everything. And all the information about the major players in the Iron Islands. I also want information on the raids they conducted. Everything.”

“That might take some time.”

Barristan sighed. “Until then… We’ll have to stall with them. Charm them into thinking they’re making some kind of progress.”

Everyone looked at Sansa. She frowned.

“You want me to play hostess to the Ironborn? Hasn’t my family done that enough? That’s never exactly worked out for the Starks.”

“Lady Stark, you manage the court for us. You’re one of our highest diplomats, if not the highest,” Butterwell said. “If anyone should do this, it’s you.”

“I have a wedding in a week. I cannot be expected to handle this at the moment.”
“You’ll be perfectly safe, I assure you,” Barristan promised.

Sansa glared. “You people… Haven’t I done enough? I got you your Tyrells. I settled things in Dorne. I also have three possible candidates for the Master of Ships post prepared.”


“Tyrell, Seaworth, and Connington. Now you want to me to play nice to the Greyjoys for no reason other than to… play nursemaid to them until we’ve crafted a solution to this issue? As you say, I’m a diplomat. Fine. But diplomacy does in fact involve a lot more than just batting my eyelashes at whomever you don’t wish to handle. You’re giving me nothing to offer or use.”

“Let Victarion think you’ll consider giving him your sister’s hand,” suggested Waters. Sansa wanted to strangle the man for that suggestion.

“I am not going to play around with Arya’s future like that,” Sansa snapped, “No. Over my dead body. Arya is going to be my seneschal. The last thing she needs is to have Victarion Greyjoy breathing down her neck.”

Butterwell sighed. “Lady Stark, while no one doubts your intellectual contributions to this council, there is something you’re ignoring.”

“What?”

“You claim to be more than just a charmer or entertainer but---“

Sansa glared, daring Butterwell to suggest otherwise. *I’ve contributed far more than you have, Ser. All you do is count coin. My work has helped insure that you’ll always have coin to count.* Butterwell hesitated, but then he continued.

“You are, more or less, the official royal consort. While you have yet to assume the name and title, you are bound to our prince by law in an arrangement dictating you as his future wife. You are a week away from being his wife as it is, and you have already assumed a number of the responsibilities of a working royal. You are princess consort to this realm in everything but name, and as our queen is in fact a regnant, that makes you the chief domestic officer of the realm. Your duties as such are to bear Prince Jon children, to oversee the royal household, and to entertain the crown’s guests and constituents. You already help to oversee the household and children are not yet on the table. Therefore, I don’t see why it is wrong to expect you to serve as the royal family’s representative and hostess.

“Maybe because I already serve in dozens of other capacities? And I’m already involved in a massive entertainment project? A little thing called my wedding?”

Butterwell nodded. “I understand. But considering that… The Greyjoys are technically your guests.”

Sansa glared. “These people ravaged my lands. And now you want me to serve them drinks because none of you can figure out how to handle them?"

She looked at Jon and Dany. Both appeared extremely uncomfortable. Daenerys sighed. “If I do it, it might encourage Victarion to pursue me again. I can’t allow him to get that close. Missandei’s too vulnerable, and Jon...” Daenerys glanced at the prince nervously. Now everyone looked uncomfortable. No one was willing to say it: their prince was still piecing himself back together, and they didn’t want to risk him breaking down in front of the Ironborn. She looked at the others.

“Barristan has to deal with the wedding security, and the rest aren’t competent when it comes to this particular. I’m sorry, Sansa.”
Sansa swallowed. *Smiling and catering to people who disgust me. I’m twelve years old again.* “Fine, but first, I want all of you to admit what this is: you all need me, a nineteen-year-old bride to be, to keep you safe from the Ironborn. Because you all haven’t been able to solve this problem, you are now at the mercy of my own patience. You have to ask the person who has had to bear the brunt of these peoples’ savagery to keep these maniacs happy. Because you all honestly can’t come up with a solution to this. You need a little girl to keep your coastlines safe.”

Everyone nodded uncomfortably. Sansa stood.

“I need more support from now on. Staff support. I want a scribe, supplied to me by the throne. I also need my own staff of ladies once I am crowned. And it would help if I had an official title on this council. One beyond mere ‘advisor.’ I want my role defined and set in stone.”

“More than understandable,” Dany said, “I’ll have someone loyal and competent assigned to you. And you’ll have ladies in waiting. As for the council… You’re now Mistress of the Court and Diplomacy. Officially. Congratulations.”

She couldn’t afford to become some random errand girl, or have any part of her occupation to suggest that she was replaceable.

She sat back down. Jon gave her a nervous look, then glanced at her belly. “Perhaps Lady Stark shouldn’t be saddled with this responsibility. I could do it.”

“You can assist her,” Dany replied, nodding. “I worry, however, that it may look… odd if the prince was spending so much time with one family, acting like he’s taking up consort duties.”

Jon snorted. “You have no problem with my consort taking up regency duties. Why can I not help her with this? She’ll probably need me.” He reached out to take Sansa’s hand.

She almost smacked him for that. They didn’t need any more council members figuring it all out. *And I may be with child, but I’m not made of glass.* It was very easy to lose a child, and very common in the first few months. But when she was carrying Eddie, she’d ridden and thrown knives, endured rape, and coped with the winter. The only time she came close to losing Eddie was when she got sick from the combination of the cold and Petyr’s loathing of modesty. And even then, she managed to carry him. Sansa knew all pregnancies were different, but she was more resilient than people gave her credit for. She had her limits. Standing up suddenly and talking to maniacs wasn’t one of them.

*People never give pregnant women enough credit.* This was always a thing that bothered her. Harry hadn’t wanted her to leave her chambers past the first couple of moons. She’d seen more than a few women kept bedridden, even when they weren’t painfully sick. *Doesn’t Jon trust me not to take risks? And to know what the risks are? This is the third time I’ve been pregnant. He’s aware that this isn’t the first time, even if he doesn’t know of the second. How many times has he carried a child? Or tended to a woman in my condition?*

“Of course I need you, My Prince,” replied Sansa, saccharine sweetness dripping from every syllable. She bowed her head slightly and cast her eyes down modestly. “I defer to your judgment in these matters, as I should as your lady. I only wish to serve, but of course I cannot do so without a strong man to guide me.”

She squeezed his hand then. Jon winced. She looked at him adoringly, pretending to be a maiden in distress. He looked away, reddening.

“We can discuss the matter further after this meeting,” Daenerys said, “Now, as to the Wildlings…”
“It’s been settled,” Sansa said sweetly. “I just took a meeting with them. The Magnar has promised that the men who have stolen girls will propose. His only condition is that the father’s consent is not required, only the girl’s. He intends to do away with the parental consent requirement in his lands. He’s promised that if his men want to steal a woman without prior arrangement, then they will be sent beyond the Wall to do so. And he’s promised that the poaching will be dealt with from now on. All this in exchange for a pardon for crimes thus far, which I am granting him. As for the economic manners, special clauses are to be added to our laws for treasures reaped beyond the Wall.”

“So the North is being taken care of, then.”

Sansa nodded. “Oh yes. My sister Arya is being sent to Winterfell after the wedding to serve as seneschal, and she is being tutored for the role by Lyra Mormont, daughter of my regent, Lady Maege Mormont of Bear Island. Lady Lyra is a great councilor to her mother and she has a fine bond with Arya. My sister’s learning at a fantastic pace and I am confident that thanks to Lady Lyra, she will do her duties well. Lady Lyra was the perfect tutor for my sister. My prince had the immense wisdom to select her. I owe so much to my future husband’s council. I don’t know what I would have done if it were not for his insight. I’m afraid I’m rather useless without him.”

Jon stared at the table’s surface, his face stony.

Waters, Dany, and Missandei were trying not to laugh.

When Jon turned to look at her, Sansa hesitated. She’d clearly hurt his feelings. Lyra Mormont was a fantastic suggestion. And it was his. Sansa glanced down. My temper got the better of me. I thought the days of that happening were over.

Discussion moved on to the city and security for the castle. Jon and Barristan handled that deftly, while Butterwell handled the accounts. Then came the discussion of Willas Tyrell’s arrival and Margaery and Willas’s additions to the council.

“Willas Tyrell is angling for Master of Ships, Master of Laws, or even Hand.” Sansa said. “Margaery has ambitions for herself as well, but they’re less clear. I’m sure she’ll be interested to become acting Mistress of the Court while I’m at Dragonstone and in Essos. I’ll make periodic trips back to the capital during my time at Dragonstone to guide her in that respect. Both of them should be watched, of course. But Margaery’s been Queen Consort, so she’ll serve competently, even if she might turn things to her advantage.”

“Aren’t you concerned about her completely wrenching control of the court from you?” Merys asked.

“Permanently? No. Margaery has other ambitions. She wants to be the new Lady of the Riverlands.”

Waters, Merys, and Barristan looked shocked. “And how do you know that, Lady Stark?” Barristan asked.

“I’ve heard nothing.” Waters noted.

“You know, I thought she might be aiming for that. She was discussing your Uncle Edmure with Randa Royce quite intently yesterday,” Dany said.

“Yes,” Missandei added. “She was speaking of it. And she managed to convince Lady Myranda not to pursue the match so that she wouldn’t be drawn from her position as Lady of the Gates. Margaery has no lands or holdings of her own. Myranda just became one of the most powerful lords of the
Vale. She wouldn’t give that up just to marry a man she considers a fool. Especially since she’s got dozens of suitors now, including several candidates for the Eyrie. Lady Myranda could become just as high a lady, while staying a powerful lord in her own right, without having to sacrifice a thing. Margaery went out of her way to point this out to her.”

Sansa knew all of this. Randa had told her everything. The Lady of the Gates, with her endearing, jolly temperament, shrewd mind, and gossipy, unaffected disposition, had a great talent for drawing information from people. She’d caught on to “Alayne’s” secret soon after their arrival at the Gates. Yesterday she managed to get Margaery to talk quite a bit about Edmure. And while the Maid of Highgarden was far too clever to confess her intentions outright or even make her comments the slightest bit obvious, Myranda was never the type who needed things to be obvious. She in fact delighted in the obscure.

Not that the conversation was entirely one-sided in terms of success. Randa had wished to wed Edmure, even asking Sansa to intercede on her behalf. But after the talk with Margaery, she decided against it, feeling the Maid of Highgarden had an excellent point.

“I haven’t heard anything of this,” Waters said, clearly alarmed. “When did you all learn this?”

“At the dress fitting yesterday,” Dany said simply.

Jon started to laugh. “Maybe we should have a Mistress of Whispers instead.”

“Speaking of the Eyrie, do we have any news on who will be taking the Vale next?” Merys inquired.

“News says it’s between Gilwood Hunter, Symond Templeton, and Cyrus Arryn of Gulltown. Arryn has the name and the wealth, putting his coin in many a lord’s pocket. But Symond Templeton has a finer reputation and is arguably closer in terms of blood. Gilwood Hunter has a similar claim, and is well liked by Ironoaks and the Royces—both branches,” Waters informed them.

Sansa cleared her throat. “The fact that Arryn is buying support sounds far more promising than it is. Petyr Baelish tried to do the same, and such methods are more looked down upon than ever in the Vale, as is that branch of House Arryn. They’re wed to merchants, which makes them rich, but they don’t have many lasting House ties as a result,” Sansa took a deep breath, “I’m casting my vote in with Hunter. I support the wishes of Lady Waynwood, Lord Royce, and Lady Myranda. Hunter came around to support me in my trial. He’s a man who is frequently underestimated, but undeservedly so. He rooted out his treacherous brother Harlan, and he’s a patient man. And a charitable one. He has kept much of the Vale fed.”

Gilwood Hunter almost starved the Eyrie to death when Petyr Baelish first took over as Lord Protector. But he was also one of the few who seemed to see Petyr for what he was. And he not only fed his own people well, but also aided his fellow lords. But there were other reasons Sansa supported him. While the Templetons were a knightly House, they were just as, if not more powerful than many of the Lords. On their own they could easily raise a thousand men. They were also Stark relations, with a good chance of inheriting Winterfell if anything happened to Sansa and Arya. Sansa had noticed on her war campaign that Ser Symond seemed the least concerned with her personal safety, and he’d supported Coldwater and Moore. She didn’t need someone that treacherous and powerful elevated to a Lord Paramount’s status.

“Could your support prove the deciding factor?” Daenerys asked.

“It could. And I intend it to.” She’d actually avoided casting her official vote until the last minute. Not only to have the extra weight of being the official princess of the empire, but also to build up anticipation.
The longer you keep them waiting, the more desperate they are and the more important you become. Better to give them time to see you rise in power in your own right so they know not to underestimate you. A lesson from Petyr. “But back to the Tyrells. I have a plan to handle Margaery and keep her loyal. She’ll prove an excellent minister and it’ll be in her best interests to serve well. I’m not completely sure as to Willas’s disposition. I know the goals, but I’m not sure how personally invested in them he is. Everything involving him thus far has gone through his grandmother and sister.”

“We’ll need to get a good judge of his character then. Waters, make sure close eyes are on the Tyrells,” Jon said.

The meeting went on for another hour as details of the progresses and wedding were hammered out, as well as affairs from overseas. The Sand Snakes were briefly discussed, as were their mother. Sansa became eager for the meeting to end. She felt bad about her tiff with Jon. He now pretended nothing was amiss, but he didn’t look at her much.

When the council finally adjourned, Sansa took his hand and asked him to walk her back to their chambers. He agreed, but when they got back, he grabbed his riding leathers and insisted he had to go fly Rhaegal.

Despondent, Sansa spoke with Arya and Lyra. Lyra offered to act as an initial emissary to Sansa’s dealings with the Ironborn.

“My sister Alysanne and Lady Asha are old friends. I know Lady Asha. I’m sure she’d be happy to see me.”


Arya took a drink with Sansa and then went to spend the afternoon with Gendry. Sansa attempted to take a nap, but her mind was restless. I mocked Jon with something he did to help me. And I did it in front of the council. All because he acted a bit overly-concerned.

She knew Jon hated the idea of being some sort of dominating chauvinist. And she’d used that against him. She’d pretended to be some cowed, submissive little girl and pretended their relationship was something it wasn’t. And she’d used the kind, excellent advice he’d given her to do it. I am the worst woman alive.

Sansa found herself crying a little. Gods, my emotions are everywhere.

When Jon finally returned to their solar, Sansa ran to him and instantly apologized. “I’m sorry I acted that way at the meeting. I shouldn’t have made fun of you. I thought you were patronizing me. I hurt you. I’m so sorry.”

It was clear from his expression that he was still hurt. “It felt awful, Sansa. You were acting like… like I was some sort of Harry Hardyng type.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I know I made you feel bad. If you like, I could make you feel good instead.” She winked at him.

“This isn’t the time,” he grumbled. “Do you want me to help you with the Greyjoys or not?”

Sansa stilled and nodded. “Of course I do.”

“I’m not offering because I think you’re incapable. I’m offering because you’re tired,” Jon informed her, frowning. “You need to stop taking my attempts to help you as condescension. Seven Hells, Sansa, you’re carrying my babe. You’re planning a wedding. Why would you want to marry me if
you didn’t want my help?”

“It’s not that. I just… I didn’t want you treating me like I’m feeble just because I’m with child. I’m still capable and I worried you weren’t recognizing that.”

Jon rubbed his temple. “Sansa… You are in a delicate condition.”

Sansa rolled her eyes. “Jon, trust me. There’s nothing delicate about this condition. That’s a false euphemism women use to get men to leave them alone. I’m creating another human being inside my body. There’s no way to create life delicately. You’re the one who just had a breakdown. You’re the one in the delicate condition. I’m with child.”

He frowned. “Well, I don’t want you thinking I’m incapable because of that.”

Sansa sighed. “Jon…”

“I mean it, Sansa. I actually think I’m doing quite well, considering. You’re not the only strong person here.”

“I know that. Do you think I’d want you if I thought you weak?”

“I’m not even sure you want me at all. You only ever seem interested when I make a request or you want to apologize for something. I’m just another duty to you now.”

She gasped. “You are not! I just wanted to give you space! Gods, Jon, that girl touched you!”

“Yeah! And you’re not touching me!” He was shouting now, leaning forward and looking angry. Then he stopped and recoiled in shame, turning away. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t--- You’re with child. You’re throwing up and such. Of course you don’t feel like---”

Sansa almost started to cry. Oh, Gods above. I can’t believe this. She definitely had her moments when she did not feel like mating at all. But then other times… It was all she could think about. It drove her to distraction.

The only reason she hadn’t tried anything was because she worried for Jon. They hadn’t coupled since that awful night before she gave him the news. Since then, she’d spent more than a couple of nights withdrawing from the bed to frig herself while he slept. One hand between her thighs. Another between her teeth so she didn’t cry out and wake him.

“But I do feel like---“ And all of a sudden, she really did feel like. It was odd. Jon didn’t look particularly dashing at the moment. He was in his brown, partially scorched leathers. His curly hair was in that usual ridiculous mess that appeared whenever he removed his cap: sticking out wildly in all directions. He was sweaty and dirty.

For some reason this all appealed to her. Desire stirred in her belly. Jon suddenly seemed very big, very manly, very rugged and handsome and natural. He just got back from riding a dragon. This took on a new significance for her.

Sansa didn’t consider herself a very aggressive person, or necessarily a dominant one. She wasn’t Arya. She didn’t thirst for battle or glory. She had no interest in being some female Aegon the Conqueror. But she also didn’t mind her own brand of power. She preferred the feminine variety. It was safer. She didn’t like violence or blood. Gentle words could move nations just as well as a bloody sword, and they could do so without hurting anyone.

But right now, the last thing she wanted was gentleness. Not from her, not from him. For the first
time she could remember, she wanted to conquer something by force, simply for the sake of conquering something by force.

When she spoke, Jon turned back slightly to look at her in wonder. Sansa’s hand flew out, grabbed him by the collar, and forced his mouth onto hers. She started devouring him, going into battle with his tongue and lips. She felt his thick lips against hers. She bit the lower one and yanked at his hair.

A strangled noise came from Jon’s throat. Sansa liked it. His hands grabbed for her, fingers running through her hair and groping her arse. Sansa reached for the laces on his jerkin and yanked them apart, snapping the leather string that bound them in the process. She tore his shirt open as well. When she saw that chest, she couldn’t resist. She bent her head down and started biting him: his neck, his chest, his shoulders.

“Sansa, Gods… What are you---?”

She growled and looked up at him. “I’m marking you. So the next time some stupid little bitch gets it into her head to touch you, she’ll have this waiting for her to remind her who you belong to.”

Sansa reached up and slipped his garments off his shoulders, then licked a long stripe up the center of his belly, up the planes of his chest, and around his neck until her lips brushed his ear. “Unless of course my prince objects.”

She wasn’t too far gone with lust to act like Harry. Jon had a choice in the matter. She’d only nibbled thus far, not enough to leave any major marks.

“Go ahead,” he shuddered. “Mark me.”

She bit down on his neck hard, enough to leave a true bruise. The next bite, more to his shoulder, drew blood. Jon cried out.

Sansa looked up at him, his blood on her lips. “Should I stop?”

“Did I say stop? If I want you to stop, you’ll know,” he told her roughly. “Mark me all the way to the bed.”

She did so. They stumbled back to the bedroom, Sansa biting, licking, and sucking at his flesh all the way. She loved it. She loved feeling the hard muscles under her lips. She loved the way his chest hair tickled her nose and cheeks. She loved the taste of his sweat. She liked every little well-defined bump on his stomach and the little points of his nipples. She loved how his hands tugged at her hair, and how he gasped as she worked. She loved devouring him. Finally, she backed him up to the edge of the bed and he fell back, and she fell with him. Really it was more like she pounced on him.

He was so hard, his cock straining through his breeches so much Sansa was a bit shocked they didn’t just burst open. Sansa finally pulled away to look down at Jon, his lean and sculpted upper body now covered in the reddish and purple rosettes of where her mouth had been.

His dreamy dark eyes were dazed, and his bruised lips parted into a smile. “You never lost your wolf, did you?”

Sansa cackled. “Not a chance.”

“You’re wearing too many clothes.” Jon said gruffly. “We both are.”

Sansa agreed, but she didn’t let him unlace his breeches. She pulled her gown off, then her girdle. She sighed with relief upon the removal of her breastband
He reached for her bosom, but she smacked his hand away. “No. They’re tender. It’ll hurt.

Disappointment danced across his eyes. Sansa sighed. She decided to distract him. Her mound still encased in her pantalets, she ground against his cloth-covered cock, soaking the front of his breeches in her essence. Her cunt twitched like mad as she did this, with every little push of contact. His hips jumped at the same time.

“You like that, Bastard Boy?” She asked.

“I… I… I can… I can think of… a few things… I’d like more…”

“Such as?”

“Our clothing gone and me inside you.”

She couldn’t deny him that. So she freed the both of them and then laid down next to him, her back against his side. She looked at him. “Like this.”

He lifted her leg and slipped between her thighs, thrusting in with a loud groan. Sansa moaned. Jon stroked her arms and kissed her shoulders as he fucked her, his pace picking up quickly. His left hand came around and began working her nub furiously. Sansa almost lost control. Determined to regain it, she turned her head and grabbed him by the back of his hair.

“Listen to me,” she growled, “I don’t ever, ever want to hear you suggest I don’t want you again. I want you. I love you. And I love your cock inside me.”

He responded to this with a deep thrust and a pinch to her nub that sent her into spasms. He finished within her soon after that, coming with a deep shudder.

When she tried to move, he gripped her. “No. I like staying inside you.”

Sansa relaxed. She let her mind settle a bit and glanced around the room. The bedchamber doors were wide open. Anyone who came in would be able to see them. And for once, she didn’t care. There was a trail of Jon’s leathers to the bed.

“It’s a girl,” she said at once.

“Hmm?” Jon asked.

“A girl. It’s a girl.”

“How do you know?”

She didn’t really know for sure. But she could guess. “I didn’t want to throw up when you came into the room.”

“I love you too.”


“What about them?”

“Whenever it was a boy, she’d throw up when she smelled leather.”

"...Eddie?"
“Yes. Riding was miserable the first couple of moons.”

Jon started brushing her belly with the tips of his fingers. She could feel him smile against her neck.

“Lovely.”

“You… you wouldn’t be disappointed?” Jon always said he wanted a girl, even that he wanted a girl first. But men could be fickle about this sort of thing, and sons were still treasured more. She wouldn’t put it past Jon to say those things to put her mind at rest and make her happy. “It’s… it’s alright if you are. I understand. And I could be wrong, it’s just a guess.”

“Well, maybe some would consider me a strange man for this, but I rather like the idea of being surrounded by beautiful women for the rest of my life. I got enough of the opposite at the Wall.”

She giggled. “You’re wonderful. May I fall asleep on top of you now?”

“Please do.”
Chapter Summary

A sexual excursion leads to a deal between Jon and Val. Rehearsals go awry. Visits are arranged on the eve of the wedding of the century.

Chapter Notes

First, I want to thank my AMAZING beta, Bluecichlid! You are the best, girl.

Second, I apologize for the delay. I have the flu and was stricken from commission for several days. I'm still recovering.

Val:

“In the Red Keep, people are so wrapped up in their secrets that they even keep their skin under wraps. Everyone here bathes in a tub, afraid of anyone seeing them nude.”

This was Arianne’s explanation as to how she found a place where the two of them could actually get some damn peace. She found the one place in the Red Keep that didn’t have spoiled lords and ladies crawling everywhere like cockroaches: the lower bath houses.

They were surprisingly well maintained, and when Val remarked upon this, Arianne revealed yet more of her encyclopedic knowledge of the Red Keep.

“That’s because the servants keep them. These were originally made for the lords and royal family. But they stopped using them. So the staff use them instead most nights. They get to enjoy the luxury of the best sort of bath to soak their aching muscles at the end of a long day, and no spoiled aristocrats bother them.

One of the things Val liked about her new lover: Arianne had friends of every rank. She’d grown up, like many a Dornish noble child, in the Water Gardens, where children of every rank were invited to swim and play together. Engaging all sorts of people in conversation and social interaction was not a habit she’d broken herself of.

So, Arianne had managed to pull some strings and have one of the bath houses reserved in the middle of the night for her and Val. A friend of hers was going to keep the water heated and deliver some food and material delights for the evening. Arianne met Val at the staircase down to the baths, covering her eyes playfully with her hands and leading her to one of the apartments.

When the wildling’s eyes were uncovered, she found several trays of fruit arranged on a table near the pool built into the ground, along with a couple of bottles of wine, whipped cream, and a stack of
fluffy towels. There was some cushioned furniture as well that looked suspiciously Dornish, including a divan.

The whipped cream did not end up going anywhere near the actual fruit. There were no complaints. Ariane tastes like a pomegranate anyways, Val reflected as she knelt between her princess’s legs, sucking at her nub. She wondered vaguely if she’d given herself a cream mustache in the process of bringing her lover to orgasm. Val giggled over Arienne’s nub at the thought, and it turned into the best laugh of her life because it made her lover vibrate.

An hour later, they were taking a brief break in the water, washing the stickiness from the cream off themselves. Val sat upon a stone bench, scrubbing herself with a wet cloth and enjoying the view she had of Arienne. The Dornish princess was floating on her back, eyes closed in a dreamy daze, candlelight glistening off her bronze form. She looked like some sort of foreign alter.

I wish I could paint, Val mused as she watched her lover. Since coming south, Val had seen some breathtaking art. But none of it could compare to what she saw before her. Naked Arienne Martell deserves to be immortalized. The world deserves such a thing.

But the image couldn’t last. Arienne opened her big eyes and lifted her head, moving into a more vertical position.

“Another go?” Val asked, surprised. They’d only just finished a few minutes prior. Not that I’m unwilling, but still…

Arienne held up a finger. “Listen.”

Val stayed silent. For a moment, there was nothing. Then she heard it: laughter. From a nearby chamber. Val smiled and looked at Arienne. They exchanged mischievous glances and hurried out of the tub, wrapping drying cloths around themselves and tiptoeing away from the pool.

The noise was coming from the next chamber over. Two voices: male and female. Val recognized one of the voices. She’d heard it enough times. Jon. But the female voice…

Her lover found a hole in the wall between the two chambers behind one of the brass candle holders mounted to the wall. Val told herself not to be surprised. Arienne had already revealed a disturbingly extensive knowledge of the Red Keep thus far. And it had been to Val’s benefit. Never had castle alcoves proved so entertaining.

Arienne and Val peered inside through the hole… Sure enough, there was the young man she once knew as Jon Snow, shirtless and standing by the pool, still in excellent shape, though much cleaner than he’d been the last time Val saw him naked. Standing just to the side, with her back to them, was an auburn-haired woman in rather scandalous undergarments of black silk and gold.

Her first thought was that it was Lady Stark. But that couldn’t be. As nice as the girl was, Lady Stark was so prim and proper. Aside from a couple of barbed words here and there, the lady wouldn’t be caught dead doing anything improper. And those undergarments she wore were anything but proper. And they were clearly made to be that way. Val knew that the poor girl had been forced to engage in some very unorthodox practices, but that just made the idea of this woman being the wench shamelessly stroking Jon’s chest and swaying her hips all the more unlikely.

Val appreciated the view, and she felt guilty and angry for that. Given Lady Stark’s history, she wouldn’t at all be surprised if the Lady of Winterfell was frigid. Rumors aside, even if she did willingly share Jon’s bed, that didn’t mean she wouldn’t have some serious issues being receptive to most activities.
Most activities appealed to Val, but having them forced upon you was another matter entirely. She’d come close to being forced a few times, and that had been enough to dampen her own drive and tastes considerably for certain stretches of time. But for it to happen repeatedly, over years had to be mortifying. And women between the Wall and Dorne were more or less trained to be... less than enthusiastic. There seemed to be an unfortunate but common idea between the Dornish Marches and the Wall that a woman could be either a virgin or a whore.

Such a mindset and an extensive history of rape could not make for the most adventurous combination.

Jon loved that woman, but that didn’t mean he was much different than most men. With Val, he’d learned to love a variety of different sexual practices. While Val was sure he’d been faithful to her, no relationship was the same as the other. Even if Lady Stark was the type to parade around in impractical underthings, Val seriously doubted she had a wildling’s mindset. Jon knew, with Val, that if he ever crossed her, he could say good-bye to his cock.

Sansa Stark was not the type to threaten her lovers with a gelding. And southern women in general tended to be more... accepting of infidelity. Especially among the higher classes. It was a curious thing, but Val had spotted more than a few married men stumbling into and out of brothels in the capital, and she’d heard more than a few rumors of wives turning blind eyes or forgiving their husbands infidelities and bastard children.

And even if she wasn’t the forgiving type... Jon was a prince now. Even if she did take offense, what could she do?

Jon did love Sansa, but perhaps that wasn’t enough. Could he have sought out a whore who looks like her to satisfy certain needs?

It infuriated the wildling. Jon, of all people. She wanted him to be better than that. You once almost doomed yourself to a life of celibacy, you stupid shit. Now you dishonor your bride-to-be?

Val looked over at Arianne, expecting to see an expression that matched her anger. But Arianne was grinning in a manner very similar to the way she had when Val had been licking cream from her cunt. Val’s stomach sank.

“How can you smile like that?” The Wildling hissed.

Arianne looked shocked at the question. “Are you kidding? You, of all people... I’ve been waiting to see something like this for moons on end.” Arianne snaked an arm around the wildling’s shoulder’s and pointed to the whore’s under-things. “See those? I gave her those.”

“What?”

“Well, I gave her something like those. She’s changed the fabric. But yes. I gave Lady Stark some counsel and some new garments to wear for her prince.”

“That can’t possibly be...”

“It most certainly---“ But both women had their attention cut off when the woman grabbed Jon by the shoulders and pushed him roughly up against a wall. “---Or maybe not.”

The woman’s voice was a purr as she leaned forward towards the Targaryen prince. Candlelight flickered over her form. Val was sure this woman couldn’t be Lady Stark. It wasn’t just the voice. It was what the voice was saying.
“Listen to me, Bastard Boy. You’ve got one more night of sin before you become a respectable married man. I intend for it to count. We’ve got to make sure that pretty cock of yours gets plenty of practice don’t we? Do you want to disappoint your Lady Wife?”

“My Lady Wife will not be disappointed, I assure you,” Jon replied, “I make a point of surpassing her expectations. And even wed, I doubt anything we do will ever be considered ‘respectable.’”

“I hear she’s a respectable lady.”

“She is. It makes me wonder what she could possibly see in a bastard like me.”

The wenche’s hands snaked down his belly. She began unraveling his laces and yanked them open. Jon’s cock came out, hard and proud. Jon gasped, his eyes rolling back.

“Maybe it has something to do with Balerion here. Has she seen him?” The whore asked, prodding the tip with her fingertip and conjuring a shudder from the prince.

“Aye, she has.”

“There’s your answer then.”

“You’re right, it can’t be her,” Arianne said in shock.

“Why?” Val asked.

“Balerion was the name of Aegon the Conqueror’s dragon,” Arianne said, “The biggest, most fearsome dragon Westeros ever saw. Balerion the Dread. There is no way in any of the Seven Hells that Sansa bloody Stark would ever deign to refer to her prince’s cock by a pet name, let alone one that… Seriously, any man on the planet would be delighted to refer to his cock by such a prestigious moniker. But a snowflake Sansa would find it horrifying.”

The redhead slipped to her knees then, kissing Jon’s torso as she went, then took ‘Balerion’ into her mouth. Quite enthusiastically as well. And, judging by how Jon threw his head back, cried out, and squirmed, also very proficiently.

No way. Val knew from what Arianne had told her of the trials that Sansa Stark had, in fact, had a cock in her mouth before. But it wasn’t by choice. There was no way she’d suck like this, especially not at this point in her life. And while Jon might not be faithful to her, Val couldn’t find it in her hear to believe he’d ever pressure her into such a thing.

And, judging by the way this woman bobbed her head so rapidly and happily, this wasn’t an action she shied away from. At first Jon’s fists were clenched, much like his eyes. Eventually, though, they found her hair, stroking it and mussing it passionately.

“Oh, my sweet, sweet girl.” He cried out. “My lovely, lovely… perfect… I can’t… Gods above…”

Val wanted to enjoy the show. Whoever the girl was, she was quite attractive from behind. Long slim legs, round arse, a somewhat wide but slightly tapered waist and sculpted arms. The hair was a bit uneven in terms of thickness, but it was a beautiful color, and her skin was like cream.

Jon was as ridiculously pretty as ever. And Val always liked watching him squirm best of all. He was still extremely sculpted and strong, and though his skin was a bit less pale than it once was, it was still glistening and clear. His hair was still thick, but cleaner and nicely cut. His beard was more closely trimmed than it had been at the Wall, but that wasn’t surprise. They’d had little time for grooming during the wars. He still had all his teeth, and they were whiter than he remembered. The
new scar on his cheek was impressive. Though he was a bit more polished, he seemed as masculine as ever. The scars that cascaded over his torso, arms, and face were enough of a reminder of his past even if his muscles weren’t. The way he bit his lower lip, too… Gods, I miss those lips.

She felt a twitching in her cunny, but it was a guilty twitch. He’s dishonoring your liege lady. While Val wasn’t entirely sold on these kneeler practices, she knew there was something important about that. While it might not matter to some women that their men had girls on the side, Val believed it might matter to Sansa. The Wildling wasn’t the Lady of Winterfell’s disciple, but she liked the woman well enough. And it was clear that the girl had suffered enough and that she worshipped Jon. That Jon would do something that could hurt his bride-to-be did bother Val on a certain level.

The wench then reached between Jon’s legs. Val noted the motion of her elbow and the way the prince yelped and almost jumped.

“GODS! FUCK!”

There were few things one could do to get Jon-the-honorable-Lord-Crow to curse. One of them was playing with his stones. She did. Sansa Stark would never, ever do such a thing. But perhaps that’s why this whore is here.

“Please… Mercy…” Jon yelped. “I can’t…”

The whore pulled her head back. “I don’t feel merciful.”

“Fine then, don’t be.” He grunted. “But be prepared.”

The whore put him back in her mouth. After several seconds, Jon was jerking his hips in a way that made it all too clear what was happening. And the whore swallowed it all up.

Val felt a flash of anger towards both of them. The wedding is two bloody days away. Weddings to the Wildlings did in fact mean loyalty. And Jon and Lady Stark were practically married already. Why marry her if he’d do this?

I’ll never be able to enjoy thinking about Jon naked again. Not without guilt. Every time the image comes to mind, I’ll be seeing him with this harlot.

Val wanted to tear the woman’s pretty red hair out. That’s probably why he picked her. So he could have a harlot Sansa to suck his cock and play with his stones since his Lady Sansa can’t and won’t do it.

The harlot pulled away and laughed. “Has the great Prince of the Targaryens been conquered? Oh dear, what shall the empire come to?”

Jon growled, slipped his hands underneath her arms and pulled her up. “I’m not conquered yet, Stark.”

Gods, he even calls her by name? Any arousal Val felt disappeared. Now she was disgusted.

Jon made it worse by suddenly growing rather tender, reaching up and stroking the woman’s cheek. “And besides,” he said softly, “I don’t like seeing you on your knees, doing all the work. You’ve been working hard enough as it is.”

Ugh. I knew you didn’t have a preference for maids, Jon, but now you like them ‘worked hard’, too?

“I like working hard,” the whore replied. “Especially when you’re so very hard.”
He put a finger to her lips. “Where did that naughty mouth come from?”

“A lady must have her secrets.”

Wait… The inflections surrounding that seemed too familiar.

Jon lifted the woman up and she giddily wrapped her legs around his waist, wiggling her arse and pulling another cry from his lips.

As it turned out, Arianne may have not have arranged for the furniture she and Val occupied, as luxury seats and tables were arranged in the adjoining chambers as well. Though the velvet in this room was blue instead of green. But Val hadn’t even noticed the furnishings until a moaning Jon chose to place his lover atop one of the long tables. Both of them turned so their sides were facing Val and Arianne and the woman turned her head. Blue eyes. Pink full lips. High cheekbones. No…

The woman in Jon’s arms was no whore. It was Sansa Stark. It really was. There could be no mistake. The golden light of the candles caught the underside of her chin as she threw her head back and there was a flash of skin a bit more silvery than the rest. A burn.

And just like that, Val was turned on once more. She gasped in shock. She heard Arianne do the same.

Short but nimble fingers danced around the wildling’s naked waist. They danced up her ribcage and groped her breasts.

“Who’d have thought little Lady Stark had it in her after all?” Arianne whispered in her ear. “Gods, but she’s good at hiding it. I’d have never guessed. Of course, that does call a couple of our prior conversations into question… but still. Gods… Look at them. Beauties, aren’t they?”

They were. Val actually preferred Jon to his partner, but Lady Stark was nothing to scoff at either. She looked lovely perched on the table, pressed up against Jon as he kissed her. Jon looked absolutely worshipful. Val had seen him like this before, but perhaps not to this degree. He handled Sansa like she was made of stardust and sunlight.

“Should I be jealous?” Arianne asked.

“What? No.” Val replied. She wasn’t interested in comparing lovers. Jon was not Arianne and Arianne was not Jon. Each were wonderful in their own ways and completely different. She’d enjoyed her time practically debauching her nervous, sweet, virtuous Jon Snow. And now she enjoyed her trysts with her knowledgeable, sultry vivacious Arianne. “Should I be?”

“No. That said… I want us to play with each others’ cunts while we watch them fuck.”

“Talk like that is why you’ll never have to be jealous of anyone, ever,” Val said tartly, pushing her arse out, leaning forward, and planting her front against the wall. Arianne giggled and knelt behind her. She began stroking Val’s folds.

“Narrate for me,” the Dornish princess said huskily.

Val tried to keep her voice and legs steady as her lover peeled her folds back.

To her disappointment, though, when she put her eye back to the hole, she saw Jon pulling away from Sansa. When he began to walk in Val’s direction, the wildling’s breath caught in a way that actually had nothing to do with her princess’s fingers. But to her relief, the Targaryen prince was just rifling through some of his dropped clothing.
“I have something for you,” he said. Sansa sat back on the table. It was then Val noticed how her belly curved. She gasped.

“What?” Arianne asked.

“Just the way you’re stroking my taint,” Val lied. She adored her lover, but she knew that what she saw was best kept to herself. She found herself hoping Arianne wouldn’t notice, but she wasn’t sure how many expectant women the princess had been around. Sansa’s belly wasn’t prominent, but Val had been around enough women who were expecting to recognize what was before her.

Jon retrieved a box from the folds of his discarded doublet. “Close your eyes.”

Sansa did as asked. She licked her lips and opened her legs further. Jon chuckled, walked up to her, and opened the box. “Open them.”

It was the necklace he’d bought weeks ago in the goldsmith’s chambers when Val had been purchasing the bracelet for Arianne. It was now altered: the once pink roses were now blue, the green leaves now red like a weirwood tree. Sansa Stark’s blue eyes grew huge and sparkled as much as the sapphires glinting against the velvet in the box.

“Jon…” She began to quiver. “Oh my Gods… Jon… You shouldn’t have…”

“I’m your husband to be,” Jon replied, “Of course I should.”

“Jon, you really don’t have to give me pretty things…”

Jon pouted. “You’ve made me plenty of pieces of fancy clothing. And you’ve gifted me that silver chain, dozens of handkerchiefs, and that fine favor of yours. And in a couple of days, strangers and sycophants with too much money will be falling on their knees to gift you with pretty things to gain your favor. If you get to give me pretty things, and everyone in the kingdoms gets to give you pretty things, why shouldn’t I get to give you pretty things as well? Or maybe you don’t think this is that pretty.” He pulled the box away and snapped it shut. “Maybe you don’t like it or want it.”

“No!” Sansa yelped, reaching out. Jon laughed.

“What’s happening?” Arianne hissed, pinching Val’s folds. Val hissed.

“He’s giving her a necklace.”

Arianne snorted. “You Northerners. Tell me when it gets hot.”

And she shoved a finger into Val’s cunny. The Wildling bit her lip to stop from yelping.

Another finger joined the first, and Arianne began fucking Val with her hand while circling the wildling’s nub with her thumb. Val tried to retain control of herself as she watched Jon and Sansa. The Lady of Winterfell was crying now and blubbering about how much she loved Jon and how he didn’t need to give her expensive things as Jon clasped the bauble about her long neck.

“I did this because I wanted to. I know I don’t need to give you things.” He replied sweetly to his betrothed.

_Duh_, Val thought, _You sucked his cock before he gave it to you. You’ve already made it pretty clear that your love doesn’t need to be bought. So enjoy your damn jewels_. Val was happy she didn’t have to deal with this shit. When she’d given Arianne her bracelet, the Princess just accepted and enjoyed it as intended.
The necklace sparkled prettily on the Lady of Winterfell’s neck. The redhead slipped off the table and went to the edge of the pool to look at her reflection, bending over becomingly.

“She’s bending over the pool,” Val whispered, “And not just to look at herself.”

It was hard to give a proper commentary and keep her voice low, because Arianne was practically sending her into spasms. Val struggled to maintain a grip on the wall. Her nerves were exploding as Arianne pushed her digits in and out more and more frantically. Val’s legs were beginning to feel like jelly. *Seven Hells, I am a woman of the Free Folk.*

She gasped as her peak took her and stumbled back. Arianne caught her, wrapping her limbs around Val’s form as the wildling fell back. The Dornish princess giggled and kissed Val’s hair. “You’re like a geyser, I swear.”

They gasped and held each other for a second, enjoying the sound of the moans coming from the other side of the wall before Arianne giggled. “My turn. I want to see if Lady Stark’s cunt is kissed by fire as well.”

She planted a sweet kiss upon Val’s forehead, then scampered over to the peephole. She took a quick look, then glanced back at Val, delighted.

“It is!” She whispered excitedly before looking back.

Val was less interested in Sansa Stark’s red cunt than the pink and brown one inches from her face. She closed that distance enthusiastically after parting Arianne’s legs a bit more. *My Dornish Pomegranate Princess.*

Val had never worked her tongue so hard, attacking at the princess’s clit like a crow that had tried to steal her best fur. Before long, the Dornish princess had forgotten all about the two on the other side and fell to her knees in an orgasmic mess. Val didn’t let up. She kept going, making the woman moan and gush. When her lover peaked a second time, the wildling flipped her over and climbed atop her, tangling their legs and grinding their mounds together roughly.

By the time they were done, they both needed to bathe again about a half dozen times. And then they fucked in the water. Then the sun was up and Val was certain she wouldn’t be able to walk right for a week.

They managed to get their clothes back on and help each other back to their chambers. Val kissed Arianne deeply behind her door before the princess departed reluctantly.

After an hour long nap, Val forced herself to scrub Dorne off of herself and put on some respectable clothing before hurrying off to the practice yards. Arya Stark, Lady Stark’s dark-haired little sister, briefly passed by with Lyra Mormont, running through the yards.

Val watched the two women hurry past in surprise. *Honestly, if I were to guess which of the Stark sisters were the enthusiastic bed partner, I’d have said her. Both Stark girls were beautiful, tall, and strong, and the similarities ended there. Arya was the polar opposite of her sister Sansa. She was active, aggressive, unpolished, and shockingly open about her emotions. She didn’t hide her pain or anger, and she certainly didn’t hide her opinions. If Val hadn’t known any better, she’d have taken Arya Stark for a spearwife.*

Or Jon’s blood sister. They certainly looked alike.

She found Jon in one of the swordyards, hacking at a practice dummy. Ghost trotted up to greet her, and she stroked the animal’s ears. When Jon turned, however, he didn’t look quite so eager. Val
stepped back as he came towards her. His solemn face betrayed nothing.

His words were more revealing. “Did you… Have an interesting evening?”

Val tried not to cringe. *Of course they fucking heard. They had to have, eventually.* After a while she and Arianne had forgotten all about staying quiet or the two on the other side of the wall.

“I had a fine evening, Lord Crow,” Val replied, punching his arm playfully, hoping she could pass this off.

Jon glanced around. Various lords, knights, squires, servants and ladies were wandering around. None appeared to be paying much attention, but Val had been around long enough to know appearances were deceiving. “I’ve known you long enough to know your voice, Val.”

The Wildling frowned. “What business is it of yours?”

He bit his lip. “Look… You need to be careful.”

“Apparently, if princes are going to be eavesdropping on magnas in the bath.” Val tried to ignore her own hypocrisy.

“Or the other way around?” He replied. “We both witnessed a bit too much of each other last night, I think. Sansa doesn’t know, I hope. But she fell asleep and I found an interesting little opening in the wall. After I put Sansa to bed, I went back to that chamber and I found an overturn candle holder that suggested you witnessed quite a bit on purpose. And I do remember you having an interest in watching people.”

Val’s stomach sank. “Jon, I---“

He frowned. “Sansa and I are wed tomorrow. I’ve decided that instead of getting angry, I’m going to turn this into an opportunity. I’ll forgive you this intrusion if you’re willing to do something for us.”

Val took a deep breath. “Of course, Your Grace.”

“Good. Spar with me. Our words will be better covered by the clash of our blades.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jon:

*I’m going to be happy during the days leading up to my wedding.*

It was a promise he’d made himself. Not one he’d thought he’d need to make, either. Jon had been sure it would go without saying that he’d not be able to keep the idiot grin off of his face. But of course, life had to come into play.

He and Sansa had spent what at first felt like a sublime night together in the baths below ground. He’d liked watching the necklace he’d given her bounce along with her teats while he fucked her in the water, her in his lap and moaning like a goddess. He always loved how deep her voice got when they were alone together, when she dropped the sweet, girlish act. She’d fallen asleep in his arms after. It was then that he’d heard them. Val and Arianne Martell moaning in pleasure.

Jon had carried Sansa out of the pool, laid her down on the divan, covered her in the towel, and then found the hole in the wall. He saw the two women grinding against one another wantonly in their own pool.
He’d watched longer than he liked to admit.

They’d watched him too, as further evidence indicated once he’d gone back to the baths to re-inspect.

There was a part of him that enjoyed that a bit too much as well. Flashes of the two of them together entered his mind. That was already enough. But the idea of them watching him and Sansa... possibly while even pleasuring each other... And then seeing Val in the training yard... Sparring with her was a mistake. It was too much. He’d hurried back to his chambers and thankfully, his lover was awake.

She’d been a vision when he first entered the bedchamber, too. Still naked from their romp the night before (Jon had wrapped her up in drying clothes and her gown when he’d carried her back up, but they’d fallen off of her in the intervening hours) she sat up in bed, stretching her long arms and throwing her head back as she yawned. She’d looked like a weirwood sprouting from the ground. Her new necklace sparkled against her throat.

He’d pounced on her, pouring all of his lust into her lovely body, stroking every silky inch of her. It hadn’t lasted long. She giggled when they finished.

“Not exactly the most virtuous way to wake a lady before she and her betrothed are due in the Sept.”

“What? Oh, right.” He’d forgotten. They were to go to the sept today to rehearse. He groaned. “Must we?”

“Yes. We have to receive my uncle, take breakfast with the wedding party, then proceed to the sept.”

Jon didn’t like the sept or the High Sparrow. He didn’t want a wedding in the Great Sept of Baelor. But it was his duty. He reluctantly got up and the two of them washed and dressed. Sansa made him put on a velvet doublet and Satin made sure he was groomed to perfection. Arya found them in the hall outside, dressed in a green lamb’s wool dress Sansa obviously had forced her to wear. But she still had a sword strapped to her belt.

They greeted Lord Edmure right before breakfast, which they were due to take with the entire wedding party. The Lord of Riverrun had arrived late yesterday evening, claiming too great a headache to be received formally upon arrival. Now, he was dressed in a fine lamb’s wool doublet of Tully blue. His red hair was greyer than Jon remembered.

He embraced Sansa with genuine affection in the halls of the High Nobles’ wing. “My Sweet Niece, you’re more lovely every time I see you.” Edmure kissed her on both cheeks and looked her up and down. “Gods... You look just like your mother on the eve of her wedding.”

Sansa hesitated. She and Edmure rarely mentioned Catelyn to one another. Edmure didn’t notice, he was too busy sweeping Arya into a big hug. “And there’s my wild she-wolf! Gods, you’re a vision!”

“Isn’t she, though?” Sansa laughed.

Arya bowed. “I thank you, Uncle. Tell us, how is Uncle Brynden? And the children?”

Jon tried not to show his annoyance as Edmure spoke of his family. Lynette was now at Dragonstone with a couple of companions, several servants, a septa, and plenty of toys and clothes and everything she could possibly want. She’d said good-bye to Sansa, but cried when Jon approached. Edmure didn’t even blink when he spoke glowingly of how Minisa was now able to
recite the names, sigils, holdfasts and words of every House in the Riverlands and how Ambrose was learning to read, but said nothing of Lynette.

Jon clenched his teeth as Edmure bowed to him. “My Prince, or should I say Nephew?”

“Lord Tully,” Jon said stiffly, hoping his use of Edmure’s formal title might be enough of an indicator.

Edmure nodded and his smile faltered slightly before he offered his arm to Sansa. “Shall we?”

Jon cleared his throat and held out his arm to his lady. Sansa glanced at Arya, who took Edmure’s arm, and then she took Jon’s. If the Lord of Riverrun was offended, he gave no sign. Instead, he engaged Arya on her studies with Lady Lyra. The four managed to speak charmingly on the way to one of the smaller banquet halls. There, the rest of the wedding party met with them: Daenerys, Ser Barristan, Brienne, Missandei, Anya Waynwood, Randa Royce, Margaery Tyrell, her cousin Luthor, Nathen Cerwyn, Arianne Martell, Ellaria Sand, Loreza and Dorea Sand, Loras Tyrell, Rickard Locke, Daynora Flint, Sam and Gilly, Satin, Podrick Payne and various others. They all sat down to a fine breakfast of quail’s eggs, smoked salmon, blood oranges, figs, rye bread and apple cider.

Sansa pointedly put the northern lords, Vale folk, and Edmure between the Tyrells and the Dornish. When they finished the meal, they made their way to the sept. Jon rode just ahead of Sansa’s litter, struggling not to glance behind him every two second to make sure everything was fine. Arya rode behind their sister, having promised to watch carefully. He used the crowds as an excuse to look around as much as possible anyways, pretending to be watching them cheer as he passed by.

Jon couldn’t help it, really. He grew more apprehensive about his lover’s health and safety every day.

When they got to the pavilion and were settling there, Jon brushed passed the various septons and septas directing people to various places and ran to check on her, making sure her litter was set down as gently as possible. *One Stark already died here. That was enough.* Sansa emerged laughing at him, though, and waving him away. “Jon, go. The High Sparrow doesn’t want to be kept waiting.”

Jon nodded and glanced at Arya, who gave him a steady nod. Daenerys took Jon’s arm and leaned in as they headed into the sept. “I know you’re nervous, but you mustn’t seem too obvious, Nephew.”

“Of course.”

The High Septon was pacing at the center of the sept-proper, wringing his hands. He glared at Jon and the others when they entered.

*Why don’t you just tap your foot as well? I can’t tell if you’re losing patience or not if you don’t.* Jon tried to ignore this and focus on the beauty of the sept: the gilded statues, the crystal lamps, the ornate paintings, the immense domes. Everything in the hall seemed to glimmer. Jon could almost believe Gods were looking upon them.

The Sparrow greeted Daenerys with a deep bow and allowed the queen to kiss his ring, and gave Jon a much shallower one. He ushered the groom’s party to the dais right before the altar between the gilded statues of the Mother and the Father. Jon tried to pretend their smiles were meant for him as he mounted the dais. He began to step off the first platform towards the altar proper, but the Sparrow stopped him.

“No, you wait here. You and the one who holds the cloak.”
The High Sparrow went over the steps once more. Then he looked at Jon’s two squires. “Which holds the cloak, and which holds the crown?”

“I’ll be holding the cloak, Ser,” Nathen said, stepping forward nervously.

“I’m not a Ser. I’m addressed as ‘Your High Holiness’,” The High Septon looked at Nathen sharply, sharp eyes narrowed as they danced across the sigil clip holding Nathen’s cape to his shoulders. A black battle-axe. “You’re of the North, Boy?”

“Aye, Your High Holiness.”

“And you’re holding the maidencloak after the prince takes it from her shoulders?”

Nathen cleared his throat. “I am.”

“You worship the Old Gods?”

“I do.”

The High Sparrow frowned. “Do they even have cloaks in such ceremonies?”

“They do.” Jon said through gritted teeth. *He knows this.*

The Sparrow fixed Nathen with a cold stare. “That cloak, Boy, represents the bride’s… virtue and purity, her old life, the family that bore her. You understand the importance of that?”

“Of course, Your Holiness.”

“If you make a mistake, you could be besmirching all of that.”

*Oh, shut up you Old Lout.* Nathen already had a rough time of it. He was an unfortunate-looking young man: chubby and awkward and spotted. He’d been bullied by the other squires before Jon chose him. Now he was occasionally sabotaged by them. There were already too many people in the world dead set on making him feel uncomfortable and inadequate.

Jon glared at the Sparrow, who stared determinedly back. He didn’t like this man’s attitude, and he’d noted the very severe pause before the Sparrow spoke of Sansa’s virtue.

“I promise not to fail.” Nathen glanced at Jon anxiously. The prince nodded and smiled slightly.

“You’ll have arrived first, of course,” The High Sparrow continued, walking up the steps. “You, the queen, and your men. The queen shall be lower on the steps…”

*Since when does the High Septon spend his time giving shallow instructions like this? Even for a royal wedding?* He said nothing. Such a question would require double-speak, a talent he’d never acquired. So he just stared as the High Septon arranged everyone.

“The guests shall gather so the aisle connects the marriage altar and the entrance hall. It will be when everyone is assembled that the bride shall arrive. The doors will open once more and Lord Tully will escort the bride down the aisle.” The High Septon looked over at two of the Silent Sisters and nodded. The doors were opened.

Sansa and Edmure entered, smiles plastered on their faces as if this were the true ceremony

Arya, Margaery, and Randa stood behind Sansa, pretending to hold her train. Sansa walked down, smiling sweetly, going the exact path of the proposed aisle. She climbed the steps to stand alongside
“You’ll join hands and face each other. The seven vows will be made, do you know them?”

Jon and Sansa recited them perfectly. The Septon continued with the seven blessings. That was followed by the seven promises. The High Sparrow looked cross at Jon’s lack of mistakes.

“Lord Tully shall take the bride’s maidencloak, and then you shall cloak her and bring her under your protection. At this, I will place the circlet upon her brow, then your hands will be bound together. And then Prince Jon…?”

“With this kiss, I pledge my love.”

Sansa was about to respond, but the High Sparrow interrupted her with a prompt she didn’t need.

“With this kiss, I pledge my love.”

“You shall kiss, I will declare you one heart, flesh, and soul and the bells will ring. Your preferred knights shall lead the procession, followed by your flower-bearer. Then you. Then the train-carriers. Then the queen and Lord Tully, the Lady Arya and--- I’m sorry, who is to be your escort in this?”

He looked at their sister.

“No one.”

“A person to represent each family is required with each new couple. Not just the bride’s.”

“I’ll be representing both sides of the family. I’m Jon’s closest relation after the queen. I’ll be walking for both him and Sansa.”

“I see. I understand there is to be a second ceremony after this? In the godswood?”

Jon nodded, his gaze not leaving the septon’s eyes.

The Sparrow sighed. “A pity you won’t be receiving your well wishers under King Baelor’s benevolent eyes, then. But then, he sees so much. Still… You shall exit the usual way, yes?”

They nodded.

“Well then, on we go.”

Jon fumed as they made their way out, growing angrier by the second. He’d rather be consecrating our execution than our wedding.

When they reached the pavilion once more, crowds were gathered and a cheering din hit their ears. Cries of “Daenerys!” “Jon!” “Sansa!” “The Queen!” “The Prince!” and even “Lady Margaery!” danced across the sea of waving arms and smiling faces. Jon hesitated before waving back. He began to relax somewhat.

And then came the flock of ravens.

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Sansa:

She wasn’t sure she saw them before Jon did. But she definitely registered their meaning first. There were so many, flying out from multiple windows. Not even the Faith has this many letters to send at
once. She could remember ravens taking flight from the Sept on another day. A terrible day. One of
the worst days of her life. Sansa wasn’t going to let this day be ruined.

“Jon, no. They’re here. The birds are real. You’re not imagining it,” she said, leaning towards him,
trying to keep smiling back at the hoard of people. She resisted the urge to glare at the High Sparrow,
who had climbed onto a nearby pulpit.

You shit, you utter shit. This was no coincidence. Everything surrounding this wedding, including
the rehearsal, was carefully arranged. Those ravens were sent out at this moment for a very special
reason.


**What if he thinks my words aren’t real either?** Jon shook. Sansa glanced at Daenerys, Barristan,
Arya and Brienne, all of them furious. Thinking as quickly as she could, Sansa grabbed Jon’s hand
and raised it high. Please, she silently begged the crowds, *I just need you to yell out* ----

“**KISS!”**

**Oh, thank the Gods.** Sansa made a point of looking like she was blushing, playing the sweet,
lovestruck maid as she pretended to cling to Jon’s arm while simultaneously holding him steady. She
gazed, starry-eyed at him as that one cry grew in popularity.

“**KISS! KISS! KISS!”**

She used that roar as an excuse to pull Jon closer to her, turning him towards her. As he turned to
her, he closed his eyes for a second, trying to stay strong and steady. Sansa stroked his cheek.

“Listen to me. You’re here. You’re fine. You’re not going mad. Ravens were released. When I’m
done kissing you, they’ll be gone. Stay with me, Jon Targaryen.” She pressed her lips to his. The
crowd went mad. She kept them that way for several seconds, stealing glances towards the sky until
she saw the very last black wing disappear from view. “They’re gone, Jon.”

She pulled away to show him, and he looked around, relief flooding his features.

Daenerys hurried over and grabbed Sansa’s hand, thrusting it into the air. Sansa did the same with
Jon’s hand. The Dragon queen beamed.

“**GLORY TO HOUSE TARGARYEN!”**

Arya hurried over and grabbed Jon’s vacant hand. “**GLORY TO HOUSE TARGARYEN!
GLORY TO HOUSE STARK!”**

“**TARGARYEN! STARK! TARGARYEN!”** Daenerys cried out. Sansa looked back and forth
between Arya and Dany. *Oh Gods, thank you.*

She chanted along. “**TARGARYEN! STARK! TARGARYEN!”**

Barristan, Brienne, Randa, Anya, Margaery, Nathen, Uncle Edmure, and the others started chanting
as well. Targaryen. Stark. Targaryen. The crowds began to chant the names as well. Jon started
calling them out as well. Sansa breathed a sigh of relief. Jon shook her hand and squeezed it, giving
her a sweet look. *I’m alright. I’m fine. Thank you.*

Reassured, Sansa stole a look at the High Sparrow. His gaze bore a hole through her. His dark eyes
seemed bigger than those on the statue of Baelor the Blessed. *At least those eyes are kind.*
The High Sparrow walked over and made a point of blessing Sansa and Jon. “My blessings to you, Sansa of the Houses Hardyng and Stark, and Jon Snow of the House Targaryen, on this the eve of your wedding.”

You will not get away with this. You try to hurt my family, I hurt you. The North remembers, Sparrow. If the wolves don’t get you, the dragons will. Before the sun rises twice more, I will be a dragon too. A hatchling already sits in my womb, ready to take flight. You will pay for this.

They hurried away from the Great Sept and bypassed various little celebrations. Daenerys, Jon, Sansa, Barristan, Brienne, Arya, Missandei, and Satin hurried deep into the walls of the holdfast, into Dany’s bedchamber.

“It’s official,” Barristan said, “The Sparrow is a threat.”

“Are we sure?” Brienne asked. “I’ve heard good things about the Sparrow. Perhaps it was a mistake—”

“No,” Dany interrupted. “There was no reason the Faith could have to release that many ravens at that time, at that place, all at once. Everything has been carefully constructed. If this were the day of the wedding, when the actual important event took place, maybe. But this was a rehearsal.”

“I always heard the High Sparrow was kind,” Satin said, shaking his head. Sansa sighed. Satin clearly hadn’t noticed the nasty looks the man sent his way.

“I know for a fact that the Sparrow isn’t as benevolent as he seems. When it suits him to be nasty, he can be. He broke the pride of Cersei Lannister.” He enjoyed trying to destroy mine. Sansa rubbed Jon’s arm. “Are you alright?”

He nodded. “I’m fine. It was just a momentary shock. What I don’t understand is why? It doesn’t make sense. I understand that the Sparrow doesn’t like me but… If he wanted me dead, he’d just have me poisoned, yes? And what purpose would that serve anyways? There needs to be an heir to dragons. Someone to carry on the line. And even if I do worship at a Heart Tree… I’ll probably never be king. I vowed my children would keep the Seven. Dany does. The current and future monarchs will all be of the Faith.”

“He might not want you dead,” Barristan said, “He may have been seeking to undermine the marriage or your faith. If you were to break down on the eve of your wedding in the plaza of the Sept, it could have sent a powerful message. Either that you’re unfit as prince or that your match is an insult to the Seven. You worship the Old Gods. Lady Sansa keeps them along with the Seven. He may fear that such a union would produce Targaryens who will always be more partial to the Old Religion.”

“But why not do this earlier then?” Sansa asked, shaking her head and rubbing her temple. “The engagement was announced moons ago. He had all this time…”

“You’ve gained a lot of popularity with the people,” Missandei mentioned. “He may have feared moving against you publicly before now. But if Jon had broken down right in front of the crowds, it might have been enough to convince them your match was unfit.”

“But why not kill me instead? The Gods know there was plenty of opportunity,” Sansa said.

“There’s been so much security around you. Your poisoning was made public almost immediately after the engagement was announced,” Dany replied, pacing. “And we had people watching you before. Arya managed to get in, but she could change faces.”
“And you’re saying the Faith couldn’t have hired one of the Faceless Men themselves?”

Arya cleared her throat. “I might have recognized one if they had. And besides… the Faceless Men worship their own way. The Faith might not have wanted to soil their hands by using them. And I was always keeping an eye on you anyways. They could have tried but were stopped. And… Well… You’d have been an expensive target, and the Faith isn’t so rich anymore.”

Sansa stepped back and sighed. “So, the Sparrow wants this marriage stopped. Enough to try and trigger and breakdown in Jon. What do we do?”

Dany sighed. “This attempt failed. For all we know, it was a last resort. But then, even if you are wed, he could still try to find other ways to bring you down. There is good news. As Arya says, the Faith is poor. Also, the Militant is gone. Furthermore, the Sparrow is desperate. He must be, to try something so obvious and public. The first thing to do is for me to make another visit to the Sept and the High Sparrow. I’ll make some threats, see how he receives them. In the meantime, Barristan, Brienne, I want you to watch these two like hawks. Arya, you too. Protect your brother and sister.”

“Don’t go to the Sept,” Jon said at once. “You’ll be putting yourself in his domain. Instead, summon him to the Dragon Pit.”

Dany smiled. “Excellent idea. We’ll chat there. You two: pretend nothing is amiss. I want you greeting everyone all smiles and joy. Make excuses for me. Say Drogon was acting restless and I had to go calm him down. It’ll instill a good degree of fear. I’ll be back in a couple of hours. I’ll take Podrick and a couple of guards and go quietly. Missandei, you’re with me as well.”

With that, the Dragon Queen swept out of the room, her scribe running at her heels. Exhausted, Sansa sat upon the bed and wept.

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Daenerys:

She had Drogon fly high enough over the pit for all the city to see. Rhaegal was kept within the dome, hovering over the pit. The poor girl wasn’t happy about it. She could sense something was wrong. She wanted to break free and fly and burn something. More than once, Dany had to cast her only daughter a warning look.

Viserion stayed in the pit. Every time he came too high, Rhaegal looked down at him and spit a small burst of flame in frustration. The green dragon was pissed

_Even Drogon seems nervous to come near her_, Dany noted with amusement. The black dragon kept giving his sister these nervous looks, and for once, he was keeping his distance without any need for reprimand.

Dany sat, seemingly alone, upon the high dais, a basket of dead birds by her side. Most of them were ravens. Lately, Rhaegal liked nothing to eat so much as ravens. _Her appetite might be turning towards sparrows as well before long._

Whenever Daenerys observed her daughter, she often felt a little twinge of regret. She loved Rhaegal, but she couldn’t help but remember when her little girl had just been a tiny hatchling, suckling at her mother's breasts. All her dragons seemed so sweet, so tameable then. While Drogon had become the most fearsome, a lot of that was due to his size. Rhaegal’s temper was immense. And Drogon, as dominating and angry as he could get, did have that special connection with his mother. Dany didn’t pick favorites, but there was a part of her that remained on that hill in the
Dothraki Sea with him, rediscovering her identity. And while Viserion might have long since forgiven and forgotten the chains, there was a part of Rhaegal that still remembered and resented.

Rhaegal often felt the need to compete with her brothers, to prove herself just as terrifying and dangerous as Drogon, just as intelligent as Viserion. And there was a part of Daenerys that sensed that underneath those hurt feelings, Rhaegal might be the most skilled of them. There were signs. She flew more beautifully, more nimbly. While she wasn’t as easily tamed as Viserion or as quick with the subtle cues her mother sent her, she’d shown incredible battle instincts. And there was a fierce sense of independence in the only female dragon that was admirable. Rhaegal had initiative. And gods, was she protective of those she loved.

It was partly why Dany had Jon take her. The Mother of Dragons wasn’t stupid. She knew she could die. She knew Jon could be king, whatever he said. Drogon and Dany’s connection was too deep for Drogon to be able to fully submit to Jon if that happened. But there was hope for Rhaegal. And if Dany died, the lead dragon, the monarch’s mount, had to be her. Her focus wouldn’t just be to protect Dany, but to protect all she loved. And if she loved Jon…

And she did love Jon.

That was all too apparent. When the High Sparrow was shown in by Pod, Rhaegal shrieked and flew a bit higher. Dany shushed her daughter and grabbed one of the ravens from the basket and flung it towards the green dragon. Rhaegal burnt it to a crisp and snapped it up nimbly. Proud, Dany threw six more. All seven ravens burned up and dropped into Rhaegal’s waiting throat.

The High Sparrow mounted the steps to the high dais bravely. He moved well for an old man. *But then, how old is he really?* According to the Faith, he was ancient, but Dany wasn’t so sure. She now saw deceit in every move he made. Deceit and steel.

He came before her, bowed, and extended his hand. This time, Dany did not kiss his ring.

“Sit,” she said through clenched teeth, gesturing to a stool that had been prepared for him. To his credit, he did not comment, and did as his queen bid.

“Your Grace, how may I serve you?”

“You may serve me first and foremost by not boring me with denials and lies. The ravens today were deliberate. You sought to provoke my nephew.”

He cleared his throat. “I sought to provoke him, yes. To test him. To see if he could keep his wits even under the gaze of the True Faith. He did so, I am proud to report.”

“Is that why you did it? And here I thought you sought to discredit him.”

“Only if he failed, Your Grace.”

“And what of his bride?”

“Lady Stark?”

“Does he have another? Yes, Lady Stark. What tests do you have for her?”

“Why would I test Lady Stark?”

“Why would you test Prince Jon?”
“My Queen, forgive me but his breakdown in the dragon pit weeks ago was troubling. And as much as it pains me to bring up unpleasant family history, they say—–“

“They say that when a Targaryen is born, the Gods flip a coin. On one side greatness, on the other, madness. Funny, I can’t recall you testing me this way.”

“You killed the Night’s King, resurrected dragons, and brought freedom to the bondaged souls of Slaver’s Bay.”

“Jon defended the Wall from Wildlings and White Walkers, was one of the youngest Lord Commanders of the Night’s Watch ever, came back from the dead, helped me kill the Night’s King, and is the key to House Targaryen’s future.”

“No one is saying he’s not a brave man but—–“

“He’s crucial to the future of this realm. As is this marriage, and the fruits thereof. And with that in mind, I wish to tell you that I now consider you the holy guardian of all future heirs to House Targaryen. From now until your death.”

“Your Grace?”

“They say you are among the most holy of pontiffs the Faith has ever seen. I cannot imagine anyone more qualified. Are you denying your personal sanctity?”

“No, Your Grace.”

“Of course you aren’t. Of course, should anything befall my nephew’s children, that would cast doubt, wouldn’t it? I mean, if anything were to happen to them under the holy blessing of the High Septon himself, it would cast doubt upon that Septon. Make him unfit if his light was too weak to protect the future Targaryen monarchs, the future dragonriders and guardians of the realm. Such a Septon, unfit to protect the protectors of the realm, well… Not a true High Septon at all. Cursed, somehow, obviously. Such a canker on the Faith would have to be removed.”

The Sparrow leaned forward. “Is that a threat?”

“No. A speculation. So listen to me. Here is what is going to happen. You are going to put aside whatever personal grudge you have against my nephew, myself, or anyone of House Targaryen or House Stark. Tomorrow, Sansa Stark will walk into the Great Sept of Baelor and my nephew Prince Jon will place his cloak on her shoulders. They shall be wed, and the realm will have Sansa Hardying Stark Targaryen as its new princess, wife in spirit and law to Prince Jon Snow Stark Targaryen. You will declare it and bless the couple and all their future children and both their Houses. And when the babes arrive, you will declare them the true and proper heirs in accordance to my own royal decrees and standards. You will do everything in your power to keep every person with the name ‘Targaryen’ safe. The Faith abandoned my family once. They will not do it again. Oh, and I want a sermon given upon the plaza before the wedding, singing the praises of all the Targaryens and Starks and this marriage. If not…”

She glanced at Rhaegal. Two small jets of flame came from her daughter’s nostrils.

The High Sparrow glared. “A queen sought to intimidate me before.”

“Cersei Lannister was a drunk grievously indebted to the Faith who gave you a militia. She was a paranoid, spoiled brat who spent her life hiding behind her father’s doublet. I never had anyone to hide behind. The only similarities between us are that we were both blond, had brothers who wanted to fuck us, and we had three children. My brother never touched me and unlike the Lannister
woman, I can actually control my children. And trust me, they aren’t so easily killed as lions. Now go and write that glowing speech of yours. Make sure there’s no mention of any… troublesome prior relationships my nephew and his intended once had, and keep in mind that I have eyes everywhere. Don’t cross me.”

The High Sparrow stood, bowed, and backed out of the pit. Dany watched his sure steps, the way he never once glanced at Rhaegal or Drogon. *He definitely has to be watched. He’s not so easily finished.*

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Arya:

She oh-so-carefully held the cloak up, careful that none of the delicate white silk touched the dirty ground as they walked towards the Heart Tree. The pearls, the silver snowflakes, the lace, all of it glittered in the moonlight.

It really was a magnificent cloak. Sansa hadn’t made the dress, but she’d made this. And she’d outdone herself. It looked like winter in a world where winter didn’t have to mean suffering and cold. It looked like winter drawn by someone who loved all seasons equally. It looked like the North in the midst of the summers snows of their youth, when they’d fought with balls of soft ice and made little castles on the ground. The crystals, the pearls, the lace, the silk, the silver… it all reminded Arya of home.

No dirt could get on it. No one could know. The cloak would be seen by every eye in the capital tomorrow, under the lights of the Great Sept of Baelor. If even a smudge got on it, someone might guess.

Underneath the magnificent cloak, Sansa’s dress was a disappointment. It wasn’t tomorrow’s gown-- there was enough risk with the cloak alone. This dress was a pretty blue and white, but it was wool, not silk, and there was no lace.

But the look on the bride’s face was enough to make up for the dress. Her smile was as big as the North itself. Pretty tears ran down her cheeks. Arya was sure she’d never seen her sister so overjoyed. She remembered Sansa being ecstatic when she’d been told of her betrothal to Joffrey. But then, Sansa had been half-frantic, trying not to jump up and down or scream, her eye maddeningly wide and her voice a squeal. This… this was different. It was a more secure, more noble joy. Sansa knew exactly what she was doing. She knew who she was walking towards. And she was truly, truly in love.

*I’m in love. But I’m not so secure.* Once more, Arya felt herself envying her sister this perfect moment. But she swallowed that after a couple of seconds and just let herself be happy. *Who else should it be but Jon? They’ll be so happy together. And they’ll have such beautiful babes. They’ll give one another everything they want and deserve. Starks happy at last. And Jon will be one of us in name.*

Arya was a bit overcome. Tears pricked her eyes. *This is not a time for you, Tears. Fuck off.*

Anya Waynwood led the bride down the aisle in the woods. Only a few people were there. Daenerys, Barristan, Gendry, Brienne, Uncle Edmure, Missandei, Lyra, Randa Royce, Satin, the wildlings, Jon’s fat friend Sam, his wildling wife, Gilly, and their son. Hardly a great turnout for a royal wedding. But no one would ever have to know. Dany’s most loyal Unsullied were patrolling the edges of the godswood now, pretending that they were just protecting Jon while he prayed. This was a secret blow towards the High Sparrow and have an insurance policy in case anything went
wrong tomorrow.

There, of course, was Jon, grinning like an idiot and looking a fool in a stupid crown of gold and Valyrian steel that Daenerys had gifted him. Ghost stood behind him alongside Daenerys, who was beaming. It had a bunch of rubies and onyx and little dragons and looked like it weighed a ton, but Jon held his head high. And grinned like an idiot.

There was no singing, but they couldn’t risk that. The loudest sound was in fact Missandei’s quill, scribbling away at some parchment as she sat at the roots of the Heart Tree, squinting under a candle held by Brienne. When they neared, Jon’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Who comes? Who comes before the Gods?”

He was actually starting to shake, as if he thought at any moment the world would cave in on itself. Arya’s heart soared to see him so happy. He looked like he was in a dream. Arya just wanted to give this to him properly. My last moment as the main Stark Girl in his life. I have to do this right. You gave me Needle. I give you my sister. And I will do this right. Father and Robb couldn’t be there, after all. It fell to her. They were before the Gods of the Starks. Even if they weren’t at Winterfell, these were their gods. Arya thought about her father and brothers. Would they be happy? They’d be happy Sansa found someone like Jon. Someone kind and gentle and brave and strong. They’d learn to understand. Mother might not understand at first, but Father, Robb, Bran, and Rickon would.

Arya offered a silent prayer. Please. Mother, Father, Robb, Bran, Rickon… You have to understand. They’re so happy. Jon and Sansa will be exactly what they need. Tell the Gods to bless this, please. For their sake and mine. For the sake of the North and the realm. Let them be happy.

“Sansa of Houses Hardyng and Stark, Lady of Winterfell, Lady of the Vale, and Warden of the North comes here to be wed,” Anya and Arya said in unison. “A woman grown and flowered, true-born and noble. She comes to beg the blessings of the Gods. Who claims her?”

“I do,” Jon replied, looking petrified. “Jon Snow of House Targaryen, Prince of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Prince of the Seven Realms of Westeros, Prince of Meereen and Slaver’s Bay, Khalakka of the Great Grass Sea, Lord of Dragonstone and Heir to Dragons. I claim her. Who gives her?”

“Allan of House Waynwood, Lady of Ironoaks, Acting Warden of the East and Lady Protector of the Vale of Arryn, who was her good-aunt.”

“And Arya of House Stark, who is her sister,” Arya piped up. She and Anya spoke together again. “Lady Sansa, will you take this man?”

“I take this man,” Sansa whispered. She and Jon joined hands and Anya stepped back to help Arya hold the cloak. The couple bowed their heads in submission. Arya looked up at the tree as they said their vows. For a second, she swore she saw Bran’s eyes in the weirwood sap. Jon nervously unclasped the white cloak. Very gingerly, Arya and Anya took it and hurried to fold it up. Gendry hurried forward to help, but Arya swatted him away. Daenerys handed Jon the marriage cloak. It was all very lovely: black velvet and fur and red gilt dragons. Blue silk lined the underside. Sansa beamed as it was placed over her shoulders. Arya noted the black fur and saw how Sansa seemed to relax once it was on. She looked warm. Jon made sure she had a warm cloak.

The woods seemed a bit warmer when that cloak fell upon Sansa’s shoulders, as if that cloak fell on every shoulder in the woods. Arya felt cozy and safe. She wouldn’t let herself cry. She grinned, though. See Father? Mother? Robb? Bran? Rickon? He’ll keep her warm. Always
Daenerys stepped forward, still beaming, with a fancy crown that looked too big for Sansa and probably belonged to Jon. It was placed on Sansa’s brow and hung loosely, but she kept it up. She was born to wear a crown. Arya observed. She really is a princess.

“With this kiss, I pledge my love,” Jon and Sansa said in unison. Their lips joined and for a while it seemed they couldn’t be parted. They held each other so gently, but so firmly. Even after their lips parted, they just stared into each other’s eyes. The entire world seemed to melt around them. The world seemed perfect.

The reverie was ended when witnesses were called forward by Missandei to sign her parchment. Arya signed, Daenerys signed, Anya signed, Barristan signed. Everyone did. They document was stamped and rolled into a special scroll and slipped into the folds of Missandei’s cloak. Then they all filed out, quick as they could, Jon and Sansa eagerly running at the head, laughing like the newlyweds they were. Daenerys invited the guests to her chambers for drinks, an invitation enthusiastically accepted by most. But Arya waited behind and touched the trunk of the tree.

“Arya?”

She swore she heard it. She might have imagined Bran’s eyes, but she didn’t imagine the voice. She was a wolf now, struggling through the snow, running towards a star. And then…

She was back, and arms were around her waist. She was back in the godswood. Arya turned Gendry was behind her, his hands on her. He stared at the tree. “Do you think… Do you think we might…?”

She elbowed him in the stomach. “You’re an idiot.”

“I’m not.” He protested, once he regained his breath.

Arya took a deep breath. “Just… Gendry… Not tonight. This isn’t about us.”

He nodded. “They’re a fine couple.”

“They’re really lovely,” Arya said, knowing what words should come next, “They’re perfect. Like a song.”

Chapter End Notes

Up next: a intimate wedding night for Jon and Sansa, then the BIG DAMN CEREMONY and lots of DRAMA... also sex.

As always, please comments and leave what you liked/disliked! :)


Chapter Thirty-eight: Wedding: Part Two

Jon:

No celebratory drinks took place. This was supposed to be a secret, and they couldn’t risk even a little celebration. Someone would take note. That’s what Jon told them. Really, he just wanted to get his new bride naked as soon as possible. Once they were safely within the walls of the royal wing, he scooped her up, bid goodnight to their loved ones, and carried her off to the Aenys chambers.

“We’re not going to your apartments?” she asked, her hands around his neck.

“You have to wake up here. That’s where all your ladies will find you tomorrow morning. And besides…” He said, kicking in the door to her fancy solar. “I think my princess should have her first night as such in the prettiest rooms.”

She giggled. “But what of the new Lord of Winterfell? The North is stern and hard and dark. Shouldn’t his first night as such be in the sternest, hardest, darkest chambers?”

“We’ll be coupling in Dragonstone before long. We’ll get plenty of stern, hard, and dark there. The place was the seat of Stannis Baratheon” He carried her across the solar to the bedchamber, kicked in another door, but then Sansa panicked. “Wait!”

He groaned. “What?”

“My wedding gown is in there.”

“You’re wearing your wedding gown.”

“My official one. Please, Jon, I don’t want you to see it until we’re in the sept tomorrow. You already got to see the cloak…”

He groaned. “Fine.”

Sansa hurried into the room when her feet touched the ground. She bustled around in there frantically
for several minutes before calling him in. He found her at the foot of her bed in what would have
been a very prim and proper stance were she not completely naked under her Targaryen cloak.

Well, not completely naked. She also had her new necklace on.

There was something about seeing her like this, her eyes cast down meekly, her hand planted
delicately on her sides, that made it all so very real. She’s wearing my cloak. A Targaryen cloak.

It seemed so, so real all of a sudden. Jon couldn’t help himself. He started laughing.

Sansa scowled, which was adorable and made him laugh even harder. “It’s not polite to laugh when
your lady is naked before you.”

“Forgive me, Princess,” Jon said, loving the sound of that, “It is not at your expense. It is from relief
and joy. It’s finally happened.”

He fell to his knees. “It’s truly happened. We belong to each other. Fully.”

She smiled meekly. “I am glad my Lord Husband is pleased.”

“Pleased?” That last word was unsatisfactory, but he did like the sound of ‘Lord Husband.’ He
walked on his knees towards her, wrapping his hands about her hips and resting his face along her
belly. “That’s a poor word for it. I’m thrilled. Why do you always downplay the best moments of my
life?”

“I like to hear how angry you get when you object,” she giggled, “I like hearing you say how happy
you are. I love that I can get you to say such things. You were always so quiet. But now…”

“Now I have you.” He kissed her abdomen.

Sansa held out a hand. “But wait. I thought North of the Wall, a man didn’t really have a woman
unless he steals her?”

Jon grinned. “Is that what you want?”

“Is that what you want?”

He laughed. “Alright. I’ll steal you like a proper Free Man. You want me to be a real wildling,
them?”

“Why not? Better that than a crow.” She pulled away then and pulled the cloak around her, covering
herself. “I’ll be the sweet, noble, virginal daughter of Winterfell, and you be the rough wildling
savage.”

He stopped then. “Let’s do it another night. Instead, you and I… Let’s be us. Just us.”

Sansa relaxed and smiled. “Alright.”

Jon stood and Sansa walked towards him. He enveloped her in his arms and buried his face in her
hair. “At last, you’re all mine. And I’m all yours. No one else can come between us.”

He began stripping his clothes off, Sansa giggling as she helped him. They insisted on the other
keeping their crowns on. Jon scooped her up again once she was naked, and carried her onto the
bed.

“I love you so much Jon,” Sansa said, lying on her back, looking up at him in amazement, and
parting her legs. There was this delicate trust there. It humbled him. Jon climbed over her and kissed her deep. He slipped his hands down and dove his fingers between her legs. She was already wet for him. But it didn’t satisfy him. He worked her to a peak with his fingers, his lips still on hers, and she moaned her release against his mouth. His mouth traveled downwards, over her teats and belly until he found that perfect place between her legs. He feasted upon her flesh and juices, feeling her come apart under his tongue. Nothing was so beautiful.

He climbed up to kiss her mouth once more. She whimpered. “Jon… Please… I want you…”

Sweet, hot, white, wet heat engulfed his cock. Pure bliss. Jon moved within her, slow but deep, as she liked, and gradually picked up the pace until they were bucking against each other like mad animals. She yanked at his hair and clawed his back. He sucked on her neck, worked her nub, and gripped her arse. She arched her back, pressing her sweet teats and pregnant belly against him. They were truly joined.

They curled up together under the bedclothes like puppies in a litter.

“So, how was that for a wedding night?” she asked him. “A bit conventional for one of our nights, but not bad, I thought.”

“Well, our mobility is a bit hampered by your current condition, not that I’m complaining,” Jon replied, chuckling and cupping her belly. It still wasn’t prominent, but there was a slight curve to it. “But I am enjoying this thus far. What about you? Was it everything you ever dreamed of, My Lady?”

She giggled. “Oh Gods, I used to dream of all sorts of things, not all of them good. But this… this is surprisingly close to what I’d hoped for as a girl. Right down to the way we did it. There’s no bedding. But I’ve got a nice soft bed, it felt quite lovely,” she reached up and prodded his nose, “I’ve got a handsome, loving, noble husband. A prince, even. So this… this is very much like what I’d once hoped for.”

He grinned and kissed her cheek, feeling very proud of himself. “But this isn’t what you expected.”

“Oh no, not at all. Well, I thought you were my half-brother once. And no one but Father and Howland Reed knew you were a Targaryen. But it’s not like I mind.”

He tried not to let his curiosity get the better of him, but he couldn’t help it. “How did you think you’d end up? Even if you were never betrothed to Joffrey? What did you think might happen?”

“Well, I was sure I’d have to wed a high-ranking Lord, even if I didn’t get a prince. I was the eldest daughter of one High Lord, the granddaughter of two others, the niece of yet another. It would have signaled a great loss of status if I’d wed someone who wasn’t of particularly distinguished birth.”

Jon’s stomach sank. You asked.

Sansa seemed to read his expression, and she frowned. “Don’t look at me like that. I had every good reason to expect as much. It wasn’t just vanity. I had one of the oldest names in the country, and I had immediate blood connections to three of the most powerful Houses in Westeros. My father was Lord of the North and my brother would come after him. My uncle by marriage was Lord of the Vale and my cousin would come later. My grandfather was Lord of the Riverlands, my uncle would come after him, and after that, my cousin. I was the eldest daughter, and I was beautiful, healthy, and had a decent mind. If I’d made a low-ranking match, what sort of message would that have sent? Either they’d think I’d lost my virtue, that I was somehow defective, or that our family was in some way weakened. A poor match could have ruined not only my reputation, but that of our whole
family. After all, if I was somehow undesirable enough not to make a match befitting my rank, what
did that say of Arya? Or of the fortunes of Winterfell in general? Or even of our father? Women of
less powerful relations had been promised to princes before. Even Elia Martell wasn’t the direct
product of two great houses and the relation of another.”

Jon swallowed, accepting all of this with no small amount of pain. Everything she said made sense,
of course. But it was an uncomfortable set of circumstances. And a fierce reminder of just how truly
removed from one another they’d have been as children.

“So it’s really not surprising that I was betrothed to Joffrey. There was no other girl in the kingdoms
at that time with that level of noble blood. The second most eligible heir in the kingdoms was
probably Robb, to be honest. Or Robert Arryn. And I was easily the most high-born girl in the
kingdoms after Myrcella and Arianne Martell. Margaery Tyrell was the only conceivable rival I’d
have had in the marriage market. This was of course before the wars. But even if I hadn’t been
promised to Joffrey, I’d have ended up the Lady to some major lord or lord’s heir. The heir to
Highgarden, or my cousin Robert, possibly Quentyn Martell, even if he wasn’t direct heir to Dorne
his sister went unmarried for a very long time and there were rumors her father wished to set her
aside. Renly Baratheon would have also been a possibility. And yes, Theon Greyjoy.”

Jon scowled. He remembered a comment Sansa had made days ago. “There were times he’d said
things that suggested a belief that one day, I’d be his to wed.”

And that was true, actually. Jon had actually seen and heard it more than once. He’d heard Robb
lament a couple of times that Theon couldn’t be his true brother. Theon replied that, “Maybe
someday, I’ll wed that sweet sister of yours and we will be.” He and Robb had laughed about it.

Robb always had the most absurd blind spot when it came to Theon Greyjoy. He’d loved the lad
from the Iron Islands, looking up to him from the very first day the Ironborn arrived. Robb laughed at
his jokes, believed his stories, followed him to the brothels and taverns once he was old enough. Not
that he went every night, but he went often enough and returned stinking of wine and dirt and cheap
whore’s perfume. He sometimes joined Theon in goading Jon over being bastard-born, too.

One of the few things Jon ever appreciated Catelyn Stark for was tempering some of Theon’s
influence on her son. She kept a close eye on Robb, making sure he never forgot his responsibilities,
or overspent his money, or got involved in anything too stupid. But still… Robb would sometimes
say that Theon was his best friend.

And there were a number of things he listened to Theon about. Things about girls and drinking, but
also about being a lord. Things Jon just would never understand. A bastard couldn’t understand.
Robb trusted Theon implicitly. And eventually, he’d sent his best friend back to Pyke, and everyone
knew what happened after that.

Jon actually wondered now. If the wars hadn’t happened, and Sansa wasn’t betrothed to Joffrey…
Perhaps Lord Eddard would not have arranged such a match. But if it ever fell to Robb to decide...
Jon could just imagine it. Theon Greyjoy whispering in Robb’s ear, “We could be brothers. And you
know me. You trust me. I’d take care of her, truly. She’d be Lady of the Iron Islands.” And Robb
might nod along and agree.

_Theon would fuck her like a kitchen wench and ignore her everywhere but the bedroom, leaving
her sad and lonely as he was out bedding whores and collecting salt wives. He’d probably lose any
sense of affection the second she began to age and leave her alone in some decaying tower in Pyke.
Theon didn’t care enough to ever write to his own mother. He’d never show kindness to his wife._

_I will, though._ Jon stroked her arms and shoulders, _I’ll appreciate her properly for the rest of her_

“Don’t get impatient. We have another day and night to finish before everyone knows for sure that I’m your wife, wedded and bedded.”

He laughed. “And then everyone will. And I can’t wait. I’m going to parade you around the entire continent and Essos. ‘There’s my wife, Sansa, Lady of Winterfell and Warden of the North and now Princess of the Empire. I made her a princess, even though she always was one, from day one. I just put the crown on that beautiful red head. Look at those blue eyes and that soft skin. Lovely and clever and brave and kind and all mine. And she’s carrying my babe and she warms my bed and sits at my council and sews my shirts and does everything anyone could ever ask of a woman. And she loves me and I love her. And she’s all mine.’ They’re all mad with jealousy.”

“Oh, is that why you married me? So people will be jealous?”

“Don’t be cross. I don’t have much experience being envied. I should be able to enjoy it a little,” he said, nuzzling her neck. Sansa snorted.

“Right, you’re only heir to the Targaryen empire. No one envies you.” Her sarcasm was then cut off and a curious look came to her eyes. “But if you weren’t? We’ve played this game with me. Let’s try it with you. Let’s say all this hadn’t happened, and you hadn’t gone to the Wall. What then?”

Jon pursed his lips. What options had been available to him? More than he’d probably realized at the time. The Night’s Watch had been omnipresent for him, thanks in part to his bond with Uncle Benjen, Catelyn Stark’s hostility and the slightly greater esteem the Starks had for the Watch in general. But it hadn’t been the only choice for him. He was a bastard, yes, but a noble bastard, and noble bastards had done a great many things. Though his religion excluded him from knighthood, he could have become the Northern equivalent, lived his life in service to the Starks, likely protecting his father or one of his siblings. 

Robb would have given me a place in his household.

Or he could have gone south with Lord Eddard and the girls. That is, if Father would have let me. That was debatable. If I wasn’t a Targaryen, Father might not have encouraged me to look for a place in the Watch, or at least not as much. He’d have no reason to send me away aside from my name, and Father always loved me as much as his trueborn children. If I hadn’t been a Targaryen, he might have let me go with them, if I wanted. He might have even encouraged it, since I would have had a hard time staying behind at Winterfell with his wife ruling it.

Lord Eddard would have never allowed his son to go hungry. Jon might have struggled a bit, but he would have found a place.

It was so hard to imagine it, really. So much of his life now had been shaped by the last seven years and all the struggles, revelations, and changes that came with it. Even his name was different now. But as a bastard… He’d been educated and skilled at fighting. Since he had no inheritance, there was no destiny laid out for him like with Robb. Since he wasn’t a girl, he wasn’t just expected to marry and have someone’s children. He could have sailed to the Free Cities, become a sell sword, become a guard, or even joined the citadel if he’d had the inclination. Bastards had served on the Kingsguard--- two, Ser Robert Flowers and Ser Addison Hill, had been Lord Commanders.

If Joffrey and Sansa had married, Jon might have served. Joffrey might have ended up king, but he’d still have been a shit. Jon had known that back at Winterfell. His dislike of the boy would have increased if he’d spent more time around him. Sansa might not have been close to Jon as a sister, but he still would have wanted to protect her. I would have come to love her as well.
"If you’d ended up marrying Joffrey, I might have become your Dragonknight," Jon replied, stroking her cheek. "But I prefer being your husband."

Sansa smiled. "I know. But… Still. You don’t need me for people to envy you. You being you is enough. Besides, you don’t think people envy me for having you? But I don’t plan on going around saying, ‘Oh, there’s my husband, Jon, Prince of the greatest empire in the known world. And I made him an even bigger lord, because now he’s Lord of Winterfell. Look at those pretty grey eyes and that curly dark hair and those strong arms. Strong and smart and sweet and brave and all mine. And he’s put a babe in me and keeps to my bed and gives me pretty gifts and helps me manage the North and does everything anyone could ever ask of a man. And we’re madly in love and he’s mine, just mine.’ Do you know why?"

"Why?" That would actually be amazing.

"Because one, I don’t have to. And two, such speech would be bad manners. We have a duty to be an example to others."

"Maybe I’ll just do it to flatter you."

"If you wish to flatter me, then do it properly. You can run free with your words to me and compliment me within reason in public. But I didn’t acquire my virtues through becoming your wife. It’s the other way around." Sansa rubbed her nose against his. "And the same goes for you."

"So I won you through virtues alone, did I?"

"You won my love that way. And you couldn’t have won my hand without them. If you think I was about to tie myself to another Joffrey Baratheon, you’re mad."

She didn’t act offended by the question. She just answered it, staring into his eyes and speaking in a very matter-of-fact way. Then she softened. "And you do know that I love you, yes?"

"Your intimate knowledge of me could only be possible if you either loved me or we were mortal enemies. I’m going to assume the former."

"Good. And for the record, I don’t need the crown to want you."

She sat up and did as she asked. Sansa thanked him, kissed his lips gently, and got out of bed, setting the baubles aside on the end table and gathering a sheet around herself before hurrying over to her wardrobe. She quickly dressed herself in a thick, comfortable-looking wool nightdress and her bedrobe before scurrying back to retrieve the jewels. When she got close, Jon grabbed her again and pulled her onto the bed. She giggled and let him kiss her a bit before determinedly moving away.

"Come back to bed," he groaned.

"In a moment."

She moved around the room once more, this time delicately depositing her necklace in the jewelry box on her dressing table and grabbing silk pillows from a nearby chair.

"What are those for?"

"Settings for the crowns." She placed the crowns and the cushions in a shelf in her wardrobe. It was actually rather adorable, the dainty and concentrated way she put things away. She began gathering
Jon’s discarded clothing off of the floor as well, moving to the foot of the bed once she had everything. It was when she started neatly folding everything that Jon felt a bit stupid.

“Sansa, you don’t need to do that,” he told her, leaning forward. She sniffed.

“You have to leave very early tomorrow, before sunrise. I don’t need you stumbling around loudly, looking for all of your things. And if you forget something, it’ll be a hard time explaining to my ladies why there’s a pair of your smallclothes or some such thing in my private chambers on a night where we’re supposed to be separated. Better that everything is folded neatly and put in a place where you can find them easily.”

He could understand the logic of this. What he didn’t like was her folding his things for him. He had enough trouble letting Satin wait on him. While he definitely appreciated his wife taking care of him on occasion, such a thing didn’t need to characterize the first night of their married life. He reached forward and pulled his tunic from her. “I can fold my own things.” I’m a grown man, for pity’s sake.

She smiled and let him, moving back to her dressing table to unpin her hair. Jon neatly folded everything, and assembled it all on one of the chairs, even placing his boots on the floor nearby and hanging up his furs on one of the bedposts. He turned to see Sansa watching him in the mirror, a grin on her face.

“What?”

She blushed. “I liked watching you do that naked.”

Oh, you glorious, beautiful minx. Delighted and aroused, Jon pounced, yanking her bedclothes off and taking her like a wolf.

They fell asleep cuddling once more. Jon stroked Sansa’s belly and they spoke of what grew within her.

“A redhead,” Jon said, smirking.

“You don’t know that. You have dark hair.”

“So did our father. And four of his children still came out kissed by fire.”

“What about the eyes?”

“Blue.”

“I find it disturbing that you clearly just want a miniature me.”

“No, she won’t be. She’ll look like you, but she’ll be more like Dany or Arya. She’ll be willful and terrorize the Red Keep. She’ll prefer knives to needles. We’ll have to fight to get her into her silks, and it’ll be a deadly battle.”

“Daenerys wear silks.”

“Mmmm. Well, that’s how our Naerys will take after Arya. Oh, and she’ll love riding like nothing else. Horses, dragons… There won’t be a creature she won’t try to conquer, tame, and ride.”

“She sounds like an utter terror. History will curse us for bringing an unholy tyrant into the world.”

“She’ll still be sweet. Maybe she’ll be rough on the dresses you’ll try to put her in, but she’ll be gentle with people.”
“And if it’s a boy?”

“I thought you said…”

“I could be wrong.”

“He’ll be wild and sweet and a great rider.”

“So…”

“Same child, different bits. Possibly a greater chance of getting him in a dress.”

She fell asleep mid-laugh. He slept shortly after, whispering to his Aemonaerys. He managed to wake before sunrise--- time at the Watch meant he was used to sleeping in short bursts and waking early. But I didn’t wake in beds this comfortable. He planted a kiss on Sansa’s forehead and slipped out as quickly as he could, tugging on his trousers and tunic.

Satin had a bath waiting for him when he arrived. His steward laughed at him. “Your doublet’s folded. Has she started waiting on you like a good little wife?”

Jon threw his folded doublet in Satin’s face. “Don’t worry, your job is safe.”

A couple young men were brought in. Jon found himself scrubbed near-red, trimmed, shaved, and even scented. “Am I a man or some centerpiece for a harvest banquet?”

“You’d be in the kitchens and much prettier if you were,” replied Satin, earning shocked looks from the other servants. Jon smirked.

Various men of the court filed into the solar as Jon put on his basic morning clothes. Sam came first, Barristan following close behind. Then Nathen Cerwyn, and Edmure Tully. An hour passed of polite conversation, jokes, and memories.

The Queen’s ballroom was reserved for the groom’s breakfast. Daenerys greeted him at the front of the royal wing. He offered her his arm.

“You look lovely today, Your Grace,” he told her fondly. And she did. Daenerys always looked good, but today she was downright radiant in a gown of periwinkle silk trimmed in gold, a modest circlet of pale gold was bound to her forehead and amethysts glittered on her wrists.

“Thank you. You looked quite nice yourself. With you so becomingly garbed, I’d say it’s time to eat your fill before you’re wed.”

Jon managed not to laugh. They adjourned to the ballroom where half the court waited to eat their food and offer congratulations. Jon took the place of honor in front of an immense Targaryen banner, Daenerys at his right, Edmure, unfortunately, to his left. A number of odd Lord, knights, and ladies approached to offer congratulations. The Northerners were all in the Maidenvault with various other court members, including numerous ones from the Vale and the Riverlands.

But Jon’s own party was a bit more varied, as numerous emissaries from other parts of the empire came forward. A Dothraki Ko, brown-skinned and thin, blue paint on his shoulders, came forward and Daenerys greeted with a smile. He reached over the table, and lifted her into the air before the court, laughing as she kissed his cheeks. When he set her down, she introduced him as “Jhogo, Blood of my blood.”

He took a seat near the queen and set his whip upon the table in front of his plate. Jon attempted to
engage the man, but his Dothraki was poor. *Even poorer than I originally thought, if his laughter is anything to go by.* After a while, the bloodrider grinned and revealed he knew the common tongue. “Don’t worry. If you can fight well enough, the khalasaar will still respect you, Khalakka.”

The Tyrells came next. Another young man, in his mid to late twenties, thin, dignified, his head high despite the need to lean heavily on both a crutch and his brother Loras, was among them. Margaery was not.

“May I present my brother Willas of House Tyrell, Heir to Highgarden,” Garlan said, waving his arm grandly.

Jon cocked his head and nodded as Willas made a valiant attempt at a bow. A smile remained despite the way he shook, eyes as bright as any of the spun-glass lamps that filled the ballroom.

“We’re honored to have you, Lord Willas. I hope the journey from Highgarden wasn’t too taxing,” Jon greeted him.

“The wheelhorse and horses did the work. I assure you, taking advantage of their labors was worth witnessing this wonderful day.”

Jon took a deep breath. “I am glad you are here to see it, Lord Willas.” I’m glad it’s you witnessing my wedding and not the other way around. He left that part unsaid, but communicated it with his eyes. The cripple swallowed heavily, but kept his smile steady.

After that came a number of envoys from Slaver’s Bay, the fringe of their tokars tapping against the marble floors as they came forward. Then the Ironborn. Victarion Greyjoy behaved himself, even making a quiet apology about being absent for the ceremony later that day. “But I follow the Drowned God and will not enter the Sept.”

And on and on it went until Jon was certain he’d seen more faces in that one room than he’d seen in his entire life prior to this day. Surely we’ll be late for the wedding itself if we receive any more people. Years of having little food available aside from turnips forced him to eat, but the food didn’t settle well.

The banquet finally ended, and Jon rushed away to be dressed and crowned and transported to the Sept. He waved and smiled to the crowds, his jaw tight and his eyes watering. Everywhere, Targaryen and Stark banners were being waved. *Less than two dozen years ago, the wolf and the dragon were at war. And now people people wave their banners side by side.* Jon kept his eyes on the sept. A few short years ago, the man I called Father was brought there to confess to a crime he didn’t commit and lose his head.

The High Sparrow stood upon the pulpit high above, shouting down to the crowds. Jon glared up at the old man and watched the windows of the sept carefully for any sign of ravens being released.

Trepidation filled the prince as he stood in the pavilion. He scanned the white marble ground, wondering where Eddard Stark’s blood had been scrubbed out, wondering where his father’s head fell when Illyn Payne sliced it from his neck. *There were crowds that day, too. Crowds jeering and cheering.* Arya and Sansa alike had recounted that awful day to him.

No one was waving Stark or Targaryen banners, though. Jon made sure to remind himself of that. Regardless, the sheer volume of people here made him nervous. Yes, they all cheered his name, yes, they all smiled, yes, they supposedly all loved him and his family. But they’d once “loved” King Joffrey. Sansa said when he was first crowned and killing “terrible traitors” like Ned Stark, the crowds cheered his name. When the famines hit, the people loathed him. Then his association with
Margaery inspired their love once more.

“Personal love--- the love of between people who truly know each other. Parents and children. Brothers and sisters. Husbands and wives. Friends. That can be ever lasting. But the feelings of people en masse to someone they don’t know--- their kings and queens and lords and ladies, is always quite fickle,” Sansa told him. “Because they don’t truly know us. Their feelings for us depend entirely upon the impact we have on their lives and what they see of us. And it’s not just in cases of love. Fear as well. People were petrified of Queen Cersei. But apparently they had no problem calling her a whore when she was reduced to a Penance Walk. Sometimes the love can last-- if you aren’t cruel to them. But everything else can change in the blink of an eye.”

Jon had no intention of ever showing his people any cruelty. But he wondered how their “love” would last. A few short years ago, the Targaryens were despised, the mad monsters of an awful era. The Starks were filthy traitors who feasted on the flesh of their enemies. Now their banners hang from a third of the windows in King’s Landing. Jon ran a finger over the scar on his neck: a souvenir from when the men who had elected him as their Lord Commander had left him bleeding in the snow.

*Today is not an execution. Today is….*

“--- the most joyous occasion in recent history!” The Sparrow cried out, “The day when the dragon meets the wolf, not as enemies, but as lovers and family. The healing, the closing of the filthy wound of the rebellion when the dragon and wolf were at each other’s necks. Now they join hands and reunite our realm in peace and love. A union as blessed as King Baelor himself, between the pride of the great Houses of Targaryen and Stark.”

The Sparrow gestured down to Jon as he continued. “Our strong, brave, righteous Prince Jon, the true son of our beloved Prince Rhaegar, the worthy heir to our Silver Prince and his aunt, the great Mother of Dragons. A young man whose courage, strength, and honor wash away the sins of the past. The hidden prince who aided in the destruction of the White Walkers once and for all, who rose from an icy grave to defend our realm from the darkest of enemies and insure the future of the crown itself. The hope of House Targaryen and its empire. More worthy of his title than perhaps any who came before.”

The expression on the pontiff’s face made it seem like he spoke the words with a tongue coated in castor oil. His smile was too stiff and his eyes too furious to be mistaken for true enthusiasm. The crowds grew louder upon hearing this. Jon waved to them, smiling in the way he’d been coached, trying to look sheepish, but enthusiastic.

Hearing this praise was actually a bit funny. Jon got some triumphant pleasure from hearing this from the Sparrow of all people. He glanced up again expectantly.

The Sparrow hesitated before speaking again. “And today he is to be joined in the light of the Seven with one of our country’s favorite daughters. Sansa Stark of Winterfell, as worthy a princess as there has ever been, second only to our beloved queen in greatness. Lady Sansa, whose beauty and grace is outmatched only by the kindness of her heart, the purity of her soul, and the extent of her virtue.”

The Sparrow looked as pleased to praise Sansa as he was to praise Jon. Why? Jon honestly didn’t comprehend the Sparrow’s obvious disdain for his bride. Sansa followed the Seven, and she was pious about it, too. Sure, she worshipped before a Heart Tree, but she paid her devotions to the Seven to just as great an extent as she did the Old Gods. And not just for political reasons. There actually seemed some sincerity to her piety, especially in her worship of the Mother. Jon had sometimes caught her singing a hymn to the Mother under her breath in times where she was nervous. When he’d asked her why, she’d replied that the Mother’s hymn had saved her more than
once.

Jon knew that the Sparrow wasn’t a great fan of women in general, but the High Sparrow normally showed some regard for pious, traditional types of girls and reserved his disdain for women who overtly rejected the roles of their sex. While Sansa did break from many of the traditional standards of what a lady should be, she was discreet about much of it and projected the ultimate good-girl image. She didn’t don trousers, or wield a sword, or flaunt her power. She kept to her needlework, remembered her curtseys, and did her charity work the way “good” ladies were supposed to. She never challenged any authority publicly, and conducted herself with great modesty and gentleness.

And she openly supported the Faith. She paid plenty of dues to the religion, worshipped and attended services regularly and collaborated with Septas on a number of charitable projects. Out of the new royal family, she was the one who was raised with the Seven, and the one who supported them the most both publicly and privately. She’d been far kinder to them than they’d been to her. If future generations were going to truly support the New Gods, it would be because of her. She’d be the one hiring the Septa to guide their children, the one to bring them to the Sept and teach them their prayers. She’d be the one actually taking it seriously.

And yet the Sparrow always looked at her the way he looked at whores and criminals.

The hair on the back of his neck stood as the prince gazed upon the pontiff. His smug pleasure at hearing a man who hated them so sing their praises began to dim. Jon glanced at the doors to the entrance hall nervously. Going inside the Sparrow’s domain didn’t make him jump for joy, but it was time. He motioned to his men and headed in, his hand stroking Longclaw’s hilt.

Jon, Nathen, and Luthor Tyrell took their places, as did Dany, and the court filed in. Every lamp was lit, the hall aglow in rainbow lights. The Sparrow came in eventually, taking a swig from a flask. Not so virtuous now, are we?

Jon smirked slightly. He wanted those ravens released yesterday to fly into the Sept and claw his eyes out. But we can’t have everything we want.

The Sparrow noted the look on Jon’s face as he approached and kept his chin up, at first saying nothing. With his back turned to the court, he then spit clear liquid back into the flask and stuffed it into his robes. “Salt water to soothe the throat, Your Grace. I want my voice to ring clear.”

And you wanted to spit in front of me and get away with it. Jon decided not to give the man the satisfaction of acknowledging the insult. I’m no longer the boy jumping at Alliser Thorne’s throat for calling me a traitor’s bastard.

The hall eventually grew quiet, and the doors on the far side of the entrance hall opened, letting in yet more sunlight. Jon thought he’d be nervous, but he just felt excited. We’re already wed. We’re safe. This is a presentation ceremony.

Gods, what a presentation, though.

It was like a summer snowstorm swept in to glitter under the rainbow lights of the stained glass lamps. Snow was seen as terrible, but Sansa’s attire was the sort of thing that reminded all who looked upon it that snow could also be enchanting and pure. When Jon looked at her, he didn’t think of the ice he’d bled on. He didn’t think of the cold. He thought of laughter and snowballs fights in his youth, of the flakes melting in Robb’s hair as he said goodbye to his brother.

Her hair was caught in a net of the palest, most shimmering metal he’d ever seen arranged to look like snowflakes dotted with pearls. Against her red hair, it looked like snow falling upon flames.
Catelyn Tully Stark’s pearl clips were tastefully integrated near her ears.

She had a sheer overdress of silvery white with crystal beads dotting the fabric and imprints of snowflakes. Underneath was a blue-grey silk with white vines. The points of her silk sleeves practically touched the floor.

About her hips was a belt of more pale metal, with a direwolf’s head at the center. Her cloak was the same as the night before: pearl beaded heavy white silk with silver and white snowflakes and a great Stark direwolf of silver. White gossamer of absurd length, easily enough to make two more gowns, flowed out from underneath her cloak like a spring.

Nothing sparkled like the bride’s eyes, though, the blue standing out in the sea of white and silver. The way she grinned made his heart dance.

She looked the way brides should look. Sweet and beautiful and so very, very happy. And she’s happy about me. She’s smiling at me. And she’s mine. All mine. Because I make her happy.

Jon hoped they could all see it. Their wedding last night was beautiful and intimate. But there was something about this ceremony he could appreciate. Last night, she’d glittered in the moonlight and they’d pledged themselves to each other for their friends and family. But today, in the sunlight for all the world to see, they were declaring their union once more. Now, the whole world would know. She’d be his in the eyes of every single person in the country, possibly the whole world.

Sansa did look so, so happy, too. Jon knew she truly believed in the Old Gods. She’d shed tears of joy before the Heart Tree last night. But that same joy was here now, and she believed in these New Gods just as much as she believed in the Old Ones. She took comfort in the Mother. No doubt being wed under the Mother’s gaze meant a great deal to her.

This was something she’d wanted her whole life. Something that she’d dreamt of even as a young, innocent girl who still believed the world was a beautiful place. She’d dreamt of a grand wedding in the Great Sept, she’d dreamt of a prince who would love her forever, she’d dreamt of love and beauty.

So much had been taken from her. Her family, her innocence, her name, her home. But they hadn’t taken this from her. She is going to have this. And I’m part of that.

That alone was enough to make Jon feel overcome with joy. Now, this wedding mattered to him. It mattered to her, so it would matter to him.

Jon glanced at the High Sparrow, giving him a hard stare. For the occasion of the wedding, Jon had a new black leather belt and sheath decorated with green dragons. He tapped one of the green dragons on his belt, then stroked Longclaw’s direwolf hilt. You will not ruin this for us, Old Man. If you do, everything you care about will become ash. I don’t fear your New Gods. I’ll gladly shed blood in their fortress. I will gladly burn the place where my father was killed to the ground.

To his delight, the pontiff shrank back slightly. Jon smiled and looked back towards his bride.

The train of her gown was enough for three women to carry. All three of her attendants were in silver velvet, though each had a different colored sash: purple for Randa, green for Margaery, and white for Arya. The younger Stark girl looked absolutely darling, dark tresses of hair peeking out from her burn to tease the sides of her face. Grey eyes flashed and she had a charmingly nervous smile playing on her lips. Jon was almost tempted to mouth the words, Don’t trip. Don’t trip. Just to chide her a bit. He couldn’t help but wonder if she’d hid any blades within her bodice. Probably.
Edmure Tully beamed, his doublet red and blue velvet and surprisingly tasteful. His hand was steady as he reached around Sansa’s shoulders and unclasped the silver direwolf clasp on her cloak. When his hands got close to her chest, she shivered ever so slightly, but did not give any sign of discomfort that would be visible to someone that didn’t know her intimately. The Lord of Riverrun was good enough to fold it slightly before handing it over to Nathen Cerwyn. The boy was a little green but otherwise appeared calm.

Sansa turned her back to Jon as her uncle backed away. Jon could tell she wasn’t breathing and neither was he. Jon glanced at the Sparrow, who frowned as he spoke.

“You may cloak the bride and bring her under your protection.”

Both Jon and his bride breathed once more. Jon removed his wife’s bridal cloak from his own shoulders quickly, wrapping it about hers and smoothing it over them. He gave her a slight squeeze and resisted the urge to kiss her cheek. Instead, they faced the old windbag pontiff at the top of the altar and ascended the steps. Getting closer to the old man was regrettable, but necessary.

Seven promises. Seven blessings. Seven vows. It all seemed absurdly long. A velvet ribbon was tied around their hands. The whole time, Jon gazed into his lover’s blue eyes. She looked so excited. Jon was sure he’d never seen her so happy. And it allowed him to forget about danger. It allowed him to truly smile. Gods above, it’s perfect.

“In the light of the Seven, I declare Sansa of Houses Hardyng and Stark and Jon of House Targaryen one heart, one flesh, one soul. Cursed be he who would tear them asunder.”

The binding on their hands was removed. The Sparrow turned to Luthor Tyrell, removed the silver and ruby coronet from its velvet pillow, and placed it upon Sansa’s brow. It settled surprisingly well against her hairnet, almost latching on so it sat steady and perfect.

This is the moment.

They smiled and turned to face the guests. “With this kiss, I pledge my love,” they declared in unison.

Their lips joined for all to see. The applause was considerable. It tickled his ears. He didn’t mind pledging his love again. He’d do it a hundred thousand times. All of you now know. It’s official. We belong to one another. You all know. No one in the world can deny it now. She is mine. I am hers. Sansa Stark is my wife. I am her prince, she is my princess. My lady’s dreams have been realized, and I helped her realize them. And all of you, all of you who would have happily let us both die in the snow and dirt, must accept it. We are joined in the eyes of all gods and men.

Loreza and Dorea Sand, crowned in blue winter roses and gowned in red silk, threw flower petals as they proceeded out of the sept. The whole world seemed to glitter, even the faces of the crowds, washed and unwashed, highborn and low. Jon greeted them with a true smile then. At last. It happened. We’re fine.

He watched his bride with careful eyes as he helped her onto her horse. As she mounted her white mare, Jon noticed her immense train had somehow become pinned up about her skirts. Despite the pinning, the volume of fabric poofed atop her saddle so it looked like she was sitting in the middle of a giant silver blossom. They rode through the crowds, Jon on his black mare, the two of them side-by-side. Flowers were thrown in their path as they rode. Their names and titles were shouted. Banners were waved. Jon felt a bit dizzy once they finally got to the Red Keep.

Sansa squeezed his hand and leaned to the side. “One more ceremony. Then the feast.”

He knew all this, but Sansa wasn’t reminding him for the sake of the information alone. It was more
The second godswood wedding went by far quicker than the elaborate sept ceremony. It was certainly louder than the first wedding the night before. A singer hailed Lady Waynwood and the bride, once again in her maiden’s cloak. The layout of the woods meant the court couldn’t file in as neatly as they would in the sept. Never had he seen a godswood this crowded. It disturbed the peace. Jon offered a quiet apology to the gods. A soft breeze teased his hair like a lover’s caress. He took that for a good sign. *Our true wedding was peaceful. Our marriage isn’t an offense.*

He felt warm, warmer than he’d expected for his outdoor ceremony. And he took that as a blessing as well. The Targaryen cloak went back on Sansa’s shoulders for the third time, and the two tried not to laugh as it happened. *I wanted to drape her in my colors, and the gods answered my prayers threefold. I wanted to kiss her for all the world to see: threefold again. I wanted to marry her before the gods of my family: twice. Such blessings must mean they forgive the noise.* Jon had developed a stronger respect for omens over the years. They’d inspired great dread before, he felt he deserved to take comfort in them now. *And I trust the Old Gods. These are not the Red Woman’s flames.*

They led the entire party out of the woods to greet well-wishers in the gardens. Brief hellos and congratulations from some of the lords, ladies, and knights. Jon managed to enjoy it. He always felt better receiving people when he had Sansa with him. She made it seem so easy. Sansa beamed and smiled and laughed. She told Edric Dayne how much the good wishes of the Lord of Starfall meant to them. She assured Lady Flint of her excitement and thanked her bannerwoman for her concern over her welfare. She congratulated Nathen Cerwyn on holding her maiden’s cloak so well, assured him that she felt so safe knowing it was in his hands, and said he looked quite handsome. She made sure to say this loudly in front of a number of other squires. Jon’s squire left red-faced and grinning.

*She’s so good at this.* Jon thought he’d faint from pride.

At last they were granted something of a reprieve to wash and prepare for the feast.

Not that it was much of a reprieve. Jon yearned to be alone with the exquisite woman now wearing his cloak. He wanted to pull her into the bedchamber and keep her from the hands of the men who were intent on undressing her later.

*That is being taken care of,* he reminded himself as Satin, Nani, and various servants rushed Sansa and him back to their apartments. They dressed for the feast together this time, as it didn’t require too much removal of clothing and they wanted these moments together, even if that involved about six other people scrambling around, thrusting basins of soap and water before them and messing about with their clothes.

“The crown suits you well,” he told her, standing near the bed as one of the grooms removed his belt, coat, and gloves. Sansa hovered near her dressing table as maids began to unpin her train. To his surprise, she threw her head back and laughed. The circlet on her head didn’t fall.

“How did you---?”

“The net. It was something Margaery and I came up with,” she replied, “During her royal weddings, she complained of how her crowns would either slip around or tear at her hair. So the top of my net has little fastenings that clip onto the rim instead. I don’t have to secure it with my actual hair, it keeps the strain off, and it stays in place.”

She turned away from the mirror and held out her arms in what Jon initially took as a theatrical little gesture. Then the maids unlaced her long bell sleeves. Underneath were narrow, sheer gauze sleeves embroidered with white vines, the flesh of her arms still clearly visible. They ended midway down
her forearms, presenting a considerably less modest picture.

Jon’s mind went to the bedding tonight. “Is that how you’re wearing your gown to the feast, My Lady?”

“Of course. You don’t expect me to eat with all that fabric in the way, do you? I’ll ruin the silk. And it’s better for me if my dress is more manageable for the bedding ceremony.”

Jon gulped. “My Lady…”

Sansa glanced around. “Leave us for a moment, please.”

The attendants quickly filed out. His wife came towards him and pressed the palms of her hands on his chest when she came close. He could feel her breath on his skin.

Sansa:

“The bedding shall be quicker and easier for me if my dress is more practical. Neither of us like the idea of strangers’ hands upon us. So the easier my gown is, the less time I’ll have to spend being stripped.”

“Won’t that just give them more time to ogle you?”

Damn it. She couldn’t tell him the other reason. If she mentioned the possibility of blades coming out to slice off any garment deemed too “complicated” for drunken fingers, she was sure he’d would lose his mind. Sansa took a deep breath. “The more quickly the dress comes off, the fewer excuses they have to keep me. I will remind them of that and cover myself. I’ll also remind them of your wolf’s blood. I’ll remind them of what you almost did to Lord Stafford. And besides… You said you wanted to be envied.”

“Not at your expense.”

“They won’t hurt me, or take liberties. Who would dare?” Please don’t think of Leona. Please don’t think of Leona.

“Leona Tyrell thought to kiss me in the Godswood.”

“And now she’s an unmarriageable wretch wasting away in a hovel in the Reach for the rest of her days. And she was a stupid little girl.” Sansa rested her head against his chest. Feed his ego and maybe he won’t push the point. “Remember who you are. You’re Jon of House Targaryen. You’re the master of Rhaegal. You’re Prince of the empire. Lord of Dragonstone. You have a direwolf and a dragon at your command.”

Sansa gestured over to the place near the window where Ghost sat. She then stood on her tiptoes and whispered in her husband’s ear.

“Everyone saw what you did to the last person who tried to harm me. No one would dare harm what is yours. And I am yours.”

“You are severely underestimating the stupidity of drunken, entitled lordlings. But it’s no matter,” he replied. “It’s irrelevant.”

No, I’m not. But what are you talking about? “Your meaning?”
“I have a few safeguards in place.” Jon reached out his hand and beckoned to the direwolf. Ghost padded over and licked his master’s palm. “He is but one. He will follow your bedding party. If anyone lays a wayward hand on you, they get that hand bitten off.”

Sansa’s breath caught and she suddenly felt a bit weepy. She clutched her husband’s face and melded his mouth to hers. Never had she ever felt more protected. Sometimes, Jon’s concern for her, his tireless foresight and efforts to keep her safe and happy left her breathless. Good man. Such a good man.

When she broke away, he smiled.

“I’ve also made an arrangement with the Free Folk. Tormund, Toregg, and Ryk will be among the party, and they’re going to watch out for you. Val’s going to do the same for me. I’m leaving nothing to chance. If the wildlings intervene, the usual nonsense about how they’re uncivilized or some such thing will protect the crown from taking too much blame. We’ll be able to attribute it to cultural misunderstandings. The Free Folk have never been afraid to play up the savage image, so they don’t mind. I’ll use the lordlings’ ignorance to protect you.”

It took every ounce of self-control she had at that moment not to demand he take her right then and there. “Oh Jon, you’ve learnt so much.”

“I have an excellent teacher,” he said as he pushed a wisp of hair behind her ear fondly.

Sansa’s core throbbed to the point of near pain. She felt like she was twelve years old again, finding solace in her troubles in the capital at night by shoving her hand between her thighs and pretending she was far away, rescued by Loras Tyrell and in his arms. She stepped closer to Jon. I swear I can feel the fire in him. But she decided to have a little restraint. It'll make it that much better later.

So instead she spoke again. “Tonight I’ll teach you to beg. I’ll do it well, too.”

Then she pulled away to remove her train, leaving his jaw open and his cock stiff.

“The train’s detachable too?” He said this in the most strangled tone. Sansa laughed.

“Of course. How will I dance with this on?” With a wink, she ordered the servants back in.

They managed to make it to the throne room on time, striding in hand in hand, all eyes upon them. Sansa beamed. This was the sort of thing she’d dreamed of as a girl. Last time I entered the throne room with a husband, it was Joffrey’s wedding and I was with poor, stunted Tyrion. She felt quite guilty for thinking of it, but she couldn’t help it. Is it so wrong that I take joy in being half of an attractive couple now and not the wife of the noseless dwarf? She hadn’t really enjoyed being paired with Harry, either. Harry had been extremely good-looking, but she hadn’t been proud of or drawn to him. It’s more than what Jon looks like. I have a husband to be proud of for a number of reasons. I still like what he looks like, though.

And he did look very handsome and fine. Black and red damask with slight silver highlights covered his chest, and to replace the cloak he’d worn earlier, a black velvet cape was pinned to his back by silver clips shaped like dragons’ heads with eyes of ruby chips. He wore his fine Meereen coronet of gold and Valyrian steel studded with onyx and rubies. Around his waist was a new belt of black leather which Longclaw was strapped to. There was a matching sheath, printed with designs of dragons. But he looked better without all that.

She’d meant what she’d said the night before, when he hadn’t been wearing anything. Tall and dark and dashing.
Sansa found herself giggling like a girl. Well, let me be a girl again today. I deserve to be a girl. I was a girl for such a short time.

Today was the best day for her to be a girl, too. It felt like one of her childhood dreams. It felt like a song or a story.

The Queensguard escorted them in and the court cheered. Daenerys, already seated, stood eagerly. The places of honor sat under the shadow of the Iron Throne. Sansa remembered Joffrey and Margaery taking their places there. She tried to push that memory from her mind. This is not that wedding.

Sansa eyed a couple of the servants standing just off to the side of the main seats. She wasn’t an idiot. In the plans, she’d insisted upon food tasters. There were also Unsullied at every entrance and near every table. Every guest had been searched and deprived of their weapons before entering the throne room. The same was done for the ceremonies. Only the royal guards and Jon were to carry arms. She’d secretly made allowances for Arya as well, and she guessed Jon had arranged for the wildlings as well, given what he’d told her about his own plans.

Robb had been in the home of a bloodthirsty, powerful man he’d offended. He’d been at war and lost the loyalty of half his army. Joffrey was a monster and everyone knew it. He was hated and replaceable. The only person who loved him was his mother. Everyone in the world was better off with him gone. Every guard here would die for Daenerys gladly. And, by extension, her family. I am part of that family now. We are in our own home, with our own people. We are popular, even loved. These people need Jon and Dany alive. A person would have to be mad or stupid to harm them. They die, and the dragons go feral. And we are surrounded by people who love us. There is no sweet child brother to use if Jon dies. There is no war that would end. No one would be better off if we were harmed. Everyone would be worse off. It’s not just guards and walls that keep us safe.

Sansa looked at Jon again. Enjoy yourself, Sansa. At the last royal wedding, you were wed to Tyrion Lannister. You were a scared little girl in the clutches of a family that hated you. But winter came, and you’ve survived it. You’ve survived everything.

Sansa and Jon arrived at the royal table, and he helped her into her chair, kissing her fingertips before sitting down as well. She smiled at him, then looked to her right. Arya sat there in her silk doublet. She smiled. Next to Arya was their Uncle, who looked pleased and proud. Beyond him were Anya Waynwood and Randa Royce, loyal to her, protecting her even when it wasn’t safe. Next to them was Lyra Mormont, her family unfailingly loyal to the Starks. Then Val, who Jon trusted with his life. Then there was Merys, after that Margaery and Willas. Both safe. Merys had a million opportunities to hurt me. And Margaery wouldn’t be so stupid. She’d be the prime suspect.

She looked to the other side then. Jon, the husband who adored her. Next to him was Daenerys, his aunt and her friend. The Dragon Queen, who wanted and needed them both alive and well. Then Missandei, never far from Dany’s side. Then there was Arianne, who had helped protect her and save her life.

Then that Dothraki Ko, fearsome looking, but clearly devoted to his Khaleesi. Jhogo, she remembered. Dany had told Sansa all about him. He stayed with her after Khal Drogo died, before the dragons hatched, when nearly the entire khalasaar had abandoned her and Dany was at her lowest point. When he’d been taken captive in Yunkai, Slaver’s Bay was in chaos, and Dany had been carried off by Drogon, he stayed strong and refused to betray her. He is her bloodrider. He knows how important Jon is. He would not harm us. After that, Sam Tarly and Gilly. Wouldn’t hurt us either. Jon is Sam’s best friend. Sam risked his life to save mine. Then the two Sand Snakes. They’re the least safe, but they’d get nothing from harming any of us. And I am on good terms with
all of their relations. At the far end was Grey Worm. *Who so adores Daenerys he’d probably flay himself at her command.*

Barristan and Brienne stood just behind them. *They’d do anything to protect us.*

There were, of course, more than a few threats among the guests. Sansa still didn’t trust Drystan Waters. There were also the Ironborn, who sat at a table to the right. Victarion Greyjoy glared at everyone and though he was devoid of his axe and one arm, it was clear from his size that he could do great damage without both. Lady Flint and Ser Rickard were loyal to the North, but Sansa knew they had far less love and loyalty towards the Targaryens and did not like this match. And, of course, there were plenty of nobles among the court with young, unwed daughters who would have a juicy new opportunity for advancement with Sansa out of the way. Sansa glanced around at the clusters of pretty young women, many of them gazing adoringly at Jon. She tried not to picture them all as miniature Leona Tyrells.

*Any Lannisters?* Sansa wondered. There had to be at least one here. What was left of that clan now wisely made themselves scarce at court, but the fragments of Ser Kevan Lannister’s family that remained still held Casterly Rock and were Lords Paramount of the Westerlands. Martyn Lannister now held Casterly Rock. Sansa spotted his golden head in the far back. *Martyn was Willem’s Twin,* she remembered. *Willem was killed by the Karstarks.* She had no way of knowing if Martyn might hold that against her. Robb had killed Karstark for it, but that didn’t assure any forgiveness.

The biggest threat, though, now strode in to stand at the center of the hall. The High Sparrow’s eyes were as steady and dark as ever. During the wedding, he’d glared at her when Jon wasn’t looking. The banquet hall quieted and the septon took a deep breath.

For a wild second, Sansa feared that he’d at once denounce her as a whore and call for her to be arrested. She’d feared the same thing when she and Jon had mounted the steps. Every time he looked at her, she could just feel the disgust. *Harlot. Wanton. Slut. Whore. Slattern.* When she attended services, his sermons often focused on sin masquerading under a guise of innocence, and how the worst sinners were the ones who pretended to be virtuous and rejected any sense of shame.

But today, the Sparrow merely recited the standard blessing before taking a seat at one of the side tables. Sansa noticed that when he sat, a couple guards stepped a bit closer to his place, their eyes fixed upon him. The Lady of Winterfell looked at Dany, who met her eyes and smiled. Sansa breathed easy.

Jon extended his hand to his bride after the blessing and they both rose. Sansa watched her husband with nervous eyes. He wasn’t comfortable with speeches or many eyes upon him.

*This is only a couple of words, though.* She’d assured him of that before. Now, she smiled broadly at the gathered guests. Jon managed to smile as well.

“Let the cups be filled!” He declared to happy cheers. The cupbearer came forward with a flagon of Dornish Red, pouring the liquid into the gold cup Jon and Sansa were to share. It wasn’t anywhere approaching the seven-sided jeweled monstrosity Joffrey and Margaery had sipped from during their wedding, but it was rather large. It had two handles in the shape of dragon’s wings. After it was filled, the servant took a generous sip and there was an awkward pause. After a few seconds of nothing, the young man withdrew.

“To my wife the princess!” He cried out, lifting the gold cup.

She and Jon took turns drinking to the cries of “Sansa!” and “The Princess!” The wildlings pounded their fists upon the tables. There was a din of cheers and cups banging together as the feast began.
Sansa sat and a thought that had come to her during all three of the weddings came to her again. I wish they were all here to see this. Eddie, Father, Mother, Robb, Bran, Rickon. Jory and Ser Rodrick and Maester Luwin and Septa Mordane and the Cassels and Pooles and everyone from Winterfell. When in the godswood last night, she’d felt something that made her feel like maybe Bran was watching. He was one of the Children now and could see through Heart Trees. Bran saw us. He knows.

When they sat down again, Sansa grabbed her sister’s hand, squeezed it, and looked at Arya with tears in her eyes. “I’m so glad you’re here. It means everything.”

Arya looked at her for a long moment, then squeezed her hand back, leaned forward, and kissed her cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Sansa whispered back, trying not to cry.

She didn’t have very long to be intimate with her sister as guests came forward to offer their good wishes. The Ironborn were among the first. Asha Greyjoy approached with her uncle. Both of them were in black and gold, and both bowed.

“I wish you both every happiness,” Asha informed them, sounding bored out of her mind. Victarion came forward and thrust his remaining hand to Sansa. The Lady of Winterfell rose and gave him her hand reluctantly. She’d always had long fingers, but when she placed her hand in his, it looked so unbearably small. She’d been touched and escorted by big men before. Tormund Giantsbane was almost as big as Victarion. But while Sansa had been charmed by the Wildling, Victorion’s grasp frightened her. The Ironborn practically yanked her hand up and when his lips touched her fingers, it felt like they were actually getting attacked by some powerful sea creature. When Victarion pulled away, he looked at Jon.

“She’s a beautiful woman. Here’s hoping she’ll give you many sons,” Victorion said. He cast a critical eye upon her hips. Sansa pulled her hand away.

“Thank you, My Lord.” Jon said, rising himself and slipping a protective arm about her waist. Victorion cast a dark look towards Daenerys, then stomped off. Asha remained, looking them both up and down.

“My uncle is a rough man,” she said. “Anyways, congratulations. Please remember that House Greyjoy is willing to serve.”

“We will, Lady Greyjoy,” Sansa said, nodding.

Asha gave another bow, turned on her heel and moved away, going so fast that her velvet skirts rustled around her. Sansa took a deep breath as a couple of Riverlands knights came forward.

Shortly afterwards, more interesting guests came forward. A slight, weary-looking man with sharp eyes came forward, a small, veiled woman on his arm. The man wore black and white wool, simple clothing. But his companion was draped in cloth of gold trimmed with black velvet. Sansa knew them at once.

She stood when they came close, as did Jon.

“We are honored to receive the Lady of Storm’s End,” Sansa said.

Shireen Baratheon parted the folds of her veil, revealing an ugly face coated with mottled skin. She frowned. “I thank you, Princess Sansa.” She looked at the groom. “Do you remember me, Prince Jon?”
“Yes, Lady Baratheon. I am glad to see you are well.”

Shireen blushed a bit. “This is Ser Davos, the Onion Knight. Kiss her hand, Davos.”

The former smuggler did as he was bid. “I wish you every happiness, Princess Sansa. And you, Prince Jon.”

Jon Connington came right on their heels, looking surly. Sansa curtsied to him and returned his compliments. She noticed him soften somewhat when his eyes were on her, but his looks to Jon were less kind, more critical. When he moved away, Sansa breathed a sigh of relief. Better to make his acquaintance again alone.

When they’d finally gotten through the guests and required courtesies, Sansa had a wicked need to relieve herself. Jon had drunk almost all the wine from their cup after Sansa’s first sip at the toast. She didn’t much care for wine when she was with child. So Jon had drained the first cup for them, and after that it was filled with cider, which she’d had liberal amounts of during all the pleasantries. It kept them both fairly sober, but that couldn’t be said for everyone. Even Daenerys was a bit red-faced, laughing uproariously with Jhogo.

Sansa gestured for Brienne to follow her as she hurried off to relieve herself in one of the side chambers, the Queensguard standing outside the door while she conducted her business. When she returned, Jon was being teased by various members of the wedding party. Jon stood upon seeing her.

“My princess, our guests insist that I must dance with you.”

“Well then, you must.” Sansa grinned and took his hand. When they got to the floor, he leaned in.

“You’ll have to lead, I’m not good at this.”

She pulled him close and laughed. “Alright. Just forget they’re here.”

They danced for a couple of songs before Jon was ready to head back to the table. Sansa’s heart sank. She so loved to dance.

“Then keep dancing,” he assured her. “I’ll enjoy watching you.”

Sansa laughed and let Ser Francis Butterwell take her for the next song. Jon watched her, as promised, for over an hour as she floated from one partner to the next.

“TIME FOR THE BEDDING!” Some Ironborn cried out. Sansa stopped sort. Ser Orther Merryweather, a tall, brawny knight, was her partner. He grinned. Shouts for the bedding filled the hall. Ser Orther clasped Sansa’s shoulders.

“I’ve got the bride here!” He cried out. “Come on, Lads!”

Sansa’s eyes went to Jon as the women began to close in around him. She wasn’t afraid for herself--- she’d been through this once before, and she hadn’t had as many guards at the time. But Jon… That Leona girl had torn his clothes. What if he breaks down again?

As the men gathered around her, leering, her view of her husband was blocked. She felt hands upon her and then began to shudder. This wasn’t pleasant at all. She didn’t feel so safe. Every hand felt like it could belong to Petyr. Sansa struggled. He’s not here. He’s gone.

She looked closely at the faces around her. There were a few fresh-faced young knights, a few ugly men. Victarion Grejoy was there, his massive hand at her back, yanking at her laces. She felt herself
be lifted up and glanced around frantically. Victarion’s hand was gone, and there were two thick hands pushing her back as she rose. A mouth came to her ear.

“Don’t you worry, little Lady,” came the voice of Ryk Longspear, Tormund’s son-in-law, “We’ll be protecting you.”

“She’s going as red as her hair, Gents!” Ser Tytos Hill cried out.

“Let’s see if she’s red all over!” Some other idiot cried. This earned some cheers and Sansa felt more hands tear at her skirts.

Sansa shut her eyes as she felt her bodice and skirts disappear and fingers grope her. They were moving. Pretend you’re somewhere else.

“Gentle with her, Boys! We wouldn’t want to deliver our prince damaged goods! He’ll be wanting to break his bitch himself!”

“No need to worry! Our princess is old hat at this!”

She felt her girdle get yanked off.

“Do the smallclothes look wet at all? Our prince deserves a she-wolf in heat!”

“Let’s hope that Tully hair won’t make her a frigid fish!”

There were no blades, though. Sansa swallowed and opened her eyes. She saw hands go for her pantalets. They were torn off quickly. The men cheered.

“THE RUSHES MATCH THE CURTAINNS!”

“See how slick she is!”

Sansa shrieked and reached out to cover herself when hands came closer. One Westerlands knights grabbed her wrist to pull her hand away. A bigger hand clamped down the Vale knight’s arm.

“YOU’LL LEAVE HER BE!” Toregg shouted. “THAT’S YOUR PRINCESS!”

The young knight glared at the wildling. “Shove off, Savage!”

Toregg blackened the knight’s eye.

“Forget the minge!” One of the other men said. “We still haven’t seen the teats!”

With that, her breastband was gone.

“THAT’LL BE THE SECOND TIME I’VE SEEN THOSE!” Clarrane Swift cried. “THEY’RE BIGGER NOW, THOUGH. BUT SHE WAS JUST THIRTEEN AT THE TIME.”

Twelve. I was twelve. Sansa swallowed and covered her breasts with her other arm. A number of the men groaned and called her frigid.

“NO NEED TO ACT SHY NOW! WE KNOW YOU’RE NO MAID!”

Sansa had had enough. “No, but I am the Warden of the North and your princess! I am a wolf of Winterfell and I am NOT your plaything! GHOST!”
“GODS ABOVE!”

There were shouts of alarm as Jon’s pet ran from the shadows, teeth bared. In their drunken stupor, most of the guests hadn’t even noticed him. Now they certainly did, though. Many of the men backed away. Tormund Giantsbane covered Sansa in his cloak. Ryk Longspear was now holding her bridal style. Without the crowd around her, Sansa could get a better look at her surroundings. They were in the royal wing, far down the hall from Jon’s Chambers.

“We’ve got you now, Princess,” Tormund assured her, patting her on the head. “You’re fine.”

“Thank you, Magnar.” She breathed a sigh of relief.

“Let me take her.”

Sansa looked up. Uncle Edmure had hurried over, looking distressed.

“She’s my blood, I’ll take care of her.”

The wildlings all looked at Sansa. “Yer Grace?” Toregg asked.

“It’s fine,” Sansa said, reaching for her Uncle. He scooped her up gratefully.

“There we are,” he whispered to her. “I wasn’t about to leave you to the savages.”

Sansa frowned. The ‘savages’ were protecting me. “They’re my people.”

Ser Rickard Locke hurried over. “I’ll want to see her deposited in the bed.”

Sansa groaned, but relented. They all hurried to Jon’s solar. The bedchamber door was wide open, Jon on the other side, his tunic being ripped off. Some more men eventually entered as Jon’s smallclothes were removed and Sansa was brought in. Toregg shoved her under the covers.

“Let him go!” Sansa cried out, seeing how her husband’s eyes were shut tight and his jaw was clenched.

“OH SHE WANTS HER DRAGON RIDE NOW!”

The women pushed the naked Jon onto the bed, and he hurried under the covers and opened his eyes.

“HAPPY? NOW LEAVE!” he shouted.

“You heard your prince!” Brienne bellowed. “Time to leave them be!”

“Aye! They’ve got dragons to make!”

“Take her like the wolf she is, Your Grace!”

But they filed out. Brienne promised to remove them completely before shutting the doors. Jon and Sansa stayed still until finally the voices died away. They took deep breaths simultaneously, looked at each other and, in unison, said, “Are you alright?”

Sansa nodded and cupped Jon’s cheek. He leaned towards her and breathed deep.

“Did Tormund and the others keep you safe?”
Sansa gestured to the cloak that was still on her shoulders. Jon smiled weakly and seemed to relax somewhat.

“Good.”

“And Val kept you safe?”

“Val, Arya, Brienne. I’m fine.”

There was another long moment of silence. Both of them breathed deeply. They embraced and rested against one another, trying to recover. For several minutes, they just took comfort in one another.

Sansa felt herself relax fully. It’s all done now. They’re gone. You’re safe. It’s just you and your husband now. Just you and Jon. She smiled and gave him a little squeeze. After a while, Jon began stroking her back. Sansa sighed and rested in the crook of his neck. He smells so good.

Jon pulled the cloak off of her shoulders after a while and flung it away. “Let me keep you warm now.”

“Do you want to couple tonight?”

He chuckled and kissed her shoulder. “Of course. I didn’t go through that bedding for nothing.”

Sansa smiled. If he’s willing, then it wasn’t too bad. The relief was palpable, and enough to return some of the heat to her blood. I promised to teach him to beg tonight.

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE DON’T HATE ME FOR ENDING IT THERE. IT JUST GOT SO LONG AND I WANTED TO GET THIS TO YOU TONIGHT. SMUT WILL FOLLOW I PROMISE.

I hope you guys liked it though.
Wedding Part Three

Chapter Summary

Sexy times ensue, Arya and Sansa have a little bonding time, gifts are given, Starfall shines, and there's a confrontation.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Blue for her betawork :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Wedding Part Three

Sansa:

Jon’s eyes upon her were as hot as dragonfire. A small smile played upon his lips.

“Oh yes, as I remember, you promised to teach me to beg.”

“I did. I keep my promises.”

He laughed and looked at her slyly. “In the sept today, you also promised to…. What was it? Oh yes, ‘obey’.”

Her mouth fell open. “Oh, so that’s what you want, is it? An obedient lady wife?”

“No, not really. But I had you for a moment, didn’t I?”

She giggled. “Maybe. But no more jokes. It’s time for your lessons.”

Jon got out of bed on her side and fell to his knees. “Please oh please, My Princess. Let me lick your cunny until you weep and then make mad, passionate love to you. Let me spill my seed inside you and kiss your lips and stroke your skin. Please, my beautiful lady. I’ll go mad if you don’t let me fuck you until the end of time.”

Oh, you wonderful man. “You’re in a mischievous mood tonight.”

“A man should be on his wedding night.”

Sansa leaned forward and put her hands to Jon’s brow. The girls had removed everything but his coronet. “You’re still wearing your crown.”

“So are you. And the hairnet.”

She grinned and removed his crown, then hers. “I’ll need to put them away properly, then.”

Jon whimpered. “Sansa…”
“No, Jon,” she replied haughtily. “One must be careful about these things. I didn’t become a princess just to ruin the crown on my first night.”

“What about your second one? Because technically, this is the second.”

Sansa laughed and opened Jon’s wardrobe. As Satin had promised her, two stands were waiting for her on one of the shelves. She placed them there, and then began removing the rest of her jewels, depositing them in a cask she had on another shelf. As she removed them, Jon walked up behind her and began stroking her sides. When her hand tumbled from the net, he took a lock in hand and kissed it.

“I love your hair. You know the wildlings thought red hair was lucky? ‘Kissed by fire’, they called it.”

Sansa shivered and grinned. “I know. You’ve told me a dozen times.”

She leaned back against him as she removed her mother’s clips and then shut the doors of the wardrobe. Jon’s cock was hard against her backside. His mouth was at her hair. His hands were stroking her belly. They traveled down, his fingertips ghosting over her flesh, making her shiver, when they came close to her core, they slipped down around her hips and thighs. Oh, so that’s how you wish to play it?

Sansa wiggled her hips, jostling his manhood. He groaned.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace, are you in some sort of pain? Shall I fetch a maester?”

She almost moved away, but he grabbed her arm and yanked her back.

“Don’t you dare,” he growled.

“What, you’re just going to rut against my arse all night like a green boy?”

“Rather do that than beg,” he grunted against her hair.

She frowned. “You don’t want to play, then?”

He slipped his hands about her hips. “Is that what you want? A simpering, whining, desperate husband?”

“Maybe once in a while, it would be fun. You’ve begged me before.”

He snorted. “Aye, but I don’t like to do it when prompted.” He ran a fingertip over the part in her folds. Sansa shivered as he whispered in her ear. “Besides, you seem just as eager as I am. We’ve waited long enough, haven’t we?”

“Oh yes, it’s been a whole day since you were last inside me.”

“As I said, much too long.”

Sansa squirmed. Her insides did as well, in the most pleasing manner. Every inch of her felt like it was on fire. Jon pressed kisses down her scalp, neck, and shoulders.

“Last—night—you—did— not—want—to—to-steal— me—, and— to—night—you— don’t— want—to— beg.” She gasped each syllable with each little kiss. “I— hope—“ Exasperated, she turned slightly and grabbed Jon’s chin so he had to look her in the eye. “I hope you don’t think that just because we’re wed now we can’t have a fair share of mischief in our bedchamber.”
It would bother her, if he did. There was a common attitude that there were things one did with one’s whores and what one did with one’s wife. That married coupling could not be as exotic, that somehow it had to fit into a narrow definition of respectability.

She recalled once hearing Theon Greyjoy talk about it when she was very young, about nine or so. She’d overheard Greyjoy and Robb in the hot springs, and the Ironborn was explaining salt wives and whores.

“But if you’ve got a high-born bride to mate with, why bother with other women?” Robb had asked, all of twelve and very curious.

“Because it gets dull. There are certain things you can do with whores and salt wives that you can’t do with wives. Wives are highborn ladies you use for breeding. Fucking them has to be very basic or they go mad. They’re not up for much fun. With them, you get on top of them, kiss them all sweetlike, thrust in and out of their cunnies and spend and you have to be all gentle and polite. If you do anything else, they treat you like some sort of monster and it makes them even more frigid than they were already. Whores and salt wives you can bend over a table, play games with, stick your cock in other holes, really explore with.”

She’d seen shades of it with Harry. He was less conservative about it than Theon. He happily had her suck his cock. But whenever he wanted her to do anything beyond that and lying on top of her as they fucked, he usually wanted her to pretend to be a whore first.

Sansa didn’t want Jon to have that mentality. Because if he felt he had to be all gentle all the time with her now that they were wed, then what did that say of what he thought of her before? He constantly protested that he didn’t think of her as a whore. But if he decided that their wedding meant he could no longer experiment…

Jon pulled his head back and laughed. “To tell you the truth… there are a couple of things I want to save for a different setting. I’d love to play at stealing you, but we’d be able to have more fun doing it at Dragonstone. We’re rather confined to just the solar and bedchamber here. But in my own Keep… Well, we’d have more privacy and more freedom. As for the begging… As I said, I don’t want to be told to do it. And I’m just not in the mood for that at the moment.”

Sansa breathed a sigh of relief. “Alright then, what sort of thing would you like to do?”

Jon blushed. “I… I…”

“What?”

“I wouldn’t want to offend you.”

“I asked. Answer me. There should be no secrets between a husband and wife.”

He blushed. “Sansa, it’s hard for me to think these things through when I’ve got my cock against your arse.”

“Well then…” She began to pull away once more. Jon grabbed her again and yanked her back.

“Here’s an idea,” he said, gripping her shoulders and nipping at her earlobe. He reached down and gripped her arse roughly. “You sit this naked arse over on my desk and spread your legs real wide. And I’ll part the lips of your little red cunny and finger and lick you until you’re the one begging me for mercy.”

Sansa squealed. “Promise you’ll talk through it.”
She so loved making him talk. It was a point of pride for her, getting her normally silent prince to speak at length. Many a time, he didn’t even have to say ‘I love you’ to tell her that he did. He just had to say anything, and a lot of it. The fact that Jon didn’t guard his words with her the way he did with everyone else was enough to tell her what she meant to him.

“Promise.”

He began to push her towards his desk playfully. When they got to it, he impatiently pushed everything off of it: all the quills and ink. Then he flipped her over so she faced him, lifted her up, sat her down on top, yanked her knees apart, then leaned over, kissing her deep and pushing her back. Sansa propped herself up on her elbows and opened her mouth, taking in his tongue, tasting him. He tasted of the plums, lemoncakes, candied ginger and Yunkish peppers they’d enjoyed at the feast. He tasted hot and wet and beautiful. His tongue battled with her, pushing her mouth and all her senses into submission. He smelled of weirwood trees, sandalwood, vanilla, sweat and leather. Every inch of him was hot, hard and dewy. His rough, calloused hands left tingles as they ran down her body, stoking the sides of her breasts, waist, hips and thighs.

Finally she just let him push her back all the way against the cold wood of her desk so she could reach out and touch him, groping his side, running her nails down his back as he pressed against her. She bucked her hips against his. He was melded to her, but his cock was trapped between them. She wanted it inside her.

By the time he pulled his mouth away, they were both breathless and their mouths very bruised. Jon grinned at her. “You look thoroughly debauched, Your Grace,” he informed her.

“The same could be said of you, My Lord,” she gasped.

He leaned forward and kissed her again. This one was brief. He caught her lower lip between his teeth and tugged before moving downwards. Jon tasted her flesh with kisses, sucks, licks, and little nibbles. He started from her jaw and worked his way down her neck, shoulders, and chest. When her got to her breasts, he sucked a bit too hard on her right one. Sansa cried out. “Jon---! Hurts---!”

“Sorry,” he grunted. He pressed a chaste little kiss upon the place where he’d sucked, then just peppered her teats with a few soft kisses before moving down her belly. As he got near her core, he sat in his desk chair, pulling it closer and leaning forward. He parted her legs further, stroking her inner thighs. Sansa shuddered and moaned, but managed to prop herself up a little once more so she could watch him. He smiled and licked his lips as he gazed at her cunt. He spared her a mischievous little look.

“With your permission, My Lady?”

“Permission for what exactly?” She hissed. “Tell me what you want to do.”

“I’d like to tease that pretty little cunny of yours. Smell it, kiss it, stroke it. Just on the outside…” He said, running his fingers along her thighs. Sansa groaned.

“Permission granted.”

Jon reached over with his left hand and ran the tip of his index finger over her mound. Sansa’s eyes rolled back and she gasped. She was just so eager.

I’m shameless, she thought to herself. Just a brush of his finger and I’m half undone.

When she opened her eyes again, Jon had stuck that finger in his mouth.
“You taste better than anything at that feast, My Lady.”

He pulled his finger from his mouth and leaned forward. The tip of his nose brushed against her mound and he inhaled deeply. “You smell better, too. Better than all those ridiculous dishes. Better than all those pampered lordlings and ladies with their overpriced perfumes. If we could find a perfume that smells of your cunt, we’d fill the treasury a hundred times over selling it.”

“That’s vile.”

“No, no it isn’t.” Jon pressed a kiss to her mound and that practically sent her into spasms.

Jon chuckled. “With your permission, Your Grace, I’d now like to part these red folds of yours, observe the pink underneath, play with your nub, and fuck you with my fingers until you come.”

“Permission granted!” She moaned. Jon smirked.

He parted her lower lips slowly and carefully, like he was handling something as delicate as a baby bird. For a second, he just gazed at what was underneath. He smelled her again, then took her nub between his thumb and forefinger. Sansa nearly jumped three feet. It sent a shockwave through her, a wave of heady, dizzying pleasure. Jon found the bud and applied pressure to it, driving her mad once more. For a while, he wiggled it around, leaving her bucking her hips and gyrating until she peaked with a loud cry.

Jon kept his thumb on her nub, but his other fingers traveled down, curling up into her entrance as he worked her bud. He thrusts his fingers in and out roughly, giving Sansa no time to recover from her prior orgasm before she was writhing once more in ecstasy.

“I like seeing you this way, Sansa,” Jon told her, his voice a deep purr, “I like seeing you writhe and cry out and soak yourself. I like seeing how good I can make you feel. You’re so… Gods… You’re so bloody gorgeous like this. I wish you could see yourself… I can’t believe you’re mine. So lovely… I want to… I want to give you hours of pleasure for every moment of pain you’ve suffered. You know that? And I’m going to. For the rest of our lives. So come for me, Sweetling. Do it.”

Sansa arched her back and did as he asked. She felt like a finely-tuned harp, and he was playing her to perfection.

“Yes… yes Sweetling… Oh Gods, perfect…”

She came down then slowly, Jon massaging her cunny lightly and telling her what a sweet, beautiful girl she was. When she opened her eyes, he looked at her with absolute reverence.

“Do you know what I’d like to do now?” He gasped.

“I can guess,” she groaned back. “Would you like to taste me?”

“With your permission.”

Sansa took a few more times before granting it.

His mouth latched onto her hungrily. He sucked upon her nub and sent her away once more into that odd, dark, dizzying place where nothing existed but the way every tiny piece of her was vibrating. His tongue swirled around her bud. Then finally, she could take no more.

“Jon, please! I can’t… I want…”
“What, Sweet Girl?’’

Her insides felt so empty. She needed to be filled.

“I… I want… I want you inside me.’’

He chuckled and stuck a finger into her.

“No!’’ She gasped. She wasn’t interested in playing this game. Normally, she’d be utterly appalled at this, but at that moment she didn’t care. *Fuck pride. Fuck propriety. “I want your cock!’’*

Jon groaned. She heard his chair fall back with a crash as he stood. He gripped her thighs and thrust in.

“I--- love--- it--- when--- you--- talk--- like--- that---’’ He said with each thrust. He gripped her hips so tightly she was sure she’d bruise. He didn’t fuck her as roughly as she expected, but that was really only something to appreciate. Sansa sat up and wrapped her arm about his shoulders, pressing herself to him and kissing his mouth. His hair felt as soft as lamb’s wool, and he kissed her like he hadn’t done it in years.

She shuddered around him, he shuddered into her, his seed spent. They relaxed there for several minutes, breathing deeply. He kissed her cheek. “I love you,’’ Jon told her, sounding absolutely gleeful about it. They both found themselves giggling at one another.

“You know,’’ Sansa replied, prodding his nose with the tip of her finger, “I rather love you too. Scandalously. It’s really rather absurd how much I love you.’’

“Absurd? What’s so absurd about loving me, exactly?’’

“Nothing. It’s me who is ridiculous about it. You’re fine.’’

He buried his face into the crook of her arm. “Mmmm…. Good. Now… I’m sleepy.’’

It took him saying that for Sansa to realize just how tired she was. “Me too. Carry me to bed and we can get cozy.’’

When Sansa woke the next morning, she found Jon on his back, smiling in his sleep, the blankets tented between his legs. Not being able to resist such an opportunity, she slipped underneath the covers and crouched over him, coming face to face with Balerion. Giggling, she blew on it and then kissed the tip. Jon jolted awake, pulling back the covers so Sansa’s head peeked out. She smiled up at him. He gaped.

“Good morning, Husband,’’ she said brightly.

He gave a stiff nod, his eyes wide. “G-good morning, Wife. I… Um… Are you going to…?’’

Sansa looked at him innocently. “Am I going to what?

He made a strangled noise. “A-are you going to show Balerion a little love?’’

Sansa glanced down at his erection as if she hadn’t even noticed it was there before. “Good morning, Balerion. I love you.’’

Jon groaned. “You know what I mean.’’

“I’m afraid I don’t. I’m just an innocent, chaste little maid who doesn’t know a thing about what
takes place between men and women.”

He moaned. “You are not. You’re a fully grown, highly learned goddess of conjugal delights.”

She giggled. “Not right now. So you’re going to ask me nicely for what you want me to do, or I won’t be able to please my lord husband.”

Jon whimpered. “Fine. If it please you, I’d like you to---“

“What?”

“I’d like you to kiss, lick, and suck on my cock. Please. If it pleases you to do so.”

“Your Grace!” She gasped. “How indecent! You can’t honestly want something so filthy!”

“I do, I do… I want it very, very much.”

“And here I thought you were a respectable sort of man.”

Jon lifted his hips. “I’m not. I’m a filthy, filthy degenerate who wants your mouth on his cock very badly. Please, Sansa.

“Well, if you want it that badly…”

“I do… Please.”

Sansa affected a half-hearted sigh. “Well then… It pleases me to please my lord husband.”

She wasted no time in bringing him to pieces, engulfing him with her mouth and employing all her little tricks. She watched him as she did this. Jon loved it when she looked at him, and she liked doing it anyways. She liked watching him gasp and squirm. There was one thing in particular that he always did whenever she did this to him that she loved. Sansa closed her eyes for a second.

“No!” Jon said then, “Look up at me. Let me see those beautiful blue eyes of yours.”

There it is. It never failed to delight her to hear him say that. I’ve got his manhood touching my throat, but he wants to look at my eyes. She just loved that about him. Jon Snow, the only man alive who can make a woman feel adored and special while he fucks her mouth.

She swallowed his seed when he finished, then withdrew, trying not to slurp as she did. She moved upward to kiss him fondly. Jon grinned, grabbed her shoulders, then flipped her over. “My turn!”

She spent the next several minutes with one leg over his shoulder, shaking like mad. Sansa finally had to yank him up by his hair to get him to return to her.

“You’re insatiable,” she admonished him. He nodded. They kissed for a while, just adoring each other before settling into a content little embrace.

“One more day,” Jon said. “One more day and we leave for Dragonstone.”

“If it makes you feel any better, today we get gifts,” she told him, stroking his chest and resting her head in the crook of his arm.

“I already have everything I want except more free time with you.”

“Well, you’ll want to enjoy this day. We’re not the only ones leaving the capital tomorrow.”
Jon looked at her and bit his lip. “I— I know she needs to leave court. And I know she is going to be happier back home. But... we just got her back. I'm going to miss her so much.”

Sansa nodded. “I didn’t get to spend as much time with her as I would have liked. I feel awful, but there’s not much I can do. It used to be our differences that drove us apart. Now it’s our duty.”

Jon looked guilty all of a sudden.

Sansa read the expression on his face. “What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“No, there’s something. Tell me.”

He frowned. “The reason your duty no longer takes you home with Arya is—–“

“This isn’t about you, Jon. Arya and I were separated long ago for reasons that had nothing to do with you,” Sansa sighed, “And let’s say I hadn’t married you, and I had returned to Winterfell... Arya and I would have separated for some reason or another eventually. And we’re not the only ones being separated. You’re also being deprived of a return to our home with our sister. And besides... One of us would have eventually married and become the lady of a different Keep. But as your wife, I don’t have to worry about giving up my title or my place at Winterfell. Arya probably won’t have to either. The advantages of our match means she can afford to marry far enough beneath her that she’ll be able to retain her name and stay home. So don’t think on that.”

He leaned in and kissed her cheek. She stroked his face. “We’ll see her again before you know it. When we return from Essos, we’ll make our progress North. She may even be able to come down south briefly to see her nephews and nieces. After that, we’re going to have another babe who will be the future Lord of Winterfell, which means we’ll have more than enough excuses to visit home as often as we wish. Not that we won’t already have plenty. I’m still Warden of the North. We’re still Lord and Lady there. We’ll have to make fairly frequent trips.”

“I’d like to return there now,” he replied. He clearly felt homesick. Sansa could relate. She wanted to visit the Heart Tree and the crypts. She wanted to eat in the Great Hall, bathe in the hot springs, and wander the grounds. She wanted to see the home they’d grown up in once more.

“Winter is still here, and the Keep isn’t completely secure yet. I am carrying your child, the future King or Queen of Westeros. It’s not—–“

“---I know.” Jon frowned. “I’m being ridiculous.”

“No, you’re being homesick.” She leaned over and kissed him again. “I want to go home too. Don’t be too frustrated. We’re going to have a lovely day.”

The marriage luncheon: the traditional meal the day after where guests presented their gifts to the new couple, now officially wedded and bedded. It wasn’t a common tradition elsewhere in the country, but for new royal couples, it was customary. In the North, gifts were given, but usually just left behind by the guests following the wedding. The newlyweds were often given about a week to themselves to get to know one another, free of any extraneous pomp and ceremony. Sansa had wanted to follow that tradition, but this was unavoidable. The empire went far beyond the North, filled with territories that incorporated gift-giving ceremonies in weddings. Dothraki weddings were essentially a daylong presentation of gifts. The people of Slaver’s Bay presented gifts at the reception. The luncheon of the capital was practiced in the Westerlands and the Reach. It went on and on. It would seem pigheaded and ungracious for them to depart immediately without some
chance for their subjects to present their favors to them.

She and Jon would leave that night for Dragonstone and arrive there in mere hours. But first, they had to host one last party so the people of the empire could offer trinkets and kiss their arses for a bit longer.

Eventually the two of them pulled themselves out of bed and summoned their attendants in. Baths were brought in for them, and they got ready as quickly as they could. Jon prepared in the solar, while Sansa dressed in the bedchamber. We’ll need to acquire apartments with a separate dressing room for me, she thought as Nani laced her into a simple blue wool dress. She and Jon took a light, private breakfast with Arya and Dany before hurrying back to her the bedchamber to prepare for the party. She asked her sister to stay with her while she dressed, and Jon stayed behind with Dany to discuss the progress to Essos.

Dressing with Arya proved awkward.

“Why are you wearing that?” Arya asked her as Nani laced Sansa into a gown of plum velvet. It displayed her height and figure well and had a higher waist, a style Sansa had ordered specifically so it would eventually be able to hide and accommodate her belly as it swelled. But while the fabric was rich and the style becoming, it was not in the least bit ornamented, distracting simple for a princess to wear to a celebration the day after her wedding. Even Arya noticed.

“But…” Sansa said, pulling away and hurrying to her jewelry box as as Nani finished lacing her up. “I’m also wearing these.”

She pulled out her coronet and the weirwood and winter rose necklace Jon had given her. Two such ornate pieces of jewelry so closely arranged pretty much demanded a simple gown. I am not Cersei Lannister, nor am I Roslin Frey. I am not going to wander around glittering from head to toe for anything less than my actual wedding. Nani quickly took the tiara and began pinning it in her hair. The Dothraki maid was painfully uncouth, but also insanely efficient. Sansa kept holding out the necklace in its box as Arya stepped closer.

“Isn’t that the necklace you wore the other night?”

Sansa nodded as the younger Stark girl leaned forward a bit to get a better look. Her sister’s grey eyes widened. “I didn’t get a good look at it in the dark. Seven Hells, that’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever seen.”

Sansa shut the box and withdrew, hurt. “I think it’s beautiful. Maybe it’s a bit ornate, but---”

“A bit?” Arya snorted. “There are probably more rubies in that thing than fell in the Trident after old King Robert crushed Rhaegar Targaryen’s armor.”

Sansa glared. “Don’t ever speak of that!” She glanced nervously at Nani, who was giving Arya an annoyed sideways glance. “And you mean the Usurper.”

Arya rolled her eyes. “Right. The Usurper. How could I forget? Father’s----”

“Be QUIET!” Sansa almost smacked her. She’d just wanted a nice, private moment with her sister. Sansa waved the maid away and sent them out before they could hear another word. “Why are you doing this?”

Arya stopped short and looked at the ground nervously. “Sorry. I didn’t mean… You’re right. The Usurper. Robert the Usurper. Who tricked the Starks into joining his vile plans to take the throne and destroy House Targaryen.”
Then her sister looked up, clearly upset. “That’s the story we’re going with now, right? The mad Robert Baratheon, so consumed with lust for the Iron Throne, used some sort of vile lies to manipulate the Starks, Tullys, and Arryns into rising against their king? Or was it that he used magic? I can’t quite remember. History seems to change so much these days.”

Sansa sat down on the bed and gestured for Arya to take the chair at her dressing table. “Arya, speaking this way is treason.”

“So not playing along with a bunch of lies? That’s treason now?”

Sansa took a deep breath. Yes, Arya. That’s the way it usually is. That’s what you never seemed to understand. “We play along with the best truth there is. Robert Baratheon rebelled against the Targaryens and nearly destroyed them. He killed the rightful heir, took the throne, plunged the crown into debt, was obsessed with killing every last Targaryen, even our current queen, and his follies, excess, and reign helped plunge the Seven Realms into chaos. His rule began and ended with wars that nearly tore our country apart. He was an extravagant, gluttonous, drunken womanizer who brought nothing but chaos to our country.”

“He went to war because of Lyanna.”

Sansa swallowed. “Is that what this is about?” She recalled the dress fitting, the way Arya looked so upset when Sansa cut her off from speaking of their aunt.

“What has Jon said to you about her? His mother?” Arya asked.

Sansa looked at her lap. “Not very much. I don’t think he thinks on it very often.”

“No.” Arya grabbed the box and opened it. She pulled the necklace from it and held one of the sapphire rosebuds up near a candle so it could catch the light. Then she gestured over to a bouquet of blue winter roses on the end table. “Lyanna loved blue roses. Rhaegar Targaryen gave her a crown of them at the tourney at Harrenhal. You were never particularly drawn to them, in general, as I remember it. But you didn’t have a great preference for the blue ones. And you preferred orchids to roses. I’ve never seen him give you an orchid.”

Sansa frowned. “They became favorites later. Blue winter roses only grew in the North, and I was kept from my home. So yes, they took on a special sentimental value for me personally. I wear far more grey and white now too, and far more wolves.”

“Don’t treat me like an idiot. That’s all politically motivated, like almost everything you do. But Jon… He doesn’t stitch propaganda into his cuffs.”

*Why this now?* Sansa wondered to herself. The party was an hour and a half. “Not everything I do is all politics, Arya. Believe it or not, I get great personal satisfaction representing our family. Our colors and sigil remind me of home. The one I’ve worked so hard to rebuild.”

“This isn’t about you, Sansa.”

“What is this about?”

“It’s about the truth. I know it’s not something you’ve ever been particularly fond of, but it’s important. I don’t know what we’re doing. I’m not like you. I can’t just magically know the perfect lies to tell, or the perfect way to warp the truth or---“

“You literally lived as other people for almost a decade, Arya,” Sansa said at once, furious. “Remember that?”
“Actually, most of it I don’t remember. What I do remember is not this sort of lying. This isn’t me pretending to be a common boy named Arry. This goes beyond that. I was willing to lie for myself to stay alive. But lying about the whole world just to help us advance—–“

“—It isn’t about that!” Sansa cut in, her teeth clenched. “You think that’s all this is about? The things I’ve said all my life were just as much about survival as your Arry costume. Just like not speaking treason is now.”

“Why is it treason to talk about what really happened?”

“What have I said about Robert Baratheon that isn’t true?”

“You left out Lyanna!”

“That doesn’t make anything I said a lie!”

“It’s the same.”

“No, it’s not,” Sansa sighed. “Arya, if this is about us sending you North, then just look at this entire conversation and you’ll understand why it’s for your own good.”

“Why? Because I might embarrass you?”

“Because you’ll get yourself killed here.”

“Oh, honestly. I survived Harrenhal and ----“

“---Stop. This is not Harrenhal. This is not the same. Surviving one situation doesn’t mean you can handle a completely different one. If you wish to mourn Lyanna, tomorrow you’ll be heading to exactly the right place to do that. Go down to the crypts. Lay a crown of winter roses upon the brow of her statue. But don’t speak a word of this to anyone here.”

Arya set the necklace down. “I can’t stand playing like this. This… whatever this is. Rewriting history, acting like certain people didn’t exist, picking and choosing what truths to tell… I thought coming back meant I could be who I really am in the world we really live in. But this drives me mad.”

“I know. That’s partly why you’re leaving for the North, Arya.” Sansa closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “This place… I came here for the first time thinking it was all gowns, jewels, romance, knights, tourneys and good manners. But as you say, propaganda is stitched into the cuffs. Also, the hairnets are poisoned, tourneys end in crushed skulls, the romance is a trick to make girls act like idiots, and the knights beat little girls. And good manners can be the only thing that can protect you. I know picking and choosing what to say isn’t easy. Do you think I like smiling and curtseying to people like Clarrane Swyft? Last night half of the men at court were groping me, tearing my clothes off, and saying things that humiliated me. Half of the women were doing the same to the man I love. And in an hour, I will be smiling and curtseying to them like none of that even happened. I may even have to apologize for some of the things I did to protect myself. I’ll like all of that about as much as I liked declaring our mother and brothers traitors and professing my love for Joffrey after our father was killed.”

“Then why stay?”

“A thousand reasons. There is Jon. He is tied here. I love him. He needs me. As much of a cesspool as this place is, it’s a cesspool I am quite good at swimming through. I can help keep Jon afloat, and Daenerys, and I might even be able to affect some positive change if we all play our cards right.
Here, I can use my best abilities to help not just our family and the people of the North, I could even end up helping people across the empire. Just doing what I’m best at. Digging my head in the snow up at Winterfell won’t make this world any less corrupt or dangerous. Father tried that and he ended up with his head cut off and everyone else ended up with the Lannisters. But I’m better equipped to handle this than he was. All the deceit, the corruption down here won’t go away if I do. The love of my life and my child are tied to this place. I can and will endure for them.”

She leaned over and put her face in her hands. “I get that you can’t hide behind smiles and courtesies with people you feel don’t deserve them. There’s part of me that admires that. But I’m not you. Maybe I’m just deceitful and cowardly for it. Maybe it makes me less honorable. But it’s kept me alive and afforded me some successes. Call me craven, but I consider it better to play the game and keep myself and others alive as a result than emulating the honesty that Father nearly destroyed our family with.”

Arya sighed as Sansa stared at her lap. She heard footsteps. Arya was standing over her a second later, holding the necklace. Her sister’s grey eyes glinted. “Turn and lift your hair.”

Sansa did so, and Arya fastened the wreath about her neck.

“You know, I used to be so jealous of you,” Arya told her, fiddling with the clasp. “Even though I thought you were stupid most of the time. But it made me so upset because you had everything. You could sing, dance, dress, sew, play the harp, curtsey and do everything so perfect and pretty. And you were beautiful. It wasn’t fair. Everything seemed so easy for you. Now… Well, you’re definitely not stupid, but I’m so happy I’m not you.”

Sansa turned and looked at her sister. “I’m glad to hear that. And for the record, I was stupid most of the time back then. It was almost encouraged since I was pretty and well-mannered and talented. Beautiful girls are rarely encouraged to be anything but that. Especially women of our rank.” She stood up and walked over to the dressing table to analyze her appearance. “When men can’t look at you without thinking with anything but their cocks, it’s easier for them if you’re conditioned to think as little as possible.”

She looked over at Arya, analyzing her sister’s appearance. Arya was in a dove-grey silk doublet and charcoal lambs wool trousers. She’d grown tall, like their father, and her grey eyes were severe like his, but far more animated and extremely large and round. Her jaw was very defined and angular, her mouth narrow but shapely. Her wavy dark brown hair in contrast with her pale skin gave her a dramatic look. Though she was tall and clearly athletic, she had narrow hips and small breasts. And she wasn’t the slab of muscle that someone like Brienne of Tarth was. If it weren’t for the catlike way she moved, she’d be almost pixie-ish. Not a pixie, no. More like some sort of dark, dangerous nymph. The sort men desire despite the danger she obviously presents.

“In a way, you were lucky to bloom later on. You had to use your wits from day one. You couldn’t get away with being a superficial twit like I could. Of course, now that you’ve become such a stunning elfin---“

“---Stop.” Arya frowned. “Please don’t do that.”

“What?”

“I know you’re guilty about how things were between us, but I’m so sick of you trying to make up for it by pretending I’m pretty. I don’t need your false flattery. I’m not one of your courtiers.”

Sansa’s eyes widened. “Arya, it’s not false flattery. I mean what I said. You’re lovely.”
“You’re the beautiful one. I’m the smart one.”

“You insult both of us. I’m not stupid, and you are beautiful. Neither of us need to restrict ourselves to one quality. Maybe there was some truth to that when we were little girls. But that’s such an immature, ignorant way of looking at us. Even then, I did have brains even if I didn’t use them most of the time. And you were going to end up with the face you have now, you just needed to grow into it.”

Arya looked ready to protest. Sansa held up a hand and rolled her eyes. “You were awkward. That is no longer the case. Now you’re pretty enough that you even make heads turn while dressed like a man. And trust me, those heads don’t turn for the same reason they turn for Brienne of Tarth. You can be as rebellious and adventurous and aggressive as you like, Arya. It doesn’t make you ugly anymore than liking to sew and dress well makes me stupid.

“Until you manage to utterly disfigure yourself permanently, you’re going to be a pretty face. I’m not telling you out of some sense of guilt. I’m telling you because it’s true and such information will aid you later in life. Once you accept what you look like, you can teach yourself to harness it properly. That can be extremely useful. And I need you as useful as possible.”

Her sister stood there for a second, red-faced. “I’m not vain. I don’t need to be pretty.”

“This isn’t about vanity. It’s about reality. Weren’t you complaining about me ignoring that very same thing minutes ago? You’re not going to lose anything by accepting this fact. Being pretty doesn’t make you any less strong or intelligent any more than being ugly does. Stubbornly clinging to an unwarranted negative opinion of yourself, on the other hand...”

Sansa rubbed some of the rosehip cream she had on her face. “You should know that you could have almost any man you wanted.”

She glanced at her sister through the mirror. Arya was looking everywhere but at her. Maybe this stubborn belief that she’s ugly is why she clings to that Gendry. She thinks she can’t get anyone else. It hadn’t occurred to her before. Sansa tried not to groan. If it had, I could have spent more of our time together curing her of this delusion and maybe encouraged her to seek better options. Gendry Waters might have already be a memory if I’d considered this before. I just thought she was with him out of stubbornness. Now he’s going to Winterfell with her because I didn’t consider that she might still think of herself as Arya Horseface.

Gendry was a battle Sansa had not been prepared to fight openly for some time. It was an issue she’d hoped she could just indulge and ignore for the time being until it resolved itself. Sansa had no time to go to battle with Arya. She’d just gotten her sister back. Years ago, Sansa and Arya were driven apart emotionally because of some young man. That wasn’t a mistake the Lady of Winterfell wished to repeat. So against her better judgment, she’d given her blessing to Ser Gendry accompanying Arya to Winterfell. But if I’d caught onto this beauty complex of hers, maybe I could have steered her away from him without having to fight her. I’d never have had to make that choice.

Sansa went over to her wardrobe and rummaged through it. She had many, many fine gowns now. Arya was less curvaceous than her sister, but they were about the same height and some of Sansa’s clothes were from that initial order she’d made before she’d still been too thin. She pulled out one of her early favorites: grey and blue samite over white damask skirts. Sansa ran her hand over the fabric with a bit of longing. The samite had the most beautiful pattern of fish swimming alongside running wolves in electric blue thread. She’d been meaning to get the dress let out when she got the chance, as she desperately missed wearing it. She glanced at her sister. This is more important. It’ll bring out her eyes.
“Put this on,” Sansa said, thrusting it out towards Arya. “I’ll help you into it.”

Arya stepped back. “No.”

“You’d look lovely. And I don’t mind, honestly. This one doesn’t fit me anymore.”

“I don’t want to wear it, Sansa. I don’t like gowns.”

“I know you think you don’t look pretty. Let me show you how wrong you are.”

“Seriously, Sansa,” Arya replied, giving the silk a look like she thought it might attack her. “It’s sweet of you. But I really, really don’t want it. I’m not comfortable in skirts. I’m not meant for them. I had to wear one in the sept for a few hours yesterday. That was enough. I like my doublets and trousers. I don’t need your gowns.”

Well then, what am I supposed to do? Her sister was as impossible as ever. The nice athletic clothing Sansa had gifted her apparently weren’t enough to make her feel pretty. And she wouldn’t don the dresses now. It seemed neither meeting her halfway or inviting her to share something wouldn’t work. So what will?

“Well,” Sansa said, moving to lay the dress out on the bed. “Even if you won’t wear it now… Take it with you to Winterfell. That way if you ever do want or need a pretty dress, you’ll have one. Alright? Take it. It’ll make me happy.”

Arya shrugged. “Fine. If it’ll make you happy.”

“Would you let me do your hair, though?”

Her sister relented, and Sansa brought Nani back in. She and the Dothraki maid managed to smooth her sister’s hair and arrange it becomingly. The entire time, her sister seemed mortified.

When it came time for them to attend the luncheon, Sansa made a point of suggesting Arya enter with Lyra Mormont. The event was being held in the Queen’s ballroom, and the initial part of it was much like the breakfast luncheons the day before. Only this time, various representatives of each house were announced and ushered forward with gifts for the new couple. As they did, Sansa tried to keep track of which young lords and knights were unmarried, or which lords and ladies had unwed sons of age. With every candidate she could remember, she would call Arya’s attention to whichever gift was presented and ask for comment. If only there were more Northerners here, Sansa thought sadly. Ser Rickard was unwed and heir to Oldcastle, butSansa didn’t like him. He was a busybody and an oaf. Lady Daynora had a son and heir who was of age, but Sansa liked the mother as much as she liked Ser Rickard. Both Houses were already too convinced of their clout. She didn’t need to entertain any connection with Arya. Calm down, she told herself after graciously accepting a hideous set of gold and bejeweled candlesticks from Lady Nymella Toland. It’s not like you’ll be marrying her off any time soon. This wasn’t about that so much as just putting Arya forward a bit so she could see how many young men would be interested. But she’ll probably have no shortage of admirers up North.

So she calmed herself for a while and concentrated on taking a gift inventory and judging how far along they were in the whole charade.

Arya actually leaned forward then. “So, what have you got for my brother and sister then, Ned? Some fancy Dornish fruit?”

Sansa’s eyes widened. She’d had no idea Arya knew Ned Dayne. But I suppose it’s not too surprising. Who doesn’t? Everyone absolutely adored the young man. As a squire, he’d risked his life to pull his charge’s body from the river at Mummer’s Ford and stayed with him throughout the battle.

He was thought to be dead for several years, but returned to Starfall two years ago. His aunt had bestowed Dawn, the ancestral sword of House Dayne, upon him when he returned. But Edric refused to wield it, believing himself not quite yet worthy to serve as the Sword of Morning.

Edric blushed. “No. I have something a bit more lasting.” The young lord glanced over at his squire, who came forward. A book bound in black leather etched with red and purple designs, was handed to the Lord of Starfall, who then placed it before Jon and Sansa.

“If it pleases you… My Uncle Arthur was close friends with Prince Rhaegar. They weren’t often separated, but when they were… Well, people always went on about what a great warrior your father was, My Prince. But he was in fact very bookish. He read and wrote extensively and sent a great many letters my uncle saved.”

Sansa gasped and leaned forward. Dany, Arya, and Jon did as well, their eyes huge. Jon reached out and opened the book. In ornate, purple-inked calligraphy the words, ‘The Letters of Rhaegar of the House Targaryen, Prince of Dragonstone and Ser Arthur Dayne of Starfall, the Sword of Morning” were written. Below them was an image of a dragon flying under a shooting star.

“It’s not all the originals. I hope it doesn’t offend you, but we kept the original drafts my uncle made of his letters to Prince Rhaegar, and we kept a couple of the original letters from the prince. But my Aunt Allyria, who is quite good with a pen, she made some excellent copies. She did the front page as well. We had the letters bound. I thought… I thought you might like to have them. I know you never knew your father, My Prince, but I thought you might like to at least a little.”

Jon’s hands trembled as he turned the page. More purple script, this time small and cramped, greeted them. It was addressed to Ser Arthur from the prince.

“Oh, Ned,” Arya gasped, at that moment sounding so much like their mother that Sansa did a double-take. Oh Ned indeed.

“My Lord….” Jon managed to say, his voice raspy. “This... I cannot even begin to…”

The whole table was rendered speechless. Even Ser Barristan looked to have tears in his eyes. After a few moments of everyone just staring and trying not cry, Lord Butterwell hurried over to whisper in Sansa’s ear.

“My apologies, Your Grace,” he said, “But we still have to allow the representatives from the Westerlands and Iron Islands to present.”

Sansa loathed the Master of Coin at that moment, but she knew that hatred was undeserved. Hating herself even more, she leaned forward and reached out her hand. When Lord Edric took it to kiss, she held it for a second, giving it a squeeze, then uttered the formal thank you’s. As he shuffled away, Sansa made a note to seek him out as soon as she could to offer him more appropriate thanks.

She managed to stay patient throughout the Western presentations. They were dull. Martyn Lannister gave them yards of fine silk. Lady Algood acted a bit overly familiar and eager when her husband
presented them with crystal and gold rimmed glasses. The Iron Islanders, shock of shocks, presented them with a model of a ship they’d made for them ready to sale for Dragonstone at a moment’s notice, called *The Ice Dragon*.

When it was finally over, Jon, Daenerys, and Arya immediately jumped for the book of letters to inspect it more closely. Sansa smiled and scanned the hall for Lord Edric, but he was nowhere to be seen. A couple of the gardens were easily accessible, however, so Sansa politely excused herself, had one of the attendants fetch her cloak, and headed outside.

She rounded a couple of hedges in the bigger nearby garden, and came upon a fountain clearing. Though a little snow still dusted the ground in this area, it was warm enough for the water to be spilling out from the marble fixtures, shaped like maidens pouring from jugs. Sansa paused to admire the scene, enjoying a little bit of solitude, the only sound being of the rippling water.

She remembered this area well. She’d come here to read and stitch by the water more than a few times as a young girl.

One evening sprang to mind. It was soon after her arrival to King’s Landing. She, Jeyne Poole, and Myrcella had snuck out after a dinner with the queen. Myrcella had stripped off her slippers and stockings before the shocked girls, grinned, and stepped into the fountains, lifting her green silk skirts high. Sansa and Jeyne had looked at each other and decided that if the princess could do it, so could they. They’d had a merry time splashing about. Sansa had gone to bed that night amazed at her daring, sure that the romp in the fountain would be the naughtiest things she’d ever done or would ever do.

*Oh, you poor girl,* she thought to her eleven-year-old self, *how little you knew.* She imagined entering that Sansa’s bedchamber and whispering to her, *‘Eight years from now, you’ll be enthusiastically waking your Lord Husband, the man you currently know as your bastard half-brother, by kissing him on the cock.* The thought of the face her eleven-year-old self would make at hearing such a thing caused her to laugh aloud.

“...Sansa...”

The Lady of Winterfell spun around, startled. Lady Algood, the one who acted so familiar upon the gift presentation, stood between two high hedges, her brown eyes eager.

Sansa stepped back momentarily, truly surprised and more than a little uneasy. The lady was small and slender, with a heart-shaped face and chestnut hair. She wore a gown of blue velvet and gold lace, and gold seashells hung from her ears.

Seashells... Seashells... There was something about seashells Sansa was forgetting.

It’s not the emblem of the Algoods...

What was even more curious, though, was that the woman was not attired exactly as she’d been in the ballroom. It wasn’t just her velvet cloak. Upon her head was now a diadem of silver and bronze. It was nice, but it made Sansa’s stomach lurch.

As did being addressed solely by her given name by this total stranger. Sansa smiled, though.

“My Lady,” she said, highly uncomfortable. She glanced over at the arches into the Keep. Guards were standing there, and with them was Brienne, her blue eyes locked upon Sansa and the lady. Sansa exchanged a look with the queensguard, then set her eyes on the lady once more. “Enjoying the fresh air?”

“I wanted... I wanted to meet you. Truly meet you, not just stand before you with all those eyes. I wanted to meet you, and Arya, and Jon. But you and Jon are always so busy. Whenever I did see
you out alone, it was usually with that great white wolf of his. And Lady Arya, she… Well, she’s rather fierce, isn’t she? I thought I’d try to meet you first, and then you could introduce me. You’re far gentler, and I’d feel less afraid approaching her if I spoke to you or Jon first.”

*Oh Gods, no.* Sansa tried to quiet her mind after that. She didn’t want the thought to register in her head. This woman was acting far too familiar. She was a woman of a standard noble house addressing her princess and speaking of her prince, neither of whom she’d met before. *And she’s not my relation. She’s not.*

“Well, you’ve met me. Unfortunately, I don’t think there’s much time for me to introduce you to my sister. The prince and I are leaving this evening and we have so much---”

“---Please.” The lady reached out and put her hand on Sansa’s arm. The princess yanked her arm back. Lady Algood gave her a shocked look.

“You--- you don’t recognize me? I--- I guess that’s understandable. We never met, and I mean, I have a different name and everything. I’m silly. I suppose I thought--- Well, I always knew I’d recognize you anywhere. And I knew who you were at once. Not because of the colors or wolves or anything. I saw you for the first time in the gardens a fortnight ago. You were all in blue. You didn’t wear anything to suggest you were a Stark--- no grey or white or wolves. But I knew you. You look so much like him. And your Lady Mother. She was always kind to me. I almost went up to you then, but then the wolf rounded the corner and I saw him and… Grey Wind always scared me.” Then she swallowed. “I’m Jeyne Stark, your good-sister.”

She called herself this so naturally. The name just flowed off of her tongue and her eyes lit up as she said it. Earlier, when she’d introduced herself to the tables, there’d been an awkward pause. “I’m Lady Jeyne… Algood.” But she said Jeyne Stark bold and proud.

Sansa’s eyes narrowed. *What Stark fears a direwolf?* She saw no Stark before her. But she knew exactly whom she was talking to. Part of her had known the second she noticed the seashells and the crown. She just didn’t want to think about it.

Sansa had purposely blocked thoughts of the Westerlings or their daughter Jeyne from her mind for years. She knew her brother had been wed. She knew the woman was still alive. But Sansa hadn’t allowed herself to find out the woman’s ultimate fate.

Robb was still a painful subject for her in many ways, and his marriage had always been something that haunted Sansa. Many a time, she’d been overcome with pain and resentment over the fact that her brother had thrown his life away by marrying so poorly. It had been his marriage that lost him the war and later, his life. It was what dashed Sansa’s hopes of her brother rescuing her. For years, she couldn’t get her head around the fact that Robb had happily alienated a fifth of his army for the sake of marrying some stranger, but wouldn’t trade for her on the grounds of keeping his bannermen. So she forced herself to forget about that Westerlands nobody who had led Robb astray.

There was a point, a short time after Sansa had married Harry, that she had given thought to that girl from the Crag. Soon after she rediscovered her Uncle Brynden and established some correspondence with a couple of the Northern bannermen who had served Robb. She’d been desperate to know who the girl was. They’d told her of how her brother’s queen was the daughter of the Lord of the Crag and some merchant’s daughter. That the girl had tended to Robb when he was wounded, bedded him, then wed him the next day. They told Sansa that Jeyne so feared Grey Wind that Robb kept the poor beast locked up outside to keep her happy. They told her how immediately after the Red Wedding, the Westerlings wasted absolutely no time crawling back to the Lannisters, begging pardons. The Lannisters did so at once. Jeyne was wed to Robb for several moons, yet did not conceive. They said her mother was a witch, a merchant’s daughter.
I wonder how a merchant’s granddaughter married as high as the Algoods? They were one of the central Houses of the Westerlands. And unlike the Westerlings, they had the wealth to back up the family name and far more power.

Sansa couldn’t bear to think on it anymore. She knew enough and couldn’t stand to learn more of how the people who had entrapped her family prospered and lived on while her mother’s bones grew ever cold.

“Well, Lady Jeyne of House Algood—” But Sansa felt her voice die in her throat. You seduced my brother, and he died. What made you special enough to sacrifice three thousand foot soldiers, a thousand knights, the Crossing, and the safety of myself and my sister? All for you? Sansa couldn’t believe Robb had given all that up for this girl. Then he and their mother had died for it. Jeyne was pretty, yes, but no great beauty by any means. Nothing truly special. Sansa had imagined that Jeyne Westerling had to have been some great beauty. But no. Robb endangered my mother, the entire North, and myself. For this common thing. “Please leave now.”

“Sansa, please, I wanted so badly to speak to you all. I just want to know you, please.”

Sansa thought back to her first wedding night, when Tyrion was naked beside her, his purple-headed cock pointing out from that thatch of yellow hair. His grubby hands at her breast as she wondered what sin she could have committed to have deserved such a fate.

How scared she’d been. How young. She remembered frantically setting fire to her bedding when she’d discovered her first blood. She remembered the dread of knowing she was officially fit to bear Joffrey’s children and how she’d be forced to marry him.

And meanwhile, Robb was forgetting his duties between this girl’s legs. And then he married her. This is the girl who was worth more than my life. More than the North. More than Arya and Mother.

Sansa shook with fury as she gazed upon her brother’s widow. How dare you approach me? How dare you call yourself a Stark? Starks are dead because of you! You seduced my brother, then married him despite all that was at stake. And then as he was paraded around the Twins with his direwolf’s head sewn onto his body, you hurried back to swear fealty to the Lannisters again. And now you walk up to me, calling yourself by the name you denounced.

Sansa’s courtesy failed her for the first time she could remember as she looked at the person who had so marred Sansa’s memory of her older brother.

“Robb could have rescued me if not for you,” she heard herself saying, “He could be alive, well, laughing and drinking at my wedding.”

Jeyne gasped and stepped back. Tears welled up in her eyes. “I—I—”

“You seduced my brother, entrapped him in a marriage that cost him a fifth of his army, then went crawling back to the Lannisters, who welcomed you with open arms and wed you to a lord of far greater wealth and birth than yourself.”

“I loved him.”

That was when the Lady of Winterfell lost what remained of her composure. She felt her blood boil. Her eyes went to the coronet on Jeyne’s head. Sansa had been forced to pry Robb’s crown from Lady Stoneheart’s cold, dead hands. It now rested with Robb in the crypts of Winterfell.

Sansa wore it for a while when she took back the North, but buried it shortly after she’d finished fighting. She’d actually gotten the thing back before she’d received Robb’s skull. The Freys had kept
everything below the neck, and she’d taken all that when she sacked the Twins. But the skull, taken by the Lannisters, was only sent to her after Daenerys conquered King’s Landing. It had arrived wrapped in black silk. A warning and gesture of goodwill simultaneously. It was when she gazed upon Robb’s skull that Sansa knew the Dragon Queen was not one to be trifled with, even without her fire-breathing beasts.

The King in the North’s crown was an ugly thing. All iron and bronze, shaped like swords clashing against each other. Sansa had to have it pinned to her hair harshly when she wore it. It was sized for her brother, and despite its appearance she couldn’t bear to have it reforged. But sometimes she’d look at it and marvel at how ugly it was. She knew looking at it that her brother couldn’t have liked it. Her brother was no dandy, but he had taste. He wore it to prove his metal, not his taste.

Jeyne’s crown, though, did display Robb’s taste. It was actually quite lovely, and she could tell looking at it that he had to have had a hand in the design. There was no iron: silver instead. More silver than bronze. And there were little metal snowflakes here and there. She and Robb both always loved the shape of snowflakes. They used to make decorations for their bedchambers, cutting them out of paper. It was one of the few things they did just together. Jon hated it because it reminded him of his bastard name. Arya could never get the ones she cut just right and would always grow frustrated. All of their siblings preferred snowballs. But her and Robb… She remembered telling him as a little girl that when he married, he should give his bride a crown of snow and call her his Winter Lady.

He did and he gave it to this girl. Uncle Edmure claimed Jeyne Westerling truly loved Robb. But Sansa never gave anything her uncle said much credit. He thought Roslin Frey loved him as well. The men in her family were more hopelessly romantic than she was.

“That’s the coronet Robb gave you?” She asked.

Jeyne nodded.

“He lost four thousand swords, axes, spears, and suits of armor to give it to you. No, over twenty thousand. The crown that cost the North. You wear it proudly. Tell me, did the Lannisters also make you a cloak from Grey Wind’s pelt? Or did that go to Roslin Frey?”

Jeyne started backing away. Sansa glared and followed her.

“Please, Sansa, it was my mother… I didn’t know. I loved him.”

“No! I swear! I---“

“Shut up!” Images of Robb’s headless skeleton, of her mother’s partially rotted body, of all the corpses of the people who were slaughtered because of the Boltons and Freys flashed through her mind. They had found dogs in the kennels of Winterfell, chewing on parts of the skeletons that had been the girls the dogs were named for. They found skins of Stark loyalists hanging in the Great Hall. Eddie had actually been inside the Dreadfort before he ever entered the walls of Winterfell because Sansa couldn’t stand the idea of his first image of the place being what Ramsay Bolton had left behind. “If you had loved him, you never would have let him marry you. Wedding you would have cost him the war, but you didn’t care. Because you didn’t love him. You plotted against him. You. Your family. The Freys. The Boltons. Traitors. All of you. You all killed my brother, my mother, and their men.”

“No! I swear! I---“

“Say you loved him one more time. Call yourself a Stark one more time. I’ll have you thrown in the Black Cells.” Sansa glared. “You know who became Lord of Winterfell after Robb? Ramsay Bolton. Do you know what he did to girls like you? No--- that’s an insult to those girls. They were
innocent. Let me tell you, though: what happened to them was worse than anything you ever feared Grey Wind doing to you. You never loved my brother. But he may have loved you, fool that he was, and that is the only reason I don’t have you cut down where you stand. That you would have the nerve to face me is incredible. Calling me sister. I have a sister. She was serving wine to another of Robb’s killers while you were slithering between my wounded brother’s sheets. After that she killed a man and had to shiver and starve on dirt roads while you were prancing around in that crown he gave you.”

It was at this point that Brienne came over. “Your Grace, is there something wrong?”

Sansa stopped short and kept her eyes on the quivering Jeyne Algood. If I look at her much longer, I will do something that will haunt me for the rest of my days. “Yes. This… woman… has insulted me and my family name, and shown disrespect to the prince and my sister. I want her and any members of her family cast from court. That includes her blood relations as well.”

A small group of people were gathering now in the archways, drawn by the volume of Sansa’s voice no doubt.

“Please… Sansa…” Jeyne whimpered.

“I will suffer your disrespect no longer, Mistress Jeyne,” Sansa snarled, “You have no right to address me as such. I am not ‘Sansa’ to you. You are not my relation, my friend, or anything. You’re the wife of a lower ranking House and the daughter of even lower ones. I am Sansa of the Houses Stark and Targaryen, Princess of Westeros and Slaver’s Bay, Khalakki of the Great Grass Sea, Lady of Winterfell, Dragonstone and the Eyrie, Warden of the North, Mistress of the Court to Queen Daenerys I Targaryen, and Consort to Dragons! I know you’re little more than a fisherman’s daughter, but you should at least know enough to address me by title, or at the very least, ‘Your Grace’!”

Jeyne fell to the ground. The coronet bounced off of her head. Jeyne sobbed.

“I was once a ‘Grace’….”

“The Queen Who Cost the North,” Sansa snarled. “Yes, we all know.”

There were chuckles. The chuckles were interrupted the sounds of running and crying out. Jon’s voice. “What’s going on?”

Her husband hurried over, looking distressed. Arya followed.

“Sansa, who is this?” Her sister asked.


“You’re the bitch who seduced my brother and sold my family to the Lannisters?”

“No! I swear, I never would have---“

Arya shrieked. Jon grabbed her just in time to keep her from pouncing on her. “Arya, calm down!”

“I WAS THERE!” She cried out. “I WAS AT THE TWINS WHEN IT HAPPENED! THE HOUND HAD TO KNOCK ME OUT TO KEEP ME FROM RUNNING IN! I HEARD THE SCREAMS!”

She struggled against him and broke free, but Brienne caught her next. Arya couldn’t free herself
from the queensguard’s arms.

“NO! THEY DUMPED OUR MOTHER’S BODY IN A RIVER! THEY SEWED GREY WIND’S HEAD TO HIS BODY! WEEKS EARLIER I WAS SERVING ROOSE BOLTON WINE! THEN I HAD TO LISTEN TO HIM KILL MY FAMILY! I NEVER GOT REVENGE! SANSA GOT TO KILL THE FREYS AND THE BOLTONS! LET ME HAVE THE WOMAN WHO RUINED OUR BROTHER! I DIDN’T GET TO KILL JOFFREY OR CERSEI OR LITTLEFINGER OR ILLYN PAYNE! I NEVER GOT TO MAKE ANYONE PAY FOR WHAT WE LOST!”

Jon glared at Jeyne. “Leave now. Get out.”

“PLEASE!” Jeyne got on her knees. “I just want to visit his grave!”

Arya couldn’t break free from Brienne’s arms. So instead, she spat as hard as she could. Her spittle landed right between Jeyne’s eyes. The woman didn’t even blink. She hung her head.

“LEAVE NOW.” Jon bellowed, red-faced and furious. Very slowly, Jeyne grabbed the diadem and got to her feet. Jon glanced at a couple of the guards. “Escort Lady Jeyne back to her chambers.”

“Princess Sansa ordered her and her relations banished from court, Your Grace,” one of the guards said.

“Then do it! She’s Mistress of the bloody court!”

“NO! I WANT THEM ALL! ALL OF THEM!” Arya screamed.

“Arya, stop, please.” Sansa said, suddenly exhausted. Seeing Arya like this scared her. But I was almost in that exact state moments ago.

“I SHOULD GET TO SLAUGHTER EVERY PERSON WHO HURT MY FAMILY! I DESERVE TO TAKE THE REST OF THE TRAITOR BLOOD! WE’LL NEVER SEE THEM AGAIN! I TRAVELED SO FAR! I WAS ALMOST TORTURED AND KILLED! I KILLED TO SEE THEM AGAIN AND I NEVER GOT TO!” Arya began to relax, slumping over Brienne’s arm. She sobbed. “We’ll never see them again, Sansa! We’ll never see them—–”

Never again. She’s right. Never, ever again. Arya killed to see them again. Now we’re all cleaning up the mess no matter how many Winterfells we build, no matter how many babes we have no matter what we do we’ll… we’ll…

The world went black.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so in case anyone mentions this... Yes, Sansa and Arya are meant to be wrong about Jeyne. They don't know that Jayne loved Robb, and they won't believe it. The circumstances surrounding what happened won't allow them to. This is all supposed to be insanely uncomfortable and unfortunate for everyone involved, including poor Jeyne. So yeah. This is not a good chapter for Sansa.

PLEASE TELL ME WHAT YOU THINK :)}
Chapter Summary

An early departure. Everyone is troubled. Many reflections, tears, and tension.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bluecichlid for beta-work :)

This chapter is a bit shorter than the last few, but I felt I had to end it where I did.

Chapter Forty: Arya Stark Gets a Hug

Jon:

Jon’s mind raced as he caught her and carried her in. Gods, no. This is all my fault. An enormous crowd had gathered in the halls, but they parted hurriedly as three queensguard led Jon and Arya down the halls. Merys had been fetched, and was waiting for them in the solar of the Maegor chambers when they arrived. Jon laid Sansa down on the bed, his heart in his throat as he looked upon her unconscious form. “Tell me how she is.”

The maester took her pulse and examined her breathing. He checked underneath her lids, in her mouth and declared that she seemed health. Then he looked nervously at Jon. “She seems in reasonable health, Your Grace. But now I must check to see if your prince is still safe and living. If you would please wait outside. This is a… delicate examination.”

“Are you under the impression that I intend to beat her with a war hammer? I want to know the second that you do.”

“Your Grace, I must insist…”

Merys was an older, grey-haired man with a stooped back. While he had sharp eyes and steady hands, he was also potbellied and thin-limbed. Jon liked Merys, but at this moment, he had no qualms with towering over the man and giving him his harshest glare. “You’re going to insist? And how are you going to enforce that insistence?”

Merys stepped back. “Very well, Your Grace. But keep in mind, the Princess Sansa might not be too pleased.”

I don’t doubt that. Sansa didn’t like him witnessing anything related to the less glamorous aspects of her body or the treatment thereof. But this wasn’t some routine check-up for what seemed a regular ailment. Sansa was carrying his child, she’d fainted. Both she and a potential new life were in danger. Sansa had allowed him to be present during examinations when she was recovering from the poison. She hadn’t liked throwing up in front of him, or talking of her ailments or receiving her medication in front of him, but she’d relented because of the severity of the situation. This is a severe
situation.

His wife might complain, but he was willing to deal with that. He wasn’t willing to just leave her after a collapse like this. *She didn’t leave my bedside after I broke down in the Dragonpit.*

“If my Lady Wife has any grievances, she can voice them to me later.” Since they’d conceived, Sansa had visited Merys twice a week to be examined. She’d never given any indication that Jon was welcome to these things, but why would he be? It wasn’t as if husbands were customarily allowed in a woman’s chambers to observe such things. Not even births. Even Lord Eddard wasn’t present in the chambers until after his wife was finished delivering, staying nearby, but never actually entering the room. But Jon couldn’t be far away at this moment. He had to be here for her. This was different. “Now check.”

Merys sighed and turned Jon’s wife on her side to unlace her gown, then put his on her back once more to remove her shift and girdle. He kept his eyes on his work, moving with deft hands. Jon stood by, trying not to show any signs of discomfort. He held his breath. Merys’s hands went to the waistband of Sansa’s smallclothes. Ever so quickly, the old man pulled them down, took a quick peek at the cloth of them. Then he dabbed at her privates with a white handkerchief before hastily pulling the pantalets up again.

He looked over at Jon and cleared his throat. “No blood.”

Jon inhaled deeply. “So the child is fine?”

“It means there hasn’t been a rupture yet. I’m not quite done.” Merys cleared his throat once more, then faced Sansa. He rubbed the lower part of her belly and her abdomen and administered some light taps, then lowered his ear to her stomach. When he straightened again, he breathed heavily.

“There doesn’t appear to be any sign of trauma. If you wish, I could call upon a Septa for further examination.”

Jon frowned. He didn’t like the idea of a member of the Faith examining Sansa in her current condition. *They’d go right back to the High Sparrow.* If nothing was wrong, he could be endangering Sansa simply by risking such exposure. He could just imagine some beady-eyed woman whispering in the old man’s ear, him grinning and coming up with some way to use this against them.

“Isn’t there an alternative? Some other sort of wise woman? A midwife, perhaps?”

“The best midwives in the capital generally are septas, Your Grace.”

With a lump in his throat, he asked: “Tell me, if the woman did find something, would there be anything we could do about it?”

“Unlikely. We’d just know ahead of time that it would happen. But it would give us forewarning to make the upcoming miscarriage more comfortable for Her Grace.”

Jon took a deep breath. “Do you need a septa to do those things?”

“No, not necessarily.”

“Alright then... do whatever you can to make her comfortable in case she is going to miscarry short of casting the child out now or doing anything that could hurt it. Just... make her as comfortable as you can while we wait... Just in case.” Jon swallowed, hating to be considering such a thing. “How long before she wakes?”
“Well, she suffered no head injury. It could be any minute.”

“Then we’ll wait for her to wake and she can decide if she wishes to see a Septa or not. In the meantime, have her maid, Nani brought in and we’ll try to make her comfortable.”

Merys nodded. “Yes, Your Grace. I’ll call for the Dothraki girl.”

There was a loud knock on the door. Jon went to open it, and Arya and Dany hurried in. Arya had been pulled away from the scene by Brienne as Sansa fainted, but had clearly calmed down a bit. She still looked as worried as Daenerys, though.

“Is she alright?” Arya asked, looking at Sansa in fear as Merys slowly redressed her sister in her shift.

“She should be fine, Lady Arya,” Merys assured her. “She likely fainted from a combination of exhaustion and nerves. It’s not uncommon in a pregnant woman. But her body is strong and she’s handled worse stress while carrying a babe. She’s got greater stress on her body, and her blood isn’t being circulated at the same rate. In a period of serious emotional trauma, it’s not surprising.”

Both Arya and Dany sighed in relief.

Dany’s eyes narrowed. “What about the child?”

“No signs of trauma. But I’m going to suggest a more thorough examination when the princess wakes.”

Jon looked at his aunt. “Do you… Dany, would any of your Dothraki women know how to do something like that? I’d rather not use a septa.”

Dany blushed slightly. “Every maid I’ve assigned Sansa is experienced and trained in medicine, especially in women’s health. Nani is one of the most skilled midwives among the Dothraki. She’s delivered countless healthy babes. She actually earned her freedom and became a powerful figure in Vaes Dothrak.”

Jon’s eyes widened. That actually explained a few things about Nani’s bluntness, efficiency, and Daenerys’s ambivalence about reprimanding the woman concerning her lack of propriety. When Jon had gone to Dany complaining about the woman, his aunt basically swept aside his concerns and insisted that Sansa keep her and promised to deal with the maid herself. Jon always got the feeling that Nani wasn’t really reprimanded at all, judging by the lack of change. Jon had assumed it had to do with her race. But now that he thought about it, even the other Dothraki girls who served were far more discreet. Dany had hand-picked Nani to be Sansa’s top lady’s maid despite the woman’s appalling manners. And now it all made sense.

“You mean you’ve been…”

Dany frowned. “Jon, really. You should be happy. I put Sansa in the very best hands possible. Trust me, Nani is far better than any of the most skilled Septas and maesters in this regard---- no offense, Merys. And I did it for everyone’s benefit.”

He frowned. “You did it without consulting me.”

“It’s none of your business, really.”

“Yes it is, she’s my wife and---“
He was interrupted by the sound of Sansa stirring. They all rushed to her side. Jon grabbed her hand.
“Sweetling?”

Sansa’s eyes fluttered open. Then she sat up suddenly.

“Careful now!” Merys said. “Princess, you have to keep calm!”

“Aemonnaerys!” She gasped, clutching her belly. Everyone but her and Jon looked bemused.

“Oh, seven hells, her head’s gone wrong.” Arya yelped.

“No,” Jon snapped, annoyed. “She’s talking about the child.”

Sansa looked at Merys in alarm. “Grand Maester, is the child—?”

“The prince seems to be secure, Princess,” Merys said, holding up his hands. “Please, lie back and calm down.”

“How long was I out?” Sansa asked, doing as bid.

“About half an hour, that’s all.”

“Has there been a full examination?”

“We were going to wait until you woke to ask you if you want one.”

“Yes. Get Nani.”

Jon’s jaw dropped. “Wait… you knew?”

“Knew what?” Sansa asked, taking deep breaths.

“That Nani is a midwife.”

“‘She is a healer. Dany told me she’s known as a miracle worker across the Narrow Sea. Why isn’t she here yet?’”

Arya offered to fetch her and Merys gave Sansa some water. Jon watched her drink it down, feeling miserable. “Neither of you ever mentioned this.”

Sansa glanced at him over the rim of her glass as she downed her drink. She wiped her mouth, breathed deeply, then spoke. “I’m sorry. I thought I had. Is this a problem?”

“You hired a midwife before we even decided to start trying for a babe.”

“Actually, I did,” Dany added.

Jon tried to swallow his concerns over this. “I see.”

Sansa’s face fell. “Jon… We’ve been preparing for a pregnancy since the engagement, more or less. You thought I was pregnant months ago even before we’d signed the betrothal agreement. After that, I felt it was better to have a healer nearby. She’s not just a midwife.”

“You Grace…” Merys said, “It’s not uncommon for a woman intent on starting a family in the near future to have a septa or nurse on hand. Please, you’re upsetting her.”

Jon nodded, feeling completely out of sorts. “I’m sorry… I just…”
Nani hurried in with Arya and two maid carrying metal devices and a bag. “Khalakki, take off your clothes and scoot to the edge of the bed.”

The maids began settling the metal things down. Sansa set her cup aside and looked at the others. “Could you all please…?”

Jon hesitated, but Dany grabbed his arm. “Come on. We’ll talk in the solar.”

Jon glanced at Sansa, who nodded. His stomach sinking, he followed the others out and closed the door behind them. Ghost padded over and nudged his upper arm with his snout. Jon swallowed heavily and looked at the women. *How do I tell them?*

Dany was staring at Arya. “You need to leave court. Immediately. Not tomorrow. Tonight.”

Jon gaped. “Dany, that isn’t fair. Sansa just---”

“*Sansa* does not need anymore stress. I do not wish to be unkind to your sister, but there is more at stake here. Sansa carries the future of the Targaryen empire. Your sister is a magnet for trouble.”

Jon’s blood boiled. “You can’t just---”

“No, Jon, it’s alright.” Arya looked at the ground. “I’ve known this for a while. I can’t… I’m not fit to be here anyways. No more than I was eight years ago, coming in and calling the prince a liar.”

“It’s for her own good as well. That outburst of hers… The whole hall heard it.”

“They heard Sansa too.”

“Sansa didn’t declare a desire to make all the people who had hurt or betrayed the Starks ‘pay’ in blood. Arya did. The uncle and sister of Theon Greyjoy, the nephew of Tywin Lannister, as well as numerous others who had at one time or another contributed to the Lannister war effort heard her. So did the daughter of the man who burned Rickard and Brandon Stark alive.”

“I didn’t mean---“

“I know,” Dany sighed. “But not everyone will know that and even fewer people will care. There are a lot of parallels here. Targaryen prince claims a Stark woman. Stark woman’s sibling causes a scene shortly after in the Red Keep. Violence is threatened. Threats are made. I’m Aerys’s daughter. Jon is Rhaegar’s son. Lady Flint and Ser Rickard Locke already accused us of rape once. People will want to use this against any one of us. Rivals of Sansa who wish to discredit the Starks. People who resent the Targaryens and want me off the throne. That aside, the Greyjoys are paranoid as hell. There are people who still don’t like the Starks… I need this dealt with swiftly and nonviolently. For everyone’s safety, you must leave.”

“I knew it,” Arya said, tears welling up. “I ruined *everything.*”

Jon couldn’t stand it anymore. “No, I did.”

“What do you mean?” Dany asked. “Jon, you had nothing to do---”

“I did,” he admitted bitterly, “I invited the Algoods to court.”

“WHAT?!” They asked in unison.

“It was something I’d completely forgotten about, and I didn’t know---” Jon took a deep breath. “The Algoods have three things in abundance: gold, sheep and mining equipment. Two of those
things are what the North need a lot of right now. Sansa was negotiating with a few of the lords in the Westerlands to donate some of their old equipment… And she’s also needed to find people to donate new herds to strengthen the wool production. I looked into a few Houses that might have some things she’s been looking for. The Algoods had both. I wrote to Lord Algood, and he said that they’d be eager to help the North and that he’d come to court as soon as he could with his wife. I had no idea his wife was Jeyne fucking Westerling, though.”

“It’s probably not something they talk about much, now that the war is over,” Dany muttered darkly. “Jon, you didn’t know.”

Arya’s eyes widened. “That makes sense, actually. I’m pretty sure Lyra and Sansa both took meetings with Lord Algood. I was there. I never met the wife, though. He always made excuses.”

He went to sit down on the sofa. *Is this how it is going to be? Before I reach out to anyone new, am I going to have to check every single detail about their families? Is that how relationships start around here?* He felt so stupid.

“Jon, it’s still not your fault. You didn’t know it was Jeyne. You didn’t know Jeyne would talk to Sansa. You didn’t know she’d react like that. And you didn’t make me lose it,” Arya said bitterly.

He looked up and sighed. “Arya… You were angry. I understand. Sansa lost her composure as well.”

Never before had he seen such a thing from his wife. Sansa was always so carefully courteous, so composed when others were around. He was reminded of that horrible night, of Sansa screaming and sobbing as she imagined their brother attacking her.

“Not like I did,” Arya said miserably. “Gods, if you two lose…”

*Gods, don’t say that.* Jon stood up at once and went to hug his sister. “We won’t… And it’s not your fault. Jeyne was the one who upset her.”

He glanced over Arya’s shoulder at Daenerys. “Are they gone yet?”

“They’re probably packing up as we speak.”

“Good.” He buried his head in Arya’s hair as she sobbed into his chest. A few minutes later, the doors opened. Nani and Merys emerged, smiling. Jon almost fainted from relief.

“The khalakki and khalakka are fine. The khalakki needs to eat and drink more, stay abed the rest of the day, and rest more. No spirits. And have her walk every day. But don’t trouble her mind so much.” Nani told them. She pointed at Jon.

“Khalakka, you won’t get mad about me. The khaleesi and khalakki did what smart women do. You men always think you have the right to involve yourselves in everything. The only time you belong looking between a woman’s legs is when you’re mounting her. But you’re always trying to pretend that you know what’s best here. It’s why your pregnant women are too weak to ride. Your healers all learn from books written by men who think the womb acts like a frightened horse, running around and bumping into everything.”

Jon looked at his lap, embarrassed. “This isn’t the time,” he admitted. “May we see her now?”

“Don’t upset her! I’m going to have food brought.”

“I have to say good-bye,” Arya said, despondent. “Will… Will that be too much?”
Nani stared at Arya for a second. “You were going to leave tomorrow, yes?”

His sister nodded.

“Go ahead. She was expecting you to part ways soon anyways.”

Jon cleared his throat. “Let me go with you.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Arya:

I was going to leave on a triumphant note. All eager and ready to do what needed to be done. A help to my family at last. Instead… Arya shook her head. Sansa’s old words came back to her. “You’re ruining everything!”

Over the weeks, Arya had worked so hard to learn how to rule the North properly, so her siblings would have nothing to worry over. She’d gone over every account, map, letter, history, report, and protocol. She’d sat in on dozens of meetings. She’d read books on building, trade, and law. She’d begun correspondence with all the proper Houses. She’d even gone over all of her proper manners. She’d poured almost all of her time into making sure she was prepared.

Arya hadn’t been able to save the Northmen during the Red Wedding. She hadn’t been able to save her father when Joffrey ordered his head. She hadn’t been able to save Lommy. She hadn’t been able to kill most of the people on her list. She’d never gotten to do anything for her family, or her father’s realm. She used to dream of being a great leader and warrior, like Nymeria of the Rhoynar. She went to bed each night promising to herself that she’d kill Joffrey, Cersei, Walder Frey…

Joffrey Baratheon was poisoned to death at his wedding thanks to the machinations of Petyr Baelish and Olenna Tyrell. Cersei Lannister was killed by her own twin brother during Daenerys’s siege of King’s Landing. Walder Frey was hung from one of the posts of the Crossing on Sansa’s orders. It was Sansa, of all people, who had raised the army and taken back the Trident and the North.

She’d hated every minute of it, but she’d done it. And what was I doing? I can’t even remember.

Arya wanted to make up for all the time she’d lost. So many were counting on her. And she’d worked so hard to make sure that faith wouldn’t be misplaced.

And then what had she done? Gone and run off her mouth in public, at the tail end of her sister’s wedding, literally hours before she was due to head north to finally serve her family and people and her siblings were finally going to get a little peace.

She made herself look Sansa in the eye as she and Jon entered the bedchamber. Sansa was in her dressing gown, looking weary and concerned. Granted, there were few times when there wasn’t an air of ‘weary and concerned’ to Sansa. She always hid it extremely well, playing the carefree and joyous young lady/new bride with aplomb. Most of the time, any regular on-looker would never be able to tell. But Arya had the unique circumstance of having known her sister back when she truly was a carefree and joyous young lady. Back when her eyes were a brighter shade of blue and a bit more vacant. With her smiles, polished manners and pretty clothes, Arya’s sister could hide her troubles from everyone. Everyone but Arya and Jon.

But her weariness was far more pronounced at the moment. Her hair was no longer perfectly arranged, but hanging in her face a bit. She was out of her court clothes, just lying there, hands folded over her stomach. She was wearing no mask. The princess, Lady of Winterfell, Warden of the North and Red Wolf were gone. Now it was just Sansa. Sansa, who clearly needed peace.
desperately.

The sooner you tell her, the sooner she can get that moment of peace. “I have to leave court tonight. The queen insists and she’s right. What I screamed in the garden today… Just more proof that I’ll only cause trouble here.”

Sansa’s eyes fluttered closed and she took a deep breath. “It’s my fault. I should have sent you to White Harbor to train with the Manderlys moons ago… Maybe if had you come down for a brief visit for the wedding.

“No. I’d have reacted the same way if I’d been up North prior to this, most likely,” Arya admitted. “I might have even done worse.”

“I’m responsible for you. I’m the one who started the scene with Jeyne.”

“I’m the one who escalated it.”

“Both of you stop it,” Jon snapped. “Neither of you are at fault. Arguing about it won’t fix anything. This was an awful thing to have happened. Neither of you reacted well, but it’s understandable. Just stop this. I’m so sick of you two arguing. This is the last you’ll see of each other for several moons. Just… please.”

Both women took deep breaths. Arya walked over to Sansa’s bedside and took her hand. Tentative, she placed another hand on Sansa’s belly. “You’re alright?”

Sansa nodded. “Or, I will be. No permanent damage.”

“And your baby? Nani said he is fine. But it’s your baby and your womb. Do you think he’ll be alright?”

Sansa placed her other hand over Arya’s. “Yes. I think Aemonaerys is just tired.”

“By the way, that name…” Among the Targaryens, there were many Aemons. There were also many who had names ending with –arys or –erys. Daenerys, Viserys, Jahaerys, Jacarys, and just plain ‘Aerys’ among others. But ‘Aemonaerys’? “Maybe something a little less… ornate?”

Both her siblings laughed.

“It’s temporary, until birth,” Jon explained, “If it’s a boy, it’ll be an Aemon. If it’s a girl, it’ll be a Daenerys, Naerys for short.”

“Aemon and Naerys?” Arya looked back and forth between them. She was sure she was going to gag. Like that sweet little queen and the dragonknight from the songs? That was so typical of her sister. She’d probably name her other girls Jonquil and Jenny and her boys Florian and Duncan. Arya never had much interest in Queen Naerys despite all the songs about her. She seemed like a silly, weak little ninny, letting that fat oaf Aegon the Unworthy push her around. She groaned. “Couldn’t you have chosen something a bit stronger? If you end up having only girls, you’ll want your queen named something strong. Call her Visenya or Daena or—–”

Jon laughed. “We can have a dozen boys follow. This first child will sit on the Iron Throne regardless. If our first is a daughter, we’ll have her be Daenerys Second of Her Name. ‘Naerys’ is so people won’t get confused. Aemon is for the Maester I knew at the Wall. Not the Dragonknight. It’s just a little coincidence.”

Arya glanced at Sansa. “Somehow I doubt that.”
Sansa gave her a hard stare. "Don’t look at me like that. You can choose whatever names you like when you have your own—" But she stopped when she saw Arya’s grimace. "---Anyways, I think he or she will be fine."

"When they’re born… Can I come down and see them? Maybe right before you head to Essos? I could visit you at Dragonstone, not at court. I know this one won’t rule Winterfell, but…"

"This babe will still be a Stark. And of course you’ll meet."

Arya suddenly thought of Eddie, the nephew she hadn’t met. She burst into tears. "I should have met your first… I should have protected him…"

"Arya! You weren’t even there! What could you have done?" Sansa’s eyes were welling up.

_But I was there. Or, rather, that maid… What was her name? I was her… What was…?_ Arya tried to keep control of herself. _I can’t remember._ She tried to put that out of her mind. _Shut up. Shut up. You don’t need to remember._ That _wasn’t_ you. She kept sobbing, crying like a little girl. Strong arms closed around her. Jon put his mouth near her ear.

"Shhhh… It’s alright. It’s alright…"

But it _wasn’t_. Maybe _Arya_ had never met Eddie, but that maid must have. She served at Winterfell, served Sansa personally. She must have interacted with the boy. And Arya couldn’t remember! She tried to summon up a face, but couldn’t. _My nephew… Our mother and father’s first grandchild, and I can’t remember him._ "It’s not alright…"

And worst of all, she couldn’t tell them. If she told them, they’d wonder what she’d been doing at Winterfell and then they’d know. Arya couldn’t tell them. She couldn’t let that happen.

Arya turned around in Jon’s arms and buried her face in his chest. She felt so small, so scared, so angry with herself. She felt like a small child.

When she was a small child, she loathed to cry. She resisted it even more than the boys did because as a girl, everyone _expected_ her to cry because girls were weak and emotional. Arya hated to prove them right. So even when she did cry, she usually ran away first so no one would see and call her a crybaby or a weeping little girl. But every so often, someone would come and find her. And there were three people she could actually cry in front of without completely hating herself later: her parents and Jon. Jon was just a boy then, not much older than her. So even when she did cry with him, it was always a bit awkward. Sometimes he’d accidentally say something that would make it worse, or his boy’s arms would get tired from holding her for very long. And as she got older, she became more difficult for him to hold. Mother was wonderful to cry to, but sometimes she didn’t really understand. She’d _try_, but she still wanted Arya to be a lady, and sometimes looking at her mother, like looking at Sansa, reminded Arya of all the ways she was inadequate as a lady.

But Father… Father was always perfect to cry to. He was so big and strong and never got tired of holding her. And he never said anything awkward or reminded her of any failings. Usually, he didn’t say much at all. He just sort of gathered her up, made her feel safe, and held her. People said Eddard Stark was as cold as the North in winter, but his arms were never anything but warm. _People are stupid._

Eddard was gone like so many others. But Jon, regardless of his lineage, just _looked so much_ like their father. He had the grey eyes, the dark hair, the long, solemn face. He was no longer a boy, but a man grown, just as tall and strong as Father. It was so eerie. Sometimes, Arya would look at Jon and
her breath would catch because she could swear for a second it was Eddard Stark in front of her.

She’d said as much to Sansa before, who had wrinkled her nose and insisted that Arya was imagining things. “He doesn’t really look that much like Father, not really. They’re alike in a lot of ways… they’re both quiet and honorable and kind. But physically? It’s just height and coloring. Our father wasn’t bad looking, but Jon is very, very handsome and dashing. I would never mistake the two or connect them in such a way.”

Arya didn’t think of their father as handsome, but she also didn’t think of Jon was handsome either, let alone dashing. Arya hated that word in general, it was so simpering and mushy. It made her think of stupid, lovesick girls with flowers in their hair and hearts in their eyes swooning over some equally stupid, narcissistic ponces in overpriced armor. But applying it to Jon felt downright gross and extra ridiculous. She really didn’t understand how Sansa couldn’t see what Arya saw. They’re so much alike. And not only do they look exactly the same…

At that moment, Arya had her face pressed against his chest and her eyes closed. She couldn’t see a thing. And yet she’d still swear to all the gods that right now, it was Eddard Stark’s embrace enclosing her. It was the first time since she was nine years old she’d felt this warm, loved, understood, and safe. She’d spent so many years of being fierce and deadly and quick and strong and brave and ruthless. But she’d also longed to be a little girl once more. Arya felt like a little girl now. A little girl in the same arms that held her as a child and kissed away her tears.

Sansa pulled herself up and joined the embrace, wrapping her arms around them both. Oddly enough, once Arya was sandwiched between them, she almost felt like she was being hugged by two of her father. Arya would have expected Sansa to hug like their mother: strong and nurturing and soft and just a little harsh and desperate. But Sansa didn’t cling as fiercely as their mother had. She seemed a bit more relaxed, more assured, more open.

Catelyn Tully’s hugs were always so intense, you felt her in every inch, every breath. But with Ned Stark, there seemed to be less force of personality. You felt less like he was taking you into his arms and more like he was letting you fill them. Their mother always loved and lived so desperately, so ferociously, so assuredly. When she loved you, you never doubted it, and sometimes the intensity of how she felt, and how openly she communicated it could almost intimidate you. With her embrace, you sometimes doubted that she would ever let you go. You imagined that you would have to be pried from her limb by limb, that she’d cling to you by her fingertips if she had to. By her very nails. You never felt afraid when she held you, because you knew this woman would tear the face off of anyone who tried to touch you. But while nothing could touch you, you were still all too aware of the all the troubles she would fight off, lurking just beyond her arms.

Her father, though… You felt you could crawl in and out as you pleased. You relaxed and thought about yourself and just the warmth. It didn’t require you to marvel at what you meant to him or what he’d do to keep you with him. You just let yourself float in his warmth, safe and peaceful. Troubles melted away. You could just sit and cry, and sit and soothe and breathe.

Sansa’s arms seemed to do that as well. There was this special calm, this warmth in her form. She didn’t speak, she just rested against them, covering the other side of Arya’s body so it seemed the whole, monstrous, terrifying world around them truly melted away. Despite their close contact and the fact that she was completely enclosed, Arya breathed easily, slowly, softly.

In the midst of all the arguments, the duty, the politics, the bloody history, the secrets, the tragedy, Arya had forgotten something. She’d forgotten just how soft her sister was. How soft and smooth and fresh and sweet-smelling and gentle.

Sansa was unfailingly sweet with pretty much everyone, but she didn’t often seem gentle, at least not
to Arya. The younger Stark girl knew that most people did in fact regard her as the soft, tempering, sweet influence on the fiery and terrifying dragon queen. But Arya always detected the tension, the frozen steel within her sister. While she was undeniably dainty and feminine, it was always conducted with this carefully-honed efficiency and skill that seemed just too perfect and utterly calculated. Sansa was less like a “Snowflake”, as some called her, or like the sweet, demure flower she pretended to be and more like the jewels she wore: dazzling, colorful and beautiful but also impenetrably hard, multi-faceted, and intricately and painstakingly crafted.

But now, she felt so warm, soft, welcoming and comfortable. Arya felt the oddest urge. She found herself wishing she was much smaller, so she could wipe her nose on Sansa’s skirts and rest her head on the pillow of her bosom and fall asleep. Maybe take a bit of red hair in her hand and run her thumb over the smoothness of it. It was painfully bizarre, but the strangest thing about it was that Arya could actually imagine her sister letting her.

Arya took a deep breath and began to move. Her siblings gave her enough leeway so she could squirm into the opposite direction without breaking the little enclosure, and they did so in such an easy, fluid manner that it didn’t prove as awkward as Arya would have expected. She didn’t wipe her nose on Sansa’s skirts--- doing so would have required her to bend over--- but when her wet face and runny nose pressed against the fabric covering Sansa’s shoulder, it was just as good and her sister made no complaint. Arya tentatively reached up, took some of Sansa’s soft red hair in hand, and ran her thumb across the surface. It felt cool and smooth, as expected. Sansa bent her head and placed a kiss over Arya’s ear.

Time passed, but the younger Stark didn’t notice until there was a soft knock on the door. The three of them broke apart and Sansa bid the door to open. Lyra and the queen were on the other side, both looking extremely guilty.

“I’m sorry… But there’s only one ship going to White Harbor today, and you need to be on it, Lady Arya,” Daenerys said grimly. “You won’t be if we wait much longer.”

As she spoke, Sansa and Jon kept their arms around Arya loosely. They remained there until she pulled away, but they let up easily. She gave Jon one last big squeeze, then kissed her sister on both cheeks and curtsied as delicately as she could. When she finished, she gave them both a long look.

“Your babes are going to be the luckiest, happiest children that ever lived,” she told them. Then she turned on her heel and strode out, her jaw set.

*I made a mess at court. That doesn’t mean I have to ruin things up north. I belong to the North. I’m going to do it all perfectly up there.* She marched onto the ship and gazed out of the sea. She’d do it all well. She’d show them. She was wanted to make up for lost time.
Chapter Summary

Edmure makes a few confessions. Daenerys sees her nephew off and proposes a solution with the Iron Islanders.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Blue for her beta-work. Thanks to all my readers/commenters. :)

Chapter Forty-one: The Grievances of Water Folk

Margaery:

They sat out on the terrace of Edmure’s quarters to enjoy the uncharacteristically warm evening. Or, rather what Lord Tully obviously considered warm. Margaery knew warmer evenings in the Reach, even during winter. Willas kept his furs on, but Margaery and Garlan braved the chill and didn’t cover themselves so much. Edmure didn’t find this suspicious, apparently attributing Willas’s dress to the weakness of a cripple.

He’d been quite quick to accept the Tyrells’ offers of friendship upon his recent arrival to court. Beyond a couple of grumbles about prior associations with the Baratheons, he’d easily accepted Margaery’s honeyed words, attributing their defection to the Lannisters as an act of fear regarding Stannis and lack of familiarity with the Starks. Of course, it did help that Sansa herself encouraged the new friendship, readily agreeing to Margaery’s offer to entertain her uncle while Sansa saw to everything in the days leading up to her wedding. The Lady of Winterfell obviously guessed at Margaery’s intentions and, to her relief, seemed to take no issue with them.

Thus, in the six days that Edmure Tully spent at court, he’d spent three afternoons sparring with Garlan and Loras, four evenings taking a drink with Margaery and one or more with her brothers, two midday meals with them, and accompanied Margaery on walks three times. Unlike his niece, he didn’t seem aware of the nature of their pursuit. Instead, he seemed to believe by this point that he was the pursuer, judging by the compliments and appraising looks she’d received from him over the last couple of days. He danced with her twice at the wedding feast and once more at the gift lunch, and likely would have danced more had the celebration not been cut short by the Lady Algood affair.

Edmure had briefly departed from the Keep early this afternoon and returned shortly after supper in time to invite the Tyrell siblings to take a drink with him. Loras, called away on Queensguard duties, couldn’t come, but the other three obliged. They found him pacing outside his terrace door. He greeted them with news that clearly infuriated him. “They sent my niece Arya home to the North this afternoon. Shipped her off like a bolt of cloth.”

Thank the gods, was all Margaery could think. That girl had as much business living at court as an actual direwolf--- No, that isn’t fair to Ghost. It was clear from that outburst with her good-sister that she needed to leave sooner rather than later. Sansa had lost her composure as well, but at least she
hadn’t physically attacked anyone or loudly declared a desire for vengeance towards a literally incalculable number of people. Margaery had no issue with women who liked to run around in trousers and carry blades. But a girl who had outbursts like that wasn’t safe on this battlefield no matter what sort of steel she carried. During her time in the Keep, she’d made practically no friends of significance while distinguishing herself as an outsider and potentially violent. It would only be a matter of time before somebody decided to slip something into her cup or slit her throat.

It was one thing to be dangerous. It was one thing to be hard to get along with. Both at once, however…

But Margaery pretended to be sad about this. “I’m so sorry, Edmure. I do wish you’d had more time with her before she left. It must be so distressing to you.”

“It’s her sister’s fault. She was the one screaming her lungs out at poor Jeyne. I bet Sansa poisoned poor little Arya against her. Then screaming and drawing Arya out like that…” Edmure shook his head and gestured for him to follow him out to the balcony, where good wine, cheese, and grapes were waiting for them.

“Well, she probably thought she was in the right,” Willas said, clearly uncomfortable with the turn of this conversation. “I mean, the Lady Algood’s story is rather suspicious and her family was—”

“--- Yes, but I told my niece years ago. The girl loved Robb. To this day, I do not doubt it. When he died, she tore her gown and fought to wear the crown he gave her. I heard her struggles with her mother in the halls of Riverrun after his death. She ran after Robb when he departed from Riverrun, forcing three tearful good-byes. She was willing to do everything she could to comfort him. It was all her mother.” Edmure Tully took a long gulp of Arbor Gold from his cup and set it down on the lacquered table with a thud.

When I “mourned” Joffrey, I tore my skirts, wore my black, shed tears, and spoke of all the virtues he didn’t have. I screamed as I watched him die, even though I felt nothing but relief. When I went before him, I denounced Renly’s mistakes and treachery and played at obedience and naiveté. I also pretended to be ignorant of Cersei’s nature, and I did that well enough that even she seemed surprised when I told her exactly what she was.

Margaery glanced at Willas, whose thoughts clearly went the same way. Willas sometimes found Edmure amusing, but this was not one of those times. The Lord of Riverrun clearly wouldn’t appreciate much argument from them, but it was also dangerous to agree with him too heartily. And the fact that Edmure seemed so quick to condemn his niece while praising some idiot who helped bring about his late nephew’s downfall was more than a little troubling.

Garlan looked uncomfortable as well. He sat beside Edmure, who had taken an especially great shine to him, obviously viewing him as more of a man than the crippled Willas or the marred and flamboyant Loras. Edmure clapped Garlan on the back, then looked Margaery in the eye. “You of all people know what it is to be the unwitting pawn in the exploits of scheming matriarchs.”

Margaery glanced at her lap in what she knew would appear to be embarrassment and docility, but was actually to hide her annoyance at this barb regarding her grandmother. Margaery had actually known her grandmother was planning something. She hadn’t known what until after it happened. But she knew that there was something planned to keep her safe from Joffrey.

She remembered it all quite clearly. Months before the wedding, Margaery had taken up Sansa as a new friend and companion in order to prepare her for a match with Willas. This included falconry trips in the more secluded kingswood. More than once, when Sansa felt safe from the prying eyes and ears that so infested the Red Keep, she’d begged Margaery not to marry Joffrey. Margaery had
done her part to try and assure the Stark girl that Loras would always be on hand to protect her. She thought it would do the trick to assuage the poor girl’s fears, especially given Sansa’s obvious infatuation with Loras. But whenever the Maid of Highgarden said this to her, Sansa would get this wary look in her eyes, like even that wasn’t enough to convince her.

As the wedding to Joffrey grew closer, Margaery became more and more preoccupied with this. Finally, she’d broken down and confessed the anxieties to her grandmother. The old woman didn’t dismiss this as Margaery expected

Instead she fixed a steady gaze upon her granddaughter and said, “If you think I’m going to leave you to that monster with only your silly brother to protect you, you’re mad. Don’t underestimate me. I intend to stop that monstrous whelp in his tracks before he ever gets the chance to harm you.”

She’d not expected Olenna to kill Joffrey at the wedding. She wasn’t even sure if Joffrey was doomed to die at all. She’d considered the possibility of a warning. Or, if death was necessary, for it to come later, after a son was born. But when she’d seen that golden-haired bastard choke to death, she’d been so happy to be spared a single night with him. Joffrey never got to lay a hand on her.

She did not appreciate the comparison of her grandmother’s efforts to protect her compared to the Westerlings. If Jeyne Westerling wasn’t a witting accomplice in Robb Stark’s ruin, then she was far more of an idiot than Margaery at that age. And it was clear that her family’s schemes were not at all done out of love for their daughter.

Robb Stark was no genius, but there were no credible words indicating that he was vicious or cruel. Even the rumors of him being a skinchanger who feasted upon the flesh of his enemies indicated to most that he must be fairly decent if the Lannisters were desperate enough to invent such ridiculous falsehoods. What Margaery had seen and heard from Catelyn Stark’s brief visit to Renly’s camp indicated both she and her son were good people. Sansa was a sweet girl, the father was known as an honorable man. Lannister emissaries that returned from the Northern Camp always appeared healthy and unharmed. There were no reports of Jaime Lannister being mistreated, and by all accounts the Young Wolf’s bannermen liked him. They declared him their king, after all.

Olenna Tyrell slipped poison into that cup to protect her granddaughter from a sadistic tyrant who liked to beat up girls for fun. The Westerlings seduced and conspired against a naïve young man trying to save his sisters and gain freedom from the people who killed his father.

It was one thing to make a few disparaging public statements in order to keep some innocent bystanders ---among them the very person Olenna intended to protect--- alive during a trial. But to declare her grandmother in the same league as the Westerlings in private to the very people Olenna tried to protect without a trace of irony was another thing altogether.

“There’s quite a difference in targets, though,” Margaery said, looking up, “I truly doubt your nephew gave the Westerlings any reason to think of him as a Joffrey.”

Edmure’s face reddened slightly and he leaned back. “No, of course not. But what I mean is… It’s so easy for a young maiden to fall into traps like that. Your gentle hearts are so easily used against you.”

Margaery tried not to roll her eyes. If Renly had a sister still alive while I was still married to Tommen or betrothed to Joffrey, I wouldn’t have run up to her crowned and all smiles, expecting friendship. “Yes… Sansa did so love her brother…”

“Maybe. I fear Sansa’s heart has been quite hardened over the years. If she still had any of her maidenly gentleness in her, she’d have been willing to believe what I told her about Jeyne,” Edmure
shook his head, “And she’s transferring that to Arya, I fear. For someone so passionate about the welfare of her family, Her Grace hasn’t exactly made much time for her uncle. You know she wanted Anya Waynwood to deliver her during the Sept Wedding as well? Over her mother’s brother. Aside from her sister, I’m her closest remaining relative.”

*Oh, for fuck’s sake.* This was absolutely unbelievable, coming from Edmure Tully of all people. Garlan was starting to look downright furious, fuming as Edmure stared down his cup, not noticing. Garlan actually had a lot of affection for Sansa. During her wedding to The Imp, he’d gone out of his way to comfort her, even though their father and grandmother had warned them all to keep their distance. He’d confessed to his wife later that evening that he looked at that poor girl and couldn’t help but imagine Margaery in her place.

Willas gaped for second before calmly reaching for the pitcher of wine, making to pour himself more. But Margaery saw him look down into it. The container had clearly been half-depleted even before the Tyrells arrived. Lord Tully had only been back at the Keep for maybe an hour. He’d downed a lot of Arbor Gold fairly quickly. Willas paused long enough for Margaery to see, then their eyes met.

Edmure did drink generously, that was clear. But there was something in how he acted this night. He was a despondent drunk, clearly. And though he didn’t seem at all violent, resentment was clearly present. Margaery didn’t exactly blame him--- he had more than enough reasons to be bitter---- but it bothered her where he was choosing to direct it.

Margaery girded her loins. “I’m sure she just wished to show her gratitude---”

“---Aye. Because Lady Waynwood was there and I wasn’t. I was too busy buying baubles for the woman plotting to murder my niece,” Edmure took another long sip and shuddered. “I’m sorry, this isn’t… I shouldn’t burden you lot with my troubles. I just…”

“No, it’s fine,” Margaery said. She decided if she was going to listen to this, she was going to learn as much as she could. She leaned forward, making sure her bosom was on display, and put a hand over his. “We Tyrells grow strong enough to shoulder many a burden. You must feel so alone.”

“I do. My children cry. They’re scared and confused. My Uncle Brynden has nothing but contempt for me. My wife is dead and secretly always despised me. My best friend was cuckolding me all those years, and he’s dead too. My parents and sisters are gone. Cat… Cat was always the one who took care of me when we were children. My mother died when I was just a lad, you see. I paid my sister back by imprisoning her when she tried to save her daughters. When I found out she survived the Red Wedding, I was so happy. Or even… *something* of her surviving the wedding. I didn’t care. I thought I’d have my chance to apologize. But then… Sansa lopped her head off. And I was so angry with her for that. It hurt more because Sansa looks so much like her mother. Whenever I look at her, I see the woman I never got to apologize to. But I know Cat would have forgiven me if I’d just had the *chance* to apologize.

“Sansa, though? She wears Cat’s face and has none of her spirit. She didn’t even show any remorse for what she did. She is so cold and calculating and closed off. She preferred *Littlefinger*. She listened to him, which was especially rich considering what he was doing to her behind closed doors. When I *dared* to broach the subject of her killing her mother, Sansa gave control of the Riverlands to him. Her raper. Cat forgave me everything and anything. Sansa would not. When I thought of how Cat sacrificed so much for the daughter who ended up taking her life, I couldn’t stand it. Cat surrendered the Kingslayer to save Sansa. Sansa took Cat’s head. I know Lady Stoneheart had done some… questionable things. But if Robb could forgive my sister for her betrayal, then why couldn’t Sansa? But I suppose she was too busy listening to the man who deflowered and destroyed my other
Margaery’s pulse quickened. She and her brothers looked at one another. No… He couldn’t… Margaery bit her lip. She’d never suspected before that Edmure might have been involved with his wife’s machinations, but now… He’s so angry. He’s still holding onto that even after all this time.

Edmure clenched his fists. “And I know Roslin turned out to be… what she was. But none of us knew that at the time. We didn’t know what she’d become! I returned from Casterly Rock, mentally and emotionally defeated, malnourished, traumatized. The only comforts I had were my wife and daughter. And Sansa just couldn’t be bothered. She was too filled with rage. She hasn’t talked to me much since. Her men now come to Riverrun to collect Roslin’s old things. And of course she’s welcome to them. I gave them to her, wanting to make amends. You know she didn’t once ask me to visit after she recovered? I wanted so badly to tell her I was sorry. To make up for what happened. She’s ignored me. I’ve sent her dozens of letters, and she always replies with five sentences at most.

“And I haven’t gotten a word from Arya. I barely even spoke to her. She looks at me like I’m a stranger, and one to be disdained. When I hugged her this afternoon, she just tensed up. She seemed so eager to leave. Catelyn always said she was a wild one, but she also always said Arya was friendly and caring and outgoing as well, and eager to see everything. I asked Arya if she wanted to visit Riverrun, maybe even foster there until she married. I told her I’d make her a fine match if she wished. She wouldn’t have to deal with the pit of vipers at court or freeze up north. She’d stay with us and I’d take very good care of her.

“I said to her, ‘Why not come and stay with us at Riverrun? You shouldn’t have to worry about doing the Lord of Winterfell’s job, trying to clean up the North in winter. It’s unfair to ask a young girl like you to do such a thing, living in that wreck in the freezing cold, having to deal with laborers, smallfolk, construction, wildlings and grasping bannermen. You’d be safe and warm and comfortable, be able to sit by the window all day and overlook the Trident, never wanting for a thing. I could host all sorts of handsome young knights who would come from all over the Riverlands and beyond to meet you and give you pretty gifts and compliments and you could play with your cousins. You’d never have to worry about anything beyond picking which gown to wear or which handsome suitor to give your favor. After all you’ve been through, you deserve to live the life of a lady your mother always wanted for you.’ She looked at me like I’d just handed her a bag of dung and ran up onto the ship with that Mormont woman and that bastard who’d abandoned the City Watch. Bad influences, if you ask me. Like her sister, she prefers the company of a bastard to her own uncle. I wonder why that is?”


“Robert Baratheon’s, if you can believe it. Gerry, I think his name is. Can barely string three sentences together, built like an ox. I’ve seen him in the yards, and his fighting isn’t polished at all. You can tell he wasn’t raised as one of us. He has Robert’s eyes, hair, and jaw, that can’t be denied. But his blood is the only thing that’s noble. Every inch of him screams commoner. I heard he used to be a stonemason’s apprentice. Or blacksmith. Or carpenter. Some kind of laborer. At least the She-Bear’s daughter can use words with more than two syllables.” Edmure swallowed. “What if he tries to take her maidenhead? Gods, being Robert’s, you know he will. Trueborn daughter of Eddard Stark and Catelyn Tully, heir to Winterfell, cousin and good-sister to a bloody prince. My father’s granddaughter. Taken by that hulking base-born gutter-rat. My sister would be horrified. How can Sansa allow such a thing?”

All three Tyrells exchanged looks. Robert Baratheon’s son. Margaery honestly wondered the same thing as the Lord of Riverrun. How can Sansa allow such a thing? She frowned. “You must be so angry with your niece.”
“Aye, I am.” Edmure growled. “You know… Well, everyone knows she was letting our prince---“ he wrinkled his nose when he said this, “---into her bed for moons before the wedding. They were both so shameless about it. Sometimes they didn’t even bother with a bed! And once again, it’s similar. You can dress that boy up as you like, give him any name and titles you want. He’s Jon Snow. And maybe it was a lie, but for fourteen years, he was the stain upon my sister’s marriage. The walking, talking emblem of my sister being dishonored by Lord Stark. Even if he was really Lyanna and Rhaegar’s son… My sister still had to live with the pain, and watch as the product of her husband’s betrayal pranced around her home, played with her children, and ate her food. She went her life believing that her beloved husband not only betrayed her, but cared so little for her honor that he flaunted his whelp before her.

“He was the dark stain that kept Catelyn from having the perfect home she deserved. And now that bastard who so tormented her has been fucking her eldest daughter, her pride and joy. Does Sansa care about how Cat would feel? No, as long as she gets her crown, she’s happy... And you know, she and Snow, when she first started getting sick from the poison, they thought she might be with child! Told me himself. Probably so pleased with himself, putting a bastard inside the daughter of his father’s true bride. Apparently, it wasn’t enough for Sansa to lop Cat’s head off. She had to destroy my sister’s pride and legacy as well. Catelyn’s grandchildren… Welped by Jon Snow. It almost makes me glad she can’t see it.”

Edmure pounded his fist on the table. “And to see her screaming and carrying on about poor Jeyne… Robb’s bloody wife. Cowering in the bloody snow, crown bouncing off of her head, pleading to see his grave! Robb loved that girl and she loved him. Such a sweet girl. Begging on her knees to see his grave. I’ve seen Jeyne since then, you know. I’ve done business with the Algoods. I thought I might honor Robb a bit by keeping an eye on his wife. Never told Roslin, but I did. She’d write to me, just asking after everyone. Poor girl, so lonely and sweet. She was a good wife to Robb, whatever that marriage cost him. Loyal and humble and sweet. She’d have done anything for him. She mended his wounds and comforted him when he learned of Bran and Rickon… She was there when Robb needed comfort. It’s not her fault she was played by that whore of a mother of hers. She would have done anything for Robb, and tried so hard. She was the only one who could get him to smile for a long time. And he so adored her. And why not? She was everything Sansa could have, and should have, been. To see her so poorly treated... Robb would be gnashing his teeth. But does Sansa care? Was she truly thinking of Robb when she ordered Jeyne banished from court?”

Margaery’s mind went to that day in the Maidenvault when she first met Sansa Stark. How the wolf-girl glanced around everywhere, blue eyes welling up with tears she was too afraid to allow to fall, fidgeting, gaping, looking like bile was more likely to come out of her mouth than breath or words. “Joffrey did that... He took me up on the walls and made me look at it. The head... He’s a monster... He lied about the butcher’s boy and made Father kill my wolf. When I displease him, he has the Kingsguard beat me... Please...”

*Was Robb thinking of Sansa when he was enjoying Jeyne Westerling’s comforts?* She felt Willas’s hand reach for hers under the table. She thought of the pictures of the stars he used to make for her, mapping out all the constellations.

Willas spoke now, severely angry. “She most likely was, My Lord. I’m sure she also thought of him while she went to the godswood to pray for his victory and hide from Joffrey and the fists of his Kingsguard.”

Willas knew the whole story. Margaery had sent him coded letters telling him everything she knew about Sansa once she got to King’s Landing. Everything she’d managed to coax from the girl herself, every word her grandmother managed to buy from Varys, every whisper in the court, everything learned from their own spies. They’d been observing her before they ever approached
her. It was why they sent Loras to escort her, why they had lemon cakes on the table, why they
pulled her into their fold so quickly. They made absolutely sure she hadn’t somehow been warped
into becoming a Lannister agent, that she could be trusted, that she had enough nerve and decency to
tell them the truth without running back to the queen so she might improve her own position.

They made sure to know if she might be worth the risk of whisking away to Highgarden, annoying
the Lannisters, and tying to Willas.

Edmure sat back. “What would you know of it?”

“I know what my brothers and sisters reported. They were at court, and I trust their words. They saw
far more than you did. I can assure you that my sister knows far more of your niece than you do.
Maybe if you weren’t so eager to blame all of your problems on her, you might have noticed that and
maybe taken an interest in learning a few things about the woman you’ve just spent the last twenty
minutes ranting about.” Willas grabbed his crutch and struggled to his feet. He shook a bit, but his
eyes were clearly pointed at Edmure, his irises and pupils like daggers. He looked so much like their
grandmother at that moment. Margaery jumped to her feet and helped her brother hold steady.

“Willas, please,” she said to him, “Lord Edmure didn’t mean to offend anyone.”

Her brother looked like he wanted to say something further, but he held his tongue. Instead, he
turned slowly on his crutch and made for the exit. Garlan stood as well. Edmure looked more than
chastened. He shrank back, red-faced and miserable. Garlan made for the doors with Willas.
Margaery hesitated. She took a deep breath. The Riverlands. He’s the key to the Riverlands.

Margaery considered him for a second. Husband number four. She’d risked married life with Joffrey
to be a queen. She’d handled that hot-headed idiot Cersei Lannister. She’d endured being married to
a child and to a man who preferred her brother’s bed to her own. Tommen and Renly had been kind,
but they offered her little to no comfort. None of it got her anywhere.

What would grandmother want me to do? Grandmother always preferred men who were easy to
manipulate. This one was stupid, lonely, bitter, confused and expressive. Desperate to be loved. So
easy. Too easy.

And now tears were gathering in his eyes. She saw a man broken, shattered by it all. All the pain and
betrayal. There was no war to fight anymore. No unfaithful wife to rail against. The wife was burnt
to a crisp. The war was over. He was angry at all the things and people that no longer existed for him
to be angry with. He was being forgotten. No longer useful to command armies now that they were
sent home. No longer in his prime. No longer innocent enough to enjoy the simple delights of his
youth. Not intelligent enough to be taken seriously as a leader. So jaded that he had to resent those
who should be most dear to him, but desperate enough to confess his darkest thoughts to relative
strangers. A man who once drank for a pleasurable experience but now drank to dull the painful
ones.

She knew, looking at him, that when he closed his eyes, he saw men screaming, bleeding and dying.
She knew that many of the men he saw were likely casualties of Stone Mill. That battle he was likely
so sure would be his greatest triumph, but ended up the embarrassment that helped his nephew lose
the war. When he dreamed of the screaming, bleeding boys of Stone Mill and the fresh corpses of the
Red Wedding, it was his wife that likely held him at night and chased away those dreams. Then his
wife turned out to be butchering the last of his family, fucking his best friend, and passing off said
friend’s bastard as Edmure’s own child.

She’d done her research on the Lord of Riverrun. His one great victory proved the battle that ruined
his own side’s chances. When people sang of the War of the Five Kings, the War of the North, and
the age of the Lannisters, they sang of the Dragon Queen, Good Lord Renly, the Lion Whore Cersei, the wicked Lord Tywin, the long-lost Dragon Prince Jon, Stannis and his Red Woman, the Night’s King, the Young Wolf, the Red Wolf, the Krakens of Pyke, Jaime Lannister the Kingslayer and Joffrey the Ill-born. They sang of men, women, magic, monsters, lady-knights, half-men, traitors, whores and bastards born of incest.

There was only one song about Edmure that anyone remembered these days. It mentioned a maid, too much ale, disappointment, and a “floppy fish.”

Now he was a cuckold.

*Can such things be remedied? Can he forgive it all and learn to move on? Allow happiness for himself and his family? She’d heard other stories. About how he’d sheltered frightened smallfolk at Riverrun when Tywin Lannister pillaged the Trident. How, despite all the misfortune and betrayal, he’d found it in his heart to love Roslin. How he’d risked everything to help his Uncle Brynden to escape Riverrun.*

Margaery cleared her throat. “Lord Edmure, you should speak to your niece. I don’t think you truly hate her as much as you claim.”

“She won’t speak to me. And besides, she sails for Dragonstone on the morrow.”

“You’ll communicate by raven, then.”

“She doesn’t care for my letters.”

“I’ll speak to her, I’ll make her care. I’ll write to her on your behalf. If such a thing were possible, would you be willing to---?”

Edure nodded. “Of course. That’s all I want, Lady Margaery. That’s really it. I want to know both of Cat’s girls.”

“I can’t help you with Lady Arya. I don’t know her as well. But Sansa I can aid you with. If you were willing to obey my instructions…”

Edmure nodded. “My children, they wonder about their cousins. They say, ‘Papa, we don’t have enough family. We want more.’ I want to give that to them. Especially now that Roslin and Lynette are gone.”

Margaery decided not to voice her thoughts on Lynette.

“I’ll… I’ll meet with Sansa briefly tomorrow, before she and Prince Jon set sail. I know you depart for Riverrun, but I can have a letter waiting for you telling you how I went when you arrive home. Is that fair?”

Edmure nodded eagerly. “Lady Margaery… I am in your debt.”

Margaery shrugged. “Think nothing of it, My Lord. I’ve made no promises, solved no problems yet. Now, if you don’t mind, it’s getting late. I must retire. Goodnight, My Lord.”

She and her brothers were quiet until they got to Willas’s rooms. Garlan didn’t stay long: just long enough to tell Margaery that he was becoming less confidant by the day in her latest pursuit and that he hoped she knew what she was doing. Then he went back to his wife. Willas and Margaery both sat down by the fire lit in his bedchamber and shared a bottle of wine.
“So, you’re going to cure the rotted trout, are you?” he said after a few quiet minutes. “I share some of Garlan’s worries, Sister. Our grandmother didn’t risk everything to save you from one dangerous shit husband so you could pursue another.”

“I don’t think Edmure’s dangerous. He’s not malicious, he’s angry and scared.”

“He’s a bitter adolescent in a middle-aged body.”

“He just had his family torn apart by utter betrayal. Again.”

“That doesn’t make it your responsibility to suffer the fallout. Surely we can find another option. Maybe the next Lord of the Eyrie shall be a bachelor. And you needn’t necessarily marry a high lord. That Edric Dayne seems a good sort. He’s young, amiable, brave, and he has a name as old as the stars.”

“He’s a Martell bannermen.”

“The idea that the Martells are enemies is a ridiculous delusion our House clings to because Father can’t admit that maybe throwing me into the lists when I was fifteen against warriors like the Red Viper is the real reason this—-” Willas patted his crushed leg, “---happened. That’s one of his mistakes you seem to cling to, now you’re clinging to another.”

“What do you mean?”

“Willingness to marry you off to someone completely unfit for the sake of status and title alone. Gods, Margaery. The man already has two heirs. He has two heirs, a lot of misplaced rage, and a lifetime’s worth of awful memories. He has not the wits or personal strength to make up for it. You deserve better.”

“I don’t want to be the Old Maid of Highgarden anymore. I need to leave the bush and sow seeds of my own.”

“You can do that without Edmure Tully and you know that. What is a silver fish to a gold rose? Your metal is worth more and you smell sweet. And you’re not old. A bit beyond the usual marriage years, yes, but still in your prime. And besides, when has marriage ever really worked out for you?”

“Thank you,” she said bitterly. “This is so easy for you to say, Willas. You’re a man. You’ll inherit all our father’s lands no matter what. You’re not defined by the match you make. Name one woman who made a mark on the world and died unwed.”

“The queen might.”

“She’s a widow twice over.”

“You’re one thrice over. If you ask me, that gives you a head start.”

She ignored him. “Unmarried women are treated always like girls or failures. I want to be treated like an adult. Not some fake maid who people pity for being the paragon of ambition gone wrong. When people hear ‘Margaery Tyrell’, they think of the woman so obsessed with being a queen that she wed a sword-swallower, a monster, and a child. If I go on too much longer or marry below my station, it won’t matter what else I do, what I accomplish. I’ll still be the leavings of a string of Baratheon pretenders.”

By the time she finished saying all this, she had tears in her eyes and Willas looked like he was trying not to punch something. Instead, he pulled her to him and stroked her hair. “It’s not true, Gaery. You
know that’s not true. Smallfolk shout your name. Not because of who you married, because of what you do. You’re still a rose. You’re a rose, no matter what. No one will ever take that away from you. I know how you feel. I felt the same way when my leg was crushed. I thought I’d be a failure, burden, and embarrassment the rest of my days. That I would never be able to do anything of note because I couldn’t fight. I feared being defined as just the cripple for the rest of my life. But I know I’m going to do more. And so will you.”

She sobbed, wanting so badly to believe it. She felt so confused. She wanted to live in the world Willas painted for her so badly. But Willas was always better with gazing at the stars than seeing the ground we walk on. He’s stayed in Highgarden his whole life, so he thinks the world around him can truly be that beautiful elsewhere. Margaery knew better.

After several minutes, consolation became easy to fake. She pulled away, nodding. “Maybe you’re right. I… I still want to pursue this Edmure thing, though. Even if I don’t marry him, he could still be a friend and ally. I just… I want to try. I may learn something.”

Willas pursed his lips, but he nodded. “Alright. But… promise me you’ll tread carefully. I don’t want you throwing your life away on someone who doesn’t deserve you.”

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Daenerys:

Gentle winds came and went, just enough to seem favorable for sea travel, but not enough to be a bother. The good weather from the prior two days blessed this one. Everyone noted it, along with the sunshine.

“It’s an omen, Your Grace,” Brienne of Tarth said with a smile as she rode alongside her queen, “The Gods look upon this match with favor.”

I know someone who probably wouldn’t be too pleased to hear that, she thought regarding the High Sparrow, who waited at the docks. She hoped the man hadn’t heard of the dust-up with Lady Algood. He wasn’t present at the gift luncheon, staying in the Sept and abstaining from such splendor. At the wedding feast, he’d only consumed a bowl of lentils he’d brought with him and water, and left quite early. Dany could just see the man twisting what happened into a bad omen. A ghost of poor Stark marriages to foretell the Gods’ displeasure or some such thing.

She’d like to enjoy this good weather as much as the rest, especially after the recent cold snap. But she couldn’t. Her nephew and her friend were leaving the capital for weeks on end. While Dany didn’t feel ill-equipped to handle things on her own, their presence and assistance was a comfort she’d dearly miss.

Dany wanted to ask Jon and Sansa to wait another day to leave. She knew it was selfish and impractical, so she didn’t. She could see a yearning to leave court in every move Jon made. She saw it in the brief moments Sansa let her guard down. And after the Algood thing, she knew it had to happen. Two of the most composed, guarded people Daenerys had ever met had both experienced recent public outbursts. It was time they took a break. Dany just wished she could join them. Of course, she planned to make a few brief visits to Dragonstone here and there, but she’d like to have a long-term break.

The departure was a public affair. Crowds were gathered along the streets cheering and throwing flowers in their path. Smiling children sat upon the shoulders of their fathers. Women and girls wore garlands of flowers. Nearly all of the blossoms, Dany noticed, were white, blue, black, or red.
At one point a blue one fell into her lap and Dany saw when she inspected it that it was in fact a daisy coated in paint. Some of what she’d just taken as blue winter roses were in fact painted as well.

It made sense. The blue blossoms were extremely rare south of the Neck. Jon had orders of them brought in for Sansa, but they were small bushels and cost him. Not everyone had a prince’s wealth. Sansa herself even had some fake silk ones made so she could have a garland for her hair without the extravagance.

The incident with the council chamber hadn’t stopped her from wearing them in her hair regularly. Indeed, it actually increased, which was something Dany definitely admired. A fun little act of defiance towards those who would shame the Stark woman. The flower had become more and more associated with her and also with Jon. But where initially the blue rose had been used as a coarse joke by vulgar courtiers, the people in general had turned it into a symbol of favor. Dany didn’t mind so much. She preferred the rose being associated positively with her family than it remaining a symbol of the abduction that had launched the Usurper’s Rebellion. And the blue paint was a fond reminder of Drogo’s khalasaar.

All in all it was a lovely scene. People seemed legitimatelly happy. Along with the flowers there were Stark and Targaryen banners and some of the more well-to-do were even waving cloth and paper dragons on sticks. Everywhere she looked she saw smiles.

The smallfolk were still not completely weary of the pageantry, though Daenerys noted their energy had lessened somewhat. Quiet in the city would be easier to find before long. Dany was grateful for it. She was growing weary of the pomp. It reminded her too much of the Ghiscari courts. But at least in King’s Landing that level of decadence was confined to very special occasions.

*And this wasn’t as bad as my coronation,* she reflected. Those celebrations lasted a week. At first it had been joyous, but after a couple of days she’d had enough. Not only was it absurdly long, but Dany was the center of it all with the added circumstance of curiosity. Most new monarchs had been princes the people of the capital were already familiar with. Daenerys was new blood. Her dragons and gender didn’t exactly decrease the novelty value either. At least with the wedding, Jon and Sansa were the stars and Daenerys could actually relax and enjoy the fun.

But that was going to end once she was the only royal left in King’s Landing. As she waved to the people, she kept her eyes ahead to the harbor and her stomach sank.

Floating further out on the waters were the other ships in the retinue. *Rhaegal the Green* waited for them at the dock. Above it flew the true Rhaegal, who would be accompanying Jon and Sansa to the island, flying overhead to keep them safe before returning to the capital. She’d make the trip again to watch over them when they returned to the capital as well. Good practice for when she left with them for Essos.

Dany didn’t want to think on that too much at the present. *Enjoy the moment.* A hard thing for a queen to do.

When they arrived at the docks, Dany waited for Jon to get off his horse and help his bride down. Then she waved aside the efforts to help her off her horse as she always did, gathered her purple velvet skirts and slipped from her silvery-white palfrey with ease. Once they were on foot, a crowd of children, dressed simply but obviously scrubbed clean, ran over and gathered with the three Targaryens. Starry-eyed, a tiny girl with dark hair took her right hand and a lad of about six took her left. She could feel further hands on her skirts and she grinned. This dress had many secret pockets, and in them were sweetments for any pickpockets among them.

She looked over at Sansa and Jon, also surrounded by children. Both were actually carrying a few.
Sansa had a dark-skinned girl of five or so in her arms. Jon had a yellow-haired three year old boy hanging on his back.

The children were all orphans from a couple of the homes they sponsored. Septas were nearby, watching the scene with steady eyes as they all walked towards the ship. Dany kept smiling and looked down at the children around her. “And what are your names?”

“Loran!”

“Beric!” The boy kissed her wrist when he said his name.

The High Sparrow stood at the foot of the ramp, sour-faced. The children dispersed as Jon and Sansa came before him. He recited blessings, at one point putting a hand on Sansa’s stomach and uttering a prayer to the mother to bless her womb with many healthy children. When he finished, Sansa offered hugs and smiles to the children before she and Jon face Daenerys. They bowed and curtsied to her, as was customary, and uttered their requisite good-byes. Dany offered them kind wishes and hugs.

Their actual good-byes had taken place in the walls of the Red Keep right before they left. There were warmer hugs and far sweeter words. They all promised to write daily. Jon reassured her that if there was an emergency, to just send Rhaegal and he’d be there in mere hours. Dany promised to make brief visits to the island.

She watched them board with some regret. She stayed on the deck as the ship pulled away, and watched until they were out of sight.

When she returned to the Keep, she was told that the Greyjoys were eager to meet with her. Dany sighed and went to meet them in the council chambers, Barristan and Loras accompanying her. Asha and her uncle waited there, the Lady Greyjoy informal and sour-faced and Victarion fuming as always.

“I take it you’ve sent the prince and princess off to their love nest?” Asha asked, a bit eager. There’d been complaints from the Ironborn about having to meet with Sansa prior to this.

Sansa, in turn, had more than a few complaints about them. Dany considered hers a bit more valid.

“I have, yes.”

“So you have no one to hoist us off on any longer.” Asha grinned when she said this. Victarion looked a bit pleased as well. Daenerys fumed.

“I’d like to hoist the whole lot of you off on my children. Harren the Black burned in his own enormous castle. You’re in the Keep of my ancestors and I have just as many dragons as he did.” Daenerys settled for, “Some would consider it a compliment to receive such personal attention from the bride during the days leading up to a royal wedding. I’d appreciate some respect, Lady Greyjoy.”

Victarion visibly bristled to hear his niece addressed this way. Sansa warned Dany about that.

“We’re not interested in brides. I didn’t come here to embroider doilies and talk flower arrangements with your nephew’s wench.”

“I truly doubt Sansa would try to engage you on the topics of doilies and flower arrangements, My Lady,” Dany replied. There is no way in any of the seven hells Sansa would want opinions on such matters from a woman who frequently wears an iron squid on her head. “She is an advisor on my council and Mistress of the Court and Diplomatic Affairs. I’m sure she kept her talk to matters of state.”
Victarion grunted and Dany fixed him a sharp gaze. “Do you have anything to say, Lord Victarion?”

“Nothing. The lady’s place on your council is interesting though.”

“Yes, very interesting. You have a girl of twenty years holding office on your council, but don’t want the Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet as your Master of Ships,” remarked Asha. Dany managed not to glare. You know very well why I don’t want him.

“It’s not that I doubt Lord Victarion’s qualifications as an admiral, we’re just concerned he may not be entirely fit for court life. And why should a kraken want to touch ground for so long a time? Despite what the title may imply, such a post does not involve much time on water.”

Victarion glanced at Asha, dismayed to hear this. It left Dany to wonder why Sansa seemed so afraid of him. If he’s dim enough not to realize that, then he is an even greater fool than they say. Of course, her good-niece was less afraid of his mind than his strength and anger. “Great hulking dimwits are not going to pull off brilliant deceit, but they can be dangerous. At Winterfell, there was a simple-minded giant named Hodor who could only say his name. Most of the time he was sweet and useful and easy to control. But every so often, he’d be so spooked that he’d run amok screaming, crying, and wrecking everything in his path. Though he was too sweet to ever intentionally harm another person, he would always wreck a great deal before someone could calm him. I saw him break down a wall, and smashed a well to pieces. Victarion is not so simple, but he is as big and far more cruel. He slays with pride and a smile and he does it well. And he is an angry man.”

“Krakens belong in the water,” he said, his voice low but rough.

“What about the ones with one arm?” But Asha looked annoyed. “I find it hard to believe that a post that was once called ‘Grand Admiral’ doesn’t do much sailing.”

“Not in times of peace. I intend to remain at peace for a good, long while.”

“Maybe the lack of time in the water is why your fleets during prior wars were so ill-equipped to defend the realm.”

Daenerys sighed. That point was fair enough, but she knew giving the role to Victarion would not make the kingdom much safer. “The Master of Ships is a post of the Small Council. It requires attendance at the meetings. Frequent attendance. We cannot properly communicate with and manage a fleet if the leader of said fleet is not close at hand. I admit I am only a young girl and know little of the ways of war, but that is why I need councilors who are available to advise me at a moment’s notice.”

“So we are never to be represented? You wish to overlook the Iron Islands again? Prior kings have done so and regretted it,” countered Asha.

“I remind you that I am no king, Lady Greyjoy. But for the record, we did offer the post to one of your own. You declined on his behalf. I understand. Like myself, you want your councilors nearby.”

Asha’s look was venom. And I need my uncle far away! “Victarion is obedient. If you tell him to stay, he will stay.”

“I am obedient to my true lord. I do my duty to the Ironborn.” Her uncle said. “Not some Greenland foreigners. Just because we’ve bent the knee once more does not mean I’m content to lose my spine as well.”

Why not? You’ve already lost an arm. Daenerys stood. But something bothered her. She’d
confirmed with her nephew’s wife about various things she might say to placate the Greyjoys, and Sansa insisted she said them to no success. She insisted that none of them would even listen to her. *She may have meant it in the fullest extent of the word. Maybe they wouldn’t even hear her.* So she tried something.

“I would be happy to have your uncle serve in the royal navy in some capacity. There are still more than enough pirate princes roaming the seas around this continent making life miserable for the smallfolk. It would be an honorable post as befits his rank. And I’d even involve you, Lady Greyjoy. You are, after all, the acting lord of the isles. If you can assure me that your men will focus on protecting our lands instead of attacking them, I might be willing to entrust you with the naval defense of our western shores. You’d be a right hand to whichever Master of Ships we choose, in some cases reporting directly to me. You’d work with other western houses, and be the commanding officer of them in naval affairs in the west. You and your uncle would be directing the movements of an even greater fleet, and be respected heroes.”

“We pay the iron price for the respect we’re given,” grumbled Victarion.

“They’ll still pay in iron, just not in the lives of my people. Besides, what is wielding your axe against weak Greenland lordlings and defenseless smallfolk when you can crush the skulls of dangerous, hot-blooded foreign pirates with gilded blades?”

Victarion suddenly looked thoughtful. Asha looked impressed.

Dany was furious. She knew this sort of reasoning had been offered to them before. She, Sansa, and Jon had all decided to make this offer and even bring up the idea that the iron price against pirates was more honorable than those of their smallfolk. Her nephew and friend had met with them and said as much, she knew it. But now these two were acting like they’d never heard it. *They utterly tuned them out. They likely didn’t hear a thing.*

“Why should I defend non-believers?” Victarion asked.

“Do you think Ghiscari brigands believe in your Drowned God any more than a Westerlands fishwife?” Dany asked. “And the pirates are more likely to attack true believers.”

“I like this, Niece.” Victarion grunted. Asha’s eyes narrowed.

“I’m glad you’re interested, Uncle. Perhaps you should go pray for guidance on the subject, your connection with our god has always been stronger than my own. In the meantime, I’d like to discuss more womanly affairs with our queen. I’d like to know if the style of gown I wore to the wedding was considered fashionable and suitable enough for other public affairs.”

Victarion stood and nodded. “Of course. I’m glad to hear you’re turning your mind to more appropriate subjects, Niece. I will consult our deity as best I can. Excuse me.”

When he was gone, Asha leaned forward and frowned. “Pirates? You want him to devote his life to fending off pirates? What pirates?”

“The countless ones who have besieged our western shores.”

Asha snorted. “Almost all of those pirates were Iron Islanders. The foreign ones attack the east.”

“Something that your uncle clearly hasn’t considered. But if he wants, he can fight around the east side too, as long as he doesn’t fight any of our own.”
“What happens years and years from now when he realizes he’s not seen a battle in ages and that he’s been duped?”

“You’ll convince him the lack of warfare is because his terrifying reputation has frightened off would-be attackers or some such nonsense,” Dany sighed. “Look, low body count or not, you said your goal was to integrate your people a bit more with the rest of the realm. I’m giving you a post to interact more with other lords, and you’ll be put in an office above them so that they’ll have to defer to you somewhat and show you enough respect that you would not lose face. And you’ll be able to send your uncle zig-zagging across the Sunset Sea far away from you.”

“You don’t understand… Paying the iron price… It’s the only way my uncle can pay for anything without losing his mind. How is he supposed to provide for himself? If you make him pay the gold price for things for the rest of his days, he’ll go berserk. And if you think he’ll last long trying to play nice with others, you’re mad.”

“Then have him isolated. Look, I’m really giving the power to you. I’m also giving you the means and pretense to handle things as you see fit, trusting you to do it well, and showing you enough recognition to assert your power among your people.”

“Ironborn don’t accept gifts. We take what we want.”

“My advisors and I constructed this deal because of pressure from you. And I thought you were trying to move away from that philosophy.”

“Not this abruptly.”

“If the only way to appease them is to incite a war with the rest of the realm, then raid the North like before,” Dany replied, “That won’t end well for you. Remember that many a night, the Warden of the North spends many an evening with me. We drink together and sometimes braid one another’s hair before she retires to my nephew’s bed. The next person who sits on the Iron Throne and commands my dragons will have suckled from her breasts and slept in her arms as a child. If you choose to attack the Riverlands, well, that will be the domain of the next king or queen’s great-uncles and cousin. And I assure you, attacks on the Reach won’t be tolerated either. You’ll make it a week before Pyke becomes another, much smaller Harrenhal and every grain of sand on your islands will become dragonglass.”

“I make that argument to my lords, and they’ll call me weak and craven.”

Dany groaned. *They’re really that pig-headed?* But she supposed she shouldn’t be too surprised.

“You know what? Fine.” Dany stood. “Then I guess I’ll have to help justify such threats.”

Asha stood too and her hand went defensively to her bodice. “What do you mean by that?”

“Remember how I greeted you? Maybe the rest of your people would like to meet Viserion as well. I could make a brief flight up there.”

“We have not given you reason to attack us yet!”

“No, and I’d like to keep it that way. I didn’t say a thing about an attack. Just a brief flight. Or better yet, I may have my nephew do it on Rhaegal. No one needs to be hurt. A warning, not an attack.”

“They won’t like you coming to intimidate us.”

“But you admit you’ll be intimidated?”
“Oh, certainly.” Asha looked at the table and lowered her hand. “And it’ll likely be necessary and effective. Fine. But I want time to prepare. And you have to promise me that there won’t be any attack.”

“As long as no aggression from your Ironborn, then fine. We’ll follow up on this. The visit doesn’t have to happen for a few moons, especially if Jon is going to be the one visiting. I didn’t send him off to Dragonstone just to pull him away immediately. Go back to Pyke, confer with your lords regarding our offer, and if they resist too much, announce that there’s to be a royal visit soon. Keep me up to date via raven.”

Asha swallowed. “Fine.”

She left a few seconds later, looking unsatisfied but nonresistant. When she was gone, Dany sunk to her chair in relief.
Dragons, Wolves, and Memories

Chapter Summary

Jon and Sansa settle into Dragonstone and take trips down memory lane. Also there's sex with Jon in animalistic post-warg mode. Then bath time.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Blue for her beta-work. Also, thanks to my awesome commenters.

Sorry about the lateness, guys. I've had a lot of stuff going on this week, including my dad having surgery. So yeah.

Chapter Forty-two: Dragons, Wolves, and Memories

Sansa:

Jon remained in a good mood from the second they set sail until their arrival at Dragonstone. Even his seasickness didn’t dampen his spirits, though Ghost’s worried him a bit more.

Fortunately for the direwolf, the voyage was mercifully short. Rhaegal the Green was a new vessel designed more for comfort than practicality or defense, but the speed of her was impressive. Not much time was spent in the beautifully furnished cabin. Jon and Sansa both stayed on deck with Ghost as he lay near one of the railings, panting heavily. Sansa just hoped the animal would gain more of a tolerance for sea travel, or the trip across the Narrow Sea was going to be miserable.

The direwolf recovered quickly once they set foot on the island, darting off the ship with great urgency. Jon called for the animal to head for the castle as he ran off, then went to tend to Rhaegal before the dragon’s departure, making sure his mount got a good meal and a decent rest.

Sansa looked on fondly as her husband stroked the giant beast’s neck and snout affectionately and thanked her for watching over them. He’d come a long way from fearing the beast. A certain bond existed now. It warmed her heart.

The island was dank and unimpressive. There was little vegetation and not much warmth. Looking at the lack of greenery, she worried for Ghost’s happiness without trees to run through. The place was sparsely populated. A crowd gathered when they docked, and Sansa was told to her surprise that the crowd made up over half the inhabitants of the main village.

Sansa’s initial reaction to Jon’s fortress was surprise. It was far smaller than she expected of such a legendary holdfast. Not that it wasn’t impressive. What it lacked in size it more than made up for in austerity and uniqueness. It stuck out from the dreary hills of the island like a scythe: black and foreboding. Every single section of the castle was dragon-oriented as well. Every tower was shaped as one. More great stone beasts flanked each gate. Indeed, from a distance it looked almost like an entire family of them congregating around the cliffs. Among them were scores of hideous gargoyles.
When they rode in, Jon whispered to her that there were a thousand or more. It seemed everywhere she looked there were stony, ugly, hostile faces.

“They don’t scare you, do they?” He asked her, nudging her shoulder.

Sansa laughed and shook her head. “I’ve met worse beasts than them.”

She thought of Ramsay Bolton. She had encountered him briefly before ordering his death. He was dragged before her covered in blood and wild-eyed in the wolfswood. His last words were a declaration that he intended to murder her son and rape her to death. The last words he ever heard were Sansa stripping his name and titles from him and declaring that ‘Ramsay Snow’ was to die.

The gargoyles were all far more attractive than the Bastard of Dreadfort.

The inner Keep was far warmer than she expected, but damp, almost humid. The Great Hall looked like an enormous dragon lying on its belly. Inside, every candle was lit, as there was little natural light to be found. It was there that she greeted them: Lynette Rivers. Formerly Lynette Tully. Roslin Frey and Marq Piper’s bastard. The child came forward nervously, her hand held by a septa, in a sea green woolen gown. She curtsied awkwardly, keeping her green eyes on the ground. The whole thing went by quickly. Jon and Sansa inquired about her health and care.

Observing the child, Sansa made a mental note to send Anya a raven asking if she might have any room for another at Ironoaks. Dragonstone was no place for such a young child. She thought of Robert Arryn, locked away in the Vale, secluded, weak, dependent on others, and horribly bratty. It sent a shiver down her spine.

After that, she, Jon, Nani, and Satin met with the middle-aged castellan, Gregan Waters, and his wife Norese, checking up on basic facets of the castle’s upkeep and giving instructions on what they were to be alerted to. The couple greeted Satin kindly, but seemed intimidated by Nani. Sansa had written to the Waterses about her small retinue of Dothraki maids to make sure they were prepared to handle any cultural differences. But there was a difference between reading about people and meeting them in person.

After some more staff introductions, instructions were given for hot water and food to be provided for everyone before Jon whisked Sansa away to their quarters. He pulled her down dark hallways lined with clawed sconces to the main keep and up a few flights of stairs until the reached the second highest floor, the site of the main family quarters.

The lord’s solar was smaller than the ones they had at the Red Keep and a bit damp. But it was well furnished, clean, and it opened up to a balcony with a breathtaking view of the cliffs. Sansa went to look, leaning over the rail and gasping. Though the ocean could be choppy and dark, the afternoon sun sparkled over the waters just the same. And looking at the horizon line she could tell that the sunrises would be exquisite. She could spy some of the famed dragonglass deposits over to the right, and there was a faint glitter.

_This is where the first Aegon stood as he dreamt up the conquest of Westeros_, she thought in wonder. She wondered if Rhaenys and Visenya had stood with him here and plotted with him.

She felt warm, familiar hands slip around her waist and a body pressed up against her. His breath tickled her ear as he spoke.

“How do you like the castle, My Lady? Does it meet with your approval?”

“Thus far it’s not entirely intolerable. But I didn’t come here for the castle itself.” She leaned back
into his embrace, smiling lazily. "I came to be alone with its lord."

“How very forward of you, Princess. Is such a mission appropriate for a lady of Winterfell?”

"Is poking your manhood against my arse appropriate for a prince of Westeros?” She replied, wiggling her backside against said appendage.

“Yes,” he grunted. His fingers found the neckline laces of her woolen kirtle, pulling them open so her breasts fell out. He stroked her lightly. "Feel good?"

"Mmmmm." Her breasts were tender, but light touches like this were fine. Pinches, bites, heavy weight was the problem at this stage. But it likely wouldn't be long before they were too sensitive for even this. She resolved to enjoy it while she could.

He was lifting up her skirts when there was knock on the door. Both of them groaned and Sansa went to fix her gown.

“What is it?!” Jon barked.

“Pardon, Your Grace,” a young, female voice called through the door. “But we’ve brought you some hot water to wash and some food.”

Sansa pulled away, re-lacing her bodice. Now that she thought about it, she was hungry, a need she could no longer ignore with a child inside of her. And Jon and I could do with a decent wash.

She left her husband on the balcony to settle himself and called the maids in. She had them arrange everything quickly, promising to set the trays outside the door once she and Jon were finished eating and giving strict instructions that they not be disturbed for the rest of the day and night. The maids averted their eyes a bit. The new princess of Westeros ignored this, going to wash her hands and face in one of the basins of warm water they’d delivered.

After the girls scurried out, Jon came in to wash his face and hands. They both sat down at the small dining table, consuming the eel pie, warm brown bread, and cider. When they finished, her husband set their trays outside, then took his seat once more.

With a small, sly smile to her, he pushed his chair back and gestured for her to come over to him. She did, smiling a bit, but she stopped short in front of him, just beyond his knees, purposely ignoring his obvious intent for her to straddle his lap. When he reached for her waist, she met both his hands with hers, pressing their palms together and intertwining their fingers in an affectionate but chaste gesture, bending over to kiss his forehead.

“Come on,” he said softly, “Give me a real kiss.”

Sansa’s stomach suddenly flip-flopped. Her mind raced back to an interaction from years ago. Grey-green eyes and a diabolical smirk. Petyr Baelish demanding the “proper” kisses he “deserved” after being dissatisfied with the chaste, daughterly ones she initially gave him.

She didn’t want to think of that. Those sort of flashbacks grew less and less common as time went on, but they were still unwelcome and unnecessary. It angered her that such a thing would spring to mind.

There was never anything predatory or sick about the way Jon touched, kissed, or made love to her. Sansa loved the intimacy, the contact, the feel of his hands, mouth, and body. She loved the sound of his voice--- deep and soft where Petyr's had been rasping and slippery. He’d managed to make her feel safe in an arena where before she’d only ever felt uneasiness, misery, and shame.
Despite this, every so often, something would happen that would make her mind go back to those
dark times once more. It wasn’t Jon’s fault. He’d never do anything to hurt her and she knew that.
Often times, when she felt Petyr’s presence again, it hit her at the oddest times. All it could take was
someone taking her hand or patting her on the back.

It shamed her so. It reminded her of how broken she was, of how used she’d been, of how the
darkest sides of human contact had been instilled in her long before she’d ever truly experienced the
beauty of it. It made her body and mind betray her. And worst of all, it hampered her experiences
with others. It reminded her that no matter how pleasurable an encounter, no matter how loving and
wonderful her partner, that she’d always have that piece of her that was a victim. The best of lovers,
the finest of pleasures wouldn’t erase what happened to her.

And no matter how hard she fought it, some hint of recoil would expose itself. Jon always could tell.

Now was no different. Sansa thought she’d held it back well enough, making sure to maintain both
her smile, her grip on his hands, and affect a heated gaze. Anyone else would have been fooled. But
he knew at once.

And then there it was. His own, far more pronounced recoil and that look she so hated. That look of
guilt, of self-loathing, of mourning that clouded over his grey eyes. His hands slipped from hers.

“Sansa, are you alright? Did I scare you? I’m sorry.”

That gutted her. She didn’t ever want Jon to feel guilty for touching her, for loving her, for wanting
her. All her life she’d been the target of unwelcome advances from men. It just wasn’t fair that the
one man who she did want so much would be the one to pull away so easily. Sure, the fact that he
would was partly why Sansa loved him so. But she didn’t want it to actually happen. Sansa wanted
him to touch, taste, and fuck her. She loved every minute that they spent getting intimate.

She just wished her enjoyment of it could always be as simple as her desires. After all I’ve suffered in
the bedroom, why can’t I just be allowed to finally take my pleasures with no fuss? Most of the time
she could now. But “most” wasn’t enough. We both deserve it to be all of the time.

Sansa just wanted her mind and body to stop betraying her like this. She knew Petyr and all the
others who hurt her would never be gone for good. But can’t they at least leave me be here?

Yes, they’d hurt her through touching her, invading her body, taking their pleasure from her body
against her will and using her. Yes, it involved her being penetrated and various physical sensations
and actions similar to what took place between her and Jon. But it couldn’t be more different. She
felt safe, loved, and complete with Jon. They shared themselves with one another. To her, the
experiences were as different as a warm bath and being frozen in a block of ice.

“No, I’m sorry…” She mumbled, knowing what was coming next.

“Don’t be,” he said, predictably, “Is it something I did?”

“No.” She kept her voice and gaze firm. “These things… they’re so hit and miss. It’s not you.
You’re wonderful.”

Sansa reached out and stroked his hair to reassure him. He did not move, he just looked at her. Both
breathed deeply. Sansa waited for her heart beat to slow, for the shock to wear away. Then she bent
over and pressed her forehead against his.

Jon’s breath was warm against her skin.
“You’re sure there’s nothing I can do? Or not do?” He asked her, his voice a bit strained. “I mean… Are you going to need the ties again?”

He’d asked her this the last time this happened, about six weeks ago. Sansa shook her head. She hadn’t needed it then or now. “It wasn’t about the hands.”

“Are you sure? I can understand how being touched might---”

“It wasn’t that. It was…” She sighed. “It was a combination of what you said and what you were doing.”

“Did I hurt you?”

“No, no,” she pulled away, “It’s not about one particular thing, exactly. It was just… You were seated and had me stand before you, you were touching my hands, and you asked me to give you a proper kiss. And it’s just… That’s how it started.”

His face clouded over. “That was the first time he violated you.“

“Well, no---” Her stomach sank. She didn’t want to talk about this. She never did, really. Jon knew the explicit points--- he knew that Petyr had used her in various ways, he knew that she’d been coerced to seduce other men to gain political support, he knew Petyr had ‘trained’ her in methods of satisfying men, he knew there was violence and degradation. Sometimes, those things were easier to admit to.

But speaking of how it came about, how he’d molded her, specific episodes, the manipulations that took place before, after and in between, those aspects were more difficult. It got too personal. The other things were all about what Petyr had done. But discussing this went deeper. They were about her.

It was bad enough reliving the physical parts. But the thoughts and feelings she’d had were so confusing and terrifying because they went beyond the more obvious things like pain, fear, and shame. There was also how she’d tried so hard not to think or feel anything, how she refused to acknowledge that anything was happening. How quickly she’d changed as a person up to and during it. How lost she was.

And she wasn’t sure he’d understand. Some of the things Petyr did made her change and feel strange things, but they weren’t things that looked bad on the surface. Anyone could understand that he’d hurt her when he’d torn off her clothes and raped her. Some might even understand why kissing her was bad. But how could she explain how his looks hurt her? How he’d started teaching her to fear him from the moment they first met and he told her how she looked like her mother?

She once mentioned to Randa that it bothered her when Petyr had called her Alayne and ‘daughter’ even in private, how she didn’t like having to greet him with kisses and call him ‘Father.’ How he’d deceived her when he promised to take her back to Winterfell. This was back when she’d just married Harry, before anyone knew the truth about Petyr.

Randa had replied, “Well of course, Sansa, he was trying to protect you. He had to make sure people around you were convinced you were Alayne. And you know just as well as anyone that even in private, there are likely people listening. And you can’t honestly fault him for not taking you to the North immediately, considering what’s been happening there. And is it so wrong for him to try and be a father to a girl who lost hers? He obviously cares for you a great deal, and he’s done so much for you. Maybe he feels fatherly towards you, what of it? He’s protected you, provided for you, loved you, made sacrifices for you and seen to your future. You’re lucky.”
A few years later, of course, Randa completely changed her tune upon learning more. Once word got to her that Petyr was reported to be Sansa’s lover, the Royce girl wrote a frantic letter to her friend begging her to cut Petyr off and not look back. This was even before she’d learned that he’d forced himself on her. She just thought Sansa was being ‘seduced’, not raped. But it took knowledge of Littlefinger sharing her bed for Randa to understand that something was wrong. Many people felt the same way.

Looks and even kisses could be far harder to explain than ‘he forced himself on me’. Rape, provided that people believed you, was not ambiguous. Rape was a crime. The other things though… The problems with the kisses were a bit easier, she supposed, especially in the context of hindsight.

But Petyr did it so cleverly. She hated thinking of it in those terms, but it really was the right word. Aside from the kiss in the garden, the other ones were treated as displays of daughterly affection. Easy enough to justify forcing when the girl’s safety depended on successfully masquerading as a man’s daughter. Without knowing the truth, a person could easily imagined he only did it to convince people he was my father, to keep me safe. He had an excuse. Petyr always had a cover or argument planned to get away with whatever he wished.

She knew Jon wouldn’t see it that way. But she feared that like Randa, he’d only see the other things as a problem because of the rape that came later. Without the violation, it was just somewhat curious and inappropriate, even playful to some.

Or what if he thinks that his own actions are exactly the same? What if he thinks if he does some of the physical things Petyr did, that means he’s hurting me just as much? What if he becomes afraid of touching me? One of the first things Petyr ever did was stroke her hair when they first met. Another time, he’d stroked her cheek. She’d been bothered by it even then. Though Septa Mordane had been present and seemed to find no fault in it, Sansa’s skin crawled and she instinctively felt that such a gesture shouldn’t be discussed with those around her.

But being stroked by Petyr was not the same as being stroked by Jon. She’d happily spend hours with her head in Jon’s lap, feeling his fingers run against her skin and hair. She didn’t want him to stop doing such things.

She hesitated now. “No, Jon. He didn’t— Actually, it started long before that. He sort of built up to it. When I’d escaped from the capital, you know I pretended to be his bastard daughter, yes?”

He nodded.

“Well, whenever Father used to come home from a long trip, how would I welcome him home?”

“Well, if it were a more formal affair, you’d curtsey, then hug him, sometimes kiss his cheek,” Jon recalled. “But if it weren’t formal, you’d skip the curtsey and run up to him like Arya.”

Then his face darkened. “Oh.”

“I’d give Father one or two pecks on the cheek, yes. Petyr was never satisfied with the cheek. Or pecks. He felt it wasn’t loving, dutiful, or grateful enough. Especially at the Gates of the Moon. The night I arrived there, I met him. There was company, so he took a peck on the cheek in front of the knights he was entertaining. When they were gone, he grabbed me and kissed me on the mouth for a long time. Then he started stroking my hand as he told me of the betrothal to Harry and what it meant. He said he was giving me the gifts of Harry, the Eyrie, and the North. Then said that for such gifts he was owed another kiss. So he pulled me into his lap and kissed me again. I tried to pull away and told him I was too old to sit on my father’s lap. He held me down and insisted I wasn’t too old. Then he got very playful and said I wasn’t too old to be tickled, either. So he touched me a bit and
then let me go. Before I left, he said that since I was going to be a new bride, he supposed I would need some nice new clothes, and that we would discuss it the next day in his chambers. After that, I just…” She shuddered, “I just knew he’d always be expecting more. And that he was likely going to get it. I didn’t… I had to be a good girl, a dutiful daughter who was grateful to the father who had saved me and told me I was clever and taught me how to think and was going to elevate me from being a bastard to being a real lady----”

“But you were---“

“---He taught me to forget that. He taught me the only reason I was anything but a corpse was because of how clever, kind, and loving he was. It wasn’t enough to say I was Alayne, I had to be Alayne. And then I’d be a queen and the only way that would happen was if I had my mother’s looks and his mind. I had to think the way he wanted me to think.” She shook her head. “I---I don’t want to speak of this anymore. Jon, please. It’s not you. You sitting there, our hands touching, me standing over you--- It won’t happen again.”

“If it happens again, it’ll happen again. I just want to help you.” He looked so sad.

“But you DO!” Why can’t he understand this? “You have done more for me than anyone.” She sat in his lap, cupping his cheeks. “You gave me hope that I could be happy again. I thought, after Eddie, that I’d never be able to smile a true smile ever again. But you made me believe that I could again. You’ve given me everything I could ever possibly wish for.”

“I try. I only want to make you as happy as you make me.”

She frowned. “I’m not making you happy now, am I?”

“No one can be smiling all of the time. Please, Sansa, this isn’t your fault.” Jon glanced downward for a second, then up at her again. “Look, why don’t you lie down for a while? We had a long trip, you’re likely quite weary. Go to the bedchamber, it’s behind the door to the right. I’ll be with you in a few minutes.”

She nodded. She was tired, and she needed some peace.

The Lady of Winterfell slipped into the bedchamber to find all of her things laid out as she’d instructed. The bedroom was actually quite large, almost cavernous, with high ceilings. More light came from the numerous candles mounted around the room on various types of black metal fixtures than the few small windows of glass stained red.

Despite candles everywhere, the room still seemed dark and the brightness of the flames didn’t seem to extend very far. Upon a raised level was an immense four-poster bed of dark wood hung with thick red velvet curtains, against a wall a stand for wash basins, a wardrobe, a desk, and a long mirror. The mantle of the fireplace was shaped, predictably, like a great stone dragon flying upwards out of the blazing flames.

_The Valyrians fashioned this castle to frighten enemies from the outside. But what was the point of having such things inside?_ For the dragon was carved so well. The sort of image that could easily frighten a young child.

There were two other doors and when Sansa looked on the other side, behind one she found a water closet and behind the other a dimly little cell converted into a dressing room for her. She slipped into the room and changed into her bed robe, letting her hair down completely and checking herself in the mirror. The dressing room was much too dark for her to make out her appearance all that well. For a second in the glass she saw not Sansa Stark but Alayne Stone. The light was dim enough that her
hair could pass for brown.

Shivering, she hurried over to the clothing chests that were arranged and found the one holding her furs. Among them was a grey wolf pelt that the Mormonts had gifted her years ago when she first rode for the North. It was old and damaged, one of the few things that was actually recovered from Winterfell. It had been a comfort to wear during the wars. Petyr had loathed it, always demanding she take it off the second they went indoors. The only reason he let her keep it was because they couldn’t afford to insult the House who’d gifted it. Draping herself in it at every opportunity had been a pleasurable little bit of mischief on her part.

Eddie used to run around in it as well. He found it hanging from a hook in her bedroom one day when he was about two and was fascinated by it. She could remember him yanking it off and it falling on his head, completely covering him. The second she told him it came from a wolf, that was the end of it. He’d play in it, making growling noises. As he got bigger, Sansa had a duplicate of it made for him. You had to fight with him to get it off. He’d run around on all fours with it covering him, pretending to be a wolf. She’d wrap him in hers on particularly cold nights or when he was scared or had bad dreams. When they laid Harry to rest, she wore the cloak and Eddie stayed under it the entire time.

She’d buried Eddie in his cloak, along with a number of his favorite toys. When she’d had to exhume his bones, one of the hardest parts was knowing someone would have to unwrap them from that cloak. She ordered that the cloak be transported with the bones. Now both were thankfully back in the Winterfell crypts.

Sometimes at night before bed, or even in the mornings when she’d wake her son up, they’d put on their furs and play at being wolves. She probably got more relief from those games than she should have. More than once she suggested that they pretend to hunt lions and stags. After Petyr died, mockingbirds were added to the list. Those few moons between Petyr’s death and Eddie’s were some of the happiest moments of her life. It was the first time she was truly free. She didn’t have to fight a war, or part her legs, or be told what to do. She could spend every night being a mother.

She could almost see him now, kneeling on his little bed with his grey pelt pulled up around his head. His bright blue eyes and dimples. Bearing his “fangs” and holding up his “claws”. “Stop smiling, Mama, we have to look SCARY. Wolves, Mama! We’re Direwolves! Direwolves are SCARY! They don’t smile, they growl. GRRRR! RAWR!” Then he’d jump on her and wrestle her. For a brief period he had a habit of biting people when he was pretending to be a wolf. But she’d gotten him to stop when he realized he was hurting people.

Sansa looked at herself in the mirror once more. She held up her hands, bent her fingers so they looked like claws and bared her teeth. “Grrr! Rawr!”

Eddie was never quite satisfied with her growling. He didn’t think it sounded real enough, and tried to teach her to do it properly. He finally became satisfied just a few days before he died. Then he decided it was time for them to move on to howling like real wolves.

Sansa slipped her hand down to her belly. “We’ll learn to howl,” she whispered.

She wished Aemonaerys’s big brother could be around to give him/her lessons. Sansa left the dressing room and went to lie down on the bed, stroking the fur. When she turned over, she tried to visualize it. Her, Jon, Eddie alive and well --- he’d be about fifty-two months old now. So he’d be almost eight by the time Aemonaerys would be old enough to play such games.--- She could practically see it now.

The four of them on a big bed, or on a pillow-and-blanket-piled bedchamber floor, growling and
cuddling and teaching each other to howl. Maybe Ghost would be there. All of them crawling over the direwolf, a three-year-old boy or girl who looked like Jon struggling to climb over Ghost’s back. Eddie sitting on top and helping his little sister or brother climb up. “Here’s how you growl and howl right.” Both of them with wolf pelts pulled over their heads—Aemonaerys’ would be bleached white to match Ghost.

Jon would smile and make sure his wolf stayed still enough not to knock the children over. He’d reach over, pull the furs aside and muss up their hair to tease them like he used to do with Arya. Would Eddie call him Father? She believed he might behind closed doors. Jon would treat Eddie like his own. And he would probably be better at growling and howling than I was.

She wondered if Jon would let Eddie ride Rhaegal with him. She wondered if she’d allow such a thing. Their children, especially their first, would have to be a dragon rider. But Eddie was no Targaryen.

He’d want to, though.

There was no way in the seven hells that she’d be able to keep that boy from trying to ride Ghost.

Sansa kept daydreaming about it. Thoughts of Eddie were always stronger than thoughts of Petyr.

The door opened and Jon came in, Ghost padding into the room at his heels.

“It seems he’s returned from his run in full health,” Jon informed her brightly. Sansa smiled and sat up. The beast ran over and nuzzled her shoulder. Jon noted the cloak. “And right on time, by the looks of it.”

He’d seen her wear it numerous times. Jon sat by her side and stroked her hand. “Thinking of Eddie?”

She nodded. “I was thinking about how he’d try to ride Ghost.”

Jon laughed. “Oh, gods. There were actually a few brave wildling children back at the Wall who were mad enough to try when another dared them. It actually became a bit of challenge with the whole lot, trying to ride the big white wolf to prove their courage. Some of them had actually been around direwolves north of the Wall, so they were a bit more familiar with them. He didn’t much care for it. He never tried to hurt them, but he would throw them off immediately.”

“Oh?” Sansa stroked the animal’s snout and looked into his big red eyes. “Would you let my boy do it, Ghost? You wouldn’t throw him off your back, would you? You’d be good.”

The beast pulled away, then promptly lay down on the ground flat, staying perfectly still and gazing up at them.

“I think he’d just do that if Eddie climbed on him,” Jon remarked, watching her with uneasy eyes. “Wouldn’t throw him off, but wouldn’t move for him either.”

Sansa found herself laughing now. “Smart wolf.”

“Very much so.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and looked at her. “I’m glad to see you smiling.”

She widened her grin and rested her head against his shoulder. “I’m feeling better. I’m sorry about--“
“Please don’t apologize for that,” he said firmly.

They both went to lie down, burrowing under the covers and keeping one another close. Sansa pressed her head against Jon’s chest. The rhythm of his heartbeat eventually soothed her to sleep.

When she opened her eyes hours later, Ghost was gone. Jon was lying on his back, his eyes open but completely white and glowing. Sansa watched in fascination. She saw more of him doing this these days. Since Leona, he mostly did it indoors, in their rooms. Before he usually went to the godswood.

Every so often, he’d twitch, kick, sniff the air, or lick his teeth while he remained in his trance. It seemed that while he entered Ghost, a little of Ghost entered him. And sometimes that bit stayed for a little while afterward. She noticed that sometimes, for a few hours after Jon had returned to his own head, he had more mood swings, was more prone to distraction, and he’d act more quiet, rough, and more in tune with his senses. Overall, he’d have a less rational, more bestial quality to him.

It could be very annoying sometimes. His table manners would drop in quality, the way he spoke to her became more gruff and confrontational, and his words would be short.

After it wore off, though, he’d be in the best of moods and he was in an overall better place for days. It cleared his head, gave him an outlet, and just made things easier for him if he had his periodic escapes.

Sansa tried not to move too much or touch him, and tried to keep herself nestled on his shoulder and just watching. These days, just the slightest contact could pull him out, and when that happened it could be a great shock. After a while, though, his eyes flickered back to normal. He blinked a few times, then looked a her.

“Welcome back,” she told him, “Where were you?”

“Village,” he replied, his eyes narrowing. “How are you?”

“I feel lovely.” She truly did. The rest was good for her eyes, she felt quite snug and safe, very calm and rested.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Then may I have you now?” A faint whine came from the back of his throat. There was a certain desperate hope there, coupled with doubt. “I’ll be careful.”

Sansa felt her whole body flush. “You want to… Just after you were---?”

His face fell and he pulled away, sitting up and shaking his head. “No. Never mind. It’s not--- we shouldn’t. I’m sorry. I’m not thinking. I’m still a bit---”

Despite herself, Sansa felt her interest peak. They never really did it right after Jon had entered Ghost’s head, aside from that one awful night a little while after the Leona thing. He’d been traumatized then. But he was better now. Their carnal life had returned to normal, more or less.

He began to turn away. Sansa wasn’t sure what had come over her, but all of a sudden, she felt very eager to learn of how else this could affect him.

“You’d never hurt me,” she heard herself say, “Even with a bit of wolf inside you, I’m safe.”
Sometimes, it scared him, the places his mind would go after returning from Ghost. His senses would be on high alert, taking in everything as he readjusted to his body. His thoughts, which had been so constricted to the base, primal processes of his wolf’s head would run on nervous energy, spreading as far as they could beyond the prior limitations of *run, kill, eat, jump, cold, ground, sky*.

He’d still view things in a rather animalistic way, and he could smell everything, hear everything. He sought out heat and comfort once he no longer had fur. He felt the restrictions of inhabiting a human form more acutely and resented them. And he craved things like mad.

Frustration had brought him to Ghost’s head. Whenever reminders of what had been done to her popped up, a murderous rage hit him that could only be properly satisfied in a few ways. Killing was one. As Ghost, he could take out his anger on some little creature and rip it apart with his teeth.

Then there was the tension in his groin. His ardor had been tempered considerably by her episode, but the physical end of it, after so much build up and anticipation, didn’t deflate so easily. He’d sent her to the bedchamber, his cock actually hurting, then tried to take care of the tension himself. It calmed him a bit, but was ultimately unsatisfying. A residual need remained, but it was tempered enough for him to feel comfortable around her. But after he’d entered the bedchamber to comfort her further, she was pressed up against him and he knew it was best that he leave his body for a while.

Of course, then the first thing he saw when he woke were those big sapphire eyes watching him with a fascinated expression. And, to his complete shame, he couldn’t help but be reminded of the way she looked at him when she sucked his cock.

Part of him knew he’d be disgusted with himself later. But he couldn’t help it. She was also dressed down, her hair loose and unkempt, and she was dressed casually. He loved her like this. She never failed to make him stare when she was groomed and adorned in her silks and jewels and braids for court. But in that state, there was some distance between them. When she was natural, she was easier to access and more herself, and the fact that she willingly let him see her thus never failed to be a touching reminder of their intimacy.

Thus his blood was heated and he found himself unable to stop himself from propositioning her. He immediately tried to withdraw, turning away and trying to calm himself. But then she said it.

“You’d never hurt me. Even with a bit of wolf inside you, I’m safe.”

Yes. Yes she was. She always would be. Neither Jon nor Ghost could ever desire to harm her. His wolf loved his wife. He was nearly as attached to her as Jon himself.

Jon had no idea her knowledge and trust went deep enough to acknowledge that, though. He looked over his shoulder at her in his surprise. Those blue eyes were fixed upon him with that same eager, fascinated look.

“I---I’m not sure I could be very gentle,” he admitted. She nodded.

“I don’t need gentleness,” she said, slowly removing her fur and placing it neatly on the side table. “I’m not in the mood for it.” She reached for the ties on her bed gown.

Jon spun around, getting on his hands and knees, guilt and fear forgotten. “No. I want to…”

His fists closed around the shoulders of her bed robe, yanking it down her arms. Jon didn’t tear the
garment, but he did rip the shift she had on underneath apart while he claimed her mouth with his. The thin linen split down the middle with a satisfying sound. The breast band was torn too, prompting Sansa to caution him to be careful with that area.

He wanted to please her, of course, and he didn’t want to hurt her. A rather exciting idea came to him. “I want you to speak,” he told her, laying her back on the bed. “I want you to tell me how you feel, how good it is, what you want, how much you want it, how much you want me. You stop talking, I’ll assume you don’t want it, and I’ll stop. You can’t be a proper lady here, understand? Not now.”

This was crucial. In this state, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to pick up on her usual subtle little cues and signals. He felt base and animalistic, he needed her energy to match his, and he needed to feel reassured of her enthusiasm. He could so easily lose himself if he didn’t have a loud, clear voice to anchor him in reality.

There was also an overwhelming personal desire to hear praise and affirmation. To see her come undone, to conquer her inhibitions. And he wanted her not only willing, not only wanting, but maybe even desperate. Jon knew Sansa enjoyed being with him, but she was always so restrained in verbalizing it, as if her pleasure and desires were somehow shameful. He wanted her shameless. Hell, he even wanted her to beg a bit.

He stared deep into her eyes. She blinked twice. “Alright,” she breathed. 

Brave girl. Jon smiled, yanked his shirt over his head, and kissed her deep. He moved his mouth down, pressing little kisses to her jaw and neck. She gasped.

“Oh, that’s nice,” she said, breathing deep and sounding a bit surprised. “Keep… keep going. That’s it. Nice. Sweet thing.”

A good start. He kept his eyes on her, eager for her approval. She panted as he worked his way down her collar bone and chest. Jon started lapping at her breasts affectionately, reveling in the smoothness of her skin and the taste of the sweat that was starting to accumulate there. Sansa arched her back and gasped.

“Oh… oh that’s good Jon, so nice… Keep going…” Her smile was nervous as they looked at each other. She reached down and ran her fingers through his hair. “Oh, lovely boy, sweet boy.”

His left hand went to stroke her belly a few times, moving up and down but going lower each time as he continued to kiss and lick her teats.

“Oh, Jon, yes, touch me,” she gasped, her hips rising slightly.

“I am touching you,” he murmured into her right nipple as he stroked her hip.

“Oh you----“ She grunted with impatience, “Between my legs, then.”

“Where?” He wanted to hear her say it.

“My… my cunny. Touch my cunny, Jon.” She flushed as she said it. He groaned.

He stroked her mound through her smallclothes. When his fingers found the fabric of them wet, his cock twitched. The moisture spread as he stroked her.

“Take them off, Jon. Touch me for real now, please.” She was whimpering now. He grinned and pulled away, gripping the waistband of her pantalets and pulling them down. She lifted her hips and
legs to help him, grinning a little. He stopped for a second, staring down at her. It just made his cock that much harder, to the point where it truly hurt.

“Gods,” he groaned, his eyes taking in every perfect inch of her. He needed his breeches off. His hands went to his laces. Sansa looked away, as if embarrassed. Jon reached down and grabbed her chin, making her face him. “Don’t do that. There’s nothing wrong here. Don’t you like me looking at you?”

“Yes, I’m just… I’m…”

“Embarrassed?” He asked, his voice hoarse.

She bit her lip and nodded a little.

“Why?” She’d not minded him seeing her naked so much before. But then, she usually wasn’t this vulnerable. She was currently naked in more ways than one. Jon went to unlace his breeches again.

“Because I’m not trying to seduce you,” she answered with wide-eyed honesty. “And I don’t have a plan. This is just happening. I want it, but I don’t have a… I’m not sure what to… Oh, I don’t know!”

Jon shoved his breeches down and pulled them off his legs entirely, kicking them off the bed. He had a feeling he knew why she was embarrassed. It was because she wasn’t in control, and she thought she shouldn’t enjoy herself unless she was asserting power in some way. Not that she was powerless here, but she wasn’t asserting anything. She wasn’t telling him what to do, nor was she trying to prove a point, or tease him, or playing some sort of game. There was nothing in this for her except love and lust. Lust in a woman was supposed to be unnatural and a form of weakness. Playing the role of seductress helped balance that out. But she wasn’t playing now, and it frightened her. But he couldn’t say that out loud. Instead, he smiled. He’d acquired a new level of control now, and he was enjoying it.

“Well then, just enjoy this. You’re allowed to, you know,” he murmured. He saw his wife’s eyes go straight to his cock, which stuck out proudly as he knelt over her. He bent over and hooked his hands behind her knees, pulling them up and spreading them. She was pliant, quivering, wide-eyed, flushed, pink, white and red with her eyes bluer than ever.

Not a bit of it was affected, either. Not that he minded when it was. He normally loved her games, her teasing, her seductions, her affectations. He loved seeing her mind at work behind those lovely sapphire eyes. The knowledge that she put conscious thought and effort into how they made love was extremely gratifying. He liked watching her exert her power over him, he loved playing with her. It went beyond the physical. He’d done far more exotic physical things with Val, but never was it as engaging on a mental or emotional level as it was with Sansa. She made things so much fun, fun in a way that didn’t leave him feeling empty afterwards. The way she mapped things out, the way they conversed, the way she engaged him, the games added a certain substance to what they did, and he adored her for it.

But this… This was wonderful too. Seeing her lose herself to him like this. Seeing her so soft, vulnerable, and a little unsure of herself. She could, at any moment, start another of her games and take control. She could start putting up walls and fight him off. But she wasn’t. There was a trust there Jon doubted anyone had ever enjoyed before. She was letting go and submitting to him.

And it wasn’t like that time in the solar when she’d told him to tell her what to do, wearing those undergarments Princess Arianne gave her. Then, she’d done it to prove a point, and she still orchestrated pretty much everything. This time there was none of that. She wasn’t proving a point.
She wasn’t playing a game. She was just there, putting herself at his mercy simply for the sake of being with him.

Naked, flushed, sweating, panting, with her legs spread, Sansa Stark looked more like a maid than she had in many, many years. Seeing her thus, it wasn’t hard to imagine that she was. That this was their wedding night and she was his innocent, naïve, untouched but interested bride. Such a fantasy was about as appealing as any other to him. He was glad she wasn’t truly a novice at this, despite his horror regarding how her actual deflowering came about. Her level of knowledge and skill as a seductress, though, actually made what he saw before him now far more beautiful and appealing than a virgin could ever be. It showed a greater willingness, a more conscious and deliberate act of surrender. Vulnerability by choice rather than circumstance.

He fell over her, planting his palms and splaying his fingers on either side of her head and crashing their lips together. The kiss he gave her was undoubtedly bruising. Lips parted, and his tongue invaded her mouth. Their tongues embraced. She arched against him and groaned. When they parted, he dragged her lower lip between his teeth and gave it a little nibble before finally releasing it. He immediately moved his attentions to her earlobe, then neck, attacking it with his tongue, teeth and lips. For once, she made no complaint about the possibility of marks. Quite the opposite. Just soft little cries of “Yes, yes, oh…”

He growled, loving the taste of her skin and sweat. He drew his tongue down between her breasts and licked a long stripe down her belly, down… down…

A louder cry of, “Oh, yes!” came when he dipped the tip of his nose between hers folds and pressed it against her nub. Her legs parted further. “Oh, Jon, yes… Lovely… Please… Please… Your mouth… Lick me…”

He grinned and did as asked, almost getting lost in the sweet and tart taste of her. Her arousal had left a large wet spot on the red linen sheets and dripped down her inner thighs, and now it soaked his beard and filled his mouth. He drank from her like a man dying of thirst. She squirmed all around him, reaching down and seizing the back of his head. “Jon, oh! More! Oh, so good… Sweet boy… Love… Oh… Yesss… I’m…”

He shoved two fingers inside her, added a third, and fucked her with them roughly. Jon kept his eyes on her flushed face, the way her eyes fluttered closed and rolled back. The way her breasts rose as she arched her back again. When she was at the edge, Jon withdrew.

“OH!” She looked near tears when her eyes flew open. “Why did you stop?”

“You like that?” He growled.

“Yes…”

“What do you like, Sansa? Tell me. I want to hear it.”

“I like you putting your mouth to me.”

“Where?”

“On my… I like you…”

“Say it, Sansa, tell me.”

“I love it when you lick my cunny and use your fingers,” she whimpered. He groaned, shoved his fingers within her once more, prompting a strangled cry from his wife, then latched his mouth onto her
once more. She lifted her hips high. Jon used this as an opportunity to grab her arse with his other hand and squeeze.

She came with a cry, then collapsed on the bed, gasping. Jon withdrew, pleased but far too aroused to go much longer without being inside her. “You ready, Sweet Girl?” Her eyes fluttered open after a couple of beats and she nodded. Jon gripped her hips.

“Oh, you hands and knees,” he growled, flipping her over. She got onto all fours, shaking a bit, but looking back at him with a smile.

“I’m ready for you,” she gasped.

Jon gripped her arse and sheathed himself in her, almost weeping with relief. She was so hot, so wet, so perfect. The strength of her passage was intense, the sensation of it incredible. Her insides gripped him beautifully. He wasn’t going to last long, but he was determined that she peak again. Jon slipped a hand around her, finding her nub as he pounded into her. He pulled her up a bit.

“Gods, so wet Sansa. You know, my other hand is soaked in you,” he told her. She moaned. Jon leaned over and put his soaked fingers to her mouth. “Taste it, Sweetling. Taste yourself on my hand while you soak the other.”

She sucked on his middle and ring fingers. Jon gasped and kiss her shoulder. He tried to hold on. Frantically, he tried to find another way to stimulate her. He increased the pressure on her nub, alternating his strokes with little pinches.

“Come for me, Sansa,” he groaned, “Don’t hold back.”

“So close….” She gasped. She shifted her hips somewhat, and moved her hands down to join his, and guided his fingers to increase the pressure. “Harder. Please Jon… Stroke me, pinch me, fuck me harder…”

Jon groaned and did as asked all too eagerly. She started crying out and bucking against him more forcefully. Jon grinned and slipped his finger under the hood of her nub so it connected directly with the little pearl there, pushing hard.

His wife screamed and seemed to lose what composure she had left. To his delight, she clenched around him, her whole form seized by little spasms. Even her nub jerked and beat against his fingers. Even if he wanted to hold back at this point, he couldn’t. Jon’s eyes rolled back as his own release took him.

For a little while, he lost himself.

They both crumpled, Jon falling to the side behind her as she fell on her stomach. Groaning, he used the last of his strength to move her onto her side and pull against his chest. His cock slipped out of her fully in the process, falling between her legs as it softened. He felt odd little jerks. When he opened his eyes, he realized Sansa’s body was still seized by little spasms. She whined, her eyes still shut tight, biting her lower lip, her hips bucking against him.

Is she still…? “Sansa?”

She grabbed his shoulder, digging her nails into his skin. Jon watched in wonder. His wife eventually seemed to come down, her whine deteriorating into little gasps, her grip loosening. Finally, her eyes opened and met his.

Her blue gaze was a little out of focus, her mouth opened a bit slack. For a couple seconds she still
seemed gone. Then she regained control and pressed her forehead to his chest.

“I didn’t know it could last like that,” she murmured.

*Neither did I.* He gaped for a second, completely in awe. *Did I do that?*

His heart rate picked up at the thought. His body was too exhausted to react in any other way, but his emotions were active.

Clearly, no one had ever been able to do such a thing to her. Jon could not help feeling a bit smug. He clutched her to him possessively, burying his face in her hair and smirking a little.

“Mmmm, you’re so warm,” she murmured, curling up against his chest, almost like she was trying to burrow inside him.

“I’m glad,” he grunted, but he liked hearing this. She gave a sweet, musical sigh.

“So am I. I love you, my big, kind, warm husband.”

“I love you, my lovely, sweet, little wife.”

They’d underestimated their own exhaustion. When Jon finally woke, it was well past dawn. Sansa still slept, looking adorably childlike in her slumber.

After she woke, the newlyweds enjoyed a breakfast of baked cinnamon apples and a sort of bread/pastry with cranberries baked in that was a specialty of the region. They did so still in their bedrobes and after they finished eating Jon happily showed his bride one of his favorite parts of the castle: the bathroom.

Back at the Wall, staying clean wasn’t easy. Heating water took time, energy and resources that were scarce. The hot water they did have generally had to be used for cooking. When he became Lord Commander, he got to enjoy a tub to bathe in on his own. Before that, though… cleaning one’s body was rarely a pleasant process. It meant jumping in a stream very briefly or, if he wanted hot water, gathering around a heated pot of water with Pyp, Grenn, Sam and the other new recruits, every man trying to scrub themselves clean as quickly as possible without making eye contact.

As a result, Jon truly appreciated a comfortable bath. The room was located next to the solar, through a door opposite the bedchamber. A large, raised black marble tub built into the ground sat at the center of it. There were little spaces dug in underneath to light coals to keep the water hot. Apparently, it used to have running water to fill it, and there were fixtures that lent credence to that claim. However, the plumbing of the castle was old Valyrian machinery that had been broken down and the secrets as to how it worked were lost.

Luckily, it didn’t take long for the servants to fill with steaming water by hand, as they’d converted a servant’s cell nearby for the express purpose of heating water to fill the bath years and years ago. Sansa was delighted, and instantly went to fetch a number of bottles from her luggage consisting of some sort of special milk, rose water, lavender oil, and some other sort of silly thing that supposedly made one’s skin soft. This of course was in addition to a number of fancy soaps and rinses.

When Jon had briefly stayed at Dragonstone before, he’d just liked the hot water, the privacy, and the size of the tub that allowed him to stretch and lie down and move about. By the time his wife was done, the black of the tub was obscured by opaque white water with a rose scent. The entire room smelled like a perfumery before long as Sansa scampered about adding things and lighting candles.

Jon at one point tried to help, ready to pour in one of the bottles she missed. “No, that’s an oil. We
don’t add that until after we’ve washed our hair or it gets greasy.”

He just stopped there and tried not to laugh. This side of his wife was not one he got to see often. Just buoyant, enthusiastic, smiling, and enjoying some pretty things simply for the purpose of enjoying them. When she was at a point in her life where even her pretty dresses and jewelry had to serve as propaganda, seeing her try to make bath bubbles made his mouth split into a foolish grin. Once she was satisfied, she thanked the attendants profusely and sent them away with a large bottle of lavender oil to share between them.

Once the door was shut, she spun around, smiled, and removed her robe. She got on her tip toes to hang it on a hook by the door and the light of a nearby candle hit her backside in a perfect way, highlighting the heart-shaped curve of it. Jon’s eyes were glue to that and the side of her right breast which rose as she lifted her arm, then bounced down as she lowered it. He could barely think as he let his own robe fall.

She looked over, then frowned. “Jon! Your new robe!”

The prince managed to catch it in time. His stomach sank. He felt like an idiot. The bed robe was new, a wedding gift from his bride. It was soft black velvet and on the back an image of Ghost and Rhaegal circling one another was stitched in beautiful detail.

Normally, he wouldn’t care for a garment so extravagant, especially one meant for private use. But he tended to make exceptions for things Sansa made him. Apparently Randa, Anya, and Margaery helped her with it, and she’d worked on it secretly for months. When she’d given it to him, it was with no small amount of relief, as she’d been worried she wouldn’t finish it in time. After her maiden cloak, it had been her primary sewing project.

And, well, it was a very impressive-looking garment. He almost wished it wasn’t a bed robe so others could see it. One look was enough to tell you how much effort and talent went into crafting it. She’d even gotten the little green veins in Rhaegal’s otherwise red-orange fire.

Sheepish, he folded it over his arm and handed it to her, red-faced. “I’m sorry.”

She shook her head in disapproval, but had a smile on her face once she’d hung it up. “I’m too tired and you’re too naked for me to feel angry with you.”

Her hands met his and she pulled him into the tub. The water felt thicker, smoother, and surprisingly refreshing. The intense heat felt good against his muscles and he descended into the water, sitting on one of the benches so he was chest-deep, with a groan. Sansa knelt in front of him, dunked her head, then re-emerged with a smile, her auburn locks slicked back around her head. “Now, isn’t that lovely?”

“Yes,” he said with an intent eye on her, “It is.”

Even without the visual she provided, all blue eyes, porcelain skin, and rose-tipped breasts, this did feel amazing. The water wasn’t as filmy as he expected, and he felt like the top layer of his skin was being almost lightened, made fresher. His burnt hand felt better too. “We didn’t have anything like this at Winterfell. Did you learn of it in King’s Landing?”

Sansa went to sit beside him, shaking her head and leaning it back against the rim of the bath, her eyes fluttering closed. “Daenerys. In the Free Cities, in Qarth, and some of the Ghiscari cities, they bathe like this. She’s a bit of an expert on the subject. You know how people used to claim she bathed in the blood of maidsens to retain her youth? She claims rosewater, goats’ milk, aloe and cream of the cacao plant is what actually does the job. Nani agrees. You know my midwife is over
fifty years old?"

“Impossible,” he snorted. At most the woman was in her late thirties. Sansa nodded.

“It’s true. The first child she ever delivered was Khal Drogo. That’s how she became a healer.”

“That’s… Wow.” He marveled at this for about half a second. Then Sansa shifted her shoulders and her teats jiggled, distracting him.

“The aloe is also good for burns. Dany says she used it constantly during the time when she could still be burned. Of course, that Valyrian skin of hers helps as well,” Sansa leaned over and stroked his cheek, “Now that I think of it, you’ve never gotten a sunburn either, have you?”

“Neither have you.”

“Well, I didn’t go out in the sun much. When I was in King’s Landing, I used a cream Cersei Lannister recommended. But the one Nani gives me is better,” she ran her thumb up and down his cheek, “But you, Arya, Robb, Theon, Bran, Jory… You were all outside all the time. Training, hunting, riding, fighting… The others would always come back with their faces bright red. But you never did.”

Jon snorted. This was true enough. “It’s a wonder my true parentage remained a secret. That alone should have told everyone that I was of the blood of Old Valyria.”

Sansa laughed, then grabbed a wash cloth, a small tub of salve, and a bar of soap. “Let me scrub you down.”

The washing was interrupted soon enough by lovemaking as she slipped into his lap to find him hard as stone. Their coupling this time was soft, sweet, and relaxed. The complete antithesis of what they’d done last night, but delightful all the same. Once he’d spent his seed inside her, she remained in place, resting against him.

“I love it when we do it like this,” she sighed, “I feel so close to you. I get to keep you inside even when we’re done. And I feel so safe.”

They stayed in that position for a while, Jon still inside her. They even washed each other’s hair like that, laughing as they took turns lathering up and then overturning jugs of water over themselves to rinse the soap out. After that, Sansa let him help her add the extra oils she’d admonished him for earlier. They spent a good long while just enjoying one another.

As they did, Jon let his mind wander and reflect. The dark, cave-like room. The water. The red-haired woman in his lap insisting on the bath. The love-making. Jon couldn’t help but recall a prior experience.

He wondered how Ygritte would react to a bath like this, if they were to have one. It would never happen, of course. Even if she’d lived. Even if he could somehow bring her to Dragonstone. She’d never consent to accepting him as prince of anything. She’d likely rather burn in Drogon’s flames than bend the knee. No one was more wildling, more Free Folk than Ygritte. But if he could have… She’d likely laugh at him. “What’s with all the fancy grog in the water, Jon Snow? You need your fine lordly skin kept soft as a babe’s arse? It’s a bath. You get naked, you get in, you rinse yourself clean, you get out. Silly, pampered southerner. What, you want to smell like a girl?”

Jon snorted. She’d like the warm water, though. She’d like being able to move about. And even though she’d never admit it, she’d like the smell.
There was another thing she’d like, an advantage of the heat. When he’d coupled with her in that pool all those years ago, the water had been quite cold. Not as icy as some of the streams, but to anyone used to warm baths it would have seemed frigid. While he’d managed to couple with the wildling in the water there, the temperature had inhibited the way he swelled. In the heat, he was bigger.

Jon couldn’t help but reflect on the changes in his life. Back then, he’d been somewhere between a boy and a man, lost and confused. Not knowing what he was, feeling as if he were betraying everyone. If he didn’t turn his cloak against his new friends among the Free Folk, he was turning his cloak against his brothers at the Wall. Ygritte had only made things more confusing.

Now, he still felt strong misgivings about his identity. That boy he’d been longed for a true name. These days he had two. One which he’d yearned to wear his whole life and another he’d never expected to assume. But neither of them gave him all the answers he’d expected. He had all sorts of prestige, status, and privilege to enjoy, but all the same the world seemed to sit upon his shoulders and brow as much as it ever did, and he still found himself plagued by doubts.

Sometimes he felt riddled with guilt. Those selfish, childhood dreams of replacing Robb still haunted him. He could remember himself freezing and troubled as Donal Noye delivered the news of Robb being declared King in the North. So now Robb will sip summerwine from jeweled goblets while I'm kneeling by some stream sucking snowmelt from cupped hands. Then Mormont spoke of beautiful princesses, sons, luxuries, praise and titles. All the things Robb had that Jon would do without.

The irony didn’t escape him. He wished it did. Despite himself, he sometimes felt an uncomfortable twinge when he kissed his beautiful princess, tasted his summerwine, wore his velvets, or heard someone call him ‘Your Grace.’ As if he’d somehow stolen that life from his brother.

It was ridiculous, of course. But that didn’t keep him from thinking about it from time to time.

Sometimes he couldn’t help but look around at the court, his aunt on the Iron Throne, the dragons, the high lords bowing, his beautiful wife, his Dornish wine and his velvet cloak and wonder what in the Seven Hells a bastard crow like him was doing there.

He looked at Sansa now, her long legs draped over his lap as she ran a silver comb through her wavy red locks. She hardly needed to do it. The teeth of the comb swept through her silken strands without impediment, not encountering a single knot or tangle. His wife looked like a mermaid: wet, glistening, naked, graceful, and lovely. Sansa combed and brushed her hair at least twice a day. He remembered looking at Ygritte and wondering if she only combed her own fire-kissed locks at the changing of the seasons.

The two women couldn’t be more different, nor could the circumstances surrounding their role in his life differ more.

Ygritte was a wild, crass, warrior woman who managed to be so simple and uncomplicated in her character. There was no hiding, no inner conflict, and no much complexity to her. She was wildling through and through. A free woman, gruff and teasing and willful and fierce. Jon always loved how confidant she could be, how sure of her place in the world she was. There was nothing about her that mystified him, and she seemed to take pride in that. Despite how unconventional she’d have been by standards below the Wall, she really wasn’t that hard to understand. If she wanted something, she took it. If someone tried to hurt or control her, she’d slit their throat. She said everything that was on her mind and if you argued, she had a response. She knew what she wanted, what she needed, how she felt, and how to take care of herself and anyone who wanted to tell her she was wrong about anything knew nothing. The only thing that took time and effort to uncover was how beautiful she was behind her narrow eyes, crooked teeth, pug nose and filthy hair.
And yet despite her relatively straightforward outlook and personality, she’d been the source of so much confusion and complication in Jon’s own life, in the way he viewed himself. An uncomplicated girl who complicated everything for him.

Sansa, on the other hand, was less like a spear or arrow, more like the Wall itself. Her strength came from her endurance and composure, wrapped in a glittering, elegant beauty that was apparent upon the first look. She resisted being a warrior with all her might, only giving in when duty forced her hand around the hilt of a blade. Then she’d done it reluctantly, and cried through every battle as blood soaked her clothes. And despite how she kept herself under tight control, despite her adherence to all manner of strict social rules regarding etiquette and femininity, despite how she made her choices based on duty, social rules, and the needs and expectations of others, she had her own captivating form of freedom. One could not seize the level of power and achievement she’d acquired without a strong sense of self-determination.

Once, when he’d been in the throes of infatuation with Val, Jon reflected on how the wildling was a warrior, ‘not some willowy creature who sits up in a tower, brushing her hair and waiting for some knight to save her.’

He didn’t explicitly think of her at the time, but in the back of his mind it was likely Sansa and all the heroines of the songs she loved and modeled herself after that formed that image. Now Sansa sat in the tower of Dragonstone, combing her hair, willowy as could be.

At age twelve, she likely waited for a knight to save her. When that didn’t happen, she subjected herself to the lusts and abuse of others in order to go to war, soaked herself in the blood of her enemies, then bludgeoned her raper to death and skewered the eye socket of the man who had killed her son. Then she’d saved herself from false accusations in court, testifying before those who once laughed at her when she was beaten and stripped in the same room at the age of twelve.

After that she went back to her embroidery, hair-brushing and silks and made herself one of the most powerful people in the Seven Kingdoms and possibly the world.

She gleefully grasped the hands of dirty children and ventured into the streets of Fleabottom to hand out food, but wanted everything neat and beautifully adorned. She loved it when her husband stuck his face between her legs, but couldn’t stand to kiss him in the morning before she’d freshened her breath. She’d been raped and touched by many a lecherous hand, but grinned as she made love. She certainly adhered the image and behavior of a traditional woman, but wielded more power in a single afternoon than most of the greatest lords and strongest knights in the seven realms would in their entire lives. She considered smiles and courtesies her armor and often wielded them as weapons as well. She’d done this quite effectively. She once led armies and killed men in graphic ways, but cried when she saw even her greatest enemies suffer and die. She constantly revealed subtle truths to things and deciphered many conundrums and mysteries that baffled all those around her, yet she could craft those same artifices and lies better than anyone.

She was ridiculously complex. And yet… She actually made Jon’s life simpler in any ways. She made the questions he had regarding his identity and place in the world easier to work through. She helped him navigate the baffling world of the court. She gave him all the things he yearned for without the epic levels of guilt that came with his liaison with Ygritte. She was one of the first things in his life that actually made sense.

Both women were redheads with their own strengths and intelligence. Ygritte had her simple, down-to-earth, pragmatic wisdom that kept herself and others alive and gave her life a solid, well-constructed logic. Sansa had her elaborate political and deeply philosophical insight that she applied to everything from her outfits to morality in general. Both ended up being guides to a new world and
society Jon had inhabited and made him deeply aware of his own ignorance. Both were his teachers as much as they were his lovers. Ygritte was passion, freedom, exploration, and understanding of the everyday world. Sansa was family, morality, responsibility, and power.

Ygritte was youth. Sansa was adulthood.

*I get to spend my adulthood in perfumed milk baths,* he thought to himself with a small smile. Jon pulled the comb from Sansa’s hands, pulled her closer to him, rested his head on her bosom, and enjoyed the water, the smells, the softness of Sansa’s skin and the memory of Ygritte’s laughter.
Duty

Chapter Summary

Barristan muses on the past and future, Jon and Sansa get a message

Chapter Notes

Thanks to my awesome beta Bluecichlid for all her help.

First Barristan POV. I struggled with his voice a bit, but I hope you guys enjoyed it nonetheless. Please let me know what you think :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Forty-three: Duty

Barristan:

Too many young faces, he thought, glancing around the council table. Babes almost.

No, that wasn’t fair. Of the council, he, Butterwell, Waters, and Merys were over forty. While he didn’t trust Waters, Butterwell and Merys were a fine sort, skilled at their jobs and holding just enough ambition to do their best work but not enough for them to overstep their boundaries.

Missandei, all of sixteen, was the youngest person here, but she’d seen and suffered too much for anyone to rightly call her a babe. She, like her mistress, had wisdom beyond her years. The sort of wisdom that came with surviving so many years of hardship.

The same could easily be said of Prince Jon and Sansa Stark. Jon’s involvement on the council was partly out of necessity. If the worst happened and Daenerys was taken from them, her heir had to be prepared to take the reigns of governance at once.

As much as he hated to admit it, one of the things that always bothered him during his time serving Robert Baratheon was that Prince Joffrey was not prepared for his future role. Prince Rhaegar began attending council meetings at the age of eight, just as his father had before him. Joffrey was twelve and crowned by the time before he set foot in the council chamber. The first time the lad took the throne, he ended up piercing himself on it and screaming for his mother before the whole court.

No one but the Lannisters seemed to be interested in preparing for what would happen in case of Robert’s death. And their preparation seemed to revolve around making sure that boy was as ignorant a puppet as could be. He’d been ordered to stay silent unless his council was requested, unfortunately, and his council was never requested.

Daenerys seemed uninterested in making her nephew a mere puppet, and for that Selmy was grateful. Not that such a thing was possible. Barristan expected the young man to be hardened considering his past. But he had a shrewd and progressive mind to go along with his strength. Many
dismissed him as cold and foolish due to his soft-spoken nature. An easy enough mistake to make. Jon did not like sharing much of himself, and so it was easy to imagine that there wasn’t much to share.

But before long, the prince’s sense of duty, quiet intelligence, and cool demeanor validated his place on the council for reasons that went beyond his blood and birthright. There was rarely a day that went by that Barristan wasn’t happy that the former bastard was the one on hand to take over should anything happen to Daenerys. The young man would have a rough time of getting used to such power, but he would wield it well nonetheless. Barristan didn’t mind the level of influence the young man had, and now that the prince was away from court, Barristan missed him.

When his queen came to him moons ago and informed him that she’d added Sansa Stark to the council, however, the Lord Commander of the Queensguard had been less enthusiastic. He actually wondered if perhaps his queen was doing it out of a desperate desire for more female companionship. Being queen often meant she was usually surrounded by groups of older men. That was likely to have an affect on a young woman.

Sansa Stark had not yet been twenty years of age when she first sat at the council table, and though Barristan knew she had a keen intellect and experience, he could not be too sure of her motives. He’d never liked Petyr Baelish and though it was clear that the young woman loathed Littlefinger, there were still distinct traces of him in her. Barristan had observed the Lady of Winterfell during her dinners with the queen and prince, not to mention during her trial and her visits with the royal family. Sometimes she’d say things that echoed Baelish’s own words.

Barristan had known her very slightly when she was the Hand’s daughter. The Sansa Stark of that time had been a sweet, romantic, dutiful little child who just wanted to be a princess and spoke of romantic stories and songs as if they were real.

The young woman at the queen’s table spoke of spying and maneuvering people like they were pieces on a cyvasse board. The way Littlefinger used to speak. But then she’d also act like that innocent little girl. Barristan could not ever be sure what she was. He feared that both his queen and his prince were being seduced.

As it turned out, though, it didn’t really matter if they were or not. Lady Stark proved herself an asset. Barristan’s fears of her using the prince subsided when he came to realize how actively she seemed to be encouraging Jon to improve his skills in reading people and playing politics. If she wanted to make Jon into her puppet, then she’d done everything she could to stand in her own way, educating him in exactly the right way to make him see through that sort of manipulation. Both the prince and the queen became more adept at handling the court, and overall the council became far more effective with her on it.

But people like Daenerys, Missandei, Jon, and Sansa tended to be the exceptions rather than the rule. They’d both endured too much hardship and responsibility, seen too much of the real world for any of them to hold on to the worst sorts of arrogance and naivété that youth was prone to. They were still susceptible to follies of the young here and there, but they were wise beyond their years regardless.

Barristan wasn’t sure the same could be said about the Tyrells.

It wasn’t a question of intelligence. Their efficiency, wit, and learning proved downright jaw-dropping. Willas and Margaery Tyrell arrived at their first council meeting with background knowledge of every issue at hand and a prepared list of solutions for a number of them. Willas took copious notes of everything that was said and Margaery acted like she’d been serving on the council for twenty years.
Unfortunately, Barristan could tell that for all their cleverness, there was a complacency and overconfidence to what they did. Furthermore, they and their ideas seemed hard to access. Some of the plans they proposed could be hard to understand. When an explanation was requested, they reacted with wide eyes, as if everything they said should be perfectly obvious to all who heard.

Sometimes their ideas were impractical. When their proposals were proven to be insufficient, they took the rejections rather hard.

It was clear to Barristan that the two of them were used to being the smartest people in the room. It was also clear that they didn’t have much patience. Margaery had been imprisoned in the Great Sept after she’d been accused by Cersei Lannister, but she’d survived that relatively unscathed. The two of them hadn’t fought in any battles, hadn’t starved, hadn’t ever been responsible for others on a grand scale. And despite their obvious interest in aiding the realm and charity work, everything they did seemed ultimately self-serving.

They played the realm like a game.

The queen needed more people on her council that were too old or too jaded for games. People who could believe in something other than themselves.

Which was why, when the subject of the new Master of Ships came up, Barristan spoke at once. “Davos Seaworth.”

“Seaworth?” Willas said, shocked. “The man is illiterate.”

“I doubt the fleet would take kindly to answering to a low-born knight,” Margaery remarked, pushing a lock of chestnut behind her ear.

“They’ll serve who the queen tells them to serve,” replied Barristan, “Ser Davos is a good man, and wise. And for the record, he can, in fact, read and write. I have letters in his hand if you would like proof.”

“He was a smuggler, was he not?” Willas said, “Basically a pirate.”


“Maybe, but at one time, so did Aurane Waters. He fought for Stannis at the Blackwater. He was taken by the Lannisters, eventually was released and made Master of Ships, and absconded with the new fleet Cersei Lannister paid a fortune for to become a pirate king,” Margaery replied, obviously trying not to laugh. Talk of the Lannister woman’s various gaffes and humiliations often brought a twinkle to the Tyrell girl’s brown eyes.

“Then he didn’t serve Stannis loyally,” replied Arther Butterwell. “But even after the Blackwater, Ser Davos returned to Stannis’s side. Now Ser Davos serves the man’s daughter Shireen.”

“Well, if he’s so devoted to the Baratheons, what makes you think he’ll want to come here? We’d have another Rodrick Harlaw on our hands,” Drystan Waters said.

“Shireen Baratheon doesn’t quite have the same hold or need of Ser Davos that Stannis did. And sending him here would be a much-needed display of loyalty on her part. It would likely give Ser Davos an opportunity to keep an eye on the court to make sure his mistress is still safe,” Merys reasoned.

They all looked at Daenerys, who seemed interested.
“Is he still at court?” she asked, looking over at Margaery. The Tyrell girl had taken over the court duties while Princess Sansa was away.

“No. He’s reportedly at his keep at Cape Wrath. It wouldn’t take long for him to journey back to the Red Keep.”

“Have him return and meet with me. We’ll bring him on the pretense of him helping organize the prince and princess’s voyage across the Narrow Sea. If he seems trustworthy enough and shows enough aptitude for such an undertaking, we’ll make the offer,” Dany said.

The Tyrells glanced at one another. Barristan couldn’t help but feel worry over this. It was no secret that Willas had his eye on the Master of Ships position his father once held. They had personal reasons to oppose Davos. The Onion Knight will need to be warned, Barristan thought glumly, I wouldn’t put sabotage past either of these two.

When the meeting was finally adjourned, Selmy made for his quarters. To his surprise, Lady Margaery met up with him in the halls.

“You know, my brother Loras speaks highly of you,” she said, taking his arm, “He says he’s never known a more honest and honorable man, and he takes great pleasure in serving under such a legend.”

Loras Tyrell was a decent young man, more cautious than his siblings having learnt his lesson at Dragonstone. He had a chip on his shoulder, and clear ambition, but was otherwise decent. Still, Barristan suspected that the young man’s words regarding him hadn’t been quite as glowing as Margaery claimed. He purposely changed his route as they walked, trying to be as subtle as possible.

“Ser Loras does me a great honor. He is a fine knight.”

“I want to thank you for making the Queensguard so accommodating for him. It isn’t easy, given his history.”

“The order is welcoming to the knights worthy enough to keep their vows.”

“Well, I was hoping that considering our new connection that we could be friends.”

“Did you? How kind.” He didn’t want to be rude. Margaery Tyrell was a lady. “Though an unconventional friendship to say the least.”

“Sometimes the least conventional ones are the most fruitful.”

“Yes. I just hope you won’t find my company fruitless. After all, we have very different backgrounds, play very different games.” Within a few seconds, they were in the High Nobles’ wing, just a few yards from the Tyrell quarters. “Ah, Lady Margaery, here we are.”

The Tyrell noticed the door and gave him a hard stare. “Have I offended you, Ser Barristan? I hope you don’t hold me in ill-regard.”

“I would not say that, My Lady,” he replied. “Thus far, you’ve given me no reason to think ill of you. I merely do not think our respective roles and aims coincide enough for me to offer you the sort of friendship you seek without one of us becoming compromised.”

“We both want what is best for the realm, yes?”

“I imagine so. I hope so. Otherwise, things would not go well for either of us.” He gave her a stern
“But I think we serve those ends in very, very different arenas. As I said, I have little to offer you at the moment. Maybe that shall change if our methods turn out to have more in common than I initially imagined. We do not seem to be at odds now. I hope those circumstances shall continue.”

“As do I.” She almost pouted. Instead, she managed to smile and curtsey. “Well, thank you for escorting me, Ser Barristan. Have a fine day.”

Barristan watched her retreating back with careful eyes. A slight chill went down his spine. I may have just made things a bit more dangerous for myself. But he was a man of honor. He was not even going to pretend to let the Tyrells buy him out. I don’t play that game.

He wondered if this was finally the time that such a refusal might cost him his life.

Daenerys Targaryen was the first monarch he’d served where the thought of his own death gave him considerable pause. Not out of any fear of dying or any self-interest. More out of fear of what would come after he was gone. When he first joined the Kingsguard so many years ago, it was a celebrated order filled with many honorable knights. Then at a certain point during the reign of King Aerys it began to deteriorate rapidly. Many a corrupt, violent lout had been named.

There had been poor members before, but it was during Barristan’s tenure that they’d acquired a literal Kingslayer among the Kingsguard, then kept him despite his crime.

It defied everything the order was known for. It made no sense. And in Barristan’s mind, it opened the floodgates to corruption and invalidation of everything the guard stood for.

Then came many other Lannister loyalists. When Robert took the throne, only two Kingsguard remained--- Barristan and the Kingslayer. The other five spots were filled with Lannister loyalists after. As if Jaime Lannister weren’t enough, people like Meryn Trant, Boros Blount, and Preston Greenfield had to join. At least the Kingslayer had some courage, but Blount was an utter coward.

And what came after Selmy left made him shudder. He’d seen some awful things in his lifetime and during his tenure. Among the worst was easily what became of poor Queen Rhaella. That, along with his service to Robert Baratheon, proved to be among the greatest tests of his vows. One had to obey the king. One also had to protect the king’s family. But what happened when the king attacked the queen?

Or ordered his guards to attack an innocent girl meant to be his bride? Barristan had heard about that years later. He could not attack a young girl. He’d stood by some of the time when his queen had been attacked in private, held back by his vows. But his knightly vows, the ones which commanded him to protect the innocent, could not allow him to actively participate in hurting a child. But apparently, many of his compatriots didn’t feel the same way. He couldn’t help but wonder how many people like that might succeed him in the order.

According to what Barristan learned later, Meryn Trant, Boros Blount, and Preston Greenfield believed the answer to be, “Do so, enthusiastically and without question.”

Several moons ago, the queen and prince came to him. Sitting in his chambers, Daenerys swallowed heavily and asked about her parents. Barristan hesitated before confessing the nature of their relationship.

“Queens are protected by the Kingsguard, but obedience to the king comes first,” he confessed miserably.

“So if I were to take the throne, and ordered you to attack my wife or betrothed,” Jon asked, “You’d
obey? Even if I were clearly mad?"

“I---” Barristan had hesitated to answer. “I would not, but I am not sure I can say the same for other members of the guard.”

“The rules are to be augmented,” Dany interrupted. “I can’t in good conscience allow such a thing. I need new oaths sworn.”

Barristan was happy for it, it pointed things in the right direction for the order. Gave them a more clear moral path. A more clear moral path was definitely needed now.

The problem was, Barristan wasn’t sure he could trust all the members of the Queensguard to follow it. Brienne of Tarth and Dead Dirt he could trust to stay moral and incorrupt without his leadership. But he was less sure of Ser Gerold Lolliston, Ser Timmure Templeton and Ser Markus Mallister. Nor was he certain of Loras Tyrell. The man had a close bond with his relatives, after all. He couldn’t be sure the lad was free from outside influence.

The last thing he wanted was for the Kingsguard to descend back into a pit of corruption. A woman or a eunuch was unlikely to be accepted as a new Lord Commander, so how could he be sure of sound leadership once he was gone? Barristan was still hard at work trying to mold the other members into proper candidates, but such things took time. In this age of regimes that so rapidly rose and fell, vows were taken less seriously. Re-teaching the importance of honor and duty proved more difficult than ever.

Barristan suddenly felt exhausted. He trudged back to his quarters with a heavy heart. I’m getting so old. I have to work faster. I don’t have much time left.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Jon:

In the nine weeks since their arrival, Jon and Sansa managed to establish a sort of routine. A routine that his duty-bound, martyrdom-prone sixteen-year-old self would likely have shaken his head at, but a routine nonetheless.

They slept late, then spent the mornings answering letters and enjoying the fresh air. At midday, they’d take lunch in the chambers with their household, including Little Lynette. They walked the grounds and sometimes visited the village or beach in the early afternoons, then Jon would go train in the yards for a few hours while Sansa took to the solar. In the evenings, they answered yet more letters, took supper in public, then retired to their chambers to watch the sunset and make love until they collapsed from exhaustion.

It was an arrangement Jon found more than agreeable.

It afforded many days of pure bliss. On some of them, they let their whims determine their every action.

One morning, they picked cranberries from the bushes in the gardens and spoke of building glass gardens so better produce might grow in Dragonstone. They went to the kitchens to help the servants make sauce from the berries they picked, and some of that special bread.

The next day they took they took the sauce and bread and various other food out near the beach and watched the tides as they picnicked. Dragonstone wasn’t a paradise, but it had its views. As long as the weather was fine one could still watch the ocean. Every time a ship passed, they played a game where they imagined what the boat was carrying, where it was going and why. They imagined one
of them belonged to that handsome Bastard of Driftmark who had hoodwinked Queen Cersei and become a pirate king, coming back to Westeros to try and pillage more Lannister gold. Another was a Qartheen vessel filled with expensive silks and spices. Another they decided belonged to a handsome merchant prince from Myr heading to the capital to try and win Daenerys’s love after hearing legends of her beauty.

“Or maybe it’s not Daenerys he seeks,” Jon joked to her, “Maybe it’s the famed Red Wolf of Winterfell. Perhaps he prefers redheads and wishes to steal away my bride.”

“And what if he did?” She asked.

“I’d call upon Rhaegal, call upon the entire royal fleet and hunt him down. I’d go to the ends of the world to get you back.”

She smiled and tweaked his nose, looking lovely as the ocean winds blew her hair back.

Many years had gone by since Jon had known such freedom and ease. Not since his childhood at Winterfell had his days been so unfettered by danger, intrigue, and responsibility.

Of course, such things can’t last forever. His heart sank as he read his aunt’s missive.

When he finished, he stood and left his solar, wandering down the hall with that blasted piece of paper clutched in his right hand. Not since his first wight had the hand burned so. He made his way to the Lady’s apartments, where Sansa had set up a private solar, office, and dressing room once she’d deemed the one prepared for her to have insufficient lighting. Sansa insisted that they needed separate areas, especially for places to do their business.

He knocked and waited to be granted entry. Nani opened the door for him and bowed.

Jon found his wife seated at her writing table at the far left wall, turned to face him. Lynette and the Septa were over by the window, stitching. Sansa pushed herself up when he stepped in, her blue eyes expectant. Jon eyed her swelling belly with some apprehension. She was about almost four moons along now, beginning to show. A couple weeks ago they gave permission for her pregnancy to be announced. Every day more and more gifts came, along with letters offering them congratulations and wishing them a strong, healthy son.

Lynette and the Septa curtsied to him while Sansa gave a small nod of her head. “Yes, Your Grace?”

Sometimes, being around his wife in front of others could be bothersome. There was often a degree of formality he didn’t care for which varied based on the company they kept. Sansa insisted upon strict formality in front of Lynette.

After a few days spent in Dragonstone it was clear that the child was painfully spoiled and highly resistant to accepting her new circumstances. Sansa insisted that it was best for her to have proper manners instilled in her and that exposing her to too much familiarity would only hinder the girl socially. “People will already cast a harsh eye upon her for her heritage. Coming across as ill-mannered or spoiled will only make things worse for her.”

Sansa wanted to send the girl to Ironoaks to foster with Anya Waynwood and be around more children her age. But Lady Waynwood did not tolerate brattiness, so Sansa wanted to make sure the girl’s etiquette was impeccable before she left. She believed the best way to do this without having to be too harsh was to lead by example.

This meant that in front of Lynette, Jon was “Your Grace”, “My Prince”, and “My Lord”, even to his wife. She didn’t even call him “My Love” in front of Lynette. In turn, Jon had to remember to
address his bride in similar terms when the girl was in earshot.

He hesitated. “My Lady, I am sorry to disturb you, but I need to speak to you in private.”

“Come along, Lynette,” Septa Darene said, quickly shuffling the child out. Nani followed them, her dark eyes narrowed.

Once they were alone, Sansa’s eyes went straight to the paper in his hand. Jon walked toward her, trying to find the right words.

“A letter came from Daenerys. She… She wants me to fly Rhaegal to Pyke.”

Sansa’s face fell. “But…”

Jon wrapped his arms around her waist. “The Ironborn lords are showing a lot of resistance to serving the crown. They’re making noise about taking up arms again. They need to be reminded of the Targaryens’ power. Dany needs to stay in King’s Landing to keep the kingdom afloat and she wants to reinforce my authority as her heir. I’d only be gone for a few weeks. Just long enough to frighten the Ironmen with a little dragon fire and show some support for Asha Greyjoy to put them in line, and I’ll be flying back to you at once.”

Sansa’s face went as red as her hair. She turned away from him and crossed her arms in front of her waist. “Well, that’s that then, isn’t it?”

“Sweetling, you know I don’t want to go---“

“But you have to. The squid woman needs the dragons to come and intimidate her lords for her so that they don’t start raiding again. Gods, what is wrong with these people?”

Well, she’s not angry with me. There was only a little comfort in that, though. His wife shook. Jon went and wrapped his arms about her and kissed her neck. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I. I’m sorry that stuck-up sully Asha Greyjoy is too incompetent to handle her lunatic bannermen on her own. I’m sorry I never took the time to wipe out the Ironborn once and for all while I was still Queen in the North. Maybe for once the realms could know some peace and I could have my husband around while I carry his child.”

Jon didn’t exactly agree with this, but he decided to keep his opinions to himself for the time being. His wife’s moods were starting to shift more dramatically, and she was likely just venting her frustrations.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, “I know this is hard. But I’m sure you’ll be able to manage without---“

That’s when Sansa turned around and glared at him. “Of course I’ll manage without you. What, do you think I can’t handle a few weeks without my big princely husband around to take care of me?”

“Well, no, but I---“

She grabbed his collar and started pushing him so he had to walk backwards. “You think I’m like Asha Greyjoy, needing some big strong prince to ride in on a dragon to save her from her own subjects? Unlike her, I can actually keep my bannermen in line. Without your help or anyone else’s. Because I’m a proper lady. Not some uncouth glorified shipwench raised amid a bunch of bloodthirsty barbarians.”

Jon’s heart skipped a beat. Sansa’s eyes were like hot coals. But then they began to waver and fill
with tears. The sobs came and she fell into his arms. “But I don’t want you to go!”

“Hey…” He wrapped his arms around her, patting her back and stroking her hair. He shushed her. “I know, Sweetling.”

Sansa looked up at him with panicked eyes, gripping his shirt. “Jon, what if they try to hurt you? Theon Greyjoy took Bran and Rickon hostage. What if these madmen try to do the same with you? They might---- Theon was mad enough to try and hold Winterfell even after he was completely doomed. You’d be a valuable hostage, after all. You’re the only heir to the Iron Throne.”

“Sansa, please…” He took a deep breath and reached down to cup her belly. “I’m not the only heir to the Iron Throne, remember? The whole kingdom knows you’re carrying my child at this point. And I’ll be perfectly safe. If you think for a second that Rhaegal or Daenerys will let anything happen to me… Even if they did make some absurd demands and Dany pretended to agree to them, what’s to stop her from turning the islands to dragonglass the second she had me back? Even Victarion Greyjoy’s not that big a fool. Even he has to realize what Dany will do to them if…”

“Forget Dany,” Sansa sneered, shaking, “If they harm a hair on your head, I’ll… I’ll…”


“Don’t laugh, Jon. You remember what I did to Petyr Baelish? To Wallace Coldwater? Those were not painless deaths. I was an unarmed woman more or less alone in those situations. What do you think I’d do with an army? Just because I hate violence doesn’t mean I won’t resort to it. I’ve proven that several times. The Greyjoys are already indirectly responsible for the burning of my home and the death of my youngest brother at the very least. This has been a long time coming. And I promise you, whatever I can’t come up with, I’ll let Arya dream up for me.”

This gave him pause. He stopped laughing. His wife was dead serious. He reached out and stroked her cheek tentatively. She was panting.

“Alright, calm down,” he said. She smacked his hand away.

“Don’t tell me to calm down, Jon! I have every reason not to feel calm! This is not me being irrational! You going to the island of the people who believed murder and pillaging to be a god-given vocation is not the sort of thing any rational woman reacts to with calm.”

“You know, I have been known to win a few fights,” Jon replied, starting to get a little worried. He kept a concerned eye upon his bride, glancing down at her belly every so often. “I’ve proven myself a fair match to some of the best knights in the country. And Dany is planning to have a guard sail to Pyke to watch over me as well. Also, you know, there’s the matter of the dragon I’m going to fly there.”

“Not enough.” Sansa hurried over to her desk and grabbed a quill and parchment. “I’m writing to the Mallisters and the Mormonts to send men from Seagard and Bear Island. The Mallisters are my uncle’s bannermen, and the Bear Island folk know how to deal with Ironborn. I want you protected.”

“Your people are already strained enough with the winter----“

“Yes, but they’ll be subjected to even more hardship if the Ironborn start a war by taking the prince of the realm hostage. My Uncle Brynden will also have to spare some men.”

“Sansa, please… No one is going to hurt me. Just… Please, don’t get yourself so worked up. Think this through. Try and sleep on it. If, in the morning, you still feel this way, you can write as many letters as you wish.”
She paused and stared down at the parchment. “When are you leaving?”

“In a fortnight.”

Sansa took a deep breath. “Fine. You’re right. I need to clear my head. It’s not good for us if I get this upset.”

“That’s right.” He walked over and out a hand on her shoulder. He reached down and pulled her to him again. “I am touched by your concern for my safety, though.”

That wasn’t something he said lightly, either. It was times like these that he was struck by just how much his wife truly loved him. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been shown so much concern. He cradled her to him and kissed her forehead. He didn’t want to leave her any more than she wanted him to. He felt a bit tempted to write to his aunt and tell her to handle it herself.

But he had a duty. Daenerys had written in her letter that she needed the Ironborn to take his authority seriously, and for that to happen, he needed to go. And his aunt was already swamped with work in the capital.

They retired to the lady’s bedchamber, the room Sansa had converted into her dressing room. The bed was still there, though, and they made use of it. They curled up against each other, trying to lie peacefully. After several minutes, Jon thought his bride had calmed herself.

But then: “Promise me you won’t stray.”


By the next morning, Sansa still didn’t feel completely at ease about the trip whatsoever He managed to convince her not to send for a whole army, but a Northern guard was prepared to meet him at Pyke along with Daenerys’s men.

Their fortnight together ended up passing far too quickly. As the two weeks went by, Jon couldn’t help but think of how his weeks traveling would be away from his wife, not being able to watch her belly swell, not being able to have her to himself. Three to four weeks of them worrying about each other, missing one another.

Sansa seemed highly preoccupied with worries regarding not only his safety, but by him being seduced. At times it annoyed him, but he tried to hide his irritation regarding that. Didn’t Sansa trust him?

“It’s not you I don’t trust.” She’d told him.

The night before he was due to leave, she gave him a wooden box. “Presents.”

Inside was a collection of things. One was a new favor, this one a blue handkerchief embroidered with the image of three wolves: a red one, a white one, and a little silver cub between them. Then there were a couple of sketches of her, one of her in her wedding clothes. Along with that was a vial of her perfume. And finally, there was a silver pendant on a chain.

The pendant was a locket. When he opened it, a tied lock of Sansa’s hair fell out. Painted on the inside was a miniature of her. A replica of her old portrait, only this time her dress was red and black.

“Remember what you said about that portrait?” she murmured. “That it was designed to make a man play with himself? Well, that’s what I want you to do when you’re gone.”
After hearing that, of course, Jon couldn’t help but attack her. Afterwards, to his embarrassment, he asked her to also give him a pair of her pantalets to accompany him. She happily acquiesced. That night he fell asleep in pure bliss, slipping into unconsciousness with his hand upon her belly.

It only made it that much harder when he climbed onto Rhaegal’s back the next morning. Sansa said her good-byes with a solemn but calm face, her words soft, sweet, and polished. He kissed her deep and gave her every reassurance he could think of before she pushed him away and told him he had to go.

Jon managed to keep his eyes dry as he took to the air.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the lateness on this one. Like I said last chapter, plenty of stuff going on. But please let me know what you think. :)
A Not-So-Iron Grip

Chapter Summary

Jon goes to Pyke. He observes. He gets some alone time with Asha.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bluecichlid for her beta-work! And fixing my shitty mistakes!

Wooo! 550 kudos! Thanks to all my awesome reader/commenters. You guys are the best!

Note: Okay, so in this, Asha's characterization might seem a little "off". This is me exploring how she's changed a bit, partly because of her family history, how she's become a mother, and how tenuous her grasp of power is. Her situation is SUPER dangerous, and she's trying to hold on as best she can. And trust me, it's not easy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Forty-four: A Not-so-Iron Grip

Jon:

It took all his strength not to fly for Winterfell when he got near the Neck. He managed to fly for Seagard, as he was meant to, but it killed him to do it. He’d yearned for home for so long, getting that close to the Neck was downright agonizing, but he flew ahead to the seat of House Mallister nonetheless. It was there he received word on the guard that was prepared for him. He was told they had already having set sail for Pyke and would likely be floating just out of bounds, waiting for him.

And waiting they were. There were four ships in total. Two from the capital, one from the Riverlands, and yet another from the North. More were docked at Seagard and at the Crag, he knew, ready to attack the isles should anything happen. But he was grateful to see them. Jon felt utterly exhausted and was eager for his journey to be at an end.

Sort of suggests a lack of confidence in poor Rhaegal, doesn’t it? He brought the dragon down to the waters beside the ships, settling next to the northern ship, the Winter’s Fear. He climbed up Rhaegal’s wing onto the deck, feeling a bit odd as the men gathered around.

Nathen Cerwyn, more used to the dragon than the others, was the first to run up to greet Jon. The Prince smiled at the lad as he awkwardly introduced the captain. Dorren Flint, the nephew of the woman who once accused him of raping Sansa, met him upon the deck. It took a while for the man to regain his senses and stop staring at the green dragon in the water beside his ship. Then he smiled brightly and bowed.

“Your Grace, I’m sorry to inform you that you’ve traveled from one gloomy island to another,” he said with what he obviously imagined to be humor, his brown eyes wide.
“One of the ‘gloomy islands’ you speak of happens to house my bride and unborn child,” Jon reminded the man.

Flint laughed. “I guess that makes the one coming up more appealing then, eh?”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. “Quite the opposite. Need I remind you that my wife is in fact your liege lady?”

Flint had the decency to bow his head. “Apologies, Your Grace. I meant no disrespect. The Lady Stark is beloved in the North, of course. I made a poor jape regarding how disagreeable some women can be when carrying a child.”

“Well, considering we’re the ones who do it to them, they are within their rights to feel a bit disagreeable. They suffer to give us our children. I think it rather ridiculous to view this as an inconvenience for us. However, I can assure you that my wife is the soul of kindness.”

“Does the new prince appear to be doing well?” he asked after an awkward pause. Many of the crew seemed to take interest in this as well.

*What prince? There is no prince. Not yet.* “I could not tell you, as the child is yet unborn. And may not even be a prince, but a princess. However, my wife is doing well, if you’re interested.”

“That’s a good thing to hear. But you must keep a positive mindset.”

Jon’s eyes widened. “I do.”

“So are we. The men and I toast nightly to the birth of your son, don’t we lads?” He asked, looking around. The men all cheered.

Another gentleman stepped forward, another of House Flint. “Our lady gave Ser Harrold a strong boy within a year of wedding him. We have no doubt she’ll do the same for you.”

Jon felt extremely uncomfortable. *I shouldn’t feel this way discussing the upcoming birth of my child.*

The closer they got to the birth, the more certain worries and questions seemed to arise. What concerned him was everyone else. If the child was a girl, would his daughter have to go through life seeing herself as a disappointment? Even if she held the Iron Throne, would she have to look into the eyes of her subjects and see scores of people who looked at her like she didn’t belong there? Would she eventually have to fear her brothers? Could there be another Dance of Dragons?

Daenerys was ruling well. Would her rule be enough to convince people to accept another reigning queen?

And his sons? Would they feel pressured to rise up against their sister?

Or if their firstborn was a boy, what then? What if he ended up feeling pressured his entire life to be “perfect”? What if he ended up a spoiled brat? Jon intended to raise his children properly, but his children would be surrounded on all sides by people eager to gain favor from a future king. Jon had the good fortune to come into his rights after he was old enough to tell the sycophants from the true friends. But his son would be a prince from birth. And it would be hard to keep him unaffected by the court.

*Now is not the time,* he told himself.

Jon wasn’t interested in making merry with these people at the moment. He prompted the crew to
brief him on the proceedings, then took to Rhaegal’s back once more.

As he flew towards Pyke, he found himself wondering how anyone could consider Dragonstone gloomy in comparison. The fortress of Pyke was made up of multiple dark-stone buildings built over miniature islands. The towers stuck out from the rock shores like blades, and instead of one or two great Keeps, there seemed to be numerous miniature ones connected by a succession of enormous curved bridges and shaky-looking walls. The castle seemed as dangerous as the people who inhabited it, and just as unstable. In a certain light it almost seemed to move.

He had Rhaegal swoop overhead, spreading her wings wide. He flew several laps back and forth while waiting for the ships to catch up, then finally landed as close to the docks as he could onto a big stretch of rocky land. As he descended, he saw groups of people gather.

There was a crowd of Ironborn surrounding them, gaping, as Jon dismounted. Smallfolk in rough grey and brown cloth, their hoods pulled up against the winds, men in leathers trying to stand proud and ignore the unaccommodating weather. When he looked closer, he saw that a couple were women.

Crowds parted and Jon saw men who looked to be noblemen come through. With them was Asha Greyjoy, her kraken cape upon her shoulders. She strode up to him, closer than anyone, easily within Rhaegal’s reach. One of her men stood just behind her, sandy-haired and young looking, his hand upon the hilt of his dirk.

Jon decided to make the first overtures. He held out a hand and when Lady Asha held out her own, he shook it, then bent to kiss her fingertips. To his surprise, she let him do so, though her jaw tightened when enduring the gesture.

“Lady Greyjoy, it is wonderful to see you again,” Jon lied.

“Prince Jon, you are welcome at Pyke. I hope your journey wasn’t too trying.”

“Not at all,” he replied. “The weather was kind to us. Rhaegal flew well. She will need to be seen to, of course. A couple of dragon handlers have arrived by ship and help unsaddle her so she can find a perch.”

Asha nodded. “Of course. I trust you’ll make sure that she doesn’t disrupt business on the island?”

“I will. But you needn’t worry. As long as she’s fed and feels safe, she shouldn’t bother anyone. I should tell you, though, that your people should keep their distance and do whatever they can not to provoke her. It’s best that only her handlers and I approach her.”

Asha nodded. “Of course.”

They made quick arrangements for Jon and the handlers to fly Rhaegal to the cave cliffs below Pyke. Jon and the young men who were assigned to help him with Rhaegal got on her back again and flew her there. They landed in a dank grotto that connected to a nearby beach. Jon made sure his dragon was fed and cared for, patting Rhaegal on the snout and thanking her before departing for the beach. Lady Greyjoy, a small retinue of ironborn and a number of his men met him there on horseback.

Asha impressed him with having a full stock of supplies and equipment prepared for Rhaegal’s care and a black palfrey ready for his use.

There was some silence as they rode for Pyke, passing through the village of Lordsport. Close behind Asha and Jon were Ser Markus Mallister and Ser Timmure Templeton, Queensguard members sent from the capital. Both were large men who cast considerable shadows. Jon normally
didn’t mind the Queensguard, and was even on fairly good terms with Timmure. But today their presence reminded him of those giant statues of the Seven within the Great Sept with their piercing crystal gazes. The two reminded him that he was in enemy territory where he wasn’t exactly welcome.

When the people saw them riding past, they bowed, though Jon knew that it was out of deference for their lady, not him. Indeed, the smallfolk of Lordsport seemed to glare at Jon. Likewise, the looks exchanged between Jon’s retinue and Asha’s were quite tense.

Not surprising, given their history. Jon wondered if any of the Ironborn saw this as sort of a revenge-invasion.

“You seem nervous, Your Grace,” Asha remarked. “Do we Ironborn make you uneasy?”

“About as uneasy as my people and I make you, I expect.”

She snorted. “Well, hopefully we’ll find a way to calm our respective nerves. You must admit, though, it’s hard to feel calm when there are dragons around. Your beast is impressive.”

“Thank you. And yes, I’ll admit Rhaegal takes some getting used to. I myself had trouble adjusting to her and her brothers. But she is as well trained as a dragon can be. I’ll admit these days I have more ease with her. We have built quite a bond.”

“I hear you have a way with large beasts. Tell me, where is that giant direwolf of yours?”

“Back at Dragonstone with my wife.”

“Well, then I suppose I have a rare opportunity to see what you’re like when you’ve left all of your wolves behind.”

His heart sank. “I would remind you that I am a Stark by blood as well as marriage. None of us can leave their wolves behind completely.”

Asha laughed. “No more than a Greyjoy can truly abandon the sea. I hear there is to be a new wolf or dragon soon. Tell me, how is your lovely little princess feeling?”

“She’s well,” Jon found himself warming to Asha in spite of himself. She at least had the decency to ask after his wife and not just the child she carried.

“You must have been well pleased that she conceived so quickly.”

“She did so with her first marriage as well,” Jon replied. “But yes, we are pleased.”

“Having a child is unlike anything, let me tell you. It’s the greatest pleasure and delight there is. I never thought I’d be drawn to babes or motherhood. And in truth, I don’t care much for others’ children. But my own… It changes you.”

“You have two sons, correct?”

“Rodrick and Tristen. Babes.”

“You must be proud.”

“That’s one word for it, I suppose. There is no greater joy than holding a son of your own in your arms.” Asha’s face softened for a second. “They’re… they’re strong boys. Like my older brothers were.”
“Not surprising, given their mother,” he said, enjoying this moment. He liked discussing this sort of thing with other parents, gleaning what experience and advice he could from him and hear of the joys and pains he was in store for. The best part was how often he heard about the love, how it was all worth it when you knew the joy of having your own.

She looked at him appraisingly. “Most like to credit the strength of the son to the strength of their father.”

*I don’t know who their father is.* Jon didn’t really care. And that wasn’t why he said it anyways. “That’s not quite fair. I inherited the Northern looks of my mother.”

*And more.* From what Jon had heard and read from the book of letters Edric Dayne had given him, his father was naturally an extremely bookish, artistic type. While he was famed as a warrior, he spoke of combat and training in his letters with a touch of bitterness and boredom. In one of the letters, his father confessed that he only took to arms because of a desire to fulfill the prophecy of the “Prince who was Promised.”

“My friend, every moment I spend with a blade in my hand, I find myself wishing to be at my harp instead. True glory comes in music, in poetry, in legends, in words. Even the mightiest fighters die eventually. But words and wisdom is immortal. Every moment in the yard is annoying, exhausting and worst of all, dreadfully dull. I curse the necessity of it. Alas, I pursue a greater purpose that requires me to have a proficiency in combat. I sometimes feel my ‘glorious destiny’ is in fact a curse.”

Lyanna, on the other hand, by all accounts was an enthusiastic fighter, rider, and hunter. She’d gone behind her father’s back and learned to wield a blade in secret, defying all tradition and expectations. And by sixteen, she’d gotten good enough to defeat three champion knights in mismatched armor by jousting in the most famous tournament in recent history.

Jon found great joy in training, in swordplay, in the open air. Just as his mother had. He honestly couldn’t stand to stay inside much. While he didn’t detest reading, he was no scholar and honestly couldn’t understand the appeal of spending one’s time surrounded by books.

It was clear to him that he took after his mother. Just as Robb had taken after Lady Catelyn in looks and temperament. Asha Greyjoy’s boys taking after their mother seemed perfectly reasonable to him. The woman was strong and fierce, that could not be denied. Definitely tougher than most, men included. She seemed more masculine than her brother Theon, that was certain. Tristen and Rodrick would do well to take after her.

Asha observed him carefully. “That’s true. An uncommon thing for a man to admit to, though. One would think you’d be eager to claim any and all similarity to your royal father.”

“A hard thing for me to do unless I found a way to turn my hair white and my eyes violet. I am no Silver Prince, My Lady.”

“No more than I am a lady.”

“Your titles say otherwise.”

She shrugged. “Words are wind. My arms are too muscled, my manners too coarse, my habits too tough for me to be a lady. Soft, demure, delicate flowers like your bride, those are ladies. The only womanly things I’ve done in the last dozen years is give birth twice, and I’ve done that well. But everything else…”
“Nonsense,” he said, smiling, reminded of Arya and Brienne.

She snorted. “I don’t mind. I imagine my predilection for axes over sewing is what gave me such strong children in the first place.”

Jon paused at this. The conversation had gone to a strange place. “You’re a lady in the sense of being a noblewoman of status, a female lord.”

“I suppose.” Asha shrugged. “But blood and name doesn’t count for as much here. We Ironborn believe in strength above all.”

Jon fell silent. Pyke grew closer.

The gates were opened and they rode into the main courtyard, servants hurrying over to attend to their horses. As they dismounted, a couple more people brought over platters of salt and bread.

Jon was surprised and grateful for the promptness of this. Though my brother and his mother once took this for granted. The gesture would not be taken for granted, but he swallowed a mouthful of it nonetheless and offered his thanks. The ritual completed, they got down to business.

“My men and I are to have a separate tower, correct?” Jon asked. Asha nodded.

“The Bloody Keep. The thralls will show you,” she gestured towards one of the towers, “We feast in the Great Hall at sundown. Enjoy.”

Some might have felt offended by the abruptness with which Lady Greyjoy departed, but what bothered Jon were the accommodations they’d been assigned. It was true that they’d made arrangements for an entire tower to be set aside for their party--- it was safer if they had some area to themselves. But the Bloody Keep was called that for a reason. Prior to his departure, he and Sansa made sure to educate themselves as much as possible regarding the Iron Islands. What the Dragonstone library couldn’t provide, Daenerys sent from King’s Landing.

The Bloody Keep received that name for a reason. More than a few murders had gone on there, including the butchering of the children of the River King many centuries back. A couple of Greyjoys had died there too, slaughtered by their own brothers.

Jon tried to convince himself that history wouldn’t repeat itself. It’s likely the only part of the castle that could possibly accommodate us properly. Pyke was no Winterfell. Its towers were fairly scarce and more than a little dilapidated.

He yearned for some rest and solitude as it was, extremely weary from his ride. So he accepted this welcome and proceeded with his men towards the tower.

He was shown to damp, high-ceilinged chambers in the tower by a couple of dour-looking servants whom he quickly dismissed. The room, like everywhere else in Pyke, was cold and dimly lit. Jon took a brief meeting with his men to review safety measures, sent letters assuring his family of his safe arrival, washed his face, stripped, and collapsed onto the large four-poster bed prepared for him.

He only got a couple hours of fitful sleep, nightmares of weeping children and stormy seas plaguing him. Jon sat up almost at once when he woke, looking around at his room with clearer eyes. The room was large and well-furnished, the rushes new and the drapes recently cleaned. But it was cold and lonely. Even Dragonstone wasn’t this dour.

The only thing he liked was the rumble of activity and conversation that he heard beyond the bedchamber walls. In the royal wing of the Red Keep, at Dragonstone, things became so quiet and
easily isolated. Normally, that was welcome. But hearing his men talk, laugh, and go back and forth through the halls reminded him of one of the upsides of Castle Black: the community.

Before Donal Noye had talked some sense into him, he’d hated the noise. The sound of his supposed “brothers”. The way other young men seemed to form their gangs, laugh with one another, joke, wrestle, tell rough stories, and sing lewd songs. Even when he’d convinced himself that they were all bullying, coarse criminals, he’d hear them drinking and laughing together at night and seethe with envy.

Finally making friends gave him a profound joy. All of a sudden, he found himself part of that laughter, those conversations, that fun. Finally he had a pack again instead of just being a lone wolf.

Jon sighed. He missed Dareon, Grenn and Pypar. He missed Sam--- now back at the Citadel with Gilly, awaiting his last link and his new babe, which was due in less than two moons’ turns. He missed Satin, back at Dragonstone helping Nani and the Waterses look after his wife.

He felt comfortable with them. He’d managed to forge a connection with them already, as hard as that had been for him. But the people out there were more or less strangers, save for Cerwyn. Jon had difficulty with strangers. But a yearning to connect with the others drove him out of bed.

The prince threw on his breeches and shirt, and descended down the halls of the Bloody Keep. They had their own private drinking hall, small and cramped as the one at Castle Black. But it was filled, and they had their ale. Various men were perched on the benches and tables, holding up tankards, clearly enjoying themselves. But when they saw him enter, they quieted immediately.

Jon’s stomach sank. He cleared his throat and looked around at them all. Cups were lowered, as were various pairs of eyes. Jon shifted uncomfortably.

“They react to me as if I were some sort of delicate lady.”

Determined to return the room to its former levity, he smiled. “How is the ale?”

Nathen Cerwyn jumped down from his perch atop one of the tables in the middle of the room and ran to fill a tankard from one of the barrels by the window. Sitting on a bench near Nathen’s former seat were the two Mallisters who had come on the trip: Ser Markus of the Queensguard and his cousin Patrek, heir to Seagard. They looked at one another, then Patrek smiled at his prince.

“I’m afraid it’s fairly watered down, Your Grace,” Mallister said. He was a tall, lean young man with dark hair and piercing eyes, a slightly less handsome version of his cousin. But he had an easy smile. His dark eyes glinted as he spoke. “But the Ironborn have given us plenty of it. We’ll have to see if they reserve the stronger stuff for themselves at the banquet.”

“Speaking of which,” Ser Timmure said, coming forward, “The hour of it draws close. I’d say it’s about time we began preparing.”

Jon looked out the window and saw to his disappointment that the knight was accurate. The sun was about to start setting. The prince nodded and motioned for Nathen to put the tankard down as the men began to rise and file out. “Come, I will need your help getting ready.”

The young man followed him back to his chambers. It was generally agreed that he and his men would try to stay armed and protected at all times when they were to meet with the Ironborn. Thus, Nathen helped him into a set of chain mail to wear beneath his black wool clothing. Once he was finished dressing, Jon slipped something else beneath his doublet: the pendant Sansa gave him.

Jon strapped Longclaw and a dirk to his waist, feeling his heart rise to his throat as he went to meet his men again. After making sure they all had their armor on under their clothes, he led them to the Sea Tower.
They found Lady Greyjoy in the passage just outside the Great Hall, speaking animatedly to that sandy-haired guard of hers. Jon sent all of his men save for Ser Markus and Ser Timmure in, then approached his hostess.

“Lady Greyjoy,” he said, giving her a short bow. He reached out to kiss her hand. She didn’t give it.

“Prince Jon,” she replied, bowing back, her eyes boring into him. Jon couldn’t help but notice the gown she wore. He recognized it: black lamb’s wool, with icy blue ribbons lacing up the low-cut bodice. She’d worn the very same gown to his wedding. He remembered because both Dany and Sansa had acted rather miffed after Lady Greyjoy came forward to pay her compliments. When Jon asked why, Dany replied that the fact that the woman, a High Lady, would dress so simply for the royal wedding was obviously meant as a slight.

But now Jon found himself wondering if this was the only gown she owned. He had only ever seen her in breeches, tunics and armor when she wasn’t wearing this.

Over the dress she wore her usual kraken cape, the tentacles of the gold shoulder-guards only seeming to emphasize her partly exposed bust. Jon tried not to stare down her bodice when she bowed.

“I thank you for your hospitality” he told her, feeling a bit awkward. Despite his determination to keep his eyes on her face, he thought he might have seen a glint of silver between her teats. “You look… quite well this evening, Lady Greyjoy.”

The sandy-haired guard glared daggers at him. Jon glanced his way. “My apologies, I don’t think we’ve been introduced, My Lord.”

Both Asha and the guard snorted.

“He’s no lord,” Asha said. Her voice wavered slightly when she said this. “This Qarl, my first mate and steward.”

Qarl had a war axe, a dirk, and a longsword strapped to him. His fingers twitched, as if he were ready to use them. Jon had a feeling he’d be encountering a lot of this during his trip.

Asha gave him a long, dark look. “Qarl, why don’t you go into the hall and make sure the men haven’t made too much of a mess yet? We wouldn’t want to embarrass ourselves in front of our guest.”

The Ironborn hesitated, but went in. Jon, wishing to end this awkward moment as quickly as possible, offered his arm to his hostess. “Shall we?”

She stared at his forearm with alarmed eyes, then looked at him and laughed. “Oh, is my prince going to lead me in like the proper lady I am not?”

“She intended to escort you. And you are a lady.” Jon wasn’t stupid. He was determined to show every proper courtesy, give the Ironmen no reason to believe they’d been slighted or disrespected. He had to be especially courteous to Asha. After all, he was here to reaffirm her authority. Such a thing could not be accomplished if her men saw anything that would indicate that she was being slighted.

Did I offend her? Jon wasn’t sure what he’d done wrong. He’d gone over this with his wife. “But we enter at your leisure, My Lady. This is your home, after all. Whatever your wish, I am happy to oblige.”
Asha:

*Oh, for fuck’s sake.*

If she entered hanging off the prince’s arm like some stupid sully, she’d look ridiculous in front of her men and validate their doubts about her strength even further. But if she didn’t take his arm, it might look like she was being disrespected and could endanger her goals.

She had no idea what this lackwit prince wanted. He stared at her with dull grey eyes. Asha tried to think quickly.

“Well, I think I should be the one escorting you.” She offered her arm. “As you say, it’s my home and my Hall.”

He reddened. “Of course.” He put his hand on her elbow.

Asha smiled, trying to look warm. “I do appreciate the gallantry, Prince Jon. I’m just not sure my men will.”

“Say no more.” The prince nodded to his two stupid guards to follow, and Asha led him through the doors.

The noise of her feasting bannermen hit them in a sharp blast. Some of the prince’s men were starting to enjoy themselves by the looks of things, but the majority of them kept their eyes upon their liege, staying alert. Most of the eyes in the hall fell upon them, and there were a lot of eyes. The Great Hall was as packed as Asha had ever seen it. Nearly every man of status on the Iron Islands was here to see the Targaryen prince and his dragon, as Asha wanted. And then there were the prince’s men as well. Not just a force from the capital, either. No, there were Riverlanders and Northmen here as well.

*No doubt sent by that wife of his.* Princess Sansa was half-Tully. Her fool uncle, Edmure, was Lord Paramount of the Trident, though they said it was the other uncle, Brynden the Blackfish who held the real power there.

*The Northerners are here on the orders of their lady.* Asha almost snorted aloud at this. *Once their queen,* she reminded herself bitterly.

According to rumor, there were many who still saw her that way, who wanted to place the crown of winter upon a Stark head once more. Even stripped of the title of Queen in the North, the Starks ruled the region with the unquestioned power of any monarch. Now that Sansa Stark had put another crown upon her head and settled for ‘princess’, there were many who would likely prefer to pass her over for her sister, currently seated at Winterfell and acting as Seneschal. But Sansa’s history still commanded a great deal of loyalty from her people.

Asha wouldn’t mind so much if some of the Northerners she’d established contact with were among those currently dining in her Hall. Maybe one of the Golvers, or the Mormont sisters. Instead she got Flints, Cerwyns, Umbers, and who knew what else. *Essentially, people who are predisposed to hate everyone here and would not hesitate to slit a single Ironborn throat if provoked.* There were a few who seemed to be from Bear Island, but no one she knew directly.

This was no time for a bloodbath. She needed to get through this first night. So much of how she would proceed depended on the way this went.
I’m depending on this night. I depend on this night more than I can depend on my men, she thought sadly, looking at the crusty glares of the Ironborn lords. She wished, not for the first time, that they were wiser. What is your hostility going to accomplish? About as much as your raids did in the end. No, less.

Her two boys were asleep five floors above. She wondered vaguely if Tristen had tried to escape his bassinet yet. Since he’d learned to walk, it had become a problem. She had a night nurse watch them carefully for that reason. One night, Tristen climbed out and fell. Seeing him curled up on the ground, clutching his head and screaming had been the most terrifying moment of her life.

Despite the fall, he still tried to climb out every night. She feared the day Rodrick decided to copy the habit.

Asha looked over at the dais. Her Seastone chair was empty, as was the place of honor to the right. Her Uncle Victarion at least had the decency to take the place to the left as instructed, though this had the unfortunate side effect of putting Uncle Rodrick two places down from her. Victarion didn’t look pleased with his place. But he’s never pleased with anything.

She marched the dour-faced prince over, smirking as she pulled his chair out for him. He seemed less affronted by this than other men might have, merely standing and waiting for her to take her place at the Seastone chair before sitting himself. He cast a judgmental eye upon the other people sitting at the table.

Asha took her seat and tried to maintain her smile. She ran her hand along the black stone armrests with a bit of bitterness. She remembered how she used to look upon her father’s throne with excitement and relish, craving the power and influence that seat would bring. She was sure that when she finally sat upon it, she’d be secure. No longer would she have to worry about others looking down upon her, about being displaced from her home, about her last brother far away in the North coming to take her rightful place. She’d be absolute ruler of the Isles, once and for all. No one would be able to take her home, her rights, or her place from her.

A false promise. I was a fool. The seat proved as meaningless as all those titles her father and brothers laid claim to. When she sat here, she knew there were plenty who saw nothing more than her playing pretend. They didn’t see her ruling, they saw her polishing the seat with her arse so it was nice and shiny for when a proper lord finally took his rightful place. And many believed that proper lord was sitting to her left. Likely including the lord to my left.

Usually it was her Uncle Rodrick to her left, but now he sat two spaces down to the right, next to the dull dragon prince. Her favorite uncle observed Jon Targaryen carefully through his Myrish lenses, reading him like one of his books. He caught Asha’s eye and nodded in a way that would have been encouraging were it not so weak. He was petrified for her. He always was. Asha sometimes feared that when she took the Seastone chair that she also took years off her uncle’s life.

I’d prefer to take years off the other’s life. She looked at Victarion, who was glaring at their royal guest. If he still had his right hand, it would be twitching.

Victarion hated the Targaryens with a passion that likely rivaled the late Robert the Usurper’s. He hated them almost as much as he’d hated his brother Euron. The loss of his arm and his brother Aeron dealt the last blows to his sanity. He loathed the Dragon Queen for rejecting his hand and then burning it off. According to him, that hand was imbued with magic that made it stronger than ever, a high blessing from the Drowned God, a sign of favor. But then the evil dragon woman with her unholy magic burned that blessing away. He believed that the Targaryens were the greatest threat to their god. Their opposition to the raids only confirmed this in his mind. He believed himself the last champion of their religion, the last hope of the Ironborn overall.
And he loathed his subjugation. Victarion, despite his delusions of divine favor, felt utterly impotent. As if it weren’t enough that the Iron Islands were under the thumb of the Iron Throne once more, it was a woman sitting upon the throne now. The same woman who had burned away his magical arm. To add further salt to the wound, he now had to serve his niece as his liege. The same niece whose partnership he once rejected.

He obeyed, but he did so with great anger. Asha knew he was awaiting any opportunity or loophole that would allow him to seize control of the Isles.

The most terrifying part was that there were plenty of days where it seemed his madness subsided, that he’d finally calmed himself, learned to accept things the way they were, and was eager to move on. Periods of calm lucidity where he managed to work with her and do his duty with patience and good intent. But then, inevitably, he’d wake up one morning and that mad, simmering fury would be back in his eyes.

Mad, angry eyes that saw a glorious future where he took the Seastone Chair, then led the Ironborn to glorious conquest, drove an axe through the prince’s skull, took control of the dragons, then sat upon the Iron Throne, with the Dragon Queen as his tamed wife, finally put in her place. Of course, if the rumors were true, he’d get no sons on her. He’d probably try to find some loophole so he could take another wife to breed with. Or he’d judge her prior liaisons as adultery and beat her to death for it and take another wife. Maybe the princess. It would be a way for him to stick it to the Targaryens, the Riverlanders, and the North. All for the glory of the Drowned God. Divine retribution.

The eyes of many of her vassals seemed to hold similar delusions, similar madness. All of them were infuriated by how the Ironborn were now “cowed”. Raids were few and far between now. Their future was uncertain. Everything the Crow’s Eye promised them died along with the Crow’s Eye himself. At least, that’s how many of them saw it.

And it was Asha who had driven her axe into Crow’s Eye’s skull.

I warned them, she thought bitterly as she watched them grunt, groan, and glare at the dais. I told them: pebbles, pine cones, and turnips. That’s what they’d get from their raids. Going as far as the Reach would only mean we’d be beaten back eventually. And I was right. We could have been free if they’d listened. But they didn’t. And now we have to deal with the dragons.

She didn’t want the prince here. Well, she did and she didn’t. She needed him here and she hated that. She didn’t want that great green ugly beast nesting under her home. She wanted the Isles left alone. But we couldn’t leave well enough alone, so now we’ll never be left alone.

She thought of Tristen, climbing out of his bassinette, falling to the ground. He could have cracked his skull open. The only thing that keeps that from happening now is his nurse.

Asha looked around the hall and saw Tristen’s face in every scowling lord. And I’m their night nurse.

The Lady of Pyke called for the ale she so desperately needed. Eager to restore the levity, she turned her order into one for the minstrels as well. “I have a thirst,” she said slyly, “Not just to drink a cask of ale, but to hear the song as well.

This brought a smile to many faces and at one, the opening notes of ‘A Cask of Ale’ hit her ears. The moods of her people changed like the tides. Before long, the men forgot to glare at instead began to sing of wanting a juicy cunt, a sweet lass to nail, a warm bed, a leg of lamb, and a cask of ale. After that came ‘Her Little Flower’, then ‘The Dornishman’s Wife’, and, inevitably, ‘The Bear and the
Maiden Fair.’

She allowed herself to laugh and enjoy her gull’s eggs and seaweed soup. The dull dragon prince sniffed his own soup before eating it, but once it was in his mouth he seemed to take to it. When ‘The Dornishman’s Wife’ was sung, he smiled and laughed. She seized the opportunity.

“How are you enjoying my hall, Your Grace?” she asked, smirking.

He straightened his back and looked at her, surprised. “I’ve rarely seen such enthusiastic revelers. I see what your brother was bragging about for all of those years.

There was an awkward pause. Asha swallowed heavily. Of course. She’d almost forgotten. Before he was Jon Targaryen, he was Jon Snow, the Bastard of Winterfell. Her heart sank. Theon was and continued to be a source of guilt for her. The prince seemed to notice his mistake, for he looked at his lap, embarrassed. “My apologies.”

“None necessary,” she assured him, trying to force thoughts of her mutilated brother from her mind. “I’m glad we live up to your expectations. We’re not as grand as your court at the Red Keep, I know. But I like to think we have our own unique charm.”

At that moment, a mug of ale sailed past her Uncle Rodrick’s bowed head and crashed into the wall. Two sailors squabbling over a kitchen wench. Jon looked over in alarm. “Shouldn’t we---?”

“No need,” Asha replied, laughing, “They’ll settle it amongst themselves. This is the norm in my hall.”

“I see.” He still looked nervous. Asha sighed.

“Qarl!” She shouted to her lover, glowering in a corner. “My husband!”

He yanked her axe from his belt and flung it at her. Both Jon and Asha rose. The Lady of Pyke caught the axe by the edge of the blade, laughing. The prince calmed considerably upon seeing her smile. Asha drove her hatchet into the table and called for the squabbling sailors to settle their conflict with a finger dance. Shouts went up in encouragement and the two men went to the center of the hall.

Asha leaned over. “Watch,” she told her royal guest.

He did so, his grey eyes wide as he observed the two fling their axes at one another until one eventually walked away with a bleeding shoulder and the other gleefully went back to his seat and pulled the wench into his lap.

“You’ll have to get used to such things while staying at Pyke, Your Grace,” she told him, “We’re a different sort. Fierce. Wild. Daring.”

“Clearly.” His eyes were still wide.

“From what I hear, though, wildness is something you enjoy.” Her mind went to the blond Magna she’d observed during her time at the Red Keep. Asha had heard all of the rumors. There’d been talk before of Jon Snow having taken a wildling wife at one point. It surprised her. She’d met the Magna Val, she’d spent more time than she cared to with Princess Sansa. She’d never met two women more different. The Magna was easy to like: swaggering, tough, good with a rude joke and capable of drinking half the city under the table. Asha’s kind of woman. Princess Sansa, on the other hand… What kind of man can love both? This little puzzle was the only interesting thing about him aside
from his lineage and position. Because it was clear from the way he interacted with the blonde wildling that they’d fucked at some point. It was also very clear that the man had at least some affection for his bride.

He sat back and pursed his lips. “A little. Sometimes. Under certain circumstances.”

The prince gave her a look. *Is it a warning or an invitation?* His hand went to his chest, as if he were clutching something. “Lady Greyjoy, I appreciate you trying to find a resolution to the conflict, but please don’t feel the need to order blood on my account.”

*Oh, for pity’s sake.* “Who said I ordered it for you?”

“My apologies. I shouldn’t have assumed.”

*Gods, he’s as bad as that sop he married.* He was less haughty, to be sure, and less pathetically dainty. But he also seemed to have even fewer brains. There were whispers that he was a lackwit. Asha was beginning to believe them.

“Take advantage of my hospitality in other ways, Your Grace, you are welcome to them. But trust that I keep the peace for the good of many.”

He made a face that looked like he was almost going to laugh. But then he didn’t. “Very well. I’m sorry I offended you.”

“Oh, it takes far more than that to offend me, I promise you. However, you may spend the rest of the night trying if it pleases you.”

The prince cleared his throat and looked over her shoulder. “Lord Victarion! Have you given any thought to my aunt’s proposal?”

Her uncle glared at the prince. “I try not to. I await guidance from the Drowned God to form my opinion. You’ll know my decision when he gives it to me.”

Jon Targaryen looked none too pleased with this answer. In fact, he looked downright disturbed. Asha just rolled her eyes.

“Don’t let him worry you at the moment,” she assured the prince. “He’s always like this.”

Her guest kept his eyes on Victarion. “That just makes me worry more,” he murmured.


The prince bent his head towards her, gesturing for her to come closer. “Lady Greyjoy… I hope you won’t take offense but… If you please… I’d like to be able to speak to you in private once we’re done here. Where we can be certain no one will hear us. I feel the matter is quite urgent.”

Asha glanced at Qarl, glowering in the corner. *Swallow your pride. Swallow your feelings.* Then she forced a sly little grin onto her face and looked into Jon Targaryen’s grey eyes. “Of course, Your Grace. Shall we confer in my chambers?”

“I’d prefer mine.”

Asha nodded and sat back. Once her men seemed drunk enough and she could justifiably declare the banquet at an end, she slipped away, going with the prince and his guards back to the Bloody Keep. She ignored their judging eyes. She’d been dealt far worse.
The Lady of Pyke entered the bedchamber she’d assigned to her royal guest and hurried over to the lit brazier to gain some warmth. The walk from Sea Tower to the Bloody Keep had been a chilly one. She listened to the dull dragon closed and bolt the door and reminded herself of the dagger stuffed in her bodice. Then she turned.

Jon Targaryen stood at the door, staring at her with his usual solemn gaze. *He wants me to come to him. Like some good little lapdog. Like that wife of his, no doubt.* They called Sansa Stark a wolf. They called her the Red Wolf. But at best she was a puppy. A haughty, spoiled puppy. Asha Greyjoy would look at her in her fine lace and pearl hair clips, pouring her fancy wine and flashing her white teeth in a vacant smile and get lost in trying to figure out how this was the woman who allegedly took down the Boltons. It took her a while to realize it had to have been some excellent generals. Sansa Stark was just a face. An artifice.

*Our prince apparently likes to have bitches for mates.* Asha thought of Tristen and Rodrick, asleep in their bassinettes. *What am I even doing? I’m as mad as any of them. I’m just as mad as Victarion, seeking to subdue a bloody dragon.*

Asha decided not to play this game. She just stared back at the Targaryen prince. “Well?”

“This can’t go on any longer,” the prince said, “You’re hanging on by a thread. It’s only a matter of time before one of them steals into your room and butchers you. Do you realize that?”

She gaped. “Well yes, you idiot. Of course I do. Why do you think I’ve never petitioned your aunt to declare my boys legitimate? So that they’re less likely to become targets once I’m gone.”

*Did I just say that out loud?* Asha stepped back, shocked with herself.

The prince took a deep breath. “First thing we need to do is to get them off the islands. Why didn’t you bring them to the Red Keep for the wedding? We could have kept them.”

“Are you insane? They’d have suspected what was happening immediately, then accuse me of surrendering my children as hostages. And they’d have been *right,* more or less. My father gave away my brother. I’m not repeating his mistakes. I knew bringing Victarion with me would keep them safe. But bringing them to the dragon’s den wouldn’t.”

Now it was the prince’s turn to look shocked. “You think we’d harm innocent children?”

“Tommen Baratheon,” she replied in a sharp tone.

Jon Targaryen flinched. “That wasn’t us. It was that madman Harys Swyft. Daenerys never wanted Tommen hurt.”

“Of course not.” Asha glared. She knew she’d made her point. It was said that many children died under Daenerys Targaryen’s rule. Legends of the Dragon Queen’s ruthlessness were widespread and damning. They weren’t exactly hard to believe, either. The woman had been Dothraki, Ghiscari, and Valyrian long before she came to Westeros and declared herself queen. That day when she’d flown her great white dragon down to the ships… It was clear that woman would stop at nothing. At first glance, one might not think much of the small, blond woman. But a single look into those flaming violet eyes was all Asha needed to see. *Fire and blood. Fire and blood. She’d do it if she felt her empire was at stake.*

“We wouldn’t hurt them, I promise you. But someone will. What happened to my wife can and will happen to you if we don’t get them out soon. Most likely your uncle.”

“No,” Asha said, shaking her head. That was the one thing she could rely on her uncle not doing.
“My uncle will kill anyone but his own kin. There is no greater sin in the eyes of the Drowned God. My uncle is mad, but he won’t risk the wrath of his god. He won’t kill the boys. He will not kill me. He wouldn’t even kill the Crow’s Eye. There was no one in this world he hated more, but he wouldn’t kill him. I had to do that.”

“And he wouldn’t kill you for that exact sin?”

“By the time I went up against my Uncle Euron, it was certain that he’d killed my father. But Victarion still wouldn’t do the deed. He let me do it instead.” Asha clenched her fists as she remembered how he wouldn’t back her until he’d seen her with the scores of men Stannis Baratheon had given her. How he’d presumed to command those forces she’d acquired from the man while still insisting he wouldn’t kill the Crow’s Eye. How he looked at her with anger over bringing greenland forces in to take down Ironborn forces. He saw using them himself more honorable since he’d have “seized” them from her. That ended up working out about as well as his courtship of Daenerys. “A loophole. A loophole he’d very much like to use again. He won’t kill Tristen, Rodrick or I. But….”

“He’ll let someone else do it.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys liked it. Hope I didn't butcher Asha too much.
The Prince

Chapter Summary

Jon has more interesting encounters

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bluecichlid for her beta-work

Sorry for lateness and bad spacing, but here is the chapter :)

Chapter Forty-five: The Prince

Victarion:

Stone posts were mounted on the beach. Dozens of them, sprawled randomly about the sand. All ended up hacked to bits within a matter of hours. Victarion moved in and out quick as he ever did, swinging at them with his axe. He only had one arm, but it flew and hit strong. But not as strong as my right once was.

One post crumbled to dust finer than the sand beneath his feet. The loss was his own fault. A punishment from the Drowned God for straying and following that Fire Thing. That was why I was humbled. But I shall rise again. He told himself every night that the Drowned God would give him the signal, tell him when he was finally worthy again. He might not have the Damphair to guide him anymore, but now that he finally knew his purpose, other things would be made clear.

Still, that giant scaled demon gave him pause. He had come out here for his practice, in clear sight of the caves, to prove to himself that he wasn’t afraid of the dragons. Every so often, he heard the monster shriek or flap its wings. Every so often, he caught sight of flames or green scales as the creature moved around the caves below Pyke. When it finally came, Victarion would be ready.

The bastard prince’s visit with the dragon was the final test, Victarion was sure. To see if he could face down one of the monsters. And if he proved himself now, the Gods would finally dub him worthy again, destroy his whore niece, and Victarion’s time would come.

The shrieks sometimes startled him. He’d hear them and then suddenly be transported back to that Ghiscari Bay, running for his ship, his arm burning off of his body. He loathed that weakness and kept trying to concentrate, hacking at the stone pillars right in view of that monster.

You may have fire, Monster, but I am a Kraken, a creature of the sea and a child of the Drowned God. Fire cannot penetrate my god’s murky depths. Water always vanquishes fire. Always.

He reminded himself of that whenever the nightmares came. Yes, Victarion Greyjoy was once forced to flee from them, but that Victarion was dead. What is dead may never die. But rises again,
harder and stronger. The Victarion who surrendered to the temptation and false strength of the Fire God was gone. Gone as surely as his right arm. A true kraken rose in his place, destined to subdue and conquer the forces of fire once more and make the Drowned God the strongest of them all.

When the time came, he’d end the reign of fire and blood and bring salt and sea to the Iron Throne. He saw it in his dreams. He saw all the fires go out. He saw the men die and the women scream. He saw them all drown. He saw the dragons bleed and their mother forced on her knees before him. He heard pleas. Pleas from men who joked that the Dragon Queen had burned off his manhood along with his arm. Please from men who called him the Kraken with One Tentacle and Theon’s Elder.

Victarion Greyjoy was not his stupid, swaggering, weak nephew. He still had his manhood. He’d not had a woman since his voyage to Slaver’s Bay but----

“She came to me wet and willing. It seems Victarion is big everywhere but where it counts.”

He could still hear the Crow’s Eye’s voice, could still see his smug smile. Victarion crushed another pillar. The way his brother’s voice echoed in his head was yet another punishment from his god. Sometimes, he swore he even saw the Crow’s eye. When he took the Iron Throne, Euron would disappear.

He was almost knocked to the ground when, suddenly, the great green dragon flew out of the caves. An enormous shadow was cast over the beach. Victarion looked up. The beast flew high over the island and disappeared into the clouds. The speed of it was unnerving, a green blur.

Victarion almost pissed himself. What is dead may never die, he reminded himself, but rises again, harder and stronger.

Another pillar shattered under his axe.

And another.

And another.

More and more went down. It took hours. Eventually, the dragon’s enormous shadow was back. The creature shot back into the caves. Victarion glared after it, then went back. Five more. The five thickest.

By the time he was done, the blade of his axe was worn down to almost nothing. He was panting and his hands were shaking. But it was the fastest he’d ever finished. Victarion bent over. The weapon slid from his hand. There is no shame in that when the battle is done.

He didn’t hear the footsteps. It was only when he saw his axe move and heard the voice that Victarion realized anyone was there.

“Your axe, My Lord Captain.”

First he saw feet and legs clad in black wool and brown leather. As he lifted his head, he saw the longsword strapped to waist, chest and arms.

The bastard prince, Victarion realized as his eyes fell upon the head.

“They say she is the fairest woman in the world. Her hair is silver-gold, and her eyes are amethysts…” Whenever he thought of Daenerys Targaryen, he heard his brother’s words. During his voyage to claim her, Victarion had worried she’d turn out to be an ugly, toothless whore with tits dangling to her knees. But as it turned out, the rumors were true. The Targaryen Queen had silvery-
gold hair, large purple eyes, full lips, and clear young skin. *Easily among the fairest in the world. Also the most horrifying.* They said all the Targaryens were blond and purple-eyed.

They said Rhaegar Targaryen was just as purple and blond as any. They called him the Silver Prince.

When Victarion had gone to the capital, he’d expected a male version of the petite blond that had removed his axe-arm. He’d gotten quite the opposite.

Jon Targaryen had a long, solemn face, clear pale skin marked here and there with scars, large lips, high cheekbones, deep grey eyes, long shaggy dark hair and a closely trimmed beard. He was slim and tall and looked like a Stark. Victarion had seen Eddard Stark shortly after the end of Balon’s first rebellion. He knew.

*Not the fire prince I expected. More believable as Stark’s bastard.* He even had a direwolf, white as the snow the prince was once named for. The creature had been left at home. Only the dragon was with him now.

*A dragon and scores of men.* Right now a dozen of those men and one boy flanked the Targaryen. He was dressed neck to toe in leathers and about his neck was a silver chain. Victarion eyed it with covetous eyes. *Paid with the gold price, no doubt, but I’ll buy it with the Iron Price when I destroy the dragons.* That could not happen until Asha was dead, though.

It bothered him that the prince managed to hold his axe out to him with one arm. Even broken down, the thing was still too heavy for most men.

*He’s young and strong, but still not as strong as I.* While his belly remained flat and his muscles strong, Victarion was starting to see the years. The skin on his chest, to his dismay, was starting to sag. The prince’s skin was marked up considerably for a man of his years, even for one who had seen warfare. But it was tight and clear and even. None of his hair had any grey. Victarion loathed him.

*I’ve killed young men before. I’ll kill this one when the Drowned God judges me worthy of the privilege.*

“I can lift my own weapons,” Victarion snapped. He saw the prince’s men move and glare. *It is not yet time to provoke bloodshed.* He reluctantly added, “Your Grace.”

“Of course, but I don’t mind, Lord Captain.”

“I do,” he replied.

Victarion yanked the axe away and forced it into the holster on his back, taking some satisfaction in the way all the greenlanders’ eyes widened at his strength. The guards feared and hated him in equal measure. Victarion was used to that. He liked it. But the prince’s eyes were steady, which made Victarion loathed him more.

*Even if those eyes are grey and not purple, he’s still a Targaryen and I loathe him for that. And even if he weren’t, he’s a Greenlander and I loathe him for that. And even if he were not a Greenlander, he’s a non-believer and I loathe him for that.*

He prayed to the Drowned God for forgiveness for letting an infidel’s feet touch the holy shores.

“My apologies, I merely wished to assist you.” This one offered his apologies quite often. He’d done it at least three times to Asha the night before. *Then he took her to the Bloody Keep and made her his salt wife.* Victarion almost marched in there and slew them both in fury and shame. *Balon would*
gnash his teeth if he saw what a whore Asha’s become. She already had two bastards. But she is my kin. I cannot hurt her. I must wait for my god.

The thought of it made the idea of killing this prince that much sweeter. You sullied my niece. Offer your apologies for that and see how inclined I am to forgive you.

“I require no assistance.”

“Clearly. I’d heard rumors of your strength,” the prince gestured around at the crumbled rock, “But the rumors did not do you justice. Still, I’m surprised you aren’t weakened by the heat alone. I almost stripped off my leathers once I dismounted from Rhaegal.

It was an unusually warm day, and Victarion did sweat through his clothes. But he did not parade himself around bare-chested. “I imagine it’s much warmer for those who can get closer to the sun.”

“It’s actually the Wall that made me this way. After that cold, everywhere else feels warm to me.”

Why is he talking to me? Victarion glared. Does he take me for my niece, his to seduce? I am not your whore, Boy. The prince was the one who looked like one of those man-whores Victarion used to see standing outside various foreign brothels with his thick hair, big eyes and silver chain. The captain liked killing those best of all. But he couldn’t kill the prince.

Victarion grunted. “How nice for you. But we value modesty on these isles.”

The prince’s mouth twitched, but he seemed to keep whatever he was thinking from leaving his lips. “Of course. It was not out of pride I might have removed my clothing, though, merely comfort.”

“Well, you Greenlanders do like your comforts,” Victarion gestured towards the chain. “And your luxuries.”

Targaryen clutched the pendant defensively. “Do you disapprove, Lord Captain?”

“How’d you buy it?” he asked, his gaze challenging.

“I’m actually a little happy you asked me,” Targaryen replied, not actually sounding all that happy. “You are well-renowned for your piety and devotion to your religion. There is a great deal of importance in the prices men pay for things here, the iron price and so forth. I know you hold those standards in high regard. But I find myself ignorant about one aspect of that. You believe that for men the Iron Price is honorable and the gold price is shameful. But how do you feel about men receiving things as gifts? I never did hear about that. I thought an expert on the Ironborn honor code like yourself would be the one to ask.”

Victarion clenched his teeth. He wasn’t quite sure how to answer this. The Damphair would know. He tried to pretend to have a response. The Drowned God will give me the right words. “That trinket is a gift?”

“Aye.”

Victarion’s eyes narrowed on it as the prince laid it flat on his palm. “Who gave it to you?”

“My wife.”

“Your wife?” Victarion shuddered. Women giving men baubles. Is he a man or not? Ever since women began taking everything over, the world seemed upside down. It wasn’t enough that one sat the Iron Throne. Or that Asha sat the Seastone chair. On top of that, there was a princess of Dorne, a
lady as Paramount of the Stormlands, and the prince’s wife was Lord Paramount of the North, with her sister as castellan of Winterfell and the Mormont bitches as her regents. Before long, there’d be men in gowns.

The prince nodded, pulled the necklace off, popped the pendant open, and held it out. “To comfort me when we are parted.”

Victarion glanced at it. There was a tiny portrait of the prince’s wife, pouting with her breasts practically spilling out of her bodice. She looks like a whore too. Albeit a more tempting one. But then, all Greenlanders are whores. Another inch and we’d see the full teats. The Ironborn felt his manhood begin to stiffen.

He’d had an issue at court. The place was filled with women. Women in becoming gowns or tight leathers. Women with their hair brushed and clean and gleaming. Women with their skin clean and pale and smooth. Women perfumed and adorned. Even the ones that weren’t particularly pretty or young had a certain quality to them. When Victarion looked at them, he knew every inch would be soft and warm. Even the serving girls of the palace, right down to the kitchen scullions, were clean.

And he could have none of them. When they’d arrived at court, it was made clear that none of the staff in the palace were to be beaten or “interfered with.” And it was apparently a rule that was actually enforced. More than few lords and ladies had been sent from court for raising a hand to a page or maid. The claims of the riff-raff were actually taken seriously.

To make matters worse, they even had a right to choose whom they served. All of the maids of court refused to be alone in a room with the Ironborn. The men even had to leave their chambers for them to be cleaned.

He wasn’t allowed to have the noblewomen either, of course. All of the people of the court despised the Ironborn, with the young noble girls shuffled away by their shrewish mothers whenever one of the Iron Islanders came close.

There were even whores of the city who apparently wouldn’t serve some of the sailors, according to some of his men. Not that Victarion would ever go to one. Paying the gold price for anything was shameful, a dishonor only to be endured for the sake of something precious like food or shelter. But for a wench? No, Victarion would not do it.

Sansa Stark was one of the few women Victarion and the other Ironborn were ever able to get close to. She was apparently considered the “Mistress of the Court” since she was the future royal consort, and was therefore expected to entertain Asha and their retinue.

She was also among the finest looking women at court. Like most Greenland ladies, she was obviously pampered, perfumed and adorned. But she didn’t need any of it. She still had shining red hair, large blue eyes, soft porcelain skin, pouting pink lips, a small waist, full breasts and good birthing hips.

The future princess was graceful and accommodating. She had a sweet, musical voice. Victarion never much listened to what she said, but the words had a pleasant sound. The only time he really paid attention to anything she said was when Asha asked their hostess how she felt about having to show them around the palace and engage them socially. The Stark woman replied that it pleased her to serve the crown and practice performing the duties that would be expected of her as the prince’s wife.

Spoiled, pampered, and slightly wanton she might be, but at least she seemed to know her place and didn’t try to be a man, unlike Asha or the dragon queen. Word was that she submitted to warming
the prince’s bed even before the wedding as well. Sansa Stark seemed to be the only woman in the world left who knew how to be a proper woman and serve.

Unlike that vicious dragon cunt, there was no terror behind that face. Just the proper woman’s instinct to mother, nurture, and obey.

That made their meetings both tantalizing and agonizing all at once. Victarion couldn’t help but want to stare at the one woman at court he could get within ten yards of and also didn’t scare him enough to make his cock shrivel up [the dragon queen, Asha, that giant freak on the Queensguard, and a couple of the other “women warriors” at court were among that category]. But at the same time, seeing such a succulent thing before him that he could not have, or at least not yet had, put him in literal pain. Sometimes she’d pour them wine and lean over and Victarion couldn’t help but try to look down her bodice. He’d often leave those meetings in need of a cold bath.

One of the last highborn beauties in the world who actually knew how to be a woman, and she was being snatched up by the Targaryens. Going to this boy.

And on top of all that, she’s already conceived. She’d given her first husband one son, whom she’d produced within a year of that marriage. The boy was now dead, but he’d not died of any physical weakness beyond being a child. He’d been murdered. But by all accounts he’d been a healthy boy. While Sansa Stark not being a maid might be a mark against her, the proven fertility more than made up for it. She already a little dragon nesting in her belly.

The Targaryens take it all and deny the rest of us. They denied the Ironborn their raiding and the riches they’d plundered from their campaigns in the North, Riverlands, Westerlands, and the Reach. The dragon queen, the fairest woman in the world, denied every man her hand. She even denied the realm and the other nations in her empire a king, keeping the Iron Throne for herself. And then the Targaryens took one of the few proper noble brides left for their own as well. The dragon queen had inspired numerous women and wives to rebel and assume more power. And the one high noble girl left with a proper subservient instinct and a pretty face, the dragon queen had taken and given to her bastard nephew.

This boy gets to have all that to himself, Victarion thought. Even though the girl was raised alongside him as a sister. But then the Targaryens practiced incest too. I wonder, does he bed the dragon queen as well? Greenland women were whorish, and Victarion heard of whores who would bed a man in groups. An image of the dragon queen and the Stark girl in bed together flashed through his mind. His manhood was getting hard as a rock.

He looked away and forced himself to think of the Crow’s Eye and his pants grew less tight.

He tried to remember if any of his women ever offered him something to remember them by when he set sail. Not that he’d ever accept such a gift. Not that I would need them. His second sometimes sailed with him, but his first never did. The third was a salt wife who stayed aboard with him. Never was anything like this ever offered him. But then, they knew better.

“Women are supposed offer one sort of comfort and give another sort of gift. Baubles are neither of those,” he sneered. He now had another reason to hate this young man: the way that boy’s eyes softened when he spoke of his bride, the idea that his wife would be so thoughtful. The way there was a small snip of red hair inside the trinket as well. Victarion had loved his wives. The one that died giving him a stillborn child and the second that succumbed to the pox. The third that cried as he beat her to death for the horns she’d given him. I cried as well.

She’d been one of three people Victarion ever wept for. His mother had been another, when a fever took her. The third was his brother Aeron, who walked into the ocean waves with stones in his
pockets, hoping his sacrifice might motivate the Drowned God to free the Isles from Euron’s grip.

The captain’s loves never ended well. He’d once thought it was only wives. But he’d loved Aeron and his mother. Once, he loved Asha, until she became the ravenous, power-hungry beast she was today.

*Perhaps if I make myself love Asha again, she’ll finally meet her end.* His hatred tended to make people thrive. Euron, the Dragon Queen, Rodrik Harlaw, Asha, the Greenlanders…

Victarion looked the prince up and down and tried to hate him less.

The Targaryen boy’s eyes seemed harder then. He reached out his hand. “Well, I can’t say I agree with you regarding women, My Lord. If you please.”

Victarion handed the trinket back over. *I’ll rip it off your neck someday, Boy. I’ll slit your throat and in your last moments, you’ll see me take this from you. I won’t wash your life’s blood from it. I’ll wear it as I take your aunt, your sister, and your wife.* He’d make a salt wife of the other Stark woman. He’d make salt wives of them all.

*No, don’t kill him first. Make him watch. Make him watch as you take his women. Then have him beg you for death.*

Victarion nearly jumped out of his skin. That voice. It came and went and the Ironborn was not sure whether it was the Crow’s Eye speaking to him, or his God.

The Targaryen boy stuffed the trinket inside his shirt and then his hand went to his sword. “If you’ll excuse me, My Lord,” he said, slowly backing away. “Have a fine day.”

Victarion grinned as he watched the prince depart. His time was coming soon. He knew it. When he rode back to the castle, he had new instructions for the thralls who built his practice pillars: from now on, a number of them were to be on fire.

“More and more each day,” he told the dumbfounded looking thrall.

“But, My Lord, how---?”

“I don’t know. That is your affair. Have them aflame when you put them up tomorrow, or I’ll beat you bloody.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jon:

He returned to his quarters, heart pounding, skin crawling, slamming the door behind him and leaning back against it. He felt like he needed a bath or five. Jon closed his eyes tight, trying to get the image out of his head of the giant, lopsided, cruel-eyed man.

Jon hadn’t realized he’d still had the pendant Sansa gave him out when he approached Lady Greyjoy’s uncle. He’d not taken it off since he left, liking the feel of the cold silver containing her image and that lock of her hair close to his heart. When he’d taken flight on Rhaegal he took it out from underneath his shirt and spent some time looking at it and missing her.

He wanted to speak to the Lord Captain and try to get a personal measure of him before he took any extreme action, which was why he approached the man on the beach when Victarion was done with his training. It had been quite a thing to see, watching the older man make so much stone crumble
despite only having one arm.

When Victarion noticed the locket, Jon decided to use it as an opportunity to evaluate him a bit more. He decided to pose the lord captain a philosophical question around it to get some more insight on both the man and the Ironborn code. He also wanted to see if there was any appreciation for more tender feelings and affection, which was why he revealed the purpose of Sansa’s gift.

He wanted to see if maybe there was any softness left in the man. If so, then perhaps he could be reasoned with.

Now he regretted it.

Jon had observed Victarion before, but not in great detail prior to this trip. He knew that Dany was a bit worried about them, but figured the issue would be resolved. That was, until her message arrived.

During the brief meetings he’d attended with the Ironborn and Sansa at court, his impression of Victarion was of a grouchy, hulking lummox who divided his time between glaring at his niece and staring at Jon’s betrothed. He never made any untoward advances, usually staying silent.

His observations of Victarion at the banquet the night before had been somewhat troubling, and what Asha had told him last night during their meeting was more troubling still. But Jon wished to get a proper impression of the man before moving forward.

The way he reacted to Sansa’s image in the locket was enough to tell Jon plenty.

At this point in their relationship, Jon had grown more tolerant of the looks people gave some of the women in his life. He’d accepted the way men and women alike gawked at Daenerys. That never bothered him too much, because no one would ever touch Dany without her wanting it and the rest was her business.

When Arya seemingly came back from the dead, seeing other men give his sister appraising looks shocked him. Sansa had to point out to him that his sister had, in fact, grown and was no longer the scrawny little girl they once knew. While he didn’t mind Arya with Gendry---- the young man was a good sort who obviously thought the world of her and would take good care of her for the time being---- the attention she got from other men definitely bothered him. Luckily, after a few weeks the attention died down when most of the male population of King’s Landing decided they were petrified of her

As for Sansa, well… that was more complicated. Before their relationship became public, she had numerous suitors lining up to stare, compliment, and try to charm and court her. Jon had to bite his tongue and tolerate it. Though the attempts at courtship died down, people still looked at her. Men still looked at her. He grew a bit more used to it. Sometimes it still bothered him. Other times, when she was on his arm and the looks she got included a touch of envy for Jon, he almost enjoyed them.

His lady insisted he learn to curb his envy and especially his anger. He did so and accepted the fact that people were going to look at her that way. So by the time the Ironborn arrived at court, the looks didn’t bother the prince too much. His bride was both well-protected and trustworthy. There was no point in getting upset about it. The glares Victarion gave Daenerys troubled Jon more.

But today, Jon’s entire interaction with Victarion scared him in a new way. Jon couldn’t be sure if it was just a trick of the light or his imagination, but when they spoke it was almost like one of Victarion’s dull, blue-grey eyes was growing darker. He looked at Jon with a level of hatred the prince had rarely ever experienced. He spat out his words like poison.
And it wasn’t just the hatred. Sometimes, the man’s stares seemed to be tinged with something else, something predatory, but in a wholly different way than pure aggression. An odd hunger, but for something more than blood. There were a couple times when the Lord Captain looked at him that Jon felt almost like he didn’t have any clothes on.

The worst though was when the man looked at Sansa’s portrait. It wasn’t just a leer. Jon actually saw the man’s pants start to tent. And he looked for far too long. Jon couldn’t believe it. He couldn’t believe the man would make such a crass display of himself. And he didn’t even seem to notice.

The way he handed the locket back was disturbing as well. He professed disgust with Jon for even having it, yet gave it back almost like he was surrendering it reluctantly. His expression afterwards was downright threatening.

With that, Jon couldn’t even see a man anymore. He just saw a monster. A giant, mad, angry, hungry monster.

“Are you going to speak or are you going to just stand there panting like an overworked whore all afternoon?”

Jon jumped. Asha Greyjoy was sitting in a corner, tossing a small knife up in the air and catching it repeatedly, the shadows of the room mostly concealing her. She stood. “Get a good evaluation of my domains and uncle, Your Grace?”

Another noblewoman sneaking into my room. Arianne, now Asha. There seems to be a pattern. Jon tried to shrug it off. He’d ridden Rhaegal around the coasts of each of the Iron Islands to get a better impression of the area. Useful information in case an invasion or escape became necessary. It was likely that one or both of those things would.

But there was another matter at hand. “How did you get in? These rooms are supposed to be guarded.”

“They are. But your guards now believe me to be your mistress. I came in, giggling and telling them I wanted to give you a sweet surprise when you came back.”

Jon reddened. “You are not my mistress. I would never---”

“Deal with it. It’s a good cover for us to meet privately. There are more important matters than your wounded pride. Now tell me, what are your impressions?”

Jon gritted his teeth and made a mental note to write to his wife immediately when this was finished. If this idea spread, she could end up heartbroken. He would write, warn, and reassure her before anyone else might have the chance to inform her of this bit of false gossip. In the meantime, Asha was right: there were more urgent matters at hand.

“He’s going to take one of those axes of his and butcher everyone he can with it if we don’t get rid of him soon.”

“Do you mean to kill him yourself?” Asha asked, walking towards him and wearing a bitter smile.

“If necessary.”

“You’ll find that easier said than done. Even if you did manage to take him down, there’d be riots. A lot of people here see him as the last defender of the Old Way.”

Jon gritted his teeth, seething in frustration. The “Old Way” to him were the values Eddard Stark
taught him. Honoring your ancestors, facing your own enemies, swinging the sword when you passed the sentence, telling the truth. To these people, it was killing, raping, stealing and burning everything in their path.

_I can’t even keep to my version of the Old Way anymore. So how can these people justify and pursue something like this? _“There’s no room for such old ways in this new age. They will have to learn.”

“Oh, and who is going to teach them that?” Asha asked, her eyes flashing.

Jon hesitated. “I don’t know. I was hoping you could. But now I’m not so sure. The point is, we need to get you and your children out. Now.”

“Even if you were to take my boys, what makes you think I’m willing to abandon my lands? You think I’m willing to run from the danger with my tail between my legs? I’m no wolf, I’m a kraken. We have neither tails nor legs.”

“Nor wits, apparently!” Jon snapped. Asha had made statements the night before that had implied a similar attitude, though she hadn’t stated this opinion explicitly. He was losing patience. Their meeting the night before had gone on for a couple of hours, and Jon was low on sleep. Two days on Pyke, and he was already speaking out of turn.

Asha glared. “Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry, My Lady, but what exactly would you accomplish by getting yourself killed?” he demanded of her.

“What makes you think I’d be killed? Give me the proper number of men, and I will end this.”

“No, you won’t. They’ll butcher you before you get the chance.”

“That’s what many said when I went up against my Uncle Euron.”

“You fled once before from him, though.”

Asha shook her head. “That was different. At the time, he’d rightfully been declared King. The Iron Islands were his. They are mine now.”

“No, they aren’t. You’re on the brink of being deposed. Violently. Your power here hangs by a thread. Your fall is all but a certainty and you can’t control it. If they were truly yours, I wouldn’t even need to be here. You’re as much the owner of these isles as your father was ever---“

The blow to his jaw almost sent him flying. Jon stumbled back a couple of steps and clutched his jaw in agony. He hadn’t been hit like that since the wars. Asha looked at him with steely blue eyes, shaking in fury.

“Don’t you ever speak of my father that way!” she snarled.

Jon glared at her. “Touch me again, and you will regret it, Greyjoy. Is that understood?”

“You’re in my Keep, I’ll do as I---“

“Your Keep, which is technically part of my family’s empire. I’m your prince, remember?”

Asha snorted. “I’ve met other princes. Mine own brother strutted into Pyke seven years ago calling himself a prince. He knew as little as you did. All of you expect us to just stand aside? A little unrest isn’t enough to make me leave my lands. They are mine by right. Unlike that ninny you married, I’m
not willing to just leave my home behind.”

*Alright, I’m done.*

“I’m not your brother, Asha Greyjoy,” Jon replied, furious. It hurt to speak, but he spoke nonetheless. “I’m not some spoiled, arrogant ponce of a lordling who expects everyone to bow to him because of what his daddy used to call himself. The realm I am prince of I’ve actually fought for. I’ve defended the borders of this realm against white walkers, wights, wildlings, giants and mammoths.”

He yanked the gloves off of his right hand and pulled up his sleeve, exposing his burns. “I went through my life expecting nothing but to serve, burn and bleed to protect this country, without the entitlement or supposed glory that comes with a noble name. Then I found out that I was indeed the trueborn son of Lyanna Stark of Winterfell and Rhaegar Targaryen, a true royal prince, not just some violent opportunist---“ He caught her fist when she raised it this time, forcing her to walk back, clutching her hand firmly and glaring at her.

“---who started a war, killed innocents, and sacrificed his sons just so he could pretend to be a king of a bunch of desolate rocks. After I discovered who I was, I rode Rhaegal the Green alongside my aunt, the Mother of Dragons, and her other children to face down the ancient Night’s King. Since then, I’ve been spending every waking hour learning to ride and control the magical beasts my aunt helped bring back into the world in order to keep her empire’s future safe and helping my people recover from the damage caused by the wars your people helped exacerbate.

“I am currently here, trying to help you instead of spending this time with my beloved bride--- whom you will not disparage again--- and unborn child. I am doing so out of a sense of duty to this realm. Like it or not, I am a prince, your prince. A true one. Not the unaccomplished brother or son of some pretender. Not Prince of Winterfell or Prince of the Iron Islands or whatever else your brother liked to call himself. I am Prince of the Targaryen Empire. I am that not just because of my blood, but because I helped secure those very borders and serve my people, including you regardless of how your people like to deny it. I am here trying to help you as well as all those who could potentially suffer should the Ironborn return to your ‘Old Way.’ So you will show me some respect when you are in my presence and not lay a hand on me again.”

Now he had her backed up against a window. “And if you ever speak ill of my wife again, I will let you and all of your lunatic subjects burn. You are so profoundly ignorant on the subject of Sansa Stark it would be laughable if it weren’t so pathetic and insulting. I can tolerate many things, but I will not listen to some ignorant, axe-mad pirate-squid insult the woman I love.”

Asha’s eyes were wide, her mouth open. There was an awkward silence. And then Jon released her, turning away in shock. *Where did that come from? How could I do that? What’s wrong with me?*

He turned back to her. “My Lady, I----”

“Very well.”

He paused, even more surprised by her reaction. She was standing up straight, composing herself. Her gaze and her tone were quite calm and casual.

“What?”

“Fine. You’re right. I have no business hitting you. Or speaking ill of your woman. But I also have no business abandoning my lands. How am I ever supposed to be Lady of the Iron Islands if I am willing to turn tail and run whenever there’s trouble?”
Jon took a few deep breaths, surprised and a bit relieved at this reaction. “You will come back, Lady Asha. But with greater support.”

“No. You don’t understand. Half the reason these people have their issues with me is because the first time I returned, I did so with a foreign army. Even if you killed Victarion and subdued them all… It would be you, not me. I need to prove that I’m their lady, not some puppet of a foreign power.

_Gods above._ Jon groaned and turned away, furious. “Do you have any support here?”

“Of course. If I didn’t, I’d be long-gone by now. My Uncle Rodrik is the Lord of Harlaw, the richest island of these domains. All the lords of Harlaw follow him and support me. I also have the Botleys of Lordsport. A few others scattered over Old Wyk and Blacktyde. I’m not friendless, just vulnerable.”

“And the rest want Victarion?”

“Enough want Victarion. A few others are on the fence.”

Jon’s stomach began to twist.

“Any powerful ones?”

“Of course.”

He turned away from her then, miserable. There was a solution to this. But one he really, really did not wish to suggest. It turned his stomach. _Those boys… But it’s this, fighting, or their death._ “Well, that’s it then, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“I’m afraid, Lady Greyjoy…” He turned around and took a deep breath. “You’re going to have to get married.”

There was a long, awkward silence. Jon became sure she was about to hit him again. He wouldn’t blame her if she did. Not this time, Not for what he was suggesting. Then she spoke.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“NO!” She cried out, red-faced. “Not again! I am not going to be forced into some marriage. If I do… Tristen and Rodrik will…”

_I know._ Jon swallowed heavily. He didn’t want to do this. At the moment, Asha Greyjoy’s sons were in a strange grey area, namewise. It was generally accepted that their mother did not wish to be wed and that they were her as-of-yet unacknowledged heirs. Not quite formally Greyjoys, but likely to be declared as such in a matter of time. However, if Asha married, any contract would want the trueborn sons of that union made the heirs to Pyke, effectively ending the boys’ chances of a true name. “They will not be targets anymore.”

“They’ll be bastards. Formally. Forever. You want me to completely disinherit my own sons.”
Jon took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Lady Greyjoy, but---“

She interrupted Jon by brushing past him and marching out of the room. He didn’t blame her for this.

_I’ve just set two innocent children up to the fate I suffered._ Jon shivered. Part of him was hoping that Lady Greyjoy would continue to refuse. _But she won’t if she feels it will keep her children safe._
The Prince Remembers

Chapter Summary

Jon reacts to his meetings with Asha, writes some letters, and talks to one of his companions.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bluecichlid for betaing.

AND OMG OVER ONE THOUSAND COMMENTS. I'M SO EXCITED!!!! Thank you guys so much. :)

Jon:

Jon ended up not hearing anything from his hostess for the rest of the day. He spent the afternoon writing letters, two of which were in the code he’d spent the two weeks leading up to this trip learning. They took the longest to write, as Jon hadn’t quite perfected how to write a natural and convincing sounding letter that wouldn’t raise any suspicions from anyone who intercepted it but also said everything he needed it to say. He spent hours on them.

The one to Daenerys came out as what appeared to be a long, pedantic account of his experiences thus far and various musings on them. In it, he seemed to profess a newfound fascination with the Ironborn culture and moral code and the hope that a respected expert in piety to the Drowned God like Victarion Greyjoy might be willing to educate him. There was also commentary on how Asha Greyjoy, like most of the female Lords Paramount in Westeros, was unmarried, questions about the futures of her sons, and also ridiculous amounts of factoids about the Ironborn, the families there, and their customs.

It looked like a long and boring letter from a dull person capable of making even the most interesting things sound tedious. Decoded, the message went:

Asha Greyjoy’s power here is shaky and a mutiny is likely. Both she and her sons are in danger due to a lack of loyalty from many of her bannermen, who crave a return to the glory of their Old Way and view Victarion as the last defender of their culture. Victarion does not revolt yet because to kill Asha and her boys would be kinslaying, the greatest of sins in the faith of the Drowned God. However, that doesn’t mean someone else won’t do it for him. Asha hangs onto power lightly, but something must be done.

She has some powerful allies--- her Uncle Rodrik Harlaw is one. But to gain more support in order to secure her place, I feel she must marry into an influential Ironborn house. She is hesitant to go through with that out of reluctance to bastardize her sons. If we cannot secure things soon, I think it is imperative that we remove her children from the Islands for their safety, something she is more willing to do, though she is not too willing to leave herself. I fear violence will come soon to the Iron Islands, and if so, we must be ready.
Do not fly out here yet---- I worry that if we act prematurely, we could end up provoking a full scale rebellion that could otherwise be avoided. Furthermore, trying to secure Asha’s power here with a foreign army may not help us in the long run. It would only make her seem more like our puppet and diminish the beliefs of her people that she is one of them.

Victarion Greyjoy is dangerous, I’m sure of it. While I think the men I have with me and Rhaegal should be enough to protect me, you should be prepared to move in quickly if I need you. Like I said, Victarion IS dangerous. The man is mad. He needs to be disposed of.

I fear his aggression and ambition go beyond harming and deposing his niece. He clearly hasn’t forgotten what happened to his arm and loathes House Targaryen. I fear he has designs to harm all of us should he ever come to power here. I am going to try and arrange for more protection for Lady Asha and come home as soon as I can. I may end up having to sneak Lady Asha’s son and the lady herself out of Pyke. Just in case rebellion does come to pass, like I said, be prepared.

As of right now, there’s a good likelihood that I can handle this, but I need to know you’re ready to send back up if needed.

I’d like Sansa to leave Dragonstone and return to court or some other safe area where she can be better protected. Likewise, I would feel more comfortable if Arya were to leave Winterfell for a better-protected fortress such as the Dreadfort. I cannot write to her suggesting this as it would raise suspicion and she does not know this code. But I am writing to Sansa and I hope both of you will write to my sister and ask this of her. Do not take this to mean that I am certain things are going to be completely destroyed. But I believe it’s best to be ready.

The possibility of rebellion hasn’t really increased from what we originally estimated, however the outcome of such an event may turn out to be more far-reaching than I guessed. Thus I would feel more comfortable if you were to prepare yourself and take measures to keep Sansa, Arya, and yourself safe until my return.

I miss you.

Sansa’s letter on the surface was equally tedious and the coded message contained much of the same information in Dany’s letter. There was this as well:

One thing you need to be aware of: my work here has required me to meet with Asha Greyjoy privately. Our meetings have resulted in talk of her being my mistress. With things being so dangerous here, that sort of cover is needed. I wanted to tell you now so that you didn’t have to hear it down the road or feel that I was keeping things from you. I wanted to tell you of this before anyone else could.

But please, please be assured that nothing of that nature is truly happening. It is merely false gossip. Lady Asha and her children are in grave peril and she can’t afford to be seen as plotting with me. Our meetings have to be private for anything to proceed. But it is merely that: political maneuvering and business.

He also told her to hold the paper close to a heated source, for on the back of the paper he used, he’d written in special lemon-based ink that only appeared when heated. That letter was this:

Please believe what I say about Asha. Please don’t let this hurt you or us.

To be honest, I don’t think I could stomach anything beyond business and political maneuvering with Asha Greyjoy. She’s not an easy person to get along with. I pity her and there are some things I respect about her, but there is so much bitterness and she’s so painfully judgmental and abrasive.
You know me, Sansa. I have no issue with tough, idealistic, or fighting-prone women. That is not the problem. She’s just so painfully suspicious and impulsive, and I can’t trust her. I’m not sure she’s willing to accept any help from anyone. And while she’s not afraid to move on, she refuses to face some facts about her family and her situation.

Lady Greyjoy seems far too willing to hurt someone for stating simple truths and is far more willing to engage in violence or let herself die than try to find a more peaceful solution. Part of me knows where she’s coming from, but she takes her pride and stubbornness to extremes. I know she is desperate and scared, but that just makes her stubbornness more frustrating.

I really want to like this woman. In some ways she reminds me of our sister. But you and I both know that for all of Arya’s issues, she’s still very much a child and she seems at least more willing to learn and move on. Asha Greyjoy is an adult. She hasn’t suffered trauma to the extent Arya has, nor has she had the memories of almost half her life taken from her. Arya doesn’t seem to have the self-destructive streak Asha has, at least not to this level, and Asha also seems to lack a certain level of self-awareness [a trait common among Ironborn, I’ve found. She’s better than most, but is still frustrating].

Perhaps I’m being too hard on the woman. I’m upset. My plan to help Asha solidify her power here nonviolently involves subjecting two innocent children to the fate I suffered growing up. How does this keep happening? If this happens, that’ll make three children I’ve had a hand in forcing into illegitimacy.

And I have a feeling that they treat bastards here worse than they did at Winterfell. Theon Greyjoy used to tell me that they beat and shame bastards on the Iron Isles, treated them like monsters. I know Asha would not mistreat her children, but this is not a kind fate for them. And she will not be around forever.

I know what you will say, Sansa. You’ll say it’s not my fault, that I’m doing the best that I can and there is no avoiding this. You’ll say that those boys are better off this way than they would be if I were to risk their lives. I know on some level that you’d be right. It isn’t my fault that a marriage could be the only thing to keep the Ironborn from engaging in a bloody uprising.. It’s not my fault that Tristen and Rodrik aren’t the children of a married couple. I’m not to blame for the mindset here, or the possible bloodshed. I didn’t cause any of the problems that have led to this. I know.

But I’m still part of this, and it kills me. I feel like an absolute monster, robbing children of their names and futures. All those years I resented being a bastard, and this is what I end up doing. If that bastard boy I was all those years ago saw me today, what would he think? Sometimes I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what I’ve become.

Do you remember how simple things used to be?

Do you remember when it was just, “This is right and this is wrong. Don’t do this, always do that. Be honest and honorable, help others, protect the innocent, be kind, and face your fears. Always do what’s best for others”?

Do you remember how easy it was? Do you remember when the people who upheld the law and protected the people were all supposed to be upright and honorable? Do you remember when we thought upholding order only ever meant punishment for the wrongdoers? When good men only ever did good things, and we were only protected by good people who never hurt anyone?

Do you remember when we thought the Night’s Watch was made up of people like our Uncle Benjen? When our king was a righteous, brave, brilliant warrior and hero who stood up to an evil king and killed an evil prince? Do you remember when we thought the nobility was always noble?
When keeping people safe meant nothing but doing the obviously right thing? When we thought the heroes never had to do anything that harmed innocents?

I remember thinking all of the men of the Night’s Watch were brave, righteous, hard-working heroes who just wanted to do their duty to the realm and serve faithfully. I remember when my only doubt was about the fact that our father sired a bastard. I remember when I admired Daeron the Young Dragon for being the perfect legendary hero and prodigy king. When I didn’t have to consider the thousands of men he sent to their deaths just for the sake of taking Dorne temporarily. I remember thinking that living by Eddard Stark’s code and having a strong arm and enough courage would be all I needed to do what is right.

I remember being so sure that I would never, ever make a bastard. Now I’ve made three. And I didn’t even have to break a vow to do it. I just had to protect my loved ones and keep my subjects safe, and as a result I’ve made a Rivers and two Pykes.

No, more than that. Almost. Sort of. You remember Gilly and Sam’s son? You know by now that Little Sam isn’t Sam’s natural child. You know that the one who sired him was in fact Gilly’s father/husband, Craster. You know how much Gilly and Sam both adore that boy. You know I once separated Little Sam from his mother? It’s true. At the Wall, Gilly served as wet nurse to Mance Rayder’s son. Melisandre wanted to sacrifice Rayder’s son to the flames because he had the blood of a king. I forced Gilly to leave the Wall with Mance’s boy and leave Little Sam behind to trick Melisandre and Stannis. She’d be able to get Mance’s son away before they knew, and then once it was too late, Melisandre would know. She’d have no reason to hurt Little Sam.

Gilly was sent to Horn Hill and Mance’s son was passed off as her bastard with Sam. So I separated one boy from his loving mother and the other I made a Flowers. Today Mance’s boy Dal lives at the Dreadfort with his Aunt Val and occasionally visits his mad father at the Gift. He’s Dal Rayder and no bastard anymore. But he was ‘Little Sam Flowers’ for a while, under my command. And if things hadn’t worked out the way they did, he might still be, and Gilly may have never seen Little Sam again.

I may likely have to remove Tristen and Rodrik from the Iron Islands until I can be sure that things are safe. And what if that time never comes? What if Asha’s marriage doesn’t help her? I would have robbed those boys of their name possibly for nothing. They could end up orphan bastards like Lynette.

I don’t want to hurt children, Sansa. I don’t want to separate babes from their mothers or rob them of their names. I don’t want to be that dragon that Lynette is afraid of.

The worst part is, I know I’m going to do it. I know I will. I wish I could pretend that I could do something different. But I have to do what’s necessary.

I’m so afraid that over time I’ll get used to making these sorts of decisions. So used to them that I’ll lose sight of any good left inside me and become a monster.

And what if after I become used to this sort of thing, I start losing sight of right and wrong altogether? What if it becomes so easy to sacrifice the happiness of innocents that I start doing it when it isn’t necessary? Or to achieve my own selfish ends? What if I just become an utter tyrant like my grandfather?

Sansa, please don’t let that happen to me. Please. I’d rather die.

I miss you so much. I hate this place. They say Dragonstone is awful and dank and dark. This place is truly gloomy. I am staying in rooms where children were murdered. The name of our tower is the
Bloody Keep. I am surrounded by madmen and rapers and murderers. It reminds me of when I first came to the Wall. But at least the Wall was a punishment. These people aren’t punished with anything but not being allowed to raid and pillage more.

What do I do, Sansa? Do you remember when I sentenced Roslin to the Penance Walk without knowing what it meant? Remember how I felt after? You came up with a solution. You helped me then. Can you help me now? Maybe you can find a loophole.

For a House to ally itself with Asha, they’ll want to know their descendants will be her heirs. But maybe you could find something, anything, to make things better for Asha’s boys?

I know you can’t. Part of me knows that. But another part holds out ridiculous hope that you can. I shouldn’t do this. I don’t want to pressure you.

I feel awful. I promised myself that my first private letter to you from Pyke would be a brilliant declaration of love. That I’d write a proper love letter to try and make up for my absence. I should be with you, holding your hair when you throw up, rubbing your sore ankles, whispering to Aemonaerys, watching your belly swell. But I’m not.

I hope you are feeling well, Sweetling. I may be watching you here and there through Ghost. I know that’s not enough, but I want to do everything I can.

While I flew here, I thought about what I’d do to try and make up for the absence. You know me, I’ve never been brilliant with words. I sometimes worry over that. I remember how you loved songs and poems and tales of romance. You’ve written me some lovely letters, even though we weren’t parted after we fell in love until now. You have such lovely handwriting and say such lovely things. And what have I done?

You were raised as a lady and expected to be courted and doted on. And it was only proper that you did, you deserved that. You still do. Sometimes I really try. But sometimes I think I should try more. I should be the man you deserve.

I was never taught to court much. I think you were actually my primary tutor on how to talk to ladies. Do you remember that? Those giggling lessons you used to drag me to with Jeyne Poole? You told me to always tell girls that their names were pretty. You were the only one who seemed keen on teaching me anything of the sort. I never understood why.

Really, why would I be taught such things? I was a bastard growing up. I would never be expected to charm ladies. No one would want me to. I was allowed to let the few courting, dancing, and poetry lessons given to Theon, Robb and I go in one ear and out the other. I was even allowed to skip them. I did so eagerly, thinking they were silly and stupid. I remember rolling my eyes a bit whenever you used to call after me and tell me it was time for a lesson. I thought it was so idiotic.

I knew nothing then. Now I know better. Those things you loved---- the poems, the songs, the stories, the romance--- none of it was stupid. Nothing that could make you happy could ever be stupid. Nothing that might make any person feel loved or good about themselves is stupid.

I fear making a fool of myself, though. I feared it then as well. Probably because I am a fool.

As I flew up here, I tried to think of what sort of romantic things I could write to you. I thought maybe I could compare the blue of the sea here to the color of your eyes. Or I could claim that the beauty of the Iron Islands still isn’t as beautiful as you are.

The sea here just looks grey. And while it is true that the Iron Islands are not as lovely as you, that
really isn’t much of a compliment. The Iron Islands are dull and dreary and most things are a fairer sight than this place.

I know that I miss you. I know that I love you. I know you’re wonderful and beautiful and that I should be with you.

Back at the Wall, when things started getting really hard, I began seeking out solitude for peace. Solitude and cold. When I first came to Pyke, I felt eager to make friends among the men here. But now I find myself seeking solitude once again. I sought it out at court too, at first. When you and I fell in love, I did that less. Yes, sometimes I needed to be alone, but it wasn’t the only way I found any relief. With you, I found not only peace but comfort. Not only could I clear my head and work out my thoughts, but I could also feel warm. I didn’t have to be alone. But now you’re not here. And this castle is so drafty and damp.

You made even Dragonstone light up. You could light up a Black Cell.

I hope you are well, Sansa. You and Aemonaserys and Ghost. Are you feeling ill at all anymore? Are your breasts still sore? Are you having any odd cravings? Do you feel Aemonaserys move? Tell our babe that their father loves him/her.

Do you miss me like I miss you? If you go back to court, do you feel like you want to resume all of your duties? Or any? Don’t be afraid to let Margaery handle the court until the babe arrives. Go slowly, please. If you want to work, do so. But not too much. Write to Arya. Write to me. Tell me everything.

I may visit you tonight through Ghost. I think I will the second I’ve sent this letter.

I hate Pyke.

I love you.

Your name isn’t pretty. It’s beautiful.

He hurried off to send the letters and return to his room as quickly as he could, telling the guards to let no one in unless he called for them and locking the door. He went to the bed and laid back, trying to send his mind out of his body.

It was harder this time, it took longer to find Ghost. Sometimes that happened when there was this kind of distance. But Jon’s heart jumped when he saw the cranberry patches in Aegon’s garden, smelled the pine trees. It was darker at Dragonstone, the sun had set more here. But Ghost could see well in the dark. And now, so could Jon.

He managed to even make out the rose bushes. There actually looked to be some blooms, partially closed against the winter night’s cold. He padded towards the bushes and ripped a bloom from the bush with his jaws, then made his way through the Keep, up stairs. Up and up until he found the door to their apartments.

His wife, her belly rounded and showing, sat upon their bed, stitching some sort of light gossamer material that looked familiar. She raised her head when he entered. She smelled so good. Like sweet lemons and lavender and roses. He could even smell pine and cranberries coming off of her. But he also smelled salt. And tears were running down her face.

She stared at him for a long time, seemingly unsure. Sansa folded the material up and put it aside, then beckoned him forward. He ran over to the side of the bed and released the wild roses from his jaws, nudging them forward with his snout.
Her eyes widened. “J-Jon? Are you in there?”

He felt so, so happy to hear her. His tail started wagging and he jumped up, landing his front paws on the surface of the bed. Sansa reached out, wrapped her arms around his neck, and buried her face in his fur.

“I miss you, Jon Snow,” she whispered. “I miss you and I love you. Please come back to me soon.”

She moved over to the edge of the bed, sitting so her belly was level with his head and pressing the side of it to her belly. “Listen.”

He liked to think he could smell Aemonaerys in there. There was definitely something different about how Sansa smelled now. It wasn’t bad, just different.

The smell began to die away and his vision started to blur. He was losing his hold on Ghost. That happened sometimes when he did this over such a great distance. He pulled away reluctantly, licked her tummy, and trotted away. Seconds later, he was back at Pyke.

He cursed this. Usually, this wasn’t so hard. His warging had gotten a bit harder since Leona. There was that fear in the back of his mind now. And it got worse when he felt stressed.

*Just be glad you got those moments. What other men get to have such privileges?* He was lucky, really. He just wished he had more time. Jon took out his pendant and looked at her picture. She’d obviously planned this gift for... what? His name day, perhaps? Or when they had to be parted. The picture was recolored. He’d first seen a version of this years ago, during the wars. She’d worn Stark white and grey in that version. In this one, her gown was black and red.

When he first saw the Stark version, though, he’d been shocked. The woman in the portrait didn’t look like the little girl he’d known.

It was true that Sansa started blossoming a bit early. He only realized it a few weeks before her eleventh name day. He and his siblings used to swim together in the hot springs. It was the one thing they all loved doing together. But then one day Sansa stopped joining them. When they asked her why, she’d get red faced and walk off. As it turned out, Lady Catelyn and Septa Mordane now forbade it. When Jon made the mistake of wondering why this was aloud to Arya, his little sister proceeded to tell him it was because Sansa now had a ‘figure’ and had to wear ‘grown up undersilk’ and could no longer bathe around boys.

He’d been shocked. He hadn’t noticed Sansa having anything resembling a ‘figure.’ Once Arya told him though, he found he couldn’t fail to notice. He tried not to, though. He actually made an effort not to think on her too much at all after that. It summoned strange feelings.

When he saw that portrait a good four or five years later, there was no way one couldn’t notice. He hadn’t even recognized her at first. He thought that it had to be a portrait of some other highborn girl. Sansa could never look like that, and she’d never wear a gown like that. This had to be another girl, another girl with a rather generous bosom. There’d already been a fake Arya, after all. Why not a fake Sansa?

That’s what he told himself when he took himself in hand, anyways. Of course, when he’d gotten proof in the form of a letter that it was indeed Sansa, it left him feeling more than a little confused. After that, he had to tell himself that Sansa wasn’t really his sister, and deep down he must have known that. All the same, he made an effort not to think of that image of her again.

It might have been why he was so much more willing to ride past Winterfell when he and Dany had
traveled down from the Wall following their defeat of the Night’s King. There were a number of reasons he hadn’t want to visit the fortress. It was shortly after Sansa settled there and was rebuilding the castle.

He hadn’t wanted to add the pressure of her having to deal with the fallout of a royal visit. Winterfell was not equipped to handle dragons, there were numerous wounded and starving men. And frankly, he wasn’t sure he trusted Dany or her dragons at that point. While he’d been grateful to her for her aid and was willing to support her as queen, he feared she might bear continuing ill will towards the Starks and didn’t want to be responsible for putting that sort of pressure on Sansa. That she had a child didn’t help things either. He honestly doubted she’d want dragons around her young son.

He’d also feared that the visit might have been taken as an attack or as him changing his mind and trying to reclaim Winterfell from her. Though he’d signed away his rights, with Dany’s army and the dragons, it wouldn’t be hard for him to go back on his word. After all the fighting, the last thing his cousin needed was any perceived challenges to her authority, especially when she’d already willingly given up her crown.

He’d felt he was helping her by keeping his distance. Though his heart ached when he passed Winterfell’s lands, he’d done so in the belief that it was best for everyone involved.

Now that he thought of it, he might have also maintained the distance out of embarrassment over the portrait as well. Seeing Sansa was not going to be easy or pleasant. Their personal correspondence was minimal to nonexistent. He’d gratefully taken it as a sign that things were well and that she wasn’t interested in reconnecting. They’d never been close, after all.

And then everything just ended up getting swallowed up in the flurry of activity. The post-war cleanup, the relocation of former Night’s Watch Members, reconstructing the court, connecting with his new aunt, assuming his new role as prince, trying to hunt down the criminals of the war and rebuild the crumbling social order. Houses had to be given new leaders, crimes had to be investigated, towns had to be rebuilt, people had to be fed, and a government had to be established.

At the Wall, he’d trained himself not to dwell upon his Stark relations too much as time went on. Such thoughts summoned too much guilt and pain. They served as sources of distraction, disappointment, and temptation to stray from his duty.

It was worry for Robb and anger over his father that made him almost abandon the Watch completely when word came of Eddard Stark’s death. It was thoughts of Arya that plagued him nonstop after the Boltons took over and eventually led him to try and lead men to Winterfell. After that, he found it easier to try and disassociate with them completely. After his Targaryen heritage became a reality, he became even more committed to this, telling himself it was meant to be.

Kill the boy, Jon Snow. Let the man be born.

He told himself that if Sansa had made it this far, she must be able to take care of herself. And the best thing he could do for her was make the realm more secure overall.

Of course, once word came of Sansa’s arrest and everything came out, he’d loathed himself for his negligence. It kept him up all night. I failed to save Arya, now I’ve failed to help Sansa.

Actually seeing her again brought it all back, helped him remember who he was, who he’d been. He’d failed to save her. But she saved herself. Then she saved him. She brought Jon Snow back to life more than Melisandre of Asshai did, and helped him find Jon Targaryen in the process.

He didn’t know why she cared so much, really. Why she’d done any of that for him. He wouldn’t
blame her if she’d decided to spit in his face and run back to Winterfell. It wouldn’t have stopped
him from giving her whatever she might have needed to rebuild her life. A small price to pay for
what she’d lost.

Sometimes he asked her about that. She laughed and said it was because she wanted a crown. “Or
maybe just because I wanted someone who might actually care about me. And I was afraid, Jon. I
was afraid of being alone. Going back to Winterfell, I’d have gone back to the place where my son
was killed. It meant going back to rubble. Being around you meant I was around a piece of home. I
don’t know. I’m not even sure when it was that I started falling in love with you.”

Of course, while having her near was a relief in some ways, it was a new source of guilt. Knowing
the extent of what was happening, what she’d lost killed him. There was some comfort in seeing
how strong she was, how capably she managed to keep herself alive and try to rebuild everything. It
was also gratifying to have the opportunity to offer her some comfort, even before their relationship
developed into a love affair. He felt more capable of truly doing something for her when she was
around, trying to help make up for past mistakes.

It didn’t take long for a new source of guilt to pop up afterwards, though. Once he started revisiting
those thoughts of her that the portrait inspired. Just another way she made me feel more like a
Targaryen, I suppose.

Still, he’d felt more than a little sick with himself over that, considering the hell she’d been through.
Looking at this image, however, made him realize that maybe some of his feelings went back further.

He remembered being at the side table during the banquet for the royal family, watching his family
march in escorting King Robert, Queen Cersei, and her children. Rickon almost stopped to say hello.
Bran was a bit more well-behaved. The Queen was beautiful and sour-looking. The King was a fat,
sweaty disappointment. Robb had his stupid grin and pretty little Myrcella was starry-eyed and
blonde. He could tell at once that Joffrey was a ponce. And he remembered Sansa marching in,
wearing her ivory silk and thinking she looked radiant.

That was the word that popped into his head. An odd word to describe his eleven year old sister. But
to him, she certainly had. If I’d seen what she’d look like years later at that moment, I’d have spent
in my pants like the greenboy I was.

Fully grown Cersei Lannister, her golden hair woven with emeralds that matched her big eyes, was
beautiful but not beautiful enough to fake a smile properly. Sansa, still so young, fresh-faced, a bit
snooty and still a child, was radiant.

He tried not to think of her too much in those days. It always made him feel odd and guilty, even
before all the tragedy.

Now he was free to think of her that way without guilt. They had worked out and established how
they felt for one another, they were wed, and Sansa even told him to touch himself while looking at
this very picture. In fact, he was the only one in the world who had the right to think of her this way.
Their union was blessed by the Old Gods and the New. But even more importantly, he was the first
and only person to receive enthusiastic permission from her to think of her in such a manner.

He knew she wasn’t exactly fond of this portrait. They only spoke of it once, that morning in her
bedchamber before Joanna the maid walked in on them. She’d laughed about it, then said she looked
like a whore. It soured her mood a bit.

But it led to one of the better conversations they’d had. It was the one that helped iron out their
relationship, put a few things out in the open, and motivated him to make some progress in regards to cementing their union. That was when he finally realized it was time to go to Dany and get serious, that he needed to fight for their future.

The criticism of the image was stupid, of course. Sansa could never look like a whore. Jon would know, having seen her in every degree of dress and undress possible at this point, doing all sorts of things. She even looked lovely and elegant with his cock in her mouth.

When she showed him the image in the locket, he’d been a bit surprised. But it made him feel better, knowing she now felt comfortable about it. It was a lovely picture, after all. And we might not even be married right now if it hadn’t come up.

Jon leaned over the edge of the bed and pulled out the box of his wife’s things he’d brought with him. There was the vial of perfume, there was the wolf handkerchief she’d made him, the favors, some blue rose petals, a collection of love letters she’d written him…

…And that pair of her small clothes. The ones she’d given him right before he left. The ones she’d given him when they first made love were actually misplaced when they’d packed up for Dragonstone. Since he found that out, he’d been looking for an opportunity to ask her for another set of pantalets. It was extremely embarrassing, but he wanted them. He certainly didn’t want to spend weeks parted from her without something that smelled like her sex.

These were actually a bit nicer than the first pair. The first ones were plain white linen, very basic. These were actual silk, pure white, with little blue satin laces. Sansa had gotten a bit more frivolous in regards to her underthings after she’d worn that gift from Arianne Martell for him.

Right before he’d left, in fact, she let him pick out which ones he’d bring. She opened up the chest where she kept her undersilk and told him to choose.

“Only one thing,” she said, reaching in and grabbing the ones from Arianne, “It can’t be these.”

“But those are my favorites,” he whined to her. “Please?”

She crossed her arms in front of her and shook her head primly, trying not to laugh. “No, I want you to have to yearn for those. Pick something else.”

So he chose these. They were so pretty and dainty and had the forget-me-not blue lacing up the sides with the little bows at the top. When he chose them, she had him wait in the solar and slipped them on underneath her gown before letting him back in. He undressed her, but she insisted on keeping them on, then had him bring her to her peak twice; once with his fingers, then with his mouth, stroking and licking her through the cloth. He’d complained at first. But now he was glad for it. The fabric was drenched in her.

Jon loved how bossy she could get.

He played with the fabric, running it over his fingers. His cock was getting harder by the minute. He leaned back, pantalets in hand, unlaced himself, then pulled off all of his clothes. He brought the underthings to his nose and inhaled, remembering the sensation of putting his head between her legs.

She was never lovelier than when she so utterly came apart. All other times she was so tightly wound, so carefully composed and ladylike. All grace and poise, every movement and gestured carefully calculated. When she came, though, it was all gone. There was just her: natural, happy, in the moment.

He thought of how her skin could glisten with sweat, how she had this rosy glow to her, how her
voice grew so loud and powerful, how her mouth fell open and her thick bottom lip quivered.

It was getting late and the sun was setting. Jon had one particular fantasy he had wanted badly to fulfill but hadn’t gotten to yet.

Whatever anyone wanted to say about Dragonstone, the sunsets there were breathtaking. There was something about seeing the water sparkle, the skies in an array of color, the way that you could almost see the Crownlands in the distance when the sun got low, and the knowledge that what you were seeing was what Aegon the Conqueror had viewed when he was plotting his conquest of Westeros. It was absolutely awe-inspiring.

And the only thing that could possibly make it better would be if he saw his wife come with that sunset behind her. He could just imagine it when he closed his eyes.

Jon would take her out on the balcony and kiss her sweetly. She’d have blue roses in her hair and wear white, looking all sweet and innocent. He’d propose it and she’d refuse at first, because it was Sansa. While she’d sort of given in the day they’d arrived, they’d both been over eager. Since then, whenever he’d proposed it after, she’d refused, scared of them being seen. So yes, Sansa would refuse at first.

But he’d convince her. He’d show her how hard he was and she’d get caught up in desire for him. He’d get her naked and lick every inch of her until she came, moaning louder than the bells of the Great Sept. And she’d beg him to take her, and he would. He’d hoist her up onto his hips and fuck her against the rail. She’d be all bathed in the last light of the day, her breasts bouncing, her back arching. She’d peak, crying out, the setting sun just behind her so it looked like all those colors were shining out of her, like she was the sun. And…

Jon came with a strangled cry.

Afterwards, he cleaned himself up, put the pantalets away and reached for some of the letters. Sansa wrote them on whims, leaving them in his desk to find, having pages deliver them. Some of them were just loving and poetic. Or they were just thoughtful. She always had the loveliest handwriting.

They could be random, these notes, and untraditional. But they were always lovely.

Dear Jon,

I saw you smile today and your whole face seemed to just light up. You were in the training yards and Garlan Tyrell had just knocked you down. And you smiled anyways. I love you for that. The way you don’t see defeat as failure, how you appreciate when someone bests you. How graceful you can be even when you aren’t the winner. You got up and kept practicing with Garlan, trying to make yourself better, happy for the opportunity to learn something new and improve yourself. So few people have that strength.

If I’d never met you before this day, I would have fallen in love with you the second I saw that smile.

Love,

Your Sansa

Dear Jon,

Spring is coming soon. I know it is. I used to think I wouldn’t survive this winter. At one point I didn’t even care. Now I do. I’m going to see the spring and the summer with you. And when the next winter comes, we’ll stay warm together.
Love,

Your Sansa

He loved that she signed them, ‘Your Sansa.’ He also liked how some of them were actually filthy. Well, as filthy as she ever got outside the bedchamber.

Dear Jon,

I want to sit upon your lap tonight before bed and embroider for a while in your solar. If you would please speak to me and touch me in a thoroughly scandalous fashion as I do so, I’d be much obliged. If you can make me miss a stitch, you get a treat.

Love,

Your Sansa

Jon read these over, smiled, and laid back. He’d see her again soon. Maybe even before my letter gets to her.

He got up and dressed himself, hurrying down to the Bloody Keep’s Hall. To his good cheer, there was a chorus of voices coming from the Hall, ‘The Dornishman’s Wife’ coming to a drunken close.

As Jon walked in, however, one of the men, a Northerner from Hornwood by the looks of his insignia, called out, “Maybe we should rename this one ‘The Kraken’s Daughter’!”

There was laughter, but it died down when Jon entered. Typical.

They all looked at him, stony-faced. Jon tried to keep a friendly expression. As usual, Nathen ran forward, eager to bring his charge some ale and food. Patrek Mallister moved from the place at the center of the head table nervously. Jon thanked him and sat before looking around at them all.

“I do not think changing the title would work, I’m afraid,” he told them, trying to smile, “The word ‘daughter’ isn’t as easy to fit as the word ‘wife’.”

There was some awkward laughter. Jon sighed. “As it is, I doubt the Ironborn would appreciate it. And at the moment, we are their guests.”

“We’re about as welcome as pigshit in an ale keg,” remarked Dorren Flint.

Jon took a sip from the mug Nathen set in front of him and wrinkled his nose. “Judging by the taste of this, a very welcome thing at Pyke.”

Now they seemed to genuinely laugh. Patrek Mallister, now sitting beside him, nudged him conspiratorially. “But how was the Kraken’s Daughter, My Prince?”

Jon grimaced. Right. “I am sorry to disappoint you, Ser Patrek, but the Lady and I have kept things strictly professional.”

“Oh, come now,” he said, grinning, “Are you worried I’m going to go loosening my lips to your wife’s uncle? I wouldn’t, but even if I did, as if Edmure would care. A man has needs. I imagine that is especially true of princes. Seven Hells, I remember when Theon Greyjoy, about to be Prince of the Iron Islands, came to Seagard. We had a jolly time in the brothels until my father felt the need to butt in.”

Jon gritted his teeth. “I am not Theon Greyjoy.”
Jon stabbed at a piece of salted beef with his skewer. “Edmure Tully’s opinions are not what concern me. Lady Asha’s honor does.”

“Oh, honestly, the woman has two bastard boys already, and she’s Ironborn besides. You care more about her honor than she does.”

“There is also the matter of my honor, and that of my own wife’s.” Jon said, cutting into the tough meat with gusto.

“Oh, your princess is a great lady, to be sure. We’re all great admirers of the Red Wolf,” Patrek told him, “I personally owe her my life. She got Riverrun back for us and got rid of those shit-eating Freys. Then went North and took care of the Boltons. She’s a clever woman. So even she knows men have needs. She knew about Harry, to be sure, and it never bothered her.”

Jon looked at Mallister curiously. “I wasn’t aware that you know my wife.”

“Oh, a great number of us do. And you won’t hear one word against her from this lot. Not here. The ones here came to protect you for her sake. I knew her, your brother Robb, Theon Greyjoy, a lot of them. I was at the Red Wedding.”

Jon’s jaw dropped. “How did you—–?”

“—Survive? Oh, there were a few of us who lived through it. Those of us who were involved in the bedding, for instance. That’s how I was saved. They found me to be of greater value as a hostage than a corpse.” Patrek grimaced. “I… I saw the aftermath though. I was howling like mad for three days straight. Your brother was a good man. He deserved better. Lady Catelyn too. And others. Smalljon Umber. Robin Flint. Dacey Mormont. Lucas Blackwood. They all deserved better.”

Jon found himself softening towards the heir to Seagard. “I wish I’d been there.”

“I wouldn’t. More dead Starks would’ve solved nothing. The realm at large needs you alive.”

“Did you know my brother well?”

“Well, I mean, better than most, but we weren’t… I was part of his guard, you know. I knew many of the guards there. Lost a lot of friends that way. I suppose we got on well enough, yeah. He didn’t open up much to those he didn’t know real well, for obvious reasons. More willing to trust a man with his life than his thoughts. Typical king behavior. I got real friendly with Theon Greyjoy before I knew what a shit he was. Saw him off to Pyke from Seaguard before I returned to Robb’s forces at Riverrun.”

“You liked him?”

“Aye. A great deal. I’ve yet to meet a Stark I don’t like, really.”

“Interesting that you’d feel so at ease with the idea of Sansa Stark’s husband dishonoring her then.”

Patrek’s eyes were narrowed. “Your Grace, do not doubt my regard for your wife. It is just that I do not suffer the delusion that a man can be truly faithful to one woman, especially not when they’re separated. I refuse to judge a man on that account. But let me tell you, I am not here for your sake. I am here for hers. As I said, that woman saved my life. I was raised on horror stories regarding the
Ironborn. Seagard was built to fend them off. But I still came here, because I don’t want the Red Wolf to suffer widowhood again.”

At this point, Jon was done trying to down the poor food in front of him. He surveyed Mallister carefully. “Join me in my chambers.”

Patrek’s eyes widened, but he nodded and obliged, standing to follow Jon back to his rooms. Nathen Cerwyn provided them with a flagon of wine and two cups before leaving them be. They took two chairs near the window.

“You know, I fucking hated Roslin Frey,” Patrek said after a few odd moments. “I never understood what Edmure or Marq saw in her. Edmure and I lost touch for a while, you know. I went back to Seagard. It was at least partly over her. She didn’t like me. She decided I was too coarse during the bedding.”

“Were you?”

“I pulled off one of her stockings, winked at her, and told her not to cry because Edmure would have her bouncing around for joy before long. I wasn’t going to take liberties. She was my friend’s wife. Of course, in hindsight my comment hardly could have sounded sensitive, but how was I to know that? It was some of the others I didn’t trust. I just wanted to make sure my friend’s bride got to him unscathed and if possible, enthusiastic.” He scowled and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “What she didn’t like was that I was close to Edmure and didn’t find her charming. So she told Edmure that I took liberties and I departed for Seagard and barely spoke to him for four years.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s no matter. Not anymore. Wasn’t worth it, really. Edmure’s become a bitter, cuckolded old drunk who thinks the world owes him honey and flowers and all the pity in the world. I don’t want or need to be around that sort of obsessive misery. I got enough misery from the wars. We all did.”

Jon swallowed. “Agreed. And yet despite all we’ve suffered, we still can’t seem to make things perfect now, can we?”

“Eh, nothing can be perfect. I don’t mind life being rough here and there. It’s people who insist on feeling sorry for themselves all of the time that I don’t care for. There are good things in this world, and you need to enjoy them. Wine is for enjoying. Getting drunk is for feeling light-headed and enjoying some stupid fun. It isn’t for ranting on all the things you’ve suffered and crying into a cup. Even your brother managed not to wallow in self-pity during his darkest days.”

Jon leaned forward himself now, intrigued. “Tell me about them.”

“Well, I mean… Look, your brother wasn’t a happy man, alright? And there were all sorts of reasons for that, as you well know. Things just kept getting worse. And he kept getting all this pressure dumped on him. Alright, I find it hard when my father leaves me to foster Seagard. Robb was left to look after all the North while your brother was newly crippled. And then his father dying and the sisters being captured. And then Greatjon fucking Umber had to go and call for him to have a fucking crown. You know, he hated wearing that thing. Ugly piece of metal. Had to have been uncomfortable too. And those battles were bloody, let me tell you. Whispering Wood and Oxcross were particularly bad. And he wasn’t sitting pretty in some tent during it, either. He was right there in the middle of it all. He saw it all. And he tried so hard to do things right. He started losing his grip sometime after the turncloak betrayed him, I imagine. And I think he knew it. He tried to play the hard, self-assured king but he looked so tired.”
Jon’s stomach sank. There was part of him that knew all this. But having someone else speak on it made it all too real. “He was so excited when I last saw him. He was so hopeful, so optimistic.”

“I saw a bit of that before Winterfell was sacked. He seemed to really believe in himself then, and why not? He was afraid, sure, but he seemed to have some real hope. Really determined, he was. Really set on rescuing his sisters. But when things went downhill. He just seemed… resigned. I wouldn’t say he gave up. He wasn’t going to do that, too much was riding on him. But he seemed far more aware of the possibility of failure. Gods, you should have seen him the day after Karstark killed the Lannister boys. Just paced around his chambers, speaking to no one, eating nothing. His bride was frantic.”

Jon flinched. “I met Jeyne Westerling. She was very pretty. I’m sure he found comfort in her quite a bit. Tell me, was she a woman worth losing everything for?”

“No. Not to me, anyways. I don’t think she was that to anyone. Maybe not even to him. But she comforted him.”

“Oh, I’m sure she did.” Jon wrinkled his nose. “It was the sort of comfort most of us didn’t get at that time. Least of all my wife.”

“Oh Gods, the Imp! I thought Robb looked miserable with Karstark… When word came about Sansa… He couldn’t look anyone in the eye for days. People said it was his grandfather. Honestly? He barely knew the man. He felt sorry for his mother, yes, but that wasn’t who he bowed his head for the day of the funeral. I don’t think he even knew what he was fighting for after that. He kept reaching for his blade, muttering about taking heads when he thought no one was listening.”

Jon stood up. “Tell me about Sansa when she took the Riverlands.”

“I didn’t see too much of her, a big disappointment, really. But it was understandable. She had a new babe, she was surrounded on all sides by servants and advisors, nurses and guards. She clung to her son like he was life itself. Wouldn’t let the wet nurse near him. She’d actually rage whenever one was suggested. Otherwise, she was lovely. I remember when we met, I’d just been released from captivity at long last. She came forward, held my hand, and offered her sympathies. She meant it, too. She spoke to me of it. She listened. When I saw her, I’d been starved for days, half delirious. I thought I was seeing the Maiden and the Mother made flesh. Even though she was soaked in blood… and she was… She was sweet.”

“And the boy?”

“I barely saw the boy at all. A crying babe, but he looked very much like his uncle. Big blue eyes. Huge.”

Jon remembered holding newborn baby Bran for the first time and seeing those Tully blue eyes staring up at him. He’d been red faced and crying, but when Jon picked him up, he stopped and just looked up. Jon shut his eyes and swallowed heavily. “Thank you, Ser Patrek. If… If you don’t mind… I think I’ll retire.”

“Of course, Your Grace. Have a fine evening. And I’m sorry if I offended you earlier. Get some sleep.”

Jon nodded, eyes still closed. He waited for the door to close before he let the tears fall.
Chapter Forty-seven: Women at Home

Sansa:

There were now chamber pots discreetly hidden in every room at Dragonstone. It was utterly humiliating. It seemed there wasn’t a minute that went by where she didn’t have to urinate. Nani told her to lean forward when she relieved herself and not to drink tea. She got a little relief from this, but not much.

Sleeping was the worst. Her need to urinate only increased in frequency when she lay down. Not that it would have been easy to sleep if she didn’t have to get up every couple of hours. Her chamber seemed so cold now. She’d actually started having Nani share her bed, which was a comfort. The midwife had very strict instructions on how she should sleep [on her side, with a pillow between her legs], but she never complained about having to wake and help her mistress out of bed to piss. Still, it wasn’t the same.

Was it this miserable with Eddie? she asked herself as she popped a squat behind some curtains in the Chamber of the Painted Table, clutching the drapes for balance. She’d been coming up here more frequently in the time since Jon left. Upon several points of the map she’d set up some of the old war figures. Polished wood carved to looks like dragons, wolves, and other sigils. There was one direwolf placed at Winterfell, something that gave her immense comfort. Unfortunately, there was a dragon and wolf on Pyke, something that more than made up for the wolf at Winterfell.

It actually was much worse with Eddie, she thought. While the urination wasn’t as frequent, the vomiting was overwhelming. She required that her attendants all carry buckets for her.

Harry actually didn’t bother her too much when her belly began to swell. He’d acted a bit repulsed by her new shape and tried to hide it, but couldn’t bring himself to bed her once she reached a certain size. He’d go out and fuck whores. But then he’d come back to their chambers and stroke her belly, rub her ankles, and hold her hair when she retched.

He was oddly… disciplined… about making sure she was taken care of. Supposedly, the utmost
The importance of caring for one’s pregnant wife was something drilled into him by Lady Waynwood. He’d raise a fuss to get her whatever she wanted when a craving seized her. He had outright screaming matches with Petyr about her riding or doing anything dangerous. When she got sick thanks to Petyr’s insistence on scant gowns, Harry threw a fit and ordered dozens of new gowns and furs for her that kept her covered.

He even tried to pretend that he didn't mind the vomit.

And he’d whisper to her belly sweetly, telling his son all sorts of stories and singing songs to him. Harry spent a lot of time talking to Sansa’s stomach. Even if he wasn’t the least bit interested in her as a person, he was interested in keeping her healthy.

It was incredibly annoying. He’d fuss like a Mother Hen and never shut up.

But it was better than Petyr. Harry, at least, didn’t taunt her.

“Why is it?” Petyr would ask as he raped her. “Whenever--- I finally ----get to enjoy ---a Tully girl’s cunt… it’s after she’s become a fat cow? ----At least your teats ---are bigger and--- not sagging yet.”

Her boy ended up being more than worth it, though.

Sansa glanced down at her belly, and obscured by layers and layers of silk. While she liked touching her stomach and talking to Aemonaerys, she did her best to make sure her pregnancy dresses obscured her new shape as much as possible.

“You’ll be worth it.” she whispered to her tummy as Ghost, her sole companion in the room at the moment, let her grab onto his fur and helped her to her feet. “You’ll be so, so worth it, little child.”

She slipped out from behind the curtains, walked over to the table and glanced at it. With a sigh, she gathered up a few of the figurines she’d placed there: the dragon at King’s Landing for Daenerys, the dragon and direwolf she’d placed at Dragonstone for herself, the ones she’d placed at Pyke, the wolf at Winterfell, the one for Bran Beyond the wall, and the fish at Riverrun. She gathered them all around the edge of the table near her, level with her swelling belly.

“These are just some of the people who are going to absolutely love you,” she said. She picked up the figures for Jon and her. “There are your Mama and Papa. Your Papa’s at Pyke with the nasty Krakens, but he’ll come home for you soon. And his wolf is here.”

Ghost nuzzled her side silently. He’d been following her around more since Jon left. She and the wolf were becoming absolutely inseparable. Even when there was no sign that Jon was with them, the Direwolf remained very affectionate and gentle, more gentle than she’d ever seen him. Ghost actually reminded her of Lady now, with how sweetly he put his head in her lap and let her brush his fur.

“You’re going to look like your papa,” she told Aemonaerys, “You’re going to be so, so beautiful. With your papa’s dark curls and sweet smile. You’ll be strong and brave and gentle like him. You’ll be a leader.”

Then she held up her figures. “And you’ll be well-mannered and clever like your mother. I’ll make sure you’re graceful, too. When you’re big enough, I’ll teach you to dance. That’s one way you’ll want to take after your mother instead of your father. When you’re big enough, we’ll practice. You can put your feet on mine at first, and I’ll do the steps so you’ll remember them.”

She picked up the dragon representing Daenerys. “And then there’s your Aunt Daenerys, who will love you so, so much, as if you were one of her own. Sometimes, she might seem odd. She can’t
have babies like you, so it’ll make her sad sometimes to be reminded of that. But you mustn’t hold it against her. Most of the time, though, she’ll be so utterly wonderful. She’s going to teach you to ride a dragon. She’ll sit upon the Iron Throne and put you on her lap. She’ll teach you how to rule. And if you’re a girl, guess what? You’ll share a name! We’re going to call you Naerys so no one mixes you up, but that’ll just be a pet name. You’re going to be a second Daenerys if you’re a girl. Another great queen to follow the one we have now. You’ll be marvelous.”

Then came Arya’s Direwolf. “And your other aunt will get you into trouble as much as she can. And even though I’ll act angry about it, I won’t always mean it. I’ll have to scold you both since I’m your mother, but I’ll secretly be laughing most of the time. It’s alright to get into trouble sometimes, even if you shouldn’t do it always. But just enough trouble is good for the mind and soul. Your Mama didn’t do that enough when she was a girl, she almost got herself killed trying to be perfect all of the time, but Aunt Arya will make sure you don’t make that mistake. She’ll be your other dancing master. I’ll teach you to dance like a lord or lady with a lord or lady as your partner. Arya will teach you to dance like water with a blade as your partner. And she’ll make sure you’re fierce and fiery when you need to be, and teach you how to make friends with everyone.”

Sansa lowered her voice. “You want to know a secret, Sweetling? That’s the best thing about her. She’ll always act like the most fierce and scary beast, but really she just wants to be friends with whomever she can. But don’t tell her I said that. She likes to pretend that it’s always Arya Stark against the world. Let her believe this or she’ll pull your hair or throw fruit at you.”

Then she grabbed the Bran figure. A lump formed in her throat and for a few seconds, she couldn’t speak. Tears began to fall. “Aemonaerys, I’m sorry, you may never meet your Uncle Bran. You’ll like never see him. But he’ll always be watching over you, I promise. There’s a godswood in King’s Landing, and you will always be able to speak to him there. And he’ll listen. And he’ll always be there. He’s going to live for a long, long time. Even longer than the dragons. So he’ll watch over not only you, but your children, and their children, and their children, and on and on.”

She knew because he’d told her. It was the last time he ever spoke to her. Right after she’d killed Petyr. She’d stumbled into the godswood with Littlefinger’s blood on her hands and knelt before the Heart Tree, wondering what she was going to do now that Petyr was gone. As horrible as he was, he had also been the guiding force in her life and she had no idea what to do. She feared being useless without him, crippled.

Then she heard Bran’s voice.

“You don’t need him, Sansa. I’m with the Old Gods now, and I’ve seen it all. I’m watching over you, your children, your grandchildren, all of them. Forevermore. And I’ve seen you live. I’ve seen you love and smile and rise up. Get off the ground. Shed the mockingbird’s broken wings and find your own. They are stronger than the ones you had before.”

When Eddie died, she was sure that she’d just hallucinated. After all, if Bran and the Gods were watching over her and her children, then why had this happened? But she believed in those words again now. It was why she had a dragon as well as a direwolf stand for her at Dragonstone.

Sansa wiped her tears. “You’re going to fly, Aemonaerys. Your Uncle Bran will watch you. You’re going to be blessed before the Old Gods and the New.”

Then the fish. “There’s your Uncle Brynden the Blackfish, who is very, very clever and brave and tough. There’s your Uncle Edmure, who has the wits of an actual fish. But I’m sure he’ll buy you lots of presents, so you’ll like him all the same. There are also your cousins, Ambrose and Minisa, who are a bit older and will play games with you whenever we visit Riverrun.”
She felt a little movement and grinned. Aemonaerys started moving much, much earlier than Eddie had. Nani said it was because it was her second pregnancy.

Sansa gathered all the little war figurines around her. Every single one. The dragons, the wolves, the fish, the roses, the suns, the lions, the stags, the falcons, the foxes, the archers, the towers, the mermen, the maidens, all of them she formed in a circle around her belly. “All of it will be yours someday. And all of the people of the Seven Realms and beyond will bow to you. You protect, serve, and rule them all. But not for a very long time.”

There was another kick. Sansa smiled and reassembled the war figurines. She scanned the immense, fifty foot table. *All this will someday belong to the being growing inside me.* That was half the reason she’d taken to coming up here so often. To wrap her head around that fact.

That, and to keep track of where everyone and everything was.

She withdrew then, leaving the room. Things had grown lonely. So lonely.

Lynette was gone. The child had seemed eager to leave and at first, Sansa was glad that she was gone. When Jon and Sansa first arrived at Dragonstone, she had abysmal manners. She screamed and cried that dragons would eat her, that her clothes weren’t nice enough, and the island was made of nightmares. She didn’t do this when Jon was around, as she was thoroughly petrified of him. But when he wasn’t around, she’d throw fits easily.

Eventually, Sansa began to calm the child down. Part of it was the staff’s fault. They neglected her in certain ways, providing little in the way of emotional support, personal involvement, and patient understanding, just preferring to completely leave her to her own devices when they could, and just slapping or indulging her tantrums away. The child hadn’t gotten much in the way of explanation as to her current situation either.

Sansa began to involve herself with Lynette almost at once. She began teaching the girl to curtsey and stitch properly. Lynette’s Septa often let her run wild in Aegon’s garden, which resulted in many a torn gown. Sansa taught Lynette to stitch up the rips in her clothing, taking her to her solar for a lesson every afternoon and giving her a new sewing kit. What was shocking was that the girl had so many fancy clothes. Almost all her gowns were delicate silk, velvet, lamb’s wool, and such. The sort of clothing that got ruined very easily at play. There were no hearty wools or linens.

Apparently, to Lynette, this was the norm. It was just that every time she ruined something, her mother would either immediately fix it or it would get replaced by a new dress.

Sansa immediately ordered more practical play clothing for the child, and began to teach her to embroider and fix her things. She carefully taught the child better manners at lunch and even spent some nights brushing her hair like she had with Harry’s bastard girl.

Unfortunately, this led to an uncomfortable period where Lynette decided that Sansa was now her mother. As she began to overcome some of her fear of Jon, she also decided he was her father. And that made her a princess. Breaking Lynette of this proved awkward.

The girl had to learn her new place in life. If she didn’t, it would come as a much greater shock to her later. Sansa tried to be gentle about it, trying to avoid words like ‘bastard’ and stressing terms like ‘natural-born.’

“You’re not our daughter, Sweetling. You’re our ward. You’re the natural-born daughter of a lady and a knight, remember? Your mother was Roslin Tully. She had you with a knight in her husband’s service, and that makes you a Waters. Your mama and papa hurt some people, and so they died. And
now my husband and I take care of you.” She told Lynette one evening, sitting on the child’s bed with the girl in her lap.

“Doesn’t that mean you’re my mother?” Lynette asked her.

Sansa sighed. Once, she’d told a child a similar lie. At the time, she told herself that a lie was not so bad if it was kindly meant. Her philosophy had altered a bit. A lie was not so bad if it was for the greater good. A kindly meant lie could still result in disaster and end up hurting people. Misleading Lynette would only hurt her.

Sansa had pulled Lynette off her lap. It was a late evening three days before Jon got the letter calling him to Pyke. Her husband had to spend the evening going over some travel arrangements with the staff and so Sansa had spent the time with Lynette. They were both in their nightdresses. Her own shift had a high waist and two layers of skirts, one which opened. She pulled that back and tightened the fabric over her rounded belly, which was more prominent.

“Not exactly, Lynette. You see how my belly is big now? That’s because I have a baby growing inside me. Prince Jon’s baby. I’m the mother of the baby growing in here. But you grew inside another lady’s belly. You remember your mother Roslin, right?”

“Yes, but she was eaten by dragons.”

Sansa couldn’t deny that, so she tried to brush past it. Dwelling on the subject only brought tears. “But she was still your mother. She grew you inside her. You’ll always be her daughter, no matter what happens. It’s why you look like her.”

“But you take care of me.”

“I know, but it’s not the same. I’m sorry, I truly am. I also lost my mother when I was young. But she’ll always be my mother.”

“Even though she’s dead?”

Sansa nodded. “When we die, our spirits go to a special place where we can watch over the people we love. And that’s where your mother went.”

“Can I be a princess anyways?”

“No, Sweetling, I’m afraid not.” The last thing they needed was her getting into trouble calling herself that. There were people who took bastards pretending to be princes and princesses very, very seriously. Or any sorts of pretenders to royal blood. If they let her hold onto a delusion like that, she could someday be seriously hurt for it, even killed.

Eventually, Lynette began to accept this, but she still could be temperamental and morose. It was certainly understandable. She’d suffered a great deal of trauma, she had few playmates and Dragonstone was a dreary place. She’d been eager to go to Ironoaks.

Sansa was happy she’d done the right thing for the girl. After the child left, she was a bit relieved. Lynette wasn’t a monster, but she could be a handful. And she looked so much like her mother that it often sent chills down Sansa’s spine.

But after a week or so of only having Ghost, Nani, Satin, and the staff for company, Sansa missed her. She even missed court. At least the Red Keep was brighter, louder, and had more going on. She had much to occupy herself with there. But stuck in this dreary castle, no longer having her work, friends, or husband to occupy her time, she grew restless.
Sansa went down to her solar. There were letters from Daenerys and Margaery to read and respond to. She got letters from them almost every day. She got letters about once every ten days from Arya and her bannermen, as it took the messages much longer to travel. Thus far, she’d only got two letters from Jon: one en route to Pyke and a second announcing his safe arrival. He’d been gone nearly a fortnight.

Daenerys and Margaery’s letters were a joy, too. Sansa corresponded more with other members of the council as well, though not as frequently, partly due to her boredom. It only took a day or two for ravens to arrive from King’s Landing.

She sat down and pulled up Margaery’s letter.

To Her Grace Sansa of the Houses Stark, Hardyng, and Targaryen, Princess of the Seven Realms of Westeros, Meereen and Slaver’s Bay, Khalakki of the Great Grass Sea, Lady of Winterfell, Warden of the North, Mistress of the Court and Diplomacy, Lady of Dragonstone and the Vale and Consort to Dragons from Lady Margaery of House Tyrell of Highgarden and Advisor to the Small Council, greeting:

Your husband is right: you Targaryens have too many titles. He’s definitely right that the empire titles need to at least be squashed down because this is getting ridiculous. My hand cramps up just from writing the greeting. I’m thinking of getting a stamp of it just to save time. It’s bad enough that you’re the lady of three different major domains and Mistress of two different areas of government.

But, honestly: can’t we at least shorten Princess of this and that and Khalakki of the other thing to just ‘Princess of the Targaryen Empire’? And Daenerys can be ‘Queen of the Targaryen Empire’ and so on and so forth? I mean, Meereen is part of Slaver’s Bay, yes? So why does that need to be separate? And the Great Grass Sea isn’t even a fixed piece of land.

Also, why do they need to specify Jon as ‘Heir to Dragons’ and you as ‘Consort to Dragons’? I understand Daenerys being ‘Mother of Dragons’, but do you and Jon really need all that detail? It just seems extraneous. And what would happen if Jon ever became king? It gives me a headache just thinking about it.

You’ll be happy to know we’re handling things well. I do wish the Small Council would take Willas and I more seriously. Not that they’re openly hostile, but they don’t seem very willing to try new things. And I think they look down on Willas. He, to me, is the obvious choice to be made Master of Ships. He’s intelligent, educated, has the right name, our father served in that position. But Barristan and a couple others are pushing this illiterate former pirate that served the Usurper’s brother. Honestly.

Nonetheless, I flatter myself that we’ve been a success thus far. I’m running the court as best I can. I’ve kept on a few of the singers, tumblers, and jesters that performed at your wedding. I think it’s important that a court be kept merry and distracted. I do wish the queen would let a few of the nobles reside in the royal wing. It would give us far more room and give us a new empty privilege to distract and bribe courtiers with.

I’m thinking of hiring a mummers’ troupe to entertain and make plays in honor of the queen, your husband, and yourself. So many of the nobility seem a bit unclear as to the truth regarding the wars and recent history. I though maybe a little historically based theater would help keep them informed. If we’re a success, I’m hoping it might inspire other major households around the kingdom to keep theaters of their own. We can send them our plays and every influential lord and lady in Westeros can entertain and educate themselves and their subjects about history. It would surely help employ a number of hungry performers and bring a bit of levity back to the realm.
Your uncle writes to me often and says he is glad you have started sending him letters again. I’m glad you two are repairing your relationship and that I could help in this endeavor.

Charity work is running along smoothly. With the weather improving, I’m hoping we might have tourneys again. Wouldn’t it be lovely to have a tourney when your son arrives?

Speaking of which, the queen, Willas, and I have been discussing converting some of the royal chambers. I remember you complaining about having to run back and forth between your private solar and Jon’s chambers and needing a private dressing room. Well, you’re also going to need a nursery. There’s of course the old dusty nursery, but I really doubt you’ll want to use it anymore. It’s gone so long unused, I’m not sure it’s safe anymore.

Also, it’s far down the hall from the Aenys and Maegor chambers. I know you said that you and Jon wanted to be more involved in taking care of your children. Well, what if we converted some of the rooms so there’s a nursery right near your chambers? You and Jon could have a bedchamber with a dressing room and a solar for each of you, and a nursery attached. Just a little cozy family hideaway.

Willas is actually incredible with designing such things. He’s planned a number of repairs for keeps in the Reach that were damaged in Ironborn raids and even done some fantastic renovations for Highgarden and Brightwater Keep. He actually did something VERY similar to this to Brightwater for Garlan and his family. They have a delightful little group of family quarters. The queen seems to be enthusiastic about this idea.

Everyone at court asks about you and Jon. I really hope all that nasty business with the Ironborn can be fixed soon. Honestly, they’re such savages. They can all drown, for all I care.

The Sand Snakes, Loreza and Dorea, are doing well enough at court. Their mother mostly looks after them. I know you told me that I had to make sure they were doing alright, and they are. I suppose Ellaria Sand is decent. You know, for the bastard whore of the Red Viper. Willas likes her.

There are whispers of spring arriving. I hope so. If it is, I think it would be wonderful if the official announcement was made the day of your son’s birth, don’t you?

Your Ever-Loyal Friend,

Lady Margaery Tyrell of Highgarden

Sansa laughed. Everything was of course typical of her friend. Sansa had relented and sent Edmure a few brief letters. His own letters were short and nervous sounding. She tried to remain kind and neutral. Margaery was too good for him, but if they did wed, it would give Sansa means to keep an eye on her and also insure that she’d actually find some decent conversation should she ever have to visit Riverrun again.

And the Riverlands could use a lady like Margaery. They weren’t very unified, and if there was something Margaery was good at, it was inspiring populations to come together. The Blackfish wouldn’t live forever, and when his end inevitably came, the people there would need someone like her. Also, those children needed a mother figure.

Of course, the renovation idea was a good one, and every bit her friend. It would give Margaery a way to ingratiate herself and her brother with the royal family, grant the Tyrells more intimate knowledge of the Red Keep and give Willas the chance to prove himself.

Spring coming, though, made her quite excited. She couldn’t think of anything Westeros needed
more, aside from a new heir to the throne. Sansa glanced at Ghost, sitting by the window. The animal had been shedding quite a bit recently. Could it be?

The winter had been awful, but if it ended soon, it wouldn’t be nearly as long as expected. After the long summer, everyone grimly anticipated one that lasted a dozen years. But if it only lasted six… That was wonderful. Many said a long summer meant an even longer winter. Perhaps that was changing.

Sansa began to cry, thinking of it. No more mass graves filled with frozen corpses. No more blue-lipped smallfolk clawing at each other for the last blanket. No more food carts having to fight through feet of snow. No more having to depend on outside trade to keep the North afloat. And Arya will have a better time learning to rule.

She felt so guilty for that. While her sister belonged at Winterfell, she was essentially thrown face first into a very, very tough situation. Her sister’s letters were often quite grim and nervous. While Arya was by all accounts doing well, it was difficult.

But new spring would ease her burden considerably.

Sansa grabbed Daenerys’s letter to look for any more information.

Dear Sansa,

They say spring is coming, can you believe it? Word has come of snows becoming less heavy up in the North [I have enclosed this report as well as all other documents pertaining to their affairs. I imagine you’ll receive a letter from your sister about it sometime soon].

Apparently, flowers that have not been seen in years are appearing once more in the Reach. Animals are shedding their coats. I haven’t noticed the days getting longer, but they do seem a bit warmer. It’s been a while since the last cold snap.

I hope to every god that has ever been worshipped that it’s true.

How are you? Bored? I’d wager you’re bored. You know I’m sorry that I sent Jon to Pyke. I felt it was best. He does need to assert himself more in his role as prince. I feel awful about the cost to you and you know I wouldn’t do it if the situation weren’t desperate. This is my fault though. If I’d addressed it sooner… Well, anyways. You know all that. I’m sorry. A pregnant woman should have her husband with her. My sun and stars stayed with me. Yours will return to you. I have every confidence in him.

I hope Nani is keeping you healthy. Half of all Khaleesis and nobles of Slaver’s Bay swear by her. I know she’s coarse, but she’s brilliant. It is known. I used to think Dothraki were wise about horses and fighting and nothing else until I met her. In a few weeks she lowered the rates of Pale Mare in Meereen considerably and also managed to fix an ear infection I’d suffered for weeks.

Your enterprising friend Margaery is very keen that the formal announcement of the new spring should come on the day of your child’s birth. I bet she’s already formulating a list of styles in her head for Aemonaerys. ‘The Prince of Spring’ or something more creative than what I can come up with. You know me, I prefer to leave that up to people like you and your friends. As long as it stays positive and supportive, I don’t mind.

I’m a little more hesitant about her eagerness to invade and change the royal wing. I don’t mind some remodeling to make you and Jon more comfortable. But I’m not about to let a bunch of overfed opportunists march into my home. I’ll last maybe a moon before I end up physically
attacking one of them. Tell her no. I’m a small woman and it’ll end up looking ridiculous.

That being said, Margaery and Willas say that they’d like to have a private garden attached to my own chambers. I very much like the idea of lemon trees outside my window. I’m sure you would support that endeavor.

I also like the idea of rearranging the rooms so that the passages in and out are no longer where Princess Arianne left them. The fewer Martell break-ins we have in the future, the better. Barristan whole-heartedly agrees. Of course he does. Although I think if it were up to him, it would be less open lemon tree orchards and more mile-high walls of stone eight feet thick. We’d have spring and never actually be able to see the sun that comes with it.

A Baratheon bannerman, one who served Stannis and used to smuggle is coming to court. Barristan wants him as Master of Ships. I’ve decided to test this so-called ‘Onion Knight’ by seeking his council on the fleet that will transport you and Jon for your progress. If he does this well, I’ll end up thoroughly disappointing your flowery friends from the Reach.

I received word from Jon reporting a safe arrival to Pyke. It seemed short, even for him. I’m hoping to receive a more detailed message soon.

Come back to court. I’m really missing the both of you. There are now singers everywhere, and tumblers. And mummers. The Tyrells think we should have a company at court. The problem is, all these mummers and singers keep singing songs and telling tales I’m not familiar with.

It’s really, really uncomfortable sometimes. I have to nod along and pretend to know what’s happening. I thought I was very familiar with my country’s history, but there are enough jokes and references I’m obviously not understanding. I understand Naerys and the Dragonknight. I understand the Dance of the Dragons. I know all about the invasions. I even understand those new Wildling tales about Bael the Bard and the maid from Winterfell.

But they keep talking about a Balerion that takes revenge on behalf of a Princess Rhaenys. Balerion was Aegon’s dragon. Also they talk about this Balerion getting revenge on the Usurper. What? Balerion the Dread died hundreds of years ago. As entertaining as the idea is, it’s confusing. I can’t find any reference to this in any of my books.

Things like that. And there are many people who seem afraid to explain some of these things to me. I know some of them must be far more offensive than they seem at face value. I just can’t be sure which is which. Come back here and explain these things to me so I don’t have to feel like I’m being secretly mocked to my face in my own court.

It’s starting to annoy me. Oh, and if I hear ‘The Bear and the Maiden Fair’ one more time…. It’s disgusting. I’ve banned it. Why was that ever popular? It’s a song about a bear raping a poor girl who was in danger. Why is that appealing to anyone? It bothered me the first time I heard it. But after hearing it three times in a day, I can’t stand it anymore. No one seems capable of adequately explaining the appeal of it to me. It makes poor Brienne uncomfortable too. I don’t like that.

I’ve decided the only bears I like are the ones from the island named for them. For the record, I have yet to meet a Mormont I don’t like. Lady Lyra was an absolute delight. I hope the majority of your bannermen are more like them and less like Lady Flint or Ser What-His-Name-Was. You know which one I mean.

Also, I think Missandei was right. Every poem and song is better in High Valyrian. I know you have
a decent familiarity with the tongue. I think I’m going to encourage the use of that language. It’s just more elegant, don’t you think? I’d really like to just insist on songs in High Valyrian and Dothraki so I can be the one enjoying songs at the expense of people without them knowing. Unfortunately, the singers here don’t speak enough of either language to make the proper impact. So Missandei, my maids, and I just have to satisfy ourselves with plain old insults in another language.

Unfortunately, while calling some imbecile like Clarrane Swyft a green-cocked, dung-breathed pervert in front of him without him knowing is fun, these remarks rarely rhyme.

Also, my meals are growing far more dull. Yunkish peppers don’t taste as good without you and Jon with me to enjoy them. I miss my family.

All of my love,

Dany [Aunt Dany! Jon doesn’t call me that enough. Please make sure your children do that]

She chuckled to herself at this, feeling her heart swell. She went to analyze the northern reports and other various council documents Daenerys had enclosed. According to them, everything seemed in order and spring definitely seemed likely.

When she finished, she went to begin drafting replies to both messages when there was a knock on the door.

“Come in!”

Norese Waters, the pretty, middle-aged wife of Dragonstone’s castellan, hurried in, her eyes wide. “Your Grace, the queen!”

“What?!” Sansa rose, feeling her blood turn to ice. Had something happened to Daenerys? Oh Gods, please no.

“The queen is here!”

“What?!” That was impossible.

“We spotted Viserion just a few miles from the shore. The sentries said he had a rider. Flying right for the castle!”

Jon? Did something happen to Jon? Any news from Pyke would hit King’s Landing before Dragonstone. Sansa sank back into her chair. No. No no no.

“Princess Sansa?”

Ghost padded over and nuzzled her shoulder. Sansa tried to remain in control of herself. You don’t know that anything is wrong yet. Get ahold of yourself. “Prepare the staff. Tell the kitchens to prepare something, make sure the pit and fields are ready for a dragon. Have the lady’s quarters cleared out and prepared for her use. Have Nani come up to help me dress and make sure everyone is assembled to receive her.”

“Of course, Nani is already on her way.” Norese came over to help Sansa to her feet, rubbing her back. “I’m sure things are fine, Your Grace.”

Yes, yes. It would do her no good to get too excited. Nani was always reprimanding her not to let her nerves get the better of her. “It’s bad for the khalakka for you to worry too much!”
She took a few deep breaths. Norese helped hold her steady and led her to the bedchamber. “Why don’t you lie down? I’ll go fetch some appropriate clothing for you, Princess. The wolf can stay with you while you wait with the Dothraki woman.”

Sansa nodded. “Yes, alright.”

Nani came in moments later with a basin of water, cold compress, a cup and pitcher, and some incense of lavender and chamomile. She made sure Sansa drank two cups of water and wiped her forehead. “You’re scared, Khalakki, and assuming the worst. The Khaleesi is just coming to visit. She’s fond of you. Fret not. Fretting is bad for the Khalakka. It is known.”

Sansa leaned forward and nodded. “Of course. Of course.”

Norese brought in a gown of black and red silk, a layer of open red skirts to complement her belly over a layer of black. She let both women help her into it, making sure her hair was brushed and she looked properly composed before filing out to the courtyard with the household.

Daenerys arrived not long after, Brienne of Tarth, looking winded and a bit terrified, with her. Sansa could hear Viserion shriek and watched as the dragon flew overhead to make for the pit around the volcano. Dany came forward in her blue riding jerkin and lamb’s wool and Sansa managed to curtsey.

“Your Grace, you are welcome to Dragonstone,” Sansa said, searching her good-aunt’s face for any sign of mourning or shock or anything at all to indicate tragedy. Dany looked a bit worried, but composed.

“This place is darker than I remembered,” Dany said, glancing around. “I only saw it once when I first came back to Westeros. But I don’t remember it being this glum. How do you manage?”

Sansa breathed a great sigh of relief. In fact, she almost fainted. Daenerys would not act this casual if Jon was hurt or killed. Sansa managed to smile. “Well enough, I suppose.”

Dany grabbed her hands. “Are you well? Healthy?”

The princess nodded. “Of course. My midwife takes good care of me.”

The queen nodded approvingly to Nani before linking her arm with Sansa’s. “Come on.”

They adjourned to one of the meeting chambers on a lower floor, Brienne following them. The chamber they entered had a rounded table and chairs at the center. They all sat and Sansa leaned forward anxiously. “What news?”

“I take it Jon’s letter hasn’t gotten to you yet,” Dany said, sighing.

“Why? What’s happened?” Sansa wasn’t entirely sure she wanted that answered.

Brienne pulled a stack of papers from her cloak and handed them over to the princess.

“Jon’s letter to me, just arrived this morning. And the code translation of it. He says that there’s a very strong chance of rebellion in the Iron Isles. Not enough to justify flying there at once but… If it does happen… He says Victarion Greyjoy’s got a special vendetta against the Targaryens,” Dany informed Sansa as she scanned the text. “He thinks he can prevent Asha Greyjoy from being deposed. He wants to marry her to an Ironborn House to secure more support and keep her in place. But if her uncle does end up taking power, he fears that the man will lead the entire Iron Fleet against us.”
“But nothing happened yet?” she asked, taking a deep breath.

“Nothing’s happened. Jon says the likelihood of there being a rebellion seems as great now as we thought when we sent him. He just fears the results of it would be far worse. It’s not just Asha who could be a victim.”

“Do all the Ironborn lords hold this loathing of House Targaryen, or is it just Victarion?” Sansa asked, trying to calm herself.

“I’m not sure. They certainly don’t like us. And they were once very happy to support Euron Crow’s Eye’s ambitions for taking the throne. There’s no reason to believe they wouldn’t support Victarion towards the same ends,” Dany said glumly. “Nonetheless, we’d all feel more comfortable if you were moved to the capital. It’s better for you to be surrounded by our forces until we can secure things. I’m here to bring you back to King’s Landing.”

“What, on Viserion?” Sansa asked, shocked.

Dany shook her head. “No, of course not. There’s a ship on its way here. I came on dragonback to warn and prepare you, and make sure you had one of my children watching over you and your babe as soon as possible. I’m not stupid.”

“Of course not,” Sansa rubbed her forehead, embarrassed. “I’m sorry, Your Grace, I’m not thinking clearly.”

She took a few more deep breaths. She looked over Jon’s letters again. He sounded petrified in some parts, confident in others. Her stomach turned at the talk of Victarion. The man terrified her, really. All Ironborn did, but him especially.

She remembered his one large hand yanking at the laces on her back. Though his fingers were big, they were nimble and quick and felt almost like a giant claw of spider scuttling about her body.

But worse were the encounters they had when Sansa had to entertain the Ironborn party. Sometimes, he smiled at her. Those were the only smiles she ever saw on his face.

“Bring Jon home,” she said, her stomach sinking. “Send him a letter ordering him to come back. Please. Immediately.”

“Sansa, you know I can’t do that. I am, however, doing what Jon asks. More forces are being assembled as we speak. Davos Seaworth arrived this morning and I’m giving him a new task to test him with. He’s arranging a fleet to be on standby and be prepared to take on the Ironborn.”

“You’re basing Jon’s safety on a test for an untried pirate?”

“Smuggler, he’s very quick to correct me on that. Former smuggler. And he has collaborators. Willas Tyrell is assisting him, and Seaworth says for counsel on fighting the Ironborn, he’s writing to the Mormonts and the Mallisters. No one knows more about fending Iron Islanders off than those two families.”

Sansa took a deep breath. “Have you written to Arya yet?”

“Sent a message right before I left.”

“I must as well.” Arya and the Dragon Queen had an uneasy relationship. Her sister was more likely to take a command to move from Winterfell seriously if it came from family.
There was a knock on the door. Norese Waters came in again, clutching folded parchment. Sansa’s eyes seized upon the dragon seal. A letter from Jon. She took it, broke the seal and began to read furiously. She could only make out bits of the code here and there. “We need to go to my solar so I might decipher this.”

Sansa took the letter to Jon’s desk in the solar they shared, as hers was being reorganized for the queen’s use. A while later, the three women were crowded around the desk. The letter started out saying roughly the same thing Daenerys’s did.

Then came the bits about Asha Greyjoy being his rumored mistress. Sansa’s stomach sank upon reading this. There was no doubt in her mind that Jon was telling the truth. But what if this gossip spread to court? The truth of it wouldn’t matter to those vultures. She’d be considered publicly dishonored and every ambitious nobleman in King’s Landing would be lining his daughter up to take Asha’s place.

But that wasn’t the biggest issue at the moment. Sansa discreetly left out the parts about the invisible message--- when they arranged this correspondence message with Daenerys, they kept that part a secret.

“If you don’t mind, Your Grace,” Sansa said wearily, “I should write to my sister now.”

Daenerys nodded. “I’ll go check back with Viserion and make sure he’s comfortable. Brienne will stay outside your door.”

Sansa didn’t want to write the letter to Arya. She’d only just sent her sister home. And despite complaints of the cold and snow keeping her indoors more than she’d like, and the noise of the construction harming her concentration, Arya was happy there. She was by all accounts doing well in her duties, and seemed to be finding some peace finally being home. *I’m finding my wolf again, Sansa.*

Telling Arya she had to leave so soon broke Sansa’s heart. Of course her sister would return, and it was for the greater good, but it still wasn’t fair. She knew Arya would want to stay and defend Winterfell, but the castle wouldn’t be what it was if there weren’t enough Starks. And it wasn’t like there was much left to defend, either. As long as there were Starks, there could be a Winterfell. If the Starks and the walls alike came down, there could be nothing.

Sansa also couldn’t live with herself if Arya was killed or taken hostage. Her sister was strong and quick, but she was emotionally fragile and mentally a child in many ways.

Once, Robb had left Bran and Rickon back at Winterfell with limited defenses. Sansa didn’t want to make the same mistake. Though Arya was far and away more capable than their little brothers had been at defending herself, Winterfell’s walls were far weaker than they’d been.

Arya would be eager to fight off the Ironborn nonetheless. Messages from the Dragon Queen and Sansa and assured wishes from Jon might not be enough. Sansa swallowed heavily, grabbed a length of parchment, quill and inkwell, and began to write.

*To Ser Gendry Waters of the Hollow Hill, former knight of the City Watch from Sansa of the Houses Stark, Hardying and Targaryen, Princess of the Seven Realms of Westeros, Meeren and Slaver’s Bay, Khalakki of the Great Grass Sea, Lady of Winterfell, Warden of the North, Mistress of the Court and Diplomacy, Lady of Dragonstone and the Vale, and Consort to Dragons, greeting:*

*Ser Gendry, I am sure you are surprised to find me writing to you. Our relationship has become rather… strained since that encounter in my sister’s apartments. I do apologize for that reaction. I*
have developed a certain protective urge concerning my sister.

Please know that my reaction wasn’t personal. I would have been upset upon finding any man in that situation with my sister. I know she’s a fierce type who can take care of herself, but older sisters worry and frankly I trust her combat instincts more than I trust her romantic ones. I know you don’t have siblings, but I know you have protective instincts, likely towards Arya most of all.

As you have probably guessed, I am writing to you because I want something. As much as it pains me to admit it. As I say, it’s nothing personal. I just feel embarrassed that I threatened you and am only speaking to you now that I want something. I am sorry for this. I should have tried to make amends before you left.

I am admitting this because despite your likely and somewhat justified disdain for me, you’ll do as I ask. You don’t strike me as the type to put pettiness like my own behavior before what you care about.

This letter to you will arrive at the same time as another message I have for my sister. One telling her that the situation with the Ironborn has become quite precarious and that if there is an uprising, she is likely to become a personal target of a very dangerous man. Winterfell is not yet complete and though we’ve supplied her with numerous guards and protectors, there is only so much one can do without a good base for operations. Thus, I want her to leave the fortress, make for the Dreadfort and stay under the protection of the Magna Val for the time being.

You and I both know Arya well enough to know she’ll resist this. You probably know better than I do that she’s a fighter who loathes to back down and insists on protecting her own. Which is why I need you to convince her to do this.

Please, Ser Gendry, convince her. She listens to you. I believe she loves you. I suspect you have a special knowledge of her. You were with her after she escaped King’s Landing. You saw what her life was like then. It is experience that both Jon and I lack. Thus, you are more likely than anyone to be able to make her see sense.

I once trusted you to protect me when I ventured into the streets of King’s Landing. I believe at that time we might have been friends. Don’t do this because I’m your lady. Do this for Arya.

Yours Truly,

Sansa Stark Targaryen

The letter to Arya was far longer, filed with answers to all sorts of pleas and arguments she could imagine Arya making. By the end, she felt utterly exhausted, as if she had actually had the fight with her sister face to face.

After she was done, she grabbed Jon’s letter and held it near a candle flame. The ink appeared in dull brown letters.

When she finished reading, she was in tears.

Jon, come home to me.

Chapter End Notes
For those wondering why there isn't an Arya letter: It's because I'm working on an Arya companion story, which isn't fully mapped out yet. I don't want to muck anything up with it, so there's going to be little in the way of Arya details for the time being. Don't worry, she WILL return. :)

Chapter Summary

Asha has boy problems which she tries to solve by setting some rocks on fire. Victarion isn't exactly stable. Jon tries to ride Rhaegal without a saddle.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Blue for her beta work :)

I WANT TO THANK ALL MY AWESOME COMMENTERS. I'M IN THE TOP TWENTY MOST COMMENTED STORIES IN THE FANDOM. YOU ARE AWESOME AND I LOVE TALKING TO YOU ALL.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Forty-eight: Blood of the First Men

Asha:

“That’s a fine gown, Lady Asha,” said Dorren Saltcliffe, “I like it. I liked it yesterday evening as well.”

And yet I’ve not acquired a good opinion of you, not last night, or this one. “Well, you never struck me as the type who enjoyed much variety in your life.”

“I admit I like to keep things traditional,” Saltcliffe replied, drinking long and deep from his mug of ale. They both shouted to hear each other over the din of the hall. Qarl had practically caused a riot, just like the last six nights. Each one brought new lordlings pretending to have come to meet the prince. Their purpose had more to do with the lady of the castle and everyone knew it. Everyone including Qarl, who’d broken more than a few bones, severed more than a few fingers.

“Not much of an explorer then.” Asha smirked. “An unfortunate trait in a seafarer.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say I have that approach to everything. My Lady.” Dorren said quickly. He was a brawny, red-faced blond with eyes more snakelike than all the eyes of his House’s nine-headed serpent put together. “I like visiting as many shores as possible. I also like to see my women well garbed. Perhaps in my travels I could find you some new fabrics. Lace from Myr. Silks from Pentos. You’d never have to repeat a single dress.”

“That would be generous of you.” Asha looked down her cup and rolled her eyes.

“As I said, I like to see my women well dressed.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“I like to see my women undressed as well,” he informed her with a leer.
“She’s your lady, not your woman.”

Asha cringed as both she and Dorren turned to her right to face the disgruntled looking Prince Jon. The Targaryen’s eyes were narrowed, his mouth in a line as thin as he could get it with his pouty, girlish lips. Asha almost smacked him.

_It’s bad enough that you want me to do this. Must you interrupt?_ They’d been over this three times now. The prince couldn’t seem to get it through his skull that this was the way things were. Ironborn spoke informally, with bravado. They laid claim to what they could. People didn’t court on Pyke. There were no gushing poems or kisses to the hand. There were displays of dominance and intent, bawdy jests and innuendo.

“She can be both, _Your Gracefulness._” Dorren said mockingly. “But pardon me, I wouldn’t want to offend the Dragon Princess.”

“Luckily for you, my aunt is too far away for you to offend her,” Jon answered. “My bride as well. They’d not tolerate your rudeness half so well as I do.”

“So you admit your women are fiercer than you?”

“Not me. But certainly fiercer than someone here.”

_Alright, that wasn’t bad._ Asha laughed outright then, watching as Dorren Saltcliffe’s face went even redder. He stood up and leaned forward, reaching for his dirk.

“I fear no dragons or wolves.”

The Targaryen stood as well, looking calm. “How wonderful. Neither do I. I’ve commanded both, you see. I’ve also faced down White Walkers and Wildlings. So as you can imagine, I don’t really fear you.” He reached down and gave the hilt of his sword a short yank so that a few inches of the blade were visible. “See that, Saltcliffe? Valyrian steel. I spend hours each day to make sure I’m worthy to wield it.”

Saltcliffe bristled, but sat down. Asha looked at Jon, annoyed. _This isn’t helping._ “Don’t threaten my bannermen, Targaryen.”

She gave Saltcliffe a somewhat apologetic look, as if to say, _Greenlanders, eh?_ The young man seemed to calm himself and rolled his eyes.

“You think you can just throw your weight around?”

Victarion, sitting to Jon’s right, was suddenly speaking. He’d been glowering into his cup for most of this and the prior five evenings. He’d taken to trying to bust down flaming stone posts and sustained more than a few injuries doing so. Embarrassed and trying to hide the pain he was obviously in, he hadn’t been very talkative during feasts.

But now attention was on him. He glared at the prince.

“This isn’t the Red Keep, Boy. We aren’t going to take your insults just because of your blood, you hear?” Victarion snarled.

“I would never assume that you’d suffer insults because of my blood, Lord Captain,” Jon replied. “But apparently you’re happy to have your niece suffer them if it comes from an Ironborn. I was attempting to speak up for her.”
“No one asked for you to speak.”

“I wasn’t aware a request was needed.” The prince’s fingers began to move towards the hilt of his blade.

“Don’t worry on it, Uncle,” Asha spoke up brightly, “It’s just that Greenland way of his. They all think they’re knights from songs rescuing fair maidens. Ladies where he’s from are sensitive, and young men are always jumping to defend their honor.”

Victarion did not make a sound, but the expression on his face said everything: As if you have honor to defend, Niece.

Asha stared her uncle down until he looked away. She refused to show her fear, maintaining her smile. When he finally sat down, she grinned at Jon and Dorren.

“I don’t want to be too finely garbed. I saw many of those fancy gowns at court. they seemed a bit too complicated. I prefer simple wear that’s easier to remove.”

There was laughter. Asha sat again and glanced back at her uncle, who was glowering again. It won’t be long now until he snaps.

The doors of the hall opened, and in strode her other uncle, Rodrick, with two men from House Farwynd. One, Lord Daven Farwynd from Sealskin Point, was in his mid-fifties, with salt and pepper hair, copper skin, and queer, staring eyes. The son, Damion, was in his late twenties, with the same dark eyes as his father, thick dark hair, and a square jaw laced with stubble. Both men always looked somewhat alarmed.

They approached and nodded their heads. “Lady Greyjoy. Lord Captain. Prince Jon,” they said in disturbing unison. Damion smiled then, came closer and bowed more deeply.

Most of the men in the hall maintained a bit of distance, and the whole room became a bit quieter upon their arrival. It was said that the Farwynds were skin-changers and sorcerers. Most of it was nonsense. People who liked to read were often suspected of sorcery. And there were the eyes. Everyone outside of Great Wyk was wary of them.

They actually came, Asha thought, amazed. The Farwynds didn’t care much for Pyke. They liked their ships and isles as much as any Ironborn, but didn’t care much for involving themselves with too many affairs of state.

Most of her men didn’t like the way the Farwynds looked at them. The Farwynds didn’t like the way most of her men looked at them. There was an unspoken mutual agreement between them all to avoid looking at one another whenever possible.

Asha didn’t really mind their eyes. Euron’s were both worse. She met them head on, smiling like nothing was amiss.

Everything was amiss.

When the night’s festivities ended, Asha dragged herself up to the nursery. She dismissed the mousy young nurse and went to sit beside her boys’ basins. They lay side by side, dark-haired, thumbs in their mouths. Tristen, two, was a good deal larger than his brother, but otherwise they were identical. Their skin was pale and smooth and Asha found herself wondering if they’d always be smooth-skinned like their father.

They were so…
Asha Greyjoy didn’t use the word ‘adorable’. Ironmen didn’t ‘adore’ anything. But if she weren’t Ironborn, she would have. She loved them so much it hurt, especially now. Sometimes, looking at them, she couldn’t even breathe. Her throat closed up. In her life, men had tried to impress her by declaring their love, cracking skulls, and telling her incredible tales of valor and violence. None of it fazed her. But she found herself marveling at things like how her sons stuck their little fists in their mouths or or them kicking their little legs. Their nurse sometimes joked that they looked like little larvae in their swaddling. *The most beautiful larvae ever.*

Her boys were perfect and strong and wonderful.

The door opened. Asha spun around, blade drawn. Qarl held up his hands.

“Calm yourself, My Lady, it’s just me.”

Asha relaxed. Every day, she grew more paranoid. “You were quite loud tonight.”

“I was quite angry.”

She looked at the ground, her stomach sinking. “I’m sorry.”

“Kill your uncle,” Qarl said, his teeth clenched. “Or let me. Shove an axe into the face of every man that defies you until they’ve all learned their place.”

“Right, because if there is anything that these islands need, it’s another massacre.”

“It’ll prove you strong.”

“I shouldn’t have to prove anything!” She snapped before biting her tongue and looking at the boys nervously. They slept on. Regretfully, she tore herself away from their bedside, pressing kisses to their heads before withdrawing with Qarl and waving the nurse back in. Once the two of them were back in her bedchamber, she spoke again.

“I shouldn’t have to prove anything to these people,” she said, pacing around the room angrily. “What exactly is it that I haven’t proven to them by now? I told them following Euron would end in disaster. Half the Iron Fleet was destroyed as the might of Highgarden, the Dornish, and the Targaryen dragons chased them off. I told them the North would gain them no wealth, that at best they’d get turnips and acorns. They got ashes and dead sons. I told them I would return and make my uncle pay. I put an axe through his skull. I told them we had no chance going to war against the Greenlanders. Guess what? I was right. What else do I have to prove to these people?”

“Your devotion to them.”

“Everything I’ve done, I’ve done to keep as many Ironborn alive as I can,” she told him. “If it weren’t for me, every shore would be made up of Dragonglass. Every Keep would look like a tiny Harrenhal. There is currently a dragon nesting right below us. What do they not understand about this situation?”

“They want the Old Way. Like your father wanted.”

“My father---!” She gasped and a knot formed in her throat. She looked over at the mantle, a great stone thing that looked like a kraken. It was essentially a smaller version of the one in the audience chamber below. She could picture her father sitting or standing at either one, gazing at the flames. It was one of her clearest images of him. For a man of the sea, he’d made great companions of the flames. Asha lowered her voice, as if they might hear her and sneak down to the Drowned God’s hall and tell Balon Greyjoy all she said.
“My father lived in a fantasy world. One where he personally ripped out the hearts of Robert Baratheon and Ned Stark. Where storming shores and slaughtering people en masse commanded respect. One where the Old Way was whatever he decided it was.”

“He---”

“He crowned himself twice. In the true Old Way, Kingsmoots determined the kings. And do you know what effectively ended the Old Way? Dragons. In the Old Way, we took what we wanted. But despite all we’ve taken from everyone, has anyone on these islands gotten what they wanted? Euron led them to take it all. They came back with less.”

Asha had difficulty speaking of her father in an honest fashion. Whenever she tried, she always found herself talking about her people in general or Euron, or Victarion, even when she was describing her own father’s attitudes specifically. It was an easy way not to have to blame Balon Greyjoy too much for the way things turned out. She knew it, and yet she couldn’t stop herself.

“You killed Euron. Kill Victarion. Do it. Why don’t you just----?”

“I’ll be a kinslayer twice over. In their minds, I’ll have killed a holy man who never actually did me any harm and just tried to uphold the old way. They’ll find another figurehead to latch onto. One who won’t be afraid to crush all of our skulls.”

“Holy man.” Qarl snorted derisively. “He started praying to that mad fire god and everyone knows it.”

“There’s no way to prove it.” Rumors had traveled back that he’d made a close friend with one of the Red Priests of R’hollor and even named a ship in the honor of the Fire God. Whispers were that he began praying to both. But proof of it burnt up along with Victarion’s arm.

“I----” Qarl walked over to the side of the bed and kicked one of the posts. “You can’t marry one of them. Selling yourself out to men who aren’t willing to support you in the first place…”

“Is what I’m willing to do to keep our boys safe and to keep the islands under control.”

“You’ll just be giving them what they want. What they expect every woman to do.”

“What, aside from trying to kill every man on the islands, do you expect me to do?”

Marry Qarl? She’d love to, of course. She almost did it when she first took back the Isles three years ago. Her victories had been fresh, she’d felt secure enough then in her power. But that personal security dissipated the second Victarion showed up again, one-armed, angry, and yet still wielding that gigantic axe of his. So many of the lords started flocking to him so quickly, their resentment at having to bow to a woman clear. If she’d wed herself to someone as lowborn as Qarl, it would have been the impetus for a quick rebellion. One of the few things that had kept her in place was the hope of her bannermen of winning her hand. She’d learned the value of dangling such a prospect long ago.

Qarl frowned, but to her relief, did not suggest a union between them.

“The same thing you did last time someone tried to make a bride of you. You have ships. You have a crew. You have two sons. You have me. You have your axe.” Qarl started walking towards her, his eyes burning holes through her. “Just leave. No one here will ever let you truly rule in peace. They won’t let a woman sit the Seastone chair and live life according to her rules. Let them have Victarion. Let them get themselves killed. You could sail away, be a queen of your own domain with no lords to appease, no Targaryen shits to bend the knee to.”
She almost punched him. “And what? Be a pirate?”

“Why not? A pirate queen, greater than any of them. You’re no stranger to raids. They want you to live by the Old Way? Do it. But do it for yourself.”

“No. I am a Greyjoy of Pyke. Not just any Greyjoy of Pyke. The Greyjoy of Pyke. I have fought too damn hard—“

“---To give your life away to lunatics who don’t deserve you.”

“---To give up.”

“Asha, you’re a woman! Don’t you get it?” He was shouting now, looking furious. “You can lie and rationalize all your want. Tell yourself it’s because of the Old Way or religion or the men you stormed Pyke with all you like. But that isn’t it and you know it. By the Drowned God, you saw it once, why can’t you now?"

“I am just as---“

“Aye, you’re just as strong, as brave, as skilled as any man on these rocks. You can throw an axe as well as any. You can sail a ship through a typhoon to the Drowned God’s Halls and back. You’ve got more wits in your head than half the lords of these isles combined. You can outfight, out-drink, outthink, out-fuck anyone here. And there’s only a handful of people living or dead who ever cared. A woman can’t rule these islands.”

She grabbed him by his sandy hair and threw him up against a wall, her hands gripping his collar. “Did you see Shireen Baratheon?”

“What?”


“Well, she sticks out, doesn’t she?”

“In one year, she becomes unquestioned ruler of the Stormlands. She’s Stannis Baratheon’s only living child. Every lord, even her current regent, swore fealty to her long ago. She has the Greyscale. She is the niece of the Usurper. And yet she will rule the Stormlands. If some diseased babe can rule the Stormlands, then I will have the Iron Islands. Even if I have to marry some twit to do it, I will. They are mine by right of birth and conquest. Lack of a cock will not stand in my way. I don’t care if they’re all lunatics, I’m not leaving. Not again.”

“And you’d make our boys bastards to do it?” He snarled, furious.

“We both made our boys bastards the days we made them.” She released him, backing away and looking at the ground. “I’m sorry, Qarl, but it’s true. They’re not Greyjoys. They’re Pykes.”

She felt like her entrails were reaching up inside her and swallowing her heart. She couldn’t breathe. Asha met his eyes. Never had he looked so betrayed.

“You truly are Balon Greyjoy’s daughter.”

Then he left.

Asha stood there for several minutes, not being able to move. This wore off. As soon as it did, she
changed into her leathers. She proceeded to march out of her chamber, out of the Keep, down to the armory. She found two thralls sleeping on a bed of straw and woke them with a bucket of water.

They sprang to their feet, looking terrified. “Lady Asha!”

The two were Holling and Corin. Craven men with big muscles.

“You two. You set up the training posts for my Uncle Victarion?”

“What?” Holling said, rubbing his sleepy blue eyes.

“WHO SETS UP MY UNCLE’S TRAINING POSTS ON THE BEACH?”

“Many of us do. About ten of us, My Lady, but Holling and I are in charge.”

“Are the ones for tomorrow up yet?”

“Y-yes, My Lady, we put them up every night.”

“Get your supplies,” she said, grabbing two axes off a nearby rack. “And saddle my horse.”

“My Lady—”

“NOW!” She was in no mood to have her authority questioned at this point. "AM I YOUR LIEGE OR NOT?"

It was done. Asha rode with them down to the beach. Sure enough, there were Victarion’s stupid posts, imbedded in the sand.

“Set them ablaze,” she commanded.

“How many, My Lady?”

“How many is my uncle up to?”

“Twelve, My Lady.”

“Then light thirty.” There were five dozen in all.

“Th-thirty? But, My Lady—”

She cast her dirtiest look at them both. “Question me again, and I’ll cut your bits off and feed them to my dogs.”

The thralls shook as they poured the oil and lit the posts. The flames went up. It looked like a true battlefield.

Asha set off at once, weaving in and out. Each of them looked like her Uncle Euron, like Erik Ironmaker, like Ramsay Bolton, like Victarion. Each of them looked like her.

Each of them stood in the way of her and Tristen, crawling out from his basinet, about to fall and hurt himself.

~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~

The Dragonslayer:
Before Victarion went to sleep, he got a visit from Dorren Saltcliffe. The young man told him he didn’t want the leavings of a dragon, a thrall’s grandson, and a man too fat to stand. “My father wanted a King. He wanted conquest. He didn’t want some weak little whore bending and opening her knees to fire-breathing lizards. We backed the wrong Greyjoy once, we do not intend to make that mistake again.”

Victarion’s dreams grew more vivid each night. So vivid they even poured over during the day sometimes. Even though he burned again, he only burned a little. The visions the Drowned God sent him washed away the pain and made him stronger.

By the time the prince was ready to leave, Victarion would probably be strong enough. Too strong for pain. Too strong to even need two arms. Strong enough to crush the Targaryen boy’s dark head in his fist like dust. Strong enough to split that green dragon’s belly open. He could see it in his dreams.

He could see himself plucking those amethyst eyes from the dragon queen’s head like ripe cherries from a stem. He could see the gleam of his axe as the moonlight reflected off of it. He could see himself upon the Iron Throne. He could see them all kneeling. He could see the dragons’ heads mounted on the prow of The Iron Victory. He could see the fires go out. He could see the tentacles of a giant golden kraken overtake the entire continent and hold it all in a never-ending grip.

Sometimes, when he looked in the mirror, he thought he could see his brother. His smirking, patched-eyed brother.

Other times, he saw his thin brother with the seaweed-strewn hair that hung to his waist, crying. Aeron, some day we will feast together. When my time comes, I will walk into the sea with the crown I took from the Targaryens weighing me down. I will drown and feast with you in the halls.

He’d take the throne, then force every man, woman, and child to accept the one true god. He’d crush the Great Sept of Baelor to rubble. He’d cut down every godswood in the realm and make ships of every weirwood tree, then set crews of warriors and priests to convert the infidels overseas. The Drowned God’s Halls would fill. He’d die and find himself greeted with cheers and thanks from every soul in the murky depths of his god’s domain.

He’d make every man brave and strong, every woman beautiful and dutiful. He’d drown the world. No more storms. No more fires.

A better future could not exist.

No other future could exist.

The Saltcliffes wanted him. He had parts of Old Wyk, the holiest of the isles, as well, though Asha had other parts. Asha believed she had the Harlaws and she surely had her bookish, lens-wearing Uncle Rodrik. But Hotho the Humpback had more than a couple young daughters, unmarried ones. He’d offered one to Victarion at the Kingsmoot years ago. Rodrik had no living sons.

Rodrik is a fool. For all his books and learning, the Reader is a fool. Balon’s goodbrother once had two sons. They died in Balon’s rebellion against Robert Baratheon, as so many good Ironborn sons had. By that point, Lady Harlaw was too old to give him more and later, too dead. And yet, even without a child left to inherit his name, Rodrik the Reader never remarried.

Too dominated by the womenfolk in his life. Rodrik let his shrewish older sister Gwyness live at the Ten Towers after she was widowed. The woman sometimes complained that she should rule the Ten
Towers as she was seven years her brother’s senior. And yet, Rodrik never bothered to beat such notions out of her. He also fostered Alannys even while Balon was still alive, and he never failed to support Asha. He declared for Asha at the Kingsmoot, helped her escape Pyke after Euron won, once offered to make Asha heir to the Ten Towers, and supported his niece to this day.

Obviously, his late wife dominated him enough not to take another bride even after her death.

Weak man. Even wears those Myrish lenses openly. Victarion didn’t wear a false arm. Weak man.

But, unfortunately, powerful. Powerful enough to command the loyalties of the richest of the Iron Islands. Asha’s greatest supporter.

Victarion didn’t like thinking of these things. He never liked thinking of these things. It made his head hurt. It troubled his sleep. Sometimes these thoughts didn’t seem like his own. They felt like the belonged to someone else, someone suited to scheming. Victarion didn’t like scheming. He liked fighting.

In his best dreams, he fought his brother Euron. He fought dragons. He fought the dragon prince.

Victarion had observed the young man in the yards. The boy wielded Valyrian steel. A great bastard sword with a white direwolf hilt. He wielded that blade well, too. He’d fought White Walkers and wildlings and all sorts.

Victarion had observed many of the Greenland fighters when he was at court. He’d trained his eye on them, to see what they were made of. He hadn’t expected much. Greenlanders, even the brave ones, were supposed to be soft and weak. That was why Theon ended up so pathetic.

As much as Victarion hated to admit it, there were more than a few excellent fighters among the Greenland court. Even those two Tyrell sons, who wore roses as their sigil, were ridiculously skilled and quick. The Knight of Flowers was one, and they said he’d even unhorsed the Mountain in a joust. Ser Barristan Selmy lived up to his legend despite his great age, trouncing twenty-year-old men. Young Edric Dayne of Starfall, nephew of the famed Ser Arther the Sword of Morning, had metal that his usually shy and kind demeanor did not suggest.

There were the Unsullied. Actual eunuchs who, despite not being very large in size, were so perfect in their technique that it made one almost forget about their lack of manhood. The Dothraki men were brutal as well, as brutal as Victarion remembered from his travels. He’d seen them at Slaver’s Bay before he was chased out.

There were a few wildlings. One loudmouth old man who called himself thousands of things and seemed to be the leader who never hesitated to wrestle giant beasts and seemed to fear nothing. He had a son almost as tall as Victarion who fought to a devastating degree and another who was a monster with a spear.

There were even many women who could fight there. The Mormont bitches Victarion expected. Every Ironborn knew of the She-Bears. But then there was also that wildling blond they called a princess. There were those two Dornish bastard girls, one of whom wielded a Morningstar as if she’d come out of the womb with it in hand. Princess Sansa’s sister was devastatingly quick and vicious and so much stronger than she looked.

And that monster on the Queensguard, the one from Tarth who seemed as strong as an ox. As much as Victarion loathed to admit it, she seemed as strong a fighter as any he’d seen. He’d seen The Mountain, the Kingslayer, the Red Viper, Ser Arther Dayne… all the best.
The Dragon Prince held his own among them all. He could even last a fair amount of time against the Tarth woman, Selmy, the Knight of Flowers, and the Dothraki savages. Rarely has Victarion seen someone move so quick, so gracefully. He led the fighters at court well, too. He taught young men to be great fighters.

Victarion couldn’t wait to spill his blood. He couldn’t wait to fight him. *A great victory for my axe.*

His dreams this night were of him splitting the bellies of dragons open in the streets of King’s Landing. When he finished, both the prince and his bitch aunt fled. But Victarion caught them. He beat Jon Targaryen bloody, but didn’t kill him. Instead, he made the beaten prince watch as Victarion butchered Daenerys and took his women. After securing Targaryen’s wife and forcing the other Stark Girl to submit to being his salt wife, Victarion sat on the Iron Throne and had Targaryen thrown before him. Victarion’s axe went up and----

Victarion was awoken by pounding on his chamber door. “Lord Captain!”

He opened his eyes. The sun hadn’t risen yet. Why did they wake him. Furious, Victarion struggled out of bed and pulled open the door. Terrified-looking servants and guards stood before him.

“What?!”

“You must come down to the beach. It’s Lady Asha!”

Victarion’s heart rose. *The whore is dead at last. The Targaryens are next.* Victarion yanked on his clothes and armor. The servants kept talking, but he ignored them, instead lost in his fantasies of what would come next and his prayers of thanks to his God. *I am ready.*

He grabbed his axe and mounted his horse, hurrying down to the beach. There was a crowd. *They’d all be here to witness me burn her corpse and kill the dragon. Then they shall cry ‘Hail, Victarion King!’*

His time had come at last.

Then he saw the flames from a distance. *It looks like…. It can’t be…. My training yard?*

He galloped down and through the crowds. Half the posts were gone. Too many of those that remained were on fire. Thus far, Victarion only managed to handle twelve flaming posts. Almost twenty were on fire now.

And running back and forth through them, striking them with half-ruined axes in each hand, was Asha. She darted back and forth, howling. Her leathers were scorched, as was her hair. Red, violent, dripping angry burns covered the backs of her hands. She howled like a demon. She struck the posts with intense determination, seemingly in the midst of an unholy rage.

Fires flickered all around her. She was undaunted. She hacked away at one the flaming posts, ignoring it when part of her hair was singed. She beat it down like she’d beat the Crow’s Eye. She was engulfed in flames, it seemed, but triumphed.

No, not again. Victarion thus far had only managed to handle up to twelve flaming posts. And that took him all day. Asha had destroyed at least that many in a few hours. He could hear the Crow’s Eye’s laughter. *Another girl, surrounded by fire, beating you with flame. Beaten by a girl once more. You ran from flames. She’s run towards them.*

“There are men who remember when you were a little girl, swimming naked in the sea, and playing with your doll.”
“I played with axes too.”

“Go back to your dolls, niece. Leave the winning of wars to warriors. I have two hands, no man needs three.”

He did not have two hands now, and he’d not won a single war. She’d retaken the Iron Isles with the axes she played with. Asha did what Victarion feared doing. She had killed the Crow’s Eye, as Victarion had so dreamed of doing. She drove an axe through Euron’s skull. Afterwards, when Victarion laid the charges of kinslaying at her feet, she answered it was justified as Euron killed Balon. “It was no crime in this case, but a just execution. He also planned to kill you and the Damphair. In this case, the death could be excused. Even the priests say so.”

She cannot beat me again. If Euron being a kinslayer justified her killing him, then surely her killing Euron justifies me killing her. I can do it. I have to. I have to. Now is my test. Now is my time.

Victarion charged into the training yard, his movements seeming not quite his own. He felt the flames lick at his armor. Smoke got in his eyes. It was so hard to see. Where is she? He howled and swung his axe, trying to find her.

Several times, his axe found the posts but not her. There were screams. But finally, he seemed to get to her. Their blades clashed. She managed to hold the force of his axe with both of hers, but she struggled.

“Ready to kill me after all, Nuncle?” She shrieked. “Better men than you have tried! I KILLED THE CROW’S EYE! I CAN KILL YOU!”

I should not be doing this, he thought. He tried to pull his arm back. This is not right. This is kinslaying. I am surrounded by flames. What am I doing?

His arm did pull back, but it didn’t lower. Instead, it struck at Asha again. She managed to dodge it, ducking out of the way. His axe was buried in a post behind her. Victarion pulled it out and Asha gained some distance, backing away, her stance guarded. Victarion remembered her as a naked little girl, playing with her dolls. It was all he could see now when he looked at her. He sobbed. But he also charged towards her.

“You killed me once, niece. But as my fool brothers so loved to say, what is dead may never die, but rises again harder and stronger!”

The voice that spoke wasn’t his. It was laughing, maniacal, a bit higher than Victarion’s. It mocked the words of their faith in a way Victarion would never dare.

Asha seemed to notice. Her face took on a new look of horror and confusion as she stared up at him. “I never hurt you, Nuncle. At one time, I would have made you a king! But you wouldn’t listen!”

“I KNOW, ASHA!” That was his voice this time. But as soon as his voice spoke, it was buried again by the laughing one.

“The stupid git thought you were offering to be his queen, Asha! And his cock stiffened up! He was ready to fuck you! Not well, though. Victarion never could fuck well! It’s why I took his wife. I thought, ‘well, this stupid girl should know a proper mounting at least once. It would be a dishonor to our family name if she believed all Greyjoys were built like Victarion!’”

There was shouting in the background. The sounds of fists and anger and tears.
“KILL THE BITCH, VICTARION!” Victarion knew that voice to be of Dagon Ironmaker, one of his supporters. Asha was wed to and later killed Dagon’s grandfather Erik. “WE’RE HOLDING THEM BACK!”

“THE TRUE LORD REAPER OF PYKE RISES AT LAST!” That was the cry of Dorren Saltcliffe.

“NO! ASHA! MY LOVE!” Tristopher Botley.

Victarion ran towards Asha, hacking at her. He didn’t want to. He wanted to stop. He wanted to get away from the flames.

He heard the dragon shriek and roar. He heard the beating of its wings. Asha countered his attacks. She moved quick. But her axes were damaged by the posts she’d fought. Victarion’s axe was new. He got her to fall to the ground. He lifted his weapon. No, I’m going to kill her. No.

But instead, he felt a horrible, rippling pain in his right thigh. Victarion screamed. He looked down. She’d buried one of her blades into his groin muscle. Blood gushed out. He doubled backward, dropping his axe, clutching the wound and screaming.

Asha jumped back to her feet. Victarion found himself grabbing the axe in his side and yanking it out. He licked his own blood off of it and grinned. Asha blanched. There was more roaring. The green dragon flew overheard.

“The dragon will kill you, Nuncle.”

“Dragons tried to kill this lummox once,” the taunting voice thundered from his bloody lips. “He was too stupid to properly use the horn I gave him. But I know the magic to conquer one.”

There were more shout, more screams. There were now shouts of “STOP! IN THE NAME OF QUEEN DAENERYS!”

Maniacal laughter rang from his mouth. Victarion only felt the pain. He advanced on his niece, wielding her axe. She dodged and swerved, she tried to hit him again.

So much pain. How do I move?

~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~

Jon:

He’d been awake, taking a meeting in his chambers with Rodrik Harlaw and Patrek Mallister.

“The boys must be removed within the week,” the man they called ‘The Reader’ told him. “I believe I can make a good excuse. I’m their grand-uncle. We can openly transport them to Harlaw. From there we can sneak them to the Mainlands discreetly.”

“They will find shelter at Seaguard,” Ser Patrek promised.

Rodrik looked at Mallister suspiciously. “How can we trust you?”

“We don’t kill little boys, Harlaw,” Ser Patrek sneered. “As I remember, it was your nephew that butchered those two farm boys in place of the Starks.”

“Enough. Lord Rodrik, I give you my solemn vow, on my honor as a Targaryen, I will keep them safe.”
“Nevertheless, I’d feel safer if family were with them.”

Jon sighed. “Speaking of which, where is Lady Asha?” He’d sent her a message to join them. He’d received word that she’d gone to the beach, and sent Nathen to fetch her. It was starting to bother him.

Lord Harlaw stood. “I don’t know. Last I saw her, she was going to visit the boys.”

Jon’s pulse quickened. Something’s not right. Asha tended to be fairly prompt when responding to messages. “When was that?”

“Hours ago,” Rodrik admitted as he began to stand, looking perturbed. “You think---?”

They were all on their feet now. Jon grabbed Longclaw. Maybe we’re overreacting, but it’s worth it to check.

All three men charged out the door. Orders were given for all available men to go with them to the Main Keep. When they exited the Bloody Keep and stepped onto the bridge, they heard screams. From his vantage point, Jon spied the beach.

“Are those…. Flames?” Patrek asked.

He could hear a mob. Jon panicked. “TO THE BEACH. NOW.”

Jon began to move, but all of a sudden, both Mallisters got in his way.

“What are you doing?” He demanded. “We have to get down there!”

“There’s too many people gathered down there for us to be able to properly protect you, Your Grace. We promised your wife and aunt that we’d bring you back alive.” Ser Markus said.

“I’VE FACED DOWN A HUNDRED THOUSAND WILDINGS AT THE BATTLE OF CASTLE BLACK WITH ONLY A FEW HUNDRED NIGHT’S WATCHMEN!”

“You were on the Wall at the time. And you had the forces of Stannis Baratheon at the end, “Ser Patrek replied. “We’ll send some men down, but not you. Not like this.”

“I AM NOT SENDING MY MEN INTO AN AMBUSH WHILE I STAY BEHIND!” He would not do that.

He heard Rhaegal shriek then. Wings flapped. The dragon tore out of the caves and into the sky. Jon grinned.

The great emerald beast flew towards him. There was no saddle, he had no whip. But I am a Targaryen.

“RHAEGAL! TO THE CAVE!” He cried in Valyrian. I’ll hurry there, saddle her up, and move.

But the dragon had other ideas. She swooped down and grabbed him in her talons and took him into the air. The bridge disappeared. Ground disappeared. He flew. He needed to get on her back. But I have no saddle. I have no whip. I have no reins.

“RHAEGAL! LAND! LET ME RIDE!”

She kept flying. Jon panicked. He kept shouting for her to let him ride. She kept flying. The beach disappeared from view. Pyke got smaller.
He kept crying out, begging her. *Please. Please Rhaegal.* He cried out in the Valyrian he knew. He cried out in the common tongue. He pleaded.

The ground got closer. Lots of ground. Rhaegal began to land. *Please. Please. Maybe…?*

She set him on the ground as she landed. Jon stumbled and fell back. He was dizzy. His stomach lurched. *Have I lost control or not?* Jon managed to regain his footing and senses. He turned.

The dragon stared at him. He stared back. She shrieked. He took careful steps towards her, holding up his hands. “Rhaegal, please. I must ride. Let me, please. We’re friends, remember? I’m your mother’s kin. I’m your kin.”

*No, you’re not,* he thought hopelessly, *Blood of the dragon is just a saying. Just a stupid saying. You were fool enough to let Dany convince you that it was true. You could never be a true dragon. Rhaegal is not a Direwolf. How could you let yourself be fooled like this? Stupid boy. You’re unworthy. An unworthy bastard. There was no way she’d obey you for long without a true Targaryen there. Dany is the only true Targaryen. A true dragon. You’re just a pretender. You always were. No better than your mad grandfather thinking burning through wildfire would turn him into a dragon.*

Rhaegal blinked at him. Then, she lowered her head and immense neck, laying them flat on the ground and crouched, extending her wings. *She expects me to mount her,* Jon realized.

He cried with relief as he scrambled onto her back. She waited patiently as he tried to find a somewhat secure seat without the saddle. Jon held on tight to the ridges on her back, clinging to her. *I’m as secure as I’ll ever be.*

He patted her back. “Thank you, Girl. Let’s go.”

She took to the air. Jon clung on for dear life. But she didn’t fly too high or too fast. She flew steady. *Slow and low. Slow and low.*

*“To the beach.”* He shouted. Pyke began to appear again. They got closer quickly. And soon, he was flying overhead, to the beach.

He cried out in relief, but clung on tightly. Rhaegal swooped down as Jon got a clear view. Closer and closer. Two figures were fighting across the flames. Crowds were going mad. Things became clearer. Jon and Rhaegal got closer and closer.

Jon got a clear view of the situation just in time to watch Victarion Greyjoy knock Asha to her knees with the blunt end of her own war axe, then drive the blade right through her left arm and deep into her side.

The world seemed to stand still. For a second, nothing moved. Asha turned her head and looked at the ground where her now severed arm had landed. Then the rest of her toppled down next to it.

Chapter End Notes

... Please don't hate me.
Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things

Chapter Summary

The fallout.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so this is me wrapping up some stuff, setting up other. It's a short chapter (at least, it is for my long-winded ass). But it needed to end where it did.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Forty-nine: Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things

Jon:

Victarion turned and ran towards Jon and Rhaegal, giggling and babbling nonsense words. Also: crying. And Jon did not hesitate.

"Rhaegal, Dracarys."

The giant man actually stopped and held out his remaining arm, grinning. But his grin fell as the dragon flame began to melt his armor about his body. His mouth managed to twist into a look of horror before melting off of his bones. His skeleton, covered in waxy-looking molten metal, crumbled into the sand like one of his stone pillars.

Ironmen ran. Others were being chased off by Jon’s guards. The beach cleared. Jon brought Rhaegal to the ground and leapt off of her back, running towards Asha’s body.

Blood gushed from the stump where her right arm used to be, and from the wound in her side. She breathed, though it clearly pained her to do it. Her eyes managed to focus as he grabbed her shoulders.

"Listen to me, Targaryen," she gasped, "You have to make sure my boys are---"

"---You’ll do that," he told her. He ripped off his sleeve and began fastening it about Asha’s wound as Maester Aemon showed him years ago. He’d dealt with more than a few severed limbs after battle in his time at the wall. As he bound it, he shouted to his men. Markus Mallister came close. Jon gave him orders to find Asha’s boys and have a maester brought to them before turning back to his patient. "Your uncle lived with a missing arm. Donal Noye went almost twenty years like that. He still smithed for the Watch and lived that way up at the Wall, where it was cold enough to freeze the spit while it was still in your mouth. If he can---"

"Oh, shut up. Maybe I won’t die, you git. But if I do, I deserve to be heard in my last moments. So shut up and listen to me." She weakly punched him with the arm she had left. "My boys. I want them safe, I want them cared for. Pyke. Greyjoy. Whatever they end up being called, they won’t be hurt. I
She paused for a second and shuddered, tears gathering in her eyes as she considered her stump. “I tried so hard. And look what they did to me! What kind of true seafarers let a kraken lose her arm? Qarl was right. Right now I should be taking off on the Black Wind and half my fleet with him and the babes, screaming fuck off to the lot of you and seeking my fortune elsewhere. Instead I’m bleeding on the bloody beach with one arm. That’s not fair. None of us Greyjoys get good ends. Father threw off the bridge of his own home. Mother dies weeping and asking for her dead sons. Rodrik is crushed by a tower. Maron is gutted by some Baratheon pigs. Theon begging for death, a toothless old eunuch, barely even human. Victarion burns. Urrigon dies from a lost bloody finger. Aeron kills himself. Euron’s skull is crushed. I tried to avoid all their mistakes. I tried to do better. And this is what I got for it.”

My Uncle Benjen disappeared like a puff of smoke. Rickon died starving and butchered on Skaagos. Jon looked at his lap, tears stinging his eyes. Robb died screaming, slain by his own men. Father was betrayed and beheaded after sacrificing his honor, listening to his daughter scream. Mance Rayder is a babbling madman who can’t recognize his son. I killed Qhorin Halfhand. Lord Commander Mormont was killed in mutiny at Craster’s fucking Keep.

Asha spat.

“If you can find it in you to try and salvage these damn rocks, try putting my Uncle Rodrik in power. Tristopher Botley, lovesick fool that he is, might not be so bad. In the meantime, get the boys and then get the fuck off my shores. You don’t belong here.”

She coughed up blood. Then she looked curiously at her new stump. “It’s so odd. I can feel the pain, but I swear I can still feel my fingers as well. Can you bring me to the tides? If I’m about to die, I want to die in the ocean. If I’m to live, I’d like to wait for my Maester in the ocean. Either way, I want the sea. Oh, and make sure you set me adrift aboard Black Wind. And when you next see Alysanne Mormont or some of those Wildling Spearwives, tell them I said thank you. They helped my brother and I when we needed it most and didn’t deserve it.”

Jon nodded and lifted her up, carrying her over so the waves washed over her hips, supporting her back so she could sit up and gaze over the water. She gazed at the moonlight rippling over the water. “You want to know a secret, Targaryen?”

“What?” He asked her. Don’t tell me secrets. You don’t need to tell anyone any secrets yet. You have years and years to tell secrets.

Her blood kept gushing, despite his efforts to stop up the wounds. He kept tearing of bits of their clothing, trying to stop it up. It wouldn’t stop. It just kept coming.

Asha winked at him. “I never cared much for Pyke. I always preferred the Ten Towers if I had to sleep ashore. Pyke is a gloomy, rotted, bloody old ruin and no one will admit it. A perfect place for my father to plot the return to the Old Way. Have you ever seen a more sorry excuse for a Keep?”

“Yeah, Craster’s.”
“What? Nevermind. I wasn’t looking for an answer. Shut up and reach into my tunic, between my teats.”

“What?”

“I’m dying, you shit.”

He did so reluctantly.

“Take the necklaces out.”

His hands finding two large, strangely shaped pendants between her breasts. He pulled it out. In his hand were two gold krakens. They looked oddly familiar.

“Those were Theon’s. Cape clips. He left them behind in his rooms after he left Pyke for the last time. Had them hidden under his mattress. Father had him destroy most of his fine baubles because they were bought with the gold price. I think he left these here so he might be able to look forward to the prospect of coming back home. I found them when I took Pyke back from Euron. Made them into necklaces and hid them. Figured I took Pyke with the Iron Price and all that was in it. Always meant to give them to the boys when they were old enough. When they’re old enough, make sure they have them, alright? Make those something to earn, and make sure they’re the first baubles they get. Like I said, I don’t want them getting too… too…”

She coughed up more blood. “Too… too…”

She stopped speaking.

~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~

Asha:

A nightmare. Just a nightmare.

She could feel all her fingers. She knew she could.

But then, when she tried to sit up, eyes still closed, she lost her balance and fell back. Something was wrong. She opened her eyes, blinking against the candle light. Servants ran up. Asha looked down at herself.

Not a nightmare. Why couldn’t it have been a nightmare? She wondered, tears gathering in her eyes as she looked down at the stump where her arm used to be.

“My Lady! You’re awake!” Her maid, Darina, a sandy-haired thrall descendent said, looking incredibly relieved. She had a couple of other attendants with her, one of whom was sent out to fetch the maester, her Uncle Rodrik, and the prince.

Asha let herself cry, ignoring her servant and staring up at the canopy. I’ll never be able to hold both my sons at once again. She’d teach herself proper balance. She’d make her remaining arm stronger, throw an axe with it, write with it, adapt in lots of ways. But never again would she be able to carry Tristen in one arm and Rodrik in the other. The few inches of flesh she had left attached to her right shoulder wiggled pathetically.

“Someone go get my boys. And Qarl. Get Qarl,” she murmured.

Darina said nothing. She helped Asha sit up and gave her some water. Asha’s throat felt awful, but
the coolness of the liquid soothed it considerably. “How long was I out?”

“Ten days, My Lady.”

Tears were falling now. Darina grabbed a cloth to wipe them. But she didn’t speak of it. There was an unspoken rule between them that Darina was never to speak of it when Asha cried. Having someone try to comfort her in such a way usually just made her feel worse.

*How am I even alive?* She wondered. There was no way she could rule now. A woman was bad enough. But a one-armed woman? *How has there not been a further revolt?*

“What’s happened in those ten days?”

“Mainland ships have come in. Sent by the queen. Apparently, Prince Jon told her to prepare more people weeks ago in case of violence. They were called in by one of Prince Jon’s men. They’ve been keeping the peace on Pyke for now. The Houses of the Iron Islands have been threatened against mobilizing. Everyone saw Rhaegal kill Victarion. A few days after he was killed, a letter came bearing the seal of Queen Daenerys. Your Uncle Rodrik read it to the people. All it said was ‘Harrenhal.’”

Asha swallowed. “So everything is contained?”

“No… not exactly.” Darina frowned. “Pyke is yours, as are the Iron Islands in general. Your uncle says no one is going to rise up against you now. But…”

“But what?”

Darina hesitated. “Um, I think we should---“

She was cut off by the door swinging open and her last living uncle running in. “Asha, Sweetling!”

Her uncle wrapped his arms around her as Darina pulled away. The prince and a maester followed closely behind. Rodrik embraced her in a way he hadn’t since she was a girl of eleven trying to figure out why she no longer had any brothers around to play with. Why Theon had to go away. Why Maron and Rodrik were gone.

“Nuncle,” she whispered, using her remaining arm to pat his back. “I’m glad you’re alright.”

“You’re glad… I was sleeping soundly through half of that mess. Yes, I’m fine. Sick with worry, but otherwise fine. Do you remember everything?”

“No. And that reminds me,” she looked up at the Targaryen prince. “I’d like my baubles back. Since I’m not going to die, there’s no need for you to keep them.”

Targaryen nodded solemnly and pulled them from his tunic, placing them on his bedside table.

Asha pulled away. “Will someone please fetch my boys?”

The room was dead silent. Asha pulse quicked. “No… No… Please tell me…”

*Did Victarion get to them first?* Asha cursed herself. She should have been there. *No. No. Please no.*

“I gave orders for my men to fetch and guard Rodrik and Tristen, but when they got to the nursery, the nurse was knocked out, the window open, and the bassinettes empty.”

“Qarl’s ship and a number of the ships he had under his command are gone too,” admitted her uncle.
Asha fell back on her pillows, remembering the fight with her lover. *He’d never hurt them,* she assured herself. But the sense of betrayal was palpable.

“Everything is being done to find them!” Targaryen said quickly, “Ships from us and from the islands have been sent out. Every major harbor from Eastwatch-By-The-Sea to Sunspear has been given orders to be on the lookout. Messages to overseas areas have been sent out as well. A reward has been offered. Tristopher Botley has set out with a small fleet to find them.”

“Prince Jon flew over the seas for a few days on his dragon as well,” Rodrik told her.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she said in a hollow voice. Asha closed her eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Asha.” Her uncle told her, grabbing her remaining hand. “But you mustn’t give up hope.”

*Hope.* She frowned. “I want Qarl brought back alive so I can hear him tell me why he did this. Then I want to gut him myself.”

“If it… If it means anything, Lady Asha,” Jon said, “There were numerous witnesses to your fight with Victarion. Everyone saw the blow to his groin. If I’d not set him aflame on Rhaegal’s back, he’d have still died a terrible death. Even his supporters admit this. The fact that you’ve survived and delivered a mortal wound first has convinced many that you are strong enough to lead the Ironborn. What happened on the beach has convinced a number of lords here that they don’t want the old way after all. There are numerous vassals praying and making sacrifices for your full recovery and the return of Rodrik and Tristen. When we bring them back, their home will be far safer than when they left it.”

*When, not if. He said when they are brought back, not if.*

Asha’s lip curled. When Victarion came charging towards her in the flames, she’d felt almost certain she was to die. But she decided that if Victarion was going to kill her, that she’d take him down as well. She’d be damned if another undeserving uncle sat the Seastone Chair. She’d gone for every non-obvious death blow she could. When she’d lost the arm, the knowledge that Victarion would end up dying slowly and painfully made her own possible demise a bit easier to accept. It was also why she was so insistent on saying all she could regarding the boys to the dragon prince before she lost consciousness.

“I suppose it is a small comfort, knowing fewer people are plotting to murder me in my bed.” Asha took a deep breath. “Nuncle, you are handling things?”

“I am. You are to rest now.”

She nodded. She couldn’t get her boys back like this. “Please… please do everything you can.”

“We are,” her uncle assured her.

She believed him. Her heart ached. She wanted her boys here. She thought of her mother going mad at the Ten Towers, asking for sons that were long dead. “Nuncle, don’t let me end up like Lanny.”

“I promise,” he whispered.

Asha couldn’t stand to speak anymore.

“Let her rest,” the maester said, “She needs it.”
Yes, I need it. I need rest. I need rest and my children back.

The men filed out and Darina sat beside her once more. Asha could feel the maid dab at her cheeks with a cloth, wiping up the tears that fell. At that moment, it was the only comfort she had. *When not if. When not if. Qarl, how could you do this to me?*

The next few days were a blur. No news on Qarl and the boys. Things were stabilizing on the Iron Islands, but with new royal forces present, there were whispers of it being an unofficial occupation. When Rodrik and Prince Jon told her this, she looked at the prince.

“Your wife is pregnant, right?”

“Into her sixth month,” he said, wincing. Heavy bags sat under his eyes.

“Go back to the capital. Take your dragon. I am ordering this in my capacity as Lord Reaper of Pyke. You are no longer welcome here. Enough men to keep violence down can stay as my guests. You cannot. Go home.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am. I don’t need whispers of occupation. I don’t need a dragon on my doorstep. You need to be there when your child is born. Go, Jon Targaryen. Thank you for your help. I wish you a strong, healthy son and all the happiness in the world. Get the fuck off the Iron Islands.”

She didn’t want or need the dragon prince here. He was a further complication. She got visitors every day from concerned bannermen. Men who whispered against her were now falling over themselves to kneel to her. Allowing the Targaryen to stay too long would only bring back the idea that she was a Targaryen puppet. Kicking him out of Pyke would send a proper message.

To his credit, he backed out of the room. He looked downright grateful.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Sansa:

“The lord he came a-riding upon a rainy day

*hey-nonny---“*

“Not that one!” Sansa snapped, setting her needlework aside. The ladies surrounding her all looked up in surprise. The singer, Darrus the Dark, stopped short, the song coming to an end with a rough, off-key strum.

Sansa sat in a circle with a number of highborn women on a terrace in the Maidenvault. Margaery sat next to her, looking alarmed.

“My apologies, Your Grace,” Darrus said. “I would not like to displease you.”

Darrus lived up to his name with his ebony skin, hair, and eyes. He draped himself in dark silks as well, making himself look like some manner of romantic shadow. He claimed to have Rhoynish heritage, and that it made his singing passionate. He was handsome and a great favorite at court. Out of the flock of new singers that were employed to stay on after the wedding, he was the most in demand.

There were titters from a few of the younger girls in the group upon seeing Sansa’s anguish.
“I heard that song under rather poor circumstances once,” Sansa told him, “It’s soured my taste for it.” And for singers in general.


“No.” Sansa shook her head. “I… Just… I’m sorry, I’m not…”

“Why not ‘Two Hearts That Beat as One’?” Margaery suggested cheerfully, rubbing Sansa’s back. The princess waved her hand in surrender, grabbing her embroidery hoop and needle once more. She tuned out Darrus’s sweet voice and concentrated on the image of a heart tree she was bringing to life.

She’d been on edge since news came of what took place on Pyke. Sansa had not cared much for the company of Asha Greyjoy, but now she wept for the woman. She’d lost an arm and possibly two children.

Whenever Sansa thought of it, she kept imagining Rodrik and Tristen Pyke as Bran, Rickon, and Eddie. Too many children taken from their mothers. She clutched her belly protectively.

There was a part of her that wanted to send a message to Asha Greyjoy and offer her some comfort. But every time she started a letter, she lost her nerve. There was a chance those boys were still alive, and all of Sansa’s experiences ended with children never to reappear, taken by the gods in some form or another. Sansa didn’t want this woman to think of dead little boys when she was trying to find her missing ones.

Her hand wasn’t as steady as it usually was. Nothing was the way it should be. Nothing is ever the way it should be. But she’d thought for a short while that it might.

Sansa glanced at the women surrounding her. Girls, really. The Sand Snakes were there with their mother. There were a couple of wives from the Stormlands and the Riverlands. Then a dozen noble daughters. More and more noble daughters were showing up at court these days.

“That’s a lovely scene, Your Grace,” Norese Morrigen said, walking to where Sansa was sitting and looking over her shoulder. “Is it for the prince?”

“It’s a tapestry for the nursery,” Sansa said wearily, “It’s to be the godswood at Winterfell.”

Norese was sixteen with porcelain skin, fetching brown eyes, silky black ringlets, and legs that went for miles. She also had absolutely no interest in Winterfell. “Oh. How nice,” she replied, “So no new gifts for His Grace upon his return then?”

“She’ll be giving him the best gift of all,” Margaery countered, “She’s carrying his child.”

“Of course,” Norese replied, her smile growing a bit stiff. “I just thought since Princess Sansa is so gifted with a needle, she’d want to also make him—”

“I’ve made my husband many fine things,” Sansa replied, extremely unhappy. “I’ve had less opportunity to craft my child as many. But I’m sure my husband will have no shortage of gifts upon his return.”

She got to her feet then. “May I see your efforts, Lady Norese?”

The young woman hesitated for a second, glancing around nervously. Sansa kept her smile.
Reluctantly, Norese went to fetch her hoop. A white wolf danced across a black background.

“How interesting, My Lady,” Sansa said, “And here I was expecting crows upon green. That is the sigil of House Morrigen, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Norese admitted, her fine white skin turning red.

“Well, that’s quite interesting. I wonder why you’d choose a white wolf. To my knowledge, white ones aren’t anyone’s sigil. Or even a very popular scene.” Sansa inspected the piece carefully. “For the record, Lady Norese, Ghost has red eyes, not blue.”

She noticed a number of the younger women starting to cover their own efforts, glancing around guiltily. Sansa saw a plethora of black fabric, green dragons, and white wolves being brought to life upon the ladies’ laps.

Sansa looked around at them all and kept a smile on her face. “I am so glad to have such pretty young faces with me at court. But I would ask that next time I meet with you all for a sewing circle, you be a bit more discreet with the favors you intend to try to seduce my husband with. Believe it or not, I’m not as stupid as the rest of you and I do not tolerate such disrespect.”

“Your Grace!” Another comely highborn wench, the auburn-haired Lady Tanda Fisher, “I can assure you, none of us have any illicit intentions towards—“

“—No, please,” Sansa held up a hand. “I have no patience for any of this. Most of you arrived at court the second word came of the prince sharing a bed with Lady Greyjoy. I know why your fathers sent you here. And I feel sorry for you. But don’t treat me like a fool. I know better.”

With that, she left the room, Nani and the Sands following close behind as Margaery hastily began trying to calm the other ladies down. Loreza and Dorea were giggling.

“Oh, you made that one Morrigen girl look like an utter fool!” Loreza said, grinning wickedly. Both she and her sister didn’t get along with most of the other young ladies at court, both of them ostracized due to their bastard status, Rhoynish looks, and odd sense of humor. They took solace in mischief and jokes.

“Truly, that was brilliant.” Dorea agreed.

Sansa accepted the compliments graciously, but could take no pleasure in them. She didn’t want this. She didn’t want nobles pimping out their daughters anymore. She didn’t want to look around at every woman she met and wonder whether they were another aspiring royal mistress.

Every day she got reports of the whispers and jokes from the network of spies she’d set up. What she heard rarely pleased her. Lately, gossip had focused quite heavily on her marriage.

The prince was staying in the Iron Islands on purpose. He chose to go because he’d lost interest in Sansa when her belly began to swell. He’d grown bored of her at once and preferred women who fought like the Wildling women and Asha Greyjoy. That he was forced to marry Sansa by the queen and had bolted as soon as he could. That he was considering taking more than one bride like the Targaryens of old.

Accordingly, Sansa had noticed a drop in the level of attention she received and an increase in the level of people talking over her at social functions. Even at council meetings, certain members seemed more prone to interrupting her and dismissing her opinions. When she continued to argue her point, she was accused of letting her nerves get the better of her.
This sort of thing wasn’t unheard of, she knew. Many royal men took mistresses once their wives grew heavy with child. There were even queens and princesses who encouraged their cousins to distract their royal husbands so that the people influencing them kept to their family’s political interests. A pre-arranged mistress would step in while the wife was too large and unattractive to hold the king’s interest, then step away once child was born.

Petyr told her of it. “It’s why so many people barely batted an eye at Prince Rhaegar taking your Aunt Lyanna. Every lady who comes to court is a potential royal whore. It was why Cersei was so obsessive about keeping every inch of the Red Keep filled with Lannister loyalists. More than a few of her pretty, golden-haired cousins warmed Robert’s bed while she carried Joffrey, Tommen, and Myrcella.”

Sansa didn’t want to think about it, but she had to. She was being undermined. And court was so much more difficult to handle when pregnant. Everyone kept telling her not to do too much. But if she did too little, she felt she’d disappear.

And everywhere she looked, she saw aspiring little seductresses, eager to take her place. Ready to use her condition to their advantage.

Sansa couldn’t deny that she’d lost a certain level of elegance. Her belly grew big, her ankles were swollen, she was often flushed and sweaty. Sansa frequently felt the need to urinate, and vomiting happened daily. People were staring at her belly, never at her face. It was like she’d disappeared entirely and there was nothing left of her but her womb and what was growing inside it.

She felt like a brood sow. A sweaty, swollen, irritable brood sow. Surrounded by young, elegant swans.

“You don’t think on it,” Nani said in warning. “You worry, and it’ll hurt the Khalakka.”

Sansa was so tired of people telling her how to feel. At the moment, she felt ready to reprimand her midwife. “I have to think on it, Nani. I worried about far more when I carried my first son. My second can handle this.”

She felt a hand touch her arm and found herself looking into the soft, sympathetic eyes of Ellaria Sand. Since her arrival, the former paramour had kept a close eye on the Sand Snakes and proved a very comforting companion. Despite her bastard name and history, she carried herself with more elegance and integrity than most at court. Sansa found herself oddly drawn to the older woman, who looked at almost everyone with a mother’s eyes.

Then her other hand was grabbed by Loreza. “Don’t worry yourself, Your Grace. Dorea and I have a plan.”

“A plan?” Ellaria asked, immediately sounding alarmed. “What plan?”

“We’ll tell you behind closed doors,” Dorea said, grinning.

Sansa smiled softly. “Then we should get to my chambers where it is private as soon as possible.”

They found themselves in the Aenys chambers before long. Ellaria sat down, her lips pursed. “Now, what is this ‘plan’?”

“Princess Sansa, what are some colors the prince absolutely hates?” Loreza asked her, walking towards the windows.

“He’s not fond of yellow or orange or gold,” she offered, confused.
“Well, we’re going to spread word that when Prince Jon arrived that you plan on wearing a cloth of gold gown because the prince loves it. Cloth of gold with yellow lace.” Dorea wound her dark curls around her finger as she said this, grinning conspiratorially.

Sansa looked at Ellaria, who threw her head back and laughed.

“Years ago, their older sisters used to play this trick on ladies who wished to replace me as Oberyn’s paramour,” Ellaria explained. “It made the would-be usurpers ridiculous and obvious to everyone.”

“And we’ll say you’ve started making capes with tentacles on them, like Lady Greyjoy wore.”

“And that you plan to wear seaweed in your hair, like those Ironborn priests.”

Sansa actually managed to laugh at this. “Oh, it’s sweet of you, really. But that couldn’t possibly work.”

It possibly could, as it turned out. Over a sennight, the demand for cloth of gold, yellow lace, and seaweed went up. Sansa ended up sitting in the council chamber as a wide-eyed, deeply confused Lord Butterwell read off the trade statistics from the merchants of King’s Landing. By the time he finished, she was laughing so hard she had to excuse herself.

The bit of laughter was good for her, though. Sansa found herself back in her rooms afterwards, feeling far more comforted. She looked down at her belly and wondered at it. “Aemonaerys,” she whispered, “Why don’t we have our first dance lesson?”

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Jon:

He’d left Seagard with a request that Patrek join him at court as soon as possible to celebrate the birth of his first child. He smiled and acted relieved to be done, relieved to return home.

Secretly, though, he was ashamed. He didn’t want to see Daenerys’s eyes when she saw what a failure he was. He’d not yet alerted her or anyone to his problems with Rhaegal. Since that night, the dragon had not rebelled again, but that wasn’t enough to reassure him. He almost didn’t take to the air to get home. Only the concern that he might not get back in time for the birth got him on her back again.

If Rhaegal noticed the lack of trust, she gave no sign. She seemed eager to return to King’s Landing, taking to the air each day eagerly and flying swift and steady. That didn’t stop her rider from watching her with a tentative eye. Jon couldn’t relax for a single moment.

I was supposed to protect Lady Asha and her boys and prevent violence. I succeeded at none of this. The morning after everything went wrong, his men immediately urged him to leave, but he couldn’t do so before the lady woke. He’d taken Rhaegal out on the Sunset Sea to try and find the boys while she still slept, but was too nervous to fly too far out of range.

He had nightmares now, of little children being stolen, hurt, killed, and driven from their homes. Of infant cries and grieving mothers.

He also dreamt of falling from a great height. Of burning. Of being lost. He dreamt of claws and talons tearing at him, yanking him apart in a dark tug of war. He dreamt of disappointed violet eyes. He dreamt of bloody stumps where strong arms once hung.

Sometimes, when he touched ground, he came upon ruined villages filled with tired, hungry people.
He saw frightened, sunken faces and wondered what kind of world he was bringing his son or daughter into. When he passed through a town, he spent generously on the food and supplies they offered him, remembered and wrote down as many names, complaints, and locations as he could, and tried to offer some comfort here and there.

_Sansa was right_, he thought as he handed recently-purchased biscuits out to silent, hungry children. _We send the armies home, but the wars don’t end._

People would see Rhaegal and then come up to him in an inn or village street and ask him if he was truly the dragon prince. He wasn’t sure how to answer.

“I’m just Jon,” he’d reply sometimes when a solid yes or no refused to come to his lips. “Jon Snow.”

Chapter End Notes

Next up: THE REUNION
Chapter Summary

A reunion of love, sex, feelings of inadequacy and identity issues.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bluecichlid for her beta work :)

Chapter Fifty: Ours

Jon:

It was all arranged carefully. There was no way Sansa was allowed near the dragonpit so late into her pregnancy, so Rhaegal was to have Jon alight from her back at the palace gates before heading to the pit on her own. When they flew into the city, Jon felt a bit of fear. *What if she rebels again?* He almost had her land outside the city limits so he could continue in on foot. But arrangements had been made already, and seeing him break from protocol could cause unnecessary alarm.

Rhaegal performed beautifully, inclining her wings so he could slide down onto the pathway to the drawbridge. There were cheers and cries as he alighted and made his way to the courtyard, forcing himself to keep his eyes on Daenerys. He feared if he looked away, he’d not regain the courage to look upon her again. *Time to face the woman you failed.*

He got on one knee before Daenerys, trying to read her expression discreetly. He was exhausted, in no mood for such a challenge. His eyes hurt, his muscles ached, and he wanted nothing more than to curl into a little corner and shut out the world.

*But I can’t. I am a prince. I have duties. Even when I fail, I have to face my failures.*

There seemed no disappointment or anger in her expression, only relief. That only made things worse. He felt he deserved her scorn. *Perhaps that shall come later when she hears about Rhaegal.*

“Your Grace,” he murmured.

“Nephew,” Daenerys said, holding out her hand for him to kiss. He did so, rising up. Dany smiled. “We are so happy to welcome you home.”

She sounded like she meant it.

“I am happy to be home,” he replied, nodding to his queen before turning his eyes to his wife.

His heart skipped a few beats as he looked at her. Her skin was rosier, her lips redder, and her figure fuller. She’d draped herself in black silk embroidered in red wolves and upon her neck and brow glittered her weirwood/winter rose wreath and wedding diadem. Under the high waist of her gown, her belly stuck out. Every inch of her seemed to scream whose wife she was.
My wife, wearing my colors, gems I’ve given her, and carrying my child. There was this odd security in that. It gave him a strange point of reference. Something to latch onto.

When she curtsied and held out her hand formally, as any lady wife would be expected to do to their princely husband. He did kiss it, but he also pulled her to him in a firm embrace. Her round stomach pressed against him and he loved the feeling of it. Jon buried his face in her neck, inhaling her scent.

There’s something alive between us, he thought giddily. Her belly had increased considerably, and he couldn’t resist getting close to her. The world around them dissolved for several minutes. Jon concentrated, eager to feel a kick of movement. To his pleasure, he could. Reluctantly, the prince pulled away.

He half expected his wife to reprimand him with a whisper and pull away, but she didn’t. “I missed you so much, Jon Snow.”

“Not half so much as I missed you,” he whispered back. “How are you?”

“We’re fine.”

As she pulled away, she looked him up and down nervously, her blue eyes darkening, her lips pressed into a thin line. Then she whistled.

Ghost came running out from one of the entryways. As he ran through a small collection of gold-clad girls, Daenerys looked at Sansa in surprise. Jon just grinned, eagerly ruffling his pet’s ears and managing to smile a bit wider. “Have you been taking good care of my family?”

“You would know,” Sansa told him, smiling. Their eyes met. He loved her so much in that moment. She took his arm, squeezing his hand in hers and said softly, “Now, Your Grace, you must show your manners and greet your subjects.”

He did this with a resigned weariness, though he noticed his wife seemed to rush through it. By the time he finished greeting the council, she seemed exhausted, and begged that they be excused. The court was more than accepting.

Indeed, when he saw the tired look in her eyes, it was like an odd switch went off in his head. All at once, he couldn’t think of anything else but getting her away from everyone, putting her feet up, and getting her a glass of water. His fears over facing his disgrace with Daenerys, explaining his failures to her, and admitting to what happened with Rhaegal immediately took a back seat.

The brief meeting Dany wanted, the one he’d anticipated on his journey home with no small amount of fear, suddenly just conjured unease and impatience.

“The altercation happened in the middle of the night, after a banquet. Lady Greyjoy, without alerting anyone, went down to the beach to interfere with Lord Victarion’s training arena,” he told her once they’d made their way to her solar. He’d immediately rushed to get Sansa a chair, ignoring the smirks from Missandei, Nani, and Barristan. Once he sat down himself, he failed to relax. As he repeated everything to the queen, he kept glancing at his wife. Should I have Nani bring her back to the bedchamber? Does she need to put her feet up? When did she last eat? “Someone alerted him to this, and he went to attack her. I got the news later. I called out for Rhaegal upon leaving the Bloody Keep and… Well, I had difficulty securing control over her without my equipment.”

There was an awkward pause. Dany pursed her lips. “… Understandable.”

“But I regained control of her quickly enough, just not--”
“---Not quickly enough to keep Lady Greyjoy from losing an arm. Well, no one expects you to work miracles.”

Jon glanced at his lap. “Your Grace, I---”

“Have you experienced any struggles with her since?”

“None.”

Daenerys nodded. “Well, there must have been some confusion. As you say, you didn’t have your equipment. It’s amazing you managed to regain control at all. I’ll have her inspected.”

You’re taking this too well. He looked at her in wonder. “I’m sorry.”

He felt a comforting hand on his back. He knew whose it was without looking.

“Don’t worry over it, Nephew. Go rest. You undoubtedly need it.” There was a sad look in her violet eyes, but a bit of agitation as well.

He pulled himself out his aunt’s chambers, disheartened, Sansa at his side, reassuring him. When they got back to their old solar in the Maegor chambers, she had him sit by the small dining table and called for a meal.

“No, you should lie down,” he goaded her.

“I’m not as tired as you think, Jon,” Sansa replied, circling him with a critical eye. “I exaggerated for your sake. You’re exhausted. And hungry. You’ve lost far too much weight. What were they feeding you at Pyke?”

“Fish. Hard bread and cheese.” None of it had been particularly appetizing, but nothing horrendous either. The worst was the watered down ale.

Roast duck, steamed peas, fresh spinach and baked apples were brought with cider and juice. The two made sure the other ate every bite off of their plates. She ordered a bath brought for him as well, and fresh clothes. Sansa herself changed into a simple blue linen shift and went to lie down at Jon’s insistence, watching him bathe himself quickly from the bed, her fingers lazily running through Ghost’s fur. Every so often, his wolf turned to nuzzle and lick her wrists.

He observed them with some amusement as he scrubbed himself clean. “You two seem quite affectionate.”

“We’ve always been affectionate,” she replied with a soft smile. “He’s been my constant companion since you left.”

“Should I be jealous?”

“Of him or me?”

Jon considered this question for several seconds. “Him?”

“You two are one being in two different forms. You cannot be jealous of yourself, Jon.”

Are we, though? His eyes widened. He gripped the edges of the tub tightly, pulling himself out and reaching for his bed robe. He cast an unsure eye upon his direwolf, whose red eyes set upon him quickly. But after a few moments, the creature bowed his large head and pulled away from Sansa’s grasp, padding out of the room. His wife looked dismayed, but didn’t say anything until the bath was
removed and they were alone.

She pulled herself up. “Come here, Jon.”

He did as she bid, taking a seat beside her and pulling her into his lap, enjoying the increased amount of weight upon his thighs. His fingers immediately splayed over the curve of her belly as he buried his nose in her hair. It took him several minutes before he realized he was crying.

His wife kissed his face and said nothing, allowing him to hold her as he wished, resting against him and letting him support her larger, altered form. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered after a while. “For what?” She had nothing to apologize for.

“For what happened to Asha. For the fact that you had to leave in the first place. For what happened with Rhaegal. I’m sorry you couldn’t find the boys. It couldn’t have been easy. But you did your best, Jon. None of it was your fault.”

“Nothing’s ever my fault.” He’d grown rather unsatisfied with the sentiment that it wasn’t his fault. It ceased being a comfort and now sounded like a declaration of uselessness. He felt as ineffectual as ever.

Now she was crying a little. “Jon, please… Don’t do this to yourself. You’re a man, not a god.” “I have no idea what I am,” he replied, staring at the ground.

“Well, I know two things you are,” she told him, running her fingers through his. “You’re a husband and a father. Just be those things for a while. For right now, alright?”

“What if I fail at that as much as I fail at everything else?” He asked her.

“Stop that. You are not a failure. No one thinks you’re a failure. You managed to quell violence in the Iron Islands and solidify Lady Asha’s power there. That is what you set out to do, and you did it. Nothing ever goes flawlessly. Just because it didn’t go according to plan, doesn’t mean you didn’t succeed.”

“She lost an arm and two children.”

“Don’t say that. Those boys are missing, not dead.” She started to grow angry now, pulling away slightly. “Don’t act like they’re dead. There… there are no bodies. They can still be found. You said they’re probably with their father. Their father wouldn’t hurt them.”

Jon cringed. “Of… of course. I’m sorry, Sweetling, I didn’t… I didn’t mean it like that.”

He clutched her face and pressed soft kisses to her face and lips, stroking her hair. Two lost little lordlings… She’s thought of Bran and Rickon as well. And Eddie. Jon couldn’t bear to speak of it, though. He gave her a sad smile. “Anyways, you’re right.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“I mean it,” he insisted. A flicker in her blue eyes told him she didn’t believe him, but she seemed a bit too weary to protest. Jon himself felt too tired to argue. A silent agreement sprung up between them to address the matter later. Jon followed his wife’s advice and concentrated on his domestic affairs. They both lay on their sides facing one another, Jon running his hand up and down her
stomach.

Jon discovered new levels of amazement every time he touched her now. During his brief visits inside Ghost’s head, he’d nuzzled and observed her carefully. But being able to fully interact with her in this state, when her condition was so developed, made things ever more real. Before, she mostly looked like she’d gained some weight. Now her stomach was so prominent and round that it made it all seem so much more real. *Our child is in there. My own sweet little babe.*

There was movement there, easy enough to detect under his fingers. Every time he felt a sudden burst of it, his breath caught.

The smile that came to his lips this time was genuine as he asked his wife a dozen questions about her health. Eventually, she drifted off to sleep. When she was out, he shifted his focus to Aemonaerys, scooting down a bit so his eyes were level with the bump.

“*Hello, Sweetling,*” he whispered, glancing up for a second to make sure he’d not woken his wife. “I’m sorry I’ve been gone, but I’m going to be here for a long time.”

He moved upwards after a while, resting his head on a pillow and stroking his wife until he too lost consciousness.

Waking proved sweet and slightly humorous, as he caught his wife sneaking to the chamber pot, obviously believing herself unseen, a look of severe relief dancing across her features. For the sake of her pride, Jon pretended to sleep on as his bride went to clean her hands at a new washbasin stand near her dressing table. She’d brought in a few new pieces of furniture in his absence, including a new wardrobe, dressing table, and collection of mirrors.

Sansa proved far more mobile in her more advanced stage than he’d expected. During the pregnancies with Bran and Rickon, Jon remembered Catelyn Tully being mostly bedridden during the last few months. But Sansa moved around the room as determinedly --- if less gracefully--- than she ever did. Jon watched her under his mostly-closed lids affectionately.

*She doesn’t run, jump, climb, and wrestle,* he observed, *but she’s always in action.*

But then, he supposed it wasn’t too surprising. Laziness never came easily to any Stark. Even during her frivolous, carefree childhood, Sansa kept busy, fastidiously practicing her needlework, her harp, her letters, her poetry, her manners, or her dancing. The family of Winterfell never cared to be idle even in recreation. Arya would explore. Bran would climb. Robb would hunt. Jon would practice with his blade. Lady Catelyn would go over accounts with Maester Luwin or play with Rickon. Lord Eddard would chat with his men.

She came over to his side of the bed and looked at him warmly, reaching down to caress his cheek. The sun had started to set, casting reddish rays from the windows that gave her a fiery glow.

“I know you’re not sleeping,” she informed him, a smile coming to her lips.

“Hmm?” He asked, pretending to stir. She giggled.

“You stopped snoring.”

“I snore?” No one had ever said anything before.

“Just a little.”

He reached out and grabbed her hands, pulling her down gently to sit astride his thighs. She slid so
her backside fell over his legs onto the bed on the other side, her legs draping over him, which she swung over him, instead snuggling against him as he sat up. He propped up the pillows behind them.

“There’s something you should know,” she told him, pursing her lips.

“What?”

“Did you notice some of the women at the reception in cloth of gold? With seaweed in their hair?”

“No. I wasn’t really paying attention. Seaweed in their hair? Like the Drowned God priests?” Jon wasn’t sure he wanted to see anyone or anything that reminded him of Pyke now that he was back.

“Yes.”

“Do we have a new religious movement?” Jon hoped not. He’d found the devotees of the Ironborn religion deeply disturbing. Their obvious mania, the way they spoke in these manic, accusatory voices and denied basic comforts. They were like the opposite extreme of some of the spoiled, extravagant septons. Their raving, odd chants, and superstition gave him troubling reminders of Melisandre.

_Drowned men with their Drowned God. Red Woman with her Red God. People shouldn’t try to speak for gods._ But he couldn’t imagine why some highborn, gentrified maids would want to emulate an order of people who famously didn’t bathe or indulge in many material comforts.

“No. They’re wearing it because they thought it would appeal to you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“A rumor was started that you like girls in gold, yellow, and orange who wear seaweed in their hair because it reminds you of ironborn customs and your mistress, Asha Greyjoy.”

Jon’s breath caught. _Oh Gods_. He’d forgotten all about that in the ensuing chaos. “Sansa, nothing happened.”

“I believe you. But not everyone will. There are many who don’t want to. There are many ambitious courtiers hoping to find a place for themselves or their daughters or nieces in your bed, as your mistress.”

He swallowed. _Do these people have no shame?_ “They’re mad.”

“They’re not. It’s actually quite a common practice. A long period of queens, upheaval, boy-kings, and Lannister-controlled courts made the practice die out somewhat in King’s Landing. But royal mistresses have been around forever.”

“I know Aegon the Unworthy had many, but—–“

“—-Not just him. He was the most flagrant, and he gave his women the most outward power. But kings have been doing it for centuries. And not just kings. A lot of young women are often put forward to entertain and influence powerful men. The more powerful the man, the more women he’s expected to have. You’re the most powerful man in the kingdom. People expect it of you.”

This infuriated him. It was like they’d gone through that interminable wedding for nothing. Daenerys, Sansa, and he had invited these people to their court, in many cases forgiving past slights or even betrayals. They’d sheltered, dined, and entertained them. They poured every minute of their day into serving them. And the nobles’ response was to try and plot at bringing their family to
dishonor?

“I have a wife,” he sneered, disgusted. *Doesn’t that mean anything to these people?*

“So do most lords and kings. Do you think our father’s fidelity to my mother was commonplace? Why do you think no one ever confronted Father over having a bastard? He was the Lord of Winterfell, people expected him to have multiple illegitimate children. It’s expected of a man of status.”

She said this with weary resignation. Jon couldn’t believe it. He knew that there were some men who kept mistresses but he’d always been told that was the practice of men like Aegon the Unworthy, dishonorable monsters. It was never treated as commonplace when he grew up. “This… this hasn’t happened before. Not like this.”

Not that no one ever tried to seduce him, of course. There were plenty of women who had set their cap at him to various degrees. During the progress he and Daenerys took from the Wall to the capital, more than once young maids were pushed before him.

At Acorn Hill, Jon had made the mistake of complimenting sixteen-year-old Carellen Smallwood on her singing following a performance of *The Dance of the Dragons* she’d done with her cousin. He’d just wished to be polite, especially given the sweetness of the lady’s voice. Lady Carellen had been a shy, lovely creature with golden curls and large blue eyes, and she seemed modest and amiable. But when he returned to his bedchamber that evening, he’d found the Smallwoods’ sweet little daughter draped over his bed in nothing but her shift.

Jon, still reeling from the war, the weight of his new position and identity, and a great deal of confusion, almost gave in. He’d gone as far as taking a few kisses from the fair Carellen, but when she reached to unlace his doublet he regained his senses and firmly asked her to leave.

The court he’d arrived to, though, hadn’t been filled with young noblewomen. There’d barely been a court when he and Dany first arrived. A few flirtatious serving girls and here and there a couple of courtiers’ daughters, wives and sisters had batted their eyelashes at him, but he’d mostly been able to ignore it.

The court grew slowly over the last couple of years, but he’d never had an entire collection of noble young maids conspiring to warm his bed like this all in one place. Mostly, it had been filled with male heads of and representatives of various Houses, with a smattering of wives and a few daughters. But until recently, most nobles hadn’t really felt comfortable bringing most of their family to the capital, for obvious reasons. Only the more ambitious or female-dominated Houses like the Tyrells and Martells had brought in scores of ladies. Obviously, that had changed.

He’d heard the place had grown quite a bit since the wedding, with the social life in King’s Landing being promoted and many families choosing to stay and serve in the aftermath of the wedding. Sansa, as princess and the mistress of the court, was expected to take ladies-in-waiting. But he’d not really considered the implications of it before now.

“The court wasn’t really set up like this before. Most noble families were still at their Keeps, recovering from the war. Our wedding drew more courtiers here. There’s an even greater opportunity now that I’m pregnant,” she told him with a sigh.

“I don’t understand. How is our marriage and upcoming child actually encouraging would-be seducers to come and disrupt our family life?”

“Well it means that with a new heir, there’s less chance of House Targaryen being swept away. They
feel more secure trying to influence you. It’s created a more traditional court structure they can
operate in. And now I’m heavy with your child, giving their young, nubile girls an opportunity to
draw you away while I’m too fat, irritable, and unattractive to excite your lust. Then there are the
Asha rumors, which have led them to believe your devotion to me isn’t as ardent as you’ve claimed.”

By now he was making fists so tight that his nails were cutting into the skin of his palms. “What do I
have to do to… I swore to the Old Gods and New that I’d love and honor you for the rest of my life.
Doesn’t that mean anything to these people?”

“To them it means that our children will be legitimate. It has nothing to do with love or honor. Or
gods. It has everything to do with opportunity. That’s how it works here.”

He knew this on some level. But this, this was a new low. Pimps, whores, murderers, thieves, and
traitors. The lot of them. He smiled bitterly. And I’m prince of them all. Just as I was Lord
Commander of all the rapers, thieves, murderers, bastards, runaways and old men at the Wall.

His wife looked so sad. She glanced down at herself despondently. Too fat, too irritable, too
unattractive to excite your lust. He stroked her hair, his heart aching. “I’m so sorry, my lady. But
they are fools to think I would ever tire of you.”

I tire of them. I’m already tired of them, and I only just returned. But he did not tire of his wife.
“You are not fat, or irritable, or unsightly in the least.”

She laughed. “Just you wait. I am in a good mood right now because you’ve returned to me. And I
put great effort into making myself as lovely as possible for your arrival.”

“You succeeded. I took notice of two women when I arrived. My queen and my princess. Well,
possibly three, if what’s inside you is in fact our Naerys and not an Aemon.”

“Well, then you’ve noticed that my pretty little waist is gone.”

“Of course it is. I put a babe inside you.”

“My figure is gone.”

“Your figure is changed. I’d find it rather troubling if it wasn’t.”

“But it’s not becoming. I’m stout now.”

He gaped at her. Displays of vanity like this he might have expected by her at age ten. But this, now,
shocked him. She’d wanted to have his children. They both wanted this very thing to happen. “It’s
quite becoming, actually. It’s lovely. It makes me happy to see you this way.”

“But my waist---“

“I don’t care about your waist. As long as it’s, you know, intact. Please, Sweetling, stop this.” He
pulled her to him and kissed her neck. “I don’t want little ladies with little waists. I want you. I’ve
been yearning for you for weeks. No one else. You.”

“You say that now.”

Jon wondered what to do or say at this point. He sighed. “Sansa…”

“I’m sorry, I just…” She shook her head sadly. “I know it’s all hearsay. I know it’s not true. But I’m
just hearing it more and more. And I’m seeing it. Young women sewing green dragons and white
wolves, ordering clothes they think will catch your fancy, whispering and giggling behind their hands. I can’t even look at most young women here without worrying they’re going to try something. I don’t want to have to look at my ladies and fear them. And it kills me. People are laughing at me. They say you don’t really care for me.”

“It’s not true.”

“I know, but that’s not the point! Do you know what they’re saying? They’re saying you never really loved me, that Daenerys forced you to marry me because she likes me and wanted to secure the North. You used to bed spearwives and then took me to wife and pretended to love me to make your aunt and I happy. But then the second you finished doing your duty and put an heir in me, you flew off to Pyke and bedded that swashbuckling warrior woman and that you only returned because the violence forced you out. They think I make you miserable and that you tried to escape. Why else go to Pyke unless you were desperate to escape something? They believe you left me and then bedded a woman who fits your usual preferences. That I’m a frivolous, whorish schemer, not the wild adventurer you’d like. And now that I don’t even have my beauty to recommend me, that they’re doing their duty in presenting you with plenty of pretty young ladies to distract you.”

Jon looked at his lap. “I never meant for… I didn’t think this could happen. I remained faithful to you, I swear it.”

“I believe you, Jon,” she said, tears in her eyes, “But it doesn’t matter. They smell an opportunity. It’s known that the Targaryens have taken more than one wife before, too. If I give you a daughter--”

“Daughters can inherit. That’s law now.”

“Something they attribute to Daenerys. But female heirs have been supplanted before. If one of these women managed to give you a son before I could, well, the believe even your aunt might be tempted to allow you to take another bride in order to keep the throne more secure. So everywhere I look now, I see these young women seeking to replace me. They thought you might be truly devoted to me before, but with the Asha rumors, they doubt it. And they think my place and influence will wane. It is waning because people aren’t taking me as seriously now.”

“I’m so sorry. If I’d known this could happen…” He shook his head. “I just… Asha and I were meeting in secret to discuss getting her boys off the Iron Islands and counter-measures in case of revolt. It was easier for us to get away with it if people believed we were together. I didn’t want to let that rumor out. I swear, I denied it to everyone, including my men. But things were so----”

“---Tense? Confusing? Dangerous? I know. I’m trying to be understanding, Jon. But I have to spend my days with these girls. Daenerys rules, she’s not tasked with this. She’s not even queen in the normal sense, she’s king. I’m queen, and thus it falls to me to entertain and foster the women of this city. It’s what a royal consort does in the midst of producing heirs. So I’m surrounded by these girls who are being pushed to seduce you every day. That’s why most of them are even here. And I must smile and entertain them.”

“Must you?” He asked this with a bit of levity. You got to throw Jeyne Algood and Leona Tyrell out quite quickly.

Sansa didn’t seem to find this funny, for her eyes narrowed. “Yes, Jon. I have my duties. One of which is entertaining and taking care of the noble families who have come to serve the crown. You and Daenerys need the support of the nobility. Part of maintaining that is keeping the court intact and playing host and hostess.”
Jon thought back to his time at the Wall. *Did I ever have to smile at Alliser Thorne or Selyse Baratheon?* He couldn’t recall that ever being required. *I had to feed and obey them, but I didn’t have to pretend to like them.* Jon swallowed, his heart sinking. “Sweetling, I’m so sorry. What can I do?”

If I can even do anything. Had he failed her too? He’d do anything, anything to make her happy, but he was starting to wonder if such a thing was possible. It seemed his life was a succession of failures at keeping people happy.

“Politely avoid younger women you don’t have to do business with. Always be courteous, but give them no acknowledgement. Try to avoid being alone in places where someone might suspect you of taking an illicit meeting. Keep Ghost with you.”

He nodded. Then his breath caught. “Should… should we worry about Margaery?”

She seemed pleased by this question. “Margaery’s set her cap upon my Uncle Edmure. If word were to get out of her conducting herself shamefully, her ambitions of becoming Lady of the Riverlands would likely turn to dust. Right now her pursuit of my uncle is based on her connections to me. If she were to betray me at this stage, Edmure would refuse to speak to her again and she’d be sullied permanently in general. No, Margaery will not be a threat here.”

“Wait, Edmure?” Jon was pleased to hear he wouldn’t have to worry about the Tyrell woman trying to seduce him, but the news of Edmure pleased him less. She can do so much better! Margaery Tyrell pursuing Edmure Tully was like, well, a rose pursuing a rotten fish. *Why in the Seven Hells would Margaery Tyrell want to go after Edmure?*

“Not him, really. His title, his lands, his power, and his fortunes.”

*Because it’s Margaery Tyrell, you fool,* he chided himself, *when has it ever been about anything else with her? It’s marriage. It’s not about the man. It’s always about the power.*

He breathed a sigh of relief. “Well then, is there… is there anything else I could do?”

She softened somewhat and kissed him. “Well… I don’t know. Don’t worry too much, Jon. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t trouble you. You’re already upset.”

“No, I want to know. I want to help.” He needed to help. He needed to feel he could truly fix *something.* “Tell me what I can do.”

She observed him sympathetically. “Jon…”

“Sansa, please.”

She glanced down then. “Well, if you really want to help…”

“I do.”

“Well, I suppose you could try fucking me with enough volume and enthusiasm to maybe reach the ears of the courtiers.”

There was a very interesting pause. Jon couldn’t help but smile at the coy look his wife gave him. Her cheeks were a bit pink, her eyes heavy lidded. A considerable flush spread from her cheeks down the rest of her. It was at this point that Jon came to appreciate how low the neckline on her pretty blue kirtle was and how much bigger her breasts seemed to be.
“I could do that.”

A small smile played upon her red lips as she brought her hands up to tease the front laces of her kirtle. “Are you sure? Jon, you have to be loud. And you’re not a loud man.”

He bent his head and grabbed one of the satin laces of her bodice in his teeth, yanking it so the ties came open. “I can be loud for you.”

“Are you sure?” She asked before pulling her bodice open altogether.

Jon showed her how sure he was once he saw her teats spill out of her bodice. “GODS!”

They looked spectacular. Her nipples were a bit darker in color, and there were a couple of silvery marks on the underside, but they swollen and bounced magnificently. Sansa was a naturally well-endowed woman. She’d started developing young. When Jon saw her again, she had already birthed Eddie. But now, they seemed not only bigger, but plumper and prettier. Her nipples were hardened and pointed outwards becomingly. Her teats sat above her enlarged belly, giving an altogether exquisite picture.

He couldn’t resist burying his face between them. They smelled a bit different. There was that soft, personal scent her flesh had beneath the rosewater and perfume. Something in her skin was a bit different. Nothing bad. In fact, it was lovely.

“Do they still hurt?” He asked, his voice a bit muffled.

“Mmmm…. No… In… in fact…” Her breath caught and she yelped as he flicked his tongue along her right nipple. “OH! That’s nice!”

He grinned, lavishing attention on her breasts, summoning little yelps from her with every little suck. But when he reached to pull the rest of her dress off, she stopped him. “I don’t… I don’t want you to see…”

But I want to see. He wanted to see it so, so badly. He’d put his babe in her. He wanted to be as close to that as possible. “Please, Sweetling.”

She sighed and shut her eyes, nodding. Jon let her do so, though he felt awful about her obvious hesitance. He slipped her gown up over her head and gasped.

“Beautiful,” he gasped, absolutely thrilled with what he saw. His whole world seemed to shake upon seeing her this way. Round and heavy with their unborn offspring, she seemed to glow. Mine, all mine, he thought with absolute wonder. My wife. My babe. She’s filled with me, every moment. We’ve made something together.

It used to be the only things he ever collaborated on with others was when he fought with his brothers. That always ended with blood and destruction. Always involved discomfort and ugliness and cold. But this… He was creating something, he’d helped create a life instead of end it, and it was warm and beautiful and just so incredible. There were only a few things in his life that had ever inspired this level of awe in him. There were Daenerys’s dragons and the Wall. The dragons just terrified him when he first saw them, and he’d not trusted them. The Wall was beautiful, cold, foreboding, and lonely. In all those cases, they involved things of unfathomable size.

But Sansa, while a tall woman, wasn’t exactly large, and their child was so very, very small. And yet looking at her like this, with that little creature they’d made inside her, he was as floored as he’d ever been. But this was something he’d helped make. Something that involved him on a level more intimate than anything. Both the dragons and the Wall had inspired a certain sense of inadequacy and
mortality in him. But this… this was his life continuing in a way he never imagined possible, something he had helped create, something he had done right.

The Wall was beautiful and strong but cold and lonely. The dragons were beautiful and powerful but terrifying and deadly. His wife was beautiful, welcoming, lush, and nurturing. Warm and soft and powerful and glowing. And he was truly, truly part of that. He’d been a Watcher on the Wall, he’d been a dragon rider. But never had he felt as suited or joyous in those roles as he did as being Sansa’s husband and the father of their child. It was the sense of belonging that had so motivated him to travel north all those years ago and take his first vows.

Sansa’s eyes opened then. She went nearly as red as her hair and reached for him, tearing up. Jon seized her mouth with his, running his fingers through her hair as he did. Sansa whimpered, her reactions less controlled than usual, her tongue battling his. When they broke away for air, Jon moved his mouth down, running his lips around her jaw, her neck, her collarbone. Her breaths came in high pitched sighs when he got back to her breasts. Jon smirked. With every little high-pitched gasp, he felt more like a man.

He moved his mouth to her belly, not just kissing but nuzzling it as well. His wife giggled. “You’re tickling me.”

“I should be doing more than that,” he told her, slipping his fingers down between her legs. He found linen blocking his way, linen he’d yet to notice thanks to the curve of her belly blocking the way. Jon growled, not pleased with the obstacle. But the wetness of it was at least pleasing to him. He tore her smallclothes away with a rough touch, ruining the fabric and flinging them to the side.

She started reacting more at his first choices than she would normally, much to his delight. “OH!” was her cry at the first stroke to her bud. She gripped the bedclothes tightly, looking away and biting her lip as he continued to work.

Never had it been so easy to make her come undone. After a few minutes of him circling her nub with his thumb and fucking her with his middle fingers, she had her feet upon his back, kicking off his robe. Sweat slicked, her hair spread out along the pillow, flushed and panting, she looked otherworldly.

He was ready to taste her. Gods, how long has it been since she’s been on my tongue? Too long.

Jon grabbed her a bit roughly, getting off the bed and pulling her so her hips were at the edge. He began to kneel when she stopped him.

“Wait, Jon, please. Could you… A cushion, for my back. I need one,” she gasped.

He smiled and got the pillow, fluffing it before stuffing it under her as she propped herself up on her elbows, a shy smile on her face. Jon kept grinning at her slyly as he sunk to his knees once more, positioning her feet on his shoulders.

“Ah, hello, Old Friend,” he said upon seeing her cunny. Sansa threw her head back and gave a musical laugh. Jon paused to enjoy the sound before diving in to lick and suck at her until her laughter turned to wanton moans. He felt her fluids coat his lips, tongue and chin. He’d missed this so much. Her toes curled against his skin, her fingers reached for his head, not quite making it.

“JON! GODS!” She shrieked.

Eventually, she was actually pushing him away with her feet. “Fill me, Snow,” she hissed, her eyes heated.
Jon got to his feet and sheathed himself in her with a moan. She was so tight, but so wet. Always wet enough for him to move within her with ease. Jon tried to keep enough of his sense to make sure he didn’t go too hard or put too much weight on her, but it was hard to maintain his self-control. He burned for her so badly, for weeks with nothing but some letters, a picture, and his hand to console him.

He moaned and grunted as he moved. It took a little while for him to find a speed he liked, having to adjust for his wife’s new shape and weight. For a little while until he regained some of his senses, he could only make some guttural, unintelligible noises. But once he found a rhythm, their eyes met.

“Love you…” He sputtered as she wrapped her legs about his hips. “Gods above… Love you so much.”

Her red hair was splayed all around her against the black of the pillow behind her head, the candlelight bringing out highlights of copper and gold. A red, pouty lower lip was clutched between pearl-like teeth. He could scarcely breathe, looking at her.

She reached towards him. Jon moved his hands from her hips to lace his fingers with hers. She squeezed his hands tight. “Oh, yes, Jon… Oh…. Sweet… Love you… Missed you… Keep going… So… So very close… Not too deep, just…”

Her eyes fluttered closed, her lids and lashes like butterfly’s wings. Then they flew open as she gasped, a shock of blue as her inner walls tightened around his cock.

“Gods, you’re so colorful!” And with that, he exploded within her.

He almost fell atop her with that, but a gentle push from his wife reminded him to fall to her side. Jon almost whined as he slipped from her.

“Jonnnn…” She whined. “I can’t stay like this.”

The prince pulled the both of them into a more traditional bed position, pulling back the coverlets and burying them under. Sansa rolled over on her side to face him, giggling.

“What was that you said? I’m so colorful?”

He went a bit red. *What kind of thing is that to say, really?* It sounded so stupid, when he thought about it. “I just… I mean…”

She looked up at him, her eyes dancing with humor despite the weary edge to them. Sansa looked so sweet and girlish then, eyes round and bright, her red hair mussed, cheeks rosy. “Jon… that’s so…”

He was starting to grow indignant. “Well it’s true! I’m sorry if that’s not a very romantic or arousing thing to say, but it’s what came to mind. I’m not skilled with words, but I know what I saw. Your eyes are very, very blue, your lips are very red, your skin was flushed pink, your nipples are even pinker…” he pinched one slightly, and she yelped. He grinned. “And your hair has all these bright bits, shining yellow and copper and red.” Jon reached out, taking a bit in his hand, holding it up then watching it fall. As expected, light caught each strand as it cascaded down along the line of her head, neck, and shoulder. He was distracted for a minute by the glitter of it. Once it settled, caressing her body, he found his voice once more. “There’s just lots of color to you.”

Jon pulled more of her hair up and watched it fall again. Then he reddened at his own silliness. *I’m playing with her like she’s a doll. I sound like a child.* He didn’t want to sound like a child. He wanted to sound like a man. It was strange, fumbling a bit, because just moments ago he’d felt like more of a man than he ever had. “I’m sorry. I sound like a fool. I’m sure poets and singers who could
put it better. I wish I could tell you this properly.” He thought back to his letters to her. How he’d failed to write her the sort of love letter she deserved. Jon groaned, turned to face the canopy of the bed, and covered his eyes.

Jon had read some of his father’s letters while at Dragonstone. A few times, Rhaegar had written to Arthur Dayne about women, including Elia Martell, Ashara Dayne, several court girls, and even Lyanna. Rhaegar wrote of some of these women in very poetic terms. Sometimes he quoted songs and poems already crafted, but likewise included his own compositions. Several of them were as good as any love song Jon had ever heard.

‘This maid of Winterfell is not just a winter rose, but a garden in spring. New things to adore about her bud and bloom with every passing day. She’s an array of soft, fragrant, dazzling color, every flower as rare and lovely as the blue roses she loves. My whole life I’ve been a slave to music. But there is no melody like her laughter and I find myself a slave to her now instead. I’ve been lost all my life and perhaps I always will be, but if I can be lost in Lyanna Stark, I shall never want or need to be found.’

Jon didn’t understand why he couldn’t come up with things like that. It was like when he used to try and joke with people at the Wall. He remembered saying something when one of the rangers wondered if Craster’s Hill was made of his shit, and it fell flat. When Val joked about Selyse having a mustache, he ruined it.

Now he couldn’t even tell his wife how lovely she was without sounding like an illiterate halfwit. The son of the Silver Prince. Rhaegar read a great deal. So does Sam. Oh Gods, what if Sam is more eloquent and romantic than I am? For all he knew, that was how his friend got Gilly despite his size and cowardice and usual awkwardness. Sweet, lovely words. Jon could accept Sam being smarter than he was. But more seductive? No. That can’t be. No.

He felt a slim leg curl over his shin. Sansa pressed herself up against his side. Jon looked at her, she looked at him, eyes wide.

“You’re saying it properly,” she told him, her voice soft.

“I’m not. Not for you. I couldn’t write to you properly, either. This is why I keep my mouth shut most of the time. I bet you’ve heard it all. I bet you’ve had all sorts of pretty poems and songs recited to you. I bet you’ve had many written for you. I couldn’t even write you a proper love letter in the midst of yearning for you madly. I just wrote about my problems.”

“You mean that one you wrote when you got to Pyke? Where you spoke of making the boys into bastards?”

“Yes.”

“That made me cry and yearn for you. It was beautiful.”

“It wasn’t. They’re not like—“

“Songs and poems are trivial things written to seduce and flatter. And they’re always written from the same perspective, from the same man expressing the same things to the same woman. Different names and hair and eye color, but always the same thing. ‘You’re beautiful with pretty hair and pretty eyes and I want to fuck you.’ What you wrote to me was written from your heart. I’ve had men write poems and songs to my eyes, my hair, my lips, my breasts… Never to me.”

His mouth went dry. “Wait… Someone wrote a song about your breasts? Who?”
“That’s not the point.”

“No, I’ll---“

“---He’s dead already. Please, Jon. Just listen to me. I love that you called me colorful. No one else would say that. Just you. It’s something only you would say only to me. It’s ours and ours alone. I don’t laugh because I’m mocking you, I laugh because it makes me giddy. Even though I tease you a bit…” She stroked his arm. “I love you for it. I love the things you say. I’m surrounded every day now by singers and poets. If I could be rid of them all, I’d be thrilled. Rid of the poets, the singers, the mummers, the court, the pretty wenches… Just us. I could listen to you speak all day.”

He turned and kissed her forehead. “You’re sweet. I’d like to get away as well.”

*In fact, I think I’ll have to steal you away.*
Be Nice to Willas

Chapter Summary

Dany takes a trip to the library. Sansa prepares for lunch.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Blue for her beta-work!

Chapter Fifty-one: Be Nice to Willas

Daenerys:

Daenerys didn’t despise reading. In fact, she used to take every opportunity to get her hands on books when she could. She’d learned early, being taught her letters by the kindly old maester employed by the bedridden Ser Willem Darry when she was three. He’d taught her the Common Tongue, Valyrian, and Braavosi. He’d sit her on his lap and lay a great book in front of them. Sometimes they’d sit under the shade of the lemon tree.

But then she was flung into the streets, deprived of her books, then given to the Dothraki, then made a queen. She’d taken great pleasure during her brief period in Maester Illyrio’s manse, pursuing the library there. But after she left… There just wasn’t any time. If she wasn’t traveling day in and day out, she had to feed people, negotiate with lords, handle her dragons, listen to petitions, deal with affairs of state. She’d become a person who was read to, not someone who read themselves.

It was partly why she’d taken to Missandei. The scribe read to her in her high, sweet voice and she could read everything so beautifully. At the end of the day, Dany’s eyes got tired. Her everything got tired. But she missed being a reader. She missed the days of being able to sit under the lemon tree and get swept up in histories, myths, and language.

She was a dreamer. She was always a dreamer. She’d learned to harness that. Unfortunately, she sometimes worried that she’d forgotten how to enjoy it as well.

It was this thought that pulled her from her bed and the warm enclave of Podrick’s arms. He’d become a mainstay in her chambers now. It wasn’t just that he was good at fucking, it was that aside from a few fun nights where they played at switching roles, he didn’t try to tell her what to do. He didn’t pretend that he knew better. He didn’t try to influence her decisions as a ruler. He didn’t ask for anything. He didn’t try to promote himself to some sort of job. He remained in his palace guard position during the day.

Daario Naharis and Hizdahr zo Loraq taught her long ago not to mix business with pleasure. The problem was, very few men were willing to accept this. Some women were, but not the men.

Podrick was the exception. He stroked her skin, hair, and private parts. He wrapped her in his arms. He kissed her. He fucked her. He said little…. An advantage over most of the women she’d bedded
as well. Too many lovers talked too much. She had to listen to voices calling out to her all day.

Also, he always looked so, so very happy to see her when she walked into the bedchamber. He grinned. He didn’t smirk. He grinned.

She commented on this a few weeks ago. “You’ve always got this great big smile on your face when I walk in.”

“Well, I mean… I get to make love to the Mother of Dragons. I like making love to you. Thank you for letting me.”

He was so adorable it actually hurt sometimes.

Sometimes they just cuddled. They always ended up cuddling at some point, but sometimes it was just that and he never minded.

She asked him about his life sometimes, and he gave her answers, some which troubled her greatly. He was a minor cousin to House Payne, he was never wanted as a squire, his father died in the Greyjoy Rebellion, he saved Lord Tyrion’s life, then followed Brienne of Tarth when she set off to find Sansa Stark so he might find his master. When she asked him about Tyrion, his eyes grew dark and he looked away. She didn’t ask again.

But she liked Podrick. And it did hurt her to remove herself from his arms. But now that he slept (she didn’t have the heart to wake him), she didn’t have much to distract her from her troubled thoughts.

She’d gone to the dragon pit after speaking with Jon. His eyes had glimmered with fear when he spoke of Rhaegal rebelling against him. It shook her as well. Rhaegal loves Jon. A missing saddle? That’s all it takes? Her daughter had always been difficult, but to completely rebel against Jon… She’d taken her for a flight and got no answers other than to find that Rhaegal flew slower and lower than usual.

The library. The library might have answers. She’d gathered a giant pile of books on dragons and then only got to read a few before warfare, reconstruction, trials, economics, and peacekeeping swallowed up her time. Other people read the rest. It was how they knew how to set up the handlers, how to feed and water her creatures properly, how to figure out Rhaegal was female. Dany was given notes. She cried when she read the notes, because she didn’t have time to read the books.

It made her feel like a terrible mother.

So she slipped on a shift, dressing gown, and slippers of matching red brocade-- a gift from her goodniece for Dany’s last Name Day -- and slipped out of her chambers, candle in hand. To her annoyance, night guards fell in behind her, following her every step outside her solar. And I’d tread so carefully so as not to wake the maids. Daenerys often craved solitude. Enough so that on some nights, she even sent Podrick from her bed. She could feel alone when surrounded by people. She often did. But the absence of others was less noisy.

Like a mother leading a trail of ducks. That’s what Jon frequently said about having guards. The truth of it made her laugh. It wasn’t like being among her bloodriders. So many of these men were strangers.

Jhogo left for Essos weeks ago. She’d begged him to stay longer, missing them all. But he had a duty. Relations between the Dosh Khaleen and Daenerys and her court were still tense. They only barely accepted the existence of her khalasaar and her rights over it. But they had rights to judge mothers of future Khals. The natural Dothraki fear of the sea made them agree to postpone judging
Sansa until her visit to Essos, but they insisted a bloodrider go to the wedding and come back at once to describe the new Khalakki in detail. Jhogo was that blood rider.

She didn’t tell Jon what he was there to do. Jhogo, luckily, was discreet. More discreet than Rhakharro or Aggo would have been, anyways. She doubted her nephew would appreciate his wife being looked over by another man. He was already uncomfortable about presenting her in Vaes Dothrak when they went East. Sansa knew. Dany had blushed when she explained that the Dosh Khaleen would want a description of her hair, her eyes, her skin, the size of her breasts and hips, and knowledge of how she rode. If she did not please them, Sansa and Jon’s children would be declared unfit to ever lead a khalasar. The Dothraki version of bastards.

Sansa smiled, cut off a snippet of her hair, brought her dressmaker forward to recite her measurements, and even had an artist sketch her. Then she invited Jhogo to a day in the Kingswood with her, Arya, and Margaery so he could watch her ride a few days before the wedding. Jon just thought she was entertaining another diplomat.

Her nephew could be ridiculously protective of his bride. Especially when it came to other men. The only reason he was willing to set foot in Vaes Dothrak in the future was because the Dosh Khaleen were women and the no-weapons rule in the city.

She’d yet to tell him about the heart test. She hoped Sansa would not be with child again when they reached Vaes Dothrak. Though it is more than possible. The two of them made love as frequently as Dany and Drogo ever did. Sansa proved herself quite fertile. And Jon said he wanted five or six children. When he said this, Sansa’s mouth made a thin line.

“He’ll lower his aspirations once he discovers how much work just producing one will give me,” was all she said as she tuned her harp one sunny afternoon in Dany’s solar.

Dany would welcome them having six children. While the thought of her nephew so carefully modeling himself after the Starks bothered her, six new Targaryen heirs were not to be scoffed at. But she’d happily accept three if it meant keeping her friend healthy. And mobile. Dany had uses for Sansa beyond breeding, ones which needed attending to carefully by someone she trusted.

Still… six children. She’d never have to worry about the succession again. If Sansa could do it, it would be excellent. Her friend was still young. They could have two in quick succession, then wait several years, have two more, then wait more years and have another two. We’d have heirs for the Iron Throne and the North. The younger ones could act as regents in the east. One for the khalasar, a couple in Slaver’s Bay. Maybe one on the Kingsguard.

She knew Barristan worried about loyal knights following him on the guard. He had Brienne and Dead Dirt, but suspected the others and didn’t think either of his more trusted knights could follow him as Lord Commander. He had given her multiple warnings to make sure that after he was gone, she looked for loyal replacements. “You’ve already given Tyrell a place, and he’ll do his duty, but that’s the only political appointment this guard needs.”

If they had enough Targaryens, then they could assign the spares, have them sworn to protect their brothers and sisters, put one at the Citadel, make another a Septon...

In the end, it was their decision. As long as some babes were produced, she didn’t really have a right to interfere.

Daenerys just hoped she wouldn’t lose them altogether.

So, so stupid. She was so angry with herself for sending Jon to the Iron Islands. She’d grown too
complacent, too comfortable. She’d thought Rhaegal and the guards would keep him safe. And they had, but the fact that Rhaegal rebelled in all of that threw her actions into question. She’d become overconfident. She’d thought that Jon becoming a rider meant everything was safe.

Her children now obeyed her perfectly, stayed under her control. She’d paid a high price for that. Jon had not had the same magic placed on him. As a Targaryen and the blood of Old Valyria did give him some control and allowed him to form a bond, but that did not guarantee foolproof obedience. Dragons were dragons.

Before the spells, they challenged Daenerys, and she had full Targaryen blood. It was only after those spells she’d undergone before her battle with the Night’s King that she could be sure her dragons would never rebel against her.

Jon didn’t have those spells. He’d be able to control them better in time without them, but he was still a fresh rider. Daenerys had sent him off with Rhaegal alone when he’d only been riding for a few moons. It was just that he’d taken to flying so well, and he and Rhaegal seemed to connect so beautifully. But she’d forgotten that dragons could still fight even their mother. It took years to tame them, especially when they were not raised alongside ones that had already been tamed or raised in a carefully controlled environment.

Daenerys’s children were born to her without her knowing exactly how to care for them. Old Targaryens had raised their dragons in the pits, with experienced minders and trainers and pre-existing creatures that already knew how to obey a master. Those dragons were raised with examples and an environment arranged for them. Drogon, Rhaegal, and Viserion didn’t have that. They were a generation raised from scratch.

While future generations would be easier, the current one had to be handled carefully to make sure a future could even exist. The magic Daenerys had undergone was necessary to make up for the inexperienced and inhospitable way her children were raised. Such would not be necessary for dragons and riders raised in the right way, but for now, things were still delicate. Daenerys had forgotten. I was a fool to forget.

She’d almost lost Jon. If Rhaegal had killed him or flown off… Daenerys shuddered. We were lucky this time. I will not rely on luck again.

But that threw a wrench into the Essos progress. Dany originally planned to have Jon and Sansa go with Rhaegal. But if the dragon couldn’t be controlled…

It was just so hard sometimes. So confusing. There was just so much she had to worry about. Daenerys often worried she’d go mad.

But you chose to be a queen. The day you stepped into the flames with your eggs, you made that choice. And she loved being queen, truly she did. But it exhausted her. Daenerys found the large, black doors to the library and pushed one open. Two guards followed her in and she gave them instructions to remain by the door.

Shelves twice her height of painted dark wood surrounded her, arranged in ominous columns. Certain pockets of the library between shelves had tables and chairs, but none were visible to her now.

During the day, the room was bright, as stained glass windows lined the circular walls and the dome of the room. There were two levels to the library, the second one opened at the center and made up the very top of the tower. During the day, sunlight burned in from the top. But at night, when the sky was black, candles and the silvery glow of the moon was all there was. The moon was a small
crescent this night, and the few candles that were lit had their glares blocked by the columns of shelves.

Daenerys felt like a ball of light moving through a polished forest as she crept down the alleys between books.

_Billions of secrets are kept here. It is a good place to be lost, a good place to hide._ With the way things were arranged, it would be easy for people to pass through the room unnoticed by the others there. _It is a forest. A dark, mysterious forest._ It almost reminded her of the Dothraki Sea, getting lost in the tall grass. But it was strangely cozy.

But also confusing. Dany hadn’t gotten to spend much time here and it took her a second to realize that she had no idea where to go for the books on dragons. She climbed a few ladders, but even with her candle, the titles were hard to make out. Dany wished she’d brought Merys with her to help, but she didn’t want to disturb him. The Grand Maester was a fitful sleeper, and she’d feel awful if she disturbed him. _And besides, a queen should learn her own library._

Dany grabbed one title about Old Valyria that looked promising. The tomb was large and heavy. Daenerys struggled a bit as she descended from the ladder, setting her candle and the book on a shelf below her over and over. At one point, her robe caught on something, so she took it off and dropped it to the ground below her before continuing. When she got to the bottom, she pulled her robe back on and went to find a table.

She rounded a corner and found, to her shock, Willas Tyrell sitting at a large oak table, a large open tome and lit candelabra before him. He still wore his day clothes, a green wool doublet covering him. When she happened upon him, he stirred and almost fell over. “Your Grace!”

The heir to Highgarden moved to grab his crutch. Daenerys held up a hand. “No, don’t move, it’s fine.”

“Thank you, My Queen.” Willas choked out the word. He looked her up and down, obviously startled, his mouth hanging open and his brown eyes wide. After a couple of seconds, Dany noticed her robe was open and hurried to close it. Willas looked away, blushing. Daenerys shrugged.

“May I sit with you?”

“What?!”

“May I sit with you,” she replied, smiling pleasantly. Willas scooted his chair in more closely and moved some of his books.

“What brings you here, Lord Willas?” Daenerys asked him as she slid into a chair across from him. It was extremely late.

“The same thing that always brings me here,” he said with a small smile. “The lure of words and information.”

“Even at this hour?” She knew the Tyrell was prone to scholarship, but this seemed a bit outlandish.

Willas blushed. “I… I hadn’t realized it had gotten so late. I have a tendency to lose track of time when I’m in here. And you, Your Grace?”

“I was lured the same way, and I couldn’t sleep. I thought to do some research.”

“On?”
Daenerys hesitated. The Tyrells used whatever information they could to get ahead. *But then, how could this hurt me? As long as I don’t expose everything, I don’t need to tell him about Jon’s loss of control, about my fears.* She crafted her answer carefully. “Dragons. I am always looking for new information on my children, but rarely get to look for it myself.”

Willas eyed her book. “Well, you’d likely find a bit of history in there. But if you like, I could help you. There are plenty of books on dragons specifically.”

“You know which shelf has them?”

“On the far wall, directly on the other side from the door. Is there anything about them specifically that you’re looking to learn?”

“Just a little history,” she replied. “Nothing too exact.”

“A collection of memoirs from Aegon and his sister wives is here.”

“Erm…” That did sound interesting, but she wasn’t sure she wanted to pick out her books now that Willas was here. It might give him too much information. “That might be nice, but I think at this hour, I might want to start slow.”

“If you like, I can show you where to get it,” he offered. “I don’t mind.”

Daenerys sighed. *I’ll let him get me the memoir book and pick a couple of innocuous, vague other titles.* She got to her feet and helped Willas balance on his crutch. Candles were grabbed and they went down the alleys of books again to find the shelf. Daenerys got the Aegon book, took note of a couple of titles that sounded like they’d be more helpful, but took another book that seemed useless but would satisfy Willas. He carried the ones she collected under his free arm, insisting on it.

He was a nice person, even if he was a little dull. Daenerys pitied him his leg. It hung limply, dragging against the stone floor. He was very thin, but moved with strength. Dany knew Missandei liked him. He was one of the few people at court who didn’t give the former slave odd looks, and he had a great love of poetry, which Missandei liked.

A lot of people condescended to Missandei for her looks, background, breeding, and youth. But apparently Willas had asked the scribe to teach him some Ghiscari. Missandei spent a good deal of time in the library, and she’d mentioned Willas did as well.

Dany and Willas didn’t chat as they moved, but the silence was surprisingly comfortable. He was a quiet person. Even at meetings, he mostly let his sister do the talking.

Another surprise waited for them when they turned into another column. A figure was standing by a shelf, his silhouette visible but his looks hard to make out. He jumped and turned around and the light caught his face.

“Jon?” Of all the people to be here at this hour, Jon was the last person she expected. Willas Tyrell at least made sense. He was a notorious scholar. But Jon wasn’t a great reader, at least not recreationally.

He squinted at her, brushing a length of his dark curls from his eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?”

“Just reading,” he said. He carried a couple of books, and slipped them down to his side, trying to obscure them.
“What?” Willas said, stepping forward eagerly. Missandei said the Heir to Highgarden was always interested in what others were looking at and discussing it with them.

“Just some… It’s not important.”

Dany’s eyes narrowed. She was worried about her nephew. He’d returned from the Iron Islands thinner and acting strange and guilty. “It must be important if you’re looking for it this late.”

*Is he looking for dragon information as well?* It would make sense. He seemed highly bothered by what happened. But Dany worried what Willas might think if he saw Jon looking at anything incriminating.

He looked at the ground and handed what he had to Willas. The Heir to Highgarden smiled.

“Oh, interesting. I wouldn’t expect you to be interested in this sort of thing, if you don’t mind me saying. I’d expect it more of your wife. But it’s lovely to know you have similar tastes.”

“It’s… It’s not for me,” he said quickly, “It’s for her.”

“What is it?” Dany said, coming over to look. Jon looked heavenward.

*Letters of Love From Great Heroes and Ladies* read the title. Dany looked up at her nephew in surprise.

“Princess Sansa told you to fetch this?” Willas asked.

“Yes. She wanted to read it.”

“But I thought she finished it three days ago,” the heir to Highgarden replied.

“How do you know?” Jon asked, sounding annoyed.

“I recommended it to her when she came in. She almost walked away with tripe like *Tributes to Myrish Beauties*. I felt it my duty to intervene.”

Jon slipped the other book he had onto the shelf behind him, his cheeks going a bit more red. He glared at Willas Tyrell. “You were showing love poetry to my wife?”

“She was looking for romantic books. I’ve familiarized myself with the library here, so I helped her find something worthy of her attention,” Willas said hastily. “She asked Merys to help, but he doesn’t know anything beyond information texts. To tell you the truth, he was a bit condescending about it. So I assisted her. I meant nothing by it.”

There was a flicker of annoyance in Willas’s hazel eyes. *If he weren’t so well trained and mannered,* Daenerys observed, *he’d roll them.*

But Jon’s interest in the romance books surprised her. And made her laugh. She’d been worried about her nephew since he arrived today. She’d hoped that plenty of alone time with his wife would make him feel better. But even with her worry, she couldn’t resist commenting on this. “If Sansa’s already read the book, why return it only to take it back again so soon? And why send you for it at this hour? She’s tired and pregnant. Surely she’d be sleeping.”

Dany could imagine Sansa sending Jon to the kitchens in the middle of the night for some lemon cakes. But for books?

“I’m guessing she’s finished *The Poems of King Aenys*?” Willas asked. They looked at him. He
shrugged. “When she finished and returned the letters, she asked me to recommend something else. But the poetry book is quite long. I’m surprised she finished so quickly. You wouldn’t happen to have it, would you, Prince Jon? It’s been a while since I’ve looked at it. I wanted to reread it when the princess was done.”

“I don’t have it!”

“Odd. She knew I wanted it. She promised to return it as soon as she was done.”

“Fine! The book isn’t for her, alright? It’s for me.”

“Oh, did Princess Sansa recommend it?”

“N-Yes! Yes she did! She wouldn’t stop talking about it.”

“You’re lying,” Daenerys cut in with sly smile. There was no way Sansa would goad Jon into reading a romance book. “Why are you really getting it, Jon?”

Even in the low light, she could tell he was blushing a deep red. Then he paused and gave Willas an odd look.

“I was looking for help so I could pen something sweet for Sansa,” he said, a little louder than was necessary. It didn’t seem to be a lie, but there was something odd about how he said it.

That’s even more adorable than Podrick holding a kitten in one hand and a puppy in the other. Daenerys’s lip quivered a bit. Her nephew wasn’t always very expressive about how he felt about his bride to Daenerys. Aside from a couple of displays during times of stress---- the Stafford Pryor duel, their reunion today---- he didn’t show his affection in public beyond normal courtesies and some subtle acts and habits that would only be discernable to people who knew him well. Even at the wedding celebration, he’d only danced with his bride for two songs.

Jon could be so withdrawn and morose, even cold on occasion. But when his love for his wife was brought out, it was extremely fun to witness. He could be such a darling about it. It made her so, so happy to see. He’d been so glum and closed off when Dany met him. Sansa’s presence slowly but surely improved him. And she just loved seeing him like this. He’s got to be feeling a little better if he’s trying to write his wife a love letter.

Willas smiled. “Oh, you know, I have a singer in my employ who could help you with that. He’s written quite a few popular songs and would be able to assist you.”

“No thank you.” Jon held out his hand. “May I have my book back now?”

“Of course, Your Grace.” Willas frowned as he slipped it back into Jon’s hand. “If you don’t require the services of our singer, perhaps I could recommend—”

“—No thank you.” Jon scowled. “If you’ll excuse me, My Queen, My Lord, I am very tired and my wife is waiting for me.”

“Of course.” Willas moved back and bobbed a bow.

“Nephew,” Daenerys said in a clipped tone. “Walk me back to my quarters.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

“If you’ll excuse me, Lord Willas,” she said, “Thank you for your assistance.”
He bobbed another bow. “Of course. I should retire as well. You are most welcome.”

Dany took Jon’s arm with one hand and her dragon books in another. They left the library with the guards walking behind them. She instructed them to stay at a distance, then glared at her nephew. “You were extremely rude.”

“I’m sorry, but I have little time for the interference of posturing lordlings.”

“Lord Willas was not interfering, he was offering you help. He’s a minister of my council and the heir to the south. Also, a nice man. Sansa likes him.”

His jaw tightened. “Well, I don’t.”

“You’ve had two, maybe three conversations with him. Brief ones. You like his siblings. Why not him? You’re not jealous, are you?”

“Maybe I am. He plotted to marry my wife.”

“Long before she was ever your wife. He did nothing untoward.”

“He gave her love poetry.”

“He recommended a book when she was looking for one.”

Jon reddened. “Right now there are people scheming to disrupt my marriage.”

“To seduce you. Not her. Honestly, Jon. Sansa has far more reason to be jealous than you.”

“I can still be jealous,” he insisted. Then his face fell. “I’m sorry. I just---- I’m tired and Sansa told me about the girls and with what happened in the Iron Islands…”

Dany’s heart sank. This is all my fault. Her nephew looked so upset. If she’d handled this properly and not sent Jon away, if she’d addressed the Ironborn situation sooner, there’d be less worry. She placed a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry about what happened. We should discuss it soon. Take tomorrow off. Spend it with your wife.”

“I wanted to ask you something… I’d like your leave for us to go back to Dragonstone.”

She stopped short. She’d been hoping that now that he was back he could practice with Rhaegal under more controlled conditions so that he might be prepared enough to take the dragon with him to Essos. But if he’s away…

“Dany?”

“We… We’ll discuss it the day after tomorrow. I’m sorry, I’m tired.” She rubbed her eyes.

“Of course. Thank you for the day of rest,” Jon said as he brought her to the door. He bowed and walked away. Dany sighed and went back to bed. When she crawled under the covers, Podrick woke.

“I missed you, Your Grace,” he said in a sleepy voice.

“I missed you too, Pod,” she said, sighing.

“You did?”
“Yes. You don’t make my life harder. I can’t sleep. I’m too wrapped up in things.”

He pulled her close and kissed her cheek. “My sweet queen. Do you… do you want me to help?”

She laughed a little. “You’re up for it? I thought you were sleeping.”

He pressed his cock against her arse. “Dreaming of you, Your Grace.”

“Mmm… Were you?”

“I was. You were a mermaid.”

“If I were a mermaid,” she said, moving to straddle his hips, “How would you fuck me?”

“What?” He asked as she rubbed her arse against his cock.

“Mermaids have fish tails. Where would this—“ She took him in and moaned, “Be?”

He thrust his hips upwards and grinned at her. “I… I dunno, Your Grace.”

“No… no m-matter…” She moaned. Podrick’s fingers crept under her skirts and went for her nub. “Oh!”

~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~

Sansa:

She woke to Jon’s head being buried between her breasts, his dark curls sticking up between them. His lips were moving lightly across the top of her belly. It took a second for Sansa to realize he was whispering to it.

“What are you talking about?” she asked with a smile. He looked up, a bit startled, his eyes still a bit sleepy and gorgeous.

“I was telling Aemonaerys about the Wall,” he told her, his eyes serious. “You never saw it, did you?”

“No.” And I don’t want to. That was the place where Jon was killed, betrayed by his own brothers. She’d already had to walk the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor several times a week. She’d already walked the halls of the Twins. She didn’t really want to go to the place where Jon was hurt too. Sansa knew she would see the Wall eventually. She was Warden of the North and the Princess of the Seven Realms and wife to a former Lord Commander. Her duty would bring her there, to Castle Black. Her duty might even bring her Beyond the Wall. If Jon wanted to go, she’d follow him. But she’d not enjoy it.

Jon spoke of the Wall to her, of the Watch. All of it, to Sansa, seemed awful, even the stuff he spoke of with a smile. Aside from some of the memories of his friends such as the jokes from Pypar and Dolorous Edd and the kindness and wisdom of Maester Aemon, she shuddered at it all. She shuddered at the cold. She shuddered at the ranging. She shuddered especially at Craster’s Keep, crying when she thought of sweet Gilly Tarly growing up in such a place. When she heard about Alliser Thorne and Bowen Marsh, she became so angry that she had to go to the practice yards and pelt knives at targets she pretended were their heads.

She didn’t like to think of Jon in the dark, in the cold, in danger. She wanted to think of Jon in the light, in the warmth, with her. Though she understood the reasoning for it, part of her cursed her
father for sending Jon to the Wall, and Uncle Benjen for encouraging it. She even cursed her mother for making Jon feel so unwelcome so as to go to the Wall. She knew that, aside from her mother, those curses were unfair. They came to her in moments of weakness. But it just made her so upset to think of her husband in such a place.

Not that she’d ever share her feelings on it with him. She knew it would only upset him further. So instead, she affected a complacent look when he spoke of it all, listened and offered whatever comforts she could.

Sometimes, when she thought about what happened to her poor, sweet Jon, she had dark, horrible thoughts. Thoughts of tracking down every last brother who had taken part in that, who had dug their blades into Jon’s flesh, and having them killed. Bowen Marsh and a number of them were killed by wights. The survivors, like the rest of the Watch, left the Wall to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Sansa was almost certain that if she put her mind to it, she could find them. But she wouldn’t. Such a thing would do nothing to help anyone. It would only hurt people. Sansa had better things to do than hurt people.

“The Wall is beautiful. The castles are practically nothing, but gods… It’s seven hundred feet high. Icy, foreboding, and the way the sun and moonlight shines and glitters off of it… It makes you feel so small.”

Sansa cupped his cheeks. “You’re not small,” she told him, “You’re big.”

He smiled as she kissed his forehead. He caught her lips in his. After a long, loving kiss, he broke away. “Someday, I’d like to take you up to the top, show you the view. You could see all of the Gift on one side, and all of the Free Folk lands from the other. I’d show you the giants and mammoths. I’ll show you where Mance lit his great fire.”

“I’d love to see it,” she lied. She hadn’t lied to Jon in ages, but she’d lie in this case. She’d see it, she’d hate it, but she’d pretend to love it to make him happy. Just like she oohed and aahed at some of his battle stories and cried at other ones to suit his needs when she really just wanted to cry hearing about all of them.

Her own battle stories she kept to herself. She didn’t want to speak of the horrible feeling when she first saw one of her blades pierce the neck of a Frey soldier, knowing she’d just killed someone. She didn’t want to think of the smell and weight of the blood soaking her white linen surcoat. She didn’t like thinking of the fires, the smells, the rotting flesh and gushing blood. She didn’t want to think of the land and streams stained red. The clashing of blades and the screams. The terror wondering if this would be where she’d died, and what would be left for her son.

She didn’t want to think of Jon in such a position. Jon, having to kill a man, being wounded. And it wasn’t just some random stranger, either. Jon killed Qhorin Halfhand, a brother and a legend for his first kill. Someone he’d fought, lived, trained, traveled, and broken bread with. She didn’t understand how Jon could tell that story without crying.

Sometimes, when she saw the scars… the ones around his eye, on his chest, his neck, his arm, his leg, she wanted to cry. She regretted that she couldn’t have been there to protect him or nurse him back to health. She wanted to hurt all the people who hurt her husband.

When Jon went around dressed all in black, it upset her. It reminded her of how he’d almost given his life away to that horrible place. It made her think of him shivering, bleeding, and dying in the cold.

He’d done a lot of bleeding and shivering, and even a bit of dying there. Jon spoke of Melisandre
with disgust, and Sansa, for the most part, was also disgusted with the woman they called the Red Priestess. But an odd part of her was grateful to the woman for bringing Jon back.

The worst thing to hear about after the murder and the battles was Ygritte. Sansa hated to hear about Ygritte. Even more so, she hated to see Jon speak of her with a smile. Ygritte gave Jon the arrow in his leg. Ygritte was involved in the attack on the Wall. She’d fought for the Wildlings. She was among the group who tried to kill all of the Watch, including Jon. She might have killed Jon herself had she gotten the chance.

Sansa hated this woman she’d never known. She didn’t deserve Jon’s smiles.

Sansa decided not to share this with him as well. Jon knew and loved Ygritte. He could talk about her as he wished. Anything to make him feel better. But Jon didn’t talk about her much anymore. He seemed to sense her discomfort with that subject. Sansa let him attribute it to womanly jealousy.

It wasn’t that. Sansa didn’t hate Val. Val never attacked Jon. Val never put an arrow in Jon’s leg. Val never tried to kill him. But Sansa let Jon think she was jealous of Ygritte. If he knew what the problem was, he’d likely protest. The one time she did say something, he replied that Ygritte came from a different world, believed her rights and lands were taken from her, that the Wildlings had their ideals, etc, etc. Sansa felt the points all became moot when it came to the safety of her loved ones.

But she felt Jon might not accept that answer, so from then on, she just let him believe it was jealousy. But Sansa didn’t waste her envy on dead women. Ygritte was dead, no threat to Jon anymore or to her. What point would jealousy serve?

The story she hated most, though, was of his death. It never failed to make her cry. It was too much a Stark death. Death by betrayal. Jon was ready to go save Arya. Or at least he thought he was. He just wanted to help their little sister. And no one at the time was helping Arya. Jon was the last person in the world who remembered to try and help her.

And his men gutted him. They took out their knives and cut him and cut him and cut him. Jon said that by the fourth knife, he couldn’t even feel the pain. He just felt cold. He just wished that he hadn’t locked Ghost in his quarters. He just thought of Arya and how he couldn’t get Longclaw from his scabbard.

Sometimes, in his sleep, Sansa heard him say “For the Watch.” She always woke him when she heard him say that. He’d wake, grab her, and hold her close, panting all the while.

Sansa hated the Wall. She was glad the Watch no longer existed. She was happy for this for more reasons than just Jon---- she was also happy that there was a measure of peace between Westeros and the Free Folk---- but Jon was a major part of that.

Jon’s yearning to see the Wall again didn’t make sense to her. She’d once said she’d like to fuck him there, in the heat of passion and partly as a joke, but she hadn’t really meant it. But if it would make him feel better to see it again, to show it to her, she’d accompany him.

Sansa clutched his face and ran her thumb along the scars on his eye. He closed them, his breathing slower and deeper. A smile played on his lips. “Daenerys said we could have a day to ourselves,” he whispered.

“And what would you like to do, My Lord?”

“Spend it with you.”

“Well, of course, I know that. But what would you like to do with me. Other than the obvious.”
“Mmmm… I don’t know. You pick.”

“We could walk along the gardens. I could show you some of Willas Tyrell’s plans for renovating the royal apartments.”

Jon opened his eyes then. “What?”

“Yes, it’s absolutely lovely.” She grinned. “I was talking to Margaery about how I need a dressing room and we need separate solars and how we both want to be close to our children and how our apartments are all spaced out and everything. Well, with spring coming and the kingdom recuperating, the treasury is going to have more coin available. And Margaery suggested we renovate the royal apartments. Willas has done a lot of that. He fancies himself a bit of a building designer. He apparently did some really wonderful things for Garlan and his family in their keep. And you should see some of the things he proposed.”

Jon pulled away, looking annoyed. “Willas has a great deal of talents, does he?”

“Well, since his accident, he’s not been able to spend time in the yards, so he filled his time instead with lots of reading and studying and such and---“

“--- And he’s brilliant. Not like the idiots like me who prefer the yards and fighting.”

“What? No!” Her mouth fell open. “Jon, are you… You know that there is nothing happening with Willas.”

“Do I? You seem to like him a lot.”

Her temper flared then. *That is not fair.* “Yes, you do. Just like I know that nothing happened between you and Asha Greyjoy.”

Jon’s cheeks went red. He looked down at his lap. “My apologies, My Lady.”

“I want to make it clear to you: Willas is my friend. He is. He is my friend as Margaery is my friend. He is a bit less conniving and he is ambitious. He is also kind and helpful and interesting and I like having him around me. You would too, if you’d calm down about a betrothal that never was. He wants to build us our own private glass garden, did you know that? Right here in the Red Keep. He looked up how they were constructed in the library and came up with a way we could have one built onto our apartments so that we could grow what we wish in winter. We might even be able to grow winter roses there, he says. I want a glass garden here and I want people with those sorts of excellent ideas around me. So you will cease this nonsense.”

Jon reddened further. “Yes, My Lady.”

“And to suspect him is to display a lack of trust in me. I do not appreciate that. I have no interest in Willas Tyrell romantically. I have you for that and various other things.” A bit of heat came over her as she said this. She had to admit, the jealousy was a bit arousing in its own way. On principle, she could not abide by it. Physically, though...

But she couldn’t reward him for this behavior. So instead, she answered the call of her bladder over the call of her loins, made Jon close his eyes, and went to relieve herself.

Sansa pulled on her robe and called for a large bathtub to be brought in. The servants filled it with water and she dismissed them, looked over at Jon from her dressing table, and told him to strip.

He did so, but when he moved towards the tub, she had him come over to her instead. His eyes
glinted and he did as bid, a smile playing on his lips.

“Don’t get too excited,” Sansa said. She wasn’t sure if she was making this request of her husband or herself. She looked him over. “I want to inspect you.”

“Inspect away.”

“--- For burns, cuts, scrapes, blisters, infections, nits, ticks, fleas, and lice.”

His jaw dropped. “I do not have fleas.”

“You were at Pyke. You could have anything. I should have done this last night, but we were too tired. Now turn. Slowly.”

Jon pulled away, looking a little hurt. “I don’t have fleas.”

Sansa sighed. “Fine, Jon. I’m sorry. I know you don’t have fleas. But let me check for any marks or anything. I just want to make sure you’re alright.”

He stepped closer and turned slowly as she directed. Sansa scanned his skin. There were some scrapes, welts, and sores on his thighs, but nothing infected. Nothing serious. No ticks. A little lice, which meant she likely had some now as well.

She pointed over to a far wall. “You see that new cabinet?”

He nodded.

“Get the small purple bottle, the large blue one, a couple of the long combs, and the yellow jar.”

“Some more of your fancy bath oils?” He asked as he walked over, grinning.

“No.” She’d acquired some healing ointments and potions for his return in case he was hurt. She knew some basic healing skills from her time during the wars. Merys and Nani both taught her some new things as well. Sansa undressed herself and went to the tub. “It’s to heal you a little.”

They barely managed to fit into the bath together. Lice-combing ensued. It lowered her passions considerably.

“I have to meet with my new ladies,” Sansa informed him as they began to dress. “Sewing for the morning, luncheon at noon.”

“What happened to our day of rest?”

“Officially, this is social. And I’d like you to come and observe.”

“To the sewing?” He asked, lacing up a burgundy doublet and smiling. “I can’t sew.”

“You don’t have to,” she replied, laughing. “I thought maybe we could go over the plans while my ladies sew. Come to my solar in, say, an hour?”

He nodded and kissed her good-bye.

She met with Margaery and the Sands outside her chambers. Margaery immediately linked arms with her. “You look darling, Your Grace.”

She had made an effort to look her best, choosing a gown of violet and white wool with a richly
embroidered bodice and putting her hair in her pearl clips. Her mother’s pearl clips always helped her confidence.

“I thank you.”

Margaery glanced over at the Sands, who were eagerly peaking with Nani at a distance. “Willas believes the prince has a poor opinion of him. Have we offended in some way?”

“Jon’s being ridiculous and jealous. I’ve spoken to him of it already. He’s coming by today to look at Willas’s plans, after that, he has to warm to your brother.”

“Jon’s coming to the sewing circle?” Margaery looked alarmed. “You know that the Morrigen, Fisher, Smallwood, and Chambers girls will be there, right?”

Sansa smiled slyly and adjusted her bodice. “Yes.”
**Fucked the Squid**

Chapter Summary

The sewing circle.

Chapter Notes

HAPPY HOLIDAYS!!!!!! (I don't know how many Jewish readers I have here, which is why I didn't put any Chanukah notes up during the festival of lights. But if there are any fellow Jews here, Mazel Tov two days late.)

Thanks to Blue for her beta work, of course.

Just in time for the holiday, here's the new chapter. It's a doozy and not exactly Christmas-y, but it was interesting writing it, definitely.

Also note: In a past chapter, I referred to Carellen Smallwood as Corellen Smallwood. This has been corrected.

Thanks to all my commenters and kudos people and bookmarks!!!

Chapter Fifty-two: Fucked the Squid

Margaery:

Dorea Sand did not like sewing. Loreza had talent for it, but Dorea preferred a knife and a block of wood. Dorea now sat at her mother’s feet (another odd habit, though she was a maiden flowered and too old for such things) small blade in hand, a collection of oaken shavings gathering over white linen as a horse began to take shape in her deft, clever hands.

The Seaweeds kept staring at her in shock, much the way Margaery had when she was first alerted to the habit. It could be very shocking, watching the young bastard take a hunk of oak or cedar and from it have an animal or flower or some such thing emerge. Though Dorea wore a gown of blue lamb’s wool as fine as any noble girl’s, over it she had an apron of white to collect the leavings, like a common scullion.

“I’m going to be a carpenter,” Dorea insisted without a trace of irony. She was one of the strangest creatures Margaery ever encountered, and she’d twice wed into the Lannister clan. Dorea was fourteen but acted like she was eight. Loreza, two years her junior, acted every bit her age and seemed shockingly normal for the daughter of the infamous Red Viper of Dorne. Her mother seemed to trust Loreza far more than her elder sister, more content to leave her alone and allow her freedoms. Dorea, however, she kept on a tight leash.

The strange thing was that Dorea was not unintelligent. The things she carved were downright stunning in their detail and artistry. She could also be remarkably perceptive, and had great talent as a
practical joker. She and her sister were joined at the hip, and together they were formidable. Dorea was one half of the plot that now had half the young women at court putting seaweed in their hair.

She built things, too, and probably would make an excellent carpenter. As of now, her project was making a set of toys for the upcoming prince or princess. She was deeply obsessed with creating a marvelous set for them in time for the birth despite everyone telling her that the deadline was too strict and the child would be too young to play with the toys when he or she first arrived. She brushed this aside.

She also had a deep obsession with mocking the Seaweeds. Every so often, she’d look up, give them a disturbing grin, and start to giggle maniacally. Then Loreza would start laughing and their mother would tell them to stop.

Margaery was having difficulty trying not to laugh herself, and she was grateful to the Sands for it. Despite the fact that she disliked Martells on principle, with the arrival of Ellaria and her two youngest she was having a harder time putting that into practice. Ellaria was too nice, Loreza was too funny (the girl had talent for embroidery, unfortunately most of the things she sewed weren’t fit to be seen by most), and Dorea was too fascinating.

The Maid of Highgarden needed that distraction. If she didn’t have the Sands in the room with her, she’d have to direct all her attention towards the Seaweeds, whose choice in hairstyle was the most interesting thing about them. Also, they just made her sad.

There was one in particular that upset Margaery: a blue eyed blond named Carellen Smallwood.

Norese Morrigen, Tanda Fisher, and Henrielle Chambers sat together, giggling and whispering for the most part. They cast cruel looks at Sansa and disgusted looks at the Sands, then carried on with their hushed prattle.

Carellen Smallwood sat apart, separated from them by her aunt. Her head stayed down and she chewed on her lip as if she wanted to say something but couldn’t make herself. Every so often, she’d give Sansa a look that made Margaery fear she’d burst into tears at any moment. But she seemed afraid even to do that while her aunt, a Septa of Oldtown, was near. Every time Carellen tried to pull up the low neckline of her blue and yellow bodice, Septa Marite gave her a filthy look.

Not that Septa Marite ever gave anyone anything but a filthy look (and maybe a sanctimonious lecture if you were unlucky). She was a thin, old woman with features that would still be handsome but for oddly cracked lips and a perpetual sneer. Her eyes looked like they might have once been as big and round as those of her beautiful niece, but were shrunk by wearing that nasty expression for far too long.

We are an odd bunch, Margaery mused, and our company is unpleasant enough to make me love the Sand Snakes.

In her youth, she wasn’t too far from the position of this bunch. Her father wanted her to be a queen, her mother wanted her to be a queen, and her brother’s lover wanted her to be a queen. Her grandmother found the idea of marrying into the Baratheons idiotic. Lady Olenna instead had her eye on Winterfell. She felt it far better.

“Either Willas should marry the daughter, or you must marry the eldest son. Or both. Personally, I prefer you marry the son. Robert Baratheon is a violent, drunken fool and I don’t want you put into the path of the Lannisters. The Stark children are connected by blood to the Tullys and the Arryns. We’d have a union of four different territories. You’d have as much power as the queen, but less of a target on your back. I don’t want you at court. They’re all monsters there. Better you take control of
the North and rule quietly.”

Even Renly agreed that the court was full of monsters. A show of freaks came to Highgarden during one of his visits. Renly, in an uncharacteristically melancholic mood, remarked that the worst of them—- the snake-boy, the crab-man, the Lady of Lizards—- looked like the souls of many people he interacted with in King’s Landing.

And it was painfully true. The worst part was that there were good people as well, and they were often devoured.

*I could have never replaced Cersei as Robert’s Queen, Margaery thought. She’d have had my throat slit the second I batted my eyelashes at the king. Unless I killed her first, I’d have been dead. And I was not ready to murder then. Grandmother knew it. It’s why she kept her plot towards Joffrey a secret.*

Margaery could kill now, if she really needed to, and the person was awful enough. She could have killed Cersei, if Jaime Lannister’s golden hand hadn’t gotten to her first. She almost did. After she had to be spirited out of King’s Landing in disgrace and heard about the Lannister woman’s joke of a trial, she was ready. Margaery read up on poisons. She selected Widow’s Blood for the job, feeling both the name and the horror of its effects made it perfect. The idea of Cersei Lannister drowning in her own shit just made sleeping through the night easier.

But then Ser Jaime the Kingslayer, mad and horrified, broke into the Red Keep, strangled his sister, and fell on his sword.

Margaery settled for using the gold she’d saved up for Cersei’s assassin to instead arrange for a vat of acid to be dropped on that Ser Robert Strong freak and it’s disturbing creator. They said the creature melted like a cheap candle.

The Maid of Highgarden considered herself a patriot.

Which was why she really couldn’t stand these Seaweeds. There was a chance here for peace. Actual peace and stability. And yet some idiots with more ambition than sense just couldn’t stand by and allow it to be. No, no, it wasn’t enough that the wars could draw to a close, that Westeros could finally be unified under one ruler who actually had both a brain and a heart, defended by three dragons, with peace established with even the bloody wildlings. All that had to happen with their grandchild on the Iron Throne, or it wasn’t worth it, apparently. Destroying a happy marriage and possibly sparking another Dance of the Dragons would be worth it as long as they got to crown one of their children.

*Lords and ladies are idiots.*

It also upset her because Margaery had looked forward to meeting the new batch of court ladies. She wanted to find Willas a wife. If she could find Willas a wife, then she was set. Edmure Tully was eating out of her hand. She gave him a moon before her father wrote to her regarding a proposal from the Lord of Riverrun.

Margaery intended for a Tyrell child to wed the little dragon-wolf in Sansa’s belly. Tully-Tyrell or regular Tyrell, either way she wanted as many options as possible. Garlan’s children couldn’t count. As the children of a lower lord, they wouldn’t be high-ranking enough. But the son or daughter of the Lord of the Reach or the Riverlands…

She wanted to smack Jon Targaryen for this mess. Sansa swore up and down that nothing actually happened between Jon and Lady Greyjoy. Margaery was concerned that her friend was slipping
back into her old naïveté with that. Sansa was desperately in love. And while Jon loved her too, Margaery wasn’t sure how strong that love was anymore. He’d left his pregnant wife to go to Pyke of all places. Not even love was enough to keep some people from straying.

Whether he fucked the squid or not, it didn’t matter. He’d let the rumor spread enough to damage his wife. And now a flock of wannabes were lining up to threaten Sansa, her child, and, by extension the royal family and the Tyrells.

_He still fucked the squid_, Margaery decided as she covered the length of silk in her lap with twinkling golden stars, _regardless of what he got up to at Pyke._

Also, Jon was rude to Willas last night.

She wanted to slap him. Twice.

When the prince did stride in with his awkward squire, Margaery did not slap him. She curtsied with the others and smiled. When she noted that his cape (the prince normally didn’t wear capes on casual occasions, so this was intentional) was fastened with a Direwolf clip, that smile became somewhat genuine. _Good move._

Another good move was the blue and white roses he had clutched in his hands.

The prince hesitated when the girls all curtsied to him. His eyes grew wide when he caught sight of Carellen Smallwood, his Adam’s Apple bobbing visibly as he bowed to them all. He hurried over to his wife, taking her hand in his, kissing it, then presenting her with the flowers.

Sansa blushed. Her bluses were pretty and since her pregnancy, a bit deeper in hue. She dipped her nose into the petals to inhale their scent and gazed up at Jon intently.

“I’d hoped you’d like them,” he said, smiling with some relief.

Margaery reached up and began winding one of her chestnut curls around her finger, gesturing with her head and eyes at the prince significantly. _Take one of the blooms and place it in her hair. Do it. Do it. Place a blue one in her hair and make comment about how it matches her eyes._

Such a thing would be obvious to someone with even a remote understanding of courtly love. _Sansa has blue eyes, for pity’s sake._ Blue eyed girls were always the easiest, because flattery was so obvious. You could compare them to the sky, to the sea, to sapphires… And, in this case, roses. It was especially fitting for both Sansa and Jon. The North had so many romantic stories surrounding their winter roses. It would be an excellent way to remind everyone around them of their special bond in the most positive and romantic way possible. The gesture would speak volumes, especially considering Jon’s heritage.

He caught her eyes and her gesture and a look of comprehension dawned upon his features. He plucked one of the blue roses from the collection, snapped the stem to a manageable length, and gently put it behind her ear, running his fingers down the length of her hair as he did.

_Now eyes. Eyes. Say something about her bloody eyes. It doesn’t have to be clever or original. Just say it._

“It matches your eyes.”

_Thank the Mother._

The moment was ruined when Carellen Smallwood, her face more than a little red, came over.
“I-if it p-please, Your Grace,” she sputtered, her voice small, “I-I could p-put them in w-water for you.”

Sansa’s look of delight fell as she turned to address the maiden. Her voice was clipped as she handed the roses over. “Thank you, Lady Carellen.”

Carellen held them near her chest and curtsied so deeply that there was a clear view right down her bodice. The prince’s back straightened, his cheeks going red.

It seemed everyone was blushing at that moment.

“My prince,” Ellaria said suddenly. They all looked at her as she helped Dorea to her feet, gathering the pile of wood shavings and shoving them in the pocket of her apron. “Dorea has something she wants to show you.”

The Sand Snake held out the half-made horse. “It’s going to be a toy for the new prince or princess. I’m making a set. A whole little wooden farm.”

“Dorea has made lots of toys for the children of the Water Gardens,” Loreza said eagerly. “She even made a whole dollhouse with a couple of the woodsmiths there.”

The prince held out his hand, looking grateful. As he analyzed the piece, his jaw dropped. Margaery could see why: the head, neck, chest, and most of the front legs were already present. The creature’s mane flew out behind it with individual locks identified and shaped like they were flowing in the wind. Details right down to the teeth and links of its bridle were there, and even the eyes looked strangely alive.

“You made this?”

“I’m making it. It’s not finished yet,” Dorea rolled her eyes as she said this, earning a dark look from her mother.

“This is incredible.” Lady Carellen and her teats were forgotten as Jon turned the thing over in his hands. It was something the young woman looked grateful for as she backed away, roses in hand. “You have a rare level of talent, Lady Dorea.” Jon looked at Ellaria. “You must be proud.”

“I’m just relieved that she found a hobby more productive than knocking oranges off trees with her Morningstar,” Ellaria laughed, ruffling Dorea’s hair with affection. “No, I am proud. She’s quite the artist.”

Jon handed the sculpture back to its crafter with a smile. “My Lady, I thank you for such fine efforts.”

Dorea looked smug as she took it back, taking her knife from her pocket again, plopping down into her original spot and resuming her work at once.

Jon gave the Sand Snake a queer look for a moment, the sort of look Dorea received from every person who ever encountered her.

“I’ve got a gift for the new prince as well!”

Norese Morrigen, boldest of the Seaweeds, rushed forward. She batted her eyelashes at Jon outrageously, thrusting out her embroidery hoop. “It’s a baby gown.”

The Morrigen girl’s work was exquisite. A pattern of forest green ivy on a pure white silk
You’re shameless!

Jon’s jaw tightened. “That’s... very nice, Lady Norese,” he said, his tone making it clear he thought this was anything but.

“Oh, I honestly cannot wait to dress our babe in this!” Sansa said brightly, taking the hoop and appraising it.

They all looked at her in surprise.

“The work of your hands, Lady Norese, is more than fit for the sorts of activities newborn babes frequently engaged in.”

“Activities?” Margaery inquired.

“Yes. And the products thereof,” replied Sansa with a grin. “When those products make contact with that fine silk, I’ll certainly be thinking of our fair maid from the Crow’s Nest.”

The little color Lady Norese had in her pale face quickly drained from it, and the enterprising twinkle in her eyes dimmed considerably. Margaery, Loreza, and Dorea burst into peals of laughter. Jon began to snort, and even Ellaria Sand looked like she was trying not to laugh.

Sansa smiled graciously at the mortified Norese as she handed the hoop back to its owner. “Lady Norese, may all your efforts meet such levels of success as this beautiful piece of sewing. Continuing in this pattern, they surely will.”

She glanced around at the remaining Seaweeds. “Does anyone else have some potential gifts they wish to present?”

Lady Tanda and Lady Henrielle shook their heads. Septa Marite glared daggers at Sansa. As lady Carellen came back, placing the vase of roses on a side table, her eyes danced slightly, her lip curled.

“I actually do, Your Grace,” Margaery ventured, “I think it’s about time we showed your lord husband the efforts of my brother and I in planning out your future quarters.”

Sansa smiled. “Oh, yes.”

She hurried over to her desk, retrieved a key from her pockets, and opened on of the drawers, withdrawing the scrolls of parchment that made up the blueprints. She then delivered them to the small dining table she had in the middle of the room. Margaery and Jon hurried over.

The basic plans for the ground and second floor were laid out. Margaery grinned smugly as she began explaining the various sections. Willas had borrowed designs ideas from Highgarden, Casterly Rock, the original Maidenvault, and some of the foreign manses, as well as couple from Winterfell with the glass garden he planned to put in the private garden.

The idea was to create a little mini-keep inside the main one, with its own courtyard so that the royal children could run and play in a carefully controlled and guarded environment without feeling boxed in. There were private paths from the family garden to the main ones of the palace, the stables, and even the godswood. It would afford them plenty of privacy, fresh air, and comfort, but also a great deal of security. Their rooms would consist of private solars, a dressing room for Sansa, a nursery, finer quarters for their staff, and smaller bedrooms for when the children grew older. They’d have a
staircase down to one of the basement bath pools, which would be remodeled for their private use. And there were private halls linking all of this so they could move about privately.

“But isn’t it a bit… isolated?” The prince asked nervously.

Margaery’s stomach sank. Is this complaint about the designs, or the designer? At breakfast this morning, Willas told her of an encounter he’d had the night prior with Jon Targaryen in the library. “He seems thoroughly uncomfortable with me and the idea of me interacting with his wife.”

“We can’t just give the princes and princesses of Westeros complete free reign, Jon,” Sansa said, tweaking his cheek. “They’ll be exposed to the rest of the Keep and the city, likely all of Westeros and beyond. But we all need our own intimate little part of the world. And they’ll need an open area where they won’t need guards walking three feet behind them at all times.”

“They’re excellent work,” he assured Margaery, as if she needed assurance of the quality of what was before them. “I mean no offense. I think it looks wonderful, truly I do. I just---"

“Well, obviously you’d have things you’d change,” she said graciously, “We don’t expect you to like everything, of course.”

“The queen loves it all. She’d have her apartments right next to ours, they’d connect. Her little garden is going to be a lemon tree orchard. She’s calling it our little house.”

Jon patted Sansa’s hand. “I’m glad my aunt is happy. What about you?”

“I think it sounds almost perfect. I did think about Ghost, though. We should have a private kennel for him. Barristan insists that the walls of our actual apartments be as secure as possible, and that won’t make things easy for him to come and go as he needs to. He’d always need to be let out. So if there was a kennel for him…”

“I’m sure something could be arranged.” Willas was quite attached to his own dogs, and would likely take great joy in such a project. “Would this kennel be just for him, or for regular dogs as well?”

“I think I’d like us to have more dogs. It would be good for the children when they grow older to have pets,” said Sansa thoughtfully. Jon looked at her warmly.

“Do you want a puppy of your own, My Lady?” He asked her sweetly. “Have you grown tired of our big, shaggy wolf?”

“Never. I am just not sure I want that big shaggy wolf and that big white dragon in your aunt’s pit to shape our children’s idea of what makes a normal pet.”

He snorted at this, placing a hand at the small of Sansa’s back. “The glass garden looks nice.”

“It’ll be a dome in the middle of your garden.” That was Margaery’s idea, actually, one she was quite proud of. She’d have something similar built at Riverrun. The concept of glass gardens thrilled her. She’d taken to designing things of her own, though hers were made based on blueprints of the ancestral seat of the Tullys rather than the Red Keep. Or, at least what Edmure had told her of it in his letters. He was quite eager to describe his home to her. His home, his children, his staff, his uncle…

Sometimes he described his dreams to her. The good and the bad. I admit, Lady Margaery, our friendship has become one of my greatest comforts. I feel I can tell you anything.
She didn’t want him getting too comfortable yet. He’d vastly overestimated how comfortable he should be during his drinking session with her and her brothers, after all. But he should be comfortable enough. She’d already convinced Sansa to invite Edmure to be present for the child’s arrival. Shortly after the invitation was received, Margaery received a missive dotted with tears of joy. *I’m allowed to have my family back!*

Margaery was giving him advice as to how to conduct himself for the momentous occasion of the prince or princesses birth. She told him it would be prudent to drink less and to present tasteful and meaningful gifts not just for the babe but also for the mother. She even gave him ideas as to what he should give his niece. Supplies, food, and some sort of legislation to make shipping things to the North easier and less costly were suggested.

They continued to go over some of the plans. Every so often, one of the Seaweeds would try to come over, and Margaery would turn and give them a filthy look. But when she saw Jon slip his arm about Sansa’s waist or smile lovingly at her as she spoke, Margaery smiled herself.

She began taking notes of some of the things the royal couple suggested, eager to show her brother. She liked listening to them converse. They spoke with a sort of easy understanding and pride in one another. Even their little disagreements seemed easy and patient.

It reminded her of her parents, a little. Mace and Alerie Tyrell weren’t the sharpest thorns in the garden, but they did love each other. There was a genuine way they spoke to each other and no one else. When Alerie Hightower looked at her husband, you could tell that she didn’t see the fat oaf. She saw the genial youth who dreamed big dreams for his children and would go to war for their futures. When Mace looked at her, he saw the young beauty he’d met all those years ago, and he heard only the gentle sweetness of her voice. He knew the only person who never intimidated him, but accepted him as he was.

Both Sansa and Jon were smarter than Margaery’s parents, and Jon was less pompous, but there was an element there to them that Margaery recognized. One she didn’t necessarily long for, but definitely appreciated. *A good fit, there. Definitely a good fit.*

She glanced back at the girls in the circle, stitching away and discreetly watching them like hawks. *If only they’d be a bit more showy about it.*

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Carellen:  
The Prince had tried not to laugh when Princess Sansa made that joke about Lady Norese’s sewing. That was kind. Kinder than Norese deserved.

He brought his princess beautiful flowers. When Carellen put the bouquet in water, she stroked the petals for a second, delighting in their fragrance, color, and texture. The blue roses would match her eyes, too. Her eyes were blue. Not as dark as Princess Sansa’s, but still quite blue. Everyone said she had lovely eyes. Even Septa Marite said so. Septa Marite never found anything but penance beautiful.

He seemed better than he was when Carellen last saw him. His hands were steadier, his smiles easier, his speech stronger. When she saw him at Acorn Hall, he’d been a mess, shaking and looking so very tired and thin. He looked so lost then, so scared, so alone. She’d just wanted to take him into her arms and kiss away his fears.

That was why she’d done what she’d done. He seemed to like her. She wanted to show him love.
Before becoming a prince, he’d been a man of the Night’s Watch and a bastard who never knew his mother. Brothers in black were denied love. And he was denied love even before he took his vows. Carellen knew she could love him. The second she saw him, she knew it. She knew he’d have to leave in the morning, but perhaps if she gave him love and comfort he’d been denied all of his life, he’d eventually send for her. He didn’t seem like the type who would take a girl’s virtue for granted. His brother, the King in the North, had married a girl he’d deflowered after all, and he loved her, even if it had led to his death.

But Carellen could do better. Her romance wouldn’t have to end in tragedy because the dragon queen was bringing a new age and the wars were over. They were truly over. Otherwise, Carellen’s mother wouldn’t have had her brought back to Acorn Hall.

Carellen loved her mother. Before she’d been sent off to the Sept, her mother used to read to her at night and tell her lovely stories and sing to her beautifully. Those sweet songs and stories were what comforted her at the sept. She wanted to prove herself to her mother again after disgracing her so. She wanted to show her parents that she could be just as valuable to them as her new baby brother.

But now she wasn’t so sure.

For moons on end, thoughts of how soft Prince Jon’s lips were on hers, how gentle his hands were, helped get her through the beatings at the septuary. She reminded herself that these sufferings were nothing to what her prince suffered. She reminded herself that she’d earned this by so disgracing herself.

What she didn’t understand was how her putting herself in his bed now would wash away the crime of putting herself in his bed the first time. Septa Marite said that it was because this time, she was doing it for the Faith. “The Seven have use for us all, even sluts like you. If you’re to be wanton, you should be wanton for them.”

She would do her duty. He would marry her and she would convince the prince to take holy vows and swear off his heart trees and nameless gods. She’d give him solace in her body and the songs of the Seven that she’d sing sweetly. Eventually, she’d give him a son who would be as holy as Baelor the Blessed and sit upon the Iron Throne, her sin washed away by the Faith’s triumph.

But then she arrived at court to learn he was on the eve of his wedding to another. And yet the High Sparrow himself came to her and insisted that she carry on. “This bride is a far greater harlot than you, Lady Carellen. She gives herself not only to many men, but many gods. She worships at a Heart Tree despite pretending to love the Faith. She is a liar and a monster that will only encourage the Targaryens to embrace the false Old Gods once more. You must draw him away, Lady Carellen.”

She didn’t want to. It felt wrong. But Septa Marite and the High Sparrow and all of the holy people told her it was right. She couldn’t argue with those who spoke for the gods.

“You’ll be wed to him if you do this right, in a true way with only a sept and no heart tree nonsense. Your sins will be washed away with that.”

A voice in the back of her head claimed that she was being lied to. That even if she did marry him, the gods would not smile upon it. Not this way.

But she’d shamed her mother. She’d shamed her mother so much that Lady Smallwood sent her back to Oldtown to relearn some morals. Her mother’s letters to her now were brief and cold. And her lady mother told her to listen to and obey Septa Marite. So Carellen did this.
She just didn’t understand why her mother would support this. She supposed it was because of her new brother. Danny was four and heir to Acorn Hall now, not her. She had no place there. But she was of marrying age. It was her duty. Still, 

_This_ marriage…

When Carellen went home, there were numerous new songs about the Red Wolf of Winterfell. And they were glorious, happy songs too. Her mother seemed particularly ecstatic about Lady Sansa’s return. “That snake Walder Frey was insisting we marry you to his boorish grandson Hoster. He threatened to cut off all protection to Acorn Hall if we didn’t. If I had the time, I’d go to that mass grave at the Crossing and dance all over it.”

But her mother’s letters clearly said it: _Do as Septa Marite tells you while you’re at court. You will go far with her. Your honor will be restored if you do as she instructs._

*Perhaps Mother didn’t know that Sansa Stark worships at a Heart Tree. Or that she’s a whore.*

Carellen just didn’t know.

All she knew was that when she returned home from the septuary, she’d been desperate to have some freedom, to leave their harsh and unforgiving rules behind. And that when she saw the sad-eyed new prince, she knew he was the one she wanted to explore her new freedom with. So she’d gone to his rooms that night, giddy with her own daring.

She wanted to spend the night making love and talking with his head in her lap. He’d only been at Acorn Hall a couple of days, and this was their last night. And he’d smiled at her a couple of times. And he didn’t smile often.

Everyone said she was sweet and fair. The prince said she was a pretty girl, and he said he enjoyed her singing. She wanted to show him that she was more than sweet and fair with a pretty voice. She wanted to show him that she was loving and bold and trustworthy and compassionate. That he could trust her with his secrets.

Carellen once heard her mother say that men have no secrets in the throes of passion (it was one of those things Carellen was never meant to hear, but she sometimes used to eavesdrop on her mother’s conversations). She wanted to hear and keep all the prince’s secrets, and love him for them. And he’d know he could trust her.

Because she knew there’d be false women pursuing him. She knew it. Women who wouldn’t care about his heart and soul. Just his crown and title. Her heart would break if such a sad, kind, fragile man became the victim of a heartless, scheming shrew who wouldn’t care about him. But she would.

So she put on her prettiest bedgown and snuck into the prince’s chambers at Acorn Hall, trying to lay on his bed as becomingly as possible, trying to mimic some of those myrish-style portraits she’d seen in how she arranged herself.

When he actually entered and stopped dead in his tracks when he saw her, she couldn’t help herself. She sat up and smiled at him. He didn’t march towards her and try to claim her, but he did look at her longingly.

“You can come closer if you like, Your Grace,” she said, patting the place next to her on the bed. “Please, come sit with me. Keep me warm. It’s still winter, after all.”

He’d walked over like a man in a daze. “Lady Carellen, I don’t want to insult your honor---“

“I feel no insult, Your Grace,” she said breathlessly, gazing up at him.

“Jon. Call me Jon.”
“Jon.” The name tasted like honey and sunlight on her tongue. She reached up and took his hands. “Please, Jon, keep me warm tonight.”

He sank down onto the bed, looking nervous. But when she leaned in and kissed his lips, he moaned, as if he were sinking into a nice, hot bath after a day of frigid, back-breaking labor. He leaned back. Carellen, excited to be taking the lead in these matters and discovering a new sense of courage in herself with them, followed. His mouth was warm and soft and he caressed her hair and arms in ways that made her shudder against him. His hands eventually found her teats and it made her happy. She liked her teats. They were pretty and bigger than most other girls’ her age. When he touched him, she pulled away for a second and untied the ribbons of her shift so he could see them clearly. He stared in near-reverence at them. At that moment, Carellen Smallwood felt more adored and powerful than she had in her entire life.

But then, when she reached to unlace his doublet, he grabbed her hands and made her stop. “No, My Lady… I’m sorry… I can’t do this. This is wrong.”

He sat up and pushed her away gently.

“Do I displease you, Your Grace?” She asked, her heart breaking.

“No. This is not on you. This is my error. But please… Please go. I’m so sorry.”

She’d run from his chamber, sobbing, holding her shift up. The next morning, her furious mother came to inform her that a maid had seen her depart from the prince’s chambers. Carellen never saw her mother so angry.

“I see it was premature to bring you home. Aunt Marite said you were a willful girl, but I dismissed that as the ramblings of a prudish old woman. I never imagined… We’ll send you back to Oldtown. You obviously need further instruction to draw you away from this sort of behavior. The failure is mine. I passed this on to you.”

And off Carellen went, sobbing and miserable, to Oldtown where Aunt Marite and her switch were waiting for her. After a few moons, Septa Marite came to her and said that she and the other Septas despaired of ever curing Carellen of her wantonness. “But perhaps we can channel it into some good works. We’re going to court. You’re going to charm your lordly love once more, Carrie. And bring him into the light of the Faith.”

But when she arrived at court, he was already going to be wed! “But to that Red Whore of Winterfell,” Septa Marite hissed, “Practically his sister. The concubine of the monster Littlefinger. A monster herself. One you must save him from.”

Princess Sansa didn’t look like a monster. Indeed, she was so indescribably beautiful and glowing during the wedding ceremony and reception that it made Carellen’s heart break. She looked like a winter princess, truly. Aside from the queen, Carellen had never seen a lovelier woman. And the day she married Prince Jon, she even eclipsed the Mother of Dragons.

Carellen had hoped that at least she’d see her family at the wedding, but they weren’t there. “They decided to give you the honor of representing House Smallwood,” Marite told her, “Make sure you do it well.”

Carellen took some happiness by the confidence her parents showed her in this. She didn’t want to let them down. Though she missed them, since the wedding and her mother’s letters, she went to sleep at night telling herself that her parents loved her enough to try to make her a princess. And not just any princess, but the princess that would bring the Faith of the Seven to its former glory. And out
of all the girls, the Faith picked me to do this. Me.

She just wished she could speak of this to her mother more openly. But with all the spies at court--- Princess Sansa, it was said, had more spies than even the Master of Whispers--- she had to word her letters carefully, stay as vague as possible. And that hurt, because Carellen didn’t entirely trust Septa Marite, who gave her vague, dismissive answers and grew impatient if Carellen’s questions grew too pervasive.

But at least Septa Marite didn’t beat her so much anymore. The threat of it was omnipresent, but Carellen hadn’t felt the bite of her switch in weeks. As long as she was a good girl, as long as she played the part well, she never had to feel the switch again. And when she married Prince Jon, her parents would come and smile at her, bursting with pride over their royal daughter, restoring her virtue and making the future of Westeros more holy.

That’s what Carellen told herself. That’s what Carellen promised herself.

She had more trouble with this before. After seeing their wedding, Carallen was sure Prince Jon was beyond any woman’s grasp. “Nonsense,” Septa Marite said, her nose in the air, “What loving, devoted groom only dances with his bride for two songs at his own wedding? He is marrying her to secure the North. Sansa Stark called herself Queen in the North and the only way to get her to bend the knee was to promise to make her a princess. He’s forced into this union. He has no love for her.”

That turned out to be true. Shortly after news came that the princess was pregnant, Jon, having done his duty, fled from his wife at Dragonstone to Pyke. When Carellen’s lady mother carried her children, Lord Smallwood stayed with her always. He must be desperate to escape her, Carellen thought, to leave her for Pyke.

And the news of what he’d done with Asha Greyjoy just seemed to confirm it. Carellen saw Asha Greyjoy at the wedding. She wasn’t very beautiful. Attractive enough, but nothing special. And old. Almost thirty. Princess Sansa was twenty years of age and a great beauty.

For him to dishonor her for an aged Ironborn shrew with not nearly the same level of beauty, Carellen reasoned, he must be miserable.

Her prince had known enough misery. She wanted to make him happy. She wanted him to be happy more than anything in the world.

The problem was, she didn’t understand why he was unhappy with his current wife. She was beautiful and elegant and she’d done great things. She wasn’t stupid, either. She’d guessed at most of these girls’ true intentions almost at once. Carellen felt shamed at that moment, feeling the princess’s accusing eyes on her. But aside from things like that, Princess Sansa was very well-mannered and nice. Everyone knew she visited the children’s homes with Lady Margaery, and gave alms to the poor. And she was very kind to those odd Sand Snake girls.

Septa Marite said she was a power-hungry schemer, a murderer, an infidel, and a whore. Carellen forced herself to agree. But that was becoming harder every day.

“You want to be a princess, right?” Septa Marite hissed.

Carellen just wanted to be a good girl. She just wanted to make her parents proud. She just wanted to make her poor, sad-eyed prince happy. She didn’t care about being a princess. She just wanted to be in love. She just wanted to go to sleep tonight without crying. She just wanted to feel that way she did when she kissed the prince once more.
Chapter Summary

Jon tells Sansa of the Carellen Encounter. Conspiracies may abound. Sansa loses her shit and goes to the godswood.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Blue for her beta-work!

Okay, so in this one, there is some serious emotional shit. Also, Sansa loses her shit. For real reasons, too. Pregnancy hormones and bad memories forming a lot of that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Fifty-three: Girls and Better Men

Jon:

Jon left his wife’s chambers with a dozen things on his mind, few of them good. Indeed, he was in a bit of a panic. He closed the door of his bedchamber and leaned back against it, cradling his temple and taking deep breaths.

Sansa didn’t know about Carellen Smallwood.

It wasn’t that he kept it from her on purpose. It just never seemed relevant enough to discuss. He had no idea the girl was at court, or that he’d ever see her again. It was a stupid encounter that almost went too far but didn’t. Jon didn’t feel proud of what he’d done that evening. He’d been well into his cups at the time. Jon wasn’t a heavy drinker, but he’d started indulging himself on the journey from the Wall to the Capital. He decided with the Watch being disbanded, the war ending, his new heritage, the release from his vows, the dragons, having plenty of new responsibilities ahead of him, and everything else he had to deal with, he deserved to get himself decently drunk a couple nights a week until he got to King’s Landing.

This plan was cut short after what happened with Carellen Smallwood. It wasn’t worth the light-headed forgetfulness to risk something like that. The girl threw herself at him, and it took him far too long to remember that she was the fifteen-year-old maiden daughter of his noble hosts. He felt awful about it, but decided the best thing he could do was send her away gently, then leave the family be. There was no need to risk her reputation by speaking of it to anyone since it didn’t go beyond some bare teats and kisses, and he didn’t want to risk any more damage being done to her or anyone else at Acorn Hall.

But now the girl was in King’s Landing. Worse, she was pursuing him. She, like Norese Morrigen and a bunch of others, was trying to get into his bed. Jon thought he’d been clear that night.
Gods, she’s Arya’s age, he felt ill thinking about it. A lot of those girls were Arya’s age. Even younger.

How was he going to tell Sansa this? She was going to find out, with how things were going. And obviously there was more damage to that girl than he’d thought. He had to tell his wife. She needed to be prepared.

But how would she react? Sansa trusted him. When he got back from Pyke, she didn’t even question him about Asha Greyjoy except to ask after the woman’s health and state of mind. She didn’t for one second seem to doubt that he’d stayed faithful to her. The only time the possibility of her not believing him was brought up was when she was scolding him about Willas Tyrell, and she’d only done that to make a point.

*When I tell her of this, she’ll probably think I kept it from her on purpose.* He wouldn’t blame her for it. Sansa was currently going over letters and accounts from the North in her solar. She’d be joining him in an hour. And he had to tell her when she got back. He had to.

He paced the bedchamber, waiting for her to return. *This is bad. Bad bad bad.* He kept getting angry with himself.

*Why didn’t I tell her of this before?*

A nasty voice in the back of his head answered, *Well, she’s hardly told you all the names of the men she’s f*ucked, has she?*

But he knew *that* was unfair. Sansa tried to tell him. He stopped her more than once to tell her that not only did he not want to know, but that it didn’t matter to him. And it didn’t, really. The agreement was that should they ever have to encounter one of her past… liaisons, she’d warn him ahead of time. But he was determinedly ignorant on the subject.

*All my fault. All my fault.* He should have cast Asha Greyjoy from his room that day with instructions to find another cover for their meetings so as to make it clear he’d reject any and all advances of an illicit sort. He should have monitored all messages leaving Pyke. Anything, anything at all that mentioned an affair removed so that word of it wouldn’t spread.

He should have never agreed to go to Pyke. He should have stayed at Dragonstone. He should have told Daenerys that he couldn’t leave for anything less than full-blown war. But he was so eager to prove himself, to make his family proud. *A stupid boy’s whim.*

He just hadn’t realized it could do this level of damage. He thought it would be trifling gossip, and hadn’t even been sure that word of it would go beyond Pyke. What real damage could idle, salacious gossip truly do? *Quite a lot, as it turns out.*

He was so eager to prove himself a dragon. *I should have spent more time proving myself a devoted husband first.*

Was Aemonaerys going to grow up believing that his or her parents didn’t love each other? That Papa was a cad who dishonored Mama? That he or she wasn’t loved enough for Papa to stay around while Mama was pregnant?

Would his children have to spend the rest of their lives watching these girls try to tempt their father? What would that teach them? That their mother could be replaced? That nothing was sacred? That women were supposed to spend their lives as whores competing for a man’s attention?

What had he wrought?
What possessed the Smallwood girl to come to court? Why was a Septa with her? This surely wasn’t the sort of thing Septas engaged in. Perhaps the woman didn’t know?

If he sent a message to the Septa, it might be enough to take care of Carellen. But Jon didn’t move to his desk. He had no idea how to phrase such a message. _Dear Septa So-and-So, I am afraid your charge is conspiring to place herself in my bed and disrupt my marriage. Please tell her to stop trying to seduce me. Best Wishes, Jon Snow._

That definitely would not work. No, he’d have to discuss it with Sansa. There was no avoiding this particular confession. Jon went to sit on the edge of the bed, his head bent and his hands folded.

He kept his head down even as she walked in, up until the point where she was standing inches from him. He stared at her violet, beaded slippers for a few seconds until she spoke.

“Jon?”

“Carellen Smallwood.”

He heard her breath hitch. Her voice became a bit more tense. “What about Carellen Smallwood, Jon?”

He looked up at her. Her eyes seemed to burn. “On the journey from the Wall Daenerys and I took to the capital… We stayed at Acorn Hall and on our last night… Carellen… I found her in my bed.”

Sansa’s breathing became louder. Louder and deeper. Her skin deepened in hue.

“You will tell me now, Jon. Right now. And you will tell me the truth. And if you don’t, I will find out and you will never see me again… Is there a bastard?”

“No! I didn’t---” He got to his feet. “We didn’t--- We didn’t couple! I was lonely and tired and needed comfort, but after a few kisses, I came to my senses. I’d never let myself father a bastard, Sansa.”

“Oh, thank the Gods!” She gave him a shove. “DON’T DO THAT! You should have led off with that!”

“I’m sorry!” He cringed, embarrassed.

“And that’s all there was? A few kisses?”

“Well, I mean… I touched her some. And… and…”

“And what?”

He swallowed. “I saw her teats. But then after she dropped her shift, I swear I sent her from the room!”

His wife stared at him for several seconds. “She’d have been fifteen, Jon.”

The prince looked at the ground again. “I know. I’m not proud of it. But I was so…”

“One-and-twenty… And she was fifteen. You were a prince and a legend and she was an impressionable young virgin who didn’t know the ways of the world. Even when she came to you, you should have sent her out at once. She was a child, and she would suffer for what happened. But you let her…”
“---I’d lost so many brothers, I’d lost the Watch, I lost my name, I lost my home… I had no idea what was happening or who I was and I was so… I didn’t know anything. I’d been fighting for so long and then the fighting was done and all of a sudden dragons and queens and the south and everything… Everything I thought my life would be was gone and I felt like I had no one. And then there was this sweet, pretty girl there, asking me to keep her warm and I just… I didn’t know what to do, Sansa. I was lonely. And for weeks I’d been around people who just wanted me for my blood. Either they wanted to kill me or they wanted me as this prince I never knew I was. I had to leave everyone I knew for something I never wanted. I mean, I didn’t even really knew Daenerys at the time and I felt like she just wanted me as a prop. But Carellen was the first person who seemed to want me as a man so I just... She wanted me to keep her warm. And after all the ugliness and cold and pain and harshness of everything she seemed lovely and warm and soft and sweet and I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. It’s just after so much cold I wanted so badly for someone to keep me warm…”

He was sitting again, clutching his temple in both hands. He felt colder at that moment than he had in… Gods, when was the last time I felt this cold?

“I once knew a man who didn’t want to be spared the cold. He wanted to flee from the flames.”

“So did I,” he whispered. “I thought the dragons would engulf me.”

Not in many moons, had he felt so cold. Not since Roslin went up in flames.

And it stayed cold for a little while. He heard his bride’s heavy breaths. He heard a swish, and creaking of the bed. He felt a weight. Then warm arms snaked around his chest

“Gentle Mother, font of mercy/Save our sons from war we pray/Stay the swords and stay the arrows/Let them know a brighter day/Gentle Mother, strength of women/help our daughters through the fray/soothe the wrath and tame the fury/teach us all a kinder way…”

He didn’t know this song well. He’d heard it a few times, of course. He’d heard Lady Stark sing it. He’d heard words of it sung by a couple of ladies. He heard a few of his brothers sing it as well. But he didn’t know the words, really. He didn’t really care about the words. He liked the voice, though.

“You don’t hate me,” he whispered.

“Right now…” She pulled away then, shaking slightly. “Jon… I’m so disappointed in you. But I’m afraid for you and I love you and I don’t know what to do. I don’t hate you, but---”

“What can I do to fix it?” That was really all he could say. There were no more defenses he could make. Sansa fixed him with a hard stare

“We. Not I. We’re going to fix this. You’re not alone beyond the Wall anymore. Keep thinking of things in terms of ‘I’ and you’ll never get the results you want.”

She got up and paced. Then she stopped and got back on the bed, laying on her side. Jon lay down next to her.

“Sansa, I was drinking and…”

“Drinking. Not thinking.” She shivered. “That’s one of the classic excuses, isn’t it? ‘I had too much to drink!’”

She looked away from him then, and Jon felt his heart twist itself into an agonizing knot. “What do you want me to do?”
She closed her eyes. “Who said I wanted you to do anything more? I asked you to come to my sewing circle today. You did. I demanded that you tell me the truth about your relations with the Smallwood girl. I choose, for the sake of my own sanity, to believe that you did. Now… I don’t know if I want anything of you. I just want to have my child in peace. I just want the humiliation and disappointment to end, just for a little while. I want things to be pretty and pleasant and happy. For once.”

His heart shattered then. I’m not going to be able to just ‘fix’ this. It’s not that easy.

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Daenerys:

She got the request for her presence while in the middle of answering ministers from Astapor. They were meetings that couldn’t be put aside for anything less than a sudden emergency, like an unexpected siege or Sansa showing signs of miscarriage or stillbirth. She sent word that they’d take dinner in Jon’s solar to discuss whatever matter was at hand.

Over goose in mulberry sauce and summerwine, Jon and Sansa recounted the situation with Carellen and the other would-be mistresses.

“I know I said I could handle them, Your Grace,” Sansa told her miserably, “But that was before I knew everything.”

Daenerys groaned and emptied her cup. She wanted to strangle her nephew at that moment

“So Lord and Lady Smallwood are pushing her, then?”

“Lord and Lady Smallwood are not here. It’s a Septa that escorts her,” Sansa told her. The three of them then looked at each other, concerned.

“I understand Septas escort young ladies, but without any parents at all?” Dany asked. “That’s not normal, is it?”

“There is usually some member of the House present. And Septa Marite isn’t even a Smallwood, she’s a Swann. No, it isn’t customary for a Septa to be a girl’s sole caretaker at court,” Sansa informed her, “Even if she’s the primary escort. But I have looked over the households of all my ladies. Carellen doesn’t have any Smallwoods or Acorn Hall staff with her.

“Then perhaps this is an operation by the Faith?” Jon asked. “I mean, who else would have the power to sponsor a noble girl like this without family support?”

*That’s a good question.* Dany’s stomach sank. “And here I was thinking I’d settled the issues with the High Septon.”

“Really?” Jon asked, surprised.

“Well, not permanently,” Dany admitted. She didn’t think that the High Sparrow was completely done. Not for good. The man had not survived this long and gotten this far without being a determined little despot. “But I thought it would at least put things with them to the side at least until your child was born. If Aemonaerys is a boy, maybe longer. But this Carellen Smallwood, do we have another Leona Tyrell on our hands?”

“No,” Jon admitted, “I found her in my bed, but she didn’t touch me until I accepted her. And she left when I told her to leave. And she seems a very unhappy person now.”
Well, if the dragon riding, witnesses, and tolerance for heat weren’t enough to prove him a Targaryen, the sexual weakness certainly does the job.

Though Dany wasn’t sure if that was really a Targaryen thing in his case. He certainly showed more restraint than Dany or Rhaegar. Still…. So young. He really is his father’s son in some ways.

Daenerys groaned. “What do we know of the House?”

“That’s just it,” Sansa said, “Lord and Lady Smallwood supported me during the wars. Lady Smallwood even arranged for a wet nurse for my son when I had to leave him behind. She was interested in arranging a Northern match for Carellen. It was why I accepted her as one of my ladies in the first place. I thought she’d be a nice counter-balance to the Morrigens. The Morrigens were great Stannis supporters and his people tend to resent me for not agreeing to the alliance against you. It’s why I find the Septa’s presence and Lady Smallwood’s absence so strange as well. Lady Ravella was quite eager to see her daughter again. But I figured when Carellen came that Lady Smallwood simply couldn’t accompany her and just wanted me to make Carellen my lady-in-waiting.”

“How religious are the Smallwoods?” Daenerys asked, her stomach turning. *How much did I miss?*

“Because if the Faith is actively turning Houses that support you against you like this, then they’ve been working far more than we originally anticipated.”

“Not especially,” replied Sansa.

Jon snorted. “Lady Smallwood’s aunt is a Septa and she sent her daughter to a septuary.”

“That’s common practice. Many times in large families, one of the children will be given to the Faith. Or the girl chooses herself. Lady Ravella is originally a Swann, they’re an old Stormlands house, and an extensive one. It’s considered an act of virtue for parents with a large brood to give a son or daughter to the orders. Even non-religious families often do this. Though I know the Swanns refused to align themselves with Stannis and turn to R’holor. But if Lady Smallwood were truly religious, why would she want her daughter to marry a Northern lord? Most of ours worship at Heart Trees exclusively. And they sent Carellen to Oldtown for protection. If you want your daughters sent away somewhere safe, a septuary is a good place to send her. Especially in times when war sweeps the kingdoms. There are many otherwise ruthless men who won’t touch a septuary.”

Daenerys sighed. “Jon, did Lady Smallwood know of what took place?”

“I feared if I looked into the matter, it would call attention to what happened. If I asked, it might alert someone and damage Carellen’s reputation. I didn’t want her to suffer for what took place.”

*Fan-fucking-tastic.* “Well, we need to write to the Smallwoods. Bring them to court. Their actions will probably tell us a great deal. In the meantime, we need to investigate the other girls and any possible ties to the Faith they might have. In the meantime, Sansa, you’re to have a food taster and I’m assigning Brienne as your permanent guard.”

“Dany…” Jon said tentatively, “Wouldn’t it be advisable for us to depart for Dragonstone? It would get her somewhere more remote, less dangerous, and might send a clear message as to where my loyalties lie if I were to leave court with her.”


She didn’t want to believe it. Daenerys didn’t want to think Ser Davos might harm the royal family. He was a humble, honest-seeming man who had a good reputation despite his background, and he
was excellent at his job. His plans for the escort fleet for Jon and Sansa’s Essos progress and his immediate response to the crisis in the Iron Islands were stunning. But now, another loyal Stannis supporter was pushing his daughter into Jon’s path and the Faith might be conspiring against the royal family. And Davos had said he rejected R’holor. He gave no clear signs of particular piety towards anything, but could that be a cover?

Daenerys stood. “I need to speak to Barristan.”

“What about Dragonstone?” Jon asked, looking annoyed.

“I still have to… Not now.”

She marched out at once. This goes further. The rumors regarding Jon and Sansa’s marriage had reached her of course. That she’d forced Jon into it to gain Northern loyalties. Because Sansa was her friend. While Jon could be a bit reserved about his feelings towards his wife in public, Daenerys was pretty open about who she favored. And she made no secret of being close to the Lady of Winterfell. Partly to help Sansa, but also to help herself. She knew that there were still Northerners who had trouble accepting Targaryen sovereignty. It was partly why she was so enthusiastic about encouraging her nephew’s relationship. She also felt that displaying her affection for her good-niece would also gain favor with the Northern lords.

If an obvious conflict arose between Jon and Sansa, if he was seen as straying from the marriage, it reflected on her as well. If people thought she forced him into it, for him to stray or set Sansa aside or dishonor her suggested strife between Daenerys and her nephew. That was an easy thing to take advantage of. Even if said strife truly didn’t exist.

There were many who didn’t like accepting a woman ruling them. She knew this. There were many who hated the return of the Targaryens overall. Some would do anything to undermine her and others would be done. And now she feared she’d placed one of those people on her council. Or maybe more.

It wasn’t just Barristan she needed to see. Daenerys didn’t even head to his quarters first. Instead, she went to her solar and had Missandei bring Drystan Waters.

Sansa:

There was an awkward silence after Daenerys ran off. There’d been awkward silence waiting for her, as well. Sansa had grown angrier and angrier with Jon in the passing hours, and tried to focus on stitching. He went to a corner and began sharpening Longclaw.

Now Sansa stared at her plate. She felt so stupid for how she acted when he first told her. She’d comforted him. Despite what he’d confessed, her first instinct was to hold him. It took a while for that to wear off. Then the misery and fury took over. The idea that this girl could be in the midst of being pushed into such a situation by an organization like the Faith just made things worse.

At this moment, she wanted to cry. But that would just make her husband fuss and start apologizing again and she wasn’t sure she could stomach hearing that.

You were supposed to be better.

She thought of herself around that age. She thought of the beds she ventured into. She thought of the beds she’d snuck into. She remembered other men who disappointed her.
Like Tytos Blackwood. The Lord of Raventree Hall had welcomed her kindly. He’d fought against
the Lannisters until the very end. He’d fought for Robb. The Blackwoods were old friends to the
Starks.

When Lord Tytos feasted her, she thought he seemed perfectly willing to support her. But then Petyr
came to her later that evening. “He’s charming, Sansa, but he knows you’re no warrior. He fought
for the Young Wolf because he knew the Young Wolf could fight for him. But he doesn’t
understand what you’re good for but charming and bedding. You’ve charmed him, but not well
enough. Time to prove you’ll bed him for his loyalty as well. Without the Blackwood’s loyalty,
we’re adrift in the Riverlands. No one will follow the Stark who couldn’t get Blackwood to take
arms. Your brother, father, and mother had their strength. You don’t have that. You only have your
sweet little body. So get to it, that is, unless you want hordes of Riverlanders seeking to prove their
loyalty to the crown by slaughtering your little Eddie in his cradle.”

She’d been stupid enough to believe Petyr, because at the time she didn’t know who or what to trust.
But when she stole into Lord Tytos’s chambers, she’d hoped that maybe Littlefinger was wrong or
lying, that Lord Blackwood might tell her he needed no reward but to see her returned home and
happy. That he didn’t want anything from her but to help her honor her family’s memory.

He’d been so kind to her, after all. He’d called her the Princess of Winterfell and raised a toast to her
success and the restoration of House Stark. He shared memories of her parents and brother. He
reminded her of when he visited Winterfell and sat her upon his knee when she was but three. “You
already mastered the curtsey.”

She wanted his kindness to be real. For him to prove to her that not all seemingly-kind acts and
smiles came from people like Joffrey and Cersei Lannister. That maybe she could matter to someone
in a way that had nothing to do with her body.

When she told Lord Tytos of how she wanted to reward him, she spoke of his loyalty to her brother
in earnest, hoping he might be reminded of how honorable her family was, that maybe he might
guess what was happening. That maybe he might care about not dishonoring the King in the North’s
sister,

“I haven’t had a woman since my wife died,” he said hoarsely, staring at her in her thin linen shift.
She thought then that that might be the end of it, and smiled. Then she burst into tears and ran into
his arms, so happy that finally she’d met someone kind and true.

Then he started stroking her hips and cupping her backside. She felt his manhood rise slowly.

“Let’s not be lonely anymore tonight, Sweet Girl.”

He’d been thin and bony and hook-nosed and old. When she first met him, she’d thought him very
gallant and swarthy and fascinating. But when she rode him and looked down at him, she saw a thin,
old, hook-nosed lecher. She wondered how her father ever could have been friends with a man like
that.

She loathed him from that day on.

She later discovered that Littlefinger lied. Lord Tytos was always enthusiastic about supporting her.
Petyr himself told her the night she killed him. He’d told her so much that night. He delighted in how
easily he could get her to fuck old men for nothing.

Why didn’t anyone see how confused and scared I was? Why didn’t they realize how wrong it was?
Lord Tytos thought I wanted him. What made him think I would want an old prune like him?
Had Carellen Smallwood wanted Jon, truly? Or was she there on another person’s orders?

It could have been both. Jon wasn’t old and too fat or thin or hook-nosed or ugly. He was handsome and fit and young. He was a prince and a hero. But even things girls want could be turned against them. Sansa once wanted Joffrey. She’d even felt a little attracted to Harry when she first met him. Their first private conversation turned her off at once, but she didn’t have any choice as it was. She had to continue pursuing him.

Sansa never knew what she wanted when she was at that age. She’d lacked the idealism and naivete that guided her childhood and the wisdom and self-confidence that guided her later. There were times she fantasized about the Hound. He’d held a knife to her throat.

Sansa had no idea what was going on in Carellen Smallwood’s mind. She doubted it made much sense.

Carellen is beautiful, though. Sansa had no doubt that she’d been beautiful two years ago as well. The Smallwood girl had a face of innocent prettiness. She had that pale porcelain skin, those golden ringlets, those big blue eyes. Jon likes big blue eyes. She shuddered. And she’s not fat with child. She’s a young fresh maid.

In fact, when Sansa used to have nightmares of Jon being married off to a sweet, beautiful, noble maid, the girl she used to imagine looked a lot like Carellen Smallwood.

It was said men liked virgins and whores. Petyr used to tell her how sometimes he’d actually auction off the maidens in his brothels. “Maidens are tight and clean and unclaimed.”

Sansa was used goods. She thought of how Jon hadn’t liked her wearing Harry’s colors. The reminder of the man who took her maidenhead.

Jon didn’t take her maidenhead.

No, he just sent her away and never bothered looking into what happened to her. That did happen a lot. Very few of the lords Sansa slept with bothered to look after her well-being afterwards. They gave her men and supplies and their pledges, then she barely saw them. Many times they looked ashamed to even meet her eyes. Jon looked ashamed now. Sansa had been the shameful secret of many a Northern and Riverlands lord. Carellen Smallwood was Jon’s shameful secret.

How many others were there? She was starting to wonder. How many women had he embraced, truly? A few short hours ago, Sansa had no doubts about her husband. He was the first man who loved her properly, who was kind and true and everything she ever wanted. But now she wasn’t sure whom she was married to.

She remembered being twelve and in the tower bedchamber, thrown towards her wardrobe as Joffrey commanded that she dress to attend him at court. She remembered seeing his vain, cruel eyes and red, wormy lips and wondering how she ever thought him handsome, wondering how she didn’t see what a monster he was before.

Sansa looked at Jon. He stared at his lap, a length of hair falling forward and obscuring his face. She was almost grateful for it, because she didn’t want to know what she’d suddenly see when she looked upon his face again. What horrible things will I suddenly see?

But you need to. On her first wedding night, she reminded herself of when Septa Mordane said all men were beautiful. And she tried so hard to find the beauty in the man who repulsed her. She’d failed. Now she had to force herself to look at the ugliness in the man she loved.
“Look at me, Jon.”

He did so. Sansa took in his full lips, which were pale and not wormy. His dark hair was thick and clean. The scars were still silvery, his eyes were still dark and deep, his skin was still smooth. He looked miserable. As he should be, she reminded herself. But as angry as she was, as betrayed as she felt, she couldn’t find his ugliness. She couldn’t delight in his unhappiness. She couldn’t wish him ill. She couldn’t hate him.

She hated herself for that. He kissed and fondled a young girl, then ordered her from his bed and never thought of her again. No, maybe he did, but just when he took himself in hand. He probably loved her golden hair and sweet lips. He probably wishes he’d taken her maidenhead. Will he think of her tonight, bending over in her low-cut gown? Probably. And you’re in love with him, you stupid girl. You fell in love with Joffrey. You desired the Hound. You always attach yourself to men who hurt you because you’re stupid.

All of a sudden, her right palm stung. A striking sound rang through the air. She blinked. Jon’s cheek was red.

“Do you like making a fool of me?” She asked him. “What else have you lied about? How many other girls have you had? I bet more than just Carellen Smallwood were throwing themselves at you when you ventured down from the Wall. And at court. How many have you been with since I’ve been at court? Tell me, are you planning to pick up where you left off with Carellen tonight when I’m asleep? How was it fucking Asha Greyjoy? Do you have the others scheduled, too? Maybe Carellen tonight. But maybe she’s too old for you. But Tanda Fisher is still only fifteen, you could take her tomorrow morning. You coulduck Henrielle Chambers in the armory when you’re done training tomorrow. Then you can have Norese Morrigen’s cunt for dinner. And you can tell yourself there’s nothing wrong with it, as they pursued you. Or maybe you’ve fucked them all already and just never told me. Maybe I should make it a requirement for my ladies that they have to have shown you their teenage teats. Should I summon other past conquests to court? Tell me their names, and I’ll send the ravens. We’ve already had Val. I just want to make sure I’ve provided an array of what you like. No one over seventeen, I promise.”

He flinched with every sentence, but said nothing. She was so angry with him for that. She wanted him to rant and rave. He was going to prove he was like all the rest, and she wanted it over with. Maybe once he finally did it, she wouldn’t love him anymore. She could finally snap herself out of it.

“BASTARD! Maybe what they’re saying is true. Maybe you never loved me. Maybe Daenerys really did want us wed and felt it was more secure if you could convince me it was love. Was that it all along? She was pressuring you to play the lover? I was easy to fool, and you both knew it. I’m a fool, after all. A lovesick fool. It must have been great fun, pretending you loved me.”

At this, he spoke. “I never had to pretend, Sansa. I love you. More than anything.”

Sansa struggled to her feet. Tears began to fall. “Stop LYING! Why do people think they need to lie to me always? Is it just that much fun to exploit my witlessness? I get it, I’m a fool. I’m still that eleven year old girl you once knew who wanted to be a princess. I’m an idiot. But you don’t need to lie anymore. Please, I’ll give you anything you want. Just be honest with me. For once. Like you were supposed to. At least give me that.”

Let me hate you, please.

Jon stared at her, horrified. “When I was twelve, there was a new serving girl named Lily who I thought was one of the prettiest girls I’d ever seen. She heard I was Lord Stark’s son and pulled me into the stables for a kiss. In the middle of kissing me, she called me ‘My Lord’. I smiled and said she
didn’t have to call me that. ‘I’m just Jon Snow. Not a lord.’ Then horror dawned on her face and she ran off. On my fourteenth name day, Theon and Robb paid for me to lose myself to Theon’s favorite whore. And all I could think about was what if I got her pregnant and made another bastard, so I fled.

“Ygritte I found Beyond the Wall. I took her prisoner, then the Wildlings took me prisoner, then she claimed we were lovers to convince Mance Rayder that I had renounced the Watch. Then to prove it she took my virginity that very night. I was in her near a hundred times and I hated myself for how in love with her I was. Then I betrayed her and she died by an arrow I kept dreaming was my own even though it hadn’t truly been.

“Then Val was made a prisoner following the battle of Castle Black and she was one of the loveliest things I’d ever, ever seen. After I was brought back I was confused and scared and I could barely control myself. Val made a meal out of me for months on end. Then the Night’s King was defeated, I had to go south, she had to go to the Dreadfort, and as easily as she might throw away a worn out pair of gloves, she sent me off, completely finished with me. I was flirted with on the way down to King’s Landing. Carellen was the only one I touched.

“At court I threw myself into work. Then you came, dirty and thin and disheveled, fighting your way out of the dirt, pulling yourself through the horrors you’d seen, saving yourself from being made into a villain or victim, fighting for your son’s memory and your honor. And after you conquered more of the people out to destroy you, you combed your hair and put your silks back on and reminded everyone what a lady you are. And I’m so hopelessly, madly in love with you that I can barely handle it. Sometimes I look at you and I wonder what in the Seven Hells you’re doing with me. There will never be anyone else but you. It’s not possible. You’re all that’s good in this world to me, everything I ever wanted. And that’s… that’s the truth, Sansa. What I said that day in the godswood is true. It was true then, it’s true now. It always will be. And I’m so sorry if I ever let you doubt that. I’ll gladly spend the rest of my life proving it.”

Sansa turned away and sobbed, clutching her belly. She knew that he was telling the truth. He’d proven it enough times by now. She’d said those things to hurt him. To hurt him enough to make him want to hurt her. To try and convince herself that she could hate him. She started to feel that weakness sink in, the one that made her anger melt away, made her want to hold him and cry and love him.

She didn’t know how she felt, really. Aside from confused.

Sansa went back to the bedchamber and slipped out of her gown and slippers. She donned blue woolen kirtle, boots, and reached for her ratted wolf pelt. She fetched a few cushions from the bed as well, and a set of Jon’s furs and his boots.

When she returned to the solar, he was crouched over in his chair, head in hands. Sansa shoved his furs and boots at him. “Put them on. We’re going to the godswood.”

“What are the pillows for?” He asked.

“So I’ll be comfortable. Kneeling, praying, sitting on the ground is much harder for me now.”

He took them and put them under his arm once he was dressed, and she took his hand. Jon gave her a look hopeful enough to make her heart break. She took a step towards the door but he stopped her. “Wait. I know you like that cloak, but it’s not enough. Let me get you another. You can wear that one under it.”

She sighed and let him go. He brought back a large black wool lined with bear’s fur and placed it
over her shoulders. Their hands intertwined again and they hurried out, Ghost following them. When they got to the Heart Tree, Jon arranged the cushions carefully so she might sit better, then knelt beside her.

Sansa prayed for guidance. She prayed for clarity. She prayed for answers to fix what was happening. She prayed for the Old Gods to keep the Faith of the New Gods from hurting her family. She prayed for Jon. She prayed until the world seemed to disappear.

The world came back with noise and blinding light. She was leaning against a couple of things. One was obviously the Heart Tree. The other was her husband. Her head was against his chest, his head bent over hers. He had his arms and his cloak around her protectively, one hand resting on her belly. The red leaves and white branches of the tree hung around them, as if it had both of them in its own protective embrace. The shadows of the branches certainly seemed to cushion the glare of the sun a bit. Despite this, there was this odd peace to it all.

“Your Grace!”

Norese Morrigen, of all people, was running up to them, a deep green cloak about her shoulders and a shocked look on her face. She was about to get close when an armor-clad figure stepped in front of her seemingly from out of nowhere.

“Stop right there. Why are you disturbing their Graces?”

It was Brienne. Brienne of Tarth. Sansa blinked a couple of times. How long has she been here?

“It’s alright, Brienne,” Sansa said, still trying to adjust her eyes. Jon began to stir. The Lady Knight stepped aside and Norese came closer, looking at them with wide eyes.

“What’s happening?” Jon asked at once in a sort of sleepy bewilderment. He opened his eyes and blinked several times. When he saw Sansa, he clutched her chin. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, just aching.” The Heart Tree was lovely, but didn’t make for a comfortable bed.

“Princess Sansa, what are you doing here?” Norese demanded, still staring. She came closer, holding out her hands. Sansa tried to wave her away, but the girl seemed to insist. “Your Grace, this is hardly proper—“

“Step away!” Jon said sharply, clearly annoyed. By the way he winced as he moved, he was aching a bit too. He pulled a couple of leaves from her hair, looking at her intently. “Are you sure that’s all?”

She had a wicked need to piss as well, but did not feel comfortable confessing that to her husband, let alone in front of her new Sworn Shield and one of the girls conspiring to sleep with him. “Fine. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“We must have fallen asleep at some point last night while praying.” Jon shivered as he said this. Sansa immediately cupped his cheek.

“We’re okay. No one’s here to hurt you. Or touch or kiss you except me.”

He nodded. “I know.”

“I went to your quarters after the queen gave me my new assignment, My Lady,” Brienne told her. “When I saw that neither of you were there, I remembered that you both worship the Old Gods and come here sometimes, so I found you here. I didn’t wish to disturb your prayer, so I stayed silent, and...
when I realized you’d both fallen asleep, I tried to wake you, but you both kept waving me away every time I tried. I didn’t want to risk carrying you in your current position and besides, every time I tried, His Grace would wave me away again or Ghost would come over and warn me away.”

Sansa peered up at Brienne. “So you’ve been here all night? Awake?”

Brienne nodded, a proud look on her face. “I swore to protect you, Princess Sansa.” She glanced over at the direwolf, now sleeping against the trunk, blending into it disturbingly well. “Of course, this one has helped a bit.”

Norese shrieked when she saw the Direwolf, jumping back. The others looked at her in annoyance. Jon groaned and rubbed his eyes. Sansa picked a couple of fallen leaves from his hair and laughed. “Targaryen red on black.”

He chuckled and kissed her.

“Your Graces, if I may be of any assistance——” Norese began, having calmed a bit.

“We don’t want any of your assistance, Lady Nora,” Jon said impatiently, getting to his feet and helping Sansa up.

“Norese,” the young woman said glumly.

“We’re fine,” Sansa told her, not in the mood to listen to her. “Brienne will escort us back to our rooms. Tell the other girls I’m not feeling up to meeting today. Lady Margaery may lead you today. You’re dismissed.”

Jon rubbed her back and she groaned. “Brienne, I’m so sorry about this.”

“It’s no bother. I’m prepared to serve and protect,” the Queensguard insisted as they went back into the castle. Jon gave her a pained but appreciative look.

“Brienne, I’m very glad you’re the one guarding my wife.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Brienne said, sounding like she didn’t need his happiness.

Nani and Satin were waiting for them in the solar. Satin started fussing, but Nani seemed oddly unperturbed. “I came by in the night to make sure you were safe. Dothraki women ride until birth. You can sleep against a tree. But I’m still sending for Zora to rub you down.”

Sansa nodded, still eager to urinate. They were fussled over a bit more, she pissed, and then she pulled Jon aside for a moment, looking deep into his eyes. “I’m still angry with you. This will not just go away,” she informed him, “But I don’t hate you, nor do I want to hate you. I love you. I love you and I am disappointed in you.”

He nodded, bowing his head. “I’m sorry I never told you. I never thought it would matter like this. But I will make it up to you.”

Sansa closed her eyes and nodded.

Chapter End Notes
Everyone's emotions be crazy, y'all. Hope it wasn't TOO jarring.

I did sort of want to capture Sansa's ability to lash out at people she loves when under extreme emotional duress. Obviously, she's got a right to be upset about this, but the strength of her later reaction is huge. She's obviously much better/mature about this these days, but all the mounting shit has really brought this out in her at the moment. Also, her ability to overly idealize things... in this case, Jon.
Wise Counsel and Make-Up Sex

Chapter Summary

Exactly what the title says. Issues are worked out.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Blue, as always, for her beta-work!

I missed writing those two schtupping.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Fifty-four: Wise Counsel and Make-Up Sex

Jon:

First he went to the training yards to hack and slash his frustrations away at a training dummy. Though he still ached from his night in the godswood, he desired an outlet more than he desired physical comfort.

At first, it was perfect. He started out with some basic training armor and started hacking away. It wasn’t just his back that hurt, really. His heart ached more than his muscles did.

Sansa called him a bastard. And not in that sweet, affectionate way that she did sometimes when they were abed. When they played their little games of the lusty bastard boy seducing the good lady. Not like when she lovingly called him Jon Snow, as if that name belonged to them, and them alone the way so many memories and warm feelings did. She called him a bastard to hurt him.

*We weren’t even together when Carellen happened!* He thought angrily as Longclaw hacked away at the dummy in front of him. Sweat was building everywhere. He could feel his tunic start to stick to his skin. *How was I supposed to know the wench would show up to court, eager to throw herself in my path once more? I cannot control everything! I sent her from my bed, didn’t I?*

*And a bloody miracle I did, too.* The girl didn’t have a body like a girl. Not now, not then. She’d worn a shift so fine and clinging she’d been able to make out the points of her nipples even in the candlelight. And she’d looked at him with these eyes of pure desire. And he knew it wasn’t for his royal blood. She’d wanted him as a man. *And I am a man, am I not? Of course I was tempted! A beautiful woman was lying in my bed, half-dressed, wanting me. I was in my cups and miserable! So I craved a bit of honey. But I still resisted, though I had no woman or vows left to be faithful to. I still stopped myself, because I remembered the lass was young and foolish and that I was a man grown and that I had a duty not to dishonor or harm her. I tried to do the right thing.*
Doesn’t that ever matter?

It just wasn’t fair. Any other man probably would have succumbed. They’d have bedded the Smallwood girl. Jon didn’t. He knew it was wrong. He didn’t want to hurt her or ruin her life. It was one misstep. One that didn’t deserve such a condemnation. But he’d held his tongue last night. He felt guilty and besides, his wife was with child. Upsetting her further would do no good.

Still, Sansa acted like he’d actually strayed. But he would never do such a thing. He didn’t care about other women now that he had her. At least not in that way. Even when he did catch himself admiring the curve of another woman’s figure or the color of her hair, he always found himself eventually comparing them to his wife and they’d always fall short. For one thing, Sansa was one of the most beautiful women in the kingdoms. Everyone said her only rival in looks was Daenerys. All the other beauties that Jon had seen, Margaery Tyrell, Arianne Martell, Cersei Lannister… they still weren’t as lovely as his wife. Not in his eyes.

For another, no one loved or understood him like she did and he knew he’d never get what he wanted from another person. Not like what he got from her. Sometimes she just instinctively knew what he wanted or needed. Or she understood him when no one else did. She even seemed to find his bad jokes amusing. And she laughed genuinely at what he said. Making her laugh made him feel more special than anything in this world and no one else alive could make him feel that good.

But, as it turned out, not only could she make him feel better than anyone else could, she also had a knack for hurting him.

And it was apparent to him that his actions had hurt her. That was why she’d said those things.

But what happened with Carellen had nothing to do with her. She was at Winterfell at the time. They’d not seen each other in years.

But now Sansa was being sucked in. Sucked into his stupid mistake. And so was Dany. And possibly his unborn child as well.

But that wasn’t supposed to happen, he thought angrily, throwing his armor off in discomfort. The weather was getting warmer and he felt stifled. He resumed his practice in his tunic alone. I was never supposed to hurt Sansa. She was never supposed to hurt me. We were supposed to be a team. A support system. Just like...

Just like your brothers?

Jon stopped for a few seconds, panting. He closed his eyes, willing the images of knives and whispers of ‘For the Watch’ away. This wasn’t that. Sansa would never betray him like that. Sansa loves me. Her slap last night is the worst harm she’d ever do me.

He was slicked with sweat all over. It took a little while for him to realize it wasn’t just sweat coating his cheeks. Jon wiped his face with the hem of his tunic, then tore the sweat-soaked garment off, feeling stifled. He gripped Longclaw’s hilt again and went for a new dummy.

Are all my past mistakes going to haunt me? Don’t I get to have a few missteps or sins that don’t ruin my life?

Jon glanced contemptuously at some of the men training in the yard. How many of these men and boys have fucked young girls, dishonored their wives, done far worse things than I? How many of them have had their mistakes buried? How many don’t have to deal with this level of consequences from their own errors?
He focused his attentions back on the dummy. He imagined it as the High Sparrow, grinning and plotting to take down his marriage, rubbing his hands together in relish or stroking his absurdly long beard.

It felt good, hacking at that image.

The relief he got from that, though, was short lived. For when he finally exhausted himself, he turned around to find a collection of young ladies gathered by the fences of the yard, gawking at him. Among them was the Fisher girl, and about five others he didn’t recognize.

He looked down at himself and realized he was shirtless, sweating, and altogether not fit for public viewing. He sheathed his blade and grabbed his tunic. Nathen brought him a drying cloth for his face, dutiful as ever, but even more nervous than usual.

“There are a lot of girls here watching today, Your Grace.” Nathen remarked as Jon wiped his face. The prince sighed.

“Yes Nathen, there are. Unfortunately. You are welcome to the lot of them, if you like.”

“Oh, I could never… Girls don’t like me.”

Jon looked at Nathen with pity. “That sort of attitude won’t do any good in changing that. Girls generally don’t like it when a man assumes he knows how they feel about anything.”

“But I do know they don’t like me! I’m all spotted and awkward and ugly.”

The prince sighed. He liked his squire, and pitied him, but he didn’t have time to help the lad with his self-esteem. He’d been trying to improve the young man’s opinion of himself since he took him into his service. Nathen’s self-loathing reminded Jon of Sam years ago. “You know nothing, Nathen Cerwyn.”

“You mean I’m stupid, too?”

“No, I mean… Nevermind. Look, just try and be friendly. And if you stop assuming you know how they feel, maybe some girl will find she likes you after all. Regardless, I don’t want these maids hanging around here.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“And get me my cloak,” he told the lad, pulling his sweaty tunic back on. It didn’t do much for modesty, as it stuck to his skin once more. When he looked over at the collection of girls, he regretted it, as they descended into giggles and flirtatious smiles.

He began marching towards the armory when one lass boldly called out, “You fought valiantly, Your Grace!”

He stopped short at that, because it was too stupid to ignore. He turned. One young lady leaned forward. Her breath caught when she saw him respond.

“What, against a wooden dummy?” He asked, eyes wide.

Her face went as red as her hair. The other girls laughed. The maid’s eyes began to well up and Jon’s stomach sank. He hadn’t meant to be cruel. Jon started to speak again so he might apologize, but the lass bolted. The other girls kept laughing.
Jon lost his patience. “Like the lot of you are any better? Sitting and gawking like a flock of hens? Either you’re here to train yourselves, or you’re not here at all. You all disturb those of us who are here to improve our skills, and I will not abide by it. I am a fighter, not a dancing bear. Leave. All of you.”

That silenced them. The whole group turned and hurried away in quiet embarrassment. Nathen brought Jon his cloak and the prince almost went back to his apartments, but then stopped and headed in a different direction.

~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~

Barristan:

He’d been up all night putting extra precautions in regarding Princess Sansa’s protection. The good news was that the queen was completely on board with him. She even came to him with the suggestion that Brienne be the princess’s sworn shield, which was perfect.

Brienne’s only rival in the fighting department was Dead Dirt (Brienne was stronger, though Dead Dirt had more endurance. The two were equally swift and disciplined, though.). She also had a very special attachment to the Stark girls, having once made a vow to their mother (who she had served at one point) to get them back to Winterfell safely. Her Queensguard vows had kept her from accompanying Arya home, but she’d put in a request to accompany Princess Sansa on her northern progress weeks ago.

Furthermore, Brienne was a woman, and the princess had some underlying discomfort when it came to most men, which was hardly surprising. Especially Kingsguard, also not a surprise. But Brienne was a woman who wore her golden heart as plainly as she wore her white cloak and armor, so it was an excellent fit.

Guards worked best when their charges trusted them and vice-versa. Robert Baratheon never trusted his Kingsguard, just treating them like some useless tradition while letting his wife fill the order with Lannister loyalists. Barristan’s compatriots never gave a shit about the king. This new order, at least, seemed genuinely devoted to their charges. And Brienne was devoted to the daughters of Catelyn Tully. When Arya Stark was at court, it was Brienne that always volunteered to escort the girl to various places and often trained with her in the yards. Brienne loved her queen, too. But Lady Catelyn’s daughters would always occupy a special place in her heart.

The same would probably be true for Lady Catelyn’s grandchildren as well. It boded well for both House Targaryen and the guard.

If only she weren’t… Barristan sighed when he thought about it. Brienne of Tarth made for the most perfect successor a devoted Lord Commander, save for what lay between her legs.

It wasn’t that Barristan objected on a personal level. Indeed, he liked the company of women, though not in the way most men did. He didn’t really have many interests in that area in general. But he regarded women the way he regarded men more or less, and being in the Kingsguard his whole life sometimes forced him to be a bit cut off from the fairer sex. Aside from the weeping Queen Rhaella, who always tore at his heart and the pernicious Queen Cersei. It was an unfortunate circumstance, thoroughly unfortunate. But now he was happy to have a queen and princess to serve and a woman among his order to converse with. It made his life feel a bit more balanced.

But Brienne was unlikely to be accepted. Perhaps a Lady Commander might be accepted a few decades down the line, but he doubted it was in the cards for when he died. Brienne was a trial run, and an excellent one, but for a place on the Kingsguard alone, not command of it. As much as things
had changed, other things would take far more time. Brienne was one of seven. A minority and an anomaly. She already had enough to deal with just being a member of the order. She often got laughs and catcalls in the city and the Red Keep. Rumors abounded that she secretly had a cock, and often she was intentionally sabotaged in her duties by various guards. Barristan outlawed such harassment among the men, but he doubted any but Dead Dirt abided by this one hundred percent. Brienne was a bit too proud to always report it, and there was only so much Barristan could do to enforce the rule. He knew she could withstand it as she had her entire life, but that didn’t stop it from bothering him.

And it was deplorable, of course. Men could laugh and cheer about a literal Kingslayer being kept on the guard and then promoted to command while the current Lord Commander still lived, but not a woman. It made his skin crawl. It made him fear for the child in Princess Sansa’s belly, should it be female. A law had been passed promoting a princess’s rights to being the equal of a prince’s, but laws on paper didn’t always mean they’d be honored.

Even at that moment, the Faith itself might be plotting to undermine Queen Daenerys. Even the Mother of Dragons isn’t safe. Who was, really? Barristan had begun to worry over the futility his chosen occupation sometime around Robert Baratheon’s crowning.

Barristan sat at his desk, cupping his head in his hands and blinking repeatedly. His eyes felt dry. The queen was employing more spies and that meant more complicated logistics for security overall. It wasn’t a bad choice at all, just one that meant more work for him.

I miss Varys. Barristan never thought such a thought would ever enter his head. It always used to infuriate him how he could never guess at the man’s true intentions. But as he was beginning to realize, that was sort of the point of the Master of Whispers. On the day that Daenerys returned to King’s Landing from the Wall, the eunuch came before the Iron Throne, bowed, informed them his work was more or less complete, and that though he’d always be watching, he wasn’t sure he was young enough to watch to the best of his abilities and resigned, recommending Drystan Waters for the post. The next morning, he disappeared. Not to be found again.

Varys’s motivations turned out to be order. But with Drystan Waters, Barristan couldn’t be sure. Varys, at least, had come to King Aerys thoroughly experienced. Drystan Waters was convenient. Varys was also definitely in the Targaryen camp. But Barristan wondered if perhaps Waters had more selfish intent.

Or perhaps I’m just naturally paranoid of all spymasters. Barristan honestly had no idea. He was tired.

There was a measured knock at his door. The Lord Commander groaned, turned, and bid whomever it was to enter. In came the prince, looking miserable and confused.

Jon Targaryen stopped short in the middle of the room. “Forgive me, Ser Barristan, but I---”

There was a long pause. Barristan looked at him expectantly. Prince Jon hesitated. “I… I don’t know…”

“Do you remember coming here?” Barristan saw a lot of that, war veterans losing time. Turning up somewhere having forgotten how they got there and why they came.

“Yes, of course. That’s not what I mean. I mean… I came here because… I need guidance.”

It was his duty to give the royal family guidance whenever they asked it of him. Still, Barristan hesitated slightly. He sometimes worried that he might do this wrong, or that he might not be listened to. He was used to that. King Robert and King Aerys had no love for him, nor did they value his
opinions. Sometimes Prince Rhaegar might ask his advice, but it seemed a trend among Targaryens to dismiss things they didn’t want to hear. Even Barristan’s beloved queen had this tendency. She was still uncomfortable hearing unpleasant truths regarding her father and brother.

The prince, though, was a bit better about this. Must be the Stark blood. While the prince did sometimes tune things out, they tended to be a bit more inconsequential than what his aunt determinedly ignored. And when the prince did ask for advice, he never cut the advisor off the way Daenerys sometimes did when unwelcome words hit her ears.

*If Prince Jon is asking for advice, then he means to hear it regardless of its content.* Barristan swallowed and gestured for the prince to take a seat.

“I did not sleep with Asha Greyjoy.”

Barristan nodded. He would take the prince at his word. If Jon did, though, it wouldn’t be the first vows he broke. *But then, he did what he needed to do to protect the realm.* Not that Barristan didn’t believe the boy suffered through his trysts with the first wildling girl. The second affair came after his death, and the vows ended at death. That was the reasoning Barristan gave himself. Now the Watch was gone, and Jon Targaryen, no longer Jon Snow, had taken a wife and fathered a child, as he must to protect the realm.

The Lord Commander felt it wasn’t entirely delusional to take the young man at his word in this case, despite his past. The vows Jon Targaryen broke before were ones taken (and broken) as a green boy of fourteen and fifteen. Barristan was twenty-three when he took his own vows, well versed in the world around him and a man grown. *Vows are not made for boys.*

“Good.”

Jon was twenty-three himself when he wed his bride, still twenty-three now. And his place by his wife’s side was perhaps a bit more enthusiastically chosen than his place at the Wall. And approached with more knowledge of what it entailed as well. More than once, the prince spoke of how shocked and disillusioned he was by the Night’s Watch when he ventured to the Wall, how he’d expected a noble order and instead found a collection of criminals.

The prince knew Sansa Stark from her birth. He’d shared her bed for at least half a year before making her his wife. *A man who once resigned himself to freezing his life away at Castle Black will not find promises to keep warm in a woman’s embrace difficult to keep.*

Barristan was pleased, if his prince was faithful. Princess Sansa was a good woman who deserved a proper husband. He remembered meeting her on the Kingsroad all those years ago. Despite the direwolf by her side, frightened by Ser Illyn and ever so sweet, eager to remember her courtesies, and well-spoken. It saddened him to know such a fine little girl was promised to Joffrey, who had already proved himself a vicious, spoiled brat to all who knew him. She’d become more eloquent in the passing years (and she’d been surprisingly articulate for her age even then), just as charming, and less affected by pockmarked men. Even the dragons didn’t seem to faze her. He liked to think her husband treated her as she deserved. He liked to think his prince was honorable.

He’d met Prince Jon at the Wall, the young man living among a group of wildling spearwives. The boy Howland Reed and others promised to be the queen’s nephew. To prove this, Daenerys had him walk towards the dragons and he did. Many men would have refused. But Jon Snow did it without question. Barristan feared for the boy. Not just from the dragons themselves, but also for the look in the young man’s eyes, as if he wouldn’t be terribly bothered if the beasts ended up burning him to a crisp. They did not. The entire ordeal, the revelation of his new identity seemed to put a new jolt in him, and gave him motivation to assist his aunt. But Barristan would never forget the resigned, dead
look in the prince’s grey eyes when he stepped up towards Rhaegal and stroked her neck.

There’d been a bit of that still in him even after the battles were won. Many men would be overjoyed to find themselves to be secret princes of an empire. It was rather like a legend or song. But Jon Targaryen had attended to this new fate with a morose sense of duty and marked lack of enthusiasm. He’d seemed so unbearably lost for a while.

Despite how this seemed to disappoint many who claimed the prince had none of his father in him, Barristan saw it. He saw it more plainly in those early moons of knowing the young man than he ever had. Everyone spoke of how brave, how talented, how beautiful Rhaegar Targaryen was. They spoke of how great a warrior he was, how well he looked in his ruby armor, how wonderful a king he surely would have made. What was never spoken of was how very, very sad the prince was. How he withdrew from people constantly. How often his legendary violet eyes looked like they were about to be filled with tears. People didn’t speak of that darkness, that melancholia. They spoke of fire, light, silver hair, and rubies.

Prince Jon’s eyes were indeed grey, but they had that same sad, lonely look to them. That pain. That confusion.

Or, at least, they had until a certain daughter of Winterfell came along.

The current prince still looked sad on occasion, this being one of them. Jon Targaryen looked miserable as he spoke.

“I let the rumor leave Pyke by accident. I let it carry through Pyke so I could meet with Lady Greyjoy with less suspicion. We were plotting to remove her sons from the islands, and needed a cover. And now I find that this lie is hurting my wife. Not only that, a brief encounter that took place before we reunited, one which I cut short, one which should never have affected her, may now hurt her as well. So badly, in fact, that it has driven a wedge between us. A wedge that caused her to rage against me last night, accuse me of all manner of things and even strike me. I… I fear that our bond is damaged beyond repair. We’ve now both hurt each other.”

Barristan’s stomach sank. He was not skilled in solving marital strife, for obvious reasons. This confused him, though. Brienne had found the two of them snuggled up together under the Heart Tree. What was this fight, then? He sighed.

Many would probably advise the prince to punish his wife through some means. This type of behavior would be considered errant and unacceptable from a woman to her husband, and in many cases, worthy of physical retribution. There were two laws regarding such matters in most parts of Westeros, the rule of thumb and the rule of six. A man could beat his wife, but only with a rod no thicker than his thumb. And he could only give her six lashes. Of course, such punishment was never really applied consistently. It varied from slight to slight, real or imagined. A man could give his wife six lashes for burning his dinner or for cuckolding him. There were some who even believed a husband should beat his wife regularly to assert his authority and warn her away from potential sin.

It wasn’t a teaching that the Lord Commander believed in. Raising a hand or weapon to anyone save an enemy was repugnant to him. Not to mention cowardly. And that poor woman had received enough of that in her lifetime.

Even if Barristan wished to suggest such a thing (and he truly, truly didn’t), he doubted very much that the prince would respond well. Even if Jon Targaryen were the type to punish his wife, his wife was not the sort of woman who would take it well. The Queensguard swore to the royal family not help them inflict physical pain on an innocent person. So even if he wanted to, he wouldn’t. But without the standard advice to rely on, the Lord Commander was a bit at a loss. The knight knew
nothing of these matters. He considered his words carefully.

“How did you respond to the princess’s rage?”

“I assured her that I loved her and asked for her forgiveness. I was hurt and offended, but decided that for her sake and the sake of our child that I should not cause her further distress with a harsh reaction. Afterwards, she wished to go out and pray with me. I assume you know how we spent the night?”

“Of course.” I do my job, Your Grace. But Barristan held his tongue.

“Well, after we returned, she informed me that she was still upset. I, likewise, was still upset about the night before.”

“And did you tell her this?”

“No. I didn’t feel like fighting with her. Not in her condition. So I went to the yard instead. Unfortunately, a number of young ladies were there gawking at me, so I found little relief with the evidence of my mistakes giggling at me the entire time.”

Barristan sighed. “Your Grace, while I understand and admire your hesitance to address your unhappiness with your wife, I am not sure it’s wise to keep these problems from her. Resentment over things like this can build up and lead to true damage if you do not try to resolve them.”

Barristan thought of Cersei Lannister and Robert Baratheon as he said this. There was never going to be love between them. But perhaps if they’d made the effort to reach some sort of understanding, their union might not have proven so poisonous. Cersei and Robert had been like children: petty, resentful, selfish, and indulgent. But one didn’t need to be so flawed in character as those two to make some of the same mistakes.

“If you spoke to her delicately, you shouldn’t fear causing too much upset in her. But you can’t let this fester.” Barristan wasn’t sure if he was saying the right thing. What do I know of marriage, really? I never wed, and the two marriages I witnessed most intimately were the most destructive and miserable unions in the history of the Seven Realms. Why is he even asking me?

“I worry she won’t forgive me for what happened. It involves one of her ladies.” The prince proceeded to tell him of a drunken night at Acorn Hall involving a few stolen kisses. “And now the girl is at court and may be spurred on by the Faith. And I almost let her seduce me. She was a young girl, possibly being pushed into my bed by some monsters with an agenda and… How could I be so weak?”

“You were unhappy and lonely. And in the end, you did the right thing. You had no way of knowing what might have been happening. Your wife has been hurt by far worse things, and it is possible she was thinking of that more than she was truly thinking of your own deeds.” The Lord Commander of the Queensguard rubbed his temple. “You need to speak to her. I do not know enough of the situation and I fear it involves certain matters that are best left between the two of you. The best advice I can give is that you be honest and gentle with her.”

The prince ran his fingers through his hair. “I want to take her back to Dragonstone.”

That did sound like an excellent idea, but a difficult one. “The queen has some suspicions regarding our current acting Master of Ships. But I will see what I can arrange passage-wise, with the permission of the queen. If I can find something Ser Davos hasn’t been involved with, she may relent.”
The prince stood. “Thank you, Ser Barristan. I truly mean it.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Sansa:

She’d fallen asleep on the massage table that Zora had brought. When she woke an hour later, her first thought was, *Oh Gods, what have I done?*

She’d called Jon a lecher, an adulterer, a liar, and a bastard. She’d said everything she could have to hurt him. She’d even *struck* him. Her own, dear sweet husband, who would do anything for her. She’d denied his love and slapped him.

How could she have done such a thing? To the one man who had shown her love, understanding, and kindness. The man who had helped her heal from all that had befallen her. Who had held her through the nights where she’d cried for her lost son and shook from nightmares of Petyr. Who held her hair when she expelled Roslin Frey’s poisons. Who discovered and killed those who tried to hurt her. Who built the Godswood for her and filled her rooms with winter roses just to make her smile.

She’d hurt him. And she’d done it on purpose.

How would he ever forgive her? For those things she’d said to him? How could she ever forgive herself?

She had to apologize. She had to tell him that she hadn’t meant it. Not a word of it. That she’d just been so upset, so jealous, so scared. The Faith coming after her, after their family, like this terrified her. And she’d just started thinking about girls being prostituted by men using them to achieve an agenda and it was too much.

But she’d said unforgiveable things to her dear, sweet husband. He deserved better. He deserved better than her. *He should cast me aside for one of those girls. They’d probably never say such horrible things to him. And they’d probably give him more children.* She’d already used up some of her childbearing years. But many of those girls were younger, and newly flowered.

*Not a used up slut with a fat belly.* Tears leaked from her eyes as she lay on the makeshift table Zora had brought in. When Nani saw her tears, she hurried over.

“What’s wrong, Khalakki?”

“I hurt my husband.”

“Did he deserve it?”

“No!”

“Then apologize. Make it up to him. It’s simple. He loves you. He will forgive you. Don’t do it again.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Yes it is. We just all like to pretend our problems are different and very strange. But we bleed and breathe the same. We hurt the same. We love the same. Now stop crying and hating yourself, Khalakki. Wait for Zora to finish. I’ll braid your hair, we’ll put a nice dress on you, and when he gets back, you’ll kiss him sweet, ask for his forgiveness, and he’ll give it to you. That is how it always is. It is known.”
“He may not be so quick to forgive me.”

“How did you hurt him?”

“I called him awful things and accused him of worse. I insulted his honor, which he holds dear above all things. I accused him of not truly loving me. I hit him.”

“Where did you hit him?”

“His face.”

Nani pulled up a chair and cupped Sansa’s cheek. Despite the tender gesture, her eyes and tone of voice were hard. “That was bad. You should not harm your husband, not unless he raises a hand to you first. He would not ever do this, so you should never do that. You have a kinder husband than any or most I’ve seen. He is strong and gentle and he is worthy of a braid and beads in his hair and knows you are as well. He may not live perfectly by your silly western customs, but he knows the good ones and keeps to those. So you will not hurt him again.

“Instead, you will kiss him where you hit him. You will tell him that what you said was not true or deserved, and that you did it out of anger. You did it out of passion, for your passions are hard to control when you are with child, and that you are under great strain. And you will not raise a hand to him again. You will keep that promise. You will tell him why you were so upset. Not just with him, but in general. I will make sure good food is prepared. He likes the Yunkish duck, and I will order the kitchens to make it. You will tell him you love him and tell him why. You will tell him why you know he loves you. And you will make love tonight and forgive each other. Tell me, what did he do to spark this?”

“He nearly bedded a young girl two years ago. Then he cast her from his room and now she may be in the clutches of someone who wishes to tear us apart.”

“And by hurting him over this, you are letting them. And by letting your guilt destroy you, you are letting them. Be stronger than that, Khalakki. He cast this girl from his bed before he claimed you. He will not take her to bed now. He is not Dothraki, he keeps to one woman. He will keep to you.”

_Thank the gods he is not Dothraki._ Sansa had been learning all about the Dothraki from Nani, Daenerys, the other maids, and even from that bloodrider who had come to court for the wedding. Not only did the khals, khalakkas, and kos often take multiple wives, but sometimes they even shared their wives with their bloodriders. Sansa was never going to let herself be “shared” again. Nor was she willing to share Jon.

_He’s mine_, she thought to those idiot seaweed girls. _He’s mine and you can’t have him._

She eventually got up and called for a bath. She asked Nani not to braid her hair, but to leave it loose and flowing. She chose a gown of black and red that obscured her bump and flattered her. Her maids went above and beyond making her presentable and putting the rooms in order. But this didn’t help her nerves much. Sansa paced for a while, wringing her hands, growing more nervous with each passing second that he didn’t return.

Finally, she grew weary of waiting and set out on her own, Brienne and Nani accompanying her. When she did find him, coming out of Ser Barristan’s chambers looking thoughtful, she found herself aghast. He was soaked in sweat, his shirt sticking to his chest under his cloak. _For the Mother’s sake, Jon_. She hoped too many people hadn’t seen him in such an inappropriate state. Nani ran ahead to arrange a bath.
Once the water was poured and the supplies assembled, though, Sansa changed into less formal attire and ordered everyone from her chambers. He sat in the tub, scrubbing himself and looking at her. There was a certain nervousness there. Then finally, Sansa spoke.

“I’m so sorry, Jon. I’m so sorry for what I said to you. I’m sorry I hurt you.” She hurried to his side and kissed the cheek she’d struck last night. “I didn’t mean a word of it. I was just so angry and disappointed and I felt threatened.”

“This is my fault. I never should have left you, and I never should have let those rumors spread. I just never imagined these things could affect us so much. I didn’t think anyone would truly believe it. I certainly didn’t think I’d come home to a gaggle of high born tarts trying to disrupt us. And that can’t be easy for you.”

“It isn’t. All my life, people have been taking things from me. I don’t want anyone to take you from me as well. And what you told me about Carellen… It just reminded me of things… things I’d done. I wanted to leave those memories behind, but with what I heard, it all came roaring back. But I hurt you, I know I did.”

Jon nodded, and her heart nearly shattered at this confirmation. “Being spoken to that way devastated me, Sansa. That you of all people would think I would engage in such dishonorable things. You made me feel like I was one of the people who had done those things to you. And it didn’t seem fair. Carellen was a girl I’d literally forgotten. I sent her away because I knew it wasn’t right. It was never meant to have anything to do with you. And I feel like no matter what I do, or don’t do, I’m still failing you as a man. I am loyal to you, and yet you’re still hurt by the possibility. I sent a young girl from my bed before we were even lovers, and somehow I hurt you then. No matter how I try, I always end up making things worse. And I felt like you hated me.”

“No, Jon...” She sniffed. “Jon… I wanted to hate you. I did. But I couldn’t. I can’t. I can’t hate you. And I know you’d never hurt me. You’re one of the only people in my life who haven’t tried to take something away from me or use me or destroy me. You’re my hero and I’m so sorry I forgot that. I heard your story and I was reminded of these nights when Petyr would come to me and tell me I had to go to the bedchamber of some lord who was reluctant to support me. And I’d go, because if I didn’t gain enough allies, my son and I would be killed. And so I’d be waiting there in an unfamiliar bed, ready to spread my legs for whatever man was demanding it and I always ended that night heartbroken. When I look at some of these girls, I see myself at that time. And to know you almost succumbed to such a temptation just gutted me. The thought that you might desire her---“

“---No.” Jon cut her off. He stared at her. “The fact that you think I want anyone else? That hurts me, Sansa. That you would even entertain the notion that I would stray from you, or even think on it… Your lack of faith in me. That hurts me. And it’s not fair. I love you more than I ever knew I could love anyone. That you could feel enough doubt to say those things to me… How could you judge me in the same way you’d judge the people who hurt you? I would never hurt you, Sansa. Never. What you said last night was so unfair…”

“I know! And I’m sorry! But you have to know, Jon, it wasn’t about you. Not really. It was about all those things that were done to me. And I’m so sorry they’ve hurt you as well. I’m so sorry.” She began to cry. Jon stood up in the tub and pulled her close. She sobbed into his shoulder.

“I’m just so afraid, Jon. I’m so afraid I’m going to lose you. You and Aemonaerys---“

“Don’t say that,” he insisted. “You’re not losing either of us. Remember what I told you that night? We’re going to be wed and live together for many years and have many pretty babes. And no one is going to take that from us. No one. Not the ladies of the court, not the Faith, not even the Seven Realms. They won’t take our family from us, I swear it. I will die before I let that happen.”
Sansa nodded and reached up to clutch his face. “I know, Jon. I just… I am just so tired of this all. Can’t it just be us for a while? Just us? I’m so weary of all of these conspiracies and machinations. I just want to be free of this, so I can greet our son with a smile.”

“Our son?” He managed to smile slightly. “I thought you said…”

“Speculation, Jon. But we need a son. Only after I give you a son will we be safe. I know the laws have been changed. But not everyone will be eager to accept them. And so, until a boy is born, I will not be seen as secure.”

“And if she’s a girl?”

“We do whatever we can to support her and make it clear who we want as your heir. But just in case, we want a boy to come soon after she does, just to set some minds at ease. As long as we teach our son his place and get him to accept his sister, we might be able to avoid another Dance of the Dragons. We have a ruling queen now. That certainly helps.”

_Things would be safer, though, if we have an Aemon._ It hurt her to think this, as she’d always wanted a girl of her own. And she knew Jon wanted one too, and that delighted her. But with so much conspiracy flying around them, they might have to leave that dream behind.

Jon grasped her more tightly. “Aemon. Naerys. Whatever you give me, you are my princess. My only princess. My only wife. No one is taking you from me. No one is taking our dreams from us. Not again.”

She loved him so much in that moment. She smiled at him for a second, her chin against his chest. He smiled back and it made her heart light up. And, strangely enough, it made her loins burn.

Sansa wanted to do something for her man. So, she began sinking to her knees.

“Sansa, I---”

“Shhhh…” She said, grinning wickedly. “Don’t you want me to---?”

“Oh Gods yes. I do but… Wear your crown. Please? I’ve always wanted to see you do it in your crown.”

Sansa cackled. “Why?”

“I don’t know… Do you have it here?” His coronets tended to be locked away in the treasury vaults for safekeeping.

She pulled herself off her knees and hurried over to one of her new cabinets. As it so happened, she did. “Since the arrival of our honored guests the seaweeds, I like keeping it on hand to wear on any and every possible occasion so that I use every opportunity to remind people who they are dealing with.”

“I love it when you get assertive in your finery.” He sunk back in the tub, casting her a wicked look. “Come in here and remind me who I’m dealing with.”

“Stand near the end, Your Grace.” She told him. Sansa felt this very intense need now to take him in her mouth. She couldn’t do it climbing over him--- it made her uncomfortable with her belly the way it was. On her knees was more comfortable.

He did so, watching and stifling a groan as Sansa pulled her kirtle and shift off. When he helped her
into the tub, he pulled her close for a second and kissed her, then began nuzzling her neck. She giggled and pushed him away. “Stay standing,” she ordered him, re-securing her coronet.

“Yes, My Princess.”

The sweetest bit was how he kept holding her hands and carefully watching her as she got to her knees in the tub. Also how he paused to pull a lock of hair behind her ear. There was also the fact that Balerion looked nice and happy to see her, standing at attention. *Dany can have Drogon, Rhaegal, and Viserion. I prefer mastering this dragon.* She could feel heat spreading from her core and knew the wetness between her legs had nothing to do with the water she was currently submerged in.

She reached between his legs and stroked his stones, earning a groan from him before leaning forward and licking his shaft. She founded herself more than a little relieved that he’d washed first before she embarked on this. She liked the taste of him well enough when he was clean. After running her tongue along the vein in his cock and conjuring a few loud declarations of adoration from her husband, she began sucking him proper. Their eyes met as she relaxed her throat and brought her lips to the base of him. He always looked at her in utter awe as she did this.

Then he threw his head back and howled when she started humming around him. *That’s right, Jon Snow,* Sansa thought, feeling her cunny twitch, *howl like the wolf you are.*

Sansa snaked a hand down around her belly and between her legs and began stroking herself. She slowed her pace with Jon, trying to catch up with him. She was more sensitive between her legs now, but this still wasn’t quite enough for her to achieve her objective. Her husband erupted within her mouth long before she got close. She swallowed his seed and her disappointment as he sunk down, reclining against the sides of the tub and pulling her onto his chest. Her disappointment went away when he slipped his arm between them.

Sansa thought for a second that he was going to just cup her belly. Instead, he fingered her to the point where she was biting down on his shoulder and nearly drawing blood in her attempt not to scream. But he was merciless, swirling her nub with his thumb and fucking her with two fingers he curled forward. Eventually, she gave up her attempt at silence and cried out, grinding against his hand shamelessly as he attacked her breasts with his mouth. Her peak left her weak.

She settled against him, unable to hold herself up anymore. Breathless, she kissed him on the cheek. “I’m sorry I was so cruel last night,” she told him.

“I’m sorry I was so foolish.”

She straddled him and looked deep into his grey eyes. “Let’s forgive one another. I love you.”

“I love you, Sweetling.” They gazed at each other fondly and he began stroking her teats softly, his eyes dropping a bit.

“You’re filthy,” she told him when his gawking got a bit too obvious to ignore.

“I’m just enjoying them. I’m going to have to share them soon, so I’m just looking my fill while I still can.”

She felt him harden against her. “Yes,” she said, slyly repositioning herself. “You are!”

The next several minutes involved a nice little encounter involving his head between her teats, her fingers in his hair, and his cock inside her cunny. Her second peak was gentler, but easier to find. And when they finished, they stayed interlocked, just sharing kisses and sweet endearments.
The water eventually cooled and Jon helped her out of the tub. He proved attentive, drying both of them off, gently padding her down with a cloth and wrapping her up tightly in her bedrobe, tucking her in, slipping in next to her once he was robed, and holding her warmly against him. “No one has ever made me feel this cozy,” he informed her. “I know who I am with you.”

She kissed him again. “Let’s stay like this forever. Please. There’s sanity here.”

“Agreed.”

This, of course, was when they were interrupted by a banging on the door. “BOTH OF YOU!” Daenerys’s voice called out, “ARE YOU DRESSED?”

They looked at each other, their hearts sinking, and groaned in unison.

“I KNOW YOU’RE IN THERE!”

“She’s the queen,” Sansa reminded Jon miserably. He scowled.

“Come in, Your Grace.”

She burst in, her skirts flying out behind her. With agility and strength remarkable and bit unnerving for a woman so small, she pounced on the foot of the bed, a giant grin matching the wideness of her violet eyes. She looked ready to cry, she seemed so happy.

“Rhaegal is carrying eggs!”

Chapter End Notes

See! This did advance the plot!
Chapter Summary

The court attends services and the High Septon attempts a miracle.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Blue for her Beta work! More notes to come, so check back!

OKAY NEW NOTES: SORRRY. I HAD TO POST THIS CHAPTER ON MY LUNCH BREAK. ANYWAYS:

Haven't had this much fun with a chapter in a long time. The High Septon's been creeping along for a while. And here we are.

I tried to give everyone an awesome moment here. Even Sam and Gilly get to shine a bit!

Chapter Fifty-five: ALL OVER A FUCKING CHAIR?

Sansa:

“When the eggs are laid, I will bring you one,” Daenerys Targaryen promised her as they rode to the Great Sept of Baelor. “In the Old Age of Dragons, Targaryen children would be given a dragon egg in their cradles.”

*I’m not a Targaryen or a child. I have no Valyrian blood. What am I to do with a dragon egg? Not that it was a gift to scoff at. Fossilized dragon’s eggs were worth a fortune, a hundred times their weight in gold or some such absurd number. A live one would be beyond price. But Sansa would never sell such a thing. She preferred that all live dragons be kept firmly within the control of her family.

“Your Grace, that goes beyond generosity,” she told her queen, wide eyed as her palfrey stepped through the streets.

“Well, my plan is that when those eggs are laid, we walk up to the pavilion up there,” Daenerys pointed ahead of them to Baelor’s statue, “You have Aemonaerys on one arm, an egg in the other. Jon and I carry the rest, and we present them to the kingdoms and to the High Sparrow. With precautions taken, of course. But I imagine such an image would be hard to erase from the public’s mind. It’ll be hard for anyone to doubt our position then. We’ll have brought them an heir and the continuation of the dragons, all at the beginning of spring. Everyone will be crying out about how blessed we are by the Seven themselves. Possibly the Old Gods AND the New, what with your northern religious beliefs.”

Sansa gaped at the dragon queen, who was grinning the way she had been for the last fortnight. Now Sansa was smiling as well, despite her discomfort. She rode her horse to the Sept, despite her heavy
belly and her husband’s protests. Her time with Nani taught her to show both strength and vulnerability when necessary, and gave her a clearer view of when those things were appropriate. When approaching the Sept for the bi-weekly service, she wished to show nothing but strength. Most Dothraki women rode when carrying a child, up until birth. The agreement was that she’d not go any faster than a light trot.

This was the sort of theatrical move that the queen excelled at. Sansa liked it a great deal. “Perhaps you should also carry a white rose and play at being the Maiden.”

Daenerys snorted and this quickly descended into full-blown laughter. “Oh, Gods!” She glanced around then leaned in, her voice low. “The Sparrow’s head would probably explode.”

*All the more reason to do it.* It didn’t need to be said aloud, judging by how Dany’s eyes widened mischievously at her good-niece’s expression.

They both giggled.

The eggs concerned her, though. Viserion was marked for Aemonaerys. “What of these new eggs, though?” she asked. “How many will there be? You and Jon are the only ones who can ride or control them properly. Our children will have the blood to do it as well but mine will grow far more slowly than yours. If they all hatch too soon… how will we control them all?”

“Hatching a dragon egg requires rituals and a special environment. The spark of life stays with them for decades. You needn’t worry too much. I’m more concerned about keeping the eggs safe once they’ve been laid. But they don’t just hatch on their own, I assure you. What’s important to me is keeping them out of the hands of others. If they came into the possession of the wrong people, it could be disastrous. At best, we’d lose another potential mount. At worst, enemies would be able to actually hatch the creatures and cause all manner of chaos.” Daenerys shuddered.

“Then I think it best that you not bring one to me.”

“Oh, don’t take this the wrong way. I didn’t mean to suggest you’d hatch and raise a dragon yourself. I know you can’t. I meant for your next children. After Aemonaerys. But I thought you’d like to keep one for your second born.”

*Third.* But she didn’t correct her queen. “Our second born will be Lord of Winterfell. A Stark.”

“And a Targaryen. We need many dragon riders if the species is to survive.”

“Should I send word to my sister to start constructing a pit?”

“If you can spare the coin.”

Sansa’s smile almost fell from her face. She struggled to keep it up so that Daenerys wouldn’t notice. She couldn’t spare the coin. Not at the moment. Arya had written with reports of Moat Cailin needing more repairs than first anticipated. A flood had come to Wintertown as well, causing serious issues with the sewage system. She also suspected the Dustins and Ryswells of misreporting their own finances and not paying their full dues to Winterfell. Unfortunately, at the moment, Arya couldn’t spare the costs to properly investigate or prosecute the matter just yet.

*‘All I know is that Barrowtown and the Rills haven’t had nearly as much trouble getting by as other areas. Their upkeep has been going along far too easily. Roose Ryswell came to woo me with a bracelet of onyx and amber the size of my thumbnails set in silver and bronze (he’s an utter tit). When I asked him how he afforded such a lovely gift in a time of meager resources, he stuttered and*
claimed he got the gems, ‘Cheap from those Wildling Savages, they’re too stupid to know how to price such things properly.’ I looked into it---- The Free Folk in fact price their gems quite shrewdly and actually charge more to Houses that were quick to support the Boltons.’

As it was, Sansa was setting aside a chunk of funds for Arya. The Dragon Pit could wait. Her sister’s livelihood could not.

Arya had sent back the bracelet---- ‘But not the doeskin gloves lined with rabbit’s fur he also gave me. Those I actually like.’. The thing was hideous, but hideous in a way that also screamed ‘EXPENSIVE!’! Definitely suspicious. One had to throw away a lot of gold to make something that ugly.

Too bad we don’t have any fossilized dragon’s eggs. Sansa thought to herself. With one of those, I could afford to build a dragon pit at once.

Arya was looking into the spending of both Houses. Aside from the bracelet, though, there wasn’t anything TOO suspicious just yet. At least nothing provable without a more in-depth investigation, which they simply couldn’t afford at the moment.

Sansa sighed. The good news was that Northern mouths were being fed again. She’d actually kept quite a few people from starving during her tenure as queen, even keeping many sheltered to a degree. But the group housing she and Petyr set up brought about their own problems in winter---corruption from overseers, fights breaking out, disease. She’d tried to address the issues as best she could, but upon her arrest, everything fell apart again. Not only had homes and necessary resources been destroyed, but people had scattered and turned to banditry. Just locating everyone and restoring some semblance of peace to most of the areas was difficult.

Her sister, though, had worked wonders. The first thing she did was clean up the roads, making them clear and safe to travel so that resources and aid could get where they needed to go. She’d ridden out to deal with a number of threats herself, and had organized her own Wintertown Militia to handle things in the areas surrounding Winterfell. All able-bodied men were put to work building, while all able-bodied women were put to work protecting said builders, trained by Wildling spearwives.

‘It's not been easy, getting people to accept this arrangement. Then I pointed out to them that the Gift, Karstark, and Bolton lands are the ones with the least bandits--- mostly because those places are filled with Wildlings, and all of them hold blades so no bandits dare attack them. So the women began to accept blades and the husbands decided that they were willing to accept some protection as they did the heavy lifting, I worked out with the Free Folk that in return for teaching our smallwomen to fight, our smiths would show them how to make good steel, and it would pay off some poaching debts.’

The good news was that now a large chunk of their constituency were Free Folk, who mostly preferred bartering to money as it was, so it made trade within the North alone a bit easier. Still, coin was no less valuable for other matters. Winterfell was still in debt, but to a degree that was manageable enough for them to keep rebuilding. But only at the pace that Sansa had mapped out with Sam Tarly. If the Ryswell and Dustins weren’t paying their fair share, it was disgusting of them. Sansa was extending what there was of Winterfell’s treasury to assist all her vassals in reconstruction, including the Dustins and Ryswells. If one part of the North fell behind, it could drag the rest of it down with it. It was generally agreed by all the Houses that it was time for them to work together to pull through.

Even the Free Folk were doing their share. Just taxes were being paid, they were falling in line with obeying the proper laws, and even sending people to less fortunate areas to help keep the roads safe. They also gleefully participated in the agreement with Dorne, collecting as much ice as they could
below and beyond the Wall. Magna Val had even worked out a contract with Arianne Martell herself to address the mining of ice from the Free Folk lands, supplementing their production and sharing a generous sum of the profits. At first, Sansa feared that the contract Val set up would threaten the agreement Winterfell had with Dorne, but the Magna made sure that transportation relied on the terms of the original contract being maintained. The Thenns were organizing a lot of the mining and transportation, while the Giantsbane folk were providing protection and shelter for miners and transporters.

If the Free Folk were willing to honor trade agreements, taxes, and laws, then traditional Northern Houses had no excuse not to do the same.

Sansa struggled to continue to smile and looked ahead. “I’d have to check with my sister,” she said, trying to laugh it off. “Maybe. Eventually. Even if my third child did become a dragon rider, it’ll be long before Winterfell would require a pit to accommodate the beast.”

“Most likely. And it’ll be long before any of those eggs actually hatch.” Daenerys smiled. “Still, I’m going to talk to Willas about having the pit remodeled a bit to make Rhaegal’s nest more secure. I don’t want anyone seizing eggs. It’s not just the worry over enemies gaining dragons, either. People will go to terrifying lengths to try to hatch them. Blood magic rituals. Sacrifice. Devastating fires. The lure of dragons drives many men mad. Summerhall, most of its household, and my great-grandfather perished trying to bring dragons back. My brother Rhaegar ignited Robert’s Rebellion to create the Prince Who Was Promised and bring them to life once more. To bring mine into this world, I walked into the flames while a traitorous godswife burned to death upon my husband’s funeral pyre. And that was when there were only fossilized eggs.”

Daenerys got a faraway look in her eyes, and her hands shook somewhat.

Sansa swallowed. “Would it not be wiser then to keep their existence a secret?”

“I don’t see how we’d be successful doing so. Eventually, we’ll have to hatch those eggs. As it is, word would get out once they are laid. Enough people know by now that Rhaegal is female. People have been waiting for this for years. There’s not a doubt in my mind that there are spies in King’s Landing who are here specifically to alert other parties to the arrival of eggs. And call me mad, but I doubt my daughter is going to be subtle about laying or keeping her eggs. Even if we were to try, we’d have to go to great lengths to not only keep them a secret, but also protect them. Since their discovery is inevitable no matter what we do, better to devote all of that effort to protecting them instead.”

The Lady of Winterfell nodded. “When do you believe they’ll arrive?”

“It’s hard to tell. I’ve been reading up on it. It took a while to even realize Rhaegal was pregnant. She hasn’t started building a nest quite yet. It’s been so long since something like this has happened, and a lot of the information on it has been lost to the ages. It’s frustrating. But I’m hoping they’ll come around the time of Aemonaerys’s birth. Lord Willas says that’s not out of the realm of possibility.”

Willas Tyrell had been the one to realize what was happening with the green dragon. Daenerys had been researching the species in the library after what happened with Jon on Pyke. Willas, who was always in the library, eventually realized what the queen was up to and asked to take a look. He was an expert animal breeder who produced the finest horses, birds, and dogs in the realm. Daenerys relented and brought him to the pit, even calming her daughter enough so Willas could touch her. The heir to Highgarden laid a hand upon Rhaegal’s belly and he knew.

Shockingly enough, it seemed he hadn’t told Margaery. Daenerys had asked him to keep it a secret,
and he may have kept his promise, as the Maid of Highgarden didn’t show any sign of knowing.

In fact, in the past week, the Maid of Highgarden seemed far more preoccupied with another piece of news altogether. Letters had arrived to both Highgarden and the Red Keep from Uncle Edmure in Riverrun requesting the honor of Margaery’s hand. The offer was accepted forthwith, and for the last week, the Maid of Highgarden was fastidiously planning a magnificent wedding.

Sansa glanced over her shoulder. Margaery was riding a little ways behind them upon her chestnut palfrey, speaking animatedly to Missandei and Willas. Upon her neck was a becoming silver locket shaped like a rose. Inside was an image of Edmure, Minisa, and Ambrose. A betrothal gift from Sansa’s uncle. Margaery kept playing with it, showing it off to everyone.

Margaery had busied herself with working on her marriage trousseau. Lots of blue and red silk, brocades, damasks, and velvets, lots of cloth of silver and gold. She was making Edmure a fine blue velvet cloak to celebrate their betrothal. Right now, the Lord of Riverrun was en route to King’s Landing to celebrate both his engagement and the upcoming birth of his grandniece or nephew.

Nothing was distracting Margaery from her wedding, save for matters of state. Not even dragon’s eggs. And Sansa hoped that the reason for that was because she didn’t know yet. It would be interesting, seeing if she did or not. It would tell us a great deal about Willas. But it could be just Margaery’s acting skills, which were formidable.

Sansa turned to look towards the Great Sept again. They came to the pavilion and dismounted, climbing the steps. Much of the court was filing in as Septas and initiates stood by the entrance and welcomed them. Sansa took Daenerys’s arm as she followed the worshippers in. They hurried to take their place of honor near the Father’s statue at the steps of the High Holy Dais. But there was something missing: a chair.

Generally, services to the Seven had worshippers on foot throughout the ceremony with brief intervals of kneeling. An exception was made for heavily pregnant women, people with small children, and the disabled. At the back of the worshipper’s area was an area of chairs for those who needed to sit.

It was, however, general practice for a chair to be provided in the royal family’s section for any royal women who were with child. This dated back to Queen Naerys’s day and was honored for every royal queen and princess since. And on most days, this was honored. But every so often, when Sansa came to worship, her chair would conveniently be forgotten. Today was clearly one of those days.

Sansa’s heart sank. She could walk and stand, but it was thoroughly uncomfortable for an extended length of time. Especially after riding. Her ankles were swollen and heavy belly grew heavier by the day. Her back already ached as it was.

Daenerys fumed at this. She gave Brienne a careful look. The Queensguard, looking similarly annoyed, went to the edge of the altar where the High Septon was chatting to a couple of his assistants. She hesitated at the edge, though. Non-clergy and people not directly involved with a ceremony were not allowed to mount an altar in the Great Sept without express permission from a high-ranking member of the clergy. It wasn’t written law, but it was a solemn custom. The Lady Knight looked up at the Sparrow and called up to him. The man pointedly ignored her.

Finally, Barristan strode over, thoroughly annoyed, and shouted up at the man. “Your Holiness! A word!”

The Sparrow could not ignore the Lord Commander. He looked over and gave a nod of
acknowledgement. “In a moment, Ser Barristan.”

He turned away then, back to the novice Septon by his side. Barristan’s jaw tightened. “Your High Holiness, it is a pressing matter!”

The Sparrow held up a dismissive finger. Having had enough, Ser Barristan ignited gasps throughout the room by climbing the steps. The High Septon’s jaw dropped.

“You are too bold, Ser! You will show respect to the Father and Mother!” The Septon cried out.

“It is a mother that I climb the steps for! The Gods will forgive me that. And I am an anointed knight, may I remind you!”

Being anointed did set a sort of precedent, especially given that Barristan was no average knight, but Lord Commander of the Queensguard. A high ranking member of the anointed. Sansa’s lip curled. Sometimes, Ser Barristan’s manner unnerved her, but she was grateful for him at that moment.

The Sparrow scowled and descended the steps. He allowed Barristan to escort him to Sansa and the queen.

“Your High Holiness, why is it that my niece has not been accommodated?” Daenerys asked after kissing his ring. “She is heavy with child, a child who may someday sit the Iron Throne. A chair is to be provided for her, as is the custom.”

“Many chairs have been provided, Your Grace,” replied the High Sparrow, gesturing towards the back area.

“She is a member of the royal family. This is the royal section. She is to sit by my side.”

“Is Princess Sansa too high and mighty not to sit with the others? I thought she might appreciate the company of other new mothers.”

“It is a gesture of respect to the royal family. A custom that dates back to Queen Naerys. Back then the Faith showed her such respect.”

“Back then, Queen Naerys respected the Faith in return and she often came to services with her husband by her side.”

That was debatable. Aegon the Unworthy was a known degenerate. He didn’t attend services often. The Sparrow had spoken to Sansa repeatedly about getting Jon back in the Sept. She’d made no promises, just vague replies. Jon loathed the Sept.

“Princess Sansa has shown the Faith every gesture of respect and deference it is due,” replied Daenerys, “She currently carries in her womb an heir to the Seven Realms. She requires guarding and protection that cannot be adequately provided sitting at the back of the Sept.”

“A true follower, one who is truly sinless in the eyes of the Gods has nothing to fear within their hall. The Father looks down in judgment to punish any of those who would harm the truly righteous and the Warrior protects them. Only those who would be judged as immoral in the eyes of the Father would come to harm here. If Princess Sansa is truly virtuous in the eyes of the Gods, she should have nothing to fear from sitting in the back.”

There’s no way out of this. Sansa sighed and began to move. Daenerys grabbed her hand.

“No. This is a matter of respect.” She glared at the High Sparrow, suspicion glimmering in her violet
eyes. “An insult to her is an insult to me. To House Targaryen.”

“House Targaryen insults the Faith with Prince Jon’s continued refusal to attend services.” The High Sparrow looked Sansa in the eye. “Tell me, Princess, why is it that you could not convince your husband to come? With a new child on the way, one would think he’d be eager to receive the blessings of the gods.”

“My husband worships the Old Gods.”

“By all accounts, so do you. And yet you still make it here twice a week. So why not him as well? Is he off doing something more important? Flying his dragon? Washing his feet?”

Daenerys and Sansa looked at each other. The foot-washing comment was suspicious enough, but the comment about flying a dragon was equally chilling. … *Could he know?*

“I keep both sets of gods, Your High Holiness,” Sansa said quietly, “But my husband does not.”

“And you have not cured him of this ill. Tell me, Princess, is it by design or inability? I wonder why a virtuous woman like yourself could not take hold of the Crone’s lantern and helped your husband see the light.”

“The prince’s choices are his, Your Holiness,” Sansa said coolly, “A woman has her methods, but a wife must honor her husband’s wishes. The Faith preaches submission of a wife to her husband, does it not? So if my husband were to make it clear that he does not wish to be brought to the Sept, I am morally bound to honor that wish.”

The Sparrow’s eyes flicked. “I am sorry to hear that you do not have it in you to sway the heir to the throne to righteousness. You swore in this very sept to help your husband to lead a moral life. One might interpret your failure as a violation of your sacred vows.”

Sansa could feel every eye in the hall on her. She could feel Aemonaerys kick. She took a deep breath. “I have kept my vows to my husband, Your High Holiness. Unfortunately, some duties take time. The Faith also preaches patience. I do, however, fear that I am perhaps ill-equipped to convert my husband completely. I am only a woman, and unanointed, not learned enough or formally approved of by the Seven to speak for them like a member of the clergy. You are the voice of the Gods, Your Holiness, not me. You are the only one truly worthy to speak for them. For one of the virtues of the Crone, the Father, and the Smith are humility. To presume that I am exalted enough to interfere with the sacred duties of a Septon would be the height of egotism. I try to stay humble before not just the Gods, but to everyone.”

She slowly got to her knees before him. “If you please, Your Holiness, use your wisdom and godliness, which is so much greater than my own, to go before my husband and present your concerns to him. If he hears your words, I believe he shall make the right decision. My husband is a good man, an honorable man, but he was raised outside the Faith, away from the light of the Seven. I believe the only way he might break himself of his habits is if he were spoken to by the Mouth of the Gods himself. They say you are a miracle worker, Your Holiness. It is true, for otherwise, why would you be raised to the holiest office there is. Your words carry the might of the Seven themselves, please use this power, your holy voice to save his soul. Only the most righteous, the most favored by the Gods will be able to reach him. You are that person. Speak for the Seven to my husband, go before him and make him see the light, I beg you. Do this, and I am sure he will do what is necessary.”

The High Sparrow stepped back, as if stung. “Words…. Words of the Seven are accessible to all true followers. The Seven-Pointed Star was crafted by holy men.”
“Yes, but not all voices reciting it are made equal. I have tried to remain pure and sinless so that my prayers might carry as much weight as they can. But… I cannot be pure as the Maiden. Though I am free of the sin of adultery and others, I cannot remain wholly chaste. My duties require me to share my husband’s bed. And though such practices are sanctioned by the Seven, a woman who has lain with a man is not wholly pure even within the confines of true marriage, especially when she carries the fruits of her coupling within her. Else why else have us who carry children seek further blessings to wash away sin? You once told me that all women are wanton at heart. If you say it, it must be true. And though I have resisted my base nature, it must still reside in me on some level by virtue of my sex. If only a completely pure and worthy soul can speak for the Seven, then you alone can convert the prince as only a true and worthy representative of the Gods can.”

She took the edge of his robe in her hands, kissed it, then looked up at him with teary eyes. “Please, Your Holiness. I beg of you. Lead my husband into the Mother’s embrace. If not for his sake, if not for my sake, then for the sake of my son. Whatever our sins may be, they are not his. He is only a babe, not yet born. I know the Seven would never turn away or fail a child, a babe not yet in its mother’s arms.”

Sansa didn’t like doing this for reasons that went beyond the agonizing pain in her knees and back or the humiliation of kneeling and crying before this charlatan. But you made me do this, you stupid shit. You made me destroy you.

“So you confess to being a sinner?”

“I must be, though in what way, I am not sure,” Sansa told him, noting the desperation in him. “I have not strayed from my marriage bed or held impure thoughts. I have not lied. I have not stolen. I have not given myself to vanity or sloth. I have remained charitable and faithful. I have resisted every selfish impulse that has crossed my mind. I have even tried to look upon those who might draw my husband from me—” Sansa glanced over at a few of the Seaweed girls, “—with mercy and kindness. I--- I admit to--- a fortnight ago, I had harsh words for my husband. I spoke out of anger and jealousy and forgot my place. Perhaps it is for that sin that I cannot bring him to the light. For that, I am profoundly sorry. I reconciled with him the next day, and I repent and mourn my sin. But that is all I can think of, the only thing I can imagine the Father would judge me. Perhaps there are other things I do not realize. I am not the wisest of women. But I have followed every law, every direction given to me by the Faith. I tell it true, before you, and before the Gods themselves. I swear it.”

There was an awkward pause. Muttering echoed throughout the Sept. When nothing happened to Sansa, the High Sparrow was forced to speak. He hesitated, waiting, hoping for her back or legs to give out and for her to fall to the ground so he could declare it the judgment of the Gods. But Sansa held firm, her eyes never leaving his.

“They say you have a will of iron, Old Man. But I have skin of steel and the blood of a wolf.

“Enough of this!” Barristan shouted impatiently. Sansa felt Brienne grab her under her arms and pull her to her feet. Barristan glared at the Septon. “She’s done all you could ask of her. Either you help her, or you don’t. You’ve got a duty to protect the moral fiber of this country. You want the prince in here so bad? You get him. Stop making his bride suffer. Will someone get her a chair for the Mother’s sake?!”

The various septons, septas and novices looked at the Sparrow for leave. The man was frozen, shaking slightly. Before he could speak, there was the sound of sobs and footsteps coming from somewhere in the aisles. Every head turned. There was a shriek.

It came from Carellen Smallwood, who was struggling against her Septa, who clawed at the girl’s yellow silk skirts.
“Let go of me!” The young woman cried, tears in her blue eyes. Everyone stood frozen, looking aghast. It was a crime to move against a member of the clergy in any place, and a death penalty to do it in the walls of a sept. People stepped back, gazing in shock at the display.

“YOU’LL STAY PUT, YOU LITTLE WHORE!” Marite snarled. “YOU DARE DEFY THE FAITH IN THEIR OWN HOME? HAVE YOU NO SHAME? YOU WANTON, MONSTROUS LITTLE—-”

There was a loud ripping noise. The girl gripped the silk and tore it herself, pulling away with all of her might. The force of it caused her to fall to the ground, and Marite fell forward. The young woman scrambled away, petrified. The Septa tried to follow her, but before she could grab the girl again, Loras Tyrell was there, standing between the Septa and Lady Carellen. He held his arms out, clearly not touching the woman, and made no action to harm her. But every time the woman tried to move around him, he stepped in her way. Finally, even the Sparrow lost patience with it and told Marite to stand down. The Septa gave him a look of utter betrayal.

Gasping and sobbing, Carellen walked to the back of the hall to where the chaired area was. She limped, her right ankle damaged from her fall. When she got close, Willas, who stayed in the back due to his leg, stopped her.

“You’re hurt,” he said to her sadly. “Sit down.”

Carellen sniffed and shook her head. “No, Princess Sansa needs to sit. I’m her lady. I have to help her. I only twisted my ankle a little. I’m fine. I can bring her a chair.”

“Let me do it!” Doreah called out cheerfully, running towards the back in a flurry of blue fabric.

“No!” Carellen insisted, stopping the Sand Snake dead in her tracks. “I have to do it!”

“You’re too twisted to do it!” Doreah insisted. “And you’re a Seaweed!”

Her mother came forward, looking cross. “Doreah, this is nonsense, don’t—-”

“Alright, alright!” Willas said, starting to look annoyed. “Doreah, come here and help the lady. My Lady?”

Carellen looked at him. Willas held up his crutch as Doreah came closer. The crutch was fine polished engraved and painted with gold roses. “Lean on this while you walk and Doreah will help you carry the chair, alright. Then come back here and sit with Ellaria and I.”

The young woman nodded and did as instructed, smiling a little. The Sands hurried over, Doreah cheerfully helping Carellen lift up one of the vacant chairs and carry it over. The crowd parted for them like they would a queen. They got about halfway down the aisle when the Sparrow marched over. “My Sweet Dears, allow me.”

The look the daughter of Acorn Hall gave him was one of complete terror. She dropped the chair and nearly lost her balance. Doreah helped her stay up, glaring at the Sparrow before reluctantly helping Carellen to the back. The High Septon brought the chair over, a false smile on his face.

“My apologies for this grievous oversight, Your Grace.”

“I will consider the debt repaid when you use your considerable holy influence to convert my husband,” Sansa replied before taking a seat. The color drained from the High Septon’s face. Sansa smiled at him. “But I am eager to hear your sermon, of course. And afterwards, perhaps you might accompany me back to the Red Keep to speak to Prince Jon. I’m sure everyone here will be eager to
witness one of your miracles."

“We... we shall see, My Child.”

“Yes.” She glanced up at the statue of the Father. “We shall.”

The man scurried up to the altar. The assembly settled somewhat and the Sparrow began to preach. Sansa stole a look to the back. Carellen Smallwood sat between Willas and Ellaria, leaning on Ellaria’s shoulder as the Red Viper’s paramour stroked her arm and whispered to her. Doreah and Loreza stood behind her chair, carefully removing the seaweed from her hair. Sansa and Daenerys looked at one another, smirking.

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Jon:

Jon loved worship days. If he were to ever thank the Seven for anything, it would be the rare days when a huge chunk of the court put on their best clothes and proceeded to Visenya’s Hill to pretend to worship something other than power, wealth, and themselves. Only a few guards and servants remained behind, most of them scheduled to attend later services. It allowed Jon to explore the castle in peace and quiet.

He went to the godswood with a letter in hand, still unopened, addressed to him from the citadel. He found a place by the Heart Tree and sat down, Ghost lying beside him. Jon leaned against his wolf’s side, eager to get comfortable. It was a beautiful day. A real spring moment. It was with relish that he broke the seal and unfolded the paper.

To His Grace Jon of the Houses Stark and Targaryen, Prince of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Prince of the Seven Realms of Westeros, Prince of Meereen and Slaver’s Bay, Khalakka of the Great Grass Sea, Lord of Dragonstone, Lord Consort of Winterfell, and Heir to Dragons from Maester Samwell of Oldtown, greeting:

He does not look like his namesake. He’s fat like me. Well, not quite like me. My father used to say that even in the cradle I was almost a perfect sphere. This one’s just a bit on the chubby side. He’s got his mother’s eyes and nose, his skin is reddish, his expression is rather startled, and he’s the most beautiful thing in this world.

We’ve now got a Little Sam and a Little Jon. But Gilly’s taken to calling our Jon Jonny instead. She says we can’t start both their names with ‘Little’ because they’d be waiting a bit to find out which one we’re referring to. She also says she thinks Jonny will grow very big and that it won’t make much sense to call him that in a few years. So Jonny it is.

Of course, this has prompted his brother to protest that he’s bigger than Jonny and so why should he be called Little? So I’ve returned Val’s old nickname for him, ‘Monster.’ He likes it. Our monster’s extremely protective of his new sibling, and says he intends to fight off all the other monsters who might try to hurt his brother. We try to encourage this attitude. Our monster’s doing better and we want him to fight instead of flee.

I’ve got my last link. Valyrian steel. Alas, I cannot perform many spells. But I know how they were done. I did manage to light the glass candle though (although these days, it’s not exactly hard to do).

Gilly is doing very well. The birth was a bit rough and she’s got to remain in bed for a while, but as long as she rests, she’ll be fine. She is actually enjoying herself quite a bit. Last time she had a baby, it was at Craster’s Keep and she’d had to run almost immediately. She had no one but her sister
wives, giving birth in that hovel in the cold. Here, she had all the most learned men in the Seven
Realms around her. A lot of the novices were eager to assist, to prove how well they could deliver a
babe. Everyone’s been fussing over her, and she’s warm and safe in the heart of the Citadel, with a
comfortable bed, plenty of people to attend her, and no one letting her on her feet. If she wants
something to eat, anything she asks for is brought. They’ve put her in a higher room in Scribes
Hearth with a nice big window and a lovely view of the harbor because fresh air is good for a new
mother and babe. She says she feels like a princess.

She doesn’t like being idle, though, so she’s decided to use her time in bed to learn to read. I’ve been
wanting this for years, but she’d always said there was too much else to do. Now that she’s being
treated like a real lady, though, she reckons she should learn her letters so she can teach them to
Jonny.

Which reminds me, I have to thank you, your aunt, and your wife for the gifts you sent. I got a bit
shocked when I saw them. I started saying how they were too fine for us, but Gilly told me to shut my
mouth. She likes the clothes you sent for her and the boys. Wearing that dress with the lace sleeves
and the butterflies all over it that Sansa sent, she really feels like a lady. The toys were lovely as well.
The pony was a bit much, but Monster disagrees, of course. He’s decided he’s going to be a knight.
A monster and a knight. As if I don’t have enough to deal with (though honestly, Jon, thank you for
the new scale sets. They’re the right type.) And, of course, thank you to your aunt for the cradle.

I’m so ridiculously happy. You have no idea. I’m actually afraid I’ll keel over and die from joy. Life
never gets this good for me. I don’t know. I don’t want to think about it. I’ll ruin it if I think about it
too much.

I’m starting to cry a bit and I’ll smudge the paper before long. There’s a man here who draws, and
I’ll send a sketch for you soon.

Best wishes,

Sam

PS: You need to talk to the council about trimming down the titles a bit. It’s getting ridiculous. Do
you really need to be ‘Prince of the Andals, the Rhoyner, and the First Men’ AND ‘Prince of the
Seven Realms of Westeros’? Do you really need to be ‘Prince of Meereen AND Slaver’s Bay’?
Meereen is already part of Slaver’s Bay, for pity’s sake. And how about just Prince of the Westeros?
Or how about just Prince of the Targaryen Empire and cut it all out? Honestly, Jon. You’ve got
another House AND another Lordship. Time to make things easier on people. I’m the only one I
know who can remember them all. (Don’t lie, you have trouble as well. You have to.) . I’m pretty
sure that your styles now exceed the Watch’s vows in length and/or word count.

PPS: I counted. The good news: they don’t. The bad news: it’s still ridiculous.

Jon was convulsing with laughter by the time he had finished reading. This made him happy. So
very, very happy. He grinned, envisioning Gilly with her feet up, baby at her breast and book in her
lap sounding out syllables while Sam bustled around the room, cleaning things up and beaming, his
new chain jingling as he moved.

It was a good image for spring.

Setting the letter aside, he began to relax. It had been a while since he’d been able to relax out here
like this. He started dozing a bit when he was disturbed by footsteps.

Deciding not to stand in the way of someone else’s prayer, Jon moved away, venturing back to his
apartments. Ghost padded along by his side. As the prince made his way back to his apartments, he heard the rumbling sound of the court returning. Not wishing to be inundated with an onslaught of chatter, he ducked into the nearest room…. Where two serving girls were engaged in a rather immodest activity. He stopped to stare for a moment, then bolted out, only to run into an eager-looking page who informed him that he was wanted in the throne room.

Displeased, Jon went, not quite sure he was fit for public viewing in a basic black shirt and trousers. The page told him it was urgent, however, so he acquiesced, not wishing to get the boy in trouble.

To his extreme displeasure, he found himself surrounded by a crowd of perfumed and finely dressed nobles. Dany sat upon the Iron Throne, looking thoroughly amused. His wife stood at the foot of the dais, looking apologetic. But the worst was the High Sparrow, standing at the center of the lower steps, appearing nervous and accusatory all at once.

The old man raised a bony finger at him. “You! Jon of the House Targaryen!”

“… Yes?”

“It is time that you see the light! To embrace the true god which is the Seven! To bow before the judgment of the Father, the love of the Mother, the courage of the Warrior, the purity of the Maiden, the strength of the Smith, the wisdom of the Crone, and the power of the Stranger! Abandon your Heart Trees and your false gods! A god with no name is no god at all! Swear yourself to the light of the Seven!”

Jon swallowed heavily. He looked the old man in the eye. “No thank you. I am of the North and the blood of the First Men. I was raised with the Old Gods alone.”

“You are also of the Crownlands and the blood of Old Valyria! Your father was named in the Light of the Seven! Anointed as a knight with the Seven Oils!”

“Aye, he was. That is his affair. Not mine.”

“Have you no desire to live in honor of the legend of your father, Rhaegar Targaryen, the Silver Prince?”

Jon stopped for a second and considered this. “To be honest, Your Holiness, I’d much rather live my own legend than that of a dead man.”

There was a collective gasp. Sansa smiled at him, though.

“Cursed be he who rejects the Light of the Seven! The Speaker of the Gods is before you now, calling you to a holy life! Have you no desire to cleanse your soul?”

Jon rolled his eyes. “My soul is between myself and my own gods. Not the ones you speak for.”

He was growing impatient. What spurred this all of a sudden? He knew the Faith had been waiting to sink their claws into him for a while, but why suddenly this display? It was utterly ridiculous.

“False gods! Demons carved into trees!”

He’d heard enough. He turned and walked away from the Septon, thoroughly annoyed.


Jon stopped short and turned back. He walked up to the High Septon, who was starting to look relieved and triumphant. The prince looked over at his wife. Though her expression remained partially neutral, she had a somewhat pleading look to her eyes. She made a gesture for calm. Jon tried to compose himself, smiled, and got close to the man. “High Sparrow, you are aware that I’ve faced the Others, yes?”

“Yes.”

Jon snorted. “Well, they were far more intimidating than you, your seven gods, and your seven hells. I can also be more intimidating than all of those things. Would you like me to prove it?”

The Sparrow’s smile fell. “You would DARE lay a hand on the holiest of men?”

“See, I have a brother who has in fact met gods, so I rather doubt your credentials in that respect.” Jon smirked. He saw Sansa bite her lip in what appeared to be amusement. But that look in her eyes, begging for continued calm remained. Jon glanced from her back to the Sparrow. “Now, what was it that you said about my family?”

“I… I…” He stepped back, then looked over at Sansa, who was smiling brightly at him. He glared at her, then looked at Jon, pointing at the prince’s wife accusingly. “You married a whore. That is where your Old Gods led you. Into a bed dripping with sin. The Maiden might have blessed you with a virtuous maid of great beauty, and the Mother would have helped you sire strong sons upon her. Instead you got a woman who, behind her long eyelashes and shining hair is a beast of corruption and sin. She’s lain with many a man before you, in every manner of doing so. Her female parts drip with the seed of many, as does her mouth, and even her back end. Every orifice of her body drips with fornication. And for her corruption, her son was taken from her, as all her future children shall be. I’ve heard of it, oh yes. She’s the most notorious slattern in the realm of her grandfathers. That is what your Old Gods have given you. None of your titles, none of your power can change that.”

The way Sansa held her hands up might look defensive on her part, as her now openly pleading expression, but she looked at Jon when she did this. He knew it was for him. Jon’s hand itched for Longclaw’s hilt so badly he almost felt like it was burning again. He wanted so badly to see this man’s blood. But he had a feeling that was exactly what the pontiff wanted. The boldness of the Septon’s actions seemed to suggest he wanted an immediate response. And a violent one. Jon recalled a few things about the man. One of them: to attack him was seen as an attack on the Seven. A horrible crime not even royalty could fully get away with. Jon looked into the Sparrow’s shrewd blue eyes. It was the same look he’d once seen in Alliser Thorne’s. Yes, that is what he wants. I will not give him that.

“And none of your threats or curses can make me care,” Jon said through gritted teeth. Every nerve was aflame, and not in the good way. Every part of him screamed for him to cut this man down where he stood. There is part of him that wants that, though. Hopes for it. Attacking the man physically would bring him no victories. So Longclaw remained in its sheath. “You’re a madman and a monster. You speak of the love of your Seven and yet not I see nor hear an ounce of love or
compassion in you. Your mouth is the one that drips with sin and corruption. You came to convert me? You have failed. You have done everything to achieve the opposite. Before, I was open to having my children named in the Light of the Seven. Now, I am not so sure, nor am I sure I want my wife patronizing your charities. Not that I imagine you want her to. She is, after all, nothing but a slattern in your eyes. Despite all her efforts to show you patience, charity, and devotion. She would have been the one to keep House Targaryen with the Faith. Now you have lost your greatest champion. Congratulations, Sparrow. You have lost the dragons. Now leave.”

Jon stepped out of the man’s way and gestured towards the door.

The Sparrow began to walk towards the exit, but Sansa called out to him.

“Your--- Holiness?”

He stopped, turned, and glared. “What is it, Queen of Heretics?”

Sansa’s eyes narrowed. “Sparrow, I am no heretic. When I lay terrified at the Battle of the Blackwater, a madman’s knife at my throat, I sang the hymn of the Mother to calm his rage. I led the women of the court in that same song to comfort them.”

“It’s true!” One of the ladies of the court, a Western woman, called out. There were a few others who cried out in agreement.

Sansa sighed. “I always believed in the Seven, Sparrow. I also believed that the High Septon spoke for them and that the Septon would be able to perform any miracles he could lay claim to. You have failed in this and in your duties to strengthen the Faith. I refuse to believe that the Father’s judgment and the Mother’s love flows through you. My husband may not be a believer, but he is right. You are a madman. You are a false prophet.”

“Slander!”

Daenerys’s voice thundered down from the Iron Throne. “It’s not slander if it is true. You have failed to convert the prince, you have failed to bring the royal family into the Seven’s Fold, and have even repelled a believer. These are all truths. You have failed to strengthen the Faith and have in fact weakened it with your actions. You laid claim to powers and miracles you cannot perform. You are false, you have been proven false, before all the court.”

“You cannot judge me, Fire-witch!” The Sparrow glared up at her. “Only the Seven can!”

“And likely the Seven will. Leave the Red Keep, Sparrow. I wash my hands of you. Go back to the Great Sept. The City Watch shall escort you.”

There were shouts and cries, catcalls, violent urgings for the man to leave. Cries of ‘False Prophet!’, ‘Charlatan!’, and ‘Monster!’ Even ‘Witch!’ and ‘Pimp!’ were used. The Sparrow, glaring, backed out of the throne room.

Jon found he was panting once the man was gone. There seemed to be this long, silent moment. The whole court seemed to stir, but the sounds seemed muted. Almost as if it were happening far away. He felt hands take his. Daenerys to his left, Sansa to his right. The only voice that seemed clear was his aunt’s. She looked terrified.

“We’ve taken a big risk,” she said. “But we can’t have that man in power anymore.

“Please get me out of here,” Sansa replied in a small voice. “I feel dizzy.”
Jon pulled her close and he and Daenerys walked her out of there at once, Jon’s heart pounding. They found a side room at once, and Sansa crumbled against Jon’s shoulder, sobbing. Daenerys wrapped herself around Sansa’s back and stroked her hair. Jon clutched his wife’s shoulders, fuming.

“It was just like being in the cells of the Sept again,” Sansa sobbed. She gripped Jon’s shirt tightly in her fingers. “He kept saying things like that when I was there, trying to get me to confess, trying to get me to do a penance walk, saying Eddie’s death was my fault, that the Gods took him from me to punish me. He said I had sin within me and that inside I was a wanton whore and that punishing and shaming myself was the only way I could be saved. He said I drew Petyr to me with the sin inside me, that I secretly wanted it all because of my nature, my lusts.”

“That is not true,” Daenerys said, through gritted teeth. Their eyes met and he knew her rage equaled his. “He’s a raving lunatic. He’s been trying to destroy us, and he’s attacked you because he thinks you’re the weakest link. He’s probably given that sort of speech to every person he’s had in his custody. He uses guilt to control people. Getting the Warden of the North and Lady of the Eyrie to do a penance walk would have sent a message that anyone could be taken down. I’d put an end to the Faith Militant. He needed a way to reassert his power to the level where he’d once forced Cersei Lannister through the Walk. Forcing another former queen through it would have made people believe the loss of his militia meant nothing, that he still had that level of power. You robbed him of his chance at that. He’s been trying to take his revenge on all of us ever since. Everything he says is a lie. He’s power-mad. You took a stand, right in the way of him intimidating others, and he hates you for it. Nothing he says is true, though.”

Thank you for putting that so succinctly. That is why you make the big speeches and I do not. He gave his aunt a look to convey his gratitude as he cradled his distraught wife.

“I need to sit down,” Sansa whispered. They helped her over to a nearby seat and she wiped her eyes. “You’re right… I’m… I’m being stupid. I know it’s madness. But… I feel so terrible and afraid. All these people are going to turn against us. The High Septon himself called me a whore. What will this do to me?”

“We’ll discredit him first. Oust him as the madman he is. A few months ago, he was singing your praises, calling you the most beloved, most virtuous daughter of Westeros. You’ll birth the heir to the Iron Throne during the oncoming spring, and dragon eggs will appear. You’ve spent hours serving the poorhouses and orphanages. All the omens are in your favor.”

“I’m taking her away, Daenerys,” Jon said, having had enough. “This seals it. We’re going to Dragonstone. She can’t take any more of this. If you want that healthy heir, she needs to be free of the court.”

“If she’s seen to flee, that’ll just look bad,” Daenerys argued. “It’ll look like she’s leaving in shame, or it’ll spark rumors that she’s lost the babe, just as the High Septon cursed her to. We can’t have her too secluded.”

In the background, someone cleared their throat. They looked over. Margaery stepped into the room, clutching a silver rose pendant around her neck and smiling. “I believe I may have a solution.”
Religious Reform

Chapter Summary

The history of the High Sparrow is discussed.

Chapter Notes

Okey dokey! So, here’s your Margaery’s plan chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fifty-six: Religious Reform

Margaery:

She had never much cared for religion. Her grandmother always scoffed a bit at the idea of men declaring themselves mouthpieces for Gods. “All men think themselves godly, more or less, but most at least have the decency not to say it aloud.”

It wasn’t just the septons who offended Margaery. Many septas loathed other members of their sex, even each other. They delighted in parroting the Seven’s words against women: weak, wanton, foolish. They often viewed any woman not among their ranks as embodying these failings no matter what. All while believing themselves exempt.

Margaery still had nightmares sometimes about her arrest. She knew her cousins did too.

Elinor, Alla, and Megga were only thirteen, fourteen years of age. The guards had marched right into the Maidenvault and hauled them all away to the Great Sept with no word as to what was happening or what they were being accused of. *Carried through the streets in closed up litters like animals in cages.*

Then, once they were in the basement of the Great Sept, the septas held them down and ripped their gowns from them. Margaery could still remember the tearing of the fabric, the way Megga threw one of the women into the candles, the chill of the air, the feelings of shame. The disbelief. She remembered the delight in some of those women’s eyes as the pearls of Margaery’s bodice burst off the laces and scattered on the floor.

They were given rough little shifts and then throne into different cells. Margaery remembered being forced onto a table. She hadn’t even really resisted, but the women handled her roughly. As they ascertained her maidenhead, ignoring her as she protested that she’d lost her barrier as a child.

That was the truth. She’d always been an enthusiastic rider and hunter. One day, after a fierce ride with her brothers where they captured a great stag, she removed her sweaty clothes to find a bloodstain between her legs. She’d screamed and told her mother and grandmother, who insisted that she had to be examined for her own health and safety.
It was Septa Freya, a kindly old woman who had raised both Lady Alerie and Margaery. Septa Freya had changed Margaery’s napkins as an infant and bathed her as a child. During the examination, she let Lady Alerie and Lady Olenna hold Margaery’s hands and distract her.

They had brought a bunch of their jewels, all of Margaery’s favorites from their collections. Mother’s butterfly opal ring, Lady Olenna’s ropes of green and white freshwater pearls, mother’s amethyst circlet. They played with them and let Margaery try them on while the young girl lay on the bed, all while telling her how brave she was being and how proper a lady she was.

Septa Freya had warmed her hands by the fire and prodded gently, checking with Margaery every few seconds to see if she was alright.

It was done privately in the Maid of Highgarden’s chambers, and never left that room, though Septa Freya had made a written record of it. All anyone except Septa Freya, Mother, and Grandmama knew was that Margaery got hurt somehow (they were led to believe she’d hurt her hip).

Afterwards, Margaery was given honeycakes with rose petals on top and was told she was a good, brave girl, a proper lady. The next day, Highgarden had a little celebration of the hunt, a banquet picnic in the gardens. The venison from the stag that was caught was spiced and presented the way Margaery liked it. Everyone spoke of what a brilliant hunter and rider she was. Garlan and Willas, who had been primarily responsible for taking the creature down, gave her most of the credit.

Margaery got to wear her favorite gown and her mother’s circlet. There was practically a whole banquet in her honor, as if it were her wedding or Name Day.

In the Great Sept, however, Margaery was forced onto a cold stone table, shivering in the rough, homespun shift. She hadn’t even resisted much after her gown was torn from her, knowing it would do her no favors. Though she did everything she could to cooperate, the Septas kept handling her like a feral beast, throwing her about.

“Part your legs!” Sept Moelle had barked. Before Margaery could even respond, the two novices just grabbed her ankles and wrenched them apart. Margaery didn’t even have smallclothes under her shift. Septa Moelle’s fingers were long, cold, bony, and harsh. Her eyes were loathing. Her smile was bitter as she declared that she found no barrier, even as Margaery tried to tell her why there was nothing there.

Then she was thrown into a cell. They didn’t let her sleep. She was so cold. They wouldn’t let her talk to anyone except a few septas who kept insisting she confess to her ‘fornications.’

She knew Elinor, Megga, and Alla were treated similarly. The Moon Tea Margaery had gotten was for Elinor. She was madly in love with Alyn Ambrose, her betrothed. She’d started doing things with him, and Margaery feared her cousin falling pregnant before her wedding, so she got the tea. Elinor protested that she and Alyn hadn’t coupled yet, but Margaery wanted her to have it just in case.

Alla and Megga were just girls, not even flowered yet. But they were dragged around, accused of fornication. Called whores and traitors.

Eventually, they were not found guilty of treason or adultery, but they were considered guilty of “lewd intentions”. For that, all of them went back to Highgarden. Margaery was formally set aside. Elinor was almost jilted completely. Her father had to double her dowry to make Lord Ambrose maintain the match.

Lady Olenna made Lord Mace pay for all three of the cousins’ dowries. She was livid upon the girls’ return. She grew so angry she literally made herself sick. It was her who helped Margaery raise the gold to pay for Cersei’s assassination. Unfortunately, she died before she could see the fall of House
Ever since then, Margaery wanted to make them pay. Ideas for how to dismantle the High Sparrow had been circulating in her head for a while. But she never really had the means or opportunity to do it. She had to be as discreet as possible, and she had to gather some of her own resources. She’d planned to start implementing plans once she had secured herself a good marriage. Being unwed, she had certain restrictions on her. Her father was overseer of her accounts, and he was afraid of the Faith. He often made troublesome inquiries, afraid that his daughter might get herself in trouble once more.

It was partly why Margaery had been so supportive of the Stark-Targaryens, why she tolerated the bonds forged with House Martell, why she pursued Edmure, why she bonded so well with Sansa. The fact was, after so much near ruin, a powerful central government base was needed, one headed by strong, powerful people in true alliance with one another. Something that could be so easily dismantled by debts and religious orders made it so everyone and anyone was vulnerable.

Cersei Lannister had given power to the Faith Militant so that debts would be forgiven. This led to the Sparrow becoming so powerful that he could imprison, mistreat, shame, and try two different queens, the daughters of two major Houses, and get away with it. Some of these things wouldn’t have been a problem if the kingdom was more unified. The Ironborn were in open rebellion, the Iron Bank had dispatched sellsword companies all over. Tyrell forces were stretched between the Reach and Dragonstone. The Northerners were fending people off on their shores while preparing for winter and still partially in rebellion. The Vale was closed off, and the Dornish were furious over Oberyn Martell’s death. Everyone was fighting one another, even supposed allies, and no one was helping anyone. It was chaos.

Margaery saw true potential with Daenerys Targaryen. Cersei Lannister had no qualms about alienating much-needed allies because she was insecure about her own power. She feared being replaced in her role as queen, being a consort and dowager. But Daenerys Targaryen wasn’t a dowager queen. She was a regnant. She was the Mother of Dragons. She couldn’t be so easily replaced, and she knew that. Petty jealousies of that nature didn’t affect her. She also could actually keep control of her children, her followers, and was a proven ruler. She’d quelled troubles across the Narrow Sea when she came to Westerosi shores, and had firm control of three cities.

And unlike Cersei Lannister, who was given everything a woman could ask for from birth, Daenerys had made herself. Sure, the dragons were much of it, but as her near-demise in Meereen showed, that wasn’t enough to guarantee such a level of success. She’d taken control of three dragons. Cersei couldn’t even control Joffrey.

Daenerys actually fought in and won battles. She had created her own power. She knew how to be effectual. She could be the one to finally unify various families and undo so much of the division and damage.

Margaery needed a way in, and she knew she needed a place among the new government. She knew the new regime would have need of her. But after marrying three different Baratheons and a host of charges being laid at her feet, such a thing was very, very difficult to arrange.

Thankfully, Sansa Stark of all people had come in and gained influence.

Margaery Tyrell knew she ought to kiss her friend’s feet. Not for defending the Tyrells at their trial, not for negotiating with Margaery and getting the family their dinner invitation with the queen, not for using her influence to exalt both Margaery and Willas, and not for helping Margaery secure her betrothal. No, the thing Sansa Stark did that made the Maid of Highgarden grateful was bending the knee to Daenerys Targaryen voluntarily.
When Sansa shed the crown of Winter without any prompting or threats, she set a precedent. No one had an excuse to rebel against Daenerys then. No family had been more abused by the Iron Throne than House Stark, and yet Sansa bent the knee. It sent a powerful message, one of acceptance of the new queen.

Margaery sometimes wondered if even Sansa herself appreciated the weight of what she did. She opened the doors for actual security, for peace, for unity. She solved years of confusion. She made a statement, once and for all, where each realm of Westeros should go.

Daenerys Targaryen had secured the most chaotic, unpredictable, and largest of the Seven Realms with Sansa’s surrender. Or rather, Sansa secured it for her. With that, the other realms began to fall in line more peacefully and willingly.

Of course, the fact that Daenerys’s heir was both a Stark and a Targaryen helped as well. But Margaery doubted that would have been enough if Sansa were killed. No doubt the North would want revenge on the Vale for destroying the last Stark and resent the Targaryens for trying to take control through Jon if Sansa had died. A lot of resentment could have been built up, especially given the circumstances of the prince’s conception. Unrest would have perpetuated.

Sansa’s actions and her importance were also partly why Margaery had forgiven her for misleading her about Jon. The Maid of Highgarden knew that for what it was. Partly, a way for Sansa to discreetly pursue her ends without suspicion during the fallout of her acquittal, and also a warning to Margaery herself. Her friend had sent another clear message with that: I can fool you. I can play as well as you do now. You will have to work with me if you want to work at all, because I hold more cards and I know how to play them.

And she truly, truly did. As it was, the power of House Targaryen was becoming consolidated like never before. A lot of that Sansa had a direct hand in. Margaery was now part of that, an important, indispensable part. And she was on the eve of enhancing her importance even more. By being part of this unit, Margaery was a leader in an alliance of the Crownlands, North, Reach, Dorne, Riverlands, and even the Vale. Under such a coalition, no one would be able to rebel or cause trouble. Westeros could actually start being a real, unified country.

And Margaery was part of the inner circle that ruled it. Not like before, where she’d been a resented consort in a den of snakes. Her allies this time actually wanted her with them. They weren’t the type to ruin her out of spite. She wanted this new inner circle maintained. And she wanted to use it to destroy those she didn’t like.

She just hadn’t had much opportunity to destroy the people who almost ruined her until now.

Margaery forced herself not to smile during the services that day. But her mind quickly went to work as she saw the situation escalate more and more. The High Sparrow seemed to have forgotten whom he was dealing with. He no longer had his Faith Militant. The realm was no longer in a state of crisis yearning for some sort of religious direction and resentful of its monarchs. The crown wasn’t made up of indebted, friendless monsters with no self-restraint.

The Sparrow had damned himself.

What he also didn’t know was that Margaery in the intervening years had been keeping an eye on the Faith. Her mother was a Hightower of Oldtown, who had grown up near the Starry Sept. Numerous pontiffs had fled there following the Sparrow’s takeover. The man had taken delight in “humbling” a number of the Most Devout and reforming the order. This made him a lot of enemies among the clergy, enemies who wanted him gone.
Margaery knew who they were. She’d befriended a number of the Septons and Septas of Oldtown, many of whom corresponded with people in King’s Landing. Many of the most High-ranking officials were the types who were easily controlled, easily paid off. The type of people Margaery wanted controlling the Faith. She wanted a Reach-raised High Septon, possibly a Hightower-connected one. Someone who was not hostile to women or women gaining power. One who would play the game with the new regime and ease things along.

Many parts of Westeros were pious. If the clergy were preaching the way of House Targaryen, it was better for everyone. Better for Westeros. Better for young women.

Willas and Margaery welcomed poor little Carellen Smallwood into their litter on the way back from the Sept. Willas, in a furious voice, recounted what the young girl had been through to his sister. When Margaery looked at the weeping child, she thought of Elinor, sobbing as she spoke of being prodded by a septa and possibly losing her beloved Alyn.

Conspiracies like the one laid out to Margaery needed to be squashed, and quickly. It was time. She knew it was time.

She walked into the side banquet room where the royal family was huddled together, her hand on the locket from Edmure. Sansa was sandwiched between the queen and prince, weeping. Margaery was reminded of Alla and Megga. It chilled the Maid of Highgarden a bit, seeing her friend in such a state. She’d handled herself so well just minutes ago. Margaery rarely, if ever saw Sansa Stark lose her composure. It was disturbing.

“I’m taking her away, Daenerys,” the prince argued, looking ready to kill someone, “This seals it. We’re going to Dragonstone. She can’t take any more of this. If you want that healthy heir, she has to be free of the court.”

“If she’s seen to flee, that’ll just look bad. It’ll look like she’s leaving in shame, or it’ll spark rumors that she lost the babe, just as the High Septon cursed her to. We can’t have her too secluded.”

Thank you. Margaery cleared her throat. “I believe I may have a solution.”

She smiled at them as they looked up in alarm. She curtsied daintily, then came closer, raising a hand to stroke Sansa’s red hair. “Sansa, he said the same things to me when I was imprisoned. And to my cousins. You have nothing to be ashamed of. And for the record, not all septons and septas would agree with anything he said. In fact, many of them will be on their way here soon to tell you that themselves.”


“I beg your pardon, Your Graces, but in the last couple of minutes, my brothers and I have given some instructions to the City Watch. The High Sparrow shall be escorted back to the Sept in comfort and safety, but find himself delayed repeatedly.” There was a Redwyne in command of the City Watch, a cousin of hers and Willas’s who had come into the position on their recommendation. He had ridden alongside their litter during the journey back from the Sept when some of this was arranged. The signal was being given in the middle of the High Sparrow calling Sansa a whore in the throne room.

“Meanwhile, a select group of clergy, many of them with lots of friends who have been dealt great humiliation by the current High Septon, are on their way here. I’d also like your permission to take Septa Marite prisoner.”
“Which one is that again?” Daenerys asked.

“She’s Carellen Smallwood’s Septa. The one who grabbed her skirts and called her a whore when the girl attempted to assist Princess Sansa. Lady Carellen has some interesting stories to share.”

The three Targaryens exchanged looks. Margaery could tell that this didn’t come as a complete surprise to them.

“Where is Lady Carellen now?” Jon asked.

“With Ellaria Sand and her daughters in their apartments. She’s well-guarded.” Ellaria and the girls had led Carellen back upon their return to the castle. City Watch were with them, as were some servants on loan from Margaery’s household.

The Targaryens looked relieved and more than a little impressed. The Maid of Highgarden grinned.

Before anyone could say anything, the doors opened again. Half of the Small Council, Queensguard, and Sansa’s Dothraki maid entered. Nani, her eyes narrowed, ran towards Sansa and pulled the princess to her, speaking rapidly in Dothraki. Judging by the way the queen’s eyes grew huge, what she was saying was not exactly decent.

Nani looked at Jon. “You will kill this man, yes?”

The woman hadn’t been present for the services. ‘Savage Heretics’ were not allowed, nor did they really want to go.

“I hope so,” replied Jon, not looking at all perturbed at being addressed like this.

“Physical force won’t do us any favors at the moment,” Ser Barristan said gravely. “That’s what the Sparrow wants. So he can become a martyr.”

“We have to discredit him,” Missandei agreed. Willas smiled.

“We’re already on it. My sister has been waiting for the opportunity to get back at the Sparrows for a long time.”

“Have you?” Daenerys asked, interested. Margaery shrugged.

“I’ve not had the opportunity until now, Your Grace. I promise, though, until now I have put nothing into action.”

The Dragon queen nodded. “Fair enough.” She glanced over at Drystan Waters. “Is this true?”

The Master of Whispers nodded. “Until recent instruction to the Lord Commander of the City Watch, Lady Margaery has had no interactions with the Faith beyond her charitable pursuits. Though she’s definitely made some friends through those activities.”

“Please show Septon Tymon, Septon Meribald, and Septa Griten every courtesy when they arrive,” Margaery remarked.

“Where are Seaworth and Butterwell?” Daenerys asked as Nani and Jon helped Sansa to a chair.

As if on cue, there was a knock, and the two men entered. Seaworth looked completely alarmed as he bowed to the others.

“I haven’t seen a display like that since the Red Woman. Is the princess alright?” Seaworth asked.
"I’m fine!" Sansa protested from her seat, though she didn’t look it. She gave Margaery a weary look. "My Lady, you said you have a solution. What is it?"

"You may have heard, but your uncle is to be wed," Margaery said, smirking, "Riverrun is being prepared for the upcoming ceremony, but as it no longer has a mistress, I think a woman’s touch is required there to make sure the ceremony goes well. I’m sure your uncle would be eager to receive you, and you’d do the Riverlands a great honor if your child were born there. Best make sure you’re out of harm’s way while the Sparrow’s hold on the Faith is picked apart."

"You’re really very sharp, aren’t you, My Lady?" Davos asked, looking impressed. He glanced over at the queen. "I like this one."

Margaery forced herself not to enjoy that.

"Wouldn’t going to Riverrun provoke just as many rumors?" Jon asked.

"If enough members of the council, royal family, and Queensguard go, we could justify bringing a good deal of the court with us and no one could say she was hiding," Margaery said.

"Riverrun might be a better place for the birth," Merys remarked, "The fresh air, the lower population. She should be able to travel, provided we don’t move too fast. A wheelhouse would be fine for her to ride in."

"I’m right here, Grand Maester," Sansa said coolly. "No need to speak of me as if I’m not in the room." She looked over at Jon and Daenerys. "I think it sounds like a fine idea."

The Princess got to her feet again. "We’re to meet with the disgruntled clergy of the Great Sept? Then I must go prepare."

"You should go lie down, rest for a few days," the queen said with concern.

"No, I need to seem as strong and able as ever," Sansa said wearily. "Best I attend meetings so no one doubts me. I’ll take meetings, then go to bed. And then I will relax as someone plans a safe, comfortable trip to Riverrun for me."

Sansa wiped the last of her tears. "If you’ll excuse me."

~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~

Daenerys:

The council chamber was locked down carefully, guards posted at the doors. Brienne, Ser Loras, and Dead Dirt stood just behind the royal party, Barristan at the table. Food and wine were laid out and the room was bathed in the orange and pink light of the slowly setting sun.

Daenerys sat at the center of the council table, Jon and Sansa on either side of her. Normally, she preferred Missandei sit immediately to her left at state functions, but it was important that her good-niece was near her. Daenerys’s scribe was two seats from her, to Jon’s right. Margaery Tyrell between Sansa and Grand Maester Merys, Willas on the other side between Ser Barristan and Drystan Waters. At the far ends were Seaworth and Butterwell.

On the other side of the table were the senior members of the Faith they’d assembled.

Septon Raynard was an ugly man, to be sure, with a pointed, red face and angry brown eyes. His beard was a grey tangle while the hair atop his head---what was left of it---was white. Next to him
was Septon Torbert, who immediately reached for the plate of grapes and cheese settled on the table before him.

Septon Tymon and Septa Griten had kind but weary eyes of brown, their skin the color of copper. They were siblings, it was said, from the streets of Sunspear. They’d been among the Sparrows once, the group of outraged, impoverished Faith Followers that helped put the High Sparrow in power. Since then they’d become major overseers of the charitable organizations the Faith ran: children’s homes, charity kitchens, labor houses, clothing dispensaries, hospitals.

Their presence at the long, narrow council table disturbed Daenerys. She tried not to glance over at the corner screen behind which Carellen Smallwood was hidden, ready to identify any co-conspirators of the Sparrow and Septa Marite.

Ellaria Sand was with her. The mother of the Sand Snakes seemed determined not to let the young woman out of her sight. Daenerys didn’t blame her. Her heart broke for the girl when she heard the story. She was reminded of her feelings prior to her first marriage, being presented to Drogo like a prized pet.

Septon Luceon had already been removed from the room upon a signal from behind the screen. Apparently, he was implicit in the scheme to groom Carellen to seduce Jon. When he left, Griten and Tymon looked relieved.

“We noticed coin disappearing from the coffers of our clothing dispensaries,” Griten said furiously. “Lots of it. Luceon always had sticky fingers.”

Tymon leaned forward and held a hand out to Sansa. “Your Grace, my full apologies for what took place today in the Sept. Are you alright?”

“I am. Just a bit rattled,” replied Sansa, smiling weakly.

“Of course you are!” Raynard said. “That charlatan always had a real predisposition toward humiliating people.”

He held up his hands: rough, calloused, red, and scraped. “I’ve been a member of the Most Devout for nearly twenty years. Upon his ascension, he forced me to start scrubbing floors.”

Torbert swallowed a mouthful of cheese. “And he locked me in a dungeon and starved me!”

Griten and Tymon looked guilty then. The other Faith members looked at them with resentment, even the friendly Septon Meribald. Septa Dorelle, a blue-eyed fresh-faced woman who looked too young to have risen high in the Faith, was the only one who didn’t glare at them.

“The High Sparrow…” Septa Dorelle hesitated. “He’s… I hate to speak ill of him. The High Septon is supposed to be the Mouth of the Seven!”

“The High Septon is also supposed to be elected by the Most Devout!” Raynard said, banging his fist upon the table. “He was forced upon us by those Sparrow maniacs.”

“Aye!” Torbert said, “They stormed the Great Sept and threatened us!”

Daenerys frowned. She knew a bit of this story. Margaery Tyrell had told her a great deal, having been in King’s Landing at the time.

“Empowered more by Queen Cersei.” Septon Meribald said, looking annoyed. “To be honest, Your Graces, I’ve had doubts about this man for years. He came to us supposedly humble. Words spoke of
how he did nothing but good works, feeding the poor, performing marriages, wandering to hungry villages. But he seemed less humble when he assumed power. To forgive the crown’s debts to the Faith, he asked that the Faith Militant be allowed to form once more. His Sparrows took part in some acts even before his appointment that troubled me. Septon Ollidor, for instance, a member of the Most Devout, was dragged naked from a brothel prior to the election. The Sparrow preached hellfire and suffering, and has never had any qualms with torture or exploitation. And it isn’t difficult to note how many… unnatural things transpired in his wake. I know many like to blame the Lannisters for it all. And surely, they had much to answer for. But…”

“He speaks of Ser Robert Strong,” Dorelle interrupted. “And Queen Cersei’s trial. The woman was guilty of all she was accused of. We all know it. She asked for a trial by combat, something that is supposed to be determined by the gods. A monster was her champion, an unnatural creature that defied all laws of life and decency. We had a virtuous, tried and true warrior to be the champion of the Gods. Ser Manning Ryker. A good man. Strong, devout, honorable. This Ser Robert Strong, wearing the rainbow of the Faith like some sort of mockery, tore him to pieces. That should not have happened if the Seven were present.”

“Why would such a monstrosity take place in favor of a guilty woman if a true High Septon were in place, I ask you?” Raynard demanded.

Daenerys forced herself not to roll her eyes. Many a trial by combat had favored the guilty party, and many a High Septon had come to power by illicit means. But if this logic would get this man out of her hair, she’d listen. To be fair, Ser Robert Strong WAS a monstrosity.

Sansa looked at Griten and Tymon. “You two were Sparrows, were you not?”

“We were,” Tymon admitted. “At the time, the Faith… Septons were appointees of the crown, bribed to do their bidding, draping themselves in jewels and silks, gorging themselves while people starved.” He cast an ugly look at Torbert, who stopped mid-mouthful. “We wanted a Faith washed clean of political intrigue, devoted to good works and defending the Seven’s children. The High Sparrow seemed humble and charitable. Not a puppet of the elite. King’s Landing at the time was soaked in sin. The realm was seized by corruption and madness. The High Sparrow seemed like he would be a champion of virtue amidst all of that.”

“We do owe our exalted place in the Faith to him,” admitted Griten, “My brother and I are the main charitable ministers along with Septon Meribald. We wanted to do good works and the Sparrow supported us. But now… We started losing faith in him shortly after he came to power. He was sending flocks of followers to brothels to drive out the whores and their patrons and cast them from the city. I wanted to go in and turn those places into houses of reform, turn those women to the Light and make them into proper members of society. We would have had the money to do it once the crown paid some of its debt. But then the Sparrow forgave the debts so he could have his army and cast the whores out instead.”

“It was cheaper,” Tymon scowled. “To cast those people out into the ravenous, freezing countryside with no food or proper clothing. Half of those poor creatures were slaves bought from the East. A third of them grew up in brothels and knew no other life. They were victims, not monsters. The Sparrow called them sinners who were reaping the benefits of their wantonness. He called it a cleansing. Fewer mouths to feed that way, I suppose.”

“He cast them out in the clothes they had, or lack thereof,” Griten said, shuddering. “Keep in mind, some of these peoples’ garb consisted of thin strips of gauze and leather. Winter was upon us, too. I tried to tell him, some of those people were in the brothels because they were forced. It was rape. He said that the sin of rape was created by sin already residing in the hearts of the victims, and that he
didn’t have time to root out the victims from the criminals. We should have abandoned him then. But our kitchens and clothing depositories and hospitals were finally being defended. Orphaned children had guards as well. And more members of the elite classes finally seemed to care about taking care of people.”

Daenerys’s heart sank and she shivered. “There are brothels now, yes?”

“Well, a small number were allowed to be kept even after he cast most of the whores out. The poorest ones, far less legal and less protected. Many of the brothels have been reinstated since you squashed the Faith Militant. But the ones that remained between the Sparrow’s cleansing and your return were ones that ran in secret. It made it even easier for those people to be exploited and practically enslaved.” Meribald looked miserable. “It’s been better since your return, of course. Pimps can no longer threaten their workers with exposure to the Faith’s army. And laws have been passed so every worker in the brothels have to get a standard percentage at the very least, though it’s hard to enforce it sometimes. Still, it’s better than what things were during the Lannister regime. We’d like to make more reform houses, but the coin isn’t there.”

“There’s been less coin for other charities as well recently,” Griten said, “I’ve brought some of the ledgers for our Faith charities, and the numbers don’t add up. Luceon was appointed chief bookkeeper for the Faith in recent months. Chunks of gold have gone missing. When I brought it to the Sparrow’s attention, he dismissed it.”

“Luceon was very eager to join up with the Sparrow once he took power,” Raynard said angrily, “He was Septon Ollidor’s great rival among the Most Devout. The Sparrows ruined Ollidor. Luceon’s chances for the crystal crown were dashed with the High Sparrow’s takeover, but Luceon used the opportunity to get close to him once he took power. He didn’t have to scrub nearly as many floors as the rest of us.”

Daenerys gritted her teeth. There were many grievances here, both legitimate and illegitimate. She was furious. “So, am I to take it that you all view the man as a false prophet?”

The Septons and Septas looked at each other nervously. “That is a serious charge, Your Grace,” Meribald said. “It could cause a great crisis in the Faith if the High Septon were seen as false.”

“Is the Faith not in crisis now?” Margaery asked. “With such a man in power?”

“We worry about hysteria and riots. The Sparrow still has friends. There are still many that believe in his greatness amongst the common folk,” said Dorelle. “We don’t want anyone hurt.”

“People are already being hurt, and yet more will be if we don’t act,” Merys said.

“It is true,” Tymon said, looking miserable. “And if there’s any time to act, it would be now. Spring is coming. We don’t want to wait until there’s another approaching winter making things harder.”

“How many septons and septas are in the Sparrow’s fold?” Margaery asked.

“It’s hard to tell,” Torbert admitted, “Many are too afraid to defy him, some fake their loyalties. Though it’s considerable, the number he has. He’s been careful to make sure novices are mostly members of his flock.”

“How many would follow you, do you think?” Daenerys asked them.

“A fair amount. We have our own people, of course. But the bulk of those unhappy with the Sparrow reside in Oldtown,” Torbert informed them. “But I think there are doubters among the Sparrow’s ranks. If we could expose some sort of crime or hypocrisy from him, we’d be able to
shake his base of power quite a bit. Unfortunately, the man keeps himself clean. No trips to the brothels, no drunkenness, no extravagance. He sleeps on a pallet with the novices and does weekly fasts.”

Daenerys glanced at Drystan Waters. “Find something.”

The evidence was already found. But they didn’t want the people in front of them knowing just yet. They’d know soon, though. Septa Marite was currently in a cell below Maegor’s holdfast.

“Prince Jon,” Meribald said, addressing Dany’s nephew for the first time since the meeting started. Jon looked surprised at this. Dany saw him grip the armrest of his chair. Meribald took a deep breath.

“I hope you will not judge the Faith by your experiences with the Sparrow alone. I personally don’t believe this man speaks for the Seven, and I do not share his views, either. I hope once this matter is cleaned up, you will not hold a grudge against our order and that you will consent to your children being named in the Light of the Seven.” Meribald looked over at Sansa with kind eyes. “Your wife is a great friend of our charitable endeavors and to the Faith. It utterly baffles me that the Sparrow has taken such a dislike to her. But he’s always had a particular loathing for those he’s decided have committed some sort of carnal crime. My princess, I assure you that most of the members of the clergy do not share his views on you. Even a number of his followers sympathize with what you’ve suffered and pray for you to have many strong sons and daughters. I personally have encountered someone on the Quiet Isle, a man who had a very interesting experience involving you and a hymn to the Mother that brought him to reform himself.”

Daenerys saw Sansa’s back stiffen. Color drained from her face. “I-is this man still alive?”

“I am not sure. I have not returned to the Quiet Isle for a few years.”

“Was he scarred?” Sansa asked. “Along the side of his face?”

“He never removed the head scarf that gravediggers are required to wear. I never saw his face, so I do not know.”

Dany looked at Sansa in concern and took her hand. There was a scarred man that Sansa spoke of occasionally. A brother to the Mountain. Could that be whom she is thinking of? But such a strong reaction surprised her. Dany wasn’t aware that Sansa had a great emotional investment in the Mountain’s brother at all. But the look of disappointment was all too clear on her good-niece’s pretty face.

Now is not the time. Dany sighed and looked at the Septons and Septas. “We need you all to come forward and decry the Sparrow. It is time.”

There was no sleep to be had that night for Daenerys Targaryen. Or for most of the city. Throughout the night, rumors were spread of the High Septon’s failure to perform a miracle. The Sparrow locked himself in his chambers to pray and fast with his closest followers. Many of those not among that number were drawn out of the Great Sept, but not as many as Dany wished. The bulk of the Septons, Septas, Silent Sisters, and novices that made up the Sept stayed within, guarded.

Daenerys took to Drogon’s back, her children flanking them, when the dawn hit. Jon rode Rhaegal beside her, his face white. Below, their assembled team of Clergy marched towards Visenya’s Hill, holding candles and singing hymns. Their own people flanked them, singing along. Places were taken along the pavilion. Crowds began to form around the structure.
Septon Meribald climbed up to the High Septon’s dais and began to preach against the man, calling him a false prophet, a liar, a blasphemer, an abuser of women and children, a thief, and a heretic. There was rumbling among the crowds. As the sun rose higher, the crowds grew larger and louder.

When the crowds were large enough, Daenerys and Jon landed upon the pavilion to speak.

Her nephew, clad in his armor with a red Targaryen cape, stood before the crowds and demanded that the honor of his wife and child be preserved.

“I have been falsely accused of adultery and dishonor and have suffered this in silence,” Jon declared, “but I shall not suffer my bride and children being threatened.”

He looked nervous close up, but there was real righteous fury in his voice and from afar he appeared a valiant warrior, a hero from a song come to life. Meribald and the others made a great show of hurrying to placate their furious prince, begging him not to shed blood upon Baelor’s steps.

“When Princess Sansa returned to court, the High Septon swore to serve as the guardian of Prince Jon’s children. He anointed the princess’s belly with the Seven oils and blessed her unborn offspring!” Daenerys declared. “Yesterday afternoon, he cursed that same child to die! What are the Faith’s words and vows worth, if such things are committed by the High Septon himself? Condemning an unborn babe to death! Threatening the prince and princess!”

There was anger from the crowds, particularly among the women. The blessing ceremony had been public, all knew of it. This was damning. All three members of the royal family were popular. The announcement of Sansa’s pregnancy was greeted with mass celebration in the streets of King’s Landing. No one would be happy to hear of this.

“This man is a false prophet and does not speak for the Faith!” Meribald insisted. “We shall oust him as the liar he is! A true holy man shall lead again, I vow this!”

He turned to the doors of the Sept. “Where are you, blasphemer? Hiding from the eyes of Baelor?”

There was no sound or movement. No sign that the man would exit the Sept.

“I want justice!” Jon cried out. “My wife was forced to endure a trial for crimes she was innocent of, and she was judged as such. The High Septon has slandered her. Where is the justice for my bride? My child?”

Finally, the doors seemed to open. The Sparrow crept out, looking furious. “Is your child dead, Prince Jon?”

“No, Sparrow. The princess rests comfortable, her pregnancy unperturbed. Your words hold no real weight. I seek justice for slander and dishonor, not murder,” Jon fumed.

“Then seek it. You are no believer. Shed blood upon the Great Sept of Baelor, I dare you.”

“I will not profane a place beloved by my people. I may not hold the Seven, but many of my subjects do, as does my wife. She begged me not to kill you today. I shall honor this request.”

The Sparrow seemed to relax, smirking. “As long as I remain on these steps, I am protected.”

“It is a good thing you shall not remain on these steps, then,” Jon snarled. He gave the signal

Daenerys stepped forward as City Watch members marched on the man. “With the blessings of the Most Devout, I, Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, Queen of Westeros and Slaver’s Bay,
Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Princess of Dragonstone, and Mother of Dragons, hereby arrest you on charges of blasphemy, slander, sedition, conspiracy, slaving, and treason.”

“NO! YOU CANNOT! THE SEVEN---!”

“If the Seven truly favor you,” declared Meribald, “Let them stop this arrest!”

But the Watch dragged the Sparrow off of the pavilion and through the crowds without trouble. People pelted him with dung as he was forced, screaming and raving, into a litter.

Members of the clergy came pouring out of the sept, several in manic protest of the proceedings.

“WITCH!”

“MONSTER!”

“WHORE!”

Those were among the screams leveled at Daenerys. Jon got “HERETIC!” “WITCH!” and “BASTARD!” A number of the more manic followers grew violent, but were restrained. Some were arrested. Above, the dragons shrieked and exhaled flames. It calmed the rioting a bit. But when Rhaegal and Drogon swept down, Daenerys and Jon were quick to mount their backs.

Daenerys looked down upon the crowds. This isn’t entirely over. Time to get the future of the dynasty out of King’s Landing.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Riverrun!
Swimming Upstream

Chapter Summary

Riverrun conjures memories of Eddie and plans for Arya and Nymeria

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Blue for her Beta-Work!

This is a breather chapter, a bit. But a fun one! And interesting (I think).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fifty-seven: Swimming Upstream

Sansa:

Her uncle greeted her with the warmest hug she’d ever received from him when she exited her carriage. Likewise, the greeting he had for Jon was kind. He bowed formally, but when her husband went to shake his hand, he clapped Jon on the back with a kind familiarity, as if he were a blood nephew.

When he greeted Margaery, he actually grabbed her by the waist and spun her around, prompting Jon to lean over and whisper in Sansa’s ear playfully. “Why didn’t you permit me such public gestures when we were betrothed?”

She gave him a mocking look. “I think the liberties I permitted you in private more than make up for it.”

They had to quiet their giggles, though, as the Blackfish, robbed of the use of his legs, was hoisted over in a rolling chair. He looked impatient as his manservant brought him forward, so Sansa ran to him and kissed both cheeks.

Her mother always said Uncle Brynden was the one she and her siblings always went to first with their troubles. When Sansa took Riverrun and finally united with her great-uncle, she knew why. He was the one to make Edmure shut his mouth about Lady Stoneheart and support his niece in the war. The Blackfish understood: he’d seen Lady Stoneheart. He hated what his niece became. On the night Sansa had the woman executed, he cradled her head in his lap, stroked her hair, and called her brave.

He was the one to kiss Sansa’s cheek, call her Sweetling, and help her take care of her son. He told Eddie stories of Robb and the war. He lost the use of his legs for her in battle months later, yet still sent her gold and men when she needed both.

If he’d been able to walk, he’d have been the one to walk her through the Great Sept. Also, if he were willing to travel to King’s Landing. I’ll do anything for you, Sansa. Except go to King’s Landing. I’m of more use to you here. My mobility isn’t much as it is. I’d only cause you more fuss
and worry, wondering after my care. You should enjoy your wedding as much as you can, not worrying over me. And the children need me.

Now, he looked at her face, not her belly as so many did, and smiled at her. “You look beautiful, Sweetling. Or should I call you My Princess?”

He winked at her. His voice was as gruff as ever, his smile just as kind. He’d never hesitated to call her ‘My Queen’ during the wars. Even when she told him to call her Sansa, he did, but never in public. He reminded Petyr to refer to her by title as well. It always made her laugh.

Now he fixed Jon with a steady eye, sizing him up carefully. Despite the lower height, he made for an intimidating presence. Jon nodded his head in respect. “Ser Brynden. It is an honor.”

“Your Grace.” He didn’t say it was an honor. Sansa grabbed Jon’s hand, kissed her husband’s cheek, then gave her uncle a hard smile. She’d never done such things with Harry. Harry felt it wasn’t dignified for a woman who called herself a queen to kiss her husband’s cheek. Sansa always felt that kissing Harry wasn’t dignified for any woman, queen or no. Now, she kissed her prince more freely.

The Blackfish’s eyes followed how Jon’s hand circled around Sansa’s waist and settled on her belly, how another hand stroked her hair. This is a good one, Uncle.

Edmure was busy introducing Margaery to the children. Almost at once, Margaery produced from the folds of her dress a little brass knight and a little parchment packet with a rose stamped on it. Minisa, who had thus far been somewhat composed, took the packet and bounced, crying out, “You remembered!”

“Of course I remembered,” Margaery said, stroking Minisa’s face. “If I’m going to be lady here, I want gardens here to remind me of home. And I trust no one better than you to help me make that happen!”

Minisa hugged Margaery, as did Ambrose, who was delighted that his brass knight had detachable swords, spears, and halberds.

“She’s a clever one. She started writing to the children the minute the betrothal was agreed upon,” The Blackfish said, “Minisa’s got herself a garden she’s obsessed with. Ambrose intends to be a knight, like every little boy. Charmed them as much as she’s charmed Edmure. Good thing, too. He’s let up on the wine a bit. Not completely, of course. But he’s a bit better.”

“He looks better,” Sansa remarked. Edmure had lost some weight since the wedding, and the dark rings were gone from his eyes. She’d been keeping a careful eye on the proceedings. She’d convinced her uncle that she was happy to be his confidante in her letters, and he’d told her of many of the things Margaery had said and done for him. She knew Margaery had to know as well, and that was good. Her friend had encouraged Edmure to make a gift to Jon and Sansa of easier transport taxes for the North in celebration of Aemonaerys’s arrival. It was a far better gift than the fancy bow and quiver and the bracelet he’d given them for their wedding. Jon wasn’t an archer.

“He’s the type that needs a woman, really. Not a Roslin, obviously. A good woman with a level head. A calming influence with good wits. He’s hot headed like most in this family. I just hope she’s as decent as she seems. Is she?”

Sansa glanced at her uncle. “She’ll be the wife he needs and deserves.”

didn’t ride in it the entire time, did you?”

Jon gave her a triumphant look. He’d not liked the carriage either, preferring her to stay in her wheelhouse the entire time. But she’d used the open carriage for a fair purpose.

The High Sparrow was under house arrest at the moment in the Great Sept. His supporters and the outcry had been too much to keep him in the Black Cells. The trial was coming up and there was unease and near unrest in King’s Landing. He’d cursed her to lose her babe, predicted she’d be cursed further by the Seven. With things so tense, the last thing they needed was to give any perceived credibility to his words by having her hid away. It was necessary for her safety that she leave the capital, but she also needed to be visible enough so people knew she still carried properly. So, when passing through the most populous towns, she took to open transport, surrounded by guards, in a gown that emphasized her belly so all could see that the princess decried by the High Sparrow was still fruitful and blessed by the Mother.

Being shut away the entire time could prove disastrous.

And the carriage was safe and comfortable, aside from the occasional cold winds and poor smells. She’d worn thick dresses and cloaks and kept her ladies surrounding her to keep her warm, and guards rode alongside. It wasn’t as if Daenerys was going to let her into a death trap, either. The carriage prepared was one actually gifted to Sansa by Arianne Martell as a wedding gift, and was built to withstand and stay stable on uncomfortable terrain. The seats had thick velvet cushions, strong wheels, and were pulled by reliable horses sent from Highgarden. Even Barristan and Brienne declared it safe (though Barristan insisted upon a partial metal lattice be added for extra protection).

As it was, she never spent more than half an hour in the thing at a time, only coming out when passing through the most populous, well-secured towns and on her arrival to Riverrun. She spent most of her time in a wheelhouse originally made for Daenerys’s use. An armored wheelhouse.

Jon was frantic whenever she stepped into the carriage, though, riding alongside it the entire time.

“I did not, just brief periods where we needed to be seen,” Sansa assured her uncle.

“She wanted to ride on a horse,” Jon said. Sansa glared at him.

“What?! Are you mad, girl?” The Blackfish demanded.

“No more than for a few brief walks!” Sansa protested. “Dothraki women ride up until birth!” She’d ridden a couple times with Eddie, though it was thoroughly uncomfortable. And up until the day the Sparrow accused her, she’d ridden in the streets of King’s Landing. But Jon and Daenerys convinced her not to take the saddle for the trip, and she agreed.

“They’re madmen!”

Sansa turned her glare on her uncle for that. “They’re our people. And one of the wisest, most rational people I know happens to be a Dothraki woman. She’s my chief midwife.”

“Still, that’s madness!”

“It’s not like I insisted on it!” She protested. “If I had, I would have come in on a horse.”

“That’s true,” Jon admitted, looking a little guilty for revealing this, as he should. “She was reasonable about it.”

“But I am weary,” Sansa admitted, “I believe we all are.”
Also, she had to urinate.

The Blackfish motioned for the attendants to start leading people into the castle. Ambrose and Minisa held each of Margaery’s hands as the procession went in. Sansa’s breathing became a bit more shallow as they walked through the halls of Riverrun. *Eddie was born here, and now my second is to be as well. Robb was born here.*

*Two sons that died before their mothers’ eyes.* Sansa clutched her belly. *Not this time.* She would not let it happen.

There were bittersweet memories here. When she’d taken Riverrun, many a soul was released from the Freys’ captivity and there were anguished, brutalized, staring faces among them, free at last. She’d felt good, helping them.

Then there was Eddie’s birth. A long process, and a painful one, but the maester and midwives assured her it wasn’t as troubled as some. She yanked on leather ties and howled and sweated. Sweat got in her eyes, she remembered. It was odd, the strange little sensations that came to mind upon memory. Ten hours it took to bring Eddie into the world. He’d been pink-skinned and even slightly pink-haired, his head with a pointed shape that rounded out over the next several days.

She’d been instructed to breathe carefully throughout the whole ordeal. But when she held him in her arms for the first time, she forgot about breathing utterly. Or really anything but her son’s pink skin, little fingers, kissable mouth, and cries. Never was anything so lovely or fascinating or perfect.

It was something she’d looked forward to so much. She’d bonded with Eddie even before he’d been born. She never felt wholly alone with him inside her. She’d often stroke her belly and speak to him. Sansa adored her son before she knew he was a son.

It was like seeing home again. She loved bringing him to her breast, playing with him, kissing him. She’d held newborns before. One of her first memories was stroking newborn Arya’s head at age two. Then holding Bran when she was four. Rickon at age eight.

Her baby siblings had been like little dolls to her. Even Arya. One of the few things they did with one another involved hair. Sansa braided Arya’s hair from when she had enough to braid until the Trident incident. It was the one thing Arya let her do because she didn’t like her hair getting in her face when she ran about. Sansa would braid and tie her hair up before bed every night so it was secure, and Arya didn’t have to worry about combing, braiding, or ruining it.

Sometimes, they’d get into arguments about it, because the styles Sansa put her in were always perfect and were the type that should have lasted her for days, but inevitably, Arya would end the day with her hair mussed. It was often Jon’s fault. Jon would not only encourage her in messy pursuits, but he’d also just go out of his way to muss their sister’s hair.

Sometimes, Sansa wanted to do a little line of braiding with her mother and sister, or sometimes with the other girls as well. But Arya didn’t like that. She and Jeyne Poole never got along and she didn’t care much for Beth Cassel either. Even braiding with Mother, Arya resented. “She likes your hair better than mine.”

Bran and Rickon’s hair she couldn’t braid, but sometimes she was able to comb it. She gave them baths and carried them around, as she did with baby Arya (though for a shorter amount of time, Arya began to walk earlier than her brothers, and she always fought to do exactly that). She used to tell Bran scary stories then tuck him in, promising him that his blankets would protect him.

So when she held Eddie in her arms, she knew how to do it. She knew how to hold his head and
embrace him. She could even change his napkins (she did so for Rickon, but only when he wetted them). But there as something so new about it being her own babe.

Sometimes, when she nursed him, he’d open his eyes and look up at her and she’d see those lovely blue irises that reminded her of all those she’d lost. At first, before he was born, she feared taking her son to the breast, thanks to her experiences with Robin Arryn. Sweetrobin would often pull at her dresses to try and suck at her breasts. He’d bitten her nipples a few times as well. Sansa worried that she was already too attached to her child, after all, she’d fallen in love with him even before he was born and the strength of her attachment was something she’d never experienced before.

_I’ve been through so much_, she’d thought sadly to herself, _What if I’m already half-mad? What if I end up like Aunt Lysa, suckling my child until he’s far too old? What if I smother him so he’s weak?_ It was true that weaning him did break her heart a little. She’d done it in steps, but even that was hard. Worse was giving him up to the wet nurse when she went north. By the time she was back, he was off the breast entirely.

Sansa loved nursing. It made her feel very strong, being able to feed her babe all on her own. She didn’t need an army, or Petyr Baelish’s coin or instruction, or the support of her bannermen to feed her son. It made her happy.

At Riverrun, she’d been able to have time alone with her son. Petyr didn’t bother her for two weeks after the birth. Harry didn’t cause a fuss, except over his son on occasion, and that was actually quite nice. Harry was the only one who seemed to appreciate just how perfect and wonderful Eddie was. When he died, Sansa wept for her husband on that account. Harry failed her as a husband in many ways. But that was one way he hadn’t. But otherwise, no one disturbed her.

_I miss him so much_, she thought, trying not to cry. She looked over at her cousin Ambrose, skipping along pleasantly in the halls, chattering about knights. She could picture him as Eddie, doing the same.

Eddie wanted brothers and sisters so much. He wanted to pick the names. He’d asked her to make him one. “Even if it’s only one. I want a pack, like a real wolf.”

She thought of herself, sixteen years old, babe at her breast, sitting in her bedchamber. Sansa at that time wondered if her mother felt the same way with Robb.

_Eddie would be so happy to be back at Riverrun_. He talked about going back often.

She could also picture him holding her hand, or Jon’s, or maybe walking with his cousins.

“My Love, are you alright?” Jon asked, gripping her arm. Sansa swallowed and nodded.

“Yes, just… weary.”

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Jon:

They were shown to lovely, spacious chambers with a great window overlooking the Red Fork. Blue silk curtains hung from the bedposts and the windows. Fine mahogany furniture with silver metalwork in the shape of Tully trout and rich embroidered red and blue velvet draperies awaited them. The rooms were very warm, bright, and pretty. Basins with water for washing were situated for them and servants were putting away their things when Jon and Sansa walked in, Satin and Nani directing them.
There was a little solar attached, and Jon had his wife sit in one of the armchairs while they waited for the attendants to finish. Sansa wiped her eyes with a red handkerchief. Jon found a stool for her to put her feet up and removed her slippers. He was worried. She was crying and she wouldn’t tell him why until they were alone. Jon waited impatiently for their attendants to finish.

When they were gone, he bid Ghost to bar the door, sat close to her and stroked her face. “What’s wrong?”

“I was thinking of Eddie. He always wanted to return to Riverrun. He was born here. He wanted brothers and sisters. He wanted to be like Robb. Robb was born here and he died young right in front of his mother. So did Eddie. My boy is gone. He should be here. He should be back at Riverrun playing with his cousins, waiting for Aemonaerys to come.”

Jon’s stomach turned. He wasn’t sure what to say. He never did, when Eddie came up. He’d never lost a child. It was honestly one of his greatest fears. But he didn’t know what it would feel like to have it happen.

The thought of losing Aemonaerys, of losing any other future children they might have gutted him. But he’d not seen it. He’d not known this pain. He’d not known Eddie, either.

The prince could think of all the people that should have been present to see many things. The people he’d loved and lost. People who deserved better. News of his brothers… Of Robb, Bran, and Rickon came to him at the Wall. It was one of the most horrifying periods of his life. When he thought he’d lost Arya, it was a hard thing to accept, and part of him never did. Losing Aemonaerys, though, would be a new level.

Sansa had already lost a son. She witnessed his death. Jon could not reach her there. She’d lived the horror. She lived it every day. Other horrors she’d lived with, Jon could either empathize with or understand on a certain level. They’d both lost their father and brothers. They’d lost Winterfell. They both witnessed the horrors of war and winter. There were so many things they understood about one another.

Though Sansa loathed speaking of her own war experiences, when Jon spoke of his, she listened and replied with a special knowledge. She knew. She understood. She understood on the level that only a war survivor could. It was a comfort.

But this… this was different. This hurt, this loss, it scarred her as much as the wars did, as the winter, as the rapes. But unlike other trauma she experienced, she spoke of Eddie intimately, openly, in a more personal way. Losing Eddie was something in a category all on its own and Jon wasn’t sure he had a place trying to connect with her on that account.

She spoke of Eddie sometimes with a smile on her face, sharing fond memories. The boy was an explorer, a trickster, far too smart for his age, and a true direwolf. Sometimes, Jon’s heart ached to think of how he’d never known this delightful sounding child.

But the tears that came with those memories, the pain, they were something Jon wasn’t sure what to do with. He’d handled parents who had lost children before. Wildling mothers wailing as the corpses of their children were put to the flames. And he never knew what to say to them. He’d surrounded himself in his duties. His duties as Lord Commander did not involve being a shoulder to cry on for countless people who lost children. He never could pay much mind to it. He had to keep those who remained alive. He had to keep the Wall standing.

But there was a certain tragedy to all those who lost children. Jeor Mormont hadn’t seen his son die, but it was clear he felt he might as well have. Ser Jorah was banished in disgrace, unworthy to hold
Bear Island or Longclaw. Jeor’s legacy had been destroyed. He knew he’d never see his son again and memories of the child he’d loved would always be tinged with the knowledge that his son was forced into exile for one of the most disgraceful offenses possible.

Then there was Tormund. “I am not the same man I was at Ruddy Hall. Seen too much death, and worse things too. My sons…” Tormund Giantsbane was a man who smiled so easily, but before Dormund and Torwynd died, it was hard to get that smile to leave his face. After, though, his smiles melted away like snow in summer. He could still be jolly and loud and boisterous, but a certain pain lay over him now. That glee seemed a little less natural, and it left him more quickly than it used to.

He was a changed man.

He thought of Gilly, pleading with Jon not to let her leave her boy. She’d had her child returned to her. But when she’d left Castle Black, there was a certain misery hanging over her. A new one, for a woman who had already known so much horror.

I’ve seen many horrible things, but I don’t know if I can fathom that certain pain.

It bothered him, though, that he couldn’t connect to Sansa on this level. He couldn’t give her the level of comfort she deserved.

Before, he’d not had time to dwell on it, to think on it, to comfort people much beyond a hand on the arm and a few words of sympathy. He’d been Lord Commander then, swept up in the Wall, winter, the Wildlings, the food, the letters, the corpses, Stannis and his Red Woman…

But he was no longer at the Wall. This was his lady wife, not some stranger clutching a dead baby swaddled in furs. Among his duties were those of taking care of Sansa, making sure she had what she needed. Jon wasn’t always sure he could do that.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered to her, “I wish he were here too.”

He meant that, he truly did. He knew he’d have loved the boy. Eddie was Sansa’s and by all accounts a wonderful child. Things Jon had been told reminded him of Bran, Arya, Robb, Rickon, and Sansa herself.

And yet, sometimes, in the darkest part of his mind, there was this doubt about Eddie. He’d have loved the boy, yes. But a strange part of him resented Eddie. The child was the product of a time when Sansa was undergoing unbelievable trauma. He was the product of her prior marriage, another man’s son. A man who didn’t deserve the woman who’d given him a son. There was part of Jon that wanted his family for himself, who resented all remnants of that period in his wife’s life. Jon hated that part of himself, and feared how present it would be if Eddie were alive. Would he resent the boy the way Catelyn Tully resented him?

It scared him.

He could never tell Sansa, of course. She sometimes spoke of what a good father Jon would have been to Eddie if he’d lived. Jon liked to think she was right. But there was doubt.

Jon wished for all the world that Eddie could be brought back. He wanted to meet his good-son, to know him. He wanted the pain to go away. He wanted an end to the tragedy of it.

He wanted his wife to stop weeping.

“It’s just not fair,” she cried, “He was just a baby. He’d have been such a wonderful man. Strong, clever, kind… He deserves to be here.”
She sniffed. “Before we left, I sent in my vote for the Lord of the Eyrie. Gilwood Hunter. Halfway decent man. But he’s Lord of the Eyrie now. All I could think was, my son is Lord of the Eyrie. Gilwood Hunter is not Lord of the Vale. That’s supposed to be Eddie Hardyng Stark.”

Jon’s stomach sank. He’d be heir to Winterfell as well. Now their second child would be heir to Winterfell. Will that hurt her too? “I know. It’s not fair. Sweetling, I’m so… I’m so sorry. But I promise you, things will be better. Eddie… Eddie is in a better place now. And he knows. He knows you fought for him. He knows he’s got a brother or sister on the way. I bet he’s happy about that. Come on, you need to lie down.”

She nodded weakly and let him help her into the bedchamber. Her sadness didn’t dissipate much as she changed into a nightdress and slipped into bed. Jon pulled her into his arms, cradling her and their babe. He felt a bit lost.

She kissed his hand. “Promise me… Promise me it won’t happen this time. Promise me our babes will be safe.”

“I promise it. By the Old Gods and New.”

When Sansa woke from her nap, she was in a better mood. Ghost had come into the bedchamber and woke her with kisses to the hand. She got up and began speaking of the upcoming events. The welcoming banquet was that evening and Arya was due to arrive the next day.

“She’s bringing Nymeria,” Sansa said, going to sit at her dressing table. “She found her… and an army of other wolves. On her way from Winterfell to here.”

Jon knew. He’d gotten the letter en route to Riverrun. It was like she was waiting for me. At Cerwyn, Jon. She and a dozen other wolves. I can’t… I don’t even know how to explain the happiness. She follows our procession with her pack trailing behind us. She’s huge. As big as Ghost.

Sansa worried over keeping Nymeria contained while she was in the castle. “I just don’t remember her having much control over the beast, and it’s been so long. I’m worried what my uncles will say.”

“They don’t have any issues with Ghost,” Jon said, sitting on the bed and scratching his direwolf’s ears. Sansa turned and beckoned the animal to her. Ghost padded over and nuzzled her shoulder as she sat. Sansa smiled and stroked his head.

“They do. I had to write a half dozen letters assuring them that Ghost would behave like a gentleman. And he will, won’t you?” She had turned her words toward the animal now, rustling his fur fondly, then looking back at her husband. “But I didn’t get their approval for a second wolf. Ghost has been trained well from the day you found him. Nymeria’s been feral for years. And apparently her pack follows her everywhere. Arya’s promised to make the other wolves stay back, but they’ll probably prowl the surrounding lands. Nymeria may have to do the same.”

Jon’s stomach sank. “Arya won’t like that.”

“I know. But it may be for the best. Nymeria prowled the Riverlands for a long time. I’m afraid she’s made some enemies. I wrote to Uncle Brynden on the way here and he promised an order would be given out for no direwolves to be harmed but…” Sansa sighed. “I don’t know how tamed she is. I worry.”

Sansa reached behind her and began undoing her bun. Ghost went to lay by her feet.

Jon walked over to her, watching in fascination as her auburn hair tumbled lose from the constraints of her hair ribbons. He got behind her, hands on her shoulders, bending over and kissing the side of
her head. “No worrying. Let me handle this one, alright? It’s not good for you to worry. Not good for either of you.”

“I just want everything to be perfect,” Sansa said, taking deep breaths. There was a certain fear in her blue eyes. She kept glancing between Ghost and Jon. “As perfect as possible. I want everyone happy and safe and getting along, so that when the babe comes, no one has any reason not to smile. You and Robb and Eddie were born in the middle of war and winter and misery… I want it to be different this time.”

Jon rubbed her back as Sansa brushed her hair. “We all want that. Don’t worry, I’ll speak to your uncles about it. Let me handle things like that for now. You’ve got a moon’s turn before the babe arrives. You can’t be upsetting yourself too much.”

He worried for Arya and her wolf as well. As overjoyed as he was that Arya had finally been reunited with her companion, there were concerns. Direwolves were not tame little lapdogs. Ghost was well trained, but that took a fair amount of time. Arya had to abandon Nymeria when she was a pup, and since then the creature had been running wild through the Riverlands and parts of the North.

His sister was far happier and at peace in her letters, and she seemed especially good in her last few since Nymeria was returned. Jon didn’t like the idea of his sister being forced to separate ----even temporarily---- from the creature after getting her back so soon.

And it wasn’t as if the creature was perfectly trained even before. Jon, Robb, Sansa, and even Bran had managed their own pups fairly well. It wasn’t impossible, considering they were tiny balls of fur at first. Sansa and Jon especially had few troubles making their creatures obey. Ghost was quiet but clever, and Jon got to have more time with his pup than his brothers and sisters, who were often called away to parts of the castle to be with their mother or attend to noble things that Jon had no part in. Lady was extremely calm, sweet, and trusting, an easy animal to bring to heel.

Nymeria didn’t obey orders easily. She and Shaggydog were the closest pair out of the littermates, and both the most wild. While other pups might have listened to the commands of others, Nymeria only heeded her mistress, and then only some of the time.

It hadn’t taken long for Jon to hear of the legendary direwolf that stalked the Riverlands with an enormous pack. The stories were rarely good. When the procession rode into a couple of towns with Ghost, more than a few people shrieked and cried out, mothers hustling their children indoors. One man almost attacked Jon’s companion. Since then, he’d kept his wolf nearby. He’d even collared him, though it hurt him to do it. He couldn’t bear to put the creature on a leash, though.

Ghost was calm and disciplined. He’d been with Jon for so long. The beast was a part of him.

Jon felt a bit less confidence in Nymeria’s safety. It only took one look in his wife’s eyes for him to feel the weight of this matter. Sometimes, when Sansa looked at Ghost, there was this painful yearning to her. She’d become markedly attached to him. But the idea of Nymeria seemed to frighten her.

It wasn’t a surprise. Sansa lost Lady because of an incident involving Arya’s wolf. And the Lannisters. And a butcher’s boy called Mycah. *It happened on the banks of the Trident.* He’d heard the story more than once, from both Sansa and Arya. Arya had been practicing sword-fighting with the butcher’s boy when Joffrey and Sansa came upon them. The Lannister bastard decided to be a shit and attacked the lad. Arya attacked Joffrey, Joffrey attacked Arya, and Nymeria bit Joffrey. For that, Mycah died, Nymeria was forced away, and Lady was executed in her place.
I told Arya to practice. I gave her Needle and I told her to practice. Sometimes, he honestly wondered what he’d been thinking with that. Giving a nine-year-old steel of her own when she’d never had any proper training. He didn’t regret the gift completely. Arya told him what it meant to her. It was her piece of home, her family when she was all alone. It was often all she had. It saved her life.

But still… Even in the practice yard, at fourteen, Jon and Robb were not to use real swords. The boys hadn’t even been allowed to carry real blades until they were four-and-ten. And they’d been trained by a master-at-arms since the age of four. Arya was barred from fighting practice. She’d never handled a blade before, even a little skinny one. He remembered frowning as he watched Joffrey Baratheon in the yard, cringing at the idea of the twelve-year-old demanding real steel.

But I gave it to Arya readily enough. Arya wasn’t a little shit, but she was inexperienced. He’d wanted her to have something like that, though. Arya was certainly more worthy to hold a blade than Joffrey, even at nine. It wasn’t fair, how she wasn’t allowed to fight.

He’d wanted his sister to be able to defend herself, since he and Robb weren’t going to be with her. She was always running about, getting into trouble. She needed to be able to protect herself. She’ll have a blade and Nymeria.

She ended up with just the blade. For a while, she’d had neither. Now she had both. She wielded Needle with rather intimidating grace, actually. He’d seen it. She used a special style from Braavos she called Water-Dancing. She moved like a dancer. When one watched her practice, it wasn’t hard to understand how she’d fought her way through half of Westeros and across the Narrow Sea. But Jon wasn’t sure if the direwolf could be controlled as easily. There was only one pointy end to a blade, one which needed to be thrust by the owner. Direwolves had claws and jaws they wielded themselves. They had minds of their own.

The more he thought of it, the more it troubled him. Jon swallowed and went to change into some more appropriate clothing. “I have to go speak with your uncles,” he told his wife. “Would you like me to send Nani in?”

Sansa nodded. “I’ll prepare for the banquet. Make sure you get back here in time to change yourself.”

He nodded and hurried off. He at first inquired as to the Blackfish’s whereabouts, but was informed that the man was meeting with the castle maester and couldn’t be disturbed. “Lord Edmure, however, is alone in his study.”

Jon wasn’t sure he liked the idea of going over this with Edmure. Or really anything with Edmure. Jon still wasn’t fond of the man, for all his warm welcomes and generous gifts. But he proceeded to the man’s rooms nonetheless.

Lord Tully’s rooms were warm in a way that Jon could remember Catelyn Tully’s being. There was less art on the walls, and more weaponry. Aside from some amateurish drawings of fish and people that looked like they were made by his children, the rooms were mostly unornamented, with surprisingly modest furniture. Edmure sat at a writing table, looking over ledgers with a smile on his face when Jon came in.

He got up at once and smiled a bit wider. “My Prince, how are you finding Riverrun? How is my niece settling in?”

“Very well, Lord Edmure, we have no complaints.”
“Good, good. My betrothed seems to be taking to it quite well. Though she’s asleep now. I imagine the same can be said for Sansa?”

“Yes,” Jon lied, not really caring to give Edmure Tully a blow-by-blow.

“The room is comfortable, then? No troubles?”

“None. I actually didn’t come to speak to you with troubles concerning Sansa. It was actually Arya I was hoping to speak to you about.”

Edmure’s eyes gleamed. “I can’t wait to see her and show her around Riverrun. To be honest, I… Well…”

“What?” Jon inquired.

Edmure motioned to a chair near the fireplace. “Here, sit. Would you like a drink?” He lifted a pitcher. “Mulled wine?”

Jon hesitated. “No thank you.”

Edmure set the pitcher down reluctantly. “Good of you. I’ve been trying to cut down myself.” He sat across from Jon. “I actually wanted to speak of Arya to you as well.”

Jon’s eyes widened. “You did?”

“Aye. I’m concerned for her future.”

“What about it exactly?”

“Well, I don’t want to offend, but… I’m not sure your wife has done right by her. I don’t like Arya up North, having to rule. She’s a young lady. That sort of responsibility isn’t meant for her. It’s certainly not what her parents meant for her. That’s no life for a young lady. I realize Sansa wants a Stark in Winterfell, but Arya won’t be a Stark forever. Perhaps not even for much longer. She’s almost eight-and-ten. That’s the age my sister married Lord Eddard.”

_Arya will be a Stark forever._ Jon frowned. He didn’t like where this was going. “Your point?”

“She ought to be taken care of, not expected to take care of others. She’s a maiden in the prime years where a maid ought to be finding a husband. There’s going to be quite a few people pursuing her. She’s a Stark of Winterfell and a Tully. I worry about her. She needs looking after so she doesn’t fall prey to charlatans and fortune-hunters. To tell it true… I didn’t want to say anything to Sansa, but there was a guard among Arya’s retinue I didn’t like the look of. Gerry or Gendel or something—”

“Gendry.”

“Right. I don’t want her falling prey to men like that. He’s Robert Baratheon’s bastard and a former blacksmith. A hedge knight.”

_I was a bastard._ Jon stiffened. “Lord Edmure, I know Ser Gendry. He is a good man.” _Your fears of him warming Arya’s bed are valid enough. But that is none of your concern._ “And for the record, Arya by all accounts is doing very well up North.”

“So I’ve heard, but it’s still not right to ask that of her. She’s not meant for it.”

_Oh, shut up._ “She’s Sansa’s heir presumptive.”
“Yes but… She ought to be enjoying her youth, especially after all she’s survived. Living the life my sister wanted for her. Like a proper lady. Meeting suitors, attending social gatherings, being looked after. Instead you have her governing the whole North like she’s her father.”

_We have her governing the whole North with the Mormonts. And we have her doing that because she’s of Winterfell. We have her continuing because she’s proved more than competent. “You’re not likely to find tourneys and balls up North.”_

“Which is why she ought to come to Riverrun. Live here with her family. I know court didn’t suit her, but that’s a lot to throw at a girl all at once. Riverrun is calmer, less stressful. And I’m in control of it.”

_The Blackfish is in control of it._ Jon sighed. “Lord Edmure… There’s something you should know about Arya. She’s not… She’s not suited for life as a proper lady, she’s---“

“She’s always been a handful, I know that. And she’s seen some rough things. But that’s all the more reason for her to become more refined.”

“She’s gotten her direwolf back. Do you intend to refine Nymeria as well?”

Edmure did a double take. Then he poured himself a cup of wine. “Damn. I forgot the bloody wolf. It is a poor pet for a lady.”

_Arya is not a lady._ “For a child of Winterfell, it is a proper companion. Those wolves are a part of us.”

“That wolf terrorized the Riverlands.” Edmure took a long gulp. “I won’t have it harmed when Arya arrives, but it will have to leave one way or another. I have children. You have your wolf. Perhaps you could---?”

“Nymeria isn’t mine.”

“You trained that great white beast of yours well enough. Why can’t you take this one?” He took another gulp.

“Because Ghost was meant to be mine. Nymeria was meant to be Arya’s. My sister has suffered enough separations. I won’t part her from Nymeria again.”

“I won’t have the wolf living at Riverrun.”

“No one expects you to.”

“If Arya’s going to foster here---“

“---Who said she is?”

Jon knew this wasn’t Edmure’s first cup. The Lord of Riverrun leaned forward.

“Look, she’s my niece---“

“Yes. And my sister.” Jon saw Edmure’s eyes flash and he hurried to correct himself. “My good-sister. And sister of my heart. I grew up with her.”

“I respect that. It’s why I’m asking you. But you’ve got an empire and a new babe of your own coming. You’ve got the mess with the Faith. Settling Arya’s affairs will be difficult.”
“Arya’s affairs are settled by Arya, Sansa, and Lyra Mormont.”

“She’s not even promised to anyone! And besides, it’s not really their responsibility anymore, is it? Sansa’s a good girl, but she’s got other things on her mind. She’s got other interests. And she’s only a young woman herself. You’re Lord Stark now. Arya’s welfare falls to you. And I’m willing to attend to it for you. I want to.”

This was news to him. “I am not Arya’s guardian.”

“You are, though. You’re Sansa’s husband and Lord of Winterfell. You even took the name.”

“Lord Consort. I am not the head of House Stark. That position is still my wife’s.”

“Your wife expects her little sister to rule Winterfell for her.”

“Yes. As she is right to. Among other regents Sansa has picked are the Mormons. And they’ve done excellent work, as has Arya.” Jon was starting to lose patience. “I assure you, Sansa did everything she could to prepare Arya for this, and made sure that she had the best guidance. Most of the North’s affairs are still directly handled by the Mormons, one of whom is Arya’s personal advisor. My si--- good-sister is very happy where she is, and greatly anticipated the role. She wants to stay in the North, at Winterfell. And thus far, she’s earned the confidence my wife showed in her.”

“Don’t you care about her being taken care of?”

_Arya can take care of herself._ “Of course. I want her happy. She is happy.”

“Her mother wanted her to—“

“Her mother wanted a lot of things. Rarely were they things that suited Arya, or the times ahead.”

“What do you mean? She’s a lady!”

Jon sighed and cradled his temple. “Your definition of lady seems rather narrow.”

“I know what my sister wanted for her girls and—“

“You have no idea what her girls want for themselves.” He stood. “Lord Edmure, Arya is happy where she is. I came here to ask that during her visit, Nymeria be allowed to stay with her in the castle.”

“Absolutely not. That thing’s a beast.”

Jon sighed. “If we were to keep Nymeria under heavy guard—“

“You can keep Nymeria under heavy guard on the shores of the Red Fork. But not within my walls.”

“Arya won’t like that.”

“She’ll get over it. I’ll make her like Riverrun enough that she won’t care. Once she sees how fine things are here, she’ll want to stay.”

Jon smiled. “Alright then, Lord Edmure. If Arya decides she wants to stop ruling Winterfell and come live a proper lady’s life at Riverrun, I will not try to force the matter. I will not try to obstruct her wishes.”
Edmure smiled as well. “Good.”

“But I want a promise that Nymeria won’t be harmed. She won’t be brought into the castle, I promise. But she will be close by when Arya comes, and if she’s hurt, I can promise you that your niece will not forgive you for it. And if a place for the creature could be set aside, someplace for her to rest, that would be helpful.”

“Fair enough. There’s a barn across the canals. But that wolf best not harm any of my people.”

“Of course.” He’d placed guards nearby to watch it. There was no doubt in his mind that Edmure would do the same. “But as I said, Arya will not be happy if something happens to the animal. Neither shall I.”

“Then take the beast yourself.” Edmure took another swig. “I’ve got children. Arya’s almost eight-and-ten, the same age Catelyn was when she wed Lord Eddard. If she doesn’t wed soon, she’ll be an old maid. I could find her a husband. Maybe Margaery could help, once she’s Lady Tully. She’s good at that sort of thing. Quite a few fine young men are going to be attending this wedding. It’ll be good for my niece to socialize with some more proper folk.”

Jon bit his tongue. “I’m sure Arya’s kept the company that suits her.”

Edmure snorted. “I doubt her mother would agree.”

Jon tried not to groan aloud. “Lady Catelyn isn’t here.”

“I know that!” Edmure gave Jon a bitter look as he poured another cup. “Both of my sisters are gone.”

“I’m sorry, My Lord.”

“Are you? If Catelyn were still here, there is no way she’d let you marry Sansa, whatever your name might be.”

Jon couldn’t argue with half of that. He was sorry that Edmure Tully didn't have his sisters anymore. The period of his life when he believed Arya was lost to him was a pain that he would not wish on anyone. While he was glad Lysa Arryn was no longer around, he didn't like the thought of anyone losing their family. But it was true that Lady Stark would likely murder Jon in his sleep before she let him lay a hand on Sansa. He couldn’t completely suppress a shudder. “I doubt it would be up to her, in the end.”

“So you’d take Sansa regardless?”

“I would always show Lady Catelyn the honor she is due. Sansa’s own wishes would take precedence in such a matter, however.” He didn’t like this conversation.

Edmure’s eyes narrowed. “I see.”

He set his cup down. “Forgive me, My Prince, but the hour is drawing to a close. I have to prepare for the welcoming banquet.”

Jon stood, relieved to go. “As do I.”

He swept out of the study, shuddering, and made his way back to the apartments. When he entered, he found his bride having her hair done. “How did it go?”
“Nymeria’s going to be kept in a barn on the shores of the Red Fork, but will not be harmed.”

“Good.” Sansa gave a sigh of relief. She gestured to her hair, being arranged in a fancy crown of braids settling into a low bun at the back of her head. “Do you like it? It’s a popular style in the Riverlands.”

“…It’s lovely.”

“You don’t like it.”

“No! It’s just… I prefer your hair loose.”

Sansa looked at the maid behind her, a Trident area girl clearly on loan from the Riverrun household. “You heard him, Henrietta. Just pin the sides back with the pearl clips.”

Satin came in to help Jon dress in his black and silver banquet clothes. Sansa put herself in a lovely dress of rose and white with Nani’s help.

Properly outfitted and groomed, they went to dine with the Tully household. There was a brief hubbub about who would be escorting whom. Edmure seemed at a loss as to whether he wanted Sansa or Margaery, radiant in plum satin, on his arm. Eventually he decided that his words were ‘Family, Duty, Honor’ and unfortunately, Margaery was not his family quite yet. Thus Margaery ended up on Jon’s arm.

They watched Edmure and Sansa walk out into the hall. Jon leaned over. “He’s still drinking.”

She sighed as they started into the hall, but immediately plastered a perfect smile on her face for the guests. “I’m aware,” she said in a voice that sounded perkier than the words warranted, “I fear he may never stop. If he can’t, I shall handle it.”

“How, exactly?” Jon murmured, trying to maintain the same air of delight as they walked through the crowds of lords, knights, and ladies. “What if he raises a hand to you?”

“He won’t. But if he does… Well it won’t matter, because he won’t. That’s not how Edmure operates. He’ll rant, rave, and say vicious things, but he wouldn’t strike me. The man saw his wife confess to cuckolding him and trying to murder his niece before the court and made no move against her, he just called her a whore and let her dig her own grave. He’ll drink himself into a stupor before he drinks himself into beating his wife.”

“If he does,” Jon told her, “Remember your protection doesn’t end with your family. One word to me, to Sansa, even to Daenerys…. It will end, I promise you.”

She gave him an appraising look. Her smile seemed genuine now. “Oh, of course it would. Still, I appreciate the sentiment. I guess I’ve truly proven myself as an asset to your regime.”

“Certainly. But that’s not the only reason why. As much as you and my wife like to deny it… You two care for one another as friends. We only want good things for you, Margaery Tyrell. All of us.”

The Maid of Highgarden smiled at him warmly as he pulled out her seat for her. She gave his hand a squeeze when he bowed away to go sit between Edmure and Sansa.

The evening passed well enough. Edmure and Margaery acted very much in love, and the bride-to-be clearly went out of her way to impress the Blackfish. The royal couple were having a fine night. A number of Riverlands nobles came up to pay their respects and offer their congratulations. Patrek Mallister soon came by and greeted both of them like dear siblings. They made arrangements to take
dinner together in a couple of nights.

Shortly after Patrek left, Edmure seemed to grow bored of the invested conversation his betrothed was having with his uncle and diverted his attention to Jon and Sansa. Jon noticed the full cup in his hand and swallowed, assuming a somewhat defensive posture, angling his back to block Edmure’s full view of his wife.

“Enjoying the night, Your Grace?” Edmure asked, half-pleasantly.

“I am. Your hall is lovely.”

“I’ll never have it said that Riverrun fails to provide proper hospitality,” the lord replied.

*Interesting, considering your wife.* But Jon just raised his cup and smiled. Edmure raised his own, and drank from it, then leaned over to get a better look at Sansa.

“Niece! Your husband and I have a little wager brewing!”

*We do?*

Sansa looked at her uncle. “Oh?”

“He doesn’t believe I can convince Arya to come live here with us.”

The princess’s eyes widened. “What?!”

Jon reached under the table and squeezed her hand. “Your Uncle hopes to foster Arya at Riverrun and give her the life of a proper lady. I’ve told him that if Arya truly wants it, I would not object.”

Sansa pulled her hand away. “And what is it that gives you the authority to promise such a thing?”

*None. I was trying to shut him up.* But Edmure laughed. “The cloak he put upon your shoulders, Little Niece. You’ve had three husbands by now. Surely you must know by now how this works.”

*You know nothing.* Jon looked at his wife in panic. “He’s drunk,” the prince whispered. Then he looked at Edmure. “I told you that if Arya wants to live here, she has my consent, Lord Edmure. I never said I would guarantee my wife’s.”

Edmure waved his hand dismissively. Jon cringed and began to speak, ready to remind Edmure once again that he was not head of House Stark. Sansa grabbed his wrist and shook her head.

“Don’t bother,” she sighed.

“Don’t bother what?” Edmure asked, smiling, clearly oblivious. Sansa shook her head in resignation and went back to her baked quail.

Edmure tapped Jon on the arm and motioned him to lean in. “I know you are a newly-wed so allow me to offer you some advice as a man who was married far longer, My Prince. Don’t be afraid to exercise a bit of your authority. I love my niece, but she has no business challenging you like that, especially not in public. You need not suffer such insolence. She’s had too much of that Red Wolf nonsense in her for too long. But she’s not Queen in the North anymore. She’s your princess and wife. There’s no harm in reminding her of that.”

Jon looked at Edmure in complete amazement. “Clearly, your experience qualifies you to counsel me in such matters. I will take it under consideration.”
Edmure gave him a nod and a wink before being distracted by some fool standing on his head. Jon turned towards his wife and muttered quietly. “I made him no promises that Arya would live here. I just said that I would not be against it if she wanted it. My words were---”

He was cut off by a smile from her. “I require some fresh air.”

Jon helped her out of her chair, and they excused themselves. Cloaks were fetched for them before they ventured out into the yard near the stables. The night air was crisp, but not frigid, and they were warm underneath their furs. Sansa turned to him. “Tell me the words you had exactly.”

He recounted the conversation. She nodded as she listened.

“I’m going to guess that you left out the part where you mentioned how much your consent on this matter is worth if it is not joined with mine.”

Jon shrugged. “I thought it would lead to a row. It did not seem prudent to do so when I’d just come under his roof.”

Another smile graced Sansa’s face. His wife seemed rather proud. “Yes, I know. You behaved beautifully. Of course, if Arya did find within herself the desperate desire to abandon Winterfell for my uncle’s protection… I guess I’ll have to come up with a list of candidates to replace her. But it’s my own fault for standing in the way of our sweet sister living the life of the proper lady that she is.”

They stared at each other for several seconds, then burst into laughter. She clutched him and bent her head towards his chest, then looked up and kissed him. After she broke away, she leaned against him, still smiling.

“Do we have to go back in?” He asked, looking up at the stars. Away from the city, the night’s sky was incredible.

She turned and rested her back against him so she could look up as well. “In a few minutes,” she whispered. Under their cloaks, their hands joined atop her belly.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Return of Arya! Conversations with Ser Patrek! Return of Dany! Return of Carellen! Stuff regarding the High Septon!
The Miseducation of Noble Maids

Chapter Summary

Arya arrives and requires some help from Jon. Sansa takes lunch with the Blackfish and reflects. Carellen gives testimony.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Blue for her beta-work!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Fifty-Eight: The Miseducation of Highborn Maids

Arya:

“Riverrun in sight,” announced one of the guards.

Arya’s heart sank as she rode along atop her grey mare. The cloudy sky matched her mood but not the warm temperature. She wanted to enjoy the heat as much as she wanted to look forward to this reunion. But her troubles hung like the greyness that obscured the sunlight. They spoiled what should have been beautiful.

People rode behind her. Not many, but enough.

I have a retinue. I have a bloody retinue.

The closest she had come to being part of a travelling retinue before this was when she and her sister travelled with their father down the Kingsroad from Winterfell to King’s Landing. A good chunk of Winterfell’s household went with them. About fifty personal guards for Father including Jory Cassel, the steward Vayon Poole and his family, Septa Mordane, a few stable hands, a few personal attendants--- ladies’ maids and menservants.

Then, she’d been part of Father’s traveling party. When she wasn’t out exploring, of course. She’d tried to escape it then. The first few days, she liked watching the guards and drivers and knights go about the process of transporting everything, but that lost its appeal before long. And she never cared much for the court. Father said she shouldn’t stray from the path, but he rarely, if ever, did anything to enforce this rule. Septa Mordane was so busy shepherding Sansa around, fussing over her. Their septa had never had much patience for Arya, but once her other charge went from being the perfect, pretty lady to being the perfect, pretty future queen, Mordane completely checked out.

Arya spent almost all of her time exploring, riding, looking at things. She climbed trees, picked flowers, went into caves, spoke with village folk, collected temporary friends, played at swords with Mycah--- up until that terrible day.

It still hurt her, to think of Mycah. Despite what her father said, she did blame herself a bit. “She ast
Why didn’t anyone warn her? At Winterfell, she’d played with plenty of low-born children. No one ever cared. Septa Mordane did, sometimes, but then only Arya got punished. Eddard Stark would never allow a butcher’s son to be threatened or hurt for playing with a highborn girl, like Joffrey had done to Micah.

But that was normal in other places, apparently. An older, lowborn boy playing—playing at swords---with a highborn girl. That wasn’t tolerated. It wasn’t just considered “improper”, it was considered an attack, even if it was just playing. But no one told her. They told her she ought to “keep to her class” and stay around “other ladies”, but no one said why. And unlike Sansa at the time, Arya needed a ‘why’ beyond what was ‘proper.’

She found out later. Lowborn people could be whipped for even a rude word to a highborn. Put in the stocks. Beaten. No one said that. Eddard Stark didn’t beat people like that.

One of the things that went through her mind when observing and reflecting on the incident at the Trident was why no one seemed to care about the fact that Joffrey had cut Mycah. Even Father, when he heard the story, didn’t seem to care about that. He just nodded in understanding. But he didn’t seem surprised.

Arya used to think it was just because no one believed her. But she now realized that wasn’t the whole reason. Some likely did. Especially those who knew Joffrey’s nature. But that didn’t matter. A lot of the court probably saw it as almost proper. They likely would have punished their own smallfolk for the same sort of “offense” as playing with the daughter of a High Lord.

Joffrey, the shit, likely saw himself as some sort of hero. Sure, he’d hurt Mycah for the pleasure of it. He hurt everyone for the pleasure of it. But in Mycah’s case, he probably felt he had an excuse. She could remember his words: “That was my lady’s sister you were hitting, do you know that?” Not only could he draw someone’s blood, but he could claim he was doing it in the name of chivalry.

People likely thought Mycah should be punished somehow, just for the crime of playing with her. Maybe they wouldn’t be as vicious, but they’d think it was worthy of reprimand.

It scared her.

It gave her a bit more caution in how she addressed people now. Even her staff.

She’d become a bit more measured in her interactions altogether. That day at the Trident, she’d just hurt herself. Mycah had hit the back of her hand so hard and she was not only hurt, but when she looked and saw that others witnessed it, heard the laughter from Joffrey, she was embarrassed. People already laughed at her for her poor stitching and singing. She hated the idea of people making fun of her attempts at swords.

And then she saw who it was. She’d just disliked Joffrey so much, and when she saw Sansa there, she was afraid her sister would tell Septa Mordane what she was doing. Arya knew, on a certain level, that Sansa would find Arya’s sword-fighting with the butcher’s boy embarrassing, especially in front of Joffrey. Her sister might tell, especially since they’d argued earlier. Sansa didn’t always snitch, but sometimes she did if they were fighting. They’d fought that morning. Septa Mordane might go through Arya’s things and find Needle and take the blade away.

So she’d immediately cried out for Sansa and Joffrey to go away.

When she saw Joffrey going towards Mycah, she remembered his demands for real steel and the way
he threatened Robb and she was so afraid. And her hand still stung and she didn’t understand how her playing had suddenly turned so terrifying. She was supposed to practice, like Jon said. She was just trying to have fun and become good at something other than riding and figures for once.

And now that ponce prince was marching towards her friend and Sansa might tell Septa Mordane and Arya might lose her friend and Needle forever. What if after Sansa told, Arya couldn’t play with Mycah again? What if Joffrey hurt Mycah?

The prince was pulling out his blade and his face was red. He had real steel. Mycah just had a stick. “She ast me to. She ast me to.” Why did I ask him to? I just wanted to practice. I thought no one would notice us. No one ever noticed him but me.

Joffrey looked at Mycah like a bug to crush. Arya just wanted that little shit prince gone… gone… I wasn’t thinking. If I’d been polite, if I’d not yelled, would things have been different? She wasn’t sure.

After, Sansa said she didn’t remember. Arya couldn’t believe it when she heard it. How could anyone forget that? Why wouldn’t she say what happened? What really happened?

Arya knew now. Sansa was scared, and Arya now knew why. Sansa had every reason to be scared. Because Joffrey was poised to control her whole life. Sansa was going to be his someday, and he was going to be King.

Joffrey was able to beat her sister when they were betrothed, after he took Lord Eddard’s head and the Iron Throne. And he got away with it. Joffrey would own Sansa. The queen was able to have Lady killed, though Lady hadn’t done anything. They had so much power.

Why didn’t Father do more? He had power too. He was Hand of the King. Why did he ask Sansa to speak before the court, in front of Joffrey? He knew Joffrey was vicious. If Sansa told the truth in front of him, he’d have hurt her for it someday. Why didn’t he tell the king no when Lady’s death was ordered?

She just didn’t understand it sometimes. Having power was so hard. It was so hard to do things right. But she just didn’t understand the choices sometimes. Her father was responsible for so many people. But he’d put them all in so much danger. Almost everyone in that retinue he’d had ended up abused or dead. Lady. Jory. The guards. Vayon Poole. Jeyne Poole. All dead. Sansa in the Lannister’s hands. I was on the run. She shivered.

Now, she was traveling with a retinue of her own to Riverrun. Her own staff, her own advisors, her own household. She even had her own coat-of-arms. Lyra had designed it with her. It was supposed to announce her place in House Stark. Her father had used the basic banner as Lord of Winterfell: the grey direwolf on the white background. But he was the head of House Stark. Arya, now that she was an adult and a recognized official of her House, needed her own arms to distinguish herself as the sister of the Head of House Stark.

Lyra had her own arms. The Bear of House Mormont had two cubs beside it, to denote her place as third daughter and second in line to inherit. Arya’s uncle the Blackfish had his own arms: the Tully trout was black. The younger Tyrell brothers had extra roses: two for Garlan, three for Loras.

Girls didn’t often have personal arms until they were wed, because they rarely had official offices within their House, just sticking to their father’s sigil when unwed. Upon their marriage, they often just rode under their husband’s banners, as Arya’s mother had. But on certain occasion, Lady Catelyn had her own personal banner brought out: The Stark and Tully sigils side by side. She hadn’t used them to the degree that Cersei Lannister and Joffrey did: The Baratheon stag was almost
Lady Dustin had created a coat of arms that joined the Dustin and the Ryswell sigils, and she flew them all the time.

Arya’s own banners were not too fancy. Two icy blue blades were crossed behind her Direwolf, to denote that she was the second daughter. But she liked her arms. She’d ordered the blades be blue for Water-Dancing and in acknowledgment of her mother. And to make sure people know I carry steel. My arms are fierce. They warn attackers away.

It was odd, though, looking at the wagons of things, the procession of people, and thinking of them as her household and retinue. They were not a huge party, but they were under her protection. Arya had a modest set of personal staff accompany her and only half a wagon’s worth of personal luggage. Her uncle had promised her he’d provide any servants she might need. But still, even this small collection of people held great weight.

Winterfell’s household wasn’t too large aside from the builders. And they needed all the people they could spare. Lyra remained behind at Winterfell to keep things going while Arya was gone.

It hurt, being parted from Lyra. Lyra was her friend. Lyra knew things. Lyra was the big sister Arya always wanted. Lyra practiced with her in the yard, sat beside her during petition hearings and meetings, helped her organize the household and labor, and gave her incredible advice.

But Winterfell needed Lyra more than Arya did for this excursion. Both of them had responsibilities. Those responsibilities required that they be parted.

Lyra wasn’t the only one Arya couldn’t have at her side as much as she wished. Her Direwolf was accompanying her to Riverrun, in a fashion. Arya knew better than to keep the creature with the camp. Everyone was afraid to go near her and her pack of wolves. The animal kept several yards away, walking in the same direction in the fields and forests that surrounded the roads.

Arya visited Nymeria at every break and whenever they made camp. But she wished she could keep her permanently by her side. Too many people were afraid of her, though.

Arya now rode along the shores of the Red Fork on her grey courser. Gendry was at her side. Even he was afraid of Nymeria. “She’s not like Ghost. She’s wild.”

He kept asking her what she intended to do once they got to Riverrun. “No one likes going near her but you. They’re not going to let her prance around the castle.”

She knew that, and it was a problem that got more vexing as they got ever closer. Riverrun was now under an hour away. There was still no solution.

It wasn’t like she could just not go. Her brother and sister were waiting for her. Her niece or nephew was about to be born.

Not for the first time that day, she glanced nervously towards the fields to her right. Nymeria and her pack were traveling just out of sight of the road.

“Arya…” Gendry said, riding along beside her, “Have you decided yet?”

“I can’t make a decision. I don’t know what my options are!” she snapped.
“You can send her back North,” Gendry said, as if it were the only choice available.

The worst part about it was that he might be right. *He wants me to, though.* Gendry, like everyone, was scared of Nymeria and her pack. He didn’t like the nights she was late coming back to camp, having spent time with her direwolf. “I worry.”

Everyone *worried.* Even Arya worried, but not about Nymeria harming her. She worried about people hurting Nymeria. She also worried about Nymeria hurting people, as much as she hated to admit it. She knew from her wolf dreams that her direwolf had attacked people. Even before she’d officially gone “feral” and without supervision, she attacked Joffrey. And people in the Riverlands had legends about her now. Some of the legends, unfortunately, seemed to be earned.

Her beloved companion was enormous now. As big or bigger than Ghost. She snapped and hunted and ran free. She didn’t obey most orders. More than once, Arya had to warg into her animal just to calm her down and keep her from going mad.

It hurt her. She hated having to keep the direwolf out of sight of her retinue. She hated having to run out to meet the creature like a dirty secret. She hated thinking of what her wolf might do to someone. She hated worrying about what her uncles would say. She hated having to choose between Nymeria and her family.

She’d finally gotten Nymeria back and now had to keep the creature at a distance. It was cruel.

Nymeria might have been sent to Winterfell, but she was afraid Lyra might not be able to handle her. She also needed Jon’s help. Jon had Ghost well trained and under full control. Jon was a warg. Jon would know what to do.

*I hope.* Arya knew she couldn’t bring Nymeria into Riverrun. But she didn’t know *what* to do.

She couldn’t abandon her wolf. She couldn’t.

Riverrun was coming into view, though. She could see the outline of the castle towers in the distances. They were closer than the visibility suggested: Riverrun wasn’t a large castle, or a tall one. It was stout and surrounded by water. You had to get close to make it out at all.

Her heart sank. A decision had to be made. She swallowed.

“Let’s stop. I want to send a raven ahead. To my brother.” Jon could help her. She knew it. *But will he want to?* Jon had a lot to do these days. He and Sansa had only arrived the day before. But she couldn’t just march into Riverrun unprepared. Jon knew about Nymeria. Perhaps he and Sansa had addressed the issue a little.

Gendry sighed and a signal was given for the retinue to halt. The guards and servants seemed grateful for the break as Arya slipped off her saddle and went to write a quick message.

It was answered promptly, to her relief. *Spoken with Edmure. Some things are settled, but Ghost and I are on our way. Stay where you are.*

She breathed a sigh of relief and showed the message to Gendry. He shrugged. “If you think you can control her like this… Fine.”

Arya disappeared into her wolf’s head, spotting an enclosure of trees through the animal’s eyes and sending every message possible for her wolf to remain there. When Arya returned, her travel party settled into a nice little circle near the road, things still packed so they could move quickly if needed, but comfortable enough to relax until Jon arrived. But Arya paced as her household sat in a circle,
Drinking and talking.

Jon arrived with Ghost and a couple of guards, clad in leathers and mail. His eyes met Arya’s and they grinned. Once he slipped off his horse, she ran to him and hugged him.

“You came,” she said, pulling away.

“Of course, Little Sister,” he said, ruffling her hair. He looked around. “Where is Nymeria?”

She pulled him by the hand and led him far off from the camp. Ghost padded along after them silently. “I’ve kept her away from the primary camp. She scares people.

They walked a bit until they found the cluster of trees where Nymeria, along with a group of smaller wolves, were gathered. Arya gave a sigh of relief. She’d worried the beast might not remain there despite her efforts.

Nymeria was immense, of a size with Ghost, all tangled grey fur, long teeth and yellow eyes. The two direwolves ran for each other and danced in a circle upon their arrival. Arya could feel their joy. Looking at Jon, she knew he could feel it as well.

The other wolves began barking. There were about six of them. When Arya had found Nymeria, there were a dozen, but with every passing day the pack thinned out. They were large beasts in their own right, but in comparison to their pack leader, they seemed so small.

Jon observed the entire scene with a smile but also careful eyes. Arya cleared her throat.

“Nymeria, come here.”

Her direwolf didn’t come immediately, continuing to play with her littermate. Arya’s heart sank.

“NYMERIA!”

“Ghost!” Jon barked. The white wolf calmed a bit and began trotting towards Arya. Nymeria followed. She buried her wet nose in Arya’s hair and licked her. The Stark girl giggled but gave her a push. “Down!”

Her wolf pulled away, then looked at Jon, baring her teeth. Jon’s grey eyes met Nymeria’s yellow ones. He didn’t move or flinch.

“That’s Jon,” Arya told her wolf. “My brother. He’s a friend.”

She wrapped her arms around Nymeria’s large neck and gave her a squeeze. At least she’s not growling. Nymeria growled at almost everyone. She even snapped at a couple of the guards.

“I’m not sure what to do,” she confessed to her brother. “I’m the only person she likes. And I don’t want to set her loose. Not just because she’s mine, either. I’m worried she’ll hurt someone. I know she’s attacked people before. I didn’t want to leave her up North because I didn’t want her let loose there. And she came for me, Jon. I thought maybe being around Ghost might calm her down. And maybe you could help me learn to control her. You’ve trained Ghost. I don’t have complete control except when I warg into her. And I can’t do that always. And if she hurts someone…"

...Have I lost my wolf? That’s what she wanted to know. She couldn’t say the words out loud, though. If she did, she would cry. Will I have to kill Nymeria to protect people?

Jon gave her a sad look. “I can try to help you. I’ll do what I can. Edmure said she won’t be harmed. There’s a barn he’s arranged for her to sleep in, but she’s not allowed in the castle. And she can’t
hurt anyone. But she won’t be hurt as long as she stays away from the castle and doesn’t hurt anyone. But, Arya… I’m not sure how much help I can be to you. It’s not that I don’t want to, but with the visit and Aemonaerys coming and the wedding and everything… I don’t know how much time I’ll have.”

She’d expected that. “I know. I don’t expect you to put everything aside. But could we… Just some time? Can we try? Can you help at all?”

Jon swallowed. “I’ll have Ghost stay with Nymeria in the barn. As you said, her littermate might calm her. And I’ll try to spare some time to help.”

He walked towards Nymeria. As he got closer, she bared her teeth again. When he reached out to touch her, she growled. The other pack wolves, almost like a chorus, began to growl as well.

“Stop it!” Arya said. “Nymeria, stop!”

She didn’t stop. Jon pulled back. Ghost walked in front of him, baring his white fangs towards the pack wolves. The growling subsided.

“Arya… The pack needs to be gone. Maybe I can help you with Nymeria, but not with this lot around here. Can they be sent away somehow?”

Arya nodded. “I can give them commands when I’m in her skin. If I tell them to leave, they should.”

Jon backed up and blinked. He’s afraid of her, Arya thought. And he should be. That was easily the worst part.

“Send the wolves away. Then we can proceed to the barn. It’s near here.”

Sansa:

“I’m so sorry, Sweetling.”

She was sitting beside him in one of the dining chambers, by a window. They’d taken lunch on a little table by the window, overlooking the courtyard. Bynden Tully looked at her with sad eyes as they ate.

“For what, Uncle?”

“For not knowing. For not protecting you. For being so bloody blind.” He banged his fist down on the little table so hard the dishes jumped an inch into the air. “Under my nose, one person was poisoning my grandniece and another was raping her. And I didn’t stop either. I didn’t even realize.”

Sansa’s stomach sank. She didn’t want to talk about Petyr or Roslin. She didn’t want to think about them. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Just like Cat and Robb’s deaths were not my fault? I should have been there, too. I also should have known what was happening with Lysa. I was her bloody guard for years.”

“I have found,” Sansa replied calmly, “That it is impossible to know everything. And of course Mother and Robb’s death were not your fault. No one saw the wedding coming. Walder Frey broke guest right. As for Aunt Lysa… You were in the Vale when she poisoned Jon Arryn. You didn’t see
her with Littlefinger."

“Not in King’s Landing, no. But I saw her fall in love with him as a child when she was at Riverrun. I saw Petyr rise when in the Vale, riding Lysa’s coattails… I should have warned Jon Arryn more strongly. But… That man… I knew him as a boy. I helped raise him. I couldn’t see what he had become. I never thought… You know, up until his death, I thought he was a saving grace to this family? I saw how he got you out of King’s Landing, how he prospered in the Vale. When I saw him with you… He seemed to dote on you so much. I thought he was doing it out of love for Cat, sure, at least partially. And you seemed so smart and together. You cried like mad, but you were so brave, riding into battle the way you did with no real training. I couldn’t believe how much you seemed to withstand. I thought Harry was your biggest problem.”

Sansa shuddered. “Uncle, he fooled everyone. No one knew until it was too late.”

“I’m sorry, Sweetling. I’m bringing up awful memories for you. Just know… I’m sorry. I’m sorry I failed to protect you.”

Brynden Tully hadn’t protected her, but he was hardly the person in her life who had failed the most in that regard. He’d not known her apart from accounts from her mother’s letters when they first met in the Riverlands years ago. And he’d been one of her greatest comforts regardless. He’d come to her shivering, starving, bloodied himself. She’d not saved anyone by that point either. She never expected her uncle to solve all of her problems. His kindness during that time, however, she’d always be grateful for.

“You succeeded in comforting me,” she replied, taking a bite of roast pheasant. She chewed and swallowed, noting the pained look in her uncle’s eyes. “But I forgive you.” Not that you need forgiveness. Honestly. But apparently, he felt that he did.

_I’m so sick of dealing with this._ She wanted a pleasant lunch with her favorite uncle. She wanted a day free of anxiety. Jon was currently riding out to meet with Arya to handle the direwolf situation. Margaery was playing in Minisa’s garden with the children. Arya was within sight of Riverrun, safe and sound. Letters from the Waynwood and Royce camps indicated their journey was similarly untroubled.

Sansa just wanted to relax. It was hard enough pushing away memories of Eddie and worries over the overturning of the Faith. Her uncle’s guilt wasn’t something she could handle right now.

She reached out and took his hand in hers, squeezing it.

The Blackfish smiled, but there was lingering unhappiness in his eyes. “Considering all that happened… Please don’t lie to me now. This one… Is he better? Does he treat you properly? He seems decent enough, but I thought the same of Petyr and I clearly have the wits of a slug.”

_ANYONE and everyone would be better than Petyr. Except maybe Ramsay Bolton or Joffrey._ Sansa snorted. “Jon is as wonderful a husband as I ever could have dreamed of.”

“Are you sure? He’s as high a match as any could hope to make, and he clearly keeps you well fed and dressed. But… I did hear rumors, Niece. I wouldn’t bring it up, but I worry for you. I do not want to ignore things again.”

Sansa sighed. “What rumors, exactly?”

“Of… entanglements with other women. That the two of you were… Edmure alluded to… He said you were sharing his bed prior to your wedding, Child.”
I am not a child. “We shared beds, embraces, memories, secrets, and a great many other things,” she told him, her voice quiet but firm. She hated seeing her uncle dance around subjects. “We did so enthusiastically.”

His jaw tightened. “Sansa… What were you thinking? Just giving yourself away like that? What if he abandoned you?”

“He didn’t. He wouldn’t. And if he had, he would have regretted it. I am Warden of the North, a woman grown, and far more formidable than that cowed creature in Petyr Baelish’s grasp. If I had been so thoroughly disgraced, I would have taken the proper measures to handle it.”

“And these affairs? Have you taken the proper measures regarding those? A man enjoying whores here and there is one thing. But Asha Greyjoy is Lord Paramount of the Iron Islands. Such a high profile conquest so soon after the wedding.”

“She wasn’t a conquest. That was all hearsay.”

“I’m sure that’s what he told you?” Sansa was getting annoyed. “I knew about everything Harry ever did. Every whore. Every coin he stole from me. Every debt. Every brawl. I’m not stupid, Uncle. The second Jon realized what people were saying, before word of it left Pyke, he sent me a raven to warn me of the rumor. I knew before anyone outside of Lordsport did. My husband honors me. I am not hiding anything from you, I am not lying, and I am not mistaken. He met with Asha Greyjoy in private to discuss the potential upheaval on the Iron Islands. It was business.”

“Sansa, I’m trying to——”

“You’re trying to make up for your perceived failings by projecting a problem that doesn’t exist onto my current marriage and then save me from it. What passes between my Lord Husband and I is none of your affair as it is. I have been more than generous with what I have told you. In return, I ask that you take me at my word. I am not a little girl anymore.”

There was a pregnant pause. Then he snorted. “You are so much like your mother.”

She gave a small smile. Don’t say that to Jon. Don’t say that at all. She didn’t like it when people said she looked like her mother. It reminded her of Petyr. He always said things like that.

The last time Sansa saw her mother, she was hacking Lady Stoneheart’s head from her neck in clumsy chops.

“So, tell me, how is my other grandniece? I’ve never met Arya. Is my idiot nephew right in hoping she’ll come stay with us?”

“No,” Sansa replied.

“He’s done much to prepare for her visit, hoping to convince her. He’s redone Lysa’s old rooms, hired some lovely maids, and has some gifts prepared. He’s quite set on it. He thinks his new bride would be the perfect person to make Arya into a lady.”

Sansa snorted. “Arya does not wish to be a lady, and even if she did, she would not want Margaery Tyrell to instruct her in such things. Has he shared these wishes with Lady Margaery herself?”

“I do not know.”

Sansa glanced out into the courtyard. Minisa’s garden was around a corner, out of view, but she could picture her friend and the children now. Are you playing at something, Margaery?
It didn’t matter, though. Arya would rather live in a cave than live as a lady. *Just let them meet their failure. It shall belong to them, not to me.*

She was growing ever more tired every day. “Arya will return North. I’d rather have relief and improvement there than frustration here.”

“That’s an unkind thing to say about your sister. You don’t know that she’d frustrate us.”

*Yes I do.* “I was speaking of her feelings, Uncle.”

“Ah. I see. Well, you Northerners were always a bit different.” The Blackfish sighed. “And this wolf of hers?”

“We’ll do what is necessary to keep everyone safe. Nymeria shall not enter Riverrun’s walls,” she promised him, taking another bite.

“Good. I know it seems harsh. But there are children living in this castle and people who would not feel comfortable to have a feral direwolf here. We barely were able to prepare for Ghost’s arrival. Luckily we had some experience dealing with Grey Wind but—”

“It does not seem harsh at all. It seems responsible. I am also apprehensive about Nymeria.” *More than anyone.*

Arya had sent a message ahead to Jon to greet her and speak with her about Nymeria, which to Sansa meant even her sister was concerned. Sansa had been prepared for Nymeria to be a problem, and that worry was confirmed. But it was a comfort knowing her sister shared similar worries. *Arya’s not treating the matter flippantly, and thank the gods for that.*

Sansa wished she could help more with that. *But I can’t train a direwolf. Not one like Nymeria.* She’d trained Lady well enough, but Lady seemed more or less pre-trained from the beginning. She was soft, sweet, and gentle. Nymeria was something else entirely. She’d displayed her greater wildness from the day the pups were brought to Winterfell. Farlen had shown them a way of testing obedience in the pups by lying them on their backs and holding a hand to their bellies. The more a pup fought, the more difficult they would have been to train.

It was initially thought that the wilder of the girl pups should go to Sansa, since she was older. But, to Sansa’s relief, Arya *insisted* upon having the one with more fight in her. *I should have helped her, though, to train her wolf.*

She’d helped Bran with Summer. It was a bit difficult, because Bran hadn’t named the creature until after his fall, so giving commands to “Hey you!” could be confusing. She missed Bran so much. Sometimes, when in the godswood, she swore she could see his face in the Heart Tree.

*I should have helped Arya more, though. Maybe if Nymeria was better trained, she wouldn’t have bitten Joffrey and then…* Sansa shook her head. No. That wolf would have bitten Joffrey. Nymeria was protecting her mistress, as she should.

*But now…* There was not much to do now except hope Jon and Ghost could help. *Maybe I could help too, if I weren’t carrying Aemonaerys.* Sansa had excellent control of Ghost. Almost as good as Jon’s, really. Ghost obeyed her every word, and followed her around often. Almost more than he followed Jon, really. Jon liked her to have the wolf nearby for protection.

Sansa wasn’t a warg. Or perhaps she was, but not a good one. She suspected it had to do with Lady’s death. But Arya, Jon, Bran, and perhaps Rickon could do it. They said Robb had a strange connection with Grey Wind and that he was one as well. There were many outlandish stories about
her eldest brother, but his skinchanging likely had some truth to it. But Jon said he didn’t start becoming aware of it until much later, and Arya said the same. Not until well after Father’s death. And they both started with dreams of being their wolves.

Sometimes, though, she had odd dreams. Odd in the degree of their realism. Sometimes, she dreamt of icy lands and packs and hunting. Other times she dreamt of flying and nesting. A couple of times, during some of her harshest, most painful moments, she almost felt like there was an animal inside of her.

During the battles, that happened often. She’d ride in, flinging knives, smell the blood, and it was like there was something else inside of her. Her vision would get blurry, and it was like her body would act on its own and she’d have this strange hunger. And battles that apparently took hours or even days seemed to pass in minutes. All of a sudden, she’d look down and see her white clothes stained red and she’d cry and weep and wonder. During the battles, every man she saw in enemy colors she’d seen as meat, as prey. But then when the fight was done, she’d see them as other human beings and she’d be horrified.

When she’d killed Petyr and Wallace Coldwater, it was similar. She had this instinct rise up in her to kill. She smelled their blood and skin so keenly. She felt like she had fangs and claws. A mania set in. Then at the end, she looked down and saw all the blood and the dead man in her lap and she screamed and howled, wondering just what took place.

It affected her in other moments as well. Odd ones. With Jon. Sometimes, she had this absolute need all of a sudden for him to take her from behind. Before truly being with him, Sansa always imagined that she’d want her love-making to be completely traditional: on her back, lying below her husband, eye contact, sweet little kisses. After Petyr, she’d been sure that would be the only way she’d ever feel comfortable with a man.

But with Jon… she just couldn’t help herself. She loved the feeling of him pounding into her from the back. Of course, he wasn’t raping her like Petyr was, nor was he forcing himself into her back end like Petyr so often did. But she’s thought the memory of being fucked without seeing someone’s face would be enough to terrify her. And yet it was one of the few positions that never gave her unsettling flashbacks, ever.

It wasn’t a ladylike or proper way to couple. The embarrassed descriptions from her mother about what was supposed to happen between lords and ladies always depicted laying down in bed, the man over the woman, facing her, kind kisses and moving within her.

Of course, her mother would never tell her of more exotic things. But the wilder things she had learned of always came in the form of crude jokes from both men and women and was always depicted as dirty or odd. Sansa associated anything beyond what her mother told her with bawdy, drunken songs, threats from Joffrey, Randa’s lurid tales of being a ‘slut’ as she gleefully referred to herself, and, of course, Petyr’s rapes.

And yet, Sansa found she liked the less ladylike methods of joining with her husband. In fact, the quiet, gentle position her mother had spoken of, tended to be the one she liked least. It triggered flashbacks more often, for one thing. And it always seemed… less natural than other things.

She found she liked a bit of a rough touch from Jon. Sometimes she loved nothing more. And she liked being rough with him, when she’d never enjoyed being rough with anything or anyone. But running her hands (and often, her nails) down his skin, biting him, pushing him around and being pushed, marking each other, mating like animals always gave her a rush. She’d never enjoyed such things before. But oftentimes, with her husband, she needed it.
It made her wonder if that was what was left of her long-dead direwolf, residing within her. She just wished it translated into more useful things than odd dreams, carnal predilections, and blackouts during violent confrontations. *If I was a proper warg, I might be able to help Arya more.*

She couldn’t really help Arya at all with this, though. Not just for the lack of warging skills. Her belly was big with her babe, she had to be careful. And it had been so long since she’d trained a wolf herself. Ghost was already tamed by Jon and though she had a strong bond with her husband’s companion, she’d not trained him herself. It hurt her not to be able to help Arya with this.

The only thing she could help Arya with at all was ruling the North, and that was at a long distance. Sansa never hesitated to write her sister letters full of advice and answer messages as promptly as possible. She also sought to help Arya practically, of course. With every new problem Arya spoke of, Sansa sought out a new way she might be able to use her contacts in King’s Landing to assist her sister, or send whatever was needed, or come up with her own solution.

Strangely enough, she and her sister worked well in this regard. Very well. Their correspondence was actually quite warm and friendly now, and it was amazing how frequently they agreed on how to handle certain issues. In fact, they’d not yet had one disagreement on how to handle any of the Northern affairs. Sometimes differing ideas would crop up, but both of them made the time to outline their reasoning as clearly as possible and gave in when the other had the better idea.

Sometimes, when Sansa read Arya’s letters, she was shocked at how clever her sister was. *Had Arya been this smart when we were children?* So many of her memories of her little sister involved the girl being scolded by Septa Mordane for clumsy, crooked stitches, muddy clothes, fights, and the Septa and Mother complaining about Arya’s behavior. Also, how much more eager most of her brothers (with the exception of Bran) were to include Arya in their games than Sansa. When she thought harder on it, she also remembered her sister’s superiority at figures, recollection of history, and skill with a horse, but there were so many more memories of Arya’s failures to master the harmonies in “The Dance of the Dragons” and reprimands over poor curtseys.

When she looked back on it, it always seemed like Arya’s poor sewing and dressing were treated as far more severe and important than they actually were. At least, by the girls and Septa Mordane and Mother and even Father.

*Arya wasn’t ugly.* There were far more memories in her head of people saying or implying Arya was ugly, or at least not nearly as pretty as Sansa, than of Arya actually being all that ugly. Her face was a little long, but Jeyne Poole’s younger sister, Nyla, actually had a longer face and was far more unfortunate looking than Arya was. Jeyne said Arya had a face like a horse sometimes, but she hadn’t really.

People didn’t seem to praise Arya as much for being able to keep ledgers better than Sansa could. No one but Maester Luwin. And why? Sansa certainly appreciated it now. Debts were being paid off so well and it made for so much less work and struggle.

Sansa always felt even more pressure to be perfect because of Arya. She’d see how much Septa Mordane seemed to despair over her sister and Sansa would feel so sorry for the woman and want to do everything possible to make up for her sister’s lack of graces. And the Septa always seemed to appreciate her so much for being ‘the good one’.

Aside from Mother and Bran, no one else seemed to really appreciate Sansa for more than how pretty she was. Robb, Jon, and Rickon always wanted to play with Arya more. She remembered one harvest festival when she was seven. Sansa had worked very hard on her gifts to everyone. For Jon and Robb, she’d made gloves. On Robb’s she’d embroidered direwolves, on Jon’s, she’d embroidered snowflakes. She’d spent weeks on them and was so proud of her stitching.
“Wolves for Robb because he’s Robb Stark, and snowflakes for Jon since he’s Jon Snow,” she’d said, grinning.

They’d thanked her awkwardly.

In retrospect, she understood the reactions, especially on Jon’s part. But she’d not really understood it then. Then, when Arya presented both boys with hastily made slingshots, she’d certainly not understood the obvious enthusiasm on both their parts. They gave Arya big hugs and immediately went outside to try them out. They spent hours after that with Arya, all playing with their slingshots, hitting all sorts of things with rock. More than once, they’d fired pebbles in her direction. She almost never saw them wear the gloves.

Septa Mordane gave her far more praise for those gloves than Robb or Jon did. So she’d spent more time with her. And Septa Mordane always complained about Arya.

It was so different now, though.

Sansa sighed now, trying not to think too much on her childhood. She was looking forward to seeing her sister, despite her apprehensions regarding Nymeria. She wanted to leave that trouble to Jon if it could be resolved. He was better qualified to handle it.

Her uncle was talking, and he had been for a while when Sansa was drifting off to think about the past. So when he looked at her expectantly, she blushed.

“I’m sorry, Uncle, what?”

“I asked if Arya has been handling the North well.”

“Splendidly.” She launched into a talk regarding some of Arya’s triumphs, feeling prouder of her sister the more she spoke.

The conversation was interrupted most fortuitously by Arya’s actual arrival to the castle. Sansa and the Blackfish left the table to had out to the courtyard, where more people were gathering. Arya rode in with Jon, Gendry, a number of guards and servants… But Ghost wasn’t there.

Sansa swallowed her nerves over this as she came forward to greet her sister. Arya looked good. A bit tired, dusty, and disheveled, but otherwise healthy. Edmure was the first to greet Arya, pulling the younger Stark girl into a giant hug and kissing both cheeks. He asked her dozens of questions, but then Margaery tapped him on the shoulder, indicating Sansa and her wish to greet her sister.

Arya smiled a bit at her sister, then her eyes went to Sansa’s bump and widened. The Stark sister held hands and hugged.

“I missed you,” they said in unison. They smiled as they pulled away.

“May I…?”

“Of course,” Sansa said warmly. Arya carefully placed her hands on Sansa’s belly.

“Oh, wow,” the younger Stark said with a gasp and wide eyes. She blinked back a couple of tears and grinned at her sister. “I’m so excited!”

The introduction to the Blackfish came next. Arya bowed to him, like a knight, then hugged him. The two began to speak animatedly to one another at once, almost to the point where once again, an interruption had to be made so Arya could greet everyone else. She enthusiastically hugged the Tully
children and offered congratulations to Margaery, but all the time seemed eager to get back to speaking with her great-uncle.

When Jon came closer, Sansa made a quiet inquiry about Ghost’s whereabouts.

“He’s going to be staying in the barn with Nymeria. We think it might help.”

“How does Nymeria… seem?” Sansa asked. “She’s not too wild, is she?”

Jon swallowed. “I’m not entirely sure.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Carellen:

“You should live in Dorne,” Doreah insisted, peeling away layers of wood from a rapidly-emerging goat. “In Dorne, no one would ever send you away for kissing a man. That’s what they did to Ashara Dayne, and it was awful. She was sent away from King’s Landing for it because she was with child. But nobody sent the man who put it in her away. In Dorne, you can just get your moon tea openly, and no one would send you from home just for a kiss.”

Carellen liked Doreah very much, but she wished that she wouldn’t sound so casual. Carellen waited in a side room with both Sand Snakes. The sounds from the throne room, where the High Sparrow’s trial was proceeding, were muffled. Ellaria was there, watching. But the girls were with Carellen.

They were waiting, sitting down at a small table. There was a pitcher and cups of water. The time would come soon.

Loreza held her hand. “This isn’t Dorne, though. And Dorne being Dorne isn’t helping her. She’s going to the Riverlands, where she’s from, after this. So are we.”

“I know that, Loreza! But I’d prefer us going to Dorne. We could stay with grandfather at Hellholt. Sansa could have her baby there. Prince Jon was born in Dorne. And I’m homesick.”

“I’m sure Carellen is, too,” Loreza argued. “And she’s been gone longer and doesn’t have her mother with her like we do. I bet you’re happy to be going back, aren’t you, Carellen?”

The Maid of Acorn Hall swallowed. Was she? She wasn’t sure. She’d sent her mother and father a letter telling them of everything. How she was going to testify against the High Sparrow and Septa Marite. How she was going to accompany the court to Riverrun for the birth of the new prince and the Tully-Tyrell wedding when she finished. ‘I’m so sorry, Mother. But I couldn’t do what Septa Marite said, not anymore. I didn’t want to ruin the prince and princess’s marriage. I don’t think she was right. I don’t think the High Septon was right. I promise, I’m still a maid. I’ve tried to be a good girl, but I’m not even sure what that means anymore. Please come and see me at Riverrun. The prince and princess say you’re welcome, and I want to see you again.’

She’d received a reply.

‘Carellen, Sweetling, we’re so sorry. We’re coming to Riverrun. Do as you’re told now. We trust the queen. Be brave. We love you.’

She was going to speak out against not only Septa Marite, but also the High Septon. The Septon spoke for the Gods. That’s what the Seven Pointed Star said, anyways. Carellen didn’t understand. They said he was a false prophet. But what if he wasn’t? What if she was damning herself by speaking out against him?
Other Septas and Septons were making so many promises that she wasn’t. But there were crowds calling for the Sparrow’s release. It seemed half the city wanted him burned, half wanted him released. Carellen didn’t go out often. It was too dangerous. But she knew there were crowds gathered outside the palace. Not all of them were happy.

Every so often, messengers came in to tell them what was happening. The Sparrow was claiming Daenerys had no right to the throne. That the Seven preached that women must be subordinate to men. It did say that in the Seven Pointed Star. But it also said that just rulers are more fit than evil ones. Queen Daenerys is just, and we’ve had evil kings. It also said that adultery is wrong, and the Sparrow wanted me to bed Prince Jon.

He called for Prince Jon to swear himself to the Seven and take the throne. But Carellen knew Prince Jon worshipped the Old Gods and she didn’t think he even wanted the throne. She didn’t even know why the Sparrow thought Prince Jon would want either. The prince rejected both. Queen Daenerys swore herself to the Seven, wasn’t that enough?

Carellen could hear his voice, ranting and raving, though she couldn’t make out the words, they sounded frantic and poisonous. He so often sounded frantic and poisonous.

The door opened and Ellaria walked in, clad in yellow silk. Kind, dark eyes were narrowed in worry. Ellaria held out her hand. “Carellen, they are ready for you.”

“You can do it! Be bold! Like my father! Seek the truth!” Doreah said, patting her on the back. Your father’s head was bashed in seeking the truth.

She swallowed heavily.

She kept her eyes ahead as Ellaria led her onto the witness’s dais. Carellen tried not to look at the Sparrow or Septa Marite. Instead, she looked up at the Iron Throne, at Queen Daenerys. She felt a thousand eyes on her.

The queen’s eyes were calm. Or as calm as they could ever be. It was hard to tell if a woman as striking as Daenerys Targaryen was ever really calm.

“You are Lady Carellen Smallwood, of Acorn Hall?” The queen asked.

Carellen nodded.

“And you were the charge of Septa Marite of Oldtown?”

“I was.” Carellen turned and pointed at Septa Marite. The Septa’s threatening blue eyes met hers and Carellen shrank back a bit. But she tried to find her courage. She can’t hit you. She’s shackled. The queen promised no harm would come to me.

“And she was the one who brought you to court?”

Carellen nodded. “Yes.”

“On your parents’ orders?”

“I do not know, Your Grace. All my letters with my parents, they just told me to do as I was told. They never told me they wanted me to go to court. They sent me to Oldtown, but not King’s Landing. But Septa Marite told me that was what was wanted.”

“When was this?”
“Sometime before the royal wedding.”

“And when you got here, what happened?”

Carellen took a deep breath. “I was brought into the halls of the Great Sept. The basement, really. And the High Sparrow was waiting for me.”

“Then what?”

“He told me I was chosen for a very special mission from the Seven themselves. He told me word had come that Prince Jon didn’t care for his bride. He said Lady Sansa was a heathen and a whore and an unfit princess. He knew I’d met Prince Jon before, and that we’d… we’d liked each other. He hoped I would lead Prince Jon away from Princess Sansa and convert him to the Faith of the Seven.”

There were gasps. A chorus of them. It sounded like a thousand people were suffocating all at once. Carellen herself could barely breathe.

But Daenerys seemed immovable. “Did he ever explain why he was so intent on this?”

“He said he wanted all the dragons to follow the Crone’s lantern.”

“Didn’t you find it odd that he wanted you to seduce a man away from his betrothed?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Did you voice these concerns?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“And what was the response?”

“He had Septa Marite beat me with a switch.”

She could still feel the bite of it on her skin. He’d been sitting at his desk, Carellen sat across from him, next to Septa Marite. He’d spoken so calmly. But when she asked him why he wanted her to do this, he just instantly gave the order. Septa MArite had grabbed her by her hair and flung her face-first onto the desk, bending over the edge. Skirts were pulled up, smallclothes were pulled down. The High Sparrow opened a drawer and pulled out a long reed, handing it to Septa Marite. The blows came. Her face was pressed into the hard wood of the desk to stifle her cries.

“He spoke to me as I was beaten,” she said. She could still feel his warm breath on her ear. “He said that I was already wanton, and that my soul could not be saved on that account and the only way for me to atone was to use my body to lead the prince to the embrace of the Seven. I had been sent back to Oldtown because I’d…”

She hesitated.

“Yes, Lady Carellen?”

“I’d met Prince Jon at Acorn Hall over a year prior. I liked him. And one night, I went to his chamber and kissed him. I thought I was in love with him. He sent me away, though, and my mother caught me. She sent me to Oldtown to be trained into more ladylike behavior.”

“But you were still a maid?”

“Yes. I was… tested. More than once.” She’d been tested at Acorn Hall by the family Septa. Then at
Oldtown. Then again at King’s Landing when she arrived. Then again right before the trial. The first and last tests of her maidenhead were more pleasant than the ones the Sparrow and Septa Marite subjected her to.

Septon Meribald stepped forward then. “We can confirm that Lady Carellen has been examined more than once and her maidenhead is intact. She has given multiple confessions, all of which consist of no worse actions than a few kisses. Likewise, we have a sworn and signed statement from Prince Jon that he never did any more than kiss the maid, and has had no close interactions with her since that night at Acorn Hall. We have found no evidence that Lady Carellen has engaged in any unsavory activities either, aside from the things the High Sparrow coerced her into doing. By all accounts, it never went farther than intentions and some immodest dresses. Everyone at court testifies that Lady Carellen is a fine maid, gentle, kind, and well-behaved.”

Daenerys nodded. “Very well, so, Lady Carellen, were you beaten again?”

“Multiple times. I was beaten after the wedding, when it was decided that I didn’t do enough to catch the prince’s eye. They thought there was no hope until rumors spread that Prince Jon had bedded Lady Asha Greyjoy when he was in Pyke. I still didn’t want to continue, but I was beaten whenever I protested. And I was threatened continually. They said they’d expose me as a whore and make me do a Penance Walk if I didn’t obey.” She began to shake then, tears coming to her eyes. “That I’d never see my family again because they’d hate me for abandoning my divine mission.”

There was outcry from the crowds. Carellen tried not to cry. She wanted to be strong.

“Did your parents ever write to you about this?”

“My parents never said much beyond ‘listen to Septa Marite’ and ‘do your duty.’”

Maester Merys spoke now. “We have copies of the Smallwoods’ letters. None of them mention any planned seduction of the Prince. Indeed, they seem to be tampered with. When we wrote to Lord and Lady Smallwood, they wrote that they knew their daughter was going to court as a lady-in-waiting to Princess Sansa, and spoke of being proud of her. They were supporters of the Starks during the wars. When the nature of Carellen’s visit was revealed, they expressed absolute shock. We have investigated, and found no evidence that they had any knowledge or involvement in this endeavor. Indeed, it seems even Lady Carellen’s expenses were all provided by the Faith.”

That was when Carellen saw blood. Queen Daenerys was gripping the Iron Throne so hard her hands bled. Her voice seemed sharper.

“Lady Carellen, weeks ago, in the Great Sept, you had a fight with Septa Marite and insisted upon fetching Princess Sansa a chair when the Sparrow refused her one. Why?”

“Because it was wrong.” Carellen said, her stomach twisting. “Princess Sansa wasn’t unkind to me or to anyone, really. She knew what was happening, and she had some harsh words about it, but she didn’t mistreat anyone. And she went to services, said her prayers, did good works in the city. She was heavy with child. And they were bullying her. And I was so tired of seeing people bullied.”

“And that’s when you decided to speak to us?”

“Yes.”

Daenerys nodded. “I see. And you swear that all you have told us is true?”

“I swear it. I didn’t mean any harm, Your Grace, honest. But I was scared. They told me I was doing the right thing. That it was what the Seven wanted from me. I thought I had to.”
The queen took a deep, steadying breath. “Thank you, Lady Carellen. Tell me, what did this mission involve?”

Carellen began to talk about the dresses that were bought for her. About how, after word came that Prince Jon liked the Ironborn style of seaweed in her hair, that she was forced to wear it, “Though it smelled, made my hair dirty, and didn’t tie it well. They told me it was what the prince liked and that was what I was going to be. What he liked.”

She spoke of how she was warned that the prince might want her to do dirty things. “They said he’d loved Wildlings and Ironborn, and that he was a Northern heathen and would have base desires. And that I was to submit to all of them. If I gave him what he wanted, they said, he’d want me more than he wanted the princess, set her aside, and take me to wife. When time passed and I still wasn’t in the prince’s bed, they blamed me and beat me.”

She’d been beaten the morning of the chair incident, before services. “Too much time has passed! Why haven’t you seduced him yet?!” Septa Marite had asked.

“They were planning on sneaking me into the prince’s bedchambers on the night Princess Sansa gave birth,” she confessed, reddening. More gasps and shouts. She tried to tune it all out.

“Were you ever led to believe that doing this might result in you becoming queen?” Daenerys asked.

“They said it might,” she recalled. “They said I could be the queen or princess who converted the dragons, or I could be nothing.’

“Your Grace!” The Mistress of Letters, Missandei, from the Summer Isles, was now running towards the queen. There was blood dripping down Daenerys Targaryen’s fingers and arms now, she was gripping the throne so tightly. The queen’s lovely face was red. The court began to make more noise. Missandei grabbed the queen’s hands.

The queen looked down at them in surprise, as if she hadn’t even noticed. She glared over at the Sparrow then. “We’re done for today,” she called out, sounding furious.

“EVEN THE THRONE REJECTS YOU!” The Sparrow cried out as the guards began leading him away.

Carellen turned away then and stumbled out of the witness platform. Warm arms encircled her. The Maid of Acorn Hall sobbed into yellow silk.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I promised Ser Patrek, but I got so into the Stark sister drama (You: This wouldn't happen if you'd hurry up and write the Arya story you keep promising, Wendy. Me: Yeah, I know.), that I didn't have space. It's coming soon. Also: Randa, Anya, and Mya Oh M
Mothers of Dragons

Chapter Fifty-nine: Mothers of Dragons

“There are women everywhere,” Patrek said, laughing as he swung his practice blade towards Jon’s cheek.

The prince dodged and ducked, delivering a counter-blown that was deflected by the heir to Seagard. “If you had spent time at the Wall, that would not be a thing you’d ever complain about.”

Mallister snorted, “True enough, I imagine! Oh Gods, what were you thinking?”

Jon took this opportunity to get his friend in the side. Patrek cursed and doubled over. “I yield! Gods, let me laugh and answer my question!”

The prince laughed and set his blade aside. He grabbed a couple of cloths from nearby, tossing one to Patrek. Both men wiped their faces.

“I wanted to find my honor. I was a bastard at the time, and felt it was the only way. And I had nothing to inherit as it was.”

A sad look came to Patrek’s eyes. He looked like he had further comment, but he decided to let the matter drop. “Fair enough. Still…”

“My wife is about to give birth. She desired to have her closest companions with her.”

“How many closest companions does she have exactly?” he asked, looking over to see Brienne knocking Arya quite soundly to the ground in the next pen over. “When they’re even bleeding into the practice yard?”

“It’s a common enough sight at court,” Jon argued. “Even the queen can wield a Dothraki arakh. My wife can throw a dagger well.”

“I know that.” Patrek said, eyes flashing. “She got Elwyn Frey right in the neck at the Twins. I saw
it up close. He was about to bash my brains in. I thought I was going to die for sure, and then all of a
sudden—" Mallister mimed clutching his neck, his eye bugging out. He made disgusting gasping and
gurgling noises. He stopped then. "The best part was, I got a look at the blade that took him down. It
had a satin bow around the hilt. She used to tie ribbons around all her throwing knives."

Jon frowned. These were the sorts of things he wished he knew about. "Sansa doesn’t like talking
about battles."

"Well, not all of her stories are that glorious. She cried a lot. And she was useless with a blade any
bigger than a cleaver. I’m pretty sure she tripped over her own surcoat more than once. But she
threw her daggers well, rode in with the rest of us, and did her job. Made some excellent speeches,
too. But, erm, she wasn’t exactly Daeron the Young Dragon. Or her brother." Patrek glanced over
once again to where Arya and Brienne were still sparring. Arya pounced upon the Queensguard,
latching onto her back, running her practice blade across the woman’s neck. Brienne stumbled back
a bit.

“She’s not her sister either, apparently,” Patrek said with wide eyes. “Seven Hells.”

Brienne roared, shoved her elbows back and caught Arya in both her sides. The younger Stark cried
out. Brienne forced the sword from her neck, then pounded Arya in the thigh with the end of the hilt.
Jon’s sister fell to the ground, clutching her leg. But when Brienne came towards her, her blade
pointing towards the Regent of Winterfell, the younger girl turned on her side and kicked the blade
out of Brienne’s hand with uninjured leg, then kicked her right between the legs.

Brienne winced, but gave a small smirk. “You’re not fighting a man, little wolf. I’ve got no stones
for you to bruise.”

She quickly regained her blade, jabbed Arya in the foot, then held the point to her chest.

“Alright! I yield!” Arya gasped, rubbing her thigh gingerly. “Seven hells, how are you so
strong?” Brienne snorted. “I never really had the option to be otherwise.”

She reached out a hand and helped Arya to her feet.

“Still, that landing after I got you in the thigh was impressive,” remarked the Queensguard, “And I
was not expecting those kicks.”

"Just because one part of my body is injured doesn’t mean the others are useless. I save my pain for
later and use what I can when I fight.”

“Well, you’ve lasted longer against me than most have. Longer than even the Tyrell brothers. Of
course, your fighting style is quite different than what I’m used to.”

Jon and Patrek watched all of this. Jon couldn’t stop smiling. Brienne was not lying. There were only
a few people who could stand against Brienne of Tarth. One was the Unsullied Queensguard Dead
Dirt who, like Arya, was so quick and nimble that his movements were hard to even track. There
was Ser Barristan, who, despite his age, was a terror to behold. Obara Sand, far more flexible and
fluid in her movements than her harsh appearance and gait suggested, managed to rival Brienne as
well. A few times Garlan Tyrell managed to last a decent amount of time.

Jon actually managed to last a good long time against Brienne in the yards with a regularity he was
proud of. He was very quick and skilled. But Brienne was quick and skilled and bigger and stronger
than him and he usually had to yield eventually simply out of weariness. Unlike many, Brienne had
the skill, reflexes, and speed to land frequent blows on him. And she was built like the walls of
Winterfell: broad, hard, and pretty much impossible to crumble. So often, he’d just be too worn out before long to continue no matter how many blows he landed.

Jon never saw Gregor Clegane the Mountain fight, but he imagined that it had to be something like going up against Brienne. Only dirtier and more sadistic.

Pride in his little sister flowed through him, though he did wish she’d fought a little cleaner. But if Arya’s opponent wasn’t offended by how she fought, Jon felt he had no right to be either. Arya did have incredible speed, reflexes, and flexibility. Her agility was downright jaw-dropping, really.

Jon hurried over to his sister. “Are you alright?”

“Oh, yeah, I’ll just be aching for the next several days,” Arya said with a smile, “Every hurt is a lesson.”

“I hope I didn’t ruin your ankle,” Brienne said, looking serious for a second. “You should go to Grand Maester Merys and have it taped up a bit.”

Arya was limping a little. “I should. I need it if we’re to fight tomorrow.”

Brienne sighed. “You know, I once promised your mother that I would protect you and see you back to Winterfell. I can’t help but think of what she might say of me knocking you to the ground on a daily basis.”

“She’d be in hysterics. My mother never wanted me to fight. I was supposed to be a lady, like Sansa.”

“Sometimes, a lady just cannot be made of certain people.”

“Please, tell that to my Uncle Edmure.” Arya replied. Jon snorted.

For the last four days, Edmure Tully paid Arya almost as much attention as he did his new bride. When Jon’s sister arrived, she not only found herself in beautifully ornamented rooms overlooking the gardens, but there was a dressmaker and a number of half-made gowns, kirtles, cloaks, and such waiting for her. Arya had almost as many maids as Sansa, though Arya had sent most of them away. Edmure had given Arya a personal tour of the castle and lands, and had told her stories of various handsome young heirs and lords who would be attending the wedding and were eager to meet her.

Whenever Arya returned from her training with Nymeria or her sparring in the yard injured or scraped up, he fussed over her like an old nurse. He’d given instructions to the men in his employ that under no circumstances were they to challenge her in the yards. He kept encouraging her to spend more time with her sister, Margaery, and Minisa.

Jon’s sister humored her uncle slightly, wearing gowns to dinner and holding her tongue as he went on his monologues about how happy she’d be at Riverrun. But Jon was sure that her patience would run out before long. Arya was enjoying her time at Riverrun, except for whenever Edmure was around. She got on famously with her Uncle Brynden (everyone did, really), she was welcomed warmly by everyone here, she had Nymeria nearby, and Jon. She had a partial reprieve from her constant duties up North and had the warmer weather to enjoy. She even got on well with Sansa.

There was something else, too. Arya made a new friend in Mya Stone, one of Sansa’s close companions from the Vale and the bastard daughter of Robert Baratheon. Mya also happened to be an excellent animal trainer. Her primary occupation was the gamekeeper and travel guide for the Gates of the Moon and the Eyrie. It was Mya who transported people and goods atop the treacherous path of the Giant’s Lance with her mules.
Everyone at this point had made friends with Mya. It was hard not to. But Arya got more of the trainer’s time than most. Lord Edmure wasn’t exactly thrilled with this, clearly preferring that Arya make a friend of his betrothed instead, but Margaery couldn’t help Arya train Nymeria, nor did she have Mya’s endearing, sincere personality.

“Everyone’s been trying to tell your uncle that for days now,” Jon said, smiling and mussing her hair. Patrek grabbed a few cloths and handed them out so the four of them could wipe their faces. Jon took one of his sister’s arms and helped her into the castle. The hours in the training yard were winding down. There were fewer and fewer sounds of swords clashing every minute. It was time to go in.

“I know, and it’s obnoxious.” Arya sighed. “At least we don’t have to eat with him tonight.”

That was true. Ser Brynden and Lord Edmure had to meet with some vassals for dinner this evening. So a night in the smaller dining chamber was ahead of them. Jon looked forward to it. Dinner with Lord Edmure, Margaery, the Blackfish, and the rest could be so painfully formal. Ser Brynden and Lord Edmure watched Jon like a hawk, judging his every move.

“Well, after the wedding, you’ll be going back to Winterfell and won’t have to deal with him,” said Jon.

“And thank the gods, neither will I.” Ser Patrek smiled. While Patrek and Edmure had repaired their ruined friendship a little, it was clear things would never quite be the same between them. Too much time had passed and resentments ran deep. Patrek wanted an apology from Edmure that he’d likely never receive, and the heir to Seagard still couldn’t stand to watch his friend drink. “Watching someone else use wine to make misery keeps me from being able to make merry with my own.”

Not that Edmure was always miserable or rude when he drank, nor did he always get completely into his cups. In the six nights since the welcoming feast, they’d only had one awkward one thus far when Edmure got well into his cups and kept pawing at Margaery. At one point he made an uncomfortable comment about the size of Sansa’s belly before he was led away by one of his menservants. The next day he apologized and didn’t touch any spirits. But even seeing him empty one cup when one knew what the potential proved uncomfortable.

“Well, make merry as you wish this evening,” Jon said, clapping him on the back. “We shall all be doing so.”

“Hear hear!” Ser Patrek said brightly as they moved to the armory to remove their armor. Attendants hurried over to help them, Brienne and Arya ducking behind provided screens to remove their own.

“I’ll take her to Merys,” Brienne promised Jon, who smiled and nodded.

“See you in a few hours,” he told them brightly once he was out of his own raiment. Satin had a bath waiting for him when he got to his chambers. He was stepping out and pulling on some fresh clothes when his wife came in, a smile on her face.

“I am very much looking forward to this evening,” she said brightly, kissing him on the cheek.

“Everyone is. Will Margaery and Loras be joining us?”

“Loras possibly, Margaery no. She wants to sit in on the dinner meeting with Edmure and Brynden. She’s intent on learning everything she can about ruling the Riverlands.”

“Of course she is.” Jon smiled. “One can’t accuse her of not being dedicated.”
The Maid of Highgarden spent extensive time with her new family. She played with the children, took long walks and rides with Edmure, met with the Blackfish, conferred with the staff. She was practically Lady of Riverrun already.

“She wants to endear herself to the people here as soon as possible. The sooner she cements her status here, the sooner she can work on getting back to court. Her goal is to be back in King’s Landing in a year’s time.”

Jon sighed. He honestly preferred Margaery in King’s Landing. It suited her better. While the Maid of Highgarden never failed to be anything but polite and charming in public, one could tell that she missed the constant activity of the capital. And honestly, Jon was hoping she’d surpass her goal, as she was far more fun to be around when she was a political advisor than she was as Lady Tully.

“Understandable.”

“So, we have Myranda, Mya, Anya---- though she’ll likely leave early, Patrek, Arya, Gendry, Brienne, maybe Loras.”

Jon nodded. He stroked his wife’s arms. “And I checked with the staff, we have everything arranged. It should be a nice little gathering.”

“Good. Gods, I missed the times when planning little pseudo-parties was the most of my troubles. Word came, by the way. The High Sparrow is on the verge of conviction. The letter is in the highest left drawer of my dressing table if you wish to read it.”

Jon nodded and walked over to the small table, grabbing the parchment with the broken dragon seal. He scanned Daenerys’s letter----- and Missandei attached written minutes----- fairly quickly, and grinned. “There’s no question of it, then. She’s prepared for a trial by combat if he calls for it.”

“Yes. She’s got Barristan and Dead Dirt. Though I’d feel a little more secure perhaps if she had Brienne and Loras as well.”

“Dead Dirt and Barristan both can stand up to Brienne in the practice yard. Either one would be more than enough to stand up to whomever the Sparrow can get. He doesn’t have his Warrior’s sons anymore and the Sparrows are flocking to Meribald,” Jon said, repeating the letter.

“Yes, I know, Jon. I read it. I’d just feel a little safer if she had all her best with her.”

She sat down on the bed. “I’m sorry, I’m being paranoid.

“No, you’re just scared, and with good reason. But try not to think about it too much.” He put the letter down and gazed at her. She was lying back against the blue and red silk and velvet pillows stacked high up on the bed, her belly swollen and high.

“It’s hard for me not to. I need a distraction,” she groaned, wiping her brow with the white linen of her sleeve.

Jon stared. She was clad in a gown of violet and white linen, parted purple skirts falling all about her. Her hair was in a braid. “I could distract you, my lady.”

She smiled at him. “I bet you can.” She sat up a little more and began unweaving her braid. Jon watched with heated blood as her auburn locks were let free, catching the light and teasing her neck and shoulders.

His hands went to the laces of his breeches. “Get on all fours.”
As they made love, he kept his face buried in her hair, one hand between her legs, and the other stroking her belly. Something about knowing he’d made it swell spurred him on even more. They finished, sweaty and smiling, lying on their sides and facing each other. He dozed off for a while before Sansa woke him to prepare for dinner.

She pulled on a gown of wine colored velvet and he changed into some fresh breeches and a burgundy doublet before proceeding to the smaller dining chamber. Sansa began fussing with the servants to make sure everything was perfect, but Jon forced her to sit down and poured her a cup of cider. “You need to stop worrying so. This is supposed to be a fun evening. You need to be calm.”

“I haven’t felt calm since I was twelve years old.”

Jon snorted. “That’s not true. I’ve seen you relax.”

“With you.”

Jon stood behind her and rubbed her shoulders. “These are our friends. Anya, Randa, Mya, Arya, and Brienne are among them.”

“I know. And I want them to enjoy themselves.”

“They will as long as you don’t faint from worry.” His stomach sank. He knew that this wasn’t the real reason she was on edge. Aemonaerys would be arriving in just a few short weeks.

Randa and Mya came in then and Jon smiled at them both. “Ah, ladies, I’m glad you’re here. Perhaps the two of you know how to get my wife to calm down.”

Randa sat down at the table cheerfully, taking the cup of wine Jon poured for her with relish. “Put her on a mountain hundreds of feet up in the air. Have her walk over an immense abyss on a stone pathway three feet wide, surrounded by howling autumn winds while being forced to face the height and descent head-on. Make her do it hand in hand with a spoiled, sickly child on the verge of a violent shaking fit. She’ll be as stoic, cool, and immovable as the Wall itself.”

Mya Stone grinned and Jon found himself utterly intrigued. Sansa gave her friend a sharp look. “Oh, honestly, Randa. Why must you always feel the need to tell tales?”

“Tales are interesting. And you act as if this one isn’t true. And honestly, this is hardly one you ought to be ashamed of. There’s no wickedness or embarrassment. You honestly cannot object to your lord husband hearing this one. I have so few fun stories I can tell about you in the Vale, Sansa. Indulge me on this one.”

Randa sighed and cast Jon a look of frustration. “The problem with your wife, Your Grace, is that she’s too bloody secretive and virtuous. Even when she was bastard-born, she couldn’t permit herself even the liberty of a few flirtations. I swear, when I met her, I was sure she couldn’t truly be Littlefinger’s bastard. Maybe Baelor the Blessed’s or some such person’s. But not Littlefinger’s. That monster was the most prolific pimp in Westeros. ‘Alayne Stone’ blushed at the thought of a man picturing a woman naked.”

“You haven’t seen what she’s like behind closed doors. Though he imagined Sansa then would be less liberated than Sansa now. ‘Too virtuous’? Is that something one can criticize a lady for?”

“It is if one is as wicked and inquisitive as I am. The whole ride down from the Eyrie, I insisted upon hearing all her secrets. She revealed nothing intentionally. But then, I suppose it makes sense in context. It was almost impossible for me to get her to misbehave after she got to the Gates as well. Sansa’s so guarded, though, she seems afraid even to hear tales of her triumphs. It’s a good thing she
has me, though. I’ve got a mouth as big as my arse.”

“I could order you to keep that mouth closed,” Sansa said. Myranda grinned at her.

“But you won’t. Because you know me better than to think I’d ever tell a tale that would harm you. Make you blush, yes. But not harm you. Even after you stole Harry from me, did I ever lay a hand on that pretty little head of yours?”

“Steal Harry?” Jon inquired. “How did this happen?”

It didn’t seem much like Sansa to ‘steal’ a man from a woman. Even if that wasn’t a ludicrous concept, Sansa valued most men so little that betraying a friend to get him wouldn’t be something she’d do. Mislead a pseudo-friend into pursuing a man already claimed by her? Yes. But take another woman’s lover? No. But then, that marriage was a machination of Petyr’s. Jon’s heart sank. Littlefinger had Sansa bed quite a few men, some of them likely married. Still, he doubted Randa would speak of such a thing in so cheery a tone.

“Randa’s being ridiculous. Sansa stole nothing,” Mya said, rolling her eyes.

“I am being ridiculous,” Randa admitted with a grin, “I enjoy it. Being Lady of the Gates gives me so few opportunities to indulge myself. No, Sansa didn’t steal anything. Harry was never mine. I set my cap at him at one point, but was judged unsuitable for the heir presumptive to the Eyrie. This happened long before Alayne Stone came along. Anyways, that’s not the point. The point is, I have some lovely stories to tell about our princess and I’m eager to share them. Of course, not everyone’s here yet. So it’ll have to wait until the suitable number of ears have come to hear them. I have other stories, too. Stories of Mya. Of Lord Robert. Of the Eyrie. Of my own wicked exploits."

“Of which there are countless, no doubt.” Anya Waynwood entered with Brienne. The Lady of Ironoaks smiled and curtsied to Jon and Sansa, then went straight for the cider. “Let me have some, Child. At my age, I have little tolerance for spirits.”

Jon got up and helped Anya into a chair. The woman moved slowly, slower than he remembered. She gave him a careful look. “Thank you, My Prince.”

“My pleasure, My Lady.”

“And are you doing well? Taking good care of your wife?”

“I’ve had no complaints.”

“Good.” She looked over at Sansa. “Make sure you remember to complain if you have cause.”

“I do.”

Jon leaned towards the Lady of Ironoaks. “How is Lynette Rivers faring?”

“She had a little trouble making friends at first,” Anya admitted, “But she’s been well otherwise.”

Shortly after came Ser Patrek, Arya, and Gendry. The heir to Seagard eagerly took a seat next to Randa, who looked extremely pleased with this. Arya sat next to Brienne and cracked her neck. “I’m still aching, Tarth.”

“My apologies, My Lady. But you asked me to treat you as I would any other opponent.”

“I pity all your opponents.”
“Everyone does,” Jon said cheerfully.

Once everyone was there and the food was served, Lady Randa launched into her story about meeting Sansa for the first time and traveling down from the Eyrie with her. It became an evening of stories. For once Randa finished, Lady Anya began telling tales of Eddard Stark and Robert Baratheon growing up in the Vale.

“Within two hours of knowing Robert Baratheon, I became convinced that he wouldn’t live to see his seventeenth name day. That he’d die in the Vale in some sort of idiotic accident involving some unwise stunt, a hammer, and too much drink, and then the forces of the Stormlands would march towards us in revenge for killing their heir. At fourteen, every whore in Gulltown knew his name. He used to drag Ned along on all sorts of foolhardy adventures.”

She sighed. “I’ll never forget… Eddard Stark would have been fourteen. A number of the Lords were gathered at the Gates for a council and the boys used the opportunity to sneak away. Well, one early morning, Eddard’s horse is trotting back to the castle, Ned slumped over in his saddle, every inch of him drenched in cheap red. Robert was nowhere to be seen. Ned and Robert had gone to a tavern. Robert drank too much and got into a fight over one of the serving girls. This became a brawl before long. Poor Ned had a barrel of red broken over his head and shoulders and was knocked out. Robert dragged him out, put him on the horse, sent him on his way, then went back into the tavern to keep fighting. We found him in the tavern, under a smashed table, sleeping it off next to the man he’d originally fought with and the girl they’d fought over, his breeches around his ankles. Ned insisted that only Robert drank too much. He said the spirits there were cheap and watered down. He’d gone to try and keep Robert out of trouble. Robert and a couple others supported this, so Eddard was spared the belt.”

Everyone laughed. Jon could scarcely believe it. It was hard to imagine the man who raised him as some hapless lad coming home from a tavern brawl drenched in wine. Robert Baratheon, yes. But not Ned Stark.

But then, King Robert had such a talent for pulling Father into dangerous situations. Too bad he couldn’t drag him out the last time. Jon loathed Robert Baratheon. He’d not even properly met the man, but he hated him. When he first laid eyes on the king, he’d been grievously disappointed in the fat drunk sweating through his silks. The man Eddard Stark spoke of as this powerful, roguish hero. But it went beyond that.

Robert neglected his kingdom and put his friends in danger. He’d drawn the Starks apart. However mightily he might have wielded his warhammer, he seemed a profoundly weak man to Jon. An utter failure who destroyed the Targaryen dynasty only to allow the realm to descend into further madness.

And he’d tried to kill Dany.

The attempted murder of Jon’s aunt angered the prince more than the slaying of his father. Rhaegar Targaryen went into battle in a war he’d started. Jon’s mixed feelings about his sire and the rebellion notwithstanding, there was no denying that Robert was threatened by the Silver Prince. Rhaegar was responsible for that situation, at least partly.

But Dany… Dany was fourteen, and she’d hurt no one. She’d kidnapped no innocent maidens, sparked no battles, killed no men. She was a young girl on the other side of the world. At the time, she had little say in how her life was handled. Daenerys was a child then, carrying a child of her own in her belly.

And Robert Baratheon sent assassins after her. Jon understood war. He understood the threat. But to
actively take part in such a thing…

The irony of it was that Daenerys had actually considered leaving Westeros behind at the time. Viserys was dead. She was Khaleesi and happy in her marriage and position. Drogo had no interest in crossing the Narrow Sea. If nothing had been done, Robert might have had nothing to worry about. But after the attempt on her life, Drogo and Dany both swore vengeance.

Robert attempted to kill a pregnant girl who had done him no harm. The decision, according to sources, caused a rift between the king and his Hand.

There was also just the overall neglect of his duties and friends as well.

*That fat oaf marched into our home, dragged my father to his death, and almost destroyed my entire family with his selfishness and stupidity.*

He knew Robert Baratheon wasn’t entirely to blame. But that mattered little. He tried to kill fourteen-year-old Daenerys and her unborn child. He allowed the Lannisters to get away with slaughtering Jory and the rest of Father’s men. He barely batted an eye at the murder of Jon’s brother and sister. He neglected his family, friends, and people, too busy drinking and whoring to care about keeping Westeros from ruin.

Jon couldn’t stand such things. The man actively chose to be king. Then he decided to enjoy all the privileges and address none of the responsibilities of his position. And the only time he ever took action seemed to be with the aim of murdering innocent young women thousands of leagues away.

*Daenerys is twenty-two. She’s been actively ruling since age fourteen. She stayed in Meereen, put her own ambitions on hold, and endangered herself just to keep the city she’d conquered stable and to learn how to govern so she might be able to rule wisely. She understood even then that conquering wasn’t enough. She’s absurdly young, but she knows her duty. She does more ruling in a week than Robert Baratheon did throughout his entire reign. I’m not even king and I put in numerous hours trying to keep things stable in this country. I was less than half Robert Baratheon’s age when he died when I was trying to make deals with the Wildlings and the Iron Bank, trying to placate Stannis Baratheon, man the castles on the Wall, prepare for hoards of White Walkers, and keep people fed as winter came. I’m twenty-three. Sansa’s twenty, and she was feeding people, negotiating trade agreements, and forging alliances for the crown before she even joined the royal family. We’re all constantly exhausted and working ourselves to the bone. And we’ve only had a proper council to help us for a few moons, and our domains extend far beyond the Seven Realms that Robert controlled. There’s no excuse for that level of neglect from a king already a man grown.*

He couldn’t help it. That sort of laziness and dereliction of duty infuriated him.

Of course, the knowledge that the king would have had him slaughtered in his bed had the monarch known his true identity certainly didn’t help.

Jon tried not to dwell on this. Thoughts of it angered him and this was not a night for anger. He looked over at Arya. “Tell us of finding Nymeria.”

The night passed smoothly. Lady Waynwood retired early, as expected. Everyone steadily got more into their cups. A few hours passed. Loras was crying on a still-sober Brienne’s shoulder over memories of Renly, apologizing profusely for ever suspecting her of killing him. “You knew what it was to love him! No one else understands! I miss him so much!”

Brienne herself looked ready to cry at this. She patted Loras on the head and whispered to him carefully, obviously uncomfortable. Jon’s stomach turned. *Time to head to bed.*
Arya was giggling about the various similarities between Gendry and Mya. “You’ve got the same eyes! You’ve got the same hair! You both laugh the same way! You’re both tough enough to shit nails and you’re both stubborn! Mya’s more cheerful, but still… Are you two as pissed as I am? No? YOU EVEN HAVE THE SAME TOLERANCE FOR ALE! You’re only half-siblings! I didn’t look a bit like any of my full siblings! So why are you both the same? Until we arrived here, you two hadn’t even met!”

Randa and Patrek had ventured into a corner and were pawing at each other. Sansa sighed wearily. “You get Arya, I’ll get Randa.”

Jon got up and went over to his sister, who was ruffling Gendry’s hair affectionately and telling Mya, “You know, he wasn’t always nice to me, when we were younger. But he’s soooo much nicer now! The knighthood definitely made him a bit more gallant. Sansa’s worried, though, because he’s Robert’s bastard. And so are you. And the queen is coming soon. So I don’t know what’s going to happen. Gendry doesn’t bother her, but he’s only one. And---“

Gendry put a hand over Arya’s mouth. “You talk too much. Especially when you’re in your cups.”

She pulled his hand away. “Only because I had to spend so much time keeping secrets and telling lies. You don’t talk enough. Mya, help me here.”

The Vale bastard had the good nature to giggle, her face a bit pink. “I doubt he’d care for what I have to say about it. The queen knows I exist. She’ll know I’m here. We’ll be fine.”

Jon grabbed his sister about her waist, pulling her to her feet. “You’ve had enough, Arya. More than enough. I think it’s time you got to bed.”

His sister didn’t protest. Instead she leaned against him and kissed him on the cheek. “I don’t care who your parents were, you’re the best brother ever. I love you so much. Not like my sister does, but you know…” She leaned her head against his chest. “Ruffle my hair?”

Jon did this. “Now come on.”

“Wait, is Gendry---“

Jon put a hand over her mouth, then glanced at the knight. “You going to be alright?”

The former blacksmith nodded and got to his feet. “I’ll follow you. I’d take her myself, but I don’t want to carry her in my state.”

Escorting his sister and her lover back to her bedchambers proved more than a little awkward. Jon wasn’t sure how to address the situation. When they entered the fancy bedrooms, a bunch of men’s clothing was hung up on the door of the wardrobe that clearly belonged to Gendry. The knight hesitated to step too far inside. Jon chose to leave as quickly as possible and hurried back to the dining chamber, where Mya was helping Sansa drag Randa away from Patrek’s lap.

“Oh, stop it! Let us have our fun!” Randa protested.

“Yes, let us have our fun!” Patrek insisted. But he didn’t get to his feet.

Jon helped Mya with Randa and asked Brienne to bring Sansa and Randa back to their chambers. The Queensgard shoved the head of the now-unconscious Loras off her shoulder and obliged. Mya and Jon ended up taking care of Patrek, and called guards in to take care of Loras. By the time he finally got back to his rooms, his wife was fast asleep. He happily curled up alongside her, burying his nose in her auburn hair.
Daenerys:

For a man convinced of his own holiness, the Sparrow went rather reluctantly to his death. In the end, he had to be carried into the Dragon Pit by four members of the City Watch. His cries, though, could barely be heard over Rhaegal’s shrieks echoing from deep within the pit further than anyone could see.

The dragon pit had never felt hotter, nor had it been brighter. A great fire burned below in the pit’s depths, and there was a full moon. Daenerys sat on Drogon’s back, hovering just above the dome. Viserion circled within the pit just below.

The charges and sentence was recited once more. The Sparrow threw more curses at his queen.

Viserion joined Drogon for this meal. When the Sparrow was tossed into the pit, the two male dragon grabbed one end of the pontiff in their jaws and tore him in half. When the teeth closed around flesh, only then were the Sparrow’s screams greater than Rhaegal’s.

Marite was next, though her death was quicker. Daenerys jumped from Drogon’s back, landing upon Viserion. There were cries of shock from the spectators. Barristan’s voice was particularly loud. Dany couldn’t help herself, though. She smiled and pulled her leather cap over her face.

Drogon flew higher and began circling the top of the pit, blocking out a great deal of the moonlight. Viserion, meanwhile, flew downward, getting ever closer to the flames. Upon closer inspection, the bottom of the pit contained a collection of fires rather than one large inferno of dragonflame. It still felt like she was flying into an oven.

At the center of it all was her daughter, writhing on the ground. She’d been there for only an hour. Her labor started too late for them to put the execution on hold. Dany feared the pressure on her daughter of laying her eggs with a crowd so near. They’d banned spectators inside the dome, but Dany knew rumors were already spreading about what was taking place.

Seeing Rhaegal like this, crouching in pain, wounded her. All of a sudden, it seemed she was back in Meereen, chaining her children to the ground, worrying over them wasting away in the old fighting pit. She would not leave her daughter alone in some pit again, regardless of the heat.

Her skin could not be burnt. Her hair could be, though. Daenerys reached the ground, sliding off of Viserion and walking towards her daughter. It took a net of iron to imprison her in Meereen, Dany remembered. Four men had burned bringing her down into the pit.

She got close and rubbed her daughter’s side. “It shall pass, Sweet Girl.”

Dany could feel her clothing burn away. Soon after, when her hood was gone, the sparks hit her hair. It fizzled away.

Her ears were in agony, for Rhaegal kept shrieking. Viserion came closer, rubbing his neck against his sister’s. It took so long. So very long.

First came a bright white egg, flecked with iridescent blue and green. It looked like a giant opal. So, they’re Viserion’s clutch then?

Yet the next was black with shocks of red, so much like Drogon’s egg that it unnerved her. All of a sudden, she felt like she was back with Irri, Jhiqui, and Doreah, setting her eggs on the braziers, dragons nothing but dreams and figures in her brother’s stories. The eggs merely things of beauty.
Two of green, one with shocks of bronze, the other with white. They came quickly. Dany began gathering the eggs, carrying them over to the curves of Rhaegal’s wings.

It took longer for the next to come. Silver and red came. Then, with the expulsion of an egg of black and white came a rush of blood and tissue. But soon after, Rhaegal began to calm. Daenerys brought the last of the eggs over, crouching under Rhaegal’s wing to place them beside the other ones in the clutch. Her daughter ceased her shrieks and just breathed long and deep. Her wing came down, grabbing not only the eggs but her mother. Daenerys found herself in her daughter’s grasp, shielded by the flames, wrapped around her grandchildren.

Daenerys managed to relax a little, wrapped around the clutch in a fetal position.

Rhaegal fell asleep after a while. When Daenerys crawled out from under the giant green wing, she found her sons sitting around her, most of the fire gone. Sunlight poured down.

Daenerys couldn’t help it. She laughed. She danced. Right there, with no witnesses but her children. *There are two mothers of dragons now.*

Sansa:

Viserion had taken up residence in the Red Fork. He liked to swim. Drogon and Rhaegal had remained behind with the clutch.

Sansa almost cried when she saw her queen’s scalp, lightly dusted with the beginnings of Targaryen silver-gold. Daenerys had such lovely hair. When she’d last seen Dany, it was a river of moonlight. Now it looked like Grand Maester Pycelle’s chin after his original beard was cut.

But Daenerys smiled when she entered Riverrun’s walls. One of the first things she did upon settling in was unroll lengths of canvas upon which were painted jaw-dropping depictions of the new clutch of eggs currently laying in the bottom of the pit in King’s Landing.

Her enthusiasm was ridiculous. “I’ve already got names picked out. Three will have to be named for the original three- Balerion, Vagar, and Meraxes. The other three—Well, I’m not sure but I thought maybe Valyrion could be one.”

The queen practically bounced as she spoke.

Sansa sat at the conference table, looking down at the paintings. She counted six. *Viserion’s already marked for Aemonaerys.* She hoped against hope that she wasn’t going to be expected to keep up with Rhaegal’s rate of reproduction.

She said as much to Jon later that evening. Her husband laughed and said he would not mind it.

“That’s because you’re not the one who has to do all the work,” she replied, grumpy. “If all those eggs hatch sometime soon, well, you and Dany will just have to find a way to control the extras yourselves. We agreed. Four is our limit.”

“I still say five is a better number,” he said, pulling the bedclothes aside for her. “And I enjoy making them.”

He helped her into bed and pulled the covers up, as if he were practicing tucking their future babes into bed. She half expected him to get her some hot milk and offer to read her a story, despite the very unfatherly words he just said.
“Well, you only have to do the fun part, as I’ve said. But if your heart is set on five, then you can carry and birth the fifth one yourself.”

He snorted. “I believe that’s impossible.”

“Your aunt just arrived in today with a painting of the new dragon eggs that just hatched and you’re talking about impossible. You, who fought the Others and was brought back from the dead.”

Jon laughed harder as he crawled into bed next to her. “No, I think that’s some magic I’d rather not involve myself in. Even I have limits.”

“As do I. Four children.” She ached terribly between her legs, and she was tired of not being able to see her feet, which also ached.

Jon leaned forward and kissed her goodnight. “Four children.”

The lights went out.

A summer snow had fallen and she was running about with Arya and Bran. Every so often, she stopped and tasted the snow as she tripped and fell. When she closed her eyes, she felt a dull thud in her lower stomach. She opened her eyes to see her sister grinning at her.

“Why did you hit me?”

“Because you’re a ninny.” And with that, Arya scampered off.

Some time after that, she was dancing at her wedding. Her new royal husband was watching her from the tables as she spun around the room with a familiar looking knight. He lifted her into the air by her waist.

His grip wasn’t strong, though, and Sansa crashed to floor, face down.

She was with Lady again. But now Lady was big, as big as Ghost. She rode her direwolf after her siblings, also on their wolves’ back. But Lady kept getting smaller and smaller while the saddle remained the same size and Sansa was bouncing around.

She was sitting on the iron throne and one of the sword handles was sticking right into the small of her back.

It was the day when she bled for the very first time. Cersei Lannister was telling her of the pain. And she knew.

Sansa’s eyes opened. She was still in bed. She heard Jon turn over in his sleep. It was still late. Sansa got out of bed, pissed, and went to the washbasin by the dressing table. She gave herself a quick sponge bath, waiting for the fluid to spill. It wasn’t coming just yet. Oh, hurry up. I want to be able to wash it away myself.

But too much time passed. Sansa got up reluctantly and nudged her sleeping husband awake.

“Hmm? What? What’s happening?!”

“I’m going to have a baby,” Sansa told him, “Right now.”
Okay, so for those of you who don't follow me on Tumblr, Trials and Tricks is almost over. Good news: there will be spin-off and sequel stories. I'm also writing some stuff based on prompts. Right now I'm not taking new ones because my writing schedule got messed up, but I should be taking new ones by next week. So message me there if you're interested.
Chapter Summary

The birth.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bluecichlid for her beta-work!

Guys, after this, there will be an epilogue including short POVs from Dany, Marg, Carellen, Barristan, and Arya. But more or less, we've come to the end of this story. Sort of. I still intend to write fics in this headcanon/AU. Spin-offs, side fics, and even a sequel. I like this headcanon too much to let it die.

But this story has gotten so big, it was becoming unwieldy. This was a good, natural ending. It was hard to end this, and this chapter was tough. But I hope you like it.

I need to thank all of you: Fans, reader, subscribers, commenters. This was one of the most fun, interesting, and beneficial experiences for me as a writer overall and I want to thank all of you for your advice, support, and encouragement. I especially want to thank my beta Bluecichlid for her excellent work, my former beta Illyana for her help, my buddy Tommyginger for her great advice and discussion, and frequent readers/commenters. I hope you guys like this.

Chapter Sixty: Spring

Sansa:

Nani entered the room and took her hand. “Come, Khalakki.”

Jon got up and took her other hand. “Do you need me to carry you?”


He walked with her, threading an arm around her waist. Sansa breathed deep as they made their way there. One of the pains hit her and she stumbled, but did not fall. When they got to the door of the birthing chamber, she kissed her husband. “We’ll be fine, I promise you. I’ll have Merys and Nani and Anya and the best midwives in Westeros.”

“And me!” Jon replied. “I’ll be with you every moment.”

Sansa’s eyes widened. Oh gods. She should have seen this coming. Eddard Stark had been close by during the births of all the Stark children save Robb. He’d even been by his wife’s side at certain stages. She still remembered Rickon’s birth very clearly. Lord Stark had sat by Lady Catelyn and held her hand during the first few hours, then left only after her mother and Maester Luwin insisted. He’d spent the time after pacing outside the birthing chamber door, sometimes calling out
encouragements to his wife, and run in the second he was allowed.

There was a time when Sansa thought this was the norm. When Cersei Lannister informed her that King Robert hadn’t been close by for the births of Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen, it took the northern girl by surprise. It was true that Robert Baratheon was a bit more neglectful than most men--most noble fathers stayed within castle grounds and certainly did not go hunting when their wives’ time was near---but they didn’t keep that close, either.

In fact, it was often common practice for the father to wait in his chambers, or celebrate in the Great Hall, or pray in the nearby godwood or castle sept. Even most low-born fathers rarely witnessed the birth. Aside from a maester, it was considered unseemly for men to involve themselves in the process.

Harry found Sansa’s pregnancy shape highly unappealing. He tried to hide it, but he stopped fucking her around her fourth month and found her shape distasteful. At the same time, he was utterly attentive to her----holding her hair when she retched (even disposing of the contents himself on more than one occasion), rubbing her back and ankles, making sure she had enough to eat, making sure she was warm enough. He got so tired of seeing her on horseback that he commissioned a new carriage to be built for her and sent from Gulltown---one of the few instances where he actually spent his own money. He’d fought with Petyr over her personal comfort and safety. He’d lost the battle over leaving her behind at the Gates of the Moon during the war or postponing the campaign, but won most of the others. There were times when they were on campaign and had limited food, and Harry gave up portions of his own meals to feed her, or personally went hunting to bring back extra game for her dinner. He took note of all the midwives’ and maesters’ instructions for keeping her and the baby healthy and safe, and applied them strictly.

But as attentive as Harry was, even he wasn’t with her when she birthed Eddie. First he went to the castle sept and offered prayers to the Mother to see her through, then he hosted his men in the Great Hall, leading toasts and celebrations of his approaching son. He’d gotten quite drunk at one point and went to sleep it off in his chambers, and arrived to meet Eddie in the chambers red-eyed, with an aching head, but otherwise happy.

Sansa was actually quite grateful for it. When Cersei had told her of Robert’s habits and told her that she hadn’t even wanted her husband there, she hadn’t understood. But she definitely understood later on.

Many women would admit that birth was a “messy” business. That was an understatement. Sansa suspected the word “messy” was used to both protect the delicate sensibilities of men and to keep young women from becoming too terrified of the practice. By fifteen, Sansa had witnessed brutal murders and battles. She’d been abused and raped repeatedly. She thought that nothing at that point could faze her. As it turned out, birth was just as terrifying as any death.

In a battle, you at least could try to fight your enemies, and you went into it with people suffering along with you, and there was an identifiable enemy. But in birth, it was your own body causing you pain, and there was no way to fight it. You had to just let it happen, knowing it would get worse before it got better. There was no shared pain among fellow soldiers. No, this you suffered alone. No one was giving birth with you. No one was going to step in to stop it.

And it was so gruesome. After she birthed Eddie, she accidentally got a look at the afterbirth when the midwife pulled the tub out from under the birthing chair. It was literally one of the most revolting-looking things Sansa had ever seen. She’d seen her father’s head on a pike. She’d seen a man with his stomach torn open and his entrails spilling out. She’d been in bed with a naked Tyrion Lannister, his nose cut from his face, the head of his man’s staff purple and bulging as he groped her.
The afterbirth was second only to Lady Stoneheart’s severed head and spastic body in the list of grotesque things Sansa ever saw at that point (it later became third after she saw what Ramsay Bolton had done to Winterfell). It looked like a monster made of blood and tissue. It looked alive almost, a great mass of bloody tissue with a white chord hanging from it. When Sansa saw it, she shrieked, certain she’d somehow pushed one of her own organs---perhaps her bladder or her womb itself---out of her body and that she’d soon die.

Sansa always intended on having more children with Harry after the war ended. After all, it was winter and the lands were war-ridden. She needed more heirs for the North and for the Vale. As unpleasant as the process of producing said children was, it was her duty.

If Harry had witnessed some of the things in the birthing chamber, there was no way he’d ever be able to stomach touching her again. She needed him to be able to look at her without his cock wilting like a flower for her to give Eddie brothers and sisters.

Also, men were not particularly helpful in birthing chambers. Even the maesters seemed nervous about the whole affair. Maester Coleman, who had overseen Eddie’s delivery, flinched away more than once. Almost all the work was done by the midwives.

Nani insisted that men being around childbirth was wrong and unnatural. “Men are designed to end life, not create it. There is a reason the gods made it so their contribution begins and ends with mounting the woman.” Even Merys seemed to agree with this. His council was that a Maester should be present, but only to be on hand in case advanced surgical measures were needed.

“Septas and midwives birth babies. Maesters are for advanced medicine.”

She’d yet to meet many men who wished to be involved anyways. Maesters had to learn to deliver babes, and according to Jon, when Gilly birthed little Jon, there was no shortage of citadel novices eager to get involved for the learning experience. But that was an isolated circumstance. Nani told her awful stories about how many Dothraki women birthed babies in carts as the khalasars traveled. “But even then, there are no men in those carts, no men around them either.”

Then, of course, there was the Kingslayer. “When they told Jaime he was not allowed in the birthing chamber, he smiled and asked which of them proposed to keep him out.”

There was no doubt in Sansa’s mind that the Kingslayer loved Cersei. And it wasn’t as if he were a man who let social rules stop him from doing anything he wished in regard to his sister. But she honestly wondered how much help Jaime Lannister truly was to Cersei in those moments. The man was an incredible warrior and he loved his sister. But that was one of the things that made birth so terrifying, having the strongest swordsman in the world did nothing. Having the most devoted of lovers did nothing. Sometimes even having the best midwives and maesters and experts in the world could do nothing. There was no strategy when it came to birth, no real battle plan beyond arranging the birthing chamber and choosing one’s attendants. There was no army to support you. A sword was useless. Even love could be useless. They said Lord Tywin only ever loved his wife Lady Joanna, that she was the only one who could make him smile. But that didn’t stop her from dying in childbirth to bring Tyrion into the world.

Sansa didn’t want Jon to see her give birth. It wasn’t just her personal modesty. It wasn’t that she thought he was like Harry, and that seeing those things would disgust him. He definitely had an opposite reaction to her physically than Harry had. Jon also nursed her when she was poisoned. More than once during that time, Sansa had thrown up all over him, and he hadn’t blinked an eye. When she’d announced her pregnancy to him, he kissed her enthusiastically despite the fact that she’d literally just thrown up in front of him. And you would have thought that her mouth had been filled with lemoncakes rather than sour vomit moments before by the way he kissed her.
But she didn’t want him to see her suffer like this. When she was sick, Jon was brought to the point of madness. Even before he had his breakdown in the dragonpit (which Sansa knew had to have had a lot to do with seeing her so sick. She didn’t think it a coincidence that it happened right after he executed the woman responsible for her suffering), he’d acted completely rash at several points. There was the Stafford Pryor reaction. He’d gone running through the city after Arya when he mistook their sister for an attacker. He’d held Sansa and cried nonstop (and Jon wasn’t one for tears). He tortured Roslin, then injured himself. He later lost it with the woman again at her trial.

Childbirth could be, if anything, even worse for him. Jon was prone to blaming himself for things utterly out of his control. But her husband actually had contributed to this. She didn’t want to see what he was like when he saw her howling in agony trying to birth the child he’d planted inside her.

She knew that it would not matter to Jon that it was part of life. It would not matter that she would have gone through this pain no matter what, as she had a duty to her people to produce children. It would not matter to him that if he were not the one to impregnate her, it would have been someone else, some very likely less loving and kind, and she’d have to go through the same, if not even more pain anyways. It would not matter to him that Sansa was more than willing to subject herself to this, or that she wanted this child more than anything.

Jon knew all of these things on a conscious level, but that played into how he viewed things. Jon knew that when he killed the Halfhand and bedded Ygritte, he was forced to in order to infiltrate the Wildlings, gain information to protect his brothers, and follow the orders the Halfhand himself gave him. But that didn’t stop him from continuing to agonize over the whole thing and think of himself as a traitor and an oathbreaker. When Ygritte died, he knew that she was a threat to him, his brothers, and even the kingdom. He knew she’d shot him full of arrows. He knew that he had to leave and betray her for the sake of the Watch. He knew that it wasn’t her arrow that struck her down. Yet he’d told Sansa that in his dreams, he was always the one that killed her, and that he hated and blamed himself for what happened to her.

He blamed himself for what had become of Lynette Rivers and the Pyke boys, even though none of that was his fault. He knew that exposing Lynette’s parentage was an unexpected but necessary measure taken to save Sansa’s life and bring Roslin Frey and numerous other threats to Sansa and the kingdom at large to justice. He knew that he wasn’t responsible for Roslin’s decision to cuckold Edmure and have a child with Marq Piper. He knew that it was Roslin’s fault for endangering her children and forcing the matter to come to light with her schemes. He knew that he had done everything possible to insure Lynette had a good life despite what happened and that he had no other choice. He also knew that Asha’s sons were bastards because Asha decided to have children with a man who wasn’t her husband. And forcing the matter by trying to get her to marry was the only possible nonviolent way to keeping the Ironborn from revolting.

Jon sometimes even blamed himself for his own death. “I was ready to break vows again, involve the Watch in the wars. I should have seen it coming.” Perhaps he should have, but he was six-and-ten and she found it ridiculous for him to blame himself. Sansa couldn’t stand that. It didn’t matter when she pointed out to him that the Watch were going to get involved anyways since Ramsay Bolton was threatening to attack Castle Black, and that if Jon hadn’t tried to attack him when he did, the bastard of the Dreadfort likely would have, at the very least, damaged what few meager resources the Wall had left and made it impossible for them to withstand the coming hoard of White Walkers or shelter the Free Folk.

Facts wouldn’t matter if he witnessed the birth. What would matter was that Sansa would be suffering, and there was no way for him to make it stop. And, god forbid, if something happened to her or Aemonaerys, he might lose his mind. Even if nothing did happen, the level of pain he witnessed might make him fear ever impregnating her again.
She now regretted waking him. She should have quietly left the room, alerted Nani, and left Jon sleeping. She’d considered doing that, but worried that Jon would be hurt or angry at her for not alerting him at once. A stupid thought, really. Whatever ill feelings Jon might have over such things, it would be eclipsed by the arrival of their child and if the problem persisted, they could speak of it.

Nani looked at him crossly. “You’re not going to be there.”

His face fell. “I can’t just leave her. I’m not going to abandon Sansa or Aemonaerys.”

Sansa took a deep breath, ready to speak. “Jon----”

Another pain hit her, winding her completely. Nani and Jon hurriedly brought her in. It was a large, circular tower room. At the back was a large bed, at the center was the birthing chair. Numerous other chairs and tables holding a number of instruments were present, as was a basinet, cradle, and collection of other baby things. The windows were shut, sealed, and covered by heavy velvet curtains. There were new rushes on the floor. Merys, a couple of midwives, and Anya were there already. Sansa was brought over to the birthing chair and settled in, nervous.

Merys inquired as to the severity of her pains and the length of time between them. Once he was satisfied, he looked at Jon, standing by her side, clearly uncomfortable. “Your Grace, perhaps it would be better if you waited elsewhere?”

“Why? Why would it be better?” He demanded. “I should be by my wife’s side.”

“Birthing is a messy business,” Merys began. Sansa, Anya, and Nani all laughed at this description. “It’s not really an affair men are meant to involve themselves in, aside from someone certified to deliver, of course. It’s not a pleasant thing to witness. You’d be more comfortable waiting it out.”

“Sansa’s body is wracked with birth pains and it’s my comfort you’re concerned with. I’ve seen many unpleasant things. I’m not abandoning her.”

Sansa cursed herself. Why didn’t I see this coming? It was just that a husband being present was just so abnormal, especially for a highborn family. Even among the smallfolk, the husbands only got involved if there weren’t enough women on hand to help in the delivery. Even the conversations she had with Val indicated that they preferred to only have women involved. She’d made a remark about the birth of her nephew, “For whatever reason, Dalla actually called for Mance when it happened. I had to be her midwife, but at least I was better than Mance would have been.”

It just wasn’t done. Her Uncle Edmure hadn’t been present for the births of Minisa, Lynette, or Ambrose, though he had been both a devoted husband and father. Lady Waynwood’s husband was not in the room with her during the seven times she’d given birth. And though she instilled the importance of attending to one’s pregnant wife in every boy she raised, she didn’t expect any of them to be present then. Half the reason Anya and Randa were allowed to come on campaign with Sansa was so there’d be women present to attend Eddie’s birth. No one expected any of the men to help her deliver, even if it happened in a remote location where access to a midwife wasn’t available.

But of course, Jon would be inclined to defy all tradition in favor of the example of Eddard Stark.

Perhaps his journey to Pyke had blinded her from this possibility. She supposed that the knowledge that he’d left her behind while she was pregnant had kept her from entertaining the possibility that he’d want to be by her side for the birth.

“Jon… My love… It’s not proper.”

He looked at her in shock. “Hang propriety! Even your mother abandoned that when you and your
siblings came!"

“Jon, you’re no midwife. Please. I need your prayers. Go to the godswood.”

“Sansa… I can’t just leave you. Please.”

She sighed. “I--- alright. For now. But promise… promise you’ll stay calm? And if I ask you to close your eyes or leave…”

“I will. I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Fine. Take a seat.” She met Anya and Nani’s eyes. They appeared disapproving. She looked at her husband again. “And promise me… Under no circumstances will you look between my legs.”

“Alright…”

She began to breathe deep. There was a knock on the door. To her disappointment, it wasn’t Randa, but Arya.

“How can I help?” Her sister demanded. Sansa shook her head.

“No! Arya---"

“I should be here! You’re my sister!”

Sansa took more deep breaths. “I need your prayers, Arya. Go to the Sept. Light a candle to the Mother. Offer prayers to the Seven for our safety. When you’ve done that go to the godswood and pray to the Old Gods as well. Please. You’re the only one who worships both.”

“But I---"

“Please!”

Her sister reluctantly ran off. Randa came shortly after. She managed to smile at Sansa. “So, we’re doing this again, are we?”

Sansa managed to laugh through the pain. “Could you put my hair up?”

Her friend nodded and went to take a seat behind her. Sansa smiled. Jon took one hand, and Anya took the other.

Anya and Randa being with her as so important to her. When she gave birth to Eddie, Maester Coleman was the only man in the room. She had a couple of midwives and Anya and Randa with her, the two women holding her hands and pressing cold, wet rags to her head. Anya proved more helpful than any of the others, as she’d gone through the process of birthing babes seven times. She’d counseled her daughters and daughters-in-law through the process.

Anya had taken the time to wipe sweat away from Sansa’s eyes so it wouldn’t sting her. She kept incense burning and kept a nosegay nearby. It was common for birthing women to defecate in the process of pushing a baby out without even realizing it. Lady Waynwood wished to spare her the embarrassment.

Anya also prepared her better than anyone. “Women will tell you how it hurts and Maesters will say whatever it takes to keep you calm. Everyone will tell that the second your baby arrives, it’ll all be sunshine and roses and perfection. It’s true the joy makes the pain worth it. But the pain and hardship doesn’t end once the child is out completely. There’s more blood, more tissue, more pain once your
babe is out. So once he or she is in the maester’s arms, don’t lose your mind when you feel more coming from you, when you feel more pain. Yes, the babe is out, but there’s all the cushioning that he had inside your womb. That needs to come out as well.”

It took just over ten hours for Eddie to come. A short birth relative to most. Anya said it was because of Sansa’s age. “You’re only fifteen. Your body is used to bouncing back and forth. It’s used to adjusting.”

That wasn’t all: “The Maester will want to shave you between your legs. Be prepared for that. Be prepared for all manner of strange instruments being inserted. The best thing to do is not to look, and make sure you have as many trustworthy people possible there to oversee things.”

When she mentioned that, Sansa had begged the Lady of Irokoaks to come with her to war. “I need someone who knows these things.”

Anya had to fight for a reason to accompany her on campaign, but she found a way to do it. She’d been present. Randa had it even harder, for her father wanted her to stay in the Vale and she had less excuse to leave. Lord Nestor only allowed it once Riverrun was secured. Randa arrived just in time and had to leave almost immediately. But her jolly presence was a relief and her antics a good distraction from the pain sometimes.

Mya couldn’t come. Petyr had forbidden it. He couldn’t outright deny Lady Waynwood or Nestor Royce on this matter. But Mya had no noble name and none of the prestige or power to press the matter. She was only a bastard, and Littlefinger had no need to appease her.

“My princess, it’s time to shave—–“

“—-Jon, close your eyes and cover your ears.” She instructed him. He did so reluctantly, and Sansa gave the approval. Nani knelt between her legs with the razor and the two assistants held Sansa’s legs down so that she wouldn’t jerk or hurt herself if a pain hit her. Sansa shivered at the cold of it, but Nani was quick about it. To Sansa’s relief, the Dothraki midwife finished before the next jolt came.

It came soon after, worse than ever, and with it, her fluids. The nurses cleaned her and Sansa allowed Jon to look again. He gave her an uneasy smile and took her hand again.

Another knock at the door. Mya was here, and so was Dany. Sansa groaned. She couldn’t let Mya in and turn away the queen. Reluctantly, she allowed them to enter.

“Are you alright?” Dany asked. She eyed the birthing chair with trepidation. “You’re not going to fall off that thing, are you? Are you secure?”

“I’m fine!” Sansa groaned. Another pain. She squeezed Jon and Anya’s hands. It was getting harder to breathe. Mya hurried over and grabbed Sansa under her arms, holding her back so she didn’t double over.

Dany began to pace in circles, wringing her hands. “Is everything being done?”

“Yes, Khaleesi,” Nani assured her. “But you must stay calm, for the khalakki’s sake.”

“Right. Calm.” Dany took deep breaths and took a seat nearby. She looked over at Jon. “Guards are right outside.”

“Good.”
“Yes. Good. We need as much protection as possible.”

The queen stopped talking upon receiving Nani’s look. “Sorry.”

“Can someone fetch me some water?” Sansa asked, weary already. *It’s going to get worse before it gets better,* she reminded herself.

A nurse fetched it for her at once. The water was a short relief, cool on her tongue. But the relief abated with another pain.

This continued for a couple of hours. Daenerys occasionally got up and paced around the room, only sitting down again when Nani barked at her in Dothraki. It made Sansa nervous. She knew why the queen was like this. Daenerys had one of the most horrific experiences possible when it came to birth.

Just thinking on it made her cringe. Sansa didn’t much care for most Dothraki birth practices as it was (nor did Nani). Birth in carts, riding until delivery… But Daenerys had it even worse. There was Drogo’s fall and death. The blood magic. The khalaasaaababandoning her. That awful horselord pushing her to the ground. And then… That child, born dead, with wings and scales and ashen skin.

*Blood magic. It was that sheep-witch’s blood magic. There’s no blood magic here,* Sansa reminded herself. But the High Septon had cursed her… *No, my child is coming at the start of spring. Right after the delivery of dragon eggs. The omens are good. I haven’t been riding hard nonstop through my pregnancy. I’m not giving birth in a tent. I have a comfortable castle, a maester, the best midwives in the world. I’ve done this before successfully. I’m better built for this than Dany was. She’s strong, but she’s also a small woman with narrow hips. She was born of incest to a mother who lost several children. My mother had five healthy babes. I am tall and wide-hipped and full-breasted naturally. I’ve done this before. I am healthier than Dany was. There are no vengeful blood witches with me.*

But then, there weren’t any vengeful blood witches with a lot of Targaryen births. And there were stories of how several Targaryen children before Rhaego were born deformed, with scales and wings, born weak or dead. What if this happened to her? *But almost all of them were born of incest… A pain hit her, as did a nasty voice in her head. But Rhaego’s father wasn’t of Dany’s blood.*

Sansa tried to assure herself as she looked at the queen. *No, but her parents and grandparents were siblings. And many of her other ancestors as well. Maybe that just tainted the blood too much. She tried to ignore this. Your parents, and Jon’s were not siblings. Aerys II is another generation removed. There’s more blood of Winterfell present than Targaryen blood.*

*But Jon and I are cousins.* That wasn’t really the same. But still… *My father’s parents were cousins once removed.* Sansa whimpered.

She was looking at sterile Daenerys.

Daenerys was strong and wonderful, but that was as much a miracle as the birth of her dragons. Her father was mad. And what Dany told Sansa of Viserys indicated the same of her brother. Rhaegar… Sansa had read some of the letters. Something was off about Rhaegar. He’d had such an obsession with that prophecy…. *Enough to start a war.* And besides, Rhaella Targaryen lost so many babes. At least six were premature, miscarriages or stillbirths.

*My mother had five strong and healthy babes…*

*But her sister didn’t. Her sister had countless stillbirths and miscarriages, just like Rhaella. And only*
one surviving child, who was sickly and half-mad.

Lysa had the Tansy!

So did you! To kill a babe of the same father!

Sansa gasped as another pain hit her. She’d eliminated Petyr’s child when she was six weeks along. Still safe, according to the Septa that had given her the tea. She’d taken the tea the second she realized what it was. Lysa, from what she could gather, had hidden it and was farther along than that. And Sansa knew that women who had taken the tea when they were further along had gone on to have healthy children. But I was also poisoned and starved and hurt…

Jon Arryn’s seed was weak, she reminded herself, He married Lysa when he was an old man, sixty-five or so. He had two wives before her and had no children. The first wife died giving him a stillborn and the second died childless. Jon’s young and strong. He put a babe in you almost immediately after you started trying. This pregnancy has been healthy. You’ve carried well, full to term, despite all the stresses. You even fainted once, but carried on. Aemonaerys moves within you often. Jon’s seed is strong. Your body is strong. You carried Eddie through war and winter.

Still, it was hard to be reminded of strength through so much pain. It was hard to be reminded of good blood when the small, infertile product of incest, one who had experienced such an awful version of birth, was before her, wringing her hands. She carried Rhaego for moons while riding through Dothraki wilderness. The father of her babe was Khal Drogo, strong and young and healthy and unstoppable. Rhaego still came out dead and deformed.

That was what was so unfair. Daenerys Targaryen was so strong, so powerful. She’d birthed dragons, conquered cities, built the largest empire since Old Valyria, faced down sorcerers, liberated millions of slaves, was the first woman to lead a khalasaar, and killed the Night’s King. And yet she still couldn’t produce a healthy child, for all her strengths, talents, virtue, and intelligence. None of it mattered. She was a living reminder of how no matter who you were, creating life could and would still go horribly wrong for you if the gods willed it.

Sansa tried not to look at her. It was just too much. Seeing the Mother of Dragons with fear in her eyes was not very comforting.

Nani insisted she eat, “Before it gets too bad. You need strength.”

She was fed broth and small pieces of bread by Jon, as if she were a child. More hours passed. Sansa lost track of time. Arya eventually returned. “I want to be here!”

Even Jon lost his patience then. He pressed a kiss of Sansa’s head and got up. “I’ll be right back. My queen, would you come with me?”

He left the room, taking his aunt and sister out to the hall.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jon:

He took deep breaths. The hall outside the chamber was oddly chilly, especially in comparison to the sealed-up birthing room. Brienne, Loras, and Barristan waited outside, standing at attention. Not wishing to do this in front of an audience, Jon brought them into a nearby room.

“I’m sorry, but Arya… Sansa’s already got so many people in there. She’s in a lot of pain. She’s already having enough trouble with the amount of people present as she is. I know you want to be
there, but she can’t handle it. You know how she is. She doesn’t even like it when people see her
with mud on her skirts. How do you think she feels about having a small crowd around her as she
gives birth?”

“She let Mya, Randa, and Lady Waynwood in and they’re not even family! I’m family!”

“Randa and Anya were with her last time. Anya was her main guide then. And Mya is very close to
her and would have been at Eddie’s birth if Littlefinger hadn’t forbidden it. But Sansa wasn’t even
sure she wanted me with her. I know you mean well, but this is about her. It’s not because she
doesn’t love you. She’s just not comfortable with so many.”

Arya’s eyes welled up. “She doesn’t want me there because she doesn’t trust me. ‘Arya ruins
everything’, that’s what she always used to say. She is happy to have her friends there, but not her
sister.”

“If Sansa didn’t trust you and thought you ruin everything, she’d have never given you control of
Winterfell. She does trust you,” Jon was losing patience, “But she needs peace. She’d worry about
you, if you were there. And Arya…”

How could he say this without being insulting?

“What?”

“It’s not like you know much about delivering babies anyways. What would you do, even if you
were there?”

“What about you? You’re a man!”

“I’m the father and I’ve witnessed births before.” He’d camped out with Wildling Spearwives after
his revival and had witnessed a few. “Arya… You’re wonderful, and there are so many things
you’re good at. But we don’t know if helping someone along during a delivery is one of them and
this is not the time to find out. At one point, Anya, Randa, and Mya were all she had. Anya and
Randa both have proven they know how to comfort her, and Mya was a missed opportunity. It has
nothing to do with you. She needs to be as comfortable as possible and I’m sorry but if she’s not
comfortable with you there, then her wishes must come first. You can discuss it with her later if you
wish, but now is not the time.”

He hesitated and thought quickly. “I have something else for you to do, though.”

“You can’t fool me, Jon. You’ve got millions of attendants willing to do whatever you want. There’s
nothing you need me for, you just want to get me out of the way.”

“You’re wrong, Arya,” he said, sick of the self-pity. “I was actually going to ask you to go to the
barn and bring Ghost back. Out of all the people in the castle, you’re one of three people who can go
near the direwolves alone and not be hurt. I am one, and I have to stay here. The other is Sansa, and
she’s rather occupied at the moment as well.”

This was true. Even Mya, who could actually approach Nymeria without a hostile response, needed
either Jon or Arya around to have that happen.

His sister looked at her feet and stood. “I’m sorry. I just… I’m afraid. I don’t like hearing my family
in pain. I don’t like not being there to help. I was dragged away the day Father died and couldn’t
help him or Sansa. I was knocked out before I could get to Mother and Robb at the Twins. I wasn’t
there to help Rickon, or you. But you’re right. I’m sorry. I’ll get Ghost.”
She left the room morosely, dragging her feet. Jon swallowed heavily, then turned to Daenerys. “I need you to leave the room as well. Sansa was afraid to say anything because she let Mya in. But you’re terrifying her. You’re acting so nervous and she’s already scared.”

Every time Sansa looked at Daenerys, more fear came to her blue eyes. It wasn’t helping anything.

Daenerys bowed her head. “I know. I just… I feel like it’s my duty to be there. Even though I know I’m making things worse, I find it so hard to leave someone suffering behind. It’s Meereen all over again, isn’t it?”

Jon snorted. “Sort of.”

He was extremely glad neither his sister nor his aunt were present when Sansa had argued that he shouldn’t be present. He knew there was an element of hypocrisy to what he was doing. But he felt he had the right to altered standards. He was the father. And if Sansa became determined he should leave, he would.

Dany got up. “The castle’s all waking up and will likely all be causing trouble outside the chamber. I’ll lead the household to the Sept for prayer and then feast them in the Great Hall to keep them at a distance. We don’t need crowds in or just outside that chamber.”

“Thank you.”

Daenerys nodded. “Promise me you’ll keep yourself together.”

They could hear the screams now. Jon took off to the chamber. His wife writhed on the birthing chair, Nani between her legs.

“The pains are worse,” Randa informed him.

“I can tell.”

He hurried over. “Are you alright, Sweetling? I’m here.”

Sansa took his hand, but she also glared at him, panting. “Why… do I… have to go… through this… and you don’t?… You just… get the … pleasure… I have to… have the… pain… All of it… And all… the work… You’d better… better… thank me… thank me… for it… I won’t… I won’t have… a Robert… a Robert… Baratheon…”

“No, no, never,” he said, his voice low. His stomach turned. He did feel quite a bit of guilt over that exact point. It definitely wasn’t fair that she had to carry all the weight and pain. He’d go through it for her in a second if he could. “I’d never act like that. I promise. I do thank you… thank you, Sansa. I could never take this for granted. I’m not Robert Baratheon.”

“Good… Because… if you… forget… what I suffer… for you… I’ll… I’ll work… quicker… than Cersei… did…”

“The pain talking, Your Grace,” Merys said.

“Oh shut up!” She snapped at him. “It’s… it’s amazing… she didn’t… kill him… sooner… She brought… brought him… a baby… He brought… brought her… a pelt…”

“I promise you, Sweetling, you’ll get far more than a pelt when this is over.”

“I swear… I swear to… the gods… old and new… I won’t… let you… act like… Rhaegar…”
“Gods, no.” My father didn’t even stick around to keep my mother safe. He just left her at the Tower of Joy and ran off to die.

When he’d opened the book Ned Dayne had given him and read the letters, he’d searched long and hard to find something, anything that might justify his father’s actions. Rhaegar had a troubling obsession with the “Prince Who Was Promised” prophecy. But even so, none of it reconciled Jon to the reality of what Rhaegar did.

The letters to Arthur Dayne about Lyanna were interesting. “I’ve seen the loveliest maid, a Stark of Winterfell. She is wild and fierce, but tragically tied to a whore-mongering oaf she doesn’t love. She does not wish to marry him. She has the blood of a wolf, blood of ice. There is a magic about this one, Arthur. I was overcome when I saw her. I couldn’t help it, giving her the garland. It was mad, I know. But the whole world but for her seemed to melt away at that moment. But I’ve hurt Elia, and I regret it.”

The way he spoke of her later on, “She’s ready to be rescued from this marriage. I want to rescue her. She needs me”, indicated that Lyanna went with him willingly. But Jon feared his father’s letter might have been tainted with his own desires and perspective. He liked to think that he wasn’t a child of rape, and he hoped that Rhaegar was at least right about her being willing… But even so, he doubted Lyanna was fully aware of what was in store for her.

And then there was Elia Martell and her children. Elia gave Rhaegar two babes, a girl and a boy. She’d nearly died giving him Aegon. She was a sickly woman for whom birth was dangerous, especially after Rhaenys’s arrival. But she’d still risked her life to give her husband a son. The letters Rhaegar wrote spoke of a kind, giving, gentle woman who loved both her husband and her children passionately, who grievously missed her brothers, her friend Ashara Dayne, and her home. Dorne was a kinder, more accepting place to women than the rest of Westeros. Elia had grown up with a powerful mother who was Princess of Dorne in her own right, and Elia was valued the same as her brothers. In King’s Landing, she had witnessed Aerys’s cruelties to his wife. After growing up in a region where girls were given the same inheritance rights as boys, she had to reconcile herself to the fact that the daughter she’d labored so hard to bring into this world was placed behind her uncle in the succession. Upon Rhaenys’s birth, her father-in-law complained that his granddaughter “smelled Dornish” and she had to handle the fact that to most, it was like the birth of her child was meaningless. But she’d put up with it all and risked her life just to give Rhaegar the son he wanted. She’d swallowed the prejudice against her people, the madness of Aerys, the bigotries of the court, the separation of those closest to her, and the disgrace of her friend all for the sake of the husband she loved and her children.

And Rhaegar repaid this devotion by publicly humiliating her and abandoning her for another woman the second Elia was no longer useful to him, content to allow her to remain at the Red Keep as his insane father’s hostage, with their children. Rhaegar provided three Kingsguard for Lyanna and Jon. Elia was less protected than the abused Queen Rhaelle. And in the end, the Mountain raped her, murdered her, and killed her children.

Jon would never, ever do such things. He couldn’t fathom treating the mother of his children like that. Betraying Ygritte had been hard enough for him. Ygritte wasn’t his wife, nor did they have any children, and Jon had to do what he did out of duty. He was married to the Wall. And still, he’d defied his vows to the Watch to try and rescue his family twice. But Rhaegar wasn’t forced away from Elia out of duty. He’d ignited the whole war and endangered her for a prophecy. He had a son with her, and a daughter. He hadn’t needed to take Lyanna. He’d endangered the whole kingdom for the sake of a poem in a book.

If Rhaegar needed another child that badly, he could have picked a woman who was unattached, or
at the very least interceded with Rickard Stark or something. He could have done a thousand things
to prevent that war. Rhaegar, though, decided to add violent death to insult when it came to Elia
through his actions. And all the talk of love in the world didn’t excuse it.

Jon had loved Ygritte. He’d left her. He’d deceived her. He did it for the good of the realm and the
Watch. Sure, the test with the old man had helped push him, but in the end, he put his morals before
his desires and love for her. His father should have done the same.

“I’m not leaving you,” he told her. “I’m not my father.”

“I swear… Jon… You won’t… forget your… duties… your honor… your vows…”

“No, I won’t. I swear it.”

She shrieked in pain. Her nails bit into the skin of his hand.

Sansa:

Please, Mother, Maiden… Please, Old Gods… Let the pain stop…. Get me through this! I just want
a healthy babe! Help me!

By the time someone was crying that they could see the head, she could barely remember her own
name. A whirlwind of agony engulfed her. But she could feel it… her child moving out of her. She
moaned. Just push. Just push. Just push. All she could cling to was that. Just push. Just push.

She couldn’t even see. All there was… pain. When someone shouted that they could see the head, it
barely registered. It went on and on. The stretching. The pressure.

“Wait until you birth a child, Sansa. A woman’s life is nine parts mess to one part magic, you’ll
learn that soon enough… And the parts that look like magic often turn out to be the messiest of all…
Even his birth… I labored for a day and a half to bring him into this world. You cannot imagine the
pain, Sansa. I screamed so loudly I fancied Robert might hear me in the kingswood.”

Sansa wasn’t sure how long she’d been laboring or how loud she was screaming. Eddie’s birth…
Eddie took less than half a day, not that it meant much to Sansa. She got so lost in the pain, it might
have been forty years or forty minutes. How long had she been doing this?

She remembered her mother’s screams when Bran and Rickon arrived. They were so awful. It was
terrifying to hear. She’d been huddled in her rooms for most of it, with Septa Mordane, Old Nan, and
her siblings. “Can it really hurt that bad?” She’d asked.

Septa Mordane shook her head. “Oh no, your mother is just a passionate woman. And besides, the
pain is nothing to the joy.”

Old Nan had made an angry noise at that. Sansa had ignored her. Old Nan was a crazy old woman.
Now Sansa knew better. Septa Mordane never birthed a babe. Old Nan had birthed several. But
Sansa remembered cursing Baby Bran. If you kill my mother, I’ll hate you.

Of course she ended up absolutely adoring Bran. She loved him more than perhaps any of her
siblings when she was a child. She loved telling him stories and playing games with him. He was
adventurous like Arya, but gentler. And he often took her side when Robb or Arya teased her.

Everyone adored Bran, and for good reason. That was what made the fall from the tower so
shocking. That was why Sansa had so much trouble processing it all. The idea that the gods would allow something so horrible to happen to her sweet little brother…

Eddie was like Bran. Even though he wanted to be like Robb… He was like Bran. He was gentle, he loved animals, he loved to explore, he loved scary stories… Septa Mordane had been right when she said that the joy was worth the pain. But she wouldn’t know, really. She hadn’t known the joy.

And the joy was hard to accept when you were still going through the agony. Sansa knew the love of a child. But she also knew the tragedy of losing one. So much love. So much pain.

She tried to think of her mother, but it was hard. Cersei popped into her head more often. Catelyn always reassured Sansa after a babe was born, giving her advice about how wonderful and joyous it was. Motherhood and womanhood were nothing but magic with a couple of bumps along the way, as Catelyn Stark taught her. Loving husband, five beautiful children, healthy births. She was able to produce five children while still being the perfect lady. And for that, Sansa got the idea it was easy.

It was easy to think of Catelyn when she’d held her beloved Eddie in her arms and known the happiness of being a mother. But at this moment…

Cersei was the first to enlighten her to the true pains and struggles. She spoke of womanhood as pain, degradation, and denial. She resented her sex. Sansa soon came to understand the pain Cersei spoke of. Still, with all she went through, she never grew to resent the fact of being a woman the way the Lannister woman did. Even when forced to strip for Tyrion Lannister, when raped by Petyr Baelish, or shamed by enemies. She never wished she hadn’t been born a woman, even though she resented the limits placed on her due to her sex. The world was horribly unfair to women, but that didn’t mean there was anything wrong with being one. Sansa never found herself thinking or saying things like, “I should have been born a man.”

Birth was the only time she ever cursed being female. The fact that men didn’t have to know this pain infuriated her. The very parts of her that made her a woman hurt the most.

She just wanted the pain to end. She’d do this again, she would. But she just wanted it to stop for now. Please. Please…

“Push,” Nani said, and Sansa gathered her strength. She felt like she was tearing apart, and then there was a sudden sensation of movement and release. Sansa gasped. The world slowly began to return to her. The pain wasn’t nearly what it had been seconds before.

People were talking. She was breathing. She couldn’t make out their voices.

“What’s happening?!” She cried. She could feel the chair against her back and thighs. She could smell the blood and incense. She saw the people moving. “SPEAK UP!”

It was then she realized both Anya and Jon still held her hands. Her knuckles ached from squeezing them so tight. Jon was kissing the back of her hand. There were infant cries. *Aemonaerys is alive.* Sansa almost fainted from relief.

“It’s a girl,” Anya informed her, wiping her brow, “A strong, healthy princess.”

“WHERE?!” She needed to see her daughter. She needed to look.

“We’ve got her, Your Grace,” Merys and one of the nurses were standing over a basin off to the side, cleaning something. Sansa saw a flash of little pink leg and her heart skipped a beat.

“LET ME SEE!”
Nani wrapped Naerys in a blanket and brought her over. “The afterbirth is still coming. So we have to wait to move you to the bed. Are you sure you can hold her in the chair?”

Sansa nodded.

Her babe had a sloped head from the birth, and her cries hurt Sansa’s ears. It was delightful. Loud cries mean strong lungs.

“She’s so perfect,” Sansa cried. There was a dusting of dark hair. “Hello, Naerys, I’m your Mama.”

The whole world seemed to shift as her daughter opened her big, round eyes, revealing irises of violet. Ah, yes, Sansa thought, remembering Eddie’s first minutes in the world. There it is.

“Hello, Sweetling…” Jon whispered, tenderly reaching down to take one tiny hand between his thumb and finger. Naerys’s fist wrapped around the edge of his thumb.

“I think that’s the last of it,” one nurse called out.

“Keep your eyes on her,” Sansa ordered her husband. She didn’t want him to make the same mistake she had and look at the afterbirth. He’d already faced White Walkers. He didn’t need any more horrors in his life. It seemed wrong for him to see something so ugly when there was something so beautiful nestled in her arms.

“What else is there to look at?” he asked, sounding a bit breathless, his eyes still right on their child’s face. Naerys’s cries decreased. Jon smiled. “I think she knows me!”

“Of course she does,” Sansa replied, “You’re her Papa.”

“Princess… it’s time to move you to the bed.”

Sansa looked at Jon. “Would you like to hold her?”

He hesitated. “Are you sure I can?”

She nodded and laughed. “Of course. You’ve held babes before. You can hold your own daughter.”

Jon took her gently. Sansa gasped at the beauty of it. But then he was distracted as the nurses grabbed Sansa’s arms. “Let me help.”

Nani took Naerys from him and Jon picked Sansa up. He kissed her as he deposited her on the bed. “Thank you.”

Their daughter was brought to them once more. “Isn’t she perfect?” Sansa said, taking her baby back.

“She is,” Anya said, coming to the foot of the bed and smiling. She looked exhausted.

“She’s as fine a girl as could be asked for,” Merys agreed.

Eager to hear more compliments for her little miracle, Sansa looked around. “Where is everyone?”

“His Grace had the queen and Lady Arya depart. Then later, when the birth got more painful, we tried to have everyone not crucial to the process depart,” Merys informed her. “You wouldn’t let go of the prince or Lady Waynwood, but Lady Myranda and Lady Mya did have to leave.”

“You have quite the grip,” Anya informed her. Sansa blushed.
“I’m sorry.”

“It’s no bother.”

Sansa looked back down at her baby. The windows were bolted and sealed and covered, but the room seemed to be filled with sunlight.

Her eyes met her husband’s. “She’s got the Targaryen eyes, see?”

They were the loveliest shade of violet, just like her great-aunt’s. No one will deny that this child is a dragon.

“I see. She’s a beauty, just like her mother.”

Sansa moved Naerys to her other breast and sighed. She couldn’t stop staring. She couldn’t stop loving. Perfect. Perfect. My little girl.

~_~_~_~_~_~_~

Jon:

He was fifteen. Janos Slynt and Alliser Thorne sat in the frigid hall of Castle Black, looking down on him. Slynt was feeding corn to that damn raven and smirking as Thorne spoke Mormont’s words.

“They will garb your brother Robb in silks, satins, and velvets of a hundred different colors, while you will live and die in black ringmail. He will wed some beautiful princess and father sons on her. You’ll have no wife, nor will you ever hold a child of your own blood in your arms. Robb will rule, you will serve. Men will call you a crow. Him they’ll call Your Grace. Singers will praise every little thing he does, while your greatest deeds all go unsung.”

“Great deeds… From a traitor’s bastard… The greatest thing he’ll ever do is that wildling whore!” Slynt laughed. “I was Lord Commander of the City Watch and Lord of Harrenhal! I had a son and a daughter of my own! All this one will ever have is—”

Cries interrupted the frog-faced man. “What is that?!”

Jon was suddenly twenty-four. He smiled. “That’s my daughter. The trueborn child of myself and the Lady of Winterfell. Heir to the Iron Throne. I’m afraid the needs of the future Queen of Westeros take precedence over the ignorant jibes of a useless old knight and the disgraced, corrupt former lord of a burnt ruin. So if you’ll excuse me…”

Jon’s eyes fluttered open and he pulled himself out of bed, marching over to the fancy cradle nearby. He lifted his daughter. Her swaddling was wet. Jon shushed her and went to change her. As he did, he glanced nervously over at the bed. Sansa still slept.

As Jon changed Naerys’s linens, she stopped crying, looked up at him, and drooled. Her head was a proper shape now. She was seven days old now, and absolutely gorgeous.

She knows I’m her Papa, Jon thought as he looked into his daughter’s pretty violet eyes. He could tell. She knows who I am. And that’s when Jon realized he did, too.

The prince wrapped his daughter up tight, then snuggled her. She didn’t seem hungry, at the very least. No need to wake his wife. Morning would come and she’d be expected to make her first public appearance since the birth.
Jon placed Naerys back in her crib and watched her for a while, still in utter awe.

The prince found himself completely overcome. Never had he felt anything like this, this complete connection to someone else. This utter adoration.

_A child of mine. My trueborn daughter and heir. And I’ve given her a name she deserves. Two, even._

His girl would have the best of everything. He’d make sure of it. Jon knew there’d be grumbling, expressions of disappointment that a girl had been born. But he’d make sure Naerys never for a minute felt less wanted, valued, loved, or important than any other child.

Naerys had a bit of dark brown hair. _Like me._ That was incredible. And her eyes were Targaryen purple. When she opened them, they were like fiery amethysts. She had her mother’s lips and nose. And she was tall for a girl-babe.

_Stark height._ Jon grinned. He bent over and pressed an adoring little kiss to her head.

Naerys’s eyelids began to droop.

“Sweet dreams, Sweet Girl,” her father whispered, “your papa loves you.”

He slipped back into bed and wrapped his arms around his wife.

Morning came, as did their attendants. Sansa gave Naerys her morning feeding before bathing. The royal couple shed the comfortable bed clothing they’d donned since the birth of their daughter and slipped into proper formal garb. Sansa was laced into white and grey brocade. Jon put on his black velvet and red silk. Even Naerys was wrapped in sumptuous black and scarlet silk trimmed in gold lace.

The other members of the household awaited them down in Riverrun’s Great Hall. When they entered, everyone stood and applauded. Jon and Sansa walked over to the high table, where Daenerys, clad in violet and gold, waited for them with the Tullys. She took the babe from Sansa and cooed at the little girl with wide-eyed delight. “I think she smiled at me!”

Numerous lords, ladies, and knights came to pay their respects to the new princess and congratulate her parents. Jon found he liked showing her off, and the praise Naerys received pleased him far more than any compliment ever directed at him.

With the end of the breakfast, they all proceeded to the castle sept, where the new High Septon, formerly known as Tymon, awaited them between the statues of the Mother and Father.

“Who comes before the Seven?”

“I, Jon of House Stark and House Targaryen…” Jon recited his titles, rolling his eyes. They really did need to trim them. “And my wife, Sansa of the House Stark, the House Hardyng, and the House Targaryen…” Sansa’s were even worse.

“For what purpose have you come?”

“We have been blessed by the gods with a daughter, whom we have come to name in the light of the Seven,” Jon informed the Septon. The man nodded. “I claim her as my trueborn daughter and heir apparent to all my titles, honors, and holdings.”

“And what name and styles have you chosen for her?”

“Daenerys of the House Targaryen and the House Stark, Princess of Summerhall, Princess of the
Seven Realms of Westeros, Meereen, and Slaver’s Bay, Khalakki of the Great Grass Sea, and Heir to Dragons.”

“Bring the child to me.”

Sansa stepped up and handed Naerys to the High Septon. He anointed the babe with the proper oils and declared her Daenerys Stark Targaryen, blessed and named by the Seven. There was applause as Jon took his daughter and turned to the crowd.

When all the formalities were completed, they were allowed to head back to their apartments at last. They took an informal tea in their solar with their nearest and dearest, passing Naerys around and cooing at her.

“She looks like Father,” Arya insisted, holding the babe in her arms and stroking her head. “Look at that dark hair. And she’s tall and skinny.”

Dany peered over Arya’s shoulder. “She’s a Targaryen. She might have the Stark hair, but she has the Targaryen eyes.”

“I think she looks like her mother,” Margaery cut in, a cup of Arbor God in her hand. She sat on the sofa across from where Jon and Sansa were perched. Willas was next to her. “She’s got the mouth and the nose. I’ll bet she’s got the cheekbones as well. Too early to tell now, but here’s hoping.”

“Bring her here!” The Blackfish said, sitting by the window. “I’ll settle this!”

“No one needs to settle anything!” Sansa protested, laughing a bit. “She’s the product of several wonderful bloodlines and Houses. Now bring her here!”

Arya reluctantly handed the babe over to Jon. Sansa leaned against him and they gazed down at their little miracle. Randa leaned over from behind.

“Who honestly cares? The point is, she’s adorable.”

“Thank you,” Jon said to the Lady of the Gates. His daughter was adorable, with her chubby cheeks, tiny hands, kissable little mouth, and big purple eyes. Cuter than any babe he’d ever seen.

Everyone began chatting, saying hundreds of things about how big she’d get, the tourney and feast that would be held in her honor once they got back to King’s Landing, the sort of queen she might be.

“She’ll be a Water Dancer,” Arya insisted, “I’ll teach her. She’ll fight.”

“And ride. Whether it’s a dragon or a horse, she’ll ride it well,” Daenerys announced.

Jon and Sansa smiled at one another and allowed the conversations to wash over them. Eventually, people began to leave their chambers, all the women pausing to give little Naerys a kiss before their departure. Only Dany and Arya remained before long.

The little family went back to the bedchamber. Dany sat at the foot of the bed, scratching Ghost’s ears. Sansa sat against the pillows and began feeding, Arya standing next to her and looking on in fascination. Jon watched, enraptured, as his wife nursed his daughter. Never had he seen such a lovely image. His breath was caught and his heart was melting. Before him was everything he’d never dared to want. Nothing he’d ever had the right to. And yet, there it all was. My wife. My child. My little sister. My aunt. My family.
Husband. Father. Brother. Nephew. They were far better titles than prince, khalakka, or lord. Jon grinned. You have everything, Jon Snow.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Some closure for the rest

Chapter Notes

First of all, thanks to my beta, Bluecichlid for all of her awesome work! Thanks to Tommyginger for her help!

Thank you to all my commenters! OMG! I can't believe I actually finished! Seriously you guys, you kept this story going. Thank you SO MUCH!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Epilogue:

Arya:

It was exactly the sort of weather one would dream of for a wedding: golden sunlight shining down from a clear blue sky, moderate temperature, flowers beginning to bloom. Arya yearned to be outside already. But instead, she was in her sister’s chambers, sitting before a mirror as Sansa began to dress her hair, voicing relief that Arya had not chopped it too short for her to restrain it without the aid of a thousand pins.

The younger Stark Girl had meant to cut it again, but she’d grown so busy up North she’d completely forgotten. But she was happy for it after seeing Mya at the mercy of Sansa and Randa’s rather severe hair maintenance practices.

The mountaineer sat upon Sansa and Jon’s bed with Randa, twitching, her normally wild hair all slicked and pinned tightly around her scalp, a garland of wildflowers atop it. It was a pity, because Arya actually thought Mya’s thick, black boyish hair was very becoming, even or especially so when it was tousled. So harshly restrained it was hard to tell how thick or naturally soft it was, especially buried under the flowers.

The garland of flowers was a custom in the Reach. For weddings, especially spring and summer weddings, maidens wore garlands of flowers in their hair. Roses were generally preferred, save for in families like House Cuy that had other flowers for their sigils. Mya Stone’s sigil was now officially the reverse Baratheon arms as an acknowledged bastard of King Robert’s, but it contained no blossoms. She insisted upon wild flowers over roses however, because she was a woman of the mountains who picked mountain flowers.

Arya liked the idea of breaking free from the herd as much as possible with the custom. But before her on the dressing table was a circlet of blue roses intended for her. While she didn’t want to have her style share too much with some of those rich, soft southern girls, there was really no other bloom for her to wear that could properly honor her identity and heritage as a Stark of Winterfell than blue
winter roses. She comforted herself that the Reach maids present would all have roses of yellow, pink, white, and red. Even with the spring, winter roses were scarce and hard to come by, especially for non-Northerners.

Next to the delicately twined blue blossoms was a circlet of yellow lilies intended for the girl currently seated next to Arya. Missandei shared the mirror and dressing table with the younger Stark girl, watching patiently as Daenerys bound her coarse curls back into low, braided buns.

On Arya’s other side was the cradle holding her sleeping niece. But unfortunately absent were Nani, Lady Waynwood, and Loreza Sand. The Lady of Ironoak had come down with a throat ailment that Nani was treating her for. Loreza, who had left her mother and sister back at the Red Keep, was elsewhere in the castle, likely with the Smallwoods. It was a pity, because Arya liked the Sand Snake, despite the awkwardness that resulted from the Arianne-Jon-Samwell poison incident. She wasn’t as combat-inclined or aggressive as her other sisters, but she was warm and funny and mischievous. But Loreza came as a companion for Carellen Smallwood, who for obvious reasons was keeping a low profile, along with her parents. Arya would have enjoyed passing more than a few formalities with Carellen’s mother and see if she remembered that dirty noble girl who had passed through Acorn Hall with the Brotherhood all those years ago. But the lady made herself and her family scarce due to the scandals that recently plagued them, and Arya hadn’t had much time to actively pursue the woman’s company.

“Can you make sure the braids are tight?” Arya asked her sister as she plaits her hair. “I don’t want anything getting in my face.”

Sansa nodded. “I remember how to do this.”

Arya remembered how Sansa would do her hair when they were young.

After Lady’s death, Sansa stopped. Her elder sister could barely stand to look at or say a civil word to her after that, let alone touch her hair. At the time, Arya convinced herself that she was happy about it and that she didn’t miss it at all.

Sansa weaved her hair into a crown braid that finished at the back of her neck with a small bun, then set the garland atop her scalp. As she worked, everyone began discussing the wedding, the breakfast, the guests. At one point, Randa asked about Nymeria. Mya and Arya filled everyone in on the progress.

“She obeys all my commands now, and she’s content to eat the food we bring her. She’s still a bit hostile to others if I’m not with them, but she’s warming up to Jon,” Arya said proudly. Her days often consisted of taking long walks along the Red Fork. Soon, she hoped her wolf would be tame enough that she could risk taking her for walks near populated areas. Every day, the possibility of being forced to put her wolf down proved less likely.

Eventually, almost everyone’s hair was finished and the ladies all started dispersing to go finish up their preparations for the wedding in their own rooms. Arya was about to leave when Sansa called her to stay for a moment.

“There’s something else I have to do.”

Arya shook her head slightly. The garland of blue roses was securely fastened to her head, and her hair seemed firmly arranged. She glanced in the mirror. It all looked right to her. *There’s probably some ridiculous detail that only Sansa and some snobby noblewomen would see.* “I think it’s alright.”
“But it’s not perfect.” Sansa bent over and opened a dressing table drawer, withdrawing a small wooden box engraved with a direwolf seal. Arya eyed it warily.

“I don’t want to wear any earrings,” she said. She had pierced ears. She couldn’t remember when they’d been pierced, but she imagined it happened sometime when she was across the Narrow Sea. She hated earrings, though. She was always afraid she’d lose them. She was never allowed to wear her mother’s jewels, nor was she gifted with fine things like Sansa was because Septa Mordane insisted she’d lose or break them. “Arya has the hands of a blacksmith, the focus of a moth, she can’t sit still, and she always fiddles with herself. Put a fine chain around her neck, she’ll break it. Let her wear a nice bracelet, she’ll wave her arms around and let it slip off her and she’d not notice for hours. Put a ring on her finger, the first thing she’ll do is go play in the mud and lose it in a puddle. Give her a pin, she’ll end up getting it caught on something or tearing it off rough-housing. Let her wear a jeweled clip or comb, she’ll let her bastard brother muss it up and knock it free. She shouldn’t be trusted with any baubles beyond leather and copper.”

Not that she’d wanted a bunch of shiny things all over her. But it hurt all the same.

“These aren’t earrings.” Sansa opened the box. Mother’s pearl hair clips were in there. The ones she’d gotten back from Roslin Frey.

Arya’s eyes widened. “But… those are yours.”

“They’re yours as much as mine. Mother’s jewels were to be divided between us, but so few of them were recovered. This is a Riverrun wedding. One of Catelyn Tully’s daughters ought to wear them.”

“Yes. You. Father gave them to her when she fell pregnant with you.”

She’d seen the pearl clips before when Sansa wore them in the days between Roslin’s trial and the wedding. She’d not given them much thought. They were a comfort to Sansa. But now she’d returned to Winterfell and seen with her own eyes how many of the remnants of her parents were truly erased. At Riverrun, she didn’t even have the crypts or the Heart Tree her father spent so many hours praying before to comfort her.

So seeing them now, having these little mementoes of her parents’ love for one another, of the sister she still had, and having them offered to her took her breath away.

“I—I can’t. They’re for you. I’ll lose them or something.”

“You won’t. I’ll pin them in really well and I trust you to be careful. One of us should wear them. And frankly, I don’t think it would be tasteful for me to wear the trophies I’d taken from Edmure’s last wife to his wedding to his second one. She wore them to his first wedding and there, Starks died. This time, another Stark has been born. The pearls should be worn to a proper Tully wedding by our mother’s daughter.”

“But I lose things,” Arya shivered. “Septa Mordane----”

“And I ruined your wedding.

Sansa cupped her face. “You don’t ruin everything. Everything’s set to be so splendid and---”
We’re not weak, stupid little girls anymore, there are no Lannisters trying to kill us, Septa Mordane isn’t here to make you feel like the failure you’re not, Joffrey Baratheon isn’t here to make me question my loyalties. So let me be the sister you deserve now. You’re as much our lady mother’s daughter as I was. So put on the clips.”

I was never the lady my mother thought I should be. Why should I get to wear her clips? But Sansa said she wasn’t a failure.

I’m not a failure, she told herself. She’s right.

Arya sat down again and took a deep breath. “Alright.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Margaery:

Today is the day I am properly wedded and bedded at last.

The thought scared her more than she’d expected. Following the thoroughly undiverting maiden’s breakfast, the Maid of Highgarden prepared for the wedding. Present were her mother, cousins, good-sister, good-daughter, and various Reach and Riverlands ladies fluttering about, gossiping and gushing over gowns, jewelry, handsome men, romance, and family.

For once, it didn’t annoy her so much. Their idle chatter often made her hear her grandmother’s japes about flocks of hens in her head and rue the fact that Olenna Tyrell was no longer around to make things more fun. But today, things were different. In a matter of hours, she’d be Margaery Tully, Lady of Riverrun. No longer the Maid of Highgarden. No longer the thrice would-be queen or the daughter of Lord Mace.

I’m leaving the garden. For good.

It was a bit unnerving, really. Not as unnerving as the possibility of spending her life with Joffrey Baratheon, but it was different. Even when wedding Joffrey, she’d felt utterly encased by the rose garden that was her family. The name Tyrell was so prominent, so crucial to the whole affair that she honestly felt more like Joffrey was marrying into her House than she was into his. She would have her court of cousins and Reach ladies. She’d have her father on the High Council and her brother on the Kingsguard. She had completely seized hold of the hearts and minds of everyone in the capital and the crown was so dependent on her family’s help that she never had to feel like she’d be changing much at all. After all, who called the queen who came before her Cersei Baratheon? No one. It was Cersei Lannister, golden lions were everywhere, people feared the lion more than the stag.

This… this was different. She was not going to have the same access to House Tyrell she once did. She was more vulnerable than she’d been at sixteen, when she had the House she married into utterly dependent on her and her family for survival, a place in the history books reserved for her, the love for her first husband bolstering her popularity with the people, and the constant presence of close relatives. In the end, even that hadn’t been quite enough to protect her

Now, she was the thrice-married girl of questionable reputation whose lack of a husband was an albatross about her neck. Her grandmother was gone. House Tully didn’t need House Tyrell to survive, Margaery had to settle for a lower rung on the political ladder, her title would be tied to the name of her husband---- ‘Lady Tully’ instead of ‘Queen Margaery’, and it was unlikely she’d ever end up stamping her golden rose on any of the walls here.

The fact that her husband was more invested and alert to traditional marriage life was an issue too. He wasn’t a monster. But he also wasn’t a boy or the type to prefer the company of her brother. He
was the type who would expect her to play the role of a traditional wife, and actually be attentive enough to keep track of what she was doing--- to a degree.

She was sure she could manipulate Edmure into giving her political power in the Riverlands and eventually allowing her to return to the national stage. It might take a while, but it would happen. Edmure absolutely adored her and he wasn’t too bright.

Today was going to be a triumph, she reassured herself. She’d return to court with the security of a legitimate and advantageous marriage and the status that such a thing would give her. She’d be, if not the queen, the wife of one of the highest ranking and richest lords in the realm with a household of her own. She’d officially be one of the highest ranking women in the nobility---- and one of the highest ranking nobles, period. She’d be leaving the Old Maid of Highgarden and the would-be queen behind.

But along with all that, she’d also be leaving behind some of the gilded roses that had so shaped who she was as a person. There wasn’t going to be a Tyrell faction at the court of Riverrun. She’d have to stay at Riverrun for a while at least while Loras and Willas went back to King’s Landing to serve the royal family and her father, mother, brother, and cousins went back to the Reach. Her grandmother was gone.

She was leaving the rose garden and Maidenvault for the waters of the Trident. *A necessary step to take, but a difficult one nonetheless. It’s not even a step. It’s a dive.*

Her mother walked over and kissed her cheek, pulling locks of hair behind Margaery’s ear. “You look so beautiful, Sweet Girl. Your grandmother would have been so proud.”

*Would she?* Perhaps. She’d make jokes about Edmure being an oaf, but she’d admittedly married one oaf and mothered another. Olenna Tyrell went far dealing with “oafs”. Margaery honestly didn’t have the same disdain for the men in her life that her grandmother did. And really, Margaery would rather take someone a bit less bright who would treat her well than a monster or a child with a monster for a mother.

Edmure *did* treat her well, that was the thing. It wasn’t just a matter of gifts, compliments, and pretty manners.

A few days earlier, she’d spoken with him about her position on the council while walking in the garden. It was just an off the cuff mention to plant the idea in his head, not meant for serious discussion. But he looked at her and squeezed her hand.

“I’d like, very much, if we remained at Riverrun for at least a year, my lady. I am… very attached to my home and my children. My experiences at court and elsewhere have not been pleasant and I still need time to adjust. I know you’ve often pursued a court life, and I’d like to make you happy. But I… I am not sure I’m ready to leave home again just yet. The children had a horrible time last time we were at court. They need a home life with a mother in their lives. Something stable and normal for at least a little while.”

She’d been shocked at this answer. Margaery never imagined Edmure would have thought on this at all. She’d expected to be planting hints for a long while in order to bring him around to the idea. But here he was, confronting it head on.

“But… you’d be willing…”

“Eventually. I think. I’m just… not ready for that.”
It was more than most would likely give her.

Margaery smiled at her mother. “Thank you.”

The two women embraced. Sometimes, communication was difficult between them. Alerie Hightower Tyrell was kind, but oddly secretive sometimes, and very sensitive about how she appeared to others. Many in her family were like that, oddly secretive and a bit different than most but seemingly determined to appear as normal as possible. To the point where their refusal to deviate from the norm in public became an idiosyncrasy all on its own.

Lady Alerie had little patience for any perceived breaches of propriety, at least in front of people outside of the immediate family sphere. It sometimes made Margaery feel anxious about sharing certain things with her mother, and made her prefer confiding in Lady Olenna, whose brusque manner made one always feeling like secrets were being exchanged rather than divulged and who never judged Margaery harshly.

But Alerie could be so formal and dignified, though some of that was dropped behind closed doors, when a certain tenderness could come flooding in.

This was one of those times. Margaery kissed her mother’s cheek and stroked a lock of her hair. For all of Margaery’s life, pure silver cascaded from her mother’s scalp despite her youth. “She came to me like that,” Mace often boasted. “A head full of the material she’s worth her weight in!” Olenna would always reprimand him for the clumsily worded compliment, “Oh, stop trying to pretend you’re a poet, Mace. You’re as good with words as you are in battle.”

The hair often made people mistake Lady Alerie for a much older woman, though her face had few lines and she was tall and strong. Margaery always loved her mother’s hair, though.

When she was little, she used to ask her mother constantly how it had gotten to be that color. Alerie would be tight-lipped and act embarrassed if the question was posed to her in front of others, but at bedtime, she’d tell Margaery and her brothers a new fantastical story about it. One story was that she once climbed to the top of Hightower itself and she bumped into the stars and the dust got all over her, staining it forever. Another was that one she said a prayer to the moon to make her special, and her wish was granted. Sometimes it was just that she was born with it.

Willas had actually written a book of the stories their mother had told them over the years. For Margaery’s first wedding, a copy of it, written and illuminated by her brother, was a gift.

“You’ll go far, I know it,” Alerie told her, “I know… I know you’re not a queen, but… You’ve done things we never dared to expect for you. And I think… I think you’re better off with royal friends than royal husbands.”

Margaery nodded. She was still working on ingratiating herself to the queen further. Daenerys valued her, but was very guarded about those she let in on a personal level. Even a number of her lovers were supposedly not trusted. But things were definitely improving on that front. The last queen outright hated her and saw Margaery as an interloper. Daenerys didn’t hate her, and Margaery believed her temporary absence at court might ease some fears about her being an overbearing meddler. Margaery wasn’t stupid. She knew her reputation. Appearing to go quietly to the Riverlands, at least for a short while, might improve her image at court somewhat.

The Maid of Highgarden stood, smoothing out her gown. The dress was almost entirely ivory, but darkened into a minty green at the hems of the skirts and the points of her dagged sleeves. There was a V of gold lace at her bodice, and she wore the locket Edmure gave her.
Ollara and Alenna walked over with the maiden’s cloak. The green velvet fastened around her neck with a gold clasp. It was less fine than her prior maiden cloak. That one had green velvet, but it was also covered in cloth of gold roses and was studded with emeralds. Just one large rose of gold thread was on this one, and the only emeralds were a single line around the hem.

Her parents offered to buy her a finer cloak, a newer version of her royal wedding ones, but Margaery refused outright. Less than a year ago, Sansa Stark wed Jon Targaryen in a cloak of white silk, silver lace, and pearl beads. It would not do for Margaery to be draped in cloth of gold and emeralds for her own wedding. The risk of appearing to attempt to upstage royalty was a weight on her mind she didn’t need.

This cloak was a weight off her shoulders as well. Margaery wasn’t a large woman, and she remembered all that gold and all those jewels being so heavy.

*It seems everything is lighter these days,* she thought with a smile before exiting the room.

Her father met her in the courtyard, garbed in green and cloth of gold, his chest puffed out proudly. There were few present, so Lord Mace didn’t hesitate to hug his daughter, his eyes tearing up. “I’m so happy you’ve found your place at last! I can’t believe I’m truly giving you away!”

Margaery wiped a tear from her father’s cheek tenderly with the end of her thumb. “It’s time, Papa. It’s time for me to leave the garden.”

The wedding seemed to take forever, the Sept somewhat cramped with visitors and not helped by the amount of incense and candles lit. The blue and red cloak Edmure draped on her shoulders was heavy velvet. But the smile on his face was lovely.

Her husband looked well and dignified in the colors of his house. A silver trout was emblazoned on a silk doublet the color of his Tully eyes, and his hair and beard were nicely trimmed. He didn’t make for an unattractive groom. Edmure had lost some weight, which was helpful, as he wasn’t tall but a bit stocky naturally. His shoulders were broad, and his eyes were bright. Love was easy to detect in them.

*Please, please don’t let me down,* she thought. *Be a proper husband.*

Margaery had a lot riding on Edmure. She just hoped he was up to it.

The feast came and Margaery found herself able to relax somewhat. Her husband was careful with his intake of wine, mostly ingesting cider from a spare cup to wet his mouth. Edmure made great efforts to cut their food into dainty bits. A funny moment came when Minisa and Ambrose bounded over to sit upon their laps. Margaery laughed, taking little Ambrose, hugging him and promising him the second dance.

The first, she led with Edmure. He moved surprisingly well, a firm but not hard grip on her waist and hand. When the song finished, Ambrose hurried up, clearing his throat and making a surprisingly gallant bow. At five, he was far more graceful than poor Tommen had been. Margaery didn’t feel so ridiculous swinging him around the room.

The Tullys were sweet children. A little spoiled, but also caring and welcoming. Ambrose chatted nonstop through the dance

“My lady?” He asked her, his eyes bright.

“My lord?”
“Do you think if I asked that lady to dance with me next, she’d say yes?” He was pointing over at Loreza Sand, being led around the floor by one of the Mooten boys. “You wouldn’t be offended?”

“Of course I wouldn’t be offended!” She grinned, “And I bet if you were very polite, she’d say yes.”

He nodded. The next song came, Margaery took a new partner, and Loreza ended up simply lifting Ambrose into the air and swinging him around. Three dances later, the children were put to bed. Margaery danced four more dances with Edmure, who seemed inexhaustible.

She was on the arm of Brynden Blackwood when finally, the call went out for the bedding to commence.

Margaery took a long breath, deep breath, her eyes meeting Edmure’s from across the room. He looked almost ready to refuse, but Margaery nodded to him. He’d offered to dispense with it before, but her answer was always the same. After so many false starts and beddings that never happened, she needed no doubts as to the validity of this particular marriage.

So she donned a great grin as gentlemen swarmed her. “Try not to tear the gown, lads!”

Garlan and Loras were nearby, watching carefully. More than a few of the young men looked nervously upon her brothers. The message was clear: cross a line, and you will bleed.

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Carellen:

When the cries for the bedding came, Loreza found her and pulled on her hand. “Come on!”

Carellen blushed and shook her head. After everything that had come out, it wouldn’t do for her to be seen undressing someone. So many people avoided her as it was.

“But you can go, if you want.” Loreza was by her side always, providing company and support. But she was clearly eager to join the fun. Carellen didn’t want to deny her that. “I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am.”

Loreza hesitated, but hurried after the gaggle of women carrying Edmure Tully off to his marriage bed. The Great Hall was slowly emptying out. Most were riotously tending to the bedding of the newlyweds, others were heading back to their chambers.

Ravella Smallwood approached her daughter, her smile warm. “Come, Sweetling, it is time to retire.”

Carellen sighed. She wasn’t sure she wanted to go to bed so quickly. The night was still fairly young, and she yearned for a bit of excitement beyond the crowded festivities.

Despite the fact that most of the people of the court avoided her and her reputation, Carellen found herself rarely free of attention. Her mother and father kept so close now that they were reunited, their attentions kind and protective. The first few days of it were lovely, as Carellen received the sort of attention she’d craved from them for years. But after a while, it grew a bit overbearing.

“Can’t we walk a bit, first?” She asked. “I’d like to get some fresh air before bed.”

Before Ravella could respond, they were interrupted by a timid voice. “Excuse me…”
Edric Dayne, Lord of Starfall approached them, bowing. Carellen was surprised. Ned Dayne had been among the few willing to be seen with Carellen and Loreza over the past several weeks, but that was understandable. There weren’t a great deal of Dornishmen at Riverrun, and she had no doubt Edric enjoyed the company of someone from his homeland. He’d danced with both Carellen and Loreza several times that evening. He also knew her parents from the war, and likely felt paying Carellen attention was a favor for all the times Lady Ravella took him and the Brotherhood in.

Ned was a shy, kind young man who acted surprisingly humble despite his rank and reputation. Carellen enjoyed his stories and liked his ashen hair and his eyes, which looked almost purple.

“My lord,” Carellen said, curtseying.

“My Ladies,” he replied, “I didn’t mean to interrupt. I just wanted to ask… I heard you say you wanted to go for a walk. I could escort you, if you wished.”

“You’re not joining the bedding?” Carellen asked, eyes wide.

He shook his head. “I wanted some fresh air myself. It’s so lovely out, and I miss the warmth.”

Ravella cleared her throat. “I suppose we might accompany you, Lord Dayne.”

Carellen smiled at her mother. Lady Smallwood wouldn’t refuse someone like Ned Dayne. He was one of the highest lords in Dorne, with one of the oldest names. Carellen suspected half the reason her mother allowed her to remain in Loreza’s company was because of her connection to the Lord of Starfall.

Carellen’s father came over and the four made their way out to the gardens. To the maid’s relief, her parents hung back as she and Ned moved along the paths between the flowerbeds. Both seemed too timid to speak, though. Carellen finally decided to break the silence.

“Did you enjoy the wedding?” She asked him.

“I liked the dancing,” he said with a smile, “You’re a very good dancer.”

“Thank you. I enjoyed it too.” She’d forgotten how much she loved to dance since being sent back to Septa Marite’s care. Carellen had danced long and hard at the royal wedding, but the entire time she was under sharp instruction to “look enticing” to the point where she couldn’t really concentrate on her partners, the music, or the fun. But tonight was different. “You were kind to ask me.”

“I wanted to ask you.”

Carellen blushed and looked down. “I was glad when you did.”

“You know, I saw you, at court. When you stood up against your Septa and the High Sparrow. You were very brave.”

It felt lovely to be called brave, especially by him. Ned Dayne fought the forces of Gregor Clegane with Beric Dondarrion. They said he pulled his charge’s body from the Mummer’s Ford after a battle. He fought his way through the War of the Five Kings when he was only twelve. “You’re very brave. I heard all about it. Everyone knows.”

He shrugged. “I know. Everyone always wants to talk about it but… I don’t like remembering the times I had to be brave. It means I have to remember the times I was scared most.”

Her eyes widened. “I know exactly what you mean.”
Ned smiled at her. “Well then, let’s talk about anything but courage.”

Their fingers intertwined.

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Barristan:

He found himself sitting in the halls, by a window overlooking the Red Fork with Brynden Tully. The noise of the celebrations had died down considerably. Barristan found himself with some spare time, the others having taken over guarding the royal family. Barristan had been on duty all day. His legs, shoulders, and arms ached like hell.

Some of the noise had died down, Barristan was glad for it. He’d come out to the halls after the bedding and found the Blackfish there. Aside from a request to join him, there weren’t many words exchanged. They just sort of listened to the castle die down.

Eventually, however, the place got so silent Barristan found himself needing to speak. So he finally ushered up the nerve to voice a question that had been in the back of his head for a good long time.

He turned to the Blackfish.

“How in the Seven Hells did you escape the siege and not end up caught or dead?”

Ser Brynden smiled. “How in the Seven Hells did you make it through Duskendale?”

Barristan was tired of telling this story. It was requested of him nonstop. Thirty bloody years of the same story. “I was sneaky and cut every man who managed to spot me.”

“I was sneaky and I grew up swimming the Trident. No one knows the Red Fork better than I do.”

There was a long pause, but it was not an awkward one. They looked at each other in appreciation.

“They always ask for so many details, don’t they? The thing about escape is, you actually have to be sneaky. If you’re good enough at it to survive, there’s not much to tell, is there?” Barristan said.

“Aye. ‘Well, first I snuck down to the passage to the water, then I waited for my nephew to raise the gates, then I went swimming. It was dark, and more than once I got slapped in the face with a fish, and when I exited the water, I found several newts wiggling around in my armor. It was freezing, but the good news was that I could piss whenever I wanted to.’”

Barristan snorted. “I climbed up a wall. I crept around the filthy streets and eavesdropped on conversations and observed the comings and going of guards to figure out where the dungeons were. I found Aerys Targaryen ranting to himself about the injuries of his kingly person, slung him over my shoulder, and crept out. The biggest struggles were carrying the king over the walls and getting him to shut his royal mouth. The good news was that it earned me a very impressive nickname.”

“See, I earned mine through a fight with my brother. A bit less impressive, really. But I pride myself on the creativity and the fact that I came up with part of it.”

“More than I can say.” Barristan leaned over the windowsill. “So, how do you feel about the Tyrell girl?”

“She’s better than Edmure deserves. I don’t think she’ll be like Roslin. She’s ready to take quite a bit of control, I know. But I find I don’t mind too much. I won’t live forever. I think she’ll take care of the lot when I’m gone.”
“Her ambition doesn’t bother you?” It bothered him.

“After years of backstabbing from craven Freys, a Tyrell isn’t an unwelcome ally. It serves her interests to serve ours. She’s good to the children. If she wants to amass herself some prestige and a fortune, I’m not going to fault her. Better than a bunch of my relatives’ corpses.”

*Fair enough. “You feel secure then? For the future?”*

“I’m no fool. Only fools ever completely secure. Especially when so many of the people they wish to protect most have died so horribly. At the same time, there’s only so much one can do before you drive yourself mad. Then you’re no help to anyone.”

Barristan looked down at the man in the chair, his legs useless, but his face calm. “Ser Brynden?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

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Daenerys:

She’d gotten fairly tipsy for the first time since she could remember. And she enjoyed it.

She and Missandei joined in on the bedding. Her friend, also more than a little emboldened by the wine, gave the very sauciest japes. Unfortunately, most of the time, no one but Dany could understand them. While other ladies just looked at them in aghast confusion, they’d just descended into Dothraki and Valyrian, saying the sorts of things that would likely make the most prolific whores in Lys blush.

Everything sounded filthier in Dothraki. Eventually, sick of everyone else not getting their jokes, they stumbled away, supporting each other, deciding to make their way to Jon and Sansa’s chambers to coo over baby Naerys before bed. Dany loved holding a cuddling her grandniece, enjoying the feeling of a babe in her arms and seeing those Targaryen purple eyes staring up at her. She sometimes felt Little Naerys looked like the sort of child she and Drogo could have had. It warmed her heart constantly, and broke her heart every so often as well.

“Do you think we’ll be welcome?” Missandei asked, a big smile on her face.

“Of course! Why wouldn’t we be?”

“Because they’re likely fucking each other into oblivion.”

This was half the reason Dany got drunk in the first place. To encourage Missandei to do the same. Normally her friend was such a quiet, reserved, soft-spoken girl. But once one got enough spirits into her, her personality went into the opposite directions.

“They’ve got a baby!”

“I really doubt that will stop them as long as it’s a sleeping baby. Lack of a bed never stopped them. They’re probably trying to make enough babies to fill a castle.”

The two of them cackled.

“Let’s go anyways! Maybe we can catch them!”
“NO!” Her friend looked at her feet, embarrassed.

“Yes. It’s so funny! I mean, I haven’t walked in on them mid-act, but I have right after they’ve finished. It’s HYSTERICAL. Sansa tries to act formal even when she’s naked. In fact, she’s even MORE formal. She once tried to curtsey while sitting naked in bed. I swear to every god that exists. And Jon… Jon goes so red and can’t look anyone in the eye. He gets so snippy and tries to pretend that they’ve done nothing. He tries to cover it up. And he’s so BAD at it.”

Missandei stopped for a second, swaying slightly. She seemed to be wrestling with her conscience. “You promise it’s funny? Because to be honest, Dany, I usually find that sort of thing rather… unsettling. It had better be VERY funny.”

“It IS!” Another thing Daenerys loved about drunk Missandei was that she forgot about titles and called her ‘Dany’ when she was like this. She linked arms with her herald enthusiastically and they practically skipped down the halls.

They ended up abandoning this mission when they made it to Daenerys’s door. They stumbled into her quarters and went to sit by the fire, giggling and making a makeshift bed out of cushions.

“So,” Missandei said as they lay on their backs, their heads close but their bodies facing opposite directions. “You’ve got a clutch of eggs in King’s Landing. You’ve got your family line more or less assured. You have your kingdoms conquered. What is next, Mother of Dragons?”

She considered this. For once, there wasn’t some huge crisis demanding her attention. The Faith was settled, her family was safe, no wars were being fought, nor were any potential wars immediately looming. Even things in Meereen were relatively peaceful according to yesterday morning’s reports. Daenerys was queen, in reality as much as in name.

“Next… I enjoy my time of safety and peace while it lasts,” she told her friend, “I’m going to relax for once. I’m going to enjoy everything I’ve worked for.”

“I’m glad. You need to stay sane.”

“I intend to do exactly that,” Daenerys grinned up at the ceiling. “I have everything I want. Peaceful kingdom, family, good friends, good wine, a clutch of dragon eggs… What’s the point of wanting anything if you can’t enjoy it?”

She fell asleep shortly after, but woke early on the floor, her head hurting a bit. Missandei slept on, and Dany threw a blanket over her, changed into some riding leathers, and ventured outside. It was dawn, and the Riverlands were quiet. Almost everyone in the castle seemed asleep. Luckily, a couple of guards were awake to lower the drawbridge for her.

Viserion swam nearby, lazily moving back and forth in the water. Dany smiled as she observed him. Her son loved the water. An odd trait for a dragon, but definitely an adorable one.

Daenerys dove in and swam to him. The water was warm from her son’s presence. Even when not breathing fire, dragons exuded heat. It soothed her head. Viserion lowered his head and Dany climbed across his neck, embracing him fondly.

They stayed like that for a while, until a nearby sound distracted them. Dany looked up and over at the bank of the river.

Arya Stark stood on the banks, dressed in rough wool. By her side was a wolf the size of a horse with shaggy grey fur and piercing eyes. Nymeria. Both the wolf and her mistress stared at Daenerys and Viserion, unmoving.
Dany, feeling a bit awkward, raised a hand and waved lazily. The Regent of Winterfell hesitated before waving back. The direwolf lowered her head and began to drink from the Red Fork. Arya, looking pleased, got on her knees and began washing her face. When she wiped herself off, the young woman looked more relaxed than Dany had ever seen her.

The Mother of Dragons patted her son’s scales. Nothing was coming for them. *The wolves, the dragons, the trout, the roses, the lions... We’re done.* She closed her eyes. *It's time for us to be at rest.*

And they were.

Chapter End Notes

To all of you who may be worried: I WILL be writing more fics in this universe, including a sequel. I hope you guys enjoyed this one! I loved writing it!

End Notes

So... yeah. What's coming next for everyone in Westeros? Let me know if I've engaged you at all and what you like/dislike about this story. Thanks!

Also, check me out on [Tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://www.tumblr.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!