**when the walls come tumbling down**

by **phantomphaeton**

**Summary**

These violent delights have violent ends.

With salt and smoke, fire and blood, iron and ice, the tides of fate wash clean the saviors of the continent. Two years after Daenerys Targaryen and Jon Snow ride south to win the Last War, Westeros is on the verge of destabilization. The Red Wolf—left simmering in fury in the North—is compelled to rejoin the Great Game.

**Notes**

For anyone who thinks certain alternative storylines ought to have been explored. This is me testing out my dark!Jon muscles. Written with advice from the lovely Janina. I'm trying to work with a much more ambiguous Sansa here, one who's a little dark herself. Enjoy.
there is no forgiveness

'These violent delights have violent ends, and in their triumph die, like fire and powder, which as they kiss, consume.'

All in all, it's been a shitty turn of events. And considering how the last few years have been for her, Sansa thinks this is a real achievement.

She's inclined to say it began around the time a certain silver-blonde birdie decided to nest in Winterfell, presented oh-so-delicately by her not-half-brother-but-cousin-who-will-not-be-named-because-she-has-dignity, but in hindsight it began around the time she gave him power. Which began around the time she arrived in Castle Black.

Men.

Oh, it had been good at first. To have someone openly, flatly, obviously in her corner. No creeping eyes upon her, no hidden motives. She didn't have to wonder or think. No walls to keep up. No role to play. Ramsay was on the horizon and losing to him meant a fate worse than death but in the hands of her final keeper she was alive and safe and free.

Freedom. There's nothing in the world quite like it. Jon did her right, and she knew it, so when the halls rang with cries of 'king in the north!' she didn't point out that it should have been her. It's alright. She can let this go. It's just a crown. She's still safe.

Also in hindsight, that might have been the time she began to notice things going wrong.

Oh, those first few months were heavenly. All Lady Stark this, Lady Stark that, Lady Stark is of the opinion this, Lady Stark ordered that. But if her misadventures down south have taught her anything, it's that the most predictable thing about life is its unpredictability.

"Going to Dragonstone yourself is a mistake," she told him when they were alone in the solar that last night. "Send me. I know Tyrion Lannister better than you do. I was married to him once."

"Aye, and he might want you to stay on those grounds."

"So you admit there might be some duplicity in all of this?"

"I admit that we're taking a risk. But I meant what I said in there today. Only a king can sway a queen."

"She's not a queen. She's a conqueror. What will you do if she tries to conquer us?"

"The dead are coming, Sansa," he said then, and his voice nearly broke for how tired he was of repeating it. "Dead things don't care about crowns or wars or rights to thrones. One problem at a time."

Sansa knew then that she'd lost this battle. But she’d known that earlier that afternoon, when he'd announced his intentions to the lords. No matter. Patience is a lesson she's learned well.

There were a million things she wanted to say to him then. Things like 'idiot', 'narrow-minded', 'tunnel-vision', and lingering somewhere in the darkest corner of her mind, 'I love you'. 
She said none of these things, settling instead on a safe ‘come back in one piece’, to which Jon could only reply with a laugh.

"No promises," he joked, gulping at his ale.

He did come back in one piece, so she supposes she can tally that with the promises he's managed to keep. Though the company he brings home with him doesn't make her leap for joy, because honestly, kneeling to a stranger isn't really Sansa's idea of a smashing success. But there was an army of dead things coming, which Sansa still didn't really know how to understand, and a massive army was at her doorstep with hands out and mouths open looking for her to figure this all out, so she decided that that was another battle for another day.

It scared her a little how easy it was to become the little bird again, if she was honest.

"Winterfell is yours, Your Grace."

It tasted like vinegar on her tongue. But she's danced this dance before.

One step, one smile, one song at a time.

With the looming threat of death overhead, Sansa found she was ready to overlook a great deal of indignity. Not that the lords necessarily shared this opinion. She did manage to find some small satisfaction in watching Jon get the shaft. She did enjoy noticing him look at her when he knew it was going south, perhaps hoping for another bailout. But Sansa was choosing her battles, and she had no more energy to spare to help Jon out. She sipped her tea. Literally.

If history has taught people anything, she's certain Jon never cared to learn it. It's the only way she can explain how he honestly expected her to really be a silent little bird at heart. She only sings when it suits her. And it did not suit her to defend Daenerys Targaryen or her claim to the Iron Throne before a bunch of angry, bitter lords who had just learned that everyone they buried in the War of Five Kings died in vain.

"We needed allies!" He declared.

But you didn't bring us an ally, she thought bitterly, the thoughts like acid between her ears. You brought us a queen.

She had questions, so many questions to ask him. Did they beat you into submission? Did you see the sun when you were there? Did you see that I was right?

Did you think of me like I thought of you?

Oh, Cersei might have been smug to know the thoughts swirling in Sansa's mind. Dark and ugly, and savoring strongly of bitterness. Sansa pushed them from her mind day and night. She had walls again.

Jon didn't look back when he rode away from Winterfell with Longclaw on his hip. They would meet the dead at Last Hearth, it was decided, to keep their numbers from overwhelming Winterfell. Sansa had watched the northward march from the battlements, Tyrion Lannister to her left, Varys to her right. Were it not for the snow, she might have imagined herself at King's Landing again.

Jon rode north. He didn't look back.

All of his missteps, and this one hurt the most of all.
They later told Sansa the battle lasted all of two days, which really was something when one considered that they had all of them been gone for three weeks. Jon left Winterfell on the back of a horse, and returned on the back of the green dragon. Sansa didn't know what to make of that, but something dark brewing in her belly warned her that her battle was still coming.

"Welcome home, Jon," she greeted him when he climbed off the winged beast. He caught her hand.

"You're safe," he told her. Like a promise, like a reassurance he'd whispered to himself a thousand times before. "You're safe."

"I'm safe," she said, but it had been a lie.

Her first thoughts on Daenerys Targaryen, she now distinctly recalls, were that this was a girl who had never, at any point in her life, known power. And after a few hours worth of observation, she was proud to say that she was right. There were moments of unnecessary humbling, shows of force and intimidation, all the tell tale signs of a girl reminding herself over and over that she is in control.

_Sometimes, feeling special is all anyone has in the world,_ a voice in Sansa's head whispered. It sounded a lot like Petyr.

For a moment, she might have felt sorry for her. As it happened, however, Sansa had exhausted her supply of fucks to give. She wasn’t exactly endeared to the cause of reclaiming the Iron Throne in the name of a girl who literally didn’t seem to give a fuck herself about anything else when she watched her march off a second time. This time, they were headed south. King’s Landing beckoned, along with all of the charms the city had to offer. The Silk Street, boasting the most beautiful and available women in the Seven Kingdoms, the Street of Steel with it’s master craftsmen, the coasts with the finest seafood—some say—on the planet—and of course a very ugly, very old piece of shoddy furniture that’s just as likely to give one blood poisoning as it is to comfortably house a derriere.

“I don’t trust her as far as I can spit,” Arya said as she embraced Jon goodbye. She whispered it so low only they could hear it, the four of them together in the courtyard. “And I can spit,” she added.

“She’ll be a good queen,” Jon assured her, and all of them. “She will. I’ll write you when it’s done.”

He turned his gaze to Sansa, who stood a little further off from them. Still smarting from his inability to look back the last time he rode away, she wasn’t sure what sort of farewell to expect from him.

“Come back in one piece,” she said to be safe.

He smiled. “No promises,” he said back, and this time it made her heart drop to the ground.

It took a month until she was able to dream of something other than dragons and ugly old thrones.

When the raven arrived, she had been in her solar, making note of the fact that the North seemed to be doing better than other kingdoms were at that point. But then, other kingdoms hadn’t had their entire harvest burned. Southern sons were riding north on behalf of their families, embroidered hats in hand, to ask for aid in getting their people through the coming months.

“Surely one of the queens in the south would be the person to ask,” Bronze Yohn Royce had commented as they discussed their new visitors in the council chamber later.
“They’re too busy fighting for the chair to notice their people are starving,” Lord Mallister replied.

Another voice echoed in Sansa’s mind. ‘*Your horses eat better than their children.*’

“The North will be generous. We’ll give whatever we can spare.”

Maester Wolkan had left the scroll in her solar for her to read at her leisure. The seal hadn’t been tampered with, the bold red three headed dragon gleaming on the page. She wondered briefly if Jon would ever use his wolf seal again, or if perhaps their new queen had deigned to inform them herself that he had fallen in battle.

She had never torn into a letter faster.

‘*Let it be known to all Seven of these Kingdoms of Westeros that the last living trueborn son of Rhaegar Targaryen has been found. Aegon Targaryen, Prince of Dragonstone, has been married to Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, the First of Her Name, The Unburnt, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoylnar and the First Men, Queen of Meereen, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Protector of the Realm, Lady Regent of the Seven Kingdoms, Breaker of Chains and Mother of Dragons, and will hereafter rule as Prince Consort of the Seven Kingdoms.*’

It took four hours, Bran, a cask of wine, Samwell Tarly, and a consultation of the family tree until anyone was able to understand what any of it meant, and when they did, it was catastrophic.

“It’s a conspiracy!” Lord Glover’s voice boomed through the hall, shaking with anger. “That lying turncoat was in on this from the start, plotting with his whore of an aunt to bring the North back into the fold of the Seven Kingdoms!”

“It makes sense,” Lord Manderly said. “We all remember how insistent he was that it be *him* to be the one to go to Dragonstone. Do you recall, all of you, how he refused to send an emissary?”

“There’s truth to it,” Lady Karstark said. “He likely spent that entire year he was tucked away on Dragonstone plotting with her for this. It’s a Targaryen conspiracy against us all.”

Arya turned her head away, her eye catching Sansa’s. “What do you think?” she asked quietly as they all continued to yell around them. Bran had no answer, watching serenely as they came. It was infuriating.

“I think Jon’s gone and gotten himself into more trouble than he can comprehend,” Sansa says. “While an entire kingdom can accuse him of underhanded politics, he’s not safe.”

“Agreed. And he and his sweet Dany might find it difficult to rule over an entire kingdom that wants him dead.”

There was a different storm brewing in Sansa’s mind then, and it stung with betrayal and hurt and jealousy and ‘*I trusted you first, I made you a king first*’ and she hated hated hated all of it and any of it.

It was an agony, really, how deep it all cut. For a short while there, Sansa had Jon Snow. But now Daenerys has Aegon Targaryen, and Sansa wasn’t sure which one was really him anymore. But she remembered how they looked riding into Winterfell together, black and white, like a king and queen, and she blinked away the burning tears before they could betray the turmoil in her heart.

He made her believe. He made her safe. He made her powerful and then he made her bow and then he left. It’s easier now to hate him, just as it’s easier to believe that those lingering glances and touches and smiles he gave her meant nothing at all. It’s easier to believe that he doesn’t love her,
never has, than it is to believe that he did, but not enough.

She hates him. He’s left her and not even had the dignity to honor what he started with and left her to rule in the name of a stranger she hates and now he’s tumbling about in the sheets with her while Sansa is stuck playing loyal servant to a Dragon Queen and she hates him, hates him, hates him.

She hates him and she’ll never forgive him.

“Lady Stark,” Lord Glover told her. “We did not name you queen. But as I said once before, we should have. Only a Stark can protect the North.”

But Jon did, she thought as she remembered the dead.

“What would you have me do, Lord Glover?” she asked.

“You need do nothing, My Lady,” Lord Manderly said. “We have done our part. We have repaid her service in the fight against the undead by winning her the throne. From here on out, we continue to operate as an independent kingdom.”

“And if word should reach her of this change in allegiances and she decides to burn us all to the ground?”

“Then she loses the only allies she has left. Every day that a southerner goes without food in their belly is a day she makes new enemies. Dragons may win battles, but the last of her enemies have fallen, and dragons plant no trees.”

“What do you think?” Sansa asked Arya later.

She had expected venomous words, hisses and whispers of ‘traitor’ from Jon’s favorite sister, but Arya only shrugged. “We can’t stop them. The lords will move forward with or without us. And I hate to think—” she huddled in on herself, looking for a few haunting moments like Underfoot. “I hate to think I watched Robb and Mother die for nothing.”

They never did get a reply from the south to this silent rebellion. But no army or dragons came north to contest it, and Sansa counts that as an achievement. When pressed for information, Bran only informed them that there was nothing immediately worth sharing.

But Jon had still left, and never returned. He had still promised to write and sent only the notice of his marriage. He had still held her hand every day in the solar and smiled so sweetly at her and demanded her faith in him while showing her none in return and she still hated him hated him hated him.

Two years later, she’s sitting in her solar celebrating her twenty-first name day with a tray of lemon cakes, and she’s pleased to see that that hasn’t changed.

“He’s asking for you immediately,” Maester Wolkan clarifies, as if she is hard of hearing.

“And I will be there post haste,” she assures him as she makes a point of eating very slowly.

Of course the only person who seems more patient that she is would have to be Bran himself, so when she arrives at his chambers later, she knows he’ll be as slow to tell her whatever it is he wants to say as he would have been had she arrived breathlessly at his door an hour earlier.

She finds him seated by the window with a plate of vanilla almond cookies on his lap. Ghost is curled up at his feet. There’s a thick strip of silk over his eyes, and an empty wine jug on the table.
A hand pops into view from absolutely nowhere and steals a cookie from the plate. Sansa blinks and Arya is sitting on the bed, stomach only just beginning to swell visibly.

“I swear I never had this sweet tooth before,” she says as she bites into the cookie.

“You wanted to speak to me, Bran?” Sansa asks, taking a seat on the chair opposite him.

He lifts his head and pulls back the strip of silk. “There’s been a development in the South,” he says.

“What is it this time?”

“Another false alarm,” he says simply, and Arya’s hand instantly rests upon her stomach. Sansa leans back in her seat.

News of Daenerys’ first pregnancy hit her like a wall tumbling down upon her. Maybe even The Wall itself. He wasn’t her concern anymore, she hated him hated him hated him and she’d never forgive him, she reminded herself over and over. And yet it burned her from the inside like a dragon. A cruel, ugly part of her hoped they were miserable together, hoped it was only cold days and colder nights and that it burned them both out until they were hollow husks of nothing.

She swore she hated him, she swore she was done, but for a month, she wept herself to sleep. When she learned that the queen had not in fact been pregnant, she had wondered if maybe Jon would have wanted her to write. She had not written him, had never written him, but then again neither had he. The only raven they’d received from the Red Keep had been to inform them that Cersei Lannister was no more, and the next to inform the world that Jon had turned his back on the North and taken up the mantle of dragon prince.

Four false alarms later, she wonders if perhaps the Gods were trying to tell them something.

“How unfortunate,” she says. “I’ll host a prayer group with Lady Karstark this evening. We’ll pray they’re luckier next time.”

“There won’t be a next time,” Bran says. “Jon has pressed for an annulment.”

Arya coughs on the cookie she’s eating. Sansa doesn’t move.

“He’s leaving her? Are you certain?” Arya asks.

“I just watched their fight,” Bran says. “Jon is not changing his mind. He won’t have her compromise.”

“What compromise?”

“Daenerys suggested he take a paramour and they legitimize whatever child is born of it,” Bran says. “But he refuses it. He’s firm on annulment. The only way House Targaryen survives is if Daenerys steps aside and allows Jon to take up a new wife.”


“What’s going to happen now?” Sansa asks.

“Jon knows I can see him. He’s trusted me to convey the message.” Bran shifts in his seat and watches Sansa with blank eyes. She hates this, too.

“What message?”
“The annulment will move forward,” Bran says. “A summit will be called in King’s Landing. You’ve been invited to discuss the future of the Seven Kingdoms with the queen.”

“Awfully bold of her to assume I’ll take that bait,” she says, handing Arya another cookie.

“But…Jon will be there,” Arya says. “You’ll get to see him again.”

“It’s more than I engage for, I assure you.”

“He’ll want to see you,” Arya says.

Sansa gets to her feet and dusts her skirts off, her mind buzzing with this new information. “Nothing doing,” she says calmly. “If that’s all, I’m going to bed.” She gives Bran a kiss on the cheek, and Arya gets one to match. “Goodnight, little one,” she adds gently as she pats the swell of Arya’s stomach before she leaves the chamber.

If he loved his queen, he’d have taken the paramour. A sick, ugly part of her might feel giddy at this, but she’s not interested in getting tangled up in this again. Locked away in her bedchamber with the candles burning bright, she takes a seat at her writing desk with parchment and a quill and begins to write.

The next morning, she places the letter in Brienne’s hands along with the strict instructions to carry it straight into the hands of Edmure Tully. She puts it out of her mind as she watches Brienne shrink in the distance. She will not think upon it again.
Six weeks later, she thinks on it again.

“You sent Uncle Edmure to represent you?” Arya asks. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I did, you weren’t paying attention,” Sansa says. “Gendry, you are not an animal,” she adds to her brother in law, who at least has the grace to look sheepish as he wipes his mouth of the goat’s milk he’d been drinking with the red-bearded wildling. “I sent Uncle Edmure weeks ago. Why? What’s happened?”

“Well, Bran just told me that Jon is asking for you.”

“And I gave Uncle Edmure the plainest instructions to explain to them that I am not going to King’s Landing.”

“He’s asking for you to wife, Sansa,” Arya says in a low whisper as Gendry and Tormund continue drinking.

The whispers in Sansa’s mind become a cacophony that make her ears pop. She steels herself, hands on her chair, knuckles white, as she steadies the walls in her mind. She hates him. She hates him and she’ll never forgive him.

So naturally, she runs straight to Bran.

“What did they say?” she asks. “Tell me everything.”

“He’s hellbent,” is all Bran will tell her on the matter. “It’s safe to go down there.”

She doesn’t know if she believes him nor does she care. A week later, a written letter arrives in Winterfell inviting her to King’s Landing. It’s signed, with all of the pomp and circumstance she cannot stand, with a million titles and Daenerys Targaryen.

‘Hellbent’ was the word Bran used.

She doesn’t care. She hates him, she hates him, she hates him.

“It’s Jon,” Arya says when next it comes up, because of course it does. “No matter what they’re calling him now. I saw him more recently than you did. He’s still Jon.”

And it’s true. Arya rode south only a month after the raven arrived declaring Jon a married man.

“Not exactly,” Sansa says. “He’s Aegon now.”

“Don’t be like that,” Arya says. “He wouldn’t hurt you.”

But he already has.

“I once believed he wouldn’t hand over our kingdom, but he did that.”

“He’s asking to propose to you, Sansa. Who would you rather see him married to? I’d rather you than her.”

“Would you really be alright with me marrying Jon? Would it really not disturb you?”
“It’s a lot easier to swallow is all I’m saying,” Arya clarifies. “Look, you don’t have to make any hard and fast decisions. I’m heading down to Riverrun anyways. I’ll go with you as far as the Neck, and if you still don’t want to go, then stay with me there until this thing is born.”

Arya would have to be a good five or six months along at this point, and still she has managed to avoid the word baby. Which is reality is quite hilarious to Sansa, and perfectly fitting for a girl who does not have a single maternal bone in her body.

She really won’t do it. She won’t go further than Riverrun. She’ll stay there with Arya because she needs her there, because someone has to meet Edmure in Riverrun and Arya can’t deliver without Sansa because Catelyn might have been there with her but dammit, it’s just them now. She prepares her escort, picks her prettiest dresses, and rides out of Winterfell for the first time since she first rode back in, ‘hellbent’ echoing in her mind.

She’s safe. Bran promised. And yet she wonders.
Edmure does not return to Riverrun in the coming months. Arya gets bigger and bigger as time passes, and more ornery as she eats everything in sight and bemoans her steadily decreasing ability to move about freely anymore. Sansa preoccupies herself with knitting for the impending arrival when she isn’t writing letters to Bran and Maester Wolkan in Winterfell.

Arya delivers a boy on a rainy night. Pink and fat and soft and howling. Gendry comes bounding into the birthing chamber just in time to watch Arya squeeze Sansa’s hand and press out the last of the baby as he comes shrieking into the world, and then Gendry hits the ground in a dead faint.

“Someone scrape him up off the floor,” Arya says, laying back and panting. “Before he gets a crick in his neck.”

Samwell Tarly obliges, holding a letter out to Sansa as he hoists up Gendry’s unconscious form. “This just came from Winterfell,” he says.

Sansa waits until after she’s met her nephew and settled his new mother, when she has her moments alone in her bedchambers, until she opens the letter.

“They’ll be writing again. Not an invitation this time. A summons. Fail to answer, and she’ll assume hostility. Go south. You will be safe. He will protect you. If you have no faith in him, then have faith in me.’

“What is he even called now?” Arya asks when Sansa tells her the very next morning as little Robb sleeps soundly in the cradle by the window. “Jaemon? AeJon?”

She’s trying to tease out a smile, and Sansa knows it, so she gives her one. It’s her weakest one ever, but she’s always cherished that she never has to put on a show with Arya.

“Congratulations,” Sansa tells her. “The little one is out. What will you do now?”

“For now, I’m staying put,” Arya says. “Until you get back from King’s Landing.”

“You really think I ought to go?”

“Bran can’t be so far gone he’d send you to your death. And he’s right. Jon won’t hurt any of us.”

She bites her tongue on her instant retort.

“He already has.”

“And if it’s a trap?”

“Well, by the time you get there I’ll have healed up from squeezing out the pup. If it’s a trap, I’ll steal into the city and slit that girl’s throat before she can say ‘dracarys’. I’d be going with you now, if I could keep my cunt in one piece.”

“We could wait for you to get better.”

“You saw Bran’s note. There’s no time. And I didn’t think you’d be afraid to match wits with the Dragon Queen.”

“I’m not afraid,” Sansa assures Arya. Not of her.

“Then you’d best pack your prettiest dresses,” Arya says, leaning back in bed. “I’ve just fought my
battle,” she adds, gesturing to the cradle. “Now you go fight yours.” And then, after a moment, she

Perhaps Sansa had guessed it was coming. Perhaps she’d known and was waiting for it all along.
King’s Landing was never truly behind her. And now that wretched glorious city beckons again.
Her things are packed, her wheelhouse prepared, and her escort reorganized. In the company of the
most loyal lords of the Riverlands, she rides south again.

“She have some faith in Jon,” Arya tells her before she leaves.

_I did, she wants to say._ Not anymore.
King’s Landing is as miserable as she remembers it being, albeit entire portions of the city have been blocked off. She can distinctly make out scorch marks along the walls of those areas, but she tries not to think about those. All she can think about is that she is riding into a King’s Landing that Cersei doesn’t occupy. A Red Keep over which Cersei holds no dominion. What does it look like, she wonders?

Black and red, as it happens. And dragons, oh the dragons.

The green one has gotten bigger, alarmingly so. And she isn’t sure how she notices this, but she could swear he wasn’t half so sullen when he first flew over the turrets of Winterfell what seems like decades ago. As soon as she can see the first walls of the city, soldiers of black and red flank either side of her wheelhouse, escorting her party into the site of her greatest fall. The green dragon circles overhead. She tries not to think on it too much. The black one is nowhere to be seen.

She closes the windows to the wheelhouse as they progress through the streets, trying not to pay any attention to the sounds of the city alive and at work. There’s something almost mechanical about the noise, and she tries to ignore that, too.

Perhaps it ought to be taken as a personal insult that the Queen is not at the palace gates to greet her. But she doubts that Daenerys Targaryen would ever permit any gesture that might honor Sansa as a queen in her own right. She is greeted by Davos Seaworth, Tyrion Lannister, and a new Maester bedecked in his golden chains, some skinny, slight creature calling himself Ortalan. He looks as though he crawled out of the bowels of the Citadel, and his fingers nervously toy with his chains whenever someone speaks to him. She decides she likes him infinitely better than Grandmaester Pycelle.

The fourth member of her welcoming party throws her for a loop. Long, dark brown hair, piercing blue eyes, and an ample figure wrapped in crimson silks, the woman looks as though she spends the better part of her days making men weep for entertainment.

“I’ve been very much looking forward to meeting you, Sansa Stark,” she says with a lilted accent that could drive men to madness.

“Kinvara is the High Priestess of the Lord of Light,” Tyrion Lannister says with a tone that seems to Sansa nothing less than absolutely chastened. She wonders briefly when Kinvara got the better of him. “She’s waited many a moon to meet you here today.”

“I am honored,” Sansa says, curiosity piquing. What could be so special about this visit that such a figure would need to attend?

“The Queen regrets that she is unable to welcome you,” Tyrion continues, and his eyes meet Davos Seaworth’s briefly. Sansa clocks this and stores it away for later. “She’s been meeting with her ministers about supplies distribution.”

Sansa doesn’t even need to indicate how skeptical she is about this, and Tyrion seems to know that. He leads her into the Red Keep, and Sansa feels the bright eyes of the red priestess boring into her skin the whole way to her chambers.

She’d already cleaned up and changed just outside of the city, but she does a second check before the polished mirror provided her, swiping imaginary specs of dust from her shoulders, smoothing
her skirts and hair, dabbing on a few hints of perfume. *Dress as if you’re going to meet your worst enemy.* Once Winterfell was hers again, she’d foolishly imagined she would never meet another enemy.

It’s warm out now, the last traces of winter long gone from the city, so the sleeves on her gown are of flimsier material than usual. The thicker fabrics she’d wear at home would have made the heat unbearable, but to go sleeveless here is not an option. Her last husband’s scars are plain and impossible to miss, and back home no one looked twice at them when she’d lift her sleeves in the council chambers, or in her solar, or in the great hall. Here, however, they would never stop staring. She is no doll, and no display.

A dragon’s screech tears through the afternoon. She knows which one it is.

Davos Seaworth comes to collect her himself for her meeting with the queen. She falls into step beside him and after a few moments her legs have slipped so easily into the memory of this castle that it is difficult to tell who is leading who.

“You’ll be lunching with her in the garden,” Davos explains. “She thought perhaps you might not appreciate being presented before the throne in open court.”

That’s true, of course, but that doesn’t mean Sansa understands it. Her conversations with Daenerys Targaryen were few during her time in Winterfell, but there was no mistaking that they had not met nor parted as friends. Sansa had made her position clear during the only time they were alone. But perhaps that might be it. Daenerys remembers how easily Sansa had picked apart her charade of friendship until she had exposed the root of the Dragon Queen’s motivations, and wishes to avoid another verbal spar. Or at least she wishes to avoid one in open court where her political failings can be made plain to courtiers. How many of them have subtly challenged Daenerys as Sansa once had? How many of them saw the dragons and sat back? How many of them are waiting for this meeting? How many of them does Daenerys trust?

If she’s smart, nary a one of them. But that’s too much faith to put into the hands of a woman whose kingdoms are still recovering from her torching their entire grain supply two years ago.

“How gracious of her,” Sansa says.

Davos is silent as they make a few turns. Lords and ladies dot the halls, bowing deeply as Sansa passes them, but she can feel their eyes burning holes in her back as she progresses. She’s arrived in the midst of something. Something far greater than a royal annulment. She can’t figure out just what it is, but she can smell it brewing in the air. A storm is coming.

“Jon will be there as well,” Davos says.

“Oh? Had he been meeting with ministers about supply distribution as well?”

“No, ma’am. He’d been escorting you into the city. You didn’t miss the dragon, did you?”

Sansa blinks. “It hadn’t seemed to me as though anyone was riding it.”

Davos shrugs uncertainly. “He…he doesn’t need to do that anymore. He still does, from time to time, except…he’s…different, now.”

“How different,” Sansa says.

“A different sort of ‘different’, ” Davos corrects.
“How many sorts are there?” Sansa asks.

Davos doesn’t get to answer though, because the next corner they turn leads them through the open archways and into the sublime greenery and floral blooms that made the Red Keep bearable for her once upon a time. She can see a table set up beneath the shade in the distance. She can make out a handful of figures seated there. She keeps pace with Davos, grateful for his slow measured steps, as it allows her time to calm her suddenly pounding heart.

It’s been so long.

She hates him.

But it’s been so long.

He left her.

She hates him.

She hates him.

She hates him.

She hates him.

She hates him.

She misses him.

“Welcome back to King’s Landing, Lady Stark,” Daenerys says with as much dignity as Sansa imagines she can muster. Lady Stark. So she’s chosen to ignore the free and independent north.

*Choose your battles, Sansa.*

“Queen Daenerys,” Sansa tips her head. “A pleasure to see you again.”

Daenerys’ eyes coolly gloss over Sansa’s figure for a long, lingering moment before she gestures to the empty seat before her. Jon is seated mutely beside his queen, but his eyes, ever dark and calculating, are focused on Sansa. She doesn’t miss this, and she tries very hard not to look at him. Sansa sinks into the pre-offered seat, observing this party gathered to welcome her. On Daenerys’ other side is Tyrion, already with his wine glass half-empty. Varys sits silently on Jon’s other side, a small, observant smile twisting the corners of his mouth. In the place right beside Sansa, grinning reassuringly at her, is her uncle Edmure. On his other side is the priestess Kinvara, watching her intently. A serving girl emerges from the shadows and pours Sansa a glass of lemon juice.

“I had imagined I’d have seen Lady Missandei nearby,” Sansa remarks to fill the silence.

“Lady Missandei has retired to the beaches of Naath,” Tyrion says, and Daenerys’ brow creases at these words. “She’s decided to enjoy her freedom away from politics.”

“If I could but go to Naath,” Sansa laments lightly as she sips at her juice. “I dare say a bit of sea-bathing would be the very thing for all of the burdens of state craft.”

“The work of a queen never ends,” Daenerys says.

Sansa raises her glass in her direction. “Most regrettably. I was very surprised to receive an invitation to attend this summit. I had imagined that my Uncle Edmure would be more than capable of settling whatever concerns you might have.”
“And you still choose to remain ignorant of what those concerns are?” Daenerys asks coldly.

“Ignorance has never brought me anything but trouble,” Sansa says. “If I am indeed ignorant of something, I always hope to be aware of it. Allow me to provide you my assurances. What troubles you?”

“Whispers have reached us from the North. Treasonous whispers. We’ve heard it said that the lords and ladies of the North defer to another as their rightful queen.”

“And who might that be?” Sansa asks.

“Youself, Lady Stark,” Daenerys says, eyes narrowed and voice betrayed her impatience. “Naturally, we all know such treason to be beneath House Stark. I would hear it from your own lips that this is no more than mere hearsay.”

“And if it were more?” Sansa asks. The table had been silent before, but Sansa imagines the silence goes up a note in light of these words. “If it were known to all and sundry that the lords and ladies of the North, that even the common people—down to the last pig farmer—were displeased with the woman who currently styles herself as their queen—if they decided they did not want her as their queen, what would be done to remedy this?”

Daenerys looks, for a moment, like a kettle about to boil over. She leans forward slowly, hands clasped together, eyes locking on Sansa’s evenly. “They will be made to see reason in whichever way their queen sees fit.”

“Fire and blood?” Sansa asks, a brow raised.

“The Northernmost kingdom of Westeros pledged itself to me in exchange for my aid against the army of the dead.”

“The Northernmost kingdom of Westeros repaid its debt by aiding you in your war against House Lannister for the Iron Throne,” Sansa says.

“You were summoned here today, Lady Stark,” Tyrion says loudly, gulping down the last of his glass. “To discuss the terms of a peaceful and hopefully fruitful union between House Stark and House Targaryen.”

“As I understand it, they’ve already had a fruitful union,” Sansa says, her eyes finally falling on Jon. She instantly wishes they hadn’t. His eyes are frozen upon her face in such a way that Sansa knows he’s been watching her all along. He sits restlessly, one hand on the table, the other on his lap. Dressed entirely in black, he’s poised like a wolf waiting to strike. The thought makes Sansa almost laugh out loud—she had been so certain there wasn’t any wolf left in him. “It seems to me as though the situation is well sorted.”

“The union between Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark is not one that many would categorize as peaceful, Lady Sansa,” Tyrion says with a smirk. “And while the current ruling couple of Westeros are unable to bear children,” he says this bit gently as Daenerys leans away from the table, arms crossed. “The future of House Targaryen has come into jeopardy.”

“Quite a pickle,” Sansa says, nodding slowly. “As it is, I am Sansa Stark of Winterfell. The future of House Targaryen of Dragonstone is no concern of mine.”

“The future of the ruling house of the seven kingdoms concerns all,” Daenerys hisses at her. It gives Sansa some hidden joy to rile her up, so she resolves to stay even calmer.
“The North was pledged to aid Daenerys Targaryen,” Sansa says slowly and clearly. “Not House Targaryen. And the North has secured for you the throne. Our offer did not, however, extend to eternal servitude for every Targaryen who exists hereafter.”

“And this is where we might begin to trade,” Tyrion says. “To secure the peace and silence these treacherous whispers in the North, it has been decided that a northern bride should be taken up by Prince Aegon to bind the kingdoms together.”

“And who would you have in mind?” Sansa asks. She knows, but she needs to hear it from them. She can feel his eyes burning holes in her face but she needs to hear it.

“Surely the honor of becoming a Princess of Dragonstone must be reserved for the Lady of Winterfell.”

Sansa’s lungs seem to deflate slowly, the bitter ache in her chest replaced with something warm and heady. It tastes an awful lot like triumph.

“And how can I be the Princess of Dragonstone if I am already the Lady of Winterfell? Surely I cannot be both?”

“We must all make concessions for the good of the realm,” Daenerys says. “To become a member of House Targaryen, you must shed the title of Stark.”

“I’m not sure being a dragon princess is worth such a sacrifice,” Sansa says, leaning back in her seat. “I am deeply honored by your proposal, but my answer is no.”

She wonders why they all look so surprised. Surely she hadn’t allowed anyone to think she would have accepted? What on earth ever gave them that impression? Only Jon doesn’t seem surprised, and that is because he seems so singularly focused on her face that there is little room in his mind for any other thought to find purchase.

“I have not come empty-handed,” Sansa says, pulling a scroll from the folds of her gown. “I had imagined that marriage alliances between the north and the south would be discussed. I’ve prepared a list for the inevitability. Queen Daenerys, I give you a guide to the Ladies of the North.”

Sansa unrolls the scroll and sets it down before Daenerys, pushing it closer. Daenerys leans forward to get a better look at it.

“You’ve come prepared,” Tyrion remarks.

“Always account for variable change,” Sansa says. “You’ll find I’ve included genealogy and recent familial history of every eligible lady in the North. It’s quite a list. I’m sure any one of these young ladies would be perfectly—”

“No,” Jon’s voice, unheard before now, cuts through the air. He speaks so softly, so certainly, yet it rends the peace of the conversation like a war-horn. Sansa blinks, caught off guard by this interruption, and every head at the table turns to look at him. Sansa licks her lips, eyes locked onto his, and tries to regain her footing.

“—would be perfectly happy to be the—”

“No.”

“—means of securing the peace—”
“No.”

“—between the North and the South—”

“NO!”

“Enough,” she hisses like a sand snake, and it’s somehow as powerful as his yell. “It’s not going to happen,” she says, and her skin seems to tighten and blood sings at the challenge. Good. She hasn’t had a proper chance to rail on him. But her blood is calling for it like a wolf calls the moon, and she’s been simmering in it for so long it’s become second nature to snarl at the sound of his name. He’s a traitor, and a liar, and he left her and she hates him hates him hates him and she won’t be rewarding his abandonment by accepting his hand now.

“This discussion would best be tabled for a later time,” Edmure Tully says, brows knit together in discomfort.

“I am in agreement,” Lord Varys says, eyes darting between Jon and Sansa as if he can smell the bitterness and resentment there. “Lady Stark has had a very long journey. I am certain she needs to rest.”

Overcome with fury, Sansa gets to her feet and leaves the table. She doesn’t head back into the castle right away, instead heading further into the gardens. Distantly, she hears warnings and calls echoing. At first, she thinks they are for her, but then she makes them out more distinctly.

“I wouldn’t, Prince Aegon!” Tyrion calls.

“Jon, just leave her alone!” Davos calls louder.

And firmest of all is the queen’s “Aegon, come back here!”

Sansa ignores this for only a moment before she hears the echoing footfalls behind her. A firm grip finds her arm and spins her around, and she is ready. Her hand comes down on his cheek like a hammer to hot metal, and she wants to laugh at the sting on her palm as Jon nearly staggers backward from the force.

She wants to give him another. She had imagined it’d be good to just hit him once, but all she can think about right now is how much she wants to hurt him more. To hurt him and hurt him and hurt him like he hurt her, until he’s broken beneath it like she was, until his skin feels tight and he can’t breathe because she’s holding him down, drowning him in how much he hurt her, until he’s choking on it and the only thing he can say or think is I did this, I did this, I did this.

She hates him and hates him and hates him and she’ll never forgive him.

“You may be a dragon now, but you’re still a damn idiot,” she hisses at him. His eyes are wild, all hurricanes and tempests and fires.

It’s been a good long while since she’s been afraid of fire.

“I’ll have you,” he says. “Or no one at all.”

“What makes you think I’d ever agree to this? Did you think I was clutching my heart and staring out the window, waiting for a dragon to come flying over the towers?”

Actually, the second part has some truth to it, but she’ll swear to anyone who’ll listen that she never clutched her heart while doing it.
“Did you think I was waiting for you?” she asks, even though she was. “Did you think I’d fall into your arms?” she asks, even though she almost did. “Did you think I’d missed you?” she asks, even though she did.

“I’ve missed you,” Jon says then, his voice dropping deeper as he steps towards her. She takes a step back, but he comes forward again. His fingers lace through hers, his grip alarmingly gentle. He pulls her closer.

“I don’t believe you,” she says stubbornly, because she’s been stewing in misery for two years and she will not, absolutely will not, cave in just because he’s soft and warm and smells like home though he’s not seen snowfall in years.

In a moment designed to test her resolve, he keeps his gaze on her as he raises her hand into the space between them and presses his lips to her fingers. She likes to pretend it hasn’t made her shiver. “I’m yours,” he says firmly and plainly, like it is the only truth in the world. “Now and always.”

“Even when you were hers?” she asks.

His grip on her hand tightens, as if he senses that she’s about to run. “Especially then. You know what I saw when she’d climb over me. Who I thought of when her hands ran all over me. Whose name I called out every. single. time. You know. You know it like you know the winter snows.”

But these words frighten Sansa, who had been so sure to come here hating him that she doesn’t know what to do when he tells her these things that might make her wish that maybe she had written to him. But he hadn’t written, either. And she can certainly hate him for that.

“You left me there,” she says.

“And I’ve dreamed of you every night, and every day, and every moment in between.”

“You abandoned me and the crown I put on your head.”

“And I’ve repented every day ever since,” he says.

She smiles now, leaning forward and resting her forehead against his. His breath is hotter than dragonfire. “Words,” she whispers into the space between them, and then she pries her hand loose and walks away.
I promised in the tag that I would be resurrecting a character whose potential was, sadly, squandered by Dumb and Dumber on the show. Though I introduced her in the last chapter, I'm glad to give her more purpose now.

Something about the red priestess has Sansa uneasy. She can’t quite pin it, but she knows it’s there. It could be the heat constantly coming off of her skin, or the bleeding red she always insists on wearing, or simply the way her eyes watch Sansa as though they know every secret locked in her heart. But Sansa knows that Kinvara has plans for her. So it is not really surprising when she steps out of her room the next morning to find the red woman just around the corner from her path to the garden, nursing a handful of grapes. Sansa glares at her until their eyes meet, blue on blue, and Kinvara smiles.

“You’re exactly what I imagined you’d be,” she says, popping a fruit into her mouth.

“And what would that be?” Sansa asks evenly.

“Brave,” is the smooth reply.

“I’m afraid of many things,” Sansa says.

“I did not say you were unafraid. I said you were brave.”

Sansa breathes slow. Falling into step with the red priestess, she gazes out at the blooms. “What do you want with me?”

“I want only to understand,” Kinvara says in response. “The entire game has changed. Surely you must have perceived that.”

Sansa gets the distinct impression from the way Kinvara is speaking that there is some information she is not privy to, and she doesn’t like it one bit. It seems all she can think on since she arrived here...that there is something much more serious at work beneath the surface that she is not aware of.

“And how could I possibly help you to understand?” Sansa asks.

Kinvara shrugs, popping another grape into her mouth. “That remains to be seen. It has been many years since you have seen Jon Snow.”

Only two. Sansa wants to point this out, but she stops herself. The only person she’s heard in King’s Landing refer to Jon by his northern name is Davos. Everyone else has taken to calling him Aegon. Hearing Kinvara say it now affirms that they are not one and the same person, and that she is not the only person who has noticed this. It’s true that Jon Snow and Aegon Targaryen share the same body, the same heart, the same mind, but how long has it been since he’s really been hers?

Kinvara smiles at her, a dazzling, enticing thing.
“He’s not the man I once knew him as,” Sansa says.

“I don’t imagine he would be,” Kinvara replies. “When one has met death as often as he has. Between his first death at the Wall, and his second on the shores of Dragonstone island, something has changed in him.”

Sansa bites her lip. “I’d…heard something had happened.”

“Something had happened,” Kinvara says, taking another grape into her mouth. She talks through the fruit, the juice dripping out from between her lips and trickling down her chin. “The Lord of Light chose him to return. First from smoking blades and icy snows, from dragon fire and salty shores. He may not have birthed dragons, but he is the Prince Who was Promised.”

Sansa doesn’t try to hide her twitching lip. “Don’t let the queen hear you saying that.”

“The Queen knows I care not for her,” Kinvara says dismissively. “I made it plain she’s of no interest to me.”

“And she didn’t kill you?”

“If you’ve noticed, she likes best to rule people through reverence, which relies too heavily upon ignorance. There is little ignorance to be found in Westeros, where she has no slaves to liberate or slave masters to crucify. So she must rely upon fear. It is difficult, therefore, for her to exercise her favorite manner of persuasion on someone who is unafraid. To die by fire is the purest death.”

“All the same,” Sansa says. “I can’t imagine she took such a declaration lightly.”

“There was little for her to do then, and less now,” Kinvara says. “She loses clout every day. To her nephew, to the lords, and especially to me. I saw all I needed to see when I gazed into the pyre on the shores of Dragonstone. She fears the fires she had to light. Who would have imagined? The queen of fire and blood, afraid of fire…and her own blood.”

“And you’ve used this to your advantage? To what end?”

“I’ve entertained no ambitions of my own. I exist only to execute the will of the Lord of Light.”

“It seems to me you’ve placed a great deal of faith in this red god’s will. What if his interests do not align with your own?”

“The Lord’s will is my own,” she says. “His plan is flawless.”

“I’ve heard of a red priestess who once said something similar,” Sansa says. “It led a man to burn his own daughter. A girl of twelve.”

Kinvara shakes her head. “The Lord’s plan is not flawed. Mankind is flawed. Therefore, our interpretation of his plan is flawed.”

“Then why are you wasting your time in King’s Landing when you could be trying to accurately interpret his plans back in your temple?”

Kinvara smiles, another devastating thing. “But I am interpreting. I am interpreting, and studying, and learning.” She leans in closer to Sansa now, her lips brushing across her cheek and her breath tickling the shell of her ear. “I am…understanding.”

They pause as they arrive at the entrance to the garden. Kinvara opens her arms and sinks into a
benevolent curtsy dripping with irony. She leaves Sansa there by the roses, hands trembling, clasped together.

*I hate him,* she thinks as fires rage behind her eyes. *I hate him. I hate him. I’ll never forgive him.*
Sansa will brazenly admit that the change in Jon is not something she was prepared for. She came prepared to meet Jon as she knew him—a sullen, uncertain thing who had no deceit in his body and too many reservations. But this Jon, this Jon who clings to her shamelessly, who reaches for her without the slightest hesitation, who stitches himself to her side and drinks her in whenever she’s in sight, this Jon is new to her. She doesn’t know how to behave around this Jon. He doesn’t fit. He won’t respond to her hatred. He won’t respond to her anger. She doesn’t know what to do. So with Kinvara watching and Jon clinging, she elects to remain within the confines of her chambers. It reminds her a lot of her last time in King’s Landing, only she supposes this is slightly better.

She steps out one day to meet Davos Seaworth near the library. The entire trip to King’s Landing is a thorn in her side, but she is pleased to see him.

“I hadn’t imagined you to take any joy in reading, Ser Davos,” she says as she eyes the aisles of tomes on arcane arts behind him.

“It never hurts to brush up,” he says gruffly, and she smiles as he holds out his arm. “I don’t have the patience for histories, but there’s lots to be learned from them, if one’s willing to look for the lessons. Especially the ones they don’t want to learn.”

“Those usually tend to be the ones they need to learn the most.”

“Agreed, My Lady,” he says as he hands her into a seat by a shelf full of dusty spines. “To be honest with ya, though, I like to come here a lot because the queen rarely does. Her and Jon both tend to avoid it here.”

“No, I don’t imagine the queen to be terribly interested in learning anything,” Sansa says. “But Jon would seem the type to grin and bear whatever he could not bring himself to enjoy.”

Davos shifts in his seat slightly as his eyes meet hers. “Jon’s not who he used to be.”

“So I’ve been told,” Sansa says, and she reaches over and catches his hand. Her grip meets the mutilated fingers, and she clings to the stumps gently. “What happened on the shores of Dragonstone, Ser Davos?”

Davos sighs, leaning back. He doesn’t shrug off her grip, which she takes to be a good sign. She isn’t sure if she wants to know what he’s about to tell her, but she does know that the more she thinks on it, the less she likes not knowing. Especially when it seems to be what she doesn’t know that is so critical to the sudden shift in political climate.

“Do you recall, after the battle against the dead, what you warned us all of at the war meeting?” he asks.

She nods. Of course she remembers. That was the day Jon sided with his precious queen over her. So suddenly, so decisively, with such finality than even Arya, who Sansa could always count on to be on Jon’s side over her own, had been infuriated. She remembers the silence in the room after the queen and her company had left, Daenerys smug and triumphant over having won his support. Arya had stepped in front of him before he could leave.

“If you want to cow-tow to that woman, be my guest,” she had said slowly, clearly, and dangerously. She sounded a lot to Sansa like what Daenerys always tried to sound like when she was being cold and hard. “But Sansa is the Lady of Winterfell. If you’re allowed to disrespect her,
then so is your queen.”

“She’s your queen, too.” Jon reminded Arya, and Sansa felt her blood singing angrily. Arya must have felt the same, but something about the journey she’s had since their sweet father’s head slid from his shoulders had taught her to reign in her worst impulses.

“Call her whatever you want to call her,” Arya says. “Sansa is the Lady of Winterfell, and she is to receive the same respect and reverence that you show to Daenerys Targaryen. Under no circumstances are you ever to speak to her thus again. Am I—in any way—unclear?”

Something about the way Jon nodded so slightly had made Sansa’s pulse thrum in satisfaction and triumph. Arya didn’t even blink, still unmoving, watching him expectantly. Sansa hadn’t been certain what they were doing, eyes locked on each other, until Jon turned to face her.

“I’m sorry I spoke to you that way, Sansa,” he said. “It won’t ever happen again.”

“I appreciate that, Jon,” she had said, carefully choosing not to tell him that she’d accepted the apology, as she most certainly had not. “I hope that you do take my counsel to heart, however. You are the Warden of the North now, and I can’t imagine the Northmen will take kindly to a Warden who cares so little for their well-being that he’d send them south to fight so soon after they faced an army of undead things.”

Jon clenched his jaw, nodding slowly. He hadn’t done it, in the end. Sansa wasn’t terribly surprised. He rode south with his queen, and the next they heard from him, he’d married her.

“Yes,” she says now. “I remember it.”

Davos shakes his head—a slow, tired movement. “Would that we’d heeded your counsel, my Lady. What came next was a disaster.”

“I’d heard. Bran gave me a rough idea. Some naval battle against Euron Greyjoy. But I’ve never known the details. I suppose I hadn’t cared to hear them. Only now I cannot help but feel as though not knowing has cost me some ground. What exactly happened after you rode south?”

"I hadn't imagined the Lady of Winterfell would be ignorant of what happened."

Sansa frowns. She doesn't know, but mostly because she had much bigger concerns. The departing army had taken no small amount of supplies and able bodied men. She had an entire castle to repair, an entire population to feed. Dammit, she was a busy woman.

"Suppose I had larger concerns," she says. "What did I miss?"

Davos sighs, lowering his head still further. “We sailed to Dragonstone behind the queen. Jon had preferred to ride on horseback to dragonback, and a damn good thing he did. Had he been on that dragon’s back, he’d have drowned when the thing went down.”

“I’d heard that the dragon had been injured. But I hadn’t known he’d fallen into the water.”

“He was shot, My Lady. Cersei Lannister’s scorpions, fired by Euron Greyjoy. Hit the beast square in the chest. Got him right in the heart. He went into the water, and though we got his body out by nightfall, it was three days before the shores ran anything but red.”

“How could he have been hit?”

“He was slower to fly,” Davos says. “He wouldn’t have been so easy a target had he had more time
“But how could he have survived such a thing?” Sansa asks.

“He didn’t. The black dragon was pulling him away from the waves with his claws, wailing so loud you could hear it for miles. By the time the Unsullied reached him, he was gone. Lungs flooded with blood and saltwater, body smoking. But then she came.”

Davos’ face took on a darkness then, and the stumps of his fingers twitched in a way that indicated to Sansa he’d have clutched her hand tighter, if he could have.

“Who?”

“The red woman,” he says, or nearly spits. “Kinvara.”

“You don’t like her much?”

“I’ve little care for any of those red servants of that fire demon. But I can’t deny what she did.”

“What did she do?”

“She brought him back. The dragon. By that time, Jon and I had already been on Dragonstone nearly a week. She talked a lot with the queen—we were never privy to their meetings, but it was plain as daylight the queen didn’t like what she heard. But Kinvara swore she could bring the beast back, so she let her. Kinvara had the Unsullied build a pyre. The dragon was too big to move, so they built it around his body right there on the rocky shores while his brother stood vigil. It didn’t look the same as when Melisandre brought Jon back at Castle Black, but Kinvara said it was different this time. This was no man she was trying to bring back. It was a damn dragon, and all the rules we thought we knew about life and magic and this world flew out the window when we all faced an army of undead at Winterfell. The black dragon lit the pyre, and the salt and smoke in the air nearly blinded us all. It took hours for that fire to catch the dragon—his lungs were so full of saltwater that he steamed for a good while before the pyre caught.”

Davos sighs now, leaning back in his seat with his other hand pressed over his eyes as though warding off a catastrophic earthquake. Sansa wants so desperately to press him, but she catches her tongue between her teeth and waits for him to gather himself.

“I couldn’t tell you what happened next,” he says at last. “Only that the queen was getting impatient because nothing was happening, and Kinvara was using all sorts of elegant, mystical ways to tell her to shut her fucking mouth, and then she looked to Jon, and his whole face seemed to change.”

“How?”

“I still don’t have the words for it,” Davos says. “Two years, and I still don’t have the words for it. To be fair, I’ve never been a man of words. But Jon took off his armor and laid it down, and he walked right into that damn pyre. My heart just about stopped from the sight. And the queen? Gods or spirits or whatever’s looking after us up there, the queen was horrified.”

“Jon walked into the fire,” Sansa repeats numbly, because it doesn’t seem right to her, and yet it somehow makes so much sense that it cannot be anything else.

“Aye,” Davos says, nodding. “Jon walked into that fire, and they burned together. And when the dawn broke, and the pyre died, when there was nothing left but ashes, saltwater and smoke, they were there on the sand alive and breathing as I am now.”
Sansa released Davos’ hand and sat back in her seat. “Jon walked into fire. And lived.”

“And the queen, her soldiers, and every single lord who’d come to pledge their fealty to her was there to witness it.”

Sansa raises her brows. “What happened then?”

“Well, that obviously raised a lot of questions regarding his lineage, and as it was unlikely that Ned Stark could have put a child in Rhaella Targaryen, people began to press for answers. It didn’t take long for them to figure it out. They had a bit of help. The Spider.”

“How did he survive that?”

“There was no other way. Even the queen could see that. The lords like Jon a lot more than they ever liked her. While she had Jon, she had someone they respected on her side. It was a better look than to challenge him for the throne. People would just see it as more senseless violence, a dragon fighting a dragon for power. And to tell you the truth, the entire incident with the pyre just left her rattled. The red woman talked to her afterwards, and I still don’t know exactly what she said to her. But whatever it was, it scared the queen.”

“And the dragon?”

“Once that pyre died out, the dragon followed Jon everywhere. His mother couldn’t control him anymore. She was down to just the black one. Jon’s got some…connection to him. It goes deeper than what the queen used to have with them. Sometimes it’s like they’re one being. Sometimes I’ve locked eyes with the beast and I could swear up and down that it was Jon Snow’s eyes watching me. That fire did something to him. And like I said, it terrified the queen. How much power he had. So when the scroll arrived from the North declaring independence, she held her silence.”

“Because she was afraid?”

“Jon isn’t what you used to know him as,” Davos says. “But he isn’t what she knew him as, either. Whatever grip she had on him, whatever he may have felt for her, it died with the last of those flames. If she tried to march north to claim your allegiance, Jon and Rhaegal would defend you. And it was clear as day that she wouldn’t like how they did the defending. So she decided it was best to leave the situation for another day. Pick her battles.”

“I hadn’t imagined that was a lesson she’d ever need to learn.”

“I’d like to say I like her better now. She’s a great deal easier to talk to now she’s not the only unburnt dragon-riding Targaryen. As it is, these last two years have been difficult. Jon agreed to marry her on the condition that she’d never look north, but that truce has been tentative, at best. They’re both dragons, in the end. We all knew it was only a matter of time before they burned the world down. And with two dragons between them, along with all of that bitterness and resentment, we knew it was only a matter of time before the fire caught and all of Westeros got caught up in the dance.”

“What’s happening now? Why was I summoned here? Apart from the obvious.”

“Apart from the obvious? Jon had agreed to marry her before we all left Winterfell.”

Sansa scrunches her nose, bile feeling bitter in the back of her throat. “Did he? He never mentioned it.”

“It was discussed between myself and her advisors. We didn’t seriously broach it until we all
arrived on Dragonstone. Most of us knew about Jon’s parents, and the lords were all there anyways. Some of them had their own opinions after hearing Jon had flown the dragon in Winterfell. They had agreed to it, then Kinvara arrived and lit that damn pyre and once everyone saw it and it was confirmed they both just went along with it to keep everyone quiet. But Jon’s been trying to get his hands on annulment since before Cersei Lannister drew her last breath. He had claims that Daenerys was barren as a brick, but when she first suspected a pregnancy, he held his tongue. Then that turned out to be codswallop, and the one after it, and the next two as well. All this time, every single time they speak all they do is antagonize each other. She fessed up last year that she always knew she couldn’t bear a living child, and Kinvara confirmed it long before that. Some sorcery in the east. She’d taken a slave who didn’t appreciate slavery.”

“How ironic,” Sansa murmurs.

Davos nods. “Jon had been pressing harder since then, but she wouldn’t let him have the annulment. She knew he’d head north to claim you as his bride, and she didn’t want him making an ally of a kingdom that had already publicly declared itself independent. Couldn’t risk giving those declarations more weight. Or giving you a husband with access to a dragon. That’d be arming the North against her.”

“So what’s changed?” Sansa asks. “Why suddenly give in now?”

“This last false alarm has put a lot into perspective for her,” Davos says. “Kinvara managed to get to her at last with regards to the annulment. She wouldn’t listen to Jon, but Kinvara had never steered her wrong. Or at least, she’s been right at every turn, even when what she says is horrible.”

“What did she say?”

“The freedom of the North is a point of contention,” Davos says. “As the biggest of the kingdoms, it represents half of Westeros on its own. The queen won’t give it up. And she’s sick of dancing around it. She was ready to head north to watch you bend the knee.”

“I haven’t been asked to bend the knee since I arrived.”

“Aye, because she agreed to hold fire until the peace talks are done,” Davos says.

“What would prompt such an act of patience?”

“Jon. He was ready to get an annulment behind her back. High Septon Alyster was readying the paperwork, and Jon was going to press his claim to the Iron Throne and take all of Westeros out from under her.”

Sansa raises a brow. “That’s so…unlike him.”

“Aye, she didn’t expect it either. None of us did, to be honest with you. These past two years he’s never even touched the throne. She sits on it, and he always lurks about in the shadows. Lots of lords talked about him possibly one day trying, but no one—not a single soul—imagined he’d do it. Except he did. He didn’t just threaten to—he was actively moving forward with it.”

“How did she take it?”

“As terribly as you’d imagine. She found him in the council chambers, and we ran from the room so quick you could light a fire on our asses as we hurried down the hall. You could hear the screaming and the yelling from Maegor’s Holdfast. And the whole time, the dragons were flying over the castle. I kept thinking they were going to start breathing fire on us all. They were holed up in there for a day and a night before they finally came out. And the next thing we knew, the queen
had agreed to the annulment and we were ordered to organize a summit. That was nine or ten weeks ago.”

Sansa takes a deep breath as her mind spins. She’s dizzy with all of this information, and she needs time, and space, to process and rearrange the pieces in her mind.

“What can be done now, to keep Westeros safe?” she asks, but she feels as though she already knows the answer.

“You know I won’t lie to you, milady,” Davos says. “The only way House Targaryen survives is if you consent to marry Jon. He’s made it abundantly clear—and trust me, we’ve tried to convince him otherwise—that he won’t have anyone else on earth.”

“The problem is,” Sansa says. “I don’t care if House Targaryen survives. I’m likely to be the person here with the least incentive to consent to this match. If I marry Jon, our children will be Targaryens, which will give Daenerys blood-ties to the North. And it’ll bind the North to the Iron Throne.”

“And it’ll prevent another dance of dragons,” Davos counters.

“Jon wouldn’t let Winterfell burn,” Sansa says. “You said it yourself, it’s the whole reason she hasn’t gone North to make us bend the knee in the first place.”

"I said Jon wouldn't let you burn," Davos clarifies. "Does that extend to the rest of Winterfell? I couldn't say. That fire changed him. I don’t know how to describe the way he feels about you. I’d say he loves you, but it’s something deeper than that. Something…inhuman. I’ve watched him obsess over you these last two years, and I’m telling you now that while you’re here, and his family is in Riverrun, I think Jon could care less what happens to the rest of the North.”

Sansa shakes her head. “He wouldn’t. The fire can’t have changed him like that.” She is ready to swear it, except she’s not so sure.

Davos shrugs. “Jon’s done a great many things he wouldn’t have done before he walked into that fire. Are you ready to risk it?”

Sansa stares at him, trying very hard to conceal her worry. “You’ve given me much to think about,” she says evenly, allowing her pleasant mask to slip over again. “Thank you for your company, Ser. It has been most stimulating.” She rises to her feet and makes to leave the library.

“Will you marry him, milady, if he asks you to?”

Sansa pauses, taking a slow breath before she turns to face him. “As I said before, Ser, I’ve much to consider. Good day.”
a clash of queens

Alone at last, the only word Sansa can think of is *fuck*.

Ignoring every invitation and summons, she stays in her chambers pondering what she’s learned. It’s too much to wrap her head around in only a few hours, so she gives herself a few days. She can’t believe how much Bran hasn’t told her. And what on earth would possess him to keep it hidden? She thinks of him, seated on that wheelchair by the window with the cold cloth over his eyes and the vanilla almond cookies on his lap. She would kick him if he was in front of her now. How could he let her walk blindly into such a situation so unprepared? She’s stumbled directly into the no man’s land in a war between a soon to be separated husband and wife.

She could kill him.

She could kill Jon, too, if the miserable bastard was half inclined to stay dead.

Somehow she doubts that he would.

But that he would make this bargain, press his claim—he *hates* ruling—press for annulment, set his wife and queen aside, walk into a fire, walk into a fire, walk into a fire—to take her to wife—

It’s just too much to think about.

A knock on the door interrupts her thoughts. The servants usually slide the invitations beneath the door, and her handmaid doesn’t knock before coming in. So she has a visitor. Honestly, she’s hardly surprised. Annoyed, yes, but not surprised. It’s been a day and a half since she left Ser Davos in the library, and she knows better than anyone that King’s Landing offers little in the way of actual relief at any given time. She *is* surprised, however, when she opens the door to find Daenerys Targaryen on the other side of it. Sansa’s brow rises at the sight of her, and the two guards on either side of her, at the ramrod stance she assumes, and at the fact that she is standing here, at Sansa’s door, this early in the day.

“Lady Sansa,” Daenerys says carefully. “I had hoped we might have words, you and I.”

Sansa is not, in any way, inclined to oblige her. She cannot think of anything she’d like less than to speak with Daenerys Targaryen, but it’d be difficult, she imagines, to word that in a way that cannot be taken as an insult.

“What do you imagine you’d need guards to protect you from words, Queen Daenerys?” Sansa asks.

Daenerys’ brows furrow and her eyes dart to her guards. “I always have my guards on hand.”

“That’s exhausting,” Sansa says, but she pulls the door open further and admits her into the chamber. The guards come in after her instead of waiting at the door, and Sansa has to push down memories of Meryn Trant’s gauntlet meeting her cheek. It happened before, but if it happens again, she is free to leave. She’s not afraid of pain.

“I wish to discuss the possibility of your union with Aegon,” Daenerys says, making herself comfortable at the table by the balcony.

“I am eager to see the North and South at peace with each other,” Sansa says.

“And yet you insist on rebellion,” Daenerys says stiffly.
“No, the North insists upon freedom,” Sansa says. “Does it immediately follow that we are interested in war? I see no occasion for battle. A peaceful marriage sounds much more appealing.”

“And yet you refuse to marry Aegon. So many simple solutions that could solve all of our problems, but we must delay and drag out their dissolution because you choose to be difficult.”

“I act according to the best interests of my people and my home. The solutions you present to me do not serve to better the condition of either, so I refuse them, and I will continue to refuse them until you present me with a solution that my people and my home stand to benefit from. That is the nature of compromise.”

“And what is your objection to this union?”

“I cannot wed Jon for a myriad of reasons.”

“Being?”

“Primarily, he is a Prince of House Targaryen. Any children we bear would also be Targaryens, and as the eldest Stark my children would one day inherit Winterfell. Targaryens cannot rule over Winterfell.”

“They would be blood-bound to the kings on the Iron throne,” Daenerys says. “It would make the North a part of the most powerful family bloodline on earth.”

“You overestimate your family’s power,” Sansa says. “You overestimate your family’s popularity,” she adds. “And most importantly: you overestimate your family’s significance. House Targaryen doesn’t matter to the North. It never has.”

“It did when Torrhen Stark knelt to my ancestor.”

“And how well has that served you, three hundred years later? When you call a half-blooded northman your husband and still hear whispers of discontent?”

Daenerys’ face seems to go pink at this. Her face twists into something resembling a snarl. “Aegon refuses to remain by my side.”

“Might be because you refuse to call him Jon.”

“His father named him Aegon.”

“The only father he ever cared about named him Jon,” Sansa says. “You tried to mold him into someone he wasn’t—someone you wished for him to become. He refuses to remain by your side because he’s sick and tired of being molded.”

“Do not presume to know my husband,” Daenerys says, gripping the chair with knuckles pale as snow.

“You’re mistaken, Queen Daenerys,” Sansa says. “I know nothing of Prince Aegon. Jon, however? He’s a different story.”

“You think you are the only person who knows him, then?”

“If he’s spent the better part of your marriage trying to get out of it, then I wonder how well you do know him.”

“You are not to speak to me thus again,” Daenerys says evenly, the deadly cold seeping into her
Sansa isn’t having it. “If you are here to entreat me to accept an offer that will save you from fighting a war, then perhaps you ought to hold back on making demands of me. Respect goes both ways. I give it when I receive it in turn, and not a moment before.”

Daenerys watches Sansa unblinking for a moment, and Sansa holds her gaze. They both seem to deflate at the same time as a loud screech echoes outside. The wingbeat of a dragon can be heard in the distance.

“My children are restless,” Daenerys says.

“Perhaps they should have an earlier bedtime,” Sansa says back. She has no patience for threats right now. “Let us return to our negotiation. What will the North gain from a union with a dying house?”

“The good favor of the crown.”

“Oh joy. However did we live without it?” Sansa asks dramatically. “Enhance your offer.”

“You will be a princess of House Targaryen.”

“Again: power, popularity, and significance,” Sansa says.

“Your children will have the blood of Valyria.”

“Well, thank goodness for that, otherwise we’d all be dead in the ground.”

“Dragons do not bear insult so lightly.”

“How many times must I tell you that your threats mean nothing to me?” Sansa asks. “Your dragons do not frighten me—frankly, they do not even vaguely interest me. Present your offer to me now or let us leave this for another date.”

“You will be allowed to return to the North,” Daenerys says.

“No force on earth,” Sansa says. “Neither Gods nor man would ever be able to keep me from returning home regardless of who I am shackled to. I am not a prisoner here.”

“I am the queen. That could easily be changed.”

“Yes, you are. And no, it cannot. I will leave when I see fit. Present me with an offer worth considering or I will leave this instant. If you are unable to negotiate reasonably, then I must ask you to leave me to my thoughts until one of your more politically adept advisors is up to the challenge. Surely Tyrion can be spared at this hour?”

Daenerys glares so heartily at Sansa that for a moment she half suspects she’s about to be backhanded. She nods briefly, and the guards step forward. Sansa laughs. Louder than she has in years. Louder than she thought she could. Her stomach is in shambles, lurching and turning, but she can’t stop laughing.

“Aye, take me to the Black Cells,” Sansa says. “Arrest me and charge me with whatever you see fit. I’m sure there’s a name for the crime, isn’t there? Of course that would be an act of war, as I’ve come here under guest right for a peace summit. And I’m sure there’s a whole continent full of lords waiting for you to overstep just so they can rally behind your soon-to-be-former-husband just
itching for an excuse to tear you off that ugly old chair.” Sansa leans forward so her face is inches away from Daenerys. “I’m here because you have no other choice. And I am long past bending over to threats from that throne.”

Daenerys is still glaring at her, but Sansa has risen from her seat and gone to the tray of fruit by the window. She takes a fig and begins to cut into it.

“He thought of you,” Daenerys’ voice is steady, but strained.

Sansa grunts. “I’m sure he did.”

“He did,” Daenerys says, and when Sansa turns, the dragon queen’s hands are clutching the chair again. “Every day you came up somehow. And…and every night.”

Sansa scrunches up her face is distaste. “Ugh.”

Daenerys raises a brow. “Bad fig?”

“Bad thought,” Sansa says, shaking her head and she retakes her seat. “I’ve heard it said that I’ve occupied his thoughts since he left home. I’m pleased to hear my brother was thinking of home.”

Daenerys snorts bitterly. “I’d imagine you’d be scandalized by the thoughts he had if they were coming from your brother.”

“If I have truly been so close to his mind these last two years, I wonder he didn’t come home sooner.”

Daenerys has no answer for this, but the look on her face suggests to Sansa that she knows one. “You take some joy in this, I’m sure you do,” she says in an acidic whisper. “Tucked all the way up north, thousands of miles away, and yet you sat between him and I every moment since we arrived here. Like a poison. Like a disease.”

Sansa takes another bite of the fig. “Oops.”

Daenerys looks indignant. “Oops?”

Sansa shrugs. “Oops.”

“That’s all you have to say?”

“What else would you like to hear?” Sansa asks calmly. “Jon and I have not communicated once since the lot of you marched south from Winterfell. And he and I did not part on the warmest terms. I can’t at all fathom how it could be my fault that he’s been fostering profane thoughts about me in your marriage bed. And being honest with you, it doesn’t change my mind.”

“Aegon refuses to have anyone else,” Daenerys says at last. “I have looked over your list. He won’t listen.”

“Well, you’ve already seen how well he listens to me.”

“And yet he wants you.”

“I will not marry him. I cannot fail House Stark thus.”

Daenerys is silent for so long that Sansa is tempted to check that she hasn’t faded to dust. She’s still there, and she looks every bit as miserable as Sansa has been these last two years.
“I am sorry,” Sansa says. “About your infertility. You and I have never seen eye to eye, but I would not wish such a fate upon anyone.”

Daenerys swallows and turns away. Her eyes are dry when she turns back. “I always knew it would be so.”

“And still I am sorry,” Sansa says. “I thank you kindly, Queen Daenerys, for coming to visit me.”

Daenerys is stiff at the dismissal, and remains in her seat for a full minute longer as if to rebel against it. Sansa allows her this rebellion. She cares very little for how long she chooses to sit there, so long as she remains quiet while she does so.

“I thank you for your time, Lady Stark,” Daenerys says, and Sansa knows she does not imagine the special emphasis upon the word ‘Lady’. “I am quite finished here. You may return to your… previous occupation.”

Sansa bites back a smile. Save face, sweet thing. She hardly cares anymore. But it is not a desire to have the last word that prompts her to speak again.

“Queen Daenerys?”

The guards are already out the door, and only the back of her silvery blonde head is visible.

“Lady Stark?”

“I would ask that we not negotiate alone again,” Sansa says. “It seems a tad…counter-productive.” Daenerys’ back stiffens. Sansa ignores it. “With your permission, of course. You are the queen.”

Daenerys somehow seems to go even stiffer. “As you were, Lady Sansa,” she says with a voice shaking from anger. Sansa doesn’t care. She will not be ambushed thus again.
Of course fate is hardly ever on her side, poor wolf that she is, so when Sansa swears she will not be ambushed again, the universe itself seems to take this as a direct challenge.

She could swear that no one took half so keen an interest in her during her last stay in King’s Landing, and she imagines they had much more reason to back then. Today she is ambushed precisely where she had imagines she is least likely to be disturbed: the Traitor’s Walk.

She is not a nostalgic person, and if she was, this is not a memory she would wish to dredge up. But there are memories here that reinforce her resolve. Here is where her journey began, where it truly began. Here was where she first knew the sharp sting of metal on skin. Where she first knew the drive to take a life. Where she first learned that every action, every word, every breath, has consequences.

Would that she had the wherewithal to teach Jon those lessons when she had the chance. But he had been a stubborn thing once they had retaken Winterfell. Always underestimating her, always determined to prove himself. She sees it now, now that she remembers him in those golden days alone in the North. He wasn’t always intending to spite her. Perhaps part of her had worried that he might, because he had good reason to. She had not been cruel when they were children, but she had been cold.

Would he have listened to her if she were Arya?

*We don’t trust your queen.*

*I don’t trust her as far as I can spit.*

No.

So it is here, where it all began, that Sansa learns to make her peace with how it all ended. And it is here where her peace is shattered.

“You were the sweetest of creatures when last you were in this city,” Lord Varys says, and she watches his long, trailing sleeves glitter in the early evening light. “But my time in Winterfell had not given me the impression that you had remained sentimental.”

Sansa gives him a small smile. “I had not been aware that you were studying my character. But the study of characters is the most amusing. People are ever changing.”

“Indeed. So much so that sometimes it overwhelms even themselves. It’s comforting then, to be able to revisit the past.”

Sansa tilts her chin up and points to the spikes. “What lessons they can teach us. If we’re willing to listen.”

Lord Varys nods. “Those were terribly dark days. I am only grateful they were cut short.”

He steps closer towards her, his arm extended. Sansa accepts it and they fall into step along the walk. “I understand I have the Tyrells to thank for that,” she says. “Though our old friend Lord Baelish seemed keen to take all of the credit for himself.”

“And I understand I have you to thank for bringing Lord Baelish to justice for the chaos he brought
to the realm.”

“I’ve heard it said that is your true master,” Sansa says. “The realm. Not a queen or a king, but a people.”

“And you’ve heard the right of it. Kings and queens are expendable. For every one that dies, we may crown another. But I have ever been a servant of the people.”

“The people are not in the Red Keep, my Lord. They are in the city below.”

“Yes. Living. As best as they can. Moving, surviving, living day to day beneath the birds.”

“I recall a time when I was mistaken for a bird myself.”

“And I notice that everyone who suggested that is no longer among the living,” Varys notes. They have departed the Traitor’s Walk now, and proceed along the halls. “Quite a serious flaw in judgement.”

“I’ve made a few misjudgments myself since I arrived,” Sansa says. “I’m still recovering from the shock of just how wrong I’ve been.”

Varys’ laugh is light, gentle, and entirely too soft for her to trust. “I believe that you, my dear Lady, are one of the precious few here who seem to be doing anything other than treading water.”

“I’m fighting every battle,” Sansa says. “To keep everything I know from erupting into chaos.”

“Chaos is a ladder,” Varys echoes.

“A fragile one.”

“As fragile as the threads our dearly departed friend Petyr used to hold his web together.”

“A spider’s web?” Sansa muses. Varys’ answering smile is a puzzle. “What is it you wish to ask of me, my Lord? Do you wish to have your turn advising me to marry my cousin?”

“Perhaps,” Varys says. “I’d say that it would placate the queen, but I don’t imagine you’d care to hear it. And I’m equally certain it would do exactly the opposite of placating her.”

“She wants me to marry him, she doesn’t want me to marry him. Whatever shall I do?”

“Whatever you choose,” Varys says. “If you are partial to the idea, I can certainly imagine worse fates than to marry a man who genuinely cares.”

Sansa shakes her head. “What Jon and I had, whatever friendship or camaraderie there was, I have left in the past.”

“The past, where all of our best lessons reside,” Varys speaks almost wistfully. “You have thrived under the tutelage of our old friend Petyr. Would you accept a lesson from myself?”

“If you are willing to teach it to me,” Sansa says.

“You are a clever creature,” he says. “I will not correct any who say otherwise, for that is their lesson to learn. To their joy or to their sorrow, it matters not. Choose your ultimate goal. What do you fight for? And whatever it is, whatever it may demand of you, fight for it.”

Sansa nods slowly. “You fight for the realm.”
“I do. And for the sake of the realm, I would serve any ruler, weather any storm, brave any hardship. Such is the price that must be paid in the name of that great vision. What is your vision?”

“I want…I want my people to be safe. Perhaps it could be said that I, too, serve the realm.”

“Then our goals are not so different.”

“And still you would advise me to marry him.”

“We are servants of the realm. And a marriage would certainly spare the realm a war.”

“But you have also made me understand that she would only be able to tolerate the union. Why would my marrying him anger her? If they are truly on such dreadful terms, I’d imagine she’d be thrilled to be rid of him.”

“I imagine she had harbored hopes that they’d be something great together,” Varys says. “One legend deserves another—at least in the mind of other legends.”

“Do you spend much time thinking on the subject of legends?”

“I am only one humble man, my Lady. Trying to stay above water in this tide of titles and crowns.”

“Very well,” Sansa says. “If you care not whether I marry him, to what do I owe the joy of your company on this fine evening?”

Varys slows his pace now, his eyes glittering. “I understand that the queen has suffered more than one lapse in decorum with regards to you. I only hope that any indignity you may have suffered here at her hands—any insult borne—does nothing to shake your resolve concerning the supply shortage in the southern regions.”

Sansa shakes her head. “Rest easy, my Lord. House Stark will remain generous. I’ll not be punishing the entirety of the south if I happen to dislike their ruler. Or her heir.”

“Her heir…” Varys continues. “There the most intriguing character study can be found.”

“I’ve seen that he is different from what I once knew him to be,” Sansa says. “And I understand that we have the red woman to thank for this change in him. If your only concern is that I not cut off Northern aid, then I assure you, I will not. But my own bluntness, I’d wager, deserves equal frankness from yourself.”

“Indeed it does. Whatever do you wish to know?”

“Surely a little bird or two would have sung a song of the union of two dragons?”

Varys nods quickly. She barely catches it. “Suppose that a few little birds may have observed them very carefully these last two years. Suppose that those little birds may have learned a song.”

“And pray tell: how does that song go?”

“For that, my Lady, we’d need a lyre. And a flute. And a harp. And a bard bold enough to sing the words to so elevated an audience as yourself.”

Sansa raises a brow. “Is it truly so scandalous?”

“Not scandalous so much as it is dark. Theirs has not been a happy union. This has been known by many from the very start. Perhaps before it even began.”
“Then why enter into it?”

“It may have seemed prudent at the time. Perhaps it was more for the hope of what it would be, than for the reality of what it truly was.”

“Such a foolish risk to be taking,” Sansa whispers. “A childish risk.”

“The queen was but a child when she stumbled upon the means of achieving everything she wished,” Varys says. “A child when she began conquest. The trouble with power—I have always said—is when its limitations are misunderstood. It gives one such a slanted perception of the world. The utterly unheard of becomes a means to an end. The impossible becomes a conceivable, tangible goal. It makes it difficult to create a cushion soft enough to ease the inevitable blow reality tends to deal.”

“I am sorry that the queen needed to suffer two years before she accepted the nature of her situation.”

“I am glad that you were young when you realized yours,” Varys says. “Though I am sorry. For all that you endured. For all that I turned a blind eye to. I am sorry.”

They slow to a stop as Sansa’s brow twitches. No one from her days within this city has ever apologized for what she endured within it. Varys’s eyes turn this way and that, scanning the corridor. “Forgive me, my Lady. I have taken you far from where I found you.”

Sansa shakes her head. “I can find my way back. The Traitor’s Walk is not so far away.”

Varys nods, tilting his head. “Neither is the past,” he says, and he leaves her with the evening breeze tickling her cheek. The screech of a dragon echoes in the far distance.
bury your dead

Her next ambush hardly counts as one, as she has been prepared to battle. All the same, she is taken by surprise just outside of the council chamber when she nearly crashes into Daenerys, who had been exiting in such a hurry that Sansa wonders what she is running from.

“Queen Daenerys,” Sansa greets her. “I understood that I would be attending negotiations in the course of the afternoon.”

“You shall,” Daenerys says, and her face is so stiff and uncomfortable that Sansa wonders what had been spoken in the room moments before she arrived to put her in such a state. “I regrettably have another engagement. You will negotiate with my advisors. Good afternoon.”

And she continues on her way before Sansa can say anything.

When she enters the council chamber to find Tyrion helping himself to a goblet of wine, Varys prodding and poking through a bowl of fruit, and Davos by the window gazing out into the morning air, she feels slightly better. Kinvara is not here, she notices, but there are traces of that cinnamon scent of hers lingering in the air. Has she just left as well?

“Thank you for answering my summons so promptly, Lady Stark,” Tyrion says, “Have a seat. We would continue our negotiation.”

Sansa wordlessly slips into the chair beside Varys. The seat on her other side is empty. Had Kinvara meant to be beside her, to unsettle her again?

Varys pours out a glass of lemon juice and places it before her graciously. Sansa gives him a smile in thanks and focuses her attention back upon Tyrion.

“I had imagined the queen would have wanted to join us,” Sansa says.

“I understand a quiet attempt was made at discussion between yourself and the queen,” Tyrion says with a smirk. “I understand also that it was…counter-productive.”

“Unfortunately.”

“My apologies. Our queen has never been particularly adept at communicating.”

“To be fair to her, she’s had little reason to learn.”

“It would please you to hear that she’s begun to take a sincere interest in being as adept a politician as she can possibly be,” Tyrion says.

“What a happy turn of events,” Sansa says. “Has the prince reconsidered the ladies on the list?” she asks, though she knows what the answer will be.

“The list is there, if you wish to see his modifications to it,” Tyrion says, gesturing with his free hand towards the fireplace. Sansa watches bits of ash floating about and sighs.

“That is a terrible shame. I had been so certain he’d take a real shining to young Lady Dustin. I wrote her entry myself.”

Tyrion laughs. “Yes, you did seem to try especially hard to make them all sound so elegant and charming. But I’m inclined to say the only care Jon had for that list was that it was you who’d
written it.”

“So now he is Jon?”

“He is always Jon, when the queen is not nearby.”

“Is she so hateful of the name?”

“It smacks to her of rebellion.”

“I had imagined she’d welcome those northernmost parts of him. She might have considered how they’d bind the kingdoms together, rather than remold him into a champion of a long dead house.”

“As I said, our queen is many things,” Tyrion says, holding his hands out benignly. “But she is no politician.”

“I will not marry him,” Sansa says flatly.

Tyrion and Varys lock eyes for a brief moment, and then they both share a glance with Davos, who makes a gesture that gives Sansa the impression he’s already tried to explain this.

“Which is why we are here to negotiate. You are no dragon queen,” Tyrion says. “And yet you are, according to some, a queen. Surely a queen needs a king?”

“Historically speaking, no,” Sansa says. “And if I intended to take a husband, it would not be one who would hang banners of red dragons in the halls of Winterfell.”

“Regrettably, Jon is the survival of his House. He cannot forsake his name to take up yours.”

“And I am not obligated to forsake mine and take up his. My answer is no. Find him another bride.”

“He refuses to have anyone else,” Varys says softly. “We have tried for years to sway him, but his gaze has only ever been locked upon Winterfell.”

“Home’s where the heart is,” Sansa says, shrugging. “The sentimentality touches my heart, but my decision has not changed. The dragon queen insists upon this union, claiming that it will bring peace to everyone involved, but House Stark—and only House Stark—can be allowed to rule Winterfell. I’ll not be forsaking my name to hand my home to a dragon.”

“We must all of us make concessions for the good of the realm, Lady Sansa,” Tyrion says.

“And what will the dragon queen concede for this union to pass? If I am expected to happily sacrifice my birthright, my name, and the future of my House’s claim on Winterfell, what will she give to ensure the survival of her family name? Why am I being asked to sacrifice mine so that hers might live on? What good is House Targaryen to Westeros when the entire continent is being fed and protected by the North? When southern lords are sending their firstborn sons to negotiate in the halls of Winterfell for supplies and provisions? When southern children are fostering in Northern houses to learn how to fight? You seem to need this marriage much more than the North does. So do not ask me to consider it again unless you have something worth offering in exchange.”

Tyrion looks, for a moment, like a fish gaping the way that he is. Varys’ face is a blank canvas. Davos has a quiet smile on his face that she has to fight hard to keep from returning. She always did like him.
“What would you propose to receive in exchange, my Lady?” Davos asks.

_Fight every battle, always, in your mind._

_The more people you love, the weaker you are._

_Everyone can be maneuvered._

_What do you fight for? Whatever it is, whatever it may demand of you, fight for it._

“The North goes free,” she says.

“I’m afraid the queen might have a few things to say about that.”

“Then Aegon Targaryen must become Jon Stark.”

“Which would absolutely defeat the purpose of marrying to continue the Targaryen bloodline.”

“Then I suppose the queen will have to pick the one that’s easier to swallow,” Sansa says evenly, getting to her feet. “I quite like negotiating with the three of you gentlemen. It’s infinitely more productive. Have the queen consider these options.”

She quits the room with her chin held high, and her peace doesn’t last the day.

In retrospect, she really did ask for an ambush this time. The gardens are the most peaceful part of the castle, and since there’s not often entertainment to be had when the monarch is not holding court, most of the courtiers often find themselves there. They are vast enough that people may roam undisturbed, but it can be depended upon that they will run into each other. But of all of the people Sansa had anticipated being accosted by in the gardens, she hadn’t counted on the queen.

The state she’d be in, however…maybe she had considered that.

“I came to rule over seven kingdoms,” Daenerys hisses when she catches Sansa by a wall of blindingly yellow daffodils. Sansa doesn’t even have the time to blink before the queen has caught her arm. The glimmer of her guards’ armor makes Sansa wince. Her grip is bruising. “I will not give away a single one. Not. A. One.”

“Then I imagine Jon must accustom himself to the title of Lord Stark,” Sansa says calmly.

“Your Grace, I beg you to allow us to move this discussion elsewhere,” Varys says quietly. A hundred eyes must be upon them now. But Daenerys’ own eyes are a wild pair of things, blazing and furious.

“You will not take my husband and my kingdom,” she seethes. Her teeth are gritted and her grip tightens. Sansa wonders briefly if her nails might break the skin. But that’d be impossible. They’d have to tear through the fabric of her sleeve, delicate though it is, and then there’s the fact her skin’s crisscrossed with Ramsay’s affection. “You will not take what is rightfully mine.”

“That kingdom is mine,” Sansa whispers so low that only Daenerys can hear it. “That kingdom has been rightfully mine for eight thousand years. Take your three hundred year old claim and bury it with your family name. As for your husband—does it look as though I want him?”

A dragon screeches overhead. The shadows dance across the garden. Sansa looks up. Green and glowing in the daylight, Rhaegal is a force to be reckoned with. Larger than when she arrived—how is that possible?—he doesn’t try to land. But his arrival seems to announce another: at the turn
of the rosebushes, Jon stands watching the two of them, eyes darting between Daenerys’ hand and Sansa’s arm. His eyes narrow into slits of black. Sansa shudders.

“Release her,” he says in a voice deeper and darker than she’s ever heard it. It makes her spine feel like someone’s doused her in ice water. Daenerys’ hand is gone from her arm. “Do not touch her again.”

Daenerys glares at him, her eyes suddenly swimming. “Aegon—”

“Stop fucking calling me that,” he says gruffly. “My name is Jon.”

Sansa flinches and turns away. His hand comes to touch her cheek softly, and she wants very badly to shrink away from it.

“Speak with me, Sansa,” he says, taking her hand and tugging her away. “Come and speak with me.”

“I have nothing to say to you,” she says. “Nothing at all.”

“Nothing?” he repeats.

She glares at him. Glares and glares and she hopes he can feel it somewhere in that dead ugly heart of his. “Not a single thing.”

Jon leans closer to her. His breath smells of salt and smoke. “Liar,” he says softly into her ear.

She nearly kills him.

“You’d call me the liar?” she asks. “You, who broke every promise you ever made me?”

His curls bounce as he tilts his head back and laughs. It’s a hollow, empty noise. It’s a shell of what he used to be. “It appears you have more than nothing to say to me, my love.”

“I’m not your love,” she says. And she leans in closer to tell him this next bit, because she needs him to hear it, and she needs it to hit home. “I hate you. I hate you, and I hate you, and I hate you, and I’ll never forgive you.”

Jon laughs again as he pulls her closer. “I love you,” he says back, and his grip on her waist is soft and scalding. “I’ve loved you, and loved you, and loved you since before I knew what love even was. Since I saw my first snow at Winterfell, since I saw you at Castle Black, since the salt and smoke cleared from my lungs on the shores of Dragonstone.”

Sansa backs away, shaking her head. She will not have this conversation with him, and she will most certainly not have it with Daenerys Targaryen and her council and a hundred (a thousand?) eyes watching.

“Would that you have stayed by my side, Aegon Targaryen,” she says. “Much might have been different.”

By the time she’s made it back to her chambers, she’s decided quite firmly that she must leave King’s Landing and return to Winterfell immediately. The condition of the North has not been decided, yes, but she imagines she’s got a much better idea of the current state of the union now than she did before. Is this every interaction between Jon and his dragon queen? Sansa shudders. How many dragons would it take to burn the world down?
She opens the door to her chambers and closes it behind her, reaching for the bell-pull to ring a maid to help her collect her things and prepare for the journey home.

“It was the fire,” says a voice, and Sansa jumps, nearly falling over. She presses her weight against the door and clutches her chest to still her pounding heart. Kinvara lays leisurely upon her bed, skirts pulled back and legs folded over each other.

“What is the matter with everyone in this miserable city!” Sansa asks as she gathers her bearings.

“Anticipation does incredible things to a person’s mind,” Kinvara replies. “Daenerys anticipates an end to the murky future of her family. Her advisors anticipate an end to having to constantly soothe her. Aegon anticipates the chance to finally hold his lady love in his arms—”

“I’m not marrying him,” Sansa says flatly. “Everyone needs to just accept that.”

Kinvara tilts her head, watching Sansa from beneath her lashes. “Have you ever wondered what it’s like to burn?”

“It’s not something I think on often, no.”

“Few people do, until they burn. But to die by fire is the purest death.”

Sansa shudders delicately. “But Jon didn’t die.”

“Yes, he did,” Kinvara says, sitting up. “He died in that fire. He and his dragon were reborn together. The fire washed him clean.”

“Of what? Jon was a good man. A stupid one, I’ll own, but not an evil one.”

“It didn’t wash him clean of darkness. It washed him clean of impurity.”

“What impurity?”

“All those silly concerns that bogged his mind down,” Kinvara says. “Honor and opinion and all of those stupid things he used to care about. The fire burned it all away until only Jon—in his purest form—remained.”

“So this thing he’s become—this is your definition of a pure man?”

“This is Jon. This is Aegon. This is the boy who tore his mother open on his way into the world at the Tower of Joy. That fire made him into everything he was meant to be.”

“And his queen? Where does she fit into this?”

“His attachment to her was one of the things that the flame washed away,” Kinvara says. “One of the…impurities.”

Sansa sits down. “Please tell me you didn’t say that to her.”

“Oh, I did. The day he rose from the ashes, I told her. The first word out of his mouth when he got to his feet, covered in soot and ash. I’ll never forget it. He looked at me, and Ser Davos slipped a cloak over his shoulders, and he gripped my hand and whispered it—Sansa. It was so quiet, but it was the loudest thing any of us had heard.”

“And Daenerys? Did…did she hear it?”
“She did. As soon as he was taken inside, she demanded to know what it meant. I told her what it meant. I warned her against it, warned her that it wouldn’t be borne. I tried to tell her what I saw in the flames. She knew he wanted you. She married him anyway.”

“What did you see in the flames?”

“Jon. Aegon. Whichever he is now. And you beside him.”

Sansa leans back in her seat, running her fingers through her hair to loosen the suddenly too tight braids. “And they’ve been at each other’s throats like this ever since?”

“It’s grown steadily worse.”

“And what would you—as an unbiased third party—have me do?”

“The Lord of Light has chosen...Jon? Aegon? Whichever one he is, to be his champion here on earth,” Kinvara says. “He has been tasked with restoring the peace of these lands. His is the song of ice and fire. But a king of fire needs a queen of ice. It is the Lord’s will that you marry him.”

“I don’t keep to the red god,” Sansa says bitterly. “And it’s not as simple as you say it is. I can’t just skip off into the sunset and marry him. I have my family to consider, I have the good of my kingdom to consider, and what’s more, I hate him.”

“You love him,” Kinvara says. “You are hurt by him, and the hurt still lingers in you.”

Sansa glares at her. Kinvara gets to her feet and dusts off her dress. She gives Sansa a weary, determined look. “Bury your dead, Lady Stark. He’ll have you or no one.”

This seems to Sansa like a load of hogwash, and as soon as she’s locked her door to ensure that no one else will come ambushing her, she takes a calming breath at the balcony to try and sort through it all. The more she thinks on it, the more annoyed she becomes. Bury her dead? What dead? Why does it fall upon her to bury the dead? Why does it fall upon her to forgive, to show grace, to be understanding, when none of this courtesy has been shown to her?

Useless noise. She’s far too precious to herself for that, and she’s learned the hard way that more often than not, one must teach people how to treat them.

*I’ve loved you since before I knew what love even was.*

What sort of love is he talking of? Certainly not the love he showed her when they ruled Winterfell, when he constantly belittled her. Certainly not the love he showed her when he returned, when he constantly undermined and devalued her authority. Certainly not when he paraded his queen before her. Certainly not when he whored himself off to the Iron Throne.

She’d kill him if he would simply stay dead. But he’d take that as a challenge. The bastard.
Sansa imagines it’s a good time for another miserable fool to try their hand at swaying her to do something she has no obligation nor incentive to do, and when Tyrion shows up at her doorstep that evening with a jug of Dornish red and a sheepish smile on his face, she is not disappointed.

“I had been wondering when you’d come knocking,” she says as she holds the door open further, admitting him inside. “I’ve already had Ser Davos, Lord Varys, and the fire priestess give me their fine opinion. Everyone here is gripped by the idea that I absolutely must marry Jon.”

“Oh no, I’m not here to ask you to marry Jon,” Tyrion lies, and Sansa laughs. “I just wanted to relive our glorious days as a lord and his lady.”

Sansa cannot fight her smile. He will bring it up, and likely soon, but she—for now—allows him to pour her a glass and push it towards her as they make themselves comfortable by the balcony. “I never dreamed I’d come back to this city again.”

“Neither did I. It’s awfully funny how that works out sometimes.”

“Whatever happened to you after I left? Part of me wondered sometimes. My Aunt Lysa said something about my pending widowhood. Though I was grateful to be single again, I admit I was sorry to hear you’d be killed.”

“Could I possibly have grown on you?”

“I did not lie that night,” she says. “You were always my favorite suitor.”

Tyrion raises his glass, and she raises hers to meet it. “And you my favorite lady.”

“I wonder—did you take another after I left?”

“I assure you, Lady Sansa, that my marriage to you left me smarting so brilliantly that the mere memory of you chased away any wayward thoughts.”

Sansa laughs. “I had hoped you’d find someone over there in Essos. I hear they’re quite energetic.”

“I wouldn’t know. All I did was drink.”

“And here you are, still drinking.”

A moment of silence follows, and in it Sansa says goodbye to whatever peace might have been between them. Tyrion has none of Davos’ friendly likeability in his mannerism when he gets to talking business. There’s less to interpret than Kinvara, to be sure. Tyrion speaks Sansa’s language more than anyone here in King’s Landing, she’d imagine. Logic, savvy, and motivation.

“Of course you do need to marry him.”

Ah, there it is.

Sansa leans back in her seat, watching him intently. “Alright, then. Let’s hear it. Give me your finest argument. I won’t interrupt.”

“The queen has grown restless,” Tyrion says. “She’s not pacified by our assurances of your loyalty to the South and the Iron Throne.”
“Smartest thing she’s done so far,” Sansa says.
Tyrion smiles grimly. “The last thing anyone wants is another war.”

“Why do I get the feeling she’ll lose this one?”

“Well, as of yet there’s no definite proof that she can return from the dead,” Tyrion concedes.

“So I marry Jon, and she is convinced of the North’s non-loyalty. I become a Targaryen, condemning all of my children to become Targaryens. Winterfell is left without any Starks to rule over it. My House becomes extinct in the male line, and Winterfell is bound to Dragonstone. Because the alternative is fighting a war that I’m probably going to win.”

Tyrion’s lip twitches, and Sansa doesn’t even hide her smile. “You’ve had quite a transformation.”

“No, no, I was always this way,” Sansa says. “The only thing that’s changed is my patience to hide it. Now, as you’ve no doubt noticed, there seems to me to be very little reason to be condemning myself thus. I stand to lose a great deal by marrying Jon. The queen seems to see it as some sort of great honor, but you and I both know that it’s more of a punishment. And I stand to gain much by refusing. Why then ought I to consent?”

Tyrion studies her over his wineglass.

Sansa smiles. “This is the part where you say something terribly witty and convincing,” she adds.

“Jon’s been fixated on you for the better part of his entire tenure as prince consort,” Tyrion says. “You come up at least in passing in nearly every conversation they’ve ever had. It’s quite maddening. And had I not thought it all mad before, I certainly do now that you’re here. Jon has changed. I won’t speak as the Hand of the Queen, but as a man who recognizes friends. Jon loves you. Or whatever it is he feels for you—this fixation, this mania, this...obsession. Kinvara does her best to keep him distracted, feeding him the visions she sees in the flames. I asked her to, because if I did not, Jon would be dogging your every step at all hours of the day. He doesn’t behave as men ought to, but I suppose that’s hardly surprising considering.”

“And how does he behave?” Sansa asks.

“He eats but once a day,” Tyrion says. “Sometimes days will go by with him being none the wiser. His sleep is sparse. Most nights he just passes staring at the moon. He’s quieter, if you’ll believe it. Except when your name is brought up, and especially when it’s brought up by the queen.”

“And you think to hand him off to me to spare yourself from having to worry about him?”

“I think you’re the only person alive who has any semblance of control over him,” Tyrion says. “The only person he’ll listen to. You want to know what you stand to gain from marrying him? You stand to gain an ally that terrifies Daenerys Targaryen. This is what I could not tell you before the others, and what I could not tell you in front of her. If you were to marry Jon, he would do exactly as you asked of him.”

Sansa leans back in her seat, brow raised, thinking hard. “That’s an awful lot of power to be placing in the hands of a girl the dragon queen is ready to dub an enemy of the people.”

“With the true heir to the Iron Throne as your husband, people might be tempted to overlook a great deal of the things the queen says about you,” Tyrion says carefully. “You’d have a fully grown dragon to protect the North. And you’d have a husband I imagine you’d prefer a great deal more to the other two you had.”
“You speak as though war is inevitable,” Sansa says.

Tyrion squirms uncomfortably in his seat. “As I said, the queen is restless.”

“But Jon has already made up his mind to defend Winterfell should a war arise,” Sansa says. “This is why you are so frightened?”

“Yes.”

“Then it appears,” Sansa says, as she leans forward and rests her arms on the table. “As though I don’t need Jon to be my husband to secure his protection. That dragon will fight for the North if I ask him to regardless. Which means that this marriage will do nothing but harm House Stark, and further the Targaryen line at the expense of my family’s birthright. Which brings us right back to the very beginning, and begs my original question: why do I need Jon’s hand?”

“Men will come for your hand eventually,” Tyrion says quickly. “Wouldn’t you rather the devil you know to the devil you don’t?”

Sansa leans back now. He has her there. While she can happily rule House Stark single as the day she was born, she cannot hold it like this for long. Eventually, suitors are going to get antsy. What will she do then? Jon would be as good a suitor as any—if he weren’t Aegon Targaryen.

“I don’t suppose it’s worth negotiating a change in Jon’s name,” Sansa says.

“That would defeat the purpose entirely,” Tyrion says with what sounds like real regret. “On this one point the queen will not negotiate.”

Sansa nods. “But she’d negotiate everything else.”

“Between you and myself,” Tyrion says. “She herself was given very little room. It’s a thorn in her side to be watching Jon annul their marriage to be with you. You’ve been a chasm between them these last two years.”

“I’m racked with guilt,” Sansa says flatly. “Whatever will I do with myself? Poor Daenerys Targaryen—marrying a half willing man only to lose him to the girl she threatened. Oh, it’s all Sansa Stark’s fault. The wolf bitch—she’s to blame for every awful thing that’s ever happened in the world ever.”

Tyrion smirks. “Careful, love. That smacks of Cersei.”

Sansa snorts in a manner most unladylike. “Sometimes I think she got the best bargain. Dead in the ground is the best way to live.”

“Sometimes I cannot help but agree with you.”

“So Daenerys has no room to negotiate because Jon insists upon me. And she won’t exercise her right as queen to force him to marry someone she’d prefer because…what? She’s too in love with him to refuse him his heart’s desire?”

“Well, I don’t doubt that she loves him,” Tyrion says. “In her own way. But…”

“But?”

Tyrion sighs. “Have you been made familiar with the details regarding the night Jon walked into the fire?”
“Ser Davos was most enlightening.”

“None of us understood what had happened that night. He had burned—he and the dragon both. When they came back to life together, we didn’t know what to make of it. Daenerys, Varys, and myself sealed ourselves away in the council chamber at Dragonstone with Kinvara. The conversation was…enlightening.”

“What did she tell Daenerys?” Sansa asks.

“The secret behind how Jon returned, both times,” Tyrion says. “She went on a spiel about how the red god had chosen Jon to be his champion, about how he was born to rule, to conquer, to fly, to burn, to freeze. The way she went on made Jon out to be some sort of god destined for greatness.”

“I’d bet Daenerys loved hearing that.”

“It went over about as well as you’d imagine. Kinvara wasn’t done yet. She warned Daenerys that Jon was best left to his own devices. She might have fancied his own devices would have taken him north, to Winterfell, to you. But Daenerys was remiss to let him go home, especially not after Kinvara explained that Jon had done everything he was born to do except conquer, until that night.”

Sansa’s eyes flickered over to the fire roaring in the hearth. “Rule, fly, burn, freeze. Conquer. But…what did he conquer that night?”

Tyrion takes a long swig of his glass and lowers it gently to the table. “Death,” he says. “The night the flame consumed the dragon and him along with it, Jon made death bend the knee. It’s why she’s afraid of him, why she holds onto him, why she has allowed him to press his suit for your hand.”

Sansa gets to her feet. “And you would have me hold the reigns on whatever it is that he’s become. You’ve dangled the possibility of a war before me, but you already know that if I marry Jon there will be no war. Winterfell will belong to House Targaryen, since its lady will be a Targaryen. No war, no danger of extinction for the dragons, nothing at all except a trainer for the untrainable northern dragon named Jon Snow. Do I have the right of it?”

Tyrion sighs as Sansa crosses her arms. “In a nutshell, I suppose.”

Sansa laughs and it’s a cruel and cold sound. “Jon’s no interest in harming the North. The North has no interest in the South. I’m not pushing my family to extinction so Daenerys Targaryen can put the North into her pocket and leash Jon in one swoop. I believe we’ve nothing left to discuss.”

When she looks out the window, the moon is a small, ominous looking thing in the distance. 

Jon made death bend the knee.
The man who made death bend the knee isn’t often seen around the Red Keep. Somedays he flies high above the turrets and towers, looking down at the mundane men with their mundane lives. What a bunch of beautiful fools, they are. Everything beyond the world is only hearsay to them, only rumors. The heavens. The hells. Only stories they hear from their septons, tales to keep them in line.

It has been many years since Jon’s had faith in anything.

When he isn’t on dragonback, he’s in his chambers, seated by the balcony where the sea breeze can find him. Once or twice a maid has come around to change his bedsheets or lay a plate of food at his table, only to run shrieking in terror upon noticing that his eyes have gone white. He’s in the dragon sometimes, though more often or not, he’s in the wolf. The wolf he left at Winterfell, where his beating heart resides.

His clever, beautiful girl. Everything he never even knew he dreamed of. Jon feels easier now. He worries less. He doesn’t have to think as hard. Things that ought to be a burden feel light as a dried feather. There’s only one thing that keeps him awake these days. One thing that makes him uneasy.

Oh, sweet Sansa. Only the gods could tell you how I have loved you.

He remembers everything.

Oh, how easy it is for her to think the worst. How can she not? His burdens made him such a fool.

He cannot trace the beginning of it. He cannot even recall the exact moment he realized it. One day he awoke and knew it, and it was as if he’d known it his entire life.

My name is Jon.

The sky is blue.

It snows in the winter.

Sansa is everything.

It was as simple and stupid as that.

He smarts from her coldness. He hadn’t known she could be so cold. But he cannot bring himself to regret the beginning of the end. Wasn’t it necessary? Didn’t they know it was impossible to defeat an army of things deader than himself without copious amounts of dragonfire?

No. That she understood. She had said it herself. She had also said what truly hurt her.

You didn’t tell me you were abandoning your crown.

He wants to say that he had been certain she’d be worthy of it. But truly, he had been afraid. He’d been impure then, a weak man carrying a weak man’s burdens. Only weak men lust after their sisters, and especially weak men lust after their sisters when there are beautiful, accessible queens in the vicinity who are not their sisters.

It was easy to care for the she-dragon. She was beautiful, and willful, and not his sister. Perhaps the weaker Jon that he was imagined it’d be easy to lock his love away where it wouldn’t hurt
anyone, and find some joy somewhere it wouldn’t hurt anyone. He cared for his dragon queen.

Seeing them together for the first time, his ladies of red and white, was like a memory from a dream. They collided as well as he imagined they could. He didn’t want them together. But she had come to trust him too much, his red wolf, and a weaker Jon couldn’t bear to have her rely on him, have faith in him, when he was detaching himself from having to depend on her. So he pulled himself further out of love for her, and further into love with the other.

It was no simple task. And the worst of it was when Samwell Tarly cornered him in the crypts and told him it was all for nothing.

He still laughs at the sheer irony of the situation. To avoid dishonoring his sister, he fled into the arms of another, only to learn that his sister was his cousin and his lover was his aunt. Exactly the stupid sort of twist of fate that would happen to an absolute idiot like Jon Snow.

And what does an idiot like Jon Snow do? He talks. Because Jon Snow cared too much about things that didn’t matter. Opinions and honor and chivalry and all of the stupid things that men hide behind when they’re too afraid to take what they want, when they don’t want to admit they’re the reason for their own misery. He rode south to honor his word, and maybe that’s the only thing he’s still proud of. Because riding south gave him the fire, and the fire washed him clean.

If he closes his eyes, he can still feel the burn.

He doesn’t speak of the day he walked through the fire. It’s led many to think it taboo, but the truth of the matter is he scarcely recalls what it might have been that called him to it. Might be it was the dragon. Might be it was the wolf. Might be he’d mistaken the flames for Sansa’s hair and meant to bury himself in it.

Wandering among ruined pillars of blistering flames, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d been in the darkness before. There had been nothing there then. There wasn’t nothing now.

_I’ve been waiting for you, Jon Snow._ Death seemed to say.

_Not today_, he said back.

He isn’t sure why it worked, only that it did. That he came back for a girl kissed by fire.

Jon Snow was a fool who cared too much about all of the wrong things. He would not be that fool again.

“Sansa,” he said as soon as he could speak. And he didn’t care who heard.

“Your sister will rule as the warden of the North,” Daenerys said to him, cheeks pink and eyes hard from her silent rage. He had called out the name of another. It would not be the first time. “We will continue our march south to King’s Landing to overthrow Cersei Lannister.”

“You may march south, and send my men back home when you’re done,” he told her. “I am going to Winterfell.” And Winterfell was where he knew he had to be. He had to mend the rift, had to fix the mess he’d made, had to assure his red wolf that all and any who tried to take her place in his heart would fail.

_Won’t you forgive me, Sansa? Won’t you keep me?_

“You will remain by my side,” Daenerys said. “You will fulfill your promise and aid me in reclaiming my throne. You will rule beside me as my husband and prince. This you have already
And distantly, he recalled that he did. But that had been a fool’s promise, and he was beyond such fickle things as oaths of honor now.

“To what end?” he asks. “You’re barren as a pile of rocks. You said so yourself.”

“And it was you who suggested that I might not be,” she said. “We may yet have a child. And while this is certain, you will remain by my side.”

Jon had a good mind to tell her to jump off the cliff, but just by those cliffs were a pair of big scaly beasts who could possibly eat him. And while he wasn’t particularly afraid to die a third time, he wondered exactly how he would manage to do so at the dragon queen’s hands without getting his red wolf killed. She’d come to avenge him. He knows this. Hate him though she now might, he knows she’d do it for him. How would she play this game? How would she work from within the boundaries of the table to achieve her heart’s desire?

Death was never too far from him, but if it came knocking again, he'd tell it to fuck off. He had time. He had time to play the game, to ensure he'd never have to play it again.

“If I marry you,” he said. “You must never return to the North again.”

“The North is my—”

“Never again,” he hissed through gritted teeth, and for the first time since he rose, he saw fear in her eyes. “I will ride with you, and I will ride you, and you’ll keep your gaze southward. You’ll leave them all be. You’ll leave her be.”

“She has not yet sworn her fealty.”

“And she never will. You have my own. Leave her.”

Perhaps that was the only gift he’d ever be able to give her, the gift of peace and solitude. But the dragon queen was barren—she’d told him so herself—and while a foolish version on Jon Snow had wanted to believe that maybe that had been a lie, a less foolish version knew better.

You have to be smarter than Father. You have to be smarter than Robb.

If she knew what he’d been thinking, his perfect red wolf, she’d have been proud. He’d have her joy and her pride and maybe even her love, instead of her hatred and her anger and her scorn.

What would become of the new world Daenerys Targaryen dreamed to build when she was dead and gone from it? Who would come forward to lead on when she could lead no longer? Children? Aye, hopefully many. But none she could bear. When Jon said his vows to her, he knew that so long as she lived, she’d never give him a single living thing. A nail in the coffin that housed her legacy was the opportunity he took to prove it was true not just to her, but to the entire world that was waiting and watching them.

Some weeks later, he noticed Rhaegal seemed to favor him. He had not known it would be so when they awoke together in the ashes. And yet when he understood it at last, he was not surprised. It was as though the twin forces of fate and destiny were apologizing for all that he had endured until that point. As if they were trying to make amends. He was long past believing in anything, but he accepted whatever gifts the world gave him.

For a while, he played with the idea of killing his queen. But that would push him onto the throne,
and he had no patience for the mundane needs of mundane men. Another avenue needed to be explored.

For a while, he imagined he could have ridden North to his wolf. But the dragon queen would come after him. And he would not bring a dragon dance to her gates, not when war is so difficult to control, not when she could yet be used against him.

How did she—his perfect girl—with no dragons and no magic and no claims of destiny—manage to build herself up so high? However she did it, he needed to follow her example. He needed to play her game. So he stayed where he was. He had time. He had all the time in the world. Stupid things like death were not going to rob him of his song.

It was an ugly dance they shared, Jon and the dragon queen. She wanted admiration, adulation, worship. He had none to give her. He left it with the ashes in the pyre. He closed his eyes and pretended that hers were blue instead of lavender, hair red instead of silver. Fur instead of scales. Freezing instead of scorching. And he wanted her, his red wolf. Oh, how he wanted her.

“You think of her when you crawl into my bed,” Daenerys accused him as though he’d feel some remorse. As if it would make him abashed. But she spoke to a shade of Jon Snow that is no longer living, and it has been a long while since he has cared for things like shame. “Do you mean to make me jealous? To incite my passion? To use my fire?”

“Fire? Nay, I only mean to use your flesh,” he’d reply.

“I am the queen, and I am your queen,” she’d say through gritted teeth. “If you mean to stoke my jealousy—"

“Keep your jealousy, my pet,” he’d say. “I’ve little use for it.”

“I am not to be used for naught but pleasure,” she’d spit.

But he’s used her. Used her, riled her up, stoked the flames, and laughed when she spun out of control so he could spin with her, only to wind her up again. What hasn’t he done, what hasn’t he said, to taint her with his misery? To punish her for what she’s taken from him? For what she still takes? what has he not done to soothe the ache and fill the whole his red wolf left behind?

Day after day, they pushed and pulled each other, always prodding for a new bout to fuel the hatred building between them. There was always a new fight to be fought, always a new angle to fight it.

“You call her name out like a prayer,” she’d say furiously, fists clenched and color high. “As if she is your Rhaenys and I only Visenya.”

Jon would chuckle, feet up on the table, slicing lazily into a blood orange. “You mustn’t be so drastic, my dear wife,” he’d tell her, relishing in her torment as she had surely relished in his. “I much prefer to think of you as the Elia to her Lyanna.”

And she’d shriek, and he’d laugh until she threw something heavy at him, and then he’d yell with her, and they’d clear a room of occupants in moments when they really began to scream. Their blood ran too hot, the fire burned too bright, and they’d be screaming and screaming until they wore each other down, until the kindling had died out and there was nothing left to burn. Until it was only ashes around them. He’d carry her to the nearest surface, and they’d make love until they were breathless and boneless, and then he’d whisper the wrong name, and they’d be screaming at each other all over again.

Four times she lorded false triumph over him. She’d been so proud, so vindictive, so smug.
I have you now, she seemed to say, hand over a belly that he knew was emptier than his wedding vow to her. Your gaze will never turn northward again. I have you.

He didn’t care. He knew—he knew—he had nothing to fear. And if there seemed to be something to fear, moon tea was easy to slip into someone.

It hadn’t been necessary in the end. He had been right, and he had succeeded. He had shown the world that their savior queen was barren, that she had no legacy, that the world she meant to build had no successor to keep it running. The empire she so desperately sought to build would crumble around her. He doesn’t have it in him anymore to feel things like remorse.

He had crippled his red wolf’s enemy. He had served her, as good lovers do. He had played the long game. And at last, he could have his prize.

If there was one thing he wanted less than a child with Daenerys Targaryen, it was to rule. But he wanted his queen—needed his queen. What could give her to him, but the promise of a throne?

He had been dreading it from the moment he said his vows, but he knew it was a necessary inevitability. A contingency. In case Daenerys decided the north was worth visiting again. His clever girl would be so proud of how much he thought it through. Because she did think to go north again, and he knew he’d rather never see his red wolf again than bring that shadow to her doorstep once more.

It had not occurred to him until he saw her again what his carefully executed plan had done. That it had cost him two years he could have spent with her, two years she spent instead believing another had won him. He had not accounted for that. But he had been so sure she’d understand—that she, of all people, could see the importance of the long game. It would have been difficult for her to see without some help—any raven he sent would have been read—but surely she had not lost all faith in him? Surely she hadn’t imagined that he’d simply walked over her and skipped off into the sunset with someone else, not even daring to write home to see how she was managing an entire kingdom on her own?

It hadn’t occurred to him that she had until he saw her again, through the high flying eyes of his dragon as she rode into the city, that she might indeed have lost all faith in him. That she might indeed have believed the worst. That he had forsaken her, betrayed her. That he had never loved her.

Lunacy. Even as the foolish oaf he’d been before, even drowning in his desire to be what everyone swore he’d never be, even cloaked in the fear and worry of stupid things like hope and honor as he’d been, he could never stop himself from looking upon her with anything but love.

He’d have her, of this he is certain. He’s played his game with no throne in mind, no crown, no titles. Only her. He’ll have her. Hatred and all. He’ll take everything that comes with her. Her anger and her raging and her storms and her silence. He’ll take it all, and she’ll be beside him—whether she wants to be or not.

He’ll have her even if she screams ‘no’ from the highest turrets in the city. If she carves it into his skin, if she paints it onto the walls with his blood. He’ll have her.

Perhaps this is the ugliest truth of all.

Jon Snow has been a dead man twice before, and he is not interested in dying again before he gets to live.
To bring her back to her earlier conclusion: all in all, it's been a shitty turn of events. And considering how the last few years have been for her, Sansa thinks this is a real achievement.

Having said this, Sansa is confident in a happy turnout for herself. While she has no reason to marry Jon and keep House Targaryen alive, she most certainly won’t do it. And while House Targaryen needs her to because Jon insists on being difficult (and it is Jon who is being difficult no matter what Daenerys says) she has all of the bargaining power. Something will have to give eventually.

She knows this to be a correct assessment when she is invited to dine with the queen and her council the following evening. She takes her dear sweet time getting ready, and arrives in Stark silver. Jon’s is the first face she sees when she walks into the chamber, and she hates this and is grateful for it in equal measure.

Jon hands her into her seat and sinks into the one beside her. His hand does not release hers. She doesn’t know what to do about that. Daenerys glares at their intertwined hands very pointedly, and Sansa decides against reminding Daenerys that it’s not her job to keep the queen comfortable.


“Aegon,” Daenerys says warningly.

Jon ignores her. “The North will go free. You will be its queen.”

“Aegon, enough.”

“I will go with you to Winterfell as your prince consort.”

“Aegon, stop!”

“My name is Jon,” he whispers threateningly. He turns back to Sansa. “Do you find these terms agreeable?” he asks her gently.

Sansa leans back in her seat, perplexed. The North goes free. She marries Jon. Prince Consort. Targaryen. Dragons? Wolves?

What?

Half Targaryen children ruling over Winterfell? Not a terrible thing. But who’s name will they have? Herein lies the problem.

“Only Starks can rule over Winterfell,” Sansa says, and Daenerys shakes her head.

“Your children will not be Starks,” Daenerys says. “They will be Targaryens.”

“Then we have no deal.”

“Then you will not be permitted to marry any other,” Daenerys says. “If there will be no Targaryens to inherit the Iron Throne, then there will also be no Starks to inherit Winterfell.”

This woman is awfully small for someone so massively annoying. And it makes Sansa wonder—if she really has no reason to accept this shit offer, and it’s clearly not going to get any better, why the
Fuck is she even indulging this?

She gets to her feet, her chair scraping the floor harshly as she does. “I’m going home,” she says. “My people need me and my family needs me.”

“The queen did not mean that,” Tyrion begins.

“Yes, I did,” Daenerys hisses. “I’m not bartering my birthright and risking my family’s extinction to trade barbs with a northern lapdog.”

“I leave with her, then,” Jon says firmly, and this is where the yelling begins. Sansa quits the room before she can catch the worst of it, hurrying back to her chambers and packing her things. Overhead, she can hear the dragons screeching.

The door to her chambers opens and closes with a painful echoing ‘thud’, and Sansa knows without knowing that it’s him. Of course it’s him. She doesn’t know why she ever for a moment thought she mightn’t have to face him alone, why she ever thought she could avoid it.

“Sansa—”

“You’re not coming with me,” she says flatly over her shoulder as she pulls at the belt around her waist. “She’ll just come after you and I never want to see her anywhere near Winterfell again.”

“She won’t come after me,” his voice is reassuring, and she hates it. Hates it like she hates him.

“She will. She’ll always come chasing after you. She would take everything from me—even my womb—and use it to her advantage without even thinking it theft. I’m not doing it. I am not giving her a claim to Winterfell.”

“She’ll not be polluting the halls of Winterfell.”

“You cannot promise that.”

All she hears is a rush of air behind her, and then his arms are like rope around her, holding her to him. He’s so warm, and so steady, that she almost forgets how much she hates him and remembers instead how much she’s missed him.

“I promise you that,” he says. “She will never darken our doorstep again,” and his grip grows tighter, as if he is afraid she’ll run away from him. “Marry me, Sansa.”

“You know I cannot.”

“Tell me why. Tell me what can be done.”

“You cannot give me what I need.”

“Ask it of me, and it shall be yours. Winterfell? The North? I’ll light this wretched city up myself and leave her to rule the ashes. We’ll have the snows together. Stark sons? I only kept this name because it gave you and I a chance. I’ll shed it by morning.”

“She’ll never have it.”

“And what makes you think I care what she’ll have or not have?”

“If she loses you, she’ll start a war. If she won’t peacefully relinquish the north, she’ll start a war. Another Dance of Dragons? I want my people to be free, but I also want them to be safe. We have
to give her something, or we’ll never be rid of her.”

There is a stretch of silence where all Sansa can hear is their shallow breathing. Finally, Jon’s grip loosens and she hesitantly turns around in his arms. He’s looking at her with eyes half adoring and half ungodly and she doesn’t know which one is which when it’s coming from him.

“My love,” he whispers reverently as he leans forward and breathes in the scent of her hair. “My love, my love.”

“Stop,” she says firmly, pressing her hands to his chest to push him away. He doesn’t step back, so she does, and his hands fly over hers to keep them where they are. One is right over his heart, and she doesn’t know why she expected to feel a steady beat, or why she’s surprised that she does not. “You’ve changed, Jon.”


Except when you were not,” she says, scratching at that old, delicate wound and letting the blood flow anew. Because this has always been the problem, hasn’t it? That he was not hers when she needed him to be the most. No, when she needed him to be hers, he was someone else’s, and the thousand injuries borne since the day Ned Stark breathed his last were nothing compared to this.

“A fool with too many burdens chose to do what was easy,” Jon says bitterly, hands grasping hers tighter as his gaze bores into her flesh. “But I left that fool to die. I’ve been stripped, you see. Stripped of all of my armor, all of my cares, all of my reservations. What remains of me now—what endures—this is yours to keep. Won’t you keep me, Sansa?”

She sees fire dancing in his eyes, slow and flickering like embers in a grate. His gaze low, his skin hot. His breathing steady and rhythmic, like a wingbeat—

“You left me behind,” she says. “You left.”

“And I fought,” he says. “I fought my way back to you.”

“When?” she asks. “When you married her? You knew it was being considered before you even left Winterfell—”

“A fool with too many burdens,” Jon shrugs this off. His nonchalance infuriates her. “I left him to burn.”

She doesn’t know why she hasn’t done it already, but for the second time since she arrived, she lets her hand come down on his face. Before he can recover, she hurries to the door and into the hallway.

She hates him and hates him. There is no forgiveness. No dead to be buried. She did not burn this bridge. She will not rebuild it.

Where is she going? She hasn’t a single clue. All she knows is that it is too hot here. There are too many people, there isn’t enough snow, and she can’t bury her dead and the past is too far away and the walls she’d built to keep herself in check are tumbling down around her. She swore she’d never lose her head, but if there was ever a place to lose it of course it would be here. Here, where once upon a time, she almost lost herself.

“My Sansa,” Jon’s voice is a whisper riding the breeze, and his fingers are laced through hers. She turns the corner, and they’re standing in the garden. The new moon has left them at the mercy of the torches. She doesn’t trust those, either.
“You don’t get to ask for me,” she says. “You don’t even care what it did to me when you left me behind.”


Slap.

She could do this all night. “I put my faith in you—do you know how long it’s been since I could do that? With anyone? I put it in you. I gave you my claim and made you a king, and you skipped off to Dragonstone and crawled into bed with a stranger—and had that been the end of it I’d have held my silence. But you gave her more than yourself, Jon. You gave her your crown—the crown I gave to you. You gave her the castle, you gave her the kingdom—my castle, and my kingdom. You gave her everything that was mine, and you dangled it in my face, and I’d kill you if you would simply do me the honor of staying dead.”

“I didn’t give her everything,” Jon says. His eyes are like dying embers in a sea of charcoal. “I didn’t give her my heart. I left that in Winterfell with you.”

Sansa blinks at him. “I’m swooning,” she deadpans.

Jon chuckles darkly. “You take some joy in this, don’t you?” he asks. “It gives you solace to think you’ve wounded me. It’s how you feel safe. And I don’t fault you for it. It might please you to know that these last two years have been as miserable for me as I imagine they’ve been for you.”

“That’s an awfully cold comfort,” she says.

Jon shrugs. “It’s warmer than dying.”

“Will you kill me if I continue to refuse you?”

“My love,” Jon says, almost coos, as he runs his fingers through her hair. His eyes never leave hers as he lifts a strand to his lips. “It’d turn your blood to ice to know the things I’d do for you. But never to you. I’d never hurt you.”

Sansa pulls her hair from his fingers and glares at him. “You’ve done worse things to me already. Death would have been kinder than forcing me to call that woman my queen.”

Jon stares at her. “Have I completely poisoned you against me, my darling? Do you hate me very much?”

Yes.

No.

Maybe.

“You’ve not made anything easy. You never do. It’s a small comfort to see something of you still lingering in there, even if it’s only stupidity.”

Jon laughs. “Give me your snipes,” he says. “And your rage. Give me your hatred and your storms. Give me your hand, and I’ll take all the rest.”

“You couldn’t handle all the rest.”

“Try me,” Jon says. “I’m sick of these games and I’m sick of these people. I’m ready to toss you onto Rhaegal and fly you off somewhere no one can take you from me. You’ll be like those
princesses in the story—trapped in a tower, guarded by a dragon.”

“Jon, I am ready to dunk your face into a pond,” Sansa says irately. “I am not the dragon queen. Don’t antagonize me. You’re not carrying me off anywhere until you’ve fixed this fucking mess.”

“So I will be carrying you off, then?” Jon asks.

Sansa pinches her nose so she has something to do with her hands besides punch him. “I’m this close, Jon,” she says, lifting her hand so he can see the space between her fingers. “This close.”

“I meant what I said in there. Marry me, and the North will go free.”

“She disagrees.”

“Does it look like anyone cares what she thinks?”

“She may not matter to you, Jon, but she still has a dragon. I don’t want my home to burn. And I don’t want Winterfell or the North to be the battleground in another Dance of Dragons.”

“So many worries,” Jon says, lifting his hand to cup her cheek. “So many burdens. I wish I could have taken you into that fire with me. It would have washed you clean, too.”

“More likely it would have just burned me,” Sansa says, pushing his hand away. His fingers lace through hers, refusing to let go. “I’m not risking it. It’d be easier to refuse and go home now.”

“Aye, it would,” Jon says. “You can return home and keep simmering in your anger—or maybe not now that you know the truth. It could be something new for you to dwell on, to stew in during the quiet hours of the day when you’re alone.”

“What truth?” she asks, sick to her stomach of looking at him and wishing she could run fast enough to fly like one of those stupid dragons.

“This one,” Jon says, stepping close enough that their breaths are drawn together. “You are the air that I breathe and the blood in my veins. You’re every shard left of my soul, every reason, every explanation, every question, and every answer. I’m no poet, Sansa. But I’m a fighter. And I have fought my way back to you. Try and push me away. Just try,” and he presses her hand firmly into his chest, to feel the heartbeat that feels like a wingbeat that isn’t there anymore. “Won’t you have me, Sansa?”

She tries to breathe in something that isn’t him so she can think, but he won’t let her go. His gaze is too hot, too intense, too honest and too Jon but also too not Jon.

“Where was this love,” she asks quietly. “When you betrayed me?”

“Tucked away where I couldn’t act on it,” Jon says. “Locked away with all of my other shameful secrets. The lock melted in the fire. I’d have come back to you, darling, I would have—but I could not then. Not right away. I needed to be sure we’d have our time in the sun without dragonfire coming to tear it all away from us. I did not lose you to dead things. I will not lose you to dragons.”

“You had one of your own,” Sansa says, proud of the chink she’s found in his defense. “Why didn’t you come home then, if you loved me so?”

“I didn’t know I had him yet,” Jon says, and she hates how quickly he answered. “My plan was the same with or without him. She had told me she was barren before I met the pyre. But she would not leave me be, and she would not leave you be.”
“And you married her anyways.”

“Aye, I married her. I knew Tormund stood a better chance at marrying your big sworn shield than Daenerys did of giving me a babe, so I waited her out. I wouldn’t stay with her if she looked North, and she wouldn’t look North so long as I stayed with her. There is no one who can say that I did not do my duties as her husband. I made sure the whole world knew it. You hold all of the power here.”

“I believe you hold that distinction, Prince Aegon,” Sansa says harshly.

Jon shakes his head. “I played the game,” he says. “For as long as I had to play it. I will not take another step without you.”

Sansa moves away from him now, clutching fistfuls of her hair and breathing deeply of the night air. She leans against a pillar, sliding down until she’s seated upon the floor. It’s too much. She needs to think. She needs to stop and lock herself in a room and think without any words or wingbeats or Jon or any fucking ambushes—

“Marry me, Sansa,” Jon says, kneeling before her. “And I’ll spend every moment we’re together mending that coward’s mistakes.”

“It can’t all have been hellish,” Sansa says. “You must have enjoyed some of it.”

“I did,” Jon says. “I enjoyed making her scream. In anger or ecstasy, I found my amusements wherever I could.”

“You loved her once. Could you really be so cruel to her? That coward loved the queen you walked all over to be standing here now.”

“If that is true,” Jon says. “Then his love would not have burned away in the flame. So stop torturing yourself about it. Marry me.”

“I cannot.”

“You can,” he says. “No one can stop you from taking me for your own. And no one will stop me from being with you.”

“She might—”

“Not. A. Soul,” he says, and his eyes are blazing now, roaring and wild and alive and Jon, what have you become?

She doesn’t forgive him. Not even close. It’s too soon and the wound is too fresh and it’s been two years and he did all of this with the blind hope that…what? She’d just fall into his arms after learning of his heroic sacrifice? What a horrible fate he’s endured, married to a powerful queen and ruling seven kingdoms. How awful life must have been for him, being so powerful that courtiers are terrified to challenge him here in this court where everyone used to challenge her, and laying with a gorgeous woman every night. It must have been such a trial for him, the poor thing.

“What do you want to hear from me, sweet girl?” Jon asks, holding out his hands. “Do you want to hear that I cared for her? Do you want to hear that I was cruel, and hard, and foolish? Tell me what you want to hear. Tell me what will sway you.”

“Nothing can sway me,” Sansa says. “I’ll not bring war to the steps of Winterfell.”
“War will not reach Winterfell if you are with me,” Jon says. “I will protect it, and I will protect you.”

“If I am with you?” Sansa repeats, her hands beginning to shake as she stares at him in disbelief.

“Marry me, Sansa, and I will protect Winterfell for you.”

Sansa feels the acid burning in her veins where blood used to be. “You absolute bastard,” she hisses. “You filthy, sanctimonious bastard—what will you do if I refuse? Will you keep me here and leave Winterfell to burn?”

“I brought this empire down around her so we could be together,” Jon says. “You love me—I know you do—and you already know I love you. What else is there?”


“Arya’s not there, is she?” Jon asks with a smile that she wants to slap off. “And if you think for a moment that Bran has not been watching us every second—that he is not at this moment making his plans to leave the castle—you are the one who needs to be smarter.”

Sansa shakes her head, burying her face in her arms. It’s as Davos said, and then some. The Jon who cared—the stupid Jon, she’ll own, but the one who thought of things like strongholds and homes and Winterfell—burned on the shores of Dragonstone.

*Be clever, Sansa. Fight every battle. Everything you’ve seen is something you’ve already seen before. Everyone can be maneuvered. What do you fight for? Whatever it is, whatever it may demand of you, fight for it.*

“You absolute bastard,” she says.

Jon shrugs. “I was ready to do worse. You and I are owed a happily ever after. And I intend to collect.”

“Do you think I’d let you near me if you had done worse? Whatever worse even means?”

“I do not ever intend to displease you, my love,” he assures her. “But there are very few things I would not do to keep you by my side.”

“How can you live with yourself with such thoughts in your mind?”

Jon laughs. “Living, my darling, is the only thing you and I have not done yet. Come. Let me show you something.”

And he gently lifts her to her feet, taking her by the hand. She can’t tell if his hands are cold or warm. Whichever it is, they are excessively so. The garden paths look so familiar at night, but for a moment it feels like an evening walk along the ramparts of Winterfell. For only a moment, it seems like everything is fine.

“I know this place,” she says, because she does. The old, winding tree, the silence so thick it feels like a cloak. Once upon a time, it made her feel safe. The Godswood of the Red Keep has always been a pitiful thing, but she took whatever comfort it gave her when she needed it. There was so little comfort to be found here. “I came here often as a prisoner.”

“I know. I’d come here when I was truly missing you, knelt there where you knelt, tried to knock the ice from my bones so I could keep playing.”
Sansa’s brows knit together. “Suppose for a moment, Jon, that I actually believed all of this. That you married her, became her prince, took up that name—all so we could one day be together. Did it not occur to you that maybe I’d have liked to know all of this? To know it was a ruse?”

“Aye, it dawned on me. A week ago, when you arrived. I’d prepared myself then for distance, coldness, even. I was not ready for anger.”

“You’ve never seen me angry,” she assures him, pulling her hand loose from his grip. “If you really meant to come for me this entire time, why stay with her so long? Why four suspicions of pregnancy? Why did it have to drag out?”

“Why else?” Jon asks, shrugging. “If there’s anything I’ve learned about the South, it’s that nothing is more important than a good show. You learned that long before I did, didn’t you? All those years you spent cooped up here, fooling everyone into thinking you were a shallow little fool. I’ve seen it, you know. She showed me. Kinvara. I’ve seen it in the flames.”

Sansa takes a step away from him. His eyes glimmer in the distant torchlight. He smiles, and it’s *wolfish*.

“I’m a stupid little girl, with stupid dreams, who never learns,” he echoes.

Sansa takes another step back. “What have you become?”

Jon takes a step towards her. “When you had Baelish killed,” he says. “You had all of the evidence you needed. You had all of the lords of the North and the Vale beside you. You’d already beaten him. He would have been killed by any hand. And yet you put on the farce of a trial. You let him think he was about to witness another step in his plan carried out. You piled the evidence on him. Why? If you already knew him guilty, and the lords already knew him guilty, why did you not simply have him dragged out of his chambers and thrown into the kennel like you did Ramsay?”

Sansa blinks. She hasn’t thought of Petyr’s death in a while.

His life, plenty of times.

His words, every moment.

“I…he needed to be lured into safety. It was the only way he’d come—if he thought he was going to win.”

“I hear you, my darling,” Jon says. “But you could have simply had him arrested. Dragged him out of his bed and killed him. Presented your information in the morning to any who doubted it and carried on. Why didn’t you? Why did he need to see a trial? Why did you need the show?”

“I couldn’t kill him without a trial!” Sansa says, now absolutely certain that Jon’s brains melted in the fires of Dragonstone. She had doubted it before, but now she is sure. “The whole of the North would have doubted my motives! If I was going to beat him, I needed to be sure I blocked every avenue he could have to posit a different argument!”

Jon’s eyes flash triumphantly, and Sansa feels as though she’s been clubbed upside the head. What about anything she just said has given him the impression that he’s won some battle?

“So the evidence was already there,” he says. “And you already had him pinned. You put on the trial so he would stay down?”

“I—yes. But what does this have to—”
“Did you ever wonder how Theon lost his name?” Jon asks. “You ever wonder how Ramsay took it from him?”

“He hurt him,” Sansa says.

“But did you ever wonder how? Theon, the git we all knew and lov—well, sort of liked—pretentious prick so proud of the name he bore like it wasn’t a symbol of failure and fish. Theon Greyjoy. But when we met him again, he wasn’t half so pretentious anymore, was he? Which begs the question—what did Ramsay do?”

Sansa closes her eyes and turns her head away. She doesn’t know what Ramsay did to Theon. All she knows is what he did to her, and it fills in enough gaps that she’s never wanted to know the answer. “Stop it,” she says.

“If he’d stopped after the first few days he had Theon on the rack, he’d have ended whatever thoughts of rebellion lingered in Theon’s mind. But he kept going. He kept cutting, and tearing, and peeling. Ramsay never stopped. Because Ramsay understood.”

She glares at him. His face hasn’t changed. “What could Ramsay have understood?” she asks hatefully.

“If he cut Theon once, he’d heal. He’d get back up eventually, and he’d keep fighting. Cut a man twice, and he’ll heal. The only way to win is to keep cutting. Block every avenue. That’s how they stay down. I knew what I wanted—you and I, side by side in all of the days we have left in this shit world—and I knew that once we have our time, I never want to turn my head this way or that again. If I wanted Daenerys Targaryen out of the formula, I needed to hit her hard enough that she’d never get back up. I needed her to stay down.”

Sansa’s eyes feel warm and watery, but the tears won’t come. She only stares at him, only finally beginning to believe what he is. A dragon? A wolf? Inhuman? Maybe none. More likely, however, that he is all three.

“It took time,” Jon says, stepping forward. He reaches for her cheek, runs his thumb along her jaw. “It took so long, and I wanted you. You’ll never know how I wanted you. But I wanted our peace, and I was ready to earn it. You’ll never know how I wanted you. But I wanted our peace, and I was ready to earn it. So I stayed. She closed half the doors on herself without my help, so inept and unprepared was she to rule these kingdoms. So stubborn and proud, so eager to prove she could do it all herself. I suppose a foolish version of myself was guilty of the same in a past life. I’ve only just learned that I’m still guilty of the same. But I did it, my sweetling. And I did it for you. She’ll never be able to bother you again. I’ll never apologize for the things I did to get us here. But I will”—and he kisses her hands. “I will apologize for what I didn’t do.”

“What are you—” Sansa tries to take a step back as he shifts, but he clutches her hands tighter.

“My red wolf,” he says. “I am sorry I didn’t listen to you about Ramsay. I’m sorry I didn’t hand you the crown as soon as it fell into my lap. I’m sorry I didn’t consult you before I gave the North away. I’m sorry I didn’t heed your counsel, or dwell on your concerns. And I am sorry that I left you alone with your anger. You are the only thing left in the world that has not already been ripped from me.” He rises slowly, and his eyes are flickering as they bore into hers. “And I would have us live, Sansa. Quietly, untouched, away from all of this. Together. Away from her, away from them, away from castles and crowns and thrones. Do you remember how you found me when you rode through the gates of Castle Black? I was ready to leave then. And I am ready to leave now. But I mean to take you with me.”

Sansa tries to blink away the wetness in her eyes. She cannot stop staring at him. “Where will you
“Where will we go, my love,” he corrects gently. “Where won’t we go? Where in the world do you want to go that you think I will not take you? What do you want, that you think I will not give you? You and I were always meant to reach this place. We were always meant to end up here.”

Sansa pulls her hands away. Her thoughts are moving too quickly, and her heart is pounding even quicker, and she doesn’t know how to process everything she’s just heard and she needs time. Why is there so little of it here? Why doesn’t she get a few days between ambushes to pull herself together? Why must she always be steel braced for the onslaught?

“I need you to leave me alone right now,” she says. “I need to think.”

And she does. It’s too dark outside and it’s the wrong type of cold and Jon is too close, looking at her with eyes too intense, and have they always been this violet?

“I’ll take you back to your chambers,” he says, and he laces his fingers through her own. His hand is familiar and strange all at once. She does not mean to lean against him, but he holds her too closely.

“I need to be left alone for a while,” she says. “While I consider the future.”

“If time is what you need, time is what you shall have. No one will disturb you.”

“Not even the queen?”

“Especially not the queen.”

She expects him to release her at her door, but she doesn’t know why she did. He walks her inside and sits her down at the edge of her bed. He kneels before her and catches her hands, kissing each one, his eyes never leaving her face.

“I love you,” he says. “Do you hear me, my love? I love you and I am not moving forward without you.”

“Will you force me, then?” she asks. “Will you drag me away to Dragonstone and lock me away? A princess in a tower guarded by a dragon?”

Jon snorts. “Please. I can smell it on you.”

“Smell what?”

Jon smiles. “Love.”

Sansa turns her head away. “Love is poison,” she says, wondering how much he has seen in the flames.

“A sweet poison,” he replies, and she knows that he has seen everything. “If I will one day die anyways, I mean—for once—to die happy.”

“If House Stark falls, I will never be yours.”

“I will protect it,” Jon says. “So long as I have you.”

Sansa pulls her hands from his grip and wraps her arms around herself. “I need to be alone. Will you leave me now, Jon?”
Jon leans forward and presses his lips to hers in such an *unholy* way. She shivers at the current that passes between them. It jolts her, and she starts. “Sleep well, my heart,” he says quietly, and she closes her eyes until she hears the click of the door shutting behind him.
musings

At the very least, it can be said that Jon has kept this one promise. Save for the maid who comes and goes to tend to the room and bring her meals, Sansa remains completely undisturbed. Even the dragons seem quieter. If all she had to do to be left alone with her thoughts was tell Jon, she wishes she’d done it sooner.

Of course, this one small kindness is not going to sway her one way or another. Because really—what is she to be taken for?

So now Sansa’s finally gotten her hands on some uninterrupted peace and quiet, she can finally do what she’s secretly been hoping to do since the first day she arrived: she sits down in her chair by the balcony, puts her head in her hands, and whispers ‘what the fuck is going on around here?’

It’s a delicate process.

He said he was sorry. Many times. For many things. But aren’t those just more words? And she knows better than anyone the value of words. Jon’s made her promises in the past. He’s kept a precious few of them, yes, but what are a few honored promises in the face of what she’s had to lose by trusting him?

She digs into the fruit bowl anxiously, pulling out a pear and biting into it. She’s heard it said since she arrived that he has had her in his head for a good long while, but only now does she actually get the chance to properly think on it. Perhaps some dark, ugly part of her takes solace in knowing that she didn’t stray from his thoughts, that she—for how easily it seemed she could be brushed aside—sat between the dragon queen and her prince like a festering infection, poisoning the both of them against each other.

She had not wished them happiness when first she saw that marriage announcement.

She polishes off the pear and gets to work on a fig. Wasn’t this everything she thought she once wanted? Jon and her home? Her family, safe and intact and undisturbed at Winterfell? He offers it to her now, as he offered himself in the garden earlier. She could have it all. The only price has been spelled out for her, clear as daylight or the crisp air of a winter morning.

Won’t you keep me, Sansa?

But isn’t that also something she’s wanted? Jon—her unfathomably stupid, devastatingly handsome, infuriatingly narrow-minded dingus of a prince?

Won’t you keep me, Sansa?

Really.

She has to hand it to him, though—for a complete dingbat, he really thought this through. Well, she imagines he thought through all of the other stupid things he’s done in the past as well, but this stupid thing was done with a little more subtlety. He may have made no secret of his disdain for his dragon queen—he may have, in fact, found amusement in tormenting her and making a spectacle of their disaster of a marriage—but Sansa can’t deny the sheer genius in his staying with her. Two years is a long time to go without children. It will be immensely difficult for her to make a marriage alliance to retain any allies now. Who would be willing to ally with her, knowing that there will be no children to cement this alliance? He’s ruined her, the bastard.
It’s a rare stroke of genius for Jon—with special emphasis upon the word *rare*.

It also caused Sansa no small amount of heartache over the last two years—hence the special emphasis to also be placed upon the term *idiot*.

She tosses the fig over her shoulder and tucks into the cherries. Could she bring herself to marry him? Possibly. As Tyrion said, she stands to gain an ally that terrifies Daenerys Targaryen, which is not a prospect she’s willing to turn her nose up at. But to avoid a war, she’d simply have to take him with his miserable name—which brings her back to the root of the problem.

An intact, independent North, the survival of House Stark—these are things she wants more than she could *ever* want Jon. These are things she’s wanted since she was a stupid little girl, with stupid dreams, who never learns. These are things she’s ready to sacrifice *anything* for.

To gain Jon would mean to quell the fury in her heart. A love to heal instead of hurt. Everything she once wanted but was so certain she’d never have.

But to gain him would be to lose the war she’s been fighting since she watched her father’s head leave his shoulders. And while losing Jon to Daenerys Targaryen broke her heart, losing the war to free the North would be enough to kill her.

*I said Jon wouldn’t let you burn.* Ser Davos’ voice, warm and low, echoes in her mind. *Does that extend to the rest of Winterfell? I couldn’t say.*

*War will not reach Winterfell if you are with me. I will protect it, and I will protect you.*

Spitting out the last of the cherry pits, she begins her assault on the pomegranate. A quick, cold part of Sansa’s mind thinks it would be wise to remove herself to Winterfell post haste. If Jon is truly so hellbent on protecting her, then her presence within the castle will ensure that it survives. But then what’s to stop Jon and Daenerys from clashing all over the rest of the North? Wishful thinking would have her function under the assumption that Jon is still somewhat sentimental towards their homeland. But Sansa has never gotten anywhere through wishful thinking. The best thing she can do, at this moment, is assume that all of the information she has been given has not been exaggerated.

Jon is different now.

He wants her.

Only her.

He would let Winterfell burn.

He would not let a spark touch her.

So how is she to protect her family and her home from the selfish whims of two half-mad dragons?

She closes her eyes. *Once you know what a man wants, you know how to manipulate him.*

What does Daenerys want?

The simple answer is *everything*.

The more complicated answer is *everything*.

The realistic answer is *heirs to that ugly old chair.*
Ergo: Daenerys really needs the girl she’s been losing her husband to for the last two years to succeed where she fails by popping out some little dragons to keep the name alive.

What does Jon want?

\textit{Won’t you keep me, Sansa?}

\textit{Her.}

Giving herself to Jon means that there will be no purpose to having fought so hard, so long, for home. There will be no independence. There will be no freedom. There will be no Starks. But there will be Jon.

Unfair trade. She’s not handing over a kingdom for a romp with a dragon. She is not an unfathomably stupid, devastatingly handsome, infuriatingly narrow-minded dingus of a prince. But she is, it appears, a stupid bitch who’s eaten too much fruit. She lies down over her bed sheets quickly before her belly hurts as much as her head.

She won’t have him unless the North goes free.

If she has him, the North will never truly be free.

The simple solution really, would be to just go home.

He’ll come after her. And his queen will come after him.

And war will come to Winterfell, one way or another.

Alternative solution: she marries him. Perhaps tries to argue for a child to bear her name so it can live on. A Stark son for the North, and a Targaryen son for the Iron Throne. Brothers. And the North is governed by a half-breed dragon.

Alternative solution: she finds some wildfire and blows up the entire Red Keep. Fire may not kill a dragon, but Sansa imagines some falling rocks might do the trick nicely.

Alternative solution: Sansa goes to sleep.

This one, at least, seems immediately doable.

She has it. She’d like to say that it’s come to her in a dream, but it didn’t. It hit her in the quiet sighs of the early morning, when she was unceremoniously awakened by the screech of a dragon. So not that quiet, really, but it hits her, and now that it’s in her head she can’t shake it loose.

Is it an answer? Possibly. It’s far less complicated. It’s likely to satisfy all involved parties. Most importantly her.

But it comes at a cost she never once dreamed she’d have to pay. What a transaction it will be.

\textit{What do you fight for? Whatever it is, whatever it may demand of you, fight for it.}

An intact, independent North, the survival of House Stark—these are things she wants more than she could ever want Jon. These are things she’s wanted since she was a stupid little girl, with stupid dreams, who never learns. These are things she’s ready to sacrifice \textit{anything} for.
What is worth the price is always worth the fight.

When next her maid enters the chamber, she is ready.

“Summon Prince Aegon,” she instructs her. “I would have words with him before I meet the queen.”

The maid tips her head and departs.

Jon does not keep her waiting long. He slips into the room like a shadow, and she feels him there before she sees him.

“I’ve crafted a solution that might please all parties,” Sansa says. “I’ll be in need of your aid.”

“I am yours to command,” Jon says, and his eyes on her are an unholy thing that makes her shiver. She holds out her hand, and he’s crossed the room in three quick strides before she can blink and takes it in his own. His grip is warm, and she can hear it in the distance. Wingbeat.

Jon’s grip on her hand tightens, and she clutches his back.

“I would hear you say it,” she says. “Tell me you are mine.”

“I am yours,” he says so quickly that she has scarce drawn a breath before he’s pulled her closer. “I am yours, Queen Sansa. Not hers. Not theirs. Not even mine. Yours.”

Sansa looks up at his face, watches the shadows dance across his skin, remembers every scar, every line, every eyelash. She nods, and the brush of his lips against hers is a soft, fragile thing. He presses forward, and she breaks away quickly, leaving him panting.

“I will never forgive you, Jon,” she says. “But to save you from this place, I will give you a second chance.” She grips his chin tightly to keep his face trained on hers. She had hoped it would secure his attention, but she already has it. *There will not be a third.* She says this slowly and clearly. He cannot misunderstand.

Jon’s kiss on her hand feels sacred. His eyes never leave hers.

“I am returning home,” she says. “Before I leave, I am to have words with the queen. You will be in attendance, and we will be wed if she accepts my every term. Only then, and not a moment before.”

Jon grins, and it’s blacker than the night. “As my queen commands.”
It’s such a maze of a plan. Well, not quite a maze, but it’s a list. She doesn’t want to stop and think on how she’s going to pull herself through it, but she has to. She absolutely has to.

It doesn’t seem so terrible, and yet it does.

Jon is in what she imagines to be a good mood—she can only pick up the subtle notes of happiness he gives her, and she relishes in the fact that he can still feel things like joy. It gives her some hope that Jon has always still been in there, in the body of this dragon prince. Which means she can still, to some extent, make him pay for all that he’s put her through.

Eager to have this entire negotiation sorted so that he may claim his bride at long last, Jon wastes no time in informing his queen of a final meeting. He arrives to collect her from her chambers in the earliest hour of the evening, taking her arm and lacing it through his own as he walks her through the halls. His thumb traces over a long, thin scar on her forearm. Davos meets them at the end of the hall and joins the escort.

They arrive in the dining hall to find that a harpist is hard at work. Daenerys sits nearest to the instrument, watching the harpist’s fingers pluck and pull at the strings. The melody is one that Sansa can only vaguely recognize. It sounds Essosi.

“Welcome, Lady Sansa,” Tyrion says from his seat nearest the table, goblet unsurprisingly full of wine.

Sansa gives him a wry smile, eyes clocking Varys by the balcony. Kinvara is nearest the torches at the wall. She’s leaning her weight against the wall, arms crossed. Her smirk is more irritating than Jon’s heady triumph. Part of Sansa wishes they’d all just stop breathing, but perhaps Kinvara may be allowed to live.

The word lapdog is still echoing in Sansa’s ears, so she has little appetite to be joining them in partaking in the dinner spread. She had told Jon so before they arrived, and true to the form he’s kept since she arrived in this city, he obliged her. Daenerys turns to face them both slowly, her eyes hardening once more upon their joined arms.

“I have considered the future carefully,” Sansa says. She unlaces her arm from Jon’s, ignoring his slight grunt in disapproval. “The future of Houses Stark and Targaryen both. The North and the South both. And I’ve come to the conclusion that it would be best for the continent if I accept Jon as my husband.”

Tyrion appears the most visibly relieved, reaching immediately for his wineglass and taking a long, celebratory swig. Varys straightens himself up admirably. Daenerys’ hands are still gripping the armrests of her chair, cheeks pink. Sansa cannot understand how it is possible for a person to be both stony and smug.

“A wise decision,” she says in a tone that is so self-assured that Sansa almost spits at her.

“On the condition that the North go free,” Sansa finishes.

“Absolutely not,” Daenerys says.

Sansa nods, stepping forward and taking a seat. “The Northern kingdom has declared that it stands independent of the Iron Throne. The lords and ladies of the North stand behind the House of Stark,
as they have for eight thousand years, and denounce the House of Targaryen and the blood of Aegon the Usurper. A three hundred year old robbery has been put to right. They know no queen but the queen in the North, whose name is Stark.”

Daenerys almost smiles. “Sansa Stark, I find you guilty of treason against your rightful Queen.”

“And I find you guilty of being a sad, broken relic of a bygone legacy. A legacy that will—if you don’t comply—die with you. At the rate your people are turning against you, I’d imagine that will happen very soon. I will not marry Jon if the North does not go free. My house will survive you, as it has survived every other who has dared to rise against it. You are not within your rights even as a queen to forbid me from marrying another—and it’s no matter if you do manage to prevent my marriage. Even bastardy has not stopped the Northern lords from keeping to their own.”

The low bark that tears through the room makes everyone jump. Everyone but Kinvara, who watches Jon reverently. Sansa can’t take her eyes off of him. His eyes are burning indigo, flashing like wildfire, and thin wisps of smoke are protruding from his snarling lips. Sansa cannot tell if he is a dragon or a wolf.

“She is mine,” Jon growls.

“Peace, Jon,” Sansa says. “I mean only to make certain the dragon queen is aware of the nature of her situation. And mine, for it is much better than her own,” and Sansa turns back to face the queen now. “Perhaps my House may die, but so will yours. I have loved ones and loyal vassals, and you have only a nephew who hates you and calls another woman’s name out in your bed.”

Even the harpist looks sorry to hear that, but Sansa doesn’t regret saying it. Daenerys gets to her feet so quickly the chair knocks over and crashes behind her. Sansa decides the time is ripe for a little verbal lashing.

“I grew up on stories about your family, you know,” Sansa says. “The romantic, watered down versions, of course. Not the real ones. I’ve noticed, however, a common trend among the tales.” Sansa pours herself a glass of wine and takes a sip. “Madness. It seems unavoidable. You boast about your Valyrian blood as though it were some great achievement, simply being born. But Valyria was wiped from the face of the earth for a reason, I like to imagine. All the dragons in the world couldn’t stop it—in fact, they burned with it. And going over the tales of your family’s reign in Westeros over the years has made me wonder if perhaps the gods were trying to pick off the survivors of the Doom.”

“Targaryens are difficult to kill.”

“And yet there are only two left in the world. Right here in this palace.”

“There aren’t very many Starks left in the world, either.”

Sansa smiles. “Understand me now, Daenerys Targaryen, when I tell you that not a single soul in the known world cares less about your family than I do. I’d be perfectly happy to watch all memory of it burn in the fire you’re so obsessed with. I stand to lose nothing by refusing Jon’s suit. Your family faces extinction. Is the survival of your bloodline not more important than your pride?”

Daenerys does that stupid annoying thing where her face becomes marble, barely concealing her rage. For a moment Sansa thinks it won’t work, it’s done, she’s pushed too far. but if war is coming for her regardless, then she may as well speak her mind.
“You’ve been a thorn in my side from the moment we met,” Daenerys says. “Always jealous of me, telling Tyrion about Aegon, plotting behind my back like a snake—you were always planning to get here. Your years with Cersei built you into a monstrous, power hungry thing who thinks she can waltz into the keep and make her outrageous demands, taking away all that is not even yours to take—and you dare to accuse me of being the proud one?”

Sansa can hear crickets chirping as the entire room simply stares at Daenerys. “If I can make a single correction to that entire statement,” Sansa says. “It would be to point out that I didn’t plot behind your back, I plotted right in front of you.”

Daenerys screeches now, and Sansa barely has a moment to blink before she is advancing on her. Before she can take a step closer, Jon’s hand is clutching Daenerys’ arm.

“Say yes,” Jon hisses through gritted teeth, eyes so black it seems that even the light from the torches has diminished. Varys sinks into a seat. Tyrion lowers his glass. Kinvara steps forward, eyes focused on Jon.

“Ae—”

“You have six kingdoms, or you have none,” Jon says. “Give it to her, or I take it all.”

Sansa’s eyes widen for a split second as she looks at him. No. No. No. No. Absolutely not. No part of her plan accounts for Jon taking all seven kingdoms. She absolutely cannot become the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms.

“You don’t even want the throne,” Daenerys says to him. Their glares are electric.

"Then I'll raze it all," Jon says. "From here to the Neck—I'll burn it all to the ground. You can be the queen of the ashes. Say yes."

If the most predictable thing about life is its unpredictability, then the most dependable thing about power is Daenerys Targaryen’s resolve to cling to it. Any of it. Even a broken part of it. The dragon queen’s eyes find Jon’s and she looks so tired, so small, and so utterly overpowered that Sansa wonders how she ever could have looked at her once and thought she might be great.

“Your children will bear my name,” she says firmly, eyes narrowed and daring Sansa to contradict her. “Only my name. Redesign your banner to accommodate the wolves and the dragons, if need be. It matters little to me. House Stark lives on through the survival of House Targaryen.”

Sansa nods curtly. “My children will bear your name,” she says. “My second condition: tell me now that I am the Queen in the North, a free and independent kingdom,” Sansa says. “That from this day until the end of days, you have no business there, no power there, no birthright there, and I will wed Jon and provide the heir to the Iron Throne.”

Daenerys’ nostrils flare and her eyes flash. A dragon shrieks furiously beyond.

“Say it,” Jon says. “Say it now.”

Daenerys inhales slowly, as if steeling herself just to endure the abject misery of acknowledging another woman with some semblance of power.

What a life she must have lived, Sansa thinks, to so greedily want it all for herself. What a life she’s lived to make her think none but herself worthy of it.

“Say it!” Jon barks, and the dragon’s shriek echoes again.
“Sansa of House Stark,” Daenerys says. “It will be known to all that you are the queen of a free and independent North, the rightful heir to Winterfell, and the queen of the First Men. From this day until the end of days, the sons and daughters of the blood of Stark shall govern Winterfell uninterrupted by the Iron Throne.”

Sansa studies her for a moment longer. Daenerys’ entire face appears to be turning puce. She takes a deep breath, and her coloring returns to normal.

“Are you satisfied with this agreement, Your Grace?” Tyrion asks, and the entire room seems to swallow its shock at the fact that he’s speaking to Sansa. But he is, isn’t he? She’s a queen now.

Of course, Daenerys’s careful wording accounts for Jon and Sansa’s half Targaryen children holding some claim to Winterfell so long as one of those children doesn’t happen to sit on the Iron Throne. And really, Sansa can’t believe that anyone honestly thinks she missed that. Her shrewdest master was a businessman. She knows how to read fine print.

Would that Daenerys Targaryen had such a teacher. She might have really been something.

“I am satisfied,” Sansa says. “My next condition: ravens must be sent out first thing in the morning bearing this news all over the kingdoms. All seven of them. All over the continent.”

Tyrion almost nods, but then quickly remembers himself and looks to Daenerys. She nods stonily. “Very well.”

“My final condition is that I return to Winterfell and inform my lords and ladies of this turn of events in person.”

“You must stay in King’s Landing to marry Aegon,” Daenerys says, still on her feet.

“Queen’s first duty is to her people,” Sansa says, and Daenerys snarls. “I must return North. They cannot be allowed to learn of this from anyone else.”

“They will read it when the raven reaches them. You will remain here until the wedding. Then you and Aegon may return to Winterfell together.”

“I recall Jon allowing the lords to learn of a shift in leadership by raven once upon a time,” Sansa says almost wistfully. “And you witnessed the reception that led to. Was he right to do such a thing? Consider the manner of governance that cost your family its crown. I leave in the morning. Jon will remain here with you.”

As she turns to leave, she catches Jon’s eye, and he looks unpleasantly surprised to hear this. She ignores him as best she can as she quits the dining chamber and goes into the hallway.

She cannot believe that it worked. Well, she supposes she can, since what other option was there, really? But still. It’s the sort of excitement she gets every time something actually works out in her favor, born of a lifetime of having virtually nothing go in her favor.

That’s the first part down. And ironically, she had imagined it would be the hardest part. Could the gods be trying to make amends for all the misery they’ve inflicted upon her in the past? Could this be their way of showing her that they are in fact real?

Jon is not too far behind her, and she can practically smell the frustration coming off of him in waves. He is silent halfway through until he decides he’s had enough and grips her arm, turning her to face him. She looks up and down the hallway. The nearest guard stands several yards away.
“We must away to the Sept now,” Jon says. “The High Septon will meet us there.”

“Jon, now is not the time.”

“You said we’d be married if she agreed to your every condition, and she has.”

“I didn’t mean the moment after. I have to return to Winterfell and settle this with the lords. You must remain here as a gesture of good faith to the queen so she doesn’t come breathing fire into the snows.”

“I’m not leaving your side.”

“I will return to you very soon, Jon,” Sansa says. “We will be married and we’ll have it all. Peace. Happiness. Everything you wanted.”

“Everything we wanted,” Jon says. “I am going back to Winterfell with you,” he says.

“You cannot be there with me when I tell the lords of this. It would be best if you minded your distance from Winterfell for a long while.”

“But then…how will we be together?” Jon asks, brows knitting together. “Will you keep me in Riverrun and come see me when it pleases you? Am I to be shunted aside like a paramour?” With every word, his voice deepens, until he is growling into the space between them.

“As you shunted me aside?” Sansa asks instinctively. She pulls away, and he follows instantly, like a reflex, reaches for her hands or her arms or something to keep her near. “I dare say a year or two on the receiving end of that might be good for you.”

“Sansa,” he says, and something soft in his voice sounds an awful lot like pleading. “Please don’t leave me. I’ve waited two years to see your face—your perfect face, your beautiful face. I can’t do this again.”

And it’s the way he says it that makes her wonder at the entire business of dragons and politics and thrones.

“Compose yourself,” she says, and the speed with which he does leaves her reeling. “I have it all worked out. I trust you can see to it that the queen honors her word?”

Jon nods slowly. “The ravens will leave for every castle and keep in Westeros at first light.”

“And I will speak with you when next we meet,” she says. When she steps back, he does not release her hand. Instead, his grip tightens. She sighs. “Jon. Release me.”

“You are not leaving me behind.”

“Do you want to be with me?”

“You know I do.”

“Then let me go. I will arrange this for us. The North goes free, you and I are wed, and we all live happily ever after. More or less. Let me go now.”

“How do I know you’ll come back?” he asks.

Sansa glares at him. “I don’t recall myself being half so mistrustful of you the last time we spoke, and I had better reason to be than you do.”
“I did it for you,” he says so easily that she wonders how many times the words have danced in his thoughts.

“You left me for me. Yes, I remember,” she says. “You gave her the North as a wedding gift. I remember that, too. You’re the reason that I’m down here negotiating my body in exchange for my birthright. I think I’ll remember that most of all.”

“I never wanted the crown. I never wanted to be king.”

“Then you ought to have given it to me.”

“You’ve taken it back, though,” Jon says, something akin to pride on his face. “You’ve done it.”

“I had to do it myself,” Sansa reminds him. “For all that you demanded me to trust you, in the end, I had to do it all on my own. I’ve never needed you to get anywhere. And if you think that I’ll ever forget that, forget all that you’ve asked me to endure, all the indignity, all the sycophantic warbling, all the ranting and raving about rightful queens and destiny—if you think I’ll ever forget that you put me through that, you are dreaming.”

Jon’s eyes seem empty and blank, but she holds his glassy gaze anyways and flips their hands so that she is gripping him now, digging her nails into his forearm. He doesn’t flinch.

“You now have the chance to make yourself useful to me,” she says. “And you will serve your purpose. You will liberate the North from the Iron Throne, you will secure the power of House Stark, and I will be your wife. But as long as I live, I shall never forgive you.”

Jon leans closer. “But you’ll marry me?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll take whatever comes with it,” he says, and he slides his arm from her grip and kisses her. “I love you,” he says into her hair. “I’ll take your hate, if it’s all you give me. I’ll take your gales and your fury and your wrath. I’ll take whatever you give, so long as you’re the one giving it.”

She shudders, pulling away, but his grip is such a gentle thing for how much closer he pulls her. “What kind of life is that?” she wonders.

“The one we’ll have,” he says. “And one day, might be you’ll forgive me. And maybe one day I’ll be worthy of it. All I’ve wanted since I left home was the chance to earn it. And you.”

She hurries away, and his stare follows her back to her chambers.
Sansa’s second departure from King’s Landing isn’t—to her at least—much different than her first. She isn’t running for her life, no alarm bells are ringing behind her, and she isn’t looking over her shoulder. All the same, she still feels the same relief as she breathes in the warm air of the Crownlands.

The green dragon circles overhead. If she squints, she might be able to make out the inky black curls of its rider. He follows her for days, until the saltwater streams of the Crownlands give way to the crisp greenery of the Reach, and then he reluctantly turns back. She is grateful and upset by this in equal measure.

It’s such a mess of a situation. Such an ugly, annoying, hideous mess. But perhaps she knew, to some extent, that this would be the final outcome. Not when she first learned of the summons, but maybe even further back. Perhaps when she was clinging to the hand of Ser Dontos as he helped her into a rowboat. There is always a price to pay.

She had half a mind to take Jon with her, and once or twice she wishes she had. But until all is settled, he is more useful to her in King’s Landing. The dragon queen is the only creature she cannot control, and Jon has more influence over her. He can reign her in.

Part of Sansa wishes someone would just snap and kill the damn woman. She’s more trouble than she’s worth, and whatever else she might be worth doesn’t seem to be of much consequence. But to kill her would mean Jon must assume the throne next, and that—Sansa imagines—is the only fate she can suppose Jon would literally rather die than be stuck with.

In any case, Jon’s too unpredictable now to be allowed to assume power. But it has occurred to Sansa many times recently that this is why so many were so keen on the marital alliance in the first place. While Sansa has some semblance of control over Jon, he may yet be a reasonable king. He won’t like it at all, but if any of his declarations and speeches are anything to go by, he may yet be persuaded to do it. And judging by how adamant the council was—each taking their turns in trying to sway her in favor of the match—it seems to be generally understood that she is the one who can do the persuading.

Which gives Sansa no small amount of grief. Not over the fact that the dragon queen’s advisors might be staging a coup against her, but that she has to be roped into it. Really, Tyrion and Varys ought to have taken a closer look at the woman before bringing her to the shores of Westeros if they were just going to stab her in the back later. Which brings her back to her understood conclusion that men are narrow-minded idiots. Tyrion, she supposes, has always been guided more by his heart than his head—for all the he has boasted of being the cleverest Lannister. She wants to say Lord Varys is an exception to her cruel generalization, but he doesn’t even have the excuse of a cock to hide behind.

And yet his words still ring in her mind.

*What do you fight for? Whatever it is, whatever it may demand of you, fight for it.*


Petyr.

If they could see her now.
Arya is riding horseback when Sansa’s wheelhouse arrives at Riverrun, and she greets her without climbing off her saddled mare.

“Bran’s been sending word regularly,” Arya says. “He’s of the opinion you’ve reached an accord with the dragon. And a raven reached us a week ago announcing the separation of the North. I’m assuming you were successful.”

Sansa steps into the great hall and looks out the window at the water flowing by. How often during her youth had her mother done the same? How often had she sat here and watched the water flow, wondering where it went or how quickly it froze when the winter came? Where are those silver trout now?

“I’ve consented to marry him,” she says.

Arya sits opposite her, back straight. “Congratulations.”

“It’s no happy occasion. Though I’m pleased to say that the raven you received was true. The North will go free.”

“You’ve been named its queen.”

“I have.”

“That’s a victory for us, then. We get the North, Robb and Mother died for something rather than nothing, Jon gets to come home—”

“That bit, I’m afraid, is impossible,” Sansa says.

Arya pauses. “You don’t think the lords would hurt him, do you?”

“That depends upon how he is presented,” Sansa says, and Arya looks different now as she ponders this information. “Luckily for us, he doesn’t particularly care where he lives, so long as I’m there with him.”

“I told you he’s still Jon,” Arya says.

Sansa shakes her head. “But he isn’t,” she says. “You went down to King’s Landing a month after they married. You must have noticed how different he was.”

“He seemed a tad more sullen,” Arya says. “But he’d just fought two wars, one after another. We were all still reeling.”

“He’s changed,” Sansa says. “To the point that even Davos Seaworth can’t reason with him. They wanted me there because they can’t control him and meant to use me as a leash.”

“How did you weasel independence out of that?”

“With patience and persistence,” Sansa says. “And it helps that I pay attention to wording.”

“So Jon will claim the Iron throne?”

“It’s difficult to say,” Sansa says.

“But he’s not coming to live in Winterfell?”
“I’d prefer to keep him and his dragon away from the North.”

“Then where will he go? Here?”

“Dragonstone.”

“How will you manage that?”

“I’ll explain it on the way,” Sansa says. “I’ve sent ravens ahead of me summoning all of the lords to Winterfell. They should meet us there. Now where is my baby nephew? I’ve been away for too long.”

The Lords and Ladies of the North are a steadfast, stubborn, and irritating bunch, but at the very least, they are punctual. Sansa arrives to find that every single one of them has been settled for well over a week.

Sansa spends most of her time with the baby, as Arya is keen on riding horseback. It’s just as well, for Sansa has a lot of comfort to be seeking, and baby Robb seems eager to give and receive soft attention. It breaks her heart to look at him when she notices that his eyes are blue. Not Baratheon blue—with the streaks of Valyria—but Tully blue, like the rivers of the Trident. His hair is black as his father’s, but Sansa sees the Young Wolf has found his place in the baby’s swooping curls. She holds him close to her, burying her face in his skin. He smells of snow, and rivers, and soft promises. He is something the ugly world hasn’t touched yet, and she sometimes thinks that if she holds him tight enough she’ll be healed, shiny, new again.

Bran doesn’t look as though he’s been particularly active, but this is not exactly a new development. He isn’t remotely surprised to see her approaching him in the Godswood, and she is relieved to see that he doesn’t need the same detailed recount of everything that occurred in King’s Landing that Arya did.

“You’re going to Dragonstone,” he says.

“I am,” Sansa replies.

“You’re going to take care of Jon,” Bran says.

“I am.”

“I am glad,” Bran says. “He needs you.”

“It seems more than he wants me than needs me.”

“You’re mistaken,” Bran says. “Completely so.”

The crunch of boots on the snow announces Arya’s arrival. Little Robb is bundled in her arms, and she places him on Bran’s lap delicately before she takes a seat on the stone bench by the roots of the tree. “Have you told Bran of the plan? Oh, wait—he doesn’t need briefing. What do you think, Bran?”

But Bran’s eyes are on Little Robb, watching his cherubic little face as he gurgles and coos at nothing in particular. Bran pulls the furs tighter around him, nestling him gently in his arms. “I think it a sound plan.”
“Then we are in agreement?” Sansa asks. “We are the last of the Starks. I will not move forward unless it is unanimous.”

Bran is silent for a moment, but that he does not make his usual correction—that he does not give them his miserable reminder of three-eyed ravens—means the universe and everything beyond it to Sansa. His eyes never leave Little Robb as he nods slowly. “Until the sun rises in the West and sets in the East, I am with you.”

Sansa nods, and something in her stomach both loosens and tightens at the same time.

The Lords and Ladies are on their feet when she enters the Great Hall this afternoon. She took the first day back home to herself, to converse with Bran and plan with Arya and dote upon Little Robb. Lady Brienne is returned from her time at Casterly Rock, having apparently arrived during Sansa’s absence. Sansa recalls all too easily how Jaime Lannister had summoned her sworn shield to the Westerlands to aid him in ‘training brand new knights’, which Sansa loosely translated into ‘straining beds at night’ but chose not to say it aloud. But if anyone can be depended upon to willingly walk away from a face like Jaime Lannister’s so that she may spend her days in the North staring into the faces of ruddy, ugly lords in the name of duty, it is Brienne of Tarth. And Sansa will say this for the woman—she seems awfully happy to be back in service.

“It is quicker to travel when one is alone,” Brienne tells her. “I left Casterly Rock as soon as the raven reached us announcing you a queen. I imagined you’d be in need of my service.”

“It’s considerate of you,” Sansa says. “And I thank you. I’m glad that you’re here with me. But I am sorry to say that I will not be staying long in Winterfell.”

“So it is true, then? You are to marry your cousin?”

“I am,” Sansa says.

Brienne seems to be on the verge of asking a thousand questions, but she holds her tongue, and for this, Sansa is grateful. Arya enters the Hall and slips into a corner by the fire quietly. Gendry wheels Bran into the space beside Sansa, and the Lords and Ladies finally take their seats and fall silent.

What do you fight for?

“My Lords, my Ladies,” Sansa begins, on her feet before the crowd. Her furs are abandoned, tucked behind her on the chair. Her father’s chair. She wonders what he would say. “I have summoned you here today to celebrate a momentous occasion, and bear witness to a new era in the North. Eight thousand years ago, this kingdom was built by the blood of the First Men—your blood and mine—and has withstood through our dedication and loyalty the treasons of lions and false stags, krakens and flayed men. Burnings and sackings, turncoats and dead things. We have survived them all. And today, I am proud to announce that it has withstood the last and most formidable of its enemies—the wolf has conquered the dragon.”

The pounding of cups and fists onto tables nearly deafens her. She has half a mind to tell them to keep it down—Little Robb is in the chamber beyond, trying to nap in the arms of his nurse. A fresh pang of longing lumps in her throat, and she swallows it down.

Fight every battle. Fight every fight.

“This final victory has come to us through war, through sacrifice, through anguish, and through
diplomacy. My loyal lords and ladies,” her eyes linger over their faces. “You have served House Stark well. And now, I ask you this: am I your Queen in the North?”

The answer is louder than the screech of a dragon. Her heart swells and she closes her eyes to savor it. When the moment has stretched too long, she holds her hands up for silence.

“A queen protects her own,” she says. “And a wolf protects its pack. Know that wherever the winds may take me, wherever the Old Gods might bid me to go, I carry the North with me. Gendry Winter!”

Gendry rises to his feet. “My Queen?”

“It was in this very hall that you were granted the name of your natural father, Robert Baratheon—and lordship over the Stormlands. And it was in this very hall that you stood before me and mine—before every lord and lady in this chamber—and renounced your inheritance. Forsaking the name of Baratheon, you took up the name Winters that you might marry my beloved sister.”

“I did, my Queen.”

“When your son was brought into the world, you kept the name of Winters that he might take up the name of Stark.”

“I did, my Queen. And if it please you, I’d keep it that way. My son is a wolf, like his mother, like his aunt, like his uncle. Like—like me.”

“And will you remain here among us? Is Winterfell your home?”

“House Stark is my home, Your Grace,” he says, but his eyes are on Arya.

What do you fight for?

“My Lords, my Ladies,” Sansa turns back to face the crowd before her. “I understand many of you have heard whispers on the wind that it is my intention to bring a dragon to Winterfell.”

There are no words spoken in response, but the shift in the air is telling.

Sansa comes around the table now, walking among them slowly. “As a prisoner at the mercy of House Lannister, I was often mistaken for a bird. Trusted to sing whatever song I was asked to, whatever tune struck the fancy of my captors. My lessons were hard learned,” she says, and for a moment she is a small, fragile thing in silks and gold, braided hair and bruised cheeks, on her knees before an ugly old throne. “But I learned them in the end. I learned the value of freedom, the value of loyalty, the value of sacrifice. But in my journey, I never walked alone. The wolves have guided me home, and I stand before you today, giving my solemn vow to you, my countrymen, and to the Gods who listen, and to our dead who watch over us, I swear this: no dragon will ever hold dominion over the North again.”

Whatever it is, whatever it may demand of you, fight for it.

Sansa’s eyes are dry, and her heart feels light as a feather. Her eyes gloss over Brienne, Arya, Gendry, Bran. For a moment, just a moment, she can see her father smiling at her.

She has never walked alone.

She raises her hands for silence, and when it has been granted, she speaks.
“I abdicate.”
The black dragon is murderous, and the green one is fed up, and they screech over the city for days on end.

The scroll reached them only a week ago, with a copy sent along to what is suspected to be every single keep on the continent. It was burned to ash within moments—Daenerys had held it over the fire with her bare hand, until it was nothing more than dust on her fingers, and still she wanted to burn it more.

*Let it be known to all seven of these kingdoms of Westeros that Sansa of House Stark has abdicated the Northern throne to Robert of House Stark, Second of his Name, the New Wolf, King of the First Men.*

“She has placed the North in the hands of an infant not past his fourth moon,” Daenerys says as she paces the floor in the council chamber. Days later, it is wondered whether she has worn a hole in the ground. “An infant king.”

“The North will be governed by a regent council until the child is old enough to rule,” Varys notes.

“Who is in this regency?” Daenerys asks. “Lady Sansa, no doubt.”

“Lord Brandon Stark’s name is the most prominent,” Tyrion says, filling his glass to the brim. “Lady Arya. Lady Lyanna Mormont. And Samwell Tarly.”

“Gendry—I legitimized him!” Daenerys says. “I made him a Baratheon! That child belongs in the Stormlands!”

“Gendry renounced his name two years ago, Your Grace,” Varys says. “He has not been to the Stormlands for some time.”

Daenerys pauses. “Why was I not informed of this?”

“You were,” Varys says drily. “Your Grace was otherwise occupied.”

"Why the child, then? Why not her brother or sister?"

"Neither seem to be particularly interested in ruling," Kinvara says wistfully. "The cripple takes his whispers from old, three-eyed things. The girl has a husband that may be used against her. He has taken a new name, but he is not of their blood. The child's claim is stronger and harder to dispute."

Daenerys hisses at nothing in particular. “She’s up to something,” she says. “Can’t you hear the gears turning in her head from here? She’s always up to something.”

Jon observes quietly from his seat nearest the window. He chuckles darkly, and the queen’s sharp glare is directed at him.

“Something to share, Aegon?”

“Aye, my dear aunt, I’ve plenty to share. My keep on Dragonstone Island, my title as prince, the love in my tender heart.”

Daenerys snarls. “You knew she would do this.”
“You’re mistaken, I hadn’t a clue,” Jon says. “The only person in the known world who trusts me less than you do is my bride to be. But this is no game. She’s abdicated her throne to her nephew. House Stark remains in control of the North. She’s disavowed herself. When she rides south, she comes alone.”

Daenerys takes a seat again, eyes hard as they watch Jon. “I agreed to a match with the Lady of Winterfell to broker a peace agreement with the North. But this match does not give me the North.”

“Nothing gives you the North,” Jon says. “You gave it away.”

“She tricked me. She always meant to abdicate so that the children she gives you would have no claim to Winterfell.”

“She deceived you,” Tyrion says, hiccupping. A smile trickles onto his face and his eyes seem to gloss over as he recalls some fond old memory. “‘Tricked’ makes it sound like the two of you have a playful relationship.”

Daenerys glares at him. “Whichever one it is, she has not been honest in her agreement with me.”

“Where is her lie?” Jon asks. “What great deception have you endured at her hands? You forfeited the North in exchange for her hand.”

“And she forfeited it in turn!”

“The crown is hers to forfeit,” Jon says. “She is the queen.”

“Not anymore,” Daenerys says. “Now she is nothing. I agreed to this deal because it granted us a queen as your bride.”

“You agreed to this deal because you had no other option.”

“The deal is null,” Daenerys says through gritted teeth. “You will not marry a woman who comes with nothing.”

“You’ll take her as she comes, or I’ll tear this empire to the ground around you.”

“She is not even the Lady of Winterfell anymore!” Daenerys says. “She’s disinherited herself!”

“And still you’ll take her as she comes.”

Jon can hear her teeth grinding together. He puts his feet up on the table and bites into a pomegranate.

“What has she told you?” Daenerys asks. “What new treachery can I expect from her?”

“Again, sweet aunt?” Jon asks tauntingly. “I have already told you that she tells me nothing. No one in these seven kingdoms is less inclined to speak to me than she is. Even you do not boast that distinction.”


For someone so utterly marinated in wine and moving on such short legs, Tyrion Lannister runs awfully quick. Davos moves after him, holding the door open for Varys. The last one out is Kinvara, whom Daenerys has grown to hate more and more since the departure of sweet Sansa, and who has grown more and more brazenly antagonistic towards the queen in turn. The door is closed at last, and they are alone.
“If she is not the Lady of Winterfell nor the queen in the North, then she is utterly no one,” Daenerys says. “She comes with neither her title nor the benefit of her family.”

“You are certainly mistaken there,” Jon says. “If—upon her return—you were to upset her, I’m sure her family would march south to see your head mounted on a spike. It’ll make a very pretty trophy on the walls in Dragonstone. Perhaps above the throne?”

“Stop patronizing me,” Daenerys says. “This is not the way political alliances are made.”

“I had no idea you had become such a political expert,” Jon says. “I defer to your superior judgement, my dear.”

Daenerys glares at him. “She’s useless without the North.”

“You’re useless without your dragons, but you don’t see anyone else pointing that out. And no—she is not useless. She comes with her mind.”

“And what good will her mind do me?”

“Not for you, my sweet. You never did appreciate the subtle art of thinking. She’s a capable politician. She’s an expert negotiator, and what’s more—people like her. She’s an invaluable asset to the Red Keep.”

“I have advisors for these purposes.”

“Aye, you do. And even they prefer her.”

Daenerys’ glare, he imagines, has been fixed to her face for the better part of the last two years. And it’s likely to stay there until she dies. She collapses into her seat. “I cannot understand what her game is. She could have had all seven kingdoms. Instead she gives up the North to her nephew and settles for nothing? That cannot be it. There is something else here.”

Jon laughs now. Really, truly laughs. He’s sure it must seem that way to Daenerys. Power is such a precious thing to her. It makes it impossible to imagine how someone might walk away from it. To abandon titles and crowns, thrones and oaths. To abandon reverence. To abandon worship. To abandon all of the courtesies that propriety dictates. To a girl raised on the streets by a beggar king, it must be unthinkable. To a girl who has nothing but power, it must be unheard of. To a girl with dragons, it must be everything.

But Jon likes to imagine that he understands this little part of Sansa, his clever girl. Dragons are strong and powerful, and thrones are high and mighty, and titles are lofty and armies are immense and allegiances are a rush of triumph but there is a single power greater than any of those, and Jon and his clever wolf both have tasted it.

The greatest power of all is the power to let power go.
There is a feast seemingly every other day, sponsored by this lord or that lady, all in celebration, all in farewell. Sansa has never been particularly gifted with farewells, a truth that stuns even herself. Especially herself.

“You’ll come and visit often,” Arya says as though this is a given fact.

“Aye,” Sansa says. “As often as I am able.”

She wonders distantly how true this is. How much freedom will she have over her schedule now? Such a funny thing. Just days ago she was a queen, and now she is a nobody-soon-to-be-princess. What a world.

She has learned to maneuver. She has learned what she has and what she doesn’t. And a wise person always knows what they know and what they don’t. She isn’t too sure which of her teachers ever said that. They all look the same to her now. All morphed into one ugly being, an omnipresent shadow as sure as the midnight tide and the winter snows, spewing wisdom whenever she needs some.

It may be many years before she returns to Winterfell, so she savors every last moment she has within its walls. She walks through the glass gardens and sits by the Godswood, sews in her solar and watches the sunrise over the battlements. Little Robb gurgles and slobbers—as far from kingly as a soul could ever be—and she loves him, loves him, loves him. It fills all of the cracks in her heart, this love—fills them all and drowns her in its warmth until the nightmares seem to grow weak. The memories don’t seem as frightening.

She can see him already. Tall, bright eyed. Her mother’s stern gaze, her father’s wide smile. She can see the king he will grow to be, and it brings tears to her eyes over and over again.

Alone in the Godswood one night, she wonders how she might have done it differently. There was no other way, but a voice echoes in her head.

\textit{My crown or the North. I chose the North.}

She thinks on it over and over, turns the thoughts around in her head, and in a way she feels as if she understands it better now.

To be perfectly clear, he’s still an ass, and also to be clear, he had a thousand other options. And to be even clearer, he did a very different sort of abdication. But there are a thousand other things she’s going to have an awful lot of fun spending the rest of her life punishing him for, and those are easier to fling in his face during arguments.

The last night before she leaves, she finds herself unable to sleep. This is no new development, and she isn’t a stranger to pacing a room or reading until exhaustion overtakes her. But tonight is a different last night, and she remembers all too well the last time she left Winterfell to marry a southron prince. She turns over in bed and finds herself facing the open window. The moon is full and luminescent. There’s not a dragon in sight.

The next morning, she is riding out of Winterfell. Her brother in law and her sister and her sworn shield and the white wolf escort her southward. She has never been less afraid of the future in her life.
Jon is waiting at the border of the Crownlands, and this doesn’t surprise her in the slightest. Astride his horse, she can hear the distant wingbeat over the rolling hills. She doesn’t move her wooden shutter to greet him, and she doesn’t try to start a conversation. She’s a light as a feather right now—as light as she’s been since she was a little girl dreaming of a golden prince—and this is the last time she’ll ever be so light. She does not squander the opportunity by talking to Jon.

She wonders briefly if—in a truly hilarious twist of irony—Tyrion Lannister is the one who will walk her down the aisle. But that is shunted aside quickly. It’ll be Uncle Edmure. No questions asked. But having Tyrion give her away would be, if nothing else—something to laugh at.

Her peaceful ride is over all too quickly, and she finds herself back in the Red Keep before the sun is high in the sky. She is a little bird again, with no family to lean on, no home to return to. She is perhaps as worthless as she’s ever been—and somehow still the greatest.

Daenerys greets her in the throne room, and it is full of lords and ladies. Tyrion Lannister is on her right, his Hand pin gleaming in the light. Lord Varys is quietly tucked on the left. Ser Davos comes down the steps of the dais to stand nearer to her, and she is grateful for this.

Sansa would be a tad confused at this reception—such a far cry from the lackluster one she had received before—but she immediately knows what is happening. The dragon queen feels she has been cheated out of a kingdom, and she means to give the world a spectacle. It’s quite a thing—what some people will do to feel powerful.

“Welcome back to King’s Landing, Sansa,” she says. Not Lady Sansa, and not Lady Stark. Just Sansa. As if to remind her that she is no longer relevant. It doesn’t bother Sansa, and she tips her head respectfully.

“I am honored to be here, Your Grace,” she replies.

“Not honored enough to kneel in greeting, apparently,” Daenerys points out, her lips curling into a sneer.

“Not that honored,” Sansa agrees.

There is no silent reaction to this—it is shattered by a bark of laughter from Jon somewhere behind Sansa. A slight commotion near the door makes every head turn that way, and Ghost weaves around the guards. The lords and ladies part quickly as he moves across the marble floor and comes to stand beside Sansa.

“You’ve brought the wolf?” Daenerys notes, eyes locked on Ghost’s red ones. He does not blink as he takes her in.

“I am no lone wolf,” Sansa says as she reaches a hand out and strokes his fur. “I’ve still a pack.”

Daenerys’ eyes flit to Sansa, narrowing in that way they do when she’s holding back her rage. Sansa wonders when this will be over so she can go to her room and eat a lemon cake.

“We are…very pleased to have you here,” Daenerys finishes lamely, and Sansa takes this as her cue to leave. She tips her head again and walks out, Ghost still close enough to touch.

“Oh, it becomes so dreadfully hot here in the summers,” Sansa says to him as he sprawls himself
out onto the cool floor of her chambers. They are not the same as the ones she had occupied on her last visit. These are infinitely larger. Silkier curtains, a larger bed. She notes that all of the decorations are black and red. But what is a banner of direwolves to her now? What need has she of white and grey when a winter wolf is here beside her? “I’ll be sure that we set up a chamber closest to the sea for you at Dragonstone. You’ll love the breeze. And I’ll take you down to the shore every day, and you can run yourself ragged. And then you can curl up beside me every night and I’ll brush your coat.”

“Sounds delectable,” says a voice, and Sansa turns to the door and glares at Jon.

“I was talking to Ghost.”

Jon comes in anyways, and she purposely gives Ghost a kiss on the top of his head. She knows she has won when Ghost stares at Jon pointedly as she does this.

“We’ll be marrying tomorrow,” Jon says.

Sansa blinks. “What?”

“Tomorrow is our wedding day,” he tries again, only slower this time.

“I heard you,” she says. “But what on earth is the rush? I have other things to take care of.”

“Such as?”

“I’m not finished with my plan, Jon,” Sansa says frustratedly, getting to her feet. “Dammit, we’re not ready yet!”

“You’ve been toying with me, putting this off,” Jon says, an edge creeping into his voice.

“Get a hold of yourself,” Sansa says sharply. “There’s more than only you and I to consider right now. We have your mad aunt to contend with as well.”

“She’s not getting anywhere near you again,” Jon says. “I’ve made sure of it.”

“Yes, and now I need to make sure of it.”

She walks over to the bed and collapses onto the sheets. This is the part that she had been secretly dreading. Not for the permanent consequences—she’s made her peace with those—so much as the immediate ones. It’s going to be a mess.

A dip in the bed lets her know one of the two beasts has joined her. She lifts her head and swallows a gasp. Jon has planted his hands on either side of her, holding his weight up just inches above her face.

“What else is there?” he asks.

“Get off of me,” she says.

“What else needs to be done?”

“Jon—”

“Tell me, darling.”

Sansa sighs. “I’m going to purchase a supply of tansy.”
“Tansy. What’s tansy?”

“A plant that is most commonly used in moon tea.”

“Moon tea. As in…child prevention.”

“Yes.”

“As in…we’re not having children.”

“Precisely.”

Jon stares down at her, his curls loose and casting shadows across his face. He lowers himself further, until she can feel the heat of his breath on her cheeks. “When did you decide that?”

“I’ve been debating it for a good long while,” Sansa says. “All the way to Winterfell and back. And the more I think on it, the more sense it makes. The world doesn’t need any more Targaryens. Let this be the end of it.”

“And you?”

“What of me?”

"Where do you fit into all of this?"

"I've been married off twice for my womb," Sansa says. "I'm no friend to Daenerys Targaryen, but I envy her her infertility. No one can harm her or try to use her through children she does not have. I watched Cersei Lannister's entire life fall to pieces because her children were usable. No one will do that to me."

“Do you not want a family?”

“I have one already,” Sansa says. “Arya and Bran and Robb. And Mother and Father and Rickon and…and you.”

“Aye, you do have me,” Jon says, and he sinks lower to press a kiss sweet as summertime to her mouth. “You’ll always have me.”

“Even if I give you no children?”

“I’m not marrying you for the children we don’t have,” Jon says. “All I want is you.”

“And in two years time, when she decides that children will never come and comes demanding an annulment, what will you say to her?”

But Jon is barely letting her get the words out between his gentle, fervent kisses. She wants to pull him back by his curls, but it’s such a serene thing—the low hum rumbling in him as he dots kisses from one cheek to the other, along her hair and over her ears. He works his way softly down to the hollow of her throat, and that’s when she hears his answer. It comes out in a lazy, undaunted whisper—but as certain as he’s been since she saw him again.

“Dracarys.”
Sansa is keenly aware of the fact that if she speaks it aloud, then the decision might seem like a last act of rebellion, a vindictive way to get the last word against the queen. But Sansa has dreamed of being a mother for many of her earlier, happier years. She could not possibly throw such a dream away for such petty reasons.

This will be, she decides, her lone act of deceit. She wishes it were not so. But if the only thing she can achieve in this world is protecting the North, then she will follow this path wherever it leads her.

It would be a most dangerous thing, to mother a child from Jon. A child of a former Stark queen—however briefly she served—could have a claim to Winterfell regardless of who abdicated what. Trueborns and rules of succession never stopped the Blackfyres.

Additionally, she has not forgiven Jon. She cannot find it in her heart to bring his sons into the world when she knows she has yet to stem the flow of the wounds inflicted on her by their father.

And—perhaps most importantly—it is essential that no children be thrown into the mix of what she senses is coming next.

“Are you still with us, my Lady?” Tyrion asks.

She blinks and turns to look at him. Lord Varys stands nearest the window, but his eyes are ever calculating.

“A coup d’état?” Sansa says, brow raised. “Who—oh who—could have seen that coming?”

Tyrion smiles. “When I first met Daenerys Targaryen, I met a young woman who was riveting, radiant, confident. She had drive…she had purpose. I believed in that purpose, and in the way she refused to hide it. It was…she was extraordinary.”

“And what changed your mind?”

“The other side of the coin,” Tyrion replies. “She’s also reckless, impulsive, and highly destructive. She operates on a policy of ‘fire first, think later’ that has caused her more problems than she can solve. She burned more bridges—some quite literally—than she can comprehend, making enemies out of potential allies and sometimes not even knowing it until she is standing in front of a person she means to make a friend of and learning that she’s sent their loved one to the grave. She’s done it here in Westeros, and I’ve learned that she did it in Meereen. There is too much importance placed upon proper dues and respect being paid to her, but little paid by her. A job well done, in her mind, seems to be largely about whether or not she has an enemy kneeling before her. In Essos, that was exactly what it meant, but here we both know that kneeling is no guarantee of true loyalty. Simply put, my Lady—Daenerys Targaryen is a queen, but not a politician.” Tyrion gives her a small smile as he says this, and Sansa remembers a golden-tipped crossbow pointed resolutely at a young girl on her knees.

“So you have decided to kill her?”

“Would that it were that simple,” Tyrion says, and for just a moment, Sansa is actually confused.

*Everyone is your enemy, everyone is your friend. Every possible series of events is happening all at once.*
“You know nothing will tempt Jon to sit the throne.”

“Something might tempt him,” Tyrion says.

Sansa sits back in her seat, weighing her options. Honestly, there aren’t many. They’ve only just achieved some semblance of peace. She had hoped she might be able to enjoy some of it before the political landscape shifts again. But the South is in dire need of a higher quality of leadership. Someone who can offer solutions beyond the occasional self-important speech. If the South sinks into any further chaos, this could destabilize the entire continent.

Sansa would normally blow a raspberry at this, except the entire continent includes the kingdom she just sacrificed her queenship, her bachelorettehood, and her dream of motherhood for.

“We need to re-stimulate the economy,” she says. “That means no more loans from the Iron Bank. We need to replenish the soil in the Reach so this territory is no longer dependent upon the North. There’s so much to be done.”

“And you understand why—with our current leadership—taking such steps to prevent total state collapse will be impossible.”

“I was the first one to understand that,” Sansa reminds him. She sighs tiredly. “Alright. How will this happen?”

“The whispers of malcontent have been spreading all too quickly throughout the kingdoms,” Tyrion says. “Alorayne Martell has resurfaced in the Red Mountains. He’s rallying all of the Dornish lords to his cause.”

“Does he mean to press for the throne?”

“No, but he’s convincing the lords to rally behind Jon’s claim.”

“What good has Jon ever done him to inspire such a show of faith amongst the Dornish?”

“Well, Jon does boast the distinction of not having arrived on the shores of Westeros as an ally of the kinslayers who overthrew Alorayne’s house.”

Sansa can scarcely believe it is that easy. “You weren’t joking about her burning bridges.”

“Regrettably, we must confess that we also had a hand in securing these particular allies,” Lord Varys says.

“I’m not surprised,” Sansa nods. “Very well. That’s Dorne in our corner. What other lords has she accidentally upset? Surely a riverlander or two is lurking in the woodwork?”

Tyrion smiles, pouring out three glasses of wine. He pushes one towards Sansa, and Varys takes a seat beside her to reach for his own. “Get comfortable, my dear. We’ve many a treason to plot.”

“Treason is an ugly word,” Lord Varys says.

“But it is treason,” Tyrion says flatly.

“Only if we lose,” Sansa points out.
Sometimes Sansa feels as though it is hardly fair, how easy it is to tear something down. Something old, something strong, something powerful, something beautiful. She can’t recall exactly what she was doing when Winterfell was sacked. She knows that she was here, in this foul city, but where exactly had she been? Was she stitching in the gardens? Was she visiting the Sept? Was she kneeling to the Throne, bruised and bleeding, dress torn, eyes red and swollen?

Winterfell is old—older than this ugly throne that tried to bring it to heel. And it survived. Old things ought to be allowed to survive. To be respected.

Except if those things are a house of madmen obsessed with fire and blood. That the world can do without.

Sansa never stopped to think about what her final wedding would be like, only that she had prepared a gown for it. She had considered wearing white, but after Ramsay, it doesn’t feel right. Everyone knows what he was like. The jig is up. But she wants something special for the day, so when tailors arrive in her chambers with swathes of black and red fabric, onyx and garnet embellishments, black diamonds and rubies for jewelry, Sansa sends them away and doesn’t let them return to her until they’ve come with yard upon yard of fine spun silver gossamer. Tubs upon tubs of gray pearls. Newly cut crystals. She will wear the winter on her back.

The ceremony itself is a quiet affair. Edmure comes to collect her in the early hours of a quiet afternoon. No one else is made aware of the fact that a ceremony is transpiring. Sansa is grateful for this. She wonders who decided it should be so.

She is not taken to the Great Sept. Instead, Sansa’s third marriage is sealed at the roots of the old godswood in the gardens of the Red Keep. Daenerys, her council, Kinvara, Davos, and Ghost are waiting there. Jon stands right beneath the lowest branches of the tree. He wears black without a stitch of red. His eyes do not once leave her face.

Did they beat you into submission?

His hand on hers is gentler than a spring breeze.

Did you see the sun when you were there?

She glitters in the light, pearls shimmering, crystals sparkling. She is no queen, with no armies or winged beasts. She has no rage of a thousand suns. But she is as luminescent and radiant as the moon.

Did you see that I was right?
Ghost lowers his head to touch it to her palm.

*Did you think of me like I thought of you?*

“I take this man,” she breathes.

It is a technicality, this statement, because she took him so long ago. She took him in the courtyard of a bleak castle, snow falling all around them, when she was shaking cold and bone tired and *afraid, so afraid*, and he held her close and breathed her in and she was *safe*.

His kiss is soft and swift, but his hand never releases hers as they make their way back into the castle. She remembers, after the fact, that the queen had been in attendance. She had forgotten she was even there.

The courtiers of the Red Keep emerge for luncheon only to hear the news that has spread like wildfire—the most highly anticipated wedding to date happened in the earliest hours of the afternoon without a single person being the wiser for it. This causes a tidal wave of disappointment, which is quickly assuaged by Sansa Stark, who had advised the council to organize a day of festivities that the nobility might celebrate this occasion.

The celebration carries all through the castle, and for a few moments, Sansa loses herself in it as she moves from one chamber to another—one party to another—and accepts congratulations and cups of wine she won’t drink and sits for songs that she doesn’t listen to. It looks an awful lot like what a young, clueless little pup had once imagined the capitol to be—a dazzling castle, glittering jewels, stunning dresses, flowing wine. Giggles. Music. Laughter.

How much blood and tears did she have to wade through to get to a night like this?

Jon finds her as the sun is just beginning to set, the sky a bruised purple and yellow beyond. He has never been far from sight. He leads her to his chamber, which she notes is significantly darker than her own, and bars the door.

“Are we alone, Jon?” she asks.

“Would you like an audience?”

“Treasons are best plotted in secret.”

Jon’s laugh is close enough to her ear that she can feel the breath touching the shell. “Does your work never end, love?”

She turns to face him, running her fingers through his curls and pulling him close. “Not while you’re around,” she replies, and she catches his lips fiercely—her mouth swallows his breathless gasp. He pulls her closer, mouths parting, and her teeth catch his lower lip and she *bites*.
Whatever they want.

.

.

.

.

.

.

His lips trace paths of fire on her skin. She melts, and she freezes, and she melts again. He is so gentle. Reverent. Worshipful. Adoring.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

We need allies.

.

.

.

.

.

.

She is not half so merciful.

.

.

.

.

.

Do you have any faith in me at all?
He doesn’t protest. Not when her nails scrape his skin, not when her teeth catch his lips, not when her pulse is *singing* her fury. She hates him, and hates him, and *hates* him, and his waist meets hers and she loves him, and loves him, and *loves* him.

*Whatever you command, we will obey.*

*She’ll be a good queen.*

“Won’t you keep me, Sansa?” he whispers into her skin as he holds her closer. But they are *too* close and somehow not close enough, and she is tired and awake, afraid and safe, euphoric…and enraged.
Winterfell is yours, Your Grace.

The stars explode around them, and they are lost in the wide, vast nowhere. The breath leaves their lungs, the sweat slicks their skin, and Jon is smiling down at her like she is everything that ever was and ever will be.

Her mind hums late into the dawn, when the sky is rosy and the world is quiet, and finally—finally—they are sated enough to sleep. The pink imprints on his shoulders her nails have left behind seem invisible in this light. She watches the outlines of his figure as he pours a glass of pear brandy and brings it to her where she lays spent on the sheets.

“I’ll never forgive you,” she whispers back, and he kisses her anyways, the taste of brandy heavy on their tongues.
When the mornings come, Jon has worshiped her enough that he can leave her be for a few hours at a time. She is exhausted, and replete, and ever hungry for him.

Daenerys glares at her whenever she sees her, avoiding the sight of her as though she carries greyscale. Sansa finds this a mercy. She has no desire to look upon icy hair and lavender eyes. She has no desire to remember the past when all it does is make resentment gnaw at her heart like an old dog with a bone.

"I suppose you think you've won," Daenerys says one day when they encounter each other by the Holdfast. Courtiers left and right fall silent to observe.

Sansa says nothing. She finds that she does not need to. From the nearest window, the green dragon is hissing his fury. Daenerys looks upon her child and her face is stony once more. "As you were, Princess Sansa," she says loudly, ending the charade.

Sansa dips into a curtsy before she moves along. The green dragon can be seen from every window she passes. His eyes are gray sometimes.

Ghost can be seen near her always. She brushes his fur and sits him beside her when she goes to the garden to embroider or embellish. He curls up near her feet, chewing on something, just enough teeth showing to deter nosy passersby from coming too close. This stay in King's Landing is nothing like her first. Everywhere, everywhere she can see, Jon is guarding her. He clings to her like a shadow, and it gives her relief and woe at once.

"We have treasons to plot, Jon," she tells him when they are alone again. The sky is dark and he is lying beside her.

"I have no desire to plot," he says, lying on his stomach with his face buried in his pillow and his arm slung over his waist. "I want to make love."

Handling Jon is much like negotiating with a small child. Tit for tat. Rewards for good behavior. Like when she would give Rickon cinnamon sweets in exchange for a few peaceful afternoons. Every morning she awakens wondering when he will be tired of being handled, tired of her managing him, tired of her. But every morning, he only wants her more.

"Let us first discuss what comes next," she says.

He lifts his head and gazes at her. His eyes are violet in the candlelight. "Very well, my love. What treason do we plot tonight?"

"Your aunt is leading the southern kingdoms into ruin."

"And why does this matter?" he asks, resting his head in his hand as he leans his elbow onto the pillow. "Let her run it into the ground."

"If the south collapses, the North will feel the effects. As inconvenient as it seems, the North and the South both share this continent. An economic collapse impacts us all."

Jon huffs and wraps his arms around her, pulling her close until their bodies are pressed tightly together and the heat from his skin melts away the cold from hers. "You know it's of no importance to me. We are here, you and I, safe and together. Why can we not simply leave for
“Dragonstone and put this all behind us?”

“It is not that simple,” Sansa says.

“No?” Jon’s hands rest on her sides, and he lifts her into the air above him. She watches him from this angle; black curls sprawled across the pillow, gray eyes positively burning violet, darkened indigo by shadows and an insatiable lust. “Does my precious heart never tire of the game?”

Sansa sighs. “It is not that simple, Jon,” she says again, pressing her hands onto his chest to steady herself. “The game does not seem to tire of us.”

Jon snorts. “You enjoy tormenting me,” he says. “Have you found your solace yet?”

Her eyes trace the contours of his body. In this light, he seems to glow. She runs her hands up his chest to his neck, and then around to cup his cheeks. He tilts his head to one side, lips kissing her palm, and then to the other. “I’d burn the world down for you, if you asked it of me,” he says gently, and he lowers her back onto his chest. His arms slide around her body like a snake coiling round its prey, and her ear rests over the nonexistent wingbeat of his dead heart. “There is no horror I would not bring upon this world for you.”

She traces her finger along his collarbone. She’ll be a good queen. “I don’t need you to bring horror, Jon. I need you to bring peace.”

Jon is silent. “Treason for peace. What a bargain.”

“But we’ve danced this dance before. You and I both. She may seem like nothing to you, but your aunt is still an enemy.”

“Would you have me deliver the killing blow?”

“No,” Sansa says. “You mustn’t become a kinslayer.”

Jon’s fingers find her chin, tilting it up so she faces him. “As long as she draws breath, you are unhappy,” he says. “I hadn’t wanted to kill her—doing so would only push the crown into my hands.”

“The crown is the only thing that keeps her a threat,” Sansa says. “It was you who taught it to me, Jon. Block every avenue. Keep cutting. I don’t want to simply put her down. I want her to stay down.”

Jon breathes deep, and the rumbling in his chest sounds to Sansa’s ears like wave upon wave of saltwater crashing against rocky shores. She draws snarling direwolves on his chest with her fingers, a gray wolf, a white wolf—

A red wolf.

“The southern kingdoms will be yours,” he says at last. “Plot your treasons, and I will wear your crown.”

Sansa props herself up on his chest with her forearm. His fingers run through her hair. “Thank you, Jon,” she says. “I know you do not want to become king.”

“But I’ll not be king,” he says with a smile that is half salt, half smoke, and all dragon-wolf. “I am yours.”
Sansa kisses his lips, and he melts into her. His arms wrap around her again, and he pulls her back down towards him. They make love again and again, until the sun crests the horizon, until her eyes can barely open, and even then Jon is whispering into her skin *I am yours, I am yours, I am yours.*
When she was still a bright-eyed child, Sansa imagined that the greatest moments in history occurred in instances of supreme theatricality. She pictured treaties and alliances signed in grand chambers by lords swathed in silks, great battles fought on wide open fields of greenery dotted with sweet flowers. Everything was so much prettier in her head once.

Reality is not so.

Sansa has learned—beneath the sneer of a golden boy king, the taunting words of a vicious lioness, the sword of a golden-cloaked henchman, the devious smiles of a summer rose, the whispers of a mockingbird, and the knife of a flayman—that history is not half so grand, nor half so elaborate. Those grand moments she read about in stories as a child are just that—moments. The execution of Ned Stark took but a moment. The assassination of the Young Wolf took a moment.

But what moments they are.

Sansa had been sewing in her chamber when it happened. Seated nearest to the window with Myrna Flowers beside her, they were placing pearls in a swirling pattern along a stretch of white crepe pulled taut by a post.

“It’d look more natural if the beading flowed in this direction,” Myrna was saying.

“I agree,” Sansa replied. “But then there won’t be any room for the garnets.”

“I’d forgotten all about those, silly thing that I am. Do you think we could stitch them along the waistline instead?”

“They’d get folded in when we attach the bodice to the skirt—and it’d be a menace to clean. The laundresses would have my head.”

“Hm…how about we put them all to one side?”

“And Sansa placed the handful of pearls in Myrna’s cupped palms. She had scarcely turned to face the tubs of embellishments to peruse her other options when the first screech of a dragon tore through the afternoon.

It hadn’t seemed terribly significant, as the black dragon was often in a state of fury these days. The green one was more silent than not, curled up contentedly somewhere. It was nothing new. Nothing that hadn’t been heard a thousand times since Sansa began to settle into life in King’s Landing. Except this time, when the black dragon screeched, the green dragon screeched back. The noise was enough to draw Sansa and Myrna to the window confusedly, staring out at the empty, cloudless blue sky.

“What on earth is happening?” Myrna wondered.

Sansa shook her head, reaching out and pulling Myrna away. “I haven’t a clue, but if they’re having a spat we ought not to stay close to the windows. Come.”

They had scant taken a step when the twin shrieks echoed again, more furious than ever. The noise made something in Sansa’s ears pop, and she dropped the thread in her hands to cover her ears. In
another beat, pearls were rolling all over the floor as Myrna did the same.

Sansa sank into her seat as her blood pounded in her ears. Myrna was yelling something, but it could barely be heard. She pointed at something behind Sansa, and when she looked over her shoulder, Ghost was at the door. His figure was ducked to the ground, pawing at his head. She could feel the sounds of his whimpering in her bones. Frantically, she searched for something soft to stuff into his ears. She settled for tearing the crepe of the new gown into shreds and inserting them quickly.

The screeching stopped. Myrna moved her hands cautiously. Sansa hazarded a glance out the window. She wished she could say that it was a breeze that had picked up, but if felt more like a wingbeat.

“What was that?” Myrna asked incredulously as she rubbed at her ears.

Sansa pulled Ghost close and hugged him tightly. He nuzzled her neck and licked her jaw. “I don’t know,” she said. The screeching seemed to slow to nothing, fading as if the castle had picked itself up and run away from the noise with all of its occupants none the wiser.

Thinking back on it now, Sansa really should have seen it coming. As it is, she had been distracted by perfecting the sweetheart neckline of her gown and coordinating the garnets to match her rouge, so she isn’t exactly surprised that she’s in this mess right now.

The door burst open with such a thunderous ‘boom’ that Myrna shrieked almost as loud as the dragons had moments before. For a sickening moment, Sansa was hit with a sense of déjà vu. The goldcloaks standing at the door were stony faced men, and there she was, reminded of the fragility of the situation—still a sweet little bird in a southron city with golden men waiting to hurt her.

Princess Sansa sits in a Black Cell in the Red Keep, and really—she should have seen this coming.

Those grand moments she read about in stories as a child are just that—moments. The execution of Ned Stark took but a moment. The assassination of the Young Wolf took a moment.

The arrest of Princess Sansa Stark-Targaryen happens in all of a moment, her handmaid screaming for Edmure Tully, her wolf running from the room to alert its master. Sansa squints into the darkness of the area, wondering if her father was afraid of the dark when he sat down here, and laughs.

It is the beginning of the end.
Sansa has been sitting in the dark for only a few minutes before she decides that whatever the cause for this is, her response will simply be ‘deny, deny, deny’ until she dies. Realistically, there’s lots of grounds for arrest. She hasn’t exactly been on her best behavior since she got here.

“Sansa?” calls a voice from afar.

Sansa sits up. “Uncle Edmure?”

“Thank the gods,” his voice sounds breathless. She wonders if he ran straight here. “Are you wounded?”

She looks down at herself, and then is abruptly reminded of the fact that she can’t actually see herself in this darkness. She knows she has a slight bruise forming from the grip one of the guards left on her wrist. There doesn’t seem to be much else, though.

“Only my pride,” she replies.

“Is she in there?” asks another voice. Ser Davos. “Princess?”

“She’s in there,” Edmure says. “Sansa, do you know which guards brought you here?”


“Hard to say, it’s such a shitstorm,” Davos explains. “The black dragon’s been antsy for weeks now. Tried to take a nip out of the green one, and this time the green one nipped back. Next thing we know, they’re tearing at each other.”

“Are they alright?”

“Hard to say. No one can see ‘em. The only dragons we’ve got in sight right now were screaming at each other in the Hand’s council chambers an hour ago.”

Sansa sighs. “Bother,” she says quietly.

“I’m sorry, Sansa,” Edmure says. “Just…just sit tight for a moment. The guards who put you in here are holding the keys. If we could just figure out which ones they are…did they have any obvious features? Anything you can think of?”

“One had a prominent underbite,” Sansa supplies. “If that helps. Brown hair. Looked like muddy straw. The other one had eyebrows thicker than bread.”

She hears footsteps retreating quickly. Silence.

“Am I in terrible danger?” she asks, wondering who has run and who has stayed behind.

There is no answer. She is alone.

It seems a clever way to keep her here—the Black Cells are terribly hard to get into. The thick wooden door with its steel locks nigh impossible to get past. And if the jailer has been dismissed—since apparently one of the Queensguard is carrying the keys—then Daenerys has found a way to hold Sansa indefinitely until…what? She can prove whatever she has chosen to arrest her for? What
exactly is Sansa going to be charged with?

Whatever it is, she’s got a solid defense already worked out. *I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.*

It seems like it’ll hold.

What Sansa had also imagined would hold is the door to the cell. Which is funny, because it takes all of ten seconds from the moment she hears the whining and dragged out scratching—almost like something is pawing at the door—and then there are rapidly approaching footsteps. There is the shrill screech of abused metal and the crackle and pop of splintered wood, and then a thunderous ‘CLUNK’.

And then nothing.

“Sansa?” calls a new voice.

She has never been so happy to hear his voice in her life.

“Jon?”

It takes only a second, and then warm hands are pulling her into the familiarity of his embrace. The weight leaves her legs as she is lifted into the air and carried out of the cells. A faint growl goes quiet as a tuft of fur brushes against her fingers. She is lowered in a dimly lit hallway, torchlight flickering dully against the outline of Jon. She looks back at the door. It’s hanging by a single hinge.

“How long were you in there?” he asks, hands cradling her face, thumbs delicately rubbing her cheeks.

“Not long—only a few minutes,” she replies. “Jon, what is going on?”

Jon leans in and kisses her fiercely—bruisingly. “I’m gonna fucking kill her.”

“Wait—” Sansa places her own hands on his face to keep their eyes locked. His glimmer ominously in the light. It’s the most frightening he’s ever looked. “Don’t. Tyrion and Varys and I are all in agreement, you absolutely *cannot* kill her. You’d be a kinslayer, and it’d destroy all of the good credit you’ve built up with the lords and ladies.”

“She tried to take you from me. She’ll try again. I have to kill her. So she’ll stay down.”

“That is not what I meant!”

“It’s what *I* meant,” Jon says. His hands release her face, and she feels the cool air around her that alerts her to how fast he’s moving.

“Jon, stop!” she calls, but she can hear his footsteps growing fainter. “How many times do you think you can cast aside my counsel before I decide I’ve had enough?”

There is no response, but the footsteps seem to have stopped.

“Every single time you have failed to heed my words, you’ve created one bigger mess for me to clean up. I will *not* be the bride of a kinslaying king. If you kill her now, you won’t need to worry about taking my rage, and my storms, and my cold silences. You’ll not have a single thing. Do you hear me, Jon? *Not a single thing.* I will leave you and I will *never* look back. Nothing will stop me.
Not your red priestess, not dragons, and *not wedding vows*.

A split second. *Thud thud thud thud.*

She’s being squished in his embrace. “Don’t leave me,” he says.

“Don’t kill her,” she says back.

The clinking of armor echoes beyond. Another torch casts shadows further around them.

“What should I do, then?” he asks. “What is your bidding?”

“Right now?” Sansa asks. “Take me back to my chambers. Find Tyrion and Varys.”

“Your Grace!” Edmure is only partly stunned to see Jon. The guards behind him all have the silver trout emblazoned on their armor. Two of them are holding a battering ram. Edmure’s hands run through his hair in disbelief as his eyes register the destroyed cell door. “Mother of Mercy,” he whispers.

“Take my princess back to her chambers,” Jon says, eyes never leaving Sansa’s. “Lord Tully, your men are to stand guard outside her door.”

“By your command,” Edmure says, eyes still bulging at the door.

“Find Tyrion and Varys,” Sansa says to Jon. “I need to speak with them.”

Jon nods stiffly, leaning forward to kiss her mouth quickly before stepping away. As soon as he is gone, Sansa turns to face Edmure. “Uncle, do you know why I was arrested?”

Edmure sighs, eyes flitting between her and the door. “Every queensguard I tried to talk to said they were on strict orders from the queen to hold their silence on the status of prisoners. Ser Davos is trying to speak with her now. Niece—the prince isn’t going to kill her, is he? That would be devastating to his supporters. I mean—I suppose they’d still support him—but it’s a massive stain to his reputation. The reason people are backing him is because he’s the *stable* Targaryen.”

Sansa snorts. “I’m sure they like to believe that,” she says. “Don’t worry, Uncle. Jon won’t kill her. Now if you would be so kind—could you tell me exactly what it is that happened this afternoon?”

Edmure sighs exasperatedly. “Right this way, niece,” he says, offering her his arm and leading her out of the dungeons.
Sansa can hear the low voices of the guards posted outside of her chamber. They speak with a distinct Riverlander tinge, and she is grateful for it. Ghost sits with his head on her lap. Myrna is standing beside her, hands folded demurely, a picture of perfect innocence.

She had run screaming for Edmure Tully. Sansa will remember this in the future.

“I honestly couldn’t tell you what happened with the dragons,” Edmure says.

Sansa takes a sip of her tea. “Is it true that no one can see them?”

“We do seem to have lost sight of them, yes,” Edmure says.

“What about this mess with Daenerys? It was pathetic. What was that about?”

“It’s difficult to say. We’ll need to await Ser Davos. I’ve sent a runner to fetch him the moment he is dismissed from the queen’s study.”

“And Tyrion and Varys? They have also been alerted?”

Edmure shrugs. “I’ve sent the runners to them. Whether they’ve responded is difficult to guess. We’ll see who returns—them or the runners.”

Sansa combs her fingers through Ghost’s fur. He snuggles deeper onto her lap. “How are you, darling?” she asks him. His eyes open, red and cool, and watch her. “Do your ears hurt terribly from all that noise? You poor thing.” She leans down to kiss his face, and Ghost’s tongue darts out and flicks her cheek. She smiles at him.

“My Lord Edmure,” a solder calls from outside. “Ser Davos Seaworth is here.”

Edmure gets to his feet. He looks to Sansa, who nods. “Send him in.” Edmure says.

The door is opened a smidge—just enough for Davos to slip through and close it again.

“Are you alright, Princess?” he asks Sansa.

“I’m very well, thank you,” she says. “Just a tad confused. Enlighten me. What happened this afternoon?”

Davos sinks into a seat beside Edmure. “The Queen is under the impression that you’ve committed treason against the Crown.”

Sansa sits back. “What am I being accused of?”

“Conspiring to endanger the survival of the Targaryen bloodline,” Davos says. “She’s under the
impression that yev been takin’ moon tea.”

“Does she have evidence?” Edmure asks.

Davos shrugs. “She has her certainty. Might be one of the serving girls in the kitchens has said something. But there’s no way to be sure unless she speaks to your personal staff. Which she will try to do.”

Sansa looks up at Myrna, who is still standing wide eyed and innocent as a newly anointed Septa. Sansa turns back to Edmure and Davos. “It appears as though the matter is quite settled.”

Edmure chuckles. “This is the most pathetic tactical planning I’ve ever seen—and I was a prisoner during the Frey siege on Riverrun.”

Davos snorts. “Even I got wind of that mess.”

Sansa wonders what the hell they’re talking about, but decides that this is another tale for another, less eventful day. There is a pounding on the door.

“No one is permitted to enter the Princess’ chamber but by leave of the Princess,” the soldier outside says stiffly.

“The Queen demands to see the Princess immediately,” replies an even keeled, heavily accented voice. Sansa’s heart stutters for a moment. An Unsullied soldier.

“Then the Queen may come here to speak with her,” the soldier says. “On the prince’s orders, the princess is not to leave these chambers.”

“The Queen is not to be disobeyed.”

“The Black Prince comes back from the dead,” the soldier says incredulously. “He ripped the fucking cell door off its hinges. I’d rather disobey the bloody Queen. And you can tell her that yourself, because you’re not getting into this chamber.”

“The Queen has demanded the presence of the Princess.”

“Are you deaf? I said fucking no.”

“This is Lord Edmure Tully,” Edmure has moved closer to the door. “On the prince’s orders I stand guard over my niece. What business has the Queen with the Princess?”

“She demands an audience. Immediately.”

“Yes, you mentioned that. Has she specified why?”

“The Princess was removed from her cell without the Queen’s consent. She is a prisoner of the Crown and faces charges of treason. As do the men who removed her and stand guard over her now.”

Sansa rolls her eyes. “Uncle—tell him I will answer the summons if I first hear it from Lord Tyrion or Lord Varys. Preferably both.”

Edmure nods. “The Princess will answer the Queen’s summons if she is informed of her charges by Lord Tyrion or Lord Varys. Or both.”
“The Queen will not negotiate with her prisoner.”

“Very well, then. You are perfectly welcome to fight your way through the soldiers posted at the door. Speaking of the door—I hope you’re as good at tearing it off its hinges as our prince is. Did you see it? Splintered wood and bent metal—that wasn’t iron, you know. It was steel.”

“Careful, Lord Tully,” Davos says with a chuckle. “You might be foamin’ at the mouth there.”

Myrna stifles a giggle as Sansa bites back a smile. Edmure doesn’t even seem remotely ashamed.

“It was a marvel, Ser Davos,” he says, eyes wide. “I’m sending a sketch artist down as soon as this is over to draw it for records.”

“The Queen will not negotiate with her prisoner.”

“Oh, I’d quite forgotten you were there,” Edmure says, shaking his head. “Inform the Queen of these terms. See what she has to say.”

There is silence. And then footsteps. “He’s gone, milord,” says the soldier.

Edmure sighs and takes his seat again. “What a day,” he says.

“What is Jon?” Sansa asks.

“He’s in his chamber,” Davos says. “Doing something about the dragons.”

“Is he searching for them? Have they been spotted yet?” Sansa asks.

“Hard to say,” Davos says. “Once he gets into that frame of mind, we lose him until he’s back out. That red woman is with him—for whatever that’s worth.”

Sansa isn’t sure why, but it’s worth quite a bit to her. She feels better knowing Jon has Kinvara with him. It’s one less anxiety in this castle that never seems to stop turning anxieties out.

It takes less than ten minutes before there is a tentative knock on the door.

“Excuse me, good ser,” the unmistakable attempted charm of Tyrion is bleeding through. “I understand the Princess wishes to speak with me.”

“Let him in!” Sansa calls loudly.

The locks click and clack, and the door swings open. Tyrion comes in with color high in his cheeks. “Such outrage and insult I have borne today!” he says with false anger. His eyes are laughing, but his hands are shaking. All the same, Sansa knows he is alright when he takes a seat beside Davos, and the first thing he does is pour himself a goblet of wine. “I—the Queen’s own Hand—being shuttled this way and that, sent to deliver summons like some common errand boy!”

Sansa smiles. “I couldn’t think of any other way to get you here,” she says.

“No, it’s quite alright. I’d have come sooner, except the queen’s had guards around me. Are you alright?”

“I’m perfectly fine. Where’s Lord Varys?”

“He got wind of our sinking popularity and decided the time is ripe to make himself scarce.”
Sansa frowns. “He’s gone?”

“Just into the city somewhere,” Tyrion assures her. “He’s not far. He’ll be back as soon as he’s reigned in enough of the city-dwellers to our cause.”

Sansa sighs. “I wish I could be out there with him. I understand the Queen wishes to see me. I’m being charged with treason. Some huff about moon tea.”

“Indeed. Naturally we all know this to be an utterly appalling fiction. But the Queen wishes for reassurances. She would like to speak to you.”

Sansa nods. “Will she attempt to kill me on the spot?”

Tyrion thinks on it for a moment. “She seems to recognize that your death could cause more problems than she knows how to solve.”

“I don’t like the idea of my safety hinging on the good sense of Daenerys Targaryen,” Sansa says.

“My safety’s been hinging on it for years, it’s no walk in the park,” Tyrion says with a shudder as he sips his wine. “Speaking of hinges—word is making the rounds that our prince has broken a set in the Black Cells.”

Edmure nods slowly, eyes huge. “He tore it right off. Right off. Like it was a cloth wrapping around a haunch of pork. I’ve never seen anything like it—”

Davos snorts. “Will you be answering the summons, Princess?” Davos asks. "I know Jon won't approve.”

Sansa shrugs. “Jon isn't here. Those who will not risk will not win,” she says, getting to her feet. “I’m not afraid of Daenerys Targaryen. Uncle, Ser Davos, Lord Tyrion—if you would be so kind as to be my escort—I’d hate to march into her chambers accompanied only by that Unsullied soldier.”

And so the door is unlocked and the motley crew move through the halls. A pirate, a dwarf, a princess, her maid, a river lord, and a white wolf. In the far distance, as if carried on the wind, Sansa hears the distant growl of a dragon.
When the motley crew enters the antechamber to the Queen’s study, the Unsullied soldiers bar everyone but Sansa and Tyrion to enter. Sansa wants to laugh. Really, really hard.

“At ease,” Sansa says to Ser Davos, who is already preparing to speak to one of them. “Lord Tyrion and I are well versed at this song. Come, my Lord. We’ll see what new dangers King’s Landing has cooked up for us both.”

Tyrion chuckles and takes her hand, walking her inside.

The room is silent before they even enter, the tension a tangible, bitter thing tainting the air. Sansa keenly remembers afternoons here listening to Cersei drink and ramble about how unfair her life is. She remembers all the great farces she put on. This very chamber. She has to bite back a smile.

There are at least a dozen Unsullied soldiers standing on either side of the queen, and half a dozen Dothraki are lounging on chairs. They all stand to attention when the group walks in, clutching their weapons threateningly. They remind Sansa of every other idiot who’s ever tried to scare her. Some of them succeeded, and some of them didn’t. None of them do anymore.

She walks ahead until there are a good five feet between herself and the queen, who sits loftily upon a high backed chair with her hands clutching the armrests. Her gaze is stony, and cold, and barely containing a slow simmering anger. Sansa remembers it well.

Whatever they want.

“Princess Sansa,” Daenerys says. Her tone is even-keeled and regal. She speaks with finality. “You cannot, I am sure, be at a loss for the reasons behind your presence here today.”

“Surely Your Grace is mistaken,” Sansa says. “I cannot account for this turn of events at all.”

“Your Grace,” Tyrion injects himself quietly in the space beside Sansa. “Before we begin, if I might have a moment alone—”

“Silence.” Daenerys’ fingers tighten over the armrests. She shifts her unforgiving gaze from Tyrion back to Sansa. “Earlier this afternoon, you were apprehended by my orders on suspicion of treason.”

“Does Your Grace refer to the quarter of an hour I spent in the Black Cells? Yes, I did get the impression something may have occurred. Allow me to grant you my reassurances that you have before you a servant of unquestionable loyalty to the realm,” here Sansa clutches her skirts and sinks into a curtsey.

Daenerys narrows her eyes. “Pretty words,” she says. “You are full of them, aren’t you?”

“Ugly words have never solved anything for me, Your Grace.”

“Pretty or not, words will not save you from reaping the rewards of the treason you have conspired to commit.”

“Enlighten me.”

“You have conspired to extinguish the Targaryen bloodline. The bloodline you are sworn to. The
bloodline that is now yours as well as mine."

“And may I be so bold as to ask what led Your Grace to such a conclusion?”

“You have been ingesting moon tea.”

“That is a very serious accusation,” Sansa agrees, nodding emphatically. “Why—it’d be enough to have me executed, I imagine.” She looks off into the distance now, pondering the delightful concept of finally dying. She snaps back to reality, staring skeptically at the Queen. “If you can prove it.” She deadpans.

Daenerys raises a serene brow. “A loyal servant in the palace has confirmed to me that wagons of tansy are routinely delivered to the Red Keep.”

Sansa blinks. “How scandalous. What a thing it is, for servants and ladies alike to be engaging in such carnal acts without benefit of marriage. I suppose it’s inevitable.”

“Do you claim that the tansy that is delivered to the palace is ingested only by ladies of my court and their maids?”

“I’m certain that they must, Your Grace. You have said that wagons are routinely delivered. I have only been married to the Prince for a month. How would I have gone through wagons upon wagons of tansy in such a short span of time?”

Daenerys inhales sharply, nostrils flaring. “I would believe that there are many ladies at my court who ingest moon tea. And the reason you are here today is because I believe you to be one of them.”

“And again, that is a very serious accusation. One that will require evidence.”

Daenerys nods to the Dothraki, one of whom steps out of the room. He returns in moments with his hand clutching the arm of a pale Myrna. He places her beside Sansa.

“Myrna Flowers,” Daenerys says. “You were appointed by myself to serve as a handmaiden to the Princess of Dragonstone. Your duties include aiding the Princess in her preparation for the day, for the night, and for her meals. Explain to me the Princess’ meal schedule.”

Myrna tucks a stray lock of light brown hair behind her ear and folds her hands before her demurely as she keeps her eyes on the floor. “The Princess takes tea with her breakfast every morning.”

“Moon tea,” Daenerys says with satisfaction, eyes gleaming with triumph.

Myrna shakes her head, eyes still on the floor. “Orange blossom, Your Grace. She sometimes takes it with a lemon. I always leave it there with a bowl of red currants. The red currant is difficult to come by, since we have more of the black variety available in the Crownlands, but the Prince knows she favors the red—and he employed an errand boy who goes into market every day at dawn to bring it back for her fresh from the picking carts.”

Daenerys somehow looks even more furious at this. “Go on,” she says slowly.

Myrna coughs delicately and continues. “The Princess does not eat or drink anything but water between then and luncheon. She always takes luncheon in the Maidenvault, with—与其他 ladies.”
Daenerys bristles further at the mention of the miniature court Sansa holds everyday at the Maidenvault. It is not a difficult void to fill. The ladies of the court had been searching for a sun to orbit, but the most powerful woman in the Keep simply did not possess the wherewithal to communicate with other important women. It’s hardly Sansa’s fault they gravitated to her as soon as she arrived. Hierarchy is the entire purpose a royal court even exists. She knew from the start that Daenerys was aware of the existence of the ladies’ court, but she also knows that Daenerys avoids it because she believes herself to be above the mundane things they do there every day—stitching together, playing cards, performing musical numbers for each other—it’s reached a point where now some gentlemen have been known to come into the Maidenvault to pass a few hours in good company.

Daenerys had shocked Sansa by seeming to underestimate the importance of keeping courtiers entertained. Idle minds are treasonous ones. The promises of events hosted by a person of importance, the gossip, the battle for royal favor…these are the things that keep a court moving. If they’re busy trying to one up each other for favor, securing entertainment and activity, then they’re not thinking about ways to betray their allegiances. It’s simple mathematics.

Daenerys, with all of the thunderous self-importance that would allow her to overlook the intricacies of such political machinations, ignores all of this with an imperceptive nod to continue.

“And what does she drink during these lunches?” she asks.

“Honey-lemon juice, Your Grace. The Princess is very partial to lemons. And sometimes a light white wine, if the other ladies are also partaking. She might eat a small fruit between luncheon and dinner. An apple, or perhaps a fig. But she always prefers pears. Except the errand boy mentions sometimes that the carts rarely have them, and I understand the Prince has commissioned a pear orchard to be maintained here in the Keep’s gardens for that purpose.”

Daenerys’ nostrils flare again, and Myrna looks as though she’s shrunken a foot. “Continue. And—if you can find it in yourself—stay on topic.”

Myrna squeaks, her hands shaking. “The Princess dines with varied company. Some days its company in the Maidenvault, other days it’s alone with the Prince. She drinks red wine—but in very small doses. I’ve never seen her finish an entire glass before. And she likes to have chamomile tea an hour afterwards. I order the tea to be made at dinner, and it is ready by the time she is preparing to retire for the evening.”

“And the moon tea?” Daenerys asks, a brow raised.

Myrna blinks. “You Grace?”

“The moon tea that the Princess drinks nightly,” Daenerys says. “Does she take it before or after bed? In the morning right before she breaks her fast? Or afterwards?”

Beforehand, Sansa thinks. I steal tansy from the barrels that arrive every month for the wild fools in this madhouse. Myrna brought me a boiling kettle last week, and I let it the tansy steep. She might have seen me drinking it. Oh wait, she’s definitely seen me drinking it.

Myrna is shaking like a leaf in her skirts, but she shakes her head. “I do not understand, Your Grace. The Princess does not drink moon tea.”

Daenerys leans forward slightly. “Do you understand why you are both here today?” she asks. “You and the Princess both?”
Myrna shakes her head. “I do not, Your Grace.”

“It is my understanding that the Princess ingests moon tea with the intention of preventing herself from being able to commit to her duties in providing the Throne with an heir.”

Myrna’s eyes are wide and watery by the time Daenerys is finished talking. She shakes her head. “The Princess takes no moon tea, Your Grace,” she says, hands trembling. “It cannot be so. I deliver all of her food, fill all of her glasses. I see every bite that goes into her mouth—and every sip. It would be impossible for her to have taken anything without my seeing it.”

“Are you prepared to stand by this statement?” Daenerys asks, voice hard and furious. “Will you be ready to swear in a trial—presided by your Queen—that this is the truth?”

Myrna nods. “I am prepared, Your Grace.”

Daenerys’ lip curls as she sits back. “Very well,” she says. “You will remain in the service of another until the trial—”

The clanging of the door opening draws all eyes in the room to the lustrous shape of Kinvara, who is leaning leisurely against the door. She is combing her fingers through her hair idly.

“What is the purpose of this interruption?” Daenerys asks sharply.

“I have been ordered to escort the Princess to the Prince’s chambers,” Kinvara says simply. “She is to remain there until she is excused from his company.”

“Excused by whom?”

“By the Prince.”

“I am the Queen.”

“I noticed.”

“My orders supersede the Prince’s, and it is by my command that the Princess go where she is ordered to go—by myself.”

“I have been tasked by the Prince with informing Your Grace that the Princess is either to be escorted by me to the Prince’s chambers, or he will come and collect her himself. If you intend to withhold her from him, I would advise against closing this door. Oakwood is costly to repair—steel hinges doubly so.”

Daenerys gets to her feet and glares so powerfully at Kinvara that Sansa briefly wonders if she might begin to spit fire. Kinvara matches her gaze, waiting. Daenerys’ fire has not left her eyes when she tilts her chin upward and waves her hand. “You may escort the Princess from my sight. She may remain with the Prince in his chambers. For now.”

Kinvara sinks into a curtsey that is positively dripping with irony. “Thank you, Your Grace. Princess, come.”

Sansa looks at Myrna. “My handmaiden must come with me. I am in a state of disarray. Surely my husband cannot see me like this?”

Daenerys’ eyes flicker between Sansa and Kinvara, and she turns away in a storm. Sansa waves Myrna towards her, and the three women are off. Sansa looks over her shoulder at Tyrion, who is
As soon as they are alone in the halls, Sansa looks to Kinvara. “I’ve had quite a day.”

Kinvara nods, smiling. “I’ve heard. Your maid must leave us here. She may not enter the Prince’s chambers.”

Sansa sighs and turns to Myrna. “Go wait with Ser Davos and my uncle,” she says. “I’ll find you later.”

Myrna’s eyes dart between Sansa and Kinvara, but unlike Daenerys, her gaze is soft. She curtsies and runs back in the way they came. Sansa looks back at Kinvara. “What is happening? Where is Jon?”

“In his chambers, awaiting you. We had not imagined that the queen would immediately demand an audience with you. Not today, at least. We believed we’d have more time.”

“Time for what?” Sansa asks, but Kinvara ignores her. “What has Jon been doing, if not speaking with the queen? Why wasn’t he in her chambers just now? Where has he been since he freed me from the Black Cells?”

“Patience, she-wolf,” Kinvara says as they turn onto the corridor that will lead them to Jon’s chamber. “I will answer all of your questions as they come. First I must see to the Prince.”

“See to him?” Sansa repeats as they arrive at the door. Kinvara turns the knob and holds it open.

“He would have had you brought here after he freed you,” she says. “Except he hadn’t wanted you to see him like this.”

“Like what?” Sansa asks cautiously.

In answer, Kinvara holds the door open further. Sansa looks back the way she came, and then peers into the chamber. She slowly steps forward. Once inside, she hears Kinvara’s surer step and the click of the door being closed behind them.

Jon’s chambers are massive—she can hear the echo of her steps on the stone. It is dark. The windows are closed, the doors to the balcony sealed. It is as if this room knows no passage of time. There is only one source of light available, a massive rectangular pedestal in the very center of the room. It holds a bed of red hot coals feeding a roaring fire. Sansa nearly faints.

Lying upon the pedestal—engulfed in the flames—is Jon.
Sansa’s eyes stay open for so long that they begin to sting and water. She wants to turn away from the sight, but she cannot. Jon lies still, as if asleep. She can’t tell if his eyes are open or not. He lies leisurely across the bed of flames with maddening ease, without a stitch of clothing on his person. The fire flickers over his skin, giving him a molten glow. Sansa thinks it is little wonder that Targaryens had such a following in their heyday. Who could look upon such a magical marvel and not believe in destiny?

“He’s alright,” Kinvara says as she approaches the pedestal. She whispers something into the fire, and the flames burn brighter.

“Is he asleep?” Sansa asks.

Kinvara shakes her head. “He is awake, but he is not with us.”

“Where is he, then?” Sansa asks, because she doesn’t like this fire, and she doesn’t like that Jon isn’t here, and she doesn’t like the way Kinvara speaks of Jon the way she speaks of her Red god or her magical things—it reminds her too much of what Jon is and isn't anymore.

“He is with his dragon,” Kinvara says simply.

“His dragon?” Sansa repeats. “How can he be—”

The brightened flames roar suddenly, and Sansa steps back. Kinvara catches her wrist and rubs it soothingly with her thumb—reassuringly. With rising blood, Sansa notices as the flames snap and crackle and dance before her that Jon’s eyes are wide open. They are milky white.

“He’s warging,” she breathes.

“Indeed,” Kinvara says, nodding.

“But…why must he be ensconced in flame to warg into the dragon? Bran never needed to do such a thing.”

“Your brother has never warged into a dragon, Princess,” Kinvara says. “Dragons are fire made flesh. To become one, Jon must douse his flesh in fire.”

Sansa steps back again, her back hitting the wall. She runs her fingers through her hair and tries to breathe deep. Kinvara releases her, stepping closer to Jon. She studies his face, but what she sees there is anyone’s guess. “He will wake soon,” she says quietly. “He will be glad that you are still here.”

“I—still here?”
“He worried you might run from the room if you saw him like this,” Kinvara says. “Elsewise he’d have brought you here when he pulled you from the Cells.”

“Has he…has he been in this fire since then?” Sansa is almost afraid to ask.

“He has…intermittently,” Kinvara says. “He rose once or twice from it to assure himself you were still safe in your chambers. It was quite an upsetting shock when he learned you were being escorted to the Queen’s study. I feared the flame would consume the entire chamber. I hope your time with her wasn’t terribly unpleasant.”

“There is never a pleasant encounter to be had with the Queen,” Sansa says. She turns her gaze back on the flames—they seem to have begun to weaken. “What is he doing? In the dragon?”

Kinvara tilts her head, eyes still glued to Jon. She reaches forward, holding her palm above the flame, and slowly, it begins to die. The roaring and the crackling fade until they are only echoes in Sansa’s ears, until the room is bathed in darkness save for the bright red embers on the coals beneath Jon’s skin.

Sansa remains rooted in place as Kinvara’s sure footsteps echo around the room. One by one, Kinvara lights the torches. Opens the windows. Throws the balcony doors wide. The room is bathed in light, and Sansa can see the gray ashes on Jon’s skin. His eyes are shut. She looks at Kinvara, who has made her way back to the pedestal and places a hand on Jon’s forehead.

She removes it. Sansa steps closer.

Jon’s eyes snap open.

She faints.
Sansa wakes with her eyes closed. It’s an old habit established during her days as Lady Bolton, when she could use it to buy herself a blissful moment pretending she was somewhere—*anywhere*—else but in Ramsay’s chambers. For the moment while her world is still engulfed in darkness, she can assess her surrounding by means of the other senses available to her. These days, she begins every morning awakening in the warmth of Jon’s embrace. His arms are always encircling her as a dragon cradles a jewel, and she sinks into his grip as easily as she has since they day they found each other again at Castle Black—bonelessly, completely, unreservedly. But then her eyes snap open, and the day has officially begun.

Which is why when she opens her eyes at last, she needs a moment to reorient herself with the fact that it is early evening. And then she remembers that she passed out.

She’s lying on a bed in an unfamiliar room. She would sit up, but Jon’s arms wind tighter around her body, pulling her closer to his own. His fingers caress her jaw, and then turn her to face him. He smiles at her gently, and Sansa is temporarily floored by his beauty.

*Do you have any faith in me at all?*

And then the moment is gone.

Sansa squirms her way out of his grip and sits up.

“Slowly, my love,” he says, sitting up beside her and running his fingers up and down her arms. She pushes away from his hands and scoots to the edge of the bed, eyes darting around the room.

It’s still Jon’s chamber, but with the daylight flooding in she can see details she hadn’t noticed before. She can see that it is in fact a proper residential apartment, and not some heinous cult ritual chamber. Her eyes land on the pedestal. The space is clean and pale, and the coals have been scraped away. Not a single spec of ash remains. Kinvara appears to have vacated the premises, the only other company in the chamber being the bird that has stopped to rest on the balcony railing.

All of a sudden Sansa is miserable. She hates this. All of it. She hates this pedestal and she is sick of dragons and this stupid game, and fire and blood and destiny and crowns and she’s so fed up with—

“Come here,” Jon says, sitting up on the edge of the bed and gesturing to his lap.

“No,” she spits at him, making a point of moving to the other side of the room.

She hears his footsteps, and she’s ready. “Sansa—”

“Get away from me!” she says again, moving to another corner. “Just let me *think!*”

She curls up in the corner, knees to chest, and wraps her arms around herself.


*Where will we go?*

Her eyes burn. She rubs at them furiously.
“Sansa,” he coos gently, like one does to a small child, and she feels his fingers swipe at a tear streaming down her cheek. “Don’t be afraid. I’m still me. Still Jon. Always Jon.”

“I’m not afraid,” she says, voice thick. She sighs. “I just—” and she stops to take a slow, deep breath. “I hate this. All of this. Fire and magic and—all of it. I hate what’s happened to you. You’re a dragon, now.”

Jon’s arms encircle her again, and she finds herself weeping for so many things now. Father and Mother and Robb and Rickon and two entire years—

“I missed you when you were gone,” she says quietly into the crook of his neck.

He holds her tighter. “I missed you,” he says back. She feels his lips press against her temple. “I missed you telling me I was making a mistake, or telling me to be smart, or trying to teach me how to play your games. I missed you brushing Lady, teaching me how to talk to girls. I missed watching the sunlight catch in your hair when you’d walk past me. I missed you in my bones.”

“I hate this,” she says, wiping her tears away, but the stubborn things don’t stop falling. “I hate how much I’ve missed. I hate how much you’ve kept from me. I hate how much I don’t know.”

“I should have told you sooner,” he says. “You’re right—I should have told you.”

“Then why didn’t you?” she asks, pushing him away. She hears him falling backwards as she rapidly gets to her feet and slides along the wall until she’s on the other side of the room. “Don’t come closer!” she yells, stopping his advance before it can carry him far. “You don’t get to come near me until you tell me why you kept this from me.”

Jon stares at her, indignant, and takes another step. She glares at him.

“Jon, don’t test me,” she hisses. “Not. Another. Step.”

Eyes never leaving hers, he takes another step.

She opens the door and runs.

Jon, ever Jon, always Jon, comes barrelling after her.
People are milling left and right, hurrying to their dining engagements. They clock Sansa Stark-Targaryen hurrying though the halls, and they sink into bows and curtsies too deep to be appropriate for a Princess, but Sansa does not notice this. She is riding a wave of longing and hurt, letting it crush her amongst the rocks on the frozen shores.

“Princess Sansa!”

“My Princess!”

“Madame, are you well?”

“Sansa,” his voice is just a whisper—barely a murmur. She can barely hear it. But it's there. And so is he. “Sansa, Sansa, Sansa.”

It’s a warm night she steps out into, weaving her way through freesias and magnolias and roses and orchids and tulips and daffodils and lilac and—

And greenery. So much greenery.

And then hedges.

And then the Godswood.

She collapses onto the ground

And she sobs.

She doesn’t even know what she’s crying about anymore. It all looks the same. Father’s kind eyes. How safe and sturdy his arm felt when she’d clutched it after Petyr made his first introduction. Mother’s fingers threading through her hair, spinning molten red into Northern braids. Septa Mordane walking her through halls, stern and stoic—promising her princes and babies. Old Nan with her pea and onion pies.

Robb’s curls burning scarlet in the setting sun.

He had such a smile.

Theon’s stupid cackle.

I would have died to get you there.

Rickon’s golden curls.

He had been so close.

Bran wanted to be a knight.

I don’t really want anything anymore.

Arya was a wild thing.

All I’d need to find out is your face.
Jon.

I’m tired of fighting.

We need to trust each other.

She’ll be a good queen.

Whatever you command, we will obey.

Where will we go?

A soft nudge at her arm doesn’t make her move. She doesn’t want to move. She doesn’t want to move, or think, or be. She doesn’t know what she wants to do.

Two years. Two long years.

Nudge.

She lifts her head. A snowy white head is nosing her sleeve. She sniffles, somehow finding it in her to smile.

“I didn’t get to brush your coat today,” she says to him as he circles her, nestling her body within
his warmth. Ghost never replies, but his silence is a balm to her wounds. He lifts his head, and his tongue darts out at her tears. “I’ve neglected you, haven’t I? What sort of friend am I, not giving that coat a good brushing?” She giggles. “But it’s been such a day,” she adds, as her smile slowly fades. Ghost rests his head on her lap, and she strokes at it to soothe herself more than to soothe him. He looks at her, and she almost misses that something is awfully wrong with him. She almost misses the violet gray of his eyes.

She wipes at her tears. “Jon, come out of…wherever you are.”

Silence. Ghost looks up at her, and his eyes are searing red. She leans down and kisses the spot between his eyes, and the slow, certain footfalls herald the arrival of his master.

“You don’t turn him away,” he observes quietly. “You never turn him away, no matter your mood.”

“I would never turn him away,” Sansa says. “He has never left me.”

She hears a wingbeat in the distance, but she doesn’t want to look up into the rapidly darkening sky, doesn’t want to see which of the two creatures is roaming above them.

“Do you hate me very much?” he asks. “Are you very unhappy with me?”

Sansa buries her face in Ghost’s fur and breathes him in deep. He smells of the perfumed bath he had this morning—her maids wanted to die when he shook off the excess water—and something else. Cold air and clean pine and freshly fallen snow.

“I’ve been such a bastard, haven’t I?” a low chuckle. “Walking all over you so I could have you. It’s alright. I’d hate me, too.”

“I dare say I miss having you as a bastard,” she admits, lifting her face from Ghost’s coat to look at him. He kneels down beside her, but he comes no closer. “I miss who you were.”

Jon shakes his head. “I don’t. Who I was only brought you misery. Who I was lacked what it takes to finish this madness. You couldn’t have done it with that Jon Snow. You know this. That Jon Snow was a coward. He silenced you, and demeaned you, and debased you, consumed as he was with his anger with you. How dare you attract him so? How dare you be everything he wanted? He looked at you—all of his childhood fantasies of being Ned Stark, with you as his Catelyn—desires he buried so deep he didn’t even realize he had them. But they were there. And they never let him be. So what does he do? This fucking coward—he crawls into bed with his aunt. Tells himself this is better, this is right—and it feels like it is. He loved his dragon queen—and his red wolf. But it wasn’t in the nature of either to share.” He inches closer. Just an inch. But she does not miss it. “He wasn’t worthy of you. Might be that I’m not, either—but at least I know it. He was someone you knew, and he is me. And—and you’re allowed to be upset that he’s gone from us now.”

“I know,” Sansa says. “I know it’s you, but…”

But what? She doesn’t know what’s gnawing at her right now, only that so much is doing so at once and she can’t stop to pick apart the different hurts, the different stings, the different wounds. They all look the same—they all hurt the same.

“Do you remember how you pretended to be a ghost that day in the crypts?” she asks.

His answering laugh in instantaneous. “Aye, you wept for an hour when I jumped out at you.” He’s silent for a moment. “Do you remember all those afternoons we’d play Monsters and Maidens?”
“Florian and Jonquil?”

“Aemon and Naerys?”

“I don’t recall that being a game,” Sansa says.

“But you dreamt of being her, and having him. I remember those days. I remember when you used to dream.”

Jon holds out his hand. She lowers hers into it, and he kisses it like she’s holding starlight in her palm. He moves closer, enough to hold her softly from behind as she leans her head back upon him. She feels his lips on her temple and hears his breathing. “We buried Jon and Sansa with our dead. They’re nothing but ghosts now. What we are now—what we are together—this joy we’ve found in each other is the joy they spent their entire lives wishing for. They wanted it for you, as I do.”

Sansa takes a shallow breath and her fingers weave through Ghost’s fur. Jon’s hand still clutches hers. She sniffs again, wiping away at another tear. “You once told me that what’s left behind is mine to keep.”

“And it is.”

“But what is left?” she asks. “Are you a dragon or a wolf?”

“You are a Tully and a Stark,” Jon says. “A wolf and a silver trout. But which one are you more?”

Sansa shakes her head. “It doesn’t work like that,” she says.

“No, it doesn’t,” Jon agrees. “I am a dragon and a wolf. Which one am I more? Neither. It doesn’t work like that. Being one does not diminish another, and I am one and the other. And I am still Jon. Your Jon. Always Jon.”

Sansa rubs her eyes and leans into him. His arms snake around her and he cradles her as he did when she first awoke. The dragon hums contentedly overhead, and Sansa starts at the noise. Jon looks up, and Sansa sees his eyes flash milky white for a moment, and then they are his own again. The wingbeat disappears.

“I thought you needed fire to warg into the dragon?” she says.


“I don’t understand. What did you do just now?”

“Let him see through my eyes that this moment is private and he needs to fuck off.”

“But…what would you need the fire-pit for, then?”

“That’s when I need his body. His breath. His wings.”

“What would you need those for?” she asks, but she is only halfway through asking when Ghost suddenly sits up, teeth pulled back into a snarl. Jon looks up as a pair of Queensguard round the corner. Their eyes dart between Jon, Sansa, and Ghost.

“If my aunt sent you to see to my Princess, you can tell her that I haven’t yet excused her from my chambers,” Jon says flatly.
“I—Your Grace, she is sitting right there beside you,” one of the guards says, only to be nudged by his companion.

Jon looks around blankly. “I see no one but myself and the wolf. How about it, Ghost? Do you see sweet Sansa anywhere?”

Ghost growls, rising to his full height and stepping forward slowly. The guards back away around the corner.

Through all of this Sansa sits mutely holding Jon’s arm. It is not so different, she thinks, from the way Father’s arm had felt when she clutched it that day at the tourney. It was safe, and sturdy, and warm, and it was unconditionally hers.

Jon kisses her swiftly, fiercely, then pulls back and tucks her hair away. “My darling,” he murmurs reverentially into her ear. “You’ve had such a day.”

“I’ve had worse days in this city,” she says as Jon slowly lifts her to her feet.

“Those days are behind you,” he promises, and she wonders briefly if he can manage to keep this one. The rest of the sentence goes unspoken, but she hears it all the same. She’ll never have those days again, and they’ll never be those children again. It makes something lump in her throat, because she so desperately misses being that child. But she swallows the lump and her eyes dry up, and she thinks good. Those children would not have made it anywhere.

Life is not a song, sweetling. Someday you may learn that, to your sorrow.
Happy Halloween.

Princess Sansa rises around mid-morning on a normal day. The Princess is not known to abide a loud wakeup, so the entire Holdfast is required to maintain a peaceful atmosphere until she has risen. Either the Prince wakes her himself or she is brought slowly back to the waking world by her handmaids making small noises (dripping water, opening the windows to let chirping birds be heard, etc.). Once a guard was walking by her room when he tripped, and the clanging of his armor made her sit bolt upright.

The Prince was not pleased, and the guard was never seen again.

The Princess does not emerge from her chambers for two hours after she wakes. This is owed in no small part to her morning beauty routine, involving her floral milk bath, her facials, her hair styling, her half hour rest from having to do all of the above, and also because she needs to overcome the trauma of being unable to walk in a straight line because her husband is a literal beast. Naturally, this process is long and arduous, and it cuts into what ought to be breakfast, so she takes her morning orange blossom tea (bagged in Dorne) and red currants there in her chamber during the break between preparations.

Note: it is known that the Queen’s Council meetings are held during this time of the day. It is known that the Princess is never present at these meetings. It is also known that no one cares what is discussed during these meetings.

When she finally (finally) emerges, she takes a stroll amongst the daffodils and freesias in the garden. No one else is allowed to take this route, because the Princess does not like to talk to people while she’s acclimatizing to the day. Anyone who approaches her faces the wrath of an angry white wolf whose eyes ought to be red but are—at this time of day—violet-gray.

The Princess’ walk leads her to the Godwood, where she is left alone to brush out her wolf’s coat. She is not to be disturbed during this time. None are permitted to approach the Godwood during this time. The guards must stand a minimum of twenty paces away from her during this time.

After her morning stroll is over, Princess Sansa makes her way to the Great Hall, where she allows herself to be viewed and greeted by the lords and ladies of the continent. No one is permitted to converse with her for longer than two minutes. Some may think they can, but they cannot. She has guards with hourglasses. Rarely, the Princess might encounter the Queen during this morning review. Even more rarely are there any words exchanged during these chance encounters.

From the Great Hall, Princess Sansa departs for her apartments in Maegor’s Holdfast. It is understood that at the present time, the Princess has no Ladies in Waiting, which is why she
remains within her apartments for an hour reviewing candidates for her royal household.

It is at this point that the Maidenvault begins to welcome visitors. It is understood that Princess Sansa hosts card games, sewing circles, and various entertainment gatherings within the Maidenvault nearly every afternoon. As there is no time limit on conversation with her there, this becomes the only time of the day when she is easily accessible.

Note: it will not escape anyone’s notice that the impeccable detailing on the Princess’ ensembles are anything short of exceptional. Having acknowledged this, the Princess’ chosen gown for the day is permitted to be admired from a safe distance. The Princess’ person is not to be touched. Although there are no guards permitted within the Maidenvault during these social events, any person who touches the Princess will find themselves barred from admittance from future occasions until the Princess wakes up one morning and decides to forgive the slight.

During the hours in the Maidenvault, the Princess is known to host a luncheon. The rotation of seating arrangements is known to change and change often. If one happens to find themselves beside the Princess, this is not a sign of favor. This is random chance.

The Princess encourages questions about her outfits. The Princess is even willing to provide names for the sources that aided her in acquiring her pieces. This is not a deliberate maneuver, and has absolutely no double purpose whatsoever. Yes, it is understood that the Princess happened to have accidentally started a trend by wearing saltwater pearl earrings once. Yes, that trend has now enriched the Iron Islands and contributed (purely by coincidence) to the decline of the economic crisis that led to the reaving, roving and pillaging of the mainland by the Ironborn. Incidents such as this are pure happenstance. The Princess does not make political maneuvers (since this is the domain of Her Grace the Queen), and she most certainly does not use her clothes to make them.

The Princess does not field questions or requests regarding the Prince at any time. Yes, she will ask him on your behalf if he is concerned about the attack on a band of Silent Sisters travelling along an off-shoot of the Rose Road. No, she will not tell you how many horses he purchased for her the week before. Yes, she will tell him that a horde of bandits have been terrorizing the King’s Road in the Stormlands. No, she will not ask him if he prefers gold or silver in his coronation crown.

While on that topic, let it be known that the Princess is never to be approached with any discussion regarding any form of coronation. To discuss a coronation would be tantamount to treason against our beloved, blessed, angelic, honorable, dignified, even-minded, mild-mannered Queen. Treasonous whispers upset the Princess’ digestion, and the Princess’ digestion is not to be upset.

After the Princess has entertained in the Maidenvault, she retires to her apartments with her guards, her tailor, and her jeweler. Yes, they are responsible for sourcing her materials. No, they are not to be asked, bribed, threatened, or otherwise coerced into revealing what those materials are before the Princess has been seen wearing them. Yes, they are permitted to be commissioned for identical copies of items worn by the Princess, but a minimum of two weeks must pass between the time the Princess was seen wearing the piece in question and the time of commission.

The Princess’ dining schedule is flexible and entirely dependent upon her company. On certain nights of the week, she dines with friends in Maegor’s Holdfast. This company includes Ser Davos Seaworth and Lord Tyrion Lannister. On other nights of the week, she dines in the Gardens with friends made during her midday entertaining. The vast majority of the time, she dines with the Prince in the Holdfast. On these nights, none are to request an audience with either of them.

After dinner, the Princess likes to go for an evening ride in her carriage. No, the coach and castellan are not permitted to reveal her favorite routes and pathways. No, there is not any way that a person can be invited to ride with the Princess in her carriage. The Prince is not often known to
accompany her on these rides, but it is understood that the Queen’s Glorious and Most Beloved Rhaegal is always (always) flying within sight of her.

After her evening ride, the Princess retires to her chambers for the evening. The Prince remains with her until she awakens the next morning. Unless the castle is crumbling, absolutely no disturbances are permitted.

Petitioner’s Court:

The Princess attends Petitioner’s Court without fail. She welcomes any who wish to approach her, but she does not receive nor does she recommend petitions. Her place is beside her gracious and excellent Queen, and she does not pass judgement or make decisions.

City Visits:

It is common knowledge that the Princess is frequently seen touring areas of the city struck by misfortune. Any who wish to join her on these trips may attend. This is not an invitation to bombard the Princess with political grievances. Any such grievances are to be related to the honorable Queen during Petitioner’s Court. The purpose of the city visits is to provide relief and comfort to the citizens of King’s Landing and (it has been noted) take notes on the city’s infrastructure.

Hunting Trips:

Very little is established about the Princess’ policies regarding hunting trips, as the Prince has only gone on one trip since the Royal Wedding. The Princess stayed, during this time, at the Kingswood Lodge in the forest and hosted the Prince’s company graciously during this weeklong period. She was accompanied only by her handmaid and the staff brought along to tend to her, but it is believed that she will take her ladies in waiting on the next occasion.

Note: It is widely believed that an incident occurred three days prior to this time that the Princess was arrested, placed in the Black Cells, removed from the Black Cells, and charged with treason. This is unconfirmed. The Princess is never—under any circumstances—to be approached about this subject. Any who wish to discuss it are welcome to do so with the Prince. And for the love of the Seven, don't mention the door.
It has been eight days since Sansa’s arrest, and she is still under the care of the Blackguard, a new team of fanatics who have gotten too much sun and believe that Jon is some sort of god come down from the heavens to either purge the planet or…purge the planet. Sansa can hardly abide their blatant extremism—while she is grateful for their loyalty to Jon—as it seems to feed whispers of impending violence. This in turn ratchets up tensions, and that means she must work even harder to provide a façade of calmness on behalf of the royal family, since neither of its other two members seem to have any semblance of sanity.

She awakens on this eighth day to Jon softly pressing kisses to every inch of her face. It’s a game he likes to play. How many kisses he can give to his wife before he wakes her. Jon is fond of games. He’s always been fond of them, even as a child. Though his games have aged as he has, and gone from playing Monsters and Maidens in the halls of Winterfell to playing How-Many-Times-Can-A-Man-Make-His-Wife-Peak-In-A-Single-Night in the Red Keep.

That would be a new favorite of his.

Still, Sansa can imagine much worse to wake up than to Jon’s adoration. “I dreamt of you,” she tells him before he silences her with a kiss to her lips.

“Did you?”

“Mm. I was riding that pony you got me—

"Which one?"

"The gray one. And you were meeting me at the beach. It seemed so normal I almost mistook it for reality. We walked along the shore and I collected seashells."

Jon’s kisses dot her shoulders and she runs her fingers through his hair. He never ties it back anymore. She likes it better this way. “Would you like to visit the beach, my love?” he asks.

“I would.”

“Name the day,” he says, and his arms slide between her waist and the bedding to hold her close. She wraps her arms around his shoulders and buries her face into his neck.

She’s relearning him slowly, this new Jon. He’s so different from the one who left her in Winterfell, but in some ways, she can still see that it’s him. It’s the learning part that seems to be the most difficult, as it seems that every day a new facet of him is discovered. Nothing she sees is something she’s seen before, and yet she is making the effort to reconcile it all with the Jon she remembers.

“Stay here,” he says quietly as he nuzzles behind her ear, fingers tangling in her hair.

“If you had it your way, I’d never leave this bed,” she says. “As it is, I’m not half as agile as you are, and I need feeding more frequently.”

Jon doesn’t release her from their bed until they’ve made love at least once in daylight, and then he sits back and watches as she unbolts the doors to let in her maids. Myrna is—per the Queen’s orders—no longer in Sansa’s service. Sansa doesn’t allow this to bother her, as she is confident she’ll have her back very soon.
The new handmaids are pretty things, in the way that a birdsong is pretty or perhaps an autumn leaf. She knows it is too much to hope that she can win over every girl as easily as she won over Myrna—inspiring devotion instead of ambition—but she knows that of these two, one is a little mouse afraid of her own shadow—which makes her easy to coerce information on Sansa’s doings out of—and the other one is a little gossiping bitch who takes it as a point of pride that she’s been placed in the service of the Princess and is perfectly happy to sell Sansa’s secrets to the highest noble bidder. This was easy enough to uncover, after Sansa made a point of bathing in floral water with hints of olivewood oil a few days ago, swearing the girls to secrecy (“It’s such a well-guarded beauty secret of mine, the scent stays in the skin for days!”). Sansa stressed its secrecy to highlight its importance to her, and then waited. The next day, she hosted a card game in the Maidenvault and counted no less than three ladies of the Westerlands alone who smelled distinctly of olivewood oil.

Now Sansa’s only rub is to keep her more important affairs—affairs far more devastating than her bath perfumes—hidden from their eyes.

The maids enter the chambers demurely, curtsying in greeting to her. They turn like birds in the direction of the bed, eyes glued to the floor, and offer a curtsy to Jon. Sansa knows Jon still laughs at them at the hilarity of the first time they came to serve Sansa, the first day after her arrest. Jon had essentially been in the same position then as he is now—back against the headboard, stone naked, grinning wolfishly at Sansa. Their cheeks had burned scarlet as they sank to their knees stammering out apologies. Since that day, Sansa’s managed to get Jon to at least pull the sheets up to his waist before she lets them in.

As they rise from their curtsy, Sansa can see Jon’s grin at the memory resurfacing. She gives him a pointed look and ushers the girls towards her bathing chamber. They leave the doors between chambers wide open, and Sansa knows they are still smarting from the first day, when they tried to close them and Jon barked at them to leave it open. It’s one of the less scandalous secrets, one Sansa is happy to have the girls spread throughout the Keep. That the Prince likes to watch his Princess prepare for her day is a sign of unity between them, and it gives Sansa a much needed security blanket in the city. It also serves the double purpose of rattling the Queen, and Sansa finds her amusements wherever she can.

“Will you be dining with me this evening?” Sansa asks as she watches the girls mix milk into the warm water of her bath. “Or does our Queen have a previous claim on you?”

She doesn’t look at him, but she can feel his eyes on her as she slips into the tub. “I’m yours,” he says, and she is submerged into the water. Jeyne slowly pours water into her hair to wash out the milk, and Lilith tosses crushed citrus and flowers into the water, swirling them around.

“Excellent. We can talk about this visit to the beach. I mean to take Ghost. He’d love the water. I can hardly believe he’s never seen the sea.”

She distantly hears a knock on the door. “Don’t you dare open that,” she calls to him. “Lilith, dear, could you get the door?”

Lilith shakes the milky water from her hands and runs like lightening to answer the door before her shameless beast of a husband gets out of bed to greet the errand boy without a stitch of clothing. Which he has done before.

Lilith returns after a beat with a tea tray in her hands. Jeyne abandons pawing through the oil bottles to pull a small table closer to the bath for Lilith to place the tray onto. There’s a teapot full of hot water, a teacup, a small cloth strainer full of orange blossom tea, and a bowl of red currants Lukas has procured fresh from the city market. Jeyne pours the water into the teacup and holds the
tea through the strainer in the cup for a minute, then holds the cup out to Sansa to take. Sansa sinks further into the bath with the cup and pops a berry into her mouth as Lilith brushes aloe into her wet hair. Tyrion sent a card around sometime yesterday. She only found it when she returned from dining with Lady Kenning and Lady Marbrand, but the gist of it is that her daily schedule is going to be shaken up just a bit. She imagines Tyrion will only need a half hour at best to discuss whatever it is he wishes to discuss—surely the lords and ladies of the Maidenvault can carry the entertainment for that long without her?

The girls stiffen and focus their gazes like beams of light upon the floor, which Sansa takes to mean that Jon has entered the bathing chamber. Sure enough, the brush of his lips across her wet cheek comes only a second later.

“You’re scandalizing my handmaids, you fiend.” she says.

“I remember these two,” he says into her ear as his lips trail down to her jaw. “They served Dany the first year I was married to her. Let them take this back to her.”

So they’re Daenerys’ spies, then? Sansa isn’t surprised in the slightest. Except she had imagined that perhaps the Queen might have attempted to be a tad craftier about spying on her.

Sansa pops another currant into her mouth. “This is why I say you are a beast,” she says exasperatedly to Jon, who is already blazing a trail to her waist beneath the water.

He grins. “Leave us,” he says to the maids. “Unless you’d like to stay and watch?”

When Sansa turns her head, the hem of Jeyne’s skirts is vanishing behind the rapidly closing doors.

“This is why it takes me two damn hours to get ready!” she huffs halfheartedly, but Jon is already lifting her waist to better his access to her legs.

“Shhh...” he whispers as his lips quiet hers. She puts her teacup onto the table and gives it a slight push so it doesn’t catch any splashing water.

Jon’s hands are rough as sandpaper, but his touch is exceedingly gentle, and her skin is so softened from the water that the slightest touch from him leaves a bright pink mark. “Not on my neck, not on my neck, not on my neck,” she says quickly, pushing his head away. “My gown has a boat-neck cut.”

Jon pauses. “What the fuck is a boat-neck cut?”

“It’s…not really important. Just don’t touch my neck.”

“As my queen commands.”

“Don’t let your aunt hear you saying that,” she says.

“Pour her some of that tea and she can watch the show,” he growls as his fingers probe and tease. She gasps, gripping the edges of the tub and sitting upright.

Knock knock knock.

“FUCK. OFF.” Jon bellows, eyes glued to Sansa’s face.

“Your Grace...a thousand pardons,” and to be fair, the voice on the other side of the door really seems to mean it. “The Princess has a visitor!”
"You may tell the visitor that the Princess will see to them once she’s been thoroughly ravished," Jon says, and Sansa’s face burns scarlet.

"You’re incorrigible," she hisses. He pointedly begins to kiss at her neck. "Not my neck, you bastard!" she whispers hotly.

"My Prince, I would not disturb you—it is Arya Stark."

"Arya?" Sansa shoves Jon hard. His startled grunt is swallowed as he splashes into the water, and she climbs out before he can react. She hurries to the bedside and pulls her robe on, tying it around her body.

When she opens the door, a face she does not at all recognize is on the other side, gleaming in golden guard armor. "A thousand pardons again, Princess. She arrived only a few moments ago."

"I’ll be dressed in a moment," she says quickly. "See to it that she’s waiting for me in the gardens."

The guard looks around the chamber. "Is Your Grace by herself?" he asks.

Sansa cocks a brow. "That’s an odd question. I am with my husband." she replies.

"I inquire after your maids, Princess. Are they not to your liking?"

"My maids are perfectly adequate, Ser. They have been temporarily dismissed."

The man's eyes drift over Sansa's shoulder, and she looks back. Jon has emerged from the bathing chamber, soaked and looking an awful lot like a wet pup. Sansa smiles.

"Arya is here," she tells him. "Good luck trying to scare her off by acting a beast."

Jon gives her a smoky smirk. "What are you talking about? She’ll probably hold the door open and then parade through the halls inviting the Queen to come and see. Isn’t that right, Arya?"

Sansa looks back at the man. He pushes Sansa inside and closes the door behind him, and then reaches upwards. Sansa barely has time to register what's happening before she turns away in disgust. There's something particularly slimy about watching Arya pull of a face. All the same, she embraces her once it's off.

"What on earth are you doing here?" she asks.

"I came as quickly as I could once Bran told me," she says.

"Told you what?"

"That you'd been arrested," Arya says. "Jon, put some clothes on. I told you," she says, looking back to Sansa. "I told you I'd slit her throat if she tried anything. You've been here scarcely a month and already she's gotten cocky."

Sansa sighs, kissing Arya's cheeks. Arya nearly swats her face, but seems to decide better of it. "I have to explain this all to you, I see," Sansa says. She gestures to the chairs by the balcony. "You'd best get comfortable."

"Not too comfortable," Arya says, shaking her head. "You're going to have quite a day."

"What do you mean?"
"I mean there's something huge going on near the Kingswood," Arya says.

Sansa furrows her brow. 'What do you mean?"

Arya doesn't reply, because just as she opens her mouth to, Jon laughs. It's the darkest, most self-satisfied sound she's ever heard.

She looks at him. "Jon, what did you do?"

He just smiles, almost to himself.

"Jon," Sansa says again, turning herself fully to face him. "What did you do?"
“I’m absolutely serious, Jon,” Sansa says. “You tell me what you did this instant.”

Jon shakes his head. “Better if neither of you know,” he says. “Plausible deniability and all that.”

“Did you kill anyone?” Arya asks.

“You don’t know what happened?” Sansa asks her.

Arya shakes her head. “Nope. Bran mentioned while I was on my way out that I should steer clear of the Kingswood. And then when I first rode into the city, I saw some palace guards headed out there. Speaking of Kingswood, Jon—” Arya gestures to the general area surrounding his lower half. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

Sansa looks back long enough to toss one of the bedsheets at him. “I have no time for this. Who else knows you’re here?”

“No one. It’d be easier to slaughter Queen Delirium Tangential if she isn’t aware there’s another wolf in the city.”

“We’re not going to slaughter her,” Sansa says firmly.

“She’s got an excellent point,” Jon says.

“Absolutely not,” Sansa says again, more firmly this time.

“Why not?” Arya says.

“Because if we do, then history will only see it as more senseless violence for that stupid chair,” Sansa says. “And Tyrion and Varys and I have been working on a much more diplomatic way to make this work. It won’t help our arrangements if the Queen is overthrown by murder. If people are going to accept this plan, then we need to be seen as rational, non-murderous human beings. *Diplomatic people*. Do you both understand?”

Arya huffs and crosses her arms. Sansa raises a brow. Arya nods stiffly. Sansa turns to Jon, who holds up his hands in surrender, thus releasing his grip on the sheet wrapped around his waist and allowing it to fall to the ground. Arya gags.

“For the love of—” she turns away. “Put some fucking clothes on, dammit!”

Sansa hurries into the adjoining room to change. Her gown for today is laid out on the pouf in the very center of the space, a vibrant cobalt green thing that brings out the red in her hair. She pulls it on hastily and slips into her shoes, then takes her earrings with her and runs back into the bedchamber. Jon has rewrapped the sheet around his waist, and Arya has apparently found the cup of orange blossom tea.

“This tastes like shit,” she says flatly. “I thought you preferred chamomile?”

“I do,” Sansa says. “Except orange blossom tea is a prime Dornish export.”

“And?”

“And people here tend to copy whatever I do.”
“So?”

“So,” Sansa says as she sits at her vanity and puts on her earrings. “Monkey see, monkey do. Rules of court life. They see me drinking orange blossom tea, they start drinking orange blossom tea. Dorne becomes bombarded with orders, giving them an economic in and a reason to throw their support behind us.”

“So you are actually doing something?” Arya says. “Not just planning, but actually doing?”

“Of course,” Sansa says. “It takes time to gather support and build trust. Right now, the Red Keep is essentially torn in half between the faction that supports Daenerys, and the faction that supports Jon. Hers grows smaller every day. She’s too flighty, changes her mind and changes it again too often. People are slowly jumping ship because they see it’s much more reasonable and profitable to be throwing their hat in with us. Now if you two don’t mind, I have to go meet with Tyrion early. I’d rather get this out of the way. Where’s the brush?” she wonders, looking around.

“It’s there,” Arya says, pointing at Sansa’s hairbrush.

Sansa shakes her head. “No, that’s mine. I want Ghost’s hairbrush,” she says, and she pulls open a drawer. “There!” she picks up the fine bristled brush by its mother-of-pearl handle and gets to her feet. “Jon, have Ghost meet me in the Godswood. Stay out of sight, Arya. We’ll speak later.” Sansa kisses Arya’s cheek.

Jon sits up. “Where’s my kiss?”

Sansa turns long enough to blow him a kiss and then pulls open the door. Jon’s groan is swallowed by the closing of the door. As she steps out into the hall, the Blackguard fall into silent step around her. They stand out, this guard, as they wear solid black armor instead of royal gold. Sansa hates what their presence does—as it only feeds the tension—but she can’t deny that she’s far less likely to be harassed by the palace guards—most of whom are firmly within Daenerys’ support faction—with them around.

Lilith and Jeyne are standing at the very end of the hall. Sansa pauses and does a quick spin for them. “Is everything in place?” she asks then.

Jeyne rushes forward and fastens something on Sansa’s back. “Just that last button,” she says.

Sansa smiles at her. “Thank you, ladies. I’m off to the Godswood. I’ll need one of you to send word to the Lord Hand to meet me there immediately.” They sink into a curtsy. “Girls?” Sansa calls. They turn back. “I do mean immediately.”

They nod and hurry off. It occurs to Sansa that they’ll most certainly be informing Daenerys of the fact that Sansa is going to be speaking to the Hand in the privacy of the Godswood, and she decides that a) she doesn’t care, b) neither does Tyrion, and c) if the Queen ever asks, she’ll just tell her that she meant to ask Tyrion to persuade the Queen to come to the Maidenvault.

Sansa finds Ghost waiting faithfully in the Godswood. He lifts his head when she arrives, leaving the Blackguard only as shadows twenty feet away. “Good morning, my love!” she says as she sinks to her knees and hugs his neck. He licks at her cheek. “Did you sleep well?”

“I slept beautifully, thank you.”

Sansa turns and gives Tyrion a look. “I was talking to Ghost.”

Tyrion pretends to look wounded. “Your new guards seem diligent,” he remarks as he takes a seat
“They’re quite something, aren’t they?” she asks. “They’ve sworn themselves to Jon the way a Septon does to the Seven. It’s quite alarming. And their presence has brought me no small amount of worry. We might find ourselves in trouble with the Faith.”

“I don’t think we need to worry too much about them,” Tyrion says.

Sansa raises a brow, not taking her eyes off of Ghost’s back. “Don’t we? I understand whatever survived of the Faith Militant is silent, but not exterminated.”

“They are too few in number to be a problem anymore,” Tyrion says. "Even they know better than to mess with a man who defeated death twice,” Tyrion says. “And certainly one who has a dragon that seems to grow larger every day.”

Sansa remembers a brief line in her history books from her childhood in Winterfell. “Jon is no Maegor the Cruel.”

“No, but he is certainly no Jahaerys the Conciliator, either,” Tyrion says.

Sansa sighs. “He is more reasonable,” she says.

“No,” Tyrion corrects. “He is controllable. And only by you.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yes, you are. And you’ve done an absolutely stunning job since you arrived,” Tyrion says. “This new fixation everyone has with saltwater pearls, this new tea fad, your frequent visits into the city…Varys has informed me that the citizens are very openly endorsing Aegon Targaryen and his Princess.”

Sansa nods. “So it’s working. What about the Reach? What’s the situation there?”

“Still tenuous, I’m afraid,” Tyrion says. “They’d be more openly in Jon’s favor, except the Queen has burned them before. They fear she might destroy whatever is left if they come out and endorse Jon openly.”

“The Riverlands have no such qualms, I assume?” Sansa asks, moving to the back leg.

“None whatsoever. Your uncle stands behind you in every way excepting the official one.”

“The Stormlands?”

“With Gendry having taken up the name Winters, leadership of the Stormlands still remains firmly in the Queen’s grasp,” Tyrion says. “And while he’s in Winterfell, he cannot call himself its lord.” Tyrion is silent for just a moment as Sansa brushes along the front leg. She knows what he will say before he says it. “It would solve the problem entirely if he were to move himself there.”

“Gendry absolutely cannot claim Storm’s End,” Sansa says firmly. “If he leaves Winterfell, Robb’s claim is endangered. A Baratheon cannot rule over Winterfell.”

“I understand. He is, however, the only remaining Baratheon in existence.”

Sansa scoffs. “The only known remaining one. I refuse to believe Robert only sired bastards in King’s Landing. He had bastards even when Jon’s mother was alive, Gods rest my sweet aunt’s soul. Joffrey and Cersei didn’t send assassins all the way to Storm’s End.”
Tyrion looks at her. “You want to start another hunt?”

Sansa finally looks up from brushing, Ghost’s tail clutched gently in her hand. “We’re not going to kill any of them,” she says firmly. “We just need one.”

“It’d be difficult to find one,” Tyrion says. “And even if we do, we’d have to be sure they can handle the responsibilities of a lordship—”

“I understand,” Sansa says, looking back at Ghost’s tail and brushing it until it shines. “It makes sense, really, that you’d be so eager to throw your cap behind a former blacksmith who couldn’t even spell his own name before I taught him how two years ago, but you draw the line anywhere else.”

Tyrion smirks. “Fair point.”

“So we’ll launch another search?”

Tyrion nods. ‘Perhaps Varys’ little birds may be useful. I know of one or two such bastards…but one is a woman in the Vale and the other—a young man—escaped to the Free Cities.’

“If we want to win over the Stormlands, they’ll only follow a man,” she says. “So if Lord Varys happens to know where in the Free Cities this boy is—and perchance he’s not a complete twat—that’d be lovely.”

Tyrion chuckles. “I doubt we’ll have half the good luck we had with Gendry. I wonder at the likelihood that Robert sired two mild-mannered young men?”

Sansa shrugs. “As long as he does his part in stabilizing the Stormlands, I don’t suppose we can ask for much more. Such a man would need the support of the other lords. Wasn’t Stannis wed to a Florent?”

“Yes, but his mother was an Estermont.”

“We’ll search among the Estermonts for a bride, then. It might make the other Stormlords nostalgic enough to back him.”

Tyrion is silent for long enough that Sansa looks up from brushing Ghost’s coat. He is smiling at her.

“What?” she asks.

He shakes his head slowly, as if in disbelief. “Nothing,” he says. “I just—I knew you could survive King’s Landing. And you did. With nothing. But watching how far you can get with something—”

Tyrion sighs, leaning back leisurely. “Westeros has been waiting for centuries to have a queen like you.”

Sansa smiles in spite of herself. “My lord—that’s treasonous,” she says. “You’ll upset my digestion talking like that.”

Tyrion shudders. “Please don’t tell the Prince, he’d have my head if he knew I upset you.”

Sansa’s smile fades slowly at the mention of Jon. Tyrion notices.

“What is it? Trouble in paradise? I happen to have it on excellent authority that the Prince is in far better spirits lately, so I doubt that’s the case.”
Sansa shakes her head. “He’s done something,” she says. “And I wonder what it could mean.”

“Perhaps that would depend on what something is,” Tyrion says.

“He will not say,” Sansa says. “He doesn’t want me to know. Calls it plausible deniability.”

Tyrion sits up straighter at this, brows furrowed. “Those two words are not ones that I imagine one typically associates with harmless practical joking.”

“I know,” Sansa says. “I’ve made him understand that the Queen is not to be harmed, but I worry that he might try to find some way around that. There’s something—I mean to ask you. Has anything happened in the Kingswood lately?”

Tyrion shrugs. “The Queen hardly tells me anything anymore. But I did get the impression that something was afoot in that general area. Why do you ask?”

Sansa sighs as she moves at last to brush along Ghost’s head. He practically purrs like a cat as she does. “I thought I heard someone say that they noticed guards headed into the woods.”

“I might head into the city today,” Tyrion says. “Perhaps to sample some Dornish wine. I’ll see what Varys knows. His little birds don’t typically go into the woods, so he might not have much. But the more we know, the better, yes?”

Sansa nods as she finishes up at last. “The more we know,” she agrees. She pulls the white hairs caught in the bristles. “You’re shedding, boy,” she says to Ghost, who does a spiffing job of ignoring her as he snoozes in the shade of the tree. “Let me know what Varys says. And bring me a cask of white, would you? Something sweet.”

Tyrion gets to his feet and bows. “At your service, Princess,” he says with absolute and utter pomposity.

Sansa tries—and fails—to hide a smile.
Sansa elects to skip the morning review outside of the Great Hall after her meeting with Tyrion in the garden, and instead holes herself up in her chambers with Arya. There’s a massive bowl of fruit on the floor by the bed they’re leaning against, and another platter of assorted meats that Ghost is brunching on.

“He’s getting spoiled,” Arya says as she burps loudly, then blows the air into Sansa’s face.

Sansa scrunches her nose. Raspberries and orange blossom tea. “Thanks,” she says. “He needs a good spoiling, don’t you, my darling?” she says, running her fingers over the stub of his torn ear. He’s resting his head on her lap, tongue darting out lazily to lick at the blood sausages on his plate.

“He’s resting his head on your lap, tongue darting out lazily to lick at the blood sausages on his plate.

“Where’s Jon skipped off to?” Arya asks. “What does he do when you’re lounging about in here?”

“This time of day he’s in the training yard,” Sansa says. “Making fools out of seasoned fighters. He has lots of energy to burn.”

“He used to do nothing but train when I first came to visit him,” Arya says. “I used to spar with him most days. He had lots of energy to burn there, too—but he was mostly just really angry. I dare say I like him much better now.”

Sansa tilts her head back as she swallows a raspberry. “For someone who hates fighting, he’s quite good at it.”

“He’s happy,” Arya says quietly.

Sansa lifts her head. “Hm?”

“Jon. He’s happy now. I mean—he was happy when we were at Winterfell together, but now… I’ve never seen him this happy before—like he was this morning.”

Sansa feels her cheeks warm as her heart stutters and her stomach settles contentedly. “Is it strange?”

“It’s…new,” Arya says. “Jon isn’t the type to be happy. I’m just—thank you.”

Sansa raises a brow. “For what?”

“For making him happy. For letting him make you happy. I don’t know. You could have tortured him with this marriage—I half thought you would—but he’s…he’s so happy.”

Sansa doesn’t know what to do with these words, so she just swallows more berries and scratches Ghost gently behind the ears. “He’s…he’s been kind,” she says in response.

Arya snorts. “You sound so surprised to say it.”

“Well, I don’t know what I’d been expecting when I first got here,” Sansa says. “But it wasn’t this. He’s not the same Jon anymore—not the one who left Winterfell. But he’s still…him…I think. I mean, he only eats once a day now!”

“I noticed that on my last trip down here,” Arya says, nodding.

“Exactly! But that one meal is always one of his old favorites. Shepherd’s pie, or—or garlic soup,
or pumpkin tarts—and he still takes mint and rosemary baths—"

Arya cackles so hard she nearly choke — the raspberry she’s popped into her mouth. “Does he still wash that oil into his hair to keep his curls shiny?”

Sansa blinks. “Jon uses oil to keep his hair shiny?” she asks. “What kind?”

Arya shrugs. “I saw it in his chambers a few times back in Winterfell.”

“Why didn’t you ask him what it was?” Sansa asks.

“Because I didn’t fucking care,” Arya says, popping another fruit into her mouth. “What do I care about how he keeps his hair shiny?”

“Don’t you want to have shiny hair?” Sansa asks.

Arya stares at her.

Sansa sighs. “Well, if he’s still using it—which he definitely seems to be—then that just settles my point, I suppose. He’s different, but still...Jon?”

Arya nods. “Exactly. And he’s infinitely better off now that you’re here with him.”

There’s a moment of silence where the only thing that can be heard is the sound of Ghost’s lazy breathing. Finally, Arya makes herself comfortable resting her head on Sansa’s lap, nudging Ghost’s just enough to make him whine. Sansa is left with two wolves to soothe. She does not waste her opportunity.

“How is Robb?” Sansa asks.

Arya smiles. “Growing. He’s sitting up by himself now. The Infant King.”

“Who does he look like?”

Arya draws a slow breath. “Rickon, I’d say. He looked like that as a baby.”

Sansa’s eyes burn and she runs her fingers through Arya’s hair. “I love him. Tell him for me, won’t you? Every day until I see him again and I can tell him myself.”

Arya’s fingers trace the gold beads stitched onto the silk of Sansa’s gown. “I already do.”

Sansa wipes the tear away before it can streak down her cheek. “Has Gendry been approached about the Stormlands?”

Arya grunts. “No one would dare. And whoever does usually has to go through Lord Manderly first. And Lord Manderly has all sorts of elegant and genteel ways to tell people to fuck off.”

“Has he begun expanding the glass houses yet?” Sansa asks.

“We’re due to start in a month, I think. Gendry is overseeing it with him.”

“Make sure that once the plans are set, you order glass from the Iron Islands,” Sansa says. “They’ve got so much sand to spare, and lately they’ve been training specialized glass blowers. Theon and Yara are opening a forge on Pyke, but they need a large contract to really get it going, and—”
Arya’s sticky, raspberry covered hand reaches up blindly and gently lands on Sansa’s entire face. “Shh,” she says. “It’s done, Sansa. The north is free, and it’s safe, and it’s in excellent hands. You’ve done right by us all. You can rest, now.”

Sansa smiles as she pushes Arya’s hand away. “I’m afraid I’m facing a ‘rest when I’m dead’ arrangement at the moment.”

Sansa tilts her head back and leans against the bedding. Ghost’s tongue darts out to lick the raspberry juice from Arya’s fingers. “Ew, no,” she says weakly, fighting off a yawn. “You’re going to be such a fucking queen,” Arya mumbles quietly as Ghost continues to lick her fingers. Sansa says nothing to this as the afternoon wears on.
Sansa has to delay her entrance to the Maidenvault a few minutes to pick loose the hairs that Ghost left on her skirts when he and Arya made cushions out of her lap. Once the fabric is clean, she arrives to find that the day’s entertainment hasn’t yet begun. Some small part of her feels sorry to have kept them all waiting, but the more calculating part of her feels triumphant that her presence is so important that they felt they could not begin without her.

Today they are playing cards. They play at tables of four each, with at least seventy people in the room. The increasing number of lords attending these little gatherings alongside the ladies makes Sansa feel confident that their faction is growing.

“My mother’s been in such a state all week,” Milla Rosby says curtly as soon as Sansa’s seated.

Sansa’s chosen as her playing partners today Milla Rosby, Alys Whent, and Anna Ashford. She doesn’t really need Alys Whent as anything but a red herring to distract Anna Ashford, because her real target is Milla, as Milla’s eldest sister is believed to be in some sort of courtship with the Marbrand heir in the Westerlands, and until Tyrion finds a wife—finally giving Casterly Rock a lady—that makes Milla Rosby’s eldest sister quite possibly the future leading social authority in the Westerlands, which means that insipid little Milla Rosby needs to be made a friend of until Sansa can convince Tyrion to get over his fear of matrimony. And it helps that insipid Milla Rosby—who thinks herself so very clever—has elected to bank on this opportunity to try and wheedle information regarding Sansa’s personal tailoring secrets out of her.

Sansa pretends to be interested as she looks at her cards. Her hand is not favorable—as appears to have been the case all her life—but that’s no guarantee of losing. “I hope nothing serious is amiss?”

Milla groans. “She’s been writing me without relief for days. She’s cottoned onto this pearl fixation, only she keeps asking me to show her the difference between saltwater and freshwater pearls. She thinks she can source pearls for her own jewels locally.”

Sansa hides her frown. “Freshwater pearls are easy to come by,” she says carefully. “I personally prefer the ones found near Blueburn in the Reach. But they’re much better suited to being tailored into clothing.”

Milla’s eyes flash excitedly, and Sansa pretends she hasn’t noticed it. “I’ve never seen you to wear pearls stitched into your gowns, Princess,” Milla says slowly, and Alys Whent and Anna Ashford lean in closer to gauge Sansa’s reaction to giving this information away.

It's no real pain for Sansa to be giving away spoilers about her clothing. A well-dropped hint is necessary now and again. Especially if insipid Milla Rosby's eldest sister could take it with her to Ashemark.

“I intend to, soon,” she says. “My tailor’s working on something now. Tell you mother that saltwater pearls are my personal preference, as they have a unique luster and sheen you simply can’t find in freshwater varieties. Your lead, Lady Anna,” she adds, turning to her left.

As the game progresses, she wonders how fast Anna Ashford, Milla Rosby, and Alys Whent can spread the news that she intends to wear a gown embroidered with freshwater pearls. The Reach can use all the help they can get—but she isn’t sure how many of their fishermen know much about pearl diving. Surely the lords along the Blueburn will be able to train men fast enough to
meet the sudden influx of orders?

If that’s going to work, then she’s going to need the gown to be ready within the next three days, while the gossip mill is still hot. There are thirty ladies wearing earrings of pearls from the Iron Islands today. And with their frequent writing home, word is spreading fast. But jewels and gowns are different subjects entirely. Gown fads change much quicker. She needs to move fast. Her poor tailor Master Buxton already has twelve seamstresses working to stitch her gown. He hardly ever complains—she’s given him so much business—but he’s been going off for weeks about how she’s going to need to provide him with his own private workshop for her commissions. If she’s going to keep up the way she is, she might just have to.

Now how on earth is she going to bring flower crowns into vogue? If she wears them alone, they might call it a fancy. She’ll need to be seen wearing them along with several other ladies for the idea to truly take root. Three or four—just enough so that people might assume there’s a clique of sorts with inside access they’re not privy to—nothing will drive them madder. Flowers grow much faster than crops—the Reach could possibly be sustained on that business alone until something can be done about the wheat fields.

But who she chooses to be a part of this little clique is another problem she doesn’t like to think about. It would be understood that whoever partakes in this trend alongside her is possibly going to be a Lady in Waiting of hers. And dammit—she isn’t familiar enough with any of the ladies at court to know which of them can be trusted. The major surviving houses would be ideal to choose from, except she doesn’t know any of the daughters of their offshoot branches—the Tyrells are wiped out, as are the Lannisters until Jaime or Tyrion can get fucking busy, the North is beyond consideration as it raises unsavory questions about potential consolidation of Winterfell’s power over the south, the Greyjoys would literally never (unless Theon has a pretty cousin he’d be willing to send south). So Sansa’s remaining choices would be from among the Martells or perhaps Talla Tarly. Talla Tarly is a sound choice—sharing blood with one of the Prince of Dragonstone’s closest friends—and she’s currently fielding suitors who are desperate to get their hands on Horn Hill. In a move of unprecedented stupidity—and to absolutely no one’s surprise—Daenerys elected not to release Sam from his vows as a maester so that he can assume his position as the Lord of Horn Hill. Ignoring any and all counsel to the contrary—his recognized status as a hero of the Great War, the first man in millennia to kill a White Walker, his status as the first born son of Randyll Tarly, his familiarity with basically everyone who matters in the Reach, and his likeability and ability to rally the Reach-born lords in the Crown’s favor—Daenerys seemed to turn down every possible argument because she believed it would do her no good to bring Sam into a position of power when she is guilty of roasting his father and brother in their armor.

Which makes sense, sort of, except Sam is infinitely more useful stabilizing the Reach than he is serving on the Regency of the New Wolf in Winterfell. While Sam is not allowed to inherit Horn Hill, Talla Tarly’s mere existence as an unmarried woman places Tarly control of the Reach in jeopardy. Sansa is well versed in the hidden terrors of being the key to a kingdom. It would be safer to move Talla to King’s Landing until Sam’s been installed in Highgarden as the Warden of the South, removing Talla from danger and giving her room to choose who’d rule Horn Hill with her—or for her if she's lazy. Serving as Sansa’s Lady in Waiting would give Talla access to the highest caliber of suitors available, and she’d actually get to choose one as opposed to waiting for someone to molest her and then be forced to marry him to save herself from the inevitable fall from grace. Or worse—have one of the Queen’s faction put himself forward.

Honestly, Sansa isn’t even sure how the girl lasted this long without being shackled to someone. But Sansa likes Sam, and saving his sister from having to marry a buffalo is just what friends do.

Daenerys will put up a fight if she hears of this choice. Sansa blows this off. If it disturbs her so
greatly, she can take it up with Jon. In fact, Sansa makes a mental note of informing Jon of this early, so he’s ready to take on his aunt when the time comes. There will be no question who has really made the decision, but Sansa likes it infinitely better if the order is seen coming directly from Jon.

The Martells are another situation entirely. There’s no question of Sansa having at least one (1) Dornish Lady in Waiting, but Alorayne Martell has no sisters to spare, with Arianne slaughtered by the Sand Snakes and Reina dead in childbirth. His little daughter Vera Sand is a wee babe of four years, and his surviving niece is married to a Volantene nobleman and living in the Free Cities. Sansa’s been entertaining the idea of having him select a lady for her himself from one of the daughters of his most loyal vassals. It would further the bond of trust between them and the Dornish, and the girl is likely to be an Yronwood or a Dayne, both of whom have near legendary status in King’s Landing. The Yronwood lord is still called Bloodroyal, and no one is ever likely to forget Arthur Dayne.

And while she’s thinking of the Dornish, Sansa wonders why the fuck Daenerys decided to snub them so for not appointing a Dornish knight to her Queensguard. Surely Sansa can understand the Dornish were annoyed with her for siding with the Sand Snakes, but even Daenerys can’t have missed the impertinence of being so butthurt that she’d refuse to attempt to smooth things over? In that way, she could at least have been able to pretend that she had been a foreign queen poorly advised and accepting whatever Westerosi help was available to her at the time, even if that help took the form of a bunch of kinslaying snakes in the sand. But instead—and again, to no one’s surprise—Daenerys instead elected to remedy the situation by choosing to pretend that Dorne basically didn’t exist and doled out what Sansa can only assume the Queen believed to be a sort of punishment by snubbing them, which really backfired because all it did was create a breeding ground for the anti-Daenerys movement to really pick up momentum as she suffered false alarm after false alarm during her disastrous marriage.

Really, it’s just one clusterfuck after another. Sansa has a blinding headache just thinking about how one person could run an entire continent so deep into a pile of shit. Surely such shoddy work has to be done on purpose? No one is accidentally this bad.

“Your lead, your Grace,” Alys Whent says from beside her.

Sansa takes a sip of her honey-lemon juice and makes her play.
After saying her goodbyes to the lords and ladies at the Maidenvault—and wondering how quickly Alys Whent, Anna Ashford, and Milla Rosby can gossip—Sansa retires to her apartments, not to be confused with her chambers, which are generally off limits to anyone. Her apartments include her study (which she knows is regularly searched on orders of the Queen) and her parlor where she entertains private guests (which she has not yet done).

Jeyne and Lilith are waiting by the doors, and Sansa gives them a sweet smile. “Your services won’t be needed right away,” she tells them. “I’ll be expecting you at dinner.”

They curtsy grudgingly and leave. Sansa wouldn’t have a problem bringing a handmaid into her apartments, except these two can be depended on to talk about her future ensembles much quicker than any lady at court can, and if two maids have access to the same information that those ladies have, then the information loses its value. What’s more, no one will trouble to learn the information through Sansa if they can simply bribe it out of a maid. And there’s the pickle of Sansa not being able to control the information that makes its way into the ears of the court, which is really just an entirely different headache.

Oh, Myrna, she thinks miserably as she collapses onto a pouf with a glass of lemonade. I’m perfectly miserable without you.

Master Buxton, and the jeweler Master Giles shuffle into the room together. As per usual, Master Buxton is aided by no less than four gentlemen carrying massive boxes upon boxes of fabrics, and one of them rushes to the corner to bring out the mannequin.

“Good afternoon, Master Buxton. I hope business is good?”

Buxton sniffs as he dusts imaginary particles off of his shoulder. "It’d be much better, I imagine, if I had a separate atelier for Your Grace,” he says with dignity.

Giles rolls his eyes, lowering his own massive wooden box onto the table and taking a seat beside Sansa. “I’ve got quite a surprise for you, Princess,” he says as he unlocks the box with a small key handed to him by his attendant. “Pulled straight from the western coast of SaltCliffe.”

He pulls back the lid on the box to reveal a hundred small compartments, each gleaming or glittering in the light. The attendant pulls back the curtains to let more light in, and Sansa’s eyes gloss over the rubies, diamonds, emeralds, sapphires and amethysts to the compartment he is pointing at. Sansa leans in to get a closer look.

“What is that? Is that a pearl?” she asks.

Giles reaches into the compartment and plucks one from the assortment. “Indeed. Lovely thing, isn’t it?” He holds it out to her.

She takes it into her palm and holds it up to the light. “I didn’t know they came in black,” she says. “Is it a rare thing?”

“The divers we purchased from do not say it is so,” Giles tells her. “Only the black variety tend to form in oysters living along SaltCliffe isle, just a stone’s throw away from Pyke. I’ve already recruited dozens of divers to procure more. Isn’t it a luscious thing?”

Sansa turns it this way and that, watching the different colors shine across the surface. “Quite,” she
agrees. “I wonder how they’d look set with rubies?”

Giles is already holding up a ruby the size of a date for comparison. “A fine necklace we could make for the Princess of Dragonstone,” he says.

Sansa nods, putting the pearl back into its compartment. Her eye catches something else in the box. “What is that?”

“That? Oh, that is jade. It’s commonly worn in Leng and YiTi.”

“Surely it’s not surging in popularity here, is it?” Sansa asks.

“Not quite,” he says. “We could pull something together for you, I’m sure.”

Sansa shakes her head. “I’m trying to push pearls in and the fad is still too fragile. We’ll give it another year or two—might be we’ll open trade negotiations with the far east then. But keep that jade close. I like the look of it.”

Giles nods, already scribbling designs for the black pearl and ruby necklace onto a thick sheet of parchment being braced on a stand by his attendant.

Buxton has, during this time, finished pinning his latest gown to the mannequin. He clears his throat to get her attention as his young assistants lift the mannequin and bring it closer to Sansa’s seat. “Sixteen seamstresses took 400 hours to stitch every last stone,” he says proudly.

“I thought it was only twelve?” Sansa says.

“And I thought I said I needed a workshop?” Buxton snaps, and then collects himself, the color returning to his corpulent, portly face as he remembers to breathe. “Forgive me, Your Grace,” he says. “The work of an artist is…most distressing.”

“I can scarcely imagine,” Sansa says. “But your work is splendid, really. Your seamstresses will be handsomely rewarded in thanks. Tell them to expect a pay rise.”

Buxton seems to inflate slightly at this, making his massive middle expand even further. “Your Grace is too kind.”

“And your work is too perfect,” she says, getting to her feet and running a hand down the length of the fabric. “Is this a blend?” she asks.

“It is. I understand you are partial to thicker fabrics, but down here the heat could make you swoon. This crepe is lighter and thinner—one of my newest secrets. It can’t hold as many jewels as pure fabric can, but it’s infinitely easier to move in—if Your Grace is partial to dancing.”

Sansa’s fingers trail over the pearls and crystals, and she gives the fabric a shake to watch it sparkle. “And the pearls are freshwater, aren’t they?” she asks. “I’ve given some friends reason to expect to see them.”

“Indeed,” Buxton nods. “From the Trident. Ruby Ford, to be precise.”

Sansa drops the fabric and turns to look at him. “I expect that specific detail to be kept between us,” she says firmly. “The Queen might take offense at the sight of her Princess wearing a gown embellished with pearls pulled from the site of her brother’s death.”

Buxton nods quickly. “I’ll tell them I got them from—”
"The Mander," Sansa says. "Specifically, the Blueburn tributary."

Buxton nods. "I happen to know there are freshwater pearls to be found in that general area," he says. "And I’m sure the Reach would be grateful for the business influx."

"Hm," Sansa agrees, saying nothing else. "This is only for viewing today, yes? It’s not prepared for fitting."

"Not today, regrettably," Buxton says, shaking his head. "But give it another fortnight. I’m sure it’ll be prepared by…whenever Your Grace should need it."

Sansa looks over the gown, taking in the soft white fabric, the grey pearls, the glittering crystals. "It reminds me of my wedding gown," she says quietly.

"I’ve seen that piece," Buxton says. "Whoever crafted it was clearly a master."

Sansa turns to Buxton, smiling. "Thank you," she says.

The distant rattling of armor beyond makes everyone look to the doors. All is silent for a moment, and then the door swings open. It’s being held by Captain Ryke, the frightening leader of the Blackguard, gleaming in his coal colored armor. He has opened the door just enough to allow Ghost entry, and Buxton pales at the sight of him.

"That wolf—" he nearly chokes as his face turns puce.

"At ease, Buxton," Sansa says. "He’ll not be hurting you."

"He’ll not—he can tear me to shreds if he pleases," Buxton says quickly, body jiggling as he dashes to the mannequin and stands before it protectively, holding his hands out as if shielding his firstborn daughter. "But heaven and earth—keep him away from the gown!"

Giles chuckles darkly as he packs away his box and hands it to his attendant. He pushes the parchment he’d been sketching on towards Sansa. "For your review, Princess," he says as Sansa looks at the charcoal sketch of the pieces. "To go with that pretty gown Buxton’s salivating over, consider white pearls and white jade. Clustered together, they can make quite a striking pair of earrings."

Sansa giggles as Ghost inches closer to the mannequin, ignoring Buxton's tortured whimpers. "I’d like to see a sample of these earrings tomorrow, if you can manage it."

Giles and his attendant sink into bows and laugh their way out the door as Buxton tries to shoo Ghost away with his foot.

"Ghost, leave him be," Sansa says, patting the spot on the pouf beside her. "You know you’re not supposed to be in here while I’m consulting with my colleagues."

Ghost comes dashing towards her and lays his head onto her knees, and Sansa frowns when she sees that his eyes are violet gray. Buxton heaves a sigh of relief as he urges his assistants to quickly unpin the gown from the mannequin and pack it away before it can come to any damage.

"What’s happening?" she asks quietly.

Ghost only whines, nosing her cheek affectionately.

"Jon," she says quietly. "Come here and speak to me, or go away. Either way, give me back
Ghost.

Ghost blinks, and his eyes are beet red again. Sansa hugs him. “I hate it when he uses you,” she says. “I’ll kill him if he does it again, I promise,” she assures Ghost. He dips his tongue into her lemonade. “Ew. Fine, it’s yours. Spoiled brat,” she says, gently pushing his head away from her lap.

The door opens again for Master Buxton and his assistants to exit, and Captain Ryke pops his head in. “Princess,” he says gruffly. “You’ve a maid come on behalf of Ser Davos.”

“Let her in,” Sansa says, and a short, thin girl enters the apartments looking as though a single stiff breeze might send her into a panic. As soon as the door is closed behind her, however, she stops and reaches up to pull her face. Sansa turns away. “Dammit, Arya, give me a moment’s notice, would you?”

Arya snorts. “I’ve been wearing this damn thing ever since you went to the Maidenvault. Did you know that two of the Queensguards are fucking each other?” she asks.

“I wasn’t aware, no. I’m not sure how it matters—don’t drink that, Ghost stuck his tongue in it.”

Arya scrunches her nose and lowers the glass of lemonade to the ground. “Well, I’ve been busy.”

“I’ve gathered. What’s been afoot?”

“Those men who rode into the Kingswood?” Arya says. “They haven’t come back yet.”

Sansa shrugs. “It’s early yet. They still have the daylight.”

“They left at dawn,” Arya says. “They should have returned by now.”

Sansa’s brow creases. “Is anyone talking?”

“Just the guards. They’re nervous, considering sending another riding out after them. They might have gotten lost. Or they might not.” The look on Arya’s face makes plain exactly which of the two she thinks is more likely.

Sansa gets to her feet. “Come with me. Put that face back on.”

“Where are we going?” Arya asks.

“Jon’s chambers,” Sansa says as she pulls open the door. “Ghost, to me. Stay close,” she adds to Arya. “That fool’s gone and made his own shoddy decision again—I swear I’ll stick his feet to the floor with pitch this time.”
We needed allies.

I chose the North.

She’ll be a good queen.

Whatever you command, we will obey.

Suffice it to say that Sansa Stark is not in any humor to entertain the idea that any plot hatched by Jon is even remotely helpful. With that in mind, she is a veritable hurricane when she storms into the darkness of Jon’s chambers.

It occurs to her that Arya might not be prepared to see Jon slow roasting on an open flame, but she is spared from having to explain this because Jon is not—as it happens—roasting on an open flame. In fact, he’s not even in his chambers.

“Where on earth has he gone off to?” Sansa wonders aloud.

“Does this mean that I’m not going to get to watch Jon get boxed around the ears?” Arya asks with the slightest twinge of disappointment.

Sansa purses her lips at her and calls out to the open door. “Captain Ryke, would you happen to know where my husband is?”

“’Fraid not, Princess,” is the instant answer. “I’ll send a runner to search for him.”

“No need,” Sansa says, eyes falling on Ghost, who is nosing at the unused bedsheets. Sansa doubts Jon has slept in his own bed once since their wedding. That bed is doing nothing now but collecting dust. She crosses the room to Ghost and rubs at his neck. “Ghost, can you help me find Jon?

Ghost looks for a moment as if she’s asked him to swallow mucus, and then he slowly leads them out of the chambers. He moves much slower than usual, measured steps and twitching ears, and Sansa wonders—not for the first time—what would have become of Lady had she been given the chance to live.

They make quite a party—Sansa, Arya disguised as a palace maid, Captain Ryke and the Blackguard, and Ghost all moving through the halls. Sansa is expected, around this time of day, to be preparing to dine. She can’t even recall who she was to dine with today. Courtiers hurrying to their dinner engagements all step aside as they pass, eyes curiously following their progress as they step out through court and enter the training yards.

Of course.

A massive throng of half-armored men forms a circle Sansa cannot peer through. She narrows her eyes as they cheer and applaud. Ghost goes toward them and does not stop moving. He noses at the side of one man, who turns and instantly jumps out of his skin in a way that makes Arya double over. Sansa takes her hand and pulls her forward, and Captain Ryke and two of his men surge forward to follow after Ghost in safely leading them through the crowd.

Sansa knows it would not be very seemly to scrunch her nose at the scent of sweat, but she’s never pretended to find any appeal in the emphatic pronunciation of a hard day’s training. And while the
men are keen on announcing it so aromatically, she has to remind herself over and over again that she is trespassing here, and this would have to be the only part of the Red Keep not designed to entertain courtiers.

The swarm of men is not a circle, but a ring. At the very center, Sansa cringes at the sight of Jon wrestling with what looks to her like the largest, ugliest man she’s ever seen. Her heart nearly stops at the mere sight of it. Both Jon and his opponent are clad in nothing but breeches and boots, rolling around on the floor like a pair of dandy teenage lovers...or what Sansa imagines that two dandy teenage lovers would look like if said lovers were hellbent on gouging each other’s eyes out.

“How do we stop this?” Sansa asks.

“I don’t know, but I hope Jon thinks to bite him,” Arya replies heartily.

Sansa glares at her.

It doesn’t take the horde long enough to realize that they have genteel company, but when they do, Sansa gives them no indication that she discourages their cheering or the fight they are cheering for. They all continue in their raucous revelry, but Sansa is grateful at least that they mind their distance.

Jon has been rolled over so that he is pinned to the ground, his massive opponent pulling back his arm and bringing his fist surging forward. Jon catches it and moves his head aside, then brings his knee up and—with a hideous thump—rams it into the man’s side. Taking advantage of the moment to roll them over so he is back on top, he then brings his fist down once—twice—thrice—into the man’s face. Sansa worries her bottom lip as she takes in the sight.

“This is barbaric,” she says.

“They look like they’re fucking.” Is Arya’s response. “Savagely.”

“Enough!” calls a familiar voice, but it is nearly swallowed by the din of the crowd. Sansa and Arya look up to see Ser Davos weaving his way to the center. “Yer Grace, he’s beaten! That’s enough!”

But Jon doesn’t seem to hear him, and the men only cheer louder, and Jon’s fist comes down again, and again, and again, and slowly, slowly, the men begin to quiet down.

“Jon, stop!” Sansa says.

His fist pauses mid-air, and his eyes, purple as amethyst, find her.

She steps forward. “He’s beaten. It’s late. I’m sure these gentlemen have been training hard. They could do with a bath and a meal.”

Jon’s breathing evens out alarmingly fast as he looks back down at the man bleeding between his knees. He gets to his feet slowly and stalks towards her, eyes narrowed.

She shakes her head, instantly knowing what is coming. “No, no, wait—” she begins, but Jon has already gripped her face in his bloody hands and pulled her towards him to catch her lips in a bruising kiss. He doesn’t pull away until she feels she could turn blue, and even then he does not release his grip on her head.

“You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” he says plainly, as if this is the simplest and easiest truth in the world.
“You’re an absolute beast,” she hisses back. “I need to speak with you.”

“As do I, Yer Grace,” Davos says, stepping forward. “Forgive me, but I’m afraid it can’t wait.”

Jon’s eyes don’t leave Sansa’s, but his head tilts slightly in Davos’ direction. “What’s this about?” he asks. “Make it quick. My princess has need of me.”

“It’s regarding the Queen,” Davos says. “Her Grace has been made aware of a riding going missing in the Kingswood earlier today.”

“That’s why I’m here as well,” Sansa says quickly, eyes darting from Davos and back to Jon. “Jon, please come with us. We can’t have this discussion out here.”

Jon leans in again and steals another kiss, this one softer than silk. “By your command,” he whispers, and his hands drop from her face.

Sansa clutches the fur of Ghost’s neck as he follows them all back inside. It takes her all of a minute to realize that the entire party seems to be following her lead. Sansa imagines that the best place to hold this discussion would ideally be her chambers, as she can have a bath drawn for Jon and possibly drown him in the water if he’s done something verifiably stupid—which she knows must be the case, because when has Jon ever done anything else?

Jeyne and Lilith are waiting by her chambers boredly when they turn the corner. At the sight of the approaching party, their eyes widen and they stand straighter. Captain Ryke and his men assume their positions up and down the hall on either side of Sansa’s door. “Have a bath prepared for Jon,” Sansa tells the girls, and they scurry off to fetch the water. Sansa pushes the door and holds it open. Jon, Arya, Ghost, and Davos shuffle inside, and she closes it behind her.

“Princess,” Davos says gruffly, holding out what looks like a handkerchief. Sansa is suddenly keenly aware of the warmth on her cheeks.

“Thank you,” she says quietly as she takes the cloth and wipes at her face. “Do you know what’s happened in the Kingswood, Ser?” she asks.

He shakes his head. “Haven’t a clue. And the queen’s men aren’t like to tell me, as none of them seem to trust me very much. I only know that a riding was apparently sent out into the wood early this morning, and they’ve yet to return.”

Sansa shifts her gaze to Jon. “Jon,” she says. “I need you to tell me what you’ve done out there.”

Jon sighs. “You’ll be complicit if you know.”

“So it’s something really awful, then?” she asks. “That’s what you meant this morning—plausible deniability?”

Jon shrugs. “I’d rather you weren’t involved.”

Sansa nearly strangles him. “I’m already involved, you blithering fool! And whatever half-baked idea you’ve cooked up in those woods—when it fails we’ll both be under water!”

“What makes you so sure it’s a bad idea?” he asks.

“It saves time,” she answers.

“Ouch,” Arya says, wincing.
Sansa sighs. “Jon, you know—you know—that you are not a paragon of sound decision making. History has proven this. And I have told you, over and over, that we cannot afford for you to be flying off on your own making judgement calls without consulting each other first.”

Jon starts, sitting up straighter. “You’re not leaving me,” he says, for the first time sounding uncertain. “I won’t do it again,” he promises.

“What did you do in the first place?” she asks.

“I warged into Rhaegal,” he says. “You saw me. That day in my chambers. When you’d been arrested.”

“You can warg into the dragon?” Arya asks incredulously.

Ser Davos eyes her. “Perhaps, miss, you might be wishing to step outside for the rest of this conversation.”

Sansa doesn’t look up from the floor as she rubs her head in a lame attempt to soothe what she feels will grow into a skull-splitting headache. “This is a friend of mine from the North, Ser Davos,” she says. “I trust her with my life.”

Davos continues to watch Arya wearing the face of a maid, and Sansa takes a seat. “Jon, what did you do as Rhaegal?”

“I went flying,” he says instantly. “Into the Reach.”

“Why did you go all the way over there?”

“I went looking for Drogon,” Jon answers. “Daenerys likes to send him around there.”

“Why does she send him there?”

“The Reach is crawling with dissenters,” Jon answers. “They’ve not forgotten the Tarlys or the harvest, seeing as it’s nearly crippled them. So she likes to send Drogon to fly about there every now and then to remind them why they should keep their dissent to themselves.”

“And you think that the sight of Rhaegal might have lifted their spirits?”

“I haven’t a clue,” Jon says, shrugging. “Wasn’t my intent.”

“What was your intent?”

“To find Drogon.”

“And I take it you were successful?” Davos asks wearily.

Jon smirks. “ Completely.”

“Jon,” Sansa says slowly. “What did you do when you found him?”

“Nothing,” Jon says.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”
“How could you have taken your dragon all the way to the Reach and done nothing?”

“Well, I was chasing after him but then I woke up because you were there,” he says. “And I wanted to go back in, except you passed out and distracted me.”

“What had you been planning on doing before you woke up?” she asks.

“Lead him back to King’s Landing,” Jon says. “Before the Reach lords got sick of the threats, decided that they didn’t care about burning, and got the entire kingdom set on fire in their anger.”


“That *has* been known to happen,” Jon says.

“And it might have helped if the Reach lords saw Rhaegal coming in to intervene,” Davos says. “It’ll help Jon’s argument later.”

Jon gives a look that plainly says he’s humoring them. “Sure.” He says.

Sansa narrows her eyes at him as a knock on the door rouses them all. “That’ll be Jon’s bath. Ser Davos, A—Alysanne, if you’ll excuse us, the Prince must prepare to dine. We’ll continue this discussion later.”

Arya sinks into the most appalling curtsy Sansa has ever seen, and it is positively dripping with sarcasm as Ser Davos tips his head and leads the way out of the chambers. Jeyne and Lilith enter immediately with two manservants carrying massive buckets of steaming water, leading them towards the bathing chamber. Sansa avoids Jon’s eye as the bath is prepared, but she can feel his on her. She allows Jeyne to pour some of the water into a basin and wipes her face completely clean of any spots she might have missed with the handkerchief. When the bath is ready, the chamber is empty save for them again. Ghost huddles himself up in Sansa’s closet. She’s too irritated to worry that he might get his hair onto her dresses.

“Get in the water, Jon,” Sansa says.

Jon doesn’t move. “You’re not angry with me?”

“I am many things right now,” she says. “Get in the bath.”

“Are you going to leave?”

“Get in the bath.”

“You’re not going to leave.”

“Jon, get into the water before I drown you,” she says flatly.

“Tell me that you’re not going to leave,” he says, matching her tone.

“I’m not going to leave,” she says.

He watches her. “Are you lying?” he asks.

“*Get in the water*,” she snaps, and finally, he obeys.

She stays in her seat as she listens to the swilling and swirling of the water nearby. Jon’s eyes are still on her.
“What’s happened in the Kingswood?” she asks. “If you sent Rhaegal after Drogon in the Reach, what has that to do with the Kingswood?”

Silence.

Sansa gets to her feet and storms over to the tub where Jon is submerged in water. She sinks onto her knees beside the tub and meets his eyes.

“Tell me what happened,” she says.

“I only got bits and pieces,” Jon answers. “I haven’t gone back into the flames since that day. So I could only see small fragments over the days since.”

“And what did you see?” she asks. “Rhaegal was with us that night, the day I found you in the flames. I remember. You had told him to go away.”

“Aye, I did.”

“Then where was Drogon?”

“Probably just entering the Kingswood, at that time.”

“Has—” Sansa breathes in slowly. “Has he been in the Kingswood this entire time, Jon?”

“I believe so.”

“The riding that went into the woods at dawn—are they safe?”

“No,” Jon says. “They’re likely dead.”

Sansa closes her eyes tightly, ducking her head to rest it on the rim of the tub. She feels trickles of warm water along her neck as Jon’s hand strokes her hair. “Drogon killed them?” she asks.

“If they’ve found him, then they’re dead.”

“Why would Drogon be hiding in the Kingswood for eight days, Jon?”

Jon sighs. “That day you got arrested,” he says. “The dragons had been fighting. Dany wouldn’t try to stop them normally, except Rhaegal’s been getting bigger lately, and she didn’t want to risk Drogon getting hurt. So she sent him to the Reach, and I thought ‘bugger that, Sansa’s been working hard to avoid a war’, so I sent Rhaegal after him, and then he chased him out of the Reach and then caught up to him somewhere near the Kingswood and I was pulled out before I could see the rest.”

“Did Rhaegal attack Drogon?” Sansa asks.

Jon nods.

“Is that why Drogon’s been hiding in the Kingswood this entire time? Because he’s wounded?”

“Yes.”

“Does the Queen know this?”

Jon sighs. “She knows they were testy around each other.”
"Jon, if Daenerys sees Drogon injured, she might blame the Reach."

Jon shakes his head. "When she sees Drogon, she'll know it was Rhaegal."

Sansa gets to her feet. "Why didn’t you tell me this?"

"Because it doesn’t matter," he says back.

"It matters!" Sansa says. "How many fucking times have I told you that you don’t get to decide on your own what does or doesn’t matter?! We're supposed to agree on this together! How many times, Jon?!"

Jon gets to his feet, the water splashing like thunder around him. "She arrested you, Sansa! She wanted to take you away from me! And still, you swore I’d lose you if I killed her! What was I supposed to do but go after him to be sure she wouldn’t do it again? What else could I have done?"

"You could have told me sooner!" she shrieks as she stomps out of the chamber.

She collapses onto the bed in a huff, thoughts racing. This is not good. Drogon’s been attacked by Rhaegal, which Sansa thinks she ought to leave Jon to smooth over once it becomes clear to his dear aunt exactly who is responsible for that. It does faintly register to Sansa that this could also be given a sound warning label to the queen. Behave because you are not invincible. But Sansa had been certain—absolutely certain—that this entire situation could be dealt with without bloodshed. Daenerys Targaryen doesn’t strike Sansa as the sort of girl to stay silent when backed into a corner—even if it’s only to buy time. She lacks the guile for such a farce.

Sansa faintly registers the approaching footsteps before Jon’s arms are wound around her. He’s pressed his body firmly against hers, and she can feel him soaking the fabric of her gown. “She won’t be able to do anything about it,” he says. “I promise.”

“How do you know?” Sansa asks. “How do you know we won’t have another Dance of Dragons on our hands as soon as Drogon heals?"

“He’ll never recover from this,” Jon murmurs between kisses he’s peppering along her shoulders.

She stiffens and turns over to face him. He’s clean and shining from the water, the candlelight giving him a warm glow. His eyes are hazy with want. “What do you mean? How serious is the injury?"

“He’ll live,” Jon says. “If he didn’t bleed to death until now, then he’ll live.”

“Then how do you know he’ll never recover?” she asks.

Jon kisses her mouth again, but unlike the hot-blooded kiss he’d stolen in the training yard, this one is gentle and soft and wordlessly sincere. “I saw him,” he says. “Rhaegal showed me what he did. He knew what I wanted him to do. He did it for me.”

“What did you want?” she asks in a whisper that Jon swallows with another gentle kiss.

Jon coos at her softly, clutching her fingers. Someone without a heartbeat shouldn't feel so warm. “I wanted Drogon to stay down,” he says.

He leans in to take another kiss, but she pushes him away and sits up. He growls at this, propping himself up with his arms. Sansa gets off of the bed. “Jon,” she says. “What did Rhaegal do to Drogon?”
“I know, I know,” Jon says. “I should have told you. I just didn’t want her to be able to hurt you. She put you in a Black Cell, Sansa! I couldn’t just—I just wanted her to learn. As you taught me. Consequences. I was just tired of watching you dance around her, work around her, accommodate her. That was my fault, and I just thought that if I could do one thing right, it would be this. If I could just make things easier for you instead of making things harder—then you’d want to stay with me. And you’d forgive me.”

He looks at her with eyes blown wide and Sansa is taken aback almost at the childlike hope she sees reflected in them. She reaches out and takes his hand, but comes no closer. He tugs at her gently, but she does not budge. Knowing full well that he once tore a door off steel hinges, she is grateful that he doesn’t pull harder.

“I will ask you this once more, and only once,” she says. “You will give me an answer, and we will move forward together. You will never keep anything from me again, and I will not leave you. Is that understood?”

He nods. “Shall we seal it with a kiss?” he asks with a small smile.

She leans forward and gives him a peck so swift that his face nearly chases hers back. He groans.

“Tell me,” she says. “What did you do to Drogon?”

The firelight flickers dully in Jon’s eyes, and she notices that they are glowing indigo. “His wings, my love,” he tells her. "I tore off his wings.”
Without giving too much away, I had an unexpected date with the Emergency Room that has delayed me from posting. To make up for it, I've given you all a particularly wordy chapter. Thanks for being patient!

Thin turkey broth. Fluffy mashed potatoes. Glistening roast beef. Thick onion soup. Seared asparagus and carrots. And one lemon cake. Tyrion has laid out quite the dinner spread tonight—they entertain many lords and ladies this evening—and Sansa mindlessly helps herself to anything and everything offered to her. Her plate is replaced at least six times throughout the meal, and she has not spoken a single word to anyone beyond her evening greeting as she takes her seat. On any other occasion, some would likely try to pull her into conversation. There is plenty of opportunity—there are at least twelve other people at this table tonight—but one of those people is her husband seated right beside her, and his intent gaze upon her and his nearly claustrophobic proximity give everyone the impression that Sansa is not to be disturbed—for the prince clearly has some business he means to discuss with his wife—and it would be most unwise for anyone to try and disrupt the conversation.

Sansa knows that this is no small thing, for Jon to be here at this dinner. From Ser Davos she learned that Jon has never—at any point in time—dined in company. Not once during his tenure as Prince Consort could he be persuaded to. Sansa knows for a fact that they have not dined together with others. When Sansa dines with Jon, they are always alone. And Jon—she knows—only eats once a day.

But it is plain that he is not here to eat tonight, as he spends the entire meal angled towards his wife, arm draped over her shoulders as he whispers into her ear. Sansa ought to be annoyed by it—and she supposes that she would be on any other occasion—but tonight it is a blessing. With Jon beside her engaging her attention, all of the other guests are discouraged from trying to pull her into conversation. Jon doesn’t actually say anything important. It’s all in the same vein as the babble he was spewing earlier.

*I did it for you.*

*My Princess.*

*My love.*

*My life.*

*My Queen.*

Every now and again she tunes back in to hear what he’s saying, makes sure it’s still the same, and returns to her thoughts with the confidence that Jon has no other declarations to be made (ones that dwell less on the concept of love and more on the subject of earth-shattering developments).

The steady, calming presence Jon provides—and his handy function as a deterrent to anyone else at the table—gives Sansa some much needed time to reevaluate her plans in light of this new
information.

Drogon is missing his wings. So he is, essentially, useless. Well, as far as Sansa knows, he can still spit fire. And if he survived having his wings torn off, that still means that he is dangerous. Likely he’s been trying to get back to his mother but has been slowed down by his newly limited movement and other pesky things like dealing with hunger. Sansa doesn’t imagine there are many hunting options for a wingless dragon. Drogon is likely taking whatever might happen upon his path: boar, elk, a particularly slow hare—an entire riding of palace guards.

Sansa shuts her eyes tightly as she forks mashed potatoes into her mouth. This is not good. And this new riding that is possibly being sent to search for the old one must be stopped before they meet the same fate. Sansa imagines she could have Tyrion give the order for the men to stay. She thinks back to their discussion in the Godwood this morning. How many people besides Jon are aware of Drogon’s injury? Surely Daenerys is not, otherwise Sansa imagines the entire city would be on high alert. Jon and the Queen have not had any arguments today—those exciting conversations of theirs are always the talk of the Keep. Sansa would have gotten wind of it. And if Daenerys is not aware, then it stands to reason that Tyrion isn’t, either. And Davos—well, in his own words the Queen’s men do not trust him much, seeing him firmly as Jon’s man.

Which really just leaves Varys, and Sansa isn’t even sure where in the city he is. No one ever has reason to bother with the Kingswood. Varys likes to know where the gossip is, but the only time the Kingswood is ever relevant is when there is a hunting party scheduled. It’s difficult to ascertain exactly how much he might know, if he knows anything at all.

Sansa huffs irately as she begins on the onion soup. Jon kisses her cheek.

“Don’t be afraid of her, love. I’d drown her in the treasures a privy before I let her blame you for this,” he says gently into her ear.

If Jon and herself are the only people who know, then they have—to some extent—some control of the situation. Drogon without wings puts a massive dent in Daenerys’ ability to maintain her power. If this news were to leak, it would send the whispers of the Queen’s unseating to a fever pitch.

Sansa pushes the onion soup away and works on the roast beef. This information cannot be contained for long, but it would ideally be made public knowledge before that second riding goes into the woods. There is no way Sansa can fathom that two ridings disappearing mysteriously in the Kingswood wouldn’t cause a major panic. At the least some would suspect a horde of absolute savages terrorizing the area. Eventually, someone will learn. And how the information reaches the world will determine how Jon is viewed by the lords and ladies whose loyalty Sansa is desperately hoping to secure without the use of abject fucking terror.

Jon runs his fingers through her hair as she sets aside the beef and washes it down with the broth. Tyrion, Varys, and herself had been planning to slowly bleed Dragon Queen’s regime. To allow the differences in policy between the Queen and her newly-remarried nephew to be made plain to the court slowly—that the courtiers might give themselves the idea that the Throne would be better off in Jon’s hands. The best way to plant an idea in someone’s mind is to allow them to do the planting. And yet Jon’s stunt has utterly shattered any chance of being able to progress naturally. They’ll need to accelerate their plans if they ever hope to stay on top of the situation.

Without a fighting dragon, Daenerys will not be able to hold onto her power. Sansa stands by her initial aspect of the plan—Jon cannot be seen actively going after the throne. Half of his appeal is that he has never wanted it, and he must continue to appear not to want it, ergo he cannot step forward and claim it unless at least thirteen (13) lords—including two great houses—suggest it to
him and make their sentiments known throughout court. Sansa had debated about a dozen, but the words ‘over a dozen’—according to Tyrion—sound better. Sansa imagines that publicly supporting Jon over Daenerys will be much easier now that there is no threat of being burned by dragonfire. Unless Daenerys decides to drag the lords out into the Kingswood all the way to wherever Drogon has managed to find shelter for himself.

Sansa drains the last of her broth and tackles the seared asparagus and carrots as she reviews the information in her mind. Drogon is without wings, and therefore will not ever survive a fight against Rhaegal, whose condition Sansa has not determined for herself, which means there is no threat remaining of a second dance of dragons. Rhaegal would be impossible for Daenerys’ army to take on, and the faction actively supporting Jon seems to be much larger than the remaining Crownlands lords who are still in support of Daenerys. Sansa frowns. How many of them are still supporting her? Not many, surely—just the coastal lords who have profited the most from the steady transport of goods to and from the Bay of Dragons.

So as far as numbers go, fate seems to be swinging in their favor. Which leaves the only anomaly—the only element that is still up in the air but can still be used to hurt them—as the actual revelation of the information regarding the dragon’s fate.

“Jon,” Sansa finally cuts his sweet murmurings short. “How many men make a riding?”

Jon blinks, thrown off by the randomness of the question. “Anything more than twelve and less than forty is a riding. Any less is a band, any more is a small escort.”

So anywhere between twelve and forty men have already died at Drogon’s feet today. And anywhere between another twelve and forty might still die. Herein lies the pickle. Pressed for time as she is, Sansa wonders if there is a delicate way to stop the riding from departing without implicating herself or Jon. There is the option to do nothing. This will no doubt appear the most natural step, as they can feign ignorance of the fight between Drogon and Rhaegal until they ‘learn’ of the injury themselves through the gossip mill—which Sansa estimates will be active with the news within the next two days at the very most and by morning at the least. They can then use their ignorance of the matter to preserve the appearance of innocence throughout the whole sad affair and allow word to spread—and therefore create the opportunity for the lords to approach Jon themselves.

But this also creates the new issue of controlling the dragons. Sansa has learned the hard way that it is extremely foolish to be feared by people. Fear breeds resentment, and eventually abates into hatred. Ruling through fear, in short, is the quickest way towards tyranny. Ruling through awe is no great feat, either. Eventually, the novelty of whatever inspired said awe will subside, as it always does, and a ruler’s relevance will drop as people search for something else awe-inspiring. Sansa recalls her own single conversation with Daenerys in her chambers, how careless she had been about being threatened by a queen who—as far as she had known—had two dragons at her disposal. If Jon is to rule through awe, then who is to say that he or Sansa won’t find themselves one day seated across from a political challenger who nurses the same blasé attitude about Rhaegal? They could burn through enemies, but that would defeat the purpose of stabilizing the kingdoms entirely.

Sansa stabs viciously at her lemon cake. Love is—as far as she can tell—infinity preferable, but it is also no great guarantee of anything. It relies too much upon popular opinion, and there will always be people who will choose not to love or even like a ruler. The Starks haven’t held the North for eight thousand years because people loved them, nor because people feared them. They held it because people respected them. It matters very little then, if people like a ruler or not. It is infinitely more critical that the ruler is respected, as respect does not hinge upon fear or awe or
love, but a delicate balance of the three. The courtiers need to like Jon enough to stand behind him, and fear him enough to never rise against him. Sansa is confident that they do fear him, and while he hasn’t done anything to harm any of them she is equally confident that while they may not like him, they prefer him to his aunt, who is sure of making enemies everywhere she goes. Sansa is in no way modest about the fact that she has contributed to Jon’s surge in popularity. He’s noted to be much more approachable these days, and an approachable king gives courtiers hope enough that they’ll be graced with his favor that they’ll gravitate towards him like moths to flame. With Davos, Tyrion, Varys, and herself guiding him, Jon is on his way to being very much the type of ruler who can maintain that steady balance of love, awe, and fear that breeds the respect the Throne will need to salvage the continent.

It will be difficult, then, to maintain that respect if it comes into question whether or not the dragons can be controlled. While they are fed livestock, no one will question them. But if something were to happen that would lead the court to wonder whether or not the kingdoms are safe from the dragons, then it casts doubt on whether or not Jon is a ruler to be respected or more a ruler to be tolerated, which is a very brittle and alarming way to maintain a court. If their hold on the south is to be maintained enough to actually keep the continent stable, then they cannot afford for Jon to be merely tolerated. A tolerated king can be challenged, and if Jon’s mettle is tested Sansa fears he might not make any bones about falling back on his aunt’s favorite pastime. Sansa doesn’t want to believe that Jon would burn the kingdoms to the ground himself, but she’d be a fool to forget his attitude when he was trying to win her in favor of their marriage.

Surely he knows she’d never forgive him if he turned into his mad grandfather? Surely he knows she wouldn’t tolerate that?

I brought this empire down around her so we could be together.
It’d turn your blood to ice to know the things I’d do for you.

I’m sick of these games and I’m sick of these people.
Give me your snipes and your rage. Give me your hatred and your storms. Give me your hand, and I’ll take all the rest.

A princess in a tower guarded by a dragon.

Sansa wants to believe that he wouldn’t go that far. That he wouldn’t stoop that low. But she’s acted on wishes and hopes before, and they have invariably failed her. Hope will not change a man’s nature. She cannot allow someone else to seize control of the Iron Throne or else they might turn their gaze on the newly independent North, therefore she cannot leave the stabilization of the continent in another’s hands—but she also cannot secure Jon’s rule through only one of the three pillars of a strong rule. It is therefore crucial that the dragons continue to be seen as controllable creatures—or that one dragon continue to be seen as a controllable creature. If word were to get out that a dragon slaughtered and ate an entire palace riding, then this becomes a question of authority.
Do the Targaryens rule the dragons or do the dragons rule House Targaryen?

Sansa sits back in her chair, belly aching. She really needs to be sure there’s no food nearby when she’s musing. It’s becoming a nasty habit, and it could cost her the ability to fit into Buxton’s new gown. He won’t even think of letting it out to accommodate her expanding waistline. She can already hear him complaining as he shakes his head, triple chin jiggling.

"The dress has already been made, Princess," he’d say stubbornly. "You’ll have to lose weight. Take this as a valuable lesson on the dangers of sweet-sampling as a hobby."

Stupid fat bastard. If he wasn’t so good at making gowns she’d have fed him to Ghost. He could probably eat him for a week.

Placing a hand over her roiling stomach, she turns to Jon. “We’ll retire to our chambers within an hour,” she tells him. “We need to discuss this in private.”

Jon frowns. “What else is there to discuss? I told you what happened.”

“And now we must decide how to move forward,” she says. “Together,” she adds enticingly.

Jon kisses her fiercely, unabashedly, and Sansa can feel the eyes of the entire table upon them. When he pulls away, his eyes are glittering. “Together,” he agrees, the word slipping off his tongue like a prayer.
plot your treasons

Chapter Notes

Everyone is really sweet for their well wishes! It wasn’t actually me who needed medical, it was my Dad because he got hurt and in his old age wounds heal slower, so we were in the ER for a while getting him patched up. I’m actually fine aside from the typical existential dread and the manic depression brought about by D&D’s spectacularly shitty storytelling. Also I did a callback to a habit of hers that I’ve given her in this story: she stress-eats when she’s thinking really, really hard. She only did this one other time in the story if you’ll all recall—when she pigged out on fruit as she pulled together her mega plan to abdicate and stuff. I didn’t think about the possibility that people might take that as a sign that she might be pregnant, but spoiler alert—she’s not. That misconception wasn’t a part of the plan, so I don’t really see the harm in telling everyone because I didn’t intend to plant that red herring and nobody needs that distraction.

As soon as the door closes behind them, Jon’s lips are on hers. His hands traverse the length of her body with the familiarity of a man who really ought to have had his fill by now. He didn’t eat a thing at dinner, which might explain why he’s so hungrily devouring her now. Sansa sighs as he lifts her off her feet and carries her to bed. As soon as she’s lying back, he pulls away to undo the clasps of his doublet, and she takes her chance to sit upright.

“Stop,” she says. “I want to talk.”

“I want you,” Jon says simply in response.

“I understand that,” she says. “But we need to talk.”

“I don’t want to talk,” he says, pupils blown so wide there is only the tiniest sliver of violet gray left in his eyes. “I want you.”

Sansa makes herself comfortable on the edge of the bed, leaning her back against the poster and crossing her arms. She’s eaten too much food, and her stomach is still churning. If Jon tries to lay with her while she’s still digesting, she may end up vomiting on him. But considering the mess he’s made for her now, he might just deserve it. “Not until you’ve told me what I need to know.”

“What do you want to know?” Jon asks as he shrugs out of his doublet.

“I need you to tell me about Rhaegal,” she says.

Jon’s tunic hits the floor. “He’s a green dragon,” he says simply.

Sansa glares at him. “Can you control him?”

Jon nods as he unbuckles his breeches. “Aye.”

“Only when you’re in the flames? Or does he respond to commands?”

“Both,” Jon says. “We’re connected, him and I. Like Ghost.”
“But…let us say—hypothetically—we faced a scenario where Rhaegal was hungry. And he happened upon a small child. A small, fat child. Would Rhaegal eat the child even if you told him not to?”

Jon watches her as he steps out of the last of his smallclothes. “Where are you going with this?”

“Jon, I am trying to fix this mess,” Sansa says. “Because it is a mess, no matter how good you may think it is. Daenerys still has the majority of the coastal lords here in the Crownlands on her side, and you’ve not been approached by any major house lords about the kingship. We’re going to have to accelerate our plans now, and I need to know everything you can tell me about your connection to Rhaegal, with special regards to one single question: can you or can you not control him?”

Jon sighs, and Sansa watches shadows from the candlelight dance across the scars on his chest. He takes a seat facing her and holds out his arms. Deciding that she’ll get a much more satisfying answer if she obliges him, she crawls into his arms and allows him to wrap them around her. He holds her gently, rocking slowly this way and that, and she kicks off her shoes one by one as the ache in her stomach slowly abates.

“Rhaegal is like Ghost,” he says. “But different in a way. The pyre changed him as it changed me. Purged him as it purged me. We are not one and the same, but we are connected.”

“How has he changed since the flames?”

“He eats when I do. He sleeps less than me. But it’s as if he is me most days. I don’t ask him to, but some days pass when I’m training outside and I can see him flying about the Keep, hovering near places he’d know you are in. He knows my heart, knows my moods and my thoughts.”

“Could you control him?”

“He’s his own being,” Jon says. “But he is easily managed.”

“How easily?”

“Very easily.”

“Would he hurt me?”

“Never.”

“You mean you would not let him or he would not choose to?”

“Both. He knows what you are to me. He wouldn’t.”

“Is he approachable?”

“Do you mean to approach him?”

“Suppose I did. Could it be done?”

“Yes. But if you mean to approach him, I’d rather be nearby.”

“In that case, I mean to approach him tomorrow,” she says. “Preferably around late morning. That’s when everyone is outside. Can you arrange that?”

“That depends. Can we stop talking now?”
“We could, but you’d best put your clothes back on. I’ve no intention of laying with you tonight.”

Jon buries his face in her neck. “It’s a sin in this part of the world to deny your husband.”

“I’m from the North, I keep to the Old Gods. And also I’ve eaten too much lemon cake.”

Jon places a warm hand on her belly and rubs it soothingly. It actually helps. “I could hear the gears in your head turning all through dinner, my clever girl.”

Sansa lays back against the pillows and closes her eyes. “We need to stop the second riding from going out to see to the first. Drogon slaughtering one riding is bad for the Queen. Drogon slaughtering two ridings is bad for us all.”

“They haven’t sent them out yet,” Jon says. “And they won’t until they have the daylight. The second riding is safe for now.”

“Do you know where in the woods Drogon is?”

“Rhaegal last saw him near the edges,” Jon says. “He’d probably be in deep by now. Depends on how well he can crawl with his hind legs.”

“How do we block an order for a riding without looking suspicious?” she asks out loud.

Jon pulls her hand towards him and begins to idly play with her fingers. “We could send Rhaegal into the city,” he says.

Sansa looks at him, brows knit. “What do you mean?”

Jon doesn’t look at her, his gaze still firmly locked on her hand in his. “We had issues when we first arrived in the city—Rhaegal and Drogon perching on buildings. We’ve since taken care of it, for the most part. But Rhaegal’s done some growing since last the city’s had a glimpse of him. If he were to perch himself somewhere, the city guards would have to block the streets nearby in case he flies up and knocks some bricks over in the process. To keep up the image of a concerned queen, Daenerys would send palace guards to help the city watch man the streets.”

Sansa sits up so abruptly that she is nearly sick. “You’re certain—absolutely certain—that you can get him out there?”

“I could,” Jon says.

“And you can perch him somewhere in the city where he can be obstructing movement, but not actually hurting anyone?”

“Have you seen this city?” Jon asks incredulously. “The streets are tighter than a fish’s arsehole. There’s nowhere Rhaegal could go where he wouldn’t do some damage.”

“Well, yes, realistically,” Sansa says, rolling her eyes. “But I mean is it possible that he can be placed somewhere the damage would only be structural?”

Jon raises a brow, lazily kissing her fingers one by one. “Is there such a place in the city?” he asks.

Sansa lays back down beside him, shoulder to shoulder, hand still clutched in his. It hits her like a bolt of lightning. Like a rampaging direwolf. Like a fully grown dragon landing in the middle of a crowded city street on a busy summer morning.

“The Sept of Baelor,” she says.
“What?”

“The ruins where the Sept once stood,” Sansa says quickly. “It’s nothing now—Cersei Lannister blew it right down to the foundations. It’s just a scar on the face of the city—Rhaegal could land there and cause a distraction. As long as he’s idle, his presence will alarm enough people that the city watch will have to block the area, and—are you absolutely sure the Queen would send palace guards?”

It’s Jon’s turn to roll his eyes now, and Sansa is a tad taken aback at the sight of it. “You’re talking about my aunt, Sansa. Her solution to every problem is to throw gold, soldiers, or fire at it.”

Sansa nods slowly, chewing her lip. “You and I could approach Rhaegal then, I suppose. The larger an audience, the better.”

“You really think it wise for people to see him as docile?” Jon asks.

“Goodness, no,” Sansa says, shaking her head. “We need them to see him as absolutely vicious. He’s a dragon, for heaven’s sake. But more importantly, we need for people to see him as controllable. He’s not the dangerous one. His master has a leash on him. You told me once that a small child was killed by Drogon, yes?”

“In Meereen,” Jon says. “A shepherd’s daughter, I believe.”

Sansa wonders how quickly they can get this information circulating in the Red Keep. “It’s imperative that Rhaegal is seen as an asset that comes with the package that is the Prince and Princess of Dragonstone.”

Jon nods. “Is this your will, my Princess?”

“I wish we could have had more time,” she says. “But what’s done is done. This is necessary.”

Jon turns over so he is facing her, and he kisses her forehead. “Then it shall be done.”
One specific event that happens in this chapter was NOT in my original plan, except I read a comment where one reader expressed a desire to see it and I thought, why the fuck not? Enjoy.

In the morning, Jon has finally taken the few hours of sleep he needs to keep him running for several days. He sleeps lightly, and Sansa doesn’t know how she can tell this. Only that she can.

As it is utterly imperative that she not appear even remotely aware of the impending development in the city, she goes about her day as usual: preparing for the day, heading to the great hall for review, retiring to her chambers to recover from the review (and to muster up the wherewithal to deal with the Maidenvault) and then off to the miniature court in the Maidenvault. She is sorry to see that today’s activity in the Maidenvault is beading, and is thus limited to ladies only. Men are—for all of their condescension—notorious gossips, and Sansa would have preferred at least one or two of them being present to witness the spectacle that is about to unfold.

It’s past noon. Long past. The last time she saw Jon, he assured her that the riding had been delayed from going into the Kingswood. Which means Rhaegal must have made his landing in the city. How long could it possibly take for word to spread to the palace? What’s taking so long?

She sent Arya into the city in the earliest hours of the morning to find Varys, and she still hasn’t returned, which either means she has not yet located him or she has and is killing him. Sansa wants to wonder at it, but she hasn’t the time. She’s having a particularly hard time stitching a crystal to the stretch of fabric in her hand while simultaneously listening to Lady Helyn Chelsted complain about the limited availability of crabs to be baked into crabcakes for her upcoming nameday luncheon.

“Have you considered having the crabs brought in from somewhere else?” Sansa asks as she stabs her fabric rather ferociously.

“I have, except the nearest lords are all keeping busy with shipping these days, and their fishermen don’t have large enough boats for the order.”

“Then perhaps you ought to change the menu. Oysters are just as nice as crabcakes.”

“But crabcakes are so much prettier on the plate,” Helyn whines. “I really did have my heart set on them.”

Sansa pretends not to have heard this so she doesn’t have to respond, as she has gleaned the only important sliver of information from Lady Helyn that she needs—that all of the nearest keeps to House Chelsted are profiting from shipping, and are—ergo—firmly in the pocket of Daenerys Targaryen.

Sansa has never sat a council meeting in King’s Landing before, and she knows it would look suspicious if she did, but—not for the first time—she sorely wishes that she could. To have the inside track or even be able to establish regular contact with Lord Florent, whom Sansa understands
currently serves in the thankless position of Master of Coin. What Tyrion and Varys have said about him hasn’t given Sansa any reason to suppose that he is incapable of his job, but it is difficult, she imagines, to be serving in any capacity as the counsellor to a woman who does not wish to bore herself with the intricacies of maintaining a stable economic system. Tyrion and Varys’ judgement can’t be trusted blindly, and yet she is seriously taking their words into account.

Sansa is hit with a sense of déjà vu when an ear-splitting shriek rends the peaceful atmosphere of the Maidenvault clear in two, and her first thought is to whether or not Ghost has remembered to stick his head underneath all of the pillows she has set up for him in her chamber like she told him to. The ladies go into an absolute panic, getting to their feet and turning this way and that, some abandoning their beadwork altogether to hurry to the windows and try to get a glimpse of the dragon.

“Do you see anything?” Sansa asks.

“Nothing,” answers Jessa Lantell quickly, leaning so far out the window that all Sansa can see is the very ends of her yellow curls. “There’s nothing there!”

“I heard him, though!”

“So loud! Do you think he’s angry?”

“What if he’s hungry? Will he feast in the training yard?”

The ladies are aflutter and positively vibrating with excitement, and the matter is only further irritated when the door is pushed open and Captain Ryke sticks his head in.

“Princess,” he says, ignoring the other ladies. “The Prince asks to see you. You are needed beyond the Keep.”

Sansa had known, and is thankful that the moment has come at last, but she continues to feign confusion. “Is this about Rhaegal?” she asks.

Captain Ryke nods, and the ladies all begin to whisper.

“Well…I suppose that if my husband insists,” she say, making a show of reluctance. “Ladies, I regret to inform you that I must step away. Please don’t think you must all set aside your entertainments, however—continue without me—do enjoy the luncheon.”

She gives them all a smile that is half benevolence, half uncertainty, and leaves the chamber. Captain Ryke and his lieutenant are on either side of her as they proceed along the halls.

“Have any ladies stepped out after me?” she asks quietly.

Captain Ryke says nothing, but his lieutenant turns back quickly. “Aye, Princess. Four—five—seven have just left the chamber.”

Sansa smiles to herself. “Good.”

Captain Ryke and the lieutenant escort her to her chambers in the Holdfast, where she finds Jeyne and Lilith still clearing out the tub from her morning bath.

“Leave that, ladies,” she says with mock urgency. “I’ve been called into the city urgently by my husband. Come, come—help me into my riding gown. Jeyne, fetch my gloves.”
There is an undercurrent of heated excitement as the girls hurry to oblige her. Lilith buttons her into her riding gown and Jeyne adjusts her hat. Sansa pulls on her gloves and rushes out the door.

Jon is waiting for her by the very edge of the palace gates. He’s already astride a black charge, hands firmly gripping the reins and watching the city beyond. He turns his head to face her, and for a split second his eyes are milky before they are his own again. Sansa counts no less than eight lords astride their own charges nearby, leaning in towards each other and whispering heatedly. At the sight of Sansa, they all tip their heads. Sansa looks over her shoulder. At least six ladies are trotting towards them, so rushed to witness the development unfold firsthand that they did not even grant themselves the time to change into riding gowns.

“What has happened, husband?” she asks. “I thought I heard one of the dragons just now. Is something amiss?”

“I’m afraid so, my dove,” Jon replies. “Rhaegal has made himself comfortable right in the middle of a city street. He’s terrorizing the citizens.”

Sansa feigns appropriate shock as she gasps dramatically and places a hand upon her chest. “Mercy!” she says as Captain Ryke helps her climb onto her horse. The ladies echo the sentiment, and the lords whisper even more. “I hope he hasn’t hurt anyone?” she says hopefully as she takes the reins. “Has anything been done to help?”

“The Queen graciously sent thirty men to aid the City Watch in maintaining the peace,” one of the lords, who she now recognizes as one of Lord Hightower’s sons, says in a tone that does not give Sansa the impression that he truly believes the word ‘gracious’ and ‘Queen’ ought to be used in the same sentence without the words ‘is not’ somewhere in between.

Thirty men. Sansa has to bite her lip to clamp down her smile. Thirty men could make a riding.

“But that was an hour ago,” pipes in another, who she distantly recognizes as Lord Hetherspoon’s heir.

“Is Her Grace there with the dragon now?” One of the ladies who has come dashing out after Sansa asks delicately. Unable to recognize her voice, Sansa looks over her shoulder. Milla Rosby. The biggest mouth in the Red Keep. She would dance if she weren’t on horseback.

“She’s en route,” Jon answers as he tugs his reins. “Ride with me, my Princess,” Jon says as he urges his horse into a steady clip. Sansa urges her own charge until she is riding evenly beside him, and the lords and ladies bring up the rear with the guards—in the Queen’s gold and the Prince’s black—surround the party.

“Is she really en route, Jon?” Sansa asks quietly.

“She will be once she’s gotten wind that you’re going,” he says.

As they ride into the city streets, the smallfolk turn and point excitedly at the approaching party. It’s a blessing, surely, that the street between the Red Keep and the Great Sept of Baelor is such a wide one, as this means that the smallfolk’s typical foot-traffic hasn’t been too disrupted by the sudden appearance of a great dragon in the middle of a crowded city street.

The smallfolk begin to call out the further along they get. Some seem to have learned to recognize the red of Sansa’s hair from her trips into the city, and hail her and Jon’s telltale black hair as they pass. When the crowds grow thicker, Sansa knows they are reaching their destination. The city guards in their bronze armor are unmistakable, blocking off two narrow streets that lead out to the
massive route facing the Great Sept. The entire circle—nearly eighty meters—surrounding the Sept has been blocked off entirely by the thirty palace guards. The citizens stand just beyond the parameters, pointing excitedly at both the ruins of the Sept and the massive party that has slipped through the guards’ borders.

Sansa clutches the reins tighter, trying to keep her face from blanching. Her breath hitches in her throat.

Rhaegal has made a habit of flying round the Red Keep, and while Sansa could sometimes hear his grunts and growls and the occasional screech, his presence was almost entirely invisible—a shadow here, a wing there, the tip of his tail disappearing round a turret when she peeks out a window. That he was growing larger was something she had already been able to guess for herself—both from her own observation and from Jon’s testimony. But she is still unprepared for the sight of him, and from the startled sounds of the lords and ladies nearby her, so is everyone else. To say he has gotten huge is a massive understatement and perhaps even an injustice. He is positively monolithic. He sits comfortably nestled among the ruins of what was once one of the largest structures in Westeros—and arguably the Known World—as languidly as a cat resting in the summer sun, mindless of the fact that he appears to have taken up the entire space and then some. His tail spills out onto the remains of the steps, flopping up and down playfully, wings upturned as his head rests in his arms. His scales—gloriously golden and evergreen—positively glow in the sunlight. Sansa is floored by the magnificence of the sight.

“Has he hurt anyone?” Jon asks the first of the palace guards who approach the party.

“No, Your Grace,” the guard replies. “But he got agitated when people got within a few yards of him, so we’ve kept everyone away as best we could just in case.”

“Excellent work,” he says, allowing the guard to hold his reins as he jumps off the saddle. He lands smoothly on his feet, then turns to pull Sansa gently from her own saddle. She’s too busy taking in Rhaegal to notice Jon’s hands around her waist, or him tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. And while she watches Rhaegal’s tongue dart out to lick his mouth, she misses entirely that Jon is whispering into her ear.

“What?” she asks.

“I said you’ll stay behind me,” he says. “Let me guide you.”

Sansa’s eyes remain on Rhaegal as she nods. “Alright. Is he…are you…”

“He’s himself right now,” Jon says as they walk across the square hand in hand. “What sort of approach were you hoping to make?”

“Just a small gesture,” she says. “Maybe he could get a whiff of me, or something…like that.”

Of course her initial hopes had rested along the lines of perhaps petting his snout, but that was before she actually got a look at him. Now she’s suddenly overcome with a desire to allow Rhaegal to approve of her from a great distance. Is it too late to stand with the rest of the party by the parameter?

As if sensing her trepidation, Jon chuckles. “At ease, my love,” he says. “He’d never hurt you.”

Sansa only grips Jon’s hand tighter. The entire square, only moments ago utterly abuzz with excited whispering, falls deadly silent.

Rhaegal seems to sense them approaching, as he lifts his head suddenly. Sansa’s heart stutters as
the watching crowd flutters with excitement at his movement. His eyes—so striking a pair—flit to her so quickly that she nearly trips. He rises slowly to his full height, swelling like a high tide, his shadow engulfing the entire square until the mere shape of him could make Sansa close her eyes and believe that the Great Sept is still standing.

Jon slows them to a stop some thirty feet away from him, and positions himself before her just slightly.

“Don’t move,” he says quietly.

Sansa doesn’t—nor does she breathe.

Rhaegal observes them curiously for a single moment, then lifts one wing from his nesting position and plants it firmly on one end of the skeleton of the Sept. He lifts the other and plants it on the other end. His long, scaly neck pulls back and he raises his head higher, and then brings it smoothly forward so his face is only ten feet from them.

He roars.

It is a horrifying noise, like a thousand angry shrieks and warhorns blowing together, like the city when her poor father’s head rolled from his shoulders times a hundred, like Cersei’s anguished calls to whatever gods she could still have faith in as she clutched her dying son in her arms. He roars, and Sansa feels her bones rattle. Mouth wide open, teeth like spearheads between his scaly lips, breath like brimstone and flint and salt and smoke.

Finally, his mouth closes, the horrendous roar dies down, and Sansa removes her face from the space between Jon’s neck and his shoulder to find those catlike eyes regarding them closely. She is only distantly aware of the crowd behind them at this point. The only thing she can register is the blood rushing through her ears, the sharp beat of her pulse in her body, the *boom boom boom* of her heart pounding so hard it hurts her chest. She releases a jagged breath.

Still holding her hand, Jon steps forward. His other hand reaches out, fingers outstretched, and Rhaegal’s long, scaly neck stretches as well. They meet halfway in the space between them, Jon’s palm and Rhaegal’s face, such a small thing on such a large creature, and the dragon’s eyes shutter closed peacefully. Jon steps slowly to the side and tugs Sansa forward by her own hand.

“He’ll never hurt you,” Jon whispers in her ear as he kisses her cheek. “He knows what you are to me.”

“Does he?” Sansa asks—or more appropriately, squeaks.

Jon nods slowly as he lifts her icy, shaking hand into the air so it is level with his. “He does. He’s seen you as I have, as Ghost has. He knows, my sweet.”

When her palm first makes contact with the scales of Rhaegal’s snout, she wants to shriek. It’s just as well that her tongue feels suddenly heavy as a brick, because she can’t imagine that Rhaegal would take too kindly to having his own roar challenged. And Sansa doubts she could match it. Jon places his own hand over her own, and between Rhaegal’s warmth and Jon’s, it is scarcely a moment before the ice in her fingers has disappeared. Rhaegal regards her with an inquisitive gaze, and it takes her several moments to realize that he is holding perfectly still.

“I think…” she says quietly, voice shaky. “I think that should do it. I think that’s enough.”

Jon nods, slowly lowering her hand. Instead of stepping back, however, he tugs her hand around the side of Rhaegal’s head, leading her along to his neck.
“Jon?” she now has no shame in squeaking. “Jon, what are you doing?”

“He has to move out of the area,” he says. “Best way to make sure he doesn’t perch on anything else. I’d need a fire to control his every move, but from up here we can manage well enough that he shouldn’t hit anything.”

“We?” she repeats. “What’s all this we business?” she asks.

Jon smiles evilly. “It’s a sin in this part of the world to deny your husband,” he says, lifting her by the waist onto Rhaegal’s waiting neck. She bites down on her screech of terror, hands instantly darting out to find purchase on the scales. She only hears a ‘whoop’, and a sharp intake, and Jon’s familiar weight is pressed against her back, clutching at protruding scales.

Sansa quickly calculates the odds of her being able to call this entire spectacle a success if she follows her instinct to jump off of this creature and run screeching back to her horse. It does not seem favorable.

“I’m going to kill you,” she hisses.

She hears a dark chuckle behind her. “Lean your weight back onto me. You’ll be fine.”

Her head is pounding so hard that she feels like she could faint, but she obliges. “Just wait for it, Jon. I’ll absolutely kill you.”

Jon doesn’t respond to her, instead his fingers grip the scales tighter. “Sāvēs,” he says firmly.

The effect is instantaneous. Rhaegal moves forward slowly, one step at a time, before his wings spread—sheets of shining emerald—to engulf the entire area in shadow. The people move back like small insects, but he heedlessly lifts them from the ground, leaving them all shrinking—and shrieking—beneath. Sansa closes her eyes as they ascend, only having enough time to take in the sudden appearance of the sun over the building tops, the cloudless sky, and below, a massive flash of gold as a small man astride a horse enters the square, another horse at his back, seated mutely upon it a head of shocking silver.
Jon!” Sansa positively screeches as Rhaegal swoops through the air. She clutches at scales so tightly she feels her fingers go numb, wind whipping at her face and making her eyes water so hard she has to close them. “JOOOOOON!”

She can’t hear a damn thing over the wind singing in her ears, but Jon’s sturdy form behind her jolts once or twice and she realizes that he is laughing. She suppresses the immediate and immense desire to push him off the dragon, except with their luck he’s like to come back from that death as well and she also has no idea how to steer this thing.

The city is only a splotch of tans and browns and sun baked reds beneath them, dotted with fluffy clouds. Rhaegal leads them far beyond, to wide greenery and flowing water. Sansa might appreciate it if she weren’t counting her heartbeats and wondering which turn would make her slip and fall to her untimely death.

The wind is whistling so fiercely that she thinks for a moment Rhaegal is shrieking again, and then Jon’s hand tightens around her waist, and she hears a thunderous swoop of air, and the wind goes
“Open your eyes, heart,” Jon whispers into her ear, lips lingering along the shell as he dots kisses to and fro. Slowly, flutteringly, she does.

They are hovering close to the ground, not close enough for her to safely jump, but close enough that she can see the field they are gliding above is dotted with yellow. She can’t tell if they’re buttercups or daisies, but she wonders if she could weave a flower crown out of one right now and send it to Gilly. It’s a silly notion, with Gilly so many miles away in Winterfell, but the fancy strikes her as it would strike a small child.

Rhaegal makes some small, imperceptive noise, and she suddenly recalls where she is.

“You absolute—unspeakable—monstrous—bastard,” she seethes, and if she weren’t clutching the scales for dear life she’d have loosened her grip long enough to turn around and smack him.

He chuckles. “This is what happens when I am forced to endure a night without,” he says matter-of-factly.

Now she really does loosen her grip, but she hardly gets in more than a swat on his leg before Rhaegal has shifted and she frantically grips his scales again. “Lower me to the ground now,” she commands. “I mean it, Jon. Or you’ll be sleeping alone for a week.”

Jon laughs. “You really think you could bar me for that long?”

“GET ME DOWN!”

Still laughing, Jon obliges. Rhaegal lands gracefully upon the grassy expanse—a perfect foil for Sansa’s epically graceless descent from his back only moments later.

As soon as her feet touch solid ground, she decides that she hates heights. As soon as her back hits the ground and she stares up at the sky, she decides that she hates flying. As soon as Jon appears before her, gazing adoringly down at her, she decides that she will bar him from her chambers for a month.

Jon takes a seat beside her as Rhaegal begins to roll away from them, cushioning himself and nuzzling against the grass. She turns away from him and back to the sky, trying and failing to steady her racing heart.

“What were you thinking?”

“You asked for a show,” Jon said, plucking a flower from the ground and spinning it in his hand to see it from every angle. Sansa spares it a glance. A buttercup. “I gave you one.”

“I asked for a visible approach,” she says. “A petting, maybe. Not being burnt to a crisp—even better. I did not ask to be hoisted onto the back of a fire-breathing dragon and flown hundreds of feet into the air.”

“Actually, we made a thousand feet before we landed,” Jon says pointedly. He lays down beside her now, tucking the flower into her hair and kissing her cheek. “You are not fond of heights.”

She shakes her head rapidly. “No.”

“I shall bear that in mind,” he says, moving on from her cheek and to her jaw.
“You were not fond of heights either once,” she recalls. “I remember it. When you were a child and you learned you’d take the black, and you told Father that you feared the Wall because you’d heard it was so high.”

Jon pauses in his ministrations, lifting his head to gaze down at her. His eyes are shocking violet. “I don’t remember that. I haven’t feared the skies in so long.”

He lowers his head again, but does not return to peppering her face with his kisses. Instead, he holds her close to him so she may rest her head beneath his chin, and they stare up at the sky.

Rhaegal sniffs beside them.

“I suppose we could call it a success,” Sansa says once her brain has slowed enough for her to process her thoughts.

“Aye, I suppose we could,” Jon agrees. His fingers trace her hairline, and then weave into the locks. Sansa’s heart feels steady enough that she can sit up now, and she takes in the field around them.

“Where are we?” she asks.

“Just a mile outside of the city,” Jon answers. “From what I could see. The Kingsroad is just that way.”

Sansa gets up and steps on still shaking feet forward. Her ankles brush against a buttercup. She bends down to pick it. It’s soft, and delicate, and pretty. At once she loves it and hates what it reminds her of.

Abruptly, she sits back down on the ground, plucking more buttercups. She weaves them together with grass blades—tall, thin ones she finds sprouting in tufts.

"You've not changed in the slightest," he says, and his voice is softer.

"Well, I need to think," she says. "And I suppose weaving garlands is infinitely better to eating."

"Eating?"

"I've taken to eating when I think too much. It's turning into a bad habit. Any more and I'll be expanding soon enough."

"I hadn't noticed."

Sansa is still bringing herself back from the edges of the absolute panic riding the dragon has sent her into, so she decides not to smile at his words. But she most certainly feels the rush of warmth that pools in her chest as he says them.

“Sansa?”

“Hm?”

“Can we make love now?”

Sansa pauses mid-weave, shutting her eyes. “Are you joking?”

“No. I’ve always wanted to take you on a bed of flowers. Next best thing, really.”
Sansa stares incredulously at the ground, then turns her head to face him. He’s standing a good ten feet away. “How long have you been thinking of this?”

“Since Castle Black,” he says after a moment’s hard thought. “Can you blame me? It was freezing there.”

She sighs, setting aside her makeshift crown and holding out her arms. “Once, and then take me back to the Keep. And don’t you dare tear anything.”

Jon comes dashing forward with alarming speed, and Sansa is lying back against the flowers with her riding coat unbuttoned and Jon kissing blooming red marks onto her jaw and neck.

“Did I have to ride the dragon with you?” she wonders as he works his fingers around the binds of her bodice.

“I wanted them to see you riding him,” Jon answers, finally undoing the fabric. She feels the cool summer breeze tickle her skin and is infinitely lighter. “So they’d know he protects you as well.”

Sansa supposes she cannot argue with this logic. “Tell me next time,” she says to him. “Tell me the things you do before you do them. I want us to work together.”

He lifts himself to look into her eyes. His own are dark gray, soft with love as he lifts her hand and kisses it purposefully. “As you say,” he assures her.

Rhaegal sniffs again in the distance, a short, curt sound, and Sansa jumps. “Heaven and earth,” she says, pushing Jon away and pulling the fabric of her gown back over herself. “I forgot he was there.”

“He’d be insulted,” Jon murmurs, sitting up beside her and tugging at the fabric again. “Lie back.”

“Gods, no,” she says with a shudder. “He’s watching us.”

“He’s not,” Jon says. “He’s smelling the flowers. And possibly also charring them.”

“Jon, we are not going to do this with the dragon a stone’s throw away,” she says flatly, pushing him aside and getting to her feet.

“Dammit, Sansa,” Jon growls, falling backwards frustratedly. “I’ve not had you since yesterday morning!”

“Oh, you poor, poor baby,” she says dispassionately. “Get up. We need to get back. How close can Rhaegal get us to the city gates?”

“He can fly us straight to the keep.”

“Can he fly slower this time?” she asks.

“Depends on my mood,” Jon says darkly, all traces of good humor gone.

Sansa sighs, brain spinning again as she tries to come up with a decent bargain that doesn’t involve her being ravished in front of a dragon. “Jon, take me back to the castle and I’ll have a massive order of flowers made the moment we arrive. You’ll have me on a bed of flowers tonight. Our bed.”

“I quite like this field,” he says pointedly.
“Once everything is done,” she says. “Once it’s all behind us, then we can come back to this field, and you can send Rhaegal away, and make love to me until you’re absolutely sick of me.”

Jon sits up at this slowly, eyes boring into her. His stare makes her spine stiffen—she’s never gotten used to it. She doesn’t know when she will. “Are you telling me the truth?” he asks.

“Every word,” she says. And though she knows she is really asking for it when she invites Jon to lay with her until he is sick of it—because she doubts that such a time will come when he is ever sick of it—she finds that she is, in fact, being perfectly honest.

Jon gets to his feet slowly, nodding. “Alright, then. I’ll hold you to your word. What comes next, then?”

“You take me back to the Keep,” she says.

“No, I mean, in this plan of yours. What happens now?”

“Eager to be done, are we?”

“Eager to get you back to this field, yes.”

Sansa sighs. “Well, Arya is somewhere in the city right now searching for Varys. I sent her earlier today to instruct him to spread the word about the shepherd’s daughter that Drogon killed in Meereen. Assuming she found him and hasn’t immediately slaughtered him—which I did specifically tell her not to do—then he’ll be hard at work right now.”

“So what are we to do?” Jon asks as they walk towards Rhaegal. Sansa grips his arm tightly as they near him.

“I need you to provide me with some of the Blackguard,” she says. “Captain Ryke’s lieutenant, perhaps, and maybe a good forty others.”

“They are yours,” Jon says.

Sansa raises a brow. “Don’t you want to know what they’re for?” she asks.

“They’re for you,” he replies easily. She releases a long suffering sigh. He places his hands on her waist. “Ready?” he asks.

“Go slowly, please,” she says. “For the love of the Seven.”

“I thought you kept to the Old Gods,” Jon replies as he lifts her onto Rhaegal’s neck.

“What’s it to you who I keep to?” she asks. “None of them will be able to help you if Rhaegal swirls me about like a tempest.”

Jon laughs, gripping the scales to pull himself up. Once he’s settled beside her, his arm snakes around her waist again, and she settles herself against him. “You’ve already given your word, princess. I’m to have you on a bed of flowers tonight.”

“And still I shall suffocate you in them if you steer too quickly.”

She can feel Jon’s grin as Rhaegal’s wings expand on either side of them. “So says the Queen.”

They arrive at the gates of the Red Keep with their hair swept wild by the wind. Sansa steps off of the great dragon with her gloves loosened and her bodice still undone. She feels as though she
might faint into Captain Ryke’s arms when he steps forward to hand her down. Jon’s eyes meet hers, and she would roll them, truly, if she could summon the wherewithal to do so.

“Take me to my apartments, Captain Ryke,” she says. “And summon the castellan. I’ve need of a florist. Immediately.”
while the iron is hot

“It was quite the spectacle, I assure you,” Tyrion says, watering down his white wine with lemon water before taking a hearty sip. He had made himself comfortable in the parlor of Sansa’s apartments, watching the florist Master Depay arranging buckets of blooms around them for her viewing pleasure.

Sansa runs her fingers through the fur around Ghost’s ears. Her heart still clenches in her chest when she recalls the wind ringing her head earlier this afternoon, but having Ghost here with his head in her lap makes her feel infinitely better. “I didn’t mean for it to be such a show, I’m pleased someone enjoyed themselves. I certainly didn’t.”

“But I’d imagined it was a dream of anyone’s to be ravished upon the back of a dragon?”

Sansa cringes. “I struggle to understand the mechanics of such an act. There’s naught to do but hold on for dear life. What would give you such an impression?”

“Well, surely you noticed your bodice undone as it was,” Tyrion says, chuckling under his breath. “You arrived in such a state, it has to have traveled the length and breadth of the castle by now.”

Sansa scrunches her nose, but elects to choose her battles. There are worse rumors to be carried through a court. “The peonies, if you please,” she says to Master Depay. “With white lilac and those roses.”

Master Depay nods. “Might I suggest a hint of greenery to liven the look?” he asks.

“That would be most unwise, given the setting,” Sansa says.

“It would be infinitely easier, Princess, to aid you in your selection if I knew where exactly these blooms were going to be placed.”

“Think of it as a large canvas,” Sansa says.

“How fares our Prince?” Tyrion asks quietly as Master Depay pulls some baby’s breath into the mix. “Is he behaving?”

Sansa takes a deep, drawn out breath and looks at Tyrion pointedly. “Everything is simply divine.”

Tyrion instantly understands her meaning, and scoots his chair closer to hers. Ghost glares at him, disturbed by the scraping of the chair on the floor, and then lays his head back on Sansa’s lap.

“What has happened? I hope it’s no lover’s quarrel.”

“Nothing of the sort. It’s…it involves the Queen.”

Tyrion glances over his shoulder at Master Depay, who is now debating with his attendant the addition of lilies. “How dire is it?”

“Terribly so,” Sansa replies.

“It can’t make your situation any worse than it is right now,” Tyrion says. “The Queen has been in so foul a mood since she watched you fly off with Jon on the back of that dragon—I don’t know how much worse it can get.”

“I suppose we’ll know soon enough,” Sansa says. “It’s about her own dragon.”
Tyrion freezes. “Drogon’s not been seen in over a week,” he says quietly.

“Nine days now, to be precise,” Sansa says.

Tyrion’s brows rise. “I don’t suppose our cherished prince would have anything to do with his sudden absence?”

Sansa only looks at Tyrion as she rubs behind Ghost’s ear.

Tyrion’s gaze matches hers, and then he lowers his glass and leans closer. “I think the carcass of a fully grown dragon would be something that not many people would miss on their morning commute,” he whispers frantically. “Where is the beast?”


“How badly?”

“Critically.”

Tyrion’s brows furrow in confusion as he tries to make sense of this new information. “Will the Queen still be able to use him in combat? How critical is critical?”

“Absolutely unusable,” Sansa says. “To pull him into combat in his state would only get him killed.”

“But he is still dangerous?”

“Absolutely.”

“Do you know where he is now?” Tyrion asks.

“Somewhere in the Kingswood, by my understanding,” Sansa says.

Tyrion nods slowly, comprehension dawning. “I take it that the riding sent out the day before yesterday is not going to be returning?”

“Perhaps their charred bones might,” Sansa says. “And whatever else Drogon decided to leave behind.”

Tyrion closes his eyes tightly. “There might have been thirty five men in that riding,” he says with real regret. “It’s absolutely terrible. But…if this information were to become public—it would not help the Queen.”

“No, it would not. But we have the advantage right now,” Sansa says. “To control the way the information comes to light. We can still manipulate the flow of the information to work in our favor.”

Tyrion nods. “Your appearance with Rhaegal has set the city positively abuzz. I don’t wager we have much time until the Queen learns of Drogon’s condition, and when she does…she might do something very unwise.”

“Which is why I determined yesterday that we must accelerate our plan,” Sansa says. “I have someone in the city right now communicating with Lord Varys to spread the word about the dead child in Meereen.”

“I know one of the little birds here in the castle,” Tyrion says. “I can find her somewhere in the
kitchens and see if she can spread the word throughout the Keep. It’s not enough to have the smallfolk learn of it, it must be common knowledge amongst the lords as well.”

“Has she spoken of Drogon?” Sansa asks. “The Queen?”

“He’s always had a habit of flying about, staying away for days on end,” Tyrion says. “She won’t suspect trouble for another few days. If we’re lucky, we might have until the end of the week. So long as no one draws attention to the missing riding, we’re still ahead of the game. But we haven’t a moment to lose. The lords might have approached Jon already if he didn’t spend all of his time in the training yards with the soldiers. Can you persuade him to ride out into the city with you on your next trip?”

“He hasn’t the disposition to be dealing with small orphans or charming old crones,” Sansa says. “He didn’t even before his…second awakening. But if he needs to be seen, then I think I can get him to attend Petitioner’s Court.”

“Excellent. That might do the trick. All we need is a small opening for lords to see him.”

“Princess,” Master Depay calls. “Are you partial to ranunculus?”

“Yes,” Sansa says. “And tulips as well.”

Tyrion drains his wineglass. This time, when he refills it, he doesn’t water it down. “There’s been an interesting development regarding our hunt for Baratheon heirs,” he says quietly.

“What has happened?”

“The male in the Free Cities,” he says. “We’re no closer to finding him now than we were when I brought it up yesterday, but I’ve determined exactly who he might be.”

“And?”

“His name is Edric Storm,” Tyrion says. “He’s young—about Jon’s age.”

“What’s known about him?”

“Only that his mother was Delena Florent,” Tyrion says. “Conceived on Stannis’ wedding night—and in his wedding bed—the day he married Selyse.”

Sansa stares incredulously at Tyrion. “Robert put a son in Selyse’s sister…in Selyse’s wedding bed?”

Tyrion shrugs. “Robert wasn’t famous for being tactful.”

Sansa shudders. “This is indeed quite the development. This makes Edric Storm a Great Bastard—with a king for a father and a lady for a mother, he has a stronger chance of securing support among the Stormlords. The Florents have quite the influence in the Reach as well, by my understanding.”

“Perhaps we ought to consider a bride from there for him, then? Or are we still set on an Estermont lady?”

Sansa sighs. “We’ll burn that bridge when we get to it. Let’s find him first.”

Tyrion nods, getting to his feet. He takes the wine jug with him. “Splendid to see you again, Master Depay. And what a stunning arrangement!” he says, tipping his glass towards the explosion of flowers. Master Depay puffs his chest at this praise. Tyrion bows to Sansa. “Get Jon to Petitioner’s
Court tomorrow,” he says. “We must strike while the iron is hot. Before the court stops whispering, before the Queen finds out about Drogon. And for heaven’s sake—make sure he behaves.”

Sansa strokes Ghost’s jaw a little too quickly to be mistaken as leisurely. “He will if she does.”
okay, so romance, believe it or not, is not actually a thing that i take any particular joy in writing. i do, however, take lots of joy in reading it, which is kinda why i'm even on this damn tag reading all these damn fics in the first place. having said that, many of you will have noticed that there are not a lot of scenes between our golden pair that are purely fluff in this fic, and that's because like smut, i am not actually a writer of The Fluff. with that in mind, i noticed some commenters who said some stuff that led me to understand that people are kind of expecting something to do with the bed of flowers, and honestly, i was just planning on skipping it to get to where i thrive, which is the political, not romantic part, because that's where i am nice and comfy. but because i am a team player, i figured that only a really mean tease would give two chapters leading up to a scene with a bed of flowers and not actually do anything with it. and again, i am a team player. so i have taken it upon myself to write The Fluff. Now if you'll excuse me, i'm going to go chase the diabetes away with saline and maybe therapy.

As children, Jon and Sansa were not close. She grew out of playing with him around the same time she grew into being a lady, and while she shunned all of her siblings equally, she freely admits to herself that she shunned Jon more equally than the others. By the time she left Winterfell for her first journey to King’s Landing as Joffrey Baratheon’s betrothed, she could not tell anyone who asked whether Jon preferred honey or blackberry tarts (honey), whether he took ale or wine (he'll drink whichever is available, but he actually prefers mead), or even what his penmanship looked like (appalling—he’s left handed). This served as both a blessing and a curse once they’d reunited at Castle Black that cold, dreary day. On the one hand, they had very little intimate knowledge of each other to relearn, since the both of them had changed so drastically since the last time they’d seen each other. On the other hand, it was the act of relearning itself that allowed the baser thoughts they harbored to enter their minds in the first place.

Through all of this, Sansa will never deny that although they were not close as children, they still believed themselves to share a father. And with that in mind, even their childhood distance could not bring them to take a single step further than their own mental boundaries would allow. They observed, and learned, and absorbed, and reacted, always pushing and pulling, working together and around obstacles, sometimes locking horns, sometimes holding hands. The arrangement worked. For a time.

It had never—in the timeSansa knew him as a king—occurred to her to wonder what sort of man her brother was when he wasn’t leading armies or governing a state or going on about dead things. He was peaceful in privacy, silent and thoughtful, eyes always fixed on some far off point as he shielded himself as best as he could from his own ghosts, as she shielded herself from hers. Jon was a wolf through and through—silent, stalking, teeth never bared—until the time came for the hunt.

It would have hurt to wonder, once she knew her heart around him better, what sort of man he was when he wasn’t someone’s brother. She had done an excellent job of barring such thoughts from her mind, whether he was frenzied or rough or spoke too much or was as silent as always. Whether
he was thoughtful and sweet or gruff and clueless. These were not questions that a sister ought to know the answers to, and she made it her business, when he returned to Winterfell with his silver queen beside him, not to have answers to any of them.

Bran spoke sometimes, during those two years she spent stewing in anger. When his eyes had gone milky and she had come to check if his feet were too cold—because he could not feel them and he’d never notice—or she was taking it upon herself to refill his mug with piping hot tea, he’d relate things she knew she ought not to hear, things that meant nothing to a raven with three eyes, but things that she had not wished to know, and had done her best—hitherto—to ignore.

“They scratch,” he’d say. “Claw, bite, roar. They like to see each other bleed.”

She knew what he had meant, and she pretended she did not. It did not give her solace to think of Jon and his dragon queen. It did not give her joy to imagine them together, violent and fierce, passionate and fiery and always fighting for dominion over the other. She hadn't wanted those thoughts in her head. She didn't have it in her to hate him more than she did. And when she married him, angry though she was—angry though she still is—she hadn’t accounted for a gentle husband.

And Jon is gentle. He handles her with a cosmic passion, pulling her close and holding her together so he can take her apart, all soft touches and promising kisses and fervent, heated whispers of love and adulation and worship. Because Jon doesn’t believe in gods anymore. He doesn’t believe in spirits or fate or higher powers, except for the way that he can make a red wolf melt in his arms, again and again and again, until the stars give up trying to outshine them and the skies aren’t vast enough to hold all that he carries in his heart for her, because there aren’t enough hours in the night for him to show her or tell her or make her see, and he clings and clings and clings to every chance he can get to do it for the hidden terror lurking in his mind that she might be torn from him before he can have his fill of her.

It’s a favorite habit of Jon’s to have her on silks or feathers. Sometimes she’s dripping in jewels, sometimes she’s only wrapped in impossibly soft furs. He seems to enjoy the sight of her when she’s presented to him as a lofty thing, and when he whispers my love my life my princess my own—Sansa is starting to believe in that.

Sometimes his eyes change while he’s loving her. The air will shift, and she'll hear the wingbeat of his heart, and he’ll lift his head and his gaze will be flashing silver, or sparkling amethyst. He watches her always, every moment he can, and most nights his intensity frightens her. But how can she be presented with such thoughtless devotion and feel anything less than perfect?

He doesn’t believe in gods anymore, she knows. He doesn’t believe in spirits or fate or higher powers. But he believes in her, and prays to her, and worships her, and she is beginning to find that she believes in that, too.

The blooms are stemless and baseless, pulled free of their greenery and attached to a single sheet of gauzy silk. There is not a single space of fabric visible beneath the layer of fresh flowers, which is really quite a feat. The petals are soft against Sansa's bare back as Jon loves her well into the dawn in their unusually brightly lit chambers. There are petals in her hair, her skin might forever smell of tulips, and Jon cannot—for the life of him—stop kissing every inch of her.

Really, this is what she had always dreamed marriage would be when she was a girl. Candlelights and sweet summer wine and being loved (and loved and loved and loved) on beds of flowers.

Well, perhaps she hadn't imagined it to be quite so literal.

"I never knew you to be such a romantic," she whispers as the sun begins to rise above the horizon.
The sky is still a tired thing, all dusty lavender and quiet shades of rose. Sansa is sprawled lazily atop her husband's chest, tracing the puckered lines of his scars. He watches the ceiling, one arm tucked behind his head, the other wrapped around her, fingers idly running up and down her arm and shoulder.

He grunts in reply. "I said to myself one day, what would my princess like? And I got to thinking about all of those songs you used to love. It made sense to me."

Sansa hums quietly, drawing a star onto his skin with her finger. "It's been many years since I've paid any mind to songs."

"Which is why I must. One of us has to be romantic, and if it shan't be you, then it falls to me. And I am more than up to the challenge."

Sansa sighs contentedly. She has little strength to move. She rarely does around this time of the day, as Jon will only have had his fill for the next few hours until he decides to accost her as her morning bath is being drawn. For now, however, she allows herself to be held. Part of her still refuses to believe that it's truly happening—that she is still alive, that the monsters in her nightmares will remain in her nightmares, and that she has—against all logic and reason and doubt—actually married a man who wants her. Not a kingdom, or a title, or a crown. Just her.

She would know. She abdicated. He wanted her anyways.

"Do you dream?" She asks. "When you get around to sleeping…I know you don't sleep much anymore, but...do you dream?"

Jon is silent for a few moments, fingers dancing over her back. "Not in the way you might be imagining," he says. "Not in the way I used to."

"What do your dreams look like now?"

"They seem realer," he says. "It's real places I visit, not places crafted in my mind. Everything feels vivid. Perhaps it's a blessing that I don't sleep as much as I used to."

"What do you dream of?"

"You. Always you."

Sansa doesn't know what to say to that. She only tucks herself deeper into him, and his arm tightens around her in response.

"I dream of you in Winterfell," he goes on. "Sitting by the snow, brushing out Lady's coat. Your hair catches the sunlight—it's like fire. And you look up and see me watching, and you give me such a smile...I could die a thousand deaths, and it'd bring me back every single time."

Sansa feels her heart swell and she bites her lip and she buries her face in his neck. His other arm comes around her now, and he's cradling her the way he does when she first wakes in the late morning.

"Is it always the same dream?" She asks.

"Not always," he says. "Some days you're praying in the Godswood back home. Some days you're walking through sunlit halls, dressed in red and gold. Some days you've got brown in your hair, and
you're watching falcons fly overhead. Some days you're trapped in a rosebush, trying to avoid the thorns. And I'm trapped...as if I'm only there to watch. There's never anything I can do to save you. But every time, you escape. You melt the gold, or you wash the color from your hair, or you shoot the birds, or you clip the flowers. Every time, you free yourself and come running into my arms. Every time, you find your way back to me.

Sansa lifts her head slightly, just enough for her eyes to trace the lines of his face. His own eyes dart to hers, and he holds her gaze.

"Every time?"

"Every single time," he says, plucking kisses from her pliant mouth.

He swallows her sighs and rolls over her, pinning her to the blooms beneath her skin. She cards her fingers through his curls and marvels at their softness.

"You found me at Castle Black for a reason," he said. "I know it. It could have been anyone else. It could have been Arya. Bran. Rickon. But it was you. It had to be you."

She draws slow, gentle breaths and wraps her arms around his shoulders, taking a moment just to embrace him as she had that day they reunited. He melts in her arms like butter in the summer sun, a low, rumbling sigh escaping his lips and tickling her neck.

"What do you dream of?" He asks her.

She has no immediate answer. She dreams of so many things. "You," she settles on after a while, because it is true.

"What a thing it is," he says. "To live."

She kisses his cheek, the course hairs of his beard scratching her lips familiarly. "We'll be safe soon," she tells him. "We fight this one last war, and we never have to fight again."

Jon nods into her shoulder, and she feels the press of his lips, soft as feather touch, and his grip on her warm and reassuring, and for a few blissful moments before sleep overtakes her she is nothing more than a girl in the arms of a boy, and the simplicity of it sounds much sweeter than any old song.
so it begins

Chapter Notes

back from therapy and back in my element, and the games have finally (finally) begun. i couldn't tell you how many chapters are left, only that i'm writing it on a day to day basis and posting it as i go, and from the skeleton idea that i had in my head when i started it looks like we're hitting endgame very very soon. i've got a rationale that i want to post at the very end after the last chapter, not sure if it's what other authors do on here, but i figured it'd be cool to work people through how this whole thing developed and changed.

so you've all noticed, no doubt, that i post a little more frequently than is normal for fanfiction. this has in fact come at a price, as i had some stuff that i let take the backseat because it honestly wasn't all that pressing. except it's become pressing again, so i'm just giving you a heads up that i might be a little infrequent over the next week. not sure exactly when, but there might be a day or two when i will not be able to post anything. its not a hiatus or anything, i just gotta take care of some stuff and i'll be right back with it. thanks.

also to the people who were wondering, yes, my dad is better, thanks for asking. and no, my infrequency isn't a health thing, it's just some college shit i have to take care of.

Sansa rises an hour earlier than usual once every week. Jon fights and clings and tries his absolute best to trap her in their bed long enough to make her howl at least twice more, but she can never let him win. She has accustomed herself to him accosting her again after this, when she takes her morning bath. Most times he joins her, and ends up going about his day smelling of her bathing perfumes. When they part for the morning, Sansa knows that he heads to his chambers, staring into his fires with Kinvara, or—more often than not—to the training yard. He never seems to run out of energy, always running hot for something. Be it a lust for blood or a lust for the skies or a lust for his wife beneath him, Jon has become a creature in constant need of stimulation. Sansa is grateful that there are always distractions to keep him busy during the daylight hours. She cannot keep Jon busy all by herself, and his desperate need to love her means she does not ever sleep before the dawn. She hopes to remedy that soon, when certain treasons have been carried out, and it is to this effect that Sansa has taken it upon herself to pull Jon closer to her side this morning as she emerges from her chamber to begin her day.

"I wish for you to join me later today, Jon," she says sweetly.

It is immediately clear that Jon is both delighted and suspicious of this development. The former because he has never turned down an opportunity to be within sight of his princess, and the latter because he is perfectly aware of the fact that his princess has never turned down an opportunity to avoid him during the day.

Sansa puts on her most winning smile as she tugs him closer to her, clutching his arm. "I wish you'd come with me," she says.

"To the Maidenvault?" He asks. "Am I to play cards with Lord Stokeworth's demon spawn or sew with Milla Rosby?"
Sansa blinks at him. "How did you know I sew with Milla Rosby?" She asks.

Jon just stares at her.

"You know—this is a conversation we will be tabling for the moment," she says. "Although it is most certainly coming. For now, I am off for the day. Once you've had your morning spar, I hope you can be prevailed upon to attend court with me."

Jon pauses, looking down at her. "Court."

"Yes."

"Petitioner's Court, you mean."

"The very same."

Jon does not move. "Sansa," he says slowly. "I am not going to Petitioner's Court."

Sansa sighs. "Jon, I need you to attend."

"I am not going," he says firmly.

"I never miss it, and I want you there beside me."

"You never want me near you during the day," Jon says.

"Petitioner's Court, you mean."

"The very same."

Jon does not move. "Sansa," he says slowly. "I am not going to Petitioner's Court."

Sansa sighs. "Jon, I need you to attend."

"I am not going," he says firmly.

"I never miss it, and I want you there beside me."

"You never want me near you during the day," Jon says.

"That's because you absolutely devour me at night," she says back hotly. "Life is about balance. You cannot spend every single day in the training yards."

"I cannot be expected to sit through two or three hours of Dany condescending to listen to court requests," Jon says. "I couldn't even do that while I was married to her."

"Jon," Sansa says so quietly she can barely hear herself, yet she knows he can hear her. "With the way things are going right now, you will be sitting in her place very soon. You need to attend court to see what it is like."

"Shall I learn from her shining example, then?" He asks. "Since she is such a fine sample of leadership?"

Sansa squeezes his hand. "I will be beside you the entire time," she says. "We shall endure it together."

"I don't mean to be dramatic," Jon says. "But I would literally rather die."

Sansa stands on her tiptoes and kisses him gently. "Please," she says. "I swear I would not ask if I did not need you there. But I do. I cannot do this alone. Please, Jon."

Jon leans forward and chases her lips, holding her mouth until he has stolen the breath from her lungs. "You enjoy this," he says quietly. "You know I can deny you nothing."

"I do not ask you to grant me the world, Jon," she says. "I only ask for a few hours of this day. Spend them beside me. You need not speak to a soul if it does not please you. In fact, I would actually prefer if you did not speak to a soul."

Jon sighs, lips touching her forehead. "Not a soul," he says slowly. "I suppose there are worse fates than court."
She beams at him as relief floods her veins. "Thank you, Jon," she says. "Thank you."

Jon nods, but says nothing in response. "I shall spend the morning in the training yard and scandalize the entire court by coming into the throne room smelling of a hundred horses," he declares.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Sansa says. "You will bathe when you return from the yard and wear the doublet I have laid out for you in my chambers--the red one with the onyx beadwork. You will meet me in the Throne room and be a perfect gentleman."

Jon is halfway down the hall when he turns back to salute her.

Save for a royal ball, Petitioner’s Court is by the far most dazzling display that the Red Keep ever hosts. A glorified puppet show where everyone arrives decked out in their finest house colored garb, Sansa does not have particularly fond memories of the event from her first stay in King’s Landing. At the very least, however, she is able to cloak herself in Stark colors shamelessly. Her previous captors had tried to wrap her in silks of demure pinks and purples, and her current captor would much prefer to see her in red and black. Sansa arrives wearing one of Buxton’s more demure pieces, a soft black thing without a single bead darned onto the smooth, touchably soft fabric.

She’s pulled her hair up into a loose tangle of braids at the back of her head. She would seem to be dressed marvelously shabby for such an occasion were it not for the positively gigantic baubles dangling from her ears.

Master Giles came to see her in her chambers after Ghost’s morning brushing with the creation he’d pulled together. She had nearly fainted with glee as she pored over it excitedly.

“Red, white, green, and pink jade clusters,” he says proudly. “Sourced straight from Yiti. I’ve thrown in a sapphire for Your Grace’s Tully roots, and it all supports the hanging teardrop pearls. Look at the sheen!”

Look at the size, Sansa wanted to say as she pulled them on. They are frightfully heavy, and large enough for her to flip back over her shoulder like hair. She is positively giddy at the thought of wearing them.

Tyrion smirks when he sees her in the hall outside of the Throne Room. “What a vision,” he says by way of greeting, bowing graciously. “I am surprised, though. I had imagined that we would have company today.”

“It is Petitioner’s Court,” Sansa says elusively. “There is to be plenty of company.”

“You know I refer to our slippery Prince,” Tyrion says as he takes her hand to walk her through the doors. “I had imagined that you of all people would be able to persuade him to attend.”

Sansa’s eyes do search the area quickly, searching for some sign of Jon’s inky black curls. “He’ll be here,” she says. “He assured me that he would. He would never disappoint me so.”

“I sincerely hope he wouldn’t,” Tyrion says quietly.

The Throne Room is crowded and sparkling, abuzz with chatter as lords and ladies cluster off to discuss the day’s petitioners. Sansa is scarcely two steps into the room when Uncle Edmure is on her other side.

“Petitioner’s Court is by far the most dazzling display that the Red Keep ever hosts,” Sansa says elusively. "There is to be plenty of company."

“You know I refer to our slippery Prince,” Tyrion says as he takes her hand to walk her through the doors. “I had imagined that you of all people would be able to persuade him to attend.”

Sansa’s eyes do search the area quickly, searching for some sign of Jon’s inky black curls. “He’ll be here,” she says. “He assured me that he would. He would never disappoint me so.”

“I sincerely hope he wouldn’t,” Tyrion says quietly.

The Throne Room is crowded and sparkling, abuzz with chatter as lords and ladies cluster off to discuss the day’s petitioners. Sansa is scarcely two steps into the room when Uncle Edmure is on her other side.

“What a sweet looking thing you are,” he says with a smile. Sansa returns the smile, ignoring the pointed looks and heated whispers as she passes, feeling the weight of stares on her—or more specifically, on her ears. The three of them stop at the steps of the dais, and Sansa’s eyes don’t
even pass over the empty throne before the crowd falls silent.

Truthfully, Daenerys only needs two guards behind her when she enters the room, and Sansa is pleased to see that she does only use the two—on smaller occasions. But Petitioner’s Court is a grand event, and one where people do tend to go all out, so it is hardly surprising that the Queen should enter with an escort of ten Unsullied. Like the rest of her court, she is cloaked in her finest—black silks and a burning red sash across her torso, glittering rubies set in silver round her wrists and neck, onyx beads woven into her hair. She is a vision, as she always is, and she marches in like a pearlescent goddess with the color high in her cheeks. Her gown has a cape attached. Sansa has always liked the style, but avoided imitating it lest she send the wrong message of support.

The courtiers nearest the dais sink into curtseys and bows as the Queen arrives at the Throne. Her eyes gloss over the company—lingering briefly over Sansa’s ears—before she climbs the steps and takes her seat on the throne. With a benevolent nod, Sansa takes her seat, trying her damnest to ignore the empty chair beside her.

During his tenure as Prince Consort, Jon’s place was in the seat right beside the Iron Throne. But Sansa was led to understand that this was never a seat that Jon occupied during his time here. As Prince of Dragonstone, his seat is still the one right beside the Iron Throne, but the only thing that can ever be ascertained about the Black Prince by the court of the South is that he has not been known to give a single fuck at any point since his Queen’s reign began. Sansa’s place is to Jon’s right, and she is grateful for this, if only because it means that the Queen is compelled to lean over when she wants to whisper something that ought to be taken as a compliment but is in fact vaguely threatening.

“Quite a pair of baubles, Princess,” Daenerys says today as the courtiers assemble. “Jade, isn’t that?”

“I believe so, Your Grace,” Sansa replies.

“Have you ever seen it? The Jade Sea?”

“No, Your Grace.”

“Tis a pity you are not more well travelled. I myself have travelled the length of the western coast of Essos—from Pentos to the Bay of Dragons.”

“Your Grace is extraordinarily lucky,” Sansa says. “To have seen so much.”

“The world is a large pond. One cannot be expected to understand its complexity by only swimming in a single corner.”

“Sage wisdom, Your Grace,” Sansa says. “I pray it is useful enough to tempt one to learn how to swim.”

Daenerys only watches her. “I understand you began to learn yourself recently. How was that ride on my beloved Rhaegal?”

“Most invigorating, Your Grace,” Sansa says. “Though I confess I am not partial to heights.”

Daenerys means to respond, a smirk on her lips that leaves Sansa thinking that she really ought to let the Queen win this round. But she does not get the chance to, because the doors to the Throne Room are thrown open again, only moments after they’ve closed, and Sansa’s heart leaps. The crowd is abuzz again, whispering this way and that as they slowly part. Jon strides across the marbled floors in the fine embellished doublet Sansa had laid out for him. He stops at the dais
before the Throne and sinks into a bow reminiscent of a jester, positively oozing sarcasm.

“Your Grace,” he says. “A thousand and one pardons for my tardiness.”

Daenerys leans forward, brows knit in confusion. “I am all astonishment, nephew,” she says. “I have never known you to take an interest in attending Petitioner’s Court.”

Jon’s eyes flicker briefly over Sansa, who has—in her fine opinion—done a brilliant job of pretending she is a part of the decorations. “It’s recently dawned on me that there is some great beauty to be found buried in the hum drum of governing,” he says.

Daenerys’ gaze flits between Jon, who Sansa thinks is beginning to salivate at this point, and Sansa, who is still expertly becoming a part of the chair upholstery.

“This is a cheerful turn of events,” Tyrion says. “And I dare say Your Grace is right on time.”

“He is not,” Daenerys says, narrowing her eyes on Jon. “You are indeed tardy, nephew. If you intend to make a habit of attending my court, take care you arrive on time.”

Jon gives her a grin that makes Sansa think he might stretch his neck up to the throne and bite her entire head off her shoulders. He sinks to one knee with a flourish, and tilts his head forward to his curls fall into his eyes.

“Your Grace, you are a most elegant and gracious example,” he says deliberately. “I hope never to disappoint you.”

Daenerys’ gaze follows him as he rises to his feet, taking his seat beside Sansa. This is seemingly his threshold for good behavior, as the moment he is seated, he leans over and kisses Sansa’s cheek. Loudly.

"So it begins,” he whispers before he steals another kiss, this one from her mouth. She wants to swat his face away before he ruins her rouge, but he has already turned to face forward, catching her hand in his.

Honestly, she knows that she is perhaps asking for much. Jon has never been a particularly patient man. Diplomatic, perhaps. It takes no small amount of skill, surely, to make peace with wildlings. But if Jon had any real political capability once, those days were behind him long before Sansa met him at Castle Black. With that in mind, Sansa knows that it would be too much to expect Jon to be a perfect prince today. But while she cannot be hopeful that he will be entirely flawless in his performance, she can certainly hope that Tyrion is flexible on the meaning of the term behave.
Petitioner’s Court commences mere moments after Sansa has determined that Jon has no intention of releasing her hand from his grip. He plays idly with her fingers, lifting them to his mouth to kiss them softly. It is a new situation entirely, for Sansa to be with company during Court. She never is, usually. Even during her last stay in King’s Landing under Joffrey she had watched Court from the overhead balcony, alone and isolated, too much of a wartime pariah to be friended by any of the other ladies. While infinitely wiser in the Dragon Queen’s court, Sansa has still grown accustomed to being alone in this cornerstone of southron politics. Having so reassuring a figure as Jon beside her throws her for a loop. While she is typically eager to maintain the appearance of perfect stupidity while also retaining every single word she hears, today she is allowed to drop the charade of stupidity, as she is more keen on pretending that Jon leaning in just enough to steal a kiss from a scandalous spot behind her ear doesn’t make her both shiver and want to punch him.

“She speak so silently that only Jon, with his claustrophobic proximity, can actually hear her. All the same, it dawns on Sansa instantly that the Dragon Queen is almost painfully aware of every movement from their part of the dais. Her eyes, so shockingly purple and pretty, narrow on Jon as he steals the kiss. Sansa does not fear upsetting the woman with her husband’s affection—in truth, she doesn’t give a fuck—but there is the minor issue of impressing enough lords with Jon’s political astuteness—or at least his ability to hold his attention for an hour or two.

“My Lords, my ladies,” Daenerys begins stiffly. “My home and hearth are open to all. My Court is open. Come forth and speak plainly.”

Typically, Sansa has observed that the courtiers who have brought guests to lend weight to their petitions are the ones who speak first. The guests—almost always some wealthy businessmen—only come to provide insight or answer any questions on the subject that the crown might have if the lord or lady themselves do not know the intimate details of a business. Joffrey had questions sometimes, where certain aspects of a business that interested him were concerned. It was during one such occasion where he encountered the wealthy smith brought along with Lord Rhysling who demonstrated his improvement to a crossbow and enabled Joffrey to have that ghastly golden tipped thing he so liked to terrorize her with.

Daenerys—upon arriving at court—quickly made it clear to the lords and ladies that she hadn’t the vaguest interest in asking further questions. If the lords or ladies could not answer a question, the petition was either denied or—if she was feeling charitable—tabled to be discussed at a later date. This later discussion never occurred with the queen, as Tyrion or Varys would take it upon themselves to come to a decision on her behalf, and almost always without her knowledge. This, Sansa has learned from Tyrion and Varys herself. Her practice has done her no favors amongst the courtiers who are unable to profit off of the ludicrous shipping trade going on between the Crownlands and the Bay of Dragons—which is no small number of them—but while the dissenters are growing larger in number every day, Tyrion and Varys had been stayed by the fact that the lords who did profit from the trade deals have grown unimaginably wealthy from the business. This, Sansa knows, it how Daenerys was able to so quickly resolve the pesky issue of the debts owed by the Iron Throne to the Iron Bank. Unfortunately, it only ever solves the problems that are visible to the queen. Holed up in the palace, so far removed from the city—and even from the other lords—is not something that Tyrion has told her is entirely new.

“When she governed Meereen, she had many dissenters amongst the nobility,” he said. “She
despised them all, holding their tolerance for slave-keeping against them. This attitude even extended to the ones who did not condone the practice themselves, to the point where she shunned sound counsel from experienced politicians who knew the Bay and its economic weak spots far better than she did.”

“Why on earth did she remain in Meereen, I wonder?” Sansa asked. “If she had her heart set on the Iron Throne all along?”

“Ser Jorah told me, when I asked, that she intended to stay so that she might learn how to rule.”

“It seems to me that she did not seem too keen to learn,” Sansa said. “At least not how to rule.”

Tyrion had nodded. “When I arrived in the city, it had been brought into a total economic standstill. She brought about so much chaos that the three cities—Astapor, Yunkai, and Meereen—came together to bring about her downfall. I met a noble there who had the misfortune of being betrothed to her—Hisdhar zo Loraq was his name—who made several attempts to help her stabilize the city even after she had crucified his father—a known slave abolitionist.”

“She crucified a slave abolitionist?” Sansa asked incredulously. “I thought she only killed masters?”

“The rich were all guilty in her eyes,” Tyrion said. “I wish I knew that, then. Still—he did his best to help her. And still, she thwarted him at every turn. The dragons made her drunk on her own hubris by that point. She was convinced that it was the will of the Gods that she be granted power. Only a select few could reason with her, and they had all been too in awe of her to think twice about really telling her that she needed to learn how to properly play.”

“You didn’t seem too eager to teach her, either,” Sansa noted then.

Tyrion had the grace to look ashamed. “I am guilty of this, true. She was still the only unburnt Targaryen by that point, though. I took a leaf from your book while I was in Meereen. While I was in awe of her, I did also say what needed to be said to guarantee not being burnt to a crisp in my bed.”

Thinking back on it now, Sansa is hardly surprised at the state of the continent. Disappointed, yes—for even she had the fancy to hope that a woman who had walked into a flame with three stones and emerged with three dragons would be destined to do good by the titles she’d be granted. That she is disappointed is beyond any question. That she is not surprised—that is beyond dispute.

Daenerys doesn’t ask further questions, so the lords and ladies made the habit long before Sansa ever arrived at court not to bother bringing along a guest. The first petitioner is Lord Warryn Beesbury of Honeyholt. Sansa has never spoken directly to him—she can’t even recall being in the same room as him—and knows him only by his livery until he announces himself to the Queen.

“Lord Beesbury,” Daenerys acknowledges him with a tilt of her head. “What have you come to ask of the Crown?”

“If it pleases Your Grace,” Lord Beesbury says. “Honeyholt has been the proud prime supplier of honey to the continent for centuries. The beekeepers we employ have been dwindling in number, however, due to…financial constraints…upon the region. I received a petition at Honeyholt by the remaining number to form a guild with chapters here in the Crownlands that will enable them to trade honey abroad. This might re-stimulate the business of beekeeping.”

Before he’s even finished speaking, Sansa sees the merits of allowing beekeepers to unionize.
Honeyholt is the leader of many houses within that region of the Reach that produce honey, and are therefore the best candidates to organize such a guild. And with the new taste for sweeter wines and mead taking the court by storm, the demand for honey is rising rapidly. This fad could last a decade, a century, or maybe even a year—but even then it would provide some new economic crutch for the Reach, which honestly needs all the help it can get right now. Unionizing beekeepers would draw so many to the area to specialize and train. The workers would most certainly be able to meet the demand, which would only send the need for honey to a fever pitch, and Sansa’s head is buzzing just imagining the doors this would open for the area. If the demand for honey can’t be met, however, then the fad will inevitably disappear, along with this glorious window of opportunity.

Daenerys lifts one hand from the armrest to run her fingers through her hair, thinking hard. She resumes her position with both hands gripping the rests and levels Lord Beesbury with an intense look. “I imagine,” she says. “That a region like yours might be put to better uses than honey-making. The Reach would be better off focusing its efforts on agricultural pursuits.”

Sansa expects nothing and she is still let down.

Jon has grown bored of the conversation, eyes on her hand in his, fingers smoothing over the dark red enamel painted onto her nails. He leans over and kisses her cheek again, but this time his lips linger and drag along her skin, trailing down to her jaw. He releases a drawn out, jagged breath that tickles her ear. She tries to pull her hand from him, but he won’t release it. She glares at him. He looks so smug she wishes she could kick him.

“You Grace,” says another as he comes forward to stand beside Beesbury. “The Beesburys and their surrounding houses have the least fertile soil in the Reach. Their land has been used primarily for beekeeping for years. None of the workers in that region of the kingdom are trained farmers.”

“They ought to rectify that situation, don’t you think, my lord?” Daenerys asks. “Train more farmers, Lord Beesbury. The kingdoms need produce more than they need honey.”

“The issue in the Reach is not the shortage of farmers, Your Grace, but rather the shortage of farmable land,” the other lord says.

Daenerys’ eyes narrow on him. “I never caught your name, my Lord.”

“Harrold Redwyne, Your Grace.”

“Harrold Redwyne,” Daenerys repeats slowly. “Of the Arbor…you share blood with one of my first Western allies, Lady Olenna Tyrell.”

“I do, Your Grace. She was a distant aunt of mine.”

“The Arbor is known for wine. Surely the grapes are grown there on your lands?”

“They are, Your Grace.”

“Then it seems to me that if a wine-making region can grow grapes, a honey-making region can be made to produce something as well. Thank you for coming forward today, my lords. I will hear the next petition now.”

Sansa does a spiffing job of keeping her expression neutral, wondering how she and Tyrion can corner Lord Beesbury and get to organizing a beekeeping guild. She desperately needs to have a look at the coffers and records. But this is for another time.
The next petitioner steps forward, a plump young man wearing purple velvet, and Sansa forgets completely who he is until he is announced as Lord Bar Emmon of Sharp Point.

“Lord Bar Emmon,” Daenerys says graciously. “What have you come to ask of the crown?”

The plump lord goes slightly pink at being address directly by the Queen, and indeed Sansa cannot recall once having seen him speak at Petitioner’s Court before. In fact, she’s fairly certain she hadn’t been aware that the head of House Bar Emmon was even in King’s Landing. He must have recently arrived, then. This makes Sansa push slightly to get Jon’s busy mouth away from her cheek and pay more attention.

“I thank Your Grace,” he says, voice uncertain but determined all the same. “Mine is a coastal stronghold, reliant upon the treasures of the sea to maintain my lands. Stannis Baratheon lost a great many of the ships in my fleet during his campaign against the Lannisters, and I did what I could to rebuild them, but what I have managed to rebuild over these last two years has been contributed to Your Grace’s trade fleet with Essos.”

Daenerys says something insignificant in response to this, but Sansa cannot make out what it is because Jon has decided to monopolize her again.

“Before you came,” he says, eyes glued to the throne as the queen speaks. “When she got to babbling, mouthing off, all those stupid self-important speeches meant to make men shake in their boots, I used to imagine shoving my cock into her mouth to shut her up.”

Sansa positively starts, and it takes real effort to school her expression again. “Shush,” she says quietly. “Fiend.”

“Sometimes I’d do just that, if I had her alone,” he goes on, heedless of her warning. His fingers dance over the nape of her neck, twiddling with the dangling pearl on her earring. “These are new,” he observes.

Sansa shushes him again.

“I am pleased to learn this,” Daenerys is saying. “Your ships, I’m sure you will be happy to hear, have been put to excellent use. The coastal crownlands have enjoyed immense benefits to this trade deal with Essos.”

“I am very pleased to have served the Crown,” Lord Bar Emmon continues. “The issue is that without those ships, my people cannot fish on as large a scale as we once did, and our own welfare becomes…disturbed. I would ask for Your Grace to consider drafting a trade deal with a lumber rich area that we might procure the supplies needed to rebuild.”

Daenerys seems to consider this for a moment. “I wonder, Lord Tully, if the Riverlands would not be interested in a trade agreement for lumber?”

Edmure raises a brow. “The Riverlands are not rich in forestry, Your Grace. I doubt we’d be able to turn out enough wood to meet Lord Bar Emmon’s demand.”

“Perhaps we ought to draft a lumber allowance into the trade deal with Essos, then,” Daenerys says. “My regency there is very capable. They can meet the demand.”

“If I may, Your Grace,” Lord Florent says demurely. Daenerys nods to her Master of Coin. “Lumber is a rarity in the east, which means the price goes nowhere but up on that side of the sea. It would be terribly imprudent to be purchasing from Essos—they’d bleed the coffers dry.”
“Then where do you suggest we acquire the materials for Lord Bar Emmon to reconstruct his fleet?” she asks.

Lord Florent coughs imperceptively, and Sansa gets the impression that the queen is not going to enjoy hearing his next words.

She is, for once, not disappointed.

“The highest producers of lumber in the known world are our northernmost neighbors,” he says.

Daenerys’ eyes flash instantly, and her expression hardens. “Princess Sansa,” she says with the sweetest venom. “I wonder if you could be persuaded to take up your pen and write to your infant nephew. See if he is willing to engage in a sale.”

Jon’s hand tightens over Sansa’s as the queen speaks. When Daenerys turns her gaze on them, Jon’s arm slings over Sansa’s shoulders in what she imagines must appear as a minor, insignificant gesture done absentmindedly. It strikes her, however, as distinctly territorial—especially after the queen’s lavender stare finds them to her right.

“I shall endeavor to arrange a deal with the New Wolf’s regency,” Sansa says carefully, mindful of the bitter sparks between aunt and nephew. “But I hope it is not forgotten that while I may entreat the regency to consider such an arrangement, I am not in a position to demand their agreement.”

Daenerys’ stony gaze only deepens, shadows dancing across her face. Shadows of greed, triumph, fury. “I wonder,” she says, and Jon’s arm moves from Sansa’s shoulders to snake around her waist. “I wonder when I can expect to see some show of good faith from our Northern neighbors. We have been peaceful for two years now, but they maintain such a determined silence that I’m afraid I’ve grown quite skittish. What other occasion but this one can allow me to collect on a return investment in this Northern bride I’ve acquired for my nephew?”

“The Princess’ betrothal was drafted under very specific terms, Your Grace. If by ‘return investment’, you refer to a child, the marriage has only existed for all of two months. Surely even little baby dragons do not grow so quickly.” Tyrion says with a nervous laugh.

Daenerys turns her glare on Tyrion, who—to his immense credit—squirms miserably, but does not back down from her stare.

“If acquiring the wood means that much to you,” Jon says impatiently, “Then cut down the bloody Kingswood.”

The entire court is so silent that a chirping hatchling can be heard distantly. Sansa swallows slowly and absolutely refuses to look at Jon. Instead, her gaze is resolutely forward, on some spot in the distance. She has worn many masks in this very room, and the mask of complete and utter stupidity is one she’s used time and time again with astounding results.

“We’ll continue this discussion later, as it appears to be going nowhere now,” Jon continues. “If it pleases you, aunt, you’ve many other lords come to see you, and we only have so many hours in the day.”

Daenerys appears, for a moment, as though she might get to her feet. Jon’s body is turned towards Sansa on his right, but his face is turned towards Daenerys. Sansa cannot see what is in his eyes, but she can hear it in his voice, gravelly with salt and husky with smoke. His eyes must be glowing purple. She can feel it.

Jon’s eyes do not leave the queen’s, with a burning to match her own, and Sansa wonders if
Westeros may yet know one last dance of dragons.

“Thank you for coming forward today, my lord,” Daenerys says, not taking her eyes off of Jon. “I will hear the next petition.”

Lord Bar Emmon stumbles back into the crowd, looking immensely grateful to be gone.


Jon tears his gaze away from the queen and brings his lips to Sansa’s, melting into the kiss. Her ears are pounding with the force of the blood in her head. Jon does not release her until he has stolen the breath from her lungs, and he strokes her cheek with his thumb as the next petitioner comes forward.

“One last battle,” Jon echoes, and Sansa squeezes his arm.

The petitioner is announced as Lord Emmond Farring. Standing a short ways behind him are two others dressed too richly to be his guests, squires or pages. Sansa assumes they are other lords, and the prospect of several lords coming together for a single petition does not thrill her.

“Your Grace,” he says with a voice smooth and sure, the hallmark of a skilled speaker. Sansa watches him carefully—he cannot be more than twenty. “My stronghold Farring Cross is a midland region, you’ve passed it many times on your trips around the Crownlands.”

“I remember,” Daenerys says. “My Dothraki have made their home near and around your territory.”

Emmond Farring’s brow twitches just slightly as he nods. “Indeed, Your Grace. It is for this reason that I am here today. The Dothraki presence has been a hindrance to our harvest. My people are incapable of maintaining their land.”

“The Dothraki way of life is not at all similar to the way you know, Lord Farring,” Daenerys says. “They are a fierce people, however, and their loyalty—once won—is immovable. I would not reward that loyalty by allowing my subjects to disrespect their way of life.”

“I assure you, Your Grace,” Lord Emmond says. “I take no issue with their way of life, save for when it interferes with the livelihood of my people. The Dothraki are a nomadic people. They trample fields with their horses and herd cattle in areas that are reserved for farming. Their camps have done damage to our most fertile areas.”

“And you have made no attempt to speak with them?” Daenerys asks. “To negotiate land use? The Dothraki make up a part of the heroic army that contributed to the demise of the pretend Queen, Cersei Lannister. That army liberated these kingdoms—your lands included. I find it a terribly funny thing that people will hail strangers for rescuing them, and then turn on them when it is inconvenient.”

Lord Emmond’s eyes flicker. “Were they interested in negotiating with words, I assure Your Grace that I would not have taken up any of your time today.”

“Have any of my Dothraki comrades attacked your person, Lord Emmond?”

“They have attacked the representative I sent to negotiate with them,” he says. “And the one I sent after that. And myself, yes, when I decided it was too dangerous to be sending envoys. They seem to be laboring under the impression that they were promised the riches of these lands by their queen—their words, and not my own.”
Daenerys’ cheeks seem to color, though her face betrays no movement. “I will speak with the Dothraki. I assume these young lords have similar complaints?”

“Regrettably so, Your Grace,” Lord Emmond says. “Lord Elson Harte has a graver report, and Lord Addam Langward has a graver one still.”

The first of the young men to step forward is the taller of the two, Lord Harte. He is a gangly, hazel eyed man who looks as though he has only just entered manhood.

“I am sorry to report this to Your Grace,” he says. “I have had the profound displeasure of arresting seven of the Dothraki bloodriders living on my lands.”

Daenerys’ glare is a quick settling thing. None of the three young men seem to care for it. “And what is the purpose behind this arrest?”

“They were found to have accosted a handful of Septas within the boundaries of my Keep. The maidens have no great names, no fortunes, no castles or keeps. But they are on my territory, and as so are under my protection. I have Bloodriders at the gates to my keep as we speak, threatening to bring fire and blood upon me and mine for this arrest. I cannot maintain order on my lands if the Dothraki are free to rape and pillage their way across it.”

“What has been done with the guilty men thus far?”

“Thus far? Nothing,” Lord Harte says. “I would have sent them to the Wall, but that is now beyond our jurisdiction. Thus it must be that the seven guilty men must be cut, as is the traditional alternative punishment for the crime. I’d have carried it out when the crime was first reported to me were it not for the bloodriders at my gates threatening to bring Your Grace’s might down upon me for daring to defend my people.”

Daenerys bristles at him visibly. “The guilty men will be dealt with as I see fit,” she says. “Princess Sansa will see to it that they are received at the Neck to be escorted to the Wall.”

“And the riders at my gates?”

“I will order them to stand down. Are you quite satisfied, my Lord? Is there anything else you wish for me to settle in your stead?”

Sansa can already smell the impatience of the queen, who clearly smarts from having her own military men used in an argument against her. Honestly, the most shocking aspect of Daenerys’ entire reign is that she did not immediately send the Dothraki back across the Narrow Sea under threat of dragon fire. How could the queen not have seen that they would be as stubborn and set in their ways as she is?

“A band of the men attacked a horse-breeder in a village near my keep, Your Grace,” says young Lord Addam Langward. He’s of moderate height, with a young, high-boned face. He can’t be older than fifteen. “They looted his horses—he was one of our prime suppliers. Some forty horses were taken. When the breeder Jacop Bilt asked for payment in exchange for the horses, they drew steel. His son came out to defend him, and they cut him down in front of his father.”

The entire court whispers discreetly. Daenerys’s brows knit together. “And where are the men who attacked this breeder and his son?”

“They rode off, Your Grace. With forty horses and the blood of a seventeen year old boy staining their curved swords.”
Daenerys draws in a sharp breath, looking away for just a moment before she has composed herself anew. “Crown will be generous. You may inform the breeder Jacop Bilt that his stolen horses will be repaid three times over.”

“Jacop Bilt did not come to my Keep seeking gold or horses, Your Grace,” Lord Langward says. “He came seeking justice. Lords Harte and Farring met with me a fortnight ago because we have all had similar problems with the Dothraki settling themselves upon our lands—namely the issue of them refusing to settle. I can understand if they choose to remain nomadic. But I cannot carry out my duties as lord if they cannot also remain peaceful.”

“The Dothraki are brave, fierce warriors who follow only who they choose,” Daenerys says. “And they chose to follow me. They have fought and bled for these kingdoms—and won the war beside me.”

Lord Emmond Farring watches her. “Their actions in liberating the land from the grasp of Cersei Lannister were nothing short of heroic,” he says. “Does it follow that we owe them our sons and daughters?”

“You owe them your very lives,” Daenerys says firmly.

The entire court is eerily silent.

“I will speak with the Dothraki,” she adds with a note of finality. “And we shall not discuss them again. I will hear the next petition now.”

The three lords exchange glances, and then back away into the crowd. Another lord comes forward, this one in his fifties. He sinks into a bow, affording the dais a prime view of his shining balding head.

“Charming,” Jon mutters under his breath.

“Lord Hightower,” Daenerys says, now seemingly affixed upon maintaining an expression of stony disdain. “What have you come to ask of the Crown?”

“If it pleases Your Grace,” he says. “I have come bearing a report drafted a moon past.”

“Behave,” Sansa says quietly as Jon scoffs silently.

“It was drafted at the Citadel,” Hightower adds. “For you see, even the Maesters have agreed upon it.”

“You think that you can make her step down?” Jon asks Sansa, lips lingering on her ear as he leaves quiet kisses on her skin.

“There is…disquiet in the Reach regarding the constant presence of the black dragon.” Hightower says.

“Has he harmed anyone?” Daenerys asks.

“Well…he is not there anymore, but his frequent trips around the area do nothing but intimidate the smallfolk working on what little farmable land we still have. A little over a fortnight ago, the dragon perched himself right in the middle of an orchard. He destroyed over two dozen peach trees.”

“You think you’ll ever make her give this up?” Jon asks Sansa again.
“The lord whose land was damaged will be compensated,” Daenerys says.

“I had hoped, Your Grace, that something could be done about the dragon being permitted to fly in that part of the country.”

“You think you and Tyrion and Varys could ever cook up a trap that can hold her?” Jon asks.

“Dragons are not permitted to do anything. They simply do. One cannot tame a dragon.”

“Where this creature goes cannot be controlled by yourself?”

She watches Hightower. “My children cannot be chained. They are not slaves. They are not lesser beasts. They are almighty, and powerful, and mine.”

Sansa can feel the exact moment a hundred pairs of eyes shift onto a man who demonstrated just yesterday that a dragon can, in fact, be controlled. Jon doesn’t even notice their stares, still drowning himself in his princess.

“She’s slipping,” Jon whispers. “And she knows it. It’s only made her cling harder. She’s going to do something extremely desperate. She might even try to kill you. And I’m waiting for her to try. I want her to try. And when she does, you’ll see. Once I’ve painted the walls of this room with her blood, you’ll see. There was never going to be any other way. If you want to take the throne from her, you’ll have to tear it from her hands. And the next time she tries to take you away from me, that is exactly what I’ll do.”

He pulls back just enough to kiss her cheek, and his smile is soft and cruel. “I’ll tear it from her,” he assures Sansa. “With fire and blood.”
“It might have gone worse,” Arya says when Sansa tells her everything.

They are bundled together in the Godswood in the early hours of the evening, Captain Ryke a safe distance away. Sansa is still in her gown from court, but Arya is now juggling with the lofty earrings she had been wearing before. Ghost lies lazily between them indulging in his early dinner of an entire deer, skinned and salted just the way he likes it. Arya strokes the fur on his neck as he eats and he chews happily, heedless of her attentions.

Sansa sighs, leaning against the trunk of the nearest tree. “I’m just grateful they didn’t have it out right there in the Throne Room.”

“But he really told you he’d kill her?”

“He seems convinced that she won’t give us another choice.”

“Do you think so?”

“Honestly? I think he might have a fair point.”

It’s no joyous occasion for Sansa to acknowledge that they are in fact drawing ever nearer to the issue of actually confronting Daenerys with the demand that she step down. There are times when Daenerys reminds Sansa eerily of Cersei. Not in their political savvy, really—even at her blindest, no daughter of Tywin Lannister’s would have made half the blunders that Daenerys has—but more in their determination. Jon swears that she’s going to do something drastic out of sheer desperation. And Sansa hates to admit it—really hates it—but he poses a fair point. Jon knows Daenerys better that Sansa does. It’d be monumentally irresponsible to discount his counsel simply because he has a history of stupidity.

In an ideal world, Sansa could depend on the queen recognizing that she is outmaneuvered, and retiring to Dragonstone peacefully with whatever dignity she can scrape together intact. Sansa imagines a once-dead Jon Snow would have stubbornly held onto such an idea.

_She’s not her father._

Heavy hands, bitter words, and empty promises have taught Sansa not to place any faith in people being good for goodness’ sake. For this purpose, she has indeed accounted for the inevitability of bloodshed. Drogon’s incapacitation, while hastening the speed of the impending upheaval, has indeed made a significant different in the scale of the carnage. If it ever comes to a fight between dragons—well, it’s not likely to now.

All the same, Daenerys has total control of the coastal Crownlands lords—an iron grip upon the most profitable international trade deal involving the continent. With her rapidly declining support among the inland lords, she, her Unsullied, and her remaining Dothraki will never be able to take on her enemies’ armies on land. But Sansa has grown increasingly concerned with the fleet of ships she’s acquired for herself. The fleet she used to arrive on the continent two years ago, and every ship she’s seized from the Crownlands in the time since to contribute to this Essosi connection combined make her a formidable naval force. Especially if her fleet can be commanded by a capable seaman.

When Sansa tells Arya all of this, her sister snorts. “There’s a simple solution. If ships are what you need to take her down, have the North Fleet. Manderly’s just finished construction on fourteen
war galleys—behemoth things—and each one has a dozen lesser warships. They’re built for combat, and he’s just itching for an excuse to test them out.”

Sansa shakes her head. “I remember. They were still under construction when I left Winterfell. But we can’t use those.”

“Why not?”

“Because this is a southron war for a southron throne. The North has worked too long and fought too hard to tangle itself up in southron politics again. The best thing that can be done for the North right now is to remain totally cut off from the south until Robb’s voice drops.”

“You want to wait a decade and a half until the North and the South can communicate again?”

“It’s the only way to ensure that the North’s sovereignty is maintained. Right now it’s still too new. Open this door, and the south will overwhelm the North with its problems.”

Arya nods. “Then…Jon might be right. You might have to kill her.”

Sansa sighs. “I hope it won’t come to that,” she says. “But I’m prepared for the worst.”

They are silent as Ghost hums contentedly through a mouthful of meat. “I hope I’m nearby her when she learns what happened to Drogon,” Arya says. “I want to see it.”

Sansa strokes a loose strand of her hair. “Jon is convinced that she might try to kill me.”

Arya nods. “He’s right. She’ll likely blame you for everything wrong that’s ever happened to her in her life. She can’t fuck her nephew? Your fault. She can’t hold her kingdoms together? Your fault. She can’t have children? Your fault. She can’t get olive sandwiches with her tea? Your fault. Her braid won’t hold? Your fault. But gods, I just hope I’m there when she learns. She’s going to fucking scream.”

Sansa curls her knees up to her chest and tucks her chin onto them. “I’m pleased to see one of us is happy.” She says, eyes darting to the edge of the Godswood, where she can make out the charcoal armor coating Captain Ryke’s shoulder blade. They used to stand a good twenty feet away from her, but on Jon’s orders the Blackguard must now constantly have eyes on her. It’s the beginning of a new phase of mania for Jon, she imagines. One that reminds her eerily of her time under Joffrey’s regime.

She knows that the end of the Dragon Queen’s reign will mean the end of this insanity. She’ll be free, and safe, and there will be no North for her, and no Winterfell—she cannot have any southron lords sniffing about trying to get their feet back under that table—but there will be Jon. It cannot be over quickly enough,

and yet.

She is not looking forward to hearing Daenerys scream.
Sansa had once taken great pleasure in being proven right. For a girl more clever than even she believed, it was a source of hidden pride. No, it isn’t possible to eat an entire tray of honey cakes in a single sitting, Arya. You can’t climb a tree that high, Theon, or you’ll fall and get the wind knocked out of you. Robb, you can’t swim in that part of the river or you’ll be caught in something. She will never stop missing the time when her being right meant smug triumph as Arya vomited an entire plate of cake, or Theon landed right on his back with an oomph, or Robb got his leg caught on a fallen branch as he swam.

Lately, she has come to resent being right, as the triumph has been replaced with chagrin. The simple remedy to this would be to stop making predictions at all. She doesn’t know how to do that anymore.

Her latest prediction is, to no one’s surprise, correct. The Blackguard have recruited new members to the elite service, and Sansa doesn’t know exactly how many men comprise this elite force that answers only to the Prince. She only knows that they are near fanatical in their worship of him, that their presence in the Red Keep raises tension amongst the nobility, and that they do not, in fact, take orders from her.

She has no real orders to give them, really, except that they mind their distance.

“Impossible, Princess,” Captain Ryke says when she tells him. “I’ve orders from the Prince that you are to be visible at all times.”

Sansa bites her lip to keep from pointing out that she’d be no less visible from ten feet away. And she very much wants to. Ever since Petitioner’s Court, Jon has become utterly consumed by the idea that Daenerys is going to try to eliminate her. Sansa wants to reassure him that the queen wouldn’t be so stupid as to try that again—still smarting from the last time she tried to outmaneuver Sansa—but she knows that there is some small grain of truth to this. She cannot dismiss the possibility.

“These dragons,” Davos says when Sansa meets him and Tyrion for luncheon. Today is one of the rare days when she does not host events at the Maidenvault, and she has chosen to while it away discussing movements with the men. “I can’t make heads or tails of them. I’d say the heat’s driven them to madness, but I think it safer to say they’ve both been mad for years.”

Sansa gives him a tight smile as she swirls her spoon through her soup. “Has there been any talk?” she asks.

“It’s the strangest thing,” Tyrion says. “Some news is making its way round the city, and the Keep besides. Something about Drogon having murdered a child in Meereen.”

“And how has it been received?”

“About as well as you might imagine. That the dragons are dangerous is beyond any dispute, but now there’s the question of whether the queen can even command them. It’s led people to turn a more favorable eye on their prince—especially after the day before yesterday, when they saw him with Rhaegal in the city.”

“At least we have that,” Sansa says. “Have you spoken with Lord Beesbury?”

“I have,” Davos nods. “He thanks you graciously for approving the guild. He’s on his way back to
Honeyholt now to buy time with the other beekeeping lordlings. As soon as this mess is over, they’ll begin the process.”

“Excellent. What’s the situation with the Dothraki?”

“Not good,” Davos says with regret, folding his hands behind his back grimly.

“Tension is reaching a fever pitch,” Tyrion says. “The Crowland lords have stayed their hands for fear of the dragon’s wrath, but one more transgression by the horselords and they won’t care about dragonfire. It’ll be a bloodbath.”

Sansa clutches her fingers fretfully. “We need to move quickly.”

“I agree wholeheartedly,” Tyrion says, swilling his white wine around in the glass. “This is becoming too complex to keep in place. There are too many pieces to manage, too many people who could send this all up in smoke. All it takes is one stroke of a sword, and we’ll have a war.”

“What does Jon say?” Davos asks.

“He’s convinced she’ll go violently.” Sansa replies.

“Well, he’s not wrong,” Tyrion grumbles.

“And what do you think?” Davos asks.

“I think it’s possible.” Sansa says with a shrug.

“It’s absolute,” Davos says. “Jon and Daenerys Targaryen—they’re cut from the same cloth. Might be they weren’t once, but they are now. Both of them have something they won’t back down from. The queen with her Iron Throne—it’s all she has.”

Tyrion chuckles. “She brought you here to secure her grip on it, but since you’ve come here her hold has been more precarious than ever.”

“She’ll need to remove you to keep her hold on Westeros safe,” Davos says, coming to sit down beside Tyrion. “She can’t try to charge you with treason because she’s got no evidence.”

“And she knows that she’ll only feed the whispers that she’s mad as her father, seeing enemies where there are none,” Tyrion adds. “There are an alarming number of lords and ladies old enough to still remember what he was like, and you can bet that they’ll be eager to talk.”

“She might yet try to pin the princess with some other stupid accusation, though,” Davos says.

Tyrion shakes his head as he takes a hearty gulp. “I doubt that,” he says. “She saw the Black Cells. There aren’t enough doors in Westeros for her to be making such an attempt. What’s more, she’s concerned about the Blackguard. An entire military unit that she has absolutely no control over? I can just picture her tossing and turning at night.”

“How many men serve in the Blackguard?” Sansa asks.

“It’s hard to say exactly,” Tyrion says. “None of them ever have to go through the queen’s council—they swear directly to Jon. Ser Davos? A guess?”

Davos’s thick gray brows knit into a line. “I’d wager at a thousand by this point. Enough to terrify her of Jon’s growing popularity.”
Tyrion shrugs. “So she’ll try to kill you. Nice and quick. Except where the Iron Throne is her non-negotiable, you are Jon’s. He’ll cling to you as viciously as she clings to the Throne.”

Sansa looks to the door, biting her lip. Captain Ryke stands still as a statue, coal black armor making him look like a menacing, soot coated mountain of a man. Before, the Blackguard would stand outside of her door when she was with company. She sighs. “I can tell.”

“By the by,” Tyrion says. “I noticed an assembly of black riders leaving the Keep the other day. Has Jon any plans to go hunting? Are they riding ahead to scout any prey?”

Sansa shakes her head. “Unless Talla Tarly would make a nice trophy,” she says. “I asked Jon for the lieutenant and some men to escort her here from Horn Hill.”

“A wise decision,” Tyrion says. “So long as she remains unmarried, control of the Reach is still in question. She’s fodder for every ambitious bastard in the realm.”

“I’ve already a candidate in mind for the position of Warden of the South,” Sansa says. “He’s temporarily being detained, but as soon as we’re in a position to act publicly, he’ll come south to take his rightful place. Talla Tarly will serve as my lady in waiting—it’s the only way to guarantee her safety. We’ll not have anyone making a Lady Hornwood out of her.”

“Talla Tarly is the daughter of a decorated war general,” Tyrion says. “Randyll Tarly was a vicious bastard, but he was a legend on the battlefield. She’s a wise choice as a lady in waiting. Have you any others?”

Sansa nods. “I had imagined it would send a stronger message to have a lady in waiting hailing from each of the six kingdoms.”

“Each of the kingdoms would have a lady with access to you,” Tyrion says. “Very tactical. Well—your strongest support base is in Dorne. Have you selected a candidate from there?”

“None,” she says. “I’ve decided that as a show of good faith, Alorayne Martel should be allowed to send one of his choosing. I imagine it might give him the opportunity to earn support from one of his own vassals as well.”

“It’s likely then to be an Yronwood,” Tyrion says.

“Or a Dayne,” Sansa adds.

“And the Riverlands?”

“Annara Whent,” Sansa says. “She’s my age, and I share blood with her. I’ve not decided upon the others just yet. Perhaps you’d be so kind as to make a suggestion regarding the Westerlands.”

“I can look into that,” Tyrion says. “Someone malleable, obedient, silent, and who wouldn’t mind laying with a dwarf to secure a lofty position in the Princess’ company.”

Sansa rolls her eyes as she gets to her feet. “I am a gentle lady, my Lord,” she says with dignity. “You see these guards that follow my every move? I’m far too fragile a thing to be hearing such language.”

Tyrion and Davos chuckle. “Will you be off to meet your brilliant artisans now?” Davos asks.

Sansa shakes her head. “I’m off to meet my husband,” she says, pursing her lips irately. “By his most recent command, I am to see him every two hours. He grows restless otherwise.”
Tyrion sits up a little straighter in interest. “He’s tossing and turning as well, it would seem.”

“I count my blessings,” Sansa says as Captain Ryke moves to open the door. “His original command had been that I not leave my chambers. I had to talk him down from that—shout him down, really. His next one had been that I see him every hour. This was the best that could be done.”

Davos shakes his head. “We’ll resolve this as quickly as we can, Princess.”

“It’ll be resolved when she learns what’s happened in the Kingswood,” Sansa says. “Which begs the question—what is happening?”

“A riding is being prepared to go searching for the missing soldiers,” Tyrion says. “They’ve not departed yet, but our time will be limited once they do.”

“Let me know the moment they leave,” Sansa says.

Tyrion and Davos nod. “There’s something else as well, Princess,” Tyrion says.

Sansa pauses by the door. “Yes?”

“My brother has written me from Casterly Rock,” he says. “He’s heard whispers on the winds that have caused him to doubt the wisdom of the Crown.”

Sansa’s eyes narrow. “Has he shared his doubts with his vassals?”

“They appear to have been the ones who brought these doubts to his attention,” Tyrion says.


“Dorne,” Tyrion says.

“The Vale.”

“The Reach.”

“That leaves the Stormlands,” Tyrion says.

“And the Crownlands,” Davos finishes.

Sansa nods again, then turns around and walks out through the door Captain Ryke holds open for her.
fleeting

Jon is by the very edge of the gardens when she finds him. She hasn’t been to this exact spot in many years—a place right where she can overlook the sea. Jon doesn’t look as though he’s been to the training yard today. He’s fully dressed, though his doublet is mostly undone. His hair is unbound as it always has been since she’s returned, and the salty sea breeze blows his curls this way and that. He doesn’t notice, seated on the stone balustrade with Longclaw in hand, dragging a whetstone deliberately across the steel.

“My love,” Jon says slowly, as if weighing out his words. The whetstone screeches as it glides across the blade. He does not lift his eyes to meet hers. “You are upset with me.”

“I’ve not had a single solitary moment since Petitioner’s Court yesterday,” Sansa replies. “I’m put out. Not upset.”

“What does being put out entail for me?” he wonders aloud, lifting his face to the trellis as if in contemplation. The whetstone shrieks again. “How does my wife seek to punish me?”

“I need to speak with you,” Sansa says. “Regarding the future.”

Jon lowers his gaze again to the sword. “You’re my future.”

“The kingdoms’ future, Jon.”

“I’ve a much more pressing concern at the moment,” Jon says, and the whetstone sings.

“Such as?”

“I’ve a queen ready and willing to slaughter my Princess.”

“Has she made a threat?”

“There’s no mistaking that look in her eye.” Jon sighs, flipping the sword over and sliding the whetstone along the metal. “I think it might be time for you to leave the city.”

“I agreed to your ridiculous two-hourly inspection,” Sansa says. “I am here, aren’t I? What’s changed? Have you spoken to her today?”

“Just this morning.”

“And what did she say to you?”

“Nothing besides stating her astonishment that I attended Court yesterday. She searched for an explanation. I gave her none. She was forced to create her own theory.”

“And did she tell you what it was?”

“She declined to share.”

“We are careful, Jon. I’ve guards watching me at all hours, I have Ghost, I have Arya, and I have you.”

“And still I am not easy.”
Sansa crosses her arms. “What would set you at ease, Jon? Would you like for me to check in hourly? I’ll admit I was annoyed with it yesterday but I’d rather that than leave the city.”

Jon laughs, but it is ugly and hollow. “I don’t imagine I’d be completely easy lest you crawled under my skin and lived there. And even that doesn’t feel like enough.”

Sansa swallows, stepping forward and catching his hand, stopping the whetstone. The screech cuts off abruptly, and he raises his eyes to meet hers at last. “Jon,” she says calmly. “I have been retailoring my plan around you every single moment since I arrived here. I need you to cooperate with me. There’s so much we need to plan for, so much we still haven’t worked through.”

“And you won’t be able to work through any of it if you’re dead,” Jon says. “You’re so focused on tearing her from that throne, but you’re ignoring the danger you’re placing yourself in.”

“I’ve played this game before,” Sansa says. “I’ve played it far longer than you have. I know the risks, I know what I’ve gotten myself into—”

“You are so clever, my girl,” he says, and his sword and whetstone hit the ground with a clang as he takes her hands and pulls her towards him. She settles onto his lap and he holds her so tightly she can scarcely breathe. “But you can’t see that I won’t rule these kingdoms without you. Leave your counsel with Tyrion and Davos, if you don’t trust me to execute it. Tell them what to do so I can remove you from this place.”

“If I were to drop everything and leave now, it would look suspicious,” Sansa says, shaking her head. “I’ve just spoken to Tyrion before I came here, and he told me that another riding is being sent after the first. They’re preparing to leave as we speak. Leaving now—with possibly only hours at least or a day at the most—until Drogon’s injuries are known to the Queen will make the both of us look guilty beyond a shadow of a doubt.”

“And what does it matter how guilty we look?” Jon asks, burying his face in her neck and breathing her in. “We have nearly every lord on our side. You know this.”

“Not every lord,” Sansa says. “We don’t have the coastal Crownlands. They’ve made too much money off of her connections in Slaver’s Bay to abandon her without cause.”

“They’re inconsequential.”

“They are not,” Sansa says. “It was through this trade deal that she was able to pay off the Iron Throne’s debts to the Iron Bank. I mean all of the debts. Robert Baratheon’s, Joffrey’s, Tommen’s, and Cersei’s. That’s at least a dozen million dragons, Jon. We cannot afford to upset that trade deal, it’s too valuable to the southern mint. The only way we maintain the deal and not lose the favor of those coastal lords is if Daenerys steps down willingly or loses their favor to us. None of them really come near me, and you’re hardly a diplomat, so whether or not we gain their allegiance depends entirely upon their perception of the Queen. This is what Tyrion, Varys and I have been working to change. We cannot realign their perception of her if we look like treasonous criminals.”

“Yes, that’s all lovely,” Jon says, waving his hand. “But I cannot allow her to try her hand at eliminating you. She won’t hide behind a trial this time. She’ll just send someone to stick you between the ribs and let you bleed out on our bed for me to find.” He clutches her tighter now, and his stubble scratches her collarbone.

“I won’t deny there’s a danger,” she says. “But if we don’t secure the future of the South, then it’ll undermine the North. I can’t—Jon, I can’t let that happen. The price of our family’s future has always been high. The risk has always been there. You know this.”
Jon sighs, nodding slowly. He lifts his head to face her, and she is startled to see the wetness of his eyes. “If you die,” he says. “If she hurts you—Sansa, my Sansa,” he tilts his head, cupping her face in his palm. “I’ll raze these kingdoms to the ground around her, then feed her to her children. From the marshes of the Neck to the Broken Arm, from the shores of Dragonstone to Casterly Rock—I’m going to burn it all.”

Sansa presses her hand over his own. “I will see you hourly,” she says. “To put you at ease. The Blackguard will stay by my side, as will Arya. And if it becomes too uncertain, and too dangerous, then I will leave and you may dispose of her however you see fit. But let us first try this my way. We’ve made it so far. Please, Jon. Please just let me try.”

Jon eyes are silver streaked with purple when he nods at last. “Hourly,” he says.

She nods. "Hourly."

A tap on the stone disrupts the peace, and Sansa turns to see Captain Ryke standing five feet away. He holds out a small slip of paper. “For you, Princess,” he says.

Sansa takes the slip and unfolds it. It’s torn on one end and edged at another, as though hastily torn from the corner of a book and scribbled onto. She recognizes Tyrion’s elegant hand.

*The riding’s just left. Double the men.*

“What is this?” Jon asks.

Sansa crumples up the paper in her fist. “The second riding has been dispatched. Twice as many as the first. We may have less than a day.”

Jon kisses her cheek. “Then this time tomorrow we’ll know where they stand? Those coastal lords of yours?”

“Perhaps,” Sansa says. She shifts in her spot to better face Jon. “I need to address another matter with you, as well.”

“What is it?”

“The Blackguard,” she says, tilting her chin to where Captain Ryke stands. Jon’s presence renders his close proximity moot, but Sansa can still see the outline of his armor in the distance. “How many of them do you have now?”

Jon shrugs. “A smidge shy of a thousand,” he says.

Sansa nods. “You need to dismiss them from your service.”

“They’ve been useful. They’ve protected you.”

“And I’m grateful for it. They will be rewarded. But they cannot remain here in the city in your service. We can’t encourage this zealotry. It will grow and take on a life of its own. Fanatics are not people that should be armed, especially not with the state of the kingdoms as it is. You must reward them, and then disarm them.”

Jon nods. “Only after Daenerys is gone,” he says.

“Agreed,” Sansa says. “There is one other matter.”

“Here we go,” he says.
“It’s nothing to do with soldiers,” she assures him. “It’s more to do with the actual throne. Governing.”

“What of it?”

“I just need to be sure that you understand the authority you will hold with regards to actually ruling.”

“We’ve already agreed upon this,” Jon says. “I remember.”

“I just wanted to be sure you didn’t forget,” Sansa says. “Even Tyrion and Varys don’t know of this. Only you and I, and Arya once I see her again.”

“Yes,” Jon nods. “I remember. You just…tell me what you want me to do.”

“For now? Stay placid.”

Jon nods again, running his fingers through her hair and kissing her. The air is still, the seas calm. Sansa squeezes her fist tighter, the crumpled paper a keen reminder that this peace is beautiful, and haunting, and so achingly fleeting.
he stays his hand

Jon’s hands are itching as he rests his weight on them at the pedestal. The sun is only just descending, the sky a watercolor masterpiece of purples and golds and pinks. Pink like the dress Sansa is wearing today. He can still smell the lemon in her hair.

He wishes he could be easy now that she’s consented to see him every hour, but it’s not enough. His overwhelming need to have her near was something bearable before, when the danger was a trickling stream of possibility rather than an impending inevitability. It’s not likely to take less than a day for the riding to find Drogon, and however many of them survive the encounter will be riding back to the Keep at full speed. His fingers twitch.

He should kill her before then.

Realistically, it makes sense. Daenerys is a threat. Threats need to be eliminated. Let them linger too long, and they’ll take the chance given to them. This is what Jon has learned, this is what he knows.

He closes his eyes, and he is a white furred beast lying blissfully on the stone floor, with the giggles of young, freshly bloomed ladies filling his ears and the occasional rustle of pale pink skirts tickling his nose.

*She’s safe.*

For now.

It’d be easier to kill her. Faster. Safer.

He laughs as the bitter thought occurs to him that Sansa had been so much easier to protect when she was hidden away in Winterfell nursing hatred of him. So far away from monsters and men, so untouchable.

He ought to simply kill her.

Sansa would never forgive him. She still hasn’t forgiven him everything else.

But she’d be safe, so safe, in a world where only he holds command. That he rule over the south is a necessary evil, he sees it now. His precious girl holds too much influence to ever truly be allowed to walk away from the Game. What’s more, he believes she loves it.

Might be she loves it more than she loves him.

*I don’t pray anymore. The Godswood is the only place I can go where people don’t talk to me.*

The thought makes a lump form in his throat. That she turn to the Game instead of him and what comfort he can offer her is his own doing, he knows. To have left for Dragonstone those years ago and returned with another by his side—and every insult he made her bear after—has hardened her against him. In her solitude, stewing in hurt and anger, she leaned on one person that, he supposes, has never disappointed her—herself.

*We have a new queen.*

He remembers the explanations he had prepared the entire sea trip back to White Harbor. He
remembers the excuses, the examples, all of the stupid defenses he had prepared for his inevitable clash with her when he rode into their home to demonstrate that he had handed it off to someone else. The arguments were weak, even in his eyes, but he practiced them over and over again, never ceasing even as the Unsullied marched through the last of the snows beneath the gates.

I am Sansa Stark of Winterfell. This is my home. And you can’t frighten me.

He saw her eyes watching him—colder and bluer than the purest ice—and he felt his words turn to ashes in his mouth.
If I’m going to die, let it happen while there’s still some of me left.

He couldn’t tell the exact moment he stopped being family to her. The exact moment he stopped being a friend, the moment they ceased to be allies and instead became separate players. All he knew was that one day he went to sleep, and he had a sister, and the next he awoke with a new obstacle.
Perhaps it was when he stopped acting like a brother.

I'm a slow learner, it's true. But I learn.

Love is poison. A sweet poison, yes, but it will kill you all the same.
What harm is there in simply setting her ambitions aside as the sky sets aside the sun? Why cling to power, to thrones, to crowns, to the Game? She has him—until the last star in the sky burns into nothing, she has him. Surely she must know this.

Sometimes when I’m trying to understand a person’s motives, I like to play a little game. I assume the worst.

His darling girl doesn’t trust him as far as she can throw this castle. He knew that when he married her, when he finally found the ice to quell the burning in his blood, when he finally buried himself within her warmth and breathed her in until she filled his lungs and washed the reek of death from his bones. He is an asset, another player of the Game. But at the very least he is an ally again. Their pieces are joined on the board, moving together again. He tells himself this will be enough for him, that he is satisfied, but he knows it will never be, and nor will he.
I used to think you were the cleverest man alive.

Did it not occur to you that I might have some insight?

No one can protect anyone.
But that’s it, isn’t it? That is why she plays the Game, why she fights and plots and plans and schemes. Everything has—invariably—been taken from her. The Game is all she has.

But what is the harm, he thinks bitterly, in putting her fury aside long enough to let herself be loved? If she were to trust him again, he would never disappoint her—he is certain of it.

And this is why—when the worry bubbles up in his throat and his fingers twitch for his sword—he stays his hand. He will protect her, no matter what she thinks, no matter if she likes it or not, and when her Game has worn her down, and she finally tires of playing, he will fill its place in her mind.

It would be so much easier, though.

He stays his hand. He is a broken thing, with a half of a soul and a dead heart and he loves her, he loves her, he loves her.

The sun has sunken beneath the horizon at last, the sky darkening. She will have finished her dinner by now. He eagerly steps away from the pedestal to meet her in her chambers. Tomorrow might be a bloodbath—it might be a massacre—and it might be nothing at all. But tonight? Fate has fashioned him for love. And he will love her in all the time she gives him before the Game beckons to her again in the morning.
the scream

Chapter Notes

hi.
um.
sorry.
I think I underestimated how long it would take to get all of that shit sorted through.
But I'm back, so on with the story. Thanks for being patient.

Jon is frantic this morning. Desperate. Sixteen hours since their departure. The riding still has not returned. It makes Sansa jittery, and the fact that Jon has been stitched to her skin the entire night, tirelessly bringing her to completion with an icy focus that terrifies her as much as it baffles her, does not ease her anticipation.

The sun has risen, staining the skies a violent pink and blue, and still he will not let her sleep. Perhaps this is a blessing, because she is not sure what she would do if otherwise left to her thoughts. All she knows is Jon's distracting touches, his fierce determination, his lips on hers and he whispers his promises, his devotion, his loyalty. The more he says, the more Sansa realizes just how soon she will have to face everything that has nothing to do with Daenerys Targaryen soon enough.

She has been thinking about it a great deal, accounting for each change, each option, and each outcome. While anticipation coils in her belly with the heady warmth of her pending umpteenth peak, she knows better than anyone that one cannot play the game one step at a time. To do so now simply because the odds are in her favor would be a failure that another version of Jon might approve of, but has proven to be even more devastating in the past than simply falling to her knees and handing her enemies the sword best equipped to take off her head.

She cannot afford to play the game one step at a time.

House Stark cannot afford for her to play the game one step at a time.

She cannot play to win for now.

She plays to win for good.

Perhaps that is the greatest lesson Petyr ever taught her, a lesson that even the likes of Olenna Tyrell and Cersei Lannister never learned. It's a lesson Sansa is certain no one ever taught Daenerys or Jon.

Jon's fingers snake around the back of her knee, hitching her leg up higher around his waist. He is lost in his rapture, eyes half shut and gleaming through a smokescreen of lust.

"My love," he says, as close to breathless as she's ever heard him. "My life, my heart, my own."

She hasn't said a word in response the entire night, not even now as the morning bleeds in through the windows and the air echoes with birdsong. It frustrates him to no end. She can smell it on him.

Completion takes her again in a wide mouthed, silent scream. She shakes from the roots of her hair
to the tips of her toes, flushed and glistening with sweat. Even her lashes tremble with the force of her exhaustion. Most of her nights since her marriage to Jon have been thus, but never have they gone on this long.

"You've stolen the dawn from me," she says when she has found the breath to speak.

"You've stolen my heart from me," he says, still hovering above her, pinning her in place. "I'd say we're close to even, wouldn't you agree?"

She shakes her head, palms to his chest as she pushes at him. "I need to sleep. Give me a few hours before the girls come in and the day begins."

"You'll have as long as you like," he promises her.

"Don't go anywhere," she says, taking his hand.

Jon's eyes alight, and hope colors his features as he lowers himself to press a kiss—long, hard and deep—to her mouth. Her lips are swollen red with his kisses, but she welcomes this last one.

"I'll stay," he assures her, and he finally parts from her body, though true to both word and form he doesn't go far. He presses himself against her back, arms winding around her. The space between them is nonexistent, like two wolves huddled together for warmth against the pending snowstorm.

"I love you," he says into her ear. "I love you."

She closes her eyes and lets sleep take her.

As it happens, sleep does not take her easily. She relaxes all the same, taking intermittent naps as the sunlight trickles in and the sky brightens with the promise of this new day. Jon holds her until she has decided that she cannot rest anymore, until the gentle tap on the door tells her that Lilith and Jeyne have come to help her start the day. Jon does not want to release her.

"I have to go, Jon," she says to him. "I have to."

Jon holds her tighter. "I could still toss you onto Rhaegal and fly away with you," he says. "A princess in a tower guarded by a dragon."

"We cannot protect Robb from a tower," she says, trying to conjure up an image of Rickon as a baby and place him as a young wolf in Arya's arms.

He could barely outweigh a loaf of bread the last time she saw her nephew. A lump of longing forms in her throat. She misses him, and loves him, and wants him safe. Wants him away from the south, and away from dragons, and away from this hideous game. She must play it for him, while he's still small and soft and something the ugly world hasn't hurt. She must play it until he is old enough, understands enough, for her to teach him how it's played. And then, when he has learned, when he has understood—maybe then she and Jon can play those childhood games. Maybe then she can be a princess in a tower far away from this miserable world, guarded from monsters by a dragon.

But for now, the game still beckons.
Jon doesn't eat, but he joins her for breakfast after he's scandalized her maids by accosting her in
her bath. She sits on his lap, his arm around her waist possessively as she swallows sips of orange
blossom tea and red currants. Her appetite is lacking. She eats mechanically, and remembers with
sour bitterness how easy it was for this city to spoil her appetite the first time she was here.

Jon's breath on her neck feels like a balm in some ways, a constant in the ever changing storm. But
she has been learning quickly since the day Petyr's lifeblood stained the stones in the great hall at
Winterfell. Jon is a wild card. He behaves when he can have her in return, but there are times when
he will overstep—overreach—think rashly. The only thing he has to lose is her. And few
weaknesses make a dangerous man.

*When you know what a man wants, you know how to manipulate him.*

"We won't stay here forever," she says.

"Swear it," he says back.

"I swear it. We'll leave one day. When Little Robb doesn't need us anymore."

"When will that be?"

"When he's old enough to realize he does."

"And then? Where will we go?"

She sighs. "Where will you take me?"

"Anywhere. Everywhere. Tell me where."

She turns around and wraps her arms around his shoulders, burying her face in his neck. "One step
at a time," she whispers, and his arms around her are gentle, like a parting kiss or a promise of
what's to come.

She leaves Jon later with Captain Ryke on one side and Ghost on the other. Ghost has always been
quiet, but there is something implacable about his silence today that unsettles her. Any other day,
he is silent like a mouse. Today he is more silent as a stone. He seems to sense something that she
cannot. He does not snap or growl at people as they pass, but his eyes dart, red as firebrands, across
every inch of every space they pass through.

Sansa tries to calm him as they sit in the Godswood. She coos at him, brushing his coat until it
shines, but he is stiff and alert, and it makes her spine straighten.

Arya arrives as Alysanne as Sansa strokes the fur along Ghost's neck.

"Varys is back in the castle," she says in greeting, eyes narrowing at Ryke's figure nearby. "Why is
he so close?"

"Jon's new policy," Sansa says. "It'll be over soon. When did Varys return?"


"Has he gone to see the queen?"

"I didn't get the impression he was keen on talking to her."

"So his return isn't common knowledge?"
"Not in the slightest. He's gotten wind of a riding in the woods."

Arya is silent for a moment as Ghost paws at the ground. "It's happening, isn't it?" She asks quietly.

Sansa nods slowly. "As we speak."

"Do you know how much time we have?"

"They left midday yesterday," Sansa says. "Late afternoon. I don't know how much longer we can give it."

Silence. Arya sinks to the ground, running her fingers through Ghost's coat. "I think I should stay close to you until it's over," she says.

Sansa nods. "Perhaps. I feel better when I can see that you're beside me. Means you're not getting killed somewhere else."

"I'm not the one you should be worried about," Arya says.

"If she tries to hurt me, Jon will peel the skin off her back," Sansa says flatly. "She knows it."

"Doesn't mean she couldn't still hurt you a little before he gets his hands on the flaying knife." Arya reminds her.

"Has Varys sent the word?" Sansa asks to change the subject.

"He has," Arya says, though the look on her face suggests she knows exactly what Sansa is about. "They'll have it in a few days, a week at the most. If they listen to the warning about formal escorts, they'll be here within a fortnight. But they'll likely complain about security and such. Give them twenty days."

Sansa sighs. "I wonder if there's a guidebook in the Citadel for things like this."

"How to Stage a Coup in Five Months Across Six Kingdoms, a Helpful Guide." Arya snorts.

Sansa bites back a laugh. "Don't Give Jon Snow a Kingdom: An Anthology."

Their laughter is almost alien in light of present happenings, but it melts through the tense air and Sansa is grateful for this.

"You know he can't rule," Arya says to her after a while. "Even when he was still...even before...he was never very good at it. He's a good leader, I'll not deny that. But as a ruler...he lacks the skill."

"Which is where I come in," Sansa says. "I am no good with rousing speeches and rallying men. But how do I compare as a governor?"

Arya shrugs. "Hands down, one of the best."

"And there is our winning formula," Sansa says. "Jon holds their awe, and they will choose him because of this. He will lead them, and I will rule them."

“He does listen to you,” Arya says. “But how long can you keep that up?"

“Just long enough,” Sansa says. “Long enough to fix enough of this mess that we can guarantee Winterfell’s safety. Then I take Jon and the dragon far away from here.”
“Where will you go?” Arya asks.

Sansa shakes her head slowly. “I don’t know yet. Somewhere no one can touch us, I suppose. One step at a time.”

Reporting to Jon every hour makes hosting a bridge game in the Maidenvault a very daunting task, but Sansa is spared the trouble of having to excuse herself after the first rounds when she realizes that Ghost’s eyes are gray and absolutely glued to her. She makes a mental note of this, ready to hang Jon for it later, but is grateful that she doesn’t have to leave the chambers. It would be noted, no doubt, that she has to step away when she has never needed to before. And with the pending disaster approaching, it is best that she does not do anything even remotely out of the ordinary to preserve her own carefully maintained innocence.

It’s just after the game has ended and luncheon has been served that Ghost’s eyes turn red again, and she welcomes him back with a massive plate of roast, medium rare and heartily seasoned just as he likes it. She sits with Minisa Mallister and Johanna Teague, and blamed her absentmindedness on an upset stomach.

“It’s just as well that Lady Helyn decided not to have crabcakes on her birthday menu after all,” Minisa is saying. “The Seven only know how much it would cost her, with crabs being so hard to get these days.”

“I’d heard that she decided to go with oysters in the end,” Johanna says. “Stewed with some new herb they’re harvesting in the Free Cities. I think it’s called a truffle.”

“Truffle? That sounds like a dessert. I quite like the name.”

Ghost nudges Sansa gently with his nose, and she smiles at him, rubbing his head. A thousand things are moving through her mind at once—her mother’s fingers are weaving through her hair. Her father is handing her a doll. Robb is rolling his eyes as she swoons over a golden prince. Arya is flinging potato into her face. Bran is climbing a broken wall. Rickon is giggling as he watches an arrow hit its mark. Theon is handing her out of a carriage. Jon is lingering in the shadows.

A chill runs up her spine, gooseflesh rising on her skin. Ghost whines into the crook of her elbow, sensing her sudden discomfort. She doesn’t move, fork frozen over her barely touched seared scallops. The chill runs along every inch of her skin.

The luncheon goes on. The ladies laugh and the lords chatter and everyone calls for wine. Only she seems to have heard it, and she doesn’t even know how. But she heard it.

She heard Daenerys scream.
As far back as she can remember, all Daenerys has ever wanted was to be truly cherished. At a tender age, she never troubled to wonder what that even meant but to be safe, and to laugh, and to live. The years have flown past her so quickly she can scarcely recall them. They are a blur of scents and sunlight, smoke and mirrors dancing before her eyes before vanishing into nothing. It seems as though nothing that happened to her was truly worth remembering before she watched her nephew walk out of the fire.

_I am Daenerys Stormborn._

There was a clench in her belly like an iron fist squeezing her middle as she watched his eyes open, watched the ashes dance around his hair like a halo of death. He was something extraordinary. Something mystical. Something to be revered. She knows the way they looked at him. The way they still look at him. Once upon a time, they looked at her the same way.

She remembers the suffering, vaguely. Perhaps, in hindsight, she ought to have remembered it more. She remembers starving in the Red Waste and fleeing one assassin after another and she remembers the bitter tears as she smothered Drogo with his pillow. She remembers these things, but for some reason she cannot remember learning from them.

What does she care to learn from the past? She has never troubled to before. The past is a painful place, full of blood and bruises and chains. _If I look back, I am lost._

Only the red priestess tells a different tale.

“Those who do not learn from the past are condemned to repeat it.” She says as she walks out the doors, leaving Daenerys alone in the throne room.

She wants to kill her, but she is not afraid of flames. She might even laugh as they lick at her body. And truth be told, every word she has said has been true—even when it has been horrible. Perhaps in allowing her to live, she might be tempted to say something sweet for once.

_You are a queen in Westeros,_ Jorah’s voice whispers in her ear.

_But it is such a long way. I am tired, Jorah the Andal. I am weary of war. I want to rest, to laugh, to plant trees and see them grow. I am only a young girl._

What a world to live in. _If I look back, I am lost._
What has been here for her, in this land of men in iron suits? Here and now, where she has found everything she has coveted for as long as she has been able to say *I have never been nothing. I am the blood of the dragon.*

All she had done since she walked through Drogo’s fire is rise, and rise, and rise again. All she has done since she set sail for this cursed land is fall, and fall, and fall ever harder.

*If I look back, I am lost.*

Approaching footsteps can’t rouse her from her thoughts, but the person they belong to doesn’t seem to care. Then it can only be one person. She doesn’t lift her eyes, and the smoky scent of burning ice fills her lungs.

When the sky is dark and she lies abed, she wonders what might have happened if she had never married him two years ago. If she had simply demanded he marry some small, simpering girl nearby. Perhaps that would have been a greater insult to the red wolf. Perhaps then she might punish him more than she does now. Daenerys hopes she has made him suffer. Made him desperate. Made him afraid, constantly looking over his shoulder for fear that one day he might not find her hand in his, that she will have decided she doesn’t need him and disappeared in a puff of smoke. She hopes these last few months have been hellish for him, and he might then wish he had married a simpering girl like the ladies standing in the entrance hall right now, peeking their empty heads into view to catch a glimpse of the dragonless dragon queen and her former husband. He might have wished he had never had his red wolf, rather than had her torturing him nightly. Sansa Stark has done the gods’ work in undoing him. Though everything else about her is a thorn in her side, it makes Daenerys smug to know this small comfort.

“Aunt of mine,” he says, voice low and throaty, as though he’s just breathed in flames of his own. “Tyrion Lannister told me you’ve been glued to the great ugly chair for hours.”

She exhales a bitter, mirthless laugh. “And he sent you to see to my welfare, then? Concerned?”

“Perhaps. What are we, if not family?”

But there is nothing remotely resembling devotion in his eyes as he brushes past her and her throne to glance at the stainglass window behind the dais. She’s seen devotion in his eyes. But never for her. No, when he first walked into the hall in Dragonstone that day, there had been weariness. Grimness. Determination. It melted away slowly, as she fed it to the flames. From the puddle emerged awe. Respect. Care. Love.

But she’s learned it now, how many different types of love there are. How some might be stronger than others. How easily some might be severed. For who could have imagined that the fire she has made her own would be the agent of destruction of his love for her? Certainly not she. No, she had always depended on the fire, yearned for it, embraced it. It frightened the world around her, and she embraced it more. It made her special. It made her more than nothing. It made her a dragon.

What a sparkling lie all of it has been. The devotion in his eyes—the resolute, unyielding love she once took as for herself burned away in the flames, and rekindled for another. He belongs to her, that wolf she welcomed into her home. That devotion is for her. That love is for her.

*You never truly had him,* the red wolf taunts her in her dreams. *You never even had the man he was pretending to be.*

She wonders, for a moment, what it would feel like to watch a red wolf burn. To turn her into ashes. She wonders if they’d still be red. Would Jon bother to turn around and kill her?
No. She knows what he would do. He’d walk into the fire, and he’d burn with her.

“Drogon is crippled,” she says, and the echo of his shriek over the shores of Slaver’s Bay as he soared—proud, beautiful, monstrous, hers—makes her eyes burn. She closes them quickly, blinks away the tears.

“I know,” Jon replies, and she isn’t surprised.

“Was it you?” she asks.

“Rhaegal acts of his own accord,” Jon says. “I cannot control him anymore than you can.”

“But you can,” she says, rising to her feet and approaching him slowly.

*Bittersteel and Bloodraven both loved Sheira Seastar, and Seven Kingdoms bled.*

Jon doesn’t even look at her. It reminds her of torturous nights when he was buried within her, her hands gripping his hair and her lips on his as they chased after a dream of laughter and children and golden crowns. She found joy in his misery then. It gave her solace to think that he had, at the very least, been as desolate and far from love as she had been. It gives her solace to know that he still is—for even she can see that his red wolf holds him at arm’s length, banishing him to training yards and midday rides when the sun owns the skies instead of the moon.

*Rhaegar loved his lady Lyanna, and thousands died for it.*

“What will you do?” he asks. “With Drogon?”

She inhales sharply, the swell of pain in her chest makes her fight the urge to double over. “His life will be a cruel one,” she says. “A cruel life for a cruel dragon. Death would be a mercy.”

“Perhaps. Would you have me carry this out?” he asks.

“Perhaps.”

Jon gives an imperceptive nod. His dark curls move this way and that as he does. The Unsullied stand straighter as she passes them on her way to Jon. Jon. Jon. Jon.

“Death would be a mercy,” he repeats under his breath, so low she almost misses it.

*Daemon Blackfyre loved the first Daenerys, and rose in rebellion when denied her.*

What evil has been leashed, what good has the world ever known, what great malice has been contained, when a Targaryen son pledges his heart to a woman he cannot have? None. None at all.

*We are dragons. Dragons mate for life.*

*So do wolves.*

Jon’s back is turned. His head is somewhere else, somewhere snow probably falls and wolves howl at the moon.

*I am only a young girl.*

*No. You are the blood of the dragon. Dragon plant no trees. Remember that. Remember who you are, what you were made to be. Remember your words.*
He doesn’t hear the singing steel, not until it sings as she slips it between his ribs. He turns to face
her then, eyes already fading, skin already paling.

“Rhaegal is the only child I have left to me,” she says. “You have taken everything else. You will
not take this.”

He sinks to his knees, dry coughs hacking his body, rending the stillness in the air.

It’s such a sweet day. She can smell flowers and lemon trees. She can see the red doors.

She barely registers the fading rasping. She barely registers the gasps from the entrance halls and
those fickle lords and ladies pop their heads in for a gossip to see what’s transpired. She doesn’t
notice it, any of it.

Rhaegal screeches from somewhere beyond, and she smiles at the familiarity. She walks over the
shaking form of a man who took more than he ever gave, and hears the rhythmic thumping of her
beloved Unsullied following after her. She does not look back. If I do, I am lost.
Davos’ head is a roaring storm of singing steel, and hacking coughs, and an inky haired prince going pale on the floor. He sinks to his knees beside the man Jon Snow, and his brains feel like they’re going to burst as he tries to comprehend what is happening around him.

“She killed him!”

“She’s gone and stabbed the prince!”

“The Prince is dead!”

“Dead? The Prince!”

“Prince Aegon!”

“…wild…”

“Fire and blood…”

“…kinslayer…”

“…went after the other dragon…”

“…as evil as her father before her.”

Davos takes one of Jon’s hands, still snowy like the winter, still warm with life, and squeezes it in the stumps of his long gone fingers. He is young, so young, and one so young shouldn’t have lived such a life. Shouldn’t have seen so many ugly, black things. Shouldn’t be forced to be a hero, or a savior, or a promised prince, or a king.

He remembers those moments looking at the pretty young lad, all black curls and black cloaked, and remembering his own boys—confused and uncertain but wanting so desperately to have answers—not even knowing the questions. He has always been such a lost boy.

“Jon,” says a quiet voice, and Davos looks up.

The lords and ladies have parted slowly, hands still covering at their gaping mouths, and Sansa approaches slowly, eyes like melting ice. She steps forward as tentatively as one approaches a wounded beast—hands gripping skirts till her knuckles are white, hair tousled from the run, eyes skittish. Her charcoal guards hover about her, helmets pulled loose and brows knotted in disbelief.

“The Prince,” whispers Captain Ryke, and his voice leaves him as his eyes rake over the sight.
Sansa’s steps become ever gentler as she reaches them. Slowly, she sinks to her knees, skirts swirling blue and watery around her, and she reaches forward to touch his face with shaking hands. Her fingers find his jaw, long white digits tracing over the black scruff of his beard, then pressing her palm flat along his neck. She presses her head forward, turning his own to face hers, and their foreheads touch.

“Jon,” she whispers again, so soft and iridescent, and Davos wants to comfort her, but he doesn’t know how.

He hears the sing before he sees the flash of steel, and his eyes find the blade unsheathed from Jon’s ribs. Sansa lifts it to the light and tosses it away, its pattering clang echoing all throughout the silent room.

Distantly, Davos registers her odd little maid Alysanne running forward, clocks the strangeness of the familiarity with which the girl runs her fingers over the fallen Prince’s curls. He would have paid attention. He would have. But the scent of salt and smoke is filling his nostrils, filling his mouth, filling his lungs, so much that he begins to choke on it, and the only thing he hears through it is the approaching sound of rhythmic footsteps.

“The Queen demands the presence of the Lords and Ladies of the Realm in the courtyard,” says the voice of one of the Unsullied. Davos can’t recall which one. They all sound the same to him. “Immediately.”

“Jon,” Sansa whispers, still pressed so close to her prince’s face, eyes shut quietly as her breath ghosts over his lips. “Jon.”

The screech of a dragon echoes overhead. Davos is inhaling too much air, too much salt, too much smoke. He backs away, releasing the prince’s hand.

But he is only a lad.

Davos leans his weight against the marbled floor, eyes closing to block out the burn. I thought I could save this one boy.

“Princess,” the soldier continues. “By order of the Queen, your presence is also required.”

“The Princess remains under the protection of the Blackguard,” says another voice stubbornly. Davos thinks it might be Edmure Tully.

“Then they are welcome to join our escort. This is not an invitation. It is the Queen’s command.”

“Jon,” she whispers again, and her lips brush over his.

A streak of red makes Davos look up. Kinvara stands only inches from the prince and princess, hands at her sides, palms out. She watches eagerly, smile curling her pretty mouth like a slow sunrise after a rainstorm. The air feels thick with it, with salt and smoke and…and something.

“You are ordered to present yourself in the courtyard immediately,” the soldier says again.

“Jon, come back to me,” Sansa whispers, voice cracking.

A wolf howls in the distance. A dragon screeches. The room feels alive, and Davos is overcome with the sudden belief that the walls will begin to speak, and the ground will begin to swallow them up, and the air will turn to poison that will sap the life from them all until there is nothing left but dry husks, heavy dregs of old and ugly souls, skulls doused in gold, fire for a throne of tin.
“Princess—”

The soldier’s repetition is cut off with a sharp hiss of breath, and Jon Snow’s mouth is on Sansa’s, hands clutching at her with a feverish passion, pulling her close until the smoke and salt seems to bind them into one. Kinvara laughs and Davos gets to his feet.

“Where has she gone?” he asks at last when he has pulled his mouth away from hers. His fingers scratch at the space where Sansa pulled loose the blade. His fingers are stained with oozing black —black as dragon’s blood.

“She’s summoned your Princess to the courtyard,” Kinvara replies when no one else does.

Sansa’s eyes are brimming with tears, from the smoke or emotion Davos cannot say. He wants to tell them to slow down, to stop, to let him rest a moment, because this is all too much at once and he’s just another old shite who can’t keep up.

Jon gets to his feet and shakes his curls out of his face. His eyes are the purest violet Davos has ever seen. Smoke emerges in wisps from his mouth, reminding Davos of the day he had ordered the queen to surrender the North. He had looked half a beast then. He is all beast now.

“Lead the way,” he says, and stopping only to pull his princess close and lift the blade that she had tossed aside, he catches the hand of the maid Alysanne and walks them both to the doors.
Sansa’s hand feels cold and frigid in Arya’s grasp, but her eyes do not leave Jon’s back as he walks them through the halls.

"Do you need a sword, Jon?" Arya asks, shattering the silence. Only the rhythmic thumping of the Unsullied and the clanking of the Blackguard armor has disrupted the quiet. "Would you like to use mine?"

The Blackguard march without their helmets, half of them having pulled them off at the sight of their dead prince, the other half having pulled them off at the sight of their undead prince. The air is buzzing with something, something that Sansa wonders if she’ll ever be able to understand or explain, if maybe the only answers can be found in the flames so loved by the likes of the dragon queen or the red priestess marching ahead of them.

Kinvara looks alarmingly tranquil, and Sansa wonders if maybe she knows as much as Bran might. If maybe the red god works just as the three eyed raven does. If maybe they are the true song of ice and fire.

A screech joins the clanging armor and footsteps, and Jon pauses.

"He's not with her," Jon says quietly.

"No," Kinvara says. "He's coming."

Jon stays rooted to the spot, his eyes darting this way and that, a violet focus that makes Sansa's blood boil and freeze at once. He looks more savage than she's ever seen him, winter wolf or fire breathing dragon she cannot guess.

"Keep moving," the Unsullied soldier calls, the rhythmic marching halted.

"Can we kill her now?" Arya asks Jon. And then, to herself. "I'm gonna kill her."

"Not yet," Sansa says, fingers shaking as she takes Arya's hand in her free one—the one that is still holding firmly onto whatever part of Jon she can reach to convince her spinning head that he's still here, still with her, and not another corpse she'll have to say goodbye to. "Please, both of you, not yet."

"Are you barking mad?" Arya asks. "She stabbed Jon!"

"And there were witnesses," Sansa hisses. "And those witnesses are in the courtyard with her right now."

"Which only makes now the perfect time!" Arya says.

"No, it doesn't," Sansa says. "If you kill her now, we'll have the entire army of Unsullied in the castle to contend with!" Sansa says in a frantic whisper, head tilting ever so slightly to the soldiers only yards away.

Jon's eyes are still on the nearest window.

"She's an excellent point," Davos says. "We can sway the Dothraki with this turn in tides, but the Unsullied are devoted to her. And there are more of them in this castle right now than there are of
"How many Blackguard men do we have in the castle right now?" Arya asks.

"Four hundred," answers Captain Ryke instantly.

"How many total?"

"Just shy of a thousand."

"How long will it take to mobilize the rest?" Davos asks.

"They're all here in the city," Ryke says. "Give it three hours. They can be here by sundown."

"We don't have that long," Arya says, eyes flickering to the Unsullied soldiers. "What can we do?"

"We need to buy time," Sansa says. "How many Unsullied are in the castle?"

"Six hundred in the city," Ryke answers again. "Three hundred in the castle. The rest are in the Crownlands."

Sansa nods. "We need to seal the castle after the rest of the Blackguard come in. Once we have them outnumbered, we can arrest her."

"We're killing her," Arya says.

"We're arresting her," Sansa says firmly. "That courtyard full of witnesses needs to see an orderly exchange of power. If Jon marches in there and slaughters her, he looks like a murderous, out of control lunatic. He looks just like her."

And Sansa doesn't say this next part aloud because they're not likely to care, but they need this clean, easy transition so the lords can have time to make their own desire to see Jon crowned known to each other. If they choose it themselves, then Jon's crowning becomes a victory for them, and the triumph of it can distract them for another few months—month Sansa can use to twist the lords this way and that while they still hold their awe and favor before Jon likely does something stupid to offend one or the other.

"How quickly could you seal off the castle?" Arya asks Captain Ryke.

"If we prepare now, it could be done within a half hour once the last of the Blackguard are within the Keep."

"Send out the order," Sansa says. "Recall them all immediately."

"I don't think it wise to leave your side, Princess," Ryke says.

"I'm with her," Arya says. "Go get us an army."

Ryke salutes Jon and Sansa, and his retreating form is barely a blip in Sansa's peripheral vision as she turns to face Jon. He has been alarmingly silent throughout the exchange, and now his eyes are smoky, brilliant. Wanting.

"Jon?" She calls gently, placing her hands on his shoulders. Though his eyes do not leave hers, he does not answer. She raises a hand from his shoulder to cradle his cheek. He turns his head to kiss her palm. "Jon, are you with me?"
"I'm with you," he murmurs, his voice low and deep. It reminds her of how she felt when she heard it the first time, when she fell into his arms in the courtyard at Castle Black.

She nods, wrapping her arms around him and squeezing him tight. "We're almost there," she says. "Almost."

She breathes him in, all salt and smoke and snow and ice and Jon, and tries hard not to cry. She will not face the Dragon Queen in tears. She is not afraid. But she will not deny how her heart had nearly withered at the sight of Jon lying dead in the throne room. She remembers how frantically he had loved her last night. She wonders how he will love her tonight.

She pulls herself away from him. "Will you go to Rhaegal?"

"He calls me," Jon says.

"I will go with him," Kinvara says, stepping closer. "There is much to be done."

Sansa doesn't understand, but she nods. "It will be over by sundown," she says, pressing forward to kiss him. He tastes of the stabbing cold of Winterfell and the hazy smoke of a hearthfire. She doesn't know what to do with how her heart stammers for him now. She had been so sure she could separate herself from the Game and every single piece moving in it--Jon especially.

*I'll never forgive him.*

*But he is mine.*

*But I'll never forgive him.*

*But he is mine.*

She shakes her head quickly. Now is not the time.

"Sundown," he repeats in a whisper, as heady and warm and quick to vanish as a wisp of black smoke.

Arya comes forward next, twining her arms around his neck. She whispers something into his ear that Sansa cannot make out, and kisses his cheek as she pulls away.

Sansa steps back and moves toward the Unsullied, who—with the Blackguard now gone—encircle her and march her through the halls.

"Does she mean to kill you?" Arya asks. "I need to know how close I should get."

"No," Sansa says. "She doesn't want to watch me die. She wants to watch me kneel."

"Will you kneel?"

"Seems the wisest choice. I'm already her subject."

"Jon could get Rhaegal right now and make her and the Unsullied stand down," Arya says quietly as they turn a corner.

"And when she doesn't? You know she won't. Will he burn his way through the courtyard? The only people who are impervious to fire and him and the queen. Everyone else could die. I doubt Rhaegal can control where the fire goes once it's out of his mouth. And I can't guarantee that the safety of the lords and ladies is a priority for Jon. It has to be for someone."
Arya nods. "Good point."

"Neither Jon nor Rhaegal can be trusted not to act rashly," Sansa says. "If this is going to end in any other way than fire, neither of them can get involved. It has to be the Blackguard."

Arya huffs. "I don't like this. It'd be easier to just kill her."

"It's never easy," Sansa says bitterly.

They turn the last corner and find themselves at the archway to the central courtyard, and the familiar sight of the greenery has never been less welcome. She can hear the whispered, frantic murmurs of the crowd beyond. Sansa breathes in slowly, lifting her chin. Little Robb is without his mother in the North, teeth not even grown in yet. Gurgling and slobbering onto a toy, or his dimpled fists. He's a king, and a pup, and will know his mother. Sansa raises her chin. *He will know her.* He will grow. He will *rule.*

She can hear the echo of his giggle as she draws herself to her full height.

*The pack survives.*

She walks.
The courtyard has never been this full before. Sansa pays more attention to it now than she did as she stepped, unsure and afraid and shaking and cold, across the marble where Jon’s body had lain. Shimmering lace, touchably soft silks, clean cut crepe and gossamer, yards upon yards of glittering embroidery—it hadn’t been a day for Petitioner’s Court, but it had been an open court all the same. The courtiers had still been buzzing from the last Petitioner’s court, hoping for another show. They have not been disappointed.

Arya manages to stay demurely a few inches behind Sansa as the crowd parts to let them through. Daenerys stands, poised and shining, pearlescent and sweet in her black and red, her long braided hair. Such a vision. Her eyes, wild chips of amethyst, fall stonily upon Sansa.

“My dear Dowager Princess,” she says benevolently. Sansa steels her spine as she sinks into a curtsy.

“I understand that Your Grace requested my presence.”

Daenerys’s face is an impossible mixture of triumph, loss, confusion, madness, fury. Sansa cannot comprehend it all. “I have summoned you to inform you of what no doubt everyone here has witnessed, save for yourself. My nephew, your husband, has been found guilty of treason against myself and summarily executed.”

Sansa blinks. “That is profoundly disturbing news. May I be so bold as to inquire after the evidence that led to this conclusion?”

Daenerys’ eyes harden. Sansa does hate it when she does that. “No, you may not. You may, however, proceed to write to Winterfell and demand the regency pledge allegiance to myself on behalf of your infant nephew.”

Sansa quirks a brow. “The North stands as a free and independent kingdom. This was the agreement that was made—”

“IA made that agreement on the condition that I be provided with heirs. Are you presently with child, Dowager Princess?”

“Your surrender of the North was not conditional,” Sansa says. “It was the price paid for my hand. I held up my end of the bargain by marrying the late Prince. If I am not yet with child, then your bloodline is extinct, as the only hope you had of passing on your family name has apparently met his end today.”

Daenerys’ eyes flash, and she flinches imperceptibly. Sansa wonders how on earth the world must look to a person who does not think until after the rage they’ve succumbed to has abated. How can one lose so much control?

At what point does what could be called madness simply become stupidity? When did Jon cross that line? When did Daenerys?

Daenerys opens her mouth to say something that she must assume sounds very intimidating, but one of the Unsullied soldiers steps forward quickly, whispering in her ear. As he moves, Sansa spots Tyrion, face pale as a ghost, standing mutely a yard away from his queen. His eyes meet Sansa, and they are panicked.
“He’s telling her,” Arya’s whisper is like a tickle on her ear. Her eyes are on the Unsullied soldier whispering to the queen. “It would be so easy.”

“Wait,” Sansa breathes back.

She can spot the exact moment it dawns on the queen what is being said to her. Her eyes widen for a moment—only a moment—the whites impossibly so, her brows twitching, knitting together in disbelief. Her fingers tremble and her shoulders rise and fall with her jagged breaths.

“Where is he?” she asks slowly, eyes meeting Sansa again. They are not green, but they look to Sansa like wildfire.

“Your Grace?”

“Where. Is. Aegon?”

“I don’t know,” Sansa says. “Literally.”

Daenerys steps forward, and her Unsullied follow. Arya’s breathing shallows beside Sansa. “Where has he gone, Sansa Stark?”

Sansa shakes her head. “He did not say.”

Daenerys steps forward again. "Do you know how many men have tried to kill me?" she asks. "How many men like my nephew have tried to hold me down, to cow me into submission? To take what is mine? To use me for their own enjoyment? Do you know how many such men I had to put into the ground for their underestimation?"

"I haven't the slightest clue," Sansa says. "Shall we compare numbers, Your Grace?"

Daenerys glares at her, a hearty, hateful stare that makes Sansa feel—for the first time since she arrived in this city to marry Jon—like she is in familiar territory. She recalls another light haired queen who would give her such looks under this same sky. This is where she thrives.

Daenerys looks around then, eyes darting up to the clouds as if the answer is written in the heavens. “You are a conqueror, Daenerys Stormborn,” she says quietly, and Sansa wonders if it is only an echo—if it had been meant as a warning. Her gaze comes back to the courtyard, eyes growing hard upon Sansa again. “Escort the Dowager Princess to my chambers.”

Sansa sinks into another curtsy as the Unsullied surround her. "Go," she whispers under her breath.

"No," comes the heated whisper back.

"Go," Sansa says again. "I'll need you as one of the Unsullied. Meet me in her chambers."

Arya’s breathing disappears from Sansa’s side. She does not turn her head to see where she has slipped away. She has only a brief glimpse of Alysanne’s face changing into a girl of brown hair and green eyes before the lithe, leather clad soldiers commence the march back inside.
The Queen’s chambers have not changed in the slightest since Sansa stood her farcical trial after her brief stint in the Black Cells. Sansa is seated nearest the fireplace, where a roaring blaze is tended and extremely redundant in the warmth of this summer. Daenerys and four Unsullied soldiers are in the room with her, and no one has spoken a word once in the hours that they’ve been sitting here.

Step by step, Daenerys comes forward and sinks into the seat opposite Sansa. The small table between them carries a pitcher of wine and a half empty goblet that is certainly not Sansa’s. Daenerys picks up the glass and swirls the red around, watching it spin.

“You only wear one braid,” Daenerys says at last, eyes still on her glass.

“Pardon?”

“Braids, to the Dothraki, are a symbol of conquest. Of victory. When they win a battle, they wear a braid for it. They never cut it off. It has to be cut from them in their defeat. Your braid is long, Sansa Stark, but you only have the one.”

Sansa’s eyes glaze over the million and one complicated twists and bells woven into the silver strands of the queen’s hair. Daenerys leans closer to the fire, watching it flicker and spit and dance in the hearth.

“I might have taken that as a sign,” Daenerys says. “That you were a warrior.”

“Do you think I’ve only fought one battle?” Sansa asks.

Daenerys looks at her now, violet eyes testing, shaking, done. “You only wear one braid.”

“I am not a daughter of Dothraki.” Sansa tells her. “I do not keep to the custom of weaving a braid per battle, per victory. Experience has taught me that it is wiser not to advertise one’s capabilities so plainly.”

“Yes, that is your expertise, isn’t it?” Daenerys asks. “Masquerading as a sheep instead of a snake.”

Wolf, Sansa wants to correct, but she settles for only raising a brow at her. “I’d say it’s quite effective, wouldn’t you agree?”

Daenerys remains silent, but she lowers her glass to the table and moves from the chair. She kneels by the hearth, arm extended, hand reaching out to the flame. Sansa watches as she holds her hand over it, watches the fire lick and snap around her fingers.

“When I was a child, I used to sit for hours watching the flames,” she says. “I could barely tear my eyes away from them.”

“What did you see?”


Sansa leans back in her seat. “It can be awfully frustrating to rely on magics. Fate. Destiny. Everyone likes to believe they have a purpose—it’s trying to learn that purpose that makes them go mad.”
“Perhaps,” Daenerys says. Her hand lingers in the flame for a moment longer, and then her fingers close into a fist. She retracts her arm and retakes her seat. “Where is my nephew?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t tell me where he went.”

Daenerys doesn’t look at her, still gazing into the fire. “Have you ever wondered what it would be like to burn?”


“Many times,” Daenerys confesses. She wraps her arms around herself. Sansa hazards a glance at the window. The hour grows late. “Would you burn, I wonder?” Daenerys asks. “If I held your hand above this flame, would the ice in your blood temper it?”

Sansa bids her heart to calm. She has faced threats before. None of them have been empty. “You’ll not be witnessing any miracles on my end. It is far more likely that I would simply burn.”

Daenerys gives her an empty smirk. “Perhaps we could test the theory.”

“Perhaps we could. Perhaps you could be crushed beneath the weight of this entire castle when Jon eventually emerges from whatever hole he’s hiding in and learns you’ve set his wife on fire.”

Daenerys’s eyes flicker. “All the same. It’s a fun idea to entertain.”

“My first stay in this city, I remember finding joy in a similar way.”

Daenerys keeps staring into the fire. “Does he think of me?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” Sansa says. “You stabbed him,” she adds, using her ice to keep the boiling rage from seeping into her voice.

“He is a traitor. He’s stolen everything from me.”

Sansa doesn’t bother trying to reason with this logic. And honestly, is it truly wrong? More importantly, what would be the point?

“Have you ever wondered,” Sansa asks. “What your life would have been like if you’d stayed in Meereen?”

Daenerys glowers at her. Sansa glances at the window again. It is not yet sundown, but the hour draws near.
Chapter Summary

hard to say exactly how many chapters are left, but we are on the home stretch here, everyone. i've noted the most repeated questions in the comment section and will be answering them all with the end of the story.

The sun is only just skirting the horizon when Rhaegal begins to fly lower. Jon found him close to the Kingswood—no short ride on horseback—and Rhaegal's screech didn't sound any different to Jon than his own non-beating heart.

His heart. Where is she now?

He left it in the castle. He's going back for it.

Rhaegal is soaring like a nimble eagle through the clouds, joyous and free, neverminding the usual restrictions that mundane men have to worry about in their mundane lives. Jon has transcended such stupid things. He has his freedom, and his wolf, and his dragon, and most importantly, his heart.

Where will we go?

The sky is a rosy shade of gold. Sansa might like a gown in that color. It brings out the natural shade of her cheeks. The color so perfect when she blushes. Or when she's angry. Or when she's writhing beneath him, short breathed, eyes fluttering shut, cresting a hill towards completion under his careful ministrations.

His perfect princess. Who could ever have a care for crowns or titles when such a jewel is within reach? How could such a fool as the one he was ever look upon her and think to want something else?

There is nothing else.

Rhaegal chirps, wings flapping delicately. Jon closes his eyes, and Rhaegal's breathing steadies as they spin through the air. Raising his hands to cup his mouth, Jon lifts his face to the heavens and howls. The noise is deep and wild, and swallowed by the wind. Gone so fast even Rhaegal might not have heard it.

But there it is. Only a moment later. The answering howl comes tumbling through the air and the wind, faster than the walls the fool he used to be built to keep her out of his heart when she was already flowing in his veins and filling his bones and carrying—in those dainty pale hands—his bruised and battered heart.

Those walls have since come tumbling down.

Another howl echoes over the wind. He steers Rhaegal lower. The turrets of the Red Keep are peeking through the clouds. He breathees in slowly, and he can smell the distant scent of lemons and flowers on the breeze.
Rhaegal knows how large he is, and knows where he can and cannot stay. He hovers by the open courtyard with the saltwater tickling his belly and the flowers tickling his snout. The castle bells are tolling, and Jon’s blood is up. Lords and ladies are littering the courtyard. Jon can imagine what the silver she-dragon had brought them out to see. Perhaps she had meant for them to witness herself mounted upon Rhaegal. He knows she had meant for Sansa to see it. She needed the show. She still does. It’s all she has, really. Elsewise she might have stayed on the shores of a distant city somewhere, living by a lemon tree in a house with a red door. But the show summons her. The awe, the applause, the commotion.

How many times has she walked through the fire? Why has it not purged her, as it purged him? What would be left of her once she emerged from the ashes?

Amidst the shimmering silks and glittering jewels, a spot of purest white slowly approaches. Jon looks into the blood red eyes of his soul and smiles.

“Bring her to me.”

Ghost holds his gaze for a moment, and then turns to head back inside the castle. The breeze blows the scent of lemons into his face, smooth across his skin, and he smiles as the bells deafen the Keep.
Daenerys is still staring into the fire, eyes roving up and along with the flames. Only moments ago, Sansa had been wondering what on earth the queen was seeing in them, if perhaps she had joined the cult of the red god. But it doesn’t seem appropriate. For all that Daenerys Targaryen and the Red God seem to have in common, they would perpetually remain locked in stiff competition for the reverence of the world. Sansa perhaps thinks this a mercy, as it would be exceedingly difficult to rearrange the structure of the queen’s reputation if she was a religious symbol.

“When I first arrived in Meereen,” Daenerys says at last. “My first act as queen was to execute 183 nobles. Penance for the children they had murdered.”

“I heard,” Sansa says.

Daenerys raises a brow at her. “What have you been up to? Making a study of my character?”

“Not at all,” Sansa says. “Well—partially. When Jon first sent me word that he had bent the knee to you, some of the lords and I decided to study your rule in Meereen. The best way to predict the future is to study the past.”

Daenerys’ eyes harden. “Those who do not learn from the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Sansa watches her, astonished. “Did you come up with that yourself?”

Daenerys shakes her head, as if waving off a wayward fly. “No, it was just—what else did you hear?”

Sansa leans back in her seat. “Enough.”

“Enough for what?”

“Enough for me to know that Jon made a terrible mistake in pledging the kingdom to you.”

“I was a good queen to the Meereenese.”

“You are a conqueror, Daenerys Stormborn, and conquering and ruling are very different things.”

Daenerys watches her for a moment. “It is a very long braid,” she says.

“That’s less to do with a lack of defeat than you imagine,” Sansa says.

Sansa undoes the braid to avoid steering the conversation back in that direction. It’s only once she’s pulled all of the pins from her hair that she relaxes again.


“I am sorry,” Sansa says. “Where is he now?”

“Still where they found him,” she says. “I do not think he wants to be moved.”

The last words are barely out of her mouth when a screech echoes overhead. Daenerys gets to her feet, running to the window and throwing it wide. There is nothing but the city below and the vast, open sky. Sansa does not rise from her chair, but she sits closer to the edge with her hands clutched tightly together.
She is familiar with the sounds of the ringing bells. She has learned to associate them with the short breaths, the quick steps, the terror of golden lions’ wrath with a cloak on her back and Dontos Hollard’s hand in hers as the echoes of Joffrey’s last choked breaths fill the space behind them.

“Why are the city bells ringing?” Daenerys asks aloud, perhaps hoping to wring an answer from the Unsullied.

“Those aren’t the city bells,” Sansa says. “Those are the castle bells.”

She is unprepared to hear the deep, thundering howl tearing through the breeze. Her heart swells at the sound of it. The city is a flock of sheep, and wolves have always been near.

An answering howl echoes, and Daenerys steps away from the window. Her brows are twisted into worry and confusion, her mouth turned into a frown. She turns to Sansa.

“Where is he?” she asks again.

Sansa doesn’t get to answer, her words swallowed by the third howl. It mingles beautifully with the dragon’s second screech. It’s an ancient, rumbling sound, an ever present chant as steady and sure as a heartbeat. Sansa gets to her feet.

“I don’t know,” she says at last.

A low growl echoes outside of the chamber doors. The Unsullied in the room circle Daenerys, leaving Sansa in her seat. She doesn’t notice, nor does she care. The sound of yelling—multiple voices—breaches the stillness of the chamber, and Sansa’s eyes narrow as, one by one, the voices die out. The space is cloaked in peculiar silence. It’s a silence Sansa has learned to recognize.

She is on edge, gritted teeth and clenched fists, feeling as though she circles an angry snake ready and waiting to strike. Anticipating every sudden movement, ready for any disturbance. Still, when the sound of scratching at the doors echoes, she jumps. It is no thundering boom, no loud shriek of protest at nails on wood. It is only a gentle scratch, and somehow it still unnerves her.

One of the Unsullied steps forward on sure, silent feet. Spear raised and aimed forward with deadly certainty, he reaches for the handle and pulls the door open. Sansa cranes her neck to see who is beyond, and her heart stammers.

“Ghost,” she whispers to herself even as she runs to him.

Blood drips from his lips and snout, a heart-stopping red over his pristine snowy fur. She remembers, for a frightening moment, the weeping red sap of the weirwood tree by the still-water pool in Winterfell. Ghost’s lips curl back, teeth bared, eyes blazing. He raises a paw forward to brace himself and then tips his head up to the ceiling and howls.

He has always been such a quiet thing. Sansa cannot understand why now, when his howl is louder than any dragon’s screech, deeper than any war-horn, chillier than a northern blizzard breeze. The answering dragon’s shriek that reverberates through the castle seems almost childish in comparison.

Sansa’s realization is nearly instant. She reaches out with unsteady fingers and cards the digits through his fur. He nudges her with his head, and they walk out of the chamber together. Blood pools on the floor. She lifts her skirts to avoid it, sidestepping the severed limbs, the torn leather armor, the eyes wide open with the necks shredded. She is not afraid.

Ghost walks her down the halls, and she can hear the rhythmic steps of the Unsullied behind her.
The queen’s tiny steps sound so starkly different now that she listens to them. She only listens, doesn’t turn. Her eyes are forward, as they have always been.

“Where are you going?” Daenerys asks. “I have not given you permission to leave.”

Ghost turns to face the queen, teeth still bared and dripping with the blood of her devoted soldiers. Sansa does not look back even now. There is a time and place to look back, and this is not that time.

*When she was a child, she believed in stories.*

Ghost guides her around corners and through corridors, and Sansa feels her stomach twisting in anticipation with every step, even as the clouds in her mind clear of confusion, even as the cogs finally turn in her head as she comes to grips with what has changed.

*She believed in ladies and knights, in secrets and songs.*

Her tongue feels heavy, and she is drunk on everything that has happened in one day. She was not prepared for the crushing despair of seeing Jon lying lifeless on the floor.

*An evil witch, a curse or a spell, a vicious monster.*

She was not prepared to hold his face in her hands, to breathe into his lips and know that he wouldn’t breathe back into hers.

*A princess in a tower, guarded by a dragon.*

She was not prepared for the ache of the light sapped from his eyes.

*A noble prince, destined to save her.*

She was not prepared for the joy of seeing him draw breath again.

When she arrives at the courtyard she had stood in only hours ago, the crowd parts almost instantly. Her eyes traverse the length of the gargantuan green creature with his wings spread wide. Jon, inky black curls blowing in the breeze. Eyes purple and glittering and deep, boring into hers.

*And she, destined to love him.*

Of all of the things she used to believe in, destiny was not one of them. She has never walked through a fire, or hatched a great beast. She was not seen in visions to bring cities low, to unseat queens, to win wars or command castles. Perhaps those fire priests and priestesses are merely fortune tellers. Seeing the future is not the same, Sansa knows, as having a destiny.

She has never believed in destiny. The higher powers that be, if they even exist, do not whisper names into the stars or choose fortune for one and forsake the other. No divine power ever said her name, or chose her fate. She took it herself—seized it—to raise kingdoms high, and bring them low. To unseat queens. To win wars. To command castles.

She laughs. She sounds more and more like a storied knight to herself every day.

She walks.

Jon leans forward, eyes ever fixed on her (they have always been so), and she cannot bring herself to look away. Might be Jon was never fated to anything, either, except to be hers.

She loves him, and loves him, and loves him, and she is *so tired* of hating him even as the wounds
still sting, even as she reminds herself over and over again that he has yet to learn, even as she assures herself that she will, she will, she will put this to rights. She will teach him to play, just as she will teach herself to forgive him, and perhaps one day he will, and she will.

When she was a child, she believed in stories. But now, as she can hear is the sloshing of the waves below, all she can smell is the salt and the smoke. All she can see is Jon. And all Jon can see is her.

_You are the air that I breathe and the blood in my veins._

As she ascends the steps to the stone balustrade, the wind picks up. Rhaegal’s wingbeats blow her hair away, warm and soft on her skin.

_You are every shard left of my soul._

Jon’s eyes are so much brighter this close.

_Every reason._

Hers begin to burn with unshed tears, and she wants to blink them away, but she will not take her eyes from him—not even for a moment.

_Every question._

His smile when she draws nearer makes her heart swell.

_Every answer._

He reaches out his hand. “Come to me, my heart,” he says, quiet as a drop of rain in the springtime. She hears it anyways. She would have heard it if they stood in the middle of a raging battlefield, if a hurricane was lapping at the shoreline, if the walls had come tumbling down around them.

_I’m a fighter._

She lifts her skirts and sits herself upon the balustrade, feeling the scratch of the stone at the fabric of her skirts, and jumps. Jon’s arms around her waist are a guarantee, strong and warm. He smells of salt, of smoke, of snow, of Jon. He buries his face in her neck, arms constricting so tightly it hurts, and she is drowning in him.

_And I have fought my way back to you._

When she was a child, she believed in stories. She wonders if there will ever live a single maester at the Citadel who could capture such a tale as this.
Sansa isn't entirely certain why she is surprised that Rhaegal has flown them to that buttercup clearing, but somehow she is. The wingbeat echoes the pounding of Sansa's heart, a wild and booming thing. But she is warm and safe and pulled tight against Jon, head tucked into the hollow of his neck, ear pressed snug against the flat of his chest, listening to the wingbeat that isn't there anymore.

"My heart," he murmurs into her hair as his lips touch her temple.

The bells still ring. It pulls Sansa away from the heat of Jon's embrace, away from the visions swimming in her mind of a princess in a tower, guarded by a dragon.

Jon jumps from Rhaegal's back and pulls her down by the waist, setting her into the ground. No sooner have the soles of her shoes touched the earth than has Jon begun his deft assault on her mouth, claiming it fiercely with his. For only a moment, Sansa is overcome with something akin to absolute elation, floating on clouds like the beast rolling around in the grass beside them. This is quickly tempered, however, when she closes her eyes and the first and only thing she can see is Arya's gray eyes—so like what Jon's used to be—in the faces of strangers.

She shudders. Jon doesn't notice, lips moving along her cheek, to her jaw, to the bob of her throat and her collarbone.

"Jon, stop," she says breathlessly, hands pressed palm down onto his chest to push him gently away. He doesn't hear her—or ignores her—lost in the heat of her skin, the flush of her face, fingers twining into her hair. "Stop it, Jon," she says again, firmer this time. His other hand slithers round her waist, pulling her close to fill the space she's placed between them. "Jon, stop it," she says a third time, and when he still ignores her, she presses insistently. But for her every push he only pulls her closer. "Dammit, Jon, not right now!" She shoves hard, catching his lip and giving it a bite.

Finally, he backs away, chest heaving and eyes wide. His hair is wild, swept by the wind. The color in his cheeks is high, the pupils of his eyes gone so large only thin slivers of purple linger around them. It's as captivating as it is frightening. There he stands, purple eyed with a dragon behind him, yet he has never looked more like a wolf.

"We will," she says. "Not right now. But you will have me."

She promises this because gods help her but she wants to feel him with her. She wants to run her hands all over him and feel his lips on her and scream and scream and scream until she's wiped the image of him bleeding black on the marble floor before that ugly throne from her mind entirely, eternally. She wants that soft and steady reminder that he is still here.

"Will we?" He asks.

"We will," she says again. "But please, not right now. Arya is—I don't know where in the Keep she is right now. And the last time she and I were separated in that castle—"

Sansa goes quiet at this, remembering the clinking of golden armor, and the hushed orders of Septa Mordane, and the cheers of the crowd as Father's head tumbled down the steps of the Sept of Baelor.

"She's fine," Jon says. "She's Arya."
Sansa shakes her head. "I spent seven years telling myself that until I saw her face again," she says. "And I never slept easy until I saw her for myself in the crypts at Winterfell. Take me back to the Keep."

"I hate that place," Jon growls. He looks half mad as he paces to and fro. "I hate it here! Damn it all, I hate it!"

"I know, Jon," she says. "I hate it, too. This will not be forever. But right now, we need to get back to the Keep."

Jon glares at her, and Sansa holds his gaze. She is not afraid of him. Not of his anger, or his bitterness, or his resentment. She is not afraid, but she remembers now why it will take her years to truly forgive him.

"You are the one who dragged me into this game," she hisses at him. "I had no business with dragons and the south and this ugly, miserable throne, until you brought that woman North and asked me to bend over for her."

"For the love of—" Jon sinks to his knees and pounds his fists once into the floor. "Are you ever going to forgive me?"

"Yes," she says, and this is a promise, too. "When I wake up one day and it doesn't hurt anymore, I will forgive you. You asked me to play this game when you first brought her into our home, and I've been playing it ever since, so you have no right—not a single fucking one—to complain about me asking you to do the same. I am finishing what you started two years ago, Jon, and by the gods who turned their back on me, I will not let you walk away from it as easily as you walked away from your crown. You will finish this with me, and this is the last mess I will ever clean up for you. Now take me back to the fucking Keep."

Jon watches her in breathless anticipation, eyes widening further as she speaks. When the last of her words have left her, he stays where he is, kneeling in the grass with the buttercups swaying around him, and her hands shake.

"Will you keep me?" He asks now, brows twitching.

She nods. It's as natural an answer as breathing. "I'll always keep you, Jon. Because you are mine. Now take me back."

Jon watches her still, pupils shrinking slowly so she can see the purple of his eyes. He sinks backward so he is sitting flat on the ground.

"I love you, Sansa," he says, and his words feel so heavy with the weight of his truth. "I love you."

"I know."

He shakes his head, laughing. "No, you don't. You haven't the slightest fucking idea."

"Jon—"

"Don't you get it?" He asks, rising to his feet and rushing towards her. "Don't you understand? All these brains, and you don't understand?"

"I know you love me, Jon," Sansa says, stepping forward to meet him halfway. She wraps her arms around his neck as his slink around her waist, and she hugs him with all of the softness and urgency she felt the day she fell into his arms in the snowy courtyard of Castle Black, when one look at him
was the first joy she had known in so many years that she was drowning in something as simple as being safe. "I know," she says into the space between his neck and his shoulder.

Jon is silent for only a moment as he holds her. "You are never going to leave me," he says. "We'll never be apart."

Sansa is almost confused by how smug he sounds at this. He pulls away from the embrace, taking her hand and pressing it over his chest. He no longer resembles a wolf. To Sansa, he looks an awful lot like a cat that ate a canary.

"What are you on about?" She asks, palm still pressed beneath his over the heartbeat that isn't there anymore.

He grins, and he's a wolf again. "We'll be together forever, my heart. I saw it in the flames."

Sansa knows there is something to this that she cannot yet understand, and she expects to file it away for another time, a time when Arya's fate is not still an unknown that makes Sansa's stomach clench. Not even seeing Jon bleeding on the floor this afternoon can match the fear that the thought of losing Arya brings her. She pulls her hand free from Jon's grip, sliding it down his chest.

"Take me back to the Keep, Jon," she says.

He sighs. "Is this to be my penance, my heart?" He asks. "Am I to share you with this game forever?"

She only watches him. Perhaps it is a unique torture she inflicts upon him. As unique as the one he inflicted on her. A small part of her is pleased that she has this power, but the greater force in her mind reminds her that she wants, so badly, to be able to forgive him one day.

She will. One day.

"Take me back to the Keep, Jon," she says. "And when this is over, you and I will retire to our chambers, and you will tell me everything that happened when you walked into that fucking fire."

Jon sighs again, and it sounds like the bated, chilly breath of a wolf after the hunt. Silent, but still deadly.

"As my queen commands," he says.

He lifts her by the waist and carries her onto Rhaegal's back. In a moment he is behind her, gripping the scales. She leans back into him as the beast carries them up to the sky and back to the castle.
Jon lowers Sansa onto the ground outside of the palace gates, and she walks in alone. It mightn’t have been prudent only hours before, except Sansa hasn’t missed the Blackguard armor gleaming smoky in the darkening sky. The sun has long since set, leaving the rapidly darkening blue of the sky to guide her to the doors.

“Who goes there?” asks the guard.

“Did you miss the dragon?” Jon asks incredulously before Sansa can respond. “It’s us, you idiot. Open the gate.”

The gate creaks open quickly. Ignoring the guard’s murmured apologies, Jon holds Sansa’s hand and squeezes it tightly.

“What’s happened?” she asks.

“The castle’s been sealed, per the orders of Captain Ryke,” the guard replies quickly. “There’s a commotion inside. Hence the bells.”

“Is it still ongoing?” Sansa asks.

“I believe so, Princess.”

Sansa can feel Jon’s stare on her. She turns to look at him. “We need to find Arya,” she says.

Jon nods, walking her inside. “Stay behind me,” he says. Sansa does half hide her body behind him, but only after she’s rolled her eyes so hard they almost go back into her skull. Still firmly gripping her fingers in his own, they approach the sound of clanging swords and turn the corner.

Sansa has never pretended to have any real interest in swordplay. Clanging swords, armor, battle cries…no. She is a child of carefully crafted smiles and poisoned words. Her sword is her pretty tongue, her armor is her gowns. She is a warrior, in this way. But this is not her type of war.

As far as fighting goes, Sansa supposes that this is minimal. They might have arrived just as the fighting began, just in time to turn corners and watch Unsullied spears meet Andal swords. It does not matter. It does not matter if the fighting began the moment Rhaegal carried them off or the moment he brought them back. All Sansa knows for certain is that the moment eyes find Jon, they stop. Stop fighting, stop screaming, stop moving. Everything simply stops.

The air in the central courtyard is so still and silent that Sansa can hear her shoes click-clacking on the stone. The fighters are solid around them, watching with anticipation. Sansa looks around at the Unsullied soldiers frozen in their fighting as they pass them, locking eyes with as many as she can.

Where is Arya? Where is she, where is she, where is she?

Jon’s steps guide them up to the Holdfast, where Sansa can see the fighting is significantly less. A few charcoal armored guards salute them as they pass.

“Come with me,” Jon says to them as he moves along. His grip on Sansa’s hand tightens. The echo of clanking armor shatters the peace of the area. Jon’s grip goes tighter.

“I can smell her,” he says with a dark chuckle.
“You can smell Daenerys?” she asks. They pause outside of the doors to the Queen’s chambers.

“No,” Jon shakes his head, tilting his chin to the door. A single Unsullied soldier guards it. “I smell her.”

Sansa’s eyes fall on the soldier. She steps forward slowly. “Is that…are you?” The soldier slackens slightly, just enough so to look alien. Sansa smiles, lunging forward to embrace her. “I was so worried I’d gotten you killed!”

“Don’t insult me,” the Unsullied voice is strange and foreign to her, but the returning embrace is not. “It’ll take more than Unsullied to bring me down.” Released from Sansa’s grip, she turns to Jon. “She’s inside. Holed up from the fighting with about six soldiers. I volunteered to watch the door.”

“Only six?” Jon asks.

“Only six,” Arya replies.

Jon nods. “We can take them.”

“Don’t kill her,” Sansa says. “Not yet. “She needs a trial.”

“I still think we should,” Arya says. “She’ll just wheedle her way out of the trial.”

“Do you think she’s Littlefinger?” Sansa asks. “She only knows how to talk her way into problems, not out of them. She’s doomed. But how she dies is the critical part.”

“Talk to her, then,” Jon says. “Take the Blackguard inside with you. And Arya as well. Convince her to come out and face me, or I’ll feed her to Rhaegal.”

Sansa gives Jon a look, and he shrugs. “He can hear me if I call him from here. And I will. I mean it, Sansa. Those are her choices.”

Sansa look at the door, hardly noticing the shift as the guards assemble themselves around her, as Arya steps forward to take her hand and squeeze it quickly before releasing it.


“You have ten minutes,” Jon says. “I’m calling Rhaegal now.”

Sansa sighs, and nods. “Ten minutes,” she agrees. She smooths out her skirts and nods to Arya, who knocks on the door.

“My Queen,” she calls with the thick, deep voice of a stranger. “The Princess to see you.”

Without waiting for an answer, Arya pushes the door open and holds it for Sansa to pass. She takes a breath, and walks inside, fingers slipping out of Jon’s as she goes.
absolute power

Six spears are pointed right at Sansa the moment she steps through the threshold, and she is not remotely surprised. Twelve Blackguard swords are unsheathed around her, and this is when she decides that she, like Jon, is awfully fed up.

“This is detrimental,” she says. “Send your Unsullied out of the room, Daenerys Stormborn, and in turn will send out my Blackguard men.”

Silence.

“I will not feel safe without my guards.”

“And I will not be safe without mine. So we’ll send them all out. I am only armed with my words.”

“And look at how far they’ve gotten you.”

“It’s much further, I imagine, than fire and blood ever got you.”

More silence. “Let them all out, then.”

Rhythmic shuffling footsteps. Clinking armor. The door closes, and they are alone. Silver hair gleaming in the candlelight, red hair burning in the dark. Sansa takes a seat by the desk, eyes meeting the queen’s.

“How long have you been planning this?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t be coy. You’ve been plotting this treason from the moment you first came down here, from the moment Aegon asked for your hand.”

“I am certain I did not plan for you to attempt to murder your own nephew. And that is why you are holed up in here, by the way—attempted kinslaying.”

“Rhaegal attacked Drogon. On his orders.”

“Jon cannot order Rhaegal to do such a thing. Rhaegal acted of his own accord.”

“Impossible. Rhaegal is Drogon’s brother.”

“You’ve had your own experiences with a careless brother. And I have as well. We both know that to mean nothing.”

Silence.

“It hardly matters now. What’s done is done. Jon is outside and has tasked me with presenting to you the two alternative solutions to this current predicament. Option one: you and I walk out of these chambers and you submit yourself to incarceration until your trial for kinslaying. Option two: Jon comes in here to deal with you himself.”

A snort. “I am still the queen. His queen. Your queen.”

“If it pleases you to think so, I shan’t begrudge you that. Your options remain the same.”
“And how will he deal with me himself?”

“He wasn’t particularly clear on that. He mentioned Rhaegal.”

A laugh. Taunting and cruel, but shaking all the same. “Rhaegal would never harm me.”

“I imagine his brother once thought something similar.”

Silence.

“He took everything from me.”

“I understand that. He took everything from me, too.”

“Has he? Has he truly? You sit here on the precipice of queenhood, and I am being asked to submit myself to chains. Who has he truly taken from?”

“You seem to mistake the presence of a crown for success. It is not so. To keep my home and family safe, I have been compelled to sever all ties with them. This I have done because of Jon Snow. Look down on me all you please. But do not underestimate my suffering. Do not make light of the cruelty I’ve endured. Jon Snow is a consolation prize. A balm to soothe the ache brought about by the role I am now obligated to play.”

“Does he know this? Does he know he is only a consolation prize to you?”

“It matters little to him what he is to me. What matters the most to him is that I keep him as mine.”

“Once that was the only thing I wanted from him. That he be mine. These last years…he was always a slippery beast. I suppose even then, you imagined yourself victorious.”

“If it pleases you to think so.”

“Stop saying that.”

“If it pleases you.”

“Do you ever tire of being a puppet to be commanded? Sing, don’t sing. Speak, don’t speak. Bark, don’t bark. Do you never tire of commands?”

Sansa leans in closer. “What gives you the impression that I take commands?”

Daenerys narrows her eyes. “Why didn’t you marry?”

“I did. I married Jon.”

“Before, I mean. Alone for two years in the North, ruling the castle and keep all on your own. Why did you not marry then?”

“Because I did not want to. Winterfell was mine, I was its Lady. All that was left was my identity as a Stark. I had no interest in having anything else taken from me. And I was not prepared to welcome a stranger to my bed so quickly.”

A slow growing screech fills the air. Sansa leans back in her seat. Daenerys folds her hands together. “My Unsullied and Dothraki will come for me.”

“Perhaps,” Sansa agrees. “Regrettably, I can no longer leash Jon from his worst impulses. They
will all perish under the dragonfire they have followed to this continent.”

“The lords will not stand for it.”

“Of course not. You are far too popular for such a thing.”

“I am their queen.”

“Indeed you are.”

Daenerys gets to her feet, chair falling back, glass tipping over and rolling onto the ground with a crash. Glass shatters, wine spatters, the fire even seems to grow brighter. “Do you know how far I have come to get here? I have crossed the Red Waste with a khalasar of twenty, starved and brittle as bones. I have braved the House of the Undying. I have brought slave masters to their knees, broken chains, walked through the fires of hell. I have overcome. I have endured. I have survived.”

“Do you think you overcame that because you were meant to be a queen?” Sansa asks. “Do you think that Cersei Lannister survived her drunken, whoring brute of a husband, survived her calculating bastard of a father, survived burying all three of her children, because she was meant to be a queen? Do you think I watched my father’s head mounted on a spike, endured being beaten and stripped and terrorized in this very castle, the lust of a mockingbird, being fed to a man who beat me every day and raped me every night because I was meant to be a queen? You did not survive your agonies or achieve your greatness because you were destined to be a queen—because you are Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen. The name is nothing. You survived it the same way Cersei did, the same way that I did—that’s the whole damn trick. You survived it all because you could.”

Silence.

“You should have stayed in Meereen. When you left it behind, you left all of your greatness with you.”

Something deflates in the air between them.

“It just…it didn’t seem worth it without the Iron Throne.”

“You’re not the first to become enslaved to the allure of it. I’ve watched it drive many a person mad. That’s the thing about power. It corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. The only power that is pure is the power we have over ourselves. And if that is the only power the gods ever give me, I’ll take it and be content.”

A dark laugh. “You think I have no power over myself?”

“Only you know the answer to that.”

Something in the queen’s face seems to change as she takes these words in, stretching over the moments as the sky turns from dark blue to black. Sansa watches the spilled wine spread out onto the tile, staining the creamy tan into a tawny red.

“When I was a child, my brother used to tell me stories about the Iron Throne,” she says softly. “Thousands of swords melted into one giant, ugly seat. What do thousands of swords look like in the mind of a little girl who can’t count to 20? I imagined a mountain of swords too high to climb. So many fallen enemies, you could only see the soles of Aegon’s feet.”

“It is quite a hideous thing, isn’t it?” Sansa asks.
Daenerys sighs. “It did not have a thousand swords. I dare say it didn’t even have two hundred.”

“Songs and stories tend to embellish,” Sansa says. “I’ve been fooled by them, too.”

“All I wanted was that life,” Daenerys says, folding in on herself. “A life like a song.”

Sansa turns away. “Life is not a song.”

Another screech. Sansa closes her eyes.

“I’m afraid that we have no time,” she says. “What is your decision?”

Silence. “You are a conqueror, Daenerys Stormborn.”

Sansa turns back to face her. “What is your decision?”

Daenerys unfurls herself and watches Sansa. “I am Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen. I am the Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea. I am the Queen of Astapor, of Yunkai, of Meereen. I am the Queen of the Andals, and the Rhoynar, and the First Men. I am the Breaker of Chains. I am the Mother of Dragons.”

Sansa doesn’t finish the rest. And you are dead, dead, dead.

She nods instead, rising to her feet and heading to the door. She pulls it open. Jon stands on the other side of it. “She has agreed to come quietly.”

Jon takes her wrist and pulls her close. “The Red Keep has fallen,” he tells her, dotting kisses on her brow. “King’s Landing is yours.”

Sansa twists their hands so their fingers are intertwined, nodding. She remembers a young girl swathed in silks and jewels, kneeling before a throne. A girl screaming for mercy on the steps of the Sept of Baelor. A girl bruised and bleeding as scraps of her gown were torn from her body. Carried over the shoulder of a Hound. Tormented by a golden lioness. Sold off to the Imp. Persecuted. Haunted. Wronged. This miserable fucking city.

“King’s Landing is yours,” he whispers again.

“King’s Landing is ours,” she corrects softly, because absolute power corrupts absolutely.
Sansa does not sleep. Not even a wink. Jon is, for a man who only died and returned that afternoon, remarkably alert. Even the coming of the dawn does not slake him, does not slow his endless siege upon her, his hands, his lips. Sansa finally crawls from the bed when she is saved by a knock on the door.

“Jon, I have to go, now,” she says breathlessly, gasping. Jon grumbles some vague reply, but it is lost between her thighs. “Jon, off. Enough. I have to go.”

Yanking on his hair only makes him madder with lust, so she shoves at his shoulders instead. He pulls away from her reluctantly, beard dripping and eyes positively smoldering.

“I’m not done yet,” he says, but Sansa is already pulling the sheets around her body as she goes to pull open the door. She smiles at the face that awaits her.

“Good morning, Princess,” Myrna says with a wide smile as she sinks into a deep, wordlessly sincere curtsy. “The new day has begun.”

Sansa pulls the door open further to admit her. Myrna rushes past Jon, who stands scandalously bare and positively glaring at her as she moves towards the bathing chamber with two scullery maids in tow.

“You must prepare for the day as well, Jon,” Sansa says, taking his face in her hands. His own hands rise to cover hers. “You have to speak to the lords and ladies to inform them of what has happened.”

“They already know what’s happened,” Jon says.

“Jon.”

“Fine. When can I see you again?” When can I have you again?

“Later, Jon. Later.”

“When is later?”

“Later is not now. Go get ready. I had Jeyne lay out your doublet. I’ll see you in the Throne Room. Don’t be late.”

With something still to be done, Sansa can put off all of the wonder she has about what the future will bring. Daenerys Targaryen sits in her bedchambers sequestered from the rest of the Keep. A dozen Blackguard soldiers guard her. The Unsullied remain in the Black Cells for the moment, but they cannot be held there forever. The Dothraki are another matter entirely, as none of them are even in the city. They’re all scattered about the Crownlands, wreaking havoc and cutting down any who challenge their Queen-given right to do so. There is much to be done before she can finally relax, but she is grateful for it. When there is something to do, she does not need to think on everything that has already been done. She does not need to wonder on everything that has happened to her.

She cannot cast it aside forever. The day is fast approaching when she will have to set aside distraction and face the past. And perhaps make peace with it. But that day is not today.
Jon is on time when she meets him outside the Throne Room, and they enter it together. The lords and ladies are not dressed for Petitioner’s Court today, and Sansa is grateful for this. Today is only a spectacle in spirit. Everyone falls silent when they enter, parting like butter met with a hot knife, sinking as they move along until they stand upon the steps of the dais. Jon is holding Sansa’s hand, and she gives it a squeeze. He gives her the look of a long-suffering child, and then addresses the crowd.

“My lords, my ladies,” he says with a voice clear as the morning air. “It is with sadness in my heart that I announce to you this morning that our beloved Queen has succumbed to a madness from which she is unlikely ever to recover. She has been charged with the crime of murder, and awaits her trial as we speak. With a heavy heart I do humbly accept the burden of her crown, and the responsibility of the Six Kingdoms. Some of you know me, some of you have never met me, but you are all of you well met, and welcome in this court.”

Sansa keeps her face even and appropriately contrite as Jon speaks. He’s cut through a few words, and it’s not as elegant as it had been when she’d taught it to him last night, but it seems to do the trick. The lords and ladies have no need to ask what’s transpired—no small number of them must have witnessed their queen’s fit of madness result in her assassination attempt on her nephew—but Jon and Sansa stay where they are to allow the whispers to carry anyways. Jon’s eyes do not so much as twitch in the direction of the Throne the entire time. This was the only specific order Sansa gave him that she is certain he would have no trouble obeying. As soon as they have remained in view long enough, Sansa tugs at Jon’s hand lightly, and they descend the steps and leave the Throne Room slowly.

“Go ride Rhaegal around the city,” Sansa tells him.

“Come with me.”

“I cannot. I must meet with the council. We need to begin to remedy the damage immediately.”

“I’m not king yet.”

“The impending collapse of this entire land will not wait until after you are crowned. Go ride Rhaegal around the city. Enter the Crownlands. Ensure the Dothraki are aware of the change in leadership. That ought to give them some chance to leave on their own.”

“And if they do not?”

“We will remove them from the area. The Dragon Fleet carried them over, and it is waiting to carry them back. Try not to burn them.”

“The lords might applaud such an endeavor.”

“They might. They might even glorify you for it. But under no circumstances are you to execute anyone by means of dragonfire, do you understand? Make sure they know what has changed, but do not attempt to harm any of them.”

“As you say. When will I see you again?”

“Dinner. You will have me all to yourself.”

Jon smiles, pulling her in by the waist and giving her a near bruising kiss. “Until then,” he says, and he walks backwards down the hall, keeping her in view until he has to turn the corner. She draws a deep breath, turns to smile at the slowly approaching lump of pale fur and red eyes slowly stalking towards her, and begins the trek to the Hand’s Chambers.
Sansa is, in a word, almost relieved to see Lord Varys standing by the window, hands clasped together within those wide embroidered sleeves. He has a soft smile when he sees her, one matched by Ser Davos by the fireplace. The only one seated at the table is Tyrion Lannister, who is already pouring himself a generous helping of wine. Sansa marches forward with dignity and takes both the glass and the pitcher, promptly flinging them both into the roaring fireplace.

“What?” Tyrion looks as though she’s cast a small infant to the flames. “What was that for?”

“I need you sober for this conversation,” she says. “Daenerys Targaryen is incarcerated.”

“Which is precisely why I need the drink,” Tyrion says.

“Which is precisely why you are not allowed to,” Sansa says. “I need all of you sharp and alert. We need to move quickly to salvage the situation before it gets any worse.”

“She speaks true, Tyrion,” Varys says quietly.

Tyrion sighs miserably. “Thank the gods we are no longer married,” he says. There’s a note of humor in his voice and Sansa bites back a smile.

“First and foremost—the Reach,” Sansa says.

“Oh, gods, that disaster,” Tyrion says. “The Hightowers seem to be stable candidates, but they have only half the military standing to hold any real power. We’d have to arrange a few marriage alliances—”

“Samwell Tarly.”

“Pardon, Princess?”

“Samwell Tarly. Randyll’s first born son.”

“By my understanding, he is a member of your nephew’s northern regency,” Tyrion says.

“He can be dismissed easily,” Sansa says. “It’s a temporary arrangement.”

“He is sworn to the Night’s Watch, is he not?” Tyrion asks.

“So too was Jon,” Sansa says. “And yet you’ve been plotting for the last few years to install him as your king.”

“Samwell Tarly hardly has the disposition necessary to be governing the South,” Tyrion says.

“You don’t know the first thing about Samwell Tarly to determine whether or not he’s fit to be governing anything,” Sansa says. “Is there a problem, Tyrion? If so, speak now.”

“I simply don’t think a half-baked maester is the finest option. His own father didn’t see any potential in him.”

“Yes, because we all knew Randyll Tarly to be a flawless judge of character,” Sansa says. “And yourself to somehow be an even better one—you who threw your support behind the Dragon Queen and helped drag us into the mess we’re in now. Your father never saw potential in you. Do
you think fathers are always correct?”

Tyrion sinks in his seat slightly, looking appropriately abashed. “You’ve grown fangs.” Sansa has elected not to tell him that his own time as Hand is nearing its end. No, such a discussion must be had later, when Jon is the king, rather than now, when the question of power is still an unanswered question.

“I’ve grown intolerant of time-consuming nonsense,” Sansa replies. “Samwell Tarly is not a power-hungry man. He’s quick and clever, and he’s well liked. He’s a keen understanding of policies and economics—exactly the sort of person the Reach needs right now.”

“And if he is not capable of rallying the Reach lords? You understand that the name Tarly demands a certain amount of…backbone…be present in its acting Lord?”

“Just as well that it should then be placed under the command of the first man to slay a White Walker.”

“I’ve met Samwell Tarly,” Ser Davos interjects quietly as he comes to sit at the table. “There’s far more to him than meets the eye. I agree with the Princess. Let him have the Reach.”

“If he takes the Reach, the he shall rule from Highgarden,” Varys says. “What will become of Horn Hill?”

“Talla Tarly was brought to King’s Landing a day ago,” Sansa says. “I haven’t met her yet, but I will in the course of the day. If she is consenting, she shall become my lady in waiting, and will remain so until she selects a suitor. For her own sake, I thought she might receive the best suitors if she served as the Princess’ lady. Once she’s married, she and her husband will rule over Horn Hill.”

“Perhaps a Hightower might be a good match,” Varys says. “Jaymes Hightower could do. He’s Lord Hightower’s son by his second wife—who is a daughter of House Redwyne. The blood of Loras Tyrell’s grandmother Olenna Redwyne, and his own mother Alerie Hightower, would be the very thing.”

“Is Jaymes Hightower here in the city?”

“No. He’s squiring in the Westerlands.”

“Send a summons. I’ll have a look at him myself before we present him to Lady Talla. I’d rather not ask her to consider some flea-bitten drunk with an overbite.”

“And what of Samwell Tarly’s wife?” Tyrion asks. “Who will he wed? I dare say Lord Hightower might not have any more daughters to spare.”

“Samwell Tarly already has a wife.”

“Yes. The wildling woman.”

“Any information regarding his wife’s origins does not leave this room,” Sansa says harshly. “As far as the court is concerned, she is a Northwoman who had the privilege of serving as my lady-in-waiting during my brief tenure as Queen in the North.”

“Their marriage might be taken as an invitation to some lords to look north for wives of their own,” Varys says. “For some who might have interests in sharing in the North’s riches.”
“I am aware of that,” Sansa says. “The Northern lords and ladies have no investments in the south, and not even the foolhardiest of them would shackle their house in holy matrimony to a southron house while the state of the country is so dire. For the moment, at least, intermarriages are not something we need to concern ourselves with. Samwell Tarly’s wife comes unattached to the south.”

“Very well, then,” Varys says. “The Westerlands are, I imagine, a different story entirely.”

“They are,” Sansa says. “Jaime Lannister is our best candidate for the role of Lord Paramount of the Westerlands and Warden of the West.”

Tyrion doesn’t seem surprised at this, only looking forlornly at the fireplace where the wine is still steaming. “Of course.”

“The Western lords will only follow a Lannister, and Jaime is the first born son. Not to mention he doesn’t come with the distinction of having promoted the agenda of the Dragon Queen. His name is in good enough standing that he can hold the lands together.”

“The Westerlands army is still in a pitiful state,” Varys says. “He’ll need to make a powerful alliance to secure the military support needed for his holdings.”

“He has already forged ahead,” Sansa says with a smile. “He has chosen as the Lady of Casterly Rock Lady—Ser—Brienne of Tarth.”

“Brienne the Beauty?” Tyrion says, eyebrows raised. “I had imagined that to be a wartime dalliance.”

“Apparently not,” Sansa says.

“A westerlands lady might be a more prudent choice,” Davos says cautiously.

“Unfortunately, Jaime Lannister desires no council and asks no permission on this matter,” Sansa says. “He is quite set on her. While she is an unconventional choice for a lady, she is far from a shrinking violet. Already she has been aiding him these last two years in repairing the damage done to the western military. They’ve made astounding progress. A marriage alliance with Evenfall Hall will guarantee the west’s continued growth and pacify her father the Evenstar. Maybe then he’ll stop sending me letters asking me to find her a suitable husband that she might give him a grandchild. Now onto the matter of the Stormlands. What’s been done to recover Edric Storm?”

“I intend to set sail for Lys after the Queen’s trial,” Varys says. “I will bring him to Westeros myself.”

“Bring him straight here to King’s Landing,” Sansa says. “Not to the Stormlands. We need him acclimated, and then we can swear him in right away once we’ve ascertained his abilities.”

“While he’s here, we might introduce him to Dania Estermont,” Davos suggests. “I’ve seen her around here. She’s a sweet girl. Pretty face. Can wipe the floor with anyone at cyvasse.”

Sansa nods, remembering her face. Dania Estermont. She hadn’t had enough to say that Sansa could use her to spread gossip—but then that is only a promise that she’s a sensible girl and not a twit—but she had been present in many a gathering at the Maidenvault. “She has a sister in Storm’s End, doesn’t she?”

“I believe so,” Davos says.
“We’ll send an invitation, then,” Sansa says. “Once we see how their meeting goes. If Edric Storm is a suitable master for the Stormlands, and if Dania Estermont becomes the Lady of Storm’s End, then her sister will be a more than excellent option for my storm-born lady-in-waiting. Now what about Dorne?”

“I sent a raven to Alorayne Martell this morning about the turn of circumstances,” Varys says. “He might want to watch the trial himself, but Dorne is firmly within your corner either way.”

“Good. When he arrives, we are due for a conversation about a Dornish lady-in-waiting,” Sansa says. “I would also have him meet with our acting master of coin to discuss a permanent supply line of exotic teas and soaps. Where is he, anyways? Master Florent?”

“He will be meeting with you tomorrow, Princess,” Tyrion says. “He’s collecting his records in his study right now for your perusal.”

Sansa nods, sitting back. “He’s going to be very busy, very soon. I do hope he’s gotten plenty of rest these last two years. And I meant to ask… I need someone to speak to the castellan.”

“Regarding what?”

“I need a private chamber in the Holdfast reserved for exclusive use.”

“What use would this be?”

“My private atelier,” she says.

“I can’t imagine that a private atelier would bolster your credibility with the lords and ladies,” Tyrion says.

“You speak as though they imagine that I stitch these gowns in my chambers myself,” Sansa says. “And in any case, I’d rather face their scorn than face my tailor’s ire.”

She thinks of Buxton’s round belly jiggling, his face turning pink, his mouth open and ready to verbally backhand her, and shudders. Only such a man could make dragons and direwolves look like housecats.
I got a heads up from some readers both virtual and in real life that having Sam as Lord Paramount of the Reach was a questionable decision. Looking back on it, I probably should have elaborated on the role Sam played in the story that led to Sansa making this decision, but there's a reason that when she abdicated, she installed him in a position in little Robb's regency. He's helped her stabilize the North during the two years she spent there before coming South, so she's seen firsthand what he can do. Yeah, Sam can't fight for nuts, but he's got the one skill that the Reach needs right now, which isn't military, it's economic. The Reach's biggest problem is an economic one, and I've made it clear throughout the story that this particular kingdom has been hit the hardest by the hard financial times. So Sam, a guy who's from the Reach and has worked with Sansa on salvaging a kingdom that makes up half the continent's landmass, is a really good choice for doing the same in a kingdom he knows that is like a quarter of that space. I imagined that had been made clear in the story, but looking back on it now I guess I could have dropped that hint a few more times to have made it more cohesive. My mistake. Thanks.

“There are, regrettably, too many investments in the coasts these days,” Lord Florent says as he paws through pages and holds several out for her to see. “The Queen has granted special concessions upon the coastal lords that grants them almost uninhibited access to the continent’s ships and shipyards. Some of these are her own fleet that was not destroyed by Cersei Lannister two years ago, but the rest are mostly merchant vessels donated generously by other coastal lords.”

Lord Florent uses the word ‘donated’ with a slight inflection that allows Sansa to understand the term as ‘seized or confiscated by men chanting ‘fire and blood’ while foaming at the mouth’.

“We need to order the return of these ships to their lords and ladies. How is trade with the east? Is it a particularly lucrative trade?”

“Being frank with you, my Princess? I find it to be more ludicrous than lucrative. It accounts for a great deal of the wealth that currently sits in King’s Landing—but it only seems to benefit King’s Landing. I have attempted to explain this to the Queen before, but it was not something she was particularly keen on listening to. It had brought in a great deal of revenue, yes, but the lords and ladies who no longer have their fleets because of it have been nearly bankrupted as a result.”

Sansa nods. “Then the trade needs to be limited. The lords and ladies who benefit from the trade must return the ships to their owners. If they wish to keep trade moving as it has, they must unpocket the funds to construct ships of their own. This shan’t be too difficult, surely, with all of the wealth they’ve accumulated from it.”

“Where are they to acquire the lumber for this? Will you be writing to the North to secure a purchase?”

“I will be writing to the North to secure several purchases, it seems. Now what is the situation in the Iron Islands?”
“I’ve not heard much from them, they’ve been…unusually peaceful lately. Last word says that a recent spike in interest in pearl jewelry has led to an alarming rise in employment. Pearl divers, it seems, are slowly overcoming pirates.”

“And the western coasts have been quiet?”

“They are slowly quieting, yes.”


Here, Lord Florent runs a hand through his graying hair. “The Reach is the territory that I feel will need the most nurturing. No territory was hit harder these last two years, and no territory has declined faster. The lack of stable leadership has been troublesome as well. The Queen was never able to quite secure a person everyone could agree on. There was always someone with bad blood with someone else.”

“Hm.” Sansa nods, leaning forward. “I wonder what you would say if I suggested Samwell Tarly as a candidate for Lord Paramount?”

Lord Florent’s face is impassive. “I met the man once. When he was a lad. Not a very promising thing at that age—at least not as a soldier. He had a scholar’s disposition. A learned man. But is he not sworn to the Night’s Watch?”

“So is the Prince, technically. The Night’s Watch disbanded two years ago. Everyone sworn to it has left. The men tending the Wall now are men with nowhere else to go. They’ve taken all sorts of liberties with their vows—taken wives, settled the Gift. Samwell Tarly is a capable man. I know this because of the work he did in helping me stabilize the North after the Queen and Prince left. We fought quite a hideous war there in Winterfell. The North had been in shambles since the death of my brother Robb Stark. Samwell Tarly is no soldier—no warrior. But then, neither am I. Nor you. But he is a learned man who can nurture a dying kingdom back to health. He’s patient, he’s careful, he’s diplomatic, and most importantly—he’s not a greedy monster.”

“Well, if the state of the North is an indication of his capabilities, I’d be inclined to throw my hat in for him,” Lord Florent says. “But what of the Reach military? If he is indeed not a soldier, but a politician, how will he manage that?”

“The Reach is in ruin,” Sansa says. “It has a husk for a standing military. Samwell Tarly would be dieal for the position of Lord Paramount, but the issue of Warden of the South may, I suppose, be determined at a later time. I have approached you with this issue because I believe that for many who recall the Reach at its heyday under the Tyrells, the kingdom may seem too juicy a prize to be left in the hands of an unambitious man. My selection of said unambitious man might be met with resistance among those people. The South cannot—at this point in its economic situation—afford to have a Lord Paramount who is corrupt. When the Prince presents this decision, can we count on your support?”

Lord Florent rubs his tired eyes. “You may, Princess. I hope Lord Tarly is as successful with the South as he was with the North.”

Sansa tugs another paper forward. “Is this the record of Dothraki expenses?”

“Indeed. They have their own means of acquiring supplies, but many of their needs were met at the expense of the Crown.”

“Cut the funding. They are being presented with the option to return to the Great Grass Sea as we
Lord Florent raises a brow. “And you believe they are likely to accept the opportunity to leave this land?”

“The alternative is not a situation that would excite general envy. I’m sure they will see reason. They are far from home.”

Lord Florent nods. “Very well. I’ll cut funding immediately. What of the Unsullied? They run up significantly less expenses.”

“They will shortly be returning as well. I’d imagine they are desperately needed in Slaver’s Bay.”

“The Queen rechristened it the Bay of Dragons after her conquest.”

“I noticed. I also noticed that the slavers re-rechristened it Slaver’s Bay once more after they overthrew her utterly incompetent military commandant Daario Naharis and reestablished their foothold on the city. The Unsullied have greater concerns than King’s Landing. They will be granted the option to return to the east and continue the fight against slavery. Hopefully this time they’ll choose to rally behind a leader with actual governing capabilities.”

Lord Florent is marking notes along the frayed edges of a page when a knock on the door interrupts them.

“Come in!” Sansa calls.

The door opens to reveal Captain Ryke. “Pardon the disturbance, Princess,” he says. “The Queen’s been wailing all afternoon for you. She demands to speak with you.”

“Tell her that her demand has been ignored,” Sansa says.

“She insists upon urgency.”

“Inform her that her insistence has also been considered and ignored. I will speak with her after the trial, and not a moment before.”

Captain Ryke nods and closes the door. Lord Florent has finished his scribbles and looks across the table at her. “There is one more matter, Princess, that I had been wondering about.”

“Go on.”

“The black dragon. If I may be so bold as to ask—what will be done about him? He is a danger so long as he remains in the Kingswood uninhibited. While our Prince is certainly an extraordinary man, I sincerely doubt there has ever existed a rider who commanded two dragons.”

Sansa lowers her gaze to the page before her, but she can barely read a word. “The Prince has volunteered to deal with him. It will be done after the trial. It would be extremely foolhardy to be wasting resources on keeping him sustained, and the neighboring lords and ladies near the Kingswood have been making their sentiments very clear regarding the presence of an angry fire breathing beast so near their holdings.”

Lord Florent nods slowly, stacking up his papers. “I’d say that we’ve covered the bare bones, then. The issue with the Iron Bank still stands, of course.”

“I had never imagined it would simply disappear.”
“Nor I, to be sure. The Crown was already indebted before the Queen ever took the Throne. She insisted that the debts owed by House Lannister’s regime were not hers to pay. And yet willing it to be so does not make it true. The Iron Throne does in fact owe a substantial sum to the Iron Bank.”

“I’ll need you to write to Braavos and ask them to send a representative to redraft the payment agreement,” Sansa says. “Stress the change in leadership, and mention my name. Not Princess Targaryen. Sansa Stark. I have negotiated with them on behalf of the North a great deal these last two years.”

“I shall apply myself to the task immediately. This has been a very productive meeting, Princess,” he says as he gets to his feet. “I’d say the first one I’ve had since I took up the post. I thank you for the time.”

Sansa smiles graciously, trying not to make it seem too offensive that she hasn’t risen to her feet as well. She would, except it’s difficult to stand on her own two legs after spending two nights in a row with them wrapped around Jon. Which is another problem entirely. Because really. She needs to sleep. And be able to walk in a straight line. As soon as he’s closed the door behind him, she slumps in her seat.

“You’re good at this,” Arya’s voice makes Sansa jump in her seat.

“Don’t do that,” she admonishes half-heartedly, knowing Arya doesn’t care anyways. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough. He’s trustworthy.”

“Is he?”

“He’s from the Reach. His accounts have taken a hit like all the others.”

“I’m thinking to give all of them a test trial,” Sansa says. “Five or sixth months after the coronation, if they aren’t up to snuff, we send them away.”

“He might survive the purge.”

“I hope he does. It’d be such a pain to replace him.”

Arya makes herself comfortable in the chair Lord Florent had occupied and puts her feet up on the table. “Unfortunately, you’ll have to smoke the rest out yourself. I’ll be headed back to Winterfell soon after the coronation.”

Sansa nods. She had known it would be so—there is only so long Arya can stay away from her son—but the knowledge that their parting is to come so soon is not welcome anyways.

“We’ll come visit as soon as we can,” Sansa says.

“I’m counting on it. Robb cannot take his first steps without you there to see them. Every time he tries, I’ll knock him over.”

Sansa laughs. “Then he’ll never walk!”

“Just as well. What’s he need legs for, anyways? Look at Bran! He’s got every single dirty secret on every single person who’s ever lived in the history of time ever, without taking nary a step.”
Sansa pours herself a glass of wine and adjusts in her seat. Arya notices.

“Seven hells. Have you even slept since the arrest?”

“He’s half dragon, half wolf. And I need him to play nice with the lords and ladies until after the coronation.”

“And when are you going to sleep in the meantime?”

“Trust me, I’ve got something worked out. Until then—let’s just say Robb’s not the only one who’ll need to learn to move without legs.”

Arya is cackling long after the luncheon arrives, and long after it’s gone.
The trial

The day of Daenerys’ trial dawns bright and dazzling—not that Sansa would truly get to enjoy it, as she is busy removing Jon’s claws from her person. He is within sight of her the entire day—he rises with her, bathes with her, dresses with her, and when they have broken fast and emerged, his arm is around her waist, keeping her close. Sansa is grateful that Myrna seems to care very little for this, or for Jon’s inability to keep his clothes on within the confines of their chambers.

There is very little to be said for the trial. Daenerys is marched in by the Blackguard. Her hands are not shackled, she is dressed in the finest shining black silk and bright red chiffon, and her hair has been braided out of her face in the daintiest, most complex pattern Sansa has ever seen in her life. She spends the first half of the trial wondering how the damn things are taken apart.

“How do you answer the charge against you, Daenerys Stormborn?” Jon asks.

He is not seated upon the throne as he addresses her. He is not seated at all. In fact, no one is. Sansa had meant for this to be so. This trial is a farce, and the theatricality of it absurd. While Sansa can appreciate the necessity of a show, this particular show is not one that she believes to be particularly important. She has far more pressing things to be worrying about, such as the raven she sent to Winterfell this morning summoning Samwell Tarly to King’s Landing.

“You did not die,” is her simple answer.

Jon raises the hem of his tunic, pulling his under shirt up with it. Sansa does not wince at the sight of the stab wound left by his aunt as she did the first day she saw it. The gasps and exclamations at the sight of the wound from the court are telling, however, of Jon’s rising fame as a legendary figure. She wonders if her husband will join the fames Heroes of old one day when a true death finally takes him.

The wound is clean, but deep. Unlike the ones she recognizes from his chest, it is not red. No, Sansa has observed that Jon no longer bleeds red, but a much darker shade of it. She will not deny that it unnerves her.

“I died,” Jon amends as he lowers his clothing again. “It didn’t stick.”

“Then no harm has been done.”

“It most certainly has. You fatally injured me with no prior knowledge that death doesn’t like me very much. You intended to remove me from the land of the living. And succeeded. Ergo, you are a kinslayer. Claimed by the vicious madness that crippled your father before you, I am compelled to act in the best interests of the realm the Gods have placed in our care. My lords, my ladies, bear witness to my words. I am Aegon Targaryen, son of Rhaegar Targaryen, and on this day I claim my birthright. Who challenges this claim?”


“Who else challenges this claim?” Jon asks.

Sansa wonders if maybe she can ask Master Giles to find a stone lighter than the sapphires dangling from her ears right now. Surely tourmalines wouldn’t feel so heavy?

“The Iron Throne is mine, I am the queen. I am your Queen, Jon Snow.”
“Am I Jon Snow again? I was just getting used to being Aegon.”

“I have taken the Throne by right of blood and conquest, it—”

“By right of blood, it belongs to me. By right of conquest, I do not deny that it is yours. And by right of conquest, I have also won it. I grant you the chance to win in again, by this same right. Who here supports the claim of Daenerys Targaryen as superior?”

Sansa thinks perhaps she can ask Master Buxton very gently to add a few champagne pearls to the gown she intends to wear on Jon’s name day. Pale champagne would look positively dashing with the emerald gown. What a striking combination. She’d have to consult him on the matter. If he doesn’t fling her from a rooftop for only giving him two months advance notice to create a gown for such a monumental occasion, he might be amenable to the look.

“It appears,” Jon says, as Sansa debates between velvet and satin. “That there are no supporters willing to support this claim of yours. Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, for the crime of kinslaying against your rightful king, you have been found guilty. The sentence is death. The city prays for the Gods’ mercy upon your soul. This court is dismissed.”

Sansa is pulled from rumination on pearls and fabric as the Blackguard lead Daenerys Targaryen away. She walks with dignity. Head held high, chin out, steps measured. You survived it because you could.

_Everyone is your enemy. Everyone is your friend._

Sansa’s eyes linger on the coastal lords who will be notified later today by Lord Florent that they are being required to hand over their confiscated ships. They already seem to sense the pending storm coming their way.

Velvet would seem too rich with the pearls. Better to go with the satin.
Sansa has, over the years, felt a great deal of inadequacy over her inability to fight. She is no longer half so ignorant of military tactics as she once was, but the actual practice of swords and shields still eludes her. She has a knife. She knows what to do with it, courtesy of one Arya Stark. But her greatest weapon has always been her words. She has learned to use them wisely, to keep them close or to release them into the world, to spin them true or false. She has learned, and she has survived, because she knows how to use her words. But one of the first lessons her Father ever taught her was to keep to them. In this, Sansa can say she has failed. There are promises made that she has not kept, vows she swore that she did not mean, declarations of love, or loyalty, of faith, that she spoke falsely, and she has learned that this too is necessary.

All the same, she had instructed Captain Ryke to inform Daenerys Targaryen that she would speak to her after the trial, and this is what she intends to do.

The early morning after the trial, Sansa arrives at the doors to the queen’s chambers. She hasn’t had her breakfast yet, choosing instead to take it with the queen. She imagines there is much the woman wants to say, and perhaps much that will not be pleasant to hear.

Captain Ryke escorts her into the chamber and follows her inside. Sansa frowns at his figure as he closes the door, and she does not remove it quickly enough for him not to notice it when he turns around.

“Pardon, Princess,” he says. “It’s by His Grace’s command that you are not left alone with the Queen.”

Sansa supposes she’s lucky that Jon even allowed her to speak with the woman at all. She had wondered at him not putting up as much of a fight as she had expected him to.

Daenerys Targaryen is by the windows, dressed in a gown of swishing silk with a leather belt tied round her waist. She gazes out at the city, and Sansa cannot see if her face is furious or simply resigned. She turns at last when it seems to suit her, and her eyes find Sansa standing there.

“Understand you asked to see me.”


“I apologize for the delay,” Sansa says. “Regrettably, I was otherwise engaged. What did you hope to speak with me about?”

“My trial. Whatever that was—for I know it was no trial.”

“It was the best that could be pulled together under the circumstances—which, as I’m sure you’ll agree—were utterly unique.”

“In what regard?” Daenerys asks, stepping away from the window and towards Sansa. Sansa hears the clinking step of Captain Ryke inching closer to her upon Daenerys’ increase in proximity. It is only then that Daenerys seems to notice Captain Ryke within the room. “In what regard?” she repeats, eyes still on his face.

“In every regard,” Sansa replies. “The crime you were charged with was murder.”

“I noticed. Do you know what else I noticed? There was no formal proceeding to that farce of a
trial. There were no witnesses asked to speak.”

“There was a hall full of witnesses prepared to speak the truth,” Sansa says. “They might have been asked to, had you denied the charges.”

“He is not dead anymore.”

“You didn’t know that he would return when you killed him. If you had denied the charges when asked, we would have proceeded with witness testimony. You chose not to deny it, so Jon proceeded with his claim, which all were invited to challenge. You chose to challenge it, and your challenge was not supported. Now is there anything else that you would like to discuss?”

Daenerys is silent for a long while. Sansa takes a seat and gets comfortable. The door opens promptly and Myrna and another maid enter carrying trays of fruit, cheese, biscuits, and tea. Sansa takes a blueberry scone and begins to spoon lemon curd onto it. Daenerys watches her.

“What a victory this must be for you,” she says.

Sansa sighs. “I just want to fix these messes and move forward,” she says, lowering the scone to the plate.

“And where is forward?” Daenerys asks, watching as Myrna pours two steaming cups of water into two teacups.

“I don’t know.”

Daenerys smirks, stirring a small mint leaf into her cup. “You once seemed to believe it a deadly thing not to think ahead.”

“And not thinking ahead is a dangerous thing. When your plans involve the lives of thousands. I will never compromise the safety of the people I have been asked to care for.”

“Then what do you not know moving forward?”

“I refer to what will become of myself when the realm no longer needs me in a position of power,” Sansa says, pulling her cup to herself. Daenerys just stares at her. “The position you seek is one that tends to end with one’s last breath.”

“I have no intention of serving that long. Once the kingdoms are stable, Jon and I will step down from the throne and go someplace else.”

“So you will leave your children to rule and skip off into the sunset?” Daenerys asks, but the final word seems to die on her throat as she watches Sansa pull her small paper bag towards her and pull out a spring of tansy. Sansa wordlessly drops the tansy into the steaming cup and watches it steep. She leans back in her seat and crosses her arms. Daenerys’ eyes narrow on the cup. Sansa’s do not move at all.

“A Targaryen must inherit the Iron Throne,” Daenerys says quietly.

Sansa shrugs. “I doubt anyone cares what name a person might bear when they take the throne provided they do their job well.”

“Jon must have a child.” Daenerys says. “House Targaryen must have an heir.”
“Jon is unfit to be fathering anyone,” Sansa says simply as she takes a sip of the tea. “And I am no longer interested in mothering anyone.” The tea sloshes bitter and hot down her throat, and she takes another quickly to avoid having the taste linger too long on her tongue. “I knew the moment I saw Jon that first day—when I strode into the garden to begin negotiations—that I’d never let him put a child in me. It is a sad thing, really. He is the only man I’ve ever trusted with my body. Only my body. My heart? My mind? These are another matter.”

“Was it a game from the very beginning, or did you make it up as you went along?” Daenerys asks.

Sansa drains the last of the tea and lowers the cup to the table. She sighs, leaning back and watching Daenerys. “Have you not been paying attention? I never make anything up as I go along.”

“The day I brought you into my chambers for trial. I accused you of ingesting moon tea. You were guilty.”

“I was. I still am.”

“You denied it during your trial.”

“I did nothing of the sort. I asked you to prove it.”

“Your handmaid lied. The girl who was just here.”

“And that is her own trouble with the gods she’ll have to face one day. I neither confirmed nor denied my guilt on the matter. But it is true. I am indeed guilty.”

“And how is it that you managed to escape that trial while I cannot escape this one? We have neither of us confessed to our crimes when asked about them directly, and yet here you are on the cusp of queenhood while I am to be met with death. How does that happen, I wonder?”

Sansa shrugs, taking a bite of her scone. “Nearly identical scenarios like this are true gauges of capability, I should imagine. For starters, I have never been foolish enough to ingest my tea in questionable company. You decided to murder your nephew in a hall full of his admirers and supporters. It might have been advantageous to you to have waited until you were in a more private setting. The less people who know about something, the more malleable that information is. Your only witness against me was a handmaid who liked me infinitely better than you. So perhaps the circumstances surrounding our trials were miles apart long before we were ever charged. I don’t suppose we’ll ever have a definite answer.”

Daenerys takes a sip of her own tea with a steady hand. "I remember the first time Tyrion mentioned you," she says. "On the ship to White Harbor. It was the first I'd heard of you. Aegon never spoke of you. He said you were a sweet little bird who was clever enough to keep herself alive. But nothing more."

"Tyrion Lannister is far from the greatest judge of character," Sansa says. "Even as a child, I knew better than to trust him."

"He amended his opinion of you within a few days of our arrival at Winterfell," Daenerys goes on, draining her teacup and pouring another.

"What did he say?"

"He said that every person who tried to outmaneuver you had somehow found themselves dead in the ground," Daenerys says, and she laughs. It's a sharp, stinging sound, and Sansa hates the
mockery in it. "Said that everyone who underestimated you ended up dead."

Sansa nods slowly, looking down at her scone. "Those people did not die because they underestimated me. Well, only two of them did," she amends, thinking of Petyr and Ramsay. "The others...I survived where they did not because they overestimated themselves in situations that past experience taught me not to take for granted. I lived because I could recognize threats, and they could not."

"And I could not," Daenerys sighs as she sits back. Her eyes flicker to Captain Ryke. “What will become of Drogon?” she asks.

“He cannot be allowed to remain in the Kingswood,” Sansa says. “He is disturbing the peace there. Rhaegal will transport him to Dragonstone. He will live out his days there unobstructed.”

“He will not be mistreated,” Daenerys commands, and she reminds Sansa now of a cold chamber full of hard, mutinous faces. *Whatever they want.* “He will not be cruelly used.”

“By your command,” Sansa says. “Is that all?”

Daenerys does not answer, only begins to spread orange preserves onto her buttermilk scone. Sansa waits a moment, and then proceeds to eat. They breakfast in silence as the birds sing through the morning.
Sansa rises early on the day of the execution. As easy as she had imagined she’d feel when the day finally dawned, she doesn’t feel easy at all. Her stomach is turning slowly—not enough to make her nauseous, but enough to make her extremely uncomfortable. Jon does not cling to her as he is wont to do, giving her the silence and peace to bathe and dress at her leisure. She dons a gown of black lined with silver, one of her own pieces brought along from Winterfell. She pins her hair out of her face with Myrna’s help, paints her lips burning crimson, and walks out of her chambers.

She remembers keenly the day she marched through the halls towards the Sept of Baelor to watch what she had imagined to be her father’s confession. How anxious, how relieved, how eager for it all to be an ugly nightmare to be put behind her. She could write to Robb once it was over—a proper letter. She was so sure then that she could find some kind soul who would smuggle him a letter in secret. One of her own words, not the swill she’d been writing under Cersei’s scornful eyes. She had been drafting the letter in her head the entire morning—right up until the moment the sword took his head, and her world went careening into the throes of oblivion.

My dear brother, I have been so anxious to see these troubles ended. And though our poor father will be a black brother of the Night’s Watch by the time you read this, I know in my heart that the North will never forget his service to them.

Sansa stalks through the halls with the Blackguard all around her, Ghost at her heels. Myrna follows behind her silently. A maid called Alysanne stands near the corner of the corridor. Sansa’s eyes meet those of many others as they progress. She holds none of their gazes, but she does not miss the way they pause in their hushed conversation, slow their walks to a stop, turn, observe, sink into bows.

My heart is broken at the horrible turn events have taken. I have not had word of Arya for many weeks now, and every day that goes by that I do not hear from her is another stone settling in my chest. I know she will likely try to make her way to you, if she can. I have heard that you have raised an army. Might be you will meet her somewhere soon. I pray that you do. I pray that she is safe.

Tyrion Lannister stands by the very edge of the open courtyard, head tilted back to catch every last drop of wine pouring from the spout of the impressively large hip flask in his hands. Varys stands opposite him, eyes narrowed at the little golden man, hands clasped together within his billowing sleeves. Tyrion lowers the flask and wipes his lips, but a single drop flows, ruby red and glinting, down into the course blonde hairs on his chin. Sansa waits until they notice her, and then she allows them to walk beside her out into the entrance courtyard.

These halls once looked to be a bright, cheerful place. Knights in glittering armor, ladies swathed in silks and jewels. It was what I had imagined in my dizziest daydreams. It was what I had prayed to find. But being here now is not at all how I thought it would be. Everything seems uglier somehow.

The massive carriage waiting for them is starkly different from the ones that the other lords and ladies will be using. This one is blackwood—polished to perfection—with a distinctive crown carved onto the side nearest the door. The guard opens it with a bow, and Varys puts himself forward to hand Sansa inside. He steps in quietly, taking the seat beside her. Tyrion stumbles in after them, apparently needing to compensate for the energy such movement cost him by swallowing another enormous gulp of wine.
“This is the longest I believe I’ve ever been within range of you and not heard you speak,” Sansa observes.

Tyrion’s response is a melodic, elegant, and deafening belch. Varys clicks his tongue and looks out the window, holding out a silk kerchief for Sansa. She has no need for it, as she’s smelled things far worse than Tyrion’s wine breath during her time as the wife of a man who enjoyed feeding people to his hounds, but she accepts it anyways. It is perfumed with something eastern. She makes a note to ask Varys for the name of it later. The carriage begins to move, rocking them gently back and forth, and the city comes into view.

*King’s Landing once seemed to me to be such a glittering city. I suppose you will take some joy in having been right about it, though I know you are too good to laugh at my expense. I understand now that I have been entirely deceived in this regard. I feel so foolish.*

The crowds gathered outside line the streets, their yells unintelligible and blending together into one giant, cacophonous roar that sends chills up Sansa’s spine. The sounds of a righteous bunch. She remembers this keenly.

*I overheard Lucy Bettley gossiping with Betha Kettleback only yesterday about our father. I was so shocked by how callously they spoke of him, as if they had not been taking tea with me so many times since I arrived here. I thought they were my first friends in the city. Lately I’ve been keeping to myself. Septa Mordane is no longer with me. I don’t know where she’s gone. I have not seen her since Father’s arrest. Am I foolish to hope that she might be with Arya? Is that another far-fetched hope of mine?*

The ruins of the Sept of Baelor are barely visible through the latticework in the wood that makes up the window pane. Sansa pushes it aside to view the spectacle. They have arrived via the southside, where once their was a grand staircase. The steps are still there, only now they appear to lead to the cloudy blue sky above them. Sansa spots a dark figure soaring through the clouds, heedless of the goings on. The carriage comes to an abrupt halt. The door is opened. Varys climbs out.

*You will be pleased to hear, I am sure, that Joffrey has promised me that he will allow Father to live if he confesses to treason. Please, Robb, please just don’t fight this sentence. He will take the black, and you will become the new Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, but he will be alive, and there need be no more damage done. I pray it all ends here. It is with this in mind that I must ask you to secure one thing for me.*

Tyrion stumbles out, and Sansa does not look but she supposes from the exclamations and swearing that Tyrion has fallen on his way to solid ground and been acquainted with the dirt by means of his face. She might have smiled to herself at the thought had she any room in her churning stomach for anything besides the overwhelming urge to get this over with and return to her chambers, where she could curl up in bed and ask Jon to do nothing but hold her and hold her and hold her until the memories fade into dust.
It has not eluded me, the truth that although Father will live as a Black Brother safe at the Wall from the machinations of this city, I, as Joffrey’s Queen, will have to remain here for the rest of my life. I will have to stand here and hold court among the people who have now made so light of Father’s predicament. These despicable, dishonorable knaves who whisper behind their fans, debating the outcome of his situation or his likelihood to confess to treason—I don’t want to live among these people.

The steps are lined with lords and ladies donned in their finest ensembles and accessories. Sansa is nearly blinded by the elaborate headdresses, dizzy from the skirt trains, the sashes, the shawls, the fans, the jewels, the rich velvets and finely embroidered tunics. They smile at her as she lifts the hem of her skirts and ascends the steps slowly. The smiles spread one by one, like light touching the wick of a fresh candle, as if she has brought some sunrise their way just by appearing here. Perhaps she has. She doesn’t know. All she does know is that they have gathered here today—every last one of them, including herself—to watch someone die. There has never been a less appropriate time to smile.
I ask you, brother, to do you absolute best to sever my betrothal to Joffrey Baratheon. I would hope that when Father travels North to join the Night’s Watch, I will be travelling with him to join you in Winterfell.

Jon stands at the very top of the steps, Longclaw sheathed in the hands of Davos Seaworth beside him. Kinvara stands to his left, hands folded before her delicately, a cruel smile on her crimson lips.
Play on my traitor's blood, play on their pride. Use any means you must, but please, I beg you, withdraw your consent. I can think of no worse fate than to be the Queen, married to the Iron Throne.
Jon does not smile, not even when his eyes find her. Of course he would not. Her stupid prince. He knows how she dreads this. He held her through the night listening to her whimper at the memories it brings.
I know it seems such a difficult thing to ask, but I would not ask it unless I was certain of it. Every day I spend in this city, I am more and more hateful of it.

Father is sitting in the Black Cells, and everyone here seems to be carrying on as if nothing is wrong.
She reaches the top step and her eyes find Daenerys Targaryen. She is dressed in purest white. Her hair is a maze of elegant braids, her cheeks pink, her eyes burning. She has never looked more breathtaking.
They ask me to behave as if nothing is wrong. I don't know how to do that.
Sansa’s eyes meet hers—sapphire on amethyst—and hold.

I don’t know how to lie.
And hold.
I don’t know how to pretend.

And hold.
I don’t know how to play this game.
Sansa tips her head in farewell, and moves to stand between Tyrion and Varys. Jon steps forward, Longclaw in hand. The crowds screams are positively thunderous. Rhaegal shrieks above them in response. Daenerys’ eyes find him, and they follow him through the sky.

“Daenerys Targaryen,” Jon says. “For the crime of neptocide, you have been found guilty. On this day, I have sentenced you to die. Have you any last words?”
And I don’t want to learn. I fear that the day I do, I will be no better than them.
“You are a conqueror, Daenerys Stormborn.”

Her eyes meet Sansa’s again. You survived it because you could. She faces forward. The screech of steel as Longclaw is unsheathed is lost amidst the screams of the crowd. Captain Ryke urges Daenerys to her knees, but she steadfastly refuses to kneel. Jon waves Ryke off and holds out his sword, steadying his grip to ensure a single blow.
But all of this can be discussed later, when we meet again. Father will come North soon, and if you are successful in your negotiation, I will be travelling with him. I will see you in Winterfell, and I will sew you a fine coat fit for the new Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North. And I will dance with you and Arya will brush her hair and Rickon will learn to dance and Bran might have improved his footing then. I will allow Theon to dance with me so long as he isn’t crass, and I hope that Jon comes down from the Wall to see the feast. He and Father can then depart from Winterfell to Castle Black together. I would feel better if none of our family were separate again after this ordeal.
“Valar morghulis,” Kinvara says quietly.

I have faith that I will see you again soon, brother. We will all of us be together again, and when
we are reunited, I only wonder what stories we’ll have to share.

The blade sweeps through her neck, and Daenerys Targaryen falls.
But now the guards are knocking on my door, and it is time to attend Father’s confession. I am certain that by the time you read this, he will be prepared to depart for Castle Black. I will see you soon, brother, and the sun will shine on Winterfell again.
Sansa sleeps well for the first time in many years tonight. Jon’s arms cradle her softly, embrace warm and sturdy, scent of pine and snow and Jon. He’s stitched to her side, every inch of his skin pressed to every inch of hers, and she cannot draw a single breath without inhaling him, yet she is safe, and she feels free.

“I used to think of Father when things would go badly,” she says as the dawn breaks. Her eyes have only been open for moments, and she is still heavy with dreams that are—for once—not horrifying. “I used to dream of him coming to kill all the monsters and carry me home.”

Jon’s lip find her temple and his fingers run through her hair. “Did you dream of him?”

“No. I dreamt of you. Of us.”

“Where were we?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere by the sea. We could see the sky. No one bothered us.”

“Is that where you’d like to go? Somewhere by the sea?”

“I suppose. We could have a lemon grove there. Then we could have cakes whenever we wanted. But it should be somewhere we can see snow every so often. Do you know any places like that?”

Jon sits up. “Let’s find us a map,” he says.

The map they are searching for is in the Hand’s chambers, which they have no qualms about breaking into in spite of it’s distance from their own rooms. Tyrion Lannister is a sorry sight, face down in his sheets stinking of wine. They tiptoe past him like naughty children and pass the hours into late morning bent over pages of the Atlas Maester Ortalan has been slaving over the past year.

“I am not going to spend the rest of my life on an island of man-eating sharp-toothed creatures,” Sansa says firmly, brushing Jon’s fingers away from the small sketch of the isle called Mossovy.

Jon shrugs. “No one we know is there.”

“I was hoping for a place where people speak the common tongue.”

“You mean like Dragonstone?”

“I had imagined that once,” Sansa says. “In some ways, it reminds me of Winterfell. But I don’t think it’d be a good thing to be on our own island.”

Jon looks at her as though she’s shrunken a foot and a half in a minute. “Do you jest?” he asks. “An entire island all to ourselves free from crowns and thrones? An entire island that’s already ours? I can think of nothing better.”

Sansa would argue this, but she hears the clattering crash of goblets on the floor and reasons that Tyrion has woken. Sure enough, he stumbles into view only moments later, eyes bleary and hair a verifiable bird’s nest.

“Are we hosting a surprise meeting?” he asks as his eyes fall upon them.

“You just missed it,” Jon says as Sansa pulls her robes tighter round her body.
“I hope you passed the night well, my Lord,” she says.

“As well as can be expected, I suppose,” he says. “What was discussed? In the meeting? Have you changed the coronation date?”

“No, no, that remains the same,” Sansa says. “We ought to leave you to prepare for the day.”

Tyrion might have meant to open his mouth to thank them, but when he does, it is not words but vomit that slips from his lips. Sansa daintily steps around him and out the door, and Jon follows immediately after.

“I don’t doubt your capabilities as a politician, my heart,” Jon says. “But I wonder how far you hope to get with him once your work begins unhindered.”

Sansa knows he is right, but this is another conversation for another day. And with Jon’s coronation only two days away, she knows that that day is coming very soon.

Once the castle has risen, she makes her way to her apartments. Against the far wall, Master Buxton is directing his attendants to arrange her coronation gown onto a mannequin.

“Good afternoon, Master Buxton,” Sansa greets him. “Your name has been mentioned among several ladies in court lately, I’m sure you’ll be pleased to hear.”

Master Buxton turns to face her and tips his head, one hand tucked elegantly on his nonexistent waist. “I’d be even more pleased if you tell me your expanding waistline is only a trick of the light or extra padding in your gown.”

Sansa smiles. “Unfortunately, it is neither.”

Buxton’s eyes trace her figure with a calculating gaze. He forces a smile onto his face that looks like he is suppressing a seizure. “Your Grace’s figure has never been lovelier. I’d even go so far as to call it divine…ly unworkable,” he murmurs the last bits under his breath, but Sansa catches them all the same.

“It might please you to hear that an atelier is being prepared for you as we speak. Soon, you’ll have your very own workshop to busy yourself with my commissions.”

“Excellent,” he says. “I was ready to tell you I’m quite fed up with having to hide your gowns in the backroom from all those prying eyes. You know some of the ladies in your court have been trying to get people into my workshop to sneak glances at your coronation gown? The very insolence of these leeches, trying to take all of my creative genius and pour it unto someone else—you know Lady Celtigar’s favored tailor doesn’t even specialize in embellishment, the pompous dotard, and he has the nerve to try and filch my designs for his own benefit? But he’s always been ten steps behind me. His father liked me better, and I completed my apprenticeship before he did, and I was the one who won the heart of that stupid perfumed ponce Cedric Depay—he never got over that.”

Sansa nods, tilting her chin towards the mannequin. “Will it still fit me, Master Buxton?”

Buxton stops and turns to glance at the gown. It hasn’t changed much since she last saw it, except the pieces are stitched together expertly. White crepe embellished with pearls and crystals, like the clean crisp freshness of the first winter snow. “Perhaps,” he says, turning his head back to Sansa. “A little whale oil and a harpoon should help you squeeze into it nicely. It’ll be tight enough to give you a powerful bout of flatulence, but imagine how tantalizing your hips will look as you sashay up the steps of the dais. If you swish hard enough, you might knock that sour-faced
Grandmaester off his fuddy duddy stool with your hipbones.”

Sansa does not suppress her smile. “I’ll have you know that I have begun to lose weight again. That might help it along.”

“And I’m certain you’ll be the envy of the city,” Buxton says with a healthy injection of skepticism. "Once it's gone," he adds under his breath.

Sansa ignores this and laces her fingers together, bracing herself for the impact of this next announcement. “There is something else I’d like to discuss with you,” she says. “My husband’s name day is two moons away, and I had been considering ideas for a special order to be commissioned.”

Buxton turns to look at her slowly, eyes raking over her figure again. “I am honored that Your Grace would consider myself for this task,” he says with all of the grace of an especially savage wildling. “I shall bear this commission as a badge of recognition as I slave away in my private atelier with my team of sixteen seamstresses working hundreds upon hundreds of hours to create a masterpiece that will only be worn once before it is committed to memory.”

“Which is another thing I had hoped to discuss with you,” Sansa says. “I wonder how partial you might be to an exhibition of your works with me.”

Buxton raises a brow. “I do not follow, Your Grace.”

“You and I have been causing a stir among the courtiers,” she says. “Our ensembles have trickled down amongst the lesser lords and ladies, and found their way to the better off common folk as well. Do you know how any of them have begun wearing mockup crepe with silk these days?”

“Those atrocities?” Buxton shudders. “I’d rather go naked. Are we to congratulate them for their poor taste?”

“Not at all,” Sansa says. “We are to simply provide a meeting ground where we might exhibit some of my most important pieces. That way nothing you make need go into storage to be forgotten.”

“But who would decide which pieces are the most important ones?” Buxton asks. “Surely Your Grace will not be offering yourself up to the judgement of tasteless imbeciles? I cannot countenance such a thing, I am an artist!”

“You and I alone shall be determining that,” Sansa assures him.

She leaves out the strategic importance of convincing the public that certain pieces are the epitome of elegance and style. If the Iron Islands could be set on a straight economic path simply because she wore pretty earrings to a tea party, she can scarcely imagine what could be done when certain fabrics and dyes were to come into fad because a Queen’s exhibition declared them to be fashionable.

Buxton seems to consider this for a moment. “I shall put some thought into the matter,” he says. “It has some real merit. Imagine what could become of this place if we could actually teach people how to dress. But this does not distract me—Your Grace has requested a new gown. And with only two moons away, I should wonder if my Princess wishes to see me dead in the ground before the year is out.”

Buxton prattles on as he turns back to the mannequin, bustling to and fro as he complains about absolutely everything from the hard time he had darning the pearls to the lighting from the
Sansa sits back and heartily ignores him. She is both excited for and dreading the days… weeks…years to come. They will be planned and measured, every single one of them. Every color she wears will have a purpose, every smile she gives, even the food she eats. Every step will have its own reason. But beyond those years is a map sitting in the Hand’s chambers that she and Jon have yet to mark. There are still plans to be made, and a future that has no plan at all. Those years—the ones that remain—will be theirs. Only theirs. They will share them with no one.
Jon sits cross legged on the corner of the bed. His fingers are twitching, flexing and clenching into fists, unclenching, relaxing again. Palms spread over his knees, eyebrows knit together in concentration. She is reclined against a thousand pillows clad in nothing but a shockingly sheer black robe, running her fingers through her waving hair carefully so the strands won’t snag on the jewels darned into the cuffs of her frock. There’s a necklace of diamonds and rubies on her neck—a gift from him—that drips glitter like a river over the swell of her breast. She tucks one lithe leg over the other as she rubs her lips together to catch the rouge painting them red. Her goal had been to look like a goddess, and from the way Jon is panting, she imagines she has succeeded.

“How do I look, Jon?” she asks.

“Perfect,” he answers, pupils swallowing the purple in his eyes.

She raises a brow. “Perfect?”

“Divine,” he remedies, leaning forward. She raises a dainty foot and presses a red enameled toe to his stomach, pushing him back. He catches her foot, grip sure but hands shaking. “Transcendent. Godlike.”

“Hm. I quite like that. Who might have guessed that you knew such pretty words?” She asks, lying back and stretching languidly. Jon’s breath hitches audibly, and she smiles. “Do you want me, Jon?”

“I do,” the words spill from his mouth like warm butter as he leans forward again, catching himself on his hands. She raises her foot again to push him back. “I do, I do.”

She sighs. “What do you think of my alterations to this necklace?” she asks. “I added these stones right here.” She lifts a lazy finger and drags it along the row of diamonds tickling the underside of her breast.

“I love it,” he rasps.

Sansa nods. “You love it. That’s good.” She props herself up with one arm, elbow digging into a pillow. “I met with Master Buxton earlier today. I’m going to be having quite a few more robes made. Do you like this robe, Jon?”

Jon’s eyes gloss, smoky and wanting, over the fabric that would have done nothing to shield her
“I was thinking of other colors as well,” she says, fingers running over the necklace, touching the jewels stretching over her chest. Jon licks his lips, tongue darting out red and shining over white teeth. “Blue, maybe. For the Tully in me. Gray, for the wolf. Which do you think would suit me better? Or do you prefer me in this one? This black one here? With this robe, and these rubies, I’d say I look like a proper Targaryen princess, wouldn’t you agree?”

“You look heavenly whatever you wear,” Jon says, swallowing as his fists clench again. “May I —?”

“No.” she says, pulling her foot back and tucking it over her leg again. He bites down on his lip, running his fingers through his curls to keep them out of his face. “Do you know what else Master Buxton and I discussed today?” she asks.

“Sansa, please—”

“I asked you a question, Jon.”

Jon takes a deep, shuddering breath. “What did you and Master Buxton discuss today?”

“An exhibition,” Sansa drags the word out, enunciating each syllable slowly as she lays back and stretches again. “For all of my pretty things. My jewels and my gowns and my shoes once I’m done using them all. What do you think? What do you think of an exhibition of Sansa Stark?”

Jon closes his eyes tightly, teeth digging into his lips as he leans forward. He keeps falling forward until his forehead is touching the bed, palms on either side. He looks like a monk in prayer at her feet. She sits up, diamonds glittering in the generous light of the candles. “Jon?” she calls sweetly, nudging the side of his head with her foot. “Up, my sweetheart. I cannot see your face.”

“If you mean to torture me with words, my lady,” Jon’s voice comes muffled through the fabric. “I find it much easier to hold conversation when I cannot see you.”

“But then, who will tell me how my hair looks?” she asks, feigning confusion as she clutches a handful of waving red locks and strokes them slowly.

Jon doesn’t lift his head, but he releases a low, anguished groan into the bed. Sansa suppresses a laugh.

“Jon,” she calls again, rising so she is supported by her knees lifting her from the bed. “How do you like my hair?”

Jon only lifts his head enough for his eyes to glint in the candlelight. They dart all over her body, unable to settle on her breasts or the necklace dazzling over them to the curve of her waist to the apex of her thighs. Finally, they meet her own eyes. “I adore it,” he says.

She gives him something between a smile and a pout. “You adore my hair? But you only loved my necklace alterations. I like adore.”

She runs her fingers through her hair again, and tries not to react when a diamond on the cuff of her robe catches in her hair. Hellbent on a smooth recovery, she sits back and pretends to be toying with the strands enticingly while she frantically tugs the hair loose. It pulls painfully at her scalp, and she smiles to keep the wince from being too obvious.

Damn, how does anyone do this? Why is she even doing it? Oh, yeah.
Deciding that it would be too much to hope she can continue this seduction without a single incident, she elects to perform the rest of this a little further from Jon. He won’t be close enough to witness the next mishap. She prays there isn’t another. Also she needs to get to the mirror to make sure her scalp isn’t bleeding. “Do you know what he said to me? Master Buxton.”

“Please don’t talk about Master Buxton right now,” he says.

Sansa laughs as she takes a seat at her vanity, pretending to check her hair as she inspects her scalp for damage. No bleeding. But whatever it is a woman might enjoy about having her hair pulled, Sansa has learned she might have been born without. She turns around in her seat to face him innocently—as innocent as a girl can look in nothing but Essosi perfume, gems and a sheer robe. “He says I’ve put on weight,” she says. “Do you think I’ve put on weight?”

“I didn’t notice,” he says. “And frankly, I don’t care. Come over here, dammit. When can I take my clothes off?”

“No yet,” she sings. “See, I’ve noticed that I have. I mean, I’ve started to lose some of it. Would you like me better once I’ve lost it?”

“I don’t care,” Jon repeats, clutching the bedpost tightly. “Get your arse over here, dammit.”

“Is that any way to talk to a goddess?”

“Fucking—” Jon lets out an agonized cry, dragging his hands down his face. “Just—come here, my sweet. Please. Just let me do something.”

“Well,” Sansa says, sighing as she pretends to mull it over. “I suppose that depends on what it is you want to do.”

“So many things,” Jon pants.

Sansa smiles. Right where she wants him. “Stay where you are,” she tells him. “You can undress.”

She turns back around and un Hooks her diamond studs from her ears as the pulling and tearing of fabric reaches her ears. It takes seconds, but when she has lowered her earrings into their little box and turned around, Jon’s flushed skin is gleaming, chest heaving, scars somehow redder. She sits back, crosses one leg over the other, leans an elbow back onto the vanity, and watches him.

“A few more weeks with this tea regime, and I suppose I’ll be back to my old measurements,” she says conversationally as Jon’s eyes devour her. She gets to her feet, pulling the robe open further as she spins in a slow circle. “What do you think of my figure, Jon?” she asks, stopping so she is facing him again.

He licks his lips, his stare as wolfish as she’s ever seen it. “I worship it,” he growls.

She smiles, stepping closer. With every step she takes, his breathing goes deeper, louder, shakier. “Here is what is going to happen,” she says, stopping before him and tracing his jaw with her fingers. He melts with her touch, eyelids fluttering shut. She cups his cheeks in her hands to hold his attention before he is lost. “You are not going to damage this robe. Or my necklace. I’m not taking them off. You’re going to have your merry way with me,” she says, and he laughs savagely, wantingly, fiercely. “I’m going to sleep just before sunrise, and I shan’t be disturbed by anyone until mid-morning. When we rise, you are going to refrain from accosting me and scandalizing my handmaids. You are going to bathe, and dress, and leave. You are going to get onto Rhaegal and
fly out beyond the city. You are going to find the Dothraki. You are going to present them with the
evered braids of Daenerys Targaryen, and you are going to command them to leave Westeros
within the fortnight. When you return, you are going to the garrison to speak with the Unsullied
—without the braids—where you will give them the full reports on the current state of Slaver’s
Bay. You will inform them that Lady Missandei of Naath and her husband Grey Worm have taken
up the cause of abolition, but are in need of a military force to aid them in the endeavor. You will
present them with the option to go back to the east to aid in the fight against slavery, or stay here
and build a peaceful life for themselves. If they decide their goal is to avenge their queen, they are
to be regarded as enemies of the people and executed. You are going to meet with the lords of the
coastal Crownlands and inform them that they have precisely three days to comply with Lord
Florent’s command to turn over the ships confiscated by the Crown after they have been used to
ferry the Dothraki and Unsullied across the Narrow Sea. Then you are going to return to these
chambers, and you will make love to me until I can’t walk. I’ll be wearing a different robe then.
And you won’t tear that one, either.”

Jon presses his lips against hers urgently, firebrands and brimstone, salt and smoke, ice and snow
and stone and home. “By your command,” he says, hands gripping her waist, arms snaking round
pulling her impossibly closer, so close she aches, and he lifts her and lays her down in her gems
and her silks and her perfume and her finery, and drinks her like she is the sweetest wine, and
drowns in her as she drowns in him, lost and found and insatiable. I take this man. This man takes
me. I am this man. This man is me.

She drowns him, smothers him, and then remembers he doesn’t need air. “I missed you when we
were apart,” she confesses in a heated whisper into his skin, and he holds her tighter as his waist
snaps against hers.

“We’ll never be apart,” he whispers back. “I take this woman, this woman takes me.”

“You’ll do as I told you?” she asks afterwards, when he lies panting above her, face buried in her
neck, breathing in the scent of her hair. She is weak and dizzy from the force of him, eyes half
shut, mind only just alert enough now that something besides lust has space to occupy her thoughts.
Her legs are wrapped tightly around him, still shaking, skin still flushed.

He releases a deep breath and nods. “If you will do something for me,” he says back.

“What?”

“If you have something to ask of me, do not think you must seduce me,” he says, lifting his head to
gaze down at her. “Do not taint what we have here with the intricacies of your Game.”

Sansa cannot oblige him, and for the first time, she is sorry for this. “The Game might be the only
thing I have,” she says.

“That’s not true,” he says, shaking his head as his fingers run along the sheer silk to grip her bare
thigh, still tight round his waist. “You have me. Until the sun rises in the west and sets in the east,
you have me.”

She imagines that one day, that will be enough. It is close to it now, now with the stars all around
them. She loves him, she knows this. He breathes her, and she loves him, and one day his love will
be all that she needs, when the last of their troubles are behind them and the Game is no longer a
valley between them. She does not need to say this aloud. He knows, and she can see in his eyes
that it hurts him still. But he does not know that it brings her joy to know that he still reaches for
her anyways, still kisses her and loves her and holds her. It brings her joy to know that he will not
give up.
He does not take his eyes from hers, and they are lush, and wild, and godlike together.
“By far, my favorite coronation,” Tyrion says with a hiccup, swirling his bottle around to check how much of his liquid meal remains and possibly wondering if it will be enough to sustain him for the remainder of the day.

Sansa raises a brow. “Have you truly seen so many?” she asks.

“Well, there was Robert,” Tyrion says, counting off on his fingers. “And then Joffrey, when his time came. I spent Tommen’s in the Black Cells, but my squire Podrick smuggled me some excellent morsels from the feast. And then the…the Queen’s.”

Sansa nods. “And now Jon’s. And you, Lord Varys? How many kings have you seen crowned?”

Varys tips his head from her other side. “The same as my wine-soaked friend here, I’m afraid. When I arrived in King’s Landing, Aerys had already been king for some time.”

Sansa hums as she moves along through the Throne Room, watching the courtiers whisper to each other. Lord Celtigar looks positively mutinous. Sansa does not find this strange. She too would have a few things to say if she had been commanded to turn over half of the ships she owns—even if they are not really hers. He and a handful of very wealthy coastal lords are a new problem she is going to have to deal with. A small problem, yes, but one that—like any small wound—may fester if left uncleaned. Lord Bar Emmon and his fellow lords will be receiving generous shares of the lumber she is currently contracting from the North—the excess to be used to aid in the construction of a new fleet of warships. It will be enough to curb any mutinous thoughts the coastal lords might be having in light of their recent fall from favor.

Arya is already leaning onto the edge of Sansa’s hightbacked chair, chewing from a handful of what looks to be cherries. She grunts as Sansa takes her seat beside the Iron Throne, smirking at the sight of a small number of ladies swathed in silk whispering animatedly, turning their heads back every so often to sneak a glance at Sansa. Arya is not Alysanne today, nor a nameless soldier. Today, she is only Arya, and Sansa is as aflutter at this as she is heartbroken. For it means that the danger is gone, and she will very soon be leaving Sansa for the snows and stone of Winterfell.

“What you’ve ever dreamed of?” Arya asks, tilting her chin in the direction of the ladies.


Arya’s mouth scrunches up as she spits a cherry pit onto the marble floor. Sansa laughs at the face Lady Celtigar makes when she sees it. “Aim the next one at her hem,” Sansa says.

“No promises,” Arya says. “I’m a better shot with my fingers than my mouth.”

Sansa looks around at the lords and ladies, the knights and maids. The sunlight is flooding the room. She can see the speckles of dust in the air and the wisps of fragrant smoke from the incense gifted her by the Dornish—part of the massive package they’ve sent ahead of the envoy that has arrived with the dual purpose of witnessing the coronation of their new King and to draft a formal trade contract for the suddenly overwhelmingly popular orange blossom tea. Ghost is curled up at her feet, and like Arya, he carries the scent of winter with him. It had taken Sansa a while—perhaps from the moment she left Winterfell—but she knows now that she, too, smells of winter. It gives her some sweet joy to know.

“You clean up well,” Sansa compliments Arya.
Arya answers this by lobbing her next pit at Sansa’s feet. Sansa sees that Arya’s had the good grace not to leave the slightest bit of the fruit on the pit. Just as well. Sansa has never soiled a gown made by Buxton as of yet, and she does not want to imagine what he’d do with her coronation gown—especially now that they are beginning to seriously discuss the idea of an exhibition. She truly feels a winter princess in this piece. Buxton hadn’t been far off the mark—it had taken a corset to be able to lace it up—but it is a fabulous stretch of winter snow, pearly and shimmering and white. She has never felt safer in this city than she does coated in this layer of home.

“Your miniature lion has a nasty habit,” Arya comments quietly. Sansa doesn’t need to turn her head to see that Tyrion is taking another hearty swig of wine. “This might be detrimental in the future.”

“Lucky me that his days as Hand are numbered.”

Arya raises a brow. “When did you come to this conclusion?”

“I’d been debating it since I left after their initial proposal,” she replies. “I made up my mind for good a few days after my wedding. He’s a drunk mess—has been for a good while now. While his mind is still sharp, his judgement is clouded, he has a nasty tendency to be governed by emotion, he thinks far too highly of his own intelligence, has convinced himself of his invaluability, and has extremely flawed decision making skills. He served as Hand to the most volatile and irresponsible ruler Westeros has seen since Aegon the Unworthy.”

“The same argument can be made for the Spider,” Arya says.

“It can,” Sansa agrees. “He frightens me, truth be told.”

“Shall I take care of him on my way out?”

“No. It’s not that sort of fear. He doesn’t care for the squabbles of the great houses. His concern lies with the commonfolk. So long as I continue to see to their welfare, his interests align with mine, ergo, he is an ally. He’s far more diligent that Tyrion, and not half so self-important. He’s less driven by passion, more focused. It will not be forgotten that he, too, served Daenerys Targaryen and aided her in her conquest. He will not remain in the council. But he is far too valuable for me to send away as easily as Tyrion. I need him to help me control the court.”

“And how do you know he’ll cooperate in this, if his only allegiance is to the commonfolk?”

“Because I will also serve the commonfolk,” Sansa says. “I’ve won his loyalty—fickle as it may be—these last two years by sustaining the South free of charge. My tours into the city, studying infrastructure, commencing construction on a proper sewage system in Fleabottom, all of this has made me someone he puts his stock in. So long as I remain a diligent servant of the commonfolk, he will continue to put his stock in me.”

“And if the Spider tries to spin his little webs against you?”

“He has no reason to as of yet,” Sansa says. “And he does not, I have learned, go searching for trouble. So long as he keeps to himself, I’ll let him spin his little webs. If he tries to entangle me, I’ll step on him.”

“And her?” Arya asks, eyes flitting to the red woman. Kinvara stands tall and proud, smug as a cat with the feathers of a canary still protruding from her lips.

“She is another problem entirely,” Sansa says, leaning forward in her seat and breaking her posture
for the first time. “She is obviously too valuable to kill. She lends credence to Jon’s status as a legend. Many of the lords who watched him burn on Dragonstone saw her with him.”

“Is there a ‘but’ approaching somewhere?”

“But,” Sansa concedes. “She is a High Priestess of that Red God. Allowing her to stay here gives other followers of that fiery faith a foothold in Westeros. I intend for Jon to send her back to Volantis. If she refuses, we can just feed her to Rhaegal and say it was an accident. I don’t like the way she looks at Jon sometimes.”

“Has she fucked him?”

“She wants to. Though I doubt it’s for romance’s sake. Probably some sacred rite. Can you imagine what he must look like to her and hers? A dragon prince, risen from the flames, cheated death three times, rides a dragon, salt and smoke and all of that hogwash.”

“Ew. I hope she refuses. I’d stick around just to see Rhaegal pick his teeth with her shinbone,” Arya spits another pit. She sighs. “I’m glad that you’re here looking after him. Look at all of them. Sheep, following the one with the biggest herding stick. He’s just an object to all of them. They either see him as a tool for their own greatness, or as a myth made man to glorify. No one knows him here except you.”

And no one knows me here except him. “I know.”

The crowd slowly begins to quiet as the sound of approaching steps grows louder. Sansa gets to her feet, nudging Arya, who grudgingly puts away her cherries. Jon stands at the very front of two rows of Blackguard soldiers—another problem soon to be dealt with—in a tunic blacker than ink, with rubies stitched carefully into the shape of a dragon, and milky opal in the shape of a wolf. And Sansa is keenly aware of the fact that the wolf is made from opal and not milky quartz, because Master Buxton spent a full quarter of an hour dinning the distinction into her ear as he explained how a garment so historic as the king’s coronation ensemble ought to be stitched by his own hand. Sansa is appropriately honored by this, of course—a man like Buxton who has achieved such success in the city that he employs dozens of seamstresses under his command is not a man who has had to lift a needle himself for nearly a decade, but took it up again to personally construct Jon’s clothes on this historic day. Jon’s hair is trimmed, his beard cropped shorter. Sansa has to blink away the vague memory of him on the day Robert Baratheon arrived at Winterfell what seems like a lifetime ago.

The most finicky obstacle in planning this coronation has been, in Sansa’s eyes, finding the right person to pronounce Jon as king. Jon and Arya both swore in the weeks leading up to this day that it was such a trivial detail, but Sansa does not at all underestimate its importance. The person who finds themselves being the first to officially call Jon the king will gain no small amount of influence, and will subsequently become indebted to the Crown for the great honor. It is an opportunity to guarantee friendship and loyalty, and to bolster the power of a particular faction. Sansa has been careful. She is keenly aware of the fact that the Reach lords are, for the moment, placated with her and Jon’s ongoing dedication to financially restoring their lands. The Dornish prince Alorayne is not in King’s Landing, having sent the trade envoy to attend while he remains in Sunspear with his ailing little bastard daughter. He will not be visiting King’s Landing for another six moons, and was therefore eliminated as a possibility. She could have chosen one of the Crownlands lords—specifically one whose favor they have managed to earn with their recent decrees and trade orders—but to do that would be to take sides in the slow-growing war between the embittered pro-Daenerys faction currently licking their financial wounds, and the smug and emboldened inland lords who are celebrating the impending departure of the Dothraki. No, no, the
Crownlands are a cesspit best left out entirely. The Iron Islands, operating on some level of independence, were out of the question. Sansa knows Yara is busy helping her kingdom accommodate their new, unprecedented prosperity, and that Theon would literally rather die that go south of the Neck. She might have chosen her uncle Edmure to make the announcement, but he is very soon to be appointed Master of Ships in the new King’s council, and to have one favor after another might earn Sansa the accusation of favoritism. Besides, there is another highly valuable relative she must appease, who she knows it would be stupid to neglect on the blind hope that he’d forgive her ignoring him simply because they are family.

“Now comes the reign of King Jon of Houses Stark and Targaryen,” Robyn Arryn says with a voice whose depth still makes Sansa’s eyebrows soar when she remembers the sickly, sniveling little brat he was when last she saw him. “First of His Name, the White Wolf, the Black Dragon, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar, Protector of the Realm, Lord Regent of the Six Kingdoms.” Robyn steps forward as Jon kneels to accept the crown. It’s a simple piece that Master Giles designed by hand, a circlet of white gold studded with rubies, onyx, and diamonds. It’s an identical match to the one that currently rests on her own head. Another woman might have bristled, but Sansa knows she needs no coronation. From the way he watches her as the crown touches his head, it is clear that Jon knows it as well.

“Long may he reign,” Robyn says, and his voice echoes throughout the hall, along with the echoes of all who answer. Jon rises to his feet and ascends the steps to the throne, his massive cloak billowing out behind him, stretching over the steps for all to see the snarling direwolf emblazoned on the fabric. Sansa could kill him for displaying such blatant northern sentiments, but she decides she ought not to go punishing him for every single public declaration he makes of his devotion to her. She will, however, make it clear that such declarations are best given in the privacy of their chambers, as opposed to the publicity of the Throne Room on his damn coronation day. The last thing she needs is anyone turning their gaze North.

Jon turns around at the top step, pushes his cloak aside so it sweeps the stairs, and takes his seat on the Iron Throne. He looks to Sansa, holding out his right hand. She slips her into his, and his fingers clutch it almost instantly, as though he expects her to retract it at a moment’s notice.

“I love you,” he says to her over the din of lords and ladies making plain their approval. “Do you hear me? I love you, she-wolf.”

She will not say it back—might never do so—but she squeezes his hand back and knows that has understood it all the same.

After a few moments seated, he rises to his feet. Still holding her hand, he pulls her closer, twin crowns glittering, the direwolf embroidered into his cloak melting into the snows of her wintry gown, his hand round her waist, black curls sinking into her red ones. They face the court together, and under her breath, Sansa murmurs,

*day one.*
The arrival of the representatives of the Iron Bank only days after Jon’s coronation is a herald of both good and bad. Sansa knows that it means they intend to collect their due debts—which must be paid in order to retain the good favor of Braavos as a trading partner. She is also aware of the fact that it is a good sign as well. That they send one of their directors instead of a lower-ranking representative means that they are interested in developing a friendship with this new monarchy, which means word has reached them of Sansa’s work since she arrived.

“I suppose this means everything’s setting itself to rights at last,” Tyrion says, raising his glass of Dornish white into the air in salute to her.

Sansa smiles tightly, hands clasped together over the desk. Her gown has no sleeves today, and her scars are red and silver, alive against her skin. She has no need for flimsy coverings here in the safety of the king’s solar. The king himself is seated at the grand table, feet folded onto the surface with a fig in his hands. He slices into it lazily, eyes glued to Tyrion’s back. From her seat behind the king’s desk, Sansa’s eyes dart between them.

“Almost, I’d say,” she says. “Jon tells me the Dothraki attempted to pledge themselves to him when they saw the braids in his hand.”

“That is the way of the Dothraki. They honor strength.”

“And I respect that. Unfortunately, they have caused too much havoc to be allowed to remain here. They cannot peacefully integrate with the locals, so it became expedient to remove them.”

“I don’t suppose the Unsullied were half so easy to sway,” Tyrion says, eyebrow raised as he swills the wine around in his glass.

Sansa gives another tight smile and a shrug. “One of them attempted to kill Jon.”

Tyrion lets out a low whistle. “Terrible business, the business of kings and queens.”

Sansa smiles wider now, leaning back. “Tis a lucky thing, then, that it should fall to my lot instead of yours. Which brings me to a crucial realization. A king and a queen are only as wise as their councilors. We must surround ourselves with effective and understanding governors if we are to govern well.”

“Well said,” Tyrion agrees, nodding. “I take it to mean you’ve some serious changes to make within our late queen’s council?”

“I do. I’ve selected my uncle Edmure to serve as Master of Ships. Lord Celtigar will be notified by myself that he has been relieved of his duty.”

“This will not be received well by him,” Tyrion notes. “But I cannot say the loss of his title weighs heavily upon my conscience.”

“Nor mine, to be sure,” Sansa says. “Lord Celtigar used his position to make a fortune for his family from the eastern trade. As the scion of the most prominent family in the coastal Crownlands territory, he’s grown steadily wealthier in these last two years to the point where I’d imagine he could see Casterly Rock as a summer home. I’m aware he’s not going to take it well. I’m also aware that he’ll cheer up much faster while he’s sailing on his luxury pleasure boat back home.”
Tyrion chuckles. “I’d give a great deal to be a fly in that room when the axe comes down. What of your Master of Coin?”

“Lord Florent appears to be very cooperative and knowledgeable,” Sansa says. “His inability to perform his duties seems to have stemmed from his own weak personality being easily overpowered by the queen he served. When one lends him an ear, he seems reasonable and level-headed. And he’s a wizard with his sums, which places him far above me. I’ll keep him on a probationary basis to see how well he fares when given a stronger voice. If, by the end of the year, I am displeased with his progress, then I shall encourage him to retire to his home in the Reach as an honored former councilor of our good King Jon.”

Tyrion grins, nodding. “And I trust our Master of Whispers has nothing to fear?”

“Lord Varys would serve Jon better from outside the walls of the council chambers,” Sansa says. Tyrion’s eyebrow quirks. “How will he take that, I wonder?”

“He took it very well.”

“You already spoke to him?”

“I did. He was very gracious about the entire affair. He and I are much alike, you see. We serve a common cause. Such a cause does not need to be served only by the one bearing a title.”

Tyrion nods slowly, thinking this over. “I see. Is he still to live within the castle?”

“Most certainly. But he will need to travel frequently to aid me in stabilizing the kingdoms. At the moment, he has arrived in the city of Lys to retrieve our wayward future Stormlord Edric soon-to-be-Baratheon. Varys will step off of the ship, and you will board it.”

Tyrion blinks. “Me? I will board the ship?”

“Indeed.”

“Where am I expected to go?”

“Oldtown.”

“Oldtown.”

“Oldtown.”

“And what am I to do in…Oldtown?”

“I’ve secured a post for you at the Citadel,” Sansa says. “You are to immerse yourself in the study of the subjects listed here,” and she pushes a sheet of stationary towards him.

Tyrion takes the paper and holds it up. “Pearl diving. Eastern economics. Soil-tilling—these will be very useful to the kingdoms, no doubt,” he says, lowering the paper. “But I cannot understand why the Hand would need to be sent to see to such duties. Unless, of course….” Tyrion trails off, noting the smile on Sansa’s face that has turned contrite. He sighs, leaning back in his seat. “Unless my time as Hand has come to an end.”

“Most regrettably,” Sansa says.

Tyrion nods. “I helped you. I helped you bring her down.” He says softly. He speaks with the air of
a man well resigned to his lot, with still words to say to make his point known.

“Yes, you did,” Sansa says. “After you helped lift her up. You will be more useful to the Crown and the continent at your post in the Citadel. Cheer up. You’ll be surrounded by more books than you can read. I’ve drafted you a special agreement with the Archmaester—you don’t even need to become one. You’ll be working on behalf of the Crown. You will still be able to help me fix this mess—just from a position with significantly less opportunity to make such devastating decisions.”

Tyrion snorts out a laugh. “I told them,” he says. “I told them not to underestimate you.”


Tyrion’s smile slowly disappears as his laugh dies. “I suppose I had a good run. Well, a terrible run. But good.”

“And I imagine there’s a great deal of wine to be found in Oldtown,” she says. “Your lodgings are exquisite. You can drink and whore to your delight, so long as you are aware bright and early every morning to continue your research at the Citadel. Captain Ryke will accompany you to ensure you are consistent in your duties.”

“Captain Ryke?” Tyrion squeaks, turning to look at Jon. “Surely a Captain of the Blackguard has more important places to be that watching over a brow-beaten bookkeeper?”

“The Blackguard has been disbanded,” Jon says, plopping a piece of fig into his mouth from the blade of the knife in his hand. “As of this morning, the organization exists no more.”

Tyrion raises his eyebrows. “They are an astounding force—”

“They are zealots who see Jon as more god than man,” Sansa says. “Fanatics with swords in their hands are dangerous people. It has become incumbent upon us to disarm them and prohibit the practice of idolizing the king.”

Tyrion makes a face as though he has understood the point. “I suppose that’s fair. But…if you don’t mind my asking…who is to replace me?”

“That is yet to be determined,” Sansa says. “I shall be reviewing several candidates. Perhaps I’ll have a choice by the end of the year.”

“A year?” Tyrion says. “That’s a long time for a king to go without a Hand.”

“The King will have a Hand in the interim,” Jon says. “His Queen is his Hand. And his heart, and his soul.”

“Enchanting,” Tyrion says. “I hope that she serves you well.”

Jon is silent, and Tyrion seems to stiffen in his seat as if he can feel Jon’s eyes on him.

“When am I to leave?” Tyrion asks.

“Within the week,” Sansa says. “The sooner you begin your research, the better.”

Tyrion nods slowly, eyes blooming in understanding. “I suppose I couldn’t do much better for myself than to retire at last in a manse in Oldtown. I could go out the way I’ve always wanted to.”

Sansa raises a brow. “And how is that?”
“At the ripe old age of eighty, with a belly full of mead and a maid’s mouth on my cock.”

Sansa smiles, getting to her feet. Tyrion does the same. “We’re all growing older,” she says. “I only hope that we can do so gracefully.”

“Speak for yourself,” Tyrion says, taking her hand and kissing it. “My ambitions are not half so lofty these days. It has been an honor serving you, my queen.”

“The honor is mine, my Lord,” she says.

Tyrion nods to Jon on his way out, and Jon gives him a brisk nod in reply. As soon as the door is closed behind him, he looks to Sansa. “That was easy.”

“I hadn’t imagined that it would be difficult.”

“You seemed to give me a different impression when you asked me to join you here today.”

“I asked you to join me here today because this is your solar and you need to be seen here,” Sansa says. “And also because I’m meeting all sorts of characters today, and I need something handsome to look upon when I’m bored.”

Jon laughs. “Would you like me to take my clothes off?” he asks.

“If you’ll spare an old man’s eyes, Your Grace,” says Ser Davos as he appears at the door, and Sansa and Jon laugh as he enters. “My Queen, I understand ya wished to speak with me?”

“I do, Ser Davos. Thank you for coming. May I offer you a drink?”

“If ya means wine or ale, I’d say it’s a tad early in the day for such indulgences.”

“Good thing, then, that I meant tea or lemon juice.”

Davos smiles. “You’re very kind, Your Grace.”

Sansa pours Davos a glass of lemon juice as he sinks into the seat Tyrion had just vacated. “You’ve been a very loyal friend to Jon these last two years.”

“I’ve tried me best.”

“I noticed that you never received a proper position within the court.”

“Our last queen didn’t care for formalizing whatever role I played here.”

“What role did you play here?”


“Jon,” corrects Jon himself, reaching with his foot to tap the back of Davos’ chair.

“I understand that your position was a difficult one,” Sansa says. “And I appreciate that your movements were very limited within the past regime. But a man who was once loyal to Stannis Baratheon, and then arrived to serve her rival for the throne might not have been very welcome in Daenerys Targaryen’s court. You did the best that you could. I would ask if you wish to continue to do so without the confines of our previous monarch.”

Davos raises a brow. “Your Grace?”
“I would like to know if you are interested in aiding in the restoration of the six kingdoms,” Sansa says. “To serve as an advisor to the king. Would such an arrangement suit you?”

Davos gives Sansa a firm, small smile and a nod. “It would please me very much, Your Grace,” he says. “I’ve not the flowery language of most of the people who’d wish to be advising the king, nor have I the learning, but I do wish to see the south prosper again.”

“And this brings us right to our first order of business,” Sansa says. “I understand you’ve had quite a…prolific career. Before you served as Hand to Stannis Baratheon, you were a smuggler, correct?”

“Aye, and crabber to boot.”

Sansa nods, leaning forward. “That is the interesting part,” she says, already thinking of Helyn Chelsted and the stupid crabcakes for her stupid nameday luncheon. “Tell me, Ser Davos, everything that you know about the business of crabbing.”
Jon had a bad dream last night, which is why Sansa got little to no sleep. He rarely sleeps himself these days, and when he does it is never through the night. Two hours that go by like the wind until he is awake and alert again.

“You got loose from the thorns,” he said as she held him. She had never seen him shake so hard. “But you didn’t come to me. You laughed and ran the other way.”

“Shhh.” Sansa combs her fingers soothingly through his inky curls. “It was only a dream.”

“You heard me calling to you. My heart was breaking. You just laughed.”

“No, no,” Sansa says. “It was only a dream. Just a bad dream. I have them, too.”

“You wouldn’t leave me like that, would you? You wouldn’t do that to me.”

“No, I wouldn’t leave you like that.” I wouldn’t leave you at all.

“You love me, don’t you? You’d never leave me. You can’t leave me.”

“I won’t leave you, Jon,” she assured him. “I won’t leave.”

She tried to calm him, and she had imagined it worked a little, except Jon was frantic for the rest of the night as he loved her and loved her. He’d always been passionate, but there was an alarming fragility in his touch that made her feel something akin to sympathy for him. When he was calm enough to slow his movements at last, all she could do was wrap her arms around his shoulders and pull him close.

“I’m not leaving you,” she promised him.

“Not even when you tire of this?” Jon asked quietly. He pulled back to look at her, eyes huge. “You’re not happy here. Playing your game. You don’t like it.”

“It’s not forever,” she said. “We’ll leave it behind one day. When they don’t need us anymore. We’ll go live in a castle by the sea. Somewhere we can see the sky. No more crowns, no more thrones, no more games.”

“You promise you’ll take me with you,” he insisted. “Promise me, Sansa. You won’t go without me.”

“I promise,” she swore. I’ll never leave you behind. “I promise we’ll leave together.”

Jon nodded, wrapping his arms around her again. “I love you,” he said. “I love you, I love you.”

He held her so tightly it almost hurt until the dawn painted the sky pastel, and the birds began to
sing their pretty tunes. Sansa used tea to dull the circles round her eyes and pinched color into her cheeks. Jon was never far from her sight, and she wonders how many years will pass before he decides that she means to keep her word.

He sits beside her in the Dragonpit now, watching as one by one, the most powerful lords and ladies in the South arrive and assemble themselves comfortably at the large round table. Their new friend from the Iron Bank is present, as is Davos Seaworth. Jon’s hand clutches hers as it has since they stepped out of their chambers, eyes darting over every single person as they arrive and take their seat. The last to arrive is Prince Alorayne Martell, who sinks into a deep, flourishing bow.

“Welcome to King’s Landing, Prince Alorayne,” Jon says cordially as Sansa begged him to last night. “I trust your journey was smooth?”

“It was, Your Grace. The queen was very gracious in her welcome,” he says, as he seats himself beside Edmure.

“How fares you daughter?” Sansa asks. “I assume your presence here is a sign her condition has improved.”

“It has, Your Grace,” he says, beaming at being asked. “She is very excited to come to King’s Landing herself one day.”

“We’d be happy to receive her.”

The lords and ladies all get their turn to preen, to be addressed on some minor detail that illustrates their king and queen are paying attention. By the time Sansa gets to the point she has wanted to get to all day, all month, since she first gorged herself on fruit in her guestchambers while formulating her plan all those months ago, it is late afternoon, and luncheon is being brought out.

“You must all be wondering why it is that you’ve been summoned here,” Jon says. “I am a simple man, I’ll get right down to it—you have been brought to bear witness to my ruling on my succession.” The table falls into a soft silence as Jon lets these words sink in. “There is a long-standing tradition within this continent regarding birthrights—the understanding that the luck of a man’s birth marks him a king. Westeros has kept to this understanding through Harren the Black, through Maegor the Cruel, through the Dance of the Dragons, through Aegon the Unworthy, through four Blackfyre Rebellions, through the War of Ninepenny Kings, to Aerys the Mad, to the War of Five Kings, to Cersei Lannister, to Daenerys Targaryen. Such is the history of this continent. War and misery wrought by brothers turning on brothers, seizing power with blood and steel, that they might claim a crown and throne each one believes is owed to them. Birthright, I have found, works indiscriminately. It cares not for disposition, for skill, for capability. Birthright is not a guarantee of a stable, prosperous rule.”

“Your Grace,” Edmure says. “What has this to do with your own succession? Do you mean to say you will not be passing the throne onto your children?”

Jon takes a deep breath. “I recall several months ago, when I was newly married to my queen,” Jon says, tilting his chin in Sansa’s direction. Sansa feels every eye at the table land on their joined hands. “Some of you did not wait very long to approach me about my own potential as a king. Am I stand here before you today because all of you chose me. Is that not true?”

“It is true, my King,” Alorayne Martell says. “And we would choose you again. A thousand times.”

Jon nods. “Then I will serve as your king. I will govern these six kingdoms, and I will restore them
to their former glory. I ask only this of you in return. When my duty is done, and my time as your king has come to an end, that you, or your children, or your children’s children—whomever will then speak on behalf of your lands—returns here, to this Dragonpit, to choose another.”

There is a brief spell of silence as these words sit heavy and vibrant in the space. A short, deep huff interrupts the spell, prompting every head to turn to the entrance. Rhaegal has settled himself comfortably by a pile of fallen bricks, scales blazing gold and green in the sunlight.

“The next king—or queen—might be one of you sitting here at this table,” Jon says. “It might not be. It might be a son of one of your vassal lords, or the granddaughter of another. It matters not. I put it to you to decide what will become of the continent you call home, because while I will serve it as long as I can, I cannot govern it forever. The world your children will live in—the world that their children will live in—cannot be left to the mercy of birthrights. The skill of a father is not the skill of his son.”

The lords look to one another as they contemplate this new alternative. In the far distance, by the entrance, Sansa spots Kinvara. A column of burning crimson. Sansa can see her smile all the way from here.

“This seems a sound plan,” says the first of the lords. Sansa turns her smile upon the new Lord Paramount of the Reach. Samwell Tarly beams back at her. “I support this decision.”

“As do I,” Edmure adds.

“Seconded,” Alorayne says.

Sansa feels her chest lighten as each lord takes their turn to voice their assent. Jon’s hand tightens over hers for a moment. Don’t leave me.

She squeezes it back. Never.

“A question, though, if I may,” Lord Hightower says. “I only wonder at the logistics of such a process.”

“Tis an excellent thing, then, that you are all to have a lengthy stay here in the city,” Sansa says sweetly. “We’ve plenty of time to work through the dull logistical details together until we’ve formed a process that suits everyone.”

Sansa’s eyes dart all over the table, taking in each face, cataloguing which ones will need more cajoling, which ones will need promises, and then her eyes flicker back to Kinvara. The Red Woman’s eyes are slowly swooping between Sansa and Jon, and then they settle on Sansa. She gives her a smile, and Sansa does not know if it is kind, or calculating, but she sees the light on the priestess’ face—Kinvara has finally found her understanding.
Jon doesn’t drink tea—he doesn’t even like it. He can’t remember ever really liking it. But it is still delivered to his solar twice a day. Sansa drinks it sometimes when she is here, but mostly it is brought in for appearances’ sake—no one needs to know he doesn’t actually drink it.

Kinvara already seems to know that he doesn’t drink it in that same outrageous way she seems to always know everything. Jon cared very little once what she knew and didn’t know. To be fair, he still doesn’t care. But Sansa does, and he’s learned.

“The new queen has a special fondness for exotic teas,” Kinvara notes softly as she watches the steam rise from the cup. Her gown is of a silkier material than usual—perhaps taking advantage of the new fabric trend running through court courtesy of his she-wolf. He’s not blind to the fact that she wears only a thin layer of the stuff. If she intends to introduce the most scandalous of the Essosi fashions to his court, he wonders if he ought to keep her here long enough for Sansa to encourage the trend. He’d hack off his own arms with rocks to convince her to wear a dress like that.

“She says they’re helping her thin out,” Jon replies, tilting his seat back.

Kinvara notes the look on his face. “Do you disapprove?”

“I don’t care. You drink the damn tea.”

“This tea or her tea? I notice she takes all sorts. Including the moon variety.”

Jon sets his seat upright again, but does not move. “You looked into the flames. As did I. Neither of us saw children in this future of ours.”

“Does that upset you?”

“It is…inconvenient,” Jon says. “I’d have given her all the children she wanted. She’d be bound to me forever.”

“She was wise to do so,” Kinvara says. “Your heart’s been stopped three times too many to have room for a child.”

“Did the Red God tell you that?”

“No. I observed it. As did she. You care for her. But only her. Perhaps now that is endearing, alluring. But if she were to give you a child, would you have in you to care for it? Be honest with yourself, Jon.”

Jon has tried to picture it—many times, in fact. Every time Daenerys had wagged her false triumph in his face, every time she carried herself smugly through the halls believing she had secured him with a child, he had tried to imagine Sansa heavy with one. One he put there. He could keep her by his side always then—she’d never be able to leave him.

“I’d have to share her,” he says, shaking his head. “I’m sick of sharing her. I’m always sharing her. Sharing her with the court, sharing her with Winterfell, sharing her with this fucking game—if she has a child she’ll never be wholly mine. She’ll love it—she’ll love it more than she ever loved
me.” Jon sits forward, folding his arms onto the desk and tucking his chin atop them. “Do you think she knows this?”

“The more people you love, the weaker you are,” Kinvara echoes quietly. “She is no longer interested in being weak. She has made her decision. For her. It took me only a short while to understand that. But she has made her choice. To have you, she will give this up. The alternative is leaving you,” Kinvara ignores the clenching of Jon’s fist, and he tries to stem the heat flooding his veins as his stomach lurches in disgust. “And finding another man it would be safer to have children with. Except she trusts no other with herself. So it must be you.”

“We’re just a perfect fit, aren’t we?”

“As far as broken pieces go? Remarkably. Broken, you have found strength in each other’s jagged edges. And House Targaryen will die with you.”

Jon nods. “Good riddance,” he says quietly.

“Good riddance,” Kinvara echoes, fingers trailing through the ends of her hair and running along the swell of her cleavage.

Jon’s eyes follow the path her fingers take, raising a brow. “I hadn’t imagined that a priestess of fire would consider the fall of a house boasting fire and blood to be a triumph.”

“Fire was man’s first great creation,” Kinvara says. “Giving light in the darkness. Life. Energy. Hope. But mankind is a fickle, self-destructive race. The Dragonlords of Valyria were the most depraved examples of this. Brothers lying with sisters to keep the bloodlust running high, taking creatures of fire made flesh and using them to destroy instead of create. They distorted the way of fire. Harnessed it for destruction. Dragons do not know the difference between glory and gore. Ever restless, ever consumed by the need for more. A dragon is never satisfied. It is a blessing, then, that you have the blood of a dragon, and the heart and soul of a wolf. When I first travelled to Meereen to serve Daenerys Targaryen, I believed that the dragon’s purpose was to purify the sins of the nonbelievers. It was only when you emerged from the fire that I finally understood what His will was. Fire alone cannot destroy the earth—ice could kill it, too. To restore these ravaged lands to glory, fire and ice would need to meet. And that did not refer to a child that needed to be born of a certain womb, of a certain seed. The world would not be safe simply because a soul of fire made love to a soul of ice—it is simply that the ice and fire joined together.

“And now that I have my ice queen,” Jon says. “I’d say your Lord’s purpose has been fulfilled, hasn’t it?”

Kinvara smiles. “I suppose it has. And now, I believe, comes the part where you tell me that I must return to Volantis.”

“You know me so well.”

“I would ask you not to send me away,” Kinvara says. “You belong in the Lord’s temple. You ought to be one of his servants. He has favored you more than any other.”

Jon snorts. “A shadowbinder brought me back the first time,” Jon says. “The Lord of Light had nothing to do with that. It was black blood magic from the shadowlands. The second time—I’ve the blood of Valyria, though it means fuck-all to me. You and I both know you had nothing to do with that.”

“You have yet to tell me how you managed to die and live again that day on the shores of
“Aye, and I likely never will understand it myself,” Jon lies, because this story will not belong to her. It belongs to him, and to his queen. “Third time—don’t you ever try to tell me your Lord of Light did that. I saw what was beyond that veil—I know what brought me back. Might be your Lord of light has something real on his side—he’s the only fucker calling himself a god that’s actually dropped a hint that he might be real—but I’ve got no business with him.”

Kinvara nods, sitting back enough so that the light dances off the ruby round her neck. She shifts in her seat, and the top of her bodice seems to hike lower as she does. She gets to her feet and comes around to his side of the desk, leaning against the end insouciantly. This close, he can see right through the fabric. He’s seen her undressed a million times before—the million other times she’s believed that laying with him might bring her answers the fire refuses to give her. As long as he wears this crown on his head, Jon imagines that he will have to deal with the constant possibility that she will try again. But then, so will Helyn Chelsted. And Milla Rosby. And Anna Celtigar. Susan Beesbury. Lollys Stokeworth. Anna Redwyne. Barbary Blackwood. Every single lady who’s ever looked into a mirror and believed herself to be pretty has made her play for him. They had stayed their hands when Daenerys was his wife, but since the annulment and subsequent marriage to Sansa, they’ve all seemed to take it into their heads that a she-wolf is not half so dangerous to be stealing from. They might even be emboldened by how amiable this new queen seems to be to them. His sweet Sansa, always the picture of perfect control. She has earned all the joy the world can give her, and Jon is determined to give it to her. Jewels, gowns, adventures, peaks—he’ll give them all freely until the day comes when they can leave this all behind and she is his—entirely his—as he is hers.

His eyes slide back up to meet Kinvara’s, and he smirks. “My heart is my queen’s,” he says. “And a man can only worship one god at a time.”

Kinvara studies him for a moment, and then smiles. “I understand,” she says. Her hand reaches forward, sunkissed and soft, to rest palm down over his heart. “So many years…I understand.”

Jon places his hand on her wrist, holding it firmly without squeezing. “It was an honor to have you at King’s Landing,” Jon says. “I hope you have a safe journey back to Volantis.”

Her smile seems to grow as her eyes brighten, and she removes her hand from his, pushing her weight off of the desk and heading for the door. “Farewell, Jon Snow,” she says softly from the door. “Worship your goddess. Rebuild your kingdoms. Find your peace.”

She blows him a gentle kiss, and the door quietly clicks shut behind her. Jon looks at the teacup that is no longer steaming. There isn’t much he can immediately do about any of her commands but the first one. *Worship your goddess.* Yes, this he can do.

Jon is told as he leaves his solar that Sansa is waiting for him in their chambers, which immediately sets his pulse racing. She is never waiting for him in their chambers. She has only done that once since they married, and that was the night she tormented him with her silken robe and jewels. His blood sings in excitement as his stomach sinks in disappointment. In the back of his mind and the corner of his heart, he asks himself what she intends to ask of him, and aches that she feels she must seduce him to ask it.

*I am not a part of this game,* he will make her understand one day. *You don’t need to play with me.*

When he opens the door, she is lying across the sheets, but there is no robe. Instead, she is cloaked in a thick coat of pure white fur, ropes upon ropes of diamonds glinting off of her skin. Her hair is shining like a waterfall of flame across the fur. Jon’s eyes nearly water at the sight. How did he last
two years without seeing something so lovely?

“Have you seen to your business with our red companion?” she asks, noticing the look on his face.

“She’ll be leaving soon.”

“So I have no more competitors for your heart in the castle?” she asks. “Well—truly important ones?”

“You know there is no competition,” he says.

She makes a ‘hm’ sound, sitting up slowly. “I’ve made a decision. Regarding the two of us.”

“Have you?”

“I have. Come closer if you wish. It’s quite critical that you hear this.”

Jon comes rushing towards her, helplessly drinking her in. She smells of something floral she’s mixed with the eastern perfumes she has been pampering in. Jon could drown in it. “What is this news?”

“I’ve decided to indulge your fantasy of the field of flowers,” she announces. “But I have conditions.” She adds quickly as she uses her foot to halt Jon’s forward march.

“Is this why you’ve brought yourself in here before me?” he asks. “You’ve elected to seduce me into agreeing to your conditions?”

Sansa watches him. “Are you angry with me?” she asks.

He swallows his answer, eyes feasting on her. If she knew how he loved her, she’d never have asked.

How did you win Daenerys Targaryen, Jon? You gave her your crown and your castle and your kingdom.

How did you win Sansa, Jon? She gave up her crown and her castle and her kingdom.

Win the wolf as you won the dragon—words are wind. Earn her. Earn her. Earn her.

“What are your conditions?” Jon asks quietly.

“We must be at least a mile away from the Kingsroad,” Sansa says. “Rhaegal must have his back turned. And I’d prefer if we had some sort of sheet between us and the earth. As romantic as it might sound, there are some…logistical setbacks involved when one lies naked in a field.”

Jon smiles at her. How did she get to be so beautiful? She isn’t fair, she isn’t fair, she isn’t fair.

“How long?” he asks suddenly.

“I’d imagined it’d ruin the romance to talk too much about it,” Sansa says.

“No, not that,” he says, shaking his head as she shrugs off his clothes. “How long do you think it will be until we can leave? Find our life? How long?”

Sansa sighs. “If we are to make the concept of a kingsmoot stick,” she says. “We’ll need to lead by example. We need to smooth over every perceived wrinkle in our plan. We need to fix the mess in
the kingdoms enough that it won’t fall immediately into shambles again the moment we step away. This requires long term effort. We cannot afford to use solutions that only solve tomorrow’s problems. We have to use solutions that solve the next decade’s problems as well. All of this will not be done in a few years time, Jon. Economically stabilizing the south, overseeing the construction of the city’s sewage system, adjusting the court to the concept of a council elected king—there are so many details, so many questions. And if we do not find answers to those questions, then the south will look north, and this we cannot abide. This could take decades. Maybe two or three, at least. But I promise you this, whatever my promises are still worth to you—it will end. We will not die in this city, wearing these crowns, playing this game. We will go away, you and I, and live in our castle by the sea, and we will stare up at the clouds in the morning and the stars in the evening and we will live.”

Jon takes her words and locks them away in his mind as she takes his face in her hands and kisses him. He buries himself in snow and wind and white furs, in red hair and diamonds and dreams of flowers and a castle by the sea, and it is the first time in two and a half years that the scent of salt and smoke does not fill his lungs.

He means to rise from her after, to lift himself and rest beside her that he might not crush her for once, but something in him breathes, sings, soars, when she wraps her arms around his sweat-slick back, keeping him in place. He lifts his head to gaze down at her, glittering diamonds and glistening sweat and river blue eyes and fire red hair, and for the millionth time, he is heavy with love.

“Tell me,” she whispers to him, skin flushed from lust and pink from his lips. “Tell me what happened in the fire.”

Jon breathes her in, winter fire that she is, and tells her.

Chapter End Notes

one more to go...wow.
PLEASE READ:
This is the final chapter. This next chapter you see here is a letter I’ve written to you, the readers, elaborating on this story, providing reasoning and also answering frequently asked questions I've been getting.

Daenerys’ fury is a tangible, palpable thing that even Drogon’s fire cannot outshine. Steam still lingers in the air from the water that had been clogging Rhaegal’s lungs, and Jon breathes it in—salt dry and smoke-thick—as Davos comes to stand beside him.

“This is madness,” Davos whispers to Jon discreetly.

Jon watches as the wood beneath Rhaegal’s weight finally catches, watches the flicker grow steadily, and cannot help but agree. His eyes dart up to the rocky ledge a few feet above, where Grey Worm stands, arms folded behind his back, not twitching so much as a muscle. Missandei looks smaller than usual from Jon’s vantage point, hands clasped together nervously. Between them is Daenerys, and she looks even smaller than her companion. Her face is a stony thing, brows knit and lips twisted into a half formed snarl. Her eyes watch the fire grow, and Jon wonders if she ever hated flames before she came to the shores of this continent and watched them consume everything she has.

Davos is glaring with gusto at their most recent visitor. Jon does not know this red woman, and his experience with red women in the past has not left a favorable impression upon him. He can find some mild comfort in the fact that there are no children on Dragonstone at present to be sacrificed. This new red woman is too preoccupied, at any rate, with this creature of fire made flesh burning upon the pyre to ask any small children to be thrown onto the sacrificial altar. Jon wonders what he will do if she does. He wonders at many things these days.

He imagined he might sleep easy when the dead were defeated—and for the most part, he does. For once, he can wake from nightmares with the comfort that the monsters are behind him rather than a worry to look ahead to. But there have been troubling words since then, words that have taken the place of undead, icy monsters in the part of his mind he has reserved for worries.

*She shouldn’t be.*

*We don’t trust your queen.*

*You left a king and return…I’m not sure what you are now.*

He can’t shake the looks on their faces. Resigned, reluctant, tentative…and not entirely trusting. He expected that they would not trust her—why would they? But she saved them, fought and lost with them.

*She charged a price,* a niggling voice in his head reminds him. He imagines it must sound like Catelyn Stark, ever scornful, ever disapproving, ever fearful that he’d swoop in one day and scoop up what is rightfully her own children’s to own.
He swallows a lump in his throat. She wasn’t wrong, in the end, was she? It was he, and not the trueborn Stark beside him, who was crowned sovereign of the North. It was he, and not the Starks who found their way home, who held the authority to yield their homeland. It was he, in the end, who did.

The fire grows, salt dry and smoke thick, and he thinks for a moment that he will miss the green dragon.

Red is the blood that burns as it oozes onto the wood, sizzling into nothing as the flames eat it. *Flames eat everything*. Red is the charcoal dotting the ground beneath the pyre. Red is the flame, licking and snipping at the wood, at the coal, at the blood, at the scales, at *everything*. Jon lurches backward as he sees it—a flicker of long, shining strands, fire red and white hot, and the jowls of a snarling wolf come to take him in her teeth.

Without knowing why, he steps forward.

*Come back in one piece.*

Why would she say such a stupid thing? She’s never said a stupid thing since he saw her again, frozen and fearful, in the courtyard of a dreary black castle.

*You stole what was hers*, the spitting fire seems to hiss at him. *You half breed, you snake in wolf’s clothing.*

*You false Stark.*

An errant spark flies, redder than the rest, and he follows it with his eyes. It floats up past the soldiers, past the lords, past the silver haired dragon with her rages and her stony silences, and his eyes meet blue, hair deep brown, gown burning crimson like the fire. The red woman smiles at him.

*You are a liar*, her eyes seem to say.

He pulls of his armor, piece by piece. *I am no liar*. He thinks stubbornly, shoring up his defenses against the walls in his mind that holds back the truth of his heart. *I did right by my family and right by my people. I am no liar.*

Still, her smile taunts him, and still, he pulls off his armor.

He walks. Distantly, he hears his name being called, but he doesn’t listen. Maybe it’s not the right name. Maybe it never was.

*Aegon.*

*Jon.*

He doesn’t know anymore. His heart aches with how little he knows.

When his eyes tear away from the red woman’s taunting smile, he finds himself face to face with the blistering fire, an inferno of destruction, salt dry and smoke thick. Red, red, *red*. He breathes it all in, and he walks into the fire.

He feels the flames snap and lick at his clothes, and the burning salt filling his lungs, and the smoke stinging his eyes, and he walks. He can see it, a waterfall of red hair over a gown of black—armor thick—snarl behind a careful smile. Such a sweet thing, such a *sharp* bite.
The flames rage and lick at the wall, and he wants to say no. He wants to say that he built these walls when he was only a boy who was not meant to be, only a boy who knew better than to want things, only a boy who took everything he wanted and locked it away. These walls are what has sustained him through the days at that bleak and sad castle, through the ice and the fire, through the games and the lies and one dead body after another, a path that guided him here. These walls have kept him through them all.

His leathers come loose as the fire consumes them, and he wonders now what he really put behind those walls all those years ago. The flames tickle at the bases, testing for weak spots, and Jon wants to laugh because there are so many of them now.

A single stone comes loose, and he looks at the fire red all around him, and when his eyes find the scales of the green dragon, he holds back a hiss.

*Hello Father. Would you be proud of me?*

Dragons do terrible things for she-wolves.

Another stone comes loose. *Fuck off, Rhaegar.*

Another. *Winterfell belongs to my sister, Sansa.*

Another.

Death is white and blue, fire hot, salt dry and smoke thick, beckoning him home.

*You've made a proper fool of me, gallivanting about with that knife-hole in your heart.*

No, Jon thinks. *No, I haven't lived. I've fought, and I've bled, and I've wept, and I've killed. I've not lived.*

Death's hair is silver, eyes indigo, smile fairer than a summer morning.

He lays his head down on the corpse of a scaly beast, closes his eyes as the flames climb higher. Another stone. He draws in a sharp breath as something from the other side peeks through.

*I wanted it.*

*Winterfell belongs to my sister, Sansa.*

*I will stand behind Jon Snow.*

*But I wanted it.*

Fire red, snarling wolf. Another stone comes loose.

*I wanted her.*

He opens his eyes, and death is grinning now, arms open, waiting to take him into the loving embrace of a father.

He turns away from that simple love for the first time in his life. For the first time in his life, he does not want it.

Another stone comes loose.
Red is all around him, and his palms run, salt dry, smoke thick, over the scales. *Did you ever have a wall, Father? Did you hide my mother behind it? Did all those people die because you couldn’t keep it standing?*

It matters little now. Something has trickled out of the gap, pulling stones with it, and he roars to the stars. *I have not lived, I will not die.*

Death is glaring, disapproving, and for the first time in his life, he does not care for disapproval. The fire is red all around him, and he drinks it in like the oceans he will drain, the forests he will level, the mountains he will crumble to get back to her.

*I have not lived,* he digs his hand into the puncture in his heart. *I will not die.*

The fire swirls all around him, red with ashes like snow, and he sees a wolf bent in prayer beneath a bleeding tree. He wants and wants and wants, and he no longer cares to hide. He shuts his eyes, and he smiles, and he *burns* until his heart swells and his roars are tearing through the skies. He pulls his heart, beating still, red like the waterfall over a gown of armored coal, and throws it at Death’s feet.

*Give it to her. Let her keep it for me. So long as she breathes, I will breathe beside her.*

*A princess in a tower, guarded by a dragon.*

The beast stirs beside him, wingbeat steady, and his blood runs hot and thick and heady, and he *howls.*

Another stone comes loose, and the walls come tumbling down.

When the fires die, he is salt dry and smoke thick. Ashes color his alabaster skin, swirling over his scars. A hand, sunny and warm, clutches his shoulder, and his eyes open.

“Sansa,” he says. It is the clearest thought he’s ever had.

*-end-*
Wow. We're done. Really, honestly done. This is the longest fic I've ever completed, and it's actually, properly, done. It's kinda shocking. Before we close this book forever, I want to say thank you to all of you for your continued kindness and support, which has been an enormous encouragement to keep it going and is the reason why I was able to finish it. I decided to write this fic because I've read through almost all of the Jonsa fics out there, and thought about writing one of my own that would include some things that I've never seen in other fics before. So a situation where Sansa doesn't end up in Winterfell, or chooses to abandon the childhood dream of having children, or ending up the queen on the Iron Throne, these are all scenarios that I figured could conceivably happen under certain circumstances. And when I got to wondering what those circumstances would be, and that's how this fic was born. The original layout of this fic was only twenty thousand words long, so as you can see, it has very much developed with the audience's interest in it. My habit of updating daily was a delight to you readers, but it was kind of for my sake more than anyone else's. If I space updates apart, I grow tired of the whole thing and abandon it. I know this is a habit of mine, so updating daily was actually the only way to guarantee that the work got done. That people got to check in on the story on an mostly daily basis was a bonus for everyone.

The show was a staple of my life these last few years, and it's dismal ending notwithstanding, there was a lot I enjoyed about how it all worked out. For starters, Sansa ended up a queen, which is what it was obvious she'd always end up being. Daenerys didn't get the Iron Throne, which, for anyone who really paid attention to the mess she left in Essos, is a really good thing, too. The concept of a kingsmoot was finally brought to the south, another silver lining. Those were the only things I can say were positive. There were probably more, but I can't even remember them right now. I tried to get past the bad ending in other ways, but writing is a therapeutic way to move past something, so I put my hands to the keyboard and got to work.

Sansa's controversial decision not to have babies:
Sansa's character is one that I'd say has the simplest dreams of any of the high born characters on the show. She wants, at the root, a happy, domestic life. But throughout the show, she is hammered left and right, used consistently for what she can give people (a baby that can be used against her) and I think a really valuable lesson she'd have taken away from that is that she doesn't need that noise. She's not the real key to the North, her uterus is. Her ability to recognize that (I said in the tag that this girl was a little dark) is a byproduct of her development as a player of the game. Limiting her weaknesses, removing the elements that make her a pawn, are an example of what some people might call negative character development (because remember, characters don't always develop for the better). I have grown up around lots of women who wanted children desperately as kids but who grew up to decide that it wasn't for them. Dreams change. So do people. My version of Sansa, one where she chooses not to have children, is a version of Sansa that has elected not to bring something else into the world that she will desperately have to protect. Not having children is how Sansa guarantees that she will one day be able to walk away from the game without anything tying her back to it. It's her insurance policy against the other players, against
House Targaryen, and against Jon. It's the ultimate 'fuck you' to everyone who ever tried to control her, and most importantly, it's how she maintains her safety. Sansa recognizes the danger in her, a trueborn Stark woman, mothering a child with a Targaryen half-breed. She plays the long game, and the long game accounts for a half Stark half Targ baby one day coming to Winterfell where her nephew is peacefully ruling and possibly laying claim to the North on the grounds of his mom being the older Stark. So keeping her uterus nice and empty is also her way of protecting House Stark's absolute control over the North. These things mean more to her than the children that she hasn't even conceived. As she said in the story, these are things she is ready to sacrifice anything for.

Will I write any more fics in this universe:
No. I don't dwell too long in one verse as it makes my head spin, and I've been in this one for far too long. I only post one fic at a time, so I've had lots of projects that I've wanted to drown myself in that I had to hold off on because of this one. Now that it's finally done, I can get cracking on them. This is my only project for this universe. I know that a lot of people have really enjoyed it, and I'm grateful for that because I enjoyed writing it. But I had one story to tell, and I've told it, and now it's time for me to move on.

Will I write any more Jonsa fics:
Hell yes. I'm writing more as we speak. There are some I got started on several weeks ago, in fact. You'll likely be seeing them within the next few days. I've got a darker, more ruthless Sansa-centric one that I've been writing for a while now. It's not very long at all. If you've more modern, lighthearted sensibilities, then congratulations, I'm also working on a modern au. Both are Jonsa, of course.

I'd like to give a very very very very special thanks for Janina, who's intriguing work with dark!Jon was one of the reasons I got so interested in the concept to begin with. She is the person who encouraged me to post my work in the first place, calmed my frazzled nerves, lent a sympathetic ear when I needed one, and provided critical support without reservation. I am not exaggerating when I say that I did a lot of incoherent babbling at the start of this, and I most likely still do. But she's been incredible support through that, so mighty thanks to her.
One last extra special thanks to all of you who have read this, whether you've commented or not, because you've all been what drove this story from a skeleton of twenty thousand words into what it is right now. The only thing I knew for certain when I first started writing was that I'd write a story where Jon is dark AF, Sansa chooses not to have kids, they end up on the Iron Throne, and the North goes free. So all of the stuff that's happened on the road to that has been pretty much made up as I go along. Funny how that works, huh?

Yes, I do have a tumblr account. You can follow me on it if you'd like, same as my username. Mostly I blog food recipes and complain, but am always happy to throw in tons of Jonsa. I thank you all one last time, and wish you a very happy new year.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!