Kindness, Not Fear

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Kindness, Not Fear

by SecondStarOnTheLeft

Summary

In the wake of Daenerys' triumph, Sansa comes to King's Landing. Multi-POV post-series short fic.
Jon Snow

Jon remembers his little sister as being pretty.

Lady Sansa, when she alights from horseback in the courtyard of the Red Keep, is not merely pretty. She is beautiful, as regal as any queen. Her kissed-by-fire hair is coiled around her head like the most intricate of weaves, lighter than the heavy styles Cersei Lannister favoured but more complex than anything Daenerys would deign to wear. The whirls of hair are highlighted by gold and amber slides, pretty little things that (perhaps accidentally, perhaps not) form a circlet of fiery gold in Sansa's curls when they catch the light, like a crown all of her own.

She's taller than most all of the women and many of the men who came to greet her, towering over Daenerys and, Jon thinks, perhaps taller even than Aegon. She's like her mother in her face, Tully hair and Tully eyes and sharp Tully features, but her bearing – the proud line of her shoulders and the even prouder way she holds her head high – it is all her father. She has, strangely, become a Stark of Winterfell while staying in the Eyrie and Riverrun.

She's wearing all her colours, too. The heavy furs around her shoulders are grey and white, Stark furs, to match her white wool cloak, emblazoned with the great grey direwolf of her house. Her heavy woollen dresses, travel-stained though they are, are obviously of high quality, the rich Tully river-blue split to reveal paler Arryn sky-blue. She comes to them here as Lady Regent of the North, the Vale, the Iron Islands and the Riverlands, holding all in trust until Rickon comes of age, and Jon has never seen her look so at ease.

Jon remembers his little sister as being pretty. Lady Sansa Stark, his cousin, Regent of all the lands above the Neck, is striking.

In audience with the small council, Jon expected Sansa to present letters and exchange pretty courtesies. Instead, she stands tall, hands clasped in front of her, and speaks easily about matters of state.

She was given time to refresh herself after her long journey, to change from her travel garments into something more fitting for the court of the Dragon Queen and her Princes. She arrives in storm-cloud grey, her hair loose down her back and a short half-cape of ermine draped over her left shoulder. When she shifts to curtsey to Daenerys, Jon sees that the cape covers the sling supporting her left arm, and wonders what happened. With her hair down, she is even more like the Lady Catelyn than before.

She begins by sharing her tale from the moment of her escape following Joffrey's death, detailing her flight to the Fingers, her aunt's marriage to Littlefinger, her journey to the Vale under a false identity. Jon sinks further and further into horror at the realisation of what Sansa endured, of what Littlefinger subjected her to even knowing as he did what had been done to her in King's Landing. Her voice falters as she comes to her false marriage to Harry the Heir, to his death and Lord Robert's, then to Littlefinger's death at her own hands. There was a rumour that she pushed him out the infamous
Moon Door, but by her own admission, she cut his throat with the knife he gave her to defend herself.

She explains the plans she and her brother and their advisors have discussed. Bran has taken the black, the better to put his gifts to use against the Others, which means Rickon is Lord of Winterfell in his place. However, owing to the casualties of war, the Starks now stand to inherit Riverrun and the Eyrie as well, and the Iron Islands are theirs through the conquest of men under Sansa's command. Houses Tully, Arryn and Greyjoy are no more, as are many of their vassals, and Rickon stands to inherit all that was theirs.

The Riverlands are theirs, Sansa explains, because the now-deceased Lord Edmure was their uncle, and died without a direct heir – his wife, Lady Roslin Frey, was with child when she travelled to Casterly Rock, but there is no record of her or the child. The Vale is theirs not because of Sansa's sham-marriage to Harold Hardyng, but because Rickon is the only eligible male relative still living of the last Arryn in the Eyrie. The Iron Islands are theirs because Sansa herself ordered their capture, and besides (Sansa laughs as she says this) who else would want them?

Sansa, in her new-found cleverness, anticipated the Queen's displeasure at so much of her lands belonging to one family, and is quick to share the terms the Northerners offer. It has been suggested that the Iron Islands be assumed into the North. Rickon's first son will remain the Stark in Winterfell, but his second and third sons would become Lords Tully and Arryn and take to Riverrun and the Eyrie. One would be fostered in King's Landing with the Queen, one on Dragonstone with Prince Aegon, and his eldest daughter would be promised to the heir to the throne, all to guarantee the loyalty of House Stark to House Targaryen.

Daenerys seems well pleased by the terms offered, because so few of the great houses supported the Targaryens when first they arrived in the Seven Kingdoms and she trusts few who came to her banner when victory was assured, but Aegon questions if perhaps it might be suitable to bind the Houses Stark and Targaryen together sooner. Jon admires Sansa's polite refusal of the proposal Aegon never manages to word, almost laughs when she manages to avoid any mention of her own marriage and leaves Aegon flummoxed.

No agreement is made on the terms, because the Queen's Hand, the Lannister Imp, is notably absent, and Daenerys relies heavily on Tyrion's guidance. Sansa is dismissed, as are all of the council aside from Jon and Aegon, who must sit in audience with Dany for at least an hour every day to discuss the intrigues of state.

Aegon clearly admires Sansa, Jon notes, amused by his brother's rapture. Daenerys is fascinated by her, deeming her to be more interesting than many of the ladies at court. Jon is pleased by the changes he sees in Sansa, relieved that she outgrew her vanity and girlish silliness. All three agree that her terms need serious consideration, because even though the Starks were the first to rally to the Targaryen call (mostly, Jon knows, because of his shared blood between the two families) and are now renowned as the Targaryens' loyalist supporters alongside the Martells, Aegon's mother's family, it might be unwise to leave all the lands above the Neck governed by one lord for as long as Rickon might live.

Daenerys and Aegon refuse to acknowledge Jon's decision to remain as Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, to forsake his right to the title of Prince and his right of succession. Dany doesn't
understand it, can't fathom why he would rather spend the rest of his life guarding the Wall and fighting the Others than reigning with her as Prince of Summerhall.

For his part, Jon finds himself unable to explain it sufficiently. The call of winter is there, though, because dragon-lord though he may be, he's a Stark to his bones, and he misses the cold of the North, of home.

It helps that the cold seems to numb the dull pain in his back, in his stomach, the ghost of the agony he felt when the knives in the dark slid through his skin, and although he knows that it's probably in his head, he longs for that ease of movement. He has talked with the maester here, understands that the absence of pain comes from the proof that he overcame his enemies in the North and that he has a definite purpose there, but he doesn't care – he just knows that he feels healthier, more alive, up North, with frost and ice and Ghost and the snow for which he was named.

He knows Rhaegon will love it at the Wall, knows that his dragon is miserable in the dragon-pit, that she (Rhaegon is female in spirit, Jon thinks, although he knows that dragons are hermaphroditic) longs for freedom to roam, even as he and Ghost do.

And the Wall needs him. His brothers are at the Wall, Sam and Pyp and, perhaps most importantly, Bran are there. He knows that Bran needs him, that together the dragon-lord and the green man might be able to destroy the Others.

Besides, Bran told him all that happened after his false death, and Jon had been horrified by some of the things his little brother had deemed acceptable. Warging into Hodor, for example – Bran needs someone who isn't afraid to reprimand him, as so many of the brothers are, someone who knows him well enough to understand that it isn't malice that drives him but rather desperation to do, and with Robb and Arya gone and Sansa wrapped up in affairs of state, there is only Jon.

He considers all this as he walks the walls of the inner keep with Sansa late that afternoon, sharing with her his plans for the Watch and the Wall, his plans to build on Stannis' aborted effort to repopulate the Gift. He finds it a relief to discuss it with her, knowing as he does that she, too, is of the North, and understands the importance of the Wall in a way that no Southron noble ever will.

Later, he will realise that he never before would have considered discussing such things with Sansa, but with Bran at the Wall, Rickon fostered at Sunspear, Robb dead and Arya gone who-knows-where, Sansa is all he has left of his old family, and he relishes having her here to speak with. It's pleasant, too, to know that she understands Westerosi politics in a way that Dany and Aegon will not for many years, if ever, because she has lived their politics.

The day passes easily into night, and then there is the feast.

Sansa is given a place of honour befitting her rank on the dais. Jon is to her right, Ser Barristan Selmy to her left. She jests about being seated between the Lord Commanders of the Black and the White, some witty comment that Jon would never have expected to hear from his most proper sister (cousin), and Ser Barristan's laughter rings through the great hall.

When the time comes for dancing, Jon pleads lame – he did twist his knee only a few days before,
after all, slipped on a patch of black ice while walking the Wall with Sam and Pyp before he and Rhaegon flew back south, and the relative heat here does cause the pain in his back to flare up – because he wants to see if his suspicions about Dany's attitude towards Sansa are right. However, he forgot to take Sansa's sling into account, and finally remembers to ask her how she acquired her injury.

He thinks at first that he may have offended her by laughing, because he supposed it was a jest when she told him she'd been shot, but then she glances furtively about and pulls aside the neck of her dark blue, nearly black, gown, to reveal the bandages wrapped around her shoulder. She smiles and admits that perhaps it was foolish of her to stand and shoot when both her height and her hair mark her as an easy target, but that her temper got the better of her when the Freys attempted to swarm Riverrun.

He is further disquieted when she admits that it makes it near impossible for her to carry a weapon at all, because her sling gets in the way of anything but a dagger. He never would have imagined Sansa willing, much less eager, to carry a weapon.

She throws back her head and laughs when he teases her, asking if she was play-acting as Arya, throwing herself into battle when she might have been better off staying behind closed doors in the keep when the Freys arrived.

She smiles and her tone is light when she replies that she has had quite enough of staying behind closed doors, but her Tully eyes are hard with Stark steel.

It is not until late into the night, when Daenerys inquires of Jon as to Tyrion's whereabouts, that he notices his friend's absence.

For all her Stark steel, there remains something delicate about Sansa, something fragile that was never there in any of the rest of the Starks, something that inspires a need to protect her. Perhaps, Jon thinks, it's the too-slender lines of her body, her too-wide eyes, the wistful melancholy that twists her smile when she thinks no one is looking at her, the softness that is so obvious in how she treats with the lesser nobles and the servants who approach her, but he knows that whatever it is, it could ruin Dany and Aegon if Sansa were ever to decide to stand against them.

All reports from Rickon's lands (Sansa's lands in reality) hold nothing but warmth towards Sansa, praise for everything from her bravery to her beauty.

Dany is nothing if not vain of her battle prowess and her looks, and Jon knows that there is always a chance that she may see Sansa as a challenger to her throne. He knows without doubt that the bannermen of both the Tullys and the Starks would gladly rise at her request (because Sansa would never presume to command), and that in vanquishing Littlefinger she earned the undying loyalty of all in the Vale. Even the Tyrells might ride under the direwolf, if it were Sansa asking them to, because they make no secret of their simmering animosity to the Queen and her House. The Lannister and the Baratheon bannermen (both under the command of Tyrion Lannister, in truth) might be split, because there are plenty who are uncomfortable with having a Targaryen on the Iron Throne once more despite Tyrion's oaths of allegiance.
Dragons and Unsullied and Martells though Daenerys and Aegon would have, even the Targaryen host might find the combined strength of the rest of the Seven Kingdoms overwhelming. Jon knows that Sansa would never break an oath of fealty such as the one she promised on Rickon's behalf moments after her arrival at the Red Keep, though, so it is really of no concern.

Either or, he and Rhaegon will keep the Wall. The Night's Watch take no part in the politics of the realm.

After five days, Tyrion's absence is particularly conspicuous. He emerges from the Tower of the Hand only for small council meetings, and scurries home immediately afterwards. Jon is due to leave with Sansa, to act as part of her escort as far as Winterfell before continuing on for the Wall, whenever she takes her leave from court. As Tyrion had expressed an interest in seeing the Wall again, in bringing the new master of the coin (an ally of Dany's from the east, a wickedly clever man by the name of Illyrio) north to see what the crown might offer the Watch, Jon wishes to seek out his friend, to discover if he wishes to come north when Jon and Sansa leave or if he would leave it till later in the year.

He is surprised, when he knocks three times, to find the Tower of the Hand empty but for Tyrion's servants. He is told that the Lord Hand left several hours previously, and is probably in the library in the inner keep.

Jon could have guessed as much, knowing as he does how Tyrion loves to read, but he is surprised to find that Tyrion ventured out at all.

He pauses when he steps into the library, which is a vast room that exists in a peculiar twilight even at noon, but which smells warm and old and wise. He listens for a moment, hearing the hushed echo of murmuring voices from somewhere in the south-western corner, and supposes that Tyrion may as well be there as anywhere else.

As he comes closer, he realises that he knows both voices. The low rumble of Tyrion's voice, gentle with concern, contrasts oddly with the soft pitch of Sansa's distress.

"Are you well, my lady? Truly well, I mean, not cheerful. You act so well for the court that one might never know the truth."

"I am well enough, my lord. Although... Lord Baelish was not so kind as you."

Tyrion's oath echoes loudly throughout the cavernous room, drawing several people who, presumably, thought he'd injured himself. Rather than the dwarf lying injured, however, they find him sitting at a table with Sansa, her hands clasped in his.

Jon is so surprised that he almost misses the flash of rage in Tyrion's eyes and the gentle sadness in the downward turn of Sansa's lips. He does notice the deep flush spreading across her pale throat and the speed with which both she and Tyrion disentangle their fingers.

He lingers long after the crowd has cleared and Sansa has taken her leave. Tyrion determinedly avoids his gaze.
From then on, Tyrion returns to court. To everyone’s amazement, he seems almost perpetually in the company of Lady Sansa, and, by extension, the Queen, because Dany has become inordinately fond of Sansa since her arrival. The three are often to be found with their heads together, eyes flashing around the hall as they talk in murmurs. They laugh often, three pitches of amusement that unnerve those uncertain of their positions within the court. Jon and Aegon are more amazed than anyone, because although Daenerys has always relied on Tyrion’s counsel, she’s rarely sought him out for anything other than advice.

When Jon questions Sansa about it over lunch in his rooms later the following week, she grins wickedly and bites into a pear before telling him that there are many things she hears which are useful to both the Queen and the Hand.

Her shoulder is healed within three weeks of her arrival at King’s Landing, and she spends her first day without a sling in the yard with Daenerys and two members of the Queensguard. Jon has never bothered to learn the first names of any but Ser Barristan, counting their houses as more important. There is a Martell, of course, and an Estermont, and a Lannister cousin that Tyrion vouched for. There is also a Royce and a lord from the Riverlands who only arrived a few days before Sansa, and about whom Jon knows nothing at all except that he’s a Mallister. The as-yet unfilled space in Dany’s Queensguard is reserved for the champion of the North, because she has been trying to maintain an equilibrium of sorts by taking her guards from across the Kingdoms as best she can.

Jon thinks the two in the yard are the Martell and the Lannister, because one is as dark as the other is fair, and neither is trying to hide their admiration of Dany and Sansa.

Dany cuts an impressive figure, he supposes, in her sandsilk trousers and her painted Dothraki vest. Sansa, of course, is the proper lady even now, although the sleeves of her brown roughspun gown reach only halfway to her elbow, and the skirts are much smaller if no shorter than she usually wears. She wears a heavy leather guard on her left wrist, and her bright hair is bound back in a braid twice as long as Dany’s own.

They chat brightly as they fire arrow after arrow into targets that seem to move ever further down the yard, much to the amusement of the watching spectators.

Tyrion appears beside Jon on the balcony overlooking the yard, and for once he seems to have no acerbic comment. He says only that perhaps the ladies should be careful, else the wildlings will come and steal them for wives.

Jon laughs, though, because the idea of Sansa and Dany living amongst the wildlings is one of the funniest things he’s ever heard.
As Tyrion and Sansa begin to take walks along the walls and in the gardens together, riding through the city together, dining together in the privacy of Tyrion's solar in the Tower of the Hand, sitting together at the feasts Dany and Aegon host at least twice a week, people begin to remember that they were, in fact, married.

Aegon raises the matter in jest during a council meeting, and Tyrion informs him that no, they were not married, that they are married. He goes on to remind them all that Sansa herself repeatedly referred to her marriage to Harold Hardyng as a sham, a farce, and points out that only Petyr Baelish ever petitioned the septons for an annulment. As neither Sansa nor Tyrion themselves approached the septons, their marriage still stands.

Silence greets his calm announcement, everyone present realising that between them, Sansa and Tyrion have claim to all of Dany's kingdom aside from the lands in the south – and everyone knows that the Tyrells are Tyrion's because he saved the beautiful Ser Loras from dragon-fire, the Stormlanders the same because it was he who begged the Queen to be merciful to Shireen, Stannis' daughter and the last Baratheon in the realm. It is a marriage that can't be allowed to stand, that shouldn't be allowed to stand, that-

Daenerys cuts across the mute panic that has engulfed her council and asks Tyrion if he and Sansa wish to now seek an annulment.

Tyrion grins, flashing them all the smirk for which he has achieved infamy, and bows his head slightly before assuring them that no, he and the Lady Sansa wish to take the time to actually consider their options before making a decision. After all, he tells them, the marriage was forced on both of them by his father and his sister, but that doesn't mean that he and Sansa might not have arrived at this point anyways.

He takes his leave then, but makes a quip about how only a truly foolish man would turn down the most beautiful woman in Westeros when he has a face like Tyrion's. Really, Jon thinks, the only thing to be done is laugh.

Word spreads quickly, especially when Sansa and Tyrion make no secret of their budding… Whatever it is. Jon is hesitant to term it a romance, because to him it looks more like a growing friendship, but he knows that the gossips are aghast at the idea of the fair Lady Sansa tying herself to the Imp of Casterly Rock.

Tyrion himself seems slightly perplexed when he admits to Jon that it was Sansa's idea to not annull the marriage immediately. He explains how things were between them before Joffrey's death, and seems to teeter on the brink of sharing something important with Jon before he tips his head back and
drains his goblet. It's Sansa's business, Jon is told, and if he wants to know he should ask her.

Instead, he turns to Daenerys, thinking that perhaps her friendship with Sansa might have inspired a confidence between the two.

Dany seems stunned that he doesn't know, tells him that there are several different whispers along the same theme winding through court. Dany, though, had it from Sansa's own lips.

"How is it that you don't know? This Littlefinger took her to his bed against her will, and she cut his throat in retaliation."

It's enough to make Jon wish that Littlefinger still lived, just so he could have the pleasure of killing the craven himself. This new knowledge, along with the talk he had with Tyrion before speaking with Dany, helps him make sense of what he overheard that day in the library, and perhaps also why Sansa is so willing to try and build a marriage and a life with Tyrion.

He finally manages to speak with his sister-cousin on the matter four days later. By now, she has been at court for almost two months.

He acts as though he knows nothing of any of it, but she laughs at him and tells him that it is well that he intends to return to the Wall, for a liar so bad as him has no place at court. Tyrion, she says, told her everything, and she heard somewhere that Jon went to Dany after. When he asks how she can be so calm, so poised, if what Dany told him is true, she bows her head and is silent for a moment too long. He immediately feels guilty and reaches for her hand, to apologise, to offer comfort, but she looks up at him and something in her expression reminds him shockingly of the man they both called Father.

Her voice is even, her tone flat, as she explains that she can be calm and poised because in killing Littlefinger herself, she both passed down the sentence and saw it done. She has found justice, she tells him, and somehow, that is enough.

When she is gone, he wonders how any of them thought her anything but a true Stark.

Two weeks later, the small council gains a member and Sansa expresses her intent to remain at court. She is sitting to Tyrion's right while she says it, an elegant filigree ring of Lannister gold on her left hand.

Daenerys and Aegon had no choice but to offer her a place on the council, everyone knows, but what most don't know is that her value lies in more than her position as Rickon's Lady Regent. She has taken over the position once given the title of "master of the whisperers," the position once held by Varys the Eunuch, utilising the skills taught to her by Petyr Baelish to gather information for the Queen that might otherwise go unheard.

The terms offered by the Northerners are finally discussed in full. It is decided that it is unfeasible that so much of the kingdom should be under the banner of one family, even if Rickon's sons were to take the Tully and Arryn colours in years to come.
It goes unsaid, but there is also a fear that Rickon will father only daughters and all his lands will pass to Sansa and Tyrion's children, which would place Lannisters as lords of Winterfell, Riverrun, the Eyrie, and Casterly Rock, leaving only Storm's End, Highgarden and Sunspear free of the lion.

Daenerys may have unswerving trust in Tyrion, but she knows enough of his family history to worry about his heirs. Other arrangements will be made, although for now, the Queen decides that she trusts in Tyrion and Sansa's stewardship.

Her trust is proven well placed when, a week later, Sansa and Tyrion together root out a plot to overthrow Dany and Aegon and plunge the Kingdoms back into civil war. When Daenerys and Aegon shower them with praise in front of the court, Sansa ducks her head and blushes prettily while Tyrion comments mildly on the preference he would have towards raising his children in a peaceful environment.

It's not until they're gone, later that evening, that Jon realises Sansa's gown was deep crimson, not purple as he'd first thought.

While Dany and Aegon seem happy enough to accept Sansa and Tyrion's marriage, there are others who are less pleased.

Doran Martell and Willas Tyrell unite in bringing their concerns to court, concerns about the sheer power Sansa and Tyrion wield. Four of the seven great houses are theirs, one is the Queen's Hand and the other is the Lady of the Whisperers. Other, smaller houses also come out against the Lannister-Stark union, demanding that it be annulled, that the Lady Sansa be married to one the lords of the Riverlands or the Vale or somewhere, somewhere that will not result in her gaining yet more influence.

Sansa's fury is righteous and beautiful and utterly polite. Only the spots of red (crimson, Jon thinks) on her high cheekbones and the absolute rage flashing in her eyes betray any emotion as she leans forward slightly in her chair at the council table and calmly informs Doran Martell that Rickon will be coming home from Sunspear to be placed with Prince Aegon on Dragonstone, and then turns to Willas Tyrell and assures him that the engagement between his infant daughter and Rickon is quite definitely at an end.

Neither lord wishes to lose a chance to influence the future Warden of the North, and both make an effort to take the sting from their words as they press on with their crusade to dismantle Sansa's marriage to Tyrion.

Tyrion says nothing the entire time, keeps his fingers linked through Sansa's and sits back, observing
the men standing before them. Jon can see the tension in his friend's free hand, though, in the way it curls tighter and tighter into a fist.

Daenerys and Aegon – Aegon in particular – are focusing on what Tyrell and Martell are saying. Jon hopes that Sansa and Tyrion are aware that Aegon has been searching for a way to dissolve their marriage since they announced their intention to remain married.

Aegon might be Jon's brother by blood, but Sansa is his sister by bond and history, and he will fight for her honour should Aegon dare to put it in question. The attempts made by the Dragon Prince to woo the Lady of the North have been the talk of the city, especially since Sansa began to use her wedded name. It is seen as improper for Aegon to still pursue her, although there have been whispers that perhaps she would be better off with the handsome prince who will one day be king than with the Imp who is likely only to become uglier.

Wyllas Tyrell rants on, pointing out that neither Sansa nor Tyrion wanted the marriage in the first place, that no permission had been sought from the head of Sansa's house (she is quick to point out that now, she is the head of House Stark, which meets with much disapproval from the lords present and a smile from Dany), that a marriage unconsummated after three years is barely a marriage at all-

Tyrion leans forward in his seat, taking Sansa's hand between both of his, and smiles wickedly at Lords Tyrell and Martell.

"And who are you to say that our marriage is unconsummated?"

The Lord of Casterly Rock and the Lady of Winterfell quickly earn a formidable reputation. Few now dare challenge them, if only for fear of offending the Queen by way of her closest friends, but there are whispers of discontent from many corners. Many feel that the marriage is still only a way of binding Winterfell and Casterly Rock together, as Tywin and Cersei Lannister planned when they arranged it, because Sansa remains in her rooms in the keep rather than moving to the Tower of the Hand with Tyrion.

However, as many as there are who choose to believe this, there are more who believe the building affection between the two is genuine. Jon has often come across them sitting in secluded parts of the keep, heads together and voices low as they discuss everything from the state of affairs on the Iron Islands and the whispers of malcontent being stirred up by the infamous Sand Snakes in Dorne to the scandalous rumours of the recently married Lord Karstark fathering a bastard child by Lord Mallister's second daughter and Dany's worries that Lord Edric Dayne will refuse to marry a lady not of Dornish blood.

It is safest to discuss anything to do with Dorne out of Aegon's hearing, because he is fiercely loyal to and protective of the Martells. Jon supposes the same could be said of him and the Starks, and realises that perhaps the Targaryens of old married brothers to sisters in order to prevent split loyalties.

That aside, he has no doubt that Sansa and Tyrion's regard for each other. He asked Sansa over supper one night why she and Tyrion decided to continue with the marriage in the first place.
“He was kind to me when no one else was, and he asks for nothing but what I would give willingly. I think that is as good a reason as any to continue a marriage, Jon.”

And really, Jon thinks, when one considers everything Sansa's been through, what they've all been through, there really is no other reason necessary.

He takes his leave for the Wall soon after that, flying ahead of the host of volunteers he's gathered since arriving in King's Landing, promising to check on the progress of the builders at Winterfell on his way north and to send a raven back to give Sansa his opinion.

She only smiles and tells him to instead give Bran his impressions, because she'll hear quicker that way. Jon rolls his eyes, feeling slightly foolish for forgetting that Bran could speak with her through the heart-tree in the godswood, or the weirwood Tyrion apparently planted in the garden of the Tower of the Hand as soon as they took King's Landing and which has grown into a healthy sapling that already towers over him, and embraces her before kissing her forehead in farewell.

Tyrion, standing at Sansa's side, holds out his hand for Jon to shake, which he does gladly. Before Tyrion can pull away, though, Jon drops to his knee to put his face on a level with the dwarf's and gives him a severe warning. Should anything happen to Sansa, Jon tells him, he will know, and on Rhaegon's back he can be in King's Landing in three days. Tyrion's smile doesn't waver for even a second, and he assures Jon that he will treat Sansa like the prize she is.

Jon knows that Sansa will be safe with Tyrion, but he felt that the warning was necessary. He still regards her as his sister, and it is therefore his duty to protect her.

He takes his leave of Dany and Aegon in public, but still manages to warn Aegon not to interfere with Sansa's happiness. His brother acts stunned, hurt that Jon would think so low of him, but Jon knows Aegon well enough to sense the disgruntlement behind his tomfoolery. Dany promises to marry Aegon off as soon as she can, if only to ascertain the alliance between the Tyrells and the crown.

Margaery Tyrell might yet become queen to a fourth king.
Margaery Tyrell

Chapter Summary

Trigger warning for attempted suicide.

Margaery never expected to be jealous of Sansa Stark, not since they’d met, but the moment that Sansa rides through the gates of the Red Keep, Margaery finds herself envious of her one-time companion.

Margaery has always been told how pretty she is, but there’s something in Sansa’s cold beauty that trumps any sort of prettiness. There’s an austerity and a certain sternness, and that indefinable iciness, but the very fact that Sansa looks so unreachable is what makes her so appealing.

When she descends from her horse, Margaery notes that under her heavy travelling clothes and heavier furs, Sansa’s limbs are long and elegant, and when she bows to the Queen, the Prince and Lord Snow, her furs part just enough for everyone who’s not focusing on her entourage to notice the ripe swell of her bosom.

Margaery has been told that she’s pretty for so long that she’s vain of it, and seeing that Sansa Stark is beautiful makes her want to spit with furious jealousy.

To stave off the annoyance, Margaery finds herself cataloguing everything about Sansa’s appearance, finding fault wherever she can.

The hem of Sansa’s dress is worn ragged, splashed with mud and water stains and filth. Surely she might have travelled by wheelhouse, and if not then she surely had time to change before meeting the Queen for the first time?

Perhaps, Margaery thinks later, this is some ploy of Sansa’s. Before, when Joffrey was king and Sansa was a pale, insipid, frightened little thing, she’d hidden behind her courtesies and her carefully learned manners. Now, of course, she’s a famed leader of men, having ridden forth from the Vale with an army at her back and joined with the Targaryens. She had retook first Winterfell and the North, slaughtering the Boltons and leaving them hanging from the gallows at the ruined gates of the Dreadfort, then the Iron Isles by way of crushing diplomacy and the ruthless execution of all that remained of the Greyjoy family, and then, finally, Riverrun, remaining in the North, the East and the Riverlands for almost a year to consolidate the Queen’s power before riding south for King’s Landing.

While in Winterfell, she’d somehow found her younger brothers, the little Lords Stark who everyone had supposed dead. The crippled one had taken the black straight away, giving up his right to Winterfell even though he was the oldest, writing to the Queen himself and explaining that he would
make a poor Warden of the North by reason of his inability to walk and for some other reason that
the Queen had not shared with the court when she had announced all this, announced that the heir to
Winterfell was travelling to Sunspear to be fostered to strengthen the bonds of friendship between
House Stark and House Martell. Relations between the two were uneasy, solely because the Martells
felt that a grave insult had been done unto them when Prince Rhaegar had taken Lyanna Stark as his
own, even though he had already been married to Elia Martell.

Sansa before she disappeared was weak and, apart from the claim she had to Winterfell and the
North, inconsequential. She was the last scion of a dead House, useful only as a breeding mare and a
way for the Lannisters to gain even more power.

Margaery was better. More than Sansa. She was the prized daughter of the second most powerful
house in all the Seven Kingdoms, a renowned beauty, a widow at sixteen but still a maiden. Then a
widow and a maiden again. Then a bride and a maiden again, and her marriage annulled because
Tyrion Lannister begged a pardon for his little nephew the Boy King but had no interest in marrying
the boy who would, probably, be his heir to the Rose of Highgarden, instead arranging for a match
between Tommen and the daughter of one of his future bannermen.

Now, Margaery is a poor joke at her family’s expense, wife of three kings and mother to none, all
but abandoned as a minor member of court, not even part of the Queen’s inner circle.

Cersei Lannister would have prized Margaery even if she hadn’t been betrothed to Joffrey for her
pretty face, her charming manner and her skills, which befitted a lady of the highest rank.

The half-wild warrior that now sits on the Iron Throne, Daenerys I Targaryen, Stormborn, the
Unburnt, Mother of Dragons, seems to prize Sansa Stark and her army more highly, because Sansa is
to be seated at the top table among the small council at that night’s feast.

There are more lords at court than any of the young ladies know what to do with, so Margaery dons
her best gown, the deep green velvet split to show gold, the colours of her house, and adding the
gold jewellery her brother presented her with before he sent her to prepare herself. Lords from the
Riverlands, the Vale, the North – lords who would be pleased with a beautiful young maiden of high
birth and wealthy connections as a bride. She has to look her best for all of them.

Her efforts are for naught, though, because there isn’t a lord present who can keep their eyes off
Sansa and Daenerys. The Winter Rose and the Mother of Dragons, people are calling them, or the
Lady Regent and the Warrior Queen. They sit with only Lord Snow between them, cousin to one
and nephew to the other and bastard to both houses, lifted high because he took the black and was
foolish enough to do what others dared not. Lucky enough to survive.

Both are in dark colours, winter colours, the Queen in the black and scarlet of her house, Sansa in
dark blue (darker than the Tully blue she arrived in) and a silver sling. The pale skin and unusual hair
of both is highlighted by the dramatic colours of their gowns, the simple touches of jewellery.

The Queen rarely wears her crown, preferring to adorn her braided hair with tinkling silver bells, and
she has done so tonight. Her only nod to her station is the coldly glowing circlet of dragonglass in
her silver hair. Her gown is cut in an Eastern style, leaving one shoulder and both arms bare, and the smooth expanse of skin on show draws the eyes of both men and women around the room.

The Lady Sansa’s hair spills down her back, held away from her face by two delicate silver wire clips shaped as direwolves. Her dress is a shade too low in the bust for a maid, but her sling covers her well enough to prevent it from being improper. Her hair seems to glow in the candlelight and, between dark Lord Snow and pale Ser Barristan the Bold, she seems wild and fey.

The dancing begins, and Margaery is relieved to see Sansa staying in her seat on the dais. Here, at least, she couldn’t be competition, even if she were to take to the floor, because Margaery was always a better dancer during the time they spent together at court. The Queen demands attention, her silver-fair hair shining as she spins from partner to partner, all desperate for a chance to prove that they would make a good consort for Daenerys I Targaryen.

Those who are not vying for the Queen’s attention spend their time lingering near the dais, hoping to be included in the conversation between Sansa and Jon Snow.

Loras has not been the same since Father died, because he blames himself for what happened.

How could he have prevented it, though? How could any of them anticipated the host sweeping down from the north, led by the mighty Dragon Queen and her princes on dragonback, her Queensguard – three of them then, a Lannister, a Mallister and Barristan the Bold, Lord Commander once more – riding at the head of the vanguard that had swept almost uncontested through Sansa Stark’s lands, gathering strength at every stop and eradicating what paltry competition arose in a hail of dragon-fire and Unsullied swords? They had moved down through the North and the Neck in just two months, and had left Daenerys’ freed men and their skills behind them to guarantee the loyalty of the smallfolk.

When the Martells had risen in the South, and Tyrion Lannister had roused the West to join the Queen and her host, it had only been a matter of time before King’s Landing fell. Cersei Lannister had commanded the defence of the city with considerable aplomb and more skill than was really seemly in a woman, but it had all been for naught – the blackguards and criminals who had been given gold cloaks had turned tail at the sight of the three dragons bearing down on them.

Huge swathes of the city had burned. Hundreds had been killed. Homes had been destroyed, businesses and septs and all sorts of places.

Still the people praised the Dragon Queen, singing her name as once they’d sang for the Rose of Highgarden.

Daenerys had not put anyone to death by dragon-fire except Jaime Lannister, deeming his crime worthy of such a punishment. Regicide, it seemed, would not sit well with the new queen. She added insult to injury by forcing the former Lord Commander of the Kingsguard to behead his sister-lover, the Queen Regent Cersei, before his death.

Tyrion had held Tommen, Margaery remembered, stroking the Boy King’s fair hair and hiding his face so he would not see his parents die.
The Kingsguard had been obliterated then, of course – the Kingslayer had been the first, and Loras the last. Only due to Tyrion Lannister’s insistence that Loras had not been loyal to the king, that the Tyrell family had been bound by unwanted marriages and massive debts to Casterly Rock, that really they had long been sympathetic to the Targaryen cause…

Their father had not been spared. Loras, bereft at the loss of everything he felt gave him worth, had pleaded with the Queen to take him, to let their father live, but she had been set on her path. Their father had been one of many executed in private deep within the Red Keep, along with the Clegane brothers, Kevan Lannister, the Boltons, the single Greyjoy who had somehow evaded Sansa Stark’s headhunt. Willas had been craven enough to bend the knee – figuratively only, Margaery thought in her crueller moments – to the Conqueror, and the rest of their House had been spared.

Loras, though, Loras had changed.

Before any of it had started, Loras had been wonderful. Beautiful and strong and noble, a champion to all, beloved by all, their father’s favourite by far. He had been kind and gentle and clever and witty, and Margaery had loved him before all others.

He had been by her side all through her marriage to Renly, and she had been happy for him when she had discovered his “special” relationship with the King in Highgarden. She had known then that Renly would do his duty in her marriage bed once the war was over, and that was all that mattered, really.

But then Renly had been killed by a shadow, and Loras faded somehow. Even Margaery and Willas, the only two who knew of their brother’s relationship with Renly, were amazed by how deeply affected he was by the king’s death – more so than she was, and her Renly’s widow! She had been able to explain that away, of course, pointing out that she’d rarely spent any time alone with Renly, that they’d barely known each other, that the King in Highgarden and his Rose had never had a chance to bond as man and wife, as king and queen, whereas Loras had been his closest friend and confidant, Lord Commander of his Kingsguard.

Serving as part of Joffrey and then Tommen’s Kingsguard had given him a purpose. He’d had a chance to be noble and brave and valiant then, too, to shine as the Knight of Flowers should, fairest man in all of King’s Landing. Before she’d realised the depravity of Cersei and Jaime Lannister’s relationship, she might have likened herself and Loras to the Lannister twins – they are close in age, after all, and look alike enough to be twins (although there are some who claim that she and Willas are more alike, something she vehemently denies).

Ever have they been close, as well – it had been a relief for her to think of him being ever in King’s Landing, knowing that Joffrey would assign Loras as her personal guard from his Kingsguard, knowing that she would have someone there that she could truly trust…

Now Loras is under permanent watch, guarded whenever he edges so much as a toe out of the Keep. Queen Daenerys gave the Kingsguard less the Kingslayer their lives, but she did not pardon them.

Loras now is dull and listless, disinterested in swordplay and riding as he never has been. Despite Margaery and Willas’ best efforts to bring a smile to his face, to regain the brother that they have undoubtedly lost since their father’s death, nothing can cheer him. He raves at night, too, and in their apartments, the rooms that they all share together, three bedchambers and a comfortable solar, Margaery and Willas are unable to avoid hearing what he says while caught in his nightmares.

It is well that they are far from the royal apartments, because seeing Loras executed for treason is the last thing any of his siblings want.
Willas feels that perhaps Garlan may be able to pull Loras from this funk he’s fallen into, but one of them must remain in Highgarden and Willas and Loras must remain in King’s Landing to deal with the settling political state and to await judgement respectively, so the thought of Garlan and Loras meeting is moot. Margaery sometimes wonders, when she lies unable to sleep because Loras is screaming at the Targaryens in his sleep, how her life would be different had Sansa Stark married Joffrey Baratheon, and her thoughts turn bitter.

She cannot help but assume that her life would be better, and that her shining brother would not be lost to her.

Everyone notices the liking the Queen has taken to Sansa Stark. It is impossibly difficult not to like the Lady of the North, with her gentle manner and kindly smile, but Daenerys has successfully kept herself aloof for so long that it is worrying to see even her succumbing to the charms of the second most powerful woman in the Seven Kingdoms.

Sansa charms everyone with an ease Margaery would never has suspected the waif she’d met all that time ago capable of. Sansa is approaching seventeen, is dangerously alluring and frighteningly powerful – her charm comes in no small part from the utter confidence of her station. The power that Cersei Lannister so craved and sought through deception is Daenerys’ and Sansa’s through conquest and skill, and there are many men at court who feel that both the Queen and Lady Stark would benefit from the guidance of a strong husband.

She knows, for instance, that Willas has already tendered offers of marriage to both, and that Daenerys had laughed outright, while Sansa had flushed prettily in that way of hers and politely declined his offer.

There were rumours about both, of course, and none of them complimentary. The Queen was married to a Prince of the Slavers, and she slaughtered him when he refused her his fortune. Lady Stark was married falsely to Lord Hardyng and was Littlefinger’s lover. The rumours of an incestuous relationship between the Queen and her Princes are brushed aside to some extent, because they are Targaryens and incest is part of their tradition.

The rumours of an incestuous affair between Lady Stark and Lord Snow, however, seem to bear some weight, if only because the two spend so much time alone in each other’s company. Jon Snow looks like Eddard Stark reborn, Sansa Stark like Catelyn Tully come again, and there are many who whisper that perhaps it is this facsimile of the parents they lost to the war that draws them together.

Margaery notices that anyone who whispers such things is soon the subject of much more poisonous whispers, and wisely keeps quiet on any subject pertaining to Sansa Stark.
Soon, it is not Lord Commander Jon Snow of the Night’s Watch whose name is whispered with Sansa Stark’s, but Lord Tyrion Lannister, Imp of Casterly Rock and Hand of the Queen. The two spend as much time together as Sansa and Jon, more, and the time they spend in the Queen’s company prompts several urgent enquiries into the state of their near-forgotten marriage.

Apparently, to the horror of many, it still stands.

Margaery remembers Sansa’s face the moment it was revealed to her that she was to marry the Imp, and she can feel nothing but sympathy for the younger girl. Even then, she grudgingly admits, Sansa was beautiful. A girl of birth as high as Sansa’s, with a face like that, might have expected a good match even after being branded a traitor with the rest of her family. While the Imp was rich and, technically, heir to Casterly Rock and the Lannister fortune, he was still the Imp – a creature so vile that his own father could scarcely bear his company.

The feeling about court is only stirred to greater discontent when Sansa is given a seat on the small council and, unofficially, named Lady of the Whisperers, taking what was once Lord Varys the Eunuch’s post.

This all in combination finally seems to stir Loras somewhat. He seems outraged to hear that all pretenders to the throne during the War, Renly included, are being damned by the Queen, and helps Willas recruit Doran Martell to his cause. Margaery dares to hope that her brother is returned to her, and that Sansa might lose some of her appeal to the court should they begin to think her power-hungry – for why else would she remain married to the bitter, twisted little freak that is Tyrion Lannister?

The morning before Willas and Prince Martell plan to launch their attack on the Stark-Lannister alliance, Margaery finds herself invited to breakfast with Lady Stark.

Sansa is pleasant, offering an array of delicacies from winter oranges, grown only in the icy north, to the salty little fish that flooded the bay when the first of the sea storms began. Her conversation is light, bordering on the point of vapid, and she is the perfect hostess – Margaery can only imagine the splendour with which Sansa would welcome any visitor to her own halls.

Somehow, though, talk turns to court intrigues, and Sansa’s women – a bastard girl from the Vale and her brother’s widow, the elder Westerling girl – excuse themselves to ready themselves for court that day.

Margaery realises that she has walked straight into a trap, and wonders if perhaps the whisperers were right to worry about the time Sansa spent under Littlefinger’s wing, but for the wrong reasons – it was not bed tricks he taught her, but court tricks, which are infinitely more dangerous.

Sansa talks earnestly of the hurt she has experienced due to the cruel whispers that followed her around the court since her arrival, how difficult it was for her to divert those same whispers from her cousin, his brother and their aunt, and Margaery suddenly understands that Sansa knows precisely what Willas and the Martells plan to do today, and that she is incandescently furious because of it.

In that moment, Margaery Tyrell finally understands just how thoroughly she has underestimated
It is oddly fascinating, Margaery realises, to watch Willas taken apart so thoroughly by a single comment from the Imp. It proves that Willas does not have their father’s political skill, she thinks, when his entire argument against Sansa’s marriage hinges on the inordinate power she and Tyrion hold – something the Queen has already begun to discuss with her advisors – and the ease with which the marriage might be annulled for political reasons.

Of course, a marriage cannot be annulled without the participants petitioning the Faith, and even then only if it went un consumm ated. While Margaery can see that many of the courtiers are unsurprised at the idea of the Imp having consummated his marriage, she wonders if perhaps he is being kinder than she would have supposed him able to be – if the rumours of Littlefinger’s treatment of Sansa while she was in his care are to be believed, then she would never be able to pass as a maiden, and it could be supposed that her husband is protecting her from the ignominy, the shame of having been raped by claiming that it was he who took her maidenhead.

It is interesting to think that Sansa and Tyrion should have grown so close since her arrival in King’s Landing. While Margaery had rarely seen them together out of Cersei and Joffrey’s company when first they’d been married, the few times she had seen them had been hallmark ed by Sansa’s utter revulsion of her husband and Tyrion’s all-consuming frustration at the coldness that blighted his relationship with his wife. Now, though, they hold tight to each other’s hands – her fingers long and pale and slender, ornamented only by a delicate ring of gold filigree, his short and thick and adorned with a heavy Lannister signet on one hand and the seal of the Hand on the other – and lean close to each other, as if each garners some measure of strength from the presence of the other.

Since her unnerving breakfast with Sansa that morning, Margaery has been considering all that she has learned about her one-time friend these past months, and has come to the realisation that the Lady Regent of Winterfell, the Eyrie and Riverrun is not the girl who refused to kneel for Tyrion Lannister in the sept all that time ago – although that refusal, that single act, marked the start of the transition from foolish girl to powerful lady.

She has come to understand that even her own tuition in the game under her grandmother, the notorious Queen of Thorns, pales in comparison to the lessons Sansa received from Petyr Baelish, that Willas and Doran Martell and all of them have little chance of out manoeuvring the Lady of the Whisperers, wife of the Hand and cousin-once-removed of the Queen and the Prince of Dragonstone.

Sansa Stark, the pale little thing who would have been mortified at the very suggestion of lying with the Imp, is gone. In her place is Lady Sansa Lannister, composed and capable in the face of all opposition, unfazed by her lord husband’s borderline inappropriate comments, as implacable as the ice and snow she grew up surrounded by.
Sansa begins to invite Margaery to sit with her during the day from then on. Sometimes they ride through the city, and Margaery is never sure how to react to the bow Sansa invariably wears slung over her back, the quiver of swan-fletched arrows that hangs from her saddle.

Her women, too, wear bows, elegant curves of yew and ash with silver fittings that shine even in the weak winter sunshine. Sansa’s own bow is fitted with rose gold, almost as red as her hair, and she wears it with the same casual ability as the Queen displays while sitting astride her dragon’s thick shoulders.

One day, when they are riding towards Flea Bottom to meet with the Imp, Jeyne Westerling notices a man dragging a woman away. The woman is screaming, fighting against the man, and Sansa’s eyes harden into that famous Stark steel, washed with Tully river-water. She barely blinks as she takes her bow in hand, knocks an arrow and shoots the man from fifty yards away while both he and her horse are moving. Margaery looks on in horrified amazement as Sansa rides forward, dismounts and exchanges a few words with the woman. She cannot be sure, but she thinks she sees a flash of gold when Sansa takes the woman’s hand, but then Lady Lannister is mounted again and they are on their way to Flea Bottom.

The rumour that Sansa cut Petyr Baelish’s throat herself seems to carry more weight now.

It is perhaps two weeks after Jon Snow leaves for the Wall when Sansa calls Margaery for a private audience in her elegantly appointed solar.

“Once, you hoped to arrange a marriage for me – now I hope to warn you of a marriage being arranged for you.”

Margaery is never sure how to react to Prince Aegon, so the news that her brother has been brokering a betrothal between herself and Aegon elicits a mixed reaction.

She understands that it is a primarily political union – the prince has made no secret of his regard for Sansa, to the point where he disregards every other woman at court. House Tyrell has similarly made no secret of their discontent with renewed Targaryen rule, and so a marriage between the Houses would cement their loyalty. However, some small part of her hopes that the prince has at least some notion of who she is. She hopes only that she will not be forgotten in her own marriage bed.

It was always said that Rhaegon, Aegon’s father, cried out the name of Lyanna Stark on his wedding night, rather than that of his wife, Aegon’s mother, Elia of Dorne. Or was that Robert Baratheon? Sometimes there are so many stories that even in Margaery’s head they cross over and become confused.

Her fears are allayed at the tourney the following week, when Aegon is victorious and crowns her Queen of Love and Beauty and then sits by her at the feast that night. She is careful to remain attentive to the prince, her soon-to-be lord husband, but she manages to catch Sansa’s eye and nod
her thanks to the smiling Lady Lannister.

The flurry of activity that has centred on Sansa’s apartments these past weeks reaches fruition when, somehow surprising everyone, Lord Edmure Tully arrives from the dungeons of Casterly Rock with his young wife, Lady Roslin of the now otherwise extinct House Frey, and their young son, Coren.

It had been assumed that Lord Tully had died or been killed during the War of the Dragons, but it seems not – he is hale and hearty, his son a beautiful child with rosy cheeks and the ruddy Tully hair but Lady Roslin’s dark eyes. Lady Roslin herself is a pretty thing, Margaery’s age or a little older, with a shy manner and a slow smile. Lord Tully is gentle and kind with her, constantly keeping watch on her even as he proudly displays his son to the scrutiny of the court and, more importantly, the Queen.

His being alive lessens the urgency of splitting the lands in Sansa and Tyrion’s control, Margaery knows, and she can see the relief her brother and his companions feel in their ready acceptance of Lord Edmure into the court. With Riverrun under the control of the Tullys once more, only three of the major Houses are governed by the Lannisters now (the Iron Islands, everyone knows, are now part of the North, because rumour has it that Sansa herself wielded the sword which took Euron Crow’s Eye’s head, although Margaery would wager those rumours to be false because she has it from Sansa’s own mouth that she has never learned to wield a sword, preferring a bow), and there have been murmurs of House Royce being elevated to the position of Lords of the Eyrie, with Bronze Yohn Royce being named Lord Protector of the Vale and Warden of the East.

Margaery, who has slowly been growing to see Sansa as a friend, is happy for the girl, happy to see that some of the family Sansa thought lost is returned to her. It is clear that she and her uncle were never close – Sansa later confides that they had never met before Edmure’s arrival in King’s Landing – but it is equally clear that Sansa intends to change that.

She gives her chambers to her uncle and his household, and ignores the surprise of the court when she moves into the Tower of the Hand, residence of her lord husband.

Lord Edmure rides in the next tourney. He rides well but unsuccessfullly, takes his defeat with laughter and good grace, and seats himself between his wife and his niece to watch the rest of the jousting.

To Margaery’s amazement, the mysterious knight who smashes through his opposition effortlessly and never lifts his visor until he is victorious is revealed to be Loras, riding for the first time since their father’s death. He defeats Prince Aegon in the final turn, and presents the crown of roses to Queen Daenerys.
Margaery is relieved, putting this gesture of fealty together with the more peaceful nights her brother has been having of late and deciding that perhaps, perhaps he might be better, might be their glorious Knight of Flowers once more.

Two days later, he falls on his own sword. Margaery and Willas barely get him to the maester in time to save his life.

It is Sansa Lannister and Roslin Tully who offer her comfort, who sit with her and hold her hands and bring her sweet teas. Willas sits at Loras’ bedside night and day, rising only when the maesters insist he stretch his lame leg and wash himself. He refuses to allow Margaery to enter their brother’s chamber when the maester comes to change the dressing on his wound, but she knows from Willas’ ashen face every time, after the maester takes his leave, that there is little improvement.

Loras is awake, though his eyes are unfocused and he speaks little of sense, his wits dulled by the milk of the poppy he needs in such huge doses to overcome the pain, but he is aware enough to understand what news Willas and Margaery share with him.

Hearing that Ser Wendel Manderly is arrived from White Harbour as Champion of the North to take the final place on Daenerys’ Queensguard rouses Loras. Aegon comes himself to visit the man that will be his goodbrother should he survive, and within four days Loras is refusing the poppy and holding conversations.

He demands that Aegon allow him to remain as part of the household when he and Margaery marry, that he be allowed act as his sister’s personal guard in the way Cersei Lannister had her brother on the Kingsguard. Aegon promises to discuss it with the small council, because only twice before has a queen ever had a personal guard, and both times almost ended in the destruction of the Kingdoms – Naerys Targaryen and the Dragonknight, Cersei Lannister and the Kingslayer. Both times the personal guard was the queen’s brother, both times a member of the Kingsguard.

When Aegon returns on the first day of the new week and tells Loras that Daenerys has agreed to him being Margaery’s personal guard, confiding in Margaery that Daenerys agreed so long as Loras never wears a white cape again and remains unmarried, she sees hope for them all. The Tyrells are perhaps forgiven for their defiance during the War, meaning Willas is secure as Lord of Highgarden against the Florents. Loras has a purpose once more, one which will not require anything of him but devotion to his family and the honing of his combat skills, two things in which he always excelled.

And the uncertain smile Aegon flashes at her upon seeing Loras’ delight assures Margaery that her marriage might not be so cold as she’d feared. She only now has to worry about her relationship with the Mother of Dragons.
Daenerys Targaryen

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay - this one rather got away from me (by about three thousand words).
Hope it reads alright - any spelling/grammar/name mistakes are all mine.

Some plot points have been changed slightly from the books, mainly because I hadn't read AFFC or ADWD when I started, and partially because they fit better with the narrative I had in mind for this.

Dany has met Jon's sister-cousin twice before.

Once, it was immediately following the arrival of her army in the Vale, where Sansa had been hidden from them by unswervingly loyal guardsmen of House Royce until she'd washed herself clean of the blood of Petyr Baelish and been given moon tea to drink. Then, she'd been in shock after taking her first life, uncertain and mildly horrified at finding herself capable of such a feat. Her fiery hair had been dulled by ugly brown dye, her pale skin mottled with blossoming bruises, and she'd been clad in an ill-fitting roughspun gown that had been made for a woman smaller in the bust and bigger in the waist.

The second time had been at Riverrun, before Dany had taken Aegon and their army south to King's Landing and Jon had flown back north to his beloved Wall, when Sansa had been named Warden of the North and East until the War was won. Then, a year after their first meeting, Sansa had been as another woman. She stood tall and strong, her hair a river of red-gold down her back, her river-blue eyes hard and stern and determined. She'd worn a light shirt of mail over her fitted woollen tunic and leggings and boots, a quiver over her shoulder and a bow slung over her back, bearing her Stark colours in the white and grey wolf pelt draped around her shoulders, her Arryn colours in the enamel of the wristguard on her otherwise bare left arm, and her Tully colours in her eyes and hair. Dany had seen her as an equal, a warrior woman fighting for family and freedom much as she was herself.

Now, seeing this elegant lady sitting side-saddle in rich gowns and heavy furs, her hair twisted and made to glow, wearing the colours of three houses and riding with the bannermen of each, Dany wonders if perhaps she has made a mistake in entrusting so much power to Jon's sister-cousin.

She is announced of Sansa of House Stark, Lady Regent of Winterfell, the Eyrie and Riverrun, and she kneels at Dany's feet and pledges her fealty and that of her brother, the boy-lord for whom she acts as regent.

Dany accepts Sansa's oath, all the while watching the artful circlet of amber in the Lady of Winterfell's shining curls.
Sansa Stark before council is refreshing. Dany is used to being surrounded by men, but this past year and a half in King's Landing has made her realise that politicians and courtiers are incomparable to the warriors and honourable men and strange folk she has surrounded herself with before.

Her small council is, apparently, the biggest in some years. She sits at every council herself, with Aegon to her right and Tyrion Lannister to her left as her Hand. She has Illyrio, who despite his mercurial motivations has proved unswervingly loyal to her cause and was rewarded with the post of master of the coin, righting the wrongs perpetrated by this Lord Petyr Baelish of whom Dany has heard so much. Her master of laws is also her maester, a vibrant young man named Sybim who has more links to his chain that any other maester of his age, among them one cast in Valyrian steel.

Her Wardens, too, are entitled to places – Tyrion relinquished Casterly Rock's claim to the wardenship of the West, pointing out that he had quite enough responsibility as the Queen's Hand and Lord of the Westerlands, neatly dividing the responsibilities into administrative and military, and so Lord Marbrand sits as Warden of the West and Shield of Lannisport. Prince Doran Martell was offered wardenship of the South in place of Willas Tyrell but refused, insisting that enough honours were his in seeing his nephew as Prince of Dragonstone and heir to the Iron Throne, in seeing justice finally done for the rape and murder of Elia and Rhaenys. Instead, House Florent brought forward their claim to Highgarden and demanded that they be appointed Wardens if the Tyrells were to remain in Highgarden. Dany and Aegon had discussed it at length with Tyrion, and Sybim, and all four had agreed that this was a reasonable request. Sansa Stark will have to be brought to council eventually as Warden Regent of both North and East, something that will be the subject of much debate in coming days.

The four Lord Commanders – Queensguard, Royal Fleet, City Guard and Night's Watch – have places, as do the leaders of the three religions (the worship of the Drowned God died with House Greyjoy, and for that she is grateful). Brandon Stark, greenseer and child of the trees, has yet to sit at a meeting as chosen representative of those who worship the old gods of the North, but Jon carries his younger brother-cousin's correspondence south with him whenever he comes. The Red Priest wears a mask and gives no hint of his name, but he comes faithfully to every meeting and is logical and sensible in the face of all problems. The High Septon, younger by far than any of his recent predecessors and viciously devout, is less inclined towards diplomacy than his peers but useful in the sway he holds over so many of Dany's subjects.

Each of the great Houses, of course, those who sit in the high seats, are entitled to send a bannerman to council under the older laws, the laws which Dany has found herself turning to in place of the mad corruptions her father implemented and the power-plays of the Baratheon dynasty. Winterfell, Pyke, the Eyrie, Riverrun, Casterly Rock, Highgarden, Sunspear and Storm's End each have a seat. Pyke's claim is null, of course, but the others have each chosen a representative and sent him or her to King's Landing.


A council of twenty-one at its strongest, twenty-two when Sansa takes her seat, twenty-three when a new Warden of the East is appointed. The biggest small council in recent history.

She snaps back to the present when Sansa insists for what is apparently the third time that yes, she is
fully aware that her brother's current claims cannot all be allowed to stand despite their validity, that it is too much power to trust to any one family, even one as loyal as the Starks, and that she and her advisors and her brother (Dany is amused to note that Sansa is always careful to remember the Wolf Pup, little Lord Rickon, true heir to Winterfell and the North) have discussed the succession at length and that there is little for the council to worry about. Jon speaks in her defence, as does Lyessa Flint and Ser Barristan and, to Dany's surprise and amusement, Aegon.

The problem most of the council have, Daenerys can see, is just how legitimate the Stark claims to the Riverlands and the Vale are, and also how strong Sansa herself appears to be. She deals eloquently with questions from all quarters, never loses her calm resolve, remains utterly in control of herself and comports herself with such graceful elegance that Dany cannot help but be jealous.

What surprises Dany most, though, is not Sansa's elegant manners and pretty courtesies, but rather the deft way she has with deflecting unwanted questions, little turns of phrase that trick her questioners into revealing more of their reasons than perhaps they would be comfortable with. She is not the retiring noble that Daenerys had heard whispered of by her peers at court, but rather the fierce Lady of the North, affectionately nicknamed the Wolf-Bitch of Winterfell out of hearing of her brother-cousin by their men, whom Dany met in times past.

By the end of her time in front of the council, Aegon is smitten and the lords are unwilling to allow a woman other than their Queen to wield so much power without a strong husband. Aegon's clumsy attempt at a proposal would have garnered much support, Dany knows, had Sansa not cut him off with a smile and a question. There is something enthralling about this queer Northern lady, sister to Jon in everything but blood, something which Dany does not understand but would very much like to.

Every day, Dany becomes more and more convinced that she was made for conquest, not ruling.

She thrived during the War of the Dragons – Aegon had, at first, dared to challenge her right to the throne, but the gift of Viserion and the assurance that she would have no sons or daughters to name her heir had quieted his fire, tempered his impetuosity, made him a useful weapon. He was clever and strong, a gifted leader of men just as she herself had come to be, but he was also handsome and arrogant in the same way Viserys had been. Dany thought even when first they'd met that he would need more time, to mature and grow into his role, his responsibilities – Ser Barristan agreed, too, and when she'd said as much to Aegon, her nephew had fumed that he was older than her, that he was the male heir, that the Iron Throne passed along the male line-

Dany had barely blinked and Jhogo's whip had been coiled around Aegon's pale neck. She reminded her nephew, her voice icily calm, that while her legitimacy as a Targaryen would never be called into question, that she was unquestionably the daughter of Mad Aerys, Aegon had only the word of Jon Connington, who so dearly missed his beloved Dragon Prince, the true Dragon Prince, Rhaegar, who had been believed dead for many years.

He remained more submissive after that, and when he saw that she truly did understand ruling better than he ever would from her time with Drogo's khallasar and with her own, from her time in Slaver's Bay, he admitted that perhaps he had overstepped when he challenged her.
She would never admit it to him, not then, but she had been quite fond of him from the start. He reminded her of the good she’d seen in Viserys before the madness had taken her brother. Now, she freely admits to being fond of her nephew, often spends her afternoons in his company because he is charming, his cleverness manifesting itself in easy wit, his handsome face and effortless charisma drawing in those who might have been reluctant to bend the knee to the Targaryen banner once more.

But Aegon may yet prove to be better at the actual business of ruling than she is – she tires of sitting on the Iron Throne endlessly, her crown heavy on her brow and her backside aching from the feel of cold steel rather than supple leather or warm dragonflesh.

Aegon seems to relish the administrative side of ruling, which surprised everyone – himself included – when it came to light. His septa, who only recently revealed herself to the court as Lady Ashara Dayne, long since thought dead by her own hand, confided in Dany that Connington had long ago despaired of Aegon as anything but a militant king, and Dany is always pleased to see the gleam of pride in the older woman’s eyes when she speaks of Aegon.

Yes, Daenerys will secure the Seven Kingdoms, will forge peace by diplomacy and marriages and promises and dragon fire, but it is Aegon who will see them bloom.

Daenerys, after all, does not expect to live that long.

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Her other nephew is… Something else.

Jon is like nothing and no one Dany ever met before, not in all her travels. Sometimes she thinks she might see echoes of the man people swear Rhaegar was, but others speak of Ned Stark and look at Jon with such recognition in her eyes that she finds it difficult to claim him as Targaryen at all.

From the moment she met him, she felt something for him which she had not felt in her whole life. She had brought her people in ships to the Bay of Seals, around the queer isle of Skagos, and barely had they landed at Eastwatch-by-Sea but they had been assailed by a troupe of these heinous White Walkers.

Drogon had taken one look at them and unleashed his flame, but even when Viserion and Rhaegon had joined him it had not been enough.

Then Jon had ridden forth from the steam risen from dragon fire on snow, his Longclaw gleaming in his hand as his sworn brothers peppered the Others with arrows of dragonglass, and he’d cut a road through them to fight at her side.

It was then, then, that Daenerys Stormborn, the Unburnt, Mother of Dragons, had decided that if she was to take another husband, that husband would be her younger nephew.

Jon had wanted none of it, of course.

He’d introduced himself as Jon Snow, Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, and then he’d fallen out of his saddle. His brothers had stripped away layers of furs and mail and leather to reveal bandages soaked dark red, soaked so thoroughly that there was no white, that Jon was all awash in the Targaryen colours but for his pale, pale face and his grey Stark eyes.
She'd innocently asked what had happened, had he been injured in coming to her aid, and his squire, the beautiful dark boy called Satin, had snapped at her and told her that she'd make a piss-poor queen if she asked such stupid questions all the time.

It had not been until later that she'd discovered the truth of it, from the frightening woman all in red, who whispered of king's blood to wake dragons when Dany confirmed the rumours of how her dragons had hatched. She spoke of daggers in the dark, a brother betrayed, vows forsaken.

Satin, coming on Jon's orders to apologise for his earlier outburst, explained it in plainer terms. Jon had been the subject of a vicious attack, an attempt on his life, and the wounds were slow to heal – he refused to lie still for long enough to allow the flesh to knit, and they had no maester here to force him with superior knowledge.

Dany laughed, remembering how Jorah Mormont, her dear sweet lying bear who had loved her so well he had almost caused her death, had tried to convince her to ride in a litter during her pregnancy. She had brought forth from her host what healers she had, and Ser Barristan had offered to give an opinion, saying he knew better than many how to treat a wound from a blade.

Her Lord Commander had returned from visiting with Lord Snow fuming about the inability of the Night's Watch, for not cauterising some of Jon's wounds, for not stitching others, for keeping yet others soft with snow-damp bandages. Dany had been relieved to know that Jon would live, although Ser Barristan assured her that it would be at least a moon's turn before her nephew would be fit to ride south with her.

She'd sat with Jon as soon as he awoke after his wounds were tended by her people, and he'd listened to her story with a quiet patience that she hadn't seen since Drogo's death. He'd nodded when she'd explained her plans for conquest, for riding down the Kingsroad and taking King's Landing, but then he'd struggled to sit up properly and had explained that she would be an idiot to do so.

She'd asked him if all men of the Night's Watch spoke to their queen like this, or if it was only him and his squire, and he'd laughed tiredly and said only one thing.

"The Night's Watch takes no part in the politics of the realm, Your Grace."

Then, she hadn't understood just how seriously he took his vows to the Night's Watch, especially since he'd broken them once already. She hadn't understood that he would have no interest in being legitimized as Jon Targaryen, in taking his seat as Prince of Summerhall, third in line to the Iron Throne or, even better, King of the Seven Kingdoms as Dany's husband.

No, Jon Snow wished only to remain at the Wall, to hold back the threat of the Others and protect his precious North. He gladly took her dragon, took her men, took whatever help she had to offer, and Dany would be the first to admit that anything Jon asked of her then, she would have given.

All he wanted was dragonsteel, dragonglass, worthy men to wield it, and a dragon.

His dragon.

He agreed to ride Rhaegal to help her in her conquest as soon as he was fit to leave his bed, and she left two Unsullied each to guard him and the dragon until then.

He is her nephew, and she wanted – wants – him as her husband. It is only a pity that Jon Snow is the only man in the Seven Kingdoms who remains utterly impervious to her abundant charms.
At the feast, Sansa is the guest of honour, and she plays her part well. She is dressed in finest midnight-blue velvet, the colour highlighting her pale skin and fiery hair beautifully. Dany knows that everyone – Jon included – thinks that she is wary or jealous of Sansa, but she has the measure of Jon's sister-cousin.

She knows that the Lady Regent of Winterfell would never accept her bannermen rising against the throne, knows that the famous Stark honour runs too deep in her for her to ever allow that.

No, Daenerys is not jealous of Sansa. She knows that Sansa is beautiful, but she knows that their beauties are too different to ever put them in competition – Sansa is all things Westerosi, with her reserved manners and demure smiles and delicate silks and velvets. Dany knows that many of her courtiers disapprove of her refusal to bend to their accepted image of femininity, of her insistence of training with her men.

Daenerys is wary of what Sansa could be used as, though. Whether Jon's sister-cousin wills it or no, she and her brother are symbols of a rebellion that should have rung true, and with the might of over half the Seven Kingdoms behind them…

And she remembers what others forget, too. She remembers a drunken Tyrion laughing and crying into his cups about his failed attempts to protect his fair lady wife, the woman-child Sansa Stark. It would not do well to harm Sansa, not when Tyrion looks at her as if she is the Maiden herself.

By the time she finally manages to sup alone with Sansa, she is heartily sick of councils. Even a year after her coronation, much of the realm is in disarray after the War of the Five Kings and the War of the Dragons. The Throne Wars, they are being called, and still people are calling for heads to be mounted atop the walls of King's Landing in vengeance for those who were slaughtered in the war.

Daenerys is so very sick of hearing calls for the Freys' heads that she broaches the topic with Sansa, who smiles a smile so cold it makes even Dany's temper falter.

"The Freys broke guest law to murder my family. For that slight, I broke guest law to take their heads. House Frey is ended, Your Grace – tell the people that Sansa Stark has brought judgement down on them, in Lord Rickon of Winterfell's name. See how they like that."

It is a statement so harsh and simple that it seems almost wrong coming from Sansa's pretty mouth, but it makes Dany smile none the less – the other ladies of her court are so afraid of offending her that they barely open their mouths in front of her, but Sansa seems to understand that pretty courtesies mean little to Daenerys. She prizes honesty above all else, after her years spent with silver-tongued wretches (Ser Jorah), and Sansa is nothing if not honest.

Sansa asks if others have been requesting blood – she mentions that the Karstarks are not satisfied with the Kingslayer's execution, that they want his son as a retribution for the brothers Jaime Lannister slew in battle. Daenerys quails from the thought of killing a child, especially one so sweet
as Tommen Lannister.

And besides, as Sansa is doubtless well aware, Tyrion would raise the West if anyone dared harm a
hair on either Tommen or Myrcella's fair heads. When he adopted them, he did so in front of the
court, before Jaime and Cersei Lannister were put to death, when Myrcella was still in Dorne, and
sware that they were to be treated as his natural children, and the way Tommen clung to Tyrion's
hand, the way Myrcella had ran so hard at him when she'd seen him waiting for her on the docks –
well, it had left little doubt of the affection his nephew and niece bore him.

Before Dany can mention this, of course, Sansa says that she has no intention of allowing a child to
be killed for his father's sins. She says the Karstarks will be made to settle for the justice of the
crown, and her eyes are like deep blue ice when she says that she will make them settle for it.

Dany smiles then, and decides that she likes Sansa Stark very much.

Dany can't help but laugh with Sansa about Willas Tyrell and Doran Martell's attack on her marriage
to Tyrion, even though Sansa herself seems less than impressed. Tyrion sits with them in the royal
solar and watches quietly as his wife vents her frustration at the walls, pacing up and down in a
temper the likes of which Dany didn't think her capable of.

Then again, it was in a temper that Sansa cut Petyr Baelish's throat, so perhaps there is something
under that polite exterior other than a razor-sharp mind. Dany has heard that the Tullys were fiery
when riled.

Sansa and Tyrion seem fatigued from dealing with the assaults on their marriage. Jon is typically
useless in matters of court, oblivious to anything except a direct attack on family or friend, and
Aegon is quietly supportive of those who wish to break Sansa and Tyrion apart.

She has greater concerns than Sansa and Tyrion being married, though, because she seems to be one
of the few members of council who don't think the two are grasping for power. Sansa has already put
forward Bronze Yohn Royce as Lord of the Eyrie, and Tyrion has confided that Edmure Tully and
his family have been found in the innermost chambers of Casterly Rock, alive and well but forgotten
in the havoc of the war. The Vale and the Riverlands are no longer Sansa's, and it will not be overly
long before her brother is old enough to take control of the North.

No, Dany is not worried about Sansa and Tyrion. She is worried about Willas Tyrell, about his
brothers and cousins and that pretty sister of his. The Tyrells are notoriously changeable, and she
trusts them little despite Tyrion's assurances.

Between Highgarden's potential treachery, the volatility of the Stormlands, the Martells demanding
ever more vengeance for the wrongs committed against Dorne – Dany knows that everyone
expected her and Arianne to become close, but Aegon's cousin bores her, with her constant
aggression – and the squalling of the lesser lords, she has no time to worry about whatever little bit of
happiness her friends can carve for themselves.

Especially when they're stripping *themselves* of their excessive power for her.
When the time comes for Jon to leave, Daenerys finds herself begging her nephew to leave the Wall for what seems like the hundredth time.

She's too proud to ever tell him why she so desperately wants him to stay, of course, to admit that she's hopelessly in love with him and would very much like him as her consort, her king, but she puts every other argument she can think of to him.

Jon kisses her forehead, hugs her close, tells her that he and Rhaegal will be more use up north on the Wall, fighting back the Others that are coming in ever-smaller numbers since the first taste of spring filtered into the air, and promises to visit as often as his duties will allow.

He plans to fly ahead on Rhaegal's back, and there is a group of some sixty young men who will follow with Jon's squire, men who are third or fourth or fifth sons, who wish to find some sort of honour and think that it will be easy found in the Night's Watch under valiant Lord Commander Snow, Prince Targaryen, Jon.

There are many things Daenerys thinks she might find under Jon, and honour isn't one of them. However, she can't prevent him from leaving unless she has him arrested, and so she sends him off with her blessing and all the obsidian his men can carry.

She'd had the two swords Tywin Lannister had commissioned from Ned Stark's greatsword reforged and cleared of the red dye, but when she'd tried to bestow it to Jon he'd laughed. He'd reached back over his shoulder, patted Longclaw's hilt and told her that Ice belongs to the Stark in Winterfell, to Rickon when he comes of age.

She thinks that she will never understand her funny Northern nephew, born of Targaryen fire and Stark ice, and she wonders if that, perhaps, is part of his allure.

Jon left her with very valid worries, though, which is absolutely typical of him.

Aegon's courting of Sansa is gone beyond improper now, especially since she began using the name Lannister. Jon suggested – and Daenerys agrees – that it is beyond time Aegon found himself a wife.

Preferably not one with a husband.

She brings it up in conversation with Tyrion and Sansa, in their daily private council in her solar. Not only is the privacy offered a relaxing break from the courtesies of court, but it allows them to speak freely – Sansa controls the rumours that are always legion in the Red Keep, after all, and so there is
little to fear from spies.

Aegon is never invited to these meetings, and the only guards Dany ever has stand at her door while Sansa and Tyrion are at council with her are her bloodriders. They seem to find Tyrion amusing, and are oddly wary of Sansa – as far as Dany can make out, it's because of Sansa's unusual height for a woman – but she knows that they would never, ever betray her. They are hers, she is theirs, and she trusts them above all others (except Jon and his unimpeachable honour).

Sansa and Tyrion share a loaded look that suggests they have already spoken of this, and Dany finds herself relieved.

She is less pleased when they offer up Margaery Tyrell as an option, and it takes them some time to convince her.

A raven arrives two days later, sealed with a crowned stag and bearing ill tidings from Shireen Baratheon – the girl wishes to inform the Queen that the Storm Lords are baying for blood and wish for penance to be done for the murders of Lords Renly and Stannis.

Daenerys knows that the Storm Lords want Brienne of Tarth's head for Renly's death, although Dany believes that the Maid had nothing to do with her king's murder, and the idea of some sort of reparation for Stannis Baratheon's execution is laughable.

Instead of offering anything at all, Dany writes to Shireen and asks if perhaps she might come to court and discuss the issue in person.

The next raven bearing the Baratheon seal is mild and pleasant, and Lady Shireen would very much like to apologise for bothering the Queen, that the Storm Lords are suddenly appeased by the prices they have already received, by the justice the Queen and her men meted out when they arrived in King's Landing.

Dealing with the lordlings and ladies that are the remnants of the great houses gives Daenerys a headache, and she wishes she had more councillors who she could trust with important affairs. As it is, she has but five – Tyrion, Sansa, Barristan Selmy, Jon and Maester Sybim.

After sealing the letter and passing it to Sybim to be sent to Storm's End, Daenerys calls for Sansa and opens the Arbor gold.
Tyrion must have heard about the Karstarks demands for Tommen's head – probably from Sansa – because within two moons, Tommen and Myrcella are brought to court from Casterly Rock.

Dany is fond of children, and always makes a point of speaking with the children and young people presented to her at court. Tyrion's niece and nephew – daughter and son – are lovely, the image of their natural mother and father but sweet and gentle.

Myrcella is horribly conscious of her missing ear, and constantly tugs her heavy curls down over it what remains, while Tommen is a carelessly affectionate child who gives his smiles as freely as Myrcella does her laughter. They are often to be found chasing each other around the gardens of the Tower of the Hand, usually with a kitten or two near at hand.

Tyrion, on such occasions, can usually be found nearby, positively bursting with pride.

Myrcella was once betrothed to Prince Trystane of Dorne, Dany knows, but the engagement fell through with the not-so-startling revelation that Myrcella is as Baratheon as the Martells themselves. The girl is nearly thirteen now, the same age Dany was when she married Drogo, the same age Sansa was when she and Tyrion married, and Dany wonders if perhaps it is time to think about another betrothal.

Sansa seems to think differently. Her opinion counts for more, Myrcella's stepmother as she is. She confides that Myrcella is not yet flowered, and that there are few who would jump at the chance of tying a son to the Kingslayer and the Mad Queen's bastard daughter.

Myrcella herself seems oblivious to the problems surrounding her, and remains as sweet and shy and quietly charming as ever she was, according to those who knew her as a child. She lives for her brother and uncle-father, the only family left to her, but seems to enjoy the company of other girls her own age, too.

It is only when Dany sees Myrcella dancing with young Edric Dayne that she understands just how young the Little Lioness truly is. Ned is a fine, tall youth with a shock of wavy fair hair, and though Myrcella has the Lannister height she is still small and slight beside him.

Daenerys decides that perhaps Sansa is right, that Myrcella would be better to wait a while before finding a husband.

All this talk of betrothals and children stirs Dany's memory, of course.

Had he lived, her Rhaego would have been six years old by now. If she closes her eyes and concentrates, she can see the child he would have been. Tall and strong and fierce like his father, with Drogo's hair and skin and features, but with her pale Targaryen eyes.

Sometimes she wonders if perhaps the witch-woman was wrong. Perhaps she should try again to bear a child, find a husband with whom she could be happy-
Edmure Tully is as charming as his niece is beautiful, and his lady wife is even shyer than Myrcella Lannister.

The lords and ladies of the court are astonished when Edmure strides quite calmly into the throne room, his son in his arms and his wife at his side. It was widely believed that he was dead, killed during the sack of Casterly Rock, or that the Lannisters had lied about having him at all, that the Freys had killed him, too, at the Red Wedding.

But no, Edmure Tully is gracious and witty and courteous and very much alive, and seems utterly devoted to his Frey wife. When he is not spending his evenings with Lady Roslin and little Coren, he dines with Sansa – rarely with Tyrion, though, because there seems to be no love lost between Sansa's uncle and her husband.

The unease comes to a head the night before the tourney to celebrate the new year. Sansa is dining with her uncle and his wife in their rooms, not far from the royal apartments. Dany is eating with Aegon in her rooms, discussing last-minute arrangements for tomorrow's festivities, when the screaming begins.

They both rush down the corridors to the Tullys' apartment, thinking that some dissident or assassin managed to get into the Keep and is wreaking havoc, but instead they find Sansa storming away from her uncle, her face twisted in rage.

"Sansa, please, wait-"

"You say you don't trust my husband, uncle? You trusted Petyr Baelish and he raped me! Tyrion has never laid a finger on me without my consent, but your precious foster brother raped me before I killed him!"

The crowd that was drawn by the noise doesn't know what to do with itself now. While there have been rumours of what conspired between Sansa and Littlefinger that ended in her killing him, few have had confirmation from Sansa herself. Dany can see how unsettled they are at the thought of Sansa, quiet, strong, clever Sansa, as a victim.

Dany does the sensible thing. She steps forward, orders the bystanders to leave, orders Edmure back into his rooms, orders Aegon to find Tyrion, and gently guides the weeping Sansa back to her solar where there is wine enough to get them both spectacularly drunk.

She isn't quite sure how to react when Tyrion and Aegon arrive, and Tyrion does nothing but take the goblet from Sansa's trembling hand, touch the curve of her jaw with his fingertips, and offer her his hand. She smiles shakily, thanks Daenerys for her kindness, and the two disappear to the Tower of the Hand.
It suddenly occurs to Dany that Tyrion never doubted his appointment as her Hand, because when he was arranging for the rebuilding of the Red Keep, he had the Tower of the Hand built with shallower steps, built lower and wider and more suited to him.

If she weren't so worried for Sansa, she'd laugh.

The most recent assassin makes his attempt the following night, before Loras Tyrell falls on his sword, and Dany finds the Knight of Flowers' attempt on his own life an excellent way to hide the attempt on hers.

She has Aggo hide the assassin's body in the walls as Ser Barristan arranges a search to ensure that her would-be killer had no allies with him.

She knows that is discomfits many that she has her Queensguard and her bloodriders, but for her, they serve different purposes. She could never have Aggo, Rhakaro and Jhogo guarding her during council sessions, for example, because they leap to her defence at the slightest of insults and tend to prefer retribution of the violent sort. She has her Queensguard to ensure her safety during the day, during council sessions and tourneys and feasts and formal occasions.

She has her ko for the darker times.

Loras Tyrell's suicide attempt sets the court all aflutter, and sets Daenerys wondering.

The fabled Knight of Flowers had been injured during the sack of Dragonstone – boiling oil had left him scarred, and, despite initial reports, his pretty face had been spared, but Dany has seen no sign of the shining youth she heard so much about.

Several of her younger courtiers, mostly her younger knights, have become reserved and reclusive, if Tyrion and Sansa's reports are to be believed. She doesn't doubt that it is, in no small part, due to the massive executions that marked the start of her reign. Many fathers and brothers were put to death, Mace Tyrell among them, and she sometimes fears that she was over-zealous in wiping out her opposition.

The false Kevan Lannister gave her constant doubts, but Tyrion had reminded her that it had been her supporters who killed his uncle, who made it look as though the Tyrells had a hand in it, who caused such strife, so it made sense to pull someone who passed for Kevan Lannister from a
distance out of the cells, to make it look as though Kevan Lannister was only now being executed for treason. She hadn't liked lying about it then, hadn't liked telling the Tyrells that the Lannisters had plotted their downfall and faked Kevan's death to cause discord.

Somehow, Willas Tyrell had believed it. They all had.

Of course, some of the deaths were less worrying. Ser Robert Strong, the headless mass that had once been Gregor Clegane, had been burned inside his armour until steel melted and bones turned to ash. Sandor Clegane, too, had been killed, his head taken from his shoulders by Rakharo's arakh. She had given him a knight's death, a lord's death, and he'd taken it cursing her name, struggling against his guards. He'd been captured near Riverrun, fighting and screaming and driven mad by septic wounds. Ser Barristan had been prepared to kill him there and then, but Sansa had pleaded for mercy for him – he had died with more honour than he'd lived, if the stories Dany had heard were true.

She is the first to admit, though, that perhaps some part of her had wanted to kill him to quench the anger that burned deep in the pit of her stomach. Why should a beast like Sandor Clegane live on, have a chance to redeem himself, when her brave bear had been slaughtered by a sellsword? Jorah Mormont had been twice the man the Hound had ever been, and Dany would never forget that.

Daenerys is lauded as a warrior queen, but she never relished death. She has ordered deaths aplenty, has seen justice done, but she had never enjoyed seeing a life end. Perhaps it made her weak, that even the Kingslayer's death had brought her no pleasure. Perhaps Daario had been right, in saying that a ruler must be the butcher or the meat. Already the people looked to Aegon, their brave prince, tall and strong and handsome and always smiling, the man who had cut through the ranks of the Mad Queen's men like so many straw dummies.

Aegon had not ridden into battle on Viserion's back any more than Jon had ridden on Rhaegal's. Both her nephews had insisted that to do so would be dishonourable, but Jon had been able to control Rhaegal even from the ground, even from hundreds of yards. Aegon had not been so easy in his control of Viserion, but that was to be expected – men whispered of Jon's relationship with his direwolf, his red-eyed Ghost, whispered warg and skinchanger, and Jon himself had admitted to her that he sometimes saw the world through Ghost's eyes or Rhaegal's, just as she sometimes saw it through Drogon's. Aegon had not yet found his bond with Viserion by the time the battle commenced, but by the end they were fighting as one.

The Battle of King's Landing had ended with the Mad Queen, the Kingslayer and their cronies cowering in the courtyard of the Red Keep while the three Targaryens, beautiful and wild and fierce, had sat astride their dragons' hot necks on the roof of the highest tower, the dragons roaring their triumph for all of Westeros to hear.

No, Daenerys didn't relish death as her father had.

But she relished victory, and what kingdom was built without bloodshed?
Aegon's marriage to Margaery Tyrell is a grand affair. The city is bedecked in red and black, in green and gold, three-headed dragons and roses. Daenerys oversees the making of the Targaryen cloak Aegon will wrap Margaery's shoulders in, the making of the circlet of gold and rubies and obsidian that Aegon will wear during the ceremony to mark him as Prince of Dragonstone, as if his hair and eyes and features did not do so already.

The Targaryen tapestries the Usurper removed and destroyed have been replaced, and Balerion's skull resides once more behind the Iron Throne.

Jon rides south for the occasion, Rhaegal flying above him, Ghost running beside him and his squire riding behind. He brings no gifts, his presence the only thing Aegon asked of him, and the brothers meet at the dragonpit with laughter and open affection.

They eat that night in Daenerys' solar, with Sansa and Tyrion in attendance, and the mood is light and the air full of laughter. Sansa teases Jon that perhaps he should change the vows of the Night's Watch. Tyrion gives Aegon mock-serious advice on the sort of romantic gestures pretty young wives appreciate, which prompts Sansa to swipe playfully at his shoulder and remind him that she and Margaery are two very different ladies, that Margaery may not appreciate books and puzzles the way she does.

The wedding goes without a hitch. Willas Tyrell's limp is barely noticeable as he walks his sister from the door of the sept to pass her into Aegon's care, Aegon who looks so handsome and regal in his black and red velvet and satin doublet.

Margaery seems to have taken the hint from the whispers permeating the city and wears her hair up, twisted through with golden ribbons and golden roses, wears rich green silks and damask. She dresses as a widow, not a maiden, and everyone seems well pleased by the choice.

She's very lovely, Daenerys has to admit, and she can't quite help herself when she glances to the side to look at Jon. He's all in black, of course, fine black lambswool and soft black velvet. He refuses to wear red, though, refuses to show his colours, remains the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch at all times. He sits beside her, so close and yet so far, so attached to his accursed Wall that he may as well have not come south.

She can't help but wonder what their wedding would look like.

Dany herself is resplendent in red satin, cut straight across the neck to bare her shoulders, her crown heavy on her brow. She knows that she looks beautiful, knows that there are men all around her who would give almost anything to be her consort, but she only wants one.

And Jon won't have her.

Sansa and Tyrion sit nearby, behind them, and she knows that tomorrow, when the festivities are over, they will have a full report ready for her. Nothing will be missed, not what the ladies are wearing, what the lords are drinking or who everyone is fucking – Sansa and Tyrion miss little, Sansa's little birds less.
The feast, too, goes perfectly – Margaery and Aegon lead the dancing, and listening to the courtiers, one would think there had never been a couple so radiant, so graceful, so perfectly matched. Jon dances first with Sansa, then with Margaery, then finally with Daenerys. He holds her as if she's made of glass, fragile and delicate, and she wants to grab him, shake him-

"Would it have been easier for you if I'd stayed away?"

His question robs her of her breath, of her sense, and she finds herself shaking her head and then nodding and trying not to look a fool.

"I would never want to hurt you, Dany, but you must understand – I can't forsake my vows. Not again."

They finish the dance, and they don't speak for the rest of the evening.

That night, Sansa and Daenerys share a bed – Sansa smiles a secretive little smile and points out that neither of them are likely to have other bedfellows, not with the menfolk so spectacularly drunk, and Dany wonders if perhaps everyone has underestimated Sansa and Tyrion's regard for one another.

They sit up for hours, and Sansa tells stories of Winterfell, of fighting with her sister and of watching her brothers spar in the yard. She tells stories of Robb more than anyone else, of the brother who died for love, who was so like her in the face that even Jon commented on it. Bran, too, features heavily in Sansa's reminisces, Rickon less so – she admits that her "baby brother," the one the Northmen call the Wolf Pup, was too little to be of any concern while they were all in Winterfell together.

Eventually, though, Sansa sleeps, and Dany lies in bed wondering what it must be like to have been so close to family. She and Viserys had never been close – he had been her everything and she his, but she couldn't speak of him with the affectionate warmth Jon and Sansa use when talking about the Starks. She misses him, sometimes, but only very rarely.

She's lost in contemplation of her relationship with her brother when the small, lithe figure climbs near silently through the window. It's dark, the darkest part of the night, and still the sounds of the revellers echo up to Dany's rooms. She almost doesn't notice the small person, barely has time to scream for Aggo before the person, all hooded and cloaked, is jumping for the bed. Sansa's awake, just, bleary eyed and confused, but somehow she manages to avoid the assassin's knife when it dives towards her.

It's a mess, a confused tangle of sheets and pillows and long hair and limbs, and Aggo is little to no help because every move he would make against the assassin risks Sansa and Dany's lives, a chance he won't take.

Aggo shouts something in Dothraki, Dany doesn't know what it is because Sansa screams as he speaks, and the doors burst open to reveal three members of the Queensguard, but what can her
valiant white cloaks do-

The assassin leaps from the bed, cursing them all in Braavosi, and makes it to the window before anyone can lay a hand on him.

Sansa stands up quite calmly, crosses the room and picks up the knife he threw down in his wake. It's bloody well up the hilt, an elegant curve of blued steel and mahogany. Sansa's lips twist into a vicious, predatorial smile.

Her forehead is bleeding, split open from the middle of her hairline to the top of her right ear, but she doesn't seem to notice and pushes aside any offers of help as she surveys the knife.

"If the knife wound or your guards don't kill him, your Grace, the poison will. Poison is a woman's weapon, after all."

Word spreads quickly of Sansa's heroics, of course, and the women of the court fawn over her, fussing over the heavy bandages the maesters insist on wrapping around her head. She laughs it off, saying it was no great effort to protect her queen, after all.

Tyrion is sure to stay by her side at all times. Jon shouts at her for what seems like an age, telling her how ridiculous it was of her, how irresponsible, why didn't she think of Rickon?

Sansa laughs at them all, going about her business as normal, ignoring the strange looks that follow her as she walks at Tyrion's side.

Jon leaves four days later, unable to spare more time with the long ride north ahead of him. He brings some dozen recruits with him, as well as gold and supplies as a gift from the crown. He makes Sansa swear that she won't go anywhere without a guard from now on, makes Dany promise the same (although she never goes unguarded anyways). Tyrion, for once, stamps down on Sansa's arguments against Jon's insistences, surprising everyone.

It's only when Jon is about to leave and Sansa is too ill to come to the gates and see him off that Tyrion admits that she's with child.
His lady wife is not someone he recognises.

This is what occurs to Tyrion as Sansa Stark rides into the Red Keep, showing all her colours and leading so many of her vassals. Regent of all the lands above the Trident, she is confident in the power that is hers, her shoulders back and her head held high until she kneels before the Queen in a gesture of fealty, bowing her head and exposing the pale nape of her neck in a show of vulnerability the likes of which she had never favoured Tyrion with during their ill-fated time as man and wife.

The girl he was forced to wed, who he attempted to shield from the ugliness of the world as he could not shield her from the ugliness of his face, would never have been confident enough to fall to her knees so elegantly. He had seen Sansa brought to her knees before Joffrey enough times to know that this was different – then, she had been showing the courtesy of fear, of abject terror and dread anticipation of her next punishment. Now, she kneels because she thinks Daenerys a worthy queen. A recommendation from the remnants of House Stark and House Tully, alike in honour and matched in pride, is not to be sniffed at. He hopes Daenerys understands just how valuable Sansa's very public show of fealty is to her in maintaining her control of her more fickle liegelords.

When she rises to her feet, her skirts dark with wetness halfways to her waist, she stands almost a full head above the Queen, and they face each other like the sun and the moon, radiant as either, golden-red and silver-pale.

Tyrion reprimands himself for his foolish poeticism, and escapes to the sanctuary of his rooms. He knows that Sansa will not be able to look on him in anything but disdain at best, hatred at worst, and the thought of seeing her face twisted as such saddens him. Hers is a face made for smiling, and his presence will be no help on that score.

Daenerys will not miss him for one day, he thinks. Sansa deserves to find some measure of happiness here in the Red Keep, in King's Landing, and he worries that his lingering too near her will only
disquiet her, remind her of the dark times she spent as Joffrey and Cersei's prisoner in this place.

Aegon comes to see him after the council meeting, to divulge all of Sansa's business. Daenerys would have come herself, but some problem had arisen with her Drogon, and she'd had to run for the dragonpit, and Jon was busy with his sister-cousin, finding a closeness that they'd never shared as children but which would grow between them now that they were without Robb, without Arya, without Ned and Catelyn.

Tyrion is unsurprised to find himself unamused by Aegon's obvious admiration of Sansa. While he may have little claim to her anymore if ever he had it, she is still his wife, and Tyrion has always found himself to be jealous of what is his. The prince is quite obviously smitten with whatever idea of Sansa he's built up in his mind, of the fierce warrior that men whisper of, the Wolf-Bitch. Tyrion knows enough of how rumour works to know that Sansa's part in the battles and conquests of the war were much exaggerated, that a woman who had not trained as Brienne of Tarth and the Mormonts would not be allowed into the fray. He knows that Sansa isn't the woman Aegon thinks, and he wonders how the prince will react to that revelation.

Besides, Aegon's found reason to admire several of Daenerys' maids and more even of the castle servants, and Tyrion has almost been on the verge of calling for another maester from Oldtown solely to provide enough moon tea in order to prevent there from being a Targaryen bastard to worry about, another Blackfyre. Tyrion dreads to think what an outright refusal from Sansa would earn from the Prince of Dragonstone – Aegon seems to think himself irresistible, a trait Jon and Daenerys are working steadily to beat from their brother and nephew by way of sly jests and wicked tongue lashings respectively. Even still, from the way he speaks of Sansa and the power that is hers until her brother comes of age, Tyrion can see that Aegon thinks himself a fine match for the Lady of Winterfell.

Much and all as he longs to do so, he must not mention his marriage to Sansa until he speaks to her. He has little doubt that she will wish for an annulment, and that, at least, he can give her.

He watches from the mezzanine above the great hall that night at the feast, unable to affect an air of true nonchalance because he must rise up on his toes if he wishes to see above the ornate railings.

Sansa, he notes, is everything she would never have become had she remained at King's Landing. She outshines the Queen, draws the eyes of every man in the hall and several women, seems perfectly at her ease between Jon and Barristan Selmy.

Tyrion notes also that Daenerys has striven to make herself as much Sansa's opposite as possible for tonight, with her bell-braid and her bare arms and her wicked smiles. Sansa is all things traditional and wholesome in comparison, even if the cloth-of-silver sling supporting her injured arm is a subtle reminder that here sits a lady who is also a warrior, and her bodice is cut a little lower than is generally acceptable for ladies of her age. He can't help but admire it, and feels no shame in admitting that he desires her – he desired her even then, when she was a terrified girl forced into his bed, although he'd had the restraint to know that any attempt at seduction would ruin her.

He is not ashamed to admit either that, should the occasion arise, no force in all the world would stop him from seducing her now.

Her prettiness has blossomed into beauty, and for all that she is the very image of her lady mother, she is also more – Tyrion has vague memories of seeing Lyanna Stark at the tourney in Harrenhall, where Jaime won his white cloak and Rhaegar Targaryen sent everything to hell, and there is something of the same detached allure that so entranced the prince about Lyanna's niece. It is no
wonder Aegon is so enraptured by her, because in so many ways he truly is his father's son.

Tyrion turns away before the dancing begins, when he hears Sansa's pretty laugh ring out and mingle with Jon's gruff chuckles as they echo round the ceilings. It strikes him as he waddles away that he has never heard her laugh before.

It is five days before he is caught out. It irks him that he is so predictable that even Sansa, who he has not spoken to in three years, can figure his hiding places and bolt holes without any great effort.

She emerges from the stacks of the library with her good hand tucked into her sling, her head bowed just enough so that she is looking through her eyelashes when she greets him. He is startled enough that he almost drops his book, a useful tome on the history of the Targaryen dynasty that he is perusing to feed Daenerys' insatiable curiosity about her family.

Sansa takes the seat opposite him, her head still down, her hair gathered low behind her left ear, the way he's often seen her wear it these past few days. She looks older than her not-quite seventeen years, and he watches silently as she reaches behind her neck and unclasps the brooch holding her sling in place. Her shoulder seems stiff, but she rests her hands on the table in front of her, the only barrier between them, and links her long, pale fingers together.

"You have been avoiding me, my lord husband. Have I offended you?"

He hesitates, unsure if this is merely prelude to her asking him to arrange for their annulment or if there is some trick up her gossamer sleeve.

"Never, my lady. To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

She smiles then, the light from the window behind her alighting on her hair and, he knows, his own, showing their crowning glories to their best advantage. Sansa manages to look like the Lady of the North that she is, while he suspects that his hair is merely being elevated from straw to sunshine.

She speaks then, her voice low, her words halting, and he pushes aside his book to take her hands when her blue, blue eyes cloud with tears. He did his best to protect her when they lived as man and wife, even before then as well, and to know that she was hurt so deeply (not, he prays, irreparably) as soon as he allowed himself to be made use of in Joff's death infuriates him. In some deep, dark part of himself, the part that he has been attempting to temper with rationale and common sense and time spent with Jon Snow since his return to the Kingdoms, triumphant at Daenerys' side, he wishes that he were more formidable and that those who harmed her were still alive, if only so he could kill them all himself, slowly and painfully.

Her description of her time in the Vale is harrowing. From the madness of Lysa Arryn – worsened, it would seem, since his personal experience of it, perhaps by seeing that Sansa was more beautiful again than the Lady Catelyn had been, more beautiful than Lysa would ever be – to being forced to endure the sloppy affections of Harry the Heir, and eventually to Littlefinger.

Littlefinger in particular makes him want to rage and roar. He has nothing but utter contempt for the craven. What kind of man turns the twisted idea of love he bore for a woman for most of his life on her vulnerable, broken daughter?

He cannot hold back a curse when Sansa admits that Littlefinger raped her – not that she says so, not in so many words, but Tyrion understands what she means. The only obvious kindness he ever showed her that she appreciated was in not bedding her, and for Littlefinger to be less kind than he himself…
He hates himself a little bit, somehow, for not staying in Westeros long enough to find her, to ensure that she was safe, even though he is fully aware that he would not be sitting here with her had he done so.

Jon Snow appears from nowhere while the echo of Tyrion's fury fades into silence, and Sansa's cheeks are aflame. He is unable to miss the way the flush of colour spreads across the pale skin of her neck, disappearing under the neckline of her dark grey gown, but is mercifully distracted when she pulls her fingers from his and hastily takes her exit.

Jon stays, watching him closely as he avoids those grey Stark eyes, Ned Stark's eyes and the accusation that probably lies therein.

He is surprised at how persistent Jon is. After perhaps twenty minutes he gives in, and is relieved when Jon asks for a private audience. Tyrion hopes that they will be able to keep the shouting to a minimum.

Instead of questioning Tyrion's intentions towards Sansa, though, Jon expresses his worries that perhaps, perhaps, certain of the Houses who are uneasy under Targaryen rule might rally to Sansa as a figurehead. Tyrion has to agree that it is a valid concern – Sansa's story is more sympathetic than Daenerys', if only because Eddard Stark and Catelyn Tully were reasonably well respected, the accusations of treason and treachery never fully believed, whereas Daenerys' father is remembered as the Mad King and not much else, but also because Sansa displays a fragility which Daenerys fights constantly to hide.

Sansa grew up learning to be a lady, and that will never leave her no matter what her achievements.

Jon's worries are irritatingly narrow, though. He thinks only of the potential threat Sansa bears to Daenerys' throne and of the White Walkers come a-calling from beyond the Wall, when in reality there are so many more tiny things that could quite easily destabilise the realm and destroy any chance he has of bringing recruits north to the Wall to fight the Others with blades of dragonglass to match the Queen's crown.

No, there are more delicate steps being taken to destabilise the kingdoms. The Tyrells have to be controlled, for one, and the remaining Baratheon loyalists, too, as they are rallying behind Stannis' girl as the last Baratheon heir. There remain murmurs of unrest even in the North, something Jon should be aware of, where certain of the most loyal bannerman to the Starks feel that the taste of freedom they experienced under Robb Stark's ill-fated reign as King in the North was more palatable than they might have expected, and Rickon does have a look of Robb, after all, direwolf and all.

Sansa, Tyrion knows, kept those lords who would dare to whisper of treason against the Dragon Queen firmly under her thumb while in Winterfell, and while in the Eyrie and Riverrun, but to manage them from King's Landing would be a feat beyond even his formidable wife.

He does his best to assuage Jon's fears, promising that Daenerys will not lift a hand against Sansa, one of her most devoted subjects, who championed the Targaryen cause with all the lords now under her regency, and the young Lord Commander seems put at ease, at least to some degree.

Sansa invites him to dine with her later that night. If not for their vows, it would be improper for him to be alone with her. He wonders if there are any in King's Landing who would readily remember their marriage, decides not, then decides he doesn't care regardless.

She has changed her gown, now wearing soft, pale blue trimmed with cream. Arryn colours, missing only the falcon. She wears them well, her hair a vibrant contrast to the gentle colours of the wool.
He, too, has changed, deciding that his dusty breeches and doublet from earlier were inappropriate for dining with his lady wife for the first time in three years. He reprimands himself for being vain, but Sansa's behaviour earlier had shown her desire for something other than an annulment – even if it only his friendship that she requires, it is something he will gladly offer her in the hope of lessening the ache of what his family did to hers.

It is not just friendship she desires, it would seem.

For the first time since her arrival at King's Landing, Tyrion is privy to a glimpse of the girl he married. Sansa has difficulty in finding the words to describe her reasons to avoid marrying one of the young lords so desperate for her hand, can explain only haltingly how afraid she remains of the marriage bed, her fears worsened by her time under Littlefinger's less-than-delicate hand.

He is astonished that she is being so open with him, that she would chose him as her confidant, but she shrugs it off as though it were nothing – who else can she turn to, if not her husband?

Tyrion very pointedly suggests her brother, but Sansa laughs at the idea and tells him precisely how Jon would react if he knew even half of what happened her in the Vale. Then she teases him that perhaps she should speak with Rickon, eight years old and far away in Sunspear, and Tyrion wants to curse again, as he did in the library. He is uncomfortable with her ease in switching her moods, and again wonders if perhaps there is some ulterior motive to her bringing him here. Does she regard him as no better than the rest of his family, irrespective of the Queen's opinions, and wish to kill him to personally avenge all the wrongs that befell her family?

But of course not. Sansa is and always will be a gentle soul, despite her military record. The only deaths she ordered in the North were those of the Greyjoys and the Boltons, because it was they personally who raped and pillaged and destroyed in her homeland. Despite the impression Daenerys gave to the court, Sansa did not lead the military conquest in the North. She already had the Vale wrapped around her little finger, and the North was only too willing to rise at her behest. The Riverlands were the same, deliriously happy to follow the woman who was, to their knowledge, the last heir of their beloved Lord Hoster.

But Sansa did not ride in the van, nor indeed in any part of her host which saw combat – Tyrion had advised Daenerys to leave a member of her Queensguard with her ally, and so the younger of the Waynwoods had been given a white cloak and named as Sansa's guard. She had been safely away from the danger, only there as a figure to whom the Northmen and Rivermen could rally, an authority figure to see Daenerys' plans through to fruition.

She was injured in the siege of Riverrun, he knows, an arrow to the shoulder, but she freely admits that it was her own temper and inexperience which made her slip past her guards and climb to the battlements, bow in hand, where she was shot, that she should have been tucked safely away in the solar which had been her grandfather's.

There are many who liken their beloved Wolf-Bitch to the Dragon Queen, but Tyrion wonders if Sansa is not maybe more like Cersei, or what Cersei might have been had she not grown twisted and mad in her lust for power. Sansa understands the necessity of subterfuge, the power of a back-handed compliment or a pointed observation, in a way Daenerys never will, in a way Cersei perfected, but rather than seeking power as Cersei did, Sansa uses her skill – doubtlessly an innate talent, honed by Littlefinger's tutelage – to maintain the status quo and to consolidate Daenerys' power, because Daenerys' is their best hope for peace.

There seems to be no malice in her this evening, none at all, and she meets his eyes in a way she never did while they lived as man and wife. Still, he presses her to discover why he, of all people, is the one she trusts with this.
"Because you were kind to me when no one else was, my lord, and because I understand that I am at your mercy if I wish to keep even a shadow of my reputation intact."

And he is abruptly saddened for her, because under the political skill and the formidable reputation, Sansa is still just a girl, one who has been used and abused in so many ways.

Assured that Sansa does not regard him with any great animosity, Tyrion returns to court. He remains surprised even after a week of her seeking out his company at dinner.

One night, while sitting between Sansa and Daenerys and telling them about the positively scandalous nocturnal activities of Lord Willas Tyrell and one of the Tarly girls, he realises that this is something that would never have been accepted at court before.

Robert had been close to Jon Arryn before his death, of course, but they'd never gossiped like this, never shared sordid knowledge of the petty goings-on of the court. The King (or Queen) and the Hand must, by necessity, trust one another, but socialising is somewhat beyond the bounds of their relationships.

Tyrion finds that without the pressure of leading an army, Daenerys is quite charming.

Sansa is proving to be surprisingly well informed of the comings and goings of the court – better than Tyrion is, better than Daenerys could ever hope to be. She knows more about the illicit Tyrell-Tarly tryst than he does, but allows him to give Daenerys the bones of the story before augmenting it with useful little details, such as the copious amounts of moon tea the Tarly girl was drinking three days ago.

Daenerys, he can see, is suitably impressed. He begins to wonder if Sansa might be suited to a place on the small council as something other than Warden Regent of the North – Varys remained in Pentos, after all, and much happens around the realm that escapes Daenerys' notice. She could do with a master of whispers, and Sansa's apparent approachability is something which could play to the Queen's advantage.

Tyrion's informants have been sharing rumours of an uprising being planned in the Reach, led by Willas Tyrell's more impulsive younger brother, but he's quietly confident that this information of his and Sansa's will put an end to that very soon.

It gives him great pleasure to reveal to her that her uncle, Lord Edmure Tully, and his wife and son are alive and reasonably well – they were found among the disquieting number of noble prisoners kept deep within the upper levels of Casterly Rock.

She wavers for a moment before restoring her perfect mask of courtesy and thanks him effusively for returning another little piece of her family to her.

Tyrion knows, from the conversations he and Sansa have during their walks along the walls of the keep, that she is fully aware of the growing discomfort of many of their peers at their new-found closeness.

They are simply too powerful together. He is the Queen's Hand and Lord of Casterly Rock, and everyone knows that the West will always rally to the Rock, regardless of who sits as Warden. She is fast becoming the Queen's closest friend, grew up as sister to the Queen's nephew, who is Lord Commander of the once-more respectable Night's Watch, and she is Lady Regent of over half the realm. Between them, they have more power than any other two people in the Seven Kingdoms,
aside from Daenerys and Aegon – and the suspicion that is steadily being heaped on them will only worsen when people remember that they're married.

Daenerys, Aegon and Jon are all either blissfully unaware of the resentment borne to their most powerful vassals or defiantly ignoring it.

Still, it is easy to ignore the murmurs of dissent that seem to follow them on their walks when Sansa is such excellent company and has so many sensible suggestions for the governance of the realm.

One day, she tells him that she wonders if he might present a suggestion to the Queen on her behalf – she thinks Bronze Yohn Royce would make an excellent Warden of the East, Protector of the Vale and Lord of the Eyrie, and perhaps he could bring the idea to the small council?

He laughs in her face, tells her to mention it to Daenerys herself, and she smiles and asks if it would not be better coming from the Hand than from a woman who has comparatively little political power.

He laughs again, and this time she joins him, because she's fully aware of her own power. She later admits that she still wants him to present the idea of the Royces being elevated to the Eyrie, because she knows that there are many on the small council who resent her and the power that is hers as Rickon's regent.

When he asks how she knows this, her eyes alight with a secretive gleam, and she tells him that she has little birds everywhere.

When Tyrion sees Sansa and Daenerys shooting in the practice yard the day Sansa's shoulder is deemed healed by the maesters, he can't help but think that Sansa is an idiot.

She's worked so hard to cultivate an image of gentle femininity since her arrival at King's Landing, to create an aura of quiet strength that has drawn in more people wishing for her friendship than her reputation should have allowed, and here she is, ruining it in a single morning's work.

It's one thing for Daenerys to be here in the yard. She's the fabled Mother of Dragons, a khaleesi before she was a queen, leader of a vast army and rider of dragons. She is often to be found there, practicing with her bloodriders and with Grey Worm, and it is acceptable because it only lends itself to her mystique.

Sansa has carefully built herself up as Daenerys' complimentary other half with the lords and ladies of the court, the traditional high-born lady to balance the Queen's foreign ways, to educate Daenerys in the ways of Westerosi nobility, because she's too stubborn to listen to anyone else who would be of any use to her.

While he admits that the strength and skill Sansa is showing becomes her, and is a fitting tribute to the trials she has come through since she fled King's Landing all those years ago, it is still bordering on the inappropriate if only because it is not her, not as most of the court sees her. It is the woman who led the Vale and the North against the Westerlanders in the Riverlands who stands beside Daenerys, not the gentle lady who sneaks sweets to the children about court when their parents and septas aren't looking.

To survive, to ensure her safety, Sansa would be better off wearing the face of the gentle lady at all times when there are watchful eyes, but perhaps she has some strategy to which he is not privy that involves portraying herself as a wildling princess to match with Daenerys' warrior queen.

Jon Snow seems to be enjoying the show though, is happy to see his sister (because regardless of their relationship before, regardless of who Jon's parents were, he will forever see Sansa as his sister,
forever watch her in Robb Stark's honour) and his aunt happy, and so Tyrion leaves him too it with only a quip about the wildlings taking an interest in Sansa.

Tommen and Myrcella's letters are always a joy, a welcome respite from the stresses of court – stresses exacerbated by Sansa's presence and the constant need to decode her every move and motive.

Tommen writes of the army of kittens he has somehow acquired since arriving at Casterly Rock, of his new friends – he never had many friends in King's Landing, mainly because Cersei thought it improper for a prince to mingle with lower-born children – and of how much he enjoys living at the Rock and visiting Lannisport. Tyrion is sure he has never heard his nephew happier.

Myrcella is more subdued – she writes of her sweet maid, Joy Hill (Tyrion's bastard cousin, something he thinks Myrcella might not be aware of), of the girls her own age that she has met, of looking after Tommen. She sometimes makes mention of some new hairstyle she is trying, the better to disguise the remnant of her ear, and Tyrion always does his best to assure her that she is still lovely, still fair.

He adopted Myrcella and Tommen, pleading with Daenerys for their lives – in part because they are Jaime's children, and he still has some lingering loyalty to his brother, and in part because he has always loved them for their own sakes. He knew even then that there are many who feel that the world would be better off without bastards born of the incest between the Kingslayer and his mad twin, but Tyrion is always sure to remind those naysayers that their beloved queen is the product of generations of incest.

Still, Myrcella's continued fretting over her scars has him worried – he was used to being ugly, and becoming uglier had been little enough concern to him. Myrcella had been used to being one of the prettiest girls in the Seven Kingdoms, and now…

If he is totally honest, he feels that everyone overstates the severity of her disfigurement. She's still a pretty little thing, with Lannister hair and eyes like Jaime's, like Cersei's, green and bright with life. Other than the ragged pinkish-purple line cutting from her nose to what is left of her ear, she is still as beautiful as she ever was, perhaps more so because of the quietness that comes from her shyness.

He breaks his fast with Sansa two or three mornings a week now, and he raises the subject with her – he wonders if she might have some insight into the workings of Myrcella's mind, some little morsel of advice he could pass on to lighten the burden she feels herself to be under.

Sansa considers his question for a long while, sipping on the sweetened lemon juice she drinks rather than wine or honeyed milk in the mornings, and then asks him if he has thought of perhaps relating some of his own experiences to her – she means no offence, she assures him, but surely his stature resulted in him being bullied while growing up?

He is surprised that he hadn't thought of it himself, but he had considered his own experiences to be vastly different to Myrcella's, so far as to be totally alien to the girl. His came from his height, his ugly face, his stunted legs and the resultant waddle to his walk, his mismatched eyes, the knowledge that had he been born without the name Lannister he would have been left out for the wolves – any unkindness Myrcella experiences comes from idiots who think themselves amusing, who think that the mark of her journey is something she should be ashamed of.

When he says as much to Sansa, she smiles, sips her lemon juice and asks him if he has thought of telling Myrcella that, and he thinks that his wife is a very clever woman indeed.
They get away with their little subterfuge for a month, and then someone mentions to Prince Aegon that Lady Sansa has been married before, and his pursuit of her may be complicated by that husband – namely Tyrion.

Aegon raises the matter at a council meeting, his tone light and his smile teasing, but there is something in those haunting violet eyes that reminds Tyrion more of Jon Connington than any myth of Rhaegar Targaryen he ever heard. Someone comments that Tyrion will surely not begrudge the prince his former lady, raising a laugh from the council, and his temper flares.

There is an implication in the jape that Sansa is something to be passed about, shared out as the menfolk see fit, and that she might be passed into better ownership than Tyrion's. The thought of anyone controlling Sansa like that makes his blood boil – these men don't seem to realise that the way they barter women for lands and titles and gold makes them little better than the slavers of Yunkai. He knows that he himself was once just the same, that he sold Myrcella's hand for Dornish peace, but being sold himself – first to bind Winterfell to the Lannister cause, then to the Yellow Whale – has changed his perspective on many things.

Whoever spread the word that his and Sansa's marriage is no more – and he will find out who it was – will rue their loose tongue, and Tyrion hints as much when he points out that his and Sansa's marriage still stands, that they have no intention of dissolving it, that Sansa is his and he will stand against any who would say otherwise.

His personal fury aside, only Littlefinger ever sought to end their marriage, and so even the High Septon must agree that soon, they will be celebrating their third wedding anniversary. He can practically taste the mounting fear as the council realises that his and Sansa's marriage ties together the Westerlands, the North, the Vale and the Riverlands, that together they could destroy Daenerys' hard-won peace, that together they are more powerful than the Tyrells could ever hope to be.

Seeing the frown settling on Willas Tyrell's clever face, Tyrion thinks that perhaps it is beyond time that he suggests Margaery Tyrell as a bride for Aegon.

Daenerys is the only one to ask if Tyrion and Sansa actually wish to remain man and wife, and he almost laughs at the chorus of surprise when he tells her that yes, yes they do, that they wish to wait and see how their relationship develops.

He jests that only a fool would turn away Sansa, the fairest woman in Westeros, when he had a face like his, and he takes his leave with a mocking bow.

He is barely at the door when Jon Snow begins to laugh.

His nightmares have changed since returning to King's Landing, and not for the better.

He no longer sees his father's ghost, which is something of a relief – instead, Cersei and Jaime haunt him with rotting faces and reaching hands. Sometimes they are reaching for his throat, but more often it is Tommen and Myrcella they seek, trying to claim their children from him, Cersei screeching and raging, her voice a sour mess because her throat is half-rotted away.

Sometimes, more often than he would like, his golden-haired, green-eyed niece twists into someone else, someone taller, more beautiful, auburn of hair and Tully blue of eye. Sansa's face twists in horror as Cersei's hands tighten around her neck, as the life is choked from her and those smiling eyes grow dull, and Tyrion wonders if those are not the worst nightmares – Sansa, Myrcella and Tommen are the few good things that came from his family's madness and depravity, and the thoughts of losing them make him queasy.
The mornings after he has those nightmares, he is always sure to bring some lemon cakes to the morning meal with Sansa.

There is always some Westerlander or other with a complaint for him, who feels that the crown is taking too much in penance, that there should be better protection in place for those who served Lord Tywin and House Lannister faithfully for years. Every day, Tyrion is forced to spend most of the afternoon in his study, writing responses to the ravens that flood the rookery for him every morning.

Somewhere after the incident at council, Sansa begins to sit with him.

He sits on a bench at his table, a high one with an ornately carved back, richly padded in velvet of Lannister crimson, and he arrives on day to find Sansa there before him, her long legs up on the seat, bent at the knees to leave a space just right for him at her feet.

He smiles, shakes his head, and climbs the steps up to his place. She doesn't acknowledge his presence, but he can see the grin tugging at her lips.

She, too, has a stack of letters that demand response, lords of Vale and Riverlands and North all begging her attention – from the Iron Islands, too, where she appointed the Reader of Harlaw as her castellan, enraging the lords of Pyke with her presumption. She writes leaning against a painted wooden box and sets aside her letters as she finishes them, ready for them all to be sealed in one go. She uses white wax and a direwolf seal, subtly different to her father's – the wolf dances rather than races across its field, and he can't help but think how well suited to Sansa it is.

Still, the first days she spent at work with him were odd. He wondered if she expected conversation or council at first, but she seemed as comfortable in silence as he was. So they sat on the bench, scratching away at sheaves of parchment until it was time for dinner, at which point they usually moved to the dining table in the solar if they do not have prior engagements.

It is during this time that they begin to become comfortable together, Tyrion thinks. Sansa often comments aloud on some of the more absurd demands of her bannermen, and Tyrion is surprised to find that sometimes she is quite witty, but that she is always clever is no surprise – she is Ned Stark and Catelyn Tully's daughter, after all.

The first time she touches him for no apparent reason startles him – she is walking behind the bench, returning from the privy, and she runs her fingers through his hair. He wonders at first if there is some hidden agenda, but when she returns to her seat and behaves as if nothing has happened, he dares to hope that it was affection that moved her to act.

The touches become more frequent after that, her fingers in his hair, her hand resting on his shoulder when she leans over to look at something, her feet in his lap. He finds himself tucking her hair behind her ear, absentmindedly rubbing her ankles as he works, adjusting her skirts when they are preparing to leave for council meetings. It is oddly domestic, he thinks, especially considering she still retains her rooms in the keep proper, while he remains in the Tower of the Hand.

When she arrives from a morning of sewing with the Queen and her ladies, full of amusing anecdotes of Daenerys' misadventures with needle and thread, and presents him with a newly-made shirt, he thanks her and kisses her cheek, but he worries at how easily she has slipped into the role of wife – he worries constantly at how well-adjusted she seems, how composed and flawlessly mannered she is at all times.

He wonders what her breaking point will be.
Some days later, Sansa fails to arrive in his study as she usually does after the midday meal.

He pays it little mind – some days she is late, although she usually sends word with pretty Jeyne Westerling or the mercurial Mya Stone. When she fails to appear for dinner, however, he begins to worry.

He makes his way to her rooms and is admitted by a relieved Lady Westerling, who ushers him into Sansa's bedchamber and then steps back, closing the door behind her. The room smells of lavender and roses, and there is a faint hint of something else – rosemary, he thinks – and he realises that this is what he assumed to be a scent Sansa wore.

The bed is in disarray, and he realises that she has been having nightmares. His own bedding is similarly tangled most mornings when he awakes, after all.

He says nothing but takes no trouble to keep his passage through the room quiet – he is unsure what words would be appropriate, although he knows that to jape would be to risk hurting Sansa. Instead, he sits beside the mound in the blankets that can only be her and waits.

It takes longer than he'd hoped – almost an hour – but eventually, she pokes her head out from under the covers. Her eyes are puffy and red, her hair a shambles, but he thinks that he has never seen anything so raw and beautiful as her in that moment, stripped of all her careful manners and the queer, glazed light in her eyes that he thinks comes from her time in the Vale, where she had to forget who she was.

She blinks at him owlishly for a moment, as if confused by his presence, but before he can question anything she has her arms around him, her face pressed into the crook of his neck, babbling frantically about nightmares, about Petyr and something Jon asked and Petyr Petyr Petyr, and there is a muddled sequence of father and I did not want that and I did not want to kill him and he made me he made me he made me and then, as her shoulders stop shaking and her breathing evens out, she whispers in a voice so venomous he thinks that Cersei would have been proud: I hate him.

All he can think to do is to stroke her hair and murmur nonsense words, meaningless comforts, to try and calm her. He feels for her, truly he does, but at the same time he is relieved that he was the one to find her like this. It is a weakness that she cannot afford to show, not now that everything is falling into place.

He coaxes her to pull on a robe, to come out of her room and allow Jeyne Westerling to comb out her hair while Mya Stone fixes her bedding. Jeyne suggests that perhaps Lord and Lady Lannister might like to eat something, and Tyrion takes the hairbrush from her when she runs off to ask for food to be sent up.

Sansa's hair is softer than he expected, even mussed as it is, and heavier, too – he thinks that he may now understand why she no longer wears her hair piled atop her head every day. She sighs quietly as he reaches the end of her hair, and he japes that he was made for just such a post as this. She murmurs some tired little reply and says that he should try working the kinks out of her neck before he claims any true skill as a handmaiden.

So he does – her muscles are tight, tense, but his fingers are strong and soon her head is lolling forwards. She makes the strangest little noises, little mewls of what he hopes are pleasure, and she does not even seem to care who sees because she makes no move to stop him when Jeyne returns.

She orders her women away then, tells them that she will be safe with her lord husband and that they have the rest of the night off. Tyrion sits opposite her at the dining table and makes no comment as a servant sets plates of meat and fruit in front of them, waiting for her to speak.
She says nothing at all though, sipping her wine and picking at her fruit in silence. It is not until he
rises to leave and bids her goodnight that she finds her voice.

"Please, Tyrion – stay."

And so they share a bed for the first time in years.

He wakes the following morning wrapped in Sansa – her hair is everywhere, spread out across
pillows and covers and the two of them, those long, slender arms and legs curled about him. She is
warm and soft and smells of lavender and roses and rosemary, and he could quite easily get used to
waking wrapped in her every day.

But not today – today, Sansa begins her preparations to take a place on the small council, and he
wonders if perhaps he should find a goldsmith. A filigree ring would look well on one of Sansa's
long, elegant fingers.

Sansa's appointment to the small council draws grumbles from those members who still feel that she
is unacceptably powerful, not only because of the lands under her regency but also because of her
new post – lady of whispers.

Neither Tyrion nor Sansa herself pay much attention to the grumbles, though, preoccupied with
reports of dissent from the Reach and the Iron Islands as they are.

It is a week later when they stand before court again, accepting Daenerys' thanks for foiling a
treason, and Tyrion wonders if anyone else will notice the fierce gleam of pride in Sansa's eyes.

The night after Doran Martell and Willas Tyrell put forward their arguments as to why the crown
should annul Sansa and Tyrion's marriage, she is so lost in fury that she hurls a beautiful crystal vase
at the wall of her solar, smashing it into a thousand glittering shards.

He sits back and watches her as she strides up and down the floor, raging and fuming and vowing
that she will not allow this insult to go unanswered, that-

He holds out a cup of wine, and she contemplates him for a moment before sitting heavily at his side
and leaning her head on his shoulder. He chuckles under his breath, drawing her closer and pressing
a kiss to her hair as she kept on cursing the Martells and Tyrells, but quietly.

When she kisses him, it takes him quite by surprise, but he chooses to enjoy the moment rather than
object.

He is not, after all, a fool.

Sansa seems oddly listless when Jon Snow leaves for the Wall, but Myrcella and Tommen's arrival
from Casterly Rock breathes new life into her.

She dotes on Tommen, who is of an age with her brother Bran, and she and Myrcella seem to grow
close instantaneously – when he mentions it in passing to Myrcella over luncheon one day, she
shrugs it off as nothing and says only that Sansa has always been very sweet.

Tyrion makes no mention of the Karstarks' calls for Tommen's blood and neither does Sansa, and
when he sees his niece and nephew dancing at the feast later that week – he makes a note to keep a
careful eye on the young Lord of Starfall, so handsome and gentle that Myrcella seems quite smitten – he vows that no one will ever lay a finger on either of them.

Watching as Sansa twirls past in Ronnet Connington's arms, he extends his vow to include her, too.

He arrives back to his rooms one afternoon to find a handful of maids ferrying armfuls of gowns into the second dressing room off the bedchamber, and turns right back around to go in search of Sansa.

She is sitting in the gardens with Myrcella and Tommen and Edric Dayne, and there is a plate piled high with lemon cakes and strawberry tarts on the table between them.

The conversation turns to Arya while Tyrion watches, and he is stunned to learn that Sansa knows where her sister is – he learns that Arya is in Braavos, working as an informant for the network Sansa is now part of, which stretches to Pentos and Varys and possibly beyond.

He wonders later why he is so surprised – he should have known that Sansa would not rest until she found some word of her sister.

It turns out that Sansa has volunteered her rooms to host her uncle and his family when he arrives in the city, and that she has no intention of taking other rooms in the Keep proper when Tyrion's chambers in the Tower of the Hand are so pleasant.

He supposes that they are – work had begun on the new Tower when the Targaryens took King's Landing, but he'd had what building had been completed torn down and replaced with something more to his liking – shallower steps, bigger windows, solid walls with no hidden passages.

He supposes that it makes sense that Sansa would like it more than the Keep – it is like something out of the songs she so loved, airy and bright and beautiful like the castles she'd envisioned when she was a girl in Winterfell.

It is good to see her smile when she settles herself on the window seat of his solar with her sewing while he teaches Tommen and Myrcella to play cyvasse. He feels almost as though they are a family.

Edmure Tully vaults down off his horse and sweeps Sansa into a hug so tight her feet lift off the ground. He sets her down and takes her face in his hands and tells her that she is the image of her mother, and then he kisses her forehead before turning to help his pretty little Frey wife down from her litter.

Their son is just two years old, a Tully but for his dark eyes. Lady Roslin is shy and polite, and seems to take instantly to Sansa – but Tyrion sees the glimmer of distaste in his wife's eyes for Roslin Frey Tully, an echo of the distaste in Edmure Tully's eyes for him.

Sansa's uncle makes no effort to hide his dislike for Tyrion, and she notices – that first night, when they dine in his solar, Tyrion is surprised to find her rising to his defence when Edmure makes some disparaging comment or other.

It makes it all that much easier to loathe Edmure Tully when he drives Sansa to tears the night before the tourney. She has regained her composure by the time he and Aegon reach Daenerys' rooms, but as soon as they return to the Tower of the Hand she breaks down, barely able to make it to their bedchamber before her tears completely overcome her.

He attempts to comfort her, but she twists in his arms and kisses him feverishly, desperately, whispering over and over again-
"Help me forget him, make me forget him."

She accepts Edmure's apology the next morning, and the flurry of activity that is the tourney and the mess of Loras Tyrell's suicide attempt is enough to prevent them from discussing what occurred between them the night before.

He only prays that she does not regret it.

It is four days before they do find the time to speak of it, and she touches his face with the gentlest of pressure and smiles, and something that tastes like relief rises up in his stomach.

They spend the next three months learning to live as man and wife.

Tyrion is hugely amused to discover that Sansa, despite all her political savvy, has about as much skill in running a household as he would at sewing.

She is a wonderful companion though, and they spend more time discussing anything at all that occurs to them, from the cultures he saw during his time in the east to the architecture of the Eyrie. Tommen and Myrcella worship her, Myrcella following her around whenever she is not at council, Tommen listening to her and only her when something needs doing.

He notices that she is with child before she tells him, and he thinks that perhaps she was waiting for him to work it out himself before she broke the news. He is equal parts terrified and elated, because on top of all the normal concerns about carrying and delivering a child, they must worry that the babe will be like him.

They are in the garden when she tells him, him leaning back against one of the trees and she lying with her head in his lap, and when he expresses his worries she smiles up serenely and tells him that none of that matters, only that the child is theirs.

They dine with the three Targaryens the night before Aegon's wedding to Margaery Tyrell, and they are the perfect guests. They discussed telling the Queen that Sansa is with child but decided to wait until after the royal wedding so as not to take away from Aegon's joy.

He regrets this decision the following night, when he finds Sansa with the maesters having her forehead sewn shut after stabbing a Braavosi assassin trying to kill Daenerys. He is beyond furious that she would risk herself and the child with the heroics he has heard tell of, but she points out that had she not stabbed the man he would likely have killed her and the baby anyway.

That does not take away from the gut-wrenching fear he'd experienced when someone had said the words Lady Sansa in the same breath as assassin.

Sansa takes to motherhood even before the child is born, skipping about the Keep as if her stomach is not so large that she cannot see her feet. She glows, and he does not think he will ever see someone as happy as she in the quiet moments when she sits on the window seat with her arms around her belly, singing softly to the babe.

Myrcella and Tommen are delighted by the thought of a cousin, and Aegon – no longer staring after Sansa with longing eyes – and the lovely Margaery are eager to help in any way they can.

Even proud Edmure Tully makes his peace with Tyrion for Sansa's sake, and soon Lady Roslin is
sitting with Sansa and Margaery every day.

Daenerys, though, watches Sansa and her ever-growing belly with something that might be jealousy, if Tyrion were forced to put a name on it.

She is with the Queen when the birthing pains hit her, the Queen and Margaery Tyrell and Roslin Tully and a handful of other women, and he is out in the city on Hand's duty.

She is in the birthing bed by the time he returns, and it falls to him to keep Myrcella and Tommen away from the Tower of the Hand. He sets them up at a game of cyvasse in Aegon's solar and frets as they play. He cannot help but fear – his own mother died bringing him into the world, after all, and he knows that while Sansa says it does not matter she does not truly want a dwarf.

It is almost two days before Lady Roslin comes for him and offers to stay with his niece and nephew while he goes to his wife.

Gerion Lannister has hair that is neither entirely Tully red nor fully Lannister blonde and eyes as blue as her mother's. Sansa is nursing him when Tyrion enters their chambers, her hair scraped back from her face and held in place with a scrap of ribbon, her eyes heavy with fatigue, her cheeks pale.

But she smiles, she smiles and beckons him closer, and Tyrion looks at her and their son and he thinks that this is what true happiness must be.

The happiness is short-lived when one of the seemingly endless stream of assassins finally gets past Daenerys' army of guards.

The Queen dies quietly, a length of silken thread around her pale neck and nary a drop of blood. The small council descends into madness, and it takes all of Tyrion's considerable skill to keep them from fracturing apart into warring factions.

Aegon rages in his grief, vowing vengeance and citing his House's words, but Margaery calms him with a whisper and he falls into her arms, weeping into her shoulder.

Jon flies down from the Wall alone, leaving even Ghost behind him. Sansa goes to him with only Gerion, and when they emerge from his rooms some hours later his face is shiny with tears but he seems less unsettled than he had when he arrived.

The funeral is a magnificent occasion. Daenerys lies in state for three days, dressed in black and scarlet with bells in her hair. Jon and Aegon stand vigil for her the whole time, taking turns to sleep when exhaustion claims them. The entire city comes out to line the streets and to fill the square before the Great Sept, and a current of shocked whispers runs through them when Jon, Aegon, Ser Barristan and Daenerys' bloodriders carry her out of the sept and lay her on the pyre.

The day after Aegon's coronation and the announcement that Queen Margaery is carrying his heir, Jon returns to the Wall. Before he leaves, he and Sansa have another of those hours-long conversations in his rooms.

When he asks her what they spoke of, Sansa looks at Tyrion over Gerion's head and smiles. She says that Jon needed to remember that while the dead have no peace at the Wall, Daenerys will rest in peace until he can join her.

When she shifts her hold on their son so she can open her gown and feed him, Tyrion wonders when
Sansa Stark became so wise.
Sansa Stark

Chapter Summary

Alayne Stone finally dies with Petyr Baelish, and Sansa Stark is reborn amidst Littlefinger's blood.

Chapter Notes

SERIOUS TRIGGER WARNING FOR RAPE.
If you find such things triggering, skip the first paragraph. This is not a drill.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When the inevitable happens, when Petyr finally forces her into his bed, it is one month to the day after what should have been her wedding night. Of course, Harry – sweet, smiling, kind Harry – had never had a chance to do more than kiss her, which left her as Lady of the Eyrie and with an unbroken maidenhead. That, of course, was all part of Petyr's plan, his plan to remake her into her mother so he might live out his sweetest, dearest fantasy of making a woman of the Tully girl he loved, not the one he despised.

She thinks that perhaps she would not have minded Harry taking her maidenhead. He was handsome and sincere and ever so sweet, and the few times he'd kissed her he'd done so as though she were something precious, something beautiful that should be treasured.

Petyr is drunk and calls her Cat, looks at her through eyes twenty years old and sees a woman who is long dead (but not at rest, Sansa will discover) and he bites into her neck and breasts and shoulders, his teeth sharp on her skin while his fingers dig into her hips and thighs and tear her shift apart.

She does not fight, because he is already so violent that she fears what he might do if she struggled, so she lies as still as she can and tries not to cry out in pain. It is so difficult though, because first he breaks her maidenhead – no, not breaks it, tears it, shears through it so carelessly she almost faints from the agony, but unfortunately remains horribly, terribly aware – and then he turns her onto her front, pinning her arms behind her back with one hand and holding her hair in the other fist, holding her head up and shouting at her to keep her eyes open, to let him watch those blue, blue eyes of hers-

When he is finished and slumps onto the mattress beside her, she lifts the knife he gave her, pulls his head back by his hair and slits his throat. There is blood, but she hardly notices it beside the relief and the pain. She screams then, and Randa comes running.

Alayne Stone finally dies with Petyr Baelish, and Sansa Stark is reborn amidst Littlefinger's blood.

It is while she is washing away the blood and Randa is brewing the moon tea that the cry goes up – Targaryen banners and a dragon have been sighted, monsters from a nightmare and gods from a fairytale, both and neither. Sansa does not care, refuses to care while her skin still itches with the feel of Petyr's blood, even though she has scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed again.
When eventually Randa takes the scrubbing brush from her with soft, sympathetic eyes and her skin is raw and sore, when she has drained the cup of moon tea and then another just to be sure, she dresses in Stark grey and pins her hair back – it is the wrong colour, she thinks deliriously, it should be the colour of fire, but mayhaps she looks more a Stark than ever with dark hair – to meet the Dragon Queen of whom there have been so many rumours.

Daenerys Targaryen is not what Sansa was expecting at all. She is small and painfully lovely, silver bells in her silver hair and silk slippers on her tiny feet, with a disconcertingly commanding air and a confidence borne of her time spent ruling in Slaver's Bay and with the Dothraki.

"Lady Stark."

"Your Grace."

They stand facing each other for a long moment, and Sansa wishes for nothing more than this woman to leave so that she might crawl back to Randa's room and cry herself to sleep, or mayhaps climb into a fresh bath of water so hot that it scalds her skin clean of the stain Petyr has left on her.

But she will not do that, not with this invader, this woman who has taken Sansa's last brother from her, in her place. Sansa never valued Jon until she became a bastard herself, but when word of his death and resurrection reached her she swore that she would find him, that she would love him.

"You are welcome to the Vale," she says. "Although some forewarning might have been apt – we are not prepared to host such an esteemed guest."

Daenerys smiles. Sansa thinks it might have been easier if the Queen had taken offence.

"You already dislike me, Lady Stark – what if I told you that for the brother I took away, I gave you back two more?"

Bran was always a Tully, like herself and Robb and Rickon, but now he is so much the North that he seems almost more like their father than Jon ever did, even though the shape of his face still mirrors her own. He is not the little brother she left behind in Winterfell, not the boy who climbed the walls and picked flowers for her in the godswood and climbed through her window with lemon cakes hidden in his pockets to share with her. He smiles at her when Hodor gently sets him down into the open chair at the table, and there is something so old in that smile that she misses Bran's sweet innocence almost as much as she misses their mother.

It frightens her when he explains why he must take the black, why his place is at Jon's side on the Wall, but she kisses his hair and holds him against her side when he falls asleep and wishes him well when he departs for Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, makes him promise to write as often as he can. Bran was always her favourite, even though everyone probably thought it was Robb, and something twists inside her at the realisation that even though he is returned to her, she will never get Bran back, not truly.

Rickon is so like Robb that Sansa thinks she will never be able to look him in the face without wanting to weep, and so it is no great challenge to ship him off to be fostered in Dorne to seal the alliance between Houses Stark and Targaryen and Martell, the alliance that will break the Lannisters. She feels unbearably guilty at how hard it is to love him, but his face is a reminder of everything she lost and will never regain – he is as Tully as she is, so like their mother that it aches somewhere deep down in her chest.
Apparently, he has the same problem with her.

"You look like Mother but you're not her," he says, his lip quivering as he fights back tears of confusion and anger and grief and pain – she knows, because her tears are of the same blend. "Just like Jon looks like Father but the Queen says that he's not even a Stark, really. I don't like it."

"And you look like Robb. So like Robb."

Rickon's face twists into something like rage at that, but he turns away from her before she can say a word, burying his face in Shaggydog's thick fur, accepting comfort only from the wildling woman who watches Sansa's every move with sharp, distrustful eyes.

Sansa attempts to speak with him two days later – he has hidden from her, hidden from the woman he thinks she is – but all he does is scream that she left him, that everyone leaves him, and she forces herself not to weep until he is too far from her to hear.

She holds him close for as long as he'll let her before he boards the ship in Gulltown – White Harbour is still impassable, the Lannister fleet still blockading the harbour, but Gulltown is hers still, just as Winterfell and Riverrun will be hers once she gets rid of the usurpers and bastards and filth sullying her ancestral seats.

The Queen has made a deal with her – in return for her support as Rickon's Lady Regent, she will have the men she needs to eradicate the Boltons and their scum from Winterfell, and then the Frey-Lannisters from Riverrun.

Sansa rides North two days after Bran and Rickon leave her once more, bidding farewell to the Dragon Queen and preparing herself for a long battle.

"Sansa Stark is dead."

She has never been so furious as she is in the moments after those words escape Roose Bolton's mouth.

"I think you'll find that I am very much alive, Lord Bolton," she calls, sitting on horseback outside the gates of Winterfell. Her whole body sings to be so close to home, belying the bitter taste in her mouth at seeing so much of it ruined, at seeing another man holding her father's seat, her brother's seat. Winterfell is her home, belongs to none besides a Stark, and she will burn every Bolton and Bolton man she can lay hands on, burn them so thoroughly that even a fire-and-blood obsessed Targaryen might flinch from her ferocity, because they have defiled Winterfell by so much as daring to lay claim to the North.

There must always be a Stark in Winterfell, she remembers her father saying, Uncle Benjen saying, but there is another side to that old adage – there has always been a Stark in Winterfell, right since it was raised over the hot springs in the Age of Heroes, and any other who thinks to make it theirs is a greater fool even than Cersei Lannister.

She remembers Theon, when they were younger, telling them of the Drowned God. What is dead may never die, he'd said, but rises harder and stronger. By all reports, it has proven true of the wights at the Wall.

Sansa will prove it true of herself, too, and of Bran and Rickon and Jon – because Jon is a Stark, no matter what Daenerys Targaryen says and who his father was, Sansa was just too silly to realise that before – to the detriment of House Bolton and any who supported them.
"Winter is Coming, Lord Bolton," she says. "You would do well to remember that."

The Bastard shouts back some retort or other about her having missed the change of the seasons high up in the Vale, but she is not listening to him. She listens to the wind, remembers Maester Luwin explaining about storm clouds and rain clouds and snow clouds, and looks skyward.

"Winter is coming," she murmurs, turning her sturdy, fat-bellied mare and returning to camp. There is much to be done if they are to be ready to strike with the snow storm that is rolling in from the north-east.

Winterfell would have burned, Sansa knows, if not for the sheer weight of snow that fell, but the snow did fall and Winterfell is merely singed at the edges.

Well, there are repairs to be done as well, but at least the bulk of the castle still stands. More importantly, the godswood still stands, the heart tree still vibrantly alive by the hot pools, and when she drops to her knees she almost thinks she might turn her head and see her father sitting by the pools, wiping the blood of a criminal from Ice's blade. It hurts to know that it is only a feeling, but there is something in the air here – soft and old and dark and home – that feels almost as if Mother and Father and Robb (and Arya, but she still hopes to find her sister and so refuses to include her in her prayers for the dead) are not truly far away, not truly lost to her forever as she knows them to be.

But then Ser Wendel is there, asking her to come, and so she rises to her feet, whisks back her cloak and strides from the heart tree.

The Dreadfort is waiting, and she will see it burn.

The Boltons scream and rage and fight, but Sansa watches with dispassionate eyes and waits with an infinite sort of patience until they are each marched onto the gallows and fitted for a rope necklace.

She watches with an interest that sickens her as they swing in the icy wind, and she cannot help but wonder if this was why the Kings in the North of old were so feared and respected, this vicious dedication to justice that she has dug up from somewhere deep inside herself.

Lord Yohn touches her shoulder, his eyes serious, and she turns her mare – she has named her Lady, although she will never match the real Lady – and follows him back to the camp.

There are Ironmen everywhere, Ironmen scattered by the Boltons and the sudden appearance of a Stark and a Targaryen working together.

Sansa pursues them, relentless, desperate to find whatever might be left of Theon so she might kill him herself, might wield the blade with her own hands because he betrayed them, they loved him and he turned on them like they were nothing at all.

She finds Theon, alright, finds him and cannot quite bring herself to look him in the wild, mad eye. He dies before she can pass judgement, and she wonders if that is not for the better.

Later that day, she asks that someone teach her to wield a bow. With all the time she is spending on horseback of late, she thinks it the most practical way for her to defend herself, and while a lady has guards to keep her safe Sansa has long since given up on knights.

They hang man after man after man, any who crossed House Stark, who desecrated Winterfell and
the North. Arnolf Karstark tries to wheedle his way into being named Lord of the Karhold, but Sansa knows from Daenerys that Alys Karstark is at the Wall with a wildling husband and his army, and so she orders Arnolf held as a traitor.

She orders many to be held as traitors, but does not have the time to sit in judgement on all of them right away. She has other business to attend to.

Winter is coming, she tells them all, and they all look at her as if to ask has she missed the flight of the white ravens, the sudden snow storms, and she pities them for not understanding that winter, to House Stark, is not just a season.

Winter is a consequence, the balance to a summer of terrible action.

The Iron Islands are so utterly dreadful that Sansa almost understands why the Ironmen are so desperate to get away, but that does not mean she will ever forget what they did to her home.

Rodrick Harlaw is the only man who does not threaten to rape and kill her (do they truly think she fears rape now, after Petyr? Do they think she fears death, after what has been done to her family? Do they know nothing at all? Has the salt air rotted their brains?), the only man who seems to have the good sense to understand that with the support of the Queen and her dragons, Sansa will not be overthrown. He controls his kin, and with all of House Harlaw and its factions throwing its support behind her, Sansa manages to leave the Iron Islands in something approaching peace.

She travels south through the Neck, and when a little crannogman comes and bids her to follow him, she does – her father told enough stories of Howland Reed, Bran of Jojen and Meera, and she trusts these people with everything she has left.

Lord Howland is taller than she expected, and Lady Jyana is so beautiful in such an exotic, alien manner, all tilted eyes and rich skin, that Sansa catches herself staring more than once. They welcome her to their home, this castle-on-legs of theirs, but they give her the greatest gift imaginable when they present her with Jeyne Westerling (Stark, she is family, she is one of the pack), and then it is broken by Jeyne's freshest grief.

"I did not know what to name him," Jeyne admits. "Robb wished to call our firstborn Eddard, for your father, but then Robb."

They cannot speak of what was done, not yet, not until every last Frey bleeds as Robb did, as Mother did, but Sansa rests her hand over Jeyne's and it seems enough for now.

"I named him Brandon," Jeyne says. "Robb always said it was the oldest of the Stark names."

But Brandon Stark did not survive his birth, bloody and painful and in the middle of the Neck with only brave Brynden Blackfish in attendance, and so Sansa takes her widowed goodsister and her fierce greatuncle with her when she leaves Greywater Watch.

The Riverlands are hell on earth, and Sansa wonders where her mother's childhood home is gone.

Some refuse to accept that she is actually a Stark at all, claiming that she must be Brynden's bastard, that he dug her up to use in reclaiming his home, and Sansa understands now how her father always remained so calm, even in the face of the gravest insults – fury burns cold, now, not hot like it had when she and Arya argued. This is true anger, she thinks, the kind of anger that cleanses rather than just destroys.
This is the icy rage the Starks have used to tame the North for generations.

Most, though, see her mother in her face, her grandfather, her brother and uncles, and they accept her with wide-open arms and promises of every sword they can muster.

She cannot watch the Twins burn, though she feels as if she should. Instead, she looks to the wolves standing in the woods above the river, sees the greatest of them and feels her heart swell – if Nymeria still lives, then surely Arya must as well?

They hunt Freys and Lannisters in the Riverlands as they hunted Greyjoys in the North, and it is in the course of this hunt that Sansa is alerted to the presence of a creature who is aiding her work, unwittingly or not, with the help of an outlaw brotherhood.

Sansa and Brynden ride out with a small patrol to treat with the outlaws, fully willing to offer them pardons for their crimes purely because of the sheer number of Freys they have killed, but Sansa wants to hang them all, every single one of them, when they present her with Lady Stoneheart.

Her mother-that-is-not-Mother, all the warmth and sunshine and love gone from those cold, unforgiving eyes, the blush of happiness and laughter gone from her cheeks (her face, her poor face, how painful that must have been, gods, how could she have borne it at all), her soft voice ruined and reduced to a rasp that sets Sansa's skin crawling.

Sansa sinks back into Brynden's chest, relieved that her granduncle is as sickened as she is herself, but apparently their appearance breaks something in Stoneheart, their appearance and Sansa's halting tale of Bran and Rickon's survival, of her hopes of finding Arya.

Genna Lannister fights bravely to hold Riverrun – for nobody would believe that Emmon Frey has anything to do with it – but Brynden leads the force that breaches the walls, and soon the Tully trout flies once more above the keep.

The Freys muster what is left of their forces and try to retake Riverrun, and Sansa is rendered mindless with fury at the sheer audacity of it all – so mindless, in fact, that she finds herself slipping away from her guards and sprinting down the corridors, across the courtyard, up the steps to the battlements and knocking an arrow on her bow, and gods but she is angry, she never remembers being this angry before in her life, and then the arrow strikes her in the shoulder-

Daenerys arrives three days later, before the maester will let Sansa leave her bed, carrying wounds of her own. She pulls at her painted vest to show Sansa the blackened, dead looking patch of skin on her right flank, the mark of a Walker's touch, and winces in sympathy when Sansa tugs aside her bandages to show the wound made when the maester pulled the arrow from her shoulder, the arrow which they had not known to be barbed and which had done more damage coming out than going in.

She cannot decide if she likes Daenerys or not, but she knows the Queen to be capable, and that is the most important thing in the end.

There are rebels everywhere, even with the threat of Stark winter and Targaryen fire, and Sansa stamps them down with her loyal men of Vale and North and Riverlands. Men come and bend the knee to her, to her, and even though she accepts their oaths in Rickon's name she knows that it is her that they mean their allegiance for.
She has asked and begged that Brynden take Riverrun, the last man of Tully name and blood, but he refuses, and she can see in his eyes that he is as broken as she is, that Riverrun holds as many ghosts for him as Winterfell holds for her, and she cannot fault him for his refusal.

She hates it. She hates that she doesn't hate it more, and she hates that she doesn't miss Rickon enough most of all.

She is at Gulltown, organising supplies to be sent to the Riverlands, when the scrawny… Person, she cannot say whether it's male or female, is brought before her and dumped at her feet.

"Said she knows you, milady," a man in Waynwood livery says, stepping back and keeping his hand on the pommel of his sword. "She was carrying this."

He tosses down a slender length of steel, a bravo's blade, and Sansa picks it up without looking at the person – woman – at her feet.

Mikken's mark is sharp and clear just under the hilt, and Sansa falls to her knees and takes Arya's face in her hands, ignores the sharp agony of her shoulder (she keeps moving it, against the maester's advice, and it is taking much longer than it should to heal) and kisses Arya's cheeks, her brow, her filthy hair, the tip of her nose. Arya is *alive*, gloriously, maddeningly *alive*, and she is holding onto Sansa as tightly as Sansa is holding onto her.

Arya's tale is… Harrowing.

She returns to Braavos on the next available ship, a letter from Sansa clutched in her hand and a heavy purse of gold hidden somewhere in her layers of clothes, and the promise to stay in touch sincere in her eyes (Father's eyes).

The summons to King's Landing comes to Riverrun, but Sansa is at Seagard on her way back from Pyke when word reaches her.

Lord Mallister cautions her against tarrying too long, but Sansa knows that Daenerys will not punish her, not with Jon at King's Landing as well. She knows that Jon will never let any harm come to her, and there have been whispers of the Queen's *special* regard for Jon.

Her hands shake as she rides through the gates of the Red Keep, and only the reassuring knowledge that Brynden is at her side and Jon is waiting for her – Jon, who looks so terrifyingly like Father that for a moment all she can see is his head rolling down the steps at his feet before she registers the lack of crimson and gold, the dragons where once there were lions, composes herself to separate the Red Keep from Baelor's Sept – keeps her from turning Lady around and galloping for home, even though she doesn't know if home is Riverrun or the Eyrie or Winterfell.

Daenerys cuts a fine figure, but does not care about how beautiful she is – Aegon, however, the Silver Prince of whom Sansa has heard so much but has not met because of his campaigns in the Stormlands and Reach and Westerlands, is fully aware of his good looks, his beauty. He smiles the smile of a man so confident in the affect his appearance has on women that he no longer even considers that he might need to try and be charming.

She drops to her knees, bowing her head in submission, and she wonders if anyone else in the courtyard watching can see how terrified she is. She prays that they can't, that they might put the flush in her cheeks down to the bite in the air, that nobody sees the tremor in her hands.
Jon smiles when she rises, and she knows – oh, Father used smile like that when she presented him with a new handkerchief or tied her favour round his arm when he was going to do his duty – that this will work. It must.

Chapter End Notes

LATE UPDATE IS LATE AND SCARY AND SPLIT IN TWO.

The next chapter will hopefully be a lot quicker in coming and will run from the end of this until ((spoilers)) Casterly Rock.

Because everyone wants to see Casterly Rock, right?

Anyways, I am fail because late, and hope someone is still reading.
On the day Sansa gives birth to her third daughter – her fifth child – she finally decides that yes, she was right to stay with Tyrion, and that no, being Lady Lannister and giving some of her children Lannister names is by no means too great a price to pay for their happiness and safety.

She and Tyrion have been living as man and wife in truth for near ten years now, after all, and with Aegon on the throne the realm is prospering – he is a good king, if only because he admits that he is not a great king and asks for help when he needs it.

Gerry is near nine years old, Elsbeth seven and the twins four when Eddara Lannister enters the world – Sansa begged and pleaded, but she supposes she can see Tyrion's reasons for not wanting a son named for her father, even if she does not like them, and so she has settled for a daughter with a Northern name to finish her Southron brood.

Of course, it has not been easy to find this peace – far from it, in fact, and Sansa thinks that it might be sweeter because she has fought for it. Why, even just this last pregnancy...

Tyrion looks almost as tired as she feels, sitting at her side, leaning his head on her shoulder as he looks down into Eddara's little red face. Their daughter is sleeping, but she has already screamed louder than any of her siblings ever did, and she is only a scant few hours old.

“A wild one,” Tyrion says softly, touching the soft red-gold hair that all their children have in common with careful fingers. He has never overcome his fear of newborns, Sansa thinks, has never become comfortable with holding their children before their first nameday. “She will run us ragged.”

“Gerry and Elsbeth are already smitten,” Sansa laughs, reaching over to tug the baby's wrapping closer around her tiny body. “I think they may put the nurse out of work.”

“Lucky septa, that it is only the older children that she need worry about,” he teases, glancing sidelong up at Sansa. “I will send word about the realm this evening, I think – the Queen has been worried for you.”

Sansa forces her face to remain smooth – everyone has been worried for her, this past half a year since her pregnancy was revealed – and shrugs the shoulder against which his head is resting.

“And you have not?” she challenges, reaching around and lifting Eddara from his arms as she starts to fuss. He helps her unlace the neck of her nightgown, adjusts it so the babe can nurse, and then he shifts to kneel up beside her, so they might look at one another better. “You have worried more than anyone, my lord.”

“Aye, well,” Tyrion says gently. “When the maester said you were swelling slower than with the rest, I feared- I feared that I might have cursed you to my mother's fate. Especially after how difficult a time you had with the twins.”
Tyrion had feared the same thing during every one of her pregnancies, Sansa knows, loathed the idea of any of their children being born like him, and while Sansa cannot deny that she worried the same, she does not think that she feared it as he did – they love their children, which is more than Tyrion's father ever did, and their children love one another as siblings ought, after all. That could save any child born a dwarf from an unhappiness such as he suffered for so long.

It will save a child. Their child.

“She is very hungry for being so small,” Sansa muses, touching Dara's cheek as she suckles. “Were you the same, I wonder?”

“Listening to my sister, you'd think I'd tried to feast on my nurse's blood, never mind her milk,” Tyrion says, a vicious grin lighting his face for a moment. He will never be handsome, this strange husband she never thought to have, but there is a devilment in his eyes and the curve of his smile that is quite charming, really, although nowhere near so charming as his mind. “Jaime never had much time for me until I was able to play, and our father... Well. You know more of my relationship with my father than most, I daresay.”

Indeed she does – Tywin Lannister is the monster in Tyrion's nightmares more often than not, and there have been enough nights where he has woken her in his terror, when the only thing that has calmed him (aside from wine) has been to coax stories and horrors from him until he falls asleep in her arms once more, for Sansa to understand the depth of pain his father left behind in Tyrion's soul.

“Fetch the children, will you?” Sansa says after sitting in silence for a few moments, when she looks down to find Dara's mouth pink and open around her sore nipple – nursing has always been painful for her, and while the maester assures her that it is nothing to worry about, that many women find it uncomfortable, she feels as though she must persevere to make up for this failing. Tyrion takes Dara, allows Sansa to right her nightgown, and then returns daughter to mother and slides down off their bed – a low bed, for Tyrion's comfort and ease – and makes his way to the door while Sansa winds the babe.

“Warn the twins,” she calls after Tyrion, but he merely waves a hand back over his shoulder and laughs before pulling the door open to admit their elder four.

The twins – Cate and Tyg – are rowdier than either Gerry or Elsbeth, and remind Sansa strongly of Arya and Bran, the way they roughhouse and run about on each other's heels, Cate always the dominant partner in their play. Tyrion had been beside himself when they were born, a girl and a boy, twins just like Cersei and Jaime, but there is little of his sister and brother in their son and daughter aside from the tilt of Jaime's smile on Cate's face and the proud turn of Cersei's chin in Tyg.

“Is she little because she is a babe or because she is like Father, Mother?” Cate asks as soon as she has scrambled up beside Sansa, peering down at her new sister with curious eyes – another thing all of the children have in common, Sansa thinks, baby-blue fading to a blue-green that is neither wholly Sansa nor entirely Tyrion. She likes that, she thinks, likes that she is visible in her children but never to the point that anyone could deny them their father's name, as some tried for her when she emerged from hiding in the Vale.

“She's a runt, child, just like me,” Tyrion says breezily, “although I daresay rather prettier.” To any who do not know him it would seem that Tyrion truly does not care at all for his own stature. He may have made peace with his short legs, with the revulsion some still look upon him with, but Sansa knows that there are few things he would have rathered their children be spared than his height. “She will hopefully look more like your mother than like me, though, just like the rest of you, when she's grown.”
The older four do look very alike, Sansa has to admit, and she feels sorry for Dara that she will not match as her brothers and sisters do – Gerry and Elsbeth look near as much alike as Cate and Tyg, and it is Gerry and Elsbeth that Sansa watches in much the same way Tyrion watches the twins, because there is a strange closeness between her eldest children that she worries about. She thinks that it may come from having spent time as children in King’s Landing, but she cannot be sure, and the thought of it being something else frightens her.

They have not yet given her cause to be afraid, but still, it is one more thing to worry about in a long list that only ever seems to grow longer.

“Nan gave me a letter to give you, Mother,” Gerry says, leaning over Tyg’s head to tuck a small square of parchment into the pocket of Sansa’s bedjacket. “She said that I was to give it to you as soon as I saw you.”

Sansa smiles at him, wondering how much longer they will maintain the charade of his not knowing who “Nan” truly is. Arya may not look at all like Sansa, but Tyrion is of the opinion that there are too many similarities between them for them to keep their true relationship hidden from those who know them well. Arya being near, watching the children, is the sort of peace of mind that no number of loyal Lannister guardsmen could ever give Sansa – she has never learned to trust a man in a crimson cloak, not even after all these long years.

“I will need to speak with her later,” Sansa says, and Tyrion nods. She hopes Arya likes the new babe's name. She liked Cate, too, although she laughed at Tygett – Sansa could not deny Tyrion that, though, because she supposes it is only fair that their sons have Lannister names, and his uncles were kinder to him than most of the rest of his family. “Now, then – what do you all think of our Eddara?”

Elsbeth sits with her legs tucked under herself on Sansa's left, opposite Tyg and Cate, and Gerry moves to stand behind her, his hand on her shoulder. “I think she's beautiful, Mother,” Elsbeth says earnestly, the child Sansa sees the most of herself in, herself as she was before King’s Landing, tempered as she was by King's Landing, but shielded, just as she was not, from any true cruelty.

“Blessed are all five of you to have inherited more your mother's face than mine,” Tyrion laughs, patting Sansa’s feet from his place at the end of the bed. “We shall have to find handsome husbands and beautiful brides for all of you, to ensure my nose doesn't appear in the family somewhere in the future.”

“I shan't marry,” Cate announces. “I shall be a warrior like Lady Brienne of Tarth, and I shall have a dozen children and not name one of their fathers.”

Sansa raises an eyebrow to Tyrion – it emerged, some years after the war, that Lady Brienne of Tarth had birthed a son sometime during the war, a babe she hid away on Tarth. Tyrion went to visit, a year before the twins were born, and he’d been stunned when he came back.

_The most beautiful woman in Westeros, and the least, he'd laughed. Jaime had strange tastes._

“Mayhaps we shall find a wandering hedgeknight to wed you,” Tyrion teases, sticking his tongue out at Cate when she giggles in horror, and Sansa rolls her eyes as she passes the babe into Gerry's waiting arms – he has held all of his younger siblings first, after herself and Tyrion, even when Sansa had to hold his arms with her own so he might support Elsbeth. She does not see why that should be different now.

“We could hear her crying outside in the corridor,” Gerry confides, a rare smile lighting his serious face – there is much of his grandfathers in him, Sansa thinks, although mercifully little of Tywin Lannister's cruelty or Ned Stark's naivety. “Hear Me Roar, indeed.”
Sansa laughs at that, startled – Gerry is quiet by nature, and serious enough to temper Elsbeth's abundant sweetness and the twins' boldness, but sometimes he passes some remark that is sharper than she might expect from a boy of his age, and all she can see is Tyrion, even though his face is entirely Robb aside from those shades of Tyrion's colouring.

“Are you well, Mother?” Elsbeth asks softly, curling against Sansa's side and resting her head on her shoulder. “You were screaming for such a long while.”

“I am perfectly well, sweetling,” Sansa promises, kissing Elsbeth's brow and raising an eyebrow as Tyrion rolls under the bed after Tyg. “Childbirth is a messy business, my love, that is all.”

“I think she looks like Uncle Rickon,” Cate announces, leaning over Gerry's shoulder and peering down at Dara. “She doesn't have Father's nose either, Mama, why do none of us have Father's nose even though he always talks about it?”

Sansa leaves it to Tyrion, now dusty and holding Tyg's boot, to explain that to Cate, and turns back to Elsbeth.

“I will be abed for a little while,” she says, wondering if Tyrion explained in any great detail why there was such a long interim between Dara's birth and the children being allowed in to see Sansa – the past four days have near driven her mad, after all. “Your father will need a lady's touch in his duties, will you help him?”

Gifts come in abundance from King's Landing – Margaery is a generous friend, and Sansa knows that there is a certain amount of pity here, too, because Dara is a dwarf, like Tyrion, but Sansa knows Margaery means no harm, not truly. She is one of the very few people Tyrion considers a friend, after all, and she was Sansa's sole consolation in those terrible days after Tyrion was attacked, before they fled King's Landing in fear of their lives – to this day, she does not know for certain who it was that tried to kill her husband, but there is a part of her that will always suspect too-sweet-to-be-wholesome Shireen Baratheon's hand in it.

Gifts come from Winterfell, too – she and Rickon will never be close, such a thing is impossible after the way they parted, after all their years apart, but they have come to an arrangement, of sorts, have learned to be civil. It is better than nothing.

The gifts are checked and rechecked and then someone else opens them before Sansa and Tyrion are let near them, because there have been far too many near-misses, some of which left scars and others which left nightmares.

Sansa has plenty of both, as does Tyrion, and she hopes to prevent her children from suffering from either if it is within her power.

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