Dancing for You

by jaimeofhouselannister

Summary

After moving to King’s Landing to pursue her career as a ballet dancer, Sansa Stark must learn to live in a city of lions, with roses and snakes for friends. As she falls in love with Jaime Lannister, the director of the Lannister Ballet Company, can she become a lioness yet remain a direwolf? Meanwhile, Tyrion, Margery, and Tywin play matchmaking. Modern AU. M for later chapters.

(If you want to know how much of the next chapter is ready, go to: https://jaimeofhouselannister.tumblr.com/dancing-for-you)
A Calling

When her daughter was three years old, Catelyn Stark took her to her first ballet class. Little Sansa had seen an advertisement for the Winterfell Ballet Company and imitated the movements she had observed for several weeks, before Ned, with an affectionate smile, suggested to his wife (they were both observing Sansa’s attempts at a pirouette) that perhaps their little daughter was lucky to have discovered her calling so early in life. Therefore, Catelyn made the necessary arrangements, and Sansa was auditioned by the Winterfell Academy of Ballet — one of the most prestigious classical dance academies in the Seven Kingdoms, if unhappily located so far in the North. She was accepted: her beauty and natural grace, unusual for so young a child, made her the perfect candidate.

The mothers were welcome to stay and observe the classes, and Catelyn watched with pride and joy, how Sansa, delighted, performed the exercises better than any of her peers. Their way home was animated by constant excited chatter coming from the back seat.

Sansa’s love for ballet grew with every lesson. It was not only the beauty of the movements that enticed her or the compliments of her teachers — it was the dream that one day, if she worked very hard and ate very little, she would be the physical epitome of beauty, elegance, and graceful perfection, who enchanted viewers from stage and TV screens. She would hold onto this dream for fifteen years.
The Envelope of Red and Gold

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Did you pack some warm clothes?” Catelyn inquired, a frown on her face.

“Mom!” Sansa groaned. “No — it’s King’s Landing! It’s warm there!”

“Well, King’s Landing or not, you, young lady, will be packing some warm clothes. Winter is coming,” Catelyn said in a voice full of determination.

Sansa could only sigh. If her mother wanted her girl to have winter clothes in the South, she would end up having them regardless of her protestations. She did not voice any more objections, however, wishing to indulge her: she knew Catelyn was taking to the separation harder than anyone had expected, especially considering that Robb had gone to college a year earlier and Jon the year before. But it was more than that: Catelyn Stark was far from liking the idea of her sweet, innocent girl entering the Lannister Ballet Company, regardless of what wonders this would do for Sansa’s career.

A nest of vipers, Catelyn thought. And I don’t care that they say Jaime Lannister is the most talented ballet dancer ever to have graced the world with his presence; nor that his brother — what was the Imp’s name, again? Tywin? No, that was the monstrous patriarch of the Lannister family, completely separated from the artistic world — nor that the dwarf is a genius director like his brother, capable of creating the most magical productions and who has connections to the entire artistic world!

Sansa’s mind, meanwhile, went back to the red and golden envelope that had arrived several months before, shaking the quiet Stark family life to its very core. Sansa had applied to the Lannister Ballet Company without telling her parents (or her siblings, for that matter). She did not care that her father disliked Tywin Lannister, once his business partner, with all his honorable Northern heart. The dancing company had nothing to do with Tywin. On the contrary, it had been created from the ground up by the Lannister siblings: Jaime and Cersei Lannister were the principal dancers, who shared the responsibilities of director with their younger brother, Tyrion. The company wavered the storms set by Tywin Lannister, who had been desperate to bring his heir back to his senses, so that instead of “jumping around in tights” he could one day head Lannisters & Co; withstood the scandal occasioned when Jaime was accused of murdering Aerys Targaryen. Even when Cersei left the stage to marry Robert Baratheon (a marriage that was heartily disapproved of by Ned Stark, who wanted better for his close friend), the Lannister brothers continued to divide the responsibilities of director: the older in charge of the dancers and choreography, Tyrion responsible for the music, mise en scène, and all that constituted the company’s relationships with the outer world, which was despised by Jaime Lannister. Despite Cersei’s departure, the Lannister Ballet Company continued as the most successful and prestigious ballet company in the Seven Kingdoms, and any dancer (Sansa Stark included) dreamed of nothing but getting his or her foot in the door.

When her senior year at the Winterfell Academy of Ballet had brought the excitement and horror of applications, Sansa submitted her portfolio for consideration to the Lannister Ballet Company. She did not allow herself to hope and was taken entirely by surprise when she had been invited for an audition. Lest her parents prevented her from going, she enlisted the help of Ygritte, her brother Jon’s girlfriend, to drive with her to King’s Landing for the audition. Ned and Catelyn labored under the
impression that their daughter went traveling with her friend over break.

Walking down the corridors of the Lannister Ballet Company for the first time was a breath-taking experience for Sansa, a moment between dream and alternate reality. To her disappointment, most of the dancers were away on a tour in Dorne, but she was auditioned by none other than Tyrion Lannister himself. Sansa took an immediate liking to the little man, whose kindness and wit compensated for his small stature. Her performance was more than usually inspired: it seemed as though her pointes never touched the luxurious flooring, as though she floated, wrapped in music, as she danced in the light-filled studio. Tyrion was impressed. Two weeks after her return from the audition, the red and gold envelope had arrived, leaving her overjoyed yet facing the necessity of confronting her family.

“Out of the question!” had roared Ned Stark. “My daughter will not step foot into the hell-pit they call King’s Landing and into Lannister jaws! Over my dead body!”

Of course, a few days later, the father relented. And now his precious little daughter was going away; away into a world he knew was cruel and unfair — especially where the Lannisters were concerned. Sansa thought she was about to enter a world of dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Please review! Kudos are love!
“Have you completely lost your mind?!”

Tyrion grimaced. It was not often that Jaime and he had disagreements, but, occasionally, his elder brother proved he was called a diva for a reason.

“Why would you make this assumption?” Tyrion replied coolly, trying not to envision the lengthy discussion that lay ahead.

“I don’t know! Perhaps, because you decided to hire a bloody Stark without consulting with me!”

“I thought we had agreed that, this year, I was in charge of auditions?”

“Of auditions — yes, but we had no agreement you would sabotage our company by taking on a horse-face in order to curry favor with the Starks! Favor, which, might I add, we don’t need!”

Jaime was fuming. One day, he was away on a tour in Dorne and all was well, the next, he came back to find his younger brother had lost his mind. And what was worse, Tyrion remained blind to the problem.

“What are you going on about so loudly?” the ever-curious Margery Tyrell, one of the female leads, stuck her head into the office.

“Marge, not now!” barked Jaime before Tyrion decided to literally walk away from the conversation by using his girlfriend as a pretext. Margery judged Jaime’s fuming to be at a nine out of ten and, with a look of sympathy in Tyrion’s direction, wisely disappeared behind the door.

“Will you please calm down and let me explain?” the younger Lannister tried, but Jaime was having none of it.

“Calm down?! Is that what you want me to do? Calm down? Ned Stark dragged our family’s name through the mud on more than one occasion; his younger brother nearly put me behind bars, and you decided to hire one of them into our company? You’re mad, if you think I will tolerate this!”

Tyrion took a deep breath.

“First of all, I did not hire Ned or Benjen Stark — they both would look terrible in tights.” Jaime rewarded his jibe with a glare. “Second, I will not break a girl’s career because of her name. You and I both know what’s it like to be judged by the deeds of our relatives, and I seem to recall you’ve always objected to such prejudice.” Jaime’s face showed that he could not argue against this point, even though he remained unconvinced. “Third,” continued Tyrion, “we must think of the company — ” but Jaime could stand this no more.

“The company has been around without the Stark girl, and it will be here long after I terminate her contract!” he interrupted, and, before Tyrion could object, continued: “Besides, what does she have to do with the company?”
“If you would only let me finish!” Tyrion was beginning to lose his patience. Jaime fell silent but continued pacing, his lips pressed into a tight line. “You haven’t seen her dance, Jaime! I have never seen anyone dance like this, besides you! And she’s only eighteen, a graduate from some frozen Winterfell Academy of Ballet!” That got Jaime to stop pacing, and he looked at Tyrion with disbelief, but the little man would not be fazed by skepticism. “The company needs young talent, especially such talent!” Jaime resumed his pacing. Tyrion delivered his last line in a quieter voice, lending it more emphasis: “She truly is outstanding.”

Jaime turned to face his brother, his index finger pointing at Tyrion.

“Fine! You want your Stark — you can have her! But when her thick-skulled father comes charging here like a bull or Mother Stark sets fire to the damned place, I will leave it to you to clean up the mess!”

With this, hurricane Jaime Lannister whooshed out of his brother’s office, slamming the door shut behind him. Tyrion sat back into his chair. By the Seven, but he could do with a little break! His thoughts went back to Margery, and he wobbled out of his chair to go in search of her. After this interlude with his brother, he certainly could do with some calmness and affection.

Chapter End Notes

Please review! Kudos are love!
Walking the halls of the Lannister Ballet company for the second time still felt like dreaming to Sansa. This time, though, the corridors were alive with dancers: stretching, rushing into the studios; walking out of them slowly, covered in sweat. It was no secret that the perfection achieved here was payed for by long hours of training and subsequent weariness. She found the office she was looking for without difficulty. She knocked and, hearing a rushed “come in,” entered, glad to see a friendly, familiar face.

“Yes, and tell Sandor not to scare them away like he did last time…” Tyrion Lannister was talking on the phone and, offering her a warm smile, motioned for her to sit. “Listen, I have to go now, but I’ll call you back. Yes, yes, I will. All right, bye!” He hung up and turned to her, still smiling.

“Well, Sansa, it’s good to have you back. Are you excited for the new season?”

Excited? She was barely containing herself from jumping with joy and squealing.

“Of course, I am! Thank you for this opportunity!”

“Very glad to hear it, very glad! Well, I will come straight to the point, then. All new dancers who join the company are required to go through a year of training first. Depending on how good you are coming in, this term may be shortened,” he raised his eyebrows at her, “or prolonged,” he sighed, motioning his large head into the direction of the corridor.

“I hope I will not disappoint,” Sansa said.

She was disappointed: she had assumed she would start performing (or at least preparing for a performance) right away.

“Of course not!” Tyrion exclaimed, indicating with his assurance that he had every confidence she would leave the “preparatory ranks,” as they were referred to, very soon. “Now, have you already moved in?” She nodded. “And your roommate is?..”

“Tyene… Tyene Sand, I believe?” she was not certain. A bubbling, laughing girl had met her excitedly when she was moving in and provided a welcome contrast to Catelyn’s frowning face. Ned, after a long battle between the spouses, acquiesced to remaining at home in order to avoid unnecessary confrontations with Sansa’s superiors. Tyrion’s voice returned her to the present.

“Ah! Wonderful! Jolly girl! She’s the daughter of two of our leading dancers — Oberyn Martell and Elaria Sand, who will also be your teachers. I’m sure you’ll get along.” He paused. “Sansa,” he resumed in a more serious, gentle tone, “I know that our families do not have the strongest ties…” She let a small, nervous giggle escape her and almost regretted it before finding an answering grin on his face. “Oh, well,” he continued more gaily, “let’s be frank: there is a lot of bad blood between the Lannisters and the Starks.” And again, more seriously: “However, I and the other members of this company value and admire the dedication and courage it took you to get here. Everyone — and I do mean everyone — will give you the respect you deserve.” Pausing, he added: “Otherwise, send them to me, and I will remind them about the rules of hospitality and politeness. All right?”

Sansa gave him a grateful smile:
“Thank you, sir.”

He waved his little hands at her in horror:

“Oh, by the Seven, do not call me ‘sir!’ It sounds so important, I will be tempted to look around to see whom you’re addressing! Ah, you’re laughing, very good.” His phone rang. “Unless you have any questions?..”

“No, Mr. Lannister, thank you!”

“Call me Tyrion, please, or I might think my father’s here and call for my bodyguard, Bronn!” he laughed, picking up his phone, winking her goodbye.

Sansa left the office smiling. It was good to see Tyrion again.

Chapter End Notes

Please review! Kudos are love!
Sansa was settling into her new life. She was relieved to learn that she had been assigned to the highest level of the preparatory classes, one with fewer students, who were taught master classes by the stars of the company in addition to other sessions. Her roommate, Tyene, was kind, if a little wild. Like Sansa, Tyene was one of the students at the highest level of the preparatory classes, so the girls were thrown together most of the time. Although her easy laughs and seemingly innate sensuality contrasted markedly with Sansa’s wary smiles and reserved nature, she and Tyene were becoming friends. In their dancing, they were opposites as well: whereas Sansa danced with cold grace, each step learned to perfection, Tyene’s sensual movements were more spontaneous; sometimes, she invented steps rather than followed choreography. While Tyene left to party all over King’s Landing at night, Sansa remained in her room before a full-length mirror, practicing dancing steps.

All of Sansa’s training sessions were going well, except two: the master classes taught by Oberyn Martell and Ellaria Sand caused her no end of grief. It was not that either Oberyn or Ellaria were unkind — on the contrary, they were eager to help their daughter’s friend, and the disproportionate attention they paid to Sansa made her feel nervous, thwarting any chances she otherwise could have had at performing to her best ability in class.

Oberyn’s dancing explained his daughter’s penchant for improvisation: he wanted his students to not only dance seductively but also to be able to come up with steps on their own. His worst task, as far as Sansa was concerned, was when he would give his students (victims, really, she thought) two steps and they would be forced to invent at least three new ones to perform in between the two they were given. Ellaria’s classes were hardly any better. Oberyn’s wife was responsible for a peculiar mixture of modern dance and ballet, and if ever there had been a style for which Sansa had neither liking nor talent, contemporary dance was the one. And as if modern dancing on its own would not have been bad enough, Ellaria took the uninhibited motions of seduction from modern dance and incorporated them into the rigorous technique of classical ballet. Sansa, who had achieved perfection in the coordinated movements of classical dance, was near tears each time she exited the studios of her friend’s parents.

“Sansa, dear, you’re too stiff,” Ellaria would say with sympathy in her thick Dornish accent. “Relax. Let your bones melt into your muscles, dance not like a leaf, whose shape is predetermined, dance as though you were water, taking endless shapes, never static. Again!”

“Sparkle!” Oberyn had given her that nickname during the first master class, when he had observed a lock of her red hair that had wiggled its way to freedom from her punishing chignon. “Sparkle, I give you point A and point B,” that was how he spoke of the two movements he would give the students as the starting and finishing points of their improvisations. “Your job is to seduce as you go from one to the other. Come on, try again! Be like fire!”

No, however kindly they showed her the steps and no matter how hard they tried to make her understand the sensuous freedom of their dance, Sansa dreaded their master classes. Seduction had been so far away from her; she had never really fallen in love, except with knights from ancient tales. How could she, as she danced, make herself burn with a passion she had never felt, let alone lived?
No, Sansa would have been glad never to set foot into either studio ever again. On the weeks when she had no master classes with either of Tyene’s parents, she felt happier than on holidays.

No one, not even Ellaria or Oberyn, could accuse her of not trying hard enough: Sansa worked nights before her mirror, trying to shake her body out of the confines of virginal grace, which had never failed her before; but no matter what she tried, she kept hearing: “Try being softer!” and “Less steel, more fire, Sparkle!” from Ellaria and Oberyn. And this was not all. She had tried preparing for Oberyn’s torture, as she referred to it in her mind, but the day the Dornishman discovered her attempts at curtailing improvisation, he took her aside after class and told her:

“Sparkle, I know when you invent the movements on the spot and when you don’t. I can see it in your face, the way your eyes are either scared or serious. Rehearsals are valuable, but not for this class. I know that this is hard for you. I know you’ve never done this before — but this is why we teach you, so that one day that cold fear goes away from your eyes and is replaced with fire and confidence.”

“But why do we need to know how to improvise at all?” Sansa attempted meekly. “In a performance, all the steps are choreographed anyway.”

She was looking at the floor, stubborn in her rare act of mutiny.

“When I was performing with the Lannisters for the first time (it was a collaboration between the Dornish company where I worked then and the LBC), one of the ballerinas had sprained her ankle in the middle of the second act, when it was just the two of us on stage,” he sounded nostalgic, awash with fond memories, and a sly smile played on his lips. “Now, the performance could not be interrupted and she could barely move her left foot. We were able to finish our segment, however, before she could be whisked off stage because we both knew how to improvise. And, of course, later, we had a daughter who embodies the very force that saved our careers and brought her parents together…” Sansa looked at him with wide eyes before realizing he was talking about Ellaria and Tyene; Oberyn smiled wider and placed a hand on Sansa’s shoulder. “Sparkle,” he said with emphasis. “I know you think this is just a useless exercise designed by the Stranger to cause you misery… No, don’t try to argue, I know this is what you think! But you have to find a way to embrace the technique, because what you learn in my classes will come in very handy if one day you need to improvise on stage. After all,” he added with a kind smile, “isn’t this what it means to be a great dancer? To be able to perform regardless of whether the world is collapsing around you or your dancing partner has sprained an ankle?”

He patted her on the shoulder and walked away. Sansa was not quite comforted. If anything, listening to stories about sprained ankles had made her even more nervous.

One evening, after Sansa had a particularly frustrating session in Ellaria’s class, which, if possible, was even worse than Oberyn’s, Tyene found her roommate sitting on the floor of her room, crying in frustration, her knee sporting an ugly bruise from where she had hit her bed while practicing.

“Hey, hey,” Tyene came to hug her friend. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t!” Sansa was wailing and screaming, her usually soft tones abandoned. “Don’t you see?! I will never be able to dance like you and your parents! This isn’t what I was made for! This isn’t what I can do, no matter how hard I try!”

Tyene looked at her with a warm smile.

“You mean you were not made for love? Everyone was.”

“Love? What are you talking about?!” Sansa’s voice was tired and gruff.
“Dancing is like making love — ” she began, but Sansa interrupted with an angry movement of her shoulders and a quiet but enraged:

“Well, I would not know about that either.”

Tyene continued:

“Your movements, your eyes, your face — they are so beautiful, but you look lonely. It’s as though you were dancing only for yourself, and you were blind. No, dancing is like when you stop being a body and become a heart — you are dancing because every part of your being is pulsing with desire, and the only way to achieve satisfaction is by seducing your love with your movements.”

“See, I could never do that! I just couldn’t… And anyway,” Sansa looked away, somewhere between embarrassment, prudence, and sadness, “love isn’t something you show to anyone, and you don’t make love in front of other people!..” she finished her thought practically outraged.

“Usually not, but it’s because you can’t make love on stage that you have to dance in a way that shows the viewers how beautiful love is.”

Sansa only shook her head. It was only then that Tyene noticed her bruised knee.

“By all the snakes of Dorne,” she exclaimed, “Sansa, what on earth happened to your knee?!”

“I was practicing,” she sniffed, “and I didn’t notice the bed.”

“Sansa, you shouldn’t practice in a small room with furniture! You could really hurt yourself! And then what?”

“What could I do instead? I have to practice, or I won’t make any progress.”

“I have keys from my parents’ studios. I can give you one — or both! It’s not like I use them to go practice at night…”

Sansa gasped.

“Could you do that? But isn’t this horribly against the rules?”

“Who cares? You’ll be able to practice without hurting yourself, and what the people don’t know won’t hurt them.” Tyene saw that Sansa was unconvinced and sighed. “But if you’re such a goody-two-shoes, you can check with Tyrion if it would be all right. Whenever I want something, I always go to Tyrion — he rarely says no to people he likes, and I know he likes you!”

“How could you possibly know this?”

“From Margery!”

Sansa knew Margery Tyrell well. She, too, taught master classes, and Sansa loved going to her studio. Each lesson reminded her of what it had been like to dance in Winterfell: Margery admired Sansa’s grace and hard work, complimenting her movements and progress. The praise she received from her meant more to Sansa than the approval of any of the other instructors combined.

“Margery… You know she’s Tyrion’s girlfriend, right?” Tyene asked.

Sansa nodded, thinking about how cute they looked together and how much love she saw on their faces whenever they were in each other’s company. Tyene confided in her friend:
“Marge told me about a huge fight Tyrion had with Jaime — such an asshole that Kingslayer even if he does dance like a god — anyway, he didn’t want you to come here because you’re a Stark, but Tyrion stood his ground, and told him he wouldn’t terminate your contract because of your last name.”

“Jaime Lannister didn’t want me here?”

Always bad at preventing her emotions from waving across her face, Sansa could not even moderate the horror that showed on her features. The horror and the hurt — Jaime Lannister, the greatest dancer of their time, maybe of the age, did not want her in his ballet company?

“Oh, don’t worry!” Tyene laughed. “Jaime does not like anyone, except Tyrion, I think. Don’t let that bother you. But do go to Tyrion, and when he says yes, I will give you the key.”

“If he says yes,” Sansa corrected.

“When he says yes,” insisted Tyene.

The next day Sansa made her way to Tyrion’s office and knocked lightly on the door, smiling when she heard the cheerful “come in!” She was embarrassed to ask for any favors, especially after finding out how much Tyrion had already done for her; but the same silent power that drove her tired legs to perform one more pas, that forced her tired, shaking arms to stay steady as she moved, that gave her the strength to go against her parents’ wishes in applying to the Lannister Ballet Company, that very same power now gave her the determination to talk with Tyrion. The latter seemed happy to see her as he motioned for her to sit:

“Ah, if it isn’t Sparkle herself!” noticing her surprised frown, he continued in a remorseful tone. “I apologize if my use of your nickname offends you, Sansa. It’s just that it suits you so terribly well.”

“Because I have red hair?” she inquired sullenly.

“That, too. But did Oberyn ever tell you why he’s bestowed this name on you? No? He did tell me.” Tyrion paused for greater effect. “He told me you’re the most talented young woman to have walked into his master class in years! (A fact, which, might I add, I already knew.) More talented and hardworking, Oberyn said to me, than his own daughter.” Tyrion imitated the Dornishman’s accent: “‘But not yet the fire!’ Apparently, you’re a sparkle who will soon become a powerful flame, or so he tells me. I must admit, between him and Ellaria, the nickname has caught on, so you better come to like it and wear it like armor! But I keep prattling on, and you had something important to tell me, forgive me. What can I do for you, Sansa?”

Sansa was blushing from the praise, especially unexpected as it was coming from Oberyn of all her teachers. But she composed herself and proceeded with her request:

“Tyrion, I know this is rather unusual, but I was hoping I could ask if I might have a key to practice in one of the studios at night? I’ve been practicing in my room, but it isn’t very large, and when Tyene saw my bruised knee — ” Seeing Tyrion’s worried expression, she hastened to add: “Oh, nothing serious, but she said I could really hurt myself and suggested that I ask if I could use one of her keys for her parents’ studios…”

Tyrion wore a small smile.

“Sansa, you’re already better than most dancers here, even some of those who perform. Why on earth would you wear yourself out practicing at night when you must rest?”

She glanced at her hands, fidgeting with the edge of her skirt.
“I… I… I am not as good as I can be. And I won’t stop practicing, but I would rather do it in a studio, if it’s not inconvenient, since I live close by anyway, and it’s a quiet neighborhood… Please, Tyrion?”

He looked at her with surprise and seemed as though he was about to say something more, but checked himself and instead told her:

“If this is your decision, all right then. But don’t bother taking Tyene’s keys — I’ll have a set made for you!”

As Sansa jumped to express her gratitude, Tyrion watched her, smiling and thinking: If Cersei had half the girl’s sedulity, could she have been as good as Sparkle here will be when she grows into herself? How different could our lives have been if she had a third of her kindness? And Jaime…

But Sansa was late for class and, having thanked him profusely, had rushed off, and Tyrion’s phone was ringing and ringing and ringing as though crescendo was its modus vivendi, tearing his thoughts away from his siblings.

Chapter End Notes

Please review! Kudos are love!
In the Darkness, They Can't See Me

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Tyrion was as good as his word. In a few days, Sansa had her own set of keys, their chain adorned with a small plush toy, which was in the shape and the color of a small flame. She smiled whenever she looked at it. After Tyrion’s explanation, she had grown rather fond of the nickname that embodied the hope her mentors placed in her. And she grew to love her evening training even more. Her days ended at four, and she returned home, ate, and gave herself to the pleasure of a daytime nap. By seven in the evening, however, she would return to the Lannister Ballet Company building, open the backdoor with her keys, and sneak in. Usually, she was alone, and she danced as the sun set and disappeared, danced with the moonlight and streetlights shining through the large windows of the studios. She disliked turning on the light, preferring the cover of semi-darkness for practicing the wanton movements she learned (or was supposed to, at least) in Ellaria’s class. With no one around and no bright light to intimidate her by showing her a crisp reflection in the large mirrors, she could free herself a little. When she looked at herself, all she saw was an ephemeral shadow. And though shadows are tied to the objects they follow, her ghostly reflection seemed free to Sansa.

Sometimes, the orchestra of the company would practice in one of the larger studios in the evenings. Although she got less work done on such occasions, Sansa loved when they gathered. Tyrion would usually show up, more often than not accompanied by Margery. She loved being around them. Having grown up in a loving, loud family and known nothing else, Sansa felt a little lonely in King’s Landing, and it warmed her heart to be around people who not only loved each other but had affection for her. Sometimes Oberyn and Ellaria also came, filling the air with innuendos. It was at one of these musical rehearsals that she met Brienne and her fiancé, Tormund.

Brienne was an imposing woman. Over six feet tall, she towered above everyone, even the men. She played the cello. In her presence, Sansa thought she understood how Tyrion must have felt on a daily basis. The latter, however, seemed to delight in making jokes about what an odd pairing he and Brienne could make. Brienne’s fiancé was by no means a less colorful character than his lady: almost as tall as Brienne, Tormund was built like a bull. In addition, he sported wild hair and a fairly long beard. He was a redhead, like Sansa, and partly because of this and partly because, like himself, she came from the North, the trumpet-player took an immediate liking to the young ballerina.

“We are both kissed by fire,” he would say to her. “So, if anyone here causes you any trouble, you just tell me, Sparkle.”

“I know another girl kissed by fire, she’s also from the far North,” she told him once.

“You do?”

She nodded.

“What’s her name?” Tormund asked.

“Ygritte,” Sansa replied fondly. “She’s my brother’s girlfriend. She came with me here when I was invited to audition.”

“Jon Stark’s the one she’s been going out with?” he asked, surprising her.

“Yes, that’s right. My brother Jon… but how did you know?”
“She’s my younger sister, that’s how I know. They came over to meet the family last year. You’re Sansa Stark, aren’t you?”

She confirmed her identity.

Sansa remembered Jon’s fond stories about Ygritte’s family and the mock terror with which he spoke about her brother, whom he clearly liked: “a bear-man if ever I saw one.” Sansa smiled affectionately — it was almost as though she had found one of her family, a connection to her far-away home. Tormund had suddenly taken her in his arms and, after giving her a bear hug, placed her easily on one of his shoulders, and, suddenly, she saw everything from higher up even than Brienne. Tormund marched them over to his fiancée, saying:

“Did you know, lass, that this here,” pointing to Sansa seated on his shoulder, “is a soon-to-be sister of mine?”

“What are you talking about?” Brienne inquired with an indulging smile. He told her, and from that moment Sansa was adopted by their little family. Brienne would sometimes check in on her in-between classes, as though suspicious that Sansa worked too much. Tormund certainly thought that she was not eating enough and had once brought her a sandwich, which Sansa thought she could not eat in three days if she tried. As politely as she could, she refused, explaining that her diet did not allow for such indulgences. Tormund clearly tried to understand the intricacies of self-starving that were being revealed to him but afterward only asked, with a worried frown:

“What do you eat then, lass?”

Sansa explained her preference for fruits and vegetables. Tormund looked perplexed, but, in a few days, he brought her an enormous bag filled with ripe oranges, the best she had ever tasted in the city.

“You’ve got to eat, lass,” he said with concern. “After I mentioned to Ygritte that you and I have met, she’d kill me, if you died from hunger on my watch.”

(Sansa had received excited texts from her friend, who was relieved that her boyfriend’s sister had family around and “not just the Imp, though he sounds awfully nice.”)

But on the days when the musicians were not playing, Sansa found herself quite alone in the darkness of the Lannister Ballet Company building. She did not feel lonely or afraid — these halls were as familiar to her as the palm of her hand, and she loved them, the life and chances they enclosed, the autonomy they gave her. She found that, although she could not invent the steps for Oberyn’s class in advance, she could practice nonetheless. She made it a habit to turn her music on at random and dance — no practice, no choreography, no thinking. Tyene had compared it to making love, but for Sansa it was not about a relationship between people: it meant surrendering to music, letting it guide her wherever it went. And in the darkness, no one could see if she missed a step.

One night, Sansa got so caught up in the harmony of music and dance, she completely lost track of time. It was not eleven as usual when she had finished. She came to her senses when she almost lost her balance and realized her limbs were shaking, her body dripping with sweat. She could not tell how long she had danced for. Taking her phone from the arm band, too exhausted to care if her headphones fell to the floor, she glanced at the time: it was two in the morning. Cursing silently into the soft darkness cut only by the rays of streetlights, Sansa made her way to her bag and, throwing her phone into it, exited the studio. The halls were reigned by complete gloom, and she started rummaging through her bag to find her phone and light the way, as she continued slowly advancing toward the exit. Her phone was not cooperating: the damned thing kept sliding from her fingers, as though consciously escaping her shaking hand. Her eyes had grown used to the darkness, and she
gave up on finding the offending device.

When she was passing one of the larger studios, Sansa was surprised to hear what sounded like voices. Curious as to who had stayed up so late aside from herself, she came closer to the half-opened door. What she had first thought to be voices were moans. Terrified that a dancer had hurt herself, she advanced, but was stopped dead in her tracks when she heard male grunts join the woman’s moans. It was too late, though: Sansa was right before the half-opened door and her eyes went to the source of the sounds.

A half-dressed couple was pressed against the wall mirror. The first and only thought that had come to Sansa’s head on the heels of the blood that rushed to her face, was: They are beautiful. They look like tango dancers. The man’s left hand was on his lover’s back, his right one gripping her thigh, bringing her closer to him, his face hidden in her neck and luscious curls. The woman’s hands were tangled in her lover’s hair. Sansa looked at them, transfixed. Their heavy breathing, their erratic, urgent movements, the moans they could not contain, made her heart drop and disappear somewhere; when it came back, it was filled with a strange ache. She watched the man with fascination. Unable to see his features in the dark, she could still admire his strong built, the leonine grace of his taut muscles. The sounds he made caused Sansa’s breath to catch.

For the first time in her life, Sansa wanted to be someone else.

She wanted to be the woman whose hands were now on his broad shoulders, hugging him closer to her body. She wished it were her hands that reached for his face, pulling his lips to hers.

“Jaime…” the woman moaned, and Sansa was jolted from the hypnosis that had possessed her.

*Jaime? As in Jaime Lannister? But the woman?*..

Illogically, Sansa wondered if in truth she was not seeing Oberyn and Ellaria. Their frequent, passionate kisses and dancing styles made them natural suspects. Yet no female dancer in the Lannister Ballet Company had hair as long as this woman. She had moaned a different name; the man swallowing the cries of ecstasy from her lips did not look like Oberyn Martell. As though she wished to leave Sansa without doubts, the woman chanted “Jaime” again. Simultaneously, the lights of a passing car caught the lovers’ faces, and the adrenaline in Sansa’s blood turned to panic. Her heart thumping like a torrential rain, she bolted from the building, running as though the Stranger was at her back, the image of two sets of reflections haunting her — the ones of the couple in the mirror and the way their faces were slightly metamorphosed reflections of each other. The same faces, the same eyes that had looked at her from posters on the building’s walls every day — the images of the company’s founding dancers, Jaime and Cersei Lannister.
Sansa rushed into her and Tyene’s apartment, thinking her lungs would burst. Dropping her bag, she made for the kitchen, tripping over things and cursing silently. Water, she needed water. Water and some drug that made people forget all memories within the range of an hour. She was spilling her drink all over the place and could barely bring the glass to her lips. The effort proved useless, and even had she succeeded, she risked knocking out her teeth — it was not just her hands that were shaking. She ended up accidentally dropping the stupid pitcher into the sink and waking up Tyene, who, for once, had returned before Sansa.

Tyene had left the party early because the only person she had wanted to see had not deigned her with his presence. Not one to sulk for long, she had returned home, watched a stupid melodrama, and went to bed. She was awakened by a terrible noise, and, upon entering the kitchen, she discovered her roommate, white as a shroud, shaking all over as though she had seen a ghost.

“What in the Seven Kingdoms is the matter?!” Tyene exclaimed.

Sansa’s eyes were barely focused, and she was soaking wet from sweat and the water she had spilled. She seemed unable to speak. Tyene rushed toward her, taking her cold hands into her own.

“Are you all right? Are you hurt?”

A nod and a shake seemed as much as Sansa could manage by way of response.

“Did someone scare you?”

Sansa shook her head, but her face and the way her shoulders betrayed her desire to curl into herself suggested to her friend that whatever was the matter, someone could be blamed for it. Realizing that she was not about to get an answer, Tyene led her friend to the couch and almost had to push her into the cushions. She took the almost empty glass from Sansa, filled it, and added a straw. Sansa drank obediently as a child, her eyes still glassy, if less wild. With each gulp of water, she seemed to return to her senses, and, soon enough, she looked almost like her usual self.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?”

Tyene’s question seemed to snap her out of whatever had taken hold of her. Sansa tried to smile, looking embarrassed and guilty.

“I’m sorry I woke you.”

“That’s all right. It’s a good thing you did, or you’d have a tooth or two fewer.”

Sansa smirked, but it was half-hearted. She fiddled with the straw.

“It’s very silly, really.” She looked oddly uncomfortable, and for a second Tyene wondered if her friend was lying, but dismissed the idea as entirely out of character for Sansa, who continued: “I thought I saw something in the studio and I got scared, so I ran home.”
“What did you see?”

Sansa opened her mouth, then closed it, and looked away. She reddened.

“I never turn on the lights, so it was probably just my own shadow. I’m sorry I woke you. Go back to sleep, and I will take a shower — as you can see, I’m filthy sweaty.”

She attempted another smile, before heading to the bathroom. Hearing the friendly purl of water, Tyene went back to bed, a little disconcerted at Sansa’s panic and her cavalier dismissal of whatever had caused her fear.

Chapter End Notes

Please review! Kudos are love!
Jaime Lannister had thought he was having a good day. He had been more than usually satisfied with his solo performance at Olenna Tyrell’s charity event; early in the evening, Robert Baratheon had drunk himself to the point of being sent home, and he had Cersei all to himself. He had not seen his twin in a while, what with the ballet company’s tour in Dorne, his solo performances in Essos, and her own manic career building at the Lannisters & Co. After the gala, they had escaped to the studios, and he could finally take her, relishing in her body, her moans, her heat. No sooner had they come down from the carnal high, however, than they heard rushing footsteps. Cersei had been furious, chiding him for what she termed his “carelessness.” Perhaps, he should not have pointed out that it had been her idea to come to the studios after declining his invitation to go to his apartment: she had flown into a rage and, doing a poor job of fixing her attire, which had made him want to grab her and take her again before she was out of his reach, she had left him in the darkness, telling him to “fix this.” So now, at the ungodly hour of eight thirty in the morning, he was pacing in his brother’s office, as he waited for Tyrion to return from a meeting.

Tyrion knew he was about to have a bad day. Meeting Stannis Baratheon was as dull an affair as staring at a white wall. Meeting Stannis at eight in the morning instead of making sweet love to Margery was a cruel, unmerited punishment. But Stannis —funnily enough, all incest things considered — was his brother-in-law, who wanted advice on good preparatory ballet classes for Shireen. Stannis’ daughter wanted to dance, and the man loathed everything contemporary with a passion. A text from Jaime, which read “we must speak NOW,” added to Tyrion’s bad mood. Jaime’s dyslexia never reared its head at a good time, and Tyrion had learned to recognize his brother’s muffled texts as a warning sign. No, Tyrion was not going to have a good day, especially considering that Stannis was talking politics and a fuming Jaime was the next thing on his menu of misery.

As expected, Tyrion found Jaime in his office, pacing.

“Slow down or you’ll wear out the rug,” he warned his brother, who did not heed him.

“Who could have been in the building yesterday night while Cersei and I fucked in one of the studios?”

“And good morning to you too, dear brother.”

To say that Sansa was having a bad day would have been the understatement of the century. She overslept; and she had never overslept anything. However, for obvious reasons, she had forgotten to turn on her alarm the night before (because of the master classes, her schedule constantly fluctuated, making the daily alarms she had used in Winterfell impractical). She awoke with a start and, as adrenaline was pumping through her, reached for her phone and discovered that, unless she could teleport to class in her pajamas, she would be seriously late. Then, the realization that she would be late for Margery’s master class hit her (because it had to be Margery’s class that day, so she could not even console herself with the thought that Ellaria or Oberyn would have a little less time to torture her). She burned with shame as she jumped around, getting ready and trying to wake Tyene, who had given up on alarm clocks altogether now that Sansa was around to wake her up every day. The girls made it to class half an hour late.
Margery made no comment as they sneaked into the studio, looking like children accused of stealing marmalade, but raised her delicate eyebrows. Tyene’s lateness did not surprise her, but Sansa’s tardiness made her almost worried: the Northern girl operated as if she were a well-oiled machine, for Mother’s sake!

Like many in the Lannister Ballet Company, Margery Tyrell was having a bad day. It all started when she did not get sex for breakfast (and she was on a very strict diet, thank you very much!). After Tyrion had not fallen for her seductions, she decided to use the advantage of her height, straddling the small man, pinning his arms, and catching his lips in a fierce kiss. Tyrion Lannister was not to be easily restrained, however: she could not figure out still how he had managed to break her grip on him and tickle her until she laughed so hard she had tears in her eyes, while he used his chance to escape from her clutches. That was cute, she had to admit with a small smile. Being deprived of morning sex was not, however. And all this fuss because he was meeting Stannis of all people! She had seen pieces of wood that were more entertaining than Renly’s brother! To add to her annoyance, a few minutes before she began the master-class, Tyrion had sent a text in which he did not even pay her the courtesy of apologizing for his mistreatment of her.

Text From: Most Loved Little Man to Queen of Love and Beauty

Send Sansa to my office THE MOMENT you finish your masterclass, please!

Although with time Margery had almost come to believe in Tyrion’s omniscience, she still did not think he could know that her most talented student was late for class. Nor did it make any sense for Tyrion to care if he did know. So, Margery’s bad day was worsened by worrying whether anything had happened to anyone in the Starks’ large family. She did tell Sansa that Tyrion wanted to see her ASAP at the end of class and was startled by the girl’s reaction: her eyes widened, she paled, then looked at the floor and turned crimson.

Whatever was the matter with Sparkle?

Come to think of it, Sansa was not at her best during class. She looked almost sleep-deprived. Margery had too much confidence in her own charm, Tyrion’s character, their relationship, and the Starks’ honor (as well as Sansa’s guilelessness), to suspect that anything was up between them. The fact that Tyrion and Margery had left the building together the night before and she could account, with satisfaction, as to where and how he had spent the night, also helped. She wondered, however, what could have caused the girl to react in this manner.

“Is everything all right, Sparkle?” she asked.

“Everything’s just great!” her student replied with a friendly smile that mingled oddly with a level of sarcasm that Margery suspected was unhealthy for the girl’s good Northern blood.

As she walked to Tyrion’s office, Sansa was on the verge of developing a multiple personality disorder.

There is no reason why Tyrion would suspect I’ve observed his brother’s incestuous tryst the night before. He probably called me for some other reason altogether.

Riiight. Because you’re his go-to person for emergencies, and you’re totally not the ONLY person known to be roaming the building at night.

But they probably didn’t even hear me over all the noise they were making.

Jealous, are we?
Irrelevant.
Point taken. But you did dash away at such a speed that your footsteps could probably wake the dead.

Nonsense! I bet I was quiet as a mouse.

Is that what you’re telling yourself Ms. Elephantus?

Oh, Seven, they probably did hear! And Tyrion knows I’m the only one who could have been around! Oh, gods, I am so screwed!

Unless Jaime Lannister has kept his dirty little secret from his younger brother…

YES!.. Wait, whose side are you on, anyway?!

Before her second inner voice could answer, she had reached Tyrion’s door. Taking a deep breath, she knocked, and felt her heart hurry to take residence somewhere in her heels when she heard a strained, not a customarily cheerful, “come in!” Opening the door, she was certain she was walking into a nightmare. Surely, the man whose tense back seemed vaguely familiar was not Jaime Lannister? He turned, his green eyes fixing her to the spot, and Sansa wanted nothing more than for the ground to swallow her whole.

“Ah, Sparkle, thanks for coming. I think I have something for you,” Tyrion said.

Oh, thank you, Mother! It had nothing to do with his elder brother after all. Steady, Sansa, whatever this is, you’re one lucky girl it’s not what you feared it was!

“You do?”

“Yes.” Tyrion picked up her headphones from his desk. “I believe these are yours?”

I’ve searched for these for two precious minutes this morning!

Not recalling that she had last seen her headphones in the studio the night before, Sansa reached for them happily:

“Oh, I’m so glad you found them!”

She froze when Jaime Lannister’s cold voice came from behind her, making her spine tingle and her heart do a somersault:

“Actually, you should thank me for recovering them for you yesterday.”

You idiot! Late trap alert! Late trap alert! her brain screamed — belatedly, alas.

Jaime watched as her shoulders tensed. Coupled with the way her eyes had widened in fear when she had first seen him, this was not a good sign at all. What was her name, again? Sparkle? Who named their children this way? Was her mother a drunken whore or an imbecile? The redhead turned to him slowly, pale as the snow that probably ran through her veins. The steadiness of her answer, however, took him by surprise.

“Well, then, thank you very much.”

Tyrion chose this moment to introduce them:

“Sparkle, this is my brother Jaime Lannister.”
“Oh, I know who he is,” Sparkle replied in a strange voice as they shook hands. *Of course, she does! And what a memorable first impression Cersei and I must have made on her.*

“And what a memorable first impression Cersei and I must have made on her. Indeed?” he asked, not letting go of her hand, which was as cold as a White Walker’s.

He thought he had caught a flash of panic on her face before she surprised him once again.

“Well, your face *is* plastered all over the building,” she sounded a little annoyed and, taking her hand from his, stepped as far away from him as she could — an odd thing for any woman to do in his presence. She tried to run a hand through her hair as though she had forgotten it was pulled into a tight chignon, and added: “Not to mention that you’re probably the most recognizable face in the world of ballet, and I *am* a professional dancer.” The flattering words came out sounding more like an accusation than a compliment.

*Damn you, Sansa, did you have to say that? “Most recognizable face?” Why don’t you just go ahead and scream: “Yeah, sure, I saw you fucking your sister yesterday?!”*

Between sleep deprivation and odd feelings that took hold of her the moment she had seen Jaime Lannister in Tyrion’s office, Sansa knew she was in way over her head. Any children of Tywin’s were probably masters at playing with people’s minds, even if half of the stories her father had told about the Lannister patriarch were true. And they were likely all true.

Tyrion cleared his throat — something she had never seen him do before — and began:

“We’re in a little bit of a delicate situation here — ” only to be interrupted by his brother.

“Oh, for the Stranger’s sake, Tyrion!” he exclaimed in a voice full of irritation and advanced onto Sansa, his body language anything but friendly. “Did you or did you not see me yesterday? It’ll serve you better to answer me quickly, minx! Tyrion, does she always blush this much?” he added casually.

Whether it was the emotional overload or sleep deprivation, Sansa would never know. The moment this fuming, lionesque man several feet taller than she began admonishing, threatening her, as though she were in the wrong, something snapped in her. This man, whom she had imagined to be the pinnacle of perfection, when she had stayed glued to her laptop’s screen, watching him dance, believed her unworthy of being in his dancing company because of her too honorable last name; this man, to whose real presence her body reacted in ways she could not control, behaved like a true monster, and would likely ruin her career because of his own indiscretion.

“Believe me, Mr. Lannister, when I tell you that I imagined my evening going rather differently as well!”

Unable to credit his ears with correct sensory intake, Tyrion watched in wonder as his brother’s
eyebrows almost touched his hairline.

“What did you just say to me?” Jaime growled at the girl, coming closer, thinking that the minx’s eyes looked almost intimidating in her righteous fury. If Jaime had had the time to expect an apology, he would have been sorely disappointed.

“Regardless of what I’ve said, I meant to convey that if I had ever screwed my married brother,” she could not keep the grimace of disgust from her face, “and was caught red-handed, I hope I would have enough decency to at least look ashamed instead of going around admonishing and threatening people who were unfortunate enough to witness it!”

In her anger, Sansa did not realize she had accomplished no small feat in leaving both Lannister brothers speechless. She went on:

“I’ve no interest in sullyng myself by making this distasteful information common knowledge, which is what you fear, I assume, since I cannot imagine another reason for my presence here. I would never dream of repaying the kindness your brother has shown me by washing his family’s dirty linen in public.” She paused and took a step toward Jaime, her finger pointing at him. “But trust me, this may change if you ever look like threatening me again!”

By the end of her tirade, Jaime had come sufficiently to his senses to grab her forearm. She shuddered — from disgust at his touch, he assumed with bitter rage. Bloody Northerners and their stupid morals. Taking vicious pleasure in yanking her toward him, he snarled in a low voice:

“If you so much as breathe a word of this to anyone, I swear I’ll — ” but she did not let him finish:

“What? You will kill me, like you did Aerys? I supposed murder is neither new to you nor beneath you. But are you sure your brother will stay silent? He seems like a decent human being to me — I suppose that makes him the outlier in the family. Or you’ll kill him, too?”

She noticed that his face went blank and his grip on her loosened. As suddenly as it had come, her rage and her courage were gone.

“Excuse me, I’m late for class,” she added almost calmly, her voice shaking a little. Freeing herself from him, she grabbed her headphones from the desk and mumbled, almost shyly, “thank you for returning these to me, Tyrion,” before running out of the door.

Tyrion had never laughed so hard in his life. He laughed until he had tears in his eyes and he was weeping with mirth; laughed until his sides ached and he was coughing. His brother’s face was priceless.

“What the hell was that?” Jaime asked him, livid if still a little dazed. Tyrion could barely articulate over the guffaws that kept escaping him.

“I must… [laughter] give it… [more laughter] to Oberyn… [laughter, laughter, more tears, laughter] he sure does have a way with nicknames!.. [laughter] That, my dear brother, though you may not believe me, was the shiest, most reserved, and innocent girl I’ve ever met — Sansa Stark. And may I drop dead right here, right now, if ever I’ve dreamed I’d see her put you in your place.” Seeing Jaime’s agitated face, Tyrion took pity on him and added: “You don’t need to worry. If there’s one person whom I would trust with a secret, it’s Sansa Stark. She won’t tell anyone. Besides, I’m sure she’ll have a stroke from all the blood rushing to her face if she ever tries voicing her… hmmm… shall we call it ‘observations’?” He laughed again. “But dammit, I cannot believe I had not thought to snap a photo of your face just now! I could have enlarged it and put it on my wall — don’t you think it could win the prize for ‘best office décor?’ I bet you, it could.”
The only answer he received was an irritated “fuck you, Tyrion” and the sound of his office door slamming shut. Goodness, but this day turned out surprisingly well. And what a little fury could Sansa Stark become when her righteous feathers were ruffled! Speaking of Sansa, he’d better go and find her: not only to make sure Jaime did not (although Tyrion doubted Sansa was in any real danger from his temperamental brother), but also because he suspected that her brave front may not last.

Having a stroke was not in Sansa’s future, but suffocation was a very real threat. As she was rushing down the corridor, Sansa almost knocked Ellaria off her feet. At seeing the friendly face of her weekly tormentor, Sansa’s willpower gave out and she collapsed onto the older woman in hysterical tears. Shocked and concerned, Ellaria managed to literally drag the weeping girl into her studio and shut the door before anyone could observe them.

As she tried to make her sit down, Ellaria realized that Sparkle was worse off than she had initially thought: she was crying so hard she was choking, sobs shaking her slender frame and convulsing her pretty face into a pitiful grimace.

“Hey, pretty girl, what in the name of all snakes is the matter?”

But Sansa could barely breathe, so speaking was definitely out of the question.

What have I done? she kept thinking, if indeed the scurried things rushing through her head could be called by that rational name.

He’ll kill me!

Ellaria had hugged her and was muttering, trying to calm her down.

“Darling,” her warm Dornish accent was soothing to Sansa’s ears, “you’re all right, everything’s all right. But, dear, you must tell me what’s going on?”

Sansa kept crying. Before Ellaria could say anything else, Oberyn walked in without knocking, his seductive smile falling when he took in the scene that greeted him.

“Just call Tyrion, the little man always knows everything that’s happening in this company,” his wife told him in lieu of an explanation. Oberyn did not have to be told twice. He dialed.

“Tyrion, we’ve a hysterical Sparkle here. No, we’re in Ellaria’s studio. Oh, you are? Very well then,” he hung up. “He says he’s coming. Kingslayer was an ass.”

Oberyn’s voice was threatening when he spoke:

“What in Seven Hells did your brother say to her?”

“Nothing much,” Tyrion replied hastily. “Mostly, it was Sparkle yelling at him.”
The couple turned to consider Sansa’s sniffling form with skeptical admiration. As if it could not get any worse, Tormund’s voice sounded behind the door:

“Oh, Ellaria, can a man come in after knocking three times?”

“Come in!” Ellaria called before Tyrion could send him away. Now, he feared for Jaime’s life. Naturally, when Tormund took in his “sister’s” state (from her muffled hair to her red eyes and puffy cheeks), his nostrils shook with rage and there was murder in his eyes.

“What happened here?”

“Jaime Lannister happened here,” supplied Ellaria vengefully.

Tormund nodded and closed the door behind him.

Text from Little Monkey to Kingslayer:

*If you value your life, run! Or at least, lock the door and don’t let Tormund in before I get there!*

Text from Kingslayer to Little Monkey:

*The fuck’s going on, Tyrion? I’m hivang coffee aournd the croner.*

Text from Little Monkey to Kingslayer:

*Tormund considers Sansa his sister-in-law. What do you think he’ll do to you after seeing her in tears?*

Text from Kingslayer to Little Monkey:

*Why is hse in treas? She was yelling ta me! Besdides, I think Icna take care fo Giantsbane.*

Text from Little Monkey to Kingslayer:

*Just take the rest of the day off, and I will catch him — hopefully before he finds you.*

Chapter End Notes

I hope this was a little funny and that you're proud of Sansa. I know I am ;) Please review and leave kudos if you liked the chapter!
The Fire in the Deepest of Seven Hells

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the week following what Sansa referred to in her mind as “the fallout,” she was surprised that her contract had not been terminated: after all, she did yell some offending truths into the face of one of the directors (not to mention one of the owners) of the ballet company. She suspected that she owed her career to Tyrion yet again. When she had been crying on Ellaria’s shoulder, describing all the horrors she expected Jaime Lannister to bring down on her, Tyrion had told her:

“We are brothers, Sansa! Why on earth would I let my brother fire you? If anything, I will check to make sure your contract ties you to us for a long enough time!” When she had looked at him in confusion, he had added with a devilish grin: “And if you ever feel like putting Jaime in his place again, be a dear, make sure you get me a photo of his face!” He had finished the odd request with a wink.

Nevertheless, Sansa spent the days following her outburst feeling like she was walking on thin ice. She did not dare venture into the building at night, even though she felt restless and wished she could practice again. Each time she rushed down the corridors from one class to the next, she prayed to the Mother to shield her from running into Jaime Lannister. And for an entire week, the Mother, in her mercy, had granted her request.

The week after that, Sansa, as well as all the other students who were attending master classes, received an email from Rose, one of the secretaries, informing them that their schedules for the next day had been cancelled and that their time would be devoted to a masterclass taught by Jaime Lannister. The email further advised them that whenever they would be notified of a master class with him in the future, they should understand it would take up the whole day. But this was not all. Apparently, Jaime Lannister disliked rising too early in the morning after fucking his sister all night (the email did not actually say that, but Sansa could draw her own conclusions, thank you), so they would start two hours later and leave two hours later as well. Sansa was anxious enough to face Jaime Lannister again as it was, but her apprehension was increased tenfold when she received a text from Margery, who sounded ominous.

Text from Margery Tyrell to Sansa Stark:
Whatever you do, stop doing it now. Get as much rest as you can, go to bed early. Take a teaspoon of the milk of the poppy if you must but you HAVE to sleep. Tie Tyene to the bed if necessary: she is NOT to go party tonight. Set two alarms at least. Remember what they say behind the scenes: the Kingslayer knows no mercy. ;)

When Sansa was reading the sinister warning out loud to a confused Tyene, the latter’s phone rang. It was Ellaria, who, unwittingly, repeated Margery’s advice — the girls were to go to bed early, get a good rest, set multiple alarms. No sooner had Tyene received her mother’s admonition than her father decided to call as well. Oberyn repeated the same message, but added: “If at some point you feel you cannot move anymore, don’t push yourself. I don’t care about family pride — no one is left standing by the time Jaime is done with them anyway. If you can’t get up, stay on the floor. If he so much as tries to make you, tell him I’ll tear his head off if I find my daughter unconscious from exhaustion after his class. You understand me? Good. Best of luck tomorrow, my little sand snake!”

The girls looked at each other with fear. What was Lannister going to do with them? Was anyone
else going to issue a warning? As though in answer to their last question, Sansa’s phone announced that Tyrion had contacted them as well.

Email from Tyrion Lannister to Sansa Stark; cc: Tyene Sand:

*Evening, girls! I’m sure you’ve heard by now that you’re in trouble! ;) Tyene, please tell Sansa no to panic, thank you. Just get some rest, BOTH of you. That means no partying for you, Tyene, and no dancing all night for you, Sparkle. And please understand that no matter how much my brother roars, he’s still called a lion only in a metaphorical sense. Cheers!*

They did as they were told. A nice long bath, a tea spoon each of the milk of the poppy, and they were in bed. Sansa set five alarms on her phone. Even Tyene set an alarm. As she waited for the drowsiness to overtake her, Sansa listened to Tyene’s measured breathing and wondered if she would live to see Winterfell again or die in King’s Landing.

She was wearing a dress the color of blood. Her red hair was down, her locks curled. Soft darkness had enveloped her, and she wondered how she could know colors when the world was entirely devoid of light. Her heart jumped in her chest when she felt a presence behind her. She knew it was him. She felt strong hands on her sides as though she and Jaime were performing a pas de deux and she was about to do a pirouette. But they were not dancing, and she felt a few strands of his hair brush her shoulder as his lips touched her neck, sending sparks of electricity down her bloodstream to her very core. Her heart disappeared from her body, as though his lips had sucked it out through her skin. Suddenly, he turned her, bringing her body flat against his. She was mesmerized, watching his green eyes. She had never seen eyes so cold. He leaned toward her, but a moment before his lips would have touched hers, she heard him whisper with distaste: “You’re not Cersei.” Suddenly, she was alone, blinded by the darkness.

Sansa jolted awake, sitting up in her bed with a speed that made the world spin. Her room was filled with morning light; the alarm clocks were going nuts; Tyene was cursing; and the lion of Lannister awaited.

“What were you dreaming about?” Tyene asked her with a sly smile, and Sansa realized she was breathing heavily, her cheeks flushed.

“I… I don’t remember,” she lied unconvincingly.

“Uh-huh,” was Tyene’s skeptical reply.

Their bags had been packed the evening before, their clothes laid out (on Sansa’s insistence). They ate, dressed, and did their hair in nervous silence. Even Tyene, who was always chirping like a bird (unless she was grunting from a bad hangover), was silent. They left their apartment feeling that, perhaps, they should have stayed.

They were the first to enter the largest studio in the building, which greeted them with emptiness. In a few minutes, they were joined by Podrick, one of the violinists and the lucky protégé of Tyrion and Brienne. A young man with chubby cheeks, usually very cheerful, Pod was frowning. The other dancers were filling the studio little by little as well. Everyone was quiet: the laughter and banter that ordinarily followed their group wherever they went seemed to have abandoned them. The tension in the morning air was so thick it could be cut with a knife. A moment before nervousness could turn to panic that suggested thoughts of escape, Jaime Lannister entered the studio and went to discuss something with Podrick. The Lannister’s swift walk and careless air did not agree with the warnings his victims had received from various sources the day before. If anything, it made them suspicious.

Sansa’s heart was beating so quickly in her chest, she found it hard to draw deep breaths. Tyene
came to stand next to her and squeezed her hand, a tight smile on her face — she knew of Sansa’s encounter with the Kingslayer two weeks earlier from her parents. She kept holding her cold hand in her warm one. Loras Tyrell, Margery’s younger brother and Sansa’s dancing partner, came to stand next to them. Loras liked Sansa — she danced well, which made his life easier; she was friendly and reliable. Moreover, he knew from his boyfriend, Renly, that Robert and Ned were old friends, which placed Sansa within the small circle of his own family and friends. Not to mention that Margery loved the girl. He knew from his sister that Jaime disfavored Sparkle, so he came to stand beside her.

When Loras’ sister entered the studio, the young dancers seemed to have collectively released the breath they had been holding. The tension lessened. A familiar and friendly face — Margery was loved for showing kindness and consideration to her students — served to lighten the gloom of Jaime Lannister’s presence. She nodded a quick greeting to him, then went to Sansa.

“Listen,” she said to her favorite in a low voice, “I would never say this to a student under any other circumstances, but hear this: you’re the most gifted dancer to have crossed this dancing company’s, read any dancing company’s, threshold in a while. You’re strong and you’re brave. He,” looking toward Jaime, “will intimidate you more than others, he’ll work you harder than others. He has a cruel tongue. Don’t let him see that he gets to you. If you can make it through today without showing weakness, he’ll be a lot easier to handle in the future. If he sees fear, he will make your life a variation on the seven hells.” She smiled. “Not saying he won’t do that anyway, but if you are fearless this class, you might have a chance. And Sansa,” she added with reassurance, “I’ve been watching you dance for weeks. You can stand your own, even against Jaime Lannister. All right?”

Sansa nodded, too stunned to blush. Giving her a pat on the shoulder, Margery resumed her place in front of the class. In a few more minutes, Jaime Lannister, satisfied that the stuttering Podrick had understood his instructions, joined Margery in front of the class.

“So here are the dancers at the highest level of the preparatory classes.” “In my company” was left hanging in the air. He took the time to look each of them over. When his eyes landed on Sansa, a dangerous smile appeared on his lips. Sansa could only watch him. He said nothing, however, and continued studying the other dancers. When he had appraised them to his satisfaction, he spoke again.

“Every master class you take here is designed to teach you the skills you will not learn when practicing choreography or training your muscles. Years of experience that each leading dancer has accumulated are presented to you, so that you may benefit from our knowledge. The Lannister Ballet Company has no interest in amateurs…”

Why is he giving me that look? He thinks I’m an amateur? Oh, Gods! I should never have said anything to him! went through Sansa’s mind as she lowered her eyes, trying to avoid his gaze.

“… consequently, we train all the new dancers we hire to make them worthy of representing this company. Thus far, you have had classes with Oberyn Martell, Ellaria Sand, and Margery Tyrell. Each of them has been teaching you what they consider to be most important outside the regular training you receive: how to improvise, how to seduce with your body; how to incorporate the freedom of contemporary dance into the somewhat stiff movements of classical ballet; how to move with grace, making each plié, each brisé, each pirouette an elegant instinct.” He paused. “In my studio, as in any other, you are expected to incorporate all that you’ve learned into your dance. But I want more from you: I want strength. My master classes will teach you endurance. So that if you’re forced to rehearse all day and then perform at night, not a single muscle of your bodies will shake. The rules are simple: you’re prohibited from sitting down in my studio. You sit, you lean against the wall, you fall, you lie down — you’re done. You’re not allowed to leave until I dismiss you. If any one of you gives up within the first four hours, I suggest you start looking for another place of
employment. None of you will be permitted to go on stage as part of this ballet company before you can work through three master-classes consecutively.”

There was dead silence.

*Oh, Mother! He will force us to dance for seven hours straight?!* She felt her heart sink. Then, a mad hope filled her. *Wait a minute! I’ve done that! I’ve danced from seven till two the night I saw him for the first time! I might actually be able to do this!*

She felt stares directed at her and realized that her hope had brought a surprised smile to her face. Jaime Lannister fixed her with his piercing eyes for a few moments, then looked at the rest of the class.

“Let’s begin. Margery and I will show you the thirty-minute segment you will be learning today. Watch carefully, because we will only do it once. Your memory and your grasp on the movements have to be sharpened as well.”

*So Margery isn’t going to stay…*

He signaled to Podrick and the lad began playing. The music seemed familiar to Sansa, so did the movements.

The segment opened with a slow, painfully sad melody. The dancers’ motions were languid and gentle. With every gesture and every bar of the music, however, the tempo increased until the dance was fast-paced and passionate; Jaime and Margery were moving so quickly, one had to concentrate intensely on their figures to grasp the details of their elegant motions. Sansa had never seen Jaime Lannister dance in real life. It was breath-taking. He was graceful yet powerful. His dance annihilated memory and self, reducing viewers to absolute spectatorship. He seemed to dance outside of the confines of his body, as though capable of becoming an abstract force. Sansa had forgotten who he was, that he was a living being, as she watched him, enthralled. Her heart was beating quickly, her mind racing, and her limbs were restless with the desire, the need to dance. Constantly worried about her performance, she had almost forgotten the passion that had animated her for so long. The rebirth of this inspiration was more powerful than fear, embarrassment, or rage. She did not remember that this was a man despised by her family, accused of murder, guilty of incest. She did not remember he was dangerous and that he terrified her. She was only aware of a yearning to dance like he danced, to dance with him. She was filled with a mad dream of obtaining the magical power to move in a way that made him watch her with the fascination that filled her as her eyes followed him.

The dance ended; but the spell it had cast lasted a few more seconds before some hesitant claps were heard.

Jaime Lannister, who was not even out of breath, raised his hand.

“Save your applause for the theater,” he bit out. “Get with your partner. Your turn to dance.”

Sansa was very lucky to have been fascinated by the Lannister Ballet Company for years. She knew this pas de deux by heart, even though she had never tried performing it before: she considered it one of the most beautiful pieces of dance. It was a part of the most famous and beloved ballet in the Seven Kingdoms, the Lannister siblings’ original composition.

She and Loras stood together waiting for the music to start.

“Do you know this piece?” he asked her quietly. She nodded.
“I don’t,” he said, “and I am not sure I will remember everything.”

She put a hand on his forearm in reassurance.

“I will be whispering your next movements when we try it the first time, all right?”

Jaime had not realized that Sansa Stark would be in his master class. When he spotted her among the dancers, holding hands with Oberyn’s daughter, he thought with satisfaction that vengeance was a dish best served cold. He would enjoy watching the self-righteous Northerner collapse before the hour was through. In his experience, girls like her — pretty but uptight — did not last very long. She kept surprising him, though: the small smile he had caught on her face as if she wanted nothing more than to dance for seven hours without pause; the way she looked when Margery and he had finished dancing — eyes a little widened, her pupils so dilated her blue eyes had almost turned black, lips slightly parted, her chest rising and falling a little too fast. She made for an enticing picture.

In the past, the students would spend the first hour or two trying to get the movements right. He had the music played to them for the first time, so they could attempt repeating the movements and appreciated the difficulty of the task he had set before them. He would proceed by going over the movements with them a few at a time. Then the game for endurance really began. This time was different. They were all dancing. Not without flaws, not without missteps; some were a little behind the music; but they were all dancing. He watched them carefully. In the first few moments, he realized that the eyes of all students were glued to one couple, whose movements they mirrored. Sansa Stark and Loras Tyrell. The girl’s lips were moving, as though she was praying. His eyebrows rose when he realized just what the minx was about: she whispered Loras’ movements to him. Jaime scrutinized her with interest. Although she was whispering, her dreamy eyes seemed far away. She danced with a grace and ease that he had never witnessed in his masterclasses previously — few could afford either of these qualities when trying to grasp new movements. Sansa Stark stood apart from hundreds of dancers he had seen come to his studio over the years. She surprised him. He began to move between the dancers, correcting their movements, but his gaze kept returning to her face, as he watched the unfocused blue eyes and moving lips.

The pace Jaime Lannister had set was better than what Sansa had anticipated: each time they completed the thirty-minute segment, he would give them a ten-minute (standing) break. It was comfortable for Sansa, who was used to working an hour and taking twenty minutes to catch her breath. It had been two hours, and although she was covered in sweat, Sansa did not feel exhausted yet. She began to wonder if she could last the entire session but pushed the thought from her mind, focusing on her movements. With Jaime Lannister in the room, she refused to be anything but her absolute best; she would not let him dismiss her as an amateur. The fire his dancing had awakened in her kept burning as she danced under his gaze, and it gave her strength and joy to polish her movements under his instruction. She felt the delight, which the circumstances of their first meetings had temporarily overshadowed, of being in the presence of the greatest living dancer, and she relished in it. She was surprised that he corrected her movements with the same careless amiability and japes as those of the other dancers. She responded to his criticisms obediently, eager to improve. She forgot who he was outside the studio. The melody captivated her, pushing her mind into the familiar state where her body was ruled not by thoughts, but by music and choreography.

Jaime would lie if he said he was not impressed with Sansa. The girl’s dancing style showed excellent training, to say the least. Her movements were considerably less stiff than what he had expected from a graduate of the Winterfell Academy of Ballet. He suspected that Ellaria and Oberyn were responsible for this. Of course, he would have chewed off his tongue rather than admitted his admiration for the Stark girl. Besides, grace and good training would avail her little, he thought, when a few hours elapsed. He was surprised — yet again! — when she kept dancing, the inspired expression never leaving her face. Each time the music drew to a close, he expected her to give up.
She did not.

It had been three hours, and one pair of dancers was seated, breathing heavily and dripping with sweat. A strange combination of shame, despair, and exhaustion was etched on their faces. Sansa forced herself to look away and turned her mind to the music before she could begin to register the tiredness of her own body.

By the fourth hour, when they had danced the segment six times, several more couples sat down, now that dismissal from the company did not threaten them. Some couples had split, and those who remained formed new pairs. Tyene was still standing, though her partner had changed. Mercifully, Loras, sweeter than she had ever seen him, was still standing too.

“Again!” came Jaime’s voice, and Podrick, who looked a little tired himself, resumed playing the familiar tune.

Tyene gave up on the fifth hour, and Sansa felt a pang in her chest as she watched her friend leave the dance floor and lie down. Loras followed her, leaving Sansa with a new partner, Jojen Reed. Sansa was tired as well, but she would not back down if it killed her.

By the sixth hour, Jaime was a little bemused: Sansa Stark was still dancing — one of only four. Every other break, she would follow some of the dancers to the side of the dance floor, make her way to her bag. Grabbing a towel, she would wipe the sweat off her face and neck, would reach for a drink of water, would occasionally gulp down a few bites of an apple. But at the end of each break, she returned to the dance floor. Her facial expression began alternating between the inspired one that had come to her face at the beginning of the class and a stubborn combination of pursed lips and furrowed brows.

Sansa could not believe that they were about to dance for the last time. For the past hour, she had been promising her body that, if it did not betray her now, then tomorrow, regardless of whether or not she had class — Sansa could not even remember the day of the week — she would stay in bed, venturing only to take a nice long bath.

*But now, I cannot start shaking. I cannot stop. Not now, not when he’s looking. Not when I know how perfectly he can dance.*

Jaime Lannister was rarely dead wrong. In fact, he was unsure if he had ever been as incorrect in his assumptions as he had been this day.

Little Sansa Stark was the last one standing.

When, after the final dancing segment, he had announced that the seven hours were through, her dancing partner had, quite literally, collapsed where he had been standing. But Sansa Stark, like a robot, albeit a very graceful one, made her way to her bag and was now drinking. Still standing. The sight of her straight back, showing every vertebra, her alabaster skin glistening with sweat, irked him.

“All right, everyone,” he smirked, observing that they expected him to dismiss them. “Let’s see if that break did some of you any good. Do I have any volunteers for the last round? I’m thinking especially of those of you who gave up early.”

He could not see her face, but he observed how her back tensed. No one spoke. *Good.*

“Anyone?” he repeated with humor, but his smile failed him when she turned.

“I could dance one more time,” she said in a voice that sounded like steel wrapped in silks of fatigue. “They say in the North that practice makes perfect.”
She was scared, scared of his reaction. She was scared that her muscles would cramp or start shaking. She was scared she would faint with weariness. But she would not give up. She expected him to throw a jibe at her. She had never dreamed he would laugh.

Jaime Lannister guffawed. The minx had spirit and stamina, he would grant her that. After watching her give her best to every movement for seven hours, he felt magnanimous enough to acknowledge her fortitude and his failure to wear her out. He turned to the rest of the dancers, who watched the scene with a mixture of admiration and horror.

“All right, gentlemen, the lady has spoken. Who will stand with Sansa in the last round?”

Not a single one of them moved. A grin on his face, he turned to her:

“I’m afraid you’ve been proven wrong, Lady Stark. It appears you cannot dance one more time, after all.”

She took a step toward him, a strange expression on her tired face.

“I said I could dance one more time. I was not proven wrong, since I never claimed to be two people instead of one. I do need a partner, and you, sir, are still standing.”

Jaime’s eyebrows went up.

Did she just challenge me?

Did I just challenge Jaime Lannister?! Oh, Mother, have mercy! Why can’t you keep your mouth shut in his presence, Sansa?!

His eyes narrowed as he approached her.

He does look like an angry lion, and I don’t think it’s because I’m hallucinating from fatigue!

He came so close to her, their chests were almost touching, and she was forced to crane her neck to meet his gaze, which was even more hypnotic than in her dream. She thought she saw his lips twitch, and for a second, she fancied she had read respect — or was it admiration? — in his eyes. But whatever flashed in the green depths of his irises was so fleeting that she dismissed it as a figment of her imagination.

Jaime watched her, intrigued. What a strange combination — timidity and fearlessness. He suppressed a smile. He did not think he had ever met a girl like Sansa Stark. Nor had he ever seen such beautiful blue eyes.

He stepped away from her abruptly, breaking the enchantment he had cast on her. With theatricality, he extended his hand to her. She took it and felt a ball a lightening materialize in her chest at his touch, generating electricity through her whole being. Her breath coming out in irregular puffs, she followed him to the center of the dance floor. She felt she had entered into an alternate universe. Was she really about to dance with Jaime Lannister?

You’re not Cersei, reverberated in her mind.

He motioned to Podrick, whose face was twisted in a comical combination of apprehension and disbelief. The music started.

With her heart in her throat, Sansa began the familiar motions. As she danced, her eyes remained fixed on Jaime’s face, and he was all she could see. She was aware only of the music and his gaze on
her. Suddenly, the exhaustion had left her, and she felt reborn, blood twirling in her veins to an elated song. The feeling of his arm on her waist, the touch of his hands on her body were not a dream. Overpowered by the magnetic steps of the dance that kept taking them apart and bringing them close, Sansa danced like she had never done before, her whole being dedicated to keeping his eyes on her.

Dancing is like making love… When you stop being a body and become a heart — you are dancing because every part of your being is pulsing with desire, and the only way to achieve satisfaction is by seducing your love with your movements, echoed in her mind. Could her arms whisper “stay” to him?

Jaime was strangely entranced by her. Her blue eyes sparkled as she danced with a passion he would not have thought her capable of. The sequence he had choreographed, the steps he knew so well, suddenly regained the power to inspire a longing for his dancing partner that he had not felt since Cersei and he had performed together. This slip of a girl from the North made him forget the world for a while, a time in which he was conscious only of the feeling of her agile, warm body in his arms and his desire to wrap them more tightly around her.

Tyrion always dropped in at the end of Jaime’s first master classes. “To prevent suicides,” he invariably explained with a sly grin. This time was no exception, as he made his way to his brother’s studio. He was a little surprised to hear music still playing. That had never happened before. When he pushed the door open, he gasped at seeing his brother’s face. His first thought was that Cersei had dropped by; but the sweaty young girl in Jaime’s arms was not his evil sister. It was Sansa, though he could barely recognize her. She was soaking wet from sweat and her hair was untidy; what differed this girl especially from the Sansa Stark he had known these past months was her face. Sansa — if indeed this woman was her — looked possessed, her eyes wild and dark. The strange apparition hardly moved like her, either: it seemed as though she had shed the cold skin that had imprisoned her body and emerged burning with a new fire. Tyrion looked back to Jaime. His brother always danced beautifully, but since Cersei left, Tyrion had not seen him dance with desire in his eyes, which had rendered his movements so poignant. Until this night. Tyrion felt tears pricking his eyes and released a shaky breath.

The couple was beautiful, unreal.

Was this possible? Could Oberyn’s nickname have prophesied a fire that would set his brother free?

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this chapter. Let me know and leave kudos if you did!
Sansa thought she was going to die. As she heaved over the toilet in the bathroom of her and Tyene’s apartment, she cursed the gods for giving her a stomach, or any other organ or limb for that matter. All her body ached. Every cell, every tissue, muscle, bone, her very skin and hair caused her acute pain as her organism protested her stubbornness. She felt another wave of nausea overwhelm her and moaned in misery. Tyene was rubbing her back, a sympathetic expression on her face.

“That’s what you get for pushing yourself too far,” she said in an unusually soft tone filled with compassion. Sansa, who was heaving, could not reply.

“How’s she?” came Ellaria’s voice from behind them.

“Terrible,” Tyene admitted honestly.

“Yeah, wait till the headache sets in,” the mother replied with a sigh.

“Headache?” came Sansa’s pitiful voice from somewhere in the toilet.

“And you thought you could just pirouette for almost eight hours without consequences, huh?” Ellaria sounded annoyed. She sighed again, and Sansa could hear the smile in her teacher’s voice when she spoke next. “Though you might think it’s worth it, seeing as Jaime Lannister could not take his stunned eyes off you.” Her observation was punctuated by sounds of Sansa vomiting. “I almost felt sorry for him,” Ellaria continued, unfazed, “you do realize that you’re the first dancer in the fifteen years he has tortured students with his endurance masterclasses to make it all the way to the end without collapsing?”

“But Jojen also made it,” objected Tyene in confusion. Her mother scoffed.

“That boy was on the floor by the end, no?” Ellaria asked, and Tyene nodded. “Well, there have been a few over the years who had danced for seven hours — four or six. But no one, and I mean no one, could ever stay on their feet afterwards, let alone dance for another thirty minutes! And dance like she did — beautiful, impassioned. She’s got it bad for the Kingslayer, yeah?” Tyene shrugged her shoulders:

“I don’t think she likes him…”

“I DON’T!” Sansa squealed her protest between nauseating spasms.

“I cannot imagine a woman going through so much misery unless she wanted to make sure a man would never forget her. And Jaime Lannister certainly won’t be forgetting this day any time soon,” laughed Ellaria.

“I think she’s just too proud,” Tyene proposed. “She wouldn’t back down, especially after Margery told her not to.”

“Don’t even try to pin this on me!” Margery walked into the bathroom, a glass of water in her hand,
and came to kneel next to Sansa. “Here, dear, rinse your mouth and try taking a few sips.” She turned back to Tyene and Ellaria: “I didn’t tell her to try killing herself! I warned her not to show weakness, but I never dreamed she’d be so insane as to go for an extra round!”

“What was he thinking, anyway!?” Ellaria sounded enraged. “He knows she’s just an eighteen-year-old girl who doesn’t know any better, how could he have allowed her to do something so stupid!?”

“Because Jaime Lannister is a self-centered idiot with a competitive streak,” Brienne tried to squeeze her large frame into the crowded bathroom. “How are you feeling, Sansa?”

“Awful,” Sansa admitted in a gruff, exhausted voice, “but I think my stomach is done punishing me.”

She tried to get up and almost fell: on her feet for the first time after crouching before the toilet for a good quarter of an hour following eight hours of dancing, Sansa screamed in pain as a series of cramps hit her. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Fortunately, the women caught her. Brienne elbowed her way to the girl — just in time, because Margery, Ellaria, and Tyene were not doing a very good job of keeping her upright — and picked her up easily.

“No, no, I have to clean my teeth,” Sansa protested weakly when the large woman tried to carry her out of the bathroom.

“Fine, but you’re sitting down,” Brienne replied in a tone that did not leave room for discussion. She sat her down on the toilet seat, and Sansa brushed her teeth, wincing every now and again as more cramps hit her in places where she never suspected she had muscles.

“Why did you have to run home on your own when Tormund or I could have carried you?” she asked with soft admonishment, when Margery and Ellaria left and Tyene busied herself with the bathtub.

What could Sansa say to this? That after surviving the deepest of seven hells and dancing with Jaime Lannister she could not allow him to see the weakness that lay behind her brave front? She shrugged and continued brushing her teeth. Her memories were not as easily dismissed as Brienne’s questions, however.

They took her mind back to the enticing moment when the music had stopped but she was still in Jaime’s arms, his green eyes blazing at her as they searched her face in consternation. She was breathing heavily and smiling — she felt rather than knew how beautifully they had danced. Her fear of him gone, she contemplated his face, wondering if he had felt a fraction of the elation she did.

Then the applause started. It came from the dancers within the studio but also from the doorway, where she saw Tyrion and Margery, Ellaria and Oberyn, Brienne and Tormund. They were clapping too. Tyrion wore a strange, unreadable expression. She had not even noticed them. Something changed in Jaime’s face at the sound of clapping. The searching look was gone from his eyes, and he took a step away from her. She felt orphaned without his arms around her, and, as though she had drawn strength from his body like Antaeus from the earth, when Jaime retreated, the whole of her fatigue hit her like a train, and she staggered. He steadied her with a quick hand.

“Sansa?”

She looked up at him expectantly, and he sighed.

“Let’s call a truce,” he proposed with an easy smile and extended to her his right hand. She shook it, offering him a bashful smile. Giving him a small nod, she forced herself to leave him. As she walked
to her bag, she still felt his eyes on her. It was when she bent to get her towel that her head had started to spin and the first wave of nausea had hit her. She gathered her things quickly and, not waiting for Tyene like she usually did, almost elbowed her way through the small crowd at the studio’s entrance. Despite their protestations of her hurried departure, she ran to the apartment, set on breaking down in the privacy of her own bathroom. She had not expected Ellaria, Margery, and Brienne to follow her roommate back to their apartment.

Meanwhile, Tyene had run a bath.

“Oh, no, you have to wash, too!” exclaimed Sansa when her friend announced that the bath was for her. Tyene laughed happily at her foolishness.

“I will, silly! But we have to wash you first. Besides, the warm water will do you good.”

“Here,” Ellaria had returned with a few bottles of oils and salts, which she handed to her daughter. “Add these to the water while I undress her.”

“Oh, are those Dornish oils?” asked Margery, who had followed Ellaria and was now helping Tyene with the bath. (Brienne, blushing, left when she saw what was afoot — the only one to consider Sansa’s privacy; the dancers were far less shy than the cellist.)

“Wash me? Undress me?” Sansa asked in confusion. Truth be told, she was too tired to understand half of what people were saying to her.

“Yes, wash you! You can barely stand, and you certainly cannot wash yourself!” Tyene laughed again. Ever after the masterclass, Sansa’s roommate was in a ridiculously good mood, proud of her friend for whipping the self-satisfied grin off the Lannister’s face. She had liked Sansa for a while, but that day her feelings turned to admiration.

“If I had half of Jaime Lannister’s sadism, I would have liked to see you try wiggling yourself out of your leotard and tights! Luckily for you, though, I will help you undress before you get a really bad cramp,” said Ellaria, adding with a suggestive smile: “However, I think sadism is not quite the right word to describe what he’d feel watching you take your clothes off.”

“Please don’t talk like that,” Sansa, red-faced, begged in a weak voice.

“Fine, but you and I are having the talk about birds, bees, and protection in the near future whether you like it or not,” Ellaria announced as Sansa reddened further and almost sobbed with embarrassment. She thought that Ellaria’s insinuations were entirely unwarranted and could not understand why the Dornish woman decided to start teasing her about Jaime Lannister of all people! She could not imagine anyone less likely to have such an interest in her.

Ellaria undressed her while Sansa lay meekly against Margery, who was supporting her limp form from behind. The women helped her into the bathtub and washed her, the warm water and oils easing some of the pain from her battered body. They helped her out and dried her off, like a baby, wrapping her in a bathrobe before calling for Brienne, who, against Sansa’s weak objections, carried her into the small living room. Tyene remained to take a shower, but Margery and Ellaria followed Brienne. In the living room, Sansa was greeted by another round of standing ovation from Tyrion, Loras, Podrick, Tormund, and Oberyn. Brienne laid her down on the sofa and covered her with a plaid, while Tyrion opened a bottle of champagne that had mysteriously materialized in their flat. Sansa was surprised to see all the men — she had assumed that only her female friends were in the apartment. Tyrion was pouring champagne into glasses — where did the champagne flutes come from?, wondered Sansa — and Podrick presented her with a glass, looking very proud to have had the honor. Tyene joined them, and when everyone had a glass:
“Well, Sansa Stark, I take my hat off to you!” Tyrion proclaimed as all echoed with “Here, here!..”
“To Sansa Sparkle Stark, the Lion-Tamer!” he roared, raising his glass to her, and everyone laughed happily. Sansa smiled as she looked at the faces of her friends, basking in the admiration and kindness shining in their eyes. They felt like family.

Loras and Tyene, talking over each other, revived the moments of the masterclass for the benefit of those who had not witnessed it in its entirety. Even Podrick, who usually restricted himself to smiling quietly in company, chimed in. Listening to them, Sansa could only smile and roll her eyes, accusing them quietly of exaggeration. Surely, the fearless girl they described, who would not back down from any challenges Jaime Lannister had thrown her way was not really her, Sansa? The apartment was filled with jokes (a few at Jaime’s expense), laughter, celebration. Sansa asked herself why Tyrion seemed so pleased. She could tell he loved his brother with a fierce devotion, which made her wonder why he seemed even happier than everyone else.

Tyrion was watching Sansa with entirely new eyes. For him, she had ceased to exist on her own that night, her being tied in his imagination to his brother’s possible happiness. After witnessing the dance she and Jaime had shared, he could no longer look at her without getting lost in the images of the future his brother could have. In Tyrion’s eyes, she was the embodiment of a hope he had given up on years ago. Now this hope was reanimated, bodied forth by Sansa Stark, and it went to the small man’s head like the champagne with which he toasted her.

From a very young age, Tyrion had harbored no illusions concerning his sister. Cersei could rival the sunrise with her beauty, there was no denying it, but he knew her to be manipulative and selfish. Her cruelty to him personally Tyrion could have disregarded — after all, he would not have been able to enumerate all those who had been unkind to him; but her disloyalty to Jaime, the hole she had created in his brother’s life, Tyrion would never forgive. He loathed his sister not for the ways she had scarred him, but for the future of which she had robbed his elder brother. No matter how he taunted Jaime, from his beautiful hair to his dyslexia, Tyrion worshipped him. From as far back as he could remember, Jaime was his knight, an ideal being Tyrion could admire and whose love he cherished. The only person in their family to have truly loved him; loved him unconditionally, blind to his small stature and stunted legs. Tyrion also understood, however, that the same traits in his brother’s character that left him unaware of the defects in his own appearance also veiled from him Cersei’s more serious flaws. When Tyrion had realized that Jaime was in love with his twin, he did not care about incest — Jaime could do no wrong in his eyes. Tyrion worried, rather, that their sister’s failings would eventually hurt his oddly naive brother. Over the years, watching him go deeper and deeper into the abyss that was Cersei became the bane of Tyrion’s existence.

He had tried telling himself that Cersei would never coldly use Jaime like she did others; but she proved him wrong when she married Robert Baratheon and had Jaime’s children, solidifying her power over him and creating new means of keeping him around. When Jaime raged at the news of the wedding, drinking himself into a stupor, Tyrion was praying that he might see light, but was sorely disappointed. Considering that his elder brother had a reputation for dishonor, Tyrion found bitter irony in that loyalty had never damaged anyone’s life as it had Jaime’s. He had tried introducing to him beautiful women, intelligent women, wanton women, and women who combined these and other qualities, but to no avail; he had considered telling Jaime that Cersei was unfaithful — he knew that Robert was neither the first nor the last man the vile woman had screwed behind his brother’s back — but he could never bring himself to do it. What would he accomplish? Jaime would be broken, he might start drinking, destroy his career, and Tyrion was not sure that he could patch him together afterwards. At last, hope had abandoned Tyrion, leaving a hole in his chest that ached whenever he remembered that family and the love of a good woman did not seem to be in Jaime’s future. But this night, this beautiful night, when, for the first time in his life, Tyrion saw someone other than Cersei capture his brother’s eye, even if Jaime himself did not realize this, Tyrion’s heart almost leapt out of his chest. In the game over Jaime’s soul that the little man played against Cersei,
he, for the first time, had the trumping card. A passionate, kind, loving, beautiful girl whose Northern blood ran like innocence through her veins. A girl who could make his brother happy; who could set him free. Tyrion had never thought the world so beautiful as he did that night. He made his way to Margery and kissed her hungrily, happily. He was elated, and he was not ashamed of the happy tears in his eyes.

“What’s gotten into you?” she asked him, brushing her hand over his hair.

“I love you,” he said quietly but with more feeling than he had ever dared.

“I should hope so,” she said with a sly smile, but something in his eyes made her serious, and she cupped his face with her hands, looking him dead in the eye: “I love you, too, my wonderful man.”

*Perhaps my brother will know true love, too, one day. Now I can hope again.*

He turned to look at Sansa and found Sparkle snoozing peacefully, a small smile of contentment on her lips. *Sparkle? No, Lion-tamer!*

Chapter End Notes

Well, here is another chapter! I hope you like it. I loved writing it, I think it has a warm family feeling to it. As always, please enjoy, leave comments and kudos!
In the days following the celebratory night, Sansa alternatively regretted being born at all or wished she had died on the evening following Jaime’s masterclass. Tyrion had forbidden her from coming anywhere near the studios, saying that the security would simply not let her inside the building. Sansa thought he overestimated her body’s strength. Not only was she unable to walk — she could barely get up to move around her apartment, while any environment outside her bed and the hot bathtub filled with Ellaria’s Dornish oils and salts became entirely uninhabitable. Her body was in active revolt against its mistress, fully set on showing her that it would not tolerate such treatment as she had afforded it. The proverbial war between the body and the mind became no joke to Sansa, who was physically unable to dance, but whose dreams filled her with a powerful desire to put on her pointes and tell the pain in her muscles to go screw itself in the seventh hell. When she was asleep, her body’s protests silenced, her mind set to work, conjuring before her slumbering eyes flashes of her and Jaime’s dance. Sometimes they felt more like memories; other times, they were definitely the creative work of her unruly subconsciousness. Most frequently, she dreamed the same dream that had visited her on the eve of the masterclass, and after hearing him whisper, “You’re not Cersei,” Sansa would wake up cranky.

On the third day of her confinement, she woke up on time without her alarm clock and decided that she had had enough. Rebelliously, she threw off her covers, ignoring the ache with which her body protested her resolution to leave the bed, and proceeded to get ready for class. Tyene, strangely enough, had not even returned home the night before, and Sansa decided to use her opportunity to escape. She took with her only the barest necessities, reducing the weight of her bag to a minimum, and headed to the Lannister Ballet Company building. Just as she was about to enter, a member of the security team stopped her.

“I’m sorry, miss, but I am under strict orders from Tyrion Lannister not to let you in.”

Sansa thought that Tyrion had been kidding when he had warned her about this measure.

“Please, sir, I’m sure he didn’t mean it. I can call him…”

“Sorry, miss, Mr. Lannister went out to a meeting.”

“Maybe you could call someone else?”

What was the name of the head of security and Tyrion’s bodyguard slash drinking buddy? The one who looked like a thug? Ah, yes…

“Can you get Bronn, please?” she asked.

The guard seemed to have taken pity on her and retreated to call his superior. Bronn appeared within a few minutes.

“Bonn, thank goodness! I know Tyron told your colleagues not to let me in, but could you please explain to them that this was only a joke?”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that for you, lass. I’ve received the same orders.”
“But this is ridiculous! I’m not a criminal!”

“No, you’re not. But from what I’ve been hearing, you may be suicidal.”

“Su — What? I’m not!”

She realized that people in the lobby were looking at her with curiosity and reddened. How could Tyrion, this kind little man, have pulled such a cruel, humiliating stunt on her? She thought they were friends! Her body was hurting, she was sick of staying alone in the apartment all day, and she wanted to dance! She knew she would feel better if her muscles warmed up.

“What’s going on here?” came an indignant snarl from behind her.

_Oh, no, not Jaime Lannister, too!_

“They won’t let me in,” she explained quietly, looking at her feet.

“They what?!” Jaime sounded oddly menacing.

“Tyrion asked me not to let Sansa in,” Bronn hurried to shift the blame onto his employer.

She dared a side glance in Jaime’s direction to find him looking at her with a mischievous smirk.

“Why, Sansa, what have you done? Did you steal someone’s pointes?”

She reddened further.

“I’ve done nothing of the kind!” she exclaimed, and watched in misery as his smirk widened. Turning to stare at the floor, she explained: “He just doesn’t want me to practice for now.”

“And why’s that?”

_Because I nearly killed myself in your damned class!_

“Hmm… I guess he worries that I work too hard.”

For whatever reason, Jaime decided not to press the issue.

“Come on,” was all he said as he started walking toward the turnstiles.

“But Jaime,” called Bronn, “Tyrion did ask me not to let her in.”

“And if he asks you how she did get in, you can tell him that she took down the entire security force on the floor. When he does not believe you, refer him to me as a key witness.” He turned to stare Bronn and the rest of the security down, no longer joking: “And I don’t ever want to hear that Sansa Stark was not allowed into the building, is that clear?” The men nodded, and Jaime walked on.

With no one preventing her from entering anymore, Sansa rushed after him before he changed his mind. She caught up with him easily enough.

“Thank you, I really appreciate your help back there.”

“I wasn’t raised to leave a damsel in distress to her own devices,” he replied with a playful smile. Observing her annoyance, he laughed. “Come, Sansa, you may be from the North, but you cannot be entirely devoid of a sense of humor.”

“I just don’t like being made fun of,” she mumbled. _Why was he so tiresome?_
“That’s really too bad,” he told her with a smirk before making a turn. She shook her head in annoyance and continued on her way.

“What do you think you’re doing here?” Ellaria looked a little scary.

“Oh, please, I’m sick and tired of staying in that room!”

“No, you’d rather be vomiting from exhaustion!”

“Please, I want to practice.”

Sansa herself could not believe that even Ellaria’s class seemed very appealing to her right now.

“No. You need to take a break for a few days.”

“It’s been two days already! Please, let me stay.”

“Absolutely not,” Ellaria declared.

Sansa clasped her hands as though in prayer and made her best attempt at puppy eyes:

“Please?”

Ellaria looked almost wavering for a moment, then shook her head and said “no” with renewed resolution. Sansa sighed in defeat.

“Can I at least stay and watch?”

“Fine, but you’re sitting in the armchair, not on the floor.”

“Yes! Of course! Thank you!”

“Go on,” Ellaria motioned toward the chair with an indulgent smile.

At least Tyene was not around to pressure her. But where was she? Sansa wondered. Tyene had never skipped class before.

Watching people dance did not help Sansa at all. She was fidgeting, feeling almost ticklish with the desire to move. When none of the instructors allowed her to dance, her squirming only grew worse. By the end of the day, she was nearly bursting with frustration. She wanted to dance! She made her way to Tyrion’s office and knocked.

Hearing his unusually happy “come in!,” she entered.

“How did you get in?” he asked without a hint of remorse for placing her in that idiotic position.

“Jaime helped,” she mumbled.

“What is wrong with my brother? Tyrion wondered.

“Tyrion, please tell Ellaria and the other instructors not to stop me from training.”

“Trust me, if Ellaria thought you should practice again, there would be nothing I could do. As it is, she needs no convincing from me that you must rest.”

“What about the other instructors?” she asked.
“Now, to them, I did make a suggestion or two,” he admitted.

“Tyrion, please, this is unfounded! I’m perfectly fine!”

“Sansa, can’t you understand that if you start practicing again after pushing yourself too far, you may seriously injure yourself? Go home, take a bath…”

“I’ve done nothing but take baths for two days! Tyrion, please, I’m begging you! I’ll go insane, if I have to stay in that room for longer.”

“Sparkle, I will not let you harm yourself, and, fortunately, I have the means to make sure you don’t. Go sightseeing, do some shopping, read a book! There are plenty of things to do in the world besides dancing.”

She started crying in frustration. Sad little sounds escaped her throat and tears ran down her cheeks. Tyrion was shocked and remorseful, but her emotional volatility only served to convince him further that his decision had been the correct one.

“Sansa, please, don’t! It’s for your own good!” Tyrion approached her and was patting her hand, but she kept crying quietly.

“Please, I just want to dance…”

The door opened.

“Tyrion, why do we have the next fundraiser scheduled for — ” Jaime’s eyebrows almost touched his hairline when he observed the crying Sansa. “What in Seven Hells? Tyrion, what’s the meaning of this?”

“Jaime — ” Tyrion began, but his brother interrupted.

“Oh no, don’t Jaime me! This morning, your thugs wouldn’t let her in, the afternoon she’s crying in your office. What’s going on?”

Tyrion barely contained his smile. Now, that was interesting. Look who was getting a little protective!..

Sansa, however, was not about to let Tyrion explain to his brother in humiliating detail exactly why he thought she was unfit to practice.

“Nothing, it’s nothing!” she hurried to say, “I’ve just heard that my dog has died, and Tyrion was kind enough to comfort me.”

Really, Sansa? Killing Lady was the best you could come up with? her inner voice judged her.

“Excuse me… I… I will let you get back to work, Tyrion. Thanks again,” she said and walked out.

Tyrion turned to Jaime.

“What about the fundraiser?”

“You do realized that I know she lied about the dog?”

“On the contrary, she spoke the truth. Her dog died this morning. Hit by a car. Tragic thing, really,” Tyrion lied smoothly.

Jaime gave him an exasperated look, but, pretending to play along, he asked with mock sincerity:
“And you’ve spent hours trying to comfort her?”

“No, not hours, but maybe fifteen minutes. She got the call when she was in my office.”

Jaime’s smile said he was going in for the kill.

“And what’s its name?”

“Whose name?” Tyrion asked, confused.

“The dog that Sansa’s mourning.”

_Fucker_, was all Tyrion thought but replied without missing a beat:

“Snow.”

“And do you think that’s the name she’ll give me if I ask her the same question?”

Tyrion’s habitual wins in poker were not explained only by his aptitude to math. His bluffing was also good.

“Certainly,” he answered. “Now, what did you want to talk about concerning the fundraiser?”

Text from Tyrion Lannister to Lion-Tamer:

_If Jaime asks, your dog’s name is Snow, and it died tragically under the wheels of a car this morning._

Text from Lion-Tamer to Tyrion Lannister:

_Thank you._

Text from Tyrion Lannister to Lion-Tamer:

_Np. But you’re still not practicing this week._

Sansa sighed and threw her phone on her bed. Why were they so set on driving her mad? Dancing was part of her metabolic process. She could not just stop. _And where was Tyene?_

Her roommate returned late that night, looking very mad.

“Hey, where have you been all day? I haven’t seen you — ” Sansa began but did not finish.

Tyene had tears of anger and pain in her eyes. She threw her clutch against the wall with surprising strength and growled. Sansa jumped off the couch, throwing away the book she was attempting to read, and ran to her, placing her hands on her friend’s forearms.

“Tyene, what happened?”

The girl looked angry for some more seconds; then, her face crumbled, she wrapped her arms around Sansa, and, hiding her face in her red hair, began to cry. Sansa whispered soothing nothings to her, stroking her short hair.

“He doesn’t want me… [sniffling] We’ve been fucking each other’s brains out for months, and _now_ he thinks we should ‘move on’?! He left so quickly yesterday after telling me it was over, I didn’t believe him! I spent the whole day in his stupid apartment waiting for him, and do you know what he
told me when he got back?!”

“No, honey, I don’t. What did he say?”

“That I shouldn’t have ‘waited up’ for him! Oh, I could kill him right now! I’m sorry I didn’t!”

“Who is he?” asked Sansa hesitantly. When she had first met Tyene, she had assumed that her roommate was exploring her numerous options, but then came to believe that there was someone special in Tyene’s life.

“I can’t tell you, you’ll judge me,” she whined lamentably.

_Believe me, with the dreams I’ve been having about Jaime Lannister, I’m the last person who will judge your choices._

“Of course, not. I promise.”

Tyene raised her head from Sansa’s shoulder and considered her friend. Sansa watched mascara running down the Dornish girl’s cheeks and thought that, without the perfect make up, Tyene looked younger than she normally did. Sansa smiled at her and wiped her friend’s tears.

“I promise not to judge.”

Tyene looked down, uncertainty on her face, but the desire to share her troubles with her friend won over.

“It’s Bronn,” she said. When Sansa just stared, Tyene began clarifying: “He’s the head of security — ”

“I know who he is!” Sansa said. “I just never would have thought he was your type.”

“He isn’t. I just like sleeping with him. A lot. I thought he liked me. He was getting kind of cute a few weeks ago, then something changed, he started being busy all the time and — ” her voice shook and she started crying again. “I don’t even know what happened!”

“Well, did he say anything?”

“No, just that we’ve had fun and now it was time to move on! I hate him!”

“I have two elder brothers who can make him into a punching bag if you like,” Sansa offered with a smile. Tyene laughed a little before resuming her weeping. After more proclamations of hatred and working out detailed plans of Bronn’s execution, they settled on watching a movie together, a saccharine melodrama that even Sansa privately thought could cause diabetes.

The next day, Sansa was allowed into the building but was again prohibited from dancing. In the morning, she was sitting in Margery’s class, watching her peers with undisguised envy. Margery had been gentle in her refusal to allow Sansa to join their ranks, but it had been a refusal nonetheless. Sansa was wracking her brains to find a solution to her predicament, when she remembered the keychain with a plush toy in the shape and the color of a small flame. She had not used it since the night she had seen Jaime and Cersei in one of the studios. She wondered if that was their usual meeting place, or if perhaps it had been simply an unhappy coincidence.

_Maybe I could ask him_, she thought desperately.

_Ask him what? If he needs the studios at night to screw his sister? Are you completely crazy?_
But maybe he isn’t even here. Maybe I can just sneak in at night, and no one will be the wiser.

I can even think of someone who will look very stupid if she stumbles for the second time onto the Lannister twins going at it in the darkness.

That much was true. With a deep sigh, Sansa dismissed the thought. That was in the morning. By the end of the day, however, she was desperate enough to reconsider.

Jaime Lannister hated attending fundraisers. Organizing them was even worse. Tyrion insisted that several important decisions could not be made without Jaime’s approval, and his little brother had an uncanny ability of forcing Jaime to do things he hated. For instance, he found himself fighting his dyslexia to look through the seemingly endless pages of administrative nightmare the insufferable little man had dropped into his email. Jaime sighed, feeling the onset of a headache. He needed a break. As though by magic, he heard a hesitant knock on the door. He called out for the visitor to come in, glad of the interruption. To his surprise, Sansa Stark walked into his office, looking like a deer caught in the headlights.

“I’m sorry if I’m interrupting…” she motioned toward his computer screen.

“I’m not,” he replied. “One more moment, and I would have thrown the damnable thing against the wall. Please, sit down.” He motioned to the armchairs before his desk. She sat down in one of them, and he came to lean against his desk in front of her.

“What brings you into the lion’s den, Sansa?”

She shifted uncomfortably, but her lips were set in the same stubborn way he had observed during the masterclass.

“I…” she began, blushed to her hairline, and paused, looking at her hands.

Jaime laughed softly.

“Whatever it is, now I’m sure it’s worth my while.”

Another wave of blushing came over her. He did not realize a human being could turn such a deep shade of pink.

“Breathe, minx, or you might have a stroke,” he said with mock concern.

“I…” she failed again.

“Yes, you! We’ve established that fact already. What it is, Sansa? I’m not getting any younger here.”

Jaime was enjoying himself immensely. He might have been unable to get under her skin during the masterclass, but she was clearly not immune to teasing. She took a deep breath, like someone who is standing on a cliff preparing to jump, then rushed into her tumbled narration:

“The night when I saw you…” she lowered her voice, “with you-know-who…”

Jaime guffawed.

This was going to be good. What was it Tyrion had said? She might have a stroke from blushing if she tried talking about that incident out loud?

She was annoyed, but he thought that the way she wrinkled her nose in irritation was highly amusing. She took one more breath and continued:
“Well, that happened because I’ve a spare key from the backdoor, so that I can come in and practice.”

“Tyrion’s told me as much.”

“He did? All right. Well, obviously, I’ve not gone to practice in the evenings like I used to since…” she motioned vaguely in his direction.

“Why is this obvious? Could you clarify?” he goaded.

She reddened further, and he caught himself wondering just how far on her body the blush extended.

“What do you mean? Well, I could not know if you would be there!”

_I wonder if it is possible for her to blush more?_

“Could have asked,” he said. “Cersei and I are rather private people, but I’m sure we could consider preforming for you.”

Sansa was so scandalized, she actually looked up at him, mouth agape and eyes wide.

_Ah, so she could turn redder still._

“That’s not what I meant at all!” she sounded panicked. “I meant I didn’t want to interrupt — ”

Jaime was laughing heartily.

“I didn’t want to walk in on you two ever again!” she exclaimed.

“Are you sure?” he said between laughs.

“Yes!” she almost screamed.

_Is that what she sounds like when she’s urging her lover on?_

“It’s almost offensive, the way you say it,” he admonished.

Sansa dropped her red face into her hands and did not lift her head when she spoke again.

“All I wanted to ask was whether I could start practicing at night again or if you and your sister would be there?” she sounded miserable, but Jaime was far from having had his fill of fun.

“Minx, I don’t see the problem. You can practice at night all you want. And, since you’re good at keeping secrets, I don’t foresee any problems even if we run into each other. Or rather if _you_ run into _us._”

To his disappointment, Sansa jumped out of the armchair and picked up her bag.

“I’m sorry to have bothered you, I’ll try to find another way. Thank you for your time.”

She made for the door, and he could not resist catching her forearm and spinning her around with ease.

“Sansa,” he said softly, “you really need to learn to recognize humor.”

Still red and annoyed, she looked at him.
“This isn’t funny,” she said stubbornly.

“Maybe not for you,” he acknowledged, “but laughter is like sex, Sansa. You can’t be too selfish, since you aren’t alone.”

She tried to bolt again, but he caught her around the waist, laughing.

“You, Northerners, and your prudish ways!”

“It’s not about prudishness, it’s about common decency! Please let me go.”

Unwillingly, he obliged her.

“You have nothing to worry about, minx. My sister and I will find better places to enjoy ourselves than this building. Practice away,” he winked at her and saw relief wash over her face, relaxing her features.

“Thank you,” she said with gratitude.

“Personally, I think it would have done you no harm watching us — ” he began, but she almost ran out of the door, and he laughed heartily as he watched her go.

Well, if he did not just find a wonderful source of amusement!

Chapter End Notes

Here is another chapter with more Jaime/Sansa. I hope you find it a little funny. Please review and leave kudos!
Looking back, she thought that the horror of speaking with Jaime Lannister, which proved even worse than Sansa had anticipated — *How could people say such things and not catch fire from shame? Oh, right, like Jaime Lannister knew what shame was! Ha!* — was worth it the moment she had unlocked the back door of the Lannister Ballet Company building and slipped inside the welcoming darkness. The quiet reminded her of the bustle that reigned this place during the day. It seemed that the halls and studios were resting from the commotion, dozing peacefully under the soft cover of night. She loved being here alone with no one but the mirrors to see her, not a single instructor to judge whether her movements were performed well or not. In the night, she could dance any way she wanted; she could be silly and make mistakes; she could forget the world altogether.

Barely restraining her triumphant giggle, Sansa rushed down the familiar route to the studio in which she usually danced. She loved its roof windows, which let in the last rays of sunlight and then filled the studio with magical moonlight. The lively yellow street light would mingle with the coldness of the moon, creating an enchanting atmosphere.

Fixing her phone to the arm band and putting on her headphones, she thought with ridiculous pride how she had fooled Tyene, who, like every other one of her friends, was part of the conspiracy against Sansa’s dancing. Tyene was having bad cramps in her left leg, so Sansa ran her a bath. The careless and happy sound of her roommate’s humming coming from the bathroom suggested to Sansa that if she were to quietly, very quietly, dress, pack her bag, and leave, Tyene might not even hear her. It turned out she had been right. She thought herself pretty clever.

Finally, she was about to dance. How she had missed it. Her heart was beating faster as she started the music. There was no one to chide her, to stop her. She had never felt so free. She started moving, her body still sore, but she did not care. There it was, the beating of her heart synching with the rhythm of the music. She started off with easy, soft movements, mindful of all the warnings she had received. But the music bewitched her, and she had forgotten the danceless days had ever existed. Recovering her body’s strength with every motion, she became bolder and followed the crescendo. Pirouette, fouetté arabesque. She felt her body shake off its fatigue and staleness. The petit allegro had never seemed like a liberation before. The soubresaut had never filled her with so much life. She had never felt her feet leave the floor so acutely with every part of her being. Glissade, jeté. How beautiful it was to dance! Coupé, step, jeté. Her muscles were as flexible as well-kneaded dough, she felt like a fountain — unrestrained, exultant, elastic. Pas de chat. What a wonder it all was!

Dancing again after such a long break filled her with deranging joy. She forgot about caution, dancing ecstatically, almost laughing her merriment. Her limbs moving of their own accord, proclaiming the end of captivity, the dawn of a new era. She felt omnipotent, unstoppable. She could overcome every obstacle, her body now stronger than ever before. She dashed around the studio in a celebration of freedom, of happiness, of dance, metamorphosed into one of the snowflakes she had watched twirl nonchalantly over Winterfell. She pirouetted, she jumped, feeling the youth of her body and the abandon in her heart, reveling in her quiet power.

That was how Jaime found her. A swift vision of innocence and bliss. In the dusk of the studio, slipping in and out of the light, she looked surreal, ephemeral. A magical spirit, perhaps a jubilant
sylph, or a fictional memory. Her limbs graceful, her body energetic, her movements filled with a
distracted, guiltless glory. Weary of Tyrion’s papers, he had come to tease her when he had heard the
light, hurried footsteps. He stayed to watch her, captivated. He did not admire ballet as a dance
anymore: it was his life, his work; he invented, criticized it. But she had stopped him in his tracks
with the ingenuous beauty of her movements. Enchanted by the spellbinding harmony she brought
into being, he watched her. The considerable skill and good technique he had noticed in her before
acquired a flow of even greater delicacy, and her motions were replete with the same passion that
had transfixed him when they had danced together.

She did not observe him in the shadows of the doorway. She did not see anything at all, her eyes
turned inward. In her mind, kept flashing the visions of him dancing all those days ago. She missed
the bemused smile that now played on his lips, the wonder in his eyes as they followed her form.
When she stopped, standing with her hands on her hips, breathing deeply, he was suddenly reminded
of reality. Shaking his head, he left noiselessly, the look of an awakened sleepwalker on his face.

“Where have you been?!?” Tyene was fuming. “Oh. My. Gods. Did you sneak off to dance at
night?!”

Sansa, still in her dancing leotard, legwarmers, and hoodie, was covered in sweat, but her eyes were
glowing.

“Yes, I have.”

“Are you out of your mind?!”

Sansa, too content to pout, smiled happily.

“Apparently not. I’ve danced for three hours, and I feel great. Better than great, actually: I feel
reborn.”

Tyene raised an eyebrow at her skeptically.

“It’s true,” Sansa said, more at peace than Tyene had seen her in weeks. “I’ve danced for three hours
without pause, I feel great. I am going to class tomorrow, and I don’t care what they say to me —
I’m going to dance.”

Sansa hugged Tyene in passing and headed to the shower. She felt strong. She felt bold.

The next day, there were no masterclasses, just the regular training sessions. Sansa walked in, ready
for a fight and was stunned to find that no one tried to prevent her from practicing. Despite her brave
words and her inspired dancing the day before, her body was still recovering. She decided to reign in
her eagerness and, since she had a day worth of training, replaced the night practice with a nice long
bath. Another reason for her caution was that on the morrow she had a masterclass with Ellaria, and
she wanted to look as fresh as she could in hopes of convincing her unbendable instructor to let her
rejoin the class. A part of her, which was conscious of a change in the way she danced and the way
she felt when moving, wondered if she could do better in Ellaria’s class now.

Ellaria was already in her studio by the time Tyene and Sansa arrived.

“I heard that you were practicing!” the older woman said by way of greeting. “I thought Tyrion had
that under control."

“Guess he decided it was all right,” ventured Sansa.

“Well, I certainly haven’t decided that,” Ellaria stated.
Before Sansa could begin to argue, the atmosphere in the room had somehow shifted. Turning, she saw Jaime Lannister, who bore a resemblance to a self-assured lion, walk into the studio.

“\"I think, Ellaria, you’re taking it too far. She’s made it through my masterclass. She can certainly handle yours,\" he spoke with playful condescension.

“I’ll thank you to mind your own business and never to attempt to mandate what I do in my studio again!” Ellaria bit back with venom. “She needs a break.”

“And she’s had it. Four days is more than enough,” he answered, unperturbed by her acrimony. “Besides,” he added, “she’s been training yesterday and looks fine to me.”

“The regular training sessions only last an hour with twenty- and forty-minute breaks between them. This masterclass lasts three hours. She’s not ready for it.”

Jaime sounded annoyed:

“Ellaria, when I hired you into this company, I don’t remember seeing a degree in medicine on your CV. Did I miss it, or have you acquired one in the time you’ve been with us?”

“I don’t need to be a certified maester to know her body will give out if she practices without stopping for three hours!”

Jaime smiled in a sly, triumphant way.

“She’s already done it,” he said calmly.

“What?”

“She danced for three hours the night before yesterday and was feeling well enough to attend class the day after.”

Wait! He knew I would practice at night, but how does he know for how long I’ve danced?!

“I still think she should not have done it and is not ready to resume her full schedule. I’m doing this for her own good.”

Jaime’s smile was unsettling — even for Ellaria, Sansa suspected. She herself was glad not to be at the receiving end of it.

“Her own good?” Jaime asked, a quiet challenge in his voice. “Very well, then. If you don’t allow Sansa to resume her normal schedule, your masterclass included, I will offer her an additional masterclass. Taught by myself,” he ended with a smirk that said he knew he had Ellaria just where he wanted her.

Sansa was not sure if she hoped Ellaria would acquiesce or refuse. But when the woman said, “Fine, Lannister,” signaling to Sansa to get onto the dance floor, the girl could not help feeling a pang of disappointment.

“Pass the message along to your husband and Margery,” Jaime said before walking out the door. Sansa followed his retreating form with a mixture of gratitude and regret.

Having agreed to Sansa’s participation, Ellaria would not go easier on her than she had in the past. Despite Sansa’s high hopes, in the first hour of the class, she kept hearing the same old “you’re too stiff,” “relax that back, Sansa!”
During the break, Ellaria approached her.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, making a poor attempt at hiding her concern. Sansa placed a hand on her forearm, smiling with all her heart.

“I feel great! I’m all right, truly. Thank you.”

“Here’s what I want you to do, then. Try to remember what you were thinking when you were dancing with Jaime the other night. I don’t know what it was, but you do. Look for it, find it, use it. Got it?”

Sansa nodded.

The only thing that had been different was Jaime’s presence. She remembered dancing two days ago when she was imagining his eyes. Maybe that was the secret? Jaime’s eyes?

“All right, everyone!” Ellaria called. “Let’s do it again!”

Sansa shut off the world surrounding her, calling up the memories. The music entered her bloodstream and filled every cell of her being. Her motions grew certain; her body’s stiffness fell away.

“Yes!” came from somewhere far away. “That’s it, Sansa, hold it. Yes! Faster! Arms a little higher! Loose that tension in the hips! Good! Spin, spin, spin, and… jump! Yes! Again! One, two, three — move! Beautiful!”

When the music was cut off, Sansa returned from her daze to find Ellaria’s triumphant eyes on her. The woman looked practically bloodthirsty as she smiled with pride.

“Finally!” she said. “Fire. Again!”

It was the first class during which Ellaria had been fully satisfied with her performance. It would not be the last.

Sansa was only too happy to resume her full daily schedule. No matter how much strength she felt in the morning, however, by evening she was too tired to drag herself out of bed, so her nightly practice would have to wait another week. It was not all bad, however. The same magic that had worked in Ellaria’s class helped her in Oberyn’s studio as well.

“I was promised a great deal by my wife,” he said to her when she entered his studio the week after Ellaria’s class. “I expect she did no lie to me? What say you, Sparkle?”

“I’ll try,” Sansa answered with a small smile. Oberyn nodded.

He gave them the starting and finishing points for improvisation. Sansa closed her eyes and breathed in before her turn. She did not worry about pausing before beginning. The music would keep playing: in Oberyn’s class, it never stopped and never repeated. No one rushed her. She imagined herself in the darkness of the studio, dreaming of green eyes as she moved. She released her breath as her unseeing eyes opened. She started, allowing the music to overtake her completely, laying on its altar the sacrifice of her embarrassment and her Northern understanding of propriety. She danced the way the music ordered her as it chanted seductively in her ear. She had never dared adding more than two or three steps to Oberyn’s two before, but that day, she had rebelled against her own limits. She danced like she did when no one saw her. She did not count the steps, seeing an uninterrupted sequence emerge in her mind as it had on so many occasions in the comfort of her accepting solitude. When she ended on the pas Oberyn had outlined, she looked up at her instructor.
Oberyn had a ridiculous expression on his face. Bewilderment did not even begin to describe it. It took him a few moments to overcome his astonishment. He blinked a couple of times, then he laughed. Heartily, merrily.

He cut off his laugh as suddenly as he had started guffawing, and fixed Sansa with deadly serious eyes. She shifted on her feet uncomfortably.

“Who are you and what did you do to Sansa Stark?”

“What?” she asked, confused by his reactions. He laughed again.

“Well, Sparkle. It appears I’ll have to come up with another nickname for you. Ladies and gentlemen, behold fire! Hahahaha! Yes! Great! Whatever drugs you’re taking, Sansa, keep taking them! Hahaha! Next!”

Sansa was finishing her lunch alone in a pleasant little restaurant close by the Lannister Ballet Company building. Tyene had rushed off somewhere, with a conspiratorial, up-to-no-good air; Sansa only hoped she was not seeing Bronn again — the man seemed like a total asshole to her.

She was joined by Tyrion and Margery.

“Ellaria and Oberyn are amazed by your progress, Sansa — congratulations,” said Margery warmly.

“Thank you. I’m just glad to be dancing again. I look forward to your class next week,” Sansa replied and Margery smiled at her.

“I hope you don’t hold a grudge against me, Sparkle,” Tyrion winked at her as he bit into his sandwich. She smiled.

“I don’t. Especially since you did tell my instructors from the regular training sessions to let me practice.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, even before your brother had asked Ellaria to let me return to class, my daily instructors had allowed me to dance.”

“I’m afraid I had nothing to do with that,” Tyrion stated simply. “I just learned that you were training again on the day you made your triumphant comeback in Ellaria’s class and decided to let the sleeping wolves lie.”

Margery looked sly.
“Jaiame’s doing,” she said.

“Probably,” Tyrion agreed.

Before Sansa could ask any questions, they were approached by a rather plump man, bald, whose yellow suit and red tie, though elegant, struck a discordant note with his serious face and intelligent eyes.

“Ah, Varys, friend, good to see you!” Tyrion exclaimed. The men shook hands.

“Likewise, Tyrion, likewise. Lady Margery, you look beautiful as always. But who is this lovely young lady?” he asked, looking at Sansa with interest.

“This is Sansa Stark,” Margery introduced them. “Sansa, this is Varys, an old friend of Tyrion. He knows everyone’s darkest secrets.”
“You flatter me, my dear, truly, you do. I’m simply a good listener. But what is a Northern wolf doing so far in the South?”

“I’m one of the new dancers in the Lannister Ballet Company,” she explained.

“How exciting!” Varys exclaimed. “And how long have you remained incognito in King’s Landing?”

“I do not hide my identity from anyone,” Sansa protested with a confused smile as she watched the strange man.

“You must lead a rather private existence if I haven’t known you were here.”

“Guilty as charged,” she admitted.

“Curious,” he mumbled to himself pensively.

“Well, ladies, if you’ll excuse us,” Tyrion said as he wolfed down the last of his sandwich and got up. “Varys and I have some talking to do about the next fundraiser. Sansa, I’ll see you around.” He turned to Margery, “And I’ll see you later tonight. Still remember we’re going to the new restaurant Oberyn suggested?”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” she smiled at him. They kissed, and the men left.

Margery turned to her:

“Did you know there was a restaurant in the city where Dornish singers performed each night?..”

Email from Varys to Mr. Lannister:

Dear Sir,

I have made a curious discovery today, which may be of interest to you. Did you know that Sansa Stark, Eddard Stark’s eldest daughter, has recently joined the Lannister Ballet Company? She is reputed to be a promising young dancer.

Yours etc.,

Varrys

Chapter End Notes

I wonder which Mr. Lannister Varys emailed? ;) I hope you liked this chapter. I loved writing Sansa's first dance after the break she was forced to take. Let me know your thoughts! Leave kudos — they warm my heart almost as much as your comments!
Sansa was glad. That evening, she had awakened from her nap, revived. She was changing into her leotard, set on resuming her evening exercise, while Tyene was perfecting her makeup and jewelry before a mirror, her party clothes glittering.

“You’re going to see Bronn again, aren’t you?” Sansa said with a half-smile.

“I am!” affirmed Tyene, happy and playful. “A few days after he told me it was over, I showed up at a place where he often goes for a drink and… Well…” she looked at Sansa suggestively, “I made sure he wanted nothing more than to have me back.”

“But what if he hurts you again?” Sansa asked, not trying to hide her concern.

“That’s love. It warms you and it burns you, but it’s not like we can live without it.”

Sansa was taken aback.

“You love him?”

It seemed that, before her question, Tyene had not quite realized what she had said. She looked almost self-conscious for a moment but shrugged and returned to her carefree mood.

“I guess I do. Better make sure he does, too.”

Sansa decided against saying that love was not supposed to burn you. Real love was supposed to be like that of her parents — gentle and comforting. She also did not convey to her friend her personal doubts concerning anyone’s capacity to make others love them at will. The girls exited the apartment together but went their separate ways.

Sansa slipped into the studio and began dancing. Just as she was about to lose herself in the music, she thought she had noticed movement but dismissed it as an optical illusion. The next time she pirouetted, however, she collided with something — or someone? — and nearly jumped out of her skin with fright. She had not heard anything, of course, over the music, and had been convinced she was alone. Instinctively, she jumped away from whatever it was that had appeared before her in the darkness and lost her balance. She would have fallen, if strong arms had not caught her.

Jaime restored her to her feet; she took out her headphones, her fingers shaking.

“Minx, if every time you see me, you’ll scream like that, it will occasion some odd encounters in the hallways,” he said, amusement dripping from each syllable.

Sansa did not realize she had screamed. Adrenaline was coursing through her, her heartbeat wild with the fright he had given her. She pushed him hard into the chest with all the strength she could muster, but he barely stumbled and rewarded her poor attempt at bodily harm with a chuckle.

“Someone is in dire need of anger management,” he commented.
“Gods, you scared me to death!” she cried. “Why on earth would you sneak up on me in the darkness? Didn’t your mother ever teach you not to frighten innocent people for your perverse amusement?!”

She saw an odd, pained expression flash over his features at the word “mother.”

“If my mother had lived long enough, I supposed she would have,” he said caustically.

“Sorry,” Sansa mumbled quietly. Like everyone else, she had heard of Joanna Lannister’s death. Jaime’s mother had been so young when she had passed. Regardless of what anyone thought, and however justifiably, about Tywin Lannister, Sansa had always felt sorry for him when she heard about his wife.

Jaime’s anguish was gone as quickly as it had come, and an impish smile Sansa had learned to recognize as a warning sign appeared on his face.

“I’m sorry, minx, I had forgotten it was your prerogative to sneak up on people in the night and watch them in their unguarded moments. At least I had the decency to show my face.”

“Did you?” she asked with a goading smile of her own.

*Oh, stupid girl. Don’t rile him up.*

His raised eyebrows dared her to finish her thought. *Sansa, don’t! Don’t you even think of —*

“When you were talking with Ellaria about letting me practice, how did you know that I had danced for exactly three hours the night before?”

*Oh, you idiot!*

He seemed surprised for a second, but his teasing expression quickly returned.

“I’m sure Catelyn Stark would have told her daughter that eavesdropping is highly unladylike. Could she have failed in her motherly duty?”

*Just leave it at that. Shut your —*

“Don’t change the subject.”

*… mouth. Now you’ve done it!*

He came to stand right in front of her, grinning as he invaded her personal space. He bent his face to hers, leaving a taunting inch between their lips. She watched him, hypnotized by his presence so near her own body and the closeness of his mesmeric green eyes.

“What if I had watched you dance? You’ve watched me do much more…” he savored the pause, tasting her breath on his lips, and smiled a salacious smile, “… intimate things.”

She jerked away from him, and although he could not see colors in the darkness, he knew she was blushing. He threw his head back in laughter as though to shake off the memory of just how close her lips had been to his and how her breath had called to him.

“I forbid you to speak to me this way!” Sansa shrieked desperately.

She sounded enraged. *Good, he thought. Then he processed her words.*

“You forbid me?” he questioned between bewilderment and mirth.
It was not that Sansa did not realize the ridiculousness of her statement. It was that she had nowhere to retreat in this conversation.

“I do.”

He took another step toward her and she took a step back, afraid of being too close to him. His smirk told her that her withdrawal had not gone unnoticed.

“And what will you do if I disregard your interdiction?”

Why was every word he said so heavy with innuendo? And why did her heart have to beat so quickly?

She remained silent.

“Come, Sansa, you aren’t at a loss for words, are you?”

*I hate you.* When she did not reply, his voice became a little more mocking.

“Oh, but you are, aren’t you?”

“You’re a horrible person,” she said halfheartedly, wondering why he wasted his time making her life miserable.

His reply seemed automatic.

“Trust me, there are worse.”

“I doubt that!”

“Don’t. Come, minx, how can I compensate you for having scared you as much as you claim I did?”

She wondered at the sudden generosity and watched his face suspiciously, searching for signs of mischief. He seemed genuine enough. And there *was* something she needed help with. Despite her enormous improvement in Ellaria’s class, new movements still often puzzled Sansa. The one they had learned (she tried to, at least) the day before was simply not working for her. After all the praise she had received, she hated the setback one particularly annoying pas caused her. She considered Jaime. What had she to lose by asking the greatest dancer in the world to help her? Sure, he could mock her. But words could only cut so deep. If, however, he did help her, she could overcome another obstacle.

“Fine,” she said, steeling herself for the jests she thought would follow. “I want your help with one of the movements we have gone over in Ellaria’s class. I cannot get the hang of it, and it’s been driving me crazy.”

If he was surprised, he did not show it.

“Which movement is that?” he asked.

She tried showing him.

*The minx was not playing coy when she said she couldn’t do it.*

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen this one before. Do you mind doing it again?”

“I want your help, not your mockery, Jaime.”
She had never called him by his first name before. *I like the way my name rolls off her tongue.*

“You know this movement very well,” she continued. “It’s in almost every part Ellaria has ever danced.”

“Now you’re exaggerating. Come on.”

Warily she came to stand next to him. He rolled his eyes at her caution and dragged her to stand in front of him.

“The reason you can’t get it right is because you are afraid of falling.” *Now how did he know that?!* He placed his hands gently on her sides, and she only hoped he did not hear her breath catch. “Now you won’t,” he added. “Think of it as an arabesque that has caught a modern dance flu.”

Sansa laughed.

“Try now,” he told her, his voice oddly soft. She did, her body rather than her mind trusting him to catch her. Her movement came out perfect, but his hands remained on her waist. “Again.” She complied with the obedience of a mechanic doll. Her movement was perfect yet again.

She laughed.

“Why are you laughing, minx?”

“Because no one should be allowed to be that good!”

“Careful, minx, you begin to sound a little friendly.”

“Thank you,” she said then, smiling.

“A Lannister always pays his debts,” was all he answered.

She watched him for a moment, taking in his handsome face, the golden hair that framed it. She felt an odd urge to memorize his features while they were illuminated by this kind smile.

His phone rang, reminding her—and him—of that outer world, which Ned Stark thought so cruel and full of treachery. Jaime picked up.

“If it isn’t my favorite sister!” he said by way of an answer. *Cersei.* Sansa felt as though a bucket of cold water had been emptied onto her. What was she thinking, allowing herself to behave so foolishly with this man? How could she be so forgetful? He was not a person to ask for help, not a friend. He was a murderer, he slept with his sister, for Mother’s sake! And if she felt that the world did not exist when she was around him, caught between a flurry of flusteredness and wonder, then she should have at least been smart enough to avoid him. She went to her bag and headed for the doors quickly, forcing herself to give him a curt nod before leaving.

He had seen her expression change, her shoulders and back stiffen. Sansa was too caught up in her own ire to notice the way the muscles of his jaw flexed when he observed her reaction.

Although Sansa was firm in her decision to avoid Jaime Lannister in the future, she would not give up her evening practice. To her relief—because she was *not* disappointed—it was he who did not appear.

A few days after she had triumphantly demonstrated her mastery of the new movement in Ellaria’s class, Sansa returned home to discover a red envelope in her mail. Inside, she found a golden sheet of
paper. The words spelled in dark crimson made her heart drop. She did not read past the first line before screaming in panic, “Tyene!”

It went thus: Lord Tywin Lannister kindly invites you to...

“What is it?” Tyene came running in, toothbrush in one hand, toothpaste in the other. Sansa turned to her wide-eyed, looking like she had received the order for her own summary execution.

“I — ” she began, then thought that, surely, this was all simply a mix-up of some kind. The letter must have been delivered to her by mistake. She glanced at the envelope; her name was printed on its red paper with golden letters. She looked at the golden sheet; her name was spelled in red. “I… Why would I get an invitation from Tywin Lannister to go to — ” she checked, “… to a gala held by the Lannisters & Co?…”

They were gathered in Tyrion’s office. Specifically, Tyrion, Margery, Tyene, Ellaria, Oberyn, and Sansa were gathered in the little man’s office. Varys was lurking in the corner. Apprehension and perplexity were the dominant emotions; irritation was also high on the list.

After the first wave of the shock at receiving the invitation had passed, Sansa had dialed Tyrion’s number, not caring that it was almost midnight. It took a few trials, but then Margery had picked up.

“I hope you have a good excuse for interrupting my sexapade,” purred Margery into the phone.

“I’m so sorry, but I do,” Sansa had replied, and her anxious voice had made Margery pass the phone to Tyrion.

“Sansa, good evening. I hope it’s nothing serious?”

“If so, you’ll have to be more specific,” Tyrion advised.

“I have in my hands an invitation to the Lannister gala signed personally by your father.”

“Shit.”

The way Tyrion had cursed must be clarified: it was a martyr’s sigh, prolonged on the single vowel.

So, the next afternoon, they were all gathered in his office. The Dornish family, strictly speaking, did not need to be there. However, their protectiveness of Sansa and their distrust of Tywin Lannister, which was considerable, had ensured their presence.

“Maybe I could just say that I’m ill?” Sansa proposed.

“Say that, and you might very well get ill under mysterious circumstances,” said Margery without mirth. “How does it go? ‘Tywin Lannister kindly invites you… RSVP or beware?’ Needless to say, in this context RSVP stand for ‘thank you for your gracious invitation, I’d be honored to attend.’ ”

“The real question is why does he invite Sansa Stark at all?” mused Oberyn. “The breach between the families is considerable, why issue an invitation?”

“Tywin may dislike Eddard Stark with all his heart, begging your apology, my dear, but this makes it all the more likely he would invite his daughter: make ties with a new generation, so to speak,” Varys supplied. “Politics are not made by ignoring people one dislikes. Moreover,” he continued, “the old lion would never have it said about him that he is anything but a gracious, if petrifying,
“What’s even more interesting is how he found out that Sansa was in King’s Landing in the first place?” came from Ellaria.

“That, too, I can answer for you,” Varys replied. “I personally informed Mr. Lannister of Lady Stark’s presence in the city.”

Tyrion nodded, his suspicions confirmed.

“But why would you do that?” Oberyn asked.

“I am the lion’s spider. If I don’t deliver such information, I become a useless liability.”

“I think,” Margery said, wiggling her eyebrows mischievously, “there’s only one question that remains to be answerer: what will she wear?”

“I can’t go!” Sansa sounded terrified. “Father will kill me!”

“What are you, five?” Tyene exclaimed and received a gentle clip on the back of her head from Oberyn. Margery clarified:

“No, Sansa, your father will, maybe, scold you;” pointing to Tyrion, “his father might kill you.”

Tyrion rolled his eyes.

“Let’s not exaggerate, either. I will say this, Sansa: I think it highly advisable that you go. Marge and I will be there, so you won’t be on your own. Jaime as well, for that matter, though I fear it’s little consolation. Socialize, drink some free champagne. You’ll be fine.”

I know who else is going to be there. And I hope to all the gods that she does not know that I’ve seen her with her brother.

Sansa always loved shopping. The glitter of window screens, the bustle of customers, the laughter, the hunt for the perfect fit, the ideal color; the excitement of seeing that dress, which was better than any of the dozens of dresses in her closet, or this sweater, which had simply no equals in the loveliness of color and the quality of material. And of course, what better way to go shopping than with your friend? But, walking with Margery, whose taste and sophistication she appreciated, Sansa felt none of the joy that usually filled her on such excursions.

“Come, Sansa, don’t be so grim! My grandmother is flying from Highgarden to be there, and she’s dying to meet you! Besides, I’ve met Tywin many times, and he really isn’t that terrifying.”

Sansa gave her a look that said she did not believe a word of it.

“Well,” Margery relented, “fine, he is a little terrifying.”

“A little terrifying? Margery, do you realize that when I was five and refused to go to bed, mother would say that if children behaved very badly, Tywin Lannister would abduct them in the night?! And that father would tell her Tywin Lannister was far too terrible to be used as his children’s boogeyman?”

She had never dreamed that the refined Margery Tyrell could guffaw so loudly, laughing until tears were streaming down her cheeks, having to lean against a window screen in order to stay upright, heedless of the saleswoman’s protestations and Sansa begging her not to be so loud.
“Oh,” the Reach girl said, wiping tears, “this takes the cake! Wait till I tell Tyrion!”

“You mustn’t! It’s his father we’re talking about.”

“It is, which is why he will enjoy it so much,” she put her arm through Sansa’s. “Come, sweet, damaged child! We have two perfect dresses to find and only so much time in which to accomplish it before you’ll be coming face to face with your bogeyman!”

They found a lovely gown for Margery. It was the color of the most tender lilac Sansa had ever seen, and it suited her friend’s light, grey-blue eyes, chocolate hair, and fair skin. They walked around a while, drove to multiple locations, but Sansa could not find anything she liked that was appropriate for the occasion and suitable to her complexion. They were driving to a seafood restaurant when she saw that dress. It resembled the one she kept seeing in her dreams. Of course, there were differences, but Sansa found the similarities striking all the same. She hastily asked Margery to stop the car.

“Crimson,” her friend commented when Sansa had tried it on. “A bold choice. And oddly enough, it does not clash with your hair. If anything, it makes it look redder. And it contrasts with your skin marvelously. Elegant and classic but unique, which is rare. Well-caught! But let me check something before you pay.” She pulled out her phone and dialed. “Hello, Shae. Margery Tyrell here. Listen, what color is the bitch wearing to the gala in two weeks? Gold? You sure? Very well, thank you!”

“What was that? And who’s Shae?” Sansa asked, surprised at the use of the expletive.

“Cersei’s stylist and, consequently, a wretchedly unhappy human being. I was just making sure you would not wear the same color as the mistress of the house. Red, after all, is as Lannister as it gets.”

“Perhaps, I should wear blue or gray instead?”

“I will let you go naked there before I allow you to wear a grey dress. Blue would suit you well, but I doubt you’ll find a gown quite as pretty as this one. I think you should get it.”

Sansa was convinced of the opposite; but she wanted to wear that dress.

“I don’t see any need for it,” Jaime said.

Tyrion sighed and sank deeper into the pillows of his and Margery’s bed. Why, oh why, was his brother blind and stubborn in addition to being difficult?

“Truly, Jaime, don’t be an ass. The girl’s frightened, and it will only make her more nervous if she has to go alone.”

“She’ll be alone with only a few hundred people,” Jaime quipped, but Tyrion ignored him.

“I cannot take her for the wonderful reason that I already have the prettiest girl in the room as my date,” Margery kissed him on the nose for that and he winked at her. “Oberyn has Ellaria, Loras is going with Renly…”

“He is? As a couple?” Jaime interrupted; hearing Tyrion’s confirmation, the elder brother chuckled evilly: “Oh, I can’t wait to see this!”

“Regardless of the small drama in the Baratheon corner, you have to go with Sansa. Father will be so pleased if you don’t show up alone. Again.”

And our bitch sister will be sooooo furious, Tyrion thought to himself with a smile. He wiggled his eyebrows at Margery, who was stifling her giggles with a pillow.
“Pleased and drawing incorrect conclusion,” Jaime answered.

*Or the right ones*, Tyrion thought, *depending on how much of an idiot you are.*

“I’ll take it upon myself to personally explain to daddy dearest that you only accompanied Sansa out of the goodness of your kind heart.” *The things I do for your stupid ass, Jaime, the things I do.* “Seriously, Jaime, I don’t know why you haven’t told him you’re gay.”

“Because I’m not?”

“I’m not sure there’s a polite term for your condition,” Tyrion grumbled.

“Don’t be a prick.”

“You neither! Go with Sansa! Find some mercy in your cold, withered, black heart.”

“Fine!” Jaime growled. “But father’s on you.” With that, he hung up.

“Did he say yes?” Margery inquired. Tyrion only raised his hand for a high-five. She squealed.

“Point one for Tyrion!” she said and kissed him. “You’re one clever little man,” she told him.

“I know,” he said brazenly.

“What will you do with the evil queen?”

“I will make sure she never forgets this evening,” he laughed lightheartedly, rubbing his small hands with glee.

**Chapter End Notes**

Well, I know this is my favorite chapter yet! I hope you feel the same way! And, ladies and gentlemen, get ready to party with the Lannister family! Leave comments and kudos if you feel like making me smile! ;)
Tywin Lannister considered himself a kindly, benevolent, long-suffering father of a dysfunctional family. A dwarf, a ballet dancer, and… well… Cersei. He could not blame Joanna for their offspring, of course, but he did not think himself at fault either. He gave them opportunities few could dream of, and they kept squandering them like stupid, careless children. There was his eldest son, for instance. Jaime was blessed with abilities few men possessed and belonged to the most powerful family in the Seven Kingdoms. What had he chosen to do with these blessings? His eldest son and heir, still unmarried and childless, was a ballet dancer! An entertainer for crowds of dim-witted fools, who aspired to be something higher than they were. There was no denying that the Lannister Ballet Company was a success, and Tywin had been surprised more than anyone when he had been unable to dissuade his children from the mad pursuit or to stifle it in its crib. But success in what? Dancing!!

Then there was his youngest child. A dwarf. A constant mockery of Lannisters’ reputation for producing handsome sons and beautiful daughters. True, Tyrion’s mind was more practical and he was less inclined than Jaime to keep his head in the clouds. Unlike his elder brother, Tyrion had at least graduated, with honors, from King’s Landing University. And what were his degrees in?! Well, yes, business, but also — theater management. Theater management! Tywin almost choked on the words each time. True also, Tyrion at least had found himself a suitable woman from a good family. All that Lannister charm was not for nothing, after all. But what had he done, once he was lucky enough to have captured the heart of Margery Tyrell? Did he propose? No. Did they at least plan to get married? “Not in the near future, father!” Not in the near future. When, then, if not in the near future? When he was dead and buried, and they could hold the celebration in the crypt over his bones?!

And Cersei… The return of the eldest of his prodigal children was a poor consolation. He had told her not to marry Robert Baratheon. Did she listen? You guessed it, she didn’t! True, Myrcella and Tommen were quite adequate, if not particularly bright at their advanced ages of five and three. He could only hope they would turn out better than either of the parents. His daughter worked at the Lannisters & Co, which, publicly at least, was a good thing. But her vicious character and constant, crazy intrigues created needless conflict and problems where everything had been running smoothly. Tywin would see himself publicly hung before he admitted that he used Tyrion’s words — “the mother of madness” — to refer to his daughter in his mind. And now that mother of madness had taken to drinking like her swine of a husband.

Yes, Tywin occasionally thought that his children were an unjustified punishment. If he had not been present at their births, he might not have believed they were his.
As if this was not enough, now the Starks were moving into the city. His city. Ned Stark, an honorable fool, had been dragging the Lannister name through the mud for decades, and Tywin loathed the man with an intensity that would have tempted a lesser man to make a dartboard out of his face and place it in his study for amusement during breaks from work. Being a man who could always rise above himself, Tywin had placed the already-mentioned dartboard in his private gym.

And how did it come to pass that the Starks were invading King’s Landing right under his nose? Haha! Yes, indeed, it was because his sons had hired one into their ballet company! Haha!
Tywin threw a dart that landed on the tip of Ned Stark’s nose, but even this habitual amusement did not help him relax. He had been forced to invite the girl to the party. What else could he have done? Joanna would be spinning in her grave at the speed of light if he had not invited a girl from a good family and newly in town to the gala. Tywin threw another dart, but he was so angry, he missed the dartboard altogether and made a sizable hole in the seat of his new exercise bike. That was the last straw. Tywin Lannister needed a drink before the guests began arriving.

Chapter End Notes

I initially planned to make this part of the larger chapter but I think it should stand on its own. The party is coming, not to worry, but at least now we know what Tywin Lannister was doing in the hour before! Leave comments (sympathy for the long-suffering father will be appreciated) and kudos — I’ll pass them on to Tywin. He needs consolation! ;)

PS The first line is a paraphrase of a quote by the wonderful Charles Dance on The Jonathan Ross Show.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ql6y3RC-Ni4
Margery had picked her and her dress up in the morning, laughing in Sansa’s face when the latter had told her that even she thought they could not possibly need all that time to get ready. Depositing the gown at her and Tyrion’s apartment, Margery had driven them to a spa. It was Sansa’s turn to laugh: there was little chance that all the famous spa salons of King’s Landing combined could relieve her tension. It was not just meeting Tywin Lannister the Boogeyman, or even coming face to face with Cersei the Megaera of House Lannister, that unnerved her; Sansa thought with equal apprehension of her parents’ reaction, should they ever find out she attended that gala (and she would not be telling them). *What would mother say?* kept resonating in her mind; and, *Father will kill me!* But Margery had been adamant, and to the spa they had gone. Sansa had been forced to admit that it did help, a little. They then returned to the apartment. It was a large, comfortable place that spoke in equal measure to the personalities of the two people who inhabited it. Here, a vase of flowers arranged in the Highgarden style; there, a book too serious ever to have enticed anyone but Tyrion; on the counter, his enormous set of keys from the Lannister Ballet Company building’s every door; her purple scarf coiling languidly on a chair; her favorite oil painting of a young Olenna Tyrell; his beautiful black and white photograph of Margery in a split leap.

“Ha, I see you didn’t dissolve in that spa after all!”

Tyrion moved his reading glasses to the tip of his nose and diverted his attention from his laptop, watching the girls enter. He was seated on the couch, his legs outstretched, and a cup of coffee steamed on an elegant little table next to him.

“Of course, we didn’t!” Margery approached him and kissed him on the lips. “We wouldn’t dream of leaving you all alone with your family.”

“No, you couldn’t possibly do that! If Catelyn Stark believes that Tywin Lannister abducts bad children at night, I would be in no small danger, if left to my own devices and without your protection. I’m told I’ve always been a very naughty little boy,” he wiggled his eyebrows at Margery.

Sansa reddened.

“Tyrion, I’m so sorry. I should never have said anything like that to Marge.”

“Are you kidding?” He looked surprised. “It’s the best thing I’ve heard in years! I’ll make sure it becomes proverbial in this city,” he winked at her.

“Come, no time for chatter, we’ve too many things to do as it is!” Margery took Sansa’s hand and dragged her into her boudoir where they would remain for hours, getting ready.

Sansa was becoming more nervous with every minute they spent in the room, which was stuffed with everything a sophisticated woman needs to get ready, but which may seem entirely devoid of purpose to the unrefined part of humanity. Sansa did not suspect then that her stress levels would get progressively worse as the evening went on.

“Jaime will be here in five minutes, so you better be ready, or I’ll never hear the end of it!” came from Tyrion’s walk-in closet.

“Don’t worry, love, we will be!” Margery called back.
Beginning to panic, Sansa turned to her friend, eyes wild:

“What does he mean ‘Jaime will be here?!’ ”

“He didn’t tell you?” Margery asked, surprised.

“Tell me what?” Sansa squealed, adrenaline rushing through her veins. She had mentally prepared herself for avoiding him all evening; by no means did she expect to see him without some few hundred people to hide behind.

“Jaime’s your date tonight!” Margery sing-song happily.

“My what?”

*Oh, no, this was not happening. She would not have to deal with him and those emotions in addition to everything else tonight!* There it was. Sansa was about to pass out.

“Sansa? Sansa?! Breathe, Sparkle. Yes, just like that. Deep breaths! Tyrion!” Margery called loudly, “Get me a glass of water!”

“Is it a makeup emergency?”

“Tyrion, NOW!”

*This isn’t happening. This is NOT happening. This CANNOT be happening to me!*.. Tyrion came rushing in with a glass of water as fast as his small legs would carry him. Margery forced Sansa to take a few spasmodic gulps.

“What’s going on?” Tyrion exclaimed, observing that Sansa was hyperventilating. “Did you forget to do a pedicure or something?”

Margery gave him a nasty look.

“Apparently, *no one*,” she emphasized the words, “had thought to inform Sansa that Jaime will be accompanying her tonight!”

“What?!”

“Yeah, ‘what!’ She’s just found out, so now she’s freaking out.”

“I always knew my brother had a strong effect on the fairer sex, but this is a little too much — ” Tyrion tried to laugh, and Sansa’s panic attack turned to rage.

“ ‘Jaime’s effect on the fairer sex?’ Are you kidding me?!” Tyrion looked slightly stunned by her animosity. “It’s not a question of the fairer sex or Jaime Lannister, dammit! Are you trying to get me killed or grounded for life? I’ll be in a lot of trouble as it is with my parents, if they find out I went to Tywin Lannister’s gala, but what do you think they will do to me when they hear their daughter went out with the Kingslayer?! Not to mention into how many little pieces Cersei Lannister will tear me when I show up at the party with her lover on my arm!”

“I thought I heard my name, and, since the door was open, I decided to investigate,” came the smooth, sardonic voice from behind her. At least Margery and Tyrion had the decency to look guilty. She turned to face him, and there he was, looking more debonair than ever in his perfect tuxedo, a self-satisfied and mocking grin on his lips.
Sansa almost sobbed in despair. *This! This was a nightmare!*

“This isn’t happening!” she exclaimed, as she tore past him into the kitchen.

Tyrion noted with satisfaction the way Jaime’s eyes had followed her, drinking in her form.

They all went after her. Sansa, who had forgotten the first thing about being a considerate guest, was tactlessly rummaging through kitchen cupboards.

“Sansa…” Margery started carefully, her voice betraying her lack of confidence in her friend’s sanity, “what are you looking for?”

“Alcohol,” Sansa threw back unceremoniously. *She needed a drink!*

“Behind you,” advised Tyrion.

*What was it that Robb and Jon always said? “One for the road?”*

Wide-eyed, they watched as little Sansa Stark poured herself some Essosi rum and gulped it down. She sat down at the bar and put her forehead on her crossed arms, which she leaned on the counter.

Jaime was the first to come to his senses. He approached and leaned onto the bar next to her.

“Minx,” he said in a derisive imitation of a lecturing tone, “you’re blowing things out of proportion. Poor Ned Stark will never find out his little wolf was running around with lions. If anyone shows such terrible judgement as to tell him, he will probably bloody their nose and call them a liar. As for Cersei, I assure you, she will have many other people to tear limb from limb tonight aside from you. Come on, you’ve had your night cap, let’s go before we are seriously late.”

“I hate you,” Sansa said in a very convincing manner; but she did get up and return to the boudoir. As she followed her friend into the her dressing-room, Margery looked surprised by the effect of Jaime’s words; Tyrion wore an infernal grin. The women were ready, as they so often are, some twenty minutes after they had said they would be. The men sipped a drink as they waited. It was going to be a long evening.

Sansa’s trials were far from over, of course. When they exited the apartment building, she saw Jaime walk to a black sports car and realized that Margery, car keys in hand, and Tyrion, who were going in the direction of the elegant creation her friend called an automobile, expected her to follow Jaime. Sansa froze in her tracks, then turned to go after Margery and Tyrion, eager to escape to the backseat and click her seatbelt in place before anyone noticed. She was not spending twenty minutes in the small space of a sports car with Jaime, listening to his beastly jokes and dying from fear at his driving — she had a bad premonition concerning his understanding of speed limits and a nagging suspicion that, what with his dyslexia, he had never bothered with reading the rules.

“Where do you think you’re going, minx?” Jaime was standing before the opened passenger door of his car, his hand still on the handle.

“I am not riding with you!”
Jaime closed his eyes and sighed.

“Minx,” he sounded exasperated, “stop behaving like a spoiled brat and get inside the car.”

Tyrion and Margery paused to observe the scene with interest. They looked ready for some popcorn.

“Absolutely not,” she replied, turning her back to him — a bad idea! — and continued on her way to Margery’s car.
“Minx, turn around and get into the car, or, I swear to the Stranger, I’ll throw you over my shoulder and you’ll spend the ride to father’s house in the trunk!”

Sansa ignored his words: she was almost in Margery’s car, and this ridiculous episode would be over soon.

“Don’t even think about throwing her over your shoulder, Lannister!” Margery barked. “You’ve no idea how much time I’ve spent doing her hair!”

“He’s threatening to put me in the trunk, and you’re worried about my hair?” grumbled Sansa as she reached for the handle of the backseat door.

She did not even hear him coming. The ground simply went out from under her feet, as Jaime scooped her up bridal style with offensive ease. For the first few moments, she was simply too stunned that he had carried out his threat to move or protest, and then the warmth of his chest and arms pressed against her body disoriented her. When she came to her senses and began to struggle for her freedom — “Put me down immediately, you beast!” — they were already halfway to Jaime’s car. He sat her into the passenger seat with surprising care, all things considered, and her heart nearly jumped out of her chest when his hair brushed her décolletage as he buckled her up. He closed the door and had the nerve, the bastard!, to lock the car while he went around to his own seat. Sansa thought she would have steam coming out of her ears soon.

“Don’t pout like that, minx,” he winked at her, the scoundrel, “you don’t want to get early wrinkles, do you?”

“What I want is to slap that grin off your face!”

He laughed and took off. Sansa paled. Her worst expectations concerning Jaime Lannister’s driving style were quickly confirmed. He drove like a madman. She tried closing her eyes, but it did not help. She hoped the City Watch would stop him, but then thought that his plates probably allowed him to drive like the Stranger. Sansa did not want to speak to him, but she truly believed she was going to die.

“Slow down!” she gritted through her teeth.

“What was that, minx?”

*Oh, how I hate this insufferable man!*

“I said, Jaime, slow down!” she tried louder, gripping the door until her knuckles went white.

“Don’t tell me you’re used to getting around in horse-drawn carriages, minx? How backward is the place you come from, anyway?”

*Oh, Mother, he was not about to overtake this truck by venturing onto the lane with the oncoming traffic!..

Sansa’s instinct for self-preservation proved stronger than her pride.

“Jaime, I’m beginning you, please, *slow down this car!*” she screamed in fear.

He rolled his eyes at her but obliged her request, though he continued going well over the speed limit.

“My gods, minx, you’re such a goody-two-shoes!”
Sansa, breathing hard, was trying to calm herself down and did not deign him with an answer. He was surprisingly quiet for the rest of the way.

Jaime had not liked Tyrion’s idea of him accompanying Sansa to the gala for several reasons. First among these was his father. Tywin Lannister had been pestering his eldest son about marriage for longer than Jaime could remember. He did not want to create a situation that would encourage him to reopen the subject. Another reason was Cersei. Regardless of how amusing he found the minx, he had no desire to deal with his sister’s unfounded jealousy. He wanted Cersei to scream for entirely different reasons when the gala was over. Another reason he had not considered, but perhaps should have, was Sansa herself. She looked magnificent in red, with her hair loose and curled. (Little did he know about Tyrion and Margery’s argument concerning Sansa’s hair the night before. Margery won, eventually, saying that there was nothing like using the trait a man liked in his current lover to attract him to someone new.) Jaime was unsettled by his heightened awareness of her beauty and his all too ready amusement at her irrationality. He spent most of the car ride cursing his younger brother.
A Night to Remember. Act II. Arriving.

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To call the living thing clawing at her stomach nervousness would not do justice to the creature that was little by little outgrowing her body, as Sansa ascended the grand flight of stairs leading up to the entrance of Tywin Lannister’s mansion. The house was beautiful, its classical architecture and grandeur the epitome of Southern craftsmanship. Every window was bursting with light, and an enormous wave of people, elegantly dressed and glittering with jewelry, was storming the place with laughter, which poorly masked the agitation filling the air. Sansa did not realize she had sunk her fingers deep into Jaime’s upper arm until he told her with infuriating nonchalance and complete disregard of her misery:

"Minx, a little more pressure, and you might crack my bones. I will sue you for ruining my career.”

"Sorry,” she mumbled and relaxed her grip.

"What has your knickers in such a twist, minx? Surely, it’s not the thought of tripping over your dress!”

Now, why did he have to say that?! Like she needed something else to worry about!

The reason Sansa liked her red dress as much as she did was because it looked like an ankle-long romantic tutu — a style for which she had an unsurpassable weakness. She was wearing high heels, however, and if one of them got caught in the thick clouds of red material...

Jaime bent to whisper in her ear:

“Smile, minx, smile, or the security might have to escort you out. No one is allowed to wear such an expression to a Lannister party — not even an angry little fox from the North.”

“I hate you,” she whispered with enough venom to take down a Wildling mammoth.

He laughed, and she knew people were staring. They had received enough curious glances as it was. She only prayed there was no one here whom she knew from back home.

Of course, there were two sets of stairs. One leading up to the entrance of the mansion itself, the other leading to the entertainment floor. On the entrance level, there was considerably bustle, as the guests handed their coats to footmen, who ran to and thro in the vestibule. Jaime helped her out of her coat, like a perfect gentleman, but, as he did, his fingers grazed the open skin of her tense shoulders, sending electricity down her spine and chest.

So, this was the seventh hell; and there were Lannisters in it.

“Why are you blushing, minx?” he threw over his shoulder, as he handed her coat to one of the servants.

Sansa reddened further but with anger. She took a step toward him and, taking hold of one of the lapels of his tuxedo, said in a low, threatening voice:
“Call me by that name in public one more time, and, I swear by the old gods and the new, I will find a way to kill you, if it takes me the rest of my life!”

His smile was unfazed as he bent his face to hers, watching the fury in her blue, stormy eyes with pleasure.

“I quite like the idea of you plotting my death for the remainder of your existence… Sansa,” he said her name quietly, in a way that was far too intimate for her mind’s liking. Her body felt differently: the treacherous thing made butterflies dance deep in her stomach.

Neither Jaime nor Sansa realized the picture they cut to the outside observer. They stood too close to each other; the young girl looking up at the man with too much emotion, grasping at his tux a little too forcefully; he bending his face to hers with a smile too pleased and eyes too playful. But what Jaime and Sansa did not understand about their interaction, the rest of the world noticed only too keenly.

Tywin Lannister, like Tyrion, but for somewhat different reasons, had practically given up hoping to see his eldest son wedded. And like Tyrion, the Lannister patriarch felt a peculiar wave of feeling overcome him when, looking down the stairs into the lobby, he observed Jaime with Sansa Stark. At first, he had not believed his eyes at all. For a fleeting moment, out of a habit to bemoan his children’s choices, he thought: By all the gods! Did it have to be the Stark girl?! But then, when Tywin fully appreciated what he was seeing and the possibilities it opened before him — for instance, little redhead grandchildren with sharp green eyes whom he could groom to inherit Lannisters & Co. — his gaze acquired a bizarre softness and his lips, not knowing what was happening to them, were not far from curling into a small smile. Tywin Lannister looked almost… hopeful? Dare we say happy? The guests whom he had deigned with his presence before the pair had caught his eye, once they were able to overcome the shock of seeing a cheerful Lord Lannister, followed his gaze. A few of them found something oddly touching in the ruthless tycoon’s reaction to his wayward son’s love life.

While Tywin Lannister was living one of the few moments in which a child of his had not made him miserable (he would not go so far as to say he was “happy”), standing much closer to the couple who had caught his father’s attention, Tyrion lightly touched Margery’s elbow, and, following his gaze to Jaime and Sansa, she offered him a conspiratorial smile and wiggled her eyebrows. Tyrion was also searching for someone else with his gleeful eyes. Soon, he found her.

Cersei had glimpsed the nearness between Jaime and — who was the little slut? Tyrion watched with pride the way her beautiful face contorted into a delightful grimace that was a combination of jealousy, rage, and signs of evil plotting. He took a deep, pleasurable breath. What a night this was going to be!..

Meanwhile, Sansa had stepped away from Jaime, and he had offered her his arm. Taking it, she felt the nervousness that had animated her for so long return. One more set of imposing stairs and she would be deep in the lions’ den.

“Sansa,” came Jaime’s voice, and she would have readied herself for another jibe if he did not sound kind, as he occasionally did for reasons unknown to her. He turned her slightly toward him and found her eyes with his. “You have lived through the Martell family, my masterclass, and you’re still here. I think you can handle a party. Keep your chin up.” Sansa tried to smile gratefully, but it was not quite convincing.

A tall man with broad shoulders watched them carefully as they ascended the stairs, blatantly studying their every move. His grey hair contrasted oddly with the vigor and power emanating from his imposing frame. He wore a closely cut beard and looked to be in his early seventies. His face had
no doubt once been remarkably handsome; and even now, he looked rather dashing. His tuxedo — no doubt the prized work of a talented tailor — sat on him perfectly. Sansa found piercing eyes to be his most striking feature. Their lagoon green shade commanded attention and exuded the same force of life and iron will that was conveyed by his entire presence. Sansa found the figure oddly familiar, although she was convinced she had never seen him before.

*He looks like Jaime probably will in some forty years... Oh, GODS!*  

But it was too late. They had reached the end of the steps and came to the doorway, in which Tywin Lannister stood tall, greeting his guests.  
“Father,” she had never heard Jaime use this tone of voice. It was a paradoxical combination of coldness, respect, and rebelliousness. “Father, may I introduce,” he caught her eyes and read in them a warning not to call her “minx” in front of his father for fear of imminent death; the threat brought a small smile to his lips, “Sansa Stark of Winterfell. Sansa, this is my father, Tywin Lannister.”

“I am delighted that you could join us, lady Sansa,” Jaime’s father sounded oddly sincere. *Why is that, I wonder?*

Tywin extended his arm to her, and she unwillingly let go of Jaime.

“Jaime,” Tywin said with a softness that had surprised Sansa, “be a good lad — greet the guests, while I introduce your lovely companion to some interesting people, who look forward to meeting her.”

“Of course, father,” Jaime said in a tight voice, and Tywin Lannister guided her away.

*My gods, but how much alike they are! The mannerisms, that commanding presence!.. Wait, did I just see Jaime take a dismissive order from someone?*

Sansa tried very hard to suppress her amusement, but a small giggle still escaped her.

“I must admit that humor is not generally considered my strongest suit,” Tywin remarked as he took two flutes of champagne from the glistening silver tray that was quickly presented to him by a waiter. Before she could begin to worry, he turned to her, offering her a glass and, when she took it, his arm, and gave her what looked like a small smile: “What makes you laugh, lady?”

She looked sheepish, but the honesty, which had gotten her into so much trouble with his son so many times, bubbled to the surface.

“It’s comforting to know that there’s at least one person in the world capable of giving orders to Jaime Lannister,” she said.

Again, Tywin almost smiled.

“Is my son very bossy, then?”

The unusual choice of words surprised Sansa.

“I would call it controlling rather than bossy. Very few people get so far out of line that he would feel the need to bully them into submission.”

“And are you one of the very few people who provoke him?” he asked, watching her face carefully.

“Not by choice,” Sansa admitted. “I am from the North, you see,” she tried to explain, “I’m afraid that gets me into trouble here.”
“I see,” he said with interest, looking reminiscent.

How she reminded him of Joanna. The soft manner clearly combined with a spine of steel that did not prevent her, however, from having a kind heart. Just the right girl for my Jaime.

“There is Jeor Mormont, one of the most gifted surgeons in the Seven Kingdoms,” he pointed with his eyes to a bear-like man with a kind face. “A few moments ago, he was telling me about his most gifted student,” Tywin made a pause. “Apparently, your older brother Jon is a promising young man,” he continued as they made their way through a sea of people — a sea that parted obediently before him. Sansa was pleased to hear that Jon was spoken of so highly by his mentor; she had heard him go on for hours, in gruesome detail, about Dr. Mormont’s surgeries. Tywin introduced them, and Sansa, yet again, hoped against hope that accounts of this night would never reach her parents’ ears. They talked for a few minutes, mostly about Jon, and then Tywin effortlessly guided them on. He kept introducing her to his guests; some of them she had heard of, others she knew not at all. All were smiling and obliging; none dared be otherwise with a guest to whom Tywin Lannister paid such unusual attention.

When Jaime and Sansa went upstairs, Cersei approached Tyrion and Margery, her face enraged.

“Margery, dear,” she murmured, “you look lovely tonight. Even your pug nose cannot spoil this wonderful dress!”

Margery was not to be intimidated:

“Cersei, I’m delighted to be in your company again! I see your latest facial lift is healing up nicely. Do pass me along the name of your plastic surgeon: I might have need of him in another twenty years — assuming he lives that long, of course,” she said with a saccharine smile. Tyrion smirked: gods, he loved the woman! And she had a way with Cersei.

“No plastic surgeon will help you, if you don’t learn to keep your mouth shut!” his sister warned.

“Threaten Margery again, Cersei, and no maester will be able to help you,” Tyrion sounded threatening, his small stature notwithstanding. He turned to Margery: “My dear, I apologize for my sister’s behavior. Please, go say hello to your grandmother for me — I would hate for you to stay for the ugliness that I know will follow soon.”

Margery smiled at him in a way that said she could handle some serious ugliness, but she kissed him and started toward the stairs. Passing Cersei, she said:

“I will try to save you a glass of wine — I know how you’ve come to rely on it. That is, if your husband does not drink it all before I reach the bar.”

Cersei rewarded her with a glare and turned to Tyrion:

“Who’s the redhead slut you’ve put on Jaime’s arm?”

“But Cersei only stormed away.

Payback is a bitch, sister, Tyrion mused as he contemplated her retreating figure. I’ve watched you fuck your way through King’s Landing behind Jaime’s back; now I will watch you bark uselessly while he slips away from you into the arms of Sansa Stark.
Oh, what a night, what a beautiful night this was!

Tywin had just introduced Sansa to Davos Seaworth, one of the most important people in the Lannisters & Co., a friendly and intelligent man, when Margery came to find her.

“Ah, Margery, good evening,” Tywin greeted her amiably. “As always, a pleasure to see you looking lovelier than ever.”

“Lord Lannister, I’m delighted to be here: thank you for your most kind invitation. This is a spectacular party!” she replied sweetly. “I must, however, beg your leave to whisk Sansa away for a few moments — my grandmother is dying to meet her.”

“Of course,” he turned to Sansa. “Enjoy meeting Olenna Tyrell, lady Sansa.”

“I’m sure I will. Thank you for introducing me to all the wonderful people who are here tonight,” she replied.

Tywin nodded, and Margery spirited her away.

Olenna Tyrell was an intimidating woman. Her outspoken remarks and her frankness were like daggers, and she did not shy away from plunging them into people’s sides. She was delighted, however, to meet Sansa in person. They had seen each other briefly when Margery spoke to her grandmother via RavenTime, and the older woman was enraptured by the selfies of her granddaughter and Sansa, which Margery kept sending her. Loras was also there, and Sansa renewed the acquaintance with his boyfriend, Renly Baratheon, whom she had met many years ago, when the Baratheons had visited Winterfell. They were chatting gaily, laughing at Olenna’s biting jokes, when the soft music of a waltz began to sound.

“Oh,” said Olenna knowingly, “there it is. Joanna’s waltz. You have to give it to Tywin: the man is nothing if not consistent. Every year, the same gut-wrenching melody opens the dancing.”

Personally, Sansa thought the music and the tradition beautiful and touching.

“I am sorry the music depresses you, lady Tyrell. Next time, I will arrange for some loud, bombastic composition the young prefer nowadays especially for you,” came Tywin’s voice.

“I wish you would!” the old woman exclaimed, completely unfazed by the Lannister patriarch — from years of habituation, Sansa suspected.

“As things now stand, I will ask lady Sansa to open the dancing with me,” he said and extended his arm to Sansa, who took it.

They were the first couple to step onto the dance floor. Tywin was a graceful dancer, and she found irony in his well-known distaste for his son’s career considering his own proclivity for dancing.

“You have the same look as my son does when he’s thinking something clever. Do share, lady Sansa.”

It was strange to her, being compared to Jaime. Odder still was that, despite her expectations, she did not find Tywin Lannister to be a monster. There could be no doubt that he was a cold father and a ruthless businessman; but a monster? No.

“I was thinking — and it’s my professional opinion as a dancer — that it was your genes that were responsible for Jaime’s career in ballet.”
Tywin sneered. “Believe me, my dear, my genes would have had a very different effect. His mother was the rebel in the family,” he added with sad fondness.

“I was merely saying that he must have gotten his natural talent for dancing from someone. I suspect it was from you. His mother’s rebelliousness could have pushed him to follow his inclination.”

He gave her an odd look.

“Could be,” he agreed. “And how did you begin dancing, lady Sansa?”

“I was three years old and saw excerpts of ballet on television. My mother brought me to my first ballet class the same year. I have pursued dancing ever since.”

“That certainly takes patience.”

“I’m afraid I cannot boast of this admirable quality,” she contradicted gently. “I do not dance because I have to. I dance because I am unable not to.”

Chapter End Notes

Please review! Kudos are love!
A Night to Remember. Act III. The Kingdom of the Phoenix.

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thank you to the most talented and generous Clarime for this gorgeous art! I am so proud and honored to add it to this story!
Jaime was in a foul mood. Not only did he get stuck in his father’s shoes, greeting the guests as though it were his house, which, he adamantly insisted, it was not, but he had also observed Cersei’s more than usually hateful grimace. Apparently, she was mad at him. He knew not what had gotten into his sister — he had not even had the time to greet her yet, how could he have provoked her displeasure already? Adding to his irritation was the way his father treated Sansa. He had never, in his entire life, seen Tywin leave someone else to greet his guests as he personally made introductions. Jaime disliked seeing Sansa, whose naiveté was matched only by her utter guilelessness, under his father’s wing. Besides, Tywin rarely bestowed his attention on anyone without an ulterior motive, and the amount of time and consideration he had shown Sansa made Jaime’s mind search frantically for his father’s aims. He could think of nothing, and this heightened his annoyance. Finally, all the guests had arrived, and Jaime made straight for the bar. He cared little for champagne — he needed a real drink. Once he was armed with good Northern scotch, he turned his eyes to the dance floor. Sansa looked lovely as ever, waltzing, the skirts of her dress floating around her.

Tyrion was having a wonderful evening. Olenna Tyrell had been unusually kind to him, much to Margery’s delight. The Queen of Thorns was warming up to him, after all. And now he had the double entertainment of watching Cersei watch Jaime watching Sansa. It was tremendously enjoyable. Jaime’s displeasure at Sansa’s time with their devious father was an encouraging sign of protectiveness. Tyrion wondered how he could bring his brother and Sansa back together after their father had so mindlessly broken them apart, when Tywin surprised him. The music had stopped, and, after the applause, Tywin led Sansa right toward Jaime. Tyrion came a little closer to be able to hear their conversation.

“The next dance is a foxtrot,” Tywin was saying, “and I am far too old for it.” Privately, neither Sansa, Tyrion, nor Jaime believed a word of it. Looking at his eldest son, Tywin continued: “But lady Sansa is such a wonderful dancer, I think it would be unkind to deny us the pleasure of seeing her on the dance floor. Jaime, I think you should be a gentleman and invite her to dance.”

“Of course, father, how could I not?”

Tyrion found Jaime’s caustic voice not at all surprising, considering that his brother had been fuming for the past forty minutes. Jaime offered Sansa his arm, and they walked to the dance floor.

Sansa wondered what had spoiled Jaime’s playful mood in the brief time since she had seen him. She considered asking him what was the matter, but decided against it.

Foxtrot was one of her favorite ballroom dances. While it kept the elegant flow of the waltz, she thought it had more liveliness. Jaime maneuvered with excellent dexterity between the couples, his movements, as always, confident and full of leonine grace. Sansa did her best to avoid meeting his eyes, fixating her gaze above his shoulder on whatever glided past them.

“You look awfully concentrated on whatever’s behind me, minx,” he said to her after a few minutes, and she was forced to meet his eyes. In truth, she had been concentrated on not getting lost in the feeling of his arm around her waist, their clasped hands, and his chest so near her own; the falling motion of the dance kept bringing them closer.

“I thought we had agreed you wouldn’t call me that,” she reminded.

“No, you told me you would try killing me if I ever called you ‘minx’ in public. You’ve never said anything about my use of the nickname when we were alone.” his smirk was back, so was the playfulness in his eyes. Now that she was stuck with him for the duration of the dance and his teasing mood had returned, Sansa knew that she was at the mercy of his taunts. She caught herself thinking that she preferred him to be playful rather than resentful, even if it meant putting up with his innuendos and goading.
“We’re hardly alone, Jaime. I don’t even know how many people are here.”

*It felt as though we were*, flashed through his mind.

“A few hundred. But the point is, *minx,*” he emphasized his use of the nickname, “that no one can hear.”

“I still don’t like it,” she pouted.

“How did you find father?” he asked her, changing the conversation rather suddenly. “Did he live up to your expectations of a bogeyman?”

“Who told you that?” She was going to give Margery a piece of her mind.

“Tyrion did,” he answered. *She was going to give Tyrion a piece of her mind.* “But you evade the question.”

“I don’t have to answer any of your questions, if I don’t want to. This isn’t an interrogation room!”

Jaime only smiled the sly smile she feared a little, knowing that it never prophesied any good. She had been right to worry; taking a firmer hold of her waist, Jaime began twirling them across the floor with a speed that could only be sustained by a professional dancer.

“Are you trying to twirl me into answering?” she asked, trying not to smile.

“I’m only attempting to make your head spin — maybe that will make you more communicative,” he answered and kept up his ridiculously rapid pace.

*But they could not keep spinning the entire dance — that would be ridiculous!* His self-satisfied grin was as good a proof as any that his real intent had been to blackmail her with public embarrassment.

“Fine, I’ll tell you, just stop this foolishness!” she exclaimed, and he immediately resumed the more languid movements of the foxtrot.

“I’m listening,” he said to her. She thought he was too full of himself.

“I don’t think your father is a monster, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Did your father mislead you?” he inquired in mock horror.

Sansa looked at him in anger.

“My father would never lie!”

“And yet, here you are: waiting to find a monster where there’s only a cold-hearted businessman.”

She was silent.

“I wonder what else did good old Ned tell you that was slightly, how shall we put it, ‘exaggerated?’”

“Next you’ll be saying that Aerys Targaryen fell off the balcony without your help!” she snapped, infuriated by the suggestion that her father could be anything but truthful. She regretted her words the moment they were out of her mouth. She thought she saw pain flash in Jaime’s eyes, though she could not be sure, and his expression darkened. His jaw muscles flexed, and she could feel with her own body how his went rigid. Before she could try to take her words back, the music had ended, and she was forced to clap. When the applause had died away, Jaime’s face was a mask, and she knew
she was locked out of his teasing world. As he led her to Margery and Tyrion without a word, she told herself that if he did not speak to her or seek her out, it would be for the better; but she failed to dispel a nagging little pain in her chest or dismiss the anger she felt with herself.

When Jaime had led Sansa to the dance floor and the sweet sound of foxtrot music had filled the room, Tyrion did not bother locating Cersei. He watched his brother and Sansa dance, saw how, within moments of holding her in his arms, Jaime’s face had brightened. Despite the shortcomings in his own appearance, Tyrion was attracted to the beautiful, admiring it without envy. And there was no denying that a lovelier couple than his brother and the Lion-Tamer could not be found. They danced impeccably, their bodies perfectly in sync, and Tyrion gazed at them happily. Someone bent toward him, but Tyrion did not turn to see who it was, too caught up in watching the figure of his brother and Sparkle float to the sound of music. He nearly jumped out of his skin, when he heard his father’s voice right next to his ear. Usually, Tywin never bent toward his son, as it would only highlight his progeny’s deficiency.

“Why didn’t you tell me about my future daughter-in-law?”

*Oh, that again.*

“Father, I told you many times: Margery and I — ” he began, but Tywin interrupted:

“I am not talking about Margery at the moment, though we *will* have that conversation at a future date. I am talking about Sansa Stark.”

Tyrion turned toward his father. The Seven preserve us, Tywin Lannister looked pleased! Tyrion was too stunned to fully grasp his meaning.

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean?! I am asking why you did not tell me that Jaime was finally seeing someone, and that this someone was Sansa Stark?”

Tyrion knew that lying to his father was, as a rule, a stupid thing to do.

“They aren’t together,” he grudgingly admitted.

Tywin looked skeptical.

“They are not,” Tyrion repeated. “It’s the truth.”

“Well, anyone who can see them together knows that, although they may not be a couple officially yet, they very soon will be.”

“I should hope so,” Tyrion said.

“Hope?” Tywin sneered. “No, my dear boy, that’s the last thing we will do. Hope is for fools. Lannisters don’t act like fools. We do not hope — we act! I’ll have Ramsay call you and set up a lunch.” Seeing Tyrion’s questioning stare, Tywin explained with some exasperation: “So we can talk about making sure that Jaime doesn’t let Sansa Stark slip through his fingers!”

With that, the Lannister patriarch unbent himself and, giving Tyrion a pat on the shoulder, walked away.

“My dear boy:” a pat on the shoulder; and matchmaking. What did his father drink? Regardless of what it was, Tyrion thought he should find out what kind of whiskey they served at the party. Just as he was sampling one, Margery came over and kissed him on the neck.
“You have an unusual expression on your face,” she purred, biting his earlobe playfully, “like the all-knowing Tyrion Lannister is confused.”

“Confused?” he replied. “Try ‘bewildered.’ Our matchmaking firm has just benefited from a new member.”

“Yeah? Who?”
“My father!”

“No! You’re kidding?”

“His personal assistant is calling me tomorrow to set up a brainstorming brunch.”

“Wow!” she exclaimed, surprised.
“‘I know.’

Margery glanced toward the dancing figures of Jaime and Sansa.

“Poor dears. They’ve no idea how the plot thickens,” she mused pensively.

Jaime had left her with his brother and Marge. *It always came down to Aerys.* He needed fresh air and quiet. He made for one of the balconies. For many years now, these had been his least favorite parts of any house. How could he have known the bastard would trip and fall to his death? On the other hand, had Aerys not fallen, would he have stopped himself? Or would he have beaten him until the son of a bitch had died under his fists? The worst was not being accused of murder or having honorable, if simple, men like Ned Stark spit on him and his family. The worst was not knowing, perpetually wondering, if he could have stopped himself? As he stared into the darkness, Jaime could not quite understand the painful anger that had seized him at her words. He had been about to ask her if the Kingslayer was not as horrible as she had heard either, when she had thrown Aerys in his face. He was glad that her cutting remark had saved him from voicing the words that had been left frozen on his lips. Who was she that her accusation provoked such a strong reaction? No one — a slip of a girl from the North. And yet, Sansa’s innocence, her kindness, and her unrestrainable honesty were qualities that had made him hope — foolishly, alas! — that he might get a fair hearing in her court of justice. The disappointment tasted bitter on his tongue.

As she socialized, smiling and chatting, Sansa waged a mental battle of no small proportions. It went something like this: one moment, she would mentally kick herself for not keeping her mouth shut; the next, she would mentally give herself another kick for caring if the Kingslayer was offended by her words or not. *What should I care if he’s upset?* She kept beaming and talking, pretending that her eyes did not scan the room for his tall figure and blond hair.

Margery was snatched away by Loras, who wanted to introduce her to someone. Left without entertainment, Tyrion decided to find himself a sister to torment. He found her surrounded by a group of two-faced flatterers. Truly, she had as poor a taste in friends as Jaime had in women — at least, up until very recently. With a few cutting remarks, Tyrion drove them away.

“Have you seen Jaime and Sansa dance?”

Cersei remained silent, but one of her facial muscles twitched. *Very nice.* Tyrion went on.

“I really think they look marvelous together. Imagine all the wedding photographs! Father is beside himself with joy, I barely recognize him. And then: tap-tap-tap and top-top-top — the patter of tiny feet. I always thought it cruel how little time Jaime had with Tommen and Myrcella. I doubt Sansa will put any restrictions on his relationship with his children. I wonder if they will have blond hair
“You’ve never seen them dance,” he said.

“You’ve never seen them dance, and it’s not in your favor. It’s not just the way Jaime looks at Sansa, or the way she looks at him. It’s about a deeper physical connection between them when they dance. One that goes deeper than your bond with him does, and they’ve only known each other a few months. Then, of course,” Tyrion decided to add insult to injury, “there’s the plain fact that Sansa’s a much better dancer than you could ever have dreamed of being. I know that. Jaime knows that. And when she steps onto the stage, which will be soon enough, the whole world will know that.”

“There’s no need to wait that long,” Cersei sounded very pleased, inspired, and Tyrion heard alarm bells go off in his head. She bent slightly toward him, a predatory smirk crawling like a toad across her lips. “We can find out how good she is right away.” Cersei walked off.

Shit.

Margery looked flushed and flustered when she burst into the small circle made up of Ellaria, Tyene, and Oberyn, who had arrived later and with whom Sansa had been speaking. Grabbing her hand, she said a little breathlessly, “we need to talk now,” and dragged Sansa away.

“What’s the matter?” Sansa asked.

“We’ve a problem,” Margery replied in anxiety.

“What kind of a problem?”

From her friend’s tone, Sansa was certain she did not want to know.

“Tyrion’s just told Cersei you were a better dancer than she,” Margery said with empathy and remorse.

Sansa’s heart dropped.

“He. What?!”

“I don’t know how or why, but he got the bitch so riled up, she wants blood.”

“But what can she do?”

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t sound good. I didn’t want her to catch you off guard. Sansa, I’ve seen her dance. She’s not that good. A very beautiful woman, not a very good dancer. So you’ve nothing
to fear from a direct comparison.” Sansa almost felt relieved. “Which is why there will be no direct comparison, probably.” And… her heart dropped again.

“Margery, you’re freaking me out. She’ll probably find many creative ways of making my life miserable in the future, but what could she possibly hope to do right now?!”

As if in answer to her question, Cersei, her golden dress catching light and making her sparkle like a precious stone, walked to the center of the dance floor. The guests parted to let her pass. She waved an elegant hand in the direction of the band, and the music ceased. As the dancing stopped, the dance floor emptied. There was only Cersei standing there, glowing like a venomous snake basking in the sun.

“We have among us an exceptional young dancer,” she said with a smile. “A rising star of the Lannister Ballet Company, I’m not afraid to say. Sansa Stark.”

*Oh. Mother. Maiden. And Stranger.*

“Come, little dove, come here.”

*Tyrion, if I live through this, you will regret it.*

She made her way toward the elder woman. She had never been so close to Cersei before. It occurred to her that, for some reason, Tywin had not introduced them.

Text from Little Monkey to Kingslayer:

*Main ballroom. NOW, Jaime!*

Cersei was beautiful. But not as beautiful as Sansa had expected. Wrinkles showed here and there. Her skin was mostly taut and fresh, but her face looked worn regardless.

“I am glad to say that Sansa and I are close friends,” she continued in her honeyed, a little breathy voice. “I’ve never heard a more blatant falsehood in all my life! “So I hope she will not refuse me, when I ask her, from the name of all present here, to gladden our hearts with a dance.”

*Oh, for the sake of the Drowned God!*

Sansa did not know why Theon’s favorite curse had occurred to her. Perhaps, because she was about to suffocate on this empty dance floor?

Sansa smiled with all her might — *maybe I can still get out of this alive.*

“‘You honor me with your praise, Mrs. Baratheon, and while I would love nothing more than to dance for you, I’m afraid I’ve left my pointes at home.”

“‘That’s all right, darling,” how could a voice so appealing repel so much? “I will lend you my very own,” she said. Damn this cunning bitch to the deepest of seven hells. Cersei added very quietly: “I hope you’re pleased. I’ve heard you’ve been wanting nothing more than to walk in my shoes.”

Cersei waved her hand, and a woman brought Sansa a pair of pointes. She stared at them a moment before a familiar phrase echoed in her mind.

*You’re not Cersei.*

How these words, said in a breathy voice, haunted her at night. How they irked her. She did not want to be this woman, whose beauty seemed so poisonous to Sansa, she felt almost surprised Cersei
did not reek like one of the moth-eating flowers Arya cultivated. Jaime was not here. He left her to his sister despite his assurances. He would not save her, and she did not need him to. She made it through a winter and merciless training. She would not go home humiliated. She would fight her own battles and win them, too. This was only a cunning woman. She had no evil powers, beyond her honeyed voice. She will not see fear. Not in me. I’m a Stark of Winterfell. I’m a direwolf, not a scared little dove.

When the girl raised her eyes from the pointes, Cersei, for the first time in a long while, felt a cold little fear snake its way down the back of her neck. Sansa did not look like a dove; she looked like a dangerous creature, her eyes gleaming with an odd light.

Oberyn and Ellaria had been watching the scene anxiously, but when Sansa had raised her eyes, Ellaria released a breath of relief.

“Cersei Lannister will lose tonight,” Oberyn stated with satisfaction.

Sansa smiled a cold smile that agreed with her deep blue eyes. Looking toward Tywin, she spoke: “With your permission, my lord?” and her voice sounded confident, menacing.

Tywin’s lips twitched. He motioned to the dance floor invitingly.

“By all means.”

Sansa took the pointes and sat unceremoniously on the floor. The ballet shoes were not a perfect fit, and her feet would be blistered tomorrow, but she was not in danger of injury or falling. She tied the pointes securely. Thank the gods her skirt ended at her ankles and its fluffy material would be forgiving to ballet dancing. She rose and flexed her feet.

This is nothing I haven’t done before. I’ve danced after seven hours of grueling practice. I’ve improvised for months and for hours on end. It’s just a room with more people and a smaller dance floor.

“May I have some music?”

Cersei, who had fully recovered her confidence, smiled widely. “Of course, dear.”

She motioned to the musicians. Sansa recognized the melody; she did not know it well, however.

Think of the darkness; the shimmering light; how there’s nothing more beautiful than dance.

There was dead silence in the room. The music played, but the dancer had not moved a muscle, her eyes closed. When they opened, her face was devoid of expression, but the blue of her irises was oddly burning. A striking chord sounded, and Sansa began to move.

The faces around her melted into an expressionless, unembodied mass, and she was alone. Alone with the music and the beating of her heart. Her mind entered the comfortable grey zone she had carved out during hours of practice, in which seeing disintegrated into hearing and hearing turned to motion. She opened her soul to the music, and it flowed in like liquid metal. Hissing, it flowed quicker than blood to her limbs, whispering chants to her body. In the burning of her dance, green eyes, as always, began to float before her mind’s eye. The transformation was complete. She was not a dove, a fox, or a wolf. She was a phoenix — red and fictional, dying and being born again to the sound of maddening music. Her arms felt like red wings, enormous and all-encompassing. If she
jumped, she flew. When she did not, her pointes seemed barely to touch the ground. Soon, her body had fallen away into the same oblivion that had engulfed the faces, and the boiling metal was free from its containment. Sansa, or rather the abstract, mindless being without pain or fear that she had become, began a jeté entrelacé. On the third jump, she was torn slightly from her trance, because she did not land. Strong arms had supported her and raised her high until she felt she was one with the blinding light of the colossal chandelier. She slowly, artfully adjusted her pose to the support she had been provided with, and her body stilled. Just in time. The musical segment contained a dramatic pause. Because of this, her partner’s entrance, though doubtlessly sudden, was elegant and fitting. His improvised intrusion had created an arresting, climactic pose for the duration of mute stillness.

Hundreds of people in the Lannister ballroom, and it was silent as a crypt, the viewers more immobile than headstones.

Sansa had returned to her state of abstraction by the time the music had begun again, softly, each note exquisitely pronounced. She knew the arms that had raised her into the light; she trusted them. She would have recognized his arms in the pitch darkness of the seventh hell. She had never known euphoria to be so deeply tangled with the agony of flame. The sizzling liquid metal inside her veins chanted, and his hands burned her body wherever they touched.

Dancing with Jaime, she did not need to follow his motions to know his next pas. She only had to watch his green eyes to move with him. The music raged, and they raged with it, their dance burning the air around them, their breathing fanning the flames. Each step they took brought them closer to music and further away from the abstract mixture that had become the world around them. In this empty space, where melody reigned supreme and fire burned according to its wishes, there were no Starks and no Lannisters; there were no murders or intrigues; no sins that could not be blazed away; no innocence that was too cold. In this kingdom of the phoenix, where they were winged beings who were born and died in conflagration, she could allow his green eyes to consume her.

If it were not for her eyes, their deep shade of indigo, he would not have known the fire sorceress. He had come to save her, swallowing his bitterness, and found she did not need a rescuer. Seeing her, however, the bewitching motions of her body, the wild dance of her red hair and skirts, which seemed to create a blazing aura around her form, had called to him to reach out and touch her, if for no other purpose than to confirm she was a being made of flesh and blood. Reaching for her waist as her legs pushed her high into the air, he lifted her above his head quickly, knowing she would catch on. Perhaps, she needed saving, after all. He knew the piece Cersei had chosen. The trick was in the pause, which sprung out of the crescendo like an assassin from the insanity of a street masquerade. As his hands held her small waist, the pads of his fingers felt the song of her blood, the warmth of her body through the stiff fabric of her corset. He wished nothing more than to sink his fingers into the material, tearing it away from the soft flesh underneath. As when they had danced before, she fixed her eyes on his face with a startling intensity and colored his world in shades of blue. He knew her motions before she began them, felt her breath before she filled her lungs, and savored the ephemeral feeling of embracing a living flame.

Tyrion was not a man whose mind lent itself naturally to alternate states of consciousness; but only when the burning spirits that were Jaime and Sansa had ended their dance, did he realize how deeply they had hypnotized him. He threw a quick glance around the ballroom and saw that hundreds of people had shared in the same feeling. Tywin’s guests looked like they had been shaken from a deep, magical slumber and could not quite understand what had occasioned the end of the reverie. He turned back to Jaime and Sansa’s faces and knew that there was danger in feeling so deeply a passion so transfixing. They were looking at each other as though they had neither identities nor names, and the colors of their eyes could mix. Tywin had been right like he, Tyrion, had been right: magnetic forces were bound to collide.
Another moment lasted the stillness, the magic lived one more batting of lashes. Then, there was an uproar — applause, yells of ‘bravo!’, and other screams he could not decipher. The dancers were shaken from their trance, and a strange, lost look flashed across both their faces for a moment as, inevitably, they separated. Margery, screaming her excitement, was the first to reach them, throwing her arms around her friend. It only took one to break the barrier of waning magic that had demarcated the dance floor. The crowd, loud and unrelenting, advanced to worship in adoration.

Sansa could not quite understand what Margery was saying: her friend was not quite coherent, and Sansa was still a little dazed. People surrounded them and filled the emptiness that had bound her to Jaime. She could not see him over their excited faces. Olenna, who had lost all her thorns somewhere, was complimenting her heartily; Oberyn and Ellaria were practically hysterical with laughter and pride; Tyene kept screaming “lion-tamer,” referring to Cersei’s defeat, no doubt; Tyrion had said something profoundly gentle; Tywin watched from the side, unprepared to mingle with the crowd, but a small smile played on his lips; Loras and Renly were laughing about something to do with a kicked lion cunt. It became too much soon, and she whispered to Margery to take her away. It was not an easy fit to accomplish, but, finally, Margery was able to lead them out of the room under all sorts of excuses. They went down a corridor, and Sansa seated herself heavily on a small recamier that stood in the inviting shadow of an enclave. Margery sat next to her.

“What do you want, triumphant darling? A glass of water?”
“Just…” Sansa breathed and smiled a grateful smile, “Just a little peace.”

Margery understood, and left her, grinning back at her before she disappeared around the corner.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this last big scene is one I had envisioned a while ago. Let me know how you like the dance of the phoenix! Review and leave kudos — make me smile! ;)
Sansa sat quietly, enjoying the silence and the semi-darkness. Her mind was having trouble readjusting to a world that was filled with borders, rooms, things. A world where he could be somewhere far away. A world where, for some bizarre reason, that was supposed to be a good thing.
I should not have said anything about Aerys. I know it has upset him. And still... He came to my aid when I did not even know I needed him. I would have missed that pause without him.

She was unaware of how long she had sat there. Her attention was brought back to reality when a door opened. An elderly but strong man came in, two small children following closely at his heels. Sansa noted absent-mindedly that it was strange that they were wearing pajamas underneath their coats.

“Now, we’re in agreement,” the old man spoke, and she instantly liked the sound of his carrying, patient voice, “I will go and try looking for your mother or uncle, and you will stay here, quiet like two little mice. And if she’s too busy to come down to see you and he isn’t there, I will take you home, and you will go to bed like good little children. Yes?”

The two little people nodded their acceptance of these terms. The man left them and went down the corridor, squaring his shoulders. When he passed Sansa, he gave her a tight, apologetic smile.

Whose children were they? Was the man a babysitting grandfather? What had occasioned the late-night visit?

The two children shuffled where they were left for a few moments. Then, noticing Sansa, they stared at her. Sansa gave them a smile — what else to do when children watch you? Interpreting her kind expression as an invitation, they approached her. The girl appeared to be around five; she held hands with her younger brother. The boy looked like he had been crying. Sansa was glad of something to distract her from the odd jumble in her head.

“Well, hello there,” she said in a friendly voice. The boy, enheartened by her welcoming attitude, let go of his sister’s hand and crawled into Sansa’s lap. He seemed in need of comfort.

The girl looked at her with apprehension.

“Sorry for my brother —” she began.

“Oh, that’s quite all right,” Sansa said with warm sincerity, as she put her arms around the boy and stroke his hair. She felt more keenly than ever how she missed little Rickon. And Bran. And even Arya. She had grown used to her elder brothers being away in college, but she had never spent so long apart from her younger siblings. She missed mother, too. The warm comfort of her presence and how small Sansa always felt in her gentle arms. She missed her father’s loving smile. The boy seemed to appreciate her embrace and snuggled. She thought how odd it was for a little boy to be so quiet. Seeing that her brother’s actions had not provoked any displeasure, the little girl came to sit next to Sansa.

“Your brother seems a little shaken. Has something happened?” Sansa asked.

The girl had taken the liberty of fiddling with a lock of Sansa’s hair.

“He had a nightmare,” she answered without looking up. “He was so scared. He woke me up with his screams. He won’t tell me what it was about. Only that he wants uncle. Or mother.”

Sansa felt her heart go out to the little boy and his sister. She remembered a time when she was little and had nightmares. Her brothers had watched a film about the White Walkers, which had terrified Sansa. For a long time, she would wake up in the darkness, imagining pale, skeletal forms in her room. She would run to her parents’ bedroom and crawl into the warmth between them. Father would say that if a White Walker showed up, he would take the large, ancestral sword, Ice, and defend his little girl. Her mother would take her downstairs, to the kitchen, and make her hot cocoa. Sansa had loved these night vigils, when she had sat in her mother’s lap before the roaring fire in the
semi-darkness of the family room, drinking the warm, sweet liquid and listening to the throaty sound of her mother’s lullaby.

“You know,” Sansa said, “when I was little like you, I also had nightmares.” She felt the boy stiffen in her arms and made her voice as soothing and quiet as she knew how. “My mother would make me hot cocoa, and I would be less scared.”

“Mother doesn’t like cooking,” said the little girl. That did not sound good.

“Well,” she tried, “if my mother was too tired to wake up, father would take me back to my room and tell me stories before I fell asleep. When I was too scared, he’d leave our family’s sword, Ice, near my bed. The thing was larger than I was, and it gave me comfort.”

“We don’t have a family sword. And father…” a look of shame, odd in one so young, came into the girl’s face. “When he gets very tipsy, he’ll start telling stories, but I don’t like them, and mother always gets very angry and tells us to go to our rooms.”

*Oh, Mother, whose children were these poor kids? What kind of family sounded like that in the mouths of the young?*

“I like uncle’s stories,” the boy peeped in. It was the first thing he had said in the entire time. There was a deep longing in his voice. “I wish uncle was here.”

“I do, too,” the girl agreed quietly.

The pitiful way in which she had said it broke Sansa’s heart. That was it! She was going to make the children some cocoa. And if Tywin Lannister killed her for messing around in his kitchen, she would die with a clear conscience.

“Have you been in the house before?” she asked the girl, who nodded. “Do you know where the kitchen is?” Another nod.

Sansa tightened her grip on the small boy and was about to get up, when she had realized she was still wearing the pointes. She carefully disentangled herself from the child, sitting him next to her when the girl had made room on the recamier. The boy made no protest; only his crestfallen expression told of his dejection. Sansa found unsettling that a small child, who could not be more than four, knew how to mute his demands for affection. She bent down and unlaced her pointes; her feet were grateful for the freedom. So what, if she walked barefoot? What did she care? She took the boy back into her arms. He looked surprised and pleased. Sansa got up with him, and the girl stood next to her. Sansa looked down at her conspiratorially:

“Where was that kitchen, again? I think you’re more than overdue for some hot chocolate.”

An uncertain smile played on the child’s lips, and she turned to rush down the dark corridor. The boy’s voice, for the first time since she had made their acquaintance, sounded like that of a normal child:

“You’re gonna make us hot chocolate?!” he squealed in excitement.

“You bet,” she said and followed the girl. The child knew her way around the house surprisingly well. She stopped, walked through a doorway, and turned on the bright lights. They were in a large kitchen, which would have been more at home in a restaurant than a private residence. But the sophisticated equipment was not what held Sansa’s undivided attention. Out of the dimness that had covered their previous interaction and in the bright light, she could clearly make out the children’s angelic features. Their golden hair; their green eyes. She froze.
Mother’s mercy. What are they doing here?

The girl looked like Cersei, only a child, devoid of hatred. Her eyes. Where had she seen such eyes? Like Jaime’s, only more round. A little like Tyrion’s! She turned to the boy and felt her breath turn to cinders, burning her lungs and suffocating her. Only someone blind would fail to see his father’s features in his face. There was not a drop of Baratheon blood in these children. Cersei’s children. Jaime’s children. Sansa felt faint.

“Are you all right?” the girl asked her with concern. She certainly had eyes like Tyrion’s. Her uncle’s. Her other uncle was her father.

Mother. Sansa did not mean one of the Seven. She thought of her own mother. She did not know what to do.

“Is something wrong?” the girl asked again, tearing Sansa from the wild kaleidoscope of her spiraling mind. Sansa looked at the child, trying to find in her a hint of depravity, a suggestion of future viciousness, but the green eyes were as clear as a Northern lake. Clear and innocent; concerned for a stranger. Sansa looked back to the boy. He looked just like a miniature Jaime with chubby cheeks. His spitting image. And the lost, apprehensive look that was in his eyes she had seen flash across his father’s face. Only the child did not know how to hide it behind cold insolence and affected nonchalance.

“I — ” Sansa began and paused. Her voice broke. How could sin produce such innocence? “I only just realized that I didn’t know your names,” she finished.

“I’m Myrcella,” the girl smiled and made a lovely curtsey.

Sansa felt the boy gently pull at a lock of her hair.

“And I’m TOMMEN,” he announced.

Sansa smiled despite herself.

Gods. How? How is it possible? How could a woman so venomous and an act so vile create such beautiful, sweet children?

“What’s your name?” the girl asked, a little timidly.

“I’m Sansa,” she said. “Well,” her voice was a little higher-pitched than usually, “let’s see if we can get some hot chocolate ready for you.” Suddenly, she imagined her mother’s disapproving eyes. I don’t care, mother. The children have done nothing wrong. “Any ideas as to the location of cocoa, chocolate, milk or sugar?”

Tommen and Myrcella shook their heads.

“Guess we’ll just have to look for them.”

The kitchen was enormous, and Sansa thought it had been organized by a lunatic. Eventually, however, they found some dark chocolate, sugar, and milk. It was not perfect by any means, but, with the right proportions, it would do fine.

While Sansa, cursing silently, was trying to figure out how the stove worked, becoming more convinced with each moment that the Stranger had had a hand in its making, Myrcella and Tommen sat themselves around a small table in a corner to the left.
“Your hair is redder than I’ve ever seen,” Tommen announced.

Unbeknownst to the trio, his father had thought the same when he had seen Sansa for the first time.

“Are you a red priestess?” asked Myrcella with curiosity.

“No,” Sansa laughed. “My mother’s from Riverrun,” she explained. “Red hair is quite common there. Though mother has darker hair for some reason. And in the Far North, too, there are quite a few people with red hair.”

“Is your father from the Far North?” Tommen asked.

“No, my father’s from the North. But my brother's girlfriend is from Beyond the Wall.”

The Wall still stood, but now people migrated freely. Sansa’s grandfather was among the most important supporters of the Free Folk Migration and Fair Employment Bill many years before Sansa had been born.

“That’s so cool!” Tommen exclaimed. “I’ve always wanted to go there! Mother said she would not let me, but uncle told me that when I was older he’d take me.”

_It’s so strange how he talks about Jaime. The love and worship in his voice. It’s a little like when Tyrion says his name._

“I don’t want to go to the North,” said Myrcella. Then, realizing that she might have given Sansa offense, she explained apologetically: “Sorry. I don’t like the cold.”

“It’s all right. Nobody really does, except my father, maybe,” she smiled. “Where do you want to go?”

To her surprise, Myrcella blushed. After all the painfully embarrassing jibes Jaime had made about her own blushes, Sansa assumed it was not something the Lannisters did.

Tommen had a look exactly like Jaime’s when he teased her; Sansa experienced an odd sense of déjà vu.

“It’s because she wants to go to Dorne,” he said with adorable mischief. “Her sweetheart is there!”

Sansa thought the concept of five-year-old Myrcella having a sweetheart endearing.

“What’s his name?” she asked kindly.

“Trystane,” the girl answered very quietly.

“Is his last name Martell by any chance?” Sansa inquired, surprised. She had listened to Tyene gush about her six-year-old nephew; she had seen photographs of him. The son of Doran, Oberyn’s elder brother, was a handsome child.

“It is!” Tommen exclaimed in wonder, looking at her as if she were a seer. “How did you know?”

Sansa smiled at him.

“I happen to be roommates and close friends with his cousin, Tyene.”

“You are?” exclaimed Myrcella. She looked embarrassed but inquired: “Could you ask her to pass a message to him from me?”
That was odd.

“I could, of course. But why don’t you text him or call him?”

The children looked uneasy. *What did I say?*

“Father says that the Martells are eastern trash and that they are only fit for Baratheons to wipe their boots on them,” Tommen repeated the long phrase with some difficulty. He looked sad and troubled. Myrcella was angry and upset.

“I did not get to ask his number,” she complained in some anger.

*WOW. Maybe they are lucky Robert Baratheon isn’t their father.* She caught herself. *Well… in a way…*

“Tyene and I could pass on a message or get you his number. Whatever you prefer.”

Myrcella looked surprised and happy.

“Oh, his number, please!” she exclaimed, then added with feeling, “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Sansa said and poured some hot chocolate into two cups she had managed to find. “Here you go.”

“What about you?” asked Tommen.

“We can share,” Myrcella suggested.

*How is this possible?* Sansa wondered again.

“You’re very kind.” *It’s true, Kind and considerate.* “But I could not swallow a bite — I just danced, and I do not want to eat or drink yet.”

They looked hesitant but drank their hot chocolate, not forgetting to mention how good it was and to thank her.

*How can this be?* Sansa watched them, wondering.

Tommen raised his eyes to her:

“Will you tell us a story? About the North?”

Sansa took a breath. *How did I end up here?*

“Of course. I can tell you the story about a dragon and the Children of the Forest.”

After the dance had ended, Jaime’s eyes had been still on Sansa even as the crowd separated them, when he felt the unmistakable feeling of his sister watching him. Cersei motioned for him to follow and disappeared around the corner. With a final look at Sansa, he took in her dazed, smiling face, and followed his sister.

“How dare you?!?” was the first thing he heard when he had entered one of the sitting rooms where she had disappeared. He sighed.

“Calm down, Cersei.”

“How dare you come here with this slut, parading her in front of me?”
He felt anger at the unjust characterization of Sansa, but bit it down.

“Don’t be ridiculous. The girl doesn’t know anyone in the city. It would hardly be — ”

“I don’t care about your motives! I want her out of the ballet company. Tomorrow."

What was that?

“Come again, I don’t think I heard you right.”

“I said, I want the little bitch out of the ballet company. I want you to terminate her contract and send her packing, back to the frozen hell she has come from.”

Jaime laughed. It was not a good sound.

“Maybe you’ve forgotten that you left the company to marry a truly fine specimen, Robert Baratheon. You’re no longer part of the hiring decisions,” he said with heavy sarcasm.

“That’s why I’m telling you to fire her!”

“And on what grounds would I fire her?”

“That’s of no interest to me. I want her gone, Jaime.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, ‘no?’ ”

“No, I will not fire Sansa because of your ravings. The girl is the most talented dancer I’ve ever seen, and I’ve been around the dancing scene for a while.” He added with a bitter smile that looked more like a scowl: “You were right: she is the rising star of the Lannister Ballet Company.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. She can barely dance. If anything, the exhibition she made of herself proved that.”

Jaime felt anger rise in him again.

“She did not make an exhibition of herself. You wanted to see her dance, and she obliged you. If you cannot accept that you’ve failed to intimidate her or make her look a fool, at least do me a favor and don’t take your anger out on me.”

“You were the one thanks to whom she didn’t miss the pause! You knew what I was trying to do, and you sabotaged me!”

“Listen to me carefully,” he said in a low, threatening voice, “in your attempt to humiliate Sansa Stark, you came close to demeaning not only her, but my ballet company, which she represents. I warn you: do not try it again, Cers. Sansa Stark will stay, and you will leave her alone. Do you hear me?”

“You want to fuck that little slut!” she said in enraged bewilderment.

He did. But if he ignored his own body, he was not about to listen to her.

His phone buzzed. It was Tyrion.

Text from Little Monkey to Kingslayer:

You really need to see this. Come to the kitchen, if you can find it.

How drunk was his little brother?
“All right, Jaime,” she said coldly. “As long as Sansa Stark stays here, don’t even think that I will let
you anywhere near me.”

His phone buzzed again. Tyrion must have read his mind, as was his habit.

Text from Little Monkey to Kingslayer:
Jaime, don’t be an idiot! I’m not drunk. Come right away.

The only answer Cersei received was the sound of the door closing shut behind him. He felt tired,
exhausted by her venom. He made his way toward the kitchen. He saw light coming from within and
wondered what Tyrion was up to. He reached the doorway and was about to enter, when he felt his
heart skip a bit. Then it jumped into his throat and disappeared.

Sansa was sitting barefoot at a kitchen table with Tommen and Myrcella, whose eyes were glued to
her face. She has that effect on other Lannisters as well, it seems. Looking at them with a smile, she
seemed to be finishing a story:

“… and so the dragon, grateful to the Children of the Forest for their kindness and help, saved them
from the White Walkers.”

Jaime could not help but smile.

“I like that story!” Tommen exclaimed.

“Me too!” came from Myrcella.

“Well, I’m very glad,” the minx smiled.

Tommen, who could never sit still for more than a few minutes in a row, began to fidget and noticed
him standing in the doorway.

“Uncle Jaime!” he exclaimed, and ran toward him. Jaime caught his son and held him in his arms.

“Hello there, big fella. What are you doing here in pajamas, flirting with one of my dancers?”

“I had a nightmare, so we asked Barry to bring us here, since we knew you were at grandpa’s
Tonight.”

“And where’s good old Barristan?”

“He went to look for you or mother and haven’t come back yet,” supplied Myrcella, always glad to
have the necessary information. She came to hug him as well.

“And how did you end up in the kitchen with Sansa?”

“How do you know Sansa?” Myrcella seemed pleased.

Sansa, who had not said a word, was watching him carefully. Fearing, apparently, that he might say
something inappropriate, she cut in:

“Your fa — ” She caught herself. So she knows. “Your uncle and I are colleagues.”

Colleagues? “I’m one of the dancers in his and your uncle Tyrion’s company.”

“You’re a ballerina, like uncle Jaime?”

Sansa laughed uproariously. It seemed that, although she thought him a monster, her judgement was
kinder where his children were concerned.
“Yes, I’m a ballerina, just like your uncle Jaime,” she said, still laughing. Jaime rolled his eyes. “She’s just envious because I look much better in a tutu than she does,” Jaime clarified.

Myrcella and Tommen laughed, and Sansa rolled her eyes, but she was still smiling. A warm, affectionate smile Jaime had never seen on her face when he was around. Why was she always so guarded when she was with him, when her smile could make the world so much brighter, somehow?

“All right, tell me, though, what are the three of you doing in the kitchen?”

“Sansa’s mother always makes her hot chocolate when she has nightmares. So she made some for us,” Myrcella clarified.

Jaime looked at her in bewilderment, a strange expression of fear and awe in his eyes. When Tommen had run into his arms, she had seen a rare, unguarded smile on Jaime’s face. The way the children’s eyes had lit up when they saw him spoke volumes about their relationship with their father. Their father. Who they think is their uncle. Because, technically, he’s both.

Jaime seemed to have trouble pulling any of his usual masks onto his face. His expression still showed apprehension, but also surprise and gratitude. A small frown betrayed his fight to cover his feelings. “Sansa was very kind to care for you while Barristan was away,” he said, brushing a few locks of hair away from Tommen’s face, his other hand on Myrcella’s mop of blond curls. He lifted his head and looked at Sansa, his eyes raw with emotions she could not quite comprehend. “Thank you,” he said to her, his voice a little odd. It’s not like I saved their lives. I just made them cocoa.

She shook her head. “Really, it’s nothing. I just made them some hot chocolate, and we had wonderful fun gossiping and telling stories,” she said, feeling uncomfortable to be thanked in such a way for something so small. “It’s more than you know,” he said.

Barristan Selmy, Tyrion, and Margery entered the room then. The kids ran to greet their other uncle with excitement, but it was clear to Sansa that their relationship with Tyrion, although full of warmth, was different from what they shared with Jaime, to whom they turned with undisguised reverence. Barristan suggested that it was time for the children to be back in their beds. Myrcella and Tommen said their goodbyes to Sansa, hugging her with the easy and deep affection of which are capable the hearts of little children. Myrcella was disappointed that she did not have her phone with her and could not get Sansa’s number, but Tyrion promised he would text it to her, “if Sansa doesn’t mind.” Six pairs of eyes turned to look at her, laden with expectation and apprehension. Well, who do they take me for? Like I was capable of causing the child pain! she thought indignantly.

“Of course, I don’t mind,” she said and smiled. Like a wave, the tension rolled away.

The kids left, and Sansa watched them go with a little sadness. The darlings had no idea how they had shaken her world. She wondered if she would ever see them again. As soon as they were gone, Tyrion announced that it was rather late. The evening was over. It was time to leave. Margery, a considerate friend, had brought Sansa her shoes. The four of them made their way back to the entertainment floor in silence, lost in thought. The house seemed very quiet; most guests had already left. They thanked Tywin Lannister for the party and, just like that, they were standing outside again.
“It’s pleasant to prolong a celebratory night.” — Mikhail Bulgakov, Master and Margarita

Happy New Year! Wish you all health, joy, and success in everything you do! Please review and leave kudos!
She wondered whether Margery and Tyrion or Jaime would drive her home. The valet brought his car around first. Jaime walked to it, and Sansa asked herself if she should follow. When he went to open the passenger door, she said her goodbyes to Margery and Tyrion and approached him. She was about to get inside the car but turned back to look at him.

“You’re not going to drive very fast, are you?” she asked hesitantly.

“I’ll go slower than a turtle,” he reassured her.

She gave him a small smile and got in.

She did not fully believe his assurance and was surprised when he exceeded the speed limit only a little. They drove in silence. She wanted to apologize for what she had said about Aerys, knowing her words had hurt him; yet the ghost seemed like a protection from his presence in her life. She wondered if whispering “sorry” could turn back time. Scared that it might, she remained silent and settled for watching his reflection on the windshield. His eyebrows were furrowed, and he looked out into the night illuminated with street and traffic lights with so much concentration, she wondered if he saw any of it.

He didn’t.

His mind was in turmoil. Jaime disliked caring what anyone thought of him. He did not want anyone’s forgiveness. But Sansa’s condemnation made him loathe being beyond redemption and abhor the strange power she had over him. Knowing her indignation at his relationship with his sister, he never wanted her to see Tommen and Myrcella. His children would not be judged — not even by Sansa Stark. Seeing her with them had moved him deeply, leaving him vulnerable before her. Jaime had grown used to insults and accusations directed at him; he knew how to dismiss or return them with interest. But he did not know how to defend himself from words spoken against his children, and he feared her words. Her prejudice against him and her quickness to judge left him exposed, now that she had seen deeply into the problems for which he had no solutions. If ever he felt shame because of his involvement with Cersei, it was triggered by his inability to do more for his children. He harbored no illusions concerning his sister’s mothering style. She might love her children, but the ordinary kindness that came so easily to Sansa was beyond her reach. He wondered for a moment why Cersei could not have a little of the minx’s gentleness. Every time he thought of Sansa, images of her dancing would come to his mind, unbidden. Never in his life had he seen
anything or anyone so beautiful as she was when she danced. The more powerfully he was affected by her, the more he desired her in spite of himself, the more ferociously he felt how out of his reach she was. A beautiful, unattainable being, who seemed to him a merciless judge in her cold Northern innocence.

Sansa was jerked from the reverie of watching his face when he stopped in front of her apartment building. She wondered why he got out of the car to open the door for her, when he could have simply dropped her off and driven away. Not knowing what to tell him, she gave him a nod and was about to walk away, when his words stopped her.

“I wanted to thank you for what you did for Myrcella and Tommen tonight,” he said in a voice more serious and severe than she had ever heard from him. He was looking straight in front of him with empty eyes. “They don’t see a lot of… kindness.”

“They seem like lovely children, Jaime,” she said softly.

The softness of her voice enraged him. No one could be that kind. He did not need her pity or her lies.

He turned to her, and she was struck by the violence in his eyes.

“I’ve always appreciated your honesty, Sansa,” he said in a low, angry voice. “I know what you think of me, and I can only imagine what names you’ve been calling my sister. I know what you think of us. Don’t try to pretend that when you look at my children you don’t see their parents or think them an abomination,” he closed his eyes as though to drown his anger and resumed in a more controlled, tight voice. “I’m very grateful that, notwithstanding your resentment, you were charitable enough not to recoil in horror.”

She was breathing heavily, tears of anger and hurt in her eyes.

“Blackguard! You appreciate my honesty? Well, here it is. I’ve never seen children more beautiful than Tommen and Myrcella. They are kind, intelligent, and profoundly good. They remind me of my little brother, Rickon, whom I miss terribly. Yes, they look like their parents, but they share none of your sins. You and your sister are an abomination. Your children are not. I would never blame them for your wrongdoings. And if you,” she stabbed his chest with her pointing index finger, “had any fatherly feeling toward them whatsoever, you would have taken them away from that horrible woman and her pig of a husband!”

“And how would I do that, huh? I’m their uncle, remember? I have once made the mistake of asking Cersei to allow me shared custody of them after I had seen that drunken oath raise his filthy hand to my son! I nearly tore him to pieces — just like your precious Aerys! I had threatened Cersei with going to the press, the authorities. Do you know what she said? That if I so much as breathed a word of this to anyone, she would accuse me of rape, and I would never see them again. So instead of giving me advice, you ignorant little fool, why don’t you mind your own fucking business?”

Before she knew what she was doing, her hand flew out, and she slapped him hard across the face. Angry tears running down her cheeks, she took a step back from him, realizing what she had done in terror, and the next moment, she was flying up the stairs to her apartment.

She shut the door behind her with a bang, crying in earnest. At least Tyene, still out partying after the gala, was not at home to witness her tears.

This is what you get for being a stupid idiot!
She wiped at her tears in frustration, but they kept falling all the same. She wanted to hear only one voice. The one voice that could make everything better, always. She dialed and had to wait a few heartbeats.

“Sansa?” her mother, worried and sleepy, had never sounded so sweet. Sansa cried harder but tried to hide it.

“Hey, mom,” she greeted shakily.

“Sansa, what’s the matter? Are you all right? Are you hurt?” Catelyn sounded fully awake and ready to handle any emergency as only a mother of six children knows how.

“No, I’m all right, I didn’t realize it was so late. I’m sorry I woke you.”

Catelyn’s voice was calmer and especially warm but not free from worry.

“How are you crying, little heart?”


“I… I just wanted to hear your voice,” she said. Her mother’s silence on the other end of the line pressed her for further explanation. “I… saw two little children today. They were so lovely. The boy is Rickon’s age and I… I just miss him… I miss you… and dad… I miss you all so much!..”

She cried harder.

“Oh, sweetheart… You know, you can always come home.”

No, I can’t. I’ve worked too hard to give up. I want it too much to let go.

“No, it’s not that. I… Can you just tell me a little about you all? And I will let you go back to sleep.”

Catelyn sighed. She, too, had tears in her eyes. She missed her little girl.

“Well, Rickon is obsessed with knights and fighting. We had to put Ice away for fear he’d try reaching for it.” How Sansa relished in her mother’s kind voice! “Bran is as serious as ever. He plans to be an engineer now.” Last week, he still wanted to be a biologist. “Arya…” her mother had a smile in her voice, “Arya is being Arya. She got into a fight in school…”

“Again?” Sansa, too, was smiling.

Catelyn sighed.

“Again. Apparently, one of the boys said that you’re were a Southerner now that you live in King’s Landing (stupid children), and Arya — she misses you enormously even though she won’t admit it — well, she just jumped on him. Fortunately, they pulled her off before she could do any serious harm. But the kid! Oh, Sansa, he looked awful! Bloody nose, scratches!.. I don’t know what we will do with her.”

Sansa was very touched that Arya defended her. She missed her sister.

“And dad?”

“Oh, he misses you more than you know, though he keeps quiet about it, knowing we all miss you. You know how stoic your father is.”

Yes, she knew. Stoic and honest and good. Nothing like any Lannister.
Her mother went on:

“I found one of your old dolls in his study the other day. The one he gave you for one of your birthdays, remember? In a pink silk dress? I thought one of the children had brought it there, so I took it away. But it reappeared on the day after that, so I just left it alone. I guess it comforts him to have it there.”

Sansa was crying softly again.

“We’re all looking forward to the holidays, when all of our children will come home to us,” Catelyn said, knowing that thoughts of a happy future are the best medicine from melancholy.

“I know. Me, too, mother.” You have no idea just how much.

It is not an infrequent occurrence that when happiness diminishes somewhere, it increases elsewhere. Margery and Tyrion entered their flat in high spirits. Opening the door, Margery came in first, placing the keys into their usual place: a shell she had brought from Essos the year before; the trip (including wild shopping sprees) was Tyrion’s present for her last birthday. She had been very surprised when, in addition, her boyfriend gave her a beautiful bracelet of white gold and purple garnets that now adorned her wrist. Tyrion loved spoiling her.

“What a night!” she exclaimed, taking off her coat.

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget my sister’s face after the dance was over!” Tyrion said with pleasure.

“I know! And the look on Jaime’s face when he saw Sansa with the kids? Awww!.. It was such a great idea to hide away and let him take in the scene as we found it, by the way!”

“Why, thank you, my lady!”

He, too, took off his coat.

“I’ve never seen him so moved,” she added.

“The strange thing is — neither have I,” Tyrion admitted.

“I was surprised by how at ease Sansa seemed to be with Tommy and Cella…” Margery kicked off her shoes and walked to the kitchen barefoot.

“Why? She’s kind-hearted and has many younger siblings — she’s probably used to it,” Tyrion said as he followed her.

Margery grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl on the counter and sliced it in two. She offered a half to Tyrion, but he shook his head.

“Yeah, but she knows about the kids’ parents. Couldn’t have been easy for her, especially considering how she looks at Jaime.”

They left the kitchen and went to the living room. She collapsed onto the couch and bit into the apple.

“I wonder,” Tyrion said as he sat, taking her feet into his lap, “if it wasn’t partly because of Jaime that she treated them with such kindness.”

“It’s still remarkable, especially considering what a bitch your sister’s been to her,” Margery remarked.
Tyrion nodded.

"And their dance! My gods, I’ve never seen anyone dance like that!" added Margery. 
"They certainly have a good instinct for each other’s movements — it will probably come in handy later," Tyrion jested, and she guffawed. 
“It’s funny the way Tywin gushed over her!” she added with good humor. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him like that, even with me. It’s a little startling, considering his dislike of Ned Stark.”

“True, but father has dreamed of seeing Jaime married and with kids, I believe, since my brother was born. I think at this point, father would not have cared if she was a commoner or a whore,” he theorized.

“Or a common whore,” Margery winked and got up, walking to the bar cabinet. “Luckily for him, though, it’s a virtuous, loving girl from a very good family. Do you want a drink?” she asked, pouring herself some Essosi rum.

“When have I ever refused to drink with you?” he asked with a grin, and she smiled at the fond memories.

“You’re going to go to that lunch with your father soon, probably,” she said as she poured him a cognac — she did not need to ask what he drank after parties.

“And?”

She walked back to him and held out his glass.

“Better tell me all about it in copious detail,” she warned.

“Of course I will,” said he, as though it was the most natural thing in the world. “I must admit, I’m curious to know what devious plans are ripening in father’s mind. I’ve a feeling he’ll spare neither time nor money where Jaime and Sansa are concerned.”

“I almost feel sorry for them,” she said with a smile that conveyed that she was, in fact, not sorry at all.

“Almost!” he echoed with mirth as they clinked their glasses.

When Jaime stormed into his apartment — a beautiful place with a view of Blackwater Bay — the left side of his face was still burning from Sansa’s slap. Who would have thought that the minx had strength enough for such a blow? The stinging sensation served as a memento of another, more unpleasant, feeling, which was unlikely to go away as easily or as quickly. Jaime Lannister — an uncommon occurrence — was plagued by pangs of conscience. The feeling — in itself rather disagreeable, and to which he was largely unaccustomed — fueled his rage. But the more he raged, the more his conscience tormented him. It was a vicious cycle.

*You and your sister are an abomination.* How these words scorched his ears, resonating over, and over, and over. Her kindness was not for him, whom she had judged and convicted. *He* was an abomination. He thought *her* the purest thing he had ever seen.

*If you had any fatherly feelings whatsoever, you would have taken them away from that horrible woman and her pig of a husband!*

He knew she was right; and he knew equally well that he was powerless. An abomination he may be, but there was some comfort in her thinking him the lesser of two evils.
He could not quite grasp how his decision to thank her for the kindness she had shown Myrcella and Tommen had spiraled into the angry scene of which he was reminded by his burning left cheek. His frustration over his leading part in the unpleasant exchange added to his exasperation. The root of the problem, of course, was that she had taken him by surprise, once again. He had expected her to throw condescending, accusing words in his face; he had expected her to pronounce her judgement on him cruelly. The kindness in her soft voice was so utterly startling that he dared not believe it, thinking it a lie or an expression of commiseration. His pride, already revolting against her influence, was wounded by the thought that he might be an object of pity in her eyes. A man who has fallen so far beyond any hope of redemption that his children, and by extension he himself, were to be commiserated. The thought left his ego severely bruised. Combined with the way she had won his grudging admiration and utterly captivated him by her dance, her glowing blue eyes, while remaining oddly unapproachable in her thrice-damned Northern righteousness, it was hardly surprising that, in a moment of bitterness, Jaime’s mind could not credit with belief the extraordinary generosity of Sansa Stark. He could do so now that her presence did not overwhelm him, and the thought of his own callousness filled him with remorse, making him wish dearly he had choked on his words. The slap in the face he had received from her was more than deserved. The greatest torture, generously supplied by his memory, was the image of her angry tears and the hurt expression on her face. When he was driving to his place, it haunted him; in the darkness of his apartment, it hounded him; and when he fell into a restless sleep, Sansa’s indignant face hovered accusingly above him.

Chapter End Notes

Well, here is an update. With the semester on the roll, I plan to post a new chapter every weekend. Also, tomorrow is my birthday — if you want to make me a present, leave a comment and/or a kudos! Cheers! :)
The Old Ghosts and the New

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

I usually leave the author’s notes until the end of the chapter, but I would like to say a few words. I have been inspired and touched by the incredible response this story has received. My new wonderful friend, Clarimel, who has been spoiling me rotten with her kind words and her amazing art, has made this beautiful piece for my story and my birthday. I am posting this chapter ahead of schedule and I would like to dedicate it to this incredibly talented and generous artist! Thank you for this beauty, my darling friend! And thank you to all who have been reading this story and supporting me — you guys have made me happier than ever!
Sansa awoke late the next morning, taking advantage of the weekend. The enticing smell of coffee reached her nostrils, and she decided that staying in half-slumber was less appealing than a cup of warm, energizing liquid. She rolled out of bed and headed for the bathroom, from which she emerged refreshed, her desire for caffeine heightened. She went to the kitchen, which was separated from the living room only by the bar. As she reached for a mug, her eyes fell briefly on the sofa. When her brain registered a form there, her gaze instinctively returned to it. She felt her blood turn to ice water in her veins, when she observed the Kingslayer sitting on her couch, a cup of coffee in his hand, his back to her. At first, she thought it was an illusion. She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping the mirage would disappear, but when she opened them again, he was still there, his head slightly turned
to the side as though to better hear her movements.

“What are you doing here?” she asked in an unfriendly voice. *And where was Tyene?* She had heard her return in the wee hours of the morning, but she seemed to have left already.

He got up lazily.

“I came to apologize.”

“Not interested,” she stated bluntly. “Where’s Tyene?”

“I’ve known her since she was very young: smart girl, but with the attention span of a three-year-old.” That much was true. “When I gave her my credit card for the morning, she forgot to ask why I came by at all,” he finished with a sly smile.

*My own friend sold me out to the beast.* Granted, Tyene did not know about their last conversation, but it felt like a betrayal nonetheless.

“Can I make you a coffee?” he asked her.

“This is my apartment. This is my coffee. And I’ll make it myself. Now, get out.” She wanted him as far away as the world extended.

“I’m trying to apologize,” he reiterated in a soothing voice.

“And I don’t want your apologies. I want you to leave me alone.”

Sansa’s hostility had several sources beyond her ire from the previous evening. Regardless of how intensely she disliked him when she went to bed, in the night, his eyes had invaded her dreams. She was miffed that hearing him say to her “mind your own business” had the power to wound her; this was worsened by the statement’s underlying truth — she *should* have minded her own business and stayed as far away from his as possible. She did not and had paid for it. She detested that, in spite of his caustic words, she sympathized with his powerless urge to protect his children. Moreover, she was seeking desperately to outmatch with her asperity the willingness to forgive him, which she was infuriated to discover in herself. And there was the fact that, after she had slapped him across the face, he decided to show up with apologies, making her feel almost remorseful. She was fuming.

He came to stand next to her, and she despised her body for its awareness of him.

“All the same, I won’t go anywhere until you hear me out.”

Sansa suspected he was *more* stubborn than a mule. The poor animal had nothing on Jaime Lannister.

“Fine. Say what you’ve come to say, then get out,” she said, deciding, of course, that this was simply the fastest way to get rid of him. She was not interested in his words. Not one bit.

“I’m sorry for the way I spoke to you last night.”
She raised her eyebrows in irritation — *that was putting it mildly.*

“As you understand, very few people know the truth about Myrcella and Tommen’s parentage. I was not expecting you to increase your already oddly deep knowledge of my life.”

She remained silent, and there was a pause. His voice sounded a little accusing when he spoke next.

“You judge swiftly and harshly, Sansa, hardly realizing how deeply your arbitrarily thrown words
“I judge? When was that, pray? When I was making the children you fathered on your sister cocoa or telling them stories?!”

“This isn’t what I meant. I’m very grateful for your unusual kindness toward them.”

She turned her head away from him. *Unusual kindness.*

“Yeah, Lannister, I’m the picture of cruelty,” she said with heavy sarcasm. “Are you sure you went to the right address? Because it sounds to me like you’ve got the wrong lines here.”

*You’re not Cersei.*

He smirked, and she turned away from him entirely, busyng herself with unloading the dishwasher. She needed to have something to do, or she would start screaming.

“What can I do to make up for it?”

*She would not be bribed in any way, shape, or form.*

“See, this is your problem! Not just you — the entire South has it. You think that, no matter what you do, you can make up for it later. Has any one of you tried not doing all the things you then need to make up for?!”

He was silent, and she hoped desperately that he would just leave, *please Mother.* He did not.

“I’d like to try earning your forgiveness nonetheless,” he sounded indomitable.

*Like hell you are.* But in spite of herself, Sansa was surprised. She had never suspected Jaime Lannister had such deep reservoirs of humility. She considered him for a moment. There was one thing that tormented her more than others; one truth she could only hear from him.

He was watching her face keenly and saw the moment she began to relent. He wondered about the price for her amnesty. There was nothing he expected less than what came out of her mouth.

“You want my forgiveness? Fine.” She closed the dishwasher with a bang and faced him, a hand on her hip. “I want you to tell me the truth about Aerys. What happened on that balcony?”

He took a deep breath. His lungs were about as efficient as if they were balloons poked full of holes. Sansa watched his eyes widen, noticed his quick intake of breath, the way his jaw clenched. She expected him to refuse, to snap at her.

“Fine, but I’m making coffee,” was all he said.

Grudgingly, she stepped aside. He took the mug from her and reached for the carafe of the energizing liquid.

“Sugar?”

“Two spoons.”

“Cream?”

“A little. Start talking or leave.”
“Let’s begin with what you know. What have you heard about that wonderful event?”

“Same as everyone. Aerys and you were seen talking on the balcony one evening. By the next day, he had been found on the ground below it. He was assaulted before he died.”

What are you doing? Do you even realize, you stupid fool, that you’re talking to a murderer?

“You were accused of killing him, seeing as he was the King of Ballet and your only real rival at the time, but the case was closed for lack of evidence. Most people say it was your farther who had arranged for you to be cleared.”

“You have the facts more or less straight, minx,” he said, passing her the coffee, “but you’re missing all the interesting details.”

He went to the sofa and sat down, not looking to see if she followed. She found it unnerving but sat next to him and took a sip of coffee, noting with annoyance that it was delicious.

“Aerys was never good enough to be my rival,” he began.

She rolled her eyes at him.

“I’m not saying this to boast,” he clarified calmly. “I’m merely explaining that I did not need to kill him in order to have a successful career. The Targaryen Theater had been dying a slow death for many years by then. The Lannister Ballet Company was the future — everyone knew it. Aerys knew it better than anyone, and this hardly endeared me to him.” He paused. “One night, Cersei and I were careless, and he saw us. When I went to confront him, he said that he liked what he had seen.” Jaime’s voice was full of scarcely controlled bitterness and rage. “He described to me what he was going to do to my sister — I will spare you the details — and said he would keep me around to watch. There were rumors about him — prostitutes tortured to death — but his family was throwing their last money to make the stories, and the evidence, go away. That night, I saw madness in his eyes, and I knew that if he had gotten it into his head that he wanted Cersei next, he would not stop until he had her.”

“Why not go to the City Watch? Any other authorities?”

“And tell them what? I had no evidence. If I began making accusations, I would have to explain how the idea occurred to him in the first place. And they would not have been able to stop him, even if they had believed me.”

“What happened after he told you?”

“If you’re wondering whether it was I who had assaulted him before his death, the answer is yes. I kept hitting him until he tripped and fell off that damned balcony.” Jaime paused, and a bitter grimace overshadowed his features. “So technically, I did not kill him. But I don’t know if I would have stopped, had he not fallen.”

Sansa was staring into her cup of coffee as if she could read in it the correct way to judge that night. He did not want her to think him a villain. How to make her understand? He grabbed at a straw:

“I understand you have a sister?” he inquired, and she nodded. “Let me ask you this: if a man you knew to be guilty of torturing and killing several other women had told you that he would hurt and humiliate her before your eyes until she died from the pain, and you could kill him — what would you have done?”

Sansa thought of Arya’s laughing, happily insolent face. How fiercely she loved, though she never
showed it. Her vivaciousness. Her spirit. Her pride and her dreams. And a monster who could snatch it all away. She felt tears and bloodthirst rise in her.

“I would have killed him,” she said quietly, still looking into her half-empty cup of coffee. He thought he had misheard her, but then she looked at him and repeated more loudly, her eyes fierce, and an uncharacteristically ruthless expression on her face: “I would have killed him and thrown his body from the top of the Wall.”

There was a long pause, and she turned away from him, sipping at her coffee quietly, lost in thought. She was trying to distill a very strange fact — that she was one of the few people who knew the truth about Aerys’ death (she sensed that Jaime had not lied); and knowing it, she could not find it in herself to condemn the Kingslayer. She realized with some horror that had Jaime even thrown the monster from the balcony with his own hands, she would still think he had done the right thing — in her eyes, if perhaps not her father’s. She kept thinking of her own siblings and knew she would have protected them regardless of what acts she had to commit. Her earlier conversation with her mother came back to her. If Arya threw punches when someone called her sister a Southerner, what would her little sister have done in Jaime’s shoes? She knew Arya’s answer to his question would have been considerably more detailed and gruesome than her own had been. She thought of how Jon and Robb always came to her aid, no matter how insignificant her troubles, their looming forms threatening and their eyes blazing. If someone had told them they would rape her or Arya they would have killed them and asked questions later. No, not only was she unable to condemn Jaime, she realized that she herself, Arya, and her brothers would have done the same. It was an unsettling reality, one that shook her previously black and white world.

Jaime, as was his habit, hid his astonishment at her words behind a joke:

“I doubt good old Ned would approve of such behavior, minx,” said he, but his voice sounded too tired and apprehensive to imbue the jest with necessary humor.

“Probably not, but I doubt I would have thought of it.”

*Such an honest little minx.*

“Careful: next you’ll say that you’re not your daddy’s little girl,” he warned her, his humor almost restored.

“Not in everything. Father didn’t approve of my going to King’s Landing — yet here I am.”

Jaime had wondered how had Ned let her go to the Lannister Ballet Company.

“How *did* you convince him to allow you to come here?”

She smiled as a fond memory floated before her eyes.

“Mother and I wore him down eventually,” she replied.

“And why would Mother Stark let her baby girl travel to the pit of the world?”

“Because she knows that working in the Lannister Ballet Company is a one-in-a-lifetime opportunity. She knows, because she watched it for fifteen years, how much I have worked for my dream — and she didn’t have the heart to rip it out of my hands. I guess… She was willing to take a chance on me, knowing that she had taught me right from wrong.”

He stayed quiet for a while. Talking of Aerys always revived the same memories. The rage and the fight; the inescapable despair that came with being a murderer; the loneliness of growing used to scorn. But there were other memories as well, no less dark ones. The anxious agony of fighting for a
company’s future while building one. And Cersei’s wedding.

Seeing the odd, dead look in his face, she put her hand on his forearm, dragging him back from the pit of memories that felt like nightmares with her warm, gentle touch. He seemed to return to reality, and a playful smile, which she knew to be his strange shield, came to his face.

“Now you have to forgive me, minx, or I’ll never trust the word of a Northerner again: better not let your people down.”

*How much warmth her smile could bring to his world.*

“I guess I’ll have to,” she agreed. “I’m afraid I’m becoming a little Southern.”

Her phone buzzed and, seeing it was Ellaria, she took the precaution of stepping away from Jaime before taking the call.

“Hi, Ellaria — ” she began but was cut off:

“Do you still remember about our brunch today? Tyene and I are at the *Rose Garden*, like we agreed. If you’re fucking the Kingslayer, you have my permission to hang up.”

Sansa blushed so deeply she thought her capillaries would burst.

“I’m not!”

“Then get your little ass here,” was the instant reply.

“I’m on my way,” she said in a voice so full of pleading for her friend not to say any more that Ellaria, wicked woman that she was, laughed.

“Oh, he’s still there, isn’t he? Tyene has so many shopping bags, I’ll be surprised if there’s anything left on his checking account… Though I doubt it’ll put a hole in that pile of gold the Lannisters shit so profusely.”

“Ellaria, I’m getting ready as we speak. I’m going to hang up now and see you in a few minutes!”

She threw her phone and rushed to her room, knowing that if she did not show up soon, she would never hear the end of Ellaria’s crude remarks about Jaime. She was running around, trying to locate her belongings, when she felt his eyes on her.

“I’m sorry, I have to run,” she jabbered, “I completely forgot about my lunch with the Sands!”

“I’m known to have a sclerosis-inducing effect on women,” he said slyly. The jesting Jaime Lannister was back. She would not admit that she had missed him. She rolled her eyes.

“Don’t be so full of yourself!”

“I will let myself out, minx,” he said, amusement in his voice at observing her antics as she ran around, trying to find her thingst.

“Wait, I almost forgot!”

Text from Sparkle to Sand Snaky:

*Text me your nephew’s phone number, I’ll explain later.*

In a few seconds, Tyene let her know the number with a simplicity that prophesied a grim
interrogation in the nearest future.

“What is it, minx? Want to kiss me goodbye?”

She blushed at his remark while she wrote down the number and offered him the sheet of paper.

“Please give this to Myrcella when you see her. I promised I would get her this number.”

He gave her a quizzical look:
“This isn’t a number of a drug dealer, is it, minx? I think you and Cella may both be too young for it.”

*Did he just compare me to a five-year-old?!*

“Ask her yourself if you want to know,” she said, calculating this would be a better punishment than a retort.

“I will.”

He left. And she was going to be so late!..
He heard the sickening sound of flesh hitting the pavement, and the red shroud that had covered his eyes disintegrated, leaving him in the darkness, alone and aghast. He did not remember how he had made his way to Tyrion’s apartment. His little brother had to pour several glasses of whiskey into him before he could tell him, however poorly, what happened.

“Oh, Jaime, you idiot! You fucking idiot!” Tyrion exclaimed in anguish. “How could you have been so stupid?!”

“He’d have found a way to hurt her, Tyrion.” His voice was dull and toneless. He had suddenly stopped caring for anything at all.

Tyrion squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Even if you needed to kill him, why not be smart about it?”

Jaime had no reply for this. He had never decided to kill Aerys — he had simply felt an unstoppable drive to annihilate the mad monster after his despicable threats had registered in Jaime’s mind.

Tyrion was intelligent enough to help his brother, drunken on shock and Stormlands’ whiskey, to change into new clothes. He cleaned his bloodied knuckles meticulously, but Jaime’s hands, so graceful when he danced, were bruised and bloody. As he fussied around, his short legs more of an obstacle than ever, Tyrion could barely bite down his panic and anger. Anger at them both for their indiscretion; at Cersei for her absence, on an evening like this; and despair at the thought that his brother, his hero and champion, could be taken away from him, because he was so foolish as to have put his life on the line for a woman who did not deserve it. Tyrion hated his sister more than ever and blamed her for Jaime’s predicament. For the first time in his life, he kept thinking of his father’s face with hope and had a mad need to speak with him. For the first time, Tyrion mentally turned his eyes to his father for protection and help. For the first time, he was glad that Tywin’s influence knew practically no bounds. His father was the last thing standing between Tyrion and the dark abyss his life would become without his brother’s smile. When he had put an almost unconscious Jaime to bed, he dialed. The wait felt like an eternity.

“I hope you have a good excuse for calling at this hour,” his father’s cold voice was music to his ears.

“I do. I can’t speak about it on the phone. You must come to the apartment immediately. It’s Jaime. I can’t say more,” Tyrion’s voice poorly hid his anxiety. He did not feel a shred of the pride that, in any other circumstances, would have made him choke on his words: “Please, father, come right
away. Make sure no one sees you leave your house and use the backdoor to come up.” Not wishing to hear anything that would diminish his hope, Tyrion hung up. He kept pacing, his brain running in circles, as he tried to find a plausible alibi for Jaime and to steel himself against whatever came next. Tywin arrived at the apartment within forty minutes.

“If you dragged me here for anything that is not a matter of life and death, Tyrion, you will regret it,” he said in his condescending, threatening voice.

Tyrion nodded, closing the entrance door softly and went straight for the bar, pouring his father a generous glass of scotch. He knew that, regardless of his father’s cold tone or his words, Tywin’s appearance at his apartment within an hour of the call was a sign of his apprehension.

“Will you tell me what’s the matter, or keep up this charade?” the father bit out.

Tyrion proffered him the scotch:
“I think you better sit down,” he said.

“What’s the meaning of this?! I will not sit down, until I am fully informed about Jaime. Where’s he?”

“Asleep, in the bedroom.”

“Asleep?!” Tywin looked menacing.

“He just returned from a meeting with Aerys Targaryen, who threatened to brutalize Cersei. The King of Ballet is dead.”

He had never seen his father pale before. Tywin sat down heavily into the armchair, almost as though his strong legs would no longer support him. Some of his scotch spilled, but he did not seem to notice. The Lannister patriarch closed his eyes and stayed still for a moment, waiting for the world to stop spinning, but kept feeling as though the ground had been pulled right out from under his feet.

“How?” was all he managed to say, eyes closed still, his strong voice, for once, not backed by his general appearance.

“He — ” Tyrion began but had to swallow against the strange tightness in his throat; he went to the bar and poured himself another drink. He did not know how many glasses he had already drained — the agitation seemed to evaporate all alcohol from his bloodstream before it could take effect. He swallowed a large mouthful of the burning liquid. “He threw punches until Aerys stumbled and fell from the balcony on which the fighting took place.”

Tywin opened his eyes and drank a generous swallow of scotch.

“Did anyone see them?”

“He doesn’t know, but he would’ve certainly been seen coming into the club and coming out of it. Considering it was dark, whoever saw them on the balcony won’t make for a convincing witness.”

His father did not seem quite himself yet, but there was no time. Tyrion shared the most terrible idea that had occurred to him while he had paced, waiting for Tywin:

“The club has cameras, even in the private rooms where Jaime found him, if they caught it on tape — ”

His father’s motion was so swift it barely registered. He dialed.
“Give me Roose Bolton,” he barked into the phone and waited. “Bolton? Tywin Lannister speaking,” he turned to Tyrion, “what club was it?”

“The Flaming Dragon,” his son supplied.

“No one sees tonight’s tapes from the security cameras of the Flaming Dragon, do you hear me? No one. Not you, not your men. I don’t care how you do it, have them destroyed. Now.”

He hung up and looked at Tyrion.

“What else?”

His younger son was for a few moments too stunned by the swift solution of the problem to speak. Then:

“They could have been heard.”

“That does not prove anything.”

“Unless whoever heard them also heard the noise of the fight. Moreover, when Jaime came in, he was covered in blood. I don’t know if anyone noticed it when he left the club, but if they did — ”

“They might remember it when a body is found in the morning,” Tywin finished.

“It’s probably been found already,” Tyrion said, "I think they’ll come for Jaime in the morning…” he paused. “Which is why you should not be here, come sunlight.”

“They may not come at all: there will be little evidence left by the time Bolton is through with the club’s security footage.”

“Unless they’ve already seen the tapes,” Tyrion countered. “The witnesses are likely to have reported Jaime’s presence in the night club. After the many altercations that have been observed between Jaime and Aerys over the past year, he will be the prime suspect.”

Few times had Aerys seen Jaime without throwing insults at him, envious of his rival’s success, and Jaime, short of temper and with the tongue of a wasp, had returned them with interest.

Tywin remained silent. Tyrion suspected he was still trying to come to terms with the cards life had dealt him that night. He knew he had to break through Tywin’s denial.

“Father, they will come for him tomorrow or the day after that, at the latest. You must prepare yourself for that.”

Tywin did not deign him with a reply. His son surmised it was because he did not have an answer.

“What will we do about the witnesses?” Tyrion inquired, looking up at his father with worry.

“They can be bought,” was all Tywin said.

“And the City Watch?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“He’ll need a very good lawyer.”

“The High Sparrow owes me a favor.”

Despite the odd nickname, the ever-wrinkled clothes, and manic eyes, he was the most feared and
successful lawyer in the Seven Kingdoms, maybe the whole world. He had never lost a case.
“What about the prosecutor?’’

“I’ll buy him, too. I’ll have Varys start identifying the witnesses and persuading them that they have
sclerosis. I will call him from the car.”

“There’s more,” Tyrion went into the kitchen and returned with a garbage bag, which he handed to
his father.

“What the hell is this?” Tywin asked indignantly.

If he were still capable of mirth, Tyrion would have laughed.

“It’s his clothes. We cannot have them in the apartment when the City Watch shows up — they are
covered in blood. Burn them when you return to the mansion.”

Tywin took the bag wordlessly. The next moment he was gone, and Tyrion felt strangely more
lonely and afraid than he had when his father’s large figure had filled the living room. He went
quietly into the bedroom and watched his brother’s sleeping face, as he had done on many nights
before, when they were children and Tyrion could not sleep. He had been right: the City Watch
came for his brother at dawn. And with the first of their knocks on the door, Jaime had awakened
from one nightmare and stepped right into the black hole of another.

Jailed, questioned, despised, and accursed, Jaime had lived the worst months of his life. The press,
hungry for a story of a rebellious heir killing his rival to pursue a career his father condemned,
latched onto it like a starved leech onto flesh. Daario Naharis, one of the most daring reporters in
King’s Landing, was the one to invent the nickname “Kingslayer,” which caught on. Jaime hated it.
In those days, he first began wondering if he was a murderer; if he would have killed Aerys, had the
monster not lost his balance. The first scornful jibes and looks of contempt thrown his way lacerated
his pride; he never dreamed that he would have to get used to them. He kept hoping Cersei would
visit him in prison, but she did not come, offering various excuses the few times he got to hear her
voice on the phone. Tyrion came every day.

Benjen Stark was the prosecutor assigned to the case. Impossible to bribe or persuade, he proved the
biggest problem. Finally, Tywin was able to pull the necessary strings higher in the hierarchy to
replace him. Soon after, the case was closed, and Jaime was released. But this was only the
beginning. Ben Stark, outspoken in his accusations and backed by his brother, Eddard, decried the
corruption of the justice system and dragged the Lannister name through the mud whenever they
were asked to comment on the case, its result, or Ben’s removal. And they were asked often.

After the effort he had put into liberating his son and the blow the family name had suffered on his
account, Tywin expected Jaime to return to the fold. When Jaime refused, father and son did not
speak to each other for a year. Tywin redoubled his efforts to crush the Lannister Ballet Company
and force his children into the Lannisters & Co. But Tyrion and Jaime did not sleep nights, inventing
new compositions, looking for donors and dancers to keep the company from going under. It was
then that Ellaria Sand and Oberyn Martell had joined the LBC. Ellaria, who had given birth to Tyene
a few years before, was unable to find employment in Dorne, but the moment Jaime and Tyrion had
seen her dance, they knew that the few pounds she had yet to lose were immaterial. The Martell
family joined the ranks of the foot soldiers in the Lannister Ballet Company. It was a difficult time,
and Cersei did not care for it. Too soon, the last blow of that dark time fell on Jaime’s head — his
sister left the ship she thought was sinking and married Robert Baratheon, King’s Landing mayor,
two years later, plunging Jaime deeper into an endless, constantly spinning abyss, where there was
nothing but a gruesome fight for survival. Regardless of his anger at her, his boundless jealousy, or
his disappointment, getting lost in his sister’s body became Jaime’s only consolation.
Chapter End Notes

Please leave comments and kudos! Happy Weekend! :)
“I’m so sorry I’m late!” Sansa exclaimed, rushing into the Rose Garden and joining Ellaria and Tyene at their table. Tyene was literally surrounded by shopping bags with logos of the best labels in the Seven Kingdoms and imported luxury brands. How many are there? Fifty? More? “Oh my gods, Tyene! What’s all this?!”

“Oh, that’s just what I like too much to leave in the car,” she waved her hand carelessly. “The rest is in the trunk. When Jaime Lannister gives you his credit card for the morning, you don’t take it lightly.”

Tyene put a piece of lamb, dripping with gravy, into her mouth. Clearly, this was her day for self-indulgence. Ellaria was smiling.

“Why did Jaime want to get rid of Tyene so much that he was ready to take the risk of letting her deplete his bank account?” asked the older woman with a knowing smile directed at Sansa.

“Yeah, and what did you need Trystane’s number for?” asked Tyene, still chewing.

The second one was a lot easier.
“I met Jaime’s niece, Myrcella Baratheon, during the gala. She wanted to have Trystane’s number because she’s rather fond of him.”

Very nice, Sansa. Enough, but not too much.

“How did you meet her?” Tyene continued her line of questioning. So long as I don’t have to answer her mother…

“The chauffeur who doubles up as a nanny, Barristan Selmy, brought them over because Tommen had had a nightmare. I made them hot chocolate while we waited for their uncle or mother to come down. We chatted.”

“That’s just the sort of thing I would expect you to do,” Ellaria said with an affectionate smile, but then her expression changed to one of wiliness. “What about my question?”

Damn it!

“Which one?” Sansa asked with assumed innocence.

Ellaria, not fooled, was about to say something — apparently, rather awful, if her canny expression was anything to go by — when she was interrupted.

“Would you like to order, miss?”

Saved by the waiter!

“Yes, please…”
Sansa spent an extraordinary amount of time giving her order, asking detailed questions about each dish she considered before she decided. She hoped Ellaria’s attention would be diverted, but the mother was not as easily distracted as the daughter.

“Don’t think for a moment that I’m forgetting you haven’t answered my question. Why did Jaime sacrifice,” she glanced at the shopping bags trying to estimate the total value, “more than what some people make in a year in order to have you alone this morning? What did you do to him?”

Sansa was red.

“I didn’t do anything to him,” she mumbled.

“Well, then what did he do to you?” Ellaria asked with pleasure.

Sansa went redder.

“Nothing!” she squeaked.

“All right, let’s take it once again from the top,” Ellaria continued with infernal patience; Tyene, the traitor, was grinning from ear to ear. “Why did Jaime have to get you alone today?”

“What makes you think he had to?”

Ellaria only raised an eyebrow, pointing to her daughter’s trophies with her eyes.

“Well, why does this make it about me?”

Ellaria’s eyes said two words: Bitch, please!

Oh, Mother, please let me think of a good lie! Sansa pleaded.

Nothing. She could come up with nothing. Why didn’t she lie as smoothly as the Lannister brothers or know how to turn people’s words against them like they did?!

“I don’t know why you always have to make everything about sex,” she said lamely.

Ellaria laughed.

“My poor, innocent, little dear! I am not making anything about sex.” Sansa thought it was untrue, but Ellaria went on: “It’s just that any person caught in the same room with you and Jaime begins to get goosebumps just from looking at you two! And when you dance… I wonder how many people have orgasmed just watching you perform yesterday! Hells, even Oberyn and I were turned on!”

Oh, I think it worked! It’s very bad, but at least I don’t have to answer the question!

“That’s the most nonsensical thing I’ve ever heard in my life,” Sansa said matter-of-factly.

Tyene nearly spit a mouthful of her drink and looked at her with wide eyes, seeming almost concerned for her friend.

“You can’t say you don’t feel it or notice it?!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but whatever it is — no!”

Liar, liar pants on fire!

Tyene, stupefied, took a timeout, but her mother jumped back into the ring:
“You mean you don’t notice the way he looks at you, or that you don’t realize how you look at him?” she asked patiently, shrewdly.

“I don’t look at him in any way! And he doesn’t look at me! I don’t know what the two of you are going on about!”

The Dornish women smiled knowingly.

“Honey,” Ellaria began in a sympathetic voice that was nevertheless filled with humor, “I can share with you the way I read glances. If Jaime Lannister could, he would lock you up in his bedroom, and I don’t think he’d ever let you leave. And from the looks of it, you wouldn’t mind!” she winked.

Sansa choked on her food. It took some painful minutes of coughing, getting even redder, alerting half of the restaurant staff, worrying her friends, and forcing down some water before she could breathe again.

“I’m sorry you choked, darling, but it’s the truth,” resumed the merciless Ellaria, “and I have an inkling that even you can feel it all the way down to your frozen Northern bones.”

“I can’t, and I don’t think you’re right at all,” Sansa persisted.

“Fine, but what did you talk about today — that is, if you did any taking at all?”

_Oh, no, not that again!_

“Can we please change the subject?”

“No!” mother and daughter cried in unison.

“Fine.”

_Southerners!_ It was easier to give them what they wanted right away, rather than, in addition, to live through the torture they would put you through trying to get it— they had what they wanted in the end anyway.

“I will only tell you so much, but after that, I don’t want to hear a word on the subject from either of you,” she looked at each of them pointedly. The women nodded, curiosity radiating from their faces. Sansa sighed: she doubted they would keep their wordless promise. “We both said some pretty rude things to each other yesterday evening and… um… I may have slapped him — ”

Tyene interrupted before her mother cold stop her:

“That doesn’t explain why he came by today!”

“He came to apologize,” Sansa explained. She never dreamed the effect her words would have on her listeners: Ellaria and Tyene went silent, frozen in astonishment. Some long moments elapsed before Ellaria blinked a few times and tried to clarify:

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I’m following what you’re telling us here. You and Jaime had an argument yesterday night, right?”

Sansa nodded.

“At the end of which you slapped him?”

She nodded again.
“And then he came to apologize?”

Another nod.

Ellaria leaned back heavily against the booth, as though the shock was too much for her to bear without support. Tyene just looked on, a little stupidly.

“You’re kidding?”

Sansa shook her head. Ellaria and Tyene exchanged glances then laughed — uproariously, hysterically. No matter what she did, Sansa could not get them to calm down. The whole restaurant was looking at them. Tears were in their eyes by the time they could control themselves. Ellaria motioned to the waiter and ordered champagne.

“You know, my dear,” she said to Sansa, wiping at her wet cheeks, “maybe, instead of giving you advice, I should ask you for some. I would like to be able to slap Oberyn across the face and then have him spend outrageous sums of money just to have the chance of apologizing!”

“Same,” agreed Tyene.

“And you haven’t even slept with him yet?” Ellaria asked with delight.

“What do you mean ‘yet’? I have not, nor will I ever sleep with Jaime Lannister!” Sansa exclaimed, annoyed and outraged.

Mother and daughter laughed again.

“Oh, no, please! Mother, Maiden, and Crone!”

Margery joined them at the table.

“What are you doing here?” Sansa asked, trying to prepare herself for another round of interrogation.

“Tyrion’s lunching with Tywin, and I have arranged to join you and the Sand Snakes when I learned from Tyene you were hanging out. Aren’t you happy to see me?”

“Oh, of course, I am.”

I just wish you came a few moments later — or maybe not at all, considering the topic of our conversation.

“What did I miss?” Margery asked, picking up a menu.

Ellaria, still with wonder in her eyes, decided to update her:

“Our virginal goodie-two-shoes here has Jaime Lannister in such a state that after she yells at him and slaps him, he’s only too happy to drop his defenseless credit card into my daughter’s grabbing little hands,” she pinched Tyene’s cheek lovingly, “just to be able to apologize to her.”

Margery turned to Sansa with a bemused smile. She, too, was speechless. Mother, please, be good, I need some help here!..

“Sansa!” came children’s voices.
The women turned and saw the Baratheon cherubs rush down to Sansa as their mother, her ominous face arranged in a tight smile, followed them. Tommen hugged Sansa, and Myrcella kissed her cheek. Only then did the children greet the others.

“Ah, if it isn’t the dancing club!” came Cersei’s condescending voice. “Come children, let’s go. I thought I had taught you better than to associate with the riff-raff.”

She patted them lightly on the backs, and, hanging their heads, Myrcella and Tommen continued along to the usual table at which they sat whenever their mother awarded them enough time to share a weekend brunch with them. They turned around and, noticing that she was not looking, waved a timid goodbye to their new friend. Cersei was about to follow when Ellaria held her up:

“Tell me, Cersei, in your experience of your twin, which, as all know, goes deeper than it usually does among siblings, is it quite normal for him to waste money buying time for apologies?”

“What are you talking about?” Cersei asked with dismissive exasperation.

“Just answer me this: if someone your brother knew only a few months would have slapped him across the face, would he be likely to make any effort to apologize?”

“Of course not!” Cersei snarled, and Ellaria’s grin was, by any measure, triumphant.

“Apparently, not anymore,” she said with vengeful pleasure.

“What do you mean?”

Ellaria looked as casual as if she were updating her on the weather:

“Seems like he was so out of line yesterday evening that Sansa had to slap him. Oh, but don’t worry — they’re reconciled. After he came to apologize, of course.”

During the entire conversation Sansa wished dearly she could dematerialize. The ground swallowing her whole was another very appealing option. She did not quite feel the power adrenaline had given her the night before, and by the end of Ellaria’s speech, she was genuinely scared for her life. Cersei turned on her, eyes blazing with jealousy and hatred.

Ellaria, why do you have no filter?!
“Stay away from my brother, you little whore,” Jaime’s sister hissed.

Sansa was too perturbed to answer; Ellaria was not:

“She would, if she could! But, you see, it’s Jaime, really, who’s the catalyst. He just won’t leave her alone! Imagine that?” Ellaria was positively gleeful; so were Margery and Tyene. Cersei ignored her and leaned toward Sansa, her delicate perfume stifling her unwilling interlocutor.

“Stay away from Jaime, or you will regret it,” she repeated her warning and left.

“Did you have to do that?!” Sansa barked at Ellaria when Cersei was out of sight.

“Darling, it’s for her own good! The faster we learn that a certain stage in our lives is over, the better it is in the long run!” she answered and winked.

Text from Margery Tyrell to Most Loved Little Man:

I've got the best of news. You won't believe it! Apparently, Sansa and Jaime had an argument last night, and she slapped him. Guess what? He gave Tyene his credit card for the morning to get rid of
her and APOLOGIZE to Sansa!

1 minute pause.

Text from Most Loved Little Man to Margery Tyrell:

No shit?!

Text from Most Loved Little Man to Margery Tyrell:

OMG!

Text from Most Loved Little Man to Margery Tyrell:

Wait till father hears this!

Text from Margery Tyrell to Most Loved Little Man:

I know! :D

Tommen and Myrcella were very quiet, thank the gods. They were usually far too chatty for her liking. Cersei Lannister was convinced of several things: one, that she was the most beautiful woman in the world; two, that, as such, she could do as she pleased; and three, that her twin brother would always be hers, no matter what she did. It would be difficult for Cersei to differentiate between love and possession. They seemed like natural continuations of one another. She loved being loved, knowing that someone belonged to her. Jaime was the one she liked having love her more than anyone else, because her twin had this way of loving — giving all of himself to her, leaving nothing to the rest of the world. And she liked taking his love more than anything. She had never once doubted that Jaime, her brother, her lover, would always be hers. After all, could there be a bond stronger than that of blood and flesh? The other men were distractions, amusements, diversifications. It was as though Jaime was the good red wine she always liked, but one cold not live on just one drink. She always drank red, but she never drank only red. That was how it was with Jaime and the other men. As her brother and a being almost as perfect as she, Cersei felt Jaime was the only man entitled to take her for the first time; the only man whose children she would condescend to have. She had deigned to place him on the step right below her own and considerably above everyone else. She had his children because she had realized that, one day, Jaime might want a family and could be so misguided as to consider having one. Of course, he would never leave her behind, but it would be an inconvenience — it was easier if he was alone. Besides, at the time he was so mad about her marrying Robert Baratheon, she had to do something…

Cersei liked seeing her brother come alone to father’s galas, family dinners, and other social occasions. His solitude was a silent, secret symbol of her ownership of him — like a collar. When she had first seen him with the redhead bitch, Cersei had not believed her eyes, thinking they must have simply run into each other inside. Not until Jaime had offered the little slut his arm did she begin to realize that — for the first time — Jaime had not come alone. She assumed the devious monkey had something to do with it. Although she did not believe for a moment that Jaime had any feelings for the little cunt, she disliked seeing him, her brother, her lover, accompany another woman. Cersei had lived many unpleasant minutes that evening.

The way father could not stop showing the whore off was infuriating — how could he not realize, she had wondered illogically, that this was all a farce? A façade necessary to prevent her and Jaime from being discovered?

Jaime was a good actor, she had thought, as she had watched them interact. You could almost
believe that he liked the girl. But even Jaime could not keep up the charade too long, and he had left
the Stark whore after the foxtrot. Tyrion, unsurprisingly, had tried spoiling her evening with the
annoying chatter of weddings and children. Cersei enjoyed humiliating people who annoyed her —
it was one of her many useful gifts. Besides, making the Stark slut realize how infinitely beneath her
and her twin she was would clear her and Tyrion’s ugly heads of any ideas. Sansa’s eyes, full of
fury, had unsettled her a little, and even though the girl had danced fairly well, Cersei waited with
patience for the pleasurable moment when Sansa would stumble onto the pause. She had not
expected Jaime to interfere with her plan.

She had not liked the way he watched the girl when they danced. There was unmistakable lust in his
eyes, which she knew well, but there was something more — an odd admiration that looked almost
like adoration. She could not say for sure if he had ever looked at her this way; certainly not in a
while. This was all the children’s fault — they created unnecessary complications. Like when he had
flown off the handle when she had refused him shared custody: the very notion was ridiculous!
Nevertheless, it was Cersei’s policy to be safe rather than sorry, and she had demanded, with every
right to it, that he dismiss the girl from the company. His uncompromising refusal had
surprised her, but it would not last — after all, whenever she wanted anything from any man, sex
was the answer. Withhold it, and he would gladly do her bidding. Jaime, like most men, was rather
simple in this way. She did not allow herself to doubt — that was just a way of getting early
wrinkles. She would wait. After all, good things always come…

Tyrion had been awakened at the ungodly hour of eight in the morning by the buzzing of his phone
and greeted by the ghastly voice of his father’s personal assistant.

My gods, but Ramsay Bolton sounds like a serial killer! Perhaps, that’s why father’s hired him —
there’s little anyone won’t do to end a conversation with the creep as quickly as possible, Tyrion
thought as he wiggled out from under Margery, who, even in her sleep, was rather hard to shake off.
Tyrion could grumble all he wanted, but he treasured the way she clung to him in slumber — it never
failed to make his heart jump as happily as a puppy. He was surprised when Ramsay explained that
Mr. Lannister wanted to lunch with him that same day. The son had expected his father to find time
for him within a month of the gala, maybe two weeks — but not on the next day. He assured
Ramsay the Creep that he was free to lunch with “Lord Lannister,” and crawled into bed, where
Margery’s arms cuddled him back to sleep. It seemed he was only dozing for a few minutes, but the
uncompromising alarm clock soon announced the official beginning of the day.

Now, hours after Ramsay’s disturbing voice had invaded Tyrion’s morning, he was seated in front of
his father at the restaurant atop the Red Keep, one of the tallest skyscrapers in the city (read: the
world) that took its name from the historical site located in its vicinity. Tywin Lannister frequently
lunched there. His favorite table was always ready for him, always kept unoccupied in the
expectation of his arrival, even if the Lannister patriarch was not coming. They had just ordered,
when Tyrion’s phone buzzed. Disliking having to take out his phone in his father’s presence, he
looked discreetly at the screen — it was a text from Margery.

“I thought I had at least taught you that staring at your phone at mealtime is the height of bad
manners,” Tywin commented drily.

“Sorry, father,” Tyrion apologized. Was he four, to be reprimanded in this way? And worse: how
could he, a man in his early thirties, still be affected by the admonition? “It’s from Margery…” he
said and returned to reading the text. He had to re-read it; and re-read it a few more times, before a
happy smile that illuminated the world with brotherly love spread across his face. He quickly typed
the replies and turned to Tywin. “You’ll never guess what happened!”

Tywin’s aspect indicated that he did not care for this expression.
“Apparently, Jaime and Sansa had an argument, which ended with her slapping him.”

Tywin’s face fell, and Tyrion paused. Satisfied with the effect, the son continued:

“And, it seems, Jaime gave his credit card to her roommate, Tyene Sand, so that he could apologize to Sansa.”

Tywin looked very pleased.

“Good,” was all he said. “Now, you and I — will you put your phone away for one hour, Tyrion?! — we must discuss how to ensure that Jaime and that lovely girl spend as much time together as possible.”

“And how will we arrange that?”

“I understand that in your line of work,” Why does he say it as though we run a drug dealing ring?, “there’s a constant need to invent something new, isn’t that right?”

“Of course,” Tyrion said, still wondering what his father had come up with.

“Any new ballets you’re planning?”

“There’s one we’ve been brainstorming for, yes.”

What did the old tyrant have in mind?

“And Jaime will be the male lead?”

“Yes.” Ladies and gentlemen, today: Tywin Lannister — the bleeding obvious! “Father, where are you going with this?”

“Tyrion, if you haven’t caught up yet, you’re a fool!” His son was silent, and Tywin went on: “Don’t scowl, it makes you look like one of my late uncles. Sansa should be cast to perform the female lead — nothing could be simpler, really, especially considering her outstanding talent.”

Damn. That was a good idea! All the rehearsals, the dancing, the late nights spent polishing steps. Tyrion grinned and was shocked to see a mirroring expression on his father’s face. It was odd for him, plotting something with his father — the last time they had done so was the night before Jaime had been arrested and charged with murder. No less odd for Tyrion was seeing his father smile: watching the thin lips, always grim, express anything other than coldness created a major cognitive dissonance in Tyrion’s mind.

“What is the plot of the ballet?” Tywin inquired.

They had never talked about ballet before; usually, Tywin avoided discussing his sons’ careers, unless it was in an attempt to persuade Jaime and Tyrion to give them up. He had never before expressed an interest in what they were creating. Tyrion felt oddly nervous. He cleared his throat.

“The oldest story in the world, really. A king invades a land, where he discovers the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Unwittingly killing her betrothed at her wedding, he takes the young woman prisoner and, with his army in tow, returns to his kingdom. There, the King’s mistress has anxiously awaited his return, but he ignores her, captivated by the beautiful woman he had discovered during his conquest of the foreign land. No matter what he does, the beauty rejects him, but he no longer wants his mistress, whose attempts to win back his love prove unsuccessful. Finally, the mistress, driven to madness by jealousy, comes to her rival’s bedchamber to kill her, and is surprised to find that her unwilling adversary wants nothing more than death. Though she’s in awe of her rival’s beauty and courage, the mistress kills her before the King and his guards can stop her. The King tries to execute the murderess with his own hand but cannot, so he orders her to be thrown
from the wall of his castle. She falls to her death, leaving him alone and unconsolled.” Tyrion took a
breath, surprised that his father had not interrupted. “I think Sansa will be wonderful as the prisoner,”
he added.

“On the contrary — Sansa should play the mistress,” Tywin countered as though it were self-evident.

Tyrion could not believe his ears.

“The rejected mistress?”

“The loving, seducing mistress, who is so passionately enamored of her beloved, she’s ready to kill
her rival at the risk of her own life,” Tywin clarified. Seeing his son’s incomprehension, he explained
his line of thought: “The reason Jaime is not doing everything in his power to win Sansa over,
regardless of how he may feel about her, is because he fears rejection. Much like you did when you
and Margery had first grown close — before you ran into each other one night when you were too
drunk to be afraid…”

*How in the Seven Hells does father know that?*!

“Who told you about this?” Tyrion asked in a tone that was none too friendly. Tywin did not reveal
much:

“I have my sources,” he admitted and returned to the earlier point of discussion: “Jaime’s case is
worse, I’m afraid. His fear of rejection is so colossal, he cannot see through it long enough to
overcome denial and admit to himself what he wants.”

“Have you been taking Psychology courses at King’s Landing University while we weren’t
looking?” Tyrion quipped.

“Your misplaced humor is not appreciated, Tyrion. Jaime does not need to be rejected — he needs to
be loved and seduced. Which is why you,” Tywin pointed at his younger son with his index finger,
“will make sure that Sansa Stark is cast as a loving and passionate character rather than a cold and
rejecting one.”

Regardless of his surprise at his father’s oddly profound analysis of Jaime’s truly hopeless case or
Tywin’s knowledge of his own relationship with Margery, Tyrion had to admit the truth behind his
father’s words. Sansa could indeed come across as reserved and unapproachable, but when she
danced, she had the power to enchant and tempt. And if Jaime saw her in the role of a woman who
loved him desperately enough to commit murder — something he himself knew a thing or two about
— he could find the image enticing enough to risk his pride and his understanding of his own
identity and dive in. Tyrion could not help the conspiratorial grin that twisted his lips.

“I see you’re finally on the same page,” Tywin said and raised his wine glass. “To the new
production of the Lannister Ballet Company,” he toasted, and they clinked their glasses. Tyrion was
surprised that his father could drink to the success of his and Jaime’s company without choking.

Meanwhile, the girls had finished their brunch and had walked around long enough to find a nearby
coffee shop very inviting. They sat down at a table on an open terrace, enjoying the sun, and gave
their orders. Ellaria’s eyes were closed and a smile of contentment was playing on her lips. She took
a few minutes to enjoy the sun, then turned to her friends.

"I’m actually very glad we’re all here,” she began; Tyene looked giddy for some reason, and Ellaria
brushed her cheek with exceeding gentleness. "There are some news I would like to share with you.”

Margery and Sansa looked at her curiously.
"Oberyn and I are going to have another child," she said with a joyful smile. "Tyene is all grown up now, and we still have strength for one more, I think."

Margery and Sansa squealed and jumped to embrace her.

"How long have you known?" Sansa exclaimed.

"Do you know if it will be a boy or a girl?" asked Margery.

"Margery, look at her, she isn’t even showing yet! How can they possibly know?!" Sansa laughed, remembering all the excitement that had surrounded her mother’s latest pregnancy and Rickon’s birth. She was so happy for Ellaria.

"You’re not leaving the company, are you?" asked Margery with concern.

“I’ll keep teaching until I have the baby in my studio," Ellaria said with determination. “I’ll have to stop performing for a time, but I’ll be back soon after I give birth — it’s nothing I haven’t done before!” she said, winking at her daughter.

Sansa took her hands in hers.
"I’m so happy for you," she said with feeling. "And for this world, too — how wonderful to have one more of your family in it! I hope you let me babysit, once you think the baby is old enough: I am fully qualified, what with three younger siblings. Besides, I know you’ll want to get some time alone with your husband," she added.

"Oh, Mother! Sansa, did you just make an inappropriate joke?" Margery exclaimed.

Sansa looked at her aghast and turned a deep shade of red.

"What? No! That’s not what I meant at all!.."

The plot of the ballet comes from one of the most beautiful, famous, and tragic Russian ballets — The Fountain of Bakhchisarai.

Chapter End Notes

The plot of the ballet Tyrion describes to Tywin comes from one of the most beautiful, famous, and tragic Russian ballets — The Fountain of Bakhchisarai.

Please leave reviews and kudos — they make me so happy! :)


The next day, she had Oberyn’s masterclass. When Tyene and she entered, her friend’s father exclaimed:

"Ah, there you are! Tyene, snaky, you go stand with the others, and you," he pointed to Sansa, "come stand by me."

With a look of confusion in Tyene’s direction, Sansa approached him. Oberyn was busying himself with the laptop, which was connected to the projector. The projector was not on, but, looking at the computer screen, Sansa noticed that he had pulled up a webpage from the most popular dancing videos website in the Seven Kingdoms and beyond. Sansa was unnerved by the unusual situation. After he had arranged everything to his satisfaction, Oberyn turned to look at the group.

"When Sansa first came to my studio," Oberyn began, "I thought to myself: how much beauty and grace, but no fire! So, as you all know, I called her Sparkle, and I think it’s a most appropriate nickname. Sansa may look like one of those Northern snowflakes, but that won’t fool me anymore. She’s a deceitful snowflake, who masquerades as frozen water but is really something else! Now, we all know that Sparkle works harder than is healthy for a human being to do, and I’m proud to say that her work, her dedication, and her passion for dancing has paid off. Her first class, she was one of the stiffest and most awkward improvisers I had ever seen." Sansa was reddening with embarrassment at his critical words. Suddenly, Oberyn scooped her up and sat her on his left shoulder, simultaneously projecting the webpage for all to see. "Students, I give you one of the best improvised performances I had the pleasure of seeing in my entire life. By our very own Sparkle."

Still keeping her on his shoulder, as if she were a child, Oberyn hit play. It was her and Jaime’s dance from the gala. One of the guests must have recorded it and put it online. Perhaps, the official photographers had captured it with their cameras — the quality of the recording was very good. Sansa could not recognize herself in Jaime’s partner. The couple was so beautiful, more alive than anything she had ever seen. Their movements certain and perfect, they looked as if they had performed this dance hundreds of times before. She kept looking at Jaime, but then the somewhat delayed realization that she was seeing herself hit her and drew her eyes to the female dancer. The young woman’s expression was inspired, her blazing eyes fixed on her partner’s face. Sansa had never seen a face so foreign to her or so transfixed with passion. Surely, this young woman with eyes that spoke of fervor and determination could not be she, Sansa Stark of Winterfell? Then, she looked back at Jaime, and her heart skipped a beat when she saw his face. Now that his hands were not on her body and his presence did not fill her mind to the brink, until she felt she could take in no more feeling, no more images, she saw the passion which had transformed her own features mirrored in his eyes. Her heart leapt in her chest, but she caught it with both hands before it could fly away — it was not for her, this passion; it was just the way he danced. She need not project her own emotions onto him. She must not.

She tried watching the dance as, over the years, she had watched thousands of other videos on this website, but could not. She kept recalling the feeling of being alone with him in a room full of people, of existing in a universe where she could drown in his eyes with every one of her breaths and feel the warmth of his hands on her waist, sense his strong body move in harmony with hers. She
was again mesmerized by him, her mind and body catching fire at her memories. But, as it had during the gala, the dance was over soon. She was still perched on Oberyn’s shoulder, when the video had ended. The Dornishman said loudly:

"A round of applause for Sansa, ladies and gentlemen! A round of applause!" They all clapped, smiling, admiring, a little surprised. Oberyn put her back on her feet and gave her a graceful bow. "Sparkle," he said, "I’ve nothing more to teach you, I’m afraid."

Martell began the class, but Sansa kept feeling curious looks directed at her. Loras whispered "bravo" when they formed a line to begin their improvisations, and Tyene, like she had done on several occasions before, clasped Sansa’s hand with feeling, a happy smile on her face.

When the shock Oberyn had dealt her wore off somewhat, which had not happened until sometime after the masterclass was over, Sansa’s brain was paralyzed by one terrifying thought. Oh. My. Gods. Horror overcame her. Mother! Her terror increased. Oh, no! As if in confirmation of her fears, when she looked at her phone, dreading to see unanswered calls from her parents, she was greeted by two messages. One from Ygritte, the other from Talisa.

Text from Ygritte to Sansa:

**Girl! R u fuckin the Kingslayer?! ;D**

*Oh no,* was all Sansa could think. The apocalypse had begun. She looked at the other message.

Text from Talisa to Sansa:

*Hey, friend! Ygritte’s just sent me a video of you and Jaime Lannister dancing. You look really beautiful. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you dance like that. Just in case, I’m not showing it to Robb, unless you want me to. :)*

Maybe there was still a chance to fix this. If she was very, very lucky, that is.

Text from Sansa to Ygritte:

*Yg! 1) NOT sleeping with JL 2) Show that video to anyone else in the family besides Talisa, and I’ll never call you a friend again! I’m serious. And gods forbid Jon ever sees it! Please, don’t do this to me!*

Text from Sansa to Talisa:

*Thank you, darling! PLEASE DO NOT TELL ROBB OR ANYONE IN THE FAMILY ABOUT THAT!*

Text from Talisa to Sansa:

*Sure thing, friend! :)*

Her frantic, panic-stricken mind was estimating the likelihood of anyone else in her family finding out. Father did not even know the website existed. Unless someone showed him the video, he would never see it. Luckily, except herself, no one in his acquaintance was actually connected with dancing in any way. And what Ned Stark did not know could not hurt him; or lead him to filicide and double murder. Mother *did* know about the website, but only because Sansa periodically brought her own laptop to Catelyn to show her something she liked. Mother did not have an account there, so she would not receive any notifications. Like father, unless shown, Catelyn would never see the video.
Her train of thought was interrupted with,

Text from Ygritte to Sansa:

*Girl, you sound a little too defensive. You need to get laid. ;P But ok, not sharing the video with anyone. You guys look hot, though. I almost wish I could show it to Jon, just to see his reaction. Don’t worry – I won’t, i won’t. ;) But, girl, fuck that man — I bet he’d show you a good time! ;)*

Sansa let out a breath. At least Ygritte was not being too difficult. Her mind returned to her list. Jon and Robb had not seen the video; they did not know about the website, and they did not care for dancing; and since Ygritte and Talisa were being silenced by her pleading and threatening texts, that was covered. Arya would rather eat her own sports shoes than watch anything dance-related. Sansa had never been more grateful for her sister’s lack of interest in her profession. Bran was interested in dancing no more than Jon or Robb. Rickon was a baby, thank the gods, and one who did not like dancing either, always sleeping as he was through her performances. That was it, wasn’t it? She was safe! But another dreadful thought came to her.

*Theon.*

That, on the other hand, was bad. She hated Robb’s friend, who always went out of his way to make her life miserable. Speak of the Stranger, and he doth appear. Her screen lit up with,

Text from Prick Greyjoy to Sansa Stark:

*Someone’s having waaay too much fun in KL. Have your parents seen this yet? I’m pretty sure they’ll be curious to know their little girl’s eyefucking the Kingslayer. Or is it just fucking?*

Her heart dropped.

*Damn it, damn it, damn it! DAMN HIM! Think, Sansa, think!*

Then, an idea occurred to her.

Text from Sansa to Ygritte:

*I need a favor. Greyjoy’s seen the video and is threatening to show it to mom and dad. Please tell him not to. He’s scared of you. Pretty please?*

Text from Ygritte to Sansa:

*On it, girl! Don’t fret. :) But do me a favor, then — think about fucking the Kingslayer, will ya? ;)*

Text from Jon’s Redhead Murderess to GreyFuckerJoyless:

*Theon, if anyone sees that video of Sansa and the Lannister, I will personally show you everything I’ve learned in Dr. Mormont’s operating room. WITHOUT anesthesia. Got it?*

5 minute pause.

Text from GreyFuckerJoyless to Jon’s Redhead Murderess:

*Fine, I won’t. Chill, Yg. Please.*

Two days after Oberyn’s wife had announced the happy news to her friends and a day after Sansa had temporarily managed a potential crisis, Jaime Lannister entered Ellaria’s studio at the beginning of the master class. Ellaria had not arrived yet. As soon as he walked in, the laughter and talking
ceased, replaced by a silence that sizzled with apprehension. Sansa, who had by then realized that Jaime’s bark was worse than his bite, found this a little amusing. After all, if he did not murder her on the spot for slapping him across the face, surely, her peers had nothing to fear from him for talking before the class had even begun.

"I’m glad to see you lot still remember me," he stated with a smirk, which showed he understood that their apprehension was explained by the collective trauma he had given them the last time they had met during his masterclass. Sansa bit back her smile. "Ellaria isn’t coming today," he continued, "the lazy woman didn’t feel like teaching you loafs this morning."

Sansa turned to Tyene with a worried frown and whispered:

"Where’s your mother?"

Her friend glanced at Jaime and smiled warmly.

"Jaime and Tyrion managed to get her as a patient to the best obstetrician in the city — maester Luwin. He delivered even Tommen and Myrcella Baratheon! He’s so renowned, he doesn’t take new patients anymore, but when the Lannisters ask…” She did not need to finish. You don’t refuse a Lannister.

Sansa was surprised to learn that master Luwin, whose patient her mother had been since she had Robb, had also delivered Jaime’s children.

Meanwhile, Jaime was saying:

"Now, seeing as Ellaria will not be here today, I’ve got you all to myself." He paused, and Sansa took a deep breath, beginning the mental mobilization of courage and strength for seven hours of dancing. "We will continue what you’ve been doing in her class," he added casually, and Sansa was certain she was not the only one who had breathed a sigh of relief.

She was surprised by how well Jaime taught Ellaria’s class. Like during his own masterclass, he corrected the students’ movements with a careless air that was at odds with his ability to notice even the smallest imperfections. Sansa felt enormous relief when he did not refer to her as "minx," or behave differently with her than the other students. Of course, she preferred the professional tone he had adopted with her during class. She did not at all feel as though she wasn’t given enough attention. She did not suspect how many jokes Jaime had to swallow, trying as he was to be considerate.

In the middle of the class, Jaime spotted his little brother coming toward the studio accompanied by a young man with dark, curly hair that reached almost to his shoulders. They stopped by the open doors, and Jaime did not like the way the young man’s eyes had immediately focused on Sansa, nor the way his face had lit up with a smile, which announced that he had missed her. No, Jaime Lannister did not like that at all. He liked even less that the moment Sansa caught sight of the intruder, she paused mid-movement and, with a cry of delight, rushed to the young man and threw herself into his harms, kissing his cheeks and laughing.

Who the fuck was he?!

"What are you doing here?" Sansa was questioning excitedly, and Jaime wondered, with displeasure, if he had ever seen her so happy. He approached the pair with an expression more menacing than he realized.

"Mother mentioned you were sad when you were talking a few days ago, so I cleared my schedule
as quickly as I could to come and make sure you were all right," the dark-haired youth was saying.

*So she knows his family, too…*

"You’re such a dear to have come!" The minx hugged the young man again and turned to Jaime, a thrilled smile still on her lips and pleading in her eyes. "Oh, Jaime, do you mind if I skip the rest of the class?"

*Do I mind?!*

Sansa was going to skip *his* class because of some somber looking kid, who was not nearly good enough for her? *Was she kidding?!*

"Of course — " *I mind* he began saying, but Tyrion, nasty little monkey, cut him off before he could finish:

"… he doesn’t mind at all! You kids go and have fun! Sparkle, show Jon all there is to see in the city when one has only a day!"

*At least he wasn’t staying.*

Letting out a squeal, which Jaime considered entirely undignified, Sansa quickly gathered her belongings and left with Jon — *whoever the fuck he was.*

Tyrion looked at his fuming brother with amusement, enjoying the sight of Jaime’s jealousy, when his sibling turned on him in fury:

"Why in seven hells do you think you can allow *my* student to leave *my* classroom without *my* permission?!” he growled, and Tyrion chuckled. *So many my’s.* After watching with satisfaction how Jaime’s angry eyes had followed Jon and Sansa down the corridor, he took pity on his elder brother.

"Jaime, the young man is Jon Stark, he came to see his sister,” Tyrion said in an artificially indifferent tone and observed with satisfaction how his brother’s face became a palette on which relief mixed with annoyance. *Father’s right. Jaime’s in denial. Big time. He’s probably imagining now that he was merely concerned for Sansa’s general well-being.* (His brother was, in fact, telling himself just that,) Tyrion continued in the same careless voice: “Unlike in our family, the relationships between the Stark siblings are rather uncomplicated and ordinary — dull even.” He swore he could see Jaime’s eyes blaze with additional rage for a moment. "Besides,” he noted casually, "Jon Stark has a girlfriend, Ygritte, the sister of that very Tormund, who still thirsts for your blood over your treatment of Sansa."

"*My* treatment of Sansa?"

Before Jaime could tell him everything he thought about this comment, Tyrion decided to remind him that he had a masterclass to finish:

"Your students eagerly await, Ser Jaime," he said and was rewarded with a deadly glare. If looks could kill, Jaime’s eyes might have done something his lawyer would have regretted.

"Who was that angry-looking fellow who seemed to want nothing more than to snap my neck?" Jon asked when Sansa had re-emerged from the changing room and they were walking toward the exit. All the while, Sansa kept repeating to herself like a mantra: *If he had seen that video, you would have known it by now. He simply talked to mom, who has not seen it either. You’d hear of it if she had.*
"Who, Jaime?" she asked, recalling that the Lannister had looked rather angry for some reason. I should not have asked to skip the class... But Jon's only here for so little time...

"How would I know?" Jon answered. "The tall one, with blond hair."

Oh, thank the gods! He has NOT seen that video. Otherwise, he would not have been asking me who Jaime was.


"The Kingslayer?" Jon did not even pretend to hide his surprise — or displeasure.

"Don't call him that, but yes."

"Why not?" Jon questioned. She only shrugged by way of an answer, and he continued: "When you said you were going to the Lannister Ballet Company, I don't think any of us realized he'd be teaching you." He sounded a little reproachful and quite worried.

"Jaime only does so very rarely," Sansa admitted and decided to speak of something safer and more pleasant: "I cannot believe you flew here all the way from the Wall just to check on me!"

The Wall Hospital and Medical School, renowned for its clean air and outstanding professionals, was where Jon studied to be a surgeon under Jeor Mormont's mentorship.

"Of course, I did," her brother replied, and she smiled.

When they were very young children, who had been born only one year apart, Jon and Sansa had a little bit of a war for their mother's affection. The siblings' jealousy caused Catelyn a lot of trouble. As they grew older, however, they became closer. Jon's quiet nature made him Sansa's confidant after she had a fight with her best friend, Jeyne Poole. When Sansa, and not Jeyne, was cast in the leading role for the Winterfell Academy of Ballet Children Production, her friend told Sansa she would never forgive her. That evening, Catelyn brought his ten-year-old sister home from ballet practice, and Jon noticed that Sansa had been crying. He was quick to forget the antagonism that usually colored their interactions, and kept patiently asking her what was the matter for as long as it took her to tell him about Jeyne. Unlike Catelyn, who, dismissing the gravity little Sansa perceived in the fight, urged her daughter to make peace, Jon told his sister that Jeyne was an envious, mean girl and did not deserve to be her friend. Sansa had been surprised to find such support in her rival for mother's affection. This incident had initiated a truce, in the course of which they became close friends, who shared secrets, dreams, and daily troubles. Sansa was the first to know of Jon's infatuation with Ygritte, for instance. One night, shortly after the first school year when Jon was not at home had begun (and she missed him terribly), he had called her from college, complaining about a wanton girl who was making fun of him. After a detailed interrogation by Sansa, Jon grudgingly admitted that he liked Ygritte despite her beastliness. His sister encouraged him to pay the girl a little more attention, rightly guessing that teasing was her way of making Jon notice her. In other words, Jon and Sansa were more than siblings — they were best friends.

"Mother and I spoke a few days ago, and she sounded upset," Jon was saying, "After some questioning, I found out you had called her earlier, crying. She said it was only homesickness, but I wanted to make sure it was nothing more. You're lucky I've convinced Robb not to fly down as well, or you would have both of us sleeping on your couch tonight."

"I don't think you and Robb would fit on that one couch. Honestly, I doubt you alone will be comfortable, either," she said. "How's he doing? I haven't spoken to him in the past two weeks."
Robb, the eldest Stark child, was a little wild. No particularly troublesome event had stained his biography, but, unlike Jon, who was serious and reserved, Robb was a careless party animal. He took two gap years between high school and college to go hitchhiking across the Seven Kingdoms and the Free Cities, doing side-jobs to get the little money he needed. Catelyn and Eddard had been seriously worried about his future. Then, during his time in a Volantis ER, where he had been forced to pay a visit after a small brawl the night before, Robb had met Talisa Maegyr, a serious and level-headed girl, who volunteered at the hospital during her gap year and dreamed of going to the University of Highgarden to get a degree in public health. Robb, who had fallen deeply in love with her, applied to the same school. He was now studying engineering, which surprised his family even more than his decision to pursue higher education. Needless to say, the way she had put Robb on the right path forever endeared Talisa to Catelyn and Ned Stark.

"He’s still studying engineering, if that’s what you’re asking," Jon joked, "and Talisa still puts up with him, thank gods… But I’m more interested to know how you’ve been doing."

"I’m all right," she said. "As you know, I have friends, who are wonderful, if occasionally aggravating."

They called each other at least a few times a week, and she had told him all about Tyene, Margery, Tyrion, Ellaria, Oberyn, Brienne, and Tormund. All of them… Except Jaime.

“You know, Tormund keeps sending Ygritte updates on you — I enjoy listening to them. He’s worried you aren’t eating much — ”

“I eat enough!”

“Don’t get so defensive, ballerina. As long as the Northern wind cannot blow you away too easily — ” She punched him on the arm. “Ouch!” he exclaimed, faking pain. "By the way, have you heard that Arya knocked some sense into a kid who claimed you were a Southerner?"

"I have!" Sansa smiled.

"Thank the Warrior someone is left to defend family honor!" Jon declared with mock concern.

They laughed, then he suddenly turned serious, as if an afterthought occurred to him.

"Sansa, why does Jaime Lannister look at you like Robb does when Talisa smiles at any other guy, even if he’s ninety years old?"

No! She was not about to hear that from Jon. She would not read anything into Jaime’s anger today — he was annoyed, because Jon and she had interrupted his class. That was all. She would not allow herself to remember the expression she had first noticed on his face in the video Oberyn had showed in class and which she had, secretly, found and re-watched many times on her own.

"Jon, that’s nonsense. Don’t be silly. Jaime Lannister thinks himself the best thing that has happened to this world since Eldric Shadowchaser. Believe me, he’s far too high and mighty to be looking with jealousy at anyone."

Jon looked almost convinced. Thank the Mother he was not as persistent as the Sand Snakes.

"If you think so, all the better. But I still don’t like him."

"I give you leave to dislike him all you want," she said. "Now, where do you want to go for lunch?"

Jon made an expression of mock astonishment:
"You mean you will actually eat real human food and not whatever you and the rest of the Children of the Forest consume on a daily basis?!

"You know, I can always take you to a wonderful little restaurant that serves exclusively salads," she suggested with an evil grin.

Jon’s face fell.

"Have mercy, Sansa. I did not fly all this way to eat some tasteless leaves of no nutritional value!"

"No, you flew here to see me!" she replied with amusement. "What do you care if we eat salads or steaks?" Noticing her brother’s dejected face, she took his hand in hers and said: "But, seeing as I will never have it said about me that I let my own brother starve, I guess I’ll have to feed you some grilled meat, after all."

"Please," Jon sighed in relief. It was one thing to drop everything and come see Sansa; it was a wholly different matter to be deprived of a good meal in the process.

By the time Jaime had finished the masterclass, he was in a thoroughly bad mood. The day had somehow lost its charm without the minx, though he would break his own legs before admitting this. He found Tyrion lounging in his office.

"Don’t you have some work to do, fundraising or in some other useful capacity?" he grumbled. Tyrion was surprisingly pleased by his rude words.

"Are you still sore because you didn’t get to ruin Sansa’s day with a brother she misses and doesn’t see very often? You cannot possibly be so callous."

"I think she shouldn’t jeopardize her career because one of her siblings — of which she has more than some rabbits do — dropped down like unexpected snow."

Tyrion had the audacity to laugh, but Jaime cut off his guffaw with an angry look.

"I see Sansa’s a touchy subject," his little brother observed with humor. "Anyway, we must discuss the casting for the upcoming ballet."

"What’s there to discuss?"

"Ellaria’s pregnant and cannot perform, so we need to figure out who’ll get the part of the mistress."

When he had first learned of her pregnancy, Tyrion could not believe his luck. Then, he wondered irrationally if his father had anything to do with it, but realized just in time that he was being paranoid. Even Tywin Lannister could not regulate other people’s reproductive decisions. Thank the gods for small mercies. Regardless, the happy coincidence provided Tyrion with a perfect segue into the cunning plan he and father had cooked up. Jaime interrupted his thoughts:

"I’m guessing you have someone in mind," he said.

Tyrion decided to play coy:

"I do. Don’t you?"

"No, I don’t." Jaime sounded annoyed.

What crawled up his ass, anyway? Tyrion wondered. He could not, rationally speaking, be jealous of Jon Stark? Oh, wait, jealousy was not rational. He was jealous of Sansa’s brother. All was even
"All right, I was thinking that Sansa Stark could take on the part."

There was silence. Tyrion watched Jaime’s face very carefully and was almost disturbed to find his brother’s expression unreadable even to his experienced eyes. Whatever Jaime was grappling with, it affected him enough to place an impenetrable mask on his features — in their family, Tyrion knew, a sure sign of considerable emotional strain.

"She hasn’t completed the three masterclasses," Jaime finally objected.

Oh, for Crone’s sake!

"Jaime, she’s the only person in more than a decade long history of this ballet company to have danced an extra round in your masterclass. She’s ready for the stage. We both know that."

Why is he frowning now?

"I'll consider making an exception."

Tyrion’s patience was running out.

"Oh, why do you have to be so tiresome?! Jaime, there’s nothing to consider! She dances better than anyone in this company, with the possible exception of you, and maybe Margery and the Martells."

She does, echoed in Jaime’s mind, and when she steps onto the stage, there will be a lot of people other than her brother dropping in to see her. But the minx dreamed of this; and she deserved it more than anyone.

"Fine," was all he said.

He had no way of holding her back, even if he wanted. Besides, the minx was not his to keep.

"Great," Tyrion said, looking all too pleased with himself. "I’ll send out the necessary emails tomorrow."

Catelyn Stark, her husband, and their youngest children were seated before the fireplace in the family room. Catelyn was embroidering, a task with which she occupied herself more often now that Sansa was far away. Looking through various designs, choosing the right colors of threads, and making careful stitches had been their joint amusement for many years, and it now made Catelyn feel as though her daughter was a little closer. Arya and Bran, faces screwed with concentration and competitiveness, were playing Cyvasse on the floor. Rickon was dozing in his father’s arms, lulled to sleep by the excerpt his father had read to him aloud from yet another history book that engrossed him, but not his youngest son. This evening, like all the others, Catelyn felt acutely that three of her children were missing — Robb’s loud jokes, Jon’s serious face, Sansa’s girly laughter. With a small sigh, Catelyn returned her attention to the canvas. A few moments later, the laptop, always opened in the evenings in case one of the children used RavenTime to call instead of the phone, began to make the happiest sound in the world — one that announced she would soon see one of her babies. The whole family was alerted by the sound — Arya and Bran forgot their game; Ned raised his eyes from the book expectantly; even little Rickon awoke. Catelyn reached the laptop first and was overjoyed — it was a joint call from all three of her elder children. On the screen, split into three boxes, Sansa, Robb and Talisa, and Jon and Ygritte’s smiling faces appeared. The remaining Stark family sat on the couch, placing the laptop on the coffee table before them.

"Well, what is it?" Robb was asking Sansa impatiently. "Now that everyone is gathered, can you
finally tell?" He received a gentle smack on the arm from Talisa for his inability to wait.

"What is going on?" Catelyn inquired, smiling, infected by the excitement that was radiating from their faces. Sansa especially looked agitated.

"I've no idea," supplied Jon. "She just called, squealing, requested we all RavenTime and call you — won't say anything."

"She will, if you and your brother will just shut your loud mouths for one moment," Ygritte proposed.

"Sweet girl," said Ned to Sansa, his solidarity with Ygritte clear, "you have some good news, seems to me. Why don't we all listen to you?"

Sansa took a breath, and words tumbled from her mouth, her unusually high-pitched voice filled with pride and joy:

"I got a part in the Lannister Ballet Company's next production!"

There was a short moment of silence, then all spoke at once:

"Oh, my darling, that's so great!" (Catelyn)

"What's the plot?" (Bran)

"HA! Sansa, girl, you'll kill it!" (Ygritte)

"Is it the leading role?" (Robb)

"Are you going to play a damsel in distress?" (Arya)

"Congratulations, sweet girl — you more than deserve it!" (Ned)

"Sansa, congratulations, I'm sure you'll be the most beautiful dancer on that stage!" (Talisa)

"Is the Lannister going to be performing in it as well?" (Jon)

Sansa was laughing happily, catching a few words here and there, without even trying to make sense of the jumble. Finally, Catelyn shushed them all and turned to her daughter:

"Darling, we're all so happy for you, so proud of you! Tell us a little more about the ballet."

"Well, it's a love story, of course," she began.

"Of course," Arya grumbled in disappointment.

"I think you might like this one," said Sansa, smiling, and Arya considered her with surprise. Normally her elder sister said, "you're just too little to understand" or, "you're a tomboy, that's why you don't appreciate it." But Sansa smiled at her with love instead of the usual pout, and Arya was moved. The youngest Stark girl cared more about her sister's opinions than anyone would have guessed; and though she took pride in her wild, unladylike ways, Arya was a little hurt that Sansa dismissed her undertakings and fights as "childish behavior" or "her tomboy ways."

"It's about a king, Azor, who takes prisoner a beautiful woman named Tanea, with whom he falls in love. He returns to his kingdom with her, but Tanea wants nothing to do with him. Then, the king's mistress, Nissa, who waited anxiously for him to come back to her, grows mad with jealousy and murders Tanea. The king, unable to kill Nissa himself, has his guards throw her from the castle's walls. The last scene is of the king sitting alone, looking absent-mindedly into the waters of a
"Well, that’s quite a tragic story," said Ned.

"And you were cast as Tanea?" asked Catelyn.

"See, I told you!" Arya exclaimed, "I told you she’d be the damsel in distress!"

They all looked to Sansa, who seemed triumphant, a small smile of delight on her lips.

“I’m not going to be dancing the part of Tanea. I was cast as Nissa."

There was silence. Except Ygritte and Talisa, they all had last seen Sansa dance in Winterfell, and the girl who had graced the Northern stage could not perform the part of a seductive mistress — they knew that.

"You are going to be the murderous mistress?" Arya said in disbelief, but there was a hint of interest and admiration in her brazen eyes.

"Well, little heart," Catelyn spoke in a voice that was slightly apprehensive, "I’m sure it will be exciting if perhaps a little… challenging."

"Well, of course, it will be challenging!" Sansa exclaimed with nervous laughter. "It’s my first time performing an important role in a major company. Not to mention that it will be an original composition! But I am so excited, aren’t you?"

They hummed and nodded their acquiescence, one thought on the minds of the Starks: What were they thinking, these so-called "professionals" of the Lannister Ballet Company? Have they never seen Sansa dance that, instead of casting her as a reserved, virtuous girl, they have given her the part of a murderous and jealous woman?

Only Arya was thinking: What happened to Sansa if she’s **excited** to perform the part of a jealous mistress?!

Chapter End Notes

Please review and leave kudos, it will make me so happy! :)


Invenzione

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

In art history, invenzione (invention) is a word most often encountered in connection with Renaissance but also later Western art. It refers to the creative power that brings art into being and the artist’s capacity for original thinking. It also designates the central idea behind a work of art.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Notwithstanding her enthusiasm, Sansa was feeling nervous when she entered Jaime’s studio. The main dancers — himself, Margery, Oberyn, Ellaria, even though she would not be performing, and now Sansa — were to begin meeting daily to conceptualize the ballet. Though Jaime was in charge of the choreography, he took into consideration the thoughts of those of his colleagues he deemed capable of providing useful feedback, especially considering that they would be the ones dancing the main parts alongside him. Tyrion, as the second most important person in the Lannister Ballet Company, whose instinct for composing dance was as good as his body unfit to carry out the motions, was also there. The other people present were Renly Baratheon, Podrick, Brienne, and Tormund, who lounged near his fiancée, watching Jaime with an unfriendly expression. Sansa was not sure what they were doing there. Tyene had tagged along as well. Remembering her fight with Jeyne, Sansa was worried that her friend would be envious or consider her casting unfair, but Tyene was sincerely happy for her, and there was not a shade of resentment in the Dornish girl’s eyes. Sansa treasured this.

"Well, thank the gods, minx, we were worried you got lost in one of the hallways!" Jaime’s voice greeted her. Concerned that she was late, she looked at her watch then turned to him: "I’m ten minutes early!" she exclaimed, indignant at his baseless insinuation.

"And since everyone is already here, you’re late," he said with a self-satisfied smirk.

*I hate him SO much.*

His smirk grew when he caught her glaring, but then Tormund, provoked by the exchange, approached him.

"If you ever make my future sister-in-law cry again, no one will call you pretty by the time I’m done with you," he growled.

Jaime’s playful smile grew a little dangerous, a little less pleasant. He had been leaning against the wall when she had come in. Now, with Tormund’s tense form standing in front of him, Jaime pushed himself off the wall lazily and straightened to full height. The movement held the same grace and menace as that of a stretching lion. Sansa was stunned when she observed that Jaime was taller than Tormund.

"When you are done with me?" he asked with cold mockery. "Let me tell you something, Tormund," he said, placing an arm around the man’s shoulders, and Sansa was surprised by how frightening this
simple, friendly gesture could become at Jaime’s will, "threaten me again, and they will carry out what remains of you in garbage bags. Remember, that, unlike you, I’ve already killed one man." That statement seemed to numb Tormund somewhat. Sansa suspected it was less out of fear than surprise at Jaime’s reference. The Lannister went on, "I could easily do it again, if forced to. Are we clear?" he patted Tormund on the back. "I’m glad we understand each other," he added before stepping away from him.

Sansa, who had observed the exchange with the fascination of a baby ocelot who had caught sight of a boa constrictor, had never dreamed Jaime could look so menacing and was surprised that he had brought up Aerys on his own. Knowing the truth behind the monster’s death, she understood that Jaime’s threats were a bluff — albeit a chillingly convincing one.

As though remembering his larger purpose in being there, Jaime brightened up and spoke to all who had gathered:

"All right, now that everyone is finally here," a playful wink in Sansa’s direction, "let’s see if we can’t produce the best ballet this company has put on yet. Since we must start somewhere, let’s begin with the first act."

The tension in the room lessened.

The first act opened with the wedding ceremony — the elegant entrance of well-wishing guests, the happy dance of the bride and groom, followed by the intrusion of King Azor’s troops and the murder of Tanea’s betrothed. That day, they were crafting the entrance of the guests, which would be performed by the less prominent dancers. Renly, who was the company’s composer was present to ensure that the dancing and the music were created simultaneously, as a harmonious, interdependent whole. He had brought the drafts he had produced after a discussion with Jaime, and now they could be altered, even completely changed, to fit perfectly with the choreography. Brienne and Podrick, whose close friendship with the composer and their impeccable skill at playing their instruments allowed them to follow where Renly and Jaime led, were here to provide the dancers with the music of more than one instrument. Renly favored the piano for his compositions, which he played with wonderful expression, but Sansa had an inkling Jaime preferred string instruments. She could understand this — she, too, thought there was more inspiration to be found in the melancholy cry of a violin than in the gentle weeping of a piano.

Sansa, who had never witnessed the invention of a ballet before, was surprised by how much fun it seemed to be. Of course, that, she had to admit, was mostly achieved by Jaime’s playfulness and leadership style. She had not expected he would be receptive to ideas that did not originate in his own head. True, at times he was loath to modify the sequences of movements he invented; but the choreography, which seemed to magically take shape in his mind, was so beautiful and perfectly coordinated, there was rarely any cause to alter it. Mostly, he was the one in charge of invention; the others tried the movements of which he had thought and adjusted them slightly. Occasionally, one of those present — mostly Oberyn, Ellaria, and Tyrion — suggested a few motions, and Jaime would seamlessly incorporate them into the arrangement he had created. Excited but unsure of herself in this new environment, Sansa viewed with enthrallment how Jaime’s eyes gleamed with a creative light, how inspiration animated him and filled his face with exhilaration. She was absorbed in watching him in this new role.

Jaime felt her eyes follow him. When asked, she performed the motions accurately and well along the rest of them, but she did not voice an opinion or suggest a combination of steps. In fact, there was a lost look on her face he had never seen before. He had grown rather used to her confidence, her unpredictable remarks, and he wondered what had caused her to become so uncertain of herself. It had been almost two hours; Tyrion and Oberyn were arguing passionately about the latest set of
movements they had all been working on, and Jaime took the opportunity to approach Sansa. When
the argument had begun, she had retreated to the side and was now leaning on a ballet bar. He came
to stand next to her.
"What’s with you, minx?" he asked her, deliberately looking away as though concentrated on Tyrion
and Oberyn when, in fact, he watched her from the corner of his eye. He saw her turn her head
toward him.

"What do you mean?"

He faced her then.

"Let me rephrase that: what have you done to the girl I danced with at father’s gala?"
"She’s still here," Sansa replied with an uncertain, slightly confused smile.

"Is she? I guess she’s hiding so well I can barely see her." He paused. "You not only dance well,
minx. You have a gift for inventing movements on the spot. That’s why you’re here. But instead of
sharing new ideas, you decided to impersonate a wallflower. Why’s that?"

"I don’t know," she said and he raised an eyebrow at her, demanding an explanation.

"Don’t you?"

“I — ” she paused, wondering why, when she had entered his studio that evening, she had felt like
she had in the first few weeks of her life in King’s Landing: small, stiff, and unsure. "I told my
family I got a part in the new ballet…” she began. He was watching her, patiently waiting for her to
continue. She shrugged her drooping shoulders. "They all thought that I would play Tanea — ”

"You want Margery’s part?" Jaime was surprised, and it was evident in his voice. He suddenly
thought that, if she asked, he would probably give her the role.

"NO!" she almost screamed, horror and indignation dominating her tone of voice and coloring her
face in red shades. "Of course, not!"

He felt relief. He had been alarmed when he had suspected Sansa of envy and manipulation — an
emotion and tactic he knew well in his sister, but which he thought the minx to be entirely without.
He was strangely gladdened when her entire countenance had rejected the notion with disgust. After
her outburst, she quieted, her nervousness and uneasiness returning. She fixed her eyes on the floor.

“I — ” she swallowed. "They all think that I’m not fit for my part. They did not say it outright, but I
could see it in their faces. They don’t believe in me… Not in this role, anyway."

As she said it, Sansa recognized that her sister’s taunts, her mother’s uncertainty, and the perplexed,
worried expressions of the rest of her family had affected her much more deeply than she had
realized. Jaime used the knuckles of his index finger under her chin to lift her face, forcing her to
look at him.

"I’m not sure how qualified your relatives are to assess your dancing abilities, so instead of criticizing
their opinions, let me give you my take on the matter. I don’t know how much weight it carries —
after all, I’m only the best ballet dancer in the world," he smirked at her, then his face turned serious
once more. "I think you will be an exquisite Nissa," Sansa felt her heart, the stupid thing, do a
somersault in her chest. Jaime, still holding her chin in a gentle lateral grip, continued: "Neither
Tyrion nor I would have given you a role we did not feel confident you could perform better than
anyone else. Frankly, I doubt there’s a part you cannot dance. So stop whining and begin
contributing to the choreography, or I will make sure you have no say in the design of your
costume," he finished with a prurient smirk and released her chin. Sansa, too touched by his words to care about his innuendos, caught his hand with hers:

"Thank you, Jaime," she said with a smile of gratitude that told plainly how much his words had meant to her. He looked at her oddly. Realizing that she kept holding his hand, she let go of him. He gave her a nod, saying only, “the work awaits," before he walked back to the rest of the group, who had been too invested in the fight between Tyrion and Oberyn — their mutual insults were growing more creative and hilarious with each moment — to have noticed Jaime and Sansa’s short dialogue. Sansa followed him back.

Encouraged by his words — his praise, his belief in her — she began to voice her suggestions hesitantly. She had feared he would taunt her, but he did not, listening to her carefully and incorporating the changes she proposed with even greater care than those of others. She felt warm inside, as though a small, friendly candle was glowing in the chamber of her heart.

They worked on the entrance of the guests for a week and a half. When they all agreed that the choreography conveyed the festive mood and the steps could not be refined further, they moved on to the dance of the bride and groom. This was particularly exciting for Sansa, who had always loved duets. Margery, who danced the part of Tanea, and Oberyn, who performed the role of her betrothed, formed a wonderful dancing couple.

As more time passed, the uncertain faces of her family began to fade and, under Jaime’s eyes, which held not a shred of doubt in her abilities, she recovered her good humor and the self-confidence she had built over time at the Lannister Ballet Company. She suggested quite a few movements for the dance of the bride and groom that were just right (Jaime said so). More days passed working out the dance of the newlyweds. Then, the choreographing of the fighting scene began. The suspense of the music, the hunting movements of the dance were very effective. They hit a wall, however, at least as far as Jaime was concerned, when they tried arranging the duel between the groom and the king. They had been working for hours, and Jaime had driven everyone, even Sansa, to the end of their patience. He did not like this and he did not like that. Sansa thought he was being difficult.

"Jaime, we'll have to settle for something, and you'll have to be a little more assenting!" Sansa exclaimed after the fifth hour. Her words gave voice to a sentiment widely shared by the rest of the group, but they had little effect on him.

“Minx, it’s all been done. None of these combinations are new. You can’t hold the viewers’ attention by showing them something they had seen before. And, more importantly, we cannot remain the leaders and innovators of ballet if we always do the same stale things.”

Sansa sighed in frustration. He was being difficult!

Tyene suddenly looked up, excitement on her face.

"Why don’t you try real fighting, then?" she suggested.

Jaime turned to her. Unused to being incapable of easily arranging the movements to his liking, he, too, was reaching the limits of his patience.

"Say what?"

"Why don’t you try real fighting? If well choreographed, it can be very elegant. I think it would give the scene the flair that, so far at least, we were unable to convey with a dance."

Jaime looked interested, so she continued.
"I have a friend who knows how to fight with real swords, I can call him."

He smirked and motioned with his hand.
"Be my guest. Call your mystery friend."

Tyene took out her phone and went to the corner of the studio to make the call.

"I bet she meant Bronn," Tyrion mused.

"You ever done any sword fighting, Martell?" Jaime asked Oberyn with a look filled with poorly concealed mischief.

"I haven’t," the Dornishman replied. "But when I was a youth, there was little I liked better than throwing spears at targets."

Sansa, who was standing next to Tyrion, asked him:

"Is it just me, or does Jaime look oddly happy at the prospect?"

Tyrion grinned lovingly.

"Oh, he certainly does."

"Why’s that?"

"Because when Jaime was eight, he wanted to take a dancing class. That did not go down very well with father, as you might imagine." Sansa could almost hear the conversation. "So Jaime did the next best thing — he took up sword fighting, which he practiced rigorously until he was old enough to figure out a way to sneak off to Cersei’s ballet classes without father finding out. It’s rather singular how he managed to catch up all the years he had missed and still make such a successful career," Tyrion said with pride. "Most people start dancing very early, you know, but Jaime only started when he was… twelve, I think?"

"Did he give up sword fighting after he started dancing?" Sansa wondered, curiosity gnawing at her.

"No," Tyrion answered with a sly smile. "Have you ever compared Jaime or Oberyn’s bodies to, say, Loras’ or Jojen Reed’s?"

Sansa shook her head.
"But if you were to, there would be some differences, right?"

Jaime looked considerably stronger and more masculine; his muscles were much better developed than Loras’ and Jojen’s, whose figures were slender, a little effeminate. The same was true of Oberyn.

"Now, I don’t know what side sport Oberyn does," Tyrion continued, seeing that she had caught his drift, "but Jaime never quite knew how to quit things. True of sword fighting in more than one way, if you know what I mean," the little man concluded, wiggling his eyebrows.

*Did he just make an inappropriate joke about his brother’s relationship with his twin sister? What is WRONG with this family?!*

Meanwhile, Bronn showed up, carrying practice swords.

"Now," the ruffian said by way of greeting, "a little bird told me that you lads want to stop dancing menacingly like peacocks and try fighting like real men?" he asked, his face the picture of
impudence.

Jaime walked toward him, baring his teeth in the smug smile that annoyed Sansa to no end, when it was directed at her, but which she liked in that moment. There was something a little exciting in watching him intimidate others, she thought, although the scolded herself for the feeling immediately upon acknowledging it. The excitement persisted, however, despite her better sense. Jaime took one of Bronn’s swords with a languid air.

"These are somewhat light, Bronn. Getting a little old for real swords? Should I place an advertisement in the newspapers for a new bodyguard for Tyrion?"

Bronn, who disliked being shamed in front of Tyene of all people, decided to use the element of surprise and swung at Jaime without a warning.

Sansa, who had never seen sword fighting in real life, could not help the little cry of fear that tore from her throat. There had been no need for it — Jaime blocked Bronn's sword effortlessly.

"Careful, Bronn: this is a much more genteel audience than what you’re used to," Jaime taunted, and then the fighting really began.

Although she was annoyed that Jaime had noticed her little scream and used it in a jibe, Sansa soon forgot her vexation. With fear and fascination, she watched the combat, which, to her eyes, seemed nothing short of real fighting. Jaime was really good. He could stand his own against Bronn, a professional bodyguard, without losing that nasty smile or breaking a sweat. Sansa, who had seen him dance, should not have been surprised by the grace of his movements when he used a sword. Now that she watched him, she understood why this training had given Jaime an advantage in the late start of his career as a ballet dancer. He moved with the same effortless, leonine elegance when he fought as when he danced. Though the fighting lasted quite a few minutes, in the end, Jaime’s sword was at Bronn’s neck, and Sansa had to make a considerable effort to keep her squeals of delight to herself. She had never thought that sword fighting could be as beautiful as dancing. She could see now why Tyene had suggested incorporating real fighting into the dance and could appreciate her friend’s acumen.

Watching Jaime fight reminded her of the time she had seen him with Cersei. Like making love, sword-fighting was an activity in which she could not join him, but it made her ache to feel his hands on her waist as they danced. It made her body want, at the risk of outraging her dazed mind, that these strong arms would enwrap her, that he would pull her close, so she could feel his body with every part of hers, that he would kiss her, that he would never let go.

*You’re not Cersei.*

Her mind awakened, ordering her to come back to a reality where Jaime Lannister was a man in love with his sister, not her. *I should remember this.*

The more time she spent with him, the more often she saw the dream that had come to her for the first time in a seemingly different age, and the more longing she felt when his presence startled her in the darkness of her slumber. This was not a dream, however, but a reality in which she still liked to think herself the mistress of her thoughts, one who could trample her pointless desires.

Jaime, Bronn, and Oberyn focused on choreographing the movements of the fighting sequence, mixing real fighting and ballet dancing. Tyrion judged from the side, every now and then giving voice to constructive criticism. Sansa sat down on one of the pillows Margery and Ellaria had wisely (and in profusion) brought to the studio and watched the action. It was engrossing. She felt with pride that, thanks to Jaime’s drive to innovate and her friend’s smart proposal, the Lannister Ballet
Company was about to introduce a formidable novelty into the way ballet fighting scenes were conceived. She smiled to herself. In the end, Jaime got what he wanted — something no one had ever done on a ballet stage before.

It was almost a month since they had begun, and the first act was choreographed to Jaime’s satisfaction, the ink had dried on the music sheets from the last bout of edits. The wedding, the fight, the abduction — it was all over. They had begun supervising the rest of the dancers who started learning the movements. The days were now spent in making sure everyone knew their steps to perfection. On Tyrion’s insistence, their group was taking a short break from invention. Soon enough though, they would gather again in the late afternoon and continue to create.

Sansa was anxiously anticipating the meeting — her turn was next.

The second act was filled with emotion and passion. It began with Nissa awaiting her king and lover in the palace. Her dance had to convey the fear of a woman who longs for her beloved to return safely from war, but then, when she looked from the window and saw him in the distance, Nissa’s dance had to acquire a joyful and happy tone. Sansa, loathe to leave anything to chance, used the free evenings to come up with the steps. She had asked Renly for the music that he had drafted for her first dance, when she found out he always recorded his compositions in addition to writing them down. She expected Jaime would direct most of the dance, anyway, but, just in case, she did not want to be caught unawares. Besides, watching him invent the choreography filled her with a powerful desire to create a dance that would last longer than the time it took to improvise it.

The first night, she had danced where the music led her, trying to remember the steps, but she had been so engrossed, she could not quite recall the sequence later on. So the night after that, she recorded her dance. She felt awkward in the first few moments and could not start moving, now that a camera would catch her every misstep and light glowered down on her, but she forced her mind to imagine the welcoming darkness and the friendly reflections of streetlights and moon. She began dancing and, as always watching green eyes in her daydreams, she forgot about the phone she had placed on the piano. When she returned home, she looked through the composition and made notes on how to revise it. She incorporated her new ideas into the dance the next night. She continued this routine for several days and began to notice small imperfections in the music: where it could be gentler, more sorrowful; the moments when she needed the rhythm to be faster or slower to accommodate the pace she thought best for her dance. If she did not have to turn on the light when she practiced, she would have loved the process without any reservations.

"You haven’t been coming up with new steps," Tyrion remarked when Jaime and he were lunching two days before the scheduled meeting. "Are you having dancer’s block?" he quipped.

Jaime had a cunning smile on his lips.
"I’m not, though you’re terribly kind to be concerned, little brother."

"Then why haven’t you planned anything? We’ll be meeting soon, and you always take your sweet time when you’re drafting the movements," Tyrion observed.

Jaime looked entirely unconcerned.

"I’m not inventing anything for the next meeting," he declared, his voice as neutral as though he were commenting unenthusiastically on the food. Tyrion’s hand froze before the fork had reached his mouth, which remained agape. He blinked and, putting the raviolo back on his plate, asked:

"I’m sorry, I think I’m hallucinating or have developed a hearing problem. Did you just say you are not inventing anything for next meeting?"
Jaime remained as unperturbed as if he were a talking piece of furniture.

"That’s exactly right."

Baffled, Tyrion guffawed.

"Are you planning on canceling the meeting?"

"Not at all."

"Then what will we be doing without choreography?!" He cried out, driven to his wits’ end.

"There will be choreography, just not mine,” was the reply.
"What the hell do you mean?"

Jaime rolled his eyes in annoyance at his brother’s uncharacteristic dullness of mind.

"Tyrion, what’s the next scene we’ll be working on?" He asked with exaggerated patience.

"Nissa’s waiting dance,” Tyrion replied, still confused.

Jaime lifted his hands and motioned as though in praise of his brother’s singular deductive achievement.

"Precisely,” was all he said.

"You don’t — ” Tyrion’s mind could not digest the only obvious conclusion. "You don’t mean that you left it all up to Sansa?"

That’s impossible! He’s a complete control freak when it comes to his choreography. Sure, he’s generous and smart enough to allow some foreign ideas to trickle in, but this… He’s never even let Cersei come up with her own steps, no matter how she whined!

"You can’t mean that!"

"Of course, I do."

Tyrion took a sip of wine. This was madness. Had he drifted into a parallel universe?

"That’s insane," he declared. "I don’t believe you."

Jaime laughed.

"You’ll see for yourself. The minx has been busy crafting her dance. From the little I’ve seen, it’s quite good."

"From what you’ve seen?" Tyrion echoed, his mind still reeling.

"Well, she does practice in the building, so, naturally, I’ve glanced at what she’s been coming up with. Mostly, I left her alone, though. It’s her dance. I didn’t want to interfere."

At this point in the conversation, Tyrion could only stare, a little helplessly. There was one option left before he asked the waiter for help.

"Have you been taking some kind of happy drugs?"

Jaime laughed heartily, shaking his head.
"Excuse, me, waiter!" A man came up to Tyrion. "Would you mind pinching me, please? Yes, I mean it. Ouch! Thank you so much. Now that we’ve established I’m fully awake, may I trouble you for some whiskey? Make it a double."

Jaime laughed harder.

"I cannot believe it!" Tyrion cried in the evening of the same day, still overwhelmed by Jaime’s announcement. He was pacing the living room of his and Margery’s flat, while his girlfriend watched him with an amused expression.

"Why not? It’s not news to you that Jaime has a soft spot for her," she reasoned, but Tyrion, who had reached the point where panic and remorse warred for dominance, was beyond reason.

"I just cannot believe it!" he exclaimed again. *This is bad. And it’s not funny or cute anymore!*

"Why are you so worried? It’s not like it’s a bad thing."
"Not a bad thing?! Marge, do you hear yourself? My brother’s undergoing a personality transplant under Sansa’s influence, and you see no cause for alarm?"

She shrugged, looking confused but entertained.

"He never let Cersei near the choreography!" Tyrion shrieked, loosing some of his dignity to his fears.

"He has good judgement on that account at least, where she’s concerned," Margery commented dryly.

"That’s not the point!" Tyrion screamed in exasperation. "Do you even realize the… I don’t know what to call it, the depth of feeling he has for her, however unconsciously? How much he trusts her? Marge, ballet has always been Jaime’s second mistress, one he guarded carefully even from our bitch sister. And now he just left it in Sansa’s hands, as if he did not care?!"

"I’m sure her ideas will be splendid!" Margery began to console him, observing Tyrion’s labored breathing and the fear jumping in his eyes.

"NOT THE POINT!" he yelled again.

Margery was undaunted.
"Then you’ll have to be more specific," she said flatly.

Tyrion came up to her, grabbing her hands by the wrists, as though she could pull him out of his terror.

"What if she doesn’t love him back?" he inquired with dread, half-whispering, half-moaning the words. He grew progressively more agitated as he spoke. "All these years of worrying he’ll never get over Cersei, I forgot about that little problem they call unrequited love! What will I do if, after he finally got rid of her, the other one doesn’t love him back? Huh? What will I do?!" Tyrion let go of her hands and resumed his frantic pacing.

Margery laughed.

"And you call your brother a control freak," mumbled she, then said more loudly: "As an authority on female feelings, I guarantee you that your brother’s heart is not in danger of being broken by Sansa. She looks at him as if he were the sun *and* stars."
Seeing that her words had failed to convince Tyrion, she reached out and caught his hand, pulling him toward her. She placed her hands on his shoulders and, looking him square in the eye, said:

"Tyrion, love, you need to calm down. Your panic attack, no matter how adorable, is entirely unfounded. You need…" she kissed him and spoke against his lips, "… to relax."

And gods know I can think of a few ways to deal with that pent up energy, which are much better than making a hole in our Meereen rug…

"All right, everyone, let’s get started, we don’t have all day!" Jaime proclaimed, when they had gathered two days later. "Minx, the floor is yours," he added.

Sansa’s eyes widened. He didn’t just say what I think he’s just said?

"Huh?" was all she could do to voice her disbelief.

"Minx, please, while we’re still young!" he replied, biting back a small smile. "Or do you need to discuss something with Renly before you start?"

Sansa just stared. Then, she looked at the faces of the others. Except for Margery, who was grinning, and Tyrion, who looked concerned, everyone wore the same idiotic expression of utter confusion: wide eyes, mouths agape, brows lost somewhere in the hairlines.

"What’s going on with you all today?" Jaime exclaimed impatiently. "Have I grown a tail or sprouted a second head? Minx, I’ll ask you one last time: do you want to alter the music or do you want to start right away? Time’s ticking!"

Sansa, finally snapping out of her shock, rushed toward Renly — if only to hide from Jaime behind the piano. She had to repeat her kindly worded suggestions several times before Renly began responding. The composer certainly looked at her as if she had grown a tail and a pair of animal ears. Finally, she was able to explain to him what adjustments she needed right away in the rhythm, correctly assuming that more considerable changes would have to wait until Renly resumed normal functioning. Then, she had to abandon the safe haven of the piano’s shadow and walk to the dance floor. She had never been more petrified in her whole life. Bracing herself for the staunch criticism that would follow, she began the dance she had conceived. It was fortunate that she had memorized the motions, because, in the first few moments, she could barely feel her legs, let alone think clearly. She kept watching Jaime’s face for signs of displeasure, but the small smile that had come to his lips at her initial confusion never left his face and his eyes followed her with satisfaction and what looked like pride. She took heart in it and allowed her mind to retreat into the darkness reigned by shades of green.

When she had finished her dance, Jaime looked at Tyrion with a triumphant grin:

"What did I tell you? The minx can save me a lot of trouble." Then he turned to Sansa. "Now, minx, what did you want to change in the music?"

Sansa began explaining her ideas. Jaime mostly agreed, though he offered several suggestions she had not thought of. Renly, recovering his wits, chirped in, and they began altering the music. When they had redrafted the score somewhat, they resumed working on the choreography. Sansa still expected Jaime to take her dance apart one step at a time, but he did not. He proposed some changes, which she considered highly valuable, and her choreography gained from them without loosing the emotion and flow she had designed. She could hardly believe it. Neither Margery nor Oberyn had any such say in their dances. Why did she?
Jaime did not give her such freedom because he wanted to humor her. Having seen her dance more than once, he knew the minx had a talent that could bring novelty and beauty to the overall composition. He had betted on her and won. Her dance was not simply good — it was, by any standard, excellent and highly original. He owed Tyrion for having hired Sansa. The whole company did. Occasionally, however, Jaime wondered if his life would not have been less complicated, had he never laid eyes on Sansa Stark. He knew it would lack colors. Blue and red, especially.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos and reviews make me smile; and you want to make me smile, don't you? ;)


Memories
Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

This chapter would never have been written if it wasn’t for my polemic with CLH_CLH, who continues to inspire me! Thank you, darling, you are such a treasured friend.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My memories devour me,
Like hungry lions their prey;
With new stories regale me
To keep these ghosts at bay.

Tyrion’s father rarely called him. Occasionally, of course, Tyrion would receive a phone call from his parent; the brief conversations, however mundane in subject, always ended with either one of two questions: had he and his brother grown smart enough to return to the Lannisters & Co. and assume their rightful places as heirs? Or: was Tyrion ever going to propose to Margery Tyrell? Which of the questions Tywin would ask was unpredictable; it was entirely certain, however, that one of these (at times, even both) would be used in the concluding lines of their every conversation.

This time had been no different in what concerned the two catechisms Tyrion had been subjected to (years before, he had dreaded this brief round of interrogation, but now dismissed the inquiries with a certain nonchalance); however, it was somewhat odd that Tywin had personally invited Tyrion to pay him a visit the coming evening. Usually, the Lannister patriarch left the scheduling of his meetings — even those with his children — to his personal assistant. The strange sign of attention left Tyrion more anxious than pleased.

For as long as he could remember, Tyrion had wanted to make his father proud. Since he was a very young child, not old enough to understand that parents could be cold and children — dwarfs, he had sought Tywin’s approbation. He knew that Jaime — and even Cersei — had wanted the same. Tyrion would make a drawing of an imaginary land and wait for the weekend, when father would return from King’s Landing to Casterly Rock, to show it to him. He would overcome the intimidating sight of the huge door that led to Tywin’s solar and knock; invited to come in by father’s distracted voice, he would find him before the antique oak desk, which was weighted down by a laptop and piles of business papers. He would approach and wordlessly place the drawing before his father. Tywin would say that imagining lands that did not exist was a waste of time and tell him to study maps instead. He would overcome the intimidating sight of the huge door that led to Tywin’s solar and knock; invited to come in by father’s distracted voice, he would find him before the antique oak desk, which was weighted down by a laptop and piles of business papers. He would approach and wordlessly place the drawing before his father. Tywin would say that imagining lands that did not exist was a waste of time and tell him to study maps instead. By the weekend that followed, Tyrion would make a copy of a map of the Westerlands and Tywin would say that he could make a map of the entire Seven Kingdoms, could he not? So, Tyrion would work tirelessly, even shortening his time with Jaime — no small sacrifice for a young child short of friends — to make a detailed map of the Seven Kingdoms, copying it carefully with his uncertain, childish hand from a book too large for him to even lift (he had had to ask the maester, in charge of the Rock in father’s absence, to get it for him from a shelf too high for
him to reach). The evening of Friday would come, and with it his father, his tall, strong, powerful figure filling the space of the Lannisters’ age-old residence like no one Tyrion had ever seen before or since could. Tyrion had always admired his father — his intelligent eyes, his powerful presence, his handsome, severe features, even his coldness. At the time, he had thought that, one day, he could break through this frigidity. Tyrion had waited excitedly for farther to return, thinking that, finally, Tywin would commend his achievements. Tywin did look at the map and noted absentmindedly that his youngest son had forgotten to indicate Sunspear. Tyrion had tasted bitter disappointment for the first time that evening; it was also the first time he had noticed that father avoided looking at him. That night, he could not comprehend why; later, when he had grown old enough to realize that fathers could be unloving, mothers dead and buried, and children — dwarfs, he understood; or at least, he thought he did.

The more he came up against his father’s coldness, the more Tyrion came to depend on Jaime’s kindness. Like their father, his elder brother was a sight to behold with his golden hair, strong built (even as a young boy), and sparkling green eyes; but Jaime was unlike father in one crucial respect — he was never distant and he never played down Tyrion’s achievements, praising his little brother more than even Tyrion himself thought he deserved. Jaime’s love, as unconditional as their father’s coldness was inevitable, made Tyrion seek him out constantly, looking for and basking in his approval, regardless of how easy it was to gain.

Roaming the grounds of Casterly Rock, however slowly because of his small, stunted legs, Tyrion would find a large dead beetle, the yellow and green wings of which would seem beautiful to him (partly because the colors reminded him of his brother’s eyes and golden hair), and he would seek out Jaime, who was puffing angrily while doing his homework, and show him the odd creature he had discovered. Jaime would leave aside his work to look at the beetle with Tyrion, despite the pressure he faced from father at performing well in academics notwithstanding his dyslexia, which, when first discovered a few years before, had for many months transformed Jaime’s weekends into an unendurable hell, as father, cold and unperturbed, with a patience of the Stranger, sat him down to read for hours each day. The brothers would spend some time examining the dead beetle together, and then, somehow, they would be playing outside, laughing happily — one forgetting his dyslexia, the other his small stature — at least before Cersei would attempt to ruin the fun Jaime was having with someone other than her.

The affection his father, more absent from the residence than he was present, would not show him, and Jaime did, made Tyrion look to his brother for the love of a fatherly figure. In ways that he had grown to appreciate only much later, his brother, not many years older than he, had raised him. The younger Lannister would repay him with a devotion and a loyalty the degree of which even Jaime did not suspect. It was at this time, when he was five, that Tyrion had developed the habit of sneaking into his brother’s room at night, when he himself could not sleep, and watch the peaceful beauty of Jaime’s slumber.

Tyrion had never known his mother — a beautiful woman he had grown to love, looking at her face, which smiled at him from the pages of family photo albums, and hearing what little Jaime had by way of stories about Joanna Lannister. One day, Tyrion must have been four or five, he was inspecting the wedding photographs of his parents, examining with curiosity the happy smile on his father’s face and the warmth in his eyes, when Tywin entered the drawing room where his youngest son was engrossed in the pictures.

"What are you doing there, Tyrion?" he asked.

Flustered, Tyrion could only turn the opened family album toward his father. When Tywin saw the photographs, Tyrion noticed for the first time something of warmth and something of pain flash in his father’s eyes. Tywin came to sit in the armchair, next to which Tyrion had lain sprawled on the soft
carpet, and extended his hand for the album; Tyrion immediately placed it in his father's hand, concealing as best he could the effort the action took his small body. Tywin turned the pages slowly, and Tyrion came to stand next to him, rising on tiptoes to glimpse the images that now engrossed his father. Noticing his son's effort, Tywin allowed Tyrion to climb onto his lap — the only time Tyrion remembered doing so in his life.

"That's your mother," Tywin said, and he had never sounded the way he did then: soft and loving. "She — " Suddenly, his father's voice caught, and he went rigid. Tyrion fixed him with his large eyes and watched Tywin's face turn cold again, as if it were becoming stone. "She died," Tywin said in his usual stern, unemotional voice.

"I know," was all Tyrion replied.

"Isn't it time you were in bed?" Tywin asked, getting up and placing his son on his feet. "Where is Miss Osha?"

"She's coming later," Tyrion explained. "My bedtime's not in an hour."

"Hmmm…" came from his father who, lost in his thoughts, avoided looking at his youngest child as he left the room.

Tyrion knew that mother had died giving birth to him — Cersei had informed him of the fact a year or so before, in a tone even more vicious than the one she usually used to address him. Jaime — enraged — had nearly slapped her and shook her as if to force some consideration into her, refusing to speak to her for days after spending hours consoling his younger sibling who had nearly drowned in silent, savage tears of despair, as he clung to Jaime's neck. That was when Tyrion had first learned self-loathing; when Jaime had first glimpsed Cersei's heartlessness.

Osha, their governess, did what she could to help Jaime bring Tyrion out of the darkness his sister's words had covered him with like a shroud. A woman from Beyond the Wall, who had come down South for reasons unknown to anyone and ended up in the Lannisters' household because, in ways none knew of, she had managed to convince the maester to hire her to look after the children, Osha was a powerful and unbreakable presence, unflinching even in the face of Tywin Lannister. Tyrion and Jaime had loved her from the moment she had first come, from her gruff voice and unmusical laughter to her odd Wildling ways. Looking back, Tyrion and Jaime had both wondered why father had tolerated her presence in Casterly Rock, particularly as the governess of his children. Her excellent degree from the Wall University and Medical School must have played a role, they had decided, as well as father's disinterest in them all, but the brothers remained puzzled nonetheless. Osha, despite her good heart, was fairly brutal even to those she cared for, and she could not give to the Lannister children the gentle affection they — the brothers, at least, — had desperately needed. Cersei, unlike her siblings, loathed the woman with a burning hatred, which often paved the way to loud confrontations between the women. In his entire life, Tyrion had not known anyone aside from father and Osha to be able to put Cersei in her place, and it was all the more reason he loved the Free Woman, as she called herself.

When Tyrion turned six — old enough to attend school — the three siblings, their belongings packed and in tow, were sent to join Tywin in King's Landing, along with Osha, who would care for them in the years to come. Jaime and Cersei's homeschooling came to an end, and the three of them were forced to face a world that was unforgiving even to the privileged children of the great Tywin Lannister.

With years, Tyrion, much like his siblings, had realized that father was a man hard to please and harder still to impress, but easy to disappoint. When the twins were fourteen, Tywin had come to Jaime's national sword fighting competition, in which his eldest son had overwhelmed the
competition, easily winning gold, but all father had said was, "good," in a voice which indicated that anything else would have been unworthy of a Lannister. Tyrion had seen Jaime’s triumphant smile fall at the words. The same year, the Lannister patriarch had come to Cersei’ ballet performance, in which she had danced beautifully the leading part and, again, he had said, "good" in the same voice. When Tyrion was twelve, Tywin had come to the national debate competition in which his youngest son had triumphed. Tyrion had received the same "good" as his elder siblings and observed, as by then he was used to, how father avoided looking at him for too long. With time, Tyrion noticed how Tywin grew somewhat better at being able to lay his eyes on him, but, sooner or later, father would avert his gaze.

Cersei was the first to give up on seeking Tywin’s approbation, silently disregarding his opinions and disobeying his orders. Jaime and Tyrion never quite could break the spell father had on them, adapting to feeling disappointed in and frustrated with themselves for their inability to make the lagoon green eyes shine with pride at their achievements. Unable to discard their need for father’s approval, the brothers had learned to pretend that his opinion did not matter — even if, deep down, they knew it did. When, years later, Jaime and Tyrion had fought for their company — fought, essentially, against their farther and the claim he seemed to have on them as his heirs — they had fought, although neither would acknowledge this even to his brother, to prove to Tywin Lannister that his sons were capable of withstanding even his wrath. As if that could impress him.

Tywin was pulled from his thoughts when the taxi had stopped before Tywin’s mansion, the place where he had lived until, at the age of sixteen (to stay closer to Jaime, Tyrion had used his superior intellect to skip grades), he had exchanged the luxury of this house for the comparatively small room in King’s Landing University dorms — much to father’s annoyance; Jaime and Cersei had moved out two years before, and Tyrion would frequently sleep over at Jaime’s place, regardless of the awkward encounters between the siblings this sometimes occasioned.

Tywin paid the driver generously and ascended the long stairway to the entrance — as always, with considerable difficulty. Before he could even ring the bell, Ramsay Bolton opened the door: the personal assistant was as considerate as he seemed repugnant to Tyrion, despite the young man’s polite smiles. Tyrion was led to one of the few smaller living rooms, where his father, a glass of scotch in his hand, was sitting before a raging fireplace. As his father aged, Tyrion had wondered if the infirmity of late years would eventually make him less intimidating, but even as the silver had replaced the gold of Tywin Lannister’s hair, Tyrion had realized that the hope had been in vain. His father aged gracefully, never losing the power of either body or mind, his presence becoming oddly more impactful. Tyrion sat in the armchair to the right of his father, pressing his lips together in a greeting that was neither a smile nor a cold nod.

Tywin took a sip of his scotch, waiting a few minutes before speaking to his son, though he had acknowledged Tyrion with a movement of his eyes before restoring his gaze to the fire. His son waited patiently, having grown used to this odd ritual over the years. Finally, the Lannister patriarch inquired:

"How is the new ballet coming along?"

Tyrion knew the question was not about The Fountain of Tears but about Jaime and Sansa.

"It’s going well," he said with pleasure.

"Is it?" Tywin asked, and the small hint of humor in his eyes, odd for Tyrion to see, indicated that his father was aware of the unspoken challenge in his son’s refusal to breach the subject that interested them both. "I’m overjoyed," he said, though his voice did not support the statement. "And how is Margery?"
If there was one thing Tyrion could not reproach his father with, it was Tywin’s utter consideration for Margery. Never had the older man failed to inquire after Tyrion’s girlfriend or be attentive to her when she was in his presence. Granted, Margery was the first woman Tyrion was involved with to have been honored with father’s regard, but the son appreciated it all the same. After all the lectures he had heard from his father about his relationships with women — and many of these relationships were only half as long as the conversations Tyrion had been forced to endure (Varys only knew how Tywin even found out about those) — Tyrion never would have guessed that he would merit his father’s approval by his choice of woman. Occasionally, Tyrion even wondered — in spite of himself — whether Jaime was not a little envious of this considerable achievement.

"Margery’s well, she sends her regards," he answered, and his father nodded in satisfaction.

"And Jaime?" Tywin continued.

Tyrion smiled — something he rarely had cause to do in his father’s presence.

"He’s all creative energy: we’ve started rehearsing a few weeks ago," he supplied.

"What about Sansa Stark?"

"Sansa is very well. She’s adapting swiftly to her new role as one of the leading dancers in the company. A very talented young woman and very helpful with the choreography. Jaime listens to her more readily than to any one else, I think," he finished and realized that, unintentionally, he had provided the segue into the conversation Tywin wished to have, notwithstanding his previous decision not to do so. He wondered if he had caught a small smirk flash across his father’s lips, or whether the reflections of flames on Tywin’s features were playing tricks on his eyes.

"Good," Tywin said, and his voice indicated not that the opposite would have been unacceptable, but that, from this point forward, he expected events to develop even more favorably. "Are they spending enough time together?"

"Quite," answered Tyrion. "Or at least as much as possible for two people who, for now, are friendly colleagues and nothing else."

This time, there could be no question about it — Tywin Lannister definitely wore a pleased, if small, smile.

"Only a few weeks before, they were not yet friendly," he observed.

"I wouldn’t say that," Tyrion disagreed. "Jaime kept teasing her — "

"Jaime teasing her and them both being friendly are two entirely different matters," Tywin stated with authority, and Tyrion preferred shrugging to acknowledging a certain truth in his father’s words. "What is he like around her?"

"For now, I haven’t noticed anything particularly different from a few weeks before: he’s still admiring her, in spite of himself; he keeps teasing her, but not when she makes suggestions about the choreography."

"Good," Tywin repeated. "If there is any way of getting them to spend more time together, I trust you will not neglect the opportunity of making sure they do."

Tyrion nodded, acknowledging with an annoyed smile his father’s orders. He did not need Tywin’s instructions where Jaime and Sansa were concerned — as it was, he was doing everything he could without arousing suspicions; and he was certainly not doing it because his father had told him to. He
was fighting his own, decades-long fight, against the ripping claws Cersei had buried deep into Jaime’s soul. Meanwhile, Tywin spoke again.

"I plan to invite lady Sansa to lunch — I see no reason wasting time getting to know my future daughter-in-law," he declared.

Tyrion let out a small guffaw.

"Aren’t you getting ahead of yourself? They’re barely even friends," he objected.

Tywin sighed, a sound that combined resignation with slight condescension.

"Tyrion," he said in a voice that told the world of his infinite patience, "I have never seen Jaime look at any woman the way he watches Sansa Stark. Have you?" When his son shook his head, Tywin continued: "Believe me when I tell you, she will not remain a Stark for very much longer. When I met your mother — " his father’s voice could never quite stay even whenever he mentioned his wife.

"Well, let’s just say, I’m quite certain I looked at her the same way." There was a pause before he asked: "And when are you going to propose to Margery?.."

Tyrion returned home with a sense of relief: meeting his father always caused him to mobilize all his mental and physical energy. It was quite late: Tywin was a night owl (though he rose early), and Tyrion had called on him at a time when the evening had already turned to night. His and Margery’s apartment embraced him with a peaceful darkness. Margery, who, he guessed, had gone to bed, had left several small lamps on so that he could find his way easily to her. He walked toward the bedroom, following the path she had traced for him with the glowing lamps, turning them off as he past them. They led him to the bar, and he smiled softly: Margery knew he always needed a drink whenever he returned from his meetings with Tywin. Tyrion poured himself some whiskey. Watching the golden brown liquid fill his glass, he pondered his father’s words. Tyrion’s certainty in Jaime’s feelings gave Tyrion increased confidence. Of course, father did not know about Jaime’s attachment to Cersei… On numerous occasions, Tyrion had even contemplated betraying the twins to Tywin in the hopes that their father might have enough influence on Jaime to put an end to the affair but always decided against it, fearful of losing his brother’s trust. Tywin’s ignorance of Jaime’s decades-long love for her could make him more inclined to be hopeful than Tyrion considered reasonable. However, though he thought his father excessively optimistic, Tywin’s belief still affected Tyrion’s perception of reality, and the wings of his own hope grew stronger. He finished his drink, turned off the light near the bar, and continued walking toward the bedroom, darkening the other lamps one by one. They guided him to his walk-in closet, where he changed before going to their bed.

Margery lay on her side, curled like a cat, her back turned to the last lamp she had left on for him. He joined her under the enormous blanket and turned off the bedside light. It took her only a few minutes to turn to him, still mostly asleep, wrapping her limbs around him and burying her face in the crook of his neck.

"How… was… your… dad?.." she mumbled sleepily. Awake, she never referred to Tywin as his "dad," taking her cue from Tyrion and using the much more formal "father."

Her lover stroke her hair gently, always afraid in moments like these that, if he touched her, she would fade away like dreams always did.

"The usual," he answered for the sake of simplicity, though he did not think it quite true. Ever since he had seen Jaime with Sansa, something had changed in Tywin. Although, Tyrion mused as sleep began to claim him, perhaps seeing Sparkle with his brother had deepened a change that had come earlier — when Tywin had first been introduced to Margery Tyrell as his son’s girlfriend.
I hope you liked this walk down the memory lane. Let me know by leaving a kudos or a comment — it will make me so very happy! :)
Lunching with the Old Lion

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

(A long one, so please skip ahead if you’d rather get to the story. If you feel like coming back to read this note later — thank you for your double attention.)

First of all: thank you to all of my wonderful readers and reviewers. I am so grateful for the love and attention you have shown this story. I’d like to say a few brief words concerning a point that, I believe, must be addressed for the purposes of this fic and for this chapter in particular.

As we know, the world of Game of Thrones and A Song of Ice and Fire is hardly a happy one. We have learned to suspect trouble at every turn and fear every dark corner. I admire and respect George R.R. Martin’s oeuvre as well as the incredible talent of the directors, the power of the performances delivered by the cast of the TV series, and the hard work of everyone else involved in the production. I would like to present you with the following disclaimer, however: in this story, which is admittedly based on these works, I have not, do not, and will not supply anything remotely connected to any of the following: kidnapping, rape, torture, and murder (which is not the same, clearly, as death from natural causes or in an accident). Although I am, clearly, a fan of the books and the series, this is simply not something I will be writing. This story is for me a safe haven from the whirlwind of tragedy and violence of the GoT and ASoI&F. If you have read it this far, I think this may be true of you as well.

There is another important aspect to this. One of my favorite writers, with whom I share the closest of spiritual kinships, Mikhail Bulgakov, believed that literature — or any other kind of storytelling — is a powerful way of delivering justice not achieved in the real world. I subscribe to this notion. For this story, I have altered it a little — this fic is a way of giving justice to fictional characters, offering them chances that they did not have in the canon or limiting the monstrosities they were able to commit. This is the reason why you will not find Joffrey, for instance, on these webpages. One character about whom I have been asked and who was brought up by quite a few of this story’s reviewers is Ramsay Bolton. If my fic is a safe place, what is this certified maniac doing in it? He, too, is receiving his dues. The feudal world of GoT/ASoI&F is what feeds Ramsay’s power to brutalize, murder, and rape. In the world of Dancing for You, where modernity has triumphed despite its imperfections, Ramsay’s punishment is worse than merely being erased. Ramsay, a monster, who is drunk on feudal power, is reduced to a personal assistant in this story, because modernity, whatever its flaws, has proved capable not of eradicating but of restricting murderousness and vileness. His reckoning is that of being no one, incapable of inflicting harm. His impotence is his payment.

In this chapter, you will find for the first time an interaction between Sansa and Ramsay. It should not feed any apprehensions concerning her well-being. Ramsay Bolton is not laying a hand on Sansa Stark. Not on in this story, not on my watch. We, women, have been empowered by modernity; our ancestors have fought for the rights many of us currently enjoy. The respect and the ascendancy for which women of the past have fought and for which women of the present still fight are given full prominence in this story. No one — neither a monster, nor a man who simply thinks himself within his rights to sexually assault women — is breaking a single girl or woman in this story. Ramsay is here precisely because he is powerless to hurt. Perhaps, you might have
preferred not to read about him at all. I can only say that he will not be making frequent appearances.

Modernity is not perfect: women are still raped; the LGBT community is, sadly, not safe yet in our world, even persecuted in many countries; murder, torture, and wars are not strange occurrences in our day; but we, the humanity, have come far; though we might have a long way to go still and, unfortunately, the road does not look smooth, we must place hope in our innate desire to improve our lives. We must comprehend that bettering our own lives means respecting and protecting those of others — regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, race, religion, or ethnicity. I will at least protect the characters of this story — for your sake and my own. Let me dedicate this chapter to you and the hope we must place in the future. Cheers! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa’s phone rang at the despicable hour of seven o’clock in the morning. At night, she always left on the setting that would only allow the third consecutive call from the same number to come through, in case something happened and someone in her family — or from among her friends — needed to get hold of her. She reached for her phone, worry tugging at her heart, but a number, not a contact name, lit up on her screen. Whoever this was, they were persistent.

"Hello?" she asked, her voice groggy from sleep.

"Lady Sansa Stark?" the voice on the other end inquired. She did not like its sound — the tonality reminded her of the endlessly creaking doors in the horror movies Jon, Robb, and Theon had loved watching as adolescents.

"That’s me," she answered and asked in turn: "whom am I speaking to?"

"Ramsay Bolton, at your service, my lady. I’m the personal assistant of Lord Tywin Lannister. He would like to lunch with you sometime in the near future. I’m calling to inquire if you’re available and schedule a time."

Damn him, Sansa thought in irritation. Did he have to call at this hour? And did she have to get out of bed, look for her planner, waking up completely, to oblige this madman? If she were still the same Sansa who had come from Winterfell to King’s Landing months ago, she would have done just this, but she had been in the capital long enough to learn that, occasionally, you had to push back.

"Mr. Bolton, is that right?" she asked frigidly.

"Exactly, my lady," the owner of the awful voice confirmed.

"Mr. Bolton, my successful work at the Lannister Ballet Company requires, among other things, sufficient sleep. I will kindly ask you, therefore, to call me back at a more civil hour, when we will be able to schedule a time for my lunch with Lord Lannister. Until then, I wish you a very good day."

With this, she hung up.

She placed the phone back onto her bedside table and pulled the covers over her head. She was not getting up for another two hours at least. One of the many advantages of working at the Lannister Ballet Company was the late start time. She fell asleep, but her slumber was fitful and her dreams unpleasant. She had a nightmare about a large black dog that was growling at her and bit Lady. Her alarm clock had mercifully pulled her far from its jaws.
It was one in the afternoon when her phone rang again. She was having brunch with Tyene and Margery. (Ellaria’s mother had come to visit when she had heard the news about her daughter’s pregnancy, so the third member of their girl’s club was unavailable; Tyene had been only too glad to escape from her grandmother.) The same number flashed on Sansa’s screen as some hours before. She accepted the call, steeling herself to the unpleasant voice of Tywin’s personal assistant. Ramsay Bolton apologized, most courteously, for waking her up earlier in the day, and they scheduled the lunch for next week. She was glad when the conversation was over, but it had reminded her nevertheless of the angry black dog she had seen in her nightmare.

"Who was that?" inquired Margery.

"Ramsay Bolton," Sansa answered without enthusiasm, and Margery grimaced at the name. "He called to schedule a lunch for Tywin Lannister and me." She paused. "I actually wonder what Jaime and Tyrion’s father wants to talk to me about," she added.

For a moment, Margery looked like she had heard a funny joke, but she bit down on her amusement.

"I think he just wants to get to know the only Stark in town," she said in a voice that seemed pregnant with some enigmatic meaning.

Sansa raised and lowered her eyebrows to indicate incomprehension.

"It’s odd," she stated. "It’s not like they’re best friends with father."

"That’s probably the last way in which I would describe their relationship," agreed Margery. "But I don’t see any harm, Sansa. I don’t think the old lion will eat you after you’ve domesticated his son," she winked. "He has a soft spot for his sons’ girls, I can tell you this from personal experience," she added.

Sansa rolled her eyes.

"You’re always talking such nonsense," she said.

"Perhaps, but I’ll give you good advice just the same: don’t even think about paying for your lunch with Tywin. I’ve once made the mistake of suggesting we split the bill, and the man looked at me as if I had spat in his face! Lannisters and that gold they shit with so much arrogance…"

In a few days, Sansa took a cab to the Red Keep Building, where she was to lunch with Tywin. Between Ramsay’s call and her oncoming meeting with Jaime’s father, she had not stoped wondering why the Lannister patriarch seemed to be paying her so much attention. She remembered his gallantry at the gala and the utmost consideration he had shown her in introducing her to guests at a party where, by virtue of her newness to the city, she would have otherwise known only very few people. Needless to say, she dismissed Margery’s interpretation of his attention to her on the grounds of utter unrealism.

The tales she had overheard her father tell her mother about Tywin Lannister the Bogeyman had long since drifted far away from her. Probably the first moment Ned Stark’s words had begun to fade was when Sansa had first seen Tywin Lannister’s lagoon green eyes and realized how much he reminded her of Jaime. Even then, before she knew much about Jaime’s past, the father’s resemblance to the son had suggested to her that Tywin could not be entirely evil. Indeed, Sansa felt that no one who looked so much like Jaime (with the possible exception of his twin sister) could be as awful as her father had led her to believe. And if Jaime — the man for whom Ned Stark had always reserved the coldest scorn — had risen so highly in her eyes, she could not quite withhold her regard from his father. Besides, her knowledge of the truth behind Aerys’ death made her see the
entire situation — and its main players — in a different light. She could not judge harshly a father for using his influence and resources to shield his son, who had done nothing more than defend his sister.

When he heard Sansa’s name, the maitre d’hotel personally escorted her from the ground-level lobby to the highest floor where the restaurant was located. Walking onto the rooftop terrace, Sansa found the view of the entire city — from the proud towers of the Red Keep castle to the glittering surface of Blackwater Bay — breathtaking. She could easily understand why Tywin liked this place well enough to make a habit of lunching there. She was led to the table where the Lannister patriarch sat engrossed in a newspaper. Seeing his guest approach, Tywin swiftly put aside his reading and rose to greet her.

"Lady Sansa," he said in his low, pleasant voice, "how delightful that you could join me."

"Thank you for your kind invitation," she replied with a smile.

They were seated; the waiter took their drink orders and disappeared.

"I must congratulate you," Tywin began with a small, almost sly smile. "I’ve heard you got one of the leading roles in the newest production of my sons’ company."

Sansa beamed.

"Thank you," she said warmly. "I was so happy when I was told."

"And how is the ballet progressing?" he inquired.

"I think it’s going rather well," she replied.

"Are you enjoying being part of the production?" he asked then.

"I am. I’ve never before witnessed the creation of a ballet — I only ever learned the steps in Winterfell and did not have the chance to contribute to the invention of one, so I find it not only very exciting but also very interesting." She paused. "Forgive me," she added, and Tywin looked at her with half-raised eyebrows, which seemed to communicate that he had already forgiven her for whatever she was going to say and that there was nothing to forgive in the first place, "I can’t help but wonder at your interest. I know that you don’t necessarily approve of your sons’ careers, so it surprises me a little that you care to discuss the production at all."

Tywin smiled a wistful smile.

"True enough. I cared to learn how you liked being a part of it," he said and sighed, almost — but not quite — in defeat. "I’ve always wanted them, Jaime especially, because he is the eldest, to take my place at the Lannisters & Co. It is a very great… disappointment to create a company so powerful from scratch only to realize that your heirs will not step into your shoes when you pass. It’s like giving away a child to strangers you don’t trust — it’s ours, it belongs to the family. It should remain in the family."

Observing her knitted brows he paused, and she took the chance to ask:

" ‘From scratch?’ I thought that it has been around for generations."

Tywin’s expression hardened when he explained:

"My father, Tytos Lannister, had run the company into the ground. When I began building it back
up, I started with worse than nothing — I had to fight the assumption that Lannisters were toothless lions." He paused, and Sansa noticed how, even almost half a century later, Tywin could not forgive his father for the damage he had done to the family name and company. "When Jaime entered the dancing profession," her interlocutor continued, "I had at first hoped that he would eventually return into the fold. Then, when I realized he would not, I had hoped that at least Tyrion would see reason, but neither did he."

"What about your daughter?" Sansa asked, feeling sympathy for the older man’s chagrin. Tywin snorted.

"My dear, I think that, notwithstanding my best efforts, you had the dubious pleasure of meeting my daughter at the gala. Being an intelligent girl, you must have realized that Cersei isn’t half as smart as she thinks she is. The trick she tried pulling on you — from which, might I add, you emerged an undisputed winner — is a classic way in which she fails. You see, Cersei is convinced that she’s quite the cleverest devil that’s ever lived and everyone else is no match for her. Not knowing the apprehension of defeat, she’s regrettably incapable of crediting her enemies with the ability to overcome her. As a result, she fails to outmaneuver them. For instance, she did not believe you were a very talented dancer, despite having received every indication to the contrary, and was rewarded for her efforts to bring you down by unwittingly handing you a triumph. I am most pleased it turned out this way in that particular case, but, when it comes to running a company, it is most unfortunate to provide with victories the people you mean to crush."

Sansa nodded. The waiter brought their drinks.

"In that case," she mused after taking a sip of her apple juice, "I'm almost surprised you were unable to kill the Lannister Ballet Company — it seems like you were ready to make every effort to accomplish this."

It was common knowledge at the LBC, as well as outside its inner circles, that Tywin Lannister had done all he could to destroy his sons’ enterprise. The man in question, however, looked like he thought himself the cleverest devil that had ever lived.

"I've never said I was unable to do so," he objected.

Sansa looked at him in confusion.

"But I thought... I mean, that it's a truth universally known that you were not... Umm... Supportive of your sons' endeavor."

"Not in the least, and I did try crushing it with all the means at my disposal."

She was so lost, she thought she would never find her way around her puzzled brain again. What Tywin was saying was entirely illogical, yet she could not believe that he lacked where rational thinking was concerned.

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

"I tried squelching the Lannister Ballet Company, that much is true. I was taking their sponsors away one by one — buying out some, threatening to annihilate others. Then," he seemed to hesitate for half a moment, "then the Aerys scandal broke out." He paused as if appraising her reaction. She waited, wondering what he expected her to say. "I imagine your father and uncle have told you all about it," he added with a barely perceptible edge to his voice, which reminded her of the way Jaime spoke about that ignominious series of events. It was the first time Tywin had ever mentioned her father or uncle in her presence. Sansa looked down at the napkin, with the soft material of which her
fingers were fidgeting restlessly.

"My father and uncle do not spare expressions of outrage whenever they speak about that incident," she admitted quietly, but the sympathy she had for her listener and her regret were obvious in her voice. "However, my family’s words are not the only account of Aerys’ death I’ve heard." She paused. "Jaime… He told me what really happened on that balcony," she said quietly. And I will bet anything that, ironically, I know more about the events leading up to that episode than you do. “I’ve come to see the happenings of that night from his perspective. You’ll not find me unsympathetic to what your family’s been through, Lord Lannister, and I daresay I now regard the whole affair from a point of view that is radically different from my father’s or uncle’s. Moreover, I believe that, had they known the truth," or at least a part of it, she mentally corrected, "they would not have been as uncompromising in their accusations."

Tywin Lannister looked at her with the gentle expression she had only ever seen come to his face when he talked to Jaime.

"He told you, didn’t he?" he said softly. "That is well." He paused, and the pleased expression she had noticed when he had greeted her returned to his face. "I’m enheartened to know that your own views on the matter diverge from those of your less… well-informed relatives," he finished diplomatically.

"What happened after Aerys’ death?" she asked quietly after a brief pause, curious to learn more about Tywin’s role in the shaping of the LBC and wishing to change the subject. He accommodated her unspoken request.

"I thought that after everything I had done to clear him of the charges, my son would show me his gratitude by taking his rightful place as my heir. When he didn’t, I redoubled my efforts of forcing him and Tyron to do as I wished. Neither of my sons would accept defeat — I knew how hard they had to work to keep the ship I was sinking afloat. I had almost succeeded in bringing it down, when someone, whose opinion I trust considerably, alerted me to the fact that, even if I were able to destroy their company, my sons would not give up their careers — that they would simply enter the employment of one of their competitors." He paused.

That evening, many years ago, Varys had paid a visit to Tywin’s residence in King’s Landing. The spymaster had been in his employ for decades and was oddly loyal for a man of his profession. Varys’ keen intellect had gained Tywin’s respect early on; his sound advice had gone a long way to earn the Lannister’s trust. They were seated before a blazing fireplace. Tywin sipped at his scotch slowly; Varys nursed a drink of Dornish flower liquor.

"Lord Lannister," Varys began, "I’m afraid no one will tell the lion when he’s going after an antelope made poisonous by the venom of a snake; so I guess I’ll have to. My lord, I must beg you to reconsider your destructive intentions toward your sons’ company." Tywin punctuated this statement with a snort, but Varys pressed on. "I know that you wish to see your prodigal sons return to the Lannisters & Co., but they won’t, my lord; especially not if you destroy what they’ve labored so tirelessly to create. Even if you succeed in eradicating their company, they will simply continue their careers somewhere else, no longer masters of their own fates but at the mercy of someone else’s whims. They will not return to the fold, my lord, but, moreover, they will never forgive you. Think of the late Tytos Lannister — did you forgive him?"

Tywin had not given any indication that he had heard Varys at all, and the spymaster soon left him to his thoughts, but his words kept ringing in the ears of the Lannister patriarch. That night, he had dreamed of Joanna. His late wife appeared to him crying, her bright green eyes sad and red-rimmed. Why, Tywin? she asked. Why do you keep hurting them, our children? Why, my love? He
Sansa Stark’s curious eyes returned Tywin to the present.

"Lannisters working for someone! My sons — someone’s employees, at the beck and call of an overseer!" The eldest Lannister was indignant at the prospect. "I would eat my own insides before I allowed that to happen," he finished with rancor. "Forgive me, my dear," he added in a gentler tone, "I get quite carried away every time I speak of this issue."

"It’s quite all right," Sansa smiled. "So when you stopped trying to sink them, they reached the safe harbor the company now enjoys?"

"Not quite," he answered. "I had done considerable damage, as you can imagine. At the point where I decided it was better that they worked in their own company than someone else’s, they may not have been able to reach that safe harbor."

"Then how?.." Sansa tried.

"Have you ever heard which was the biggest sponsor the Lannister Ballet Company had attracted in its early days?" Tywin questioned.

Of course, Sansa knew. She had studied the company’s history since she was a little girl. Witnessing its brilliant rise to prominence, even as a young child, Sansa had known she was living history.


Tywin smirked in a self-satisfied way that, she realized, Jaime had inherited from him.

"The Frey Enterprises were then being acquired by the Lannisters & Co. By the time the Lannister Ballet Company had received its donation from the Frey Enterprises, the lawyers’ ink had dried on the acquisition papers. No one knew this, of course: I rarely permit such large deals to be publicly advertised. Except for very few people in the Lannisters & Co., you’re the only one who knows this. I am quite certain you’re the only person in the Lannister Ballet Company who does. I trust you will remain the only one?"

Sansa could only stare. Unless she was having considerable auditory hallucinations, Tywin Lannister had just informed her that he had prevented the LBC from going under. She nodded, acknowledging his request for her silence, and kept watching the older man with incredulity, unable to say anything. He looked quite pleased with the effect his tale had had on her.

The morning after Varys and Joanna — in different ways but, it seemed to him, with a joint purpose — had visited him, Tywin Lannister instructed Davos Seaworth to add a new clause to his acquisition of the Frey Enterprises: they would be sponsored to provide a substantial donation to the Lannister Ballet Company; they were never to tell of the source from which the money had come.

The waiter materialized before them, and, with utmost reverence, inquired whether they cared to look at the menus.

"I know what I am going to have, but fetch a menu for Lady Sansa," Tywin requested. The waiter instantly produced the menu, and Sansa had to make an effort to concentrate on the letters.

"I can’t decide," she complained quietly after a few minutes. Indeed, her mind was still reeling from Tywin’s story, and she would be unable to tell chicken from fish.

"Might I suggest you try the Dornish Lamb?" Tywin proposed. "If you taste the dish and do not like
it, you will order something else, of course."

She nodded.

"A Dornish Lamb for the lady and a Dothraki Beef for me," ordered Tywin. "I'll have the Casterly Rock wine — lady Sansa, would you care for a glass?"

"No, thank you," she declined softly. She had never been one for drinking alcohol during the day — it made her unpredictably either too agitated or too drowsy.

The waiter vanished as quickly as he had appeared.

"There’s one thing I don’t understand," Sansa said. "If you were the one to save the LBC, why haven’t you ever come to see a performance?"

No less notorious than his attempts to dismantle the LBC was the fact that Tywin Lannister had never graced his sons’ productions with his presence.

"I wasn’t invited," he replied with a blatant simplicity that was poorly mitigated by his affected indifference.

Of course not! Sansa thought with some irritation. Because you and your sons were too proud to make peace. Still, she found it ludicrous that the father had never seen a single one of the dozens of ballets his sons had produced over the years. Lannisters and their damnable pride. Well, she thought, I’m not too proud; and I’ll get Tywin Lannister an invitation to the next ballet, if Jaime and Tyrion kill me for it.

They talked more about the oncoming production, and Sansa kept wondering how Tywin Lannister — a man who reportedly despised ballet ever since his sons had bound their lives to this art form — knew so much about it. It was not simply his understanding of the art that surprised her — this could have been explained by his remarkable intelligence and learning. No, Tywin’s vocabulary was that of a person who knew ballet thoroughly enough to carry on a conversation filled with the specific jargon common in studios and among connoisseurs.

Their dishes arrived, and Sansa was, yet again, amazed by Tywin’s consideration. He inquired several times if the lamb was to her liking and, each time, she replied with a smile that she had never had a better prepared dish in her life. She did not lie — the lamb was delicious.

They talked of other things as well in the course of the meal. Sansa discovered that Tywin’s sons had both inherited the graceful charm of his conversation. She liked speaking with him, and she appreciated the brilliance of his intellect as well as his wide knowledge of the world, from ballet to history, to business, to politics. She caught herself thinking that she wished she had such conversations with Jaime, realizing that, for instance, she had no idea whether the son agreed with his father on the flaws of the Free Folk Migration and Fair Employment Bill. Tywin considered the legislation in itself practical, but he criticized some points that had been added to the bill in a finer print. Sansa found herself agreeing with his arguments, which raised issues she had never considered before.

He asked her about her relatives but was more interested in her siblings than the older members of the Stark family, and Sansa could understand this. He inquired after Jon and his studies under the guidance of Dr. Mormont. Sansa spoke of her brother with affection, proud to boast of his accomplishments, surprised that Tywin had remembered her brother and his mentor. She also spoke of Arya, describing her sister’s dislike for commonly accepted rules of behavior. Speaking of her family was always bitter-sweet, now that she was far away and had not seen them in months, even if she spoke to them almost everyday. Her tales of Arya’s escapades reminded Tywin of the pranks for
which Jaime and Tyrion were nearly kicked out of middle school. Sansa laughed till her sides ached at one particularly comical account that involved the two brothers pretending to discover a bomb at school: apparently, the principal, who had earlier offended Tyrion, made quite a fool of himself trying to save the lives of his students and colleagues from what turned out to be nothing more than an alarm clock and some batches of confetti.

When it was time to say goodbyes, Sansa regretted the swift passage of time and happily agreed to lunch with Tywin some time again in the future. She was even more strengthened in her resolve to procure him an invitation to *The Fountain of Tears*. It was fair to say that, on this day, Ned Stark’s stories about the head of the Lannister family became to her just that — stories. Sansa wondered if her father’s trusting nature had not been taken advantage of by people who filled wolves’ ears with falsehoods about lions.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave comments and kudos — it’s a sure way to make me really happy! :)


In Jealousy, Find Love. Lock Dreams Away in Stones.

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In hatred, look for an old passion;

In jealousy, find love.

If your dreams haunt you,

Lock them away in stones.

The scene following Nissa’s first dance was the duet of Azor and Tanea. In the castle, the king visited his prisoner, offering her his love, his riches, and his kingdom, but the young woman, grieving for her betrothed, rejected his killer and her captor. It was a beautiful and moving scene, filled with the ache of two hearts burning with loves that would not be abated.

Jaime and Margery had been practicing for several hours, working out the steps with the help of their colleagues and friends. A large part of the sequence had been outlined, and the two dancers were performing it for the first time with the altered music. Though Sansa had seen him dance many times by then, Jaime’s movements still had the power to hypnotize her. In his dance that day, and in his face, there was a different expression from any Sansa had ever observed before. It was as if this dance brought heavy thoughts to his mind, making his heart contort with venom.

Jaime disliked being interrupted when he worked on choreography; consequently, his apartment had a large dancing studio where he could be alone with the music and the movements it made flicker before his mind’s eye. When, several evenings before, he had begun inventing the steps and was listening to Renly’s score for the first time, noting immediately the passages that needed revising, his mind kept going back to the last time he had seen Cersei. It was as though the music called forth his sister’s face. Her angry face.

Ever since her marriage to Robert Baratheon, their relationship had been strained, to say the least. It was not simply Jaime’s jealousy — it was his utter inability to comprehend why Cersei had chosen that repulsive man. He shuddered with disgust and saw red whenever he imagined them in bed together. He knew she did not love her husband, and he doubted she saw any redeeming qualities in him — no one did, except perhaps for Ned Stark, Robert’s childhood friend. Worse than igniting Jaime’s jealousy, this choice made him question his sister’s integrity — and, sometimes, even her dignity.

From the twins’ very first night together, Jaime had begged her to run away with him or to bite down on fear and announce to the world that they loved each other and that anyone who did not like it could go to whichever of the seven hells they preferred. What had Cersei and he to fear from scorn or outrage, if they could be together? He hated the secrecy in which his sister tenaciously draped their relationship. He was galled by her insistence that he did not claim her publicly — he was hers, why could she not be his?

Tyrion had been much closer to the truth than he realized when he had hoped that Cersei’s marriage would break the back of Jaime’s patience. If it were not for Myrcella’s birth a year after the wedding
and Cersei’s assurances of her fidelity, which Jaime, blinded by the sight of his newborn daughter, believed, his wounded pride and the powerful feeling of betrayal he felt might have been too much for him to overcome. Though he remained hers, Jaime became more and more aggravated with his sister as time went by, and his ire increased daily as he watched his children grow up addressing as “father” a drunkard hardly worthy of being called a man. As powerfully as he had wanted to claim Cersei, he wanted to call their children his, and the perplexity he felt regarding his sister’s choice of husband grew to a wholly different degree where her choice of father for their children was concerned. The more he resented her actions, the more relief he found in her supple, warm body.

Impersonating in dance a man rejected by the woman he loved, Jaime kept seeing Cersei’s face. The face of his sister, his lover, the mother of his children. The woman who, for some idiosyncratic reasons, had never been truly his. He danced with Margery, but he rarely saw her — golden hair and irascible green eyes seemed to float before him.

Sansa could be naïve, but even she was not blind enough to ignore the impassioned, almost furious way in which Jaime danced. Sadly, the observation hardly led to sensible conclusions.

The more she watched Jaime and Margery during practice, the more quiet Sansa grew, until, by the time they were going through the motions of the long sequence, she had sat down, looking at the pair sulkily from a dark corner.

She kept asking herself why Jaime danced like this with Margery; why the rejection and frustration etched on his face seemed so real. She could not help speculating whether, perhaps, his relationship with his sister was not the only passion he had known. She wondered if Jaime had some inclination toward Margery, and whether he fought against it out of love for his brother. She kept thinking that in dance, a passion always surfaced very easily. She could not help comparing the feelings she had seen on his face and memorized from the recording of their dance — for she dared not give credit to her own recollections of it without some evidence — to the ones her pained eyes could see as he danced now. He looked happier when he danced with her, she thought and wondered whether darker feelings were by their very nature more powerful than the ones that filled gazes with light. Her own emotions were certainly rather painful at the moment. She had never seen Jaime dance with Cersei and, somehow, she had grown used to imagining that, in dance, he belonged to her, Sansa. But now, she could see with clarity that, even with her dance, she could not claim a part of him; a part of him she had not known how desperately she wanted until she had realized she did not have it, would not have it. Sitting in the dark corner, she hated Margery with a painful, self-destructive loathing. She asked herself why the thought of Jaime caring for her friend filled her with so much vehemence and pain — she had always known he belonged to another woman. Why had she felt so much less enmity toward Cersei when she had seen Jaime’s sister at the gala several weeks ago? Was it because she had never actually seen them together, safe for that one time when she had stumbled onto the lovers in the darkness? Or was it because, in the past weeks, Jaime had been so kind to her that she had forgotten a little to keep her heart’s gates on permanent lockdown? In the depth of her misery, Sansa was almost physically aware of how much she wished she could be what occupied Jaime’s thoughts, even if they were filled with rancor. It was in this moment that she had felt her breath leave her lungs and fear materialize like an invasive, deadly pathogen, clawing its way to every cell of her body.

No.

Mother, have mercy.

She took a breath but could barely release it. Here eyes were still glued to the dancers, and her breathing grew shallow and ragged.
I’m not. I can’t be. I mustn’t be... falling in love with him.

But it seemed the gods were set on playing a cruel joke on her. The tragic stories of first loves she had read and cried over with pleasure as a child seemed so insignificant in comparison with what her own would be. She should never have been in that dark studio; she should never have come close to the half-opened door; and if she was fated to meet him in King’s Landing, would to gods she had stayed in Winterfell! She could be naïve, but Sansa was not stupid. She saw a dark abyss of future pain open before her, its hungry jaws wide and filled with hunger. From her beloved stories, she knew only too well the agony that could be brought by unrequited love.

She gathered her belongings quietly and made to leave the room. She doubted anyone would notice. They did. Green eyes grew even darker when they had caught sight of her retreating form.

"Where do you think you’re going, minx?" his voice, tinted with irritation, lacerated her.

"I’m not feeling well," she replied. It was only half a lie.

"Sansa?" the irritation was gone; he sounded concerned. She did not turn to face him, still frozen in the doorway.

"It’s nothing, really. I will get some sleep and be good as new tomorrow," she said and left without looking back. Those words were an utter lie. She doubted she would get any sleep. Even if she did, she knew his eyes would haunt her. And tomorrow, she would be as devastated over her realization as she was today.

Jaime’s considerable ill humor, provoked by thoughts of Cersei, increased at a pace so rapid after Sansa’s departure that he ended the meeting early. It was as though her presence tempered his rancor, and when she left, his demons could pounce and devour him without fear. Moreover, he kept worrying, and scolding himself for doing so, about what was the matter with the minx, who — always so energetic and cheerful — had turned taciturn and lethargic that evening. When he returned to his flat, the emptiness of which he felt more acutely than ever — Tommen and Myrcella should have been there — Jaime’s mind was a dark place.

He did not expect to find Cersei lounging on his sofa. His sister was still wearing her black coat, but she had helped herself to a glass of red wine.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, as he threw his keys onto the bar. He did not sound friendly and he did not care.

"I was wondering what you’ve been doing," she replied, heedless of his unwelcoming attitude. "You haven’t called, and I haven’t seen you in days." She let out a cold laugh. "Don’t tell me you’re mourning because Sansa Stark has left?"

He felt adrenaline crawl between his ribs, down the inside of his spine, like a large snake. What the hell did she mean, talking about Sansa leaving?

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I assume you’ve sent her back to Winterfell by now," she purred.

He released a breath of relief. Cersei was not privy to Sansa’s sudden takeoff from King’s Landing. The minx was still in the city, glowing like a small, red fire in a dark pit.

"On the contrary, I’ve just given her one of the leading roles in the next production," he said, taking considerable pleasure in vexing his sister. He poured himself a glass of scotch. "I’m tired, Cersei," he
continued. *Tired, tired of you tonight. My rage and disappointment have exhausted me.* "So whatever it is, make it quick."

She came to him, embracing him from behind, and rested her head between his shoulder blades. Her hands traced the planes of his chest; her voice was as soft as the rustle of silk.

"Send the Stark girl back to the North, and all will be as it was," she whispered. He reached for her hands and disentangled himself from her arms.

"I think we've already discussed the subject. My answer is still no," he said, walking away from her. He did not have the time to wonder why, notwithstanding Sansa’s talent, the thought of never seeing her again filled him with anger and fear.

Cersei began undoing the buttons of her coat. Of course, she had nothing underneath — his sister never entered negotiations unprepared.

*Didn’t she say she would not have me until Sansa was gone?*

"I told you, I’m tired," he said, and her hand froze on one of the middle buttons. Her surprise did not last, however. Still in her half-opened coat, she approached him again.

"You’re never too tired to take me," she said with a smile as she reached for his face with her hands. Her lips touched his softly. Whenever she wanted something, Cersei’s lips could acquire a surprising gentleness. He deepened the kiss, burying his hand in her luscious blond hair. Feeling a rush of desire, he moved to kiss her neck, his hand molding her warm breast.

"Promise me," she breathed, threading her fingers through his hair and massaging his scalp, "Sansa Stark leaves tomorrow."

She should not have said it. For the first time in her life, Cersei Lannister had misjudged her brother. The moment Sansa’s face flashed before his eyes, his sister’s body lost some of its hypnotic hold. He remembered that the minx was not feeling well, and that he did not know if she was any better. Thoughts of her sobered him from the intoxication by his twin. It was as if a magic spell was waning.

So, Cersei did not come because she wanted *him*. She came because she wanted something *from him*. Something more than all he had already given.

He grabbed her by the roots of her hair, turning her face toward him, looking heatedly into her eyes for a hint of feeling other than lust and vengefulness. She was watching him with an inviting smile, her eyes brimming with seduction. She wanted Sansa’s career, and he would not give it to her. He pushed her away from him.

"Sansa will remain at the Lannister Ballet Company. This is final. If you want *me* — stay. If you want something else in addition — leave," he said and, as always, he hoped that he would be enough. He wasn’t: her face contorted in angry snarl.

"I want her gone, Jaime!"

No, she did not want him. She wanted destruction. He started walking toward the front door, and she followed him, in her fury not realizing where he went.

"Do you hear me, Jaime? I want her gone!"

He opened the door.
"Get out," he said coldly.

"We both know that sooner or later you’ll do what I ask. You can never say ‘no’ to me, Jaime. You can never stay without me too long,” she added, caressing his thigh. He caught her hand and used it to twirl her, a little roughly, out of his apartment.

"Go to the seventh hell, Cersei," was all he said before shutting the door in her face.

Text from Jaime Lannister to Sansa Stark:

*Feeling any better, minx?*

There was no answer. He went back for his glass of scotch.

Margery was sitting before the mirror of her vanity table, brushing her hair. She kept thinking of how ill Sansa had looked. The Tyrell girl had noticed that her friend had grown progressively more silent, watching her and Jaime dance with a pained look in her eyes.

"For the sake of our plan, I’m glad that Sansa’s jealous of me, but I’m much less inclined to be happy about it considering that she is a close friend," Margery asserted, still watching her reflection.

"Jealous of you and Jaime?" Tyrion mused from the bed, with faked carelessness. "Should I be concerned, too?" he asked, poorly hiding his apprehension behind an attempt at humor.

"Yes," Margery said in a grotesque voice so full of mockery, he knew that she had detected the doubt and jealousy in his own. ‘I’ve discovered the insurmountable charm of your tall, handsome brother and have been dreaming of nothing but shagging him in a dark corner.’

Tyrion, who, in spite of the humor in her tone, had been irrationally, deeply wounded by her words, thought her cruel. He rarely felt jealous with Margery, and even more rarely did he give voice to the feeling. He tried not to allow himself to be jealous, knowing it was a trait that could disadvantage much more attractive suitors. Besides — usually, at least, — Margery showed him that she cared for him too well for him to feel the torturing emotion; but Tyrion idolized his brother, and it was not difficult for him to imagine that even Margery could be affected by his charm. Sensing his anger and pain, she put down her brush and came to straddle him, pinning down his arms and brining her face close to his. No matter how difficult it was for him, given his short neck, Tyrion turned away from her, stubbornly refusing to let her see the ache in his eyes.

"Look at me," she said in a commanding voice that had lost all humor. He did not move. "I love you, you stupid little man. You, and no one else. Not your pretty brother, not your boorish friend, not the guy next door. You."

He met her eyes, still feeling an agonizing mixture of anger, jealousy, and self-loathing.

"Do you? Love me? An ugly dwarf?"

She rolled her eyes.

"I cannot believe that after four years we’ve reached this point!" she exclaimed in amazement and baffled irritation. "Four years is a long enough time to figure shit out, Tyrion. You never said any of this nonsense when we first got together — why start now?"

"Because at first I thought I was just an exotic amusement for your carnal appetites," he said in a wounded voice.

She rolled her hips against him and smirked at his body’s immediate reaction to her.
"Well, guess you’ve done such a great job satisfying my ‘carnal appetites,’ I got rather attached to you,” she laughed and tried to kiss him, but he turned his face away again, the expression of torment on his features intensified, and she was exasperated: ‘Oh, for fuck’s sake, Tyrion, what’s gotten into you?! I love you! How many times do I need to say it? I love you! How can you be less certain of my feelings after four years than you were after one or two?!’

"Because I did not love you so completely then!" he cried, his voice so desperate, it resonated with pain in her heart. He spoke the next words so quietly she could barely hear him: "Even later, I tried not to… I tried hiding little pieces of my heart from you, but you found each and every one of them with your greedy hands and… If you left me now, I would be… I don’t know what I would be… There would not be enough humor, or drink, or whores in this world to fill the hole you’d leave in me. I now that I’m a funny little man, but it’s because of you… it’s for you… my every joke and my every breath. All of them for you."

She kissed him hungrily, thoroughly. She kissed him long and deep, and he almost forgot what she had said, or what he felt, or how short his legs were. When she looked at him, her eyes were so full of fire, she scared him a little.

"I. Love. You." She said slowly and with rage. "I don’t care what you think of yourself, or what others think of us. I love you, and I will never let you go. You hear me? Never."

He looked away for a moment, then restored his gaze to her. There was so much hope in his eyes and so little humor, she could not look away from him if the sky started falling down on her.

"Never?"

"Never."

"Then you might as well — ” he began jokingly, but his voice cracked, “… marry me?” he finished so softly, it was barely even a whisper.

"Not if you don’t have a ring," she joked, her laugh a little nervous. "Honestly, Tyrion, it’s in such bad taste to propose to a girl without a ring."

He smiled a smile that was so sheepish and self-reproachful, it made her yearn to be able to read his mind. He made to get up, and when she did not let him, he said:

"I need to grab something, let me go, tigress."

Watching him warily, as though he might try to run away from her, she let him go. Tyrion walked to his office, and she followed him, the same vigilant expression in her eyes. He went to his safe and opened it, reaching for a small, black velvet box. Inside, he knew, was a ring he had ordered for her from the best jeweler in the city after the first year they had been together. It was just like the one he had seen his mother wear in the photographs he had loved inspecting as a child. Only this ring did not hold a green emerald in its golden mounting but a purple diamond — a precious stone of Margery’s favorite color. He never thought of actually proposing to her, waiting, each year with mounting anxiety, that she would leave him. Every now and then, when he caught himself dreaming of a long life with her, he would open the box and watch the violet stone to remind himself who he was and that fate did not have a princess in store for a dwarf like him. He would put the ring back and wait for her to leave him. She did not, and he would have to look at it again to stop himself from dreaming. He felt as though all the dreams he had tried expelling from his heart had accumulated in the glittering stone. After watching the box in his hands for a few long moments, he almost fled the office, Margery following closely at his heels. He could not force himself to return to the bedroom for her rejection, a place where she had said she loved him, and he could not stay behind, so he went to the living room. He opened the box and kneeled awkwardly, fully realizing the ridiculous picture he must cut. Not daring to raise his eyes to her, he said, as if to prove to her that she would never
acquiesce:

"Will you marry me?"

He never heard an answer — she knocked him to the ground, breaking his fall with her arms, cradling his large head in her hands. She kissed him again with that hunger, that love he had felt in her earlier kiss, before she said:

"Yes, you stupid, stupid little man. I will marry you. And if after that you ever again complain about not being tall, I will give you a pair of stilts for our wedding anniversary. Now, give me that ring — I’ve never seen a prettier bauble in my life! When did you get it?"

"Three years ago," he said sheepishly, still dazed by her answer, watching her as if he had seen the sun for the first time.

"Three years ago?! How much longer were you planning on waiting?!

"I didn’t plan on waiting — I never thought of actually proposing," he looked at her beautiful hand on which the ring now sparkled. "I simply looked at it, dreaming," he answered simply. "I love you," he said, and there was so much feeling in his voice. "I can’t believe you agreed to marry me," he added, a little bewildered. She caressed his face with affection, love shining in her eyes, and smiled.

"I cannot believe you kept this pretty thing from me!" she joked, unable to take his doubts about her affection seriously for long — it was so evident to her that she loved him. "I bet any girl would agree to marry you if you showed her this ring! Ah, don’t you dare pout! Don’t you dare, Tyrion." She kissed him and grinned slyly. "You know what’s the difference between me and those other girls?"

"Can’t even imagine," he said, a small pout still warring with a smile on his face.

"It’s that I would marry you if you didn’t have a pretty ring or anything else beyond your jokes, your smartass remarks, and that wonderful cock I clearly cannot get enough of."

He shut her up with a kiss, and she smiled against his lips.

"I can always return the ring," he teased.

"Don’t you dare say that, Tyrion Lannister!" she screamed in mock horror and added with gentleness: "I’ll never take it off, I promise." Her seriousness did not last, however: "Our great-grandchildren will have lots of trouble getting it off my protesting corpse!"

Chapter End Notes

If you liked the chapter, please leave a comment or kudos — it will make me so happy! :

:)
Don’t reject me,

I’m trying to seduce you.

Leave me in this darkness

If you can’t give me light.

With the email that had announced the first meeting to outline the choreography, Tyrion had attached a spreadsheet with every major participant’s contact information. Sansa had diligently made sure she had everyone’s number in her phone address book and added Jaime’s. She felt rather silly about it at the time — why would she call him? She had certainly never expected to receive a message from him. After her screen lit up with —

Text from Jaime Lannister to Sansa Stark:

Feeling any better, minx?

— she could only stare. Then, she closed her eyes and placed her phone back on the bedside table. She almost wished he did not show her kindness. Perhaps, if it were not for his encouraging words, which had shielded her from self-doubt, she would never have begun falling in love with him? Maybe she would at least not have realized she had? Her senseless, senseless heart skipped a beat when she had seen his name and read his words, but her mind, afraid and apprehensive, seemed to scold: I told you to keep your mouth shut; I told you not to get closer; I told you so many times you would get hurt. And now you will. And I told you so. She thought of his dance with Margery, of his passionate embrace with his sister.

You’re not Cersei.

He will never be mine.

She did not text him back, turning on her bed to stare at the wall instead.

I should not want him to be mine.

When Tyene returned home, she began asking what was wrong. Sansa, who knew only too well what ailed her, could not stand mumbling any more lies, so she gathered her things and left for the only place that could bring her peace.

She slipped into the cozy twilight of the Lannister Ballet Company building and went to the studio she considered to be hers this time of day. She did not care to rehearse anything that night. She wanted nothing more to do with reality, which loomed over her heavily, ominous and rumbling like a storm cloud full of lightening. She came to the darkness glowing with street lights and moonlight because she needed healing.
She would not call her mother in the middle of the night again — gods knew, then father would come to check on her for sure. He called much more often ever since she had awakened mother with her tears. Ned was worried for his little girl, and Sansa preferred depriving herself of comfort to causing her parents any more anxiety. They had their hands full with Arya. She smiled a little. She wished suddenly that she were more like her little sister — careless and free. Arya would probably never have become infatuated with Jaime Lannister. Maybe her sister was right that day a couple of years ago when they had had a horrible fight — maybe Sansa was a stupid girl with stupid dreams.

She could not call Jon or Robb for the same reasons she did not want to call her parents. Besides, what would she tell any of them? If she so much as breathed a word of Jaime Lannister… She refused to even envision the nightmare that would ensue. She did not want anyone in her family to learn how foolish she was; she wanted her new friends to know of her idiocy even less, so she could not call Margery or Ellaria and had to escape from Tyene. She wished she could talk to Margery — she had never had a girl friend she liked and admired as much as her. Sansa’s jealousy had quieted, partly because reason had not abandoned her completely, partly because she was overpowered by the much more shaking realization of the feelings that had caused her resentment. Left alone with her pain and the mortification at her own imbecility, Sansa resorted to the only other consolation she knew.

With habitual movements, she fixed her phone to her arm band and put on her headphones. She hit "play" and let herself go to a place where heartbreak did not exist, where music filled her being so completely she could not feel anything besides its beat. She danced, and the waves of pain ebbed from her heart. She danced, healing a little. She danced, danced, danced her heartache away. The darkness, the yellow and silver light were blurring, and the green eyes she saw brought her no torment.

Then, an awareness zipped through her body and offset the calming effect of her remedy. She stopped, and, though the music still sounded in her ears, it no longer permeated her body. She could be standing with her back to him, but she felt his eyes on her. She knew he was there.

The glass of scotch had done little for Jaime. His thoughts and his anger made him restless. He had tried working on the steps for another sequence but found himself unable to concentrate. Exasperated, he had picked up his keys and left his apartment. Speeding down the empty streets of King’s Landing did little to soothe him. Finally, he drove back to the company’s building. He knew that the minx seemed to find a bizarre kind of peace in its gloomy studios; perhaps he could, too. He did not expect to see her there after she had left the meeting almost two hours early, citing her health as an excuse. Like the night he had stumbled upon her when she was dancing as if she were a jubilant sylph — it seemed a lifetime ago — he paused to admire her motions, hoping that watching her would assuage his chagrin. There was something strange in her dance that night: she did not look like a magical being. Instead, her movements called to his mind a day at Casterly Rock, decades ago, when, as a child, he had seen a bird, her wing broken by someone’s well-aimed stone, start falling toward the ground, her healthy wing clapping frantically but uselessly at the air. The bird — it turned out to be a young black kite — had fallen dead at his feet.

He did not know what gave away his presence, but she stopped and stilled. She took out her headphones and turned to him, standing with her back to the light, and he could not see her face.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, and he almost did not recognize her strained voice.

"I could ask you the same, minx," he parried. “Be careful of your answer, though — remember, you left the meeting earlier today because you were not feeling well." He made a point of looking her over. "You look fine to me."
He denied feeling any relief at the conclusion. She bowed her head like a guilty child, and Jaime realized that the minx had lied. He found it too amusing to be believed and had opened his mouth to throw another jibe, when something in her dejected countenance stopped him. He came to stand closer to her.

"What’s the matter, minx?" he asked her without mockery. "It’s not the doubts plaguing you again, is it?"

*What doubts could there be?* she mused. She was falling in love with him and would pay a high price for her heart’s blunder.

"No," she answered, her voice a little shaky.

He tried turning her face up to see her eyes, but she gently moved his hand away from her chin, and her gaze remained downcast.

"What are you doing here?" she repeated.

*So she has learned that attack is the best kind of defense.*

"I was looking for peace, but I found you instead," he said with a smile.

She was silent, so he asked her, as if his questions could prevent her from leaving:

"Have you been trying to come up with new movements?"

"No," she answered. "I was looking for peace, but then you decided to waltz in."

She threw his words back at him without mirth or gleam of rhetorical victory.

He smiled more broadly.

"At least I haven’t startled you like I did last time," he offered.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Were you leaving, then?" he asked.

She shrugged again.

"Minx, it’s dangerous talking to you," he quipped, "one might never get away from your chatter."

No answer, not even a smile.

"Minx, are you sure you’re all right?"

*I’m sure that I’m not.*

"I’m fine," she lied. *You should leave,* her mind warned her. *Stay,* an evil spirit chanted invitingly. She was frozen in indecision, and he spoke again.

"Well, since it seems that we’re both affected by insomnia, we might as well use the time productively," he said in a cheerful voice that did not sound quite as careless as usually. "Have you thought of Nissa’s second dance yet?"

She shook her head.
The second time Nissa appeared was a pas de deux performed by her and the king. Driven to desperation by her lover’s coldness, Nissa would go to Azor, trying to seduce him, to remind him of their love, but to no avail. Sansa had not had the opportunity to think of that second dance, preoccupied as she had been with rehearsing the first and then shattering with her realizations.

_Dancing is like making love… when you stop being a body and become a heart — you are dancing because every part of your being is pulsing with desire, and the only way to achieve satisfaction is by seducing your love with your movements._

The voice of her reason was fading, and her heart was calling; hope trumpeted its summons. She remembered the admiration of all those who had seen her dance at the gala; Jaime himself had said on multiple occasions that she danced well. People often told her she was pretty, and her mother believed her to be beautiful. Perhaps… Perhaps, if she could just dance well enough, she could break through into the depths of his green eyes. Perhaps, she could at least see again that look in their green abyss that made her breath catch when she replayed and replayed the recording of their dance and dwelled on her memories of him.

She took her phone from her armband and walked to the speakers to connect it. Renly had sent her the draft of the music he had created for the scene a few hours before. Her heart was beating a wild staccato in her chest and her hands were shaking. She thought she knew in that moment what Nissa would have felt.

In the semi-darkness, she could almost, _but not quite_, imagine that Jaime Lannister was not there, and the man standing before her was the figment of her inflamed imagination. But his presence was too powerful, too real, to be ascribed to her dreams. The music started, its tone seductive and plaintive. She began to dance and lost the erratic motions of a wounded bird. The grace, the splendor of her movements seemed more soft, more sinuous than ever before. For the first time since she had begun dancing for green eyes, she did not fall into a trance-like state. She saw _him_ just as he stood before her, real and tangible, and he was more powerful than daze. Dancing with her heart, she had never been so awake, so free of reverie, so focused on the reality before her. It seemed that she saw every line of his face with greater clarity, as if her eyes had refocused. Her every motion began in the depth of her soul and was performed for him, as if her movements were ribbons she was throwing like paper streamers, and they could bind him. She danced around him, as if to encircle him in the magic ring of her steps. His eyes followed her, waiting, and she believed he would not miss a single batting of her lashes. She began to narrow her magic circle, coming closer, a little closer to him with each pas. She reached him just as the music softened almost to a complete pause. She stood before him, watching his face as the melody whispered and died around them, learning to see him and know this was he — the man she was unwittingly falling in love with. It was paradoxical, like seeing a familiar face for the first time. The music revived, its tempo and volume rising, and they began to move together. She had never felt more powerfully herself than in that moment; she had never before been so completely Sansa and no one else; and she had never wished for anything more strongly than for him. She could not read his face.

Every time Jaime saw her dance, he caught himself thinking that it was impossible for her to be more beautiful than she was as she floated or burned to the sound of music; and every time he saw her dance anew, she seemed more magnificent than she had appeared before. He watched her bewitching dance; watched as her white skin reflected streetlight, even as it seemed to shine with moonlight from within; watched her red hair catch fire every time she came out of shadows; watched her near him and stop, her eyes bright with a soft flame, her chest rising and falling with deep, slow breaths. He began to dance with her in the magical sphere she had brought into being. Holding her waist, the touch of their hands — sensing her warm body — made him loathe to feel cold emptiness against his palms.
The air they were breathing seemed to grow thinner; the ephemeral touch of the dance became less fleeting, as though they could savor more the same momentary brushes of hands. Her frantic heart was beating, singing its blood song to him. The music died another diminuendo, and they separated — Nissa’s seduction was bound to fail. The last bout of impassioned music was meant to accompany the beginning of her jealousy, her madness, her despondency.

The moment his hands left Sansa, her mind reared its head: *He will never be mine. Just as Azor would never be Nissa’s.*

She danced to the song of despair. She let herself imagine that she could caress him from a distance with every arabesque and every pirouette. The further she moved away from his body, the more she wished her motions could make him come closer. Like on the night she had first seen him, all she wanted was to take the place of that woman with long, curly blond hair, who could pull him as close to her as she liked and trace the line of his strong shoulders with her lips while she gave herself to him. Watching his expressionless face, she began to burn, and she danced in that flame — for him.

Jaime watched her retreat, the darkness nearer to her than he, the shadows fortunate enough to cling to her shape. He absorbed the sight of her glowing skin, her graceful limbs; the soft curve of her long neck; her lithe, balletic body; her tempting, slightly opened lips; and her gleaming blue eyes that called to him as nothing had before.

He wanted her. The longing was so entirely overpowering, there was no hiding from it, no ignoring the craving he felt for her body. He wanted to explore with his tongue every part of her mouth, learn every motion that made her whimper and moan. He wanted to feast on her youthful breasts, making her arch her back like a cat. To move to her sweet, wet cunt and kiss it until she lost all coherence, the last shreds of her coldness. Every inch of her alabaster skin he wanted to trace with his lips; every one of her long, slender limbs he wanted wrapped around him, pulling him closer as he thrust deep into her, enveloped by her heat. He yearned for her slender fingers to tangle in his hair as he fucked her until the only thing she knew was how to scream his name. He wanted her to *always* look at him the way she did now. He wanted her to feel for him the maddening lust that was sweeping him off his feet, and yet for her eyes to remain soft, so that when he took her enough times to be able to make love to her slowly, she would chant his name and look at him as if there was nothing in this world but him. He wanted her to love him with every part of her beautiful, innocent being. And it was *this* desire that pulled him from the tumult of lust and reminded him that he was the Kingslayer and she a virginal, virtuous slip of a girl from the incorruptible North.

The music ended, and she had stilled in the final pose. Another track started playing, breaking the enchantment; she walked to her phone and killed the sound. Her back turned to him made him want to bring her against him, trace the curve of her neck with his lips, warm his palms on her skin.

"I don’t think I will remember the entire sequence," she said, and her voice startled him.

He would. He would remember every way in which her lungs drew breath. But before he forgot himself, pulled her against him, wrapped her legs around his hips, and covered her mouth with his own, he had to leave.

"Then you’ll have to invent again, minx, — not the worst of tasks," he said.

Sansa was surprised by the sound of his voice, how low, and quiet, and strained it was. She turned to him and searched his face for a sign that could give her heart a single argument against the imminent onslaught of her mind. She discerned nothing in his unreadable expression.

If he watched her look at him in this odd way one more moment, he would act on the madness that had possessed him. He gave her a curt bow and left. Rushing down the corridor, he ran his hand
through his hair, as if to pull himself back to his senses.

_I must be going insane._

He left her in the darkness. There was nothing for her heart to hold onto. Her mind was victorious over its vanquished, moribund foe.

_See how that hurts? And I told you it would,_ her reason whispered in savage vindication, as her heart collapsed onto itself.

He shut his flat’s door loudly behind. If, when he had exited the apartment some time before, Jaime thought that he might return less restless than he was when he had left, he was cruelly disappointed. Images of Sansa kept flashing in his mind, constricting his chest a little too much to allow for normal breathing. Aside from his sister, no woman had ever been able to hold his attention long enough for him to desire her, yet there was no denying he wanted that blushing, Northern minx. Jaime threw his head back and laughed — it was not a happy sound. Truly, there had never lived a man less fortunate in his desires than he. He needed as much scotch as was to be found in his apartment, maybe more. He pretended that he could drown his lust in alcohol, refusing to acknowledge that the sickness of desire could not be cured with liquor. Surely, this attraction to Sansa was occasioned by his prolonged separation from Cersei. Certainly, it was an illusion — like the flickering light that made her hair seem as if it were woven from fire. Doubtlessly, tomorrow’s hangover would be the last adumbration left of this deranging mirage.

She returned home to find that Tyene had left. Her roommate took to spending more and more nights without returning home until morning, if at all. Sansa only hoped that Bronn would treat her friend right. She disliked the emptiness of the apartment even more than she had Tyene’s questions.

Her mind kept spinning the circles of the seven hells, in which she found reflected Jaime’s face.

_Why did it have to be him?_

She grew intimately acquainted with despair that night. When she laid her woeful head on her pillow, she tossed and turned for what seemed like hours before she fell into a fitful sleep.

The twins were clinging to each other tightly. She tried pulling them apart, screaming in anguish, but it was as though her hands could not touch them and her shouts did not reach their ears. Like a wild bird that cannot understand the concept of a cage, she was beating against the invisible wall that separated her from them. Then, suddenly, she had taken the woman’s place. She was encircled in his arms, her legs wrapped around his hips; his lips caressed her neck. Just as she was falling into a blissful, warm abyss, he brought his face close to hers as if to kiss her. His green eyes looked at her with accusation and distaste.

_You’re not Cersei._

Sansa sat up with a jerk, waking. Oh, she was going to go mad! She put her face in her hands, breathing heavily. What had she ever done to be punished thus? How was she going to live, working at the Lannister Ballet Company, plagued by fervent nightmares and no less insane daydreams?

Text from Sparkle to Ellaria:

_Can you and I get together tomorrow? Just the two of us? There’s something I need to talk to you about._

She did not know why she had reached out to Ellaria, and not to Margery or Tyene. She intuitively sought a motherly figure, if one who was very unlike Catelyn Stark. She never thought she would be
able to speak to her own mother about something like this, partly, because she would never be able
to hide anything from her like she could from Ellaria; partly, because she would be too afraid of
unvoiced judgement or disappointment. Of course, mother would never say that Sansa had done
something wrong, but she would fear reading this in Catelyn’s Tully blue eyes. And she did not want
to. Somehow, she was convinced that she would not see condemnation of her feelings in Ellaria’s
brown eyes. She hoped to find council and strength in their warm, chocolate depths.

Text from Ellaria to Sparkle:

Sure thing, hon. Does it have anything to do with why you left early tonight?

Sansa could not help a sad smirk. Of course, Ellaria would have noticed.

Text from Sparkle to Ellaria:

No, I just forgot to eat and had a headache. But I do want to talk to you, please.

Text from Ellaria to Sparkle:

Alrighty. Rose Garden Café?

Text from Sparkle to Ellaria:

Somewhere less crowded with acquaintances?

Text from Ellaria to Sparkle:

How about my place? I’ll kick Oberyn out ;)

Text from Sparkle to Ellaria:

That sounds lovely. Thank you.

Tomorrow, then, she would begin learning how people lived on with hearts maimed by unrequited
love.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! Please leave me a review if you enjoyed this chapter!
Kudos are another sure way to make me very happy! :)
Reap Happiness in Pain

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To know joy,

Reap happiness in a field of pain.

To lessen sorrow,

Close your ears to the sound of rain.

Ellaria and Oberyn’s apartment was like a miniature Dorne. Golden tones and bright colors — yellow, green, orange — dominated their interior decoration. Large windows let in the light and the breeze of the sea. Silks, rugs, furs of exotic animals; the smell of spices, aromatic oils and candles; the soft chatter of wind chimes; the inviting pillows and divans; the colorful decorative pottery — all imparted a distinctly Dornish atmosphere to the place. Sansa loved Ellaria’s home. Her friend was making fruit tea in the large, light-filled kitchen, while Sansa sat on a barstool at the kitchen counter.

"So, what did you want to talk to me about?" asked the older woman.

Sansa took a deep breath.

"Please, promise me you will not laugh at me or tease me. I’m… I’m in enough pain as it is," she pleaded in a small voice.

Ellaria looked concerned.

"If anyone has hurt you in any way, just tell me, and I’ll castrate them and fuck them in the ass with their own cocks," she growled deep in her throat, dark brown eyes flashing.

"No! My gods, no!" Sansa cried in shock. Why did Ellaria always have to be so explicit and extreme in her wild opinions? "I just want your advice… I know you won’t judge me and… I wanted to talk to you because I don’t think my mother would understand…"

Ellaria reached for the young girl’s hand.

"Sansa, you can tell me anything — anything at all — and I’ll tell you the truth as I see it, no judgement attached," she winked, "you know I always do." Ellaria squeezed her hand and let go, returning to making tea. "As a mother, however, I can tell you that there’s nothing we won’t understand about our babies."

Sansa shrugged. She did not want to take any chances where her mother’s understanding was concerned.

"So what is it?" persisted Ellaria.

"I… I think I’m falling in love with someone who will never love me back," Sansa said hesitantly. Ellaria seemed as if she knew whom Sansa had meant.
"Are you talking about Jaime?" she began. "Because — "

1. **GODS!** flashed in Sansa’s mind, and she hastened to interrupt:

"I’m talking about someone else!" she yelped her lie in panic.

"Oh." Ellaria looked surprised; anxious; and a little disappointed. "Who, then?" she inquired.

"Someone else!" Sansa repeated. "Look, it doesn’t matter who," she added and sighed. "The point is: that person will never love me back. So I want to ask you this: is there a way to live with this… Learn to get around it? Like a disability or something?"

Ellaria looked pensive for a few moments, as if sad memories called to her from the past.

"Yes," she said, and Sansa released the breath she had been holding. "Yes, there is."

The hopes she had placed in Ellaria were not in vain.

"Could you teach me how?" she asked.

Ellaria proffered her a cup of the delicious fruity drink and walked toward an orange divan that stood before an open balcony. They sat and drank in silence for a few minutes.

"You’re right to compare it to a disability," Ellaria said finally. "It’s like dyslexia, or ADD. It’s always there, making your life a little harder than everyone else’s. You can curse and despair, but it won’t go away… So you learn how to go on in spite of it; how to overcome it. With unrequited love… What you learn is to find the little happiness you can. Don’t think, 'he doesn’t love me,' or 'he loves someone else.' Focus instead on a friendship, perhaps a few warm words. Learn to be happy with scraps until something changes, or you can move on."

The Dornishwoman took a sip of her tea.

"What if I don’t move on?" Sansa asked almost in a whisper. In truth, this question petrified her more than any other.

"Nothing lasts forever," replied Ellaria with conviction, "not even love."

"But my parents will always love each other," Sansa countered, "so some love does." Ellaria’s smile was a little rueful.

"When love is returned, it *can* last an eternity; but when it’s not — sooner or later, the heart shakes it off. It’s like a bad dream: it may seem you’ll never stop running, but at some point, you do wake up."

They paused, watching the sea and the white boats in the far distance.

"When I fell in love with Oberyn," Ellaria began, turning to examine the pieces of fruit in her teacup, as if to read in them her fate, "he didn’t pay me any mind. It was nothing but a fling for him, and he wouldn’t have known what faithfulness was if you showed him the definition in a dictionary." She smiled a wistful smile, pained still by the memories. "So I learned to close my eyes to his escapades: even if I killed his lovers, it wouldn’t have mattered — he’d simply find new ones. So I pretended to be blind, opening my eyes only when he was mine, if for a brief time, dedicating the rest of myself to my art. I was jealous but patient. I loved on, regardless of how my whole body seemed to ache and blood boil when I caught a whiff of feminine perfume or noticed stains of lipstick on his clothes."

She paused. "I learned that I was happier when I was with him even if he wasn’t mine than when I was without him at all." She turned to Sansa and put a warm hand on her knee: "Learn how to be happy hearing a laugh or a kind word; learn to ignore the pain — it won’t go away, so put it on a back burner. Find comfort in a smile that you have brought to his face; feel happy because you do..."
get to speak with him, see him. You would be more miserable if you didn’t. If you’re certain he’ll not love you…” Sansa nodded in discouragement, "something I find hard to believe," Ellaria commented, "accept that you can change nothing and that you must be content with what you have, and you have more than just the love for one person: you have a wonderful family, adoring friends, and a promising career."

Sansa had never dreamed Ellaria had experienced heartbreak firsthand. She had simply assumed that her friend would have sound advice based on what she had seen in others.

"What happened then — with Oberyn?" she inquired hesitantly, gently, so as not to disturb an old wound.

"I domesticated him," Ellaria smiled with good humor. "After a while, he’d stay longer, return sooner. He wanted me more and the others less. He grew to depend on me, because I refused to depend on him — I was the one he could talk to, knowing I would never throw a fit over his words. He started sharing secrets and dreams with me, and I did the same. At some point, I could tell it was just me he was with. He didn’t say anything, didn’t make any promises, but the perfume and lipstick were gone from his clothes and I knew where he was almost every hour the day — partly, because he was never far from me. Then, one day, we were in a bar, and a big Dothraki guy began flirting with me. Oberyn flew into a terrible rage. I thought he would kill that guy — Sansa, and the big brute was three times Ober’s size! Anyway, when we returned to my place, I started cleaning his bloody, bruised hands, and it was the first time I’d ever reproached him for anything." She smiled at the fond memory. "He pulled me against him and told me that he’d tear anyone who tried taking me away from him to pieces. I got angry, I slapped him, but he never let me go. I told him I did not make similar threats and that he should show me the same curtesy. He said he wouldn’t, and that I was welcome to claw anyone who looked at him in ways I didn’t like. I almost kicked him out of my apartment, I was so mad." Ellaria chuckled and shook her head. "Anyway, we shouted a long time that night — at first in anger, then with pleasure. And that day, something changed between us: we knew it would only be us and no one else. A year later, he asked me to be his wife; then I had Tyene, and Oberyn went nuts — I never imagined a guy like him would turn to putty in his daughter’s hands."

Ellaria paused, drinking more from her cup.

"Why did you never change your name?" Sansa asked. She had pondered this for a while.

"I was known as Ellaria Sand professionally, so I couldn’t change my name. I worried Oberyn wouldn’t understand, but he did. Tyene took my name, because she wanted to continue the ‘female line.’ I think Oberyn’s still a little wounded," finished Ellaria with mock sympathy, which poorly hid her pleasure at her daughter’s choice. Sansa had noticed early on that, in the Martell-Sand family, there seemed to be a latent competition between the parents for their daughter’s smiles.

She smirked into her cup; the sweet aroma of Dornish tea surrounded her like a soft, warm summer wind. Ellaria tucked a lock of Sansa’s flaming hair behind the girl’s ear.

"There’s no telling how love will turn out, Sansa," Ellaria said. "Whoever he is, he might never love you, or he might fall in love with you someday, or he might love you already and you simply don’t know it yet. On average, men are slow creatures when it comes to feelings — it takes them longer to go from willful ignorance through denial to acceptance. In the meantime, look for small joys and try not let your heart dream of greater ones. Nothing cures unrequited love so well as friendship, darling."

Sansa nodded, recognizing the truth in Ellaria’s words. After all, what choice did she have?
They drove to the LBC building together, chatting cheerfully along the way as if they had never known heartbreak and one was not teaching the other to live with it, yet a bitter sweetness seemed to float around them like perfume.

When they arrived to Jaime’s studio, they walked into the arena of a heated argument. That day, they were supposed to continue crafting the dance of Azor and Tanea. Margery and Jaime were arguing with venom.

"That movement doesn’t work, Lannister!" Margery was screaming at the top of her lungs, but Jaime would not be contravened:

"Of course, it does! You’re simply too clumsy today for whatever reason to carry it out! Yesterday, you were spouting none of this nonsense!"

"I told you yesterday it wouldn’t work! And it doesn’t! You won’t be the one risking to sprain your ankle to satisfy some lunatic’s ideas! I’m telling you, I won’t be doing this!"

"Don’t be ridiculous, Marge — not even a one-legged dancer would sprain her ankle doing this simple pirouette!"

"What’s happening here?" Ellaria inquired.

"He’s trying to make me do this crazy pirouette!" Margery complained, annoyance heavy in her voice.

"Which one?" asked Sansa.

Margery showed it without performing the motions fully. It was difficult — but hardly impossible.

"But you were doing it fine yesterday,” noted Ellaria in confusion, and Jaime bowed to her in exaggerated gratitude.

"Traitor," bit out Marge and went for a drink of water.

Margery Tyrell was not, ordinarily, a person to be pissed. She could be annoyed, exasperated, or mad but, generally, she would not describe herself as “pissed.” That day, however, she was unable to find in her rich vocabulary a more appropriate word to summarize her emotions.

She was elated the night before — the man she loved had finally gotten a hint and asked her to marry him. No sooner had she seized his proposal (and the accompanying ring, which, by the way, was the prettiest thing she had ever seen in all her life), than Tyrion began saying that they should wait before announcing their engagement. At least he had the decency not to state anything like that while they made love through the night — but did he have to spoil her morning? She wanted to put the magnificent piece of jewelry on her finger — where it officially belonged now — and tell everyone that Tyrion Lannister was off the market for good, back off bitches. But no. Tyrion had to start saying stupid nonsense about how the ring needed to be refitted (it absolutely did not, of course — it was a special order, after all); then he began suggesting that they should wait to tell the news anyway ("father will not leave us alone until we’re married, and I want some quiet time to savor getting used to the idea," he said). At first, Margery laughed him off, but he was more persistent than a bulldog who had seized his owner’s slipper and would not unclench his jaws. Finally, after a prolonged argument, her fiancé made a statement, which, in ridiculousness, rivaled any foolish thing that had ever been said. He declared that he simply would never believe that she did not act on impulse unless she had time to "think the whole thing through." Margery tried reasoning with him; she tried some dirty tactics; she tried false tears, threats, and puppy eyes, but Tyrion was indomitable. She would
have time to reconsider whether she wanted to or not. Margery was outraged, but, in the end, she had no choice but to give in.

She wanted to tell everyone, most of all her grandmother and Sansa, but her stupid, stubborn fiancé had somehow managed to temporarily cheat her of this fun. At least, she could take some small pleasure in his new title — though she could not say it aloud, damn it! Margery was not a big believer in delayed gratification, and if she lacked one virtue, it was patience. She wanted a wedding, a wedding with Tyrion. She had waited for at least two years already, though glimpses of a future with him had begun flashing before her eyes much earlier than that. Weddings took so long to plan — good ones, anyway — why could they not take the time to “think the whole thing through” while preparations were underway? It was not like the outcome would be different — she would just have to wait longer until she walked down the aisle.

She was not sure if she wanted a wedding in the Great Sept or on a beach somewhere… Perhaps a garden? Oh! Maybe they could go to Highgarden and celebrate there, at grandmother’s estate? She wondered what Olenna, Sansa, Ellaria, and Tyene would think of these ideas, but she could not ask them! Because Tyrion, no matter how wonderful in any other matter, was being absolutely impossible in this one! Margery even considered secretly telling Tywin and so having the problem taken off her hands entirely; but she knew that Tyrion would think this a betrayal, and she could not very well betray her own husband-to-be? She smiled, but then a frown came to her face — she really liked the term but could not share it with anyone!

Yes, there could be no doubt about it: Margery Tyrell was pissed. And she was not in the mood for dealing with Jaime Lannister’s crazy ideas about stupid moves no one cared about anyway when they wanted to get married to the love of their life!

That day, the rehearsal was difficult. Although usually inventing steps was a pleasant and exciting occupation, Margery was distracted and unenthusiastic the whole afternoon, her mind seemed far away, which irritated Jaime, because it hampered the progress they were supposed to be making with the scene. By the time the session was through, everyone was more than happy to retreat.

Fortunately, in the days that followed, Margery’s irritability left her. In fact, she seemed happy, and her eyes acquired a sly look as if she had pulled a prank on the entire world without anyone’s knowledge. Not one to focus on the negative, Margery decided to enjoy her secret, realizing that sooner or later — though she wished it would be sooner rather than later — Tyrion would accept the fact that he was in her nets and she had no intention of ever loosening them.

In the next few weeks, Sansa, who had taken Ellaria’s words to heart, tried acting on her advice. Her good sense triumphed completely over the petty feelings she had felt toward Margery, partly because Jaime’s strange rancor had disappeared from his dance as inexplicably as it had come. The return of his good humor certainly helped Sansa keep her own sulkiness at bay. Soon enough, they had finished the dance of Azor and Tanea, and it was time to rehearse the dance of Nissa and the king.

Sansa had not tried arranging all the steps on her own, mainly because it would be challenging to do so without a partner. Besides, she would not presume to invent Jaime’s movements for him — he could do it just fine on his own. In the nearly three months they had been working on the choreography and music, the only sequence that had been coordinated without Jaime’s lead was Nissa’s waiting dance. Sansa realized that she had been given such freedom with this scene because she would be the only one on stage in its duration. Dances that involved more than one person, however, had to be coordinated when everyone was present. Still, she had thought of various combinations beforehand.

She was pleasantly surprised when Jaime decided to keep a large part of the dance they had invented
a few weeks before and was astonished by his detailed memory of the composition, which she remembered much more dimly. In the beginning of the dance, Nissa moved spirally, in a circle that continuously narrowed until she reached Azor. She would come to stand next to him by the first diminuendo of the music and then, like they had done the other night, Jaime and Sansa would dance together. As far as Sansa could tell, they did alter the steps somewhat, but the overall structure remained the same. Her suggestions were also incorporated.

Trouble came later.

The dance essentially consisted of three parts: Nissa’s seduction as she neared Azor, which was followed by the king temporarily succumbing to his former lover’s charms during their joint pas de deux; then came his rejection and Nissa’s frantic, desperate dance that would initiate her descent into the madness of jealousy. The music was supposed to adhere to these divisions and reflect the changing feelings of the characters. Renly thought that it did. Jaime, however, stated plainly that the melody following Nissa and Azor’s pas de deux had to be changed almost entirely. The argument that ensued between the choreographer and the composer had been terrifying. In the end, Jaime prevailed. Considering his position as the co-owner of the company and artistic director, this was unsurprising. Moreover, Tyrion had sided with his brother, making the directors’ vote unanimous: the music that followed Azor’s rejection had to have more passion, its rhythm had to be faster, its volume more violent.

One of the major alterations in the steps Jaime and Sansa had invented several weeks before came at the end of Azor and Nissa’s joint dance. When music froze, her arched body was fully supported by his outstretched arms, their faces inches apart, their gazes locked. They would sustain this arresting pose for a long pause. Everyone, even Renly (after some convincing), agreed that the music for the third part of the dance, which followed the pause and centered on the rejection and the inception of jealousy, had to begin briskly, on a strong note. The problem they faced in choreography was how to follow the swift beginning of the music from the complex and still pose which they would hold during the pause. It was an issue that had been occupying their minds for the past two days. They had tried different ways in which Jaime could deposit her back on her feet while conveying Azor’s rejection, and yet none of them seemed right or fitted the altered music. They were trying another one, when Sansa, who enjoyed the feeling of Jaime’s arms around her without reservations, seeking to find happiness where she could, as Ellaria had advised, was enlightened. Jaime was about to begin lowering her to the ground, when she said urgently:

"Wait!"

He stilled, his strong arms supporting her body effortlessly, and looked back to her face.

"Do share, minx," he said, and a smirk began tugging at his lips. The serious and somewhat annoyed expression that had settled on his features in the past hours left his face and his eyes turned teasing.

"What if you threw me?" she asked excitedly.

"Come again?"

It was an odd way of having a conversation: their chests pressed together, her hands resting lightly on his shoulders, her back arched and her legs thrown over her head as his arms, aligned with the backward curve of her legs, supported her thighs, his hands reaching her knees. During pauses, when they waited for the music, she never fully realized how intimate this pose was: she was quite literally enveloped in him. She fought the blush that crept into her cheeks and, still relishing, though not as guiltlessly as before, in the alignment of their bodies, explained:

"I said: what if you threw me instead of lowering me to the ground? It would go well with the music
and would be a perfect way of communicating Azor’s rejection."

She saw a flash of interest in his eyes and knew that he agreed with her, but then his expression became neutral.

"It’s too risky," he said. "You might not land well and hurt yourself."

"Put me down," she ordered, and he returned her to her feet. She might be able to enjoy being close to him without holding back, now that she looked for such moments and caught them when she could in her continuous search for small joys, but this did not mean she had lost her sense of propriety entirely.

"I’ve seen something similar in a Dornish ballet once, quite a few years ago. The ballerina who performed it didn’t seem to have any problem, so it can be done. And I think we should at least try it."

"It’s only been done that one time," Oberyn cut in. "Jaime’s right — it is rather risky, Sparkle."

"You hear that, minx?" Jaime said with a self-satisfied smile.

"You’re the one who says we need to innovate!" she accused him.

"Yes, but not at the cost of our limbs," he countered. "Minx, you do realize that the expression 'break a leg' is a metaphor?" he jibed.

She rolled her eyes at him.

"Let’s just try it!" she urged.

"Absolutely not," was his categorical answer. "Now, let’s return to the last step we’ve thought of."

She was pouting as, again, they tried the different ways of breaking from the pose. They worked for another hour without making any progress. Everyone — Margery, Tyene, Tyrion, Ellaria, Oberyn, Renly, even Podrick and Brienne — was suggesting different ways of solving the difficulty in Jaime and Sansa’s dance. Jaime kept thinking of new movements as well, and Sansa gave up her moping, trying to come up with a solution. They diligently tried everything, but to no avail. The music was perfect for the dance, but it made its demands.

"Sansa," Tyrion spoke when they were all taking a break, their sullen silence a gloomy indicator of their frustration, "do you think you could land safely if Jaime were to throw you?" he asked quietly.

"I think so," she said with more confidence than she felt, but Jaime would hear none of it.

"The matter is not up for discussion, Tyrion," he said uncompromisingly, his tone a warning.

"How about we try it with Oberyn as stand by? He can catch me," Sansa ventured.

"And who will be your stand by on stage, minx, huh?" Jaime inquired mockingly.

She took a deep breath and felt exasperation fill her lungs.

"I’m just saying we should try it," she said stubbornly. Before Jaime could refuse yet again, Tyrion spoke:

"Honestly, Jaime, I think she’s right. You should try it. If it works, we can figure out the precautions later."
Jaime’s eyes flashed:

"Well, that’s a great idea, Tyrion!" he exclaimed with heavy sarcasm. "And pray tell: will those ‘oncoming precautions’ be handy enough to heal her broken bones or sprained ankles?!"

"Oh, don’t be such a drama queen, Jaime," Sansa said, and the flaming eyes turned to her with doubled anger. Seeing that he was fuming, she put a hand on his forearm, a gesture that seemed to quiet his indignation. "I really don’t think it’s that bad."

In the past month, she had noticed that her touch had a strangely calming effect on him when he was irate. Since the disturbing realization that she was falling in love with him and her conversation with Ellaria, Sansa had clenched her teeth and prepared for the worst. Somehow, however, she found that her friend’s advice was not impractical. Having never doubted Jaime’s unavailability, it was not impossible for her to accept that he would not be hers. She tried being happy with what she had, which, she constantly reminded herself, was not little: a promising career, a loving family, and caring, wonderful friends; even Jaime, although sometimes the sight of him made her heart sting as if from the bite of a venomous snake, was a kind, gently teasing presence. She came to realize that, though he had an odd way of showing it, what with his nickname for her and constant jibes, Jaime respected her as a dancer. His teasing was a form of endearment. She grew to warm herself with his taunts and even more often she was able to return his japes with interest. He did not seem to mind. Since their argument and his revelation of Aerys’ death, there was a sense of kinship between them. His support for her in her moment of doubt about her dancing abilities was something she would recall when she felt blue, and the memory never failed to bring a small smile to her face. Sansa was proud that she did not allow the ill-placed inclination of her heart drag her down. In her understanding of her own feelings and her acceptance of them, she had found an odd sort of peace. The bondage of love was not without its sense of freedom.

There were moments, however, when she felt acutely the bitter ache of wanting someone she could not have. Every so often, at night, when she could not stay brave, she would hide her face in the pillow and deny that she cried softly, wishing at times that he could be hers, at times that her heart were not his; but she did not let sadness turn to depression and fought against melancholy by looking for bright spots in her garden of shadows. She simply refused to give up on happiness because she could not chose whom she loved. More often than not, it was around Jaime that she found peace. In his presence, she rarely felt forlorn, and she discovered that she herself had a pacifying influence on him.

His deep sigh returned her to reality. Jaime was clearly fighting against multiple degrees of irritation.

"Minx, for the last time, we’re not going with this crazy idea," he said, exhaling. Seeing that she opened her mouth to protest, he added: "I’m warning you: if you bring up the subject one more time, I swear, I’ll ask Varys for old Ned Stark’s number and inform him of his daughter’s dangerous carelessness."

Sansa pursed her lips in annoyance, and an infuriating smirk spread itself on Jaime’s.

"Well, thank the gods for the stern Northern parental authority! Now, where were we with that other movement?"

It was unlike Sansa to give up after the first attempt. Next morning, she talked Oberyn into trying the movement in secret. They made a pact: if anything went wrong, Sansa would not tell Ellaria on him, and Oberyn would not betray her to Jaime. Both conspirators were rather unsettled by the wrath that the Sand Snake and the Kingslayer would unleash upon them, if they even discovered before time that they had practiced the risky step.
As Sansa had predicted, the movement, although it required considerable concentration and unusual care in execution, was neither too dangerous nor too challenging. Oberyn and she practiced until they both felt confident that Sansa could perform the motion without any hiccups, and they could boast of their achievement to the rest of the group. Despite their high hopes, both felt somewhat uneasy when they walked into Jaime’s studio the same evening.

They waited, upon tacit agreement, until the search for the right way to break out of the pose began to fuel irritation and respite was called for. Then, they walked to the center of the dance floor together.

"Renly, be a good man, take it again from the pause, will you?" Oberyn asked as he lifted Sansa into his arms. She noted absentmindedly, not for the first time that day, how Oberyn’s arms did not affect her at all: it seemed as though there was something magical about Jaime’s embrace, a secret to making her whole body glow, which no one else knew.

The silence lingered, and then Renly’s piano, accompanied by Brienne’s cello and Podrick’s violin, launched into the tumult of passionate music. With the first, resonating note, Oberyn’s arms flexed, and Sansa flew backward through the air, landing gracefully on her feet and immediately beginning the steps she was supposed to perform. She only made a few motions to show how seamless was the transition. When she paused and the musicians stopped playing, Oberyn wore a pleased, proud smile he was accustomed to displaying when his student’s achievements were in evidence; adding to his satisfaction was his own contribution to the discovery of the successful transition. Sansa looked to Jaime and was taken aback by his expression. His face betrayed a petrifying fury, yet his eyes could not conceal his admiration. He flexed his jaw muscles and, without saying a word, advanced on Oberyn. Everyone tensed, bodies ready for preventive measures. Tyrion, leaving his place next to Margery, even followed his brother cautiously. Jaime came to stand so close to his colleague and friend that their height difference forced Oberyn to look upward to meet his eyes. Sansa knew this intimidation tactic of Jaime’s very well.

"Oberyn, was I not clear yesterday when I said — and several times, too, — that we were not going to try this movement because it might jeopardize Sansa’s health and ability to perform in the ballet we’ve all been working on tirelessly for the past three months?"

"Jaime, listen — " Oberyn began, but the Lannister was not in the most open-minded of moods.

"Was. I. Not. Clear?" he repeated, his voice quiet and dangerous.

Sansa would not let Oberyn be pulverized for helping her. She approached the enraged lion fearlessly.

"Jaime, calm down," she began soothingly, as if, truly, she were entering a cage with a wild animal, entreating him not to tear her to pieces, "I asked Oberyn to help me practice. If he had not agreed, I would have gone to someone else. It was better that he helped me, considering that he’s one of the most experienced dancers in — "

Jaime turned on her, and she was immediately daunted by his anger.

"YOU!" he exclaimed with a passion. "I have no words for you! What kind of an imbecile jumps, forgive the pun, into something so remarkably stupid?!"

Sansa was resolved not to feel like a scolded child, but her determination had availed her nothing. She looked down at her feet. Tormund, who had been coming every now and then to the meetings, his trumpet in tow, began approaching them, when Jaime whipped his head toward him and growled:
"One more step, redhead, and you’ll regret it."

Tormund would have kept advancing, but Brienne, by far the more reasonable of the two, put a hand on his arm, stopping his progress. Sansa was still grateful for the reprieve. Jaime turned back to her, and she tried defending herself:

"Listen, you can see for yourself that everything’s fine. You’re overreacting!"
"Overreacting?!"
"Yes!"
"I should fire both of you for disobeying direct orders from your superior," he barked.

Oberyn bit back a nervous smirk, but Sansa gave full voice to her indignation:

"This isn’t an army, Lannister! And if you dislike having your 'orders' disobeyed, maybe you should have just been less stubborn and tried doing the step with me when I asked you to!"

Jaime’s astonishment and outrage at her words rendered him speechless for a moment. Tyrion took advantage of the pause to join the conversation:

“Jay,” he used the shortened form of his elder brother’s name very rarely, "I also happen to think you need to calm down," he began, and Jaime redirected his gaze, which called to mind the muzzles of dueling pistols, onto his younger brother. Tyrion was perhaps the only one entirely unfazed by his sibling’s temper. "Sansa can clearly perform the movement very well and without any risk to her health, so we should acknowledge her and Oberyn’s hard work, incorporate the movement into the composition, and — finally! — move on. We still have quite a bit of choreography to get through, and we’ve been stuck on this dance for far too long as it is!"

My gods, thought Sansa, he looks like a bull about to charge. Indeed, the only thing Jaime Lannister lacked, as far as the resemblance to the above animal was concerned, was the ability to beat the ground with hooves. Seeing as this was not an option, he ran a hand through his golden hair. The gesture was filled with animosity and irritation.

"Why do I bother?" he asked rhetorically, though it seemed as though the question truly interested him.

After a prolonged argument, he grudgingly agreed to attempt the movement. ("Minx," he had commented angrily, "if and when you sprain your ankle or break a godsdamned bone, don’t complain and whine about wanting to dance!") The way Sansa saw the matter, however, his acquiescence was still quite a victory.

He refused to let her land on her feet right away, making Oberyn catch her the first few tries. The entire time he wore an expression of annoyance, but Sansa could see that there was worry in green eyes and felt the unusual tension in his muscles. Is he worried about me? she wondered happily, and her heart, always ready to jump to conclusions, sang. She felt a little giddy.

Finally, she, Oberyn, Tyrion, and Margery insisted that sooner or later they would need to try the movement without a stand by. (Ellaria, like Jaime, was glaring daggers at the group.) Jaime muttered something barely audible, but Sansa, who was standing close to him, caught the words "a bunch of idiots." During the break they were taking before trying the throw for the first time without Oberyn’s help, which, she knew, had been entirely superfluous in the first place, Sansa watched Jaime’s face and was left without a doubt that he really was quite concerned for her.

"You’re worried about me," she stated with a pleased smile as she came to lean on the wall next to
"Why would I be worried about you?" he grumbled. "A foolish minx with nothing but wind between her ears and a liking for trouble?"

She grinned.

"I’m a very smart minx, who saved us a lot of trouble," she returned cheekily.

She observed that he was not simply worried. Jaime seemed agitated and apprehensive. She placed her hand on his arm.

"What’s eating at you?" she asked gently.

"Your stupidity," he said tartly. "It’s a rather corrosive chemical."

"I’m not letting you throw me across the room with that attitude, you might enjoy it too much," she joked. That seemed to have hit a nerve.

"I’d throw you out of a window, if that would help add some grey matter to your brain," he bit out. "I’m afraid, though, that your case is rather hopeless."

She would not let his angry remarks get to her. Watching him carefully, she thought she understood the source of his annoyance and his concern.

"You think that if you throw me too strongly or not strongly enough, I’ll get hurt because of you?" she asked.

She took his silence as a yes and moved to stand in front of him. He was deliberately looking at a point beyond her head, drinking water. There was something neurotic in the simple action.

"Jaime, I trust you, and you should, too. I know you will do perfectly well — we’ve done it several times already and, as you like to remind us all, you are the best dancer in the world. I’m certain it’ll be just fine — great, even."

His deepened frown was the only indication that he had heard her and that she had not convinced him.

"Listen, people sprain their ankles and what not all the time in ballet," she tried. "Even if something were to happen," he looked at her menacingly, but she soldiered on, "I would never blame you."

His eyes displayed an odd combination of coldness and burning anger.

"And, of course, you take me for a heartless egoist, whose own conscience wouldn’t bother him in the slightest while you were hopping around on crutches?" he said with venom. Sansa could not help but smile.

"I really don’t think it’ll come to that," she said and walked to the dance floor, indicating that it was time to pick up where they had left off. He followed her with the same expression of disapproval that had stuck to his face since the episode had begun.

Jaime had not been particularly surprised that Sansa went behind his back, stubborn in her determination to get the transition right. He was not even surprised that she had been able to master the movement. But he was mad beyond belief. Her obstinacy made him livid, and he wanted to crack a few of Oberyn’s bones for indulging her dangerous whims. That her idea did solve the problem
they had been unable to overcome exasperated him even more, because he realized it would be harder to prevent her from pushing the dangerous step into the choreography. Then, there was the additional displeasure of seeing her in Oberyn’s arms… All in all, Jaime felt like breaking things by the time the morons had finished their little demonstration.

At the same time, he could not help admiring how beautifully she held her limbs as she flew through the air and the graceful ease of her landing. He was no more able to neglect marveling at her performance of the challenging movement than he was to prevent the fear that made his blood run cold when he had first observed Oberyn’s arms flex and realized the Dornishman was about to throw her.

While raging at the band of idiots that he had made the mistake of surrounding himself with, he had not realized that he would end up worse off than he had started. He grasped this only when they had talked him into trying the movement, and he was faced with the unnatural task of taking Sansa’s small body into his arms and throwing her away from him with strength. Had he tried, he could not have imagined an action he liked less. Breaking contact with her flesh in this violent manner was unthinkable, and his body practically refused to do so. It was enough that he had to fight daily the magnetism that drew him to her, to watch her leave him every time he wrapped up the choreography meetings — now he had to act against his instinct and better judgement in throwing her away from him. What was even worse, was the absolutely blinding fear that he might hurt her. He had memorized her shape so well in the past few months, had traced almost every one of her muscles and grown used to feeling her warm body under his hands; he knew that, in spite of her stamina when it came to dancing and her unrivaled willpower, her body was delicate and alarmingly breakable. Throwing her as he was forced to do by the grace of her devious mind, Jaime felt his heart shrink somewhere deep inside his chest as his eyes anxiously traced her trajectory and he waited for her to land. He kept anticipating, with considerable horror, that her face would contort in pain. He did not know what he would do if she hurt herself — his mind blocked any thought past the excruciating images of her agonized face, which it was powerless to thwart.

In the end, they had tried the motions enough times that even he was (somewhat) convinced that it could be done. That Sansa had not hurt herself seemed a magic trick to him; but if there was anyone whose falls the gods would cushion, Jaime felt certain it would be the minx’s. The group of careless dimwits hailed the atrocious invention and forced his hand into adding it to the dance. He hated all of them for it with a passion. When they ended the session, he roughly took Tyrion’s flask from him. Ignoring the little monkey’s galling look, he downed the entirety of the whiskey the flask contained, disregarding his dislike of that drink, which ran strong ever since Tyrion had poured it down his throat on the night of Aerys’ death. He considered procuring himself a similar container for some scotch — after all, if he was forced to throw the minx like that for the foreseeable future of rehearsing the dance, he just might need it.

Chapter End Notes

Do let me know what you think, reviews always make me so happy! Kudos do too, no doubt about it! ;)
It had almost been two weeks since they had begun rehearsing the second dance of Azor and Nissa. Now that they had solved the problem with the transition, the choreography was coming out nicely. Jaime still grumbled about it, but, luckily, they had done the step over a hundred times without any hiccups. Nevertheless, he would mumble "foolish minx" almost every time they would go over the motion or mention it, as if it was a refrain to his general song of disapproval. His unwavering dislike of the movement notwithstanding, Sansa felt that when she and Jaime were inventing steps together, the world blurred away, and it was just the two of them — inventing, laughing, adding to each other’s ideas — until Tyrion’s, or Oberyn’s, or Ellaria’s, or Margery’s remark would bring the surroundings back into focus. She grew to love nothing more than arranging steps with Jaime: he seemed more carefree than in any other context she had ever seen him, and she loved the happy sparkle in his green eyes. On the other hand, she had to admit that she also basked in being near him and that the invention of the ballet was what afforded her the opportunity to do so.

Occasionally, she wondered if the playful and happy mood that characterized him during the rehearsals always animated him when he was with Cersei. (Had she voiced her thoughts to Tyrion, he would have assured her of the contrary.) No matter how she tried to push such thoughts aside, occasionally, they would come after her like a pack of hungry hounds, who had caught the smell of some luckless fox’s blood, and images of the Lannister twins — naked and laughing — would burn the inside of her eyes, penetrating deep into her mind and gnawing at her soul from within. In such moments, Sansa could not rely on Jaime’s presence to comfort her, the way it usually did when she was plagued by thoughts — or, rather, feelings — of misery common to those who believe themselves to suffer from unrequited love. Seeing him when hungry hounds of his and his sister’s happy laughter were at her heels only made her visions worse, so she sought out the company of her female friends. Margery, Ellaria, and Tyene, with their shopping sprees, their mirth of contentment, their endless innuendos, to the pricks of which she had grown accustomed, usually dispelled the images that haunted her. Ygritte and Talisa were another powerful resource for mood management. If her girl friends did not help, she would call Jon an additional time, talking of nothing and sipping comfort from the gruff sound of her brother’s voice on the other end of the line. When all else failed, she would call her mother and listen to Catelyn go on about Arya’s misdeeds, or Rickon’s gluttony, or Bran’s endless new pursuits. All in all, Sansa managed to keep her head above the waters of despair and melancholy — an achievement that made her proud. It was the modern age, and in it, there were no helpless maidens who withered away from unrequited love. There were real women who watched sadness in the face and found antidotes to her venomous stare.

She was walking to Jaime’s office in order to discuss a movement they had devised the evening before. Reaching the door, she knocked and proceeded to enter, lost in her thoughts and oblivious to whether or not she had heard an answer. Jaime was not in his office; instead, she discovered Myrcella and Tommen cuddled together on a sofa and flipping through the pages of a beautiful children’s book. When she came in, two pairs of green eyes considered her with obvious pleasure.
"Sansa!"

The Lannister — Baratheon!, she corrected herself — cherubs rushed to greet her, hugging her tightly.

"What are you doing here?" Tommen asked, but Marcella answered him before Sansa could.

"She works at the company with uncles, don’t you remember?"

Tommen clarified:

"But what is she doing here?"

Sansa smiled as she embraced the children, surprised that they still remembered her, and with so much fondness, too.

"I’ve come to speak with Jaime about a step we’re working on," she explained and proceeded to ask, in her turn: "But what are you guys doing here?"

"Mother decided to have a spa day, so Barry brought us to uncle. Uncle told us he’d come as soon as he can get out of his meeting," explained Myrcella.

Of course! She had completely forgotten that Tyrion and Jaime had a meeting with some sponsors that afternoon.

"And how long have you been here?" she asked. The kids shrugged. Uh-oh, she thought, this means quite some time, I bet. "Well, while your uncle is coming, why don’t we go get some ice cream? I know a wonderful place around the corner," she suggested.

"Ice cream!"

Chubby-cheeked Tommen could barely contain his enthusiasm. Myrcella’s smile suggested that, despite her infinitely better manners, she was not averse to thoughts of ice cream either. The little girl proved to Sansa, yet again, that Cersei’s children were not particularly spoiled with their mother’s attention:

"You have time?" she asked doubtfully.

"Of course, I do!" Sansa reassured her, thinking, And even if I didn’t, how could I leave the two cooked up in Jaime’s office? Although, by any standards, the Lannister’s office resembled a living room more than anything else.

She sent Jaime a quick text, and then the children and she proceeded to exit his office and head down the corridors, out onto the bustling street, and toward the ice-cream shop Sansa had mentioned. Tommen hung onto her right hand unceremoniously, but Myrcella slipped her delicate little hand into Sansa’s left one gently. The slight hesitation in the gesture had tugged at Sansa’s heartstrings with the realization that cuddles — or any form of gentleness, probably — were in all likelihood tragically foreign to their mother.

"So, Myrcella," she began with a kind smile, and the girl looked up to her with an answering warmth in her face, "have you had the chance to chat with Trystane?"

Myrcella blushed a little but looked happy.

"Yup," chirped she. "And we text, too! He sends me pictures of Dorne — it looks so pretty!"
Sansa smiled broadly. Jaime’s daughter was adorable — there was no denying it. As if to remind her that Jaime’s son was absolutely no less adorable, Tommen tugged at her sleeve.

"Do you think, if we ask uncle, he’ll take us to Dorne?" he wondered aloud. "He could take only Myrcella, if he had to. I know she wants to go, and I could stay," Tommen added, bowing his head a little. Sansa felt her heart do an "awww..." and become putty in the little hands of Tommy Baratheon.

"I’m sure that Jaime could take both of you to Dorne and that he would never leave you behind, Tommen."

*It’s Jaime who they hope will take them there, not their mother — and small wonder.*

She disliked Cersei more acutely each time she observed her children’s reticence, so uncharacteristic of their age. Myrcella looked forlorn.

"You know mother won’t ever let him," she said to her brother with disappointment, and Sansa observed how Tommen’s shoulders slumped a little.

"Sorry, Cella. I know you want to go," he said.

*No, this is monstrous!* Sansa screamed internally.

"Even if your mother doesn’t think it’s a good idea for you to go to Dorne," Sansa reasoned, though in her own mind she did not formulate her thoughts quite so diplomatically, "I’m sure Trystane will come to meet his little cousin, and that won’t be so very far off now," she consoled, reminded of how her own mother had always found silver linings among the clouds of her children’s small woes. "And when he comes, I’m sure you’ll be able to see him — just ask your uncle, I don’t doubt he’ll be happy to help."

Suddenly, Tommen giggled, as if he had remembered something ludicrously funny.

"You know," he said, gulping with an excitement so strong, it made him swallow some of the letters, "uncle Jaime called you ‘minx the matchmaker’ after he found out you gave Trystane’s number to Cella!"

Sansa laughed. Knowing Jaime, she found this easy to believe.

They reached the ice cream shop and approached the counter.

"All right," Sansa said, motioning to the delicious assortment of flavors, "which ones do you want?"

She had no idea what torment her simple question would unleash. Everything was simple enough with the ladies: Myrcella wanted vanilla covered with chocolate glaze; Sansa went for her usual guilty pleasure — raspberry, lychee, and rose flavor; but Tommen… Poor Tommen spent a quarter of an hour (and nearly all of his intellectual energy) deciding on a flavor. It was as amusing as it was heartbreaking to watch him being torn by indecision. Sansa suggested he get two different flavors — perhaps even three — but this hardly helped the poor boy.

"Your children are lovely," noted the saleswoman, smiling.

"Oh, they aren’t mine, I’m just babysitting," answered Sansa casually, even as in the back of her mind she wished for a moment that they were — the thieving desire flashed like a small ember.

Finally, Tommen asked Sansa to pick a flavor for him, and she took pity on the poor child’s soul.
She chose chocolate flavor, and the way the little cherub consumed it — resembling a small, hungry animal more, in that moment, than he did a putto — assured her that it had been the right decision.

They went back to the LBC building. As they entered, Sansa checked her phone, wondering if there was a text from Jaime, but the empty home screen announced that the art directors were still busy.

"Are you gonna go work now?" inquired Myrcella with an air that informed Sansa the girl expected nothing else.

"I was actually thinking we could hang out in your da— I mean, uncle’s studio," she suggested, and her little companions smiled gleefully at the prospect.

Damn it, Sansa! U-N-C-L-E. How hard is it?

It was hard, though, for her to refer to Jaime as the children’s uncle, and the more time she spent with the father and the children, the more carefully she had to watch herself to avoid a slip of the tongue. It occurred to her in that moment that if she, a virtual stranger, found it difficult to keep up the pretense, then, for Jaime, it must be considerably more so. She knew the charade wounded him, and she was certain the children were less happy because of the arrangement. In fact, she was convinced that Jaime would have done a considerably better job of raising them than their mother.

The children seemed at home in their father’s — uncle’s! — studio, something Sansa had not expected. In fact, they seemed to know more about it than she did, despite her daily presence there during the rehearsals. As soon as they entered, Tommen went to a wall closet and, opening it with a sure hand, produced a teddy bear, which he immediately placed under his arm, and kept searching for something else.

"Do you want to play Dragons’ Landing?" he inquired over his shoulder as he kept searching on the lower shelves — the only ones he could reach.

"Of course," Sansa replied.

Dragons’ Landing, a simple board game that had grown very popular since its inception a decade ago, was based on the legends surrounding the arrival of Targaryens to the Seven Kingdoms many centuries before. It had never been among Sansa’s favorites, and for a good reason: she always lost. Among siblings, prone to merciless teasing — at least until Jon or, before they had become friends, Robb would stand up for her — Sansa had hated playing it. With Myrcella and Tommen, however, her utter lack of luck would be advantageous. While Tommen searched for the game, she contemplated the closet with interest. The division of the shelves was clearly demarcated: wherever the children could reach, their possessions prevailed and chaos reigned supreme. Further up, however, Jaime’s things were arranged with considerably greater success at order. She smiled at the observation. Finally, Myrcella joined Tommen in his efforts to locate the game; soon, they found it, and the three of them began playing. Sansa was not surprised to discover that her luck — at least where board games were concerned — had not changed over the years, an occurrence which caused parcels of giggles to escape the luckiest child who had ever lived, Tommen, who seemed to always get the very best combinations on the dice; even Myrcella was laughing merrily at Sansa’s utter lucklessness. Sansa, of course, punctuated with exaggerated groans of defeat each time the dice rolled — not in her favor, of course, — which made her lucky competitors laugh even more at her "misfortunes." They hardly noticed how time flew by, but, eventually, Tommen’s eyelids began to droop and even Cella allowed a few yawns to escape her. Sansa gently suggested a nap, something Catelyn always enforced despite her children’s protests. The Baratheons acquiesced and, after the three of them had arranged the pillows, which Ellaria and Margery had brought to the studio, into a credible imitation of a sleeping place, Sansa was tugged by the little lions to settle in the middle, and the children curled into her and dozed off with an immediacy that amazed her. Their even breathing,
the warmth radiating from their small bodies, and the comforting memories of her own childhood naps lulled the supposed grown-up to sleep with a speed that would have made Catelyn Stark smile.

When Jaime — finally! — escaped the meeting to which Tyrion, as always, had dragged him with utter mercilessness, it was almost three hours after Barristan had called to let him know he could drop off Tom and Cella at his office and nearly two hours since Cella had called to inquire how soon he could come. Jaime was angry — he did not see his children nearly often enough to be careless about missing several hours with them. Besides, he disliked the idea of the two being alone in his office — gods knew, he kept forgetting to isolate those seven-times-damned power sockets, or make someone else do it!

Barristan was a good man, whose heart could not remain indifferent to the contrast in Cersei and Jaime’s treatment of the children: the careless inattention of the mother; the love and care that shone in the uncle’s eyes. Jaime suspected that, not being blind (or constantly drunk), Barristan had probably put two and two together, which made him all the more grateful for the older man’s willingness to risk incurring Cersei’s wrath by bringing the children to him whenever an opportunity presented itself.

Jaime raced down the streets, cursing under his breath the other drivers, Tyrion, the meeting, and useless streetlights (and, in his opinion, all streetlights were useless). When he had finally reached his office, all Jaime discovered was an abandoned fairytale book. Between the two brothers, Tyrion certainly had stronger claims to rationality, but Jaime was not a lunatic either, although, when it came to his children, his sanity was frequently put to the test. His first thought was kidnapping?, and a potent mixture of fear and murderousness began to brew in him. He reached for his phone, looking to call Barristan — Perhaps, they have already left? But I thought he said Cers was out for the day? — when he noticed two messages from Sansa. One was from an hour and a half ago, and it read:

Text from Minx to Jaime Lannister:

*Jaime, please don’t freak out. Tommen and Myrcella are with me. We went to get some ice cream (just around the corner).*

Jaime released a breath of relief. *If Tom and Cella are with Sansa, gods help anyone who dare threaten the two of them.* He smiled and looked at the text she had sent forty minutes later.

Text from Minx to Jaime Lannister:

*The kids are still fine, Jaime. We’re hanging out in your studio.*

He chuckled softly. Perhaps, he should not have been surprised that the minx guessed he would be grateful for a second update. He walked to his studio and found her and his children sleeping peacefully, blonde curls tangled with crimson locks. A lovelier scene he could not have imagined had he tried, though why the sight that greeted him affected him so powerfully, he could not quite tell. It was most likely the combination of the same qualities that had astounded him before in the minx — the generosity with which she carelessly gave away her kindness in handfuls, seemingly unaware of her precious gifts; and the gentleness of which she was capable despite her strong, unfettered spirit. This time, however, her goodness did not wound his pride. He knew her well enough to understand that seeing Tom and Cella alone in his office, she had decided to make them happier than they had been before she had found them — an action brought on not by condescending, self-righteous commiseration, but by a genuinely tender heart, which was oddly unique in its capacity to care about the joys and sorrows of two little children. *His* two little children.

Jaime could not tear his eyes away from them. He had seen Tom and Cella sleep on multiple occasions. Sometimes, when the rehearsals or other LBC-related business kept him away from them
too long, he would unceremoniously use the key he had from the back door of the Baratheon mansion and come to see his children sleep. Sometimes, Cella, who, unlike Tom, slept very lightly for a child, would wake up with a sleepy smile on her face. Usually, she would say, "uncle," and extend her little arms toward him. He’d sit by her bed and talk her back to sleep, telling her stories or sharing news about the LBC. Once, though, when she was younger, she had called him "dad," and Jaime knew in that moment that, though he would not trade his children for anything in the world, he regretted having had them with Cersei. It was not a late-coming pang of consciousness over his relationship with his sister — he refused to believe that love could be wrong, especially theirs, no matter his twin’s flaws. He regretted with bitterness that made his eyes burn and his heart ache that his daughter would likely never call him "dad" again.

Lately, he was able to free himself much more often and spend time with Cella and Tom during the day, but still, every now and then, he would come at night to the Baratheon mansion and watch them sleep, refusing to admit, partly for fear of his own actions, that he worried about his children living under Robert Baratheon’s roof. Robert was a loud, perpetually drunk womanizer, and Jaime wondered what had kept him from loosing his position as mayor for so long. He suspected that Stannis had something to do with it — the younger brother was phenomenally good at quieting the scandals that followed Robert around like the retinue a king. Jaime had not lied to Sansa when he had told her that he had nearly killed Robert once, when he had witnessed the man — drunk as always — try raising a hand to Tommen. Jaime did not remember, nor did he care to, what Tommen had said or done to provoke his "father’s" displeasure, but he could recall distinctly how his vision had gone red. He had thrown Robert against the wall, and his hand’s deadly grip around the man’s throat was enough to considerably sober up the swine; he had told him that if he ever saw him raise a hand to Tommen again, he would not have hands to speak of by the time he was through with him. Jaime knew from Barristan, Myrcella, and even Varys that no other such incident had ever occurred since. Another, even darker thought, that tore at Jaime’s mind with sharp, brutal claws, was the idea that one day, when Myrcella grew older, Robert, in a drunken stupor, might not be able to tell his daughter from a whore. And this thought made Jaime’s blood run cold. He had never told even Tyrion that, on multiple occasions, he had considered kidnapping his own children and taking them far across the Narrow Sea, buying with Lannister gold a new life for the three of them. He was prevented from doing so by the realization that, in case of failure, he would not only never see them again — he would not be around to protect them either. How could Cersei allow their children to grow up with a man to whom Jaime would not entrust a gold fish, let alone his children?

A movement from the pile of pillows on which the direwolf and the lion cubs slept peacefully had caught his eye and brought his attention back to the present. His gaze was captivated by Sansa’s face, which was framed by locks of red hair that had wiggled themselves free from her chignon as she slept, and he could not look away. He had never seen her sleep — an action so simple and yet somehow intimate. Without her blue eyes looking at him, preventing him from watching her too long with their innocence, he could trace with his eyes every line of her face. She was beautiful, and even compared to his sister, of whom Myrcella’s closeness to the minx’s form reminded him, he thought Sansa dazzling. He caught himself thinking that he could probably watch her features for hours, heedless of time. Unlike his sister’s face, which he had come to associate with rage and pain as well as love, Sansa’s features reminded of their mistress’ kindheartedness. He wondered for a moment — and only for a moment — how his life could have been different if Sansa had been born earlier and had come into his life before, as it seemed to him, he had reached the point of no return. The thought left him incomprehensibly bitter. He did not recognize in this virulence the cruelty of fate, which placed before him the vision of a possibility that seemed out of his reach.

As if she had sensed his mood’s astringency, Sansa opened her eyes lazily, sleep still reigning over her, clinging to her lashes. Her sleepy smile at seeing him made his heart jump and his breath catch, when for a second — and only for a second — he had imagined waking up to her smile and her
sleepy blue eyes. She turned to consider the children and, noticing that it would be impossible for her to disentangle herself from them without waking them, looked back to Jaime with a sheepish grin. The sleep was almost gone from her face, and he missed the drowsiness of her smile. He came to sit next to the three of them and spoke to her in a low voice. "You didn't have to do it, you know," he said, only half-serious, smiling with an affection he could not keep from his features, "babysitting isn't part of your job description."

He noticed how indignation flashed across her face for a second, but, as she did so often now, instead of burying him under her Northern virtuousness, she rolled her eyes and smirked — a new expression that seemed odd but endearing coming from her.

"I think this makes the job considerably less attractive," she returned, and he chuckled softly: the she-direwolf had certainly learned how to use her claws.

"You are probably the only one who'd think that," he supplied with good humor and was rewarded by another roll of her eyes. She decided to change the subject:

"How was the meeting?" she asked.

"I don't think I remember anything but boredom and hurrying to get away," he answered, and it was her turn to laugh in a whisper.

"I wonder what answer Tyrion will give me," she quirked.

"The same as always: I was impossible," he prophesied.

She raised her eyebrows suggestively:

"You can be rather impossible," she agreed, and he was the one to roll his eyes.

"Don't even get me started on that stupid move you've pushed into the choreography," he grumbled, and she chuckled.

"It's a wonderful transition," she said teasingly but with conviction, "you know that as well as I do."

"I know that you are — "

"... 'a foolish minx,' " she finished for him and sighed. "I know. I've heard you say it repeatedly over the past week."

He had never seen her pout before, he thought: a stubborn expression of certainty that she was being treated unfairly for no apparent reason. Her slightly pushed out lower lip made him want to catch it between his own.

"Don't pout, minx," he said teasingly as if he could dispel her unwitting magic with a jibe, "or you just might break my heart."

She laughed quietly.

"You don't have a heart to be broken, Lannister," she said in a tone far too playful to lend her words any credibility.

*I do have one. I just don't know anymore to whom it belongs.*
Well, here is another chapter! I hope you have enjoyed it! Comments and kudos would make me really happy. :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Of infidelities

There are two kinds:

The ones of bodies

And of minds.

As for loyalty,

There’s just one kind:

With trials aplenty,

Like love, it’s blind,

But never wavers.

And, like time,

It’s as benign

As it is endless.

Cersei Lannister found herself perplexed by Jaime’s behavior and unable to explain it. In the past, whenever they had a quarrel or she simply wanted something from him, she would not see him, least of all sleep with him, until she got her way. It really was that simple. He was always the first to apologize, regardless of how their quarrel had started or who was to blame; he always caved into her wishes. But that was before. Before that little whore, Sansa Stark, had come to King’s Landing. Except for defending Tyrion against her, the only thing Jaime had ever refused Cersei, the only time in their lives when he had not given her what she wanted, was when she had demanded the ruin of Sansa Stark’s career. It was worse than just this, however. Jaime did not seek Cersei out: almost as if, although this was surely impossible, he did not want her anymore. She could never have imagined that Jaime would be able to go without sex for so long: her brother’s hunger, empowered by, she thought, a frankly irritating stamina, would have been intolerable if he did not make her come as hard as he did. And now, it had been weeks since they had been together last, yet he was not showing up at her door, his ravenous lips muttering between deep kisses apologies and promises she knew he would keep. Although she had never dreamed this day would come, she even wondered if her brother was not finding satisfaction elsewhere. She could not have it. She would not have it. Jaime was hers to keep.

She was distracted by the feeling of Lancel's lips on her shoulder and shrugged him off. The boy was
useful in his utter inability to keep her uncle and father’s secrets from her as she rode him hard. Tywin was cutting her out of the loop more and more insistently lately, and she needed every secret she could get her hands on. She blamed Davos Seaworth for her father’s decision to reduce her responsibilities.

"Dress up and leave," she told Lancel coldly but not harshly.

"Can’t I stay the night?" he asked in a whining tone that irritated her so much she wanted to slap him.

"Sure you can," she said mockingly, "if you wish for my husband to catch and castrate you." That certainly galvanized Lancel into dressing quickly. The pretty fool was afraid of Robert’s loud bark. Her husband, whom she had married for the very simple reason that she wanted to be the wife of a mayor and, one day, of the man who would lead the Seven Kingdom’s government, was incapable not only of biting — he was incapable of anything at all. She saw clearly now that he would never head the Seven Kingdoms, unless it was in a contest of drunkards. This cruel disappointment of her ambitions had solidified her resolve to one day control the Lannisters & Co. She did not care much for working at her father’s company, wasting time on dreadfully dull business reports, which she always relegated to someone else. No, she wanted to be the company’s single owner, its leader. Her preoccupation with that pursuit had forced her to neglect some other aspects of her life — like Jaime.

Cersei did not have confidantes. She did not need any, always knowing as she did the best course of action. Besides, she would never ask for advice — that was not something Lannisters condescended to do. Moreover, she would not trust anyone with her secrets. However, she was somewhat in need of another person’s opinion, so she dialed the only being who had ever come close to what others might have called by that name which inspires trust.

"Good evening, Cersei," came the languid, cool voice from the other end of the line. Melisandre’s voice. "Why do you call?"

"I’ve something on my mind," she replied, not too eager to admit her musings.

"I’m listening."

Objectively speaking, Mel was the best person to call in her situation. The woman had accomplished something none would have even thought possible — seduced Stannis Baratheon, a man who seemed no more likely to feel passion than a piece of cardboard. Even more remarkably, she had proved able to wring from her stingy lover sums of money that would have seemed inconceivable even to the most accomplished, high-end prostitutes of King’s Landing. Cersei and Melisandre were not friends. Initially, on the few occasions that they were brought together, Mrs. Robert Baratheon had treated the Essosi whore with the disdain appropriate to the differences in their stations. It takes one woman willing to sell her body to know another. Melisandre was not to be provoked by words, and instead, sought to cultivate a queer form of companionship with Cersei. Stannis’ lover swallowed insults and waited, biding her time. She soon came into the possession of a few compromising negatives of Cersei as well as some sensitive information that could help Tywin’s daughter with her intrigues at Lannisters & Co. Melisandre had kept half of the negatives for herself; the other half, as well as the information about the Lannisters & Co, she delivered to Cersei. As she had intended, the gesture alerted the Lannister woman to her hazardousness and, paradoxically, served as a sign of good faith. Grudgingly, Cersei admitted Mel into her circle of well-selected cronies. The two women had a lot in common, and although, by their very natures, they were incapable of forming a friendship, they acknowledged a certain kinship. On the very few occasions that she wanted to hear someone other than herself talk, Cersei resorted to Melisandre, recognizing that the Red Woman — as she was called with so much spite by the high society to which Cersei
was Melisandre’s ticket — could be very, very useful.

"What’s the matter?" Melisandre inquired after the pause had stretched for too long, her cold but soft voice suggesting her willingness to help as well as her utter disinterest in whether or not Cersei Baratheon was well.

"I’ve been thinking about men’s natures," Cersei began as if to mask a practical concern under the guise of philosophical discussion.

"They are rather simple," came the Red Woman’s reply. She sounded no more interested than if she were discussing the latest studies on the mating behaviors of frogs.

"Generally, yes," Cersei agreed. "Occasionally, however, there’s a more curious case."

"Of course, there is," agreed Melisandre in a voice that announced she bowed before her interlocutor’s statement — even if, privately, she doubted its wisdom.

"Say, a man has always been faithful but is oddly distant," Cersei began, “some would say he has a new interest; others — that he grew bored; and yet, sometimes it’s neither of these things. So I’ve been thinking, theoretically, of course —"

"Of course," Melisandre confirmed.

“…I’ve been thinking what other reasons a man might have."

"A disagreement is usually at fault," Melisandre ventured. Cersei pricked up her ears. Yes, that sounded about right. "In such cases," the Red Woman continued, "when a man gets stubborn over a minor matter, it is the best course of action to remind him of the important things in his life and deal with the minor matter when he is quite aware of just how much his partner truly means to him."

"Indeed," Cersei said as though she had thought of this answer herself. She made some more remarks on the same “philosophical” issue, then changed subjects. The women spoke of the latest lingerie line that was opened by a hussy from the East but, although they agreed she was up to no good, neither one nor the other could remember her name. Soon enough, their conversation dried up, and they said their goodbyes.

Cersei’s ability to prioritize was perhaps her finest quality. Sansa Stark was a problem for later — Jaime’s indifference was an emergency to be solved immediately. She had learned from her mistake during their previous encounter, which she saw clearly after her conversation with Melisandre: she would not mention the Stark bitch this time as she seduced him. But after… Sometimes, men were truly easier to deal with once they had gotten what they needed.

She went into her boudoir. For Cersei, picking out lingerie and perfume, the perfect stockings and the right shoes, was an action as practiced and fine-tuned as that of a thug cleaning his old, trusted gun. Her weapons were made of the best silk and the finest lace; her poisoned arrows were the most prized scents to be had in the world. She armed herself with care, taking her time, her motions as determined as fate. Satisfied with her appearance — from the roots of her glorious blond hair to the ends of her perfectly pedicured toenails — she left the Baratheon mansion.

A driver was waiting for her by the time she had descended the steps of its porch. She ordered him to drive to her brother’s flat, and the streets of King’s Landing flashed before her: the passers-by enjoying the evening; the shop windows glittering; the streetlights dancing. It all felt old to her. She felt a little aged that evening. It was not that she had any new wrinkles or — gods forbid! — had put on any weight; it was that Jaime’s lack of attention concerned her, making her ponder anxiously —
however much she would tell herself not to — whether two decades was too long a time for a woman to be able to keep a man: even a man like her brother; even for a woman like her. She shook her head: no, Jaime was hers, would always be hers. Of course, they had had a few fights and misunderstandings over the years, mostly due to his odd ideas about the way a couple ought to behave; but the foundational truth of this universe, in Cersei Lannister’s eyes, was her brother’s unending and intransigent devotion to her.

The car stopped before Jaime’s apartment building — a luxurious enough skyscraper with a view of Black Water Bay he could not get enough of for reasons she did not understand. All seas looked the same to her.

She sent the driver away, as she had done several times before. The servants were too low, too small a folk for her to take into account: after all, she thought, they could always be silenced with a threat or some cash if ever they were so misguided as to make a sound.

She entered the flat, wondering if he would be there. It was early evening, and she was hardly surprised to find the place empty. She poured herself a glass of wine — he still had bottles of red waiting for her, the one she liked but he did not, and this pleased her. She set the air conditioning to a slightly warmer temperature and discarded her coat. In high heels and elaborate lingerie, her golden hair falling in curling locks to her waist, Cersei Lannister was a sight to behold. She was beautiful, unreal; she was perfect. So perfect, indeed, it seemed that nature, having bestowed so much beauty on this woman, could not have given her anything else. It appeared almost reasonable that a body so alluring could not be endowed with a soul equally fine. And yet, there was also a dissonance in finding anything but inner beauty within a being whose appearance gave representations of perfection a run for their money.

Her wine glass in hand, Cersei roamed the apartment as she waited. It was odd, she reflected, how long she had not seen him. Except for their two brief arguments at the gala and a couple of weeks ago, they had hardly been in each other’s company in the past months. That was an oversight on her part. As she walked around, tracing with the tips of her slender fingers photograph books, sketches, and notes that always drowned Jaime’s place whenever a new ballet was afoot, she realized that she had missed him. That was something to use to her advantage when he returned, she thought. Never was emotion as effective on one’s viewers as when it was truly felt by the speaker. She had never had time to miss him before, she reflected, and this was all the more reason to have him back as soon as possible and keep him preoccupied with her body as long as she could. Tonight, and many nights to come. She had been careless with inattention, having assumed that she could neglect Jaime without consequences. After all, he had always been at her beck and call. Well, she would not make the same mistake twice. Else, she stood in real danger of losing one of her favorite pastimes — coming hard around her brother’s cock deep inside her. She waited, her leisurely walk around his flat taking her to the large home studio.

Being in a ballet studio reminded her of their tryst all those months ago when someone had seen them. In spite of her questions, Jaime had never informed her as to who had witnessed their escapade, only telling her that she had nothing to worry about. She wondered now if it was not that little red-head bitch again — who else would Jaime cover up for? She could not understand his odd tenacity when it came to that half-grown child — no more than she could ever understand his penchant for defending their misformed brother, a tiny monster who had killed their mother, ripped her body apart with his large, ugly head.

She flicked off the lights and left the studio, returning to the living room. Just as she entered it, she heard the sound of a key turning in the lock, and Jaime came in. She disliked that he did not immediately sense her presence. She liked even less the warm half-smile he wore on his lips and the distant look of a dreamer in his eyes. And what she did not like at all was that when he did see her, a
frown came to his face. Ordinarily — or should she have thought "before"? Before all the problems that followed her marriage, their children’s birth? Before the Stark girl? — previously, when he saw her, Jaime’s face would instantly brighten, and even with all the issues they had had over the past couple of years, hitherto she had never seen him frown upon discovering her presence. The breath he released was tired, annoyed, as if his good mood and his energy were sucked away by the sight of her. She could barely discern even lust in his eyes, and that emotion, certainly, had always been there heretofore.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, and she thought the question utterly idiotic. She was standing in the middle of his apartment in nothing but her latest lingerie set — what did he think she was doing here? She would have told him not to be a moron, but, in her experience, men were easier to handle if they thought themselves the smartest in the room. She approached him instead, becoming more acutely aware with each step that he watched her with irritation rather than desire. He did not seem pleased to see her at all, and it was not out of anger or hurt brought by their fights; it was a much more dangerous feeling, it seemed to her — a candid dislike of her very presence. She came to stand close to him. In her high heels, she reached nearly to his lips. She had always hated their height difference, his greater physical strength — it seemed to her a sleight of hand that nature had not dealt in her favor. She dragged her palms languidly over his shoulders, reacquainting herself with their strong muscles. Her hands locked on the nape of his neck, like two snakes joining; she had almost forgotten how she liked his body, despite its superior strength. She moved still closer to him, feeling his chest against hers — unyielding, robust flesh, so unlike her own.

"I’ve missed you," she said, and, for once, her breathy voice did not lie. There was no joy in his eyes, only expectation. Expectation, she realized, of her next demand, which he was not interested in granting. She smiled at him — a smile that, despite its well-calculated effect, conveyed some of her own weariness. He did not smile back.

"What do you want, Cers?" he questioned again.

"You," she said, quite simply. "Just you, Jaime." And she kissed him.

He did not respond right away, as if he could not decide between pushing her away and bringing her closer, so her arms made their way to around his back, pulling herself closer, ever closer to his body. When, in a few moments, she felt his hands on her waist and he returned her kiss, she immediately noticed a change in him. She could not say if it was the way he touched her — somewhat less gently, somehow less urgently — or that he did not say her name like a prayer, the way he used to; but it seemed to Cersei that he was not entirely hers in these moments, almost as if he thought of someone else. But that was impossible — he would always be hers, she mused; and then his lips and his strong hands, which knew her body so well, displaced even her incessant thoughts. She relished in his body, in their joining, and knew that she had missed him more than she had realized.

Jaime’s ability to forgive Cersei practically anything had always been rooted in the way the world, her flaws, even his self, fell away when he was with her. He had always been able to lose himself in her body — the soft silk of her hair, the swamps of her green eyes, the opiate of her flesh. But not tonight. Whether he watched her with intensity or pulled her closer, the green and gold blurred before him, replaced, with each one of his thrusts, by clear images of blue eyes and hair red as fire. It was by some strange luck that the minx’s name did not tumble from his lips as he came deep inside his sister.

Tyrion Lannister had never been one for self-pity. It was a luxury that only the tallest and most handsome could afford, in his eyes. The youngest Lannister sibling always thought that if he started a pity-party, one that, he imagined, would begin with complaints about his height, it just might never end, and he would drown in his long list of grievances. As such, Tyrion was used to swallowing
whatever it was that bothered him and moving on. This night, however, he could not.

As he downed drink after drink — he had long ago left Bronn far behind where the number of consumed shots was concerned — Tyrion felt more and more dismayed by the world. It was irrational; it was inexplicable; it was "deeply idiotic," as Bronn had pointed out; but Tyrion could not help it. The incredible high, to which Margery’s acceptance of his offer of marriage had thrown him, had been replaced by something akin to depression. No matter what he tried telling himself, Tyrion could not convince himself that Margery had truly agreed to marry him because she loved him. Skeptical — nay, suspicious — of her decision, which he himself could not rationally understand, Tyrion tormented himself by imagining wild and awful reasons for her acceptance of his marriage proposal. Perhaps, it was that she wanted to be a Mrs. Lannister? But who, in their right mind, would want to marry into their family? Maybe it was to secure her position at the LBC? But her position was secured long ago thanks to her talent and hard work. Could she be pregnant? The thought had for a fleeting moment filled him with a blinding joy, but he stomped the feeling — who would be mad enough to risk having a child with him? And regardless, since abortion was legal and good clinics abounded throughout the Seven Kingdoms, pregnancy was hardly a good reason to marry, especially not for a young woman like Margery, who would never have been heedless of her career. No, Tyrion Lannister could not understand why she had not left him; why she claimed she wanted to marry him; or why she would do any of it if she did not love him like she said. Unable to give credit to the latter or find a believable alternative for her motivations, he excruciated himself with dark imaginings and wallowed in his misery.

"You are crazy," Bronn was presently saying. "You got yourself a beauty of a girl, who loves you and not your bank account, and who, on top of it all, agreed to marry you. And considering that everyone in your family is completely fucking mad, this is as good a proof as any of her loving your stupid ass. And instead of kissing her feet and placing a diamond ring on each one of her toes, you, pampered little shit that you are, are spending your time getting drunk with me in this dirty bar."

Tyrion, who was well in his cups by then, retaliated with an uncertain tongue:

"And you? How are you any better? You’ve got a beauty of a girl who loves you though you are old enough to be her father, even though you have no family and what you had once probably was not something to recommend you… And yet," he hiccuped, "here you are… Getting drunk with me in this liiiittle baaaar…"

"That’s a whole different thing," Bronn countered, "I’d be fucking my girl right now if it weren’t for a bit of a duty I have in making sure you actually get home — or Marge will have my head, so she will."

Tyrion gulped down what little was left in his glass — he could not distinguish by taste what drink it was that he had finished nor remember what it was he had been drinking. He called for more, but the bartender shook his head.

"Can’t a man get properly drunk anymore?!" Tyrion exclaimed with mild indignation — he was too inebriated for any sharp emotion.

"Not when your father will drive me to the end of the earth if you die of alcohol poisoning because you got too wasted in my bar," the man replied.

"Ah, my father! My father, the mighty Tywin of House Lannister!" Tyrion roared, standing up shakily on his chair and toasting the air with his empty glass. Bronn smirked at him.

"Come on, let’s get you home," he suggested.
"You’d bring me home to my fia-a-ah!-née," he barely managed to sit back down, even with Bronn’s assistance, "in this state, you’d let her see me in this state, you bastard without heart or conscience?" Tyrion exclaimed in incomprehension. "She’d probably never agree to set eyes on me again after beholding me in such a condi-," he hiccuped, "-ition!"

"I’m sure she’s seen you drunk before," Bronn said as he got up.

"Yeeessss…” Tyrion dragged out, raising his index finger as he clarified, "but not when she was sober herself. No," he declared decidedly, "I shall go to my brother! What are brothers for, if not drunken conversation?"

"If that were true, you and me would have been brothers," Bronn remarked with his usual sarcasm.

"And so we are — drunk brothers! No — drink brothers, that’s what we are! Bounded by the whiskey, and scotch, and…" he hiccuped. "Come on, drink brother, take me to the Kingslayer!!" Tyrion roared the last word as if to petrify the few remaining patrons. He was rewarded for his efforts with a few grunts of annoyance.

"All right!" Bronn agreed easily, only too happy to let Jaime deal with the wasted Tyrion and go back to Tyene, "To the Kingslayer we shall go."

While Jaime was in the shower, Cersei returned, once more, to pondering his strange attitude. When she came to from the heights of her orgasm sufficiently to contemplate him, she thought he looked like a man who had seen a ghost. His breathing was heavier than she had ever noticed before. He breathed as heavily as if he had run a marathon, and there was an odd look of consternation on his face. In other words, without delving too deeply into the thickets of analysis, which was not Cersei’s favorite territory by any means, she knew that Jaime looked nothing like a man is supposed to look when he had just come inside the woman he loves. The scarcity of caresses she received from him after he had caught his breath alarmed her. If it was not for her insistence that no one should ever see her with wet hair and running make-up — especially not a man whose interest she meant to keep — she would have followed him under the spray of warm water in order to find a solution to the riddle of his behavior.

Her musings were interrupted by the doorbell and loud knocks (which were more banging than anything else).

"Jaime open that fucking door, or I swear I’ll piss all over your 'welcome' rug!" came Tyrion’s drunken slur and the banging renewed.

"He’s not kidding you on that one, Lannister," Bronn’s laughing voice confirmed.

Cersei, even if they were about to break the entrance door, would not dignify them with her presence. The sounds of the shower ceased, and Jaime, water still streaming all over his body, with nothing but a towel around his hips — a welcome sight, she thought — exited the bathroom.

"Couldn’t you get the door for once, Cers?” he threw over his shoulder in irritation as he passed by. She heard him open the door and then Tyrion’s drunken footsteps, accompanied by Brown’s steadier ones, invaded the flat. Since her childhood, in fact, from as early as Tyrion could crawl, she had hated the sound of her baby brother moving around. It seemed to her that the irregular, cacophonic sound, was a trumping of her mother’s insides, and she hated every single one of his steps.

"I’ll leave him to your good care," she heard Bronn say.

"Thanks for brining him over, Bronn" Jaime replied, and she — as always when her twin readily
accepted to care for the imp — was surprised not to hear sarcasm or irritation in his voice.

As soon as the door closed behind Bronn, she emerged from the bedroom, wrapped in one of the sheets.

Tyrion was leaning heavily against the underbar, his eyes nearly closed as he breathed heavily. She hated every one of his breaths, too. It seemed utterly unfair to her that a creature like him — ugly and vulgar, full of envy, drunkenness, gluttony, and lust — should draw breath at all; and it seemed a preposterous joke that something so low should exist at the price of her mother — a being so beautiful and perfect; the only being Cersei had ever fully loved. Tyrion’s breaths, every single one of them, rightfully belonged to her mother, and she loathed him for taking them from her. Tyrion half-opened one of his eyes and took her in. At first, he did not seem to recognize her, and he opened both his eyes, which lit up with hope, and remorse at his interruption flashed in them; when he did see her for who she was and not whoever he had taken her for, he grimaced in distaste.

"What is she doing here?.." he moaned, as if in pain.

Jaime was silent, and she fumed wordlessly — her mind had been too preoccupied with deciphering her twin to shift easily into angry banter with her youngest brother. Tyrion detached himself forcefully from the underbar and, swaying heavily on his even ordinarily unsteady feet, made his way toward Jaime, mumbling all the way, "Leave us alone, Cersei, leave us alone!.." He braced himself against his brother’s leg, the support of which he badly needed, encircling the long limb with his small arms like a tarsier hugging a tree branch, and paused for a minute, probably waiting for the world to stop spinning.

"Just make her go, Jaime!" he whined, like he used to do when they were children, and he was very young, so young, indeed, that he was not yet ashamed to whine, although, even then, he had only done so very rarely. He grew quiet after this outburst, exhausted by the effort it took him to move and make loud sounds. Then he mumbled again. "Make her go…"

She saw Jaime’s eyes acquire that peculiar softness that always rose to them when he dealt with a troubled Tyrion or one of the children. Even with herself, Cersei had rarely seen him look so gentle lately, and she resented Tyrion for this immensely. Jaime ran his hand absentmindedly through his brother’s tangled, curly hair — an unconscious action she had later seen him carry over to the children — and he smiled at him indulgently. She hated Tyrion for how Jaime always indulged him. The few times she had been able, when they had been children, to tear Jaime away from Tyrion as her baby brother cried, had been some of the happiest and most triumphant in her life. After Jaime and she had become lovers, it was somewhat easier for her to make him forego Tyrion’s company, but by then, her youngest brother had grown too old to give her the pleasure of his tears.

Jaime turned to her, still smiling, but his expression changed, becoming more somber when their eyes met.

"I think it’s time for you to go, Cers," he said.

She was breathing heavily. How could he — how dare he! — choose that ill-made creature over her? And then she noticed Tyrion’s pleased drunken grin, his head with eyes closed still resting against Jaime’s leg as if he was ready, despite his condition, to fight for his brother in a tug of war.

"Why would I go?!" she exclaimed with rage. "Why not put the drunken little beast into a cab and send him off to his Highgarden whore?!"

Jaime closed his eyes. There was no indecision in his face — only exasperation. Tyrion tugged at his towel to get his brother’s attention. When Jaime looked down toward him, Tyrion was looking up at
him with wide-open eyes.

"Jaime," he complained in a soft voice. "She’s saying such terrible things. Why do you let her say such terrible things to me?"

And Jaime remembered.

He remembered the words:

"Jaime, she’s saying such terrible things. Why do you let her say such terrible things to me?" spoken in a small voice full of surprise and pain.

He remembered the warm, sunny day at Casterly Rock. The sea was kissing the beach gently, with the innocent insistence of first love; the green of the trees was so full of life’s juices, it looked good enough to eat. And his sister had just told his baby brother that he was a monster and that he had killed their mother. With an expression of bloodthirsty viciousness, which had disfigured her pretty face, she had told him he was the ugliest, worst creature that had ever lived and that, one day, he would die in as much pain as their mother, only he would be all alone. Tyrion had not started crying right away. He looked to Jaime, who was lost, disoriented by Cersei’s hatred. His little brother had looked to him for protection, just as he did now.

"Go, Cersei," he told her as he had told her a little over two decades before.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think! :) If you feel like leaving kudos — I promise not to complain! ;)
Jaime did not want any of this. He had never asked for his mother’s death or a brother, whose pain at being unlike others, which he could not heal, he would carry inside him with impotent rage at the world and a burning pity for the little, defenseless boy asking for his love and care. He had never asked for a sister who would refuse to share this burden; who, with her loathing, would drive deeper the wedge of their mother’s death, which had split the family apart like a fisherman’s auger the ice of a frozen lake. He had never asked to love a woman so full of hatred. He had never asked for children he would be unable to call his own. And what he certainly had not asked for was a red-head slip of a girl to bring further chaos into his universe of gloom. He was tired of the unending wretchedness that overwhelmed his family. He was in fear of his inability to dismiss thoughts of Sansa. And he thought apocalyptic that he no longer could find refuge from this spinning madness in Cersei’s body. His sister’s angry snarls brought the present back into focus.

"I’m warning you, Jaime, get rid of him! Get rid of that malignant creature before he destroys us!"

He wanted to tell her so many things. That she was mad, merciless, inhumane. That she had destroyed their family more, perhaps, than their mother’s death had. That if he could erase their twin birth from the annals of this universe, he would have done it. But he did not want to hear anything more from her, especially with Tyrion listening, however drunk he was. She had said more than enough. He resorted to the tactic he had discovered in their childhood.

"You can stay, for all I care," he announced, as he picked his little brother up and carried him to the sofa, "but I will be taking care of Tyrion," he informed her in a tone that allowed for no negotiations, and added with vicious sarcasm, while he gave his full attention to laying Tyrion down and taking off his shoes: "You can stay and help me, if you like."

He was aware of her heavy breathing — the telltale sign of her rage and jealousy. He saw how, in spite of her evident desire to mend things between them, which had surprised him by its lack of demands, she was no more capable of overcoming her hatred for their brother than she was of not being the center of attention. To be overlooked in favor of Tyrion was beyond her limited endurance. As he expected, she picked up her coat, turned on her heels, and went to the bedroom. Soon, she walked the straight line from there to the entrance door and left without a backward glance or a goodbye. The moment she exited the apartment, Jaime felt relief — a feeling that had never accompanied her departures before. There was no regret, no disappointment, no anguish; there was the sense that someone, in unbound mercy, had removed shackles from his lungs.

He turned to Tyrion, next to whose lying, relaxed form he was sitting. His brother never looked so
young or behaved with such infantilism as when he was drunk practically beyond consciousness. A childish Tyrion always brought to Jaime’s mind memories of his brother when he was just that — a child — and it never failed to stir tender feelings in his heart. Tyrion was watching him with so much immature pleasure and self-satisfaction, it was clear that, in spite of his compromised sobriety, he had not missed a moment of his and Cersei’s argument and had enjoyed every second of Jaime taking his side over their sister’s. Smirking like a benevolent conspirator, Jaime pushed a few locks of hair out of his brother’s eyes.

"Why are you so drunk, Tyrion?" he asked with a smile.

Tyrion’s face changed: frowning, he looked away from his elder brother, and his hands went to play with the edge of the plaid Jaime had covered him with, knowing his baby brother always felt cold when he was so drunk. It seemed to Jaime that his simple question sobered Tyrion up a little, proving that he had a serious reason to explain his intoxication.

"You wouldn’t have a little bit of scotch or whiskey?" Tyrion asked instead of addressing his question. "Maybe some cognac?"

"I have all three," Jaime answered with humor, "but you are getting neither. And in case you try reaching for a bottle yourself, I will put them so high up, you won’t even be able to see them."

Tyrion pouted, but he was not offended. Jaime was the only person in the world who could make such teasing remarks about Tyrion’s height without, somehow, making him feel misformed, ugly, or monstrous. Perhaps, it was because Jaime never actually made fun of him in any way that was hurtful; perhaps it, was because they had an unwritten pact of making fun of each other’s disabilities, and Tyrion knew that he himself was considerably more nonchalant with his japes concerning Jaime’s dyslexia than Jaime had ever been with his dwarfism. Most likely, however, it was because Tyrion knew that Jaime’s love was as blind as it was unconditional, and that, in reality, his elder brother did not care how short in stature he was.

There was a brief pause, a harmless contest of wills: Jaime watched Tyrion, expecting an answer to his earlier question, knowing that, even in his drunken state, Tyrion had not forgotten it; Tyrion, on the other hand, did his best to avoid his brother’s query — and his eyes. But then, as it had always been the case, when he felt something was truly wrong with his baby brother, Jaime’s carefree nature receded before a persistent and nagging attitude. He cupped his brother’s face and repeated:

"What’s the matter, Tyrion?"

Tyrion swallowed, then sighed heavily. He felt oddly vulnerable even before Jaime, his sworn shield.

"Marge…” he began and saw fear come to his brother’s eyes.

"What happened?" Jaime asked in a strained voice.

"I…” Tyrion refused to spill drunken tears. “I… proposed…” he managed.

Jaime’s eyebrows rose, and the light of pleasant surprise filled his features, but then his eyes narrowed. Tyrion saw, with surprise, a cold light fill their green depths, which spelled peril to his offender.

"What did she say?" he asked in a dangerous voice, which reminded Tyrion of their father.

"She…” Tyrion swallowed heavily once more, his intoxicated mind’s clarity further compromised by the tension rolling off his brother. "She says she wants to marry me… and I… I think — ” but he did
not get to finish. Jaime shot out of the sofa with an almost angry cry:

"Oh, you first-class moron!" he exclaimed in exasperation and relief. "Why the fuck would you make me think (against all common sense!) that she left you, then, huh? You fool!"

"She doesn’t want to marry me," Tyrion protested. That got Jaime to sit down, but, his suspicions once aroused, he continued to eye him skeptically.

"Did she say that?" he inquired.

Tyrion pouted again.

"No, Jaime," he replied, annoyed, "she did not say that…"

His elder brother interrupted him.

"Then why do you think that?" he asked, not without amusement.

Tyrion’s pout grew considerably worse, and he lowered his gaze again, but he did not answer. It was this stubborn resolution to keep silent that showed Jaime the way into the puzzle of his brother’s inadequate behavior.

"Oh, Tyrion…" he said and laughed.

"It’s not funny," came his brother’s sullen voice.

"I think it is. You cannot possibly think that Marge agreed to marry you if she doesn’t love you?"

Tyrion did not reply, looking injured by how lightly Jaime was taking the matter.

"You’re mad," his brother stated with humor, a playful smile on his face.

Tension had left Jaime completely. With the exodus of both Cersei and the fear of Tyrion being heartbroken, he felt so carefree, he could almost pretend that visions of Sansa had not invaded his mind so brazenly only a few hours before. He sat back comfortably on the sofa, his right hand resting over his brother’s knees.

"Marge is not the kind of person who does anything she doesn’t want," he continued. "If she didn’t want to marry you, she would have told you so. And besides, she would not have stayed with you for… How long has it been, now? Four years? She would not have stayed with you for four years if she didn’t love you. I can barely make her do a pirouette she doesn’t like — I pity anyone who would try marrying her off to someone she had not chosen herself."

“But — ” Tyrion protested weakly, only to be interrupted again:

"But what?"

"I… She…” Tyrion tried and looked up at his elder brother. Jaime’s one raised eyebrow announced plainly that he did not think much of his brother’s eloquence. "She cannot possibly love me," Tyrion whispered. He expected Jaime to roll his eyes or to groan like he usually did when Tyrion claimed he was not good enough for something or someone. Instead, his elder brother laughed.

"You’re quickly becoming the stereotype lover from one of those atrocious love songs they forced us to memorize in first grade," he said and laughed again at Tyrion’s indignation. He placed a hand on his shoulder to get his attention. "When you began telling me you were in this state because of Marge, I was afraid that she had hurt you, but I still found it hard to believe. In the four years you’ve
been with her, I’ve never known you two to have had any serious problems." _Like Cersei and I do, for instance_, he thought bitterly but with relief that his brother was at least spared this particular variety of pain. "I think you need to trust her more," he suggested gently. "I wouldn’t say that," he added, "you know I would not, if I didn’t believe she deserved your trust. I know I can trust her with you — and it’s more than I could ever say for anyone else."

Suddenly, Tyrion, who had been listening to his brother’s words carefully and whose eyes, little by little, had been permeated with belief, grinned in a malicious way.
"You’d trust Sansa with me, though, wouldn’t you?" he asked out of the blue.

He watched his elder brother’s face very carefully, and Jaime’s displeasure at the suggestion did not escape him.

"What does the minx have to do with anything?" Jaime countered in a voice that even Tyrion would have thought unchanged if he were not listening as intently for the subtle modification of tone. Easily absorbed, as he always was prone to be, in advancing his brother’s happiness — even when untangling the nots of his own demons on the strings of his blessings — Tyrion was eager to investigate. Having taken his brother by surprise, he decided to press his advantage, even if, due to his inebriation, he could not help a cunning grin from spreading on his features.

"Oh, I’m just wondering," he said as if it were the alcohol talking, "if I was involved with Sansa and had asked her to marry me — would you have trusted her to keep my heart safe like you do Marge?"

He watched Jaime like a hawk, registering the waves of emotions that chased one another across his brother’s face: the annoyance, the anger — these red flags of jealousy he recognized with satisfaction as rapidly as they had flashed in Jaime’s eyes. He did not expect anything else, but, caught up in Jaime’s expressions like a seer in deciphering the signs revealed by a crystal ball, he watched other feelings spark: resignation and love. Tyrion knew his brother so well, having always followed him with careful fascination, that Jaime’s feelings, unlike his unpredictable ideas, hardly ever bewildered Tyrion. But his brother’s next reply shook Tyrion to his very core.

"Yes," Jaime answered simply, and Tyrion felt like he had been hit in the stomach as two incredible thoughts emerged in his mind. He was convinced in that moment, like he had never been before, that Jaime, whether he knew it himself or not, would one day love the Northern girl with _all_ his heart — without reservations, more than he had ever loved Cersei; and that, although Tyrion had always cherished his elder brother’s love and been grateful for its uncompromising power and its protective nature, his pride in his own devotion to Jaime had fooled him into thinking that he loved Jaime even more than Jaime loved him. And yet here was his elder brother, effectively admitting he would not have stood in Tyrion’s way even if he wanted to claim the woman Jaime himself was falling in love with — something Tyrion was uncertain he would have been able to do. Tyrion closed his eyes, unable to watch his brother’s loving smile, which was his first memory. His throat was constricted as if he was being suffocated, he felt tears burn the back of his eyelids — tears that no alcohol could ever bring — and Tyrion was humbled. Humbled by his brother’s love; humbled by Jaime’s oddly serene sincerity in the face of his own humorous probing. He lifted himself up with effort and, overcoming the spinning world all around him, embraced his brother with all the strength he had in his arms. Jaime held him close, and Tyrion hid his face in his strong shoulder as a few tears escaped him. It seemed to him in that moment that everything was fair in this world — when one had a love so strong to fall back on as Jaime’s, the rest of humanity had almost no right to love one at all. Like he had always done, Jaime had given him the strength to look the world’s many monstrous heads in the eye, and feel he could cut off each one, and every one that grew in their places besides.

"Your drunkenness is gifting you with new symptoms, brother dearest," Jaime’s teasing voice soothed him.
Tyrion whipped his eyes hastily, and sat back, crowding his small body to his brother’s side, and finding the comfort, undiminished over the years, in Jaime’s heavy arm around his shoulders. It had always seemed to Tyrion that the heavier were the burdens placed by the world on his own shoulders, the stronger his brother’s arms grew to keep them from crushing him. They sat like this in silence for a while, and Tyrion lost track of time. He grew drowsy. He never noticed that he fell asleep.

Jaime sat silently as Tyrion snored peacefully at his side. A smile played on his lips. He was happy for Tyrion: like many of his brother’s friends (not to mention his father), he thought it odd that he and Marge had not married earlier. They were happy together, that much was obvious. She loved him, he had no doubt. And, of course, it was plain for all to see that Tyrion saw the sun rise and set in her eyes. This train of thought reminded him of his brother’s fiancée.

Text from Kingslayer to Marge:
_Tyrion’s ovre ta my plcae. Jsut in case yuo were wondrieng._

Text from Marge to Kingslayer:

_Why the fuck is your dyslexia playing up? Has something happened? Is Tyrion all right?_

Jaime cursed silently. Trust his dyslexia to serve as the barometer of his mental state.

Text from Kingslayer to Marge:

_Evevrything’s fine. He’s jsut whacked otu of hsi mind._

Text from Marge to Kingslayer:

_If something happened, and you are lying to me, Jaime Lannister, I will kill you._

Text from Kingslayer to Marge:

_Carzy woamn. I’m teliling you: evevrything’s fien._

He smirked: who would ever have thought Marge could be such a mother hen?

When Tyrion and Marge first got together, Jaime had been worried. He knew Marge to be somewhat unscrupulous and rather willful; at the time, he thought her very selfish. Consequently, he had hoped that Tyrion and she would not stay together long, fearing that his brother might get seriously attached to her and that she would end up breaking his heart. Then one day, Jaime had witnessed a scene, which convinced him that, after all, Margery Tyrell could have been the right woman for his brother.

Tyrion and he were seated at a bar, lazily sipping their drinks and talking about the LBC, when Marge and some of her cousins, who had come to visit from Highgarden, entered. Jaime noticed how Tyrion shrunk into himself a little, seeming eager to be able to dematerialize, and hoping that his lover would not see him. Tyrion’s defensive pose would not have brought the attention of any other observer to the change in his mental state, but Jaime knew it all too well: the way his brother would pull in his head a little, like an alerted turtle, and draw his arms closer to his body — he had seen it often enough before. They both expected Margery to walk past and either not notice them at all or pretend she had not. Instead, almost as soon as she and her cousins were seated (they were too large a group to fit in a booth, and the waiters had to push together two tables), she observed them at the bar and immediately yelled: "Tyrion! What are you doing here?.. Anyway, come over here, I want you to meet my cousins!"

Tyrion, surprise in his eyes, looked to him uncertainly, and Jaime motioned his head slightly toward
Marge in encouragement. His brother left his seat awkwardly and walked toward the group of Highgarden girls. His small stature was evident, of course, when he walked. Marge shooed away some of her cousins, her brother Loras, who was with them, brought over another chair at her command, and she seated Tyrion next to her. The moment he sat, she kissed him unapologetically on the lips. She introduced him as “my lover, Tyrion Lannister,” and then came the scene that had once and for all convinced Jaime that Marge Tyrell had enough sense to have appreciated his brother like he deserved. Having observed the kiss with a grimace of disgust, one of Margery’s cousins laughed at the introduction.

"Well, Marge, you always did have an undiscriminating taste," she said with a nasty smile. Jaime noticed Tyrion’s pained smirk, and then he saw something that made him curious: Margery’s face was disfigured by rage. She rose so abruptly, her chair fell backward, and an uncomfortable muteness invaded the bar. She was breathing heavily, her nostrils flaring like those of a rabid horse. As quickly as she had risen, she moved toward the cousin who had spoken and pulled her off her chair roughly by the arm. Jaime was certain that her fingers, which had dug deep into her relative’s flesh, would leave bruises.

"Get the fuck out of here, you loud-mouthed little bitch," she growled quietly, "and if I ever see you again, I will pull out some of your hair extensions."

With these words, she pushed her toward the entrance. The shocked girl stumbled but did not dare protest. She left the bar with eyes wide as saucers, and Marge stared her down as she went with a menacing look in her eyes. When the revolving door had twirled away the offending cousin, Marge turned back toward the group with a smile as pleasant as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"All righty," she said. "I’m getting the drinks! What do y’all want?"

They muttered their drink orders. She gave Tyrion, who was still speechless, a peck on the lips; she said, "I know what you’re having," and winked. Then, she made her way over to the bar to give the order to the bartender — an action that was entirely unnecessary, considering that there was no shortage of waiters.

"You’re awfully protective of my brother," Jaime noticed with a teasing grin: he was relieved, he was delighted. She turned to him, and he saw that indignation and anger were jumping still in her eyes even as her hands shook. He recognized the symptoms; he had displayed them many times in his life: Tyrion had never lacked for mockers.

"I’m surprised I did not gauge out her eyes," she muttered.

"Oh, no, we could not have you in jail — Tyrion might miss you," Jaime said with humor, but a genuine smile was on his face. Marge smiled back briefly, distractedly: she was still overcome with adrenaline.

He helped her carry some of the drinks to the table, a waiter with a heavy tray following them. He said his goodbyes right away and made himself scarce under the pretense of an early morning meeting. He smiled the entire drive back.

And now his baby brother had proposed. Jaime was not surprised that Tyrion would get married, and before him. Since he had realized that Cersei would never agree to stay brave under the assault, perhaps even the prosecution, they would face if they ever made their relationship public, Jaime expected that Tyrion, one day, would marry, and he himself would not. Yet he could not help but wonder, like he did when he was sixteen and deeply in love, what his life would have been like if Cersei were not his sister. And he could not repress a question that he had never internalized before, notwithstanding his father’s, and, he knew, even his brother’s efforts: what could his life be like if he loved someone else?
Before his thoughts could take him farther down this dangerous path, he tried remembering again that night when he had come to trust Marge — a fond memory. Instead, he recalled, unwillingly, the end of that evening. He did not drive to his apartment; he drove to Cersei. She was lying in his arms, languid and spent; he was tracing mysterious patterns on the soft skin of her back. He was so happy that he forgot — or, perhaps, he had deceived himself into forgetting? — Cersei’s invariable animosity toward Tyrion, and he shared with her that he thought Tyrion had finally found someone who would truly love him. She tensed in his arms, then sat up, moving away from him. He could not quite remember now exactly what she had said. Something along the lines of murderers not deserving love, and that she wished Tyrion would one day die in as much pain as their mother. Jaime left quickly and did not speak to her for days.

He did not want to think about Cersei now. He was tired of thinking about her. He searched in his mind for something to lighten his mood. Images of Sansa napping with Tom and Cella rose before him, and he smiled. But just as swiftly, the smile was gone, replaced by contrition. He did not know how to even begin understanding his utter inability to escape Sansa when he was with Cersei. It made him feel like a thief, and it terrified him. Like a man of ancient times, a lone survivor of carnage, standing on the ruins of his temple, Jaime felt he was falling in spite of his immediate stability. His world, which he had build on the foundations of his love for Cersei, had begun crumbling all around him. Two columns were left of this beautiful imagining, standing tall and proud among the ruins that surrounded him: his brother and ballet. Elsewhere, all around him, was chaos and devastation of the past. And like the survivor of his city’s sacking, whose gaze is lowered in contemplation of the ruins, Jaime remained blind to the bright red dawn that rose on the horizon of the future, which he obstinately refused to face.

Tyrion awoke in the middle of the night — a frequent occurrence when he was very drunk before yielding to somnus. He noticed Jaime asleep next to him — still sitting on the sofa, as if guarding him against the darkness. His brother’s words had given Tyrion courage, and they fought his demons for him; but the doubts still clamored with their weapons, harpoons of sorrow and spikes of fear. There was one person, always, who could annihilate them completely — or, alternatively, give them such power that they would drag him into the abyss of seven hells.

He rose, feeling the onset of a violent headache, which grew worse with the effort it took him to carefully push Jaime into a supine position and cover him with the plaid. As quietly as he could, he made his way out of his brother’s apartment. Knowing all too well that Jaime’s phone would still be on silent after the morning meeting with the sponsors, Tyrion texted him:

Text from Little Monkey to Kingslayer:

Yes, I’ve sobered up enough to leave.

Then, he sent another message.

Text from Little Monkey to Kingslayer:

Thank you.

He took a taxi to the nearest twenty-four-hour pharmacy, where he procured some hangover pills, water, and much needed mint chewing gum. He had to be as presentable as possible, he thought, attempting to give his tangled hair a semblance of order. The driver was waiting for him, and he told him the address while he slipped into the backseat. When they drove off, he dialed.

"Yes, I must. Wake him, then, I don’t care."

He waited the interminable pause.
"Tyrion?" came that voice. Always that voice.

"Father."

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think! Remember: nothing makes an author as happy as reviews (and kudos, of course). ;}

Tywin Lannister was dressing unhurriedly. If he was awoken in the middle of the night and made to get up, the least Tyrion could do was wait while he made himself fit to be seen. Like many of the older generation, Tywin never began his day in anything other than a three-piece suit. On the rare occasions he spent an especially relaxed morning, he would wear a heavy, woolen housecoat instead of a jacket. The housecoat — of prized wool, well tailored, and covered with elegant, inconspicuous embroidery — still looked more official than what most men wore to business meetings these days.

The semi-darkness that surrounded him was a compromise between the inappropriate hour for the beginning of the day and the need to rise. It did not impede him — he had dressed following the same ritual for over half a century. Adjusting his tie automatically, he glanced at the old clock in the heavy guided frame that stood on the chest-of-drawers: it was four in the morning.

Half an hour earlier, he had heard a soft knock on his bedroom door. When he had called for Ramsay to come in, his personal assistant entered with the phone in his hand.

"I beg your pardon, ser," he said, "but your son demands to speak with you. He’s very insistent."

Tywin extended his hand for the phone, and Ramsay promptly placed the device in his palm.

"Is it Tyrion or Jaime?" he asked Ramsay, bringing the phone to his ear.
"It’s Tyrion, ser," came the answer.

Tywin nodded, indicating to his personal assistant that he would not be needed for the duration of the conversation. The Bolton boy disappeared behind the heavy door, closing it noiselessly behind him.

"Tyrion?" Tywin inquired in a voice that, because of his recent awakening, did not carry the full strength of disapprobation that the situation warranted. Of course, Tywin was not concerned for his son — his children were adults, and adults were not supposed to need supervision. He sighed. If only.

"Father," Tyrion sounded odd. A note of tragedy reverberated in his tone, and the impudent challenge that Tyrion always imbued into his voice when addressing him was gone. Tywin shook his head — was there no end to the troubles his children got themselves into?

"What’s the matter Tyrion?" he inquired, "I trust this late-night call," although, in all fairness, it was early morning, "is not again occasioned by Jaime’s… carelessness?"

"No," Tyrion sounded guilty. The last time Tywin had heard guilt in his son’s voice was when, in spite of his father’s categorical interdiction, the young rascal, high as a kite, had taken his favorite antique automobile for a drive and smashed its whole front part beyond recognition. If Tyrion had hurt himself in addition, Tywin would have probably killed his offspring himself.

"Tyrion, I trust you’re aware that it’s nearly half past three in the morning," he said, irritation seeping into his voice. It was not his son calling him that annoyed him; it was that he had never been able to impress upon his children common notions of propriety. "I would dearly like to know the reason for this call."

"I need to speak with you," was all Tyrion said in answer, and it did miracles to, figuratively speaking, raise his father’s blood pressure.

"We are speaking at this very moment," Tywin bit out.

"No, I’m on my way to the house right now," Tyrion stated unapologetically and with an unyielding determination in his voice. "I need to talk to you in person," he added in a different tone, one that sounded more like a plea.

Tywin sighed. The gods certainly had sent his children to teach him patience.

"Seeing as you are so determined — " he began and was infuriated when Tyrion cut off his generous invitation.

"Great, I’ll see you soon!" his son announced, and the line went dead.

Tywin nearly threw the phone against the wall. That was what was so deeply wrong with the young generation — their utter inability to comprehend that there were rules according to which life was organized. One did not call people at three o’clock in the morning, least of all to schedule a meeting only an hour in advance; people did not meet at four in the morning, period, unless they were mobsters planning a raid. One did not interrupt one’s elders, especially parents; one did not hang up on people who were so high above oneself in their station.

Tywin sighed. Sleep had left him completely. He would have a headache by afternoon, but there was no point in trying to stay in bed, now that irritation, rather than peace of mind, dominated. Besides, if Tyrion, the little whipping top, was coming to the house, Tywin’s chances of getting any sleep were close to nil. The Lannister patriarch sighed again and sat up, his feet landing into comfortable slippers finished with soft fur. He reached for his printed dressing gown, which he donned on top of his
As he finished adjusting his tie and reached for his waistcoat, he wondered what had brought Tyrion to him in this ungodly hour. Clearly, if it was an emergency, it was not a life threatening one — otherwise, Tywin was sure his youngest child would throw civility entirely to the wind and burst into his room. He snorted, imagining his own indignation at the action. However, his son’s visit still served to unnerve him. Ever since the last time he had been forced to meet with Tyrion in the middle of the night — an evening that was followed by Jaime’s arrest — Tywin disliked waking or being woken in the middle of the night. In fact, although he would not admit it, Tywin feared it. He took his time buttoning his waistcoat and putting on his jacket, as if to delay the discovery of the reasons behind Tyrion’s impromptu call.

Tyrion, ushered into the small living room by Ramsay, was pacing in front of the fireplace in which his father’s personal assistant had lit a fire. The reason Tyrion had gone to his father was simple: a divorced dwarf or a dwarf left at the altar was worse than a dwarf only. His father’s maniacal preoccupation with the family name, as well as Tywin’s disregard for other persons’ feelings, particularly those of his children, were guarantors, in Tyrion’s mind, of his objectivity. If Tywin thought there was even the slightest chance that the family would be humiliated, he would tell Tyrion as much, whether this served to break his son’s heart or not. Jaime, on the other hand, Tyrion could not trust entirely, knowing that his brother would bite off his own tongue before he let hurting words slip past his lips. Of course, father was obsessed with getting his sons married, but even this drive, Tyrion felt, was less powerful than preserving family honor. That was how Tyrion rationalized his visit to Tywin.

There was, however, another aspect to the call. Regardless of the powerful way in which Jaime, squaring his shoulders, had tried to fill the large emptiness of a fatherly figure for Tyrion, both brothers had never ceased to look to their father, hoping against hope, that one day, for some reason, they would be able to find in him the solace they had always sought. Unconsciously, Tyrion’s engagement — that which his father had always wanted — pushed him to look for his father’s encouragement one more time.

His father’s entrance, as always, got his full attention.

"Don’t pace," Tywin Lannister said by way of greeting. "How many times have I told you not to pace?"

Tyrion smiled. Of course, that was something father would say. He smiled also because he found something oddly endearing yet funny in that, even at four in the morning, father looked the way he always looked — dressed in a fine suit, not a hair out of place. He admired this discipline, this style, in spite of himself, the way Jaime also did: the brothers always made jokes on this subject, as if to convince themselves and each other that they did not revere their father in the slightest.

Tywin sat in one of the armchairs before the fireplace and motioned for Tyrion to do the same, only to purse his lips slightly upon noticing that his son had sat at the same time as he, not waiting for an invitation. There was no respect for tradition in the young. Before father and son could begin a conversation, Ramsay brought in the tea tray, which he placed before the two men. The personal assistant poured the tea and, with a small bow, made himself scarce.

"I thought tea would be more appropriate, seeing as we are meeting so early," Tywin noted in a matter-of-fact way, which still served to berate Tyrion for his scandalous behavior.

Tyrion took one of the silver tea glass holders, the tea glass itself filled with the dark brown liquid,
and took a sip. It was the taste of weekends, when father came to Casterly Rock; it was the taste of moving to King’s Landing; it was the taste of childhood, of youth, of his father. Cersei had always hated it. It was always the same tea. Black, strong, with lemon and sugar. Where had father picked up this way of drinking tea, Tyrion never knew. Had he asked, perhaps, his father would have told him that Joanna, who had travelled the world in her youth, had brought the recipe and the glass holders from her travels, and that Tywin, who revolted at first, grew used to it over the years, and when she passed, drinking this tea was like drinking memories of her with every gulp.

Tywin was sipping the tea quietly. Then, the older man fixed his son with his immobilizing stare, which demanded an explanation, demanded one immediately. Tyrion, always uncomfortable under such scrutiny by his parent, reached for a biscuit, as if sugar could give him courage. Tywin watched him, patient and exacting.

"I…" Tyrion began but faltered. He took a deep breath. He knew that the moment he mentioned his and Margery’s engagement, he would never hear the end of it from his father until they were married. On the other hand, he thought, from where he saw things at the moment, there might not even be a wedding… Regardless, family name came first for Tywin: if his son was on the brink of making a fool of himself and, by extension, of the whole Lannister clan, Tywin would pull him back with a decisive yank of both hands.

"Tyrion, silence is a virtue only when one is not expected to provide an explanation," Tywin observed, sipping at his tea.

"I proposed to Margery," Tyrion blurted.

Tywin was frozen in his seat, his tea glass holder still in his hands. The same expression that had come to Jaime’s face now animated the father’s: his countenance was all pleasant surprise, he even smiled.

"My dear boy — " he began, and then, just like Jaime’s, his eyes narrowed when he connected the news to the context in which it was announced. "And?.." he inquired in a tense voice.

"And…" Tyrion said, "she said 'yes' but — "

"Aha!" His father’s happy exclamation cut off Tyrion’s expression of doubt. He was annoyed by the similarity in his brother and father’s reactions. Were they deliberately ignoring his concerns?!

"I don’t think she wants to marry me…” he tried.

Tywin looked insulted.

"Why on earth would you think that? Who would not want to marry a Lannister, a — " but Tyrion could stand this no more. Someone was going to hear him, or he would burst.

"It’s not about a Lannister, or your son, or anything else! It’s about a beautiful, intelligent, ambitious woman condescending — for reasons I am incapable of understanding! — to marry an ugly dwarf!" he cried.

He was breathing heavily, watching his father. He did not know what to expect. Never before had his father and he confronted the defects in his appearance so bluntly.

Tywin Lannister had a cunning expression on his face, on his lips swayed a ghost of a smile, which was barely distinguishable from his usual grim expression.

"So what have you come to me for?" he said calmly, as if his son had not just shouted in his
presence.

"I…" Tyrion stumbled. What had he come here for? Reassurance? Sympathy? He might as well have gone to the insane asylum, if that was what he expected to find in his father’s house. He stared down at his tea. He was not mad, however; he had come here for judgement, an execution to relieve him of his pain. He swallowed thickly. "I want you to tell me that a young woman like Margery would never stay with a brute like me; that I am a delusional fool who has set his sights too high; that I should stop this charade before the great Lannister family is forced to pay for my foolery."

There was silence. He looked up at his father, like the kneeling prisoner at his executioner. Tywin still wore the same cunning expression.

"You want me to tell you she’s too good for you and that you should cut your losses while you can?"

Tyrion nodded. Here came the swing of the sword.

"I won’t." Tywin stated with gravity.

Tyrion looked up at him in bewilderment: the sword had hit the rock with a singing of metal — he had been spared.

"What?" he mumbled in incomprehension.

"If you want someone to indulge this baseless self-pity, go to Jaime," Tywin suggested coldly, "he always gratified your penchant for rue, but I won’t. I’ve seen many flaws in you over the years, Tyrion," he added, "but I’ve never known you to be a coward," he finished with an odd intensity. Tywin paused, and, as if he had realized at the last moment he may have been too harsh, as if Joanna’s ghost had shaken her head in reproach from the other end of the room, he continued in a softer tone. "Have a little pride, Tyrion," he said almost gently, "Margery Tyrell is a woman who knows her own mind. She can have very little mercenary motivation — she’s from a good family, she’s rich, she’s young, she has a successful career. No, she doesn’t need to marry you. Apparently, she wants to." He paused once more, and his tone became gentler, almost soft, nearly soothing: "I have seen you two together. There’s no doubt in my mind that she loves you." As unexpectedly as it had come, the gentleness was gone, and Tywin was stern again: "Now, you can continue to whine, or you can congratulate yourself on having won over such a wonderful young woman, but — as I hope you yourself understand — only one of these actions is worthy of a Lannister."

Tyrion was silent, taking in the words, processing his emotions.

"You don’t think she’s marrying me even though she doesn’t love me?" he asked once more.

"No," Tywin said, as he placed plum jam on his croissant, his voice indicating his exasperation as well as his self-sacrificing willingness to be patient.

"You think she loves me and wants to marry me?"

"Yes," in the same tone. He bit into the puff pastry.

"You — "

But it was too much: Tywin threw down the remaining piece of the delicacy with distaste.

"I think," he said with emphasis, "that you sound like an insecure girl! For gods’ sake, Tyrion, yes, she loves you; yes, you should get married…” He interrupted himself as a realization dawned on him: "When are you getting married? Have you set a date yet?"
"No!" Tyrion cried, relieved almost that his father had resumed his pestering.

Tywin pinned him down with his stare like a butterfly with a needle:

"You have given me to understand that you have proposed and been accepted," he said in a tone that accused Tyrion of serious misdemeanor. "How come you haven’t set a date yet?"

"It’s a recent development," Tyrion lied. He would not admit he was the reason behind the delay, fearing his father might have a stroke from fury at this admission.

"Ah," Tywin took up his croissant again. “Well, in that case, I suggest you set it for summer, some lovely day at Casterly Rock — ”

"Father," Tyrion cut off his musings, amused by his father’s dreamy tone. "What?" Tywin asked, irritated at being interrupted. Yet again.

"If I know Margery at all, she’ll probably like to have the wedding in Highgarden," he said with a smile.

"Hmph…” came from Tywin. "I don’t see an issue. Have two ceremonies: one in Highgarden, one at Casterly Rock. There is historical precedent for that, you know, even in our own family. Now, one of our ancestors…”

It was morning when Tyrion left, but Tywin still had several hours before he needed to head to Lannisters & Co. He made his way up the grand flights of stairs to the roof terrace. Joanna, who had always disliked being far from nature, had talked him into creating a garden on the roof. He had protested for weeks, but she wore him down eventually. He was still proud of having been able to withstand the demand for that much time. After her death, although the garden was maintained in prime condition, with the same flower arrangements that she had left, he rarely went there, like he rarely went anywhere that reminded him of her if he could avoid it. Something in this day, however, had drawn him thither.

He walked onto the roof terrace. The sun had not yet risen fully, and the world was suffused in a soft light that enveloped it in the shades of purple. He picked up the silver scissors with the gilded handles — they were just where she had left them, hanging on a hook near the entrance. He went to the bed of roses, her favorite flower, perhaps the only thing that was unoriginal about her yet was made unique by the very strangeness of this predictability. He cut a few roses — the red, the color of love; the white, the color of innocence; the yellow, a strange color of friendship and jealousy; the violet rose, a rare extravagance, the meaning of which he did not remember. When he plucked the pink rose, his thoughts had drifted away from his actions, and he thought of Tyrion, his son, getting married, finally, and to the unabashed Margery Tyrell, no less. They made a good couple. Maybe Jaime will come around to his senses, too, he thought. He made his way to the small table mechanically, taken a vase from the bottom shelf by habit; he filled it with water and arranged the roses he had gathered. By habit? Yes, for having never done it himself, he had seen Joanna do it countless times. He sat on one of the benches not far from the bed of roses, breathing the fresh morning air, which was perfumed by the aromas of flowers. Perhaps, Joanna had been right, he mused. Perhaps, there was something in this morning air, in this odd light, in this serene quiet. He took a deep breath, and it filled his lungs with youth; he could almost trick himself into thinking that she was sitting next to him. How strange was the smell of roses — well-suited to joy and sadness alike, indeed, the most bitter-sweet of all flowers. He stayed there for a while, breathing in the blossoms’ melancholic joy. He watched the sun rise for the first time in decades.

Tyrion did not go home straight from his father’s: he did not want to wake Margery. Instead, he found an open coffee shop and dealt with his emails while sipping a double espresso. He then made
his way to the LBC building, where he showered and changed — he would not face her with any remaining traces of the wild drinking he had done the night before. On his way home, he bought her flowers, as he was prone to do.

When he came in, the apartment was already awake, it seemed; the sounds that never disturb a place of sleep animated it: water running in the shower, the angry puffing of a kettle that had just stopped boiling, the noise from the street rushing in on the back of the breeze through the open window. He was about to make his way to the kitchen to put the flowers into a vase, when the sounds of running water died away, and Margery, in her silk bathrobe, emerged from the bathroom.

"There you are!" she called happily. "Even though Jaime assured me you were fine, I was still kind of worried."

"Why?" Tyrion asked as he extended her the flowers, which she took, kissing him lightly on the lips.

"He texted me yesterday night, probably after you fell asleep. His dyslexia was through the roof, and you know how he always starts mixing up letters when something’s wrong."

"Ah, yeah, Cersei was over when I came by…" he explained.

"That had never triggered his dyslexia before! What happened? Don’t tell me the lovebirds have had a fight?" she finished with mock concern.

"Something like that — I’m hazy on the details, to be honest."

She let out a small laugh. "How much did you drink?" She looked him over and asked as she went into the kitchen: "Where are you coming from? You look way too tidy."

He laughed.

"I dropped by the LBCB to change — couldn’t subject you to watching me in the hangover style."

She rolled her eyes:

"Like you could have shown me something I haven’t seen before — "

"Trust me, it’s a good thing I did not come the way I was: you might have thrown me straight into the washing machine…"

She laughed as she arranged the flowers. He watched her profile from the kitchen’s threshold. He loved seeing her do such ordinary things: arranging flowers, doing her hair, rehearsing dance movements when she thought she was alone. Her hand caught the sun coming from the window, and her engagement ring glittered in its rays. He wondered whether she meant to start wearing it notwithstanding their previous agreement. He would not mind — in fact, he wondered how he could suggest to her that he wanted to damn it all and try telling the world that she was his, if only to see it laugh in his face. She noticed him watching her hands.

"Oh, I know, I know," she said, "you don’t want me to wear it in public, because you are not completely sure yet if you really want to marry me." She laughed, but there was a strangely insecure note in her voice — a note he had never heard before, and, frankly, would never have thought her capable of. He must have imagined it, he decided. "But," she continued, avoiding looking at him, "I can wear it at home when it’s just us… That is, unless you decide to take it away." She smirked, but the teasing did not reach her eyes. No, he had not imagined it — Margery was a little shaken.

"Marge," he called, and she stopped arranging flowers in that slightly neurotic, hurried way she had
been doing. "I’d never take it away."

She was not looking at him: her eyes focused on the violet roses he had brought her, her fingers playing with one of the flower heads absent-mindedly. He came to stand closer to her, and looked up into her face. Free of make up, it was framed by her wet hair — she looked even younger than her twenty-six years, almost like a teenage girl; and her eyes were full of tears. Seeing this, Tyrion felt his heart drop and land somewhere on the ground floor of their apartment building.

"Marge!" he exclaimed in terror, reaching for her hand. She let him take it in his own, but she still would not look at him. "Marge, what on earth is wrong?"

Had something happened?

"Margery, you’re scaring me," he pressed, when she did not answer him. Was Olenna not well?

"I don’t know, Tyrion," she said, and her voice was strained in a way he had never heard it before — like he had never seen her cry, even a little, like she did now. "One day you ask me to marry you, the next you’re saying we should keep it a secret; you act weird for days, and then you go off and get drunk and don’t even come home… If you’ve changed your mind, you can just tell me, you know…” she sniffed, and, as if the sound had alerted her to her condition, she wiped at her tears furiously and took several deep breaths to calm herself.

"Marge, I want to marry you!.. I — " He meant to say: I just want you to be able to leave me, if you must, but then he remembered Jaime’s laughter, his reassurances; he remembered his father’s words, "I’ve never known you to be a coward;” and, most of all, he remembered how it had always pained his brother that he could never claim Cersei for his own. He, Tyrion, could declare to the world that the woman he loved loved him back. He was given a blessing, and, perhaps, he ought to stop questioning how it had come about. Perhaps, his father was right — he ought to be brave, else he might lose her. As if he had been awakened from a poisonous, immobilizing slumber, Tyrion squeezed Margery’s hand and said: "I love you. I don’t want any secrets. Let’s… Let’s tell our friends, let’s tell your grandmother…”

Margery laughed:

"So she can start pricking you with every thorn she’s got?"

"So she can start pricking me with every thorn she’s got," he confirmed and added: "I love you."

She narrowed her eyes at him in playful warning that was not yet fully free of the pain she had let slip through the generally careless confidence of her demeanor:

"You better, or I will make your life a living hell," she said and kissed him.

It was a strange day, Sansa thought, as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other, warming up in Jaime’s studio. Tyrion and Margery were late — and they were never late. They were not answering her texts either. Neither were they answering Ellaria, Oberyn, or Tyenne’s. What was stranger still, Jaime was late. And Jaime was always on time, making terrible fun of people who were less punctual than he. Where were they? It had been a half hour after they were supposed to have started. She looked at Ellaria, who shrugged her shoulders. They waited some more time.

Jaime was the first to arrive. To Sansa, he seemed a little tense, as if something he could not shake off annoyed him. Without a word of explanation to those gathered, Jaime began talking to Renly about something to do with the music score. The way he talked confirmed her suspicion that something was amiss. She made her way toward Renly and Jaime. The composer was scribbling something on his music sheets, and she took her chance to inquire gently:
"Jaime…" he did not look at her, indicating only by the slightest motion of his head that he had heard her. "Is anything the matter?"

"No, minx," he said in the same terse voice that she had noticed with concern when he was talking to Renly, "nothing’s the matter."

He did not look at her when he spoke, and the playfulness with which he usually addressed her was not to be found in his voice that morning. Something in his distant face made her remember the last time she had probed into his life. She watched him one more moment, upset at his sour mood and her inability to lighten it, before walking away. She did not realize that he watched her go.

Margery and Tyrion arrived some twenty minutes later, and their glowing countenances contrasted strongly with Jaime’s gloomy mood. Sansa looked Margery over, searching for the reason behind her high spirits. A glittering light on her friend’s hand caught her eye…

Jaime’s attention was taken away from what he considered Renly’s obstinate stupidity by Sansa’s squeal of delight. He had raised his eyes from the music sheets just in time to see her run to Margery and bring her friend into a fierce hug. He couldn’t help but smile: it seemed the minx was more attentive to detail than he would have thought. He was glad, watching Tyrion and Margery be surrounded by their friends, who were offering excited congratulations, women hugging, men shaking hands. Eventually, the women had separated into a group of excited chatter, most of which he found incomprehensible. His brother made his way toward him.

"I’m very glad for you, Tyrion," he said. “Looks like she’s quite happy to marry you, after all."

"It does look like it, doesn’t it?" Tyrion said with a smile that made Jaime wonder what happened since he had last seen his brother. Tyrion appeared happy — and the haunted look was gone from his face.

If Tyrion had thought that, after this day, father would no longer end every conversation with: "Have you proposed to Margery Tyrell yet?", he was greatly mistaken. On the contrary, it seemed that Tywin called more often, almost as if only with the purpose to ask the worn-out question in an oddly happy voice. Not only that: when Tyrion, smiling in spite of himself, would answer 'yes,' Tywin, who sounded almost teasing, always followed up with, "And what did she say?.." And Tyrion, his smile turning to a grin, would say in one breath: "'Yes,' she said 'yes.'" She said yes, she said yes, she said yes.

"It’s because she loves you," father would say before hanging up.

It’s because she loves me. She loves me. She loves me!

Chapter End Notes

Let me know how you like it! :)
Chapter Notes

This is not symbolic by any means. I simply prefer not to assume linguistic knowledge — hate when people do it to me! ;)
primae (feminine, plural, nominative case) Latin, adjective: "first."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

At the end of your dark road,
I have lit a fire for you.
In the blackness it roared,
When I left it for you.
Come and hear its happy songs,
Let its whispers heal your wrongs.

At the end of your dark road,
I have saved you some peace.
Come, enjoy its safe abode,
Taste your lover’s sweet lips.

At the end of your dark road,
I hope that you have learned
What separates right from wrong;
But the difference between
What you were and should have been
Must no longer be your load.

At the end of your dark road,
I think I can set you free,
So that life now you can roam,
Without help or judgement from me.

Jaime was haunted by the events that had preceded his brother’s engagement announcement, and the strange whirlwind that followed the happy news seemed to him like a gust of wind, which, when invading a room, may be prone to breaking crystal vases and making snowflakes out of paper sheets, and which brought new chaos, however pleasant, into a world that was spinning out of his control.

Father had called him two times that day, and there was no other way to describe what Tywin was doing without saying that the Lannister patriarch was simply gushing about his youngest child and his fiancée. Indeed, father sounded so sincerely delighted, it made Jaime feel concerned for his mental well-being. Had the world gone completely mad one night when he was not looking? When had father developed an interest in discussing various arrangements that could be made at Casterly Rock for a wedding? When had he, Jaime, come to admire the Stark girl so much she could invade his mind without invitation? When had his relationship with Cersei disintegrated to the point where he did not long for her presence?

But, perhaps, it was not the world that was mad but he himself?

The few days that followed the announcement he felt he had been caught in the eye of a hurricane. He entered his apartment, his mind reeling. If any one more unexpected news broke out, he felt certain his illusory self-control would snap like an over-used violin string. His apartment made him restless, reminding him of Cersei’s last visit. He could not stay, he had to escape. Picking up his keys, he hastened out the door, to his car. Once behind the wheel, he sped away, as if by reaching the limit of his car’s powerful engine he could elude his thoughts.

Speed had a different effect on Jaime than anything else: making the world blur away, forcing his concentration to remain fully on the road, the rage of velocity cleared his mind of thoughts, freed him from the burdens he seemed to carry on his shoulders. He knew not where he was exactly, following the road mindlessly, loosing track of time as he lost sight of his thoughts. Streetlights, road signs, lanes whirled passed him, and in the control of the outer chaos he found an intermission from the one that raged inside his own mind.

He came to his senses, or, rather, was brought back to his senses, by the sound that announced to him he was running out of gas. The prosaic circumstance forced him to slow down and consider his surroundings. Whether by chance or habit, he found himself in front of the Baratheon mansion.

His mind’s — and, what was worse, his body’s — susceptibility to Sansa had haunted him not only because of the ramifications such feelings, if faced, could have on his life, but because he felt it insulted all three of them — her, Cersei, and himself — that he could not help thinking of one woman while being with another. It was disloyal and undignified. Now that he was in front of his sister’s home, the guilt provoked by this occurrence was amplified by the memory of how he had driven Cersei out of his apartment with cold words when she had come to make peace between them. He got out of the car and made his way to the mansion’s backdoor.

The house was dark and quiet. He made his way upstairs, to Cersei’s room. Midway through the hallway, his hearing made more acute by the darkness that surrounded him, he became aware of sounds: female moans and male grunts. He assumed that Robert, for once, was at home — even if not without a whore. Unwilling to reveal his presence, he quickened his steps toward Cersei’s room, not realizing in his haste that the sounds grew louder as he came nearer. If he had, the sight that greeted him when he had opened the door to her room would have come as somewhat less of a
He came upon her, naked and disheveled, fucking — for there was hardly a more delicate way to call this — a man whose face he thought he knew but did not recognize. He was startled by the coarseness of him: the black hair covering the brute’s body and face like those of an animal; the half-drunk glassiness of his little swine eyes. What astounded him even more in the mere seconds he stood rooted to the ground, was his sister’s face, which he had always thought of as delicate and refined, but which now reflected the same animalistic, base lust, possessing neither feeling nor dignity, as the one that animated her vulgar partner. He had never before seen Cersei as coarse or lewd. The sight provoked unbound revulsion, a physically palpable disgust. He felt himself soiled by every additional moment he spent on the threshold of this room, which seemed a window into a distorted, feverish brothel of hell. He turned on his heels and charged down the corridor, eager to put as much distance between himself and the filth he had witnessed. It was ludicrous that, just as he was reaching the front door, he realized that he had seen the man once at the Lannisters & Co: Osmund he was called, but Jaime could not recollect his last name; he only remembered thinking at the time that it was as laughable as its owner was boorish. He was descending the mansion’s front steps, when he heard Cersei’s voice:

"Jaime!"

She was running after him, but he did not turn back or slow down, walking to his car with resolution. She caught up with him just as he had reached the vehicle. Wearing nothing but a loose kimono, she reminded him of a nameless prostitute he had once seen with Tyrion, a decade ago. Cersei placed her hand on his arm, and he was appalled by the touch. He shook her off.

"Jaime, I don’t know what Tyrion has told you — ” she began.

It was the oddness of hearing his brother’s name in this context that halted his progress.

"What?"

"I don’t know what Tyrion has told you," she repeated, breathing hard, "but I want you to know that I would never betray you like this… Osmund… He…” Jaime noticed her eyes move quickly from side to side like those of cornered rat, "… he forced himself on me!” she cried.

He knew she was lying; he almost laughed at her.

"Did he?” he bit out. "With you on top?"

The whole conversation was beneath him. It felt like wallowing in dirt. He moved past her and jerked the driver door open. She was screaming something else, but he got into the car, shutting the door behind him. He pushed the accelerator to the limit, heedless of her closeness to the vehicle. As the automobile tore off, screeching like a bird with its monstrous speed, she jumped aside.

Jaime did not remember how he found himself at a gas station — he could only assume that, as he was driving away, the car had once more demanded gasoline. Under the brutal, colorless glare of floodlights, he was returned to reality by the beeping of the fuel dispenser. He placed the hose back and closed the fuel door, and then he was on the road again. As he was driving, the numb emptiness of his mind was torn asunder, like stormy sky by lightning, by the words that had so surprised him:

“I don’t know what Tyrion has told you…”

What the hell did she mean? What could Tyrion have told him?

Then came the thunder.
He knew. His brother knew. Surely if he had known… If he had known, he would have told him? Wouldn’t he?

He made a reckless right turn, and a chorus of honking from the other drivers decried his rashness. He sped toward his brother’s apartment.

Tyrion was awakened by loud banging on the front door and Jaime’s angry voice:

"Tyrion, open this fucking door, or, I swear to the Stranger, I’ll knock it the fuck off the hinges!"

Tyrion shot out of bed with unusual speed, worried sick for his brother. The moment he unlocked the door, Jaime rushed in:

"Did you know?" he asked loudly.

"Know what?" Tyrion inquired, blinking sleepily, watching him with concern.

Jaime looked angry, enraged. Angry and enraged at him, Tyrion realized. Never before had he found himself on the receiving end of his brother’s fury. Jaime’s green eyes were wild, he was breathing heavily. He looked insane.

"That Cersei was whoring around, did you know?"

Tyrion was stupefied. He felt the room spin around him but was steadied by the feeling of his brother’s palms cupping his face, the long fingers enveloping his skull. He stared into the depths of turbulent green eyes, and for the first time in his life, Tyrion was scared of his brother.

"Did. You. Know?" Jaime repeated, and Tyrion fancied in this moment that his brother’s hands were capable of cracking his skull like a walnut.

"Yes," he croaked.

His words had the opposite effect from the one he had anticipated: instead of amplifying Jaime’s anger, they seemed to have delivered him a blow — the fury had gone out of the green eyes, and they were filled with pain. In this pain, Tyrion read the most terrible sentence for himself: betrayal. Jaime’s hands, suddenly limp, left his head, falling to his shoulders, and Tyrion, terrified of this new state of his brother’s mind far more than he had been of his anger, clutched his hands with his own.

"Jaime, listen to me — " he began, but his brother interrupted.

"Who?" Jaime asked, shaking off Tyrion’s hands and stepping away from him.

"I don’t know — " Tyrion lied, fearing his brother’s actions, but Jaime cut him off: "Who?" he demanded again.

So the reckoning Tyrion had feared for so many years had come… It was more petrifying than he had ever imagined. Galled by his silence, Jaime advanced on him.

"Who, Tyrion?"

Tyrion started reciting a mixed-up list of names. He had a good memory, and the intense loathing he had felt for these men had branded their names and their faces onto his mind.

"Wyman?" Jaime suddenly interrupted his enumeration. "Wyman Rivers?"

Tyrion paused and nodded. A look of stupefaction came to Jaime’s face. They had been in high
school together; Wyman had transferred during senior year, when Cersei and Jaime were eighteen — barely two years after they had become lovers. He looked at his brother, pain and incredulity mixing on his face.

"You’ve lied to me for twenty years?" he asked.

It was less than that, Tyrion thought, but he was not about to debate Jaime’s mathematics.

"I never lied," he said, knowing the weakness of his defense.

"No, you just didn’t think to tell me!" Jaime cried out.

"I thought then it was just a one-time occurrence, a lapse of judgement on her part!"

"And years later?"

"I didn’t know how you would survive it! I didn’t want to hurt you!"

"Didn’t?.. You… You… Didn’t want to hurt me?" Jaime asked, incredulous, and guffawed. Tyrion found the sound macabre. The laughter ended as soon as it had come, and Jaime narrowed his eyes on him again. "And how do you think you’ve managed?" he asked bitterly. Tyrion had no answer. There was a pause.

"How could you not tell me, Tyrion?" his brother asked in a tired, disappointed voice. A voice as full of pain as of reproach.

"Jaime, I was afraid that… After Aerys…" Tyrion saw another flash of betrayal in Jaime’s eyes. "I was worried you might… Where are you going?" he exclaimed, watching his brother start toward the door.

"As far away from here as I can," came the answer. "Somewhere where there’s enough alcohol to drown the whole Seven Kingdoms and myself besides."

"Jaime, no! You cannot drive in this state, you cannot!…"

But Jaime was out of the door and had shut it closed behind him. Tyrion ran after him, but his small steps were no match for Jaime’s strides, and all he caught was a glimpse of his brother’s sports car disappearing into the night at breakneck speed.

Sansa woke up with a start in the middle of the night. She had been practically asleep when her brain’s last coherent thought had overwhelmed her: the alarm clock! Where was her phone?! She stretched her hand toward the bedside table but could not locate it. She rummaged though her memories of that evening, trying to recall when she had last seen it. She sighed. Of course. She had forgotten her phone in the studio where she had practiced. She had placed it on the floor next to her bag when she had knelt to grab a towel and wipe her sweaty face… Dammit!

Tyene was out, as usual, sleeping over at Bronn’s. Tyene’s phone was as out of reach as was its owner.

*Why don’t I keep an old clock with an alarm?!*

She did not want to get out of bed: she was lulled to sleep by the comfort of her warm bath; she was so clean and tidy, she wanted to stay enveloped in her cover and pillows instead of dressing and going out into the dark night. She sighed again — a sound of resignation. She needed an alarm if she wanted to wake up and be on time the next day; so, she would have to go… She threw off the cover
decidedly, as if the rash deprivation of warmth could strengthen her resolve. She dressed and was out of the door in a few minutes, cursing her own empty-headedness.

She also cursed Jaime. Ever since Margery and Tyrion had announced their engagement a few days ago — which had made Sansa so happy for them! — Jaime had been avoiding her. The teasing, the jokes, the laughter — it was all gone, evaporated like water in the sands of Red Waste. She missed him, the carefree, devilish Jaime she loved more than she cared to admit. In her bewilderment at the change in him, which she could not understand, she became rather scatterbrained. She had tried remembering if something in her words could have given him offense, then her mind — which had become a powerless presence, constantly outvoted by her heart and body — wailed that she should not care, that it was a good thing if he kept his distance since, clearly, she would not. She was being punished now for her preoccupation with the mercurial moods of Jaime Lannister by having to walk in the stifling, humid darkness of King’s Landing night.

It was only when she slipped into the LBC building that she had realized her trip was unjustified — tomorrow started the weekend. She cursed silently: she could have stayed in bed and picked up the phone in the morning! Well, since she was already at the LBCB, she might as well get her stupid phone. She made her way to the studio. As she had deducted, her phone was lying on the floor where she had forgotten it. She picked it up and was about to leave, when a strange sound startled her.

So odd, she thought, like an empty bottle rolling on the floor. She strained her eyes against the darkness and felt fear erupt in her chest when she realized there was a dark shape in the far corner of the studio. It seemed a living thing. She was terrified. Would that Jon, father, Robb, Lady, or even Arya were with her!.. She would not approach it in the gloom — she was far too scared; but if she turned on the lights, she might anger or wake whatever it was that hid in the darkness. Sansa had always been afraid of monsters, the beasts that lived in the nightmarish forests Nan would tell her about notwithstanding mother’s strict interdiction. During the day, it was easy enough to pretend they did not exist; but when the hour was late, loneliness her company, and blackness all around her — who could tell? The light switch was close to the door. Whatever it was, she would see it in the light, and, if she judged it necessary, she would run. She made her way to the door, her muscles mobilized, straining like those of a lioness before she sprints, and flipped the switch. She heard a weak groan of protest. As soon as her eyes adjusted to the bright light, a whole other fear animated her.

"Jaime!" she exclaimed in utter shock.

It was Jaime, although who would have recognized him? Seated on the floor, leaning heavily against the wall, his long legs outstretched in front of him, Jaime Lannister looked as if he was asleep. When he did not react to her, she rushed toward him and knelt by his side, afraid that he had hurt himself. It was then that she noticed the bottles that surrounded him and felt the smell of scotch in the air.

*My gods, how much did he drink?*

She looked at the bottles, noting absentmindedly they were both large scotch-bottles. One empty and a barely started one still in his hand.

*Oh, Mother! No wonder he is barely conscious.*

Then she was filled with pain: what had to have happened to reduce *Jaime* to this state? She had never even seen him hungover, let alone drunk, and he did not strike her as the type of man who drank heavily or frequently. She shook his shoulder.

"Jaime, can you hear me?" she asked.
He mumbled something incoherent; he made a wobbling, uncoordinated gesture with his arm as if to shake off her hold on him. The clumsy movement caused her heart to ache: she never dreamed Jaime Lannister could ever lose his leonine grace. What had happened to him?

"Jaime, are you all right?" she tried automatically, but, of course, he did not hear her, nor did he reply.

Well, it was clear that Jaime Lannister had drunk himself into unconsciousness and would not be answering any of her questions. Whatever had driven him to try the strength of his liver against the onslaught of a bottle of scotch, she would not find out in the next hours, if ever she did. So, the question was: what was she to do now? She tried moving him, but it was impossible — she would never be able to lift him, let alone drag him anywhere. He was easily twice her size, and he was dead weight. Well, she could not leave him here: he would be in so much pain from spending the night on the hardwood floor in this uncomfortable position — that is, if he could get up in the morning at all, and someone needed to be around to check on him. Besides, she would not leave him to be found in this condition by friends, or worse — colleagues. Jaime was proud, she knew, and she would not let him be humiliated. He was hurt, he needed care, and at her place, she had everything that would help him — that is, as far as his terrible intoxication was concerned, at least. The problem, however, remained the same: how to get Jaime there? She did not want to call any one of their friends, partly because she intuited that Jaime would not want any of them to see him in this state; partly, because then Jaime would be driven to his place, and she would have no excuse to take him to hers. Suddenly, a solution occurred to her. She took up her phone and dialed:

"I need a cab to the Lannister Ballet Company building. My friend is not feeling well, I will need help getting him to the car."

She did not want the bottles to remain as glaring evidence, so she picked the empty one up and tried to take the other one from him. He held it in a deadly grip.

"Jaime, give me the bottle," she said as she yanked, but it was useless: he could hear her no more than she could unclench his fingers. She had always known he was strong, but she had never realized just how strong: if she could not unclench his fingers with both hands and the whole weight of her body… She persisted, of course, trying to remove his fingers one at a time, surprised that the strength with which he held the bottle was not enough to break the thick glass… Having failed, she grew annoyed.

"Dammit, Jaime, unhand this bottle!" she exclaimed in loud exasperation.

"San… sa…" he mumbled, eyes still closed, no comprehension on his features, and she could not help her small smile of pleasure: he recognized her, even practically unconscious as he was.

"Jaime," she said slowly, as if explaining to a child, slipping easily into the same tone she had used with Robb in similar situations, "I need you to unhand this bottle right now. Come on. Let go of the bottle."

She tried pulling it away from him again, but he did not let go and moved his hand — the bottle with it — away from her with a low groan of indistinct annoyance. She gave up, smirking: if Jaime Lannister decided he would hold on to his scotch, not even Sansa Stark’s determination could change it. She threw away only the empty bottle.

She stayed seated next to him, watching his handsome features. A shadow of tragedy seemed to darken them this evening. She reached out, hesitantly, to caress his cheek, knowing he would never feel her hand.
What happened to you, Jaime?

The driver called from downstairs, jerking her back into the real world, and she went to open the door for him. She knew this cab service well, having used it for many months: Tyene, who had often needed a trustworthy cab to drive her drunk ass home, had recommended it when Sansa first came to King’s Landing and required a mode of transport.

"Is that your man there?" the driver asked her with a little pity.

If only, she thought without bitterness, but was angered by the pity in the man’s eyes: like Jaime Lannister’s woman would need pity.

"No," she said stubbornly, "he’s a friend."

The cab driver eyed her with skepticism.

"Is that what you young people call it these days?"

"No," she said again, "I call things by their right names. Now, will you help me get him into the car or not?"

The driver looked her over with a smirk.

"Looks to me like it’ll be you helping me get him into the car," he stated and went toward Jaime.

It took them both considerable effort to lift him up. At least Jaime was too drunk to struggle, but the opened bottle he would not let go made fast work of covering the three of them with scotch. He was so heavy, she thought in despair, as the three of them slowly made their way across the studio — and she was not even moving him on her own.

How can someone so damnably heavy move the way he does? she wondered.

They reached the hallway, they struggled to the elevator. Inside, they rested him on the wall.

"The fuck does he do for a living?" exclaimed the driver.

"He’s a ballet dancer," Sansa answered automatically.

The driver laughed.

"That’s a good one," he said in appreciation of what he thought her joke.

She did not bother to explain, crushed by Jaime’s weight. Of course, with the training in sword-fighting that he did in addition to ballet, it was hardly surprising he had a lot of muscle, not to mention that he was very tall. He’s a lot taller and a lot heavier than Robb is, Sansa thought. She could always boss and move Robb around anyway she wanted when he would return — or be returned — drunk from high school parties. She looked up at Jaime. His head was resting heavily on his chest, his eyes closed.

My poor Jaime, flashed in the liminal space between her mind and heart.

If she and the driver thought that dragging Jaime out of the building was difficult, getting him inside the car proved nearly impossible, and only Sansa’s nagging and care saved him from receiving a concussion while being pushed into the cab. Finally, he was in the backseat, and she had slipped next to him — to make sure he would not fall to the side, hit his head against the door, and other such things, not at all because she wanted to hold him, giving what little comfort she could offer him.
"Where to, lady?" asked the driver. He was sweaty and still breathing hard. She gave him her address.

It was the ride that sobered Jaime up a little bit — at least, as much as could be at all possible for a man in his condition — and she was able to take the scotch bottle from his hold, which had grown lax. As the streets of King’s Landing whizzed by, he began to mumble incoherently. She could not understand most of what he was saying, but she caught a few words. She recognized his siblings’ names — "Cers" and "Tyr-ion" he mumbled; there was something about a hairy beast; he said, "betray me" and "how could he?" several times; he said something about a red kimono, but she was not sure. She could not make sense of any of it until she caught one more word: "whore." At that, the pieces to the puzzle of Jaime’s drunken stupor began to fall into place. She had never hated anything so much as she did his sister in that moment; she had never dreamed such hatred existed, that it could fill one’s body without bursting it open like an over-pumped capillary. That golden snake was the reason Jaime was like this. It was Cersei Lannister who had hurt him to the degree that he tried drowning himself in scotch. How could she be unfaithful when she had Jaime, for whom Sansa would have given her whole world and more besides? How dare that hateful woman stray, when it hurt him like this? She loathed her. Jaime’s mumbling filled her with pain and sympathy in equal measure. She reached out to stroke his hair, like she did Rickon when he cried, and her touch seemed to soothe the Lannister man as much as it did the Stark child.

When the last struggle of getting Jaime to her apartment was over, and he was lying on her couch, she felt exhausted. Both she and the driver were breathing hard.

"Heavy that one," commented he.
She could only nod. She went to her room to get her wallet and paid the driver, giving him a very generous tip for his pains. He looked around the empty apartment, looked at Jaime on the couch, and back at her.

"You sure you’ll be all right, lady?"

"Me?" she asked, confused.

He motioned toward Jaime.

"Men drunk like this… There’s no telling what they might do."

She looked at him with indignation.

"Jaime would never hurt me!" she exclaimed. Then, realizing the man was only looking out for her, she said politely and even with a small smile: "Thank you, I will be quite all right."

The driver smirked again.

"Friends, hey?" he said and left, shaking his head. He closed the door behind him.

Left alone with Jaime, who had not made a sound since they had put him on the couch, she took a deep breath. Her battle, she knew from experience, was only just beginning. She went to Jaime and took away some of the sofa pillows to give him more space. She placed two under his head, knowing that the further up it would be, the better. She took off his shoes and covered him with a woolen plaid. Then, she went into the kitchen.

When Sansa had been packing for King’s Landing months ago, she had taken with her everything she needed — and much of what, objectively speaking, she did not. Among the things she had packed despite their uselessness was the box in which she kept everything she needed to treat Robb’s
hangovers. When Robb was in high school and she in middle school, her eldest brother started partying hard, and, often enough, he would either return home completely wasted or be brought back unconscious by some of his slightly less intoxicated friends. Not wishing to wake the entire household each time this happened and, more importantly, desiring to hide the whole truth of his wild behavior from his parents, Robb made Sansa a deal: she would handle him on nights when sobriety was as far from him as good sense, without grumbling and scolding him like Jon did, and, in return, he would help her with math. Of course, Sansa did more than manage him when he came home, learning quickly the herbs that could alleviate the terrible headaches that followed his adventures. She would probably have done so without compensation, but Robb doing her math homework for her and preparing her for exams was an added bonus. When she went South, Sansa brought her box of remedies with her, because she had grown used to it as a kind of souvenir when Robb had gone hitchhiking across the Seven Kingdoms and then off to college. The box no longer held anything of use to Robb: since he had met Talisa, he barely touched alcohol and certainly never got wasted. Interestingly, Sansa’s remedies had proved highly useful to Tyene. This night, however, Sansa was particularly glad that she had brought the herbs with her. She took the box off the shelf and opened it. The familiar scent enveloped her as she took out the herbs she called "primae," because the potion made from them, though it did not taste particularly well, prevented the worst symptoms from setting in, reducing both the headache and the nausea better than any pills that could be gotten from over the counter. All his friends envied Robb his cheerful looks and the overall healthiness that emanated from him on the mornings after wild nights, never realizing that it had little to do with the Stark’s ability to hold his liquor and everything to do with his sister’s newly-acquired knowledge of Northern medicinal herbs. Sansa brewed her elixir slowly, stirring gently. In the circularity of her movements, her mind wondered... to Cersei Lannister. She envied her all the more powerfully because Jaime’s heart did not cherish it; and the one who would could not get it. She sighed and turned off the stove. She poured the mixture into a cup and walked over to the sofa. The real battle started now and would consist in waking him up and making him drink, no matter how long it took. She sat next to him and shook his shoulder gently, noticing with concern the pained expression on his face.

"Jaime… Jaime…” she called.

The world was spinning and spinning all around him. Then, he realized it was not the world spinning — it was that he had been locked inside an enormous kaleidoscope. To the left, to the right, beneath, and above — there was no escape, not a single opening. How did they get him inside?

In the illusory box, nothing stayed stable: what he stood on, what he leaned against, what he looked at — all turned and twisted. On the colorful walls of this box kept flashing the face of Tyrion — heartless laughter disfiguring his features, as if by force of a distorting mirror. Cersei’s face — lewd, flushed with alcohol and lust — spanned around him in this distorted, colorful, reeling hell. Her limbs; limbs covered with coarse, dark hair; bodies and bodies flashed before him on the moving walls. He tried closing his eyes but could not; instead, his vision grew myopic, and for a while all he saw were swarming blotches of color that nauseated him as he struggled to squint his eyes to see anything, anything at all. When his vision finally returned to him, the kaleidoscope’s walls were filled with swine; but they were not quite swine: some had human legs, others hand human ears, human hands instead of hoofs, human bodies or human eyes. These swine petrified him, and he started running, but colorful walls kept blocking his way, and the blotches of red, green, and yellow were pulling at him like quick sands, dragging him deeper and deeper into the suffocating walls of the kaleidoscope.

"Jaime… Jaime…”

A voice, soft and gentle, called to him through the nightmare. Sansa’s voice. Suddenly, he entered a
different dream: Sansa, a concerned frown on her face, her eyes as gentle as her voice, was seated next to him.
"Here, Jaime, drink this," she said extending to him a cup with some strange liquid, "it will help with the pain…"

She was saying something else, but he could not make it out. He had been wrong, it seemed. She was not a minx or a fox… How did a child of the forest make her way into the LBCB? Especially past the turnstiles? Of course, if anyone had a magic potion against pain, it would be this redhead elf. She held the cup to his lips, and he drank without protest, but the magic did not work on someone like him, and darkness enveloped him again, hiding her sweet face from him.

When Jaime opened his eyes, Sansa thought they would break her heart. She had never seen such torment. She wished she could take at least half of his pain and bear it with her own. Aware that he would likely not stay conscious too long, she pushed the cup to his lips, and the obedience with which he drank, the trust in his tortured eyes, reminded her of a day when Ghost had hurt his paw, and Jon had cleaned and banded the wound: the wolf had looked at his owner without menace, trusting, pained eyes waiting for Jon to heal him. She reached out to stroke Jaime’s hair, wishing she had a potion for his heart as well as his head. Consciousness had left him almost immediately after he had finished drinking. She was left sitting next to him, guarding his drunken slumber, holding the empty cup, stroking his hair. She cupped the side of his face, tracing the cheekbone gently with her thumb.

I wish you loved me, not her, she thought. I would never hurt you. I would keep you happy. I would put your wants above mine. I would never throw your heart back in your face.

She was captivated, hypnotized by his face. Her thumb stilled on his cheek and her breath caught. She might never get another chance… and… what was the harm?.. She leaned to him; looked to his eyes, closed in slumber; and pressed her lips lightly against his. If only I were a child of the forest. If only I could cast a spell on you.

A fraction of a moment, and she pulled away. She sat next to him, contemplating his sleeping face.

I love you.

And if healing you took making a potion out of my broken heart, I’d give the foolish thing to you. I don’t know what to do with it now anyway.

primae (feminine, plural, nominative case) Latin, adjective: "first"

Chapter End Notes

Well, I hope that makes y'all happy. You know what makes me happy? Kudos and reviews! This is not a hint at all! ;) (Yes, it totally is...)
You walked and you grieved
For something you had not achieved.
I have watched and pitied you,
Knowing my power over you…

So, instead of more contrition,
I only ask for your volition
To accept my precious gift
And to know you’re not adrift:

Know that love is in your heart,
That I’ll not tear it apart,
And that for the pain I’ve sown
I now give you a red dawn.

Jaime was awakened by a strange herbal smell he had never encountered before: it was foreign, it had nothing of the warm, exotic smells that had always drifted to King’s Landing on board of Southern and Eastern ships. Unlike the overwhelming spices one usually came across here, the herbal smell was soothing. The second thing he became aware of was the dull headache that droned between his temples and that was amplified by the morning light penetrating behind his closed eyelids. It was the headache that reminded him of the night before — his sister fucking a repulsive stranger; and his brother, who had lied to him for two decades. The weight of the world would have been lighter than the burden he felt descend on his shoulders along with his awakening memories. Like the droning in his head, there was a dull ache in his heavy heart, exhausted by nightmares that had plagued him all night. The ghastly dreams had been occasionally interrupted by visions of Sansa’s concerned face, visions that were a balm the Mother had probably sprinkled on his eyes in her unbound clemency. Light footsteps, which sounded oddly like Sansa’s, brought a question to his clouded mind: where was he? He felt someone sit next to him, like the Sansa with a concerned face had done in his dreams. He wished he did not have to face whoever it was, or the world. If it were not for the nightmares, he would have wished he could return to the numbing slumber brought by scotch.

"Jaime…” called a voice, the same voice that had called to him through his incubi. Perhaps he was
still dreaming; perhaps there was another nightmare in the making somewhere in the deep recesses of his drunken mind. He did not want to admit he had come back to this world, where his sister was disloyal and his brother untrue, or to watch Sansa’s face being erased by darkness again.

"Jaime…" came again, only this time he could hear a smile in her voice. "Come on, I know you aren’t sleeping."

He opened his eyes, half expecting his vision to be myopic and to see the walls of the kaleidoscope once more. Instead, he saw Sansa’s smile. Seated next to him, she held in her hands a cup, which was the source of the smell that had awakened him. There was no describing the healing quality of her luminous face: as if her smiling lips and her shining eyes possessed a purifying force, seeing her made his nightmares — and, it seemed to him, even his memories — recede.

"Well, I’m terribly glad you’re awake," she said cheerfully. "After the amount of scotch you’ve drunk last night, I wouldn’t have been surprised if I ended up having to drive you to a hospital. Here, drink this," she added, before he could say a word, and pushed the cup to his lips. He drank the warm liquid obediently. It was sweet, it burned his throat with an herbal cold, and its taste called to his mind the smell of one of his mother’s perfumes, the one she had brought from her travels in the North but never wore, because Tywin kept buying her the expensive smells that were all the rage then in King’s Landing, and she did not want to refuse his gifts. When he finished drinking, Sansa took the cup from his hands and placed it on the coffee table. He was surprised that she remained seated next to him and that her body language did not show any sign of revulsion.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, her voice gentle.

His head was heavy, but there was nothing of the monstrous headache or nausea that he had earned with his drinking.

"How come I do not feel even half as ill as I’m supposed to?" he inquired.

"Supposed to?" she chuckled, the sound and the sight soothing to his anguished mind.

"Yes, after drinking however much I ended up drinking."

"It’s because of the Northern herbal mixes I’ve been pouring down your throat," she said, smiling still. His immediate queries satisfied, he looked around and felt his blood grow cold as he fully realized her presence was not a dream. Why the hell was he at Sansa’s place? Had he come to her in the night, drunk to half-madness? He turned to her, horror on his face.

She laughed at his expression.

"What’s that look for?" she asked.

"How did I get here? I didn’t wake you last night, did I?" he answered her with a question, thinking that if he did, in fact, barge in on her in the wee hours of the morning, it would have been a whole lot better if he had smashed his car and himself into a wall instead.

She laughed again, but this time he was irritated, partly because of the guilt eating at him when he imagined the manner of his possible intrusion.

"Oh, don’t glower," she begged him through her mirth, "you didn’t wake me — I found you at the LBCCB. I had forgotten my phone in the studio, and when I came to get it, there you were. You scared me: for a second, in the darkness, I thought you were a monster my Nan used to tell me about."
He began processing her words slowly. She had found him at the LBCB. He dimly remembered starting a bottle of scotch in a bar somewhere, then taking that bottle and one more, "for the road," and driving away. Now he knew he had gone to the LBCB, to the studio where Sansa practiced in the evenings. He sighed heavily: he was not surprised at making this decision when the amount of scotch in his veins seemed to have equalled the amount of blood itself. Neither was he particularly surprised that, having found him unconscious from drink, Sansa had decided to take care of him. Still, why would she go to the trouble? He looked to her face as if, in its beautiful lines, he could find the answer to the riddle of her kind heart.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

Although she still smiled, her eyes were full of sympathy, making him wonder if, somehow, she knew about his trials of last night. Another thought came to him, filling him with dread. What have I told her?

"What have I been talking about last night?" he asked, ignoring her question, unable to hide the concern in his voice.

He saw her eyebrows rise a little, her eyes round slightly.

"Jaime — " she began to say, and, for a moment, he had a feeling that she was going to lie, to tell him she had not heard him say anything. He did not want any more lies; especially, he did not want to hear lies from her. Then, as if she had changed her mind, she said: "Why don’t we talk later?"

"Sansa — " his tone demanded information, and she looked as if she was ready to lower her eyes, but something suddenly changed in her expression, and, as she often did now, she held his gaze and dodged the remark with a jibe:

"My gods, Jaime, you must still be quite drunk," she said.

After the trouble he had caused her, however unwillingly, he did not think himself in a position to press her further, so he played along.

"What makes you say that?" he questioned.

This time, she did lower her gaze; she shook her head, a small smile on her face.

"You never really call me by my name when you’re sober," she said and got up quickly. He was left feeling as if the happy bubble that protected him from his harrowing world had been burst by her sudden movement.

"I will make us something to eat," she said.

Like hell is she cooking in addition to spending the night caring for my drunken ass!

"Absolutely not," he objected as he sat up, noticing that his headache grew with the movement. He was caught off guard when she turned to him, looking very much offended.

"I’m a great cook, I’ll have you know!" she exclaimed in indignation, and he smirked.

He had missed her amusing reactions to his words, he realized, in the few days he had kept his distance. He should thank her and leave: there was no honor in dragging a girl like Sansa into the disturbing eclipse of his world — she belonged on the side where the sun always shone; but he knew that, the moment he could no longer see her, his incubi would strangle him with their countless tentacles. His whole being seemed to revolt against parting from her and returning to a world that
was uncouth and foul. After last night, he was in need of some redemption, some light, before, inevitably, he was submerged by the black waves. The temptation to pretend that the universe, instead of being filled with betrayal and pain, consisted of Sansa was too great. Could he not turn away from the darkness of the previous night, feign that he remembered not a moment of its wretchedness? Just for a few hours? A few hours with him could not corrupt or harm her, he thought — after all, they saw each other daily, dancing for hours on end. And for him, the few hours in the light of her smile would make a difference in facing his demons, when, inevitably, they came to pay him a call.

She interrupted his battle between selfishness and conscience with her caring voice:

"You need to eat, Jaime, or even the Northern herbs will not help you with your hangover," she warned.

"Fine," he said, giving reign to the recklessness that had guided him most of his life, "but you aren’t cooking. After all the trouble I’ve caused you, the least I can do is take you out to lunch," he announced.

"It’s barely noon," she observed.

"Fine, brunch, then," he conceded easily.

He saw her hesitate a little, as if she was pondering some delicate issue she did not know how to bring up. Then he saw her square her shoulders in decisiveness.

Sansa knew that she was treading on dangerous ground, but she had always believed in telling people the truth about their appearance. Jaime looked disheveled, a state in which she had never seen him and which she herself found endearing because of its unguarded nature, but she knew that the rest of the world may not share her opinion.

"You cannot go anywhere looking the way you do now," she declared categorically. "You need a shower. Not to mention that there’s still far too much alcohol left in your system, and water might sober you up a little more."

She went to the chest-of-drawers where she and Tyene kept towels to get him one, but Jaime’s laughter interrupted her, just as it had surprised her: she would not have expected him to laugh after what he had been through last night.

"If you think I’ll go in there," he said humorously, motioning with his head toward her bathroom in mock fear, "and come out smelling like a fairy and with bows in my hair, you, dear girl, are sadly mistaken."

She bit the inside of her cheek to keep herself from guffawing.

"Why, Jaime?" she answered with feigned surprise, but her tone was sly, "I think my girly shampoo will suite your hair just fine. You shouldn’t be so worried about doing it any damage."

He sighed.

"I’m still far too drunk to have an appropriate response for this unjustified affront," he said lazily, and Sansa let out a happy laugh.

"You should get drunk more often, then," she suggested. "You’re a great deal easier to handle when you’re hungover."
He rolled his eyes at her, which was considerably more difficult to do when his brain was struggling against alcohol.

"All right, minx," he said, and she secretly rued that he had stopped saying her name, "I will go back to my place, make myself presentable enough for your scrupulous taste, and maybe then you'll do me the honor of having lunch with me."

He watched her fold her arms.

"And how do you think you will get to your place, Jaime?" she asked in a strangely patient voice.

"I suppose my car is still at the LBCB," he said, not understanding her question in the slightest. He looked for his keys and was surprised to discover them still in the pocket of his jeans. He dangled them in front of her. She smiled in a patronizing way, which suggested to him that, somehow, he had walked straight into her trap.

"And do you think you should be driving now?" she asked, her voice sweet and a little mocking. "After you've only just started forming complete sentences?"

His hungover was considerable enough in spite of her magic potions, so he preferred surrendering to continuing the battle. He threw his car keys at her, and she caught them.

"You can drive me to my place, then, miss goodie-two-shoes. Anything else? Or can we go now?"

She frowned at him, as if he were a lunatic in addition to being a drunkard, and placed the keys on the coffee table.

"No," she said, as though explaining something to an utter idiot. "We cannot go 'now,' because I'm not dressed."

He would have preferred it if, when his mind and will were weak from alcohol, she did not draw his attention to her pajamas. He made a shooing motion at her:

"Well, go then! Dress and whatever else it is you need to do!"

"Don't boss me around!" the minx protested.

"I am only concerned for my hangover," he parried, glad to feel some of his wits returning, "one redhead elf I know told me I should not be starved for too long, else I will be at risk of feeling very ill."

She had no words for the way he had used her concern for him against her. Shaking her head, her lips pursed to hide a smile that was fighting through her indignation — a picture of good natured affront — she marched into her room and shut the door with a bang. Smiling in spite of himself, Jaime went back to sitting on the sofa. It was peculiar, he thought, how none of his misfortunes seemed too great for her mere presence to expunge. Barely a minute later, Sansa re-emerged: the only difference was that her hair was loose, as if she had just started brushing it when something brought her out of her room. If he was not as mesmerized by the long locks, he would have certainly made a sarcastic remark — or, at least, so he told himself. She strode into the kitchen, then toward him, threw an apple at him without a word, and went back into her room. He laughed at her stubborn expression, and thought he had caught a silent curse from behind her closed door. He bit into the apple lazily. His fate, thus far, had been an evil bitch, he reflected, and she owed him one for last night. He felt that a few carefree hours with Sansa would be an appropriate compensation.

Sansa’s mind was caught in a strange state of hurry and utter empty-headedness. In her meticulously
ordered and clean room, she could not find things she knew she had placed "right there." Her brush it took her an inordinate amount of time to locate, once she had supplied Jaime with his apple. Had anyone observed her, as she rushed around her room, searching for things that were right in front of her, they would have rightly concluded that Sansa Stark was a nervous wreck.

She had not spent the most tranquil of nights. True enough, she would not have exchanged a night of caring for Jaime for a night of peaceful slumber, but the aftereffects of rare sleep deprivation were influencing her nonetheless, gifting her, for instance, with an inability to see what was right in front of her. She had been worried about him drinking so much scotch, had even considered driving him to a hospital. She had never seen how much it was that Robb drunk, but she knew it to be mostly beer. Scotch, however, was a much more aggressive chemical. She had once heard a story about a man who died from drinking too much whiskey, but, still, she did not know how much was too much. Consequently, she was afraid to leave Jaime alone for too long and had woken him up two more times — a difficult task — to give him additional doses of her herbal mixes as well as water. She had inadvertently fallen asleep sitting next to him before she allowed herself some hours of rest. Still, her slumber was fitful, and she had awoken many times and tiptoed to check whether he was all right — as far as she could tell, at least. In the morning, when he had awoken — alive and well, if clearly hungover — she had been relieved beyond anything she could have described.

Despite her state of "I've nothing to wear!," she finally remembered a favorite aquamarine and yellow summer dress she loved so much she was always happy to put it on. There was something so girlish in the flow of its skirts, something like laughter in the way the folds of the material danced in the wind. The search for the damnable thing was taking too long, though: she was concerned about getting some food into Jaime’s stomach before his headache grew worse. Pressed by her concern for him, she hurriedly searched for her dress and took much longer than she would have, had she been calm. As her hands wracked through her closet, she could not help but think back to a moment from last night, which, along with her stolen kiss, dominated her very being. There was a reason she had fallen asleep sitting next to him at night before she had retreated, unwillingly, to her bed, guided more by what Catelyn had taught her of propriety than her own inclination.

After she had given him the second additional portion of the herbal mix, he had remained awake — or rather, somewhat conscious — for a few seconds longer than he had before, watching her in a bizarre way, it had seemed to her. In the green eyes that studied her, there had been consternation and despair. She did not know what he was looking to find in her face and she did not know if he had. He lowered his eyes, and she thought he had fallen asleep, but he reached for her hand instead, holding it in his, studying her fingers.

"I wonder sometimes," he said with uncharacteristic seriousness, almost as if he was been talking to himself, "if the Stranger has sent you here… to mock me…"

Before she could even contemplate asking him what in the world he had meant, his eyes had drifted shut, and scotch had retaken possession of his mind. She remained seated next to him, unwilling to take her hand from his.

She had never heard Jaime talk about gods with any seriousness — they mostly appeared in his speech as parts of expletives. She doubted that he believed in them. It seemed that, like for most people in King’s Landing, for him, the gods were not divine beings who guided men and judged them, but that he used them as a metaphor for the combined forces of chance and fortune. Herself, Sansa had never quite come to believe in gods, either, but for different reasons: caught between two kinds of divinities — the strange, mysterious, incorporeal gods her father worshipped by the heart trees, and the specific, well-defined gods of her mother’s faith — she had never figured out if both (or any of them) existed. Neither had her siblings. The gods had receded even further away from her when she had moved to King’s Landing, making way for the reality, the buzz, the life of the city. It
seemed almost a stretch of the imagination to envision divine beings dwelling in a place so removed from spirituality as the capital of the Seven Kingdoms. Sometimes, however, she wished for the quiet serenity of the godswood — whether a spirit dwelt in it or not.

But what had Jaime meant — why associate her with mockery? She admired him, loved him; of the first, if not of the second, he had to be aware — after all, who did not admire the greatest ballet dancer of their time, perhaps, of all time? Of course, when she had come to know him, it became difficult to reconcile the man himself with the legend, as if, bodied forth by the same human form, the Kingslayer and Jaime existed on two different planes. The teasing, mercurial Jaime Lannister was little by little making it impossible for her to remember him the way she had always perceived him before coming to King’s Landing. Could a man be legend and human simultaneously? It was when she watched him dance from a distance that glimpses of Jaime the Kingslayer would overcome the Jaime she knew; not so when they danced together, however. She had admired and worshipped him from a distance all her life for his incredible talent, his gods-given artistry; she had always imagined him to be as cold and unreachable as her mother’s deities. The real Jaime, who was, oddly, neither cold nor distant, she had come to love. It felt like coming into a temple with petrifaction in one’s heart, and, instead of finding a statue of a severe man with frowned eyebrows, to discover a younger, living man full of teasing and jokes. She wondered sometimes if it were not the very contrast created by the discovery of the man underneath the power of the legend that had made her fall in love with him. Yet there was something about loving him that reminded her of the time she had not known him, for having come so close to him that she could fall in love, the unrequited nature of her affection seemed to keep her at a distance. It was with their friendship that she sought to reduce the span that separated her from him.

What had he meant, though? How could she mock him?

Her unseeing eyes had finally landed on her summer dress. She changed hurriedly and considered her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was still loose from when she had been brushing it — soft, nebulous, undefined curls framed her face. Catelyn had always insisted that hair could only be worn down if it was carefully arranged in well-curved locks that announced the intentional nature of the coiffure and had always bemoaned Arya’s unkempt hair. Sansa did not have the time to do a chignon, so she gathered her locks into a large braid, the way her mother had always worn her hair. She looked into the mirror again.

"I love your hair," she remembered Margery say the night they were readying for the gala, and her friend had insisted that she wear her hair down. "I cannot understand why you never leave it loose. Although, men would probably fall at your feet on the streets if you did, and that might be inconvenient."

She looked into the mirror again; and undid her mother’s braid.

"Just as I was about to come check if you had not drowned in your wardrobe, minx!" Jaime’s voice greeted her from the sofa.

"How’s your headache?" she asked him, watching with wariness as he got up.

"Bearable — notwithstanding you taking your sweet time starving me," he answered and winked.

She would have objected against this accusation if she had not noticed the slight grimace of pain that had followed the wink. She felt guilty.

"I gave you an apple," was all she mumbled as she went toward the door.

Again, his laughter took her by surprise.
"Sansa," he called, and she faced his smiling face. “I’m merely teasing. I don’t know how to thank you — ” he began, but she cut him off:

"Don’t thank me yet: your headache may still come back with a vengeance," she warned as they exited the apartment.

"Minx, you do realize there’s a reason they call this a sports car?"

"I really don’t need this right now, Jaime!"

"You’re shaming this fine vehicle with this undignified speed — ”

“Stop distracting me! This is bad enough!”

"I don’t have a grandmother, minx, but, if I did, I’m sure she’d drive faster than you — ”

"Be quiet, or I swear to the old gods and the new that I’ll park this monster right here, and we’ll walk the rest of the way to your flat!"

"When you drive like a turtle, minx, you create more chances for a mishap than if you drive like a normal human being."

They stopped at a streetlight, and she took a breath of relief. She used the intermission to push back:

"That’s the silliest thing I’ve ever heard! And, besides, you don’t drive like a normal human being! You drive like a madman! So don’t talk to me about how normal people drive — you wouldn’t know anyway!"

"I adjust to the speed appropriate for my driving skills," he said and gave her a look of mock pity, "I’m afraid that so do you."

"Nonsense! I’m a good driver, and just because I don’t — ”

Honking interrupted her.

"It’s green, minx. That means you can go. You are not colorblind, are you? Although, even then, I suppose you could tell the difference between the vertical position of the lights. That is, assuming you were paying attention…”

She gritted her teeth, wishing nothing more than to slap his pleased grin off his face. By all accounts, Jaime Lannister was back — at his most unbearable — and it seemed he had made it his mission to raise her blood pressure.

**Ingrate.**

The fresh air had done him good, that much was certain. The brief walk from her apartment to the LBCB had restored some agility to his movements, which had been strained under the effects of what remained of his intoxication. They had found his car still parked before the LBCB, and Sansa had felt her blood turn to frost when she had imagined the fragile string of lucky escapes from a serious accident Jaime must have made while driving the night before. He had given her the car keys once again and proceeded to make himself comfortable in the passenger seat. She had felt her heart take refuge deep inside her heels. Jaime had meant for her to drive *that*? *That* didn’t even look to her like a car, she had reflected as she had gotten into the driving seat.

"How..?.." she had begun and then grown silent. She had not even been sure what she had meant to
ask.

*How do I drive that?*

*Does it fly, too?*

*How do you even turn the engine on in this thing?!!*

"Minx," had come his voice, which had suddenly acquired the merciless teasing intonations she had grown to recognize in the first few weeks of their acquaintance, "if you ask me how to drive, I swear, I’ll jump out of this car right now."

"How do I turn it on?" she had barked, annoyed and embarrassed in equal measure.

He had reached out and pressed a button near the wheel. The automobile purred to life.

"Are you *sure* you know how to drive? My life may not be at the highest point at the moment, but I would still rather keep it," he had said, unintentionally distracting her for a moment from thoughts about the stupid car and his annoying teasing and reminding her of the words she had heard him mumble through his nightmares; words that told of pain, betrayal, and utter misery.

"Minx, I need to ask you a serious question," he was presently saying, but she did not believe he was being serious for a moment. "Do they still mostly use horses for transportation in the North? Because the only way I can explain your driving is that you are trying to match the speed of the car to the speed of a horse. And not even a good, young horse — an old, miserable, sick, dying jade…"

She did not dignify him with a reply, absorbed in making sure the car did not suddenly spin out of her control.

"When was the last time you were behind the wheel, anyway?" he asked her then.

"Before I came to King’s Landing."

"Ah," was all he said, and she hated him for making one vowel capable of transmitting to her his utter lack of confidence in her driving skills.

Sansa had not considered that, had Jaime really wanted to avoid her driving his car, he could have taken a cab. Indeed, he could have taken a cab and picked her up at her apartment later. That he made every effort to remain in her company had gone entirely unnoticed by her: she was more focused on his merciless determination to drive her mad as she was trying not to kill themselves, any pedestrians, or other drivers. Jaime, on the other hand, was enjoying himself immensely. He had always liked teasing Sansa, but it proved particularly amusing when she was driving. Her concentration on the road allowed him to study her expressions of annoyance. He thought he had counted half a dozen or so, with a few variations.

Sansa was walking around Jaime’s apartment. She had never been to his place before, and she found that Jaime’s home suited its owner. She loved the huge windows, the unobstructed view of the Blackwater Bay and the quay they offered. She realized that Oberyn and Ellaria lived close by, although she was convinced this was coincidental: who would not like living with a view of the sea *and* in the city center? She liked the spacious rooms, the subdued and elegant tones of the decor, the well-chosen furniture. He certainly had good taste, which she could have guessed from the fine minimalism of his clothes. For a second, she wondered if his sister had had a hand in the design and decoration of the apartment, but she pushed these thoughts away.

When — finally! — she had stopped the car in front of the building, the monstrous machine had been
taken off her hands by a valet, whose expression could not contain his surprise at witnessing anyone but Jaime himself behind the wheel of his beloved sports car.

"Make yourself at home," Jaime had told her when they had come in, "and feel free to look around." He had thrown his keys onto the bar with a habitual gesture. "I'll be quick," he had added, "unlike some others I know, I do not need half an hour just to choose an outfit."

She had rolled her eyes at him.

"Try not to drown in the shower," she had returned without malice, "stranger things have been known to happen to people who had drunk a whole bottle of scotch." He had laughed and disappeared behind a door.

Her curiosity at being inside Jaime’s home far exceeded her built-up annoyance at the teasing he had subjected her to on the way over. She was happy to have a few leisurely moments to study the lion’s lair while the hungover lion was in the shower. The living room was filled with books, which she thought a little strange, considering Jaime’s dyslexia — the main subject of Tyrion’s jibes directed at his elder brother. Most of the books had to do with ballet, with many priceless photographic albums of long-past performances. Unwilling to forego her opportunity to look around, however, she left the living room. She did not venture into more private spaces — his bedroom, the guest rooms — but she did spend a few moments in his study, unable to overcome her curiosity. It was filled with sketches, photographs, and notes to an even greater extent than the living room, and she recognized the formation of ideas that went into the creation of the ballet they were working on as well as the other ballets currently being performed by the LBC. She left his office unwillingly, pestered by the feeling of her mother’s disapproving eyes on her. Her walk down the corridor took her to the home studio, which astonished her. On the one hand, she should not have been surprised to discover that Jaime’s flat was well equipped for his profession; on the other, the enormous, light-filled room must have required re-designing the entire floor plan. She was quick to decide that the studio was her favorite room in the whole flat.

This must be so convenient!, she thought almost with envy as her daily walks from her apartment to the LBCB rose before her. Of course, Jaime Lannister would have his own private studio right at home. Well, perhaps, one day, when she was a ballet star herself, she would have such a one built in her own home.

Feeling she had satisfied her curiosity as far as propriety permitted, she returned to the living room, eager to study Jaime’s library more closely. As she perused the books, occasionally taking out a photographic album that recorded one legendary ballet or another, her attention was caught by a small photograph hanging on the wall, lost in a poorly lit corner. She approached, and studied the picture more closely. It captured a male dancer in a perfectly executed split jump. The small size of the photograph made it difficult to discern his identity right away. She knew it was not Jaime — she would have recognized him instantly, she was certain. She stepped closer still to the photograph and squinted her eyes. A small gasp escaped her when she recognized the man it depicted.

Jaime was about to start searching for her, when he noticed her in the corner of the living room, studying that photograph carefully. He should have taken it off and thrown it away long ago — so long ago, in fact, that he had forgotten it existed at all, observing from the corner like a large spider: watching, waiting, saving up its venom. He feared that, perhaps, the angry bite of that spider may have poisoned Sansa against him, something that, to his mind, should not have been a difficult task to accomplish. He watched her, anxiously awaiting her reaction.

Sensing his presence the way she was prone to do, Sansa turned to him a few moments after he had entered the room. She looked him over, a puzzled expression still on her face, but a small smile
began to tug at her lips all the same at seeing him. When she spoke, her voice was particularly gentle, as if she, too, was gauging his reaction.

"Why do you have that photograph?" she asked.

No one noticed that photograph. Or, if they did, no one recognized the man depicted. That is, except for Tyrion. His brother, however, had only looked at him oddly, somewhat like she did now, but he had not asked. Sansa did. He hoped that, perhaps, she had not divined the identity of the dancer.

"It's one of the dozens of photographs in this room, hardly anything remarkable," he tried to dismiss it.

To his surprise, she smiled.

"I know you better than that, Jaime," she said, and he found strange the idea of her knowing him at all, "your dismissive tone will not make me doubt the truth of my finding." She pointed to the photograph. "So let me ask again: why do you have a photograph of Aerys Targaryen in your living room?"

She folded her arms, waiting for his answer, a stubborn expression on her face. It reminded him of the first time he had really seen her: she wore the same look of stubbornness at the end of his master class. He should have known she would have recognized who was depicted on that picture.

"I've had it for years before — "

He never knew how to describe that night. In saying, "Aerys died," there was hypocrisy, but he refused to say, "I killed him," for so had fate laid out the cards that this was not true, either.

"Before that night?" she asked him, and he thought her merciful for taking from him the burden of completing his sentence.

He nodded.

"Why didn't you take it off? Later?" she asked.

He had not asked himself that — he had simply kept the photograph. Presented by Sansa with the question, however, he found himself saying:

"If I took it off, it would have been like admitting guilt," he said. "I might as well have written 'murderer' right on the empty space it would leave."

She nodded, as if in understanding.

"It's not all, though, is it?"

He had not realized before that moment that Sansa knew him well. True, she was among the very few people who knew certain details of his life that were hidden from the rest of the world; yet, he had never before thought that, beyond her knowing things about him, she knew him.

"When have you suddenly become an expert in my feelings?" he asked and feared that she would take offense, but she only smiled.

"Knowing your tell certainly helps," she answered with a small, mysterious smile he had discovered on her lips not for the first time that day, "whenever you don't want to admit or face something, you try to shield yourself with questions." She smiled again, and came to stand near him. "You don't
need to do that with me," she added, looking up at him with her innocent blue eyes, "I am much simpler than most people here: if you don't want to answer me, you can just say so to my face, and I won't bother you."

He sighed. He smiled in peaceful defeat.

"Aerys was the reason I became interested in ballet. I saw his performance once, when I was eight, and I wanted to become him. Later…"

He ran his hand through his wet hair. He did not know if anyone had ever fully realized that, contrary to what the world believed, Aerys' death was not a cause for celebration for Jaime Lannister: indeed, it had been a tragedy; not only because he had been the cause of Aerys’ death, but also because, in the death of the King of ballet, some of the Kingslayer's dreams had turned to ashes. By fully apprehending, and in such a gruesome way, that the dancer he had admired was really an inhuman monster, Jaime had wondered if he himself were not a monster, too. Keeping the photograph had become, perhaps, a way of reminding himself that monstrosity was not far from him. The black and white picture stayed — a reminder of the danger of his rage.

Sansa nodded once again.

"You were afraid of becoming him, weren't you?" she asked.

He said nothing. She came closer and put a soft, small hand on his cheek, confounding him.

"You could never become a monster, Jaime," she said gently. Then, as if she had remembered herself, she took away her hand and took a step back. "Well, are you ready to go?" she said in a cheerful voice that rang a little forced. "Because, I'm telling you, if you don't eat soon, this city will be in great danger from an angry, hungover lion."

They left the apartment; but the picture remained, glaring from the corner: a memory of the past that had frozen on the wall like a venomous insect.

Chapter End Notes

As always, I hope you let me know what you think! :)
We stood on top of the world,
And watched the earth below.
I wondered if there we belonged,
In that bustle, that noise, among that throng;

Or if, like ghosts, on these great heights,
Forever and a day we should have stayed.
I have dreamt of you for nights,
When slumber my desires betrayed.

We are together only in my dreams;
But, my dreams, they shatter at the seams,
When, in your eyes, I dream I see your lover’s face.
Reflected it is also in the fears

That plague my mind, but, it appears,
On my heart, they leave no trace.
My heart, it loves you in a foolish way,
And my love, it will not fade away.

Sansa had noticed fairly quickly that while she had Jaime’s attention, he seemed almost happy. Occasionally, however, when she was silent, an empty look would come into his eyes, as if he was no longer with her; as if his thoughts had taken him back to the same dark place where she had seen drunk slumber push him. She would say something then — anything, really — to make his eyes refocus and see her. Just as her heart was full of glee at her ability to make his eyes smile, it ached at seeing his pain, and she fought against his misery with the few means at her disposal. It seemed to her that she was battling his twin’s ghost. Unbeknownst to her, Sansa had entered the same war that Tyrion had been fighting for nearly thirty years: the war against Cersei; the war for Jaime’s heart.
They were sitting at a lovely open terrace of a restaurant she had never been to before, which amazed her: Margery, it had seemed to her, had dragged her to every corner of the enormous city. Jaime had offered Sansa to choose the place they would go, but she declined, shifting the pleasant responsibility onto his shoulders, wishing to learn something so simple about him as where he would go for lunch. Given the view of the sea she had admired at his place, she had not been particularly surprised to discover that the restaurant of his choice was located on the quay. It was a wonderful place: sea breeze, the gentle whisper of the surf, the animated Merriment of the passersby and fellow diners (the quay was largely made up of restaurants and boutiques). When they would be served, the delicious food would fully establish the place as her new favorite restaurant in King’s Landing. Even before, she imagined that sipping evening drinks must be a delight here. In the first minutes, as she sat, taking in the joyous atmosphere, she noticed Jaime watching her with curiosity and restored her full attention to him.

"What makes you look so curious?" she asked without preamble.

"You do," he answered simply, the expression of curiosity turning to a lightly teasing smirk. "I find it curious that, coming from the North, you like things that are so quintessentially Southern."

"You forget that I came here on my own free will — no one forced me to leave Winterfell," she pointed out with a smile.

"No, but you came for work — could have hated the place all the same," he countered.

"True," she had to admit. She paused for a few moments, then decided to confide in him: "I wanted to come South, though… I do not like the North that much — the cold, the winter, the harshness of it all. If I had to come up with a metaphor, I’d say that the North is always mourning, while the South seems to be perpetually celebrating something — gods know what…"

"Probably the weather — in both cases," he suggested teasingly.

She laughed a little, then grew semi-serious.

"That may be part of it, but I’m not sure it exhausts the issue. Anyway," she decided to summarize her life choices, "I wanted to come to the South; I like its sense of festivity."

He looked at her skeptically, as if to point out that she was not quite the party type.

"Fine," she conceded, "I may not party like a Southerner, but that doesn’t mean I fail to appreciate the lively atmosphere."

"What about disappointments?" he asked then. "There must have been something that did disappoint you here."

"What makes you say that? It’s not like I’m packing my bags and leaving…"

She thought she had seen his eyes widen a little — so slightly that she did not give credit to her observation; a fleeting moment, perhaps even less, and it was gone. Meanwhile, she continued. "So, I can say that everything in the South is to my satisfaction."

He smirked.

"Now, that I know to be a lie."

"Whatever makes you say that?!" she exclaimed, trying to remember when she had ever said anything to him that could justify his statement.
"I distinctly remember you saying, and I quote: 'all Southerners think that no matter what they do, they can make up for it later.' You characterized it then as our 'problem.'"

She had said something to that effect on the morning after the gala. This was months ago, though, how on earth did he remember?

"Do you have photographic memory or something?" she inquired in an almost miffed tone.

"That would have made my dyslexia so much easier," he complained. "But no, I don’t. I simply have a good memory for the statements of people I find curious."

"Don’t make me sound like a three-winged bug in a jar!" she protested loudly, indignant at his phrasing. He laughed, and she found so much peace in the happy sound, notwithstanding her annoyance at its source.

"All right, minx: 'of people who surprise me' — is that better?"

She produced something along the lines of a "humph…" and pretended to consider the menu. His next statement, which followed the brief pause, took her by surprise.

"Your words," he said without a trace of mockery. "I have a good memory for your words."

She lifted her eyes to him quickly, finding a peculiar seriousness and softness in his expression and the odd look in his eyes she had seen the night before when, playing with her fingers, he had wondered if the Stranger had sent her to mock him. Before she could say anything, before she could ask a question she had not formulated, the waiter appeared to inquire after their drink orders, breaking the strange spell of Jaime’s words. When they announced their choices and the intruder departed, Jaime went back to his questioning:

"Well? We’ve established you were disappointed in at least one aspect of Southern life — what other grievances does the Northern princess have?"

Oh no. Nonononononono! He was not about to baptize her with another nickname.

"Don’t. You. Dare." she warned darkly.

He feigned surprise, or at least, in her sudden rage, she thought he did.

"What has you turn into a fury in a matter of seconds? What did I say?"

"'Northern princess?' Are you kidding me? 'Minx' was not enough, now you have to come up with another nickname for me?!

He laughed again.

"You know, minx, I had not thought of it before your suggestion, but now that you mention it, I quite like it…"

She groaned in dismay at her own stupidity, hiding her face in her hands. She did not really bring this onto herself, did she?

"… I will say, 'minx' is quite my undisputed favorite," he continue in his mocking yet relaxed tone, "but I’m sure that 'Northern princess' will come in handy every now and then…"

Just wait till Marge or — gods forbid! — Ellaria witness him call me 'Northern princess': I’ll never hear the end of their innuendos and jokes!
"I hate you," she said in misery.

"No, you don’t," he answered with a confidence that was ingested with a little too much bravado. "No one takes care of people they hate when they are drunk to unconsciousness." He paused for a second, sizing her up, and sighed. "Although, you would be capable of even that, wouldn’t you?" he asked in a manner that suggested he knew the answer.

Unable to withstand the questioning way in which he looked at her, she sighed and said in an exasperated tone:

"Oh, for gods’ sake! No, I don’t hate you. I mean — ” she noticed his eyes narrow slightly as he began to watch her closely when the last words had left her mouth, "Well… I’m not going to lie: there are moments when I hate you…”

He waved his hand dismissively:

"Everybody does, even Tyr — ” he began to say, but his brother’s name seemed to have stuck in his throat like a fishbone. His eyes grew empty, as if the merriment that had splashed in their green depths like golden fish in a pond had been burned out of his irises.

She noticed his pause, the change in his countenance.

"Jaime…” she began to say, "I am quite certain that Tyrion — ” but he interrupted her:

"Let’s not spoil a fine meal with this conversation,” he urged her and added, in a lighter tone, "especially when we never finished discussing the downfalls the Northern princess finds in the South…”

"Don’t you ever again — ”

"… ‘call you Northern Princess?’ Why not? It’s not only appropriate, it happens to be true: if it were not for the invasion of the despicable Targaryens — ”

"I’m serious!.."

"Fine, minx, I’ll consider your objections, so long as you answer my question," he said in a tone that made his blackmail sound like magnanimity.

No, I really do hate you sometimes. Especially when you’re awake.

"Fine," she said and paused, honestly examining her Southern life for flaws.

"Well?.." he asked in a few minutes.

“I’m still thinking!..”

He took a sip of his drink, watching her, waiting. He noticed right away the moment she had thought of something, and her embarrassment at whatever discovery she had made did not escape him.

"Ah, there it is!” he announced, and she knew there was no hiding her recollection. "Out with it, minx!”

She worried her lower lip between her teeth for a moment.

"I don’t want to tell you this: you’ll never stop making fun of me."

"Now I certainly insist on hearing it!”
She took a sip of her drink, breaking contact with the demanding eyes for a moment.

"I swear, if you make fun of me for this — ”

"I promise to be chivalry itself," he said, placing his hand over his heart in a theatrical manner. She rolled her eyes at the performance. Even if he teased her without mercy, so long as she could chase away the empty, dead look from his eyes, she would not actually mind.

"I don’t believe that for a second, but fine. When I just moved here, I had hoped that, with the sea so near, I would be able to see dolphins every now and then," she confessed with the air of a swindled child.

Perhaps, in spite of future taunts, her confession was worth the expression of utter bafflement on his face. He blinked a few times. It was a couple of moments before he could speak.

"Seriously?" he asked, when he had regained the power of speech. "Dolphins? Did you expect them to sing songs, too?"

"Oh, shut up!" she exclaimed, and was dismayed when he guffawed even as her heart rejoiced that she could make him laugh at all on that day — even if it was at the price of him making fun of her childish, petty disappointments. When he had stopped laughing, he said:

"Of all things, minx… Of all the things you could have said, never in my life did I expect you to confess that the second greatest shortcoming of the South is the absence of singing dolphins!"

"I never said that I expected them to sing…” she mumbled.

Perhaps, if there was anything in Sansa that ought to have stopped astonishing him was her very capacity to surprise him with her words.

Dolphins... Dolphins!..

The great shortcoming of the South: not the vile men, not the soulless women — but the absence of dolphins! He watched her as she looked out onto the quay and the sea, her long red hair fluttering gently in the breeze, a smile as soft as the summer day on her lips. She was utterly, breathtakingly beautiful. He reflected that there was something in her that was beautiful the way nature is beautiful: contemplating her face was akin to witnessing a beautiful sunset or perhaps a glowing sunny day — a sense of peace and gratitude came with the sight. In beholding her beauty, however, accompanied as it was by a heart both kind and fierce, there was consolation to be sought and found, even for a man like him. He wondered, not for the first time in the past weeks, if the Stranger had sent her to King’s Landing to mock him, or if perhaps the Mother, in her foolishness, had meant for her to redeem him. He doubted there was redemption for a man like him; he certainly thought that the minx was too high a price to pay for it, even if it did exist in some hypothetical realm. What remained certain, however, was Sansa’s ability to inspire dreams. Dreams that flashed like lightening — quick, ephemeral — yet imprinting on his consciousness with the permanence of ink on dry parchment. Dreams that must never come true — if only because on their futility lay justice’s stern seal. There was no crime in being healed by her presence, however. He watched her profile with contentment. Red began to creep into her cheeks for reasons he was ignorant of, but which became clear when she spoke, without turning to him:

"You’re staring," she accused him.

"You’re staring as well," he countered, "you don’t hear the sea complaining."

He was provoking her quite deliberately; he loved little more than inciting her indignation. She faced
him then, fluster warring with annoyance. For a second, she seemed on the verge of arguing his statement, but then something shifted in her countenance, and she only shook her head and smiled a little. He wondered if she was letting the remark slide because of her awareness of how he had spent the previous night. He wanted to ask her again what he had told her in his drunkenness, but he remembered her unwillingness to breach the subject earlier in the morning, so instead he decided to tease her further.

"What?" he questioned in mock astonishment. "No indignant response? Not even a brief lecture on how 'women are not part of nature?!' I’m shocked and disappointed, Sansa Stark! Where’s your feminism?!"

She was smiling a little more widely, looking at him as if he were a misbehaving child.

"You just enjoy exasperating me, don’t you?"

He leaned forward.
"Absolutely. More than anything else."

She shook her head in playful resignation.
"Watch out, Lannister," she warned with make-believe menace, "one of these days, you may regret this."
"I’ve no doubt. You look very threatening," he teased.

"Your father says that it’s very foolish to underestimate one’s opponents."

He feigned fear, though his surprise was genuine, but he did not lack for words.

"Now, if you’re taking lessons in perfidy from my father, I may be in more trouble than I’ve realized…"

She laughed.

All things considered, Sansa was surprised at Jaime’s good mood. She had expected him to sulk, be angry, saddened, or enraged — any combination of negative emotions would have seemed appropriate to her for a man in his situation to express. Not for a moment, however, did she think he would be so relaxed and playful, except for these times when his eyes wandered inside and his gaze grew empty. She questioned what could be the reason behind his cheerfulness and dared not credit it to anything of her own doing. The waiter came to take their order, which he was given. When he departed, she faced Jaime and was unsettled by an intensely teasing smirk she discovered on his features. She almost wondered if anything was amiss in her appearance or if her choice of food had given rise to the merciless teasing that, she knew, was about to unfold.

"What?" she asked hesitantly, feeling utterly defenseless before his cunning green eyes.

"I just realized that I’ve not asked you how you came to be so knowledgeable in treating hangovers… Confess, minx, you aren’t nearly as perfect a goodie-two-shoes as you make believe? Did someone party too hard in school, huh?"

Oh, that!.. That was not nearly as bad as what she had for a second feared: because for a moment — and only for a nightmareish moment — she had wondered if he were not about to tease her for falling in love with him as foolishly as she had. Before he had even spoken, however, the delusion had passed: he could not know she loved him; probably, he would not acknowledge it even if he did know; and, if worst came to worst, she hoped that he would be merciful enough not to tease her.

"Yes," she answered in a misguiding manner, thinking that, for once, perhaps, he would be unable to
call her bluff, "someone did party too hard in high school."

Jaime was right, she reflected: it was very amusing to tease and fool people with words. She reveled in her momentary triumph. For a second, she had gotten the upper hand: Jaime’s eyes rounded, his lips parted slightly, as utter disbelief invaded his face.

She laughed uproariously then, and, immediately, his expression grew skeptical and a little, humorously, annoyed.

"Now, minx, you’re becoming a fairly convincing liar..." he commented. "Or perhaps," he added, "I’m still hungover."

"Could be both," she teased. "It’s true, though: someone did party too hard in high school, only it wasn’t me — it was my brother Robb."

"Truly? A Stark with a taste for amusement?"

She nodded.

"Very much so. Robb’s always been a party animal — that is, before he met Talisa, his current girlfriend."

Jaime winked at her.

"Can that even be true? Are you sure he’s not adopted?"

"I’m quite certain of that. If it were not for the photographs of my mother when she was young and had almost the same color hair as I do now, I would have been the candidate for being the 'adopted' child. I’m the least Stark-looking of all my siblings," she added.

"The red fox of the direwolf family?" he teased again.

"A little bit, yes. Certainly so where my geographical preferences are concerned…"

They exchanged smiles, common to people who share an understanding.

"Anyway, when he started drinking a lot at parties, Robb offered to help me with math if I helped him when he returned home drunk, though, to tell the whole truth, more often than not his friends returned him. We made it work."

"Somehow, I would have imagined that you’d be good at every subject regardless of your attitude to it — the perfect student through sheer stubbornness!... I’m almost disappointed," he japed.

"No matter how much of a good student I was — and I’ve always been a very good student — math was simply not my friend. I don’t like it; I don’t understand it; I consider it an utterly useless subject," she declared boisterously, unaware of how many filthy jokes he had to swallow at her declaration of being "a very good student."

"Well, except for the construction of everything in this city," he said feigning agreement, "I’m sure that math is utterly useless."

"You know what I mean," she protested, "yes, it’s great for engineering, architecture… All of this…" she motioned to the buildings around her, "… and the people who get it. No need to torture the rest of us," she concluded with conviction.

He laughed.
"Oh, please! Like you ever enjoyed math?! With your dyslexia?" she exclaimed.

"I’m laughing precisely because I actually happen to agree. Tyrion…” again, there was hesitation in his voice, but he seemed to force himself to finish the sentence: “he always did most of my math homework.”

"You’re guilty of exploiting child labor, Mr. Lannister, that’s a grave offense," she spoke in her best imitation of a City Watch officer.

He smiled, but she noticed that the smile was rueful. She wanted to say, once more, that she could never imagine Tyrion to have truly betrayed him — contrary to what she had heard Jaime mumble through his nightmares the night before; but she remembered his unwillingness to speak of his younger brother and looked for something else to engage his mind. Suddenly enlightened — and a little surprised that she had not thought of this before — she started talking about The Fountain of Tears, and, certainly, discussing the ballet helped divert them both. They spoke animatedly, nearly not noticing when the waiter brought their food, refilled their drinks, and entirely unaware of the swift passage of time. It was their life, their world, their passion — and there was never enough time nor enough words to discuss it at sufficient length. They spoke of the movements that were not yet honed to perfection and the pas still in the making. As when they were creating the ballet, Sansa found Jaime’s mind an enticing place. She loved speaking of ballet with him, because, when they spoke of dance, it seemed that they were one mind — one heart, even — at least as far as their dedication to their art was concerned.

On Sansa’s insistence, when Jaime had informed her that their lunch destination was close by, they had walked the short distance from his apartment to the restaurant. Consequently, after the brunch, they found themselves on the quay. Their conversation was animated, purling with the vivacity and liveliness of a city fountain, and so they had, quite naturally, glided into a walk near the waters’ edge. They were walking along the sun-lit quay with a certain laziness, understandable after a good meal, and Sansa chattered on excitedly about the ballet — just as she had done when they had been sitting at the restaurant — only she noticed that her interlocutor had grown silent. She watched him closely and could say with certainty that there was none of that emptiness in his eyes against which she kept battling. On the contrary, his eyes followed her closely, and a ghost of a smile glittered on his lips; and there was also that peculiar softness in his expression, which she had noticed several times already; but quiet he was all the same. She was unaccustomed to Jaime’s silence and failed to interpret it. Coming to a halt somewhat abruptly, she placed her hand on his arm.

"What's wrong?" he asked, confirming with his question that he had been listening to her and that he did not understand the sudden interruption of her speech.

"That's what I wanted to ask you," she said gently. "You're quiet — and you're never quiet..."

He chuckled softly.

"I suppose not..." he paused, a wistful half-smile on his lips. "Don't hold it against me, Sansa."

"No... Of course not..." she mumbled.

What I wouldn't give to forever free you of that sadness, that pain. I wish that my loving you could be enough. I know it's not, but I wish it were.

When she had interrupted herself, pausing unexpectedly, he had been feeling a quiet peace in his soul. No, he could not have her. And yet, she could still put back together the pieces of his heart. As if she had spent last night in a dark realm, picking up the fragments one by one and then, when she had gathered them all, had pressed her hands together and re-created his soul — just as alive as it had
been before it had shattered, if a little the worse for wear. There was a certain peace to be found in proximity to a force of good. Noticing her silence, he spoke.

"Come," he said, taking her hand from where she had placed it on his arm, keeping her slender fingers in his, "I'd like to show you my favorite place in the city, and one you've never been to before, I'll wager."

She smiled with that recently acquired, taunting expression:

"I hope it’s not one of those other places where 'I've never been' that Marge has already showed me," she teased.

"I think not," he said, and there was pleasant secrecy in his words that fed her curiosity.

They walked along the quay. The city’s walls had once stood here, protecting the capital from attacks from the sea. Now, there was no need for it: modernity had dispatched with pirates and invaders. The politics of the Seven Kingdoms were different now from when the walls had been erected; they were not carried out by military force but by competition over markets, innovation, purchasing power — even if this competition was, in some ways, no less brutal, it left fewer dead behind and required fewer fortifications. Under the pressure of these new forces, the old walls had crumbled, replaced by the quay filled with shops and restaurants. Nevertheless, the quay still led, like the walls once had, to the Red Keep, or rather, to the ruins of that sinister castle. Sansa, of course, had visited the former seat of royal power, and marveled at its sublimity and the strange power the old, crumbling building still had over the capital, since it had been permitted to remain — a skeleton of the past, shaking, under the careful scrutiny of a preservation team — in the very heart of the modern city. An icon of a bygone era. A fossil-like jewel of old times.

"If you think I haven’t been to the Red Keep, Jaime, you’re very much mistaken," she said, a little bemused at his direction, even though, with her hand in his, she would be happy to walk to the end of the world if he pleased.

"Not where I’m taking you," her companion returned, a little too self-assuredly, she thought. She reconsidered this assessment, however, when, instead of lingering in the long-time roofless throne-room, like Margery and she had done, Jaime started walking deeper into the remains of the ancient castle.

"How on earth do you even know where you’re going?" she wondered aloud, watching her step carefully to avoid hurting a toe on the crumbled stones and leaning on Jaime’s supporting hand.

"We moved to King’s Landing when I was ten," he explained, "and there were the ruins of a castle barely twenty minutes away from our house — do you really think my brother and I, and even our sister-dearest, have failed to explore it?"

She saw his point; and she also noticed his avoidance of saying his siblings’ names, as if by using these generic terms, he could escape thinking about Tyrion and Cersei. They made it to a stairway that spiraled upward, and she guessed they were at the threshold of one of the towers. Jaime paused before the first step and turned to look at her.

"How do you feel about a long walk up the stairs?" he taunted.

She squeezed his hand, which she had been holding, blissful, as they made their way among the ruins.

"I think it’s just what I need to free myself from the torments of my conscience after that delicious
meal," she replied cheerfully, and up the stairs they went. She never let go of his hand, and he did not suggest she should.

Had any of her siblings — Arya, for instance — proposed an excursion into the ruins of a castle and invited her to go up the stairs of a semi-broken tower, she would have laughed at them, called them crazy, and prevented them from going by threatening to tell mother, even if she would never have actually betrayed them to Catelyn. Needless to say, she herself would never have considered going with them. With Jaime, for some reason, it was a different matter. She trusted him in a compulsive way. If he thought the ruins safe, then she believed that they were; if he thought the two of them would not fall to their deaths and be covered by blocks of aged stone as they ascended the stairway, then she believed that, too. They kept going, getting higher and higher, and she lost sense of the number of flights they must have passed. He always stopped to help her in the places least friendly to passage, and she smiled quietly at his consideration. There came a time, however, when she had to pause to catch her breath. Letting go of his hand unwillingly, she leaned against the wall. Jaime waited for her.

He’s not even breathing hard, she thought with admiration and a little envy.

As if in answer to her thought, he spoke in his ever-sardonic voice:

"For someone who can dance for over seven hours, you have very little endurance for something so simple as coming up the stairs…"

She swatted him lightly on the arm, and he laughed.

"How did Tyrion climb all these stairs, especially when he was a child?" she asked, suddenly surprised by the thought.

A fond smile was for a second in Jaime’s eyes, but more recent and less pleasant memories bleached it away. He sighed.

"I'd carry him," was all he said in answer.

All this way... And himself only a child... she thought and couldn’t help smiling. He was frowning slightly, and she regretted reminding him of his brother.

What does he think Tyrion has done that he blames him so? she wondered. Through his mumblings last night, she had realized Cersei’s guilt, but exactly what role Tyrion had played in Jaime’s anguish she did not comprehend still. She had caught her breath and took him by the hand, as if to chase the frown off his face with her touch. They went upward again.

Finally, just as she was out of breath again, they had reached the end of their ascent. Rains, rare snows, and time itself had left no roof to cover the old tower, and they stood atop its uppermost remaining platform. Wind played with their hair and the skirts of her dress, whispering its summer song to them. The sea glistened below; the city lay behind — buzzing, animated; but themselves, they stood on stones as immobile and seemingly unmovable as the past to which they belonged. She turned to look at Jaime, to take in the pleased smile on his face.

"You were right," she admitted, "I’ve never been here before."

He smiled more widely.

"You should believe me more readily, minx."

"Why is this your favorite place in King’s Landing?" she asked. "I can see that it’s beautiful, but
there are many beautiful places here. Why this one?"

He turned from her to look out onto the sea, and she pondered what he meant to discern in the distance.

"My brother and sister never liked each other — " he began but interrupted himself: "No, that’s not quite right. Cersei hated Tyrion from the moment he was born, from the moment our mother died. This place… It was the only place where we went together — for a brief time; the only place where we all wanted to be badly enough that they would get along, somewhat. At that time, we all loved the stupid songs they made you memorize in schools, you remember those?"

She nodded.

"Ah, so they still make children memorize them," he concluded, "I wondered if perhaps your generation had escaped that…"

She rolled her eyes and snorted at his decision to split them into two different generations. Ageist, she thought, but then he went on, and she had forgotten to contravene him.

"Anyway, we would sneak off here, even though, of course, we were strictly prohibited from doing so, even by Osha…"

"Who’s Osha?"

“She was our nanny."

She giggled at the thought of Jaime and Tyrion having a nanny. How cute!.. He rewarded her with an eye roll.

"When we sneaked off, we’d crawl all over this place, finding out where every passage that still remained went… I think we remembered even the position of each stone after a brief time… And then we found the stairway and this platform… It was unreal, like a modern child’s dream come true…" He chuckled. "For me, it was different than for Cersei or Tyrion. You see, I had started jumping off the cliffs at Casterly Rock when I had just turned ten — right before we moved to the city. Cersei was afraid to jump with me, so she told Osha. And Osha…” he chuckled more. "She did not believe her at first, but then she caught me herself. Well… She was not happy, and she made me promise never to jump off those cliffs again, and I did promise… So, when we found this tower, and I saw I could jump off it into the water, I was so pleased, because I could do it without breaking a promise."

"Aren’t there rocks beneath the tower?"

He chuckled.

"You’re betraying your love of illustrated love songs," he taunted her, and she blushed to her hairline in embarrassment. "No, there aren’t any rocks — not anymore… The pictures you, lady, know are based on contemporary illustrations from hundreds of years ago. Since then, with the floods and what not, the rocks that would have obstructed the jumping had gone. But that did not prevent Tyrion from being frightened whenever I tried to jump: he’d cry, begging me not to… So, I would not jump when all three of us went to the ruins… Instead, I’d go on my own, but Cersei… She loved excluding Tyrion, you know… So she’d tag along with me, but she was afraid to jump with me, and she hated being unable to do whatever I was doing, particularly when inaction could be interpreted as cowardice. She decided to put an end to my jumping — and she did."
"How?"

He snorted.

"Very simply. She told father."

There was a pause. Sansa could only imagine how Tywin Lannister had reacted to learning of this hobby of his eldest son. *He probably blew a gasket…*

"Was he very angry?" she asked cautiously.

Jaime chuckled darkly.

"Angry? He was furious. I swear, at the time, I thought he would kill me."

Again, there was silence. Sansa returned to contemplating the waves rolling, ever-patient, ever-present, toward the shore. The white crests seemed so small from the height where they were standing, almost indistinguishable from the waves. She looked back at Jaime and found him contemplating her, and the frown, the sadness were gone from his smiling face. She felt so happy with him. They were so rarely alone, except when it seemed as if they were when they danced, which, to her at least, was often; and she loved being alone with him like this, in a setting that demanded no distance.

*I love him.*

She watched the wind play with his golden hair teasingly, lovingly, and she speculated whether she was part of the breeze. Memories may haunt him, but in this moment, he was hers alone.

*I love him.*

Her heart did a somersault in her chest and seemed to have drawn adrenaline, like a dipper draws water in a well, before resuming its normal position. It beat wildly in her chest.

*I'm not like her. I'd jump with you.*

Her heart jumped one more time, more powerfully it seemed, then fluttered like the wings of a hummingbird. She gave him a debonair smile.

"I guess I'll see you below," she said and stepped into the void.

The air whooshed past her as if it were the wind, and not she, that was moving.

*I am not Cersei. I love him.*

Chapter End Notes

Before you ask about Sansa, let me say: have a little faith in me! ;) It's Jaime having a heart attack that I would be worried about, if I were you, to be honest. :D Now that we’ve dealt with the emergency, how did you like the chapter? ;) I know it's been a while and I am so grateful you're still reading! ;)}
A Day to Cherish, Part III. Lion's Jaws

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

You’ll notice that the poem is the same here as it was in last chapter: this is because I decided it suited this one best, and added a different one to chapter 36. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I am utterly confused

By the power of your ruse

And the trick you’ve played on me

In your unforgiving glee.

Why your face holds me entranced

I cannot know at a glance,

But there’s something in its lines

That with my heart intertwines.

Why your eyes are so appealing

I have never truly known —

You will not begin revealing

All the secrets that they own.

I have wondered if your lips

Are tantamount to bliss,

Or whether in their red

Lies the reason I’ll be dead.

I have contemplated why
My mind can you stupefy

And what magic feeds your hold

Over my immortal soul.

I have yet to know the reason

For the way you make me feel

Or if to gods I should appeal

To be rescued from your prison.

I guess I’ll see you below.

He had not understood her words: they had seemed to have come from a place of absurdity, so little sense they made. He had seen her move toward the edge of the platform but, his mind still deciphering her last sentence, he had not suspected any danger in it, or he would have grasped her without any intention of letting her go until they were somewhere from where she could not jump. These same words had acquired a terrifying meaning, however, when he had seen her step into emptiness and disappear. He rushed toward the edge but only caught sight of her red hair, which, worn loose by her that day, had affected something akin to hypnosis on him so many times in the past hours; the red locks, which he had watched being caressed by the wind with some envy of that element, had taken the shape of a fiery teardrop as she fell. That tear of flame kept gliding further and further away from him as he watched, petrified into immobility, how Sansa flew through the nearly two-hundred feet of nothing that separated the place where he now stood alone from the sea below. He had never felt such utter, gut-wrenching dread. Indeed, he had never conceived that such all-engulfing fear existed. There seemed to be acid in the place where his heart had jumped and disappeared when he understood what she had done. Had the world been suddenly turned inside out and he had found himself in its burning center, he would not have been so utterly confused or felt such trepidation. His blood chilled, seemingly unable to move through his veins, he had grown cold in the blaze of Southern sun as he followed with his gaze the seemingly immaterial dot Sansa had become as she neared, faster and faster, the waters’ surface, and he was entirely, brutaly incapable of stopping the terrifying progression. He kept watching, aghast, how her feet touched the waters’ surface, how the green-blue substance swallowed her slender form, and Sansa — that kind-hearted, beautiful, talented, magical creature, who was his comfort in a world that was neither kind nor beautiful and had so little talent or magic in it — metamorphosed into sea foam. In that moment, while he watched the white splash she had left in the wake of her dive, had the Stranger materialized before him and offered him that the minx may come up for air at the price of his own life and more besides, Jaime would have considered it a bargain. The Stranger, it seemed, was preoccupied with other matters that early afternoon and did not appear. However, as, in a mixture of panic and absolute concentration, the green eyes frantically searched the aquamarine waters, they beheld the red hair and the ivory-white skin re-emerge from the depths of the sea. Re-emerging, Sansa laughed, gave a triumphant, jubilant cry, and waved to him from below. The relief that followed the monstrous fear he had experienced was so great, he staggered. His heart had returned to fill the acid hole left by her abrupt and, he thought now, utterly inhumane departure, and it was beating wildly, pounding through his veins with such force and rapidity that he felt lightheaded. He lowered his hands to his knees and stood bended thus, focusing on catching his breath and not letting his heart jump out of his body by way of his mouth.

She’s alive.
Then, on the heels of that relief, came a terrible suspicion.

Is she hurt?

Immediately, he restored his gaze to where she floated indolently, apparently unhurt. But how to make sure that she was, indeed, uninjured and that the adrenaline that must have flooded her bloodstream — even if its amount must have been nothing in comparison to what he himself had been awarded by her actions — did not conceal a sprain or something akin to it? Something worse, perhaps? Moreover, what if, in case she was injured, she would have trouble staying afloat before he reached her? These and other such thoughts flashed through his mind with such celerity, his brain retained only the vaguest impression of them, which culminated in one absolute, dominating imperative: he had to get to her, and he had to do it now. He did not even consider taking the stairs, or the fact that if, in jumping, they were both injured, it would be so much the worse for them.

He dove after her, headfirst.

Thus, the stupefied public of the quay of Blackwater Bay was presented with the bizarre sight of two people jumping off the Red Keep tower within the space of less than five minutes.

Sansa had never liked heights and, evidently, had never tried jumping from them. But — as with so many things she had discovered in King’s Landing, many of them in some ways connected to Jaime Lannister — she had found an incomparable thrill in having the world zip past her and entering the water, feeling her body permeate with rapid force the welcoming depths of the warm sea. She came up for air and shouted happily, proclaiming to the world her elation and her love, as if she had performed a sacred rite of passage. Then, she looked up and discerned Jaime’s silhouette on the tower’s platform. She waved to him, taking satisfaction, as always, in doing something he enjoyed with him. She watched him plunge into the void, his straightened, agile body flying through the air like a well-carved arrow, its trajectory perfect, its speed terrific. She traced his jump — although, in his case, it looked more like a professional dive than a fall — and saw him enter the water with few splashes only a couple meters from her. Giddy at having forced her way into his secret hobby, she smiled as she waited for him to come up to the surface. Through the crystal-clear sea, she saw him turn once his inertia had slowed and swim toward her underwater instead of coming up directly for air. He emerged from the water right in front of her, his wet hair clinging to his face in a chaotic fashion. At seeing him like this, her heart jumped in that familiar way. As soon as he had broken through the surface of the water, his hands reached for her, as if to connect her to earth, like tying a balloon so as to prevent it from drifting off into the sky.

“Are you all right? Are you hurt?” came the questions.

His face a picture of seriousness, his eyes narrowed, his hands, entirely devoid of the sensuality that usually seemed to emanate from him, felt the bones of her arms as he tried to ascertain if any one of them was broken. He would have carried out a similar, medically distant, inspection of her legs, but that she pushed him away, laughing at his concern.

“Don’t be ridiculous! If nothing has happened to you — or to your ten-year-old self, for that matter — why would anything happen to me?”

Jaime watched her, happy and unharmed as she was before him, his brain slowly catching up to the fact that, indeed, the enormous fright she had given him had had no serious repercussions, although it would certainly account for most of his grey hair, when they came. His fear was translated into fury.

He grasped her by the shoulders, his green eyes blazing:

“Are you completely mad?!” he screamed. “What in the Stranger’s name were you thinking, jumping
like that?! What if you had hurt yourself?! What — ”

But she cut him off by wiggling out of his hold once more, her long legs pushing lightly against the water as she drifted some two feet away from him, the happy expression never fully leaving her face, even though defiance came to her features:

“Oh, please,” she said, and he thought her careless tone the height of insolence, entirely unwarranted after she had used him so ill, “you begin to sound like your father.”

This remark made Jaime speechless, as his sense capitulated before the cognitive dissonance her words had produced in his mind. Taking advantage of his shock, she continued, swimming closer to him before she made her point.

“You,” she said, stabbing his chest with her index finger, as had become her habit whenever she desired to stress the words she addressed to him, “are not my father, and, as we’ve already established, I don’t even listen to him, or I wouldn’t be here.” She paused for emphasis. “So, you, especially, don’t get to tell me what I can and cannot do, Jaime Lannister.”

Though he was livid, or perhaps because of it, he could find nothing immediately to answer her. Nevertheless, he felt a gnawing, impotent rage at being unable, as she herself had just pointed out, to prohibit her from doing something so idiotic ever again.

“Idiot,” he grumbled under his breath, the sounds gritted through his teeth.

“Hey!” she protested vehemently, “I might take offense!”

“It would be better if you could draw conclusions instead!” he barked, still palpitating with anger.

She came closer to him, her temper rising, and her own eyes began to flare:

“Why is it you think that I should not be allowed to do what you do?!” she exclaimed, “You yourself admitted to jumping from the tower!”

He did; but to him, it had always seemed that his death would have been nothing particularly troublesome, while Sansa’s…

“When I was a child and didn’t know any better!” he countered.

He refused to address the fact that she was now only eight years older than he had been when he had started jumping.

“Of course, you knew!” she countered, “You’ve been told so by Osha, and Tyrion hated it when you jumped! You said so yourself: there are no rocks at the bottom — what could possibly go wrong?”

Too late had she realized that she should not have posed the rhetorical question, because Jaime did not consider it rhetorical in the slightest.

“It was over twenty years ago, you little fool! What if something had changed since then?! What if there were rocks there now, huh?”

He would have said more, but she interrupted him.

“Tell me true, Jaime, when you were jumping all those years ago,” the time she had pronounced in a mocking tone that irritated him, fail as he had to discern in her mockery a desire to lessen the
difference between their ages rather than exaggerate it, “did you begin by going into the water below the tower,” again there was mockery in her voice, “and carrying out a detailed inspection of the sea bottom — or did you just jump, headfirst?”

He had jumped feet-first, but that was not the point.

“That’s not what we are talking about right now!” he exclaimed, driven to the end of madness by what he considered her stubborn foolhardiness.

“Of course, it is!”

“We are talking about you doing something utterly daft that puts your life in danger! It’s just like that stupid transition all over again!” She could not believe he decided to bring up the movement she had pushed into the choreography weeks ago. He continued: “Only this time, it’s by far more dangerous! Why would you do something so exceedingly moronic?!”

His exasperation availed him nothing by way of reasoning with her: his words did not reach her in the slightest, it seemed, for she splashed him with water as a way of cutting short his monologue. She had the temerity to laugh gaily and start swimming away, as if to escape from his possible retaliation. Noticing, however, that his fury had not abated and that he had not accepted her invitation to a splashing contest, she halted her progress. He brushed his wet hair away from his face, and she recognized immediately this gesture of exasperation. Upset in spite of herself and feeling guilty for having provoked his anger — and, she guessed only now, his fear — on a day when, in all fairness, Jaime deserved more gentle treatment, she swam back to him. If their relationship permitted her such liberty, she would have wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her body to his, to appease him, but, as this was entirely inappropriate, all things considered, she dove and came up behind him, throwing her arms around his neck in this, far more friendly and less intimate, way. He pretended to ignore her.

“Fine! I’m sorry I’ve upset you,” she offered in an almost sheepish way.

He hemmed, indicating that, while he had heard her, he was not prepared to accept her peace terms that easily.

“Hey!” she protested, “I’m trying to make peace here!”

“Why don’t you begin by promising you’ll never jump off that tower again?”

She was still clinging to his neck from behind, but he knew she had thrown back her head as she laughed.

“Oh, miss Osha,” the vixen’s voice mocked him, “I promise to be good! I’ll never jump — Oh, wait! I’m not ten years old, and you’re not my nanny! I don’t have to promise you anything!”

That’s it!, was all that had flashed through Jaime’s mind before he acted.

She had expected him to talk back to her, bickering further. However, she had not been prepared for a momentary pause that followed her jape — the first sign that something she had not anticipated was afoot. Like when he had scooped her up easily into his arms on the evening of the gala months ago, so now she had not even had the time to realize what and how he had moved to achieve his ends. All she had been aware of was that, somehow, she had lost her grip on his shoulders and neck and his hands had pushed her over his head and into the water in front of him. A little disoriented by this occurrence, she had been powerless to evade the swift hands that brought her close to him. In a space of some seconds after the quip had left her lips, she found herself staring into green eyes that, while, still, there was concern and anger in them, were softer now. As she had had cause to think on several
other occasions, this time, too, she believed that Jaime Lannister looked very much like a lion — albeit, wet and disheveled, but still glorious. She rested her hands on his forearms, not daring to place them on his shoulders, like she so desperately wanted to.

“Promise you’ll never jump off that tower again,” he said in a tone that was soft and serious, entreat ing in its quiet strength. A prisoner of his quiet voice that seemed to reverberate through her very being, still she shook her head.

“I can do whatever you do…” she countered quietly, stubborn even in her newly found timidity.

“You can, I don’t doubt it,” he answered, “I’m just asking you not to. Promise me,” he entreated her again.

“No,” she mumbled.

She wanted too desperately to preserve her right to this new part of him that loved flying through the air from the height of two-hundred feet; that part of him Cersei had not already claimed. He sighed, exasperation warring with patience on his face.

“Sansa — ” he began.

“I’ll make you a bargain, Lannister,” she interposed, rediscovering her spirit.

“What kind of a bargain?” he asked warily.

She spoke quickly, as if to utter the words before they had frozen on her lips.

“I can promise you never to jump from that tower on my own, if you agree we’ll come back and jump together sometime.”

Having made the bold proposition, she searched his face, trying to ascertain if she had crossed a line. He was watching her, too, and she did not know that, for some time now, even in spite of his anger, he had been thinking that her eyes were even more beautiful than the water of the Narrow Sea: bluer, clearer, more dazzling. He sighed again, realizing she had cornered him.

“All right, minx, that’s a deal,” he agreed.

But I’ll make sure to catch you before ever you jump away like this.

Their peace deal brokered, he released her as unwillingly as she was reluctant to leave his arms, and they started toward the shore. She proposed to race and lost long before they reached land: he outswam her considerably in a matter of minutes, waiting for her to catch up with a celebratory grin. Acknowledging her defeat with a puff, she swam next to him the rest of the way without suggesting contests.

“Tell me, minx,” he said in a voice full of humor as they were nearing the beach that lay between the castle walls and the quay, a liminal space between the past and the present, “what do you think we should do now, wet to the bone as we are?”

She was silent. She had not exactly thought through these details when she had stepped into emptiness, and now, faced with the prospect of walking around the city with hair from which water would drip for at least a quarter of an hour and a wet dress that clung to her body immodestly, she was beginning to perceive the less well-worked out aspects of her actions.

Jaime’s voice, mocked her with its feigned seriousness:
“I’m very curious as to your plan.”

They had reached the shallow water and were walking knee-deep in it, toward the beach.

“I don’t know, Jaime, you’re the jumping expert!”

He only laughed at her.

“Well,” she improvised under this pressure, watching the sun-lit rocks and sand, “we can always dry a little here in the sun before considering what to do next.”

He looked around the beach and then at her, an infernal smirk on his lips.

“Why not? After your madness earlier today, I don’t suppose that a sunstroke will do me much harm…”

_I hope he will not be grumbling about this the way he has been about the transition…_

“Oh, for gods’ sake, Jaime!” she cried out. “It’s probably not even possible to get a sunstroke from sitting in the sun when you’re completely wet!”

“I suppose you’re the expert in sun matters, Northern Princess,” he returned.

Annoyed at his use of this new nickname, she pushed him, hoping he would lose his balance and fall in the shoal, but he did not, bringing her to him instead.

“You’re awfully fond of pushing me around,” he observed. She rolled her eyes and snorted but did not try to get out of his grasp. “Is that the sort of violence with which you bully your brothers?” he asked before releasing her.

“No,” she said, a little abashed. “And what does the way I treat my brothers have to do with you?”

They left the sea and walked along the beach toward the large rocks that could serve for seats. When he answered her, there was so much teasing in his voice, it was inordinate even by the standard of his generally taunting attitude toward her.

“Oh, you treat my hangovers the way you do Robb’s, you generally harass me the way I still suspect you do your brothers…” The latter was not true, but she did not have the time to point this out, because he continued: “I suppose I’m wondering if you think me one of them…”

_A brother is, perhaps, the very last thing I’d ever want you to be_, she reflected, feeling a little stung by this gibe of his.

“I don’t know, Jaime,” she answered, suddenly brazen in her retort, “it seems to me that, with you, it’s a bit of a trick question.”

His eyes rounded, astonishment the absolute ruler of his features. No one, except Tyrion, had ever dared tease him about his relationship with Cersei (and even Tyrion did so very rarely): no one really knew about the affair, and those who did suspect something kept quiet. Notwithstanding, here was the minx, making fun of this hidden aspect of his life, dragging it into the sunlight as if it were just another peculiarity of his biography — nothing to be concerned about, a fact of life, fair game for taunts. He watched her, too astounded to speak. Seeing his shocked expression, Sansa grew conscious of the low blow she had delivered him unwittingly and cursed her own stupidity as well as her insensitivity: such brutality came from having as one’s only object never to find oneself without a retort and not watching one’s tongue as a consequence. She came to him and took her hand in both
her own. He looked at her in stupefaction, empty-eyed, but she was relieved not to see pain in his expression — not yet, at least.

“I’m sorry,” she said guiltily, “it just sort of slipped out… I… I was just teasing… I… You see, I forgot for a moment about what happened last night and — ”

He faced her fully, then, his eyes re-focusing on her, losing the emptiness.

“What do you know?” he asked. “What did I tell you last night?”

She sighed.

“I… You…Well…”

Realizing that she was not exactly eloquent, she pursed her lips as if to physically prevent any more stuttering from leaving her mouth. She did not know what to say to him or how to say it. She made her way to the rocks, trying to escape the conversation. He came to sit next to her.

“It’s only fair,” he said in a tired voice, “that you tell me what I was saying.”

“I don’t know, Jaime, you weren’t exactly coherent…” she tried.

“That’s not even a lie, she thought, I only have my guesses to go by.

“And yet, you seem to know that whatever happened last night had strained my relationship with my sister,” he countered with evil sarcasm.

“It’s only a guess,” she protested weakly, in a quiet voice.

He saw her face redden, and her blush told him that her deductions had hit the mark.

“Clearly, a fairly good guess,” he said, his voice growing cold.

Not realizing that the coldness had been provoked by his recollections of the risqué position in which he had surprised his lover last night and not by her, Sansa grew fearful and desperate. She turned to him, her eyes searching his face.

“You didn’t tell me anything!.. You only mumbled your sibling’s names and about betrayal… I…”

She felt herself reddening further in a painful sort of way. Talking about the unfaithful sister-lover of the man she herself was in love with was hardly an easy or a pleasant task, and she feared how he would react to this conversation. She was again animated by the powerful loathing of Cersei Lannister that she had felt the night before.

“I hate her, she thought, for not loving him completely, for not treating him right… I would have hated her less, had she but loved him… Like I do.

“You looked so hurt…” she continued quietly, shifting her gaze to her hands when he turned to look at her. “You kept saying their names… Something about a beast and a red kimono — I didn’t understand that… Then, you said ‘whore,’ so I concluded that…” she thought the capillaries under the skin of her face would burst, “I thought that your sister… that she wasn’t… faithful,” the last word she had pronounced in a whisper — a tortured sound that may have hidden her own sob and certainly did conceal a shaky release of breath.

To her surprise, Jaime laughed at the end of her bungled monologue, but this laugh was not the joyous one she usually heard from him when they were together; instead, it was an angry, hate-filled
sound.

“I must say,” he stated, and his tone was cuttingly cold, “I’m rather gratified that, even unconscious, I was able to characterize my sister with so much precision.”

So it’s true, Sansa thought and found that this confirmation of her suspicions — nay, her insights — filled her with astonishment. True, she thought this was what had happened; and yet… And yet, she could not fully grasp how — or why — a woman whom Jaime loved could betray him thus. It was so utterly incomprehensible to her, who dreamed of simply spending a few hours in his company, that she could not entirely give credit to this truth, so entirely preposterous it seemed to her. The memory of Jaime’s tortured face from last night rose before her, and her heart wailed in anger and pain. Overcome by these emotions, she embraced him from the side, her arms encircling his shoulders, her hands joining on the deltoid muscle of one even as her head came to rest on the other. She felt him tense for a second.

“I’m so sorry, Jaime,” she said in a quiet voice that served well to conceal how it was breaking, and felt him relax a little into her touch. “I… I am so sorry…”

His hand turned her face to him, and she found the narrowed green eyes watching her with suspicion.

“Why?” he asked with genuine incomprehension. “You don’t particularly like Cersei… You cannot possibly think our relationship normal — if anything, I’m quite certain it revolts you… So why in the Seven Hells would you say you’re sorry? And, what’s more, how can you mean it — as you genuinely seem to do?”

She dared touch his cheek, feeling the angular cheekbone with her hand, like she had done the night before.

“I’m sorry because you’re hurt,” she said slowly.

I don’t care what’s ‘right’ — I care that you’re hurt, flashed in her mind.

He seemed quite surprised by her words. He smiled that rueful smile she recognized from earlier and took her hand from his cheek, watching her fingers the way, although he did not remember it, he had done last night.

“You…” he laughed softly. “You’re quite possibly the single kindest, most generous person I’ve ever met,” he said before placing a chaste kiss on the back of her hand.

Her heart seemed to have burst from the adrenaline, then, regenerating, did a somersault in her chest.

I’m not that good, she thought, I just love you.

Emboldened by his gesture of affection, she traced her free hand over his hair lightly, as if, truly, it was a lion’s mane.

“Do you think you can forgive her?” she asked, hoping that, perhaps, the twins could be reconciled, and the pain would leave Jaime’s face.

I can’t have him, she reflected, and I can’t make him happy, like she can. At least, if they patched things up, maybe he’d be less upset.

But Jaime, it seemed, was not disposed to even consider her suggestion. He got up, leaving her embrace, depriving her of that rare closeness between them.
“I’m far more likely to wring her neck,” he bit out.

She knew instinctively that he had put the distance between them because of his anger at her suggestion, but she did not give credit to his threat toward his sister. “I didn’t mean to upset you,” she said in a pacifying tone, “but, perhaps, it was just a mistake, and one she regrets.”

He nearly scared her, and certainly unsettled her, with his malevolent laugh.

“Two decades for the same mistake, I doubt she regrets it very much,” he bit out in a quiet, dangerous voice.

“What?” she asked, completely misapprehending his meaning.

He paused. He was looking out onto the sea again, his back to her, as if, by turning away, he could bear facing the truth in Sansa’s presence with a blind kind of courage.

“Last night… After — ” he sighed and rubbed his face with his hands.

“After you’ve seen her?” Sansa asked.

She probably confessed to him that she’d made a mistake and said how she regretted it.

“Yes, her and that swine, Osmund Kettleback.”

The name meant nothing to her; the heinous manner of the revelation Jaime had received left her feeling nauseous.

Poor Jaime. She hated his sister with renewed venom. No wonder at all he drank so much — probably, to forget what he’d seen.

“But it’s not just that,” he continued, still with his back to her, “I also learned from Tyrion that she had other lovers since we were teenagers.”

Another wave of nausea. Another wave of hatred. Another wave of pain she felt for him. No sooner had she battled these waves than Jaime continued.

“And my brother…” he paused, anger and pain ringing in the silence. “My brother knew about it — from the very beginning — and he did not tell me. Cersei and I had problems for a long time, but I’ve always thought that Tyrion…”

She couldn’t leave him alone anymore, standing in solitude on this beach, nothing but the heartless sea in front of him. She came to stand by his side and took his hand. He half-turned to her and half-smiled but restored his gaze to the water.

“Jaime…” she began, “I hope you… I hope you can… eventually… I hope you can recover from this…”

He smirked sadly.

“It’s twenty years of my life, Sansa,” he said and looked at her. “It’s longer than you’ve been alive.”

She smirked, too, rueful in her turn.

“I don’t know how, but I wish I could help…”
“You already have,” he smiled, “imagine if I had a hangover in addition to everything else…”

Or if I was alone… I would have probably kept drinking...

Sansa smiled sadly.

“I wish I could help more than that… I know I can’t, but I wish I could.”

He smiled at her again.

“Like I said: the single kindest, most generous person I’ve ever met.”

“Don’t exaggerate,” she advised him.

“I don’t,” he answered. She had nothing to say to that.

In silence, they started walking along the beach toward the quay. Their clothes had at least stopped dripping water, allowing them to venture into public spaces. As they walked, Sansa was thinking about what Jaime had said concerning Tyrion. She had always thought the relationship between the Lannister brothers very touching: the warmth, the love, the care that was so clear in the way they behaved toward each other. She remembered how Tyrion always said Jaime’s name: a little, it reminded her of how very religious people pronounced the names of their gods — the way her grandfather used to talk about the godsdess, for instance. Rickard Stark had died when she was very young, but the way he used to say, “godsdess,” was one of the main things she remembered about him; he would often take her there with him, telling her about the sacred trees and the Old Gods, while his weak hand held her little one. She had no doubt that the Lannister brothers would die for each other, and it often seemed to her when she looked at them together that it was just them against the world — and had been so for a long time. So why would Tyrion lie to his brother, the person whom he loved best in all the world — better even, she suspected, in some ways, than Margery? No, she could not believe that Tyrion had willingly betrayed his brother. It was simply impossible — not because she could not imagine it; but because she knew it was not true.

She spied an empty bench on the quay, near the water, and started walking toward it. They sat there in the same silence that had marked their stroll from the beach.

Jaime had always trusted his brother; in fact, it had never occurred to him not to trust Tyrion, and if, with time, he had come to see that Cersei was not always genuine and did not always have his best interests at heart, he had always believed that Tyrion was the only person who would never betray him or do anything to harm him — after all, Jaime had always loved and protected his little brother. To discover Tyrion’s betrayal was, in many ways, far more difficult than to witness the last mask being peeled off Cersei’s face. And now… What could he not blame on his brother’s treacherous silence! Aerys; a life-long devotion to a woman who clearly did not love him back — at least, not in the way he had loved her or had wanted her to love him. In these moments of bitterness, when rational thought was very far from Jaime’s mind, it seemed to him that, had he known about his twin’s multiple infidelities, he would have walked away from her long ago… And then, Sansa would have met a very different man, perhaps: one not accused of murder, no longer guilty of incest… A man a little more worthy in her eyes, if not sufficiently so… His children were perhaps the only strange gift of his fate that he would not bear to fade away if the wheels of time were turned back; but even as he could not wish them gone — no more than he could wish his heart to be something else — so he could not help imagining these same children being born to a different woman and calling him ‘father.’ Of course, he never imagined them being Sansa’s, perhaps because he subconsciously stopped his mind before it could paint before him images too enticing and torturous to contemplate. There was much he could reproach Tyrion with, much to add to his account against his younger brother. In spite of his brooding, he had noticed Sansa start walking to a bench and
“Jaime,” she called and he turned to watch her. “I know that it’s not my place and that you may be angry with me for saying what I’m about to say — ”

“I don’t think it’s possible for me to be really angry with you,” he smiled.

“Just wait until I come up with another choreographic step or jump from that tower!..” she teased.

“Oh, then, I make no promises!”

They laughed softly.

“You realize,” he said, “that it’s more fear than anger, even?”

“When you yell at me for jumping?”

“Yes. I’m in great fear of how many bones your foolhardiness may cost you,” he said, as if his joking tone could distill the meaning of his words.

She nodded, blushing a little. It was not strange that she should blush, when her heart was like an over-worked engine, puffing and puffing in reckless rashness at his words. She took a deep breath and faced him — or rather, made herself face him. She caught the same gentle expression on his face that made her feel as if sun was a liquid and had been spilled in her chest.

“But I was going to say…” she said, and he indicated by his raised eyebrows his readiness to hear her, “about Tyrion — ”

He turned away from her quickly, acrimony invading his eyes.

“I know you’re angry and you don’t want to hear it, because you’re hurt!” she started, speaking quickly, more loudly than she had intended, certainly with more feeling than she thought was due to entreat him peaceably. “But that’s like medicine: it hurts because it’s useful, and I think it’s useful for you to hear what I’ll say.”

He made as if to rise from the bench, but she held onto his arm.

“Please, listen to me,” she begged, urgency in her voice. “I have two elder brothers, Jon and Robb, as you know. They love each other very much — we, my siblings and I, we all love each other very much… And my father, he has a younger brother, Ben…” She saw a muscle jump in Jaime’s jaw at the mention of her uncle’s name — the man who had been the prosecutor initially dealing with Aerys’ death — but she soldiered on, regardless: “What I’m trying to say is this: I’ve been around brothers all my life, brothers who love each other dearly. I cannot speak about your relationship with your sister, because I’ve hardly ever seen you together, but I have seen you and Tyrion. A lot. And, Jaime, I’ve never seen — not between Robb and Jon, or my father and uncle — a bond like the one you two share. I know, because it cannot be otherwise, that Tyrion, whatever mistakes he’s made, never meant to hurt you — ”

Carefully, Jaime broke free of her and moved to stand on the parapet of the quay. Undeterred, she took another deep breath and followed him.

“The least you can do is hear him out,” she said, “because, Jaime, I can promise you this: you will regret losing your brother, even if you think now that he deserves your anger.”

He turned to look at her, who contributed more even, perhaps, than his sister’s actions to his wrath against his brother. Blue eyes looked out at him from her worried face; looked out at him
entreatingly, pleadingly — and for what? His own good, most likely, since, aside from his brother, he had discovered in Sansa one more person he could not suspect of ulterior motives, though, in her case, that did not make him an exception.

“Please,” she urged quietly, “promise you’ll give him a chance to explain.”

The same arrogance that had led once already to a quarrel between them when he had tried resisting her influence, which, like honey, was sipping into and drowning his soul, that same arrogance anew revolted against her. He turned to face her fully, intimidating her with his height in the way he had not done for a long time now, and his green eyes seemed to be showering her with biting sparks:

“What makes you think you can make me promise anything?” he asked, irrationally, since only an hour ago he had extracted a promise from her.

She was not fooled by his animosity and smiled:

“Last time you told me to mind my own fucking business, Jaime,” she said, “I slapped you across the face, and then you came to apologize.” She paused to let her reminder sink in. “The reason I decided to put my head in the lion’s jaws again, knowing you’d likely bite it off, is that I happen to care about your and Tyrion’s well-being. And to answer your question: there’s nothing I can do to make you promise anything; but then again, this isn’t how promises work. You don’t force them out of people, they are given freely. I was asking you,” she laughed a little, “begging, really, to promise — not to me, just to promise — that you’d hear Tyrion out. I was only thinking of your own good, because you are too angry and hurt to do so.”

Her tirade ended and her courage spent, she shrugged her shoulders and shook her head in a defenseless kind of way, before starting to walk away. She did not really know where she was going. She had not had a chance to contemplate this, either, because he had caught up with her and reached for her hand to halt her progress. She turned to face him, noticing that, for some reason, his temper had passed, and he looked almost remorseful. She considered him expectantly, wondering what he would say. He surprised her by giving her a sly smile:

“Tell me,” he said in that beguiling voice of his, “would I get credit for apologizing right away instead of waiting for twelve hours like last time and making that promise?”

She raised an eyebrow:

“Sure, you would. You’d get to keep your credit card from Tyene.”

“No, that’s not nearly good enough, I think,” he complained with a dramatic flair, and then the sly grin was back on his face, and the green eyes sparkled: “How about a smile instead?”

She laughed.

“Fine, Lannister, a smile it is. But remember: you promised.”

*What trick have you played on me, minx, that I drive such strange bargains?*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! Leave a comment and/or a kudos if you want to make me really happy! :)}
Dance with me, dance with me:

There is peace in this night;

Dance with me, dance with me:

In darkness, madness and terror fight.

Dance with me, but do not speak

Sweet words that havoc wreck

In my soul; in that dark place,

Enough demons frantically race.

Do not add to their number,

Or they will tear me asunder;

They are cruel, they are thirsty

For the blood of my desire

Their jaws know no amnesty,

Their teeth despair inspire:

Sharp, venomous, full of doom

Into my soul they sink like gloom.

Dance with me, even as you grow cold

And a mask your face conceals;

I may not see through this façade of cool,

But, perhaps, my heart in my eyes reveals
To you the secrets of my soul,
Which I did not mean to share;
And, perhaps, it tells you all
That I know I’ll never dare.

Dance with me, whatever us might befall:
On the tide of this waltz, its soft waves,
Let’s pretend that we’ve forgotten all
That our past and future enslaves.

Sansa had once heard Ygritte say — her brother’s girlfriend had then been speaking to someone else — that one should never drink to feel better, only to feel even better. Although Sansa hardly ever drank, and certainly never dreamed of solving her problems with alcohol — after all, she was the daughter of Catelyn Tully Stark — she retained her fellow-redhead’s words and translated them onto things she craved when feeling blue: sweets, for instance. With rare exceptions, Sansa allowed herself lapses in diet only on festive occasions, never to cure woes; and she considered a day with Jaime nothing short of a festive occasion. Consequently, she surprised him by demanding they stop to get some ice cream, when she spotted an irresistible gelateria while they were walking along the quay. Armed thus with her favorite desert, they continued in their aimless wandering around the city, no less pleasant for its lack of purpose. Sansa had not suggested they should part ways, partly because she did not want Jaime to be alone; partly, because she would not cut short her time with him. To her surprise, he had not proposed that they turn back, either.

Ever since the inception of her friendship with the Tyrells and the Sands, Sansa had learned there was much pleasure to be had in walking around King’s Landing, occasionally sitting down to enjoy a cup of tea or some other refreshment. It was a lovely enough past-time with her girlfriends, but, with Jaime, she felt she could wander the city for days and never get tired. Their walk was particularly pleasant because, departing from the quay, they found themselves in the very center of the city, where from grand avenues of a few centuries ago, like capillaries from arteries, spread winding little streets that had seen the medieval times come and pass. They were walking down one of these avenues, discussing a ballet the Targaryen Theater had once put on, long before it had gone under, and with which Sansa had only been acquainted through photographs and old video recordings of poor quality. She found out that day, however, that Jaime had actually seen the ballet and subjected him to a merciless catechism, at which he laughed — even as he supplied her with answers to all her questions. Her curiosity a little satisfied, they had passed to a discussion of that composition and were in the midst of an argument concerning the similarity of one of the pas in that ballet to one in The Fountain of Tears, when a male voice called:

“Jaime!”

Her companion turned around to locate the source of that voice in the crowd of the avenue. Following his gaze, Sansa discovered a tall, strong man, who looked to be in his fifties, coming toward them. Seeing that the intruder had not provoked displeasure in Jaime, Sansa was predisposed to like him. Indeed, the man had a pleasant, open face, and she was ready to grant that he was
handsome — even if, in her opinion, he had nothing on Jaime Lannister.

“Arthur!” Jaime exclaimed, his voice welcoming.

The man, whom Jaime had called Arthur, approached them. He was dressed casually, and, in his hands, he carried a handless green shopping bag with a yellow rose — the recognizable symbol of the Tyrell organic foods empire. The men shook hands.

“Good to see you, Arthur,” Jaime said in greeting.

“It’s been a while,” Arthur returned. “Why are you wet?”

Wet they were, indeed: both still looked nothing like respectable people ought to look when they go for a stroll in the city.

“Because,” Jaime answered, and she knew he would take his revenge, “Miss Adventure here decided to jump off the Red Keep tower, and my mother did not raise me to leave a damsel in distress.”

She rolled her eyes at his pun.

“Oh, please!.. I was doing perfectly fine…”

It was then that Arthur noticed Sansa standing next to Jaime and realized that she was not a passerby and that, moreover, she and his friend were well-acquainted and had been getting into trouble together before this chance meeting. Arthur’s enlightenment was easily traceable on his features: his eyes began to round, and he looked from his friend to his companion with consternation, which would soon turn to utter astonishment.

“Arthur, this is Sansa Stark,” Jaime introduced them, and she smiled at his friend, “Sansa, this is Arthur Dayne — ”

Jaime was about to say something else, she thought, but Arthur did not give him the chance:

“Stark? Sansa Stark? Did you mean to say ‘Karstark,’ maybe?”

Sansa decided this was a good moment to intervene:

“I assure you, Arthur, Jaime has pronounced my last name correctly. I’m Sansa Stark of Winterfell, daughter of Catelyn Tully and Eddard Stark.”

Her pronouncement certainly produced a powerful effect: Arthur’s shopping bag began to slip through his hands slowly as he stared at Jaime, helpless in his utter confusion; he caught it just in time before dropping it.

“Ned’s daughter? Ben’s niece?” he asked, then mumbled something along the lines of “from frying pan into fire” and “death wish,” and laughed darkly. “I hope you remember how to use that sword, Lannister, because you might have need of it soon!”

Sansa looked at Jaime in a questioning way, but he only rolled his eyes and tried changing topics.

“Arthur is one of the greatest sword fighters of our time; he used to train me — ”

“I sure trained you well,” the man interrupted again, and Sansa noticed pride in his eyes, “I hear you are poised to win the championship once again this year? Shouldn’t you give someone else a try, huh?” he winked, then turned serious once more: “But seriously, my man, what are you doing here
with Ned’s daughter?”

“She has a name,” Jaime said, almost, it seemed, in warning.

“Oh…” Arthur made a long sound of surprise at Jaime’s last statement, “she does, doesn’t she?..” He continued, undaunted, however: “And a pretty one it is, too…” he chuckled. “I’ll say: never did I think the day would come when I’d see you standing next to a Stark without looking thirsty for blood — ”

“That’s enough,” Jaime interrupted, his voice assertive but not cutting or offensive, clearly in deference to his former teacher. Arthur looked back to Sansa:

“Please, little Lady Stark, tell me at least that you aren’t running away — gods know, there’s bad precedent for that in your family…”

Having no notion of what Jaime’s friend meant, Sansa laughed.

“I don’t know what you’re referring to, but, I assure you, I’m not running away from anything or anyone: I work at the Lannister Ballet Company…” seeing him open his mouth, she added, “…with the full knowledge of my parents.”

“Oh,” was all Arthur Dayne had to say on that account. Then, his expression grew humorous: “And have you had the chance to meet other Lannisters as well, Sansa?”

“Of course. I know Tyrion quite well.”

“Oh,” came again from Arthur, “anyone else?”

“What are you up to, Arthur?” Jaime asked in a tired manner that poorly concealed his irritation.

The sparkle in Arthur Dayne’s eyes grew positively malicious.

“Oh, I’m just wondering if Sansa has met your other relatives… Lord Tywin, perhaps?..”

Sansa decided to indulge him.

“I have met, I think, most of the Lannister family: I’ve had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of Jaime’s father and sister as well as his niece and nephew.”

She thought that the way she had referred to Jaime’s lover and children without so much as blinking could have been commended by the sliest liar in the Seven Kingdoms. Something shifted in Arthur Dayne’s eyes, as if, his momentary shock now passed, he remembered himself:

“Very good, very good. Well, I must get back,” he added hastily, as if in a hurry to efface himself, “I only ran out to get some groceries… Good running into you, Jaime,” he said as they shook hands, “let’s make sure you and I get a drink some time soon!” Then, he turned to Sansa: “It’s lovely meeting you, Sansa Stark,” he said, taking her proffered hand, but instead of shaking it, he gallantly pressed a kiss to her knuckles before winking at Jaime and walking away. Arthur Dayne made his way home with the pleasant image of Jaime Lannister’s tense jaw muscles and the happy reflection that the era of Cersei Lannister had come to an end.

The pair that had inspired these pleasant reflections of Arthur’s was meanwhile continuing down the avenue.

“I didn’t know you won sword-fighting championships — or even that you participated in them,”
Sansa observed.

“Didn’t think a ballet dancer would be tough enough for that?” Jaime taunted, but she detected a hint of annoyance in his voice.

“I never said that!” she protested, surprised by his train of thought. “I knew you were really good — I’ve seen you fight Bronn, and he’s a professional bodyguard… I was just saying I didn’t know you participated in championships — ”

“…Or that I won them,” he reminded her of her words.

She laughed.

“I’m sure the mighty Jaime Lannister would win every championship!.. My gods, Jaime! What vanity!”

The thin line briefly formed by his lips informed her that he was not amused by her taunts. Then, came revenge.

“Pride is one of the fundamental Lannister characteristics,” he declared, “in the same way that foolhardiness and self-righteousness are passed on in the Stark family line — ”

“I’d say the Starks are better off than the Lannisters!” defended she her house.

“And I’d say it’s a wonder there are still any of you left with those kinds of tendencies,” he countered.

“Must be doing something right!”

“Or maybe it’s the luck of living in the North — only in such an honorable environment could you be expected to survive…”

Sansa laughed, because his words reminded her of the way uncle Ben had always cursed the South before he had returned to the North. She grew conscious — having noticed it a sufficient number of times over the past weeks — that Jaime could never quite resist smiling when she laughed, and this time was no exception.

“In spite of my terrible callousness,” she said in a light tone, “I’m not actually surprised you win in these contests…”

*I wish I could see you fight one of these days…* she thought.

“Why’s that?” he queried.

She shrugged her shoulders and ventured to say:

“I bet Tyrion’s never missed a single championship of yours — ”

That much was true, but he would not be so easily distracted.

“In order to counterbalance your callousness, as you so aptly described it,” he said, “the least you can do is answer the question.”

“Fine… You are one of these people who always seem to win, you know? Your father has that, too,” she added.

He laughed with little mirth.

“Can you really say that, knowing what I’ve been up to recently?” he asked.
She blushed in some exasperation.

“I was merely making the observation that this is the way you appear to people.”

*Father and I certainly share more than the appearance of victory...* Jaime suddenly reflected, and the faces of his mother and Cersei rose before him. *When it comes to love, we both can speak to little but defeat.*

Sansa noticed a change in his countenance. It had been some time now since last his eyes had grown empty in this way she had come to hate. She slipped her hand into his and returned to the conversation that Arthur Dayne’s appearance had interrupted. With satisfaction, she soon noticed the blankness leave his face. She hoped that she would never see it again — but feared that she would, and for a long time.

They strolled awhile more in the city, their conversation dominated by animated discussions of ballet, but also taunts and laughter. In the evening, they settled in a small, but highly prized, Reach restaurant — Sansa’s choice, on Jaime’s insistence, since he had selected the place where they had lunched. She loved that restaurant — *Little Delights*, it was called — for the jovial but peaceful atmosphere, the half-light of its garden terrace where was cultivated an abundance of flowers and plants. Being a Reach restaurant, *Little Delights* certainly pleased with its food as well.

As they dined, the sun set, and the purple sky permeated the air, painting everything in the violet colors of itself, but its dye did not last, giving way to blackness, little by little. The waiters had lighted more candles, which glowed mysteriously in the semi-darkness of the city night. The Southern wind, softer than a child’s kiss, twirled on the terrace, gently bended the small trees, caressing the wind chimes into singing magical chants. The night seemed to be a thing of volume, its air so warm, it rested faintly on one’s shoulders, like a weightless fur-coat; and from somewhere in a short distance, came the heartbroken moans of melancholy violins. Sooner or later — neither one of them could have said — they became again aware of time, as, alas, one must. It was, perhaps, the emptiness of the terrace that had alerted them of the late hour; but the violins still played, as if their judgement of time was the more accurate one.

They were walking slowly down another avenue, not far from *Little Delights*, and thoughts of time’s finite nature, the day’s ending, and parting were not far from either of their minds. But still, they wandered — silent, as if, should they break the silence, obligations of mundaneness would encroach on them. They strolled onto Baelor Square, the largest piazza in the city. A sept had once stood there, but now, it was an open space in the historic center of King’s Landing, paved with large, immaculately worked stone slabs: a favorite gathering place of street artists, musicians, other entertainers, tourists, and city-dwellers — all looking for the cheer of night life in the capital. It was from thence that the sound of violins had reached them when they had been seated at the restaurant. A group of violinists, accompanied by a cellist, were playing at the far end of the piazza, and some dancing couples had taken advantage of their music-making. As soon as Sansa had noticed the dancers, she was overwhelmed by a desire to join them. In this peaceful darkness, where laughter, cheers, and music compounded into a symphony of city-streets and where men and women danced in a casual enjoyment of their life-filled limbs and each other’s embraces, she thought that she could pretend that Jaime was hers, if only for the few dances they would share — a dangerous but irresistible self-deception. She hesitated, all the same. Catelyn Stark had always been very clear, her gentle voice notwithstanding: women did not invite men to dance — they waited to be chosen. Arya, who had been present when Catelyn had been reminding her elder sister about such critical points of comportment on the eve of Sansa’s débutante ball, had laughed outright: she would never have been able to carry a hunting knife, let alone her gun, she had said, if women always waited to be chosen by men to do things. Both Sansa and Catelyn had rolled their eyes at Arya’s remark, but now, restrained from asking Jaime to dance by her mother’s teachings, Sansa began to wonder if her sister
had not been right — at least, as far as invitations to dances were concerned. Jaime’s voice interrupted her musings:

“It seems we’re doing a tour of my favorite places in the city today,” he said, and she could hear the smile in his voice before she turned to see it. She faced him.

“How so?”

“The dancers and the music players over there,” he pointed, “the ones you’ve just been looking at… They are often here on warm nights like this. Never fail to enchant, do they?”

“I’ve never seen them here before,” she said.

But then again, I’m rarely out this late…

“Well,” Jaime announced, “since you’re clearly too ill-mannered to invite me to dance, I guess I’ll have to ask you,” he winked at her.

She laughed, loving him more than ever in that moment. He offered her his hand; she took it. She thought they would come closer to the other dancers and the musicians, but Jaime’s arm wrapped around her waist, bringing her to him, accelerating her heart beat; she placed her hand on his shoulder, and they began to waltz.

It’s just like Jaime Lannister to assume that the whole square is his ballroom… she thought, smiling in spite of herself. She could lie; but she loved this about him — his presumption, befitting someone on whose sigil a lion roared his dominance. The bystanders made way for them, but there was hardly need for it: her partner’s skill in maneuvering while dancing in a crowded space bespoke years of attending his father’s galas.

“What makes you grin in this provocative way?” he asked, making her blush.

“I was thinking back to our discussion of Lannister… sense of self-importance,” she responded.

“Were you now?”

The crowd had given up space for them; they had waltzed closer to the musicians, but remained far enough to move with great freedom. The observers and by-standers, who had found themselves between them and the other dancers, ceded their positions. The Lannister conquest of additional dancing space was complete. One couple now commanded half the piazza. She giggled.

“Yes, indeed, I was!..”

“And what brought on these reflections?” he inquired, smirking, his eyes agleam with humor.

“You know this expression, ‘the world is your oyster?’ ”

“Of course, I do — what of it?”

“You think that every piazza is your private studio.”

He laughed loudly, throwing his head back in his great mirth, yet never missing a step.

“I may think that it’s true,” he said, “but, in your case, I believe it ought to be true.”

She thanked the uncertain illumination of streetlights for partially hiding her red cheeks from his observant eyes. Though they did ballet together five days a week, they had not danced like this —
moving together without breaking from each other’s embrace — since Tywin’s gala. Sansa basked in the uninterrupted feeling of his shoulder under her palm, the touch of their joined hands, his arm wrapped around her, his hand on her waist. She loved being surrounded by his embrace, feeling small and protected yet drawing daring power from his strong body.

*If I could ever make a wish that would come true,* she thought, *I’d wish to spend my life in his arms.*

The waltz ended; they separated to applaud with the rest of the dancers and bystanders. There was a great deal of serenity, she reflected, in being among these nameless dancers, these nameless musicians, these nameless bystanders. Without names, could she fool herself into imagining that she had come here on her own and a dashing stranger, separating himself from the crowd, had invited her to dance? That nothing stood between them — neither past nor present? The musicians had rested for the few minutes they needed and started playing again. She looked to Jaime, who extended his hand to her once more; once more, she took it without hesitation, smiling her pleasure. They danced to the ebbing and flowing sounds of another waltz.

“Never would have thought you’d like dancing in the streets,” Jaime remarked, smiling in that kind way that made her heart glow like one of the candles on the terrace of *Little Delights.*

*I like dancing in the streets with you.*

“Well, I do. I find the notion enchanting. No one said that dance belongs to the professionals: it’s always been a folk entertainment.”

He chuckled.

“In some of its cruder forms,” he said, noticing her embarrassed look with satisfaction, “and, in this case, by ‘crude’ I mean ‘unsophisticated.’ ”

She rolled her eyes and swatted him lightly on the shoulder, where her hand had been lying.

“You’re the walking stereotype of what people imagine a Lannister to be like,” she chided with laughter in her words.

“I’m not sure if I should be offended or pleased by the statement: on the one hand, you’re from the North, and I doubt my family is held in high regard there; on the other, you’ve lived in the South long enough to know better.”

*You’ve known me long enough to know better,* he meant to convey, it seemed.

“Well?” he inquired, taunting, smirking down at her, his eyes gentle, however, “which Lannister stereotype do I fit? The Northern or the Southern?”

Too late had she realized she should have held her tongue, but then again, she had never learned to quiet the devils that rose to spring from her lips whenever they spoke. She tried to be vague.

“The stereotype’s the same; it’s the attitude to it that’s different.”

But, of course, he would not let her get away so easily.

“Do tell.”

His infernal grin provoked her.

“Oh, please, like you don’t know!”
“Refresh my memory,” he said, unapologetic in the satisfaction he visibly took from metaphorically backing her into a corner.
“The stereotype…’ she hesitated, unwilling to expose herself to the merciless teasing that could follow; then, she grew curious to know exactly how cruel he would be, and her curiosity was not idle: not being a fool, she realized that her feelings could hardly go unnoticed forever — sooner or later, someone, perhaps Jaime himself, would discover them; already, Ellaria and Margery seemed to know, indeed, they seemed to have known before her — and she wondered just how much he would hold her feelings over her head. He did not strike her as cruel, much in contrast to his sister; still, she wished to know. She took another plunge that day, even though she was not brave enough to face him as she spoke: “The stereotype is that the Lannisters are these handsome, arrogant, impudent, unapologetic lions who succeed at everything without seemingly trying. The difference in the way it’s perceived is that the Northerners think it makes you insufferable, and the Southerners seem to admire you for it.”

“Let me be clear: you just said I fit all of these characteristics?”

She looked beyond his shoulder, seeing nothing at all.

“I did,” she answered in the most careless tone she could assume.

“I see,” Jaime said. Had she but kept her eyes on his, she would have remarked the keen interest he could not hide when, again, he posed the same question: “And to which of the perceptions — Northern or Southern — do you subscribe?”

Her sly plan to consider his possible reaction to her admiration suddenly no longer seemed that sly at all. She faced him, surprised that no teasing had followed her remark. Not yet, at least, she thought.

“Let’s just say I find merits in both views.”

He laughed.

“I hope you never break the law, minx,” he said, out of the blue, she thought.

“Why?”

“I do not envy the officers of the City Watch who would be questioning you.”

She shook her head in a way that was meant to convey she thought his latest joke silly.

“So,” he began in a tone of someone who goes down a laundry list, “handsome, successful, arrogant, impudent, unapologetic, not particularly hardworking,” he summarized; he sounded pleased enough with the first two, but in the measure that he progressed down the list, the satisfaction left his voice, as if the agglomeration of these features was not flattering. He sounded a little cold: “Makes one sound superficial, I must say…”

She groaned inwardly, noticing how he had tried to distance himself from the set of attributes. She had only meant to make a teasing remark, never expecting it to evolve into an entire discussion by the end of which he would be offended. Besides, she found it more difficult to trade barbs with him when she was in his arms: in these moments, she only wanted to close her eyes and lean her head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat, giving herself up to the pleasure of holding her body so close to his. She felt far gone on the waves of the tender waltz that made her mind drift a little into a state in which feeling — rather than thought — dominated. She sighed. Jaime had had a long twenty-four hours, and she had not been, frankly, always considerate of his feelings during the day they had spent together. She meant to be brave for her own purposes; she should also have meant to appease
him. His sister had bruised him enough — she, Sansa, had no business poking at the injuries he had sustained. She smiled in an indulgent way, and, suddenly, her fear was gone.

“I said that you fit the Lannister stereotype perfectly — you do, at first glance. I was referring more to the way passersby could have thought of you as you designated the square for your own. I never said that I think there’s nothing more to Jaime Lannister than the family stereotype.”

She smiled at him, noticing that he looked surprised — and a little suspicious, as if he expected her words to be an introduction to yet another jibe; she hoped this was more out of habit to be despised than because he expected hurtful words from her, but, all the same, she felt sudden anger at the world that had dubbed him ‘Kingslayer,’ forgetting for a moment that her father and uncle had led this effort. It was this anger that prompted her to say more — certainly more than she had intended.

“When I first met you,” she smiled gently into his unusually serious face, “I thought you an arrogant monster… Now, don’t glare at me, you know very well you make a fine impression of it!” She laughed. “Even then, though, I had no illusions about your work ethics — you make it look easy, the perfection with which you dance, but I know (as any professional dancer does) that it’s simply not possible to achieve this only by virtue of talent, and that merciless practice is how you got to where you are. So, I said: ‘seemingly without trying.’ Over time, I also learned that you’re kind, that you love your brother and your children, that you treat your colleagues with consideration, and that compassion and generosity are a part of who you are. And I’ll not forget that you were the one who encouraged me, believed in me — who was nothing to you and whom you could have treated harshly without consequences — and how you made me believe in myself when my own family doubted my abilities…” she smiled fondly: “You’re kind of like Tommy and Cella, now that I think of it: if someone is only revealed your story… Well, people might not be kind… But then, when one meets them — or you — suddenly, the story doesn’t really matter that much…”

Perhaps, it was as well that the music had stopped then, for she might have said more; and, anyway, it seemed that her words had not produced the desired effect: halfway through her brief speech, she had noticed something flash in his eyes and thought she would see… something; instead, an unreadable mask had descended on his face; his eyes had not been empty: worse, almost, they had been the eyes of a bewildered stranger, who had seemed to see her as if for the first time, then his whole face had seemed to have become stone, not a single muscle permitted to move under the power of the emotionless mask. She had only had a glimpse of it before the music had stopped. Abruptly, he released her, as if she had burned him. He turned toward the musicians to clap — turned away from her — and she could no longer see his face. She watched his tense shoulders, wondering why her complimentary words had wrought so formidable a change. She did not glimpse the chaos revealed when the mask had shattered; the chaos produced by the earning, the anger, the desire, and the arrogance that were warring behind green eyes.

Jaime had never believed himself to be easily affected — particularly not by words. With a father and, later, a reputation like his, it would have been madness to care for words at all. He should not be affected by the words of a slip of a girl… No. He should not be affected by Sansa’s words. Perhaps, he should not have been — but he was. She was speaking, her voice pouring into his ears like sweet, purifying honey — poison for a man like him. Where, in which one of the Seven Hells, had she found the power to speak, as it seemed to him, past his ears, directly into his soul? Where along his drunken road to his company’s building — or, perhaps even, his road from Essos to see her for the first time — had he lost his ability to shrug off words, laughing only at the most scorching ones? What deviltry had placed before him this strange creature with huge blue eyes that were as beguiling as they were blameless; whose innocence, it seemed, made it a damnation to take advantage of that guilelessness even as it enticed and seduced? When had kindness become a disarming weapon? Since when had it stopped being a liability, a means of easily stealing victory from the gullible? Since when had she acquired the power to move him so with words that ought to have meant nothing,
nothing at all? Had he not suffered enough that after throwing his heart like a tennis ball to a lustful whore, fate had decided to let it roll to the feet of an oblivious girl he dared not look at too long for fear his gaze might sully her? And why, in moments when he hated her for her angelic tyranny, he could not help but love her?

*Love her.*

He did not. He would not.

The music had stopped, as had the blood interrupted its flow through his frozen veins. It was an illusion, an optical illusion induced by her blue eyes. He only had to turn away from her, and the spell would be broken. He did turn away, something like madness breaking through the surface of green irises. But the spell she had cast retained its power even after her face was no longer in front of him, even after he briefly closed his eyes, cursing fate, an evil bitch with sadism for a sense of humor. As if his rage at the goddess of fortune had frightened the deity and she had sought to appease him, a certain quiet resignation descended softly on him, like a panther landing gently on his shoulders. He almost laughed — at himself, at the world, and at the power of the goddess he had offended twice in one day. Of course, he was destined to suffer from the love of extremes.

The musicians were set on taking a longer break, it appeared, from the way they drank wine, fumbled with their instruments, and talked to each other and the bystanders. Sansa took a hesitant step forward, coming shoulder to shoulder with Jaime, glancing at his face, afraid of what she would see. Not finding either emptiness or anger in his eyes, she smiled, a little sheepishly, still uncertain how the words that came from her heart — and, she thought, contained nothing to rouse anger or give offense — had affected him so strangely. She looked more closely at his expression: it had something of the derisive mirth she had seen in his face before.

“I meant every word I said,” she ventured, “you are a good person.”

The derision began to leave his face, but she thought it was replaced by melancholy. He smiled a smile broken by that wistfulness and said, in a quieter voice than usual:

“You’d think that, wouldn’t you?”

“It’s not about my *thinking* anything! You might have grown used to people wrongly considering you dishonorable and unkind, but I haven’t. And I — ”

He took her hand, his fingers closing around hers with more strength than she had expected, but without violence, causing her no pain.

“Minx,” he said, his voice tense, “you ought to stop — ” he paused, the derisive half-smiled zipped across his lips once more, and his tone grew humorous, although it did not lose its strain, “or your praise might go to my head.” He let go of her hand.

“All right, all right — I’ll say no more…” she acquiesced.

“I’m mostly concerned for your reputation,” he added, humor overtaking the strain, “imagine if any of the good Northerners ever heard you go on like this about the Kingslayer…”

She smiled a crooked smile, and came a little closer. He pulled back — just a little, just as much as his pride would ever permit him, even where self-preservation was concerned.

“I’d tell them to go to the Seventh Hell if they objected,” she said with quiet determination.

He laughed, trying to shake off the unwittingly seductive power of her quiet voice. The musicians had begun playing a foxtrot, and her face reflected her awareness of the music that had announced
her favorite ballroom dance. Her expression was not lost on him.

“Come, minx, it seems these musicians still have wind in them for another tune…”

She took his proffered hand, he wrapped his arm around her waist, and they began to dance again. He should have avoided holding her body close to his again; he should have… Ah, he should have done anything he could to put much needed distance between them… But he saw her eyes and the eagerness to dance that was in them. If the Crone had interrogated him, he would have said he only wished to please the minx — and the goddess may have rightfully sent him to the deepest of the Seven Hells for insulting her wisdom by so blatantly covering the whole truth with half-truths. The whole truth consisted in that — notwithstanding the turmoil in his soul, which certain brutal revelations had occasioned, and disregarding that in distance lay a semblance of refuge — he wanted, without justification, like one desires the cessation of pain, to hold her in his arms when his mind and soul had shatter.

The musicians had wind in them for several more tunes, and they danced to all of them, but he had grown silent, and she, unnerved by the effect of her last monologue, did not try engaging him in conversation. When the music had died and the instruments had been laid to rest in their cases, they walked back across Baelor Square. In silent agreement, they re-traced their steps slowly down the avenues, along the quay. It was in the emptiness of dark streets that she had fully grasped the lateness of the hour. As if she could hear the striking of a clock, she felt the pulsing of time pull her back from the day that had twirled her into a strange place where clocks did not exist at all… Now, mundaneness, like an evil force freed by the clock-face, pulled at her. It was late, very late — too late for her to be out alone with a man, especially one for whom she felt so strongly with so little encouragement. The hour had struck — she had to submit to it and go. She shared the latter conclusion with her companion in a small voice. He nodded.

She wondered at his taciturnity while they made their way to his apartment building. A sleepy valet brought them his car and bade them goodnight.

Jaime moved to sit behind the wheel, and then she broke the silence:

“Please say you won’t drive very fast,” she pleaded.

He smirked, but it was half-hearted.

“Or you’ll commandeep my car keys again?”

“What?!” she exclaimed in unbound indignation, “You gave them to me! I did not ask for them!”

And my heart? he could have retorted, you did not ask for it either, I suppose. You’d say I gave it freely… But you’ve appropriated it with an uncharacteristic remorselessness.

He was considerate of her fear, however, and did not drive very fast — for him, that is, since, still, he drove faster than anyone else she had ever had the misfortune of riding with. The car braked softly next to her apartment building. He made to get out, but she placed her hand on his arm to stop him.

“I’d rather you didn’t walk me to the door,” she said.

His eyebrows rose.

“Why’s that?” he asked in suspicious perplexity.

She smiled. “Allow me one caprice I don’t have to explain,” she bargained.
He settled back into the seat.

“As you wish.”

She smiled.

“Will you be all right?” she inquired, a little timidly.

It was his turn to smile.

“Yes, minx, between your Northern herbs and amusing companionship, I’ll be just fine,” he said in a lighter tone.

*But if I were frank, I’d say I’ve passed from the sixth to the seventh hell in twenty-four hours. At least, the way lay through paradise.*

She gave him one last reassuring smile and left the car, closing the door softly behind her. She had not wanted him to walk her to the door — the memories of the last time he had done so were none too pleasant; she wanted new ones: a memory of turning back to see his sports car speed off into the night, for instance, like dreams rush out into morning sky when we wake. But when she turned to look behind her before crossing the threshold, the car and he were still there.

She was at her front door, when she had become aware of her faulty memory: she had left her keys and her phone in the glove compartment of his car when she had sat behind the wheel in the morning. Thinking that he had probably already left, she tried ringing the doorbell, but Tyene, unsurprisingly, was not at home. Sansa cursed silently, then rushed down the stairs, hoping that, perhaps, by some strange luck, she might catch him. To her surprise, when she exited the apartment building, she discovered the black sports car where she had left it. She approached it, noticing that Jaime looked lost in thought. She knocked lightly on the window, slightly startling him. Immediately, the window rolled down, the door was unlocked.

She opened it, giving him an embarrassed smile.

“I’ve forgotten my keys and phone,” she explained, as she sat down into the seat and reached into the glove compartment, extracting her belongings. “Why are you still here?” she asked by the way.

“Waiting for your to come back for your phone and keys, minx,” he said, but his tired voice did not convince her of the genuineness of his jape. She smiled, all the same.

“Good night, Jaime,” she said softly.

Something in his tired, defeated voice made her bold in her hopeless wish to chase away the clouds from the sky of his mind; she would later explain to herself that she had been sleep deprived; that, having spent a night with him asleep, she had grown too bold, too familiar; that she had been too overcome by the feelings that had jumped and jumped in her heart that whole day; that, really, she could not help it…

He was looking straight ahead, his profile to her; she leaned toward him and placed a quick kiss on his cheek. She dashed from the car and walked away without turning back, her heart fluttering.

*However did I dare?*

This time, when she had crossed the threshold of the building’s entrance door, she heard the purring of the engine and the screech of tires as the car tore off. She ascended the stairs the second time, entering her flat in a quotidian way that did not reflect her extraordinary day. As soon as she had
crossed the threshold, however, mundaneness drowned her, and she was pierced with a terrifying thought:

*I haven’t called mother all day!*

In a rush, she looked at her phone. Twenty-five missed calls from mother alone, nineteen from father; twenty-three texts from Jon, eleven from Robb; more texts and calls fairly equally distributed between the rest of her family (even a few from Arya), her brothers’ girlfriends, and her King’s Landing friends.

*Oh, no!*

It was almost three in the morning. She couldn’t exactly call her parents this late…

She settled for sending a group text to her mother, father, siblings, Ygritte, and Talisa. The rest of the world could wait. Jon, it seemed, however, would not: no sooner had the group text been sent than her phone exploded with ringing. Sighing, she picked up, feeling remorseful that Jon had stayed up waiting for her call when he was so busy at med-school and needed sleep.

“Sansa? Are you all right? Are you hurt? Has something happened?”

Jon was quiet by nature, and his voice rarely sounded much above the gruff, quiet tone she was used to; but now he was frantic, and his voice, less gruff than ordinarily, was filled with more sound than usual.

“Jon, Jon!” she called, frightened almost by his panic. “I’m all right! *All right*, do you hear me?”

She could hear his release of breath, and when next he spoke, he sounded almost normal.

“What’s with your phone?.. What happened?”

There was a pause; she prayed Jon would not ask more questions. Her prayers went unanswered.

“He?” Jon pounced on the main point of interest like a hawk, his tone a little teasing but still very much concerned. “I don’t remember you ever having many *he*-friends…”

“I don’t have many, but I do have some…” she said evasively.

“He?” Jon repeated, somewhat assuaged by her answer.

“Who’s this *he*? And how were you supporting him at three in the morning?”

*Mother, Maiden, and Crone!*

“Oh my gods, Jon! We just had dinner and danced in a square! Nothing happened!”

“Who’s this *he*?” Jon repeated, somewhat assuaged by her answer.

“You don’t know him,” she lied, praying that her brother, unused to hearing anything but the truth from her would buy into her deceit; and it was not a complete lie — Jon had only seen Jaime once; he didn’t really *know* him; not knowing him, Jon would never understand why she had spent the entire day — and half the night — with him. And, if she told the whole truth, nothing — nothing! — would prevent Jon from coming down to “check on her,” possibly with Robb in tow, with the intent
of telling Jaime Lannister to stay away from their little sister.

“Does ‘he’ have a name?” her brother kept probing.

Jaime did not need angry Stark brothers coming down on him just now. She sighed.

“His name’s Jay,” she answered, using with a smile Tyrion’s nickname for his elder brother.

“Hmmm…” came from Jon, but he was satisfied, for now; she heard him sigh. “You know mother and father are in a frenzy? I don’t know if they were even able to sleep tonight — the whole family’s worried sick, you know that, San? I only got all of them to go to bed by promising I’d keep trying to get in touch with you and that I’d fly out immediately if anything was wrong or I didn’t hear from you by morning…”

She sighed guiltily.

“I’m sorry…”

She heard him smile.

“Well, get ready for tomorrow: you’ve lots of explaining to do to lots of worried people.”

*The benefits of a big family…*

“I know.”

“All right, then. Sleep well, sis.”

“Good night, Jon. Love you.”

*Gods only know how will I ever fall asleep tonight.*

Chapter End Notes

A new chapter, again, it seems! ;) Let me know how you like it. Kudos and comments make me really, really happy. Here’s some emotional blackmail for you: I sprained my ankle pretty badly, and I am positive that a kudos/comment will make it heal quicker! ;P
While Jaime was driving home, the quiet resignation he had felt while standing next to Sansa on Baelor Square after voicing to himself for the first time that he loved her — an inconvenient truth this to a man who was recovering from the betrayal by the only woman he had ever loved even as his heart was rolling to the feet of another — was transforming into something lighter, something that felt more like the sweeter languor of being in love, particularly when feelings are not returned. Over the past twenty years, Jaime had been caught in a strange situation, which combined the gnawing feelings that usually accompany unrequited love — jealousy, rejection, desperation — with the
ephemeral and inflaming satisfaction incapable of assuaging longing, characteristic of secret affairs. Being in the liminal state of incomplete rejection was, indeed, something he was accustomed to. Between Sansa and Cersei there was the difference, however, that whereas he could only see his sister for the brief moments they spent having sex, he would see Sansa daily without feeling it in his right to touch her when they were not dancing. Another essential change in his situation concerned the difference between the two women, of which he was that day more fully aware than ever before: Cersei, always ready to exploit and manipulate, had been a heavy presence in his life; Sansa, by contrast, wanted nothing for herself, offering kindness, friendship, solace. Without necessarily formulating to himself these aspects that accompanied the transition of his heart from one woman to another, Jaime felt with certainty that while he may never claim Sansa as his, being in love with her could never bring such acute pain and bitterness as the ones Cersei's nature and betrayals had dealt him. The minx was a sweet creature, who would never intently harm a living soul, which made her a more trustworthy guardian of his heart than the self-serving and obdurate woman who had previously held it. Moreover, Jaime drew considerable comfort from the understanding that Sansa cared for him a little, and that he could count on her friendship as well as her rather constant presence in his life — if nothing more. He felt allayed: his love for his sister had been ripped apart — something he had wished for, fleetingly and unavailingly, in the darkest lows of their long love affair. Loving her had brought him more pain than happiness and had cost him dearly: she had shredded his heart, having first degraded his self-respect and spat on his dignity; she had held him on a short leash, never allowing him to come too close or for too long either to her or their children. The tenderness her face used to inspire, the longing he had felt for her body, the jealousy she used to arouse in him, the pain she had caused him by remaining forever possessive yet unreachable — it was all gone, withered. Like a patient recovering from a prolonged and grave ailment, Jaime felt a new freshness in the air he breathed into his lungs that night as he drove home, still feeling the light touch of Sansa’s lips on his cheek.

To say that Tyrion felt uncomfortable stuck in his brother’s living room with Cersei would have been a serious understatement.

He had been unable to locate Jaime after his elder brother had left his and Margery’s apartment in a fury the night before. Unsurprisingly, Jaime was not picking up his phone. By midday, Tyrion’s concern began to grow, and he went to his brother’s place, where he had at least hoped to find him — likely drunk and incoherent. When he did not, he alerted Varys, who began trying to recover Tywin’s eldest son through his invisible web of informants that spread across the entire city and beyond in all the coordinate directions. Sitting in Jaime’s living room, determined to stay in the place where his brother was most likely to return, Tyrion called him once again. The phone rang somewhere in the flat, and Tyrion discovered it in Jaime’s bedroom, lying on the nightstand in a way that suggested it had not been forgotten — but purposefully abandoned. With a sigh, Tyrion returned to the living room and continued waiting.

He was somewhat surprised when the entrance door opened, and his sister, not her twin, walked in. In a sense, this had been a relief — at least, now Tyrion knew for certain Jaime had not killed her or her lover after their late-night conversation.

"What are you doing here?" the younger brother inquired.

"I could ask you the same," she replied.

Tyrion was in no mood for veiled insinuations.

"I’m waiting for Jaime. I haven’t seen him since yesterday night, when he and I discussed in detail your multiple and various infidelities."
Cersei’s face was disfigured by rage.

"What lies have you told him, imp?"

"No lies," Tyrion answered. “I’ve told him all the truth I knew about your escapades. He did not seem too surprised, considering the… ahem... position in which he had found you before driving to my place. In other words, my presence here is to be expected; yours, on the other hand, is puzzling."

Cersei did not deign him with an answer, and she hardly needed to explain. Tyrion’s questions had been meant to goad her, to hide from her his own quarrel with Jaime — not to extract information. He knew she had come to prevent his brother from leaving her — something Jaime should have done, in Tyrion’s view, at least a decade ago. Cersei’s presence, as always, made her younger brother feel threatened that she would turn Jaime against him — and this evening, notwithstanding her own position vis-à-vis their brother, she still had many chances to do so, Tyrion reflected with bitterness.

She sat down in the living room, likely calculating in the same way Tyrion had that the easiest way to find a wounded lion was to wait for him to crawl back to his den. In the same way Tyrion had, she dialed Jaime’s number and found his phone in his bedroom. It was in moments like these — and there were few of them — when a certain commonality in his and his sister’s manner of thinking and acting manifested itself, when they seemed a little similar in the idiosyncratic way in which relatives resemble each other, that Tyrion felt a strange little ache pulsate deep in his heart.

How did she always hate me?..

Now, they were both waiting for Jaime’s return and, as the hour hand traced time further and further into the evening, their silence grew heavier. Tyrion contacted Varys several more times, but the spider master was unable to tell him any news, saying only that Jaime was certainly not at a police station, in a hospital, or in a morgue. This hardly served to assuage Tyrion’s concern: his elder brother — in a state that Tyrion had feared since the idea of Jaime’s separation from Cersei under circumstances such as these had first arisen in his mind — was out there somewhere; probably drunk; definitely miserable; and, since no one had seen him, likely alone.

It was night, and Tyrion considered calling Tywin. Margery, who had checked all the locations where Jaime could have gone, had not found him either. If his eldest son had disappeared, father had the right to know. Still, Tyrion waited, pushed by intuition to prolong the moment of expectation instead of admitting that Jaime was missing. If anything happened to his brother because of Cersei, Tyrion swore to himself that he would kill her. He would strangle her with every ounce of strength his small but oddly tough hands possessed.

Then, came the news that increased the tension in Jaime’s living room ten-fold. Varys called Tyrion.

“My friend, I don’t know if there’s any credibility to these rumors,” the spider began in a voice that was tense, serious, concerned; a voice that announced calamity, “but some of my little birds are reporting that they’ve seen Jaime jump off the Red Keep tower today afternoon.”

Tyrion's legs, which were never as stable as he would have liked, gave out under him and he sat — or, rather, fell — onto the soft carpet with the measured grace of a sack of potatoes.

“What?” he rasped, his voice not his own.

Varys knew he was not asking for repetition but for elaboration.

“Like I said, I don’t know if these rumors are true — they sound absurd, grotesque to me. Your
brother isn’t the sort of man to kill himself, I’ve always thought… Besides, if he did kill himself, his body would have been recovered by now, and I would have known — but it hasn’t. So, I’m afraid there’s more waiting ahead, my friend. I considered withholding these rumors from you, but it’s my policy to convey what I know to those whom I’ve promised my help.”

Tyrion nodded, not realizing that Varys could not possibly see his gesture. One thought, brief and full of terror was looping in his mind.

No. Please gods, no.

Then, a childhood memory arose before him with the same incongruity as a butterfly flying above the stinking rot of a swamp: Jaime jumping off the Red Keep tower; jumping — not toward the ground, but into the sea. He clung at his phone, madly, his voice tense, urgent:

“Where did he jump?”

“How do you mean?”

“Your little birds, do they say he jumped to the ground or into the sea?”

“I’ll have to check…” Varys said, and Tyrion listened to the silence and shuffling on the other end of the line with the intensity that was splitting his head. He noticed Cersei lean in, his sister’s face, for once, looking agitated, her eyes huge, as if with their extended surface area, they could intake more information.

“Tyrion?” Varys called his attention.

“Yes! I’m still here!..”

“They say he jumped into the sea.”

Immediately, the tension rolled away somewhat from both Lannister siblings.

“Thank you, Varys,” Tyrion said, “please keep me informed.”

“I will.”

They hung up. Brother and sister exchanged glances, which were not devoid of concern; these glances seemed to say:

*He used to jump all the time when we were children… But now, if he’s not thinking clearly, if he’s drunk or high… Could he still have drowned?*

Their pride and mutual animosity was too great, however, for either of them to speak — either to voice their concerns or to quiet each other’s fears. They settled into mute waiting again. The merciless clock kept ticking; the silence kept swelling like a bruise; still they waited. Images of past that seemed happy and of a future that looked like a string of horrors kept flashing before their eyes. Child Jaime, laughing Jaime… And Jaime, lifeless, his body disfigured like that of any other drowned man.

Suddenly, the quiet was cut through by the muffled noise of footsteps, unmistakably originated by Jaime’s easy, swift gait, and the sound of whistling reached them. It was this last sound that tore through the silence with particularly acute ghastliness. Like hysterical laughter at a funeral, this gay noise was disturbing and unsettling at a time when they had expected pain, anger, and rage from him, if he was still alive; despair from their own hearts, if he had died.
Jaime rarely whistled. In fact, Tyrion had not heard the melodic bird sound escape past his brother’s lips since Aerys had died. The tune — the Rains of Castamere, their family’s anthem, inherited from the feudal lords of the distant past — sounded just as it had the last time Jaime had whistled it: playful, without a care, as if the song did not tell of death and decimation. The footsteps reached the door, the key clicked in the lock, the whistling never ceasing; they braced themselves for seeing him, not knowing what to prepare themselves for.

Jaime entered. Tyrion’s eyes immediately scanned his body for bruises, blood, signs of injury. Nothing: he was recently shaven, his clean hair shone in the soft light of the lamps, his entire appearance free of any signs that would speak to an overconsumption of alcohol; he had changed his clothes from the ones he had worn the night before. More stunning than Jaime’s appearance, which betrayed nothing out of the ordinary, was his face. There was no frown, his eyes were not bloodshot; more than that, an expression of peace, almost of serenity, illuminated his features.

_Drunken?_ thought Cersei before she, too, recognized that Jaime looked completely sober.

_Drugs?_ thought Tyrion, but he knew instinctively that there was no drug so powerful or available in sufficient quantities to render his brother thus after last night.

Jaime threw his keys onto the bar with the habitually careless gesture. Either he was too lost in his thoughts, or his appearance, so ordinary in what his siblings thought a moment of dire crisis, had made them too still, but he had not noticed them until he entered the living room. He raised his eyebrows in surprise at discovering his guests. Tyrion did not miss the way his brother’s eyes narrowed.

"By the Crone," Jaime said, and his voice, like the rest of him, was extraordinary in its very casualness, its unchanged sound of everyday Jaime, except for an evil note that rang amidst his words, "the whole family is here. Is father coming as well? What’s the occasion?"

Tyrion was acutely aware of the sarcasm that laced his brother’s words.

"You weren’t answering your phone," he informed Jaime hesitantly, afraid of what his own sentence was.

Jaime looked at their sister and a smirk — a smirk! Tyrion could not believe it — whizzed across his lips:

"And with good reason."

"Jaime," Cersei began, and he looked at her with feigned naïveté and mock interest. "What you saw yesterday — " he cut her off, waving his hand dismissively:

"Oh, I know, I know: you were just doing yoga. Truly, sister-dearest, no need to explain."

Tyrion — caught between hesitant joy at Jaime’s unperturbed, derisive words and a nagging fear that, yet again, his brother would forgive her — anxiously watched the exchange.

Cersei came as close to her lover as she could. Jaime watched her with a rueful yet mocking smile. It was this smile that allowed Tyrion to slowly release his breath: he saw that his brother’s eyes had remained cold and unresponsive to Cersei’s presence, as if a barrier had emerged between Jaime’s irises and his sister’s once hypnotic gaze.

"Jaime," she purred, "why don’t you ask Tyrion to leave, so we can talk?" and Tyrion knew that she, too, had seen it — this indifference in her lover’s eyes.
"You're right," Jaime said in a dangerous tone, and for a moment Tyrion’s heart felt like it had tried gulping down blood but came up empty. "One of you needs to leave," Jaime continued, his face and voice betraying no emotion, "but it isn’t Tyrion — it’s you."

With these words, he threw her over his shoulder, a movement in which there was not a hint of consideration or playfulness. He picked up her bag with his free hand and carried them both to the door. He threw her bag to the floor near the sill — an action she would have protested against, if, between his astonishing words and perturbing actions, she had found the power of speech. He opened the front door. With the same negligence — an inconsiderate roughness — that had characterized his movements before and that seemed akin to scorn, he flung her to her feet on the other side of threshold; she staggered in her heels. Picking up her bag, he went through its contents unceremoniously and extracted her keys to his apartment, which he sent flying over his shoulder without looking: they landed onto the bar next to his own pair; he threw the purse back to her. It hit her in the chest but, still, she barely caught it. Her disoriented cry of "Jaime!" was cut off by the door he shut in her face.

As calmly as if he had just discarded laundry, Jaime returned to the living room. He poured a glass of whiskey for Tyrion — who was watching him in dumb awe, half wondering if he was about to receive the same treatment as their sister — and some scotch for himself before sitting down on the sofa next to his younger brother. He rested his head on the pillows of the headrest and closed his eyes. It was the tired way in which he had done so that showed Tyrion his brother was not as unperturbed as he appeared. They sipped their drinks — and the silence — for a few moments. Tyrion still felt uncertain of the future, fearful even, of Jaime’s next actions. After all, he himself was not exactly in his good graces. Still, a small hope animated him: he had not been thrown out, like their sister; he had been offered a drink, if not a word of greeting. It was clear to him that whatever powerful bond had once tied Jaime to his twin had finally been broken, but theirs, the bond of brothers, seemed to have magically withstood the test of old lies, even if it was the worse for wear. Tyrion listened to his heart’s hesitant song of joy even as he still feared Jaime had not forgiven him. Then, he asked with a gentleness reserved for ill children:

"Where have you been, Jay?"

Jaime’s eyes remained closed, but the ghost of a small smile animated his lips. He said only two words, but, to Tyrion, they sounded more glorious than any hallelujah:

"With Sansa."

I wonder if Sparkle is to thank for my not having been thrown out with Cersei, Tyrion mused.

He had discerned Jaime’s taciturnity and was wary of breaking the silence, so he stayed quiet for some more minutes; then, his curiosity got the better of him:

“Did you run into each other?"

Tyrion’s voice, usually boisterous and filled with irony, was gentle, even hesitant, now that his brother thought him a traitor.

“You could say that,” answered Jaime.

Jaime rarely dodged his brother’s questions with such coldness — he was far more prone to rage or to tell Tyrion outright that he had no wish of satisfying his probing. Tyrion bit his tongue and stayed quiet, gnawing at his lower lip as if to force his mouth shut. The guilt he had felt over the years because of his silence and of the pain Jaime received from being so fully in their sister’s power mingled with the joy at seeing that bond broken; he was all the more despondent that this moment,
which he had awaited for years and had imbued with so many happy dreams, had been accompanied
by a serious setback in his relationship with Jaime — something he had never dreamt would occur.
Jaime’s love had been the only thing Tyrion had ever come close to taking for granted, no matter
how much he treasured it, in that he thought it the only love that would never be taken away from
him. As if sensing penitence in his younger brother’s muteness, Jaime spoke in a voice that sounded
irate with himself.

“She found me drunk at the LBCB and forced a taxi driver to help her drag me to her flat — you
know, Tyene and she live nearby there.” Tyrion nodded, not fully believing his ears. Could it
really be this fortunate a coincidence? “Anyway,” Jaime continued, his voice harsh in his brother’s
presence, “she poured some of her magical Northern herbs down my throat, sparing me a
considerable hangover.”

This answer had been laconic enough, but it was better than silence, and it offered Tyrion a hope that
his brother might not deprive him of friendship altogether. The younger Lannister let the pause hang
in the air a little while; the brothers sipped their drinks. Then,

“What is it I hear about you jumping off the Red Keep Tower?” he asked.

Jaime snorted.

“That’s her doing,” was all he said by way of response.

This was too much for Tyrion to be able to contain his boundless curiosity.

Sansa jumped off the Red Keep Tower?!” he exclaimed.

That got a chuckle out of his brother.

“What do you suppose? That I pushed her? The fool jumped following some bizarre inclination of
her own — ”

“Did that inclination by any chance arise out of stories about how you used to jump as a child?”
Tyrion asked, unable to prevent some teasing intonations from creeping into his voice.

Jaime sounded annoyed.

“If Varys has been reporting to you on our every conversation, why do you ask me questions?”

Tyrion protested his innocence, sharing by the way that Varys had not been able to locate Jaime the
entire day. This mollified his elder brother a little.

“How did you know, then? That I’d told her about my jumping?..” he asked.

Tyrion smiled a gentle smile devoid of mockery — a rarity for him, even with his elder brother.

“That girl would probably jump into fire to prove her worth to you — just remember your master-
class… If she jumped off that tower, she did it to impress you.”

Jaime rolled his eyes, but Tyrion suspected that his statement had not displeased him. Perhaps, his
brother had truly been appeased by that remark, because the next time Jaime spoke, he did so
voluntarily, without being interrogated.

“We ran into Arthur,” he said with a small smile. “We were still wet from head to foot…” he
chuckled, and Tyrion, hesitantly, joined him in his mirth.
“What did he say?” the younger brother asked.

“He asked, ‘why are you wet?’ ” Jaime answered humorously, and they laughed. It was characteristic of Arthur to begin by establishing the basic facts: short questions was how he had always trained Jaime, demanding that the pupil analyze his own mistakes. But the brothers’ laughter did not linger, nor was it full of undarkened joy and camaraderie to the same extent as before — it was but an ember that died out after a few moments, where bright fires had once burned. They grew silent again. Sansa’s words echoed in Jaime’s ears.

… I know, because it cannot be otherwise, that Tyrion, whatever mistakes he’s made, never meant to hurt you… The least you can do is hear him out… You will regret losing your brother, even if you think now that he deserves your anger…

Promise you’ll give him a chance to explain.

He had promised. He did not know, however, if forgiving Tyrion, forgiving him completely, was in his power. It seemed to him that something had broken deep in his soul the moment he had realized his brother had known — and kept silent… It was as though he had believed in a magic ring of trust that bounded them together, and the realization of Tyrion’s betrayal had broken that ring, turning its shining gold to dust. He felt immeasurably tired.

“Why did you not tell me, Tyrion?” he asked.

It seemed that this question had broken a dam that kept his younger brother’s feelings bottled up inside him in true Lannister fashion. The hours of agitation produced by the idea that he had lost his elder brother’s friendship, the trust of his golden knight and protector, and the even more terrible hours that followed when he suspected that Jaime had died, then the relief of seeing his brother alive and well (and not being shown the door), had been too much for Tyrion to bear. He began speaking, and it was as if a torrent ripped through him. He told Jaime of the shock and the impotent rage he had lived through when, as a young teenager, he had first discovered Cersei’s infidelity; how the fear that his sister would be able to convince Jaime that Tyrion had slandered her had kept him from telling the truth. Losing his elder brother was a risk too great for Tyrion to gamble with. He told Jaime how he had wanted to believe that this had been a mistake on Cersei’s part, a lapse of judgement she would come to regret and never repeat; how, when he had realized that it was a sign of her nature rather than a youthful blunder, he had waited for the right moment to speak up, but it never came. He confessed that he had feared Jaime’s reaction and that, if he served to break the bond between the young lovers, his elder brother might come to associate the messenger with the disaster and sever all ties with both siblings. He told how, with years, he began to not only fear Jaime’s reaction to the truth but also to fret over how to explain his own long silence. Then, after Aerys and everything that was happening with the company, Tyrion admitted, he could not bear to add another woe to Jaime’s many burdens. He related that, when Cersei had married Robert, he had hoped Jaime would leave her — and there would be no need for painful revelations.

“I didn’t want to hurt you…” he kept saying.

He acknowledged that, when Myrcella had been born, and then Tommen, he could not bring himself to destroy a family that had come into existence — imperfect as it was — and hoped that, perhaps, the birth of her children might change Cersei’s ways. He could not imagine breaking the fragile happiness Jaime had found in the smiling eyes of his newborn children. Tyrion admitted that, later, when the last hope for Cersei’s self-reformation had left him, but he was forced to acknowledge that, for twenty years, Jaime had not strayed from her, he had resigned himself to the notion that, tel quel, Cersei could be Jaime’s one true love, and who was he to shatter his brother’s illusions? Moreover, he confessed that his partiality to Jaime and his own potent dislike of their sister had sometimes made
him wonder if, indeed, he was an objective judge.

Over the outpouring of this long-drawn-out confession, several aspects, reiterated, emerged with great clarity. A prisoner of his teenage fear, Tyrion had become unwillingly complicit in his sister’s deception of their brother, and he feared Jaime’s judgment. Breaking his brother’s heart was a blow he had not found it in himself to deal, and, again, fear proved a powerful obstacle to truth-telling, for he was in terror of being unable to prevent Jaime from taking a shortcut to self-destruction. Another theme emerged as well from this account: knowing that Jaime had stayed in love with the same woman for twenty years, notwithstanding all the others he had met (coincidentally, as well as through the efforts of their father and Tyrion himself), Tyrion had realized that, having no one with whom to replace their sister would make Jaime ever the more despondent upon learning the truth of her deceptions. It came down to this: Tyrion feared losing Jaime — whether he lost his trust or whether his elder brother was brought low by a broken-heart; so, he decided that, all in all, Jaime was better off been deceived than he would have been knowing the truth, hoping all the while that an external event would rupture the twins’ bond. All this, and more besides, sparing neither his own pride nor Jaime’s feelings, leaving no truth untold and pronouncing his own faults with a harsh judgement borne out of guilt and fear, Tyrion related to his brother. When he finished, he was dismayed to realize he had tears in his eyes.

“I’m greatly to blame, Jaime,” he finished his admissions, his throat constricted when he spoke, “and I… I deserve your anger and distrust… But… I… I love you,” his voice broke on the last words, “and if I have to lose my brother, believe me, it will be a thing much harsher than having been born a motherless dwarf.”

He looked to Jaime, something he had feared to do throughout his speech, which he had delivered while looking at the fabric of the couch. Jaime’s face displayed no anger or resentment, not even accusation. Instead, in his brother’s features, Tyrion found weariness and sympathy — the look of affection and compassion that Jaime so often wore; this only increased Tyrion’s enormous feeling of contrition.

“I’m so very sorry,” he mumbled.

There was a small pose. Then, his elder brother said:

“I know,” and there was silence again.

Tyrion knew that the time for the sentence had come; he waited, penitent, wishing with the passionate remorse of a child that he may be forgiven. But his brother remained silent, looking in front of himself with empty eyes, which gave Tyrion the same shudder they had brought Sansa. Tyrion waited. It seemed that waiting was his lot that grim day. He waited. Then, he could wait no more.

“Can you forgive me?” he questioned and discovered that his voice was unsteady and hoarse. It was Tyrion’s great mistake; his question unleashed the demons that his confession had brought out in his brother but which, before his ill-timed inquiry, had been tamed by his honesty and self-denunciation.

Jaime looked at him with a strange, unsettling half-smile.

“I promised Sansa I would hear you out,” he said, “and I did.” He paused, then spit out: “I didn’t promise her to forgive you.”

When the ax of the guillotine falls down onto the neck of its victim, there is a moment when the cord suspending the blade seems to snap. When he was listening to the words delivered by his brother in a quiet tone, Tyrion felt that, in his heart, strings had snapped just like the chord of the guillotine does as the blade submits to gravity.
Tyrion nodded his understanding of this blow. He got up unsteadily, his stunted legs, which had fallen asleep while he had sat in the same position, shakier than ever, especially in a moment when their owner’s feelings were too devastating to allow thoughts of balance. Swaying like a drunk man, he began making his way around the couch, toward the door, feeling as though he had been gutted, and his soul pulled out roughly along with his intestines. He was passing his brother when Jaime’s arm shot out, and his fingers closed firmly around Tyrion’s forearm, halting his progress.

Jaime was angered and pained by the truths Tyrion had revealed to him, but the peacefulness he had felt earlier in the night had alleviated his rage. The resentment he felt was strong, nevertheless, particularly because, with his silence, Tyrion had taken away Jaime’s choice in a matter so central to his — not Tyrion’s — life. The elder brother’s words did not reflect the truth, nonetheless: he could never imagine throwing Tyrion out the way he had done Cersei, prevented from doing so by love and a sense of justice, but most of all by the dedication to protecting his younger sibling. His words had the undignified lack of restraint, which, for the first time in his life, had been meant to hurt Tyrion, just as Tyrion had hurt him. Jaime might not have been able to withhold his forgiveness — but, temporarily, he was free to inflict pain. Even in the dark abyss of swirling demons that Jaime’s mind had become, however, the sight of his little brother, swaying unsteadily on his stunted legs, his face the image of remorse, defeat, and utter misery reached Jaime’s poisoned heart, which was spasming in a seizure of anger and ache. Amidst the oblivion of agony, the most painful and enraging feeling was love and compassion that would not be subdued. He grasped at his brother’s arm.

Tyrion looked up at his brother, half-wondering if Jaime meant to strike him. In this whirlwind of sorrow and the unimaginable, all could happen. The worst already had — why not the next worst thing? He had never felt so defeated, so deprived of life’s sustenance, of hope. Never, in a life that had showed him much misery and hatred, had he known such absolute despair and such complete desolation; never had he known himself to be so forlorn. This was the end; the end of the only true, good, happy attachment he had cherished all his life; the one that had been, for most of his existence, the sole source of his happiness. In the privacy of his mind, he had thought he had known bleakness — he knew now that he had not dreamt of what bleakness really was. He looked to his brother, incongruously wishing for his consolation in this unbound torment, like he had always wished for him whenever life presented him with her unsavory side. Jaime spoke, without releasing his brother’s forearm.

“I did not promise her I would forgive you,” he repeated, and Tyrion Lannister flinched — flinched at words for the first time in his life. Jaime tugged at him, bringing him closer to himself and spoke in a tone full of rancor: “I don’t have to forgive you! Why should I?” His jaw muscles flexed, and for some reason his mother’s gentle face flashed before him. “Answer me! Why should I forgive you? Hmmm?”

Tyrion could not speak; he could barely constrain himself from shaking or letting tears — a sign of weakness unworthy of his family name — to fall from his eyes like spring hail.

You protected me all my life. You loved me all my life. I betrayed you. You owe me nothing.

Jaime shook him a little, not too forcefully, the physical manifestation of his acrimony thoroughly controlled. The elder brother’s eyes searched his sibling’s face for some moments, as if Jaime was deciding whether he could withstand seeing his brother in pain as a contemptible antidote to his own misery. Then, he spoke, his voice quiet, as it sometimes was when passions reigned him. “I forgive you because you’re my brother; because I’ve cared for you all my life and I’ll never stop. I forgive you because… you’re all I have.” He released his forearm as abruptly as he had taken hold of him. As he did, he was demobilized, strength leaving him, it seemed, and he closed his eyes. He repeated in a voice so low, it could have been a whisper: “You’re all I have.”
To Tyrion, who had thought a moment before he had lost his brother forever, these words brought a joy and a relief so magnificent in its scope, he felt as light as if he were levitating. Unafraid of his brother’s volatile mood, he embraced him, strangling Jaime’s neck with his short arms — a lock he had no intention of easing regardless of what brutal efforts his brother would make to free himself. Tyrion released some shaky breaths; he had hurt Jaime, he knew, and he would have to restore his brother’s full trust, but he had not lost him, and this, in that moment, was all that mattered. For a few moments, Jaime remained still as a corpse, but then the strong arms of the elder brother wrapped themselves around the younger’s smaller body. Like Tyrion, in the moment when pain dominated, Jaime stood in need of his brother.

“I never meant to betray you,” Tyrion mumbled into his neck.

“I know,” the sound of his brother’s consoling voice was just as soothing as it had always been. Jaime had proved powerless to watch the pain he had inflicted.

“I just didn’t know what to do…”

Jaime unlocked Tyrion’s hands from around his neck and looked him in the eye. The demons had dissipated, there was a semblance of quiet again in his soul.

“I know, Tyrion, I know.”

They sat next to each other in silence for a few minutes, assimilating the immediate past, forgiving — themselves, each other.

“There’s nothing I would not forgive you,” Jaime said quietly. “Nothing. You will always be my brother.”

There was silence. Then,

“I promise, there will never be need to forgive me again,” the younger vowed. The elder smiled — the first genuine smile since he had crossed his own threshold.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Tyrion,” he said and ruffled his brother’s hair lazily. Tyrion smiled.

After momentous emotional cataclysms, the restoration of peace is accompanied by the return of the quotidian, which appears strange when it follows dire crises. Jaime reached for the glasses that had been abandoned by the brothers in the midst of their argument; he extended Tyrion’s to him.

“What shall we drink to?” he asked, and the question sounded bizarre in a place that had just witnessed penitence and despair, anger and forgiveness; pain.

“How about us? The Lannister brothers?” Tyrion asked hesitantly, hopefully.

Jaime smiled.

“To Lannister brothers,” he agreed.

They clinked their glasses.

*It’s just us, now.*

They talked for much longer that night. Their toast had naturally led to reminiscences of their childhoods, their youth — the past that they shared a formidable cure to the conflict they had
overcome. There is little that tastes so sweet in life as remembering the past to help heal wounds in
the present. Remembering what made them who they were, what had bound them together for the
duration of their lifetimes — the pain and the happiness — soothed their strained nerves, their
lacerated pride, their hurt feelings, and gave them hope. Their ballet company — that powerful entity
they had built together, sweated for together, defended together — was the natural direction of their
memory lane. Recollections of that company’s past brought thoughts of its future and, with it,
considerations of more practical nature. They came to speak of The Fountain of Tears, discussing
mundane details of the premiere’s organization that neither could have fathomed they would mention
that night. Mundanity could be a cure for tragedy. Talk of their company — no matter how boring or
insignificant were the matters they discussed — filled them with the joined spirit that had always
animated them when they discussed it together, establishing a semblance of peace over the surface of
their beings even as, in the subconscious depths, both were still shattered by how easily they could
have separated that night and how close an escape they had made from becoming bruised strangers.
Amidst their deliberations, they realized with some surprise that it was nearly morning. Belatedly,
Tyrion texted Margery that Jaime was all right and that he himself would stay over. She must have
intuited something behind these simple words, because she did not ask questions, only messaging her
hearty approval by means of a smiling emoji and a thumbs up. It was not uncommon for Tyrion to
sleep over at his brother’s place, particularly before Margery had entered his life, and he settled easily
in the guest room that had so often served him. The brothers said nothing but the too quotidian “good
night,” which, verbally at least, conveyed none of the reprieve their reconciliation had brought them,
even though the two simple words, thrown over the shoulder with true Lannister bravado, carried the
feeling of recovery. It was nearly dawn, when Tyrion came to stand at the threshold of Jaime’s room,
watching his exhausted brother sleep like he had done when he was too little to cause pain or to
understand what it meant to keep that dearest and most precious thing one had nearly lost.

Chapter End Notes

Well... How did you like it? Please tell me! :)


In the Sunlight

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darling, it's very strange —

I seem to have swallowed some sunlight.

You may think me deranged,

And, perhaps, you are right.

I was walking down the street,

When I thought I had seen you;

I smiled at my feet

And to meet you I flew.

When to greet you I opened my mouth,

One of sun’s rays I’ve swallowed.

How else can I explain the joy uncouth

I felt when I saw that you smiled?

The better part of the weekend remaining to Sansa was spent in explaining to her numerous family members (beginning, via RavenTime, with her mother and father accompanied by Arya, Bran, and even a frowning Rickon) why she had gone missing the day before. To them all, she kept repeating the same story she had half-invented for Jon’s benefit on the eve: a friend of hers, Jay, had been going through a rough patch, and she had spent the day with him, trying to cheer him up. What rough patch? No, not drugs… Heartbreak, more like. What they were doing? Sure, she could tell… (She briefly narrated their day, taking care not to mention jumping off Red Keep Tower.) No, they were not involved, they were just friends. No, she was not in love with him (the biggest lie of all). No, they did not know him. Yes, he was of good family. Yes, she did know his family, they were great. His last name?.. It was her father’s question, and it had caught her completely off-guard; unable to squeeze an acceptable half-truth from her brain, which by then had been exhausted by two hours of cautious explanations, she lied straight away, saying they wouldn’t know his family name either. Mostly thanks to the eighteen years in which she had never lied, it all had gone fairly smoothly, even her call to Robb and Talisa, until she had called Ygritte — the last call to her family, the one she had dreaded more than others and which she made in the afternoon, having spent the morning in long-drawn conversations with everyone else. Ygritte reminded Sansa of Margery and Ellaria — deprived of the naivety that was so strongly ingrained in the rest of her family (except for
Arya, who, luckily, cared fairly little if Sansa went missing for a day so long as her elder sister had not disappeared for any nefarious reason). Ygritte barely let Sansa sell her story:

“And ‘Jay’ doesn’t happen to be Jaime Lannister’s nickname, ay?” asked she in a sly tone. Sansa turned cold from head to foot.

_HOW?_. moaned her mind, _How did she know?!_

“Ummm… I… I mean…”

_Dammit!_ After so many hours of flawless dodging and having pacified her whole family, she had been blindsided and tongue-twisted by this simple enough question!

“Ah… Emmm… I mean… No!..” The negation came out sounding more like a question. Ygritte squealed in delight on the other end of the line.

“Awww! Girl! Are you finally fucking him?” she inquired excitedly; before Sansa could open her mouth to protest, Ygritte added, “Don’t worry: Jon isn’t here, so you can spill all your dirty lion secrets! I’ve been waiting and waiting for a man to come along and ravish you, but this is even better than anything I could have hoped for just a year ago! How’s he in the sack?.. My gods, with the flexibility of two ballet dancers, what you two couldn’t have been doing!..”

Before Ygritte could drown in her fantasies of her friend shagging Jaime Lannister, and Sansa could combust from the flaming blush that had invaded her entire upper body, the younger girl interrupted:

“Oh. My. Gods. Ygritte! I am _not_ sleeping with Jaime Lannister! How many times do I have to repeat this??”

Ygritte gave a groan of disappointment, but quickly recovered her optimism.

“But he _is_ the mysterious Jay, isn’t he?”

Sansa’s blush deepened.

“Yes,” she answered in a quiet voice that was full of misery at having been so easily caught in a lie. “Ygritte, I swear, there’s nothing between us! Please, please, please promise you won’t tell anyone!”

“I promise, girl, I promise,” Ygritte reassured her. “You know I’ve got your back — we redheads gotta stick together… Remember how I never breathed a word to anyone about your tryouts for the Lannisters’ company? Well, I won’t say anything now, either. If I thought you were in trouble, I wouldn’t have promised to keep quiet and I would have ratted you out immediately… But I saw the way that man looks at you on that video, and I’m too good a friend to tell on you when you are in _that_ kind of trouble…”

Sansa groaned.

“My gods, Ygritte, please get your head out of this fantastical gutter! Jaime Lannister is a friend: he’s in love with another woman, a bitch, really, who’s just broken his heart into a million little pieces — ”

“Owww… Sansa! What language!” teased Ygritte, “And pray tell: why is it he came to you when his heart got broken? You aren’t his mother — I think even Targaryens never looked at their mothers this way,” she added.

“It’s a long story, but he didn’t come to me,” Sansa argued, telling her heart to ignore her friend’s
words of folly and to stop skipping beats in that stupid manner. “We… ran into each other… Kind of…”

“Uh-huh…” was all Ygritte said. “Ring me up when you ‘kind of run into each other’ in a Lannister-size bed — I’ll want details!”

Before Sansa could recover from the bomb her friend had detonated in her brain, Ygritte laughed and hung up.

*Mother, Maiden, and Crone. How the fuck did Ygritte always — always! — get to the underbelly of things? And why — why?!... — did she always have to make everything about sex?!!*

Sansa sighed. Her family had been dealt with — even Ygritte. The worst was far from over, however: it was time to call her King’s Landing friends. Since morning, she had been bombarded by texts from Margery, who demanded to know in details how Sansa had spent her day with Jaime, and threatening to tell Ellaria and Tyene if Sansa did not come clean to her right away. In the style of a true gangster, Margery had even set her a deadline: Sansa had to “spill the beans” by midnight or be subjected to a catechism by all three of her female friends.

*The Crone only knows how Marge learned about all that already!*

She would have to confess to Margery, it seemed. To the rest of her concerned King’s Landing friends, she lied that her phone’s battery had died, and she had not noticed. She called them first, leaving the final — and, by far, the worst — interrogation for last.

Tyrion had lost most of his penitent behavior by morning, Jaime thought, because his brother had dragged him to his and Margery’s place for breakfast with the stubborn determination of a mule. Jaime did not like intruding into his brother’s life with Margery, particularly at a time so familial as the morning hours just before they turn to noon, but Tyrion had been adamant and would hear none of Jaime’s excuses. The elder brother wondered if, partially, this determination of Tyrion’s had not been brought on by his younger brother’s unwillingness to leave him alone — something he thought he had sensed in Sansa the day before, as well. This annoyed him more than it touched him: he was not a child or a lunatic who had to be watched. Nevertheless, to breakfast he was dragged.

“So…” Margery was saying to him as she poured coffee, “you’ve caused quite a fright yesterday…”

Jaime attempted to ignore her. Margery would not be ignored. Following her engagement to his brother, she had slipped from the role of a friendly colleague she had previously been content to occupy into that of a nagging sister-in-law.

“I said, *Jaime*, you’ve caused quite a fright yesterday,” she repeated.

He looked at her with annoyance.

“I heard you the first time,” he grumbled.

“And?...”

“If I’m surrounded by hens with dependency issues, who cannot spend a day without me, it isn’t my problem,” he stated.

“First of all: yes, it is. Second, I’d like to see exactly in what ways *you* would have turned King’s Landing on its head, if Tyrion disappeared like that…” she countered, smiling in a sly way that he found annoying beyond any description. Tyrion’s marriage might be a good thing for Tyrion, but, Jaime reflected, it would prove a test to his own endurance of being patronized. She wasn’t his...
mother.

“That’s different: I’m the elder brother, it’s my day-job to worry about this rascal.”

Margery laughed.

“Cute — I’ll admit as much. So… how did you spend your mysterious day?”

Jaime looked up to heavens, wondering why he had not used the advantage of his long legs to simply run away from his brother’s considerate invitation and his utterly unbearable fiancée.

“Apparently,” Tyrion interposed with sadistic pleasure, “Jaime spent yesterday with Sansa…”

If looks could kill, Tyrion would have been a dead man long before he had finished that sentence. Margery was comical in her astonishment:

“What?! He did?.. Oh!” she paused, chewing on her surprise, then grinned: “How did that come about?”

Jaime took refuge in a phenomenal imitation of anger — all the more credible because he was exasperated; besides, after last evening, he felt entitled to some flashes of temper. He turned to Tyrion.

“Remember how I forgave you yesterday for lying to me about Cersei?” he asked him, “Well, that forgiveness has a twenty-four-hour reversal policy, and your fiancée here is seriously making me consider taking it back,” he barked.

Tyrion could only stare at him in a mixture of incomprehension of his dark humor and a fear of the possible reality behind the warning. Seeing her lover’s concern, Margery bit her cheek to prevent herself from giggling in pleasure.

*Touchy, are we?*

She caught Tyrion’s pleading eyes, which silently begged her not to aggravate his brother, and she nodded her ascent. She estimated she would have months — years, perhaps, if he remained so teasable after he and Sansa got together — in which to pester her brother-in-law. Margery liked that her engagement to Tyrion had placed her in a position of greater power in relation to Jaime Lannister, who had long bossed her around in his capacity as LBC choreographer. Besides, she would get the whole truth out of Sansa, who was a far gentler and easily interrogated creature than a grumbling lion. While the brothers settled into a discussion of administrative aspects that were boring enough to make her teeth ache, she texted her friend.

Text from Margery Tyrell to Sansa Stark:

*So… I hear you and Jaime went out yesterday… For like… The WHOLE day… What’s up with that? ;)*

Text from Margery Tyrell to Sansa Stark:

*Oh, and if you refuse to tell me, I’ll tell Ellaria AND Tyene, and we’ll question you in full force!*

Text from Margery Tyrell to Sansa Stark:

*You have until midnight to spill the beans! ;P Love ya!*

Varys was walking up the Lannister mansion’s stairs with the usual feeling of dim irritation: yes,
grandiosity was useful, but did consideration for guests mean nothing at all to the powerful of this world — only mere showmanship? Even so, the stairs would have been impressive enough if they were half what they were… Perhaps, his dietician was right, and it was time to lose a few pounds…

His birds had been in utter confusion all night: Jaime Lannister had been seen here, Jaime Lannister had been seen there, and here, and there, and here, and there, until the Spider felt like ripping apart his web and his own head along with it. The first news — of Tyrion’s reckless sibling jumping off the Red Keep Tower — had caused the usually emotionless Spider-master to worry for his friend, whose affection for his elder brother knew no bounds. The next thing Varys had been told was that Jaime Lannister had been seen entering his own apartment, so the Spider had reckoned there was no need to inform Tyrion, who was waiting inside said apartment. It was following this report that the gates of an informational hell had broken down, and the web became agitated with the diverse reports concerning Jaime Lannister’s long day. The diversity of his whereabouts was not what had propelled Varys to ascend the long staircase of the Lannister mansion to be greeted by Tywin’s creepy lackey; it was the reports — doubtless due to their number and multitude of sources — of Jaime’s companion that had caused the Spider to seek out the Old Lion.

“What do you mean, 'there wasn’t time?'”

Tyrion winced; his father blasted on the other end of the line.

“Why didn’t you make time to at least call me, if you absolutely couldn’t come — which I’ll take leave to doubt! Couldn’t you tell me sooner that Jaime’s spending days with Sansa Stark?”

“One day,” Tyrion attempted, “they’ve spent one day together.”

“Well, who cares if it’s just one day?! It’s a whole day, nonetheless! Why do I have to learn these details about my son’s life from Varys?! I demand you pay me a visit today!..” There was a pause. “Well,” father seemed to have regained his composure, “and how’s Margery doing? What does she think about a lovely wedding at Casterly Rock?..”

It took nearly forty minutes of diplomatically explaining that Margery was considering all her options for the wedding (and multiple reiterations of his promise to come by in the evening), before his father gave Tyrion leave to go.

It was mid-afternoon. Jaime had utterly refused to spend the rest of the day with Tyrion and Margery, exclaiming that he would not be watched like a suicidal madman, and left, saying he still needed to work out some movements for the next part of the ballet they were going to take on in the upcoming weeks. After the emotional rollercoaster of the previous day, Tyrion had been too spent to do more than collapse onto the couch; Margery came to lie next to him, putting her head on his chest with the grace and contentment of a cat.

“You know,” she said when Tyrion had hung up after his call with Tywin, “we could make the official engagement announcement at Casterly Rock… Do you think your father would be pleased?”

“He would be, I’m sure…” he replied, thinking her very generous to show his father such consideration, “Only he would still demand we get married there as well — which is something you shouldn’t take into consideration!..” he added quickly.

Margery laughed. “I rather like his idea of two wedding ceremonies,” she said with a smile in her voice.

Tyrion twisted his neck to look her in the eye. “Really?” he asked with skepticism.

“Of course! Imagine: two dresses, two different receptions…’”
“What about the guests?” he questioned. “Who, except for close friends, cares to attend two ceremonies?”

“We can invite only the closest friends to both… It would actually be very rational, and spare us an excessive crowd… Instead of having five hundred guests in one place, we’d only have some two-hundred-fifty at each party, which is very manageable. To the ceremony in Highgarden, we would invite the crowd grandma will surely want, and to the Casterly one… Let’s give your dad a carte blanche? As far as the guests are concerned, at least: grandma will murder me if I let anyone but her and the bridesmaids she’ll tyrannize handle the decorations…”

Tyrion kissed the crown of her head.
“You’re very generous.”
“Oh, I intend to stay on your father’s good side!”

“What about the bridesmaids?” he asked, smiling. “Have you decided?”

“Well, Sansa and Ellaria, of course,” Margery said, “and some of my cousins… Loras, since he will not forgive me if I don’t ask him to be one of the bridesmaids… Then, Tyene — I’ve grown rather fond of her lately: to think she has been an unruly teenager only a few years ago…”

“She’s still a teenager, much like Sansa…”

“Well, don’t tell that to your brother!” Margery laughed uproariously, “Or poor Jaime will have a heart attack! Besides, eighteen isn’t quite teenager anymore, and they’ll both be nineteen soon — surely, that’s a young woman’s age already!” She paused for a few moments. “Was Jaime very mad with you yesterday?” she asked in a quiet tone.
“He wasn’t so much mad as… I don’t know… Unforgiving, probably… At first… I’ve never imagined he could…” Tyrion paused, realizing his mutterings were not particularly coherent, “You were right three years ago — I should have told him…”

She kissed him lightly on the lips.
“It doesn’t matter now,” she consoled him. “It’s over — for better or worse, it’s happened the way it’s happened. Moreover, we don’t know how it would have turned out if you’d told him before he and Sansa had grown close… I’m looking forward to learning what they’ve been up to yesterday! Particularly because I find it striking that you say he was sober… What did our Sparkle-girl do to keep him out of trouble for that whole day, I wonder…”

“Technically, he did get drunk — the night before — but you’re right. You know, when he came in, before he noticed Cersei and me, there was this strange look on his face… Like he was… Not happy, necessarily, but at peace, you know?”

“We need to get them together soon,” she said excitedly. “Awww!” she squealed, animated by a new idea, “we can do a double date!” Seeing Tyrion’s skeptical expression, she clarified: “Well, we won’t tell them that it’s double date or call it that — we’ll just get together, the four of us, and it will be one de facto! What? It makes perfect sense: we are newly engaged and want to start having these family dinners, and it’s only natural that you invite your brother while I invite my closest friend to keep me company while you boys talk some silly nonsense…”

“To keep you company?” Tyrion chuckled.

“Well, that’s what we’ll say…” she wiggled her eyebrows and kissed him. “I’m really glad all is well with you and Jaime,” she added seriously.
“Not completely, though,” Tyrion admitted sadly. “He’s still hurt and angry at me, even if he won’t show it anymore… I… doubt he trusts me like he did before.”
“Believe me, that will be fine… And soon, too! For a cynic and a Lannister, Jaime is ridiculously trusting. Besides, the faster we strap him with Sansa, the happier and more forgiving he will be! Speaking of Sansa…”

Text from Margery Tyrell to Sansa Stark:

You are running out of time… I want details, and I want them now!

Sansa groaned. There it was. The hour she had dreaded. Like a criminal convicted to death by poison who extends her hand for the cup of the deadly liquid, Sansa picked up her phone and dialed Margery Tyrell.

“Aha!” came her friend’s triumphant voice from the other end of the line, “I knew you wouldn’t want to spill your guts to Ellaria and Tyene as well! Well?"

“Marge, I really don’t feel at liberty to…” she began and paused. How to explain any part of yesterday without possibly betraying something Jaime did not wish her to share with his colleague, even if she was his brother’s fiancée… Besides, what Margery knew, Ellaria and Tyene (then Oberyn, then their whole circle) might know within a few hours. Jaime did not need friends and colleagues snickering behind his back when he was dealing with a serious blow to his ego, not to mention a broken heart.

“What is it you don’t feel at liberty to disclose?” Margery sing-sang, “That Jaime walked in on Cersei fucking Osmund Kettleback or that he was really angry at Tyrion for not having told him his sister-lover was a slut?”

Sansa nearly fell from her couch. What was happening today?! How did her closest female friends know things she had never told them?

“How?.. How?.. How can you possibly know?!” was all Sansa could manage through her shock.


Sansa sighed. This was going to be much worse than she had anticipated.

“What do you want to know?..”

“Well, let’s start with you finding him drunk at the LBCB and go from there…”

Correction: this was not going to be “bad;” this was going to be pure torture.

In pursuing her career as a ballet dancer, Margery Tyrell had missed her calling as a first-class interrogator. Within an hour and a half, she had rung out a substantial amount of information from the meekly struggling Sansa, even though the latter had made Margery promise to keep what Ygritte had referred to as her “lion secrets” from Ellaria and Tyene.

Margery had been satisfied with the conversation — very satisfied. She told Tyrion with a sly grin:

“I think there’s a very simple reason your brother isn’t lying dead drunk in a ditch somewhere.”

She was lounging on their bed while Tyrion was adjusting his tie before the mirror of her dressing table, preparing to leave for his own catechism at the Lannister mansion.
“Oh yeah?” her fiancée called. “Do share.”

“He’s in love with Sansa,” she said laconically.

Tyrion rolled his eyes.

“We’ve known that for months, now!” he exclaimed. “Where’s the discovery here?”

“No,” she corrected, “what we’ve known for months was that he was falling hard for her, even though he was still deluding himself about Cersei; what we know now is that he loves Sansa — there is no more Cersei…” she paused to give her next words greater effect, “and Tyrion? I think he knows it.”

That certainly got Tyrion’s attention, and he forgot about his tie as he turned to look at her.

“What did you?.. How could you possibly know such a thing?!” he exclaimed, and she laughed.

“From what Sansa tells me, and the mean girl isn’t particularly generous when it comes to details, I conclude that Jaime does whatever he can to please her and, what’s more, to keep her with him as long as he can; that he lost it when she jumped from that tower… From what I saw of him today, I am convinced that he knows it’s Sansa he wants, though he’s awfully difficult about it, I’m afraid…”

Tyrion had been listening to his fiancée’s insights with great seriousness.

“What do you mean,” he asked, “by ‘awfully difficult about it?’ ”

“It means,” she answered, “that, under the influence of Lannister men’s only serious flaw, he’s fighting his feelings instead of pursuing the girl…” She looked at Tyrion with significance, as if to remind him of the obstacles they themselves had had to overcome before becoming engaged.

Tyrion looked crestfallen.

“Oh, no…”

Margery nodded with the expression of a sympathetic seer, who will not change her verdict just because it is not particularly inspiring.

“No…” Tyrion moaned again in exasperation, “Jaime can’t be like me…”

She laughed.

“I don’t know if you two get it from papa Tywin,” the heartless Margery stated, “but you certainly have that in common. I’ll add that Jaime’s hesitance to pursue Sansa is much more understandable, I think, than you dragging your feet with proposing to me…”

“What now?” Tyrion exclaimed, almost indignant.

“Well, you’ve never really loved anyone before me,” Margery stated with confidence. “You said so yourself — unless you care to contest that statement now?” she challenged him, but Tyrion knew better than to do something so singularly stupid even for the sake of a joke; satisfied with his silence, she continued: “Unlike you, Jaime has been in love with the same woman for twenty years, and this love ended in disaster, if we’re being honest.” Tyrion snorted: “disaster” was putting it mildly.

“Now,” Margery continued, “he’s fallen in love again, but with a girl who is, admittedly, half his age. You, on the other hand, have fallen in love seriously only once, I loved you back, and we’re fairly close in age.”

“I have a few years on you,” he boasted, but she only laughed.
“A few years and twice one’s age aren’t the same things…”

Tyrion sighed.
“You’re right,” he admitted, “our match-making job isn’t nearly done… So, my general, what next?” he teased.

“It’s fairly simple, really,” she answered. “From first-hand experience in domesticating a Lannister, I can say all we need to do is bring them together often enough in a setting where it’s inappropriate for him to be too distant or professional with her, though I hope this, at least, won’t be a problem…”

During their conversation, Tyrion had been caught by Margery’s glowing eyes; mesmerized, he was coming closer to her while they spoke, and — now he had come to the bed where she had been lounging in deceptive languor — she caught him by the very tie he had spent so much time adjusting to suit his father’s scrupulous taste.

“Marge!” he protested, but he did not get to voice his grievances because she was kissing him, pulling him to her until he lost his balance and fell onto the bed.

“Are you happy now?” he asked in mock exasperation, but his eyes were smiling with undiluted happiness, “You’ve wrinkled my suit and ruined my tie! What will I wear to father’s?!”

“Oh dear,” she replied with fake concern, “you will need to change into another suit and another tie…” she tugged unceremoniously at the elegant knot presently around his neck, “but before you can do that, you’ll need to get out of these clothes…”

“You have the devious mind that would give my father a run for his money,” Tyrion laughed while she pulled at his jacket; she gave him a deep kiss.

“If this is your idea of talking dirty, hon, I might consider divorcing you!” she threatened.

“We aren’t married yet,” he reminded her, jokingly. She rewarded him with a playful but stinging slap and a laugh before kissing him again.

He was going to be very late to father’s…

As he followed his Tywin’s personal assistant up and up the mansion’s stairs, Tyrion wondered if the creepy Bolton offspring meant to play a cruel joke; he reminded himself that such an action on the young man’s behalf would bring onto his head such wrath from Tywin Lannister that he would never again find employment. They ascended one more flight of stairs, coming to the highest floor, and Tyrion seriously wondered what on earth had possessed his father to meet in this unused part of the house. His confusion grew when the Bolton boy pushed open a door and revealed another flight of stairs.

“Ramsay,” Tyrion warned, “I hope you aren’t so much of a fool as to play any sick games with me…”

“No, ser,” came the swift, polite reply, “Lord Tywin wished to see you as soon as you arrived, so I led you directly to him.”

The personal assistant continued to go up the smaller flight of stairs, and Tyrion followed, reflecting that if his father wished to see him as quickly as possible, this aim could have been achieved much faster if Tywin had come down to him. The lackey pushed open one more door, behind which Tyrion was surprised to discover a roof terrace with a blooming rose garden. His astonishment became boundless when he noticed his father, who was wearing a perfectly starched white apron, plucking out the weeds from one of the rose beds. Tyrion stared, blinked a couple of times, and still
could not believe his eyes had not deceived him.

“F-f-f-father?” he questioned, fully expecting that the man would turn out to be someone else, even though he knew the shape of this strong back all too well.

Tywin Lannister, for it was really him, turned to his son, and immediately his face grew dark. Tyrion briefly wondered what had he done wrong this time, when his father came to stare down not him but Ramsay Bolton.

“What in the world have you dragged my son here for?!” he inquired, his voice calm, but his intonations full of ire. “Couldn’t you come to inform me of his arrival?”

“Ser, I only brought him because you said you wanted to see him right away…”

Tyrion watched his father’s jaw clench.

“And do you suppose it was a comfortable journey for him here?” his father growled.

Tyrion could see beads of perspiration forming on the young man’s temples. Even when he was not the object of his father’s fury, the younger son still felt on edge when witnessing it. He tried to assuage it:

“Father, it really was not that bad, I could do with some exercise…”

Tywin was still terrorizing his personal assistant with his cold eyes when he next spoke:

“You’re lucky my son is more tolerant of mistakes than I am,” he said in a tone the imperturbability of which was all the more horrifying for the rage it concealed. “Get out. Next time, I’ll terminate your employment.”

The young man made himself scarce with phenomenal rapidity. Several minutes after he left, there was still silence between father and son.

Tywin returned to the chair from which he performed his gardening.

“When you were little,” he spoke without diverting his attention from the offensive weeds, “I had all the stairs isolated at Casterly Rock… It was feared,” never I feared, “that you might fall and die. I still dislike the idea of you on long flights of stairs, I suppose…”

His son digested this information in silence. Knowing his father’s dislike for expressions of feelings, Tyrion did not venture to articulate how deeply his words had affected him. Instead, he asked:

“What’s this place? I don’t think I’ve ever been here…”

“It was your mother’s favorite project,” Tywin explained, “she pestered me for weeks before I agreed to create this nonsense on the mansion’s roof. Of course, it isn’t surprising that she got her way in the end — she always did. I haven’t been here… Well, I haven’t been here in a long time.”

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“It’s beautiful,” was all Tyrion could say. And it was true: the mansion’s position on a slight elevation offered a beautiful view of the neighborhood’s mansions’ dainty roofs; the soft light of the evening sun bathed the garden in a light as warm as melting honey.

His father gave one of his rare smirks.

“Trust your mother to know that. Still, it was a massive expense, and if anything had been done wrong, the whole garden would have one day fallen onto my dining table,” Tywin grumbled; the son bit down a chuckle. He came to stand by his father, watching his hands perform the work so unusual to his person.
“You probably have a few dozen gardeners,” he questioned without asking. “Yes, and they take care of most things here — had for over three decades,” father explained, “but I recently told them to leave this rose bed to my care as far as weeding and watering are concerned. It was Joa’s favorite.”

Tyrion had never heard this nickname of his mother’s.

“Joa?” he asked, expecting the strangely peaceful and kindly countenance of his father to freeze up. It did not.

“It was the way I always called her,” he said, and a small smile came to his thin lips, “it’s because it sounds similar to ‘joy’ — or at least I thought that it did, at the time.”

Tyrion smiled and began plucking at the weeds that had so far evaded his father. They worked in an amicable silence for some while. Tyrion, still taken aback by his father’s strange behavior, strove to dilute his own bewilderment with words:

“Margery thinks that it’s a great idea to have two weddings instead of just one,” he offered. “I’m glad to hear it,” his father’s voice sounded more like it ordinarily did. “It would be a shame to have a wedding in Highgarden when Casterly Rock can be used.”

Tyrion could not suppress a guffaw. “Don’t tell this to Olenna, or she will kill me with her thorns.”

The old lion snorted. “When are you planning to have the wedding?” he inquired.

“Marge’s thinking a few months after the premiere,” Tyrion answered, “we will be performing for a while, so there won’t be time enough for all the planning.”

“Well, so long as you are thinking of a time within the decade…”

Tyrion had a strange sensation that his father could be joking. He decided not to ask.

“So,” Tywin changed topics, “what can you tell me about Jaime, who is, unfortunately, much further from his wedding day than you are?”

“I wonder,” Tyrion could not help himself, “who will walk Sansa down to the altar? Will it be Ned Stark, or will you have him kidnapped, so you can do the honors?”

“I do not find this joke particularly funny,” his father grumbled, and Tyrion thought that, if and when his brother and Sansa were planning a wedding, he should send Bronn to guard the bride’s father — just in case. To his own, he answered lightly:

“Ah, you never find my jokes funny.”

“Some of them are funnier than others,” Tywin answered, and, this time, Tyrion wondered if his father meant to convey he found at least some of his jokes amusing. He had never seen him laugh at them.

“Anyway,” Tyrion continued, “Margery thinks that Jaime has now realized he’s in love with Sansa.” His father was laconic:

“Good.”
“However, she also thinks he will be fighting his feelings for a while before he tries to pursue Sansa…” Tyrion paused to give his full attention to a particularly stubborn weed. “Margery thinks it’s a family trait in Lannister men — fighting their feelings,” he added, before he remembered he was speaking to his father: Tywin’s strange good-humor had disoriented him.

“Could be,” his father replied. There was another pause, then Tywin spoke again: “You must try getting them together more often,” he suggested, “wear Jaime down.”

Tyrion stared.

“What?”

“I said — ”

“No, I heard what you said!” Tyrion exclaimed, “It’s just that… Marge proposed the same thing…”

His father chuckled.

“Intelligent and sly, that fiancée of yours — reminds me a little of your mother… She’s right.”

“Yes, but how did you know?..”

Tywin looked him directly in the eye, the corners of his severe lips still concealing a smile.

“Because it’s the trick your mother played on me.”

Having escaped his brother and Marge with some difficulty, Jaime went to the LBCB. The building was usually empty on the weekends, and he found that day he preferred his studio there to the one in his apartment. He could not say for certain if it was the memories haunting him or if he was hunting memories; whether he wanted to escape recollections of his sister or revive those of Sansa. In any case, he did not return to his flat. On the drive to the LBCB, he listened to the melody Renly had sent him earlier in the morning, the draft for the last dance of Azor and Nissa. He could not but succumb to some melancholy upon the reflection that, soon enough, the premiere would come, and the ballet would recede into the past. True, of course, the minx was not going anywhere, and The Fountain of Tears would establish her as one of the LBC’s leading dancers, ensuring he would not lack for her presence in any future production, and yet… It was the first ballet on which he had worked with her, and the last one she would dance as an unknown dancer. He wondered if Sansa Stark would prove as incorruptible by fame as by everything else.

He thought back to the day before, her smiles and laughter, her sparkling blue eyes rose in front of him. He could not help but wish he had the chance to spend another day like this with her, feeling the warmth of the sun and the soft whisper of the wind with the felicity he had not felt in years, had not felt at all, perhaps, before she had appeared in his life. He could not help but wish he had more days to abandon himself to her smile. He thought that, perhaps, he could occasionally convince her to spend time with him — after all, she was on close terms with everyone in their little group. He could show her places none of the others, he was certain, knew in King’s Landing; just as they did not know about the dancers on Baelor’s Square; he could bring her to Casterly Rock, show her the cliffs from which he used to jump when he was but a boy… He chuckled: he would watch her carefully, lest she get it into her mind to jump again; he was not going to watch her fall through emptiness ever again. He shook his head, as if to dislodge the daydreams, but the visions were more powerful than he, and Jaime remembered how the minx had jumped yesterday. Involuntarily, he remembered a day when, tired of Cersei’s grumbling about him jumping, he had asked his sister to jump with him, and she had refused, walking away from him. He did not know if it had been fear or a desire to subdue him to her wishes that had made her refuse; but he did know that Sansa was braver than his sister ever was — when it came to jumping from great heights or conquering her fears for the sake of doing something together, something he did. He had never conceived that a woman
superior to his sister could exist — and yet he was faced with that simple truth. In a comparison no woman could withstand in the past, he now discovered that his sister had lost. He thought the minx more beautiful — a quality his sister had always flaunted; he thought her brave in a way Cersei had never been: brave in generously giving away kindness and pieces of her heart to those in need of that magical alms. He thought he had never seen a being so filled with light. He remembered her dancing at the gala, in his master-class, performing Nissa’s dance… It suddenly occurred to him that she danced more beautifully than Cersei had: his sister had never been prepared for the dedication it would have taken her to achieve Sansa’s level, even if she had an equal talent, and, as a professional dancer, Jaime did not believe she did. He had never compared their dancing before, and he now understood why: from the moment he had first seen her dance in the dark studio, Sansa’s dancing had always stood apart from anything else — a sorcery of its own.

There were so many things he realized he had come to love about the minx — from her blushes to the way her eyes could flare with indignation, to the way she smiled or rolled her eyes… There was another contrast he had drawn — not for the first time, this — between the two women; he had always been surprised by Cersei’s unconcern when it came to their children, and he had been no less astonished by Sansa’s gentle care. He had noticed many times the hurt little look in Myrcella’s eyes when her mother refused to spend a weekend day with her, because she wished to make a social call, and the way Tommen would look at his feet when Cersei would not come to his performances at the kindergarten theater… In many ways, Cersei’s parenting reminded him of their father — or rather, what became of Tywin when he had buried Joanna Lannister. Cersei was careless about hurting others — her own children, himself. Perhaps, he was drawn to the minx in part because he did not think her capable of consciously hurting those around her. He parked his car at the LBCB and made his way to his studio, where he spent the rest of the day developing the choreography for one more dance scene.

The next day, Sansa arrived to Jaime’s studio even earlier than usually. She told herself it was because Tyene was at Bronn’s and she herself was bored in the lonely flat; she told herself it was because she did not want to provoke his teasing by being late — or, rather, not early enough; but her heart told her she simply wished to find herself close to Jaime again, as soon as she could, even if it was by staying in his empty studio for an empty hour — at least, she would be the first to see him come in, the first to greet him. She almost envied sunrises for seeing him before ever she herself did. On her way to the LBCB, she could not quite restrain herself from walking so quickly she was almost running. There was barely anyone in the building, and the studios were empty; she made her way to Jaime’s. She had come to love his studio more than she did any other, for the simple reason that it was his studio, and she loved him to the last shadow of his presence left behind in the places he visited. She lingered in the sun-filled room, practicing pas without knowing, without any music, moving half-heartedly, as if to distract herself. She worried about him: she had not heard from him since she had left him in his car the day before yesterday; she did not dare call him. She somehow felt closer to him since that day, as if the bond they had built in the past months had solidified — or perhaps, it was because she felt she loved him even more than before, having seen him in pain. She had come to love the man, not the idol, and his misery, which she helped heal, seemed to bind her to him more strongly. Since she had stood vigil over him while he was sleeping on her couch, she felt that his ache and the words of grief he had mumbled belonged to her, because she had been the only one to witness them; and that his smiles, his laughter of the day that followed also belonged to her — and for the same reason. These possessions were fleeting, they lasted only as long as memories, but she treasured them just the same. She swayed to the sound of silence, hands on her hips, a small smile playing on her lips. Then, she thought she had felt his presence, and told herself she was being silly: she had never seen him at the LBCB so early — he would not be here for another hour at least; but the feeling persisted, so she turned, and there he was, leaning against the doorway, a friendly smirk on his ever-teasing lips, but his eyes held that kindness, that warmth she saw more and more frequently.
“Could have said hello,” she reproached him, smiling.

He pushed himself off the doorframe, making his way to her in that lazy manner that was deceptive in someone so quick and alert.

“You seemed far too pleased, I didn’t want to interrupt,” he explained. “What’s got you smiling like this, minx?”

“You do.

“I don’t know,” she lied innocently, smiling more widely, “it’s a beautiful day, I’m in a happy mood...”
“Oh yeah?”

“Yup! Oh, and guess what? I’ve learned about this new place here in the city!..”

He played along, the teasing smirk growing into a grin.

“Where’s that?”

“Oh, it’s a tower — great to jump from!”

She laughed gaily as he rolled his eyes.

“What are you doing here so early?” he asked, “You’re always late — ”

“That’s not true! I’m never late!”

The happy mirth in his eyes told her just how much he enjoyed her uncontrolled reaction to his teasing. He looked well: she did not think he had done much drinking — if any; and he was not crestfallen, which made her so happy she could have confused the sunlight with the delight bursting from her heart. Embolden by his good mood and her own contentment, she ventured to say:

“Well, if you aren’t happy to see me,” she made as if to move past him, although she had no real intention of leaving. “I can always go.”

He was quick to catch her, his arm wrapping around her waist.

“I never said that,” he protested, still smiling when she stayed in his arms, looking very pleased with herself.

“Well, are you happy to see me, then?” she smiled.

He gave a short chuckle, releasing her.

“Can you doubt it?”

She laughed, shaking her head, wondering how it would have been to just stay with his arm wrapped around her waist.

“Well,” she gave up on estimating his happiness at seeing her — she only had so much boldness — and changed subjects, “what are you doing here?”

“It’s my studio, minx.”

She made a grimace of bewilderment.

“Really? What, this one? You sure?”
He chuckled again, and she just smiled at him, her heart joyous, full of love.

“I came to give another go to some new choreography ,” he explained.

“Seriously?”

He feigned exasperation, but his good mood subverted the pretense:

“Yes, minx, we have a premiere coming up in a few months, or don’t you remember?”

“I remember that just fine,” she pouted half-heartedly, “I was only saying that I was surprised you were already working…”

He walked away to drop off his bag.

“Why’s that, minx?” he threw over the shoulder.

“No reason,” she lied, sensing he did not wish to revive such recent ghosts.

His back was still to her, but she heard the smirk in his voice.

“I can always tell when you lie,” he said, “you get those intonations of a guilty child.”

She was so annoyed by this, she stomped her foot.

“I’m not a child!”

He was connecting his phone to the bluetooth speakers.

“No, you just act like one,” he teased.

“When have I ever?..”

“Stomping your foot — really?”

“You were being impossible!”

“Well, how about jumping off a tower two hundred feet high?”

“That was just one time!”

“The dangerous transition — being thrown backward?”

“Justified!”

He laughed.

“I’ve no doubt…” he had finished connecting his phone, “Here, listen to this, minx,” he said, discarding their bantering when the music began to play; she came to stand next to him.

“I don’t remember hearing this before,” she offered when the track had played in full. It was a beautiful, impassioned piece that reminded her a little of the music to which they were dancing the dance of Nissa and Azor.

“No, Renly only sent it to me yesterday morning,” he clarified.

“Which part is it for?” she asked excitedly.

“It’s the duet between Azor and Nissa after she kills Tanea.”
The last confrontation between the lovers before the king ordered her execution.

“But we haven’t yet done the scene between Nissa and Tanea, and that comes before!”

“That’s exactly what I told Renly,” Jaime sounded faintly irritated, “but the scoundrel told me that, since, in the next few days, we will still be polishing the other dance of Nissa and Azor, as well as other scenes, before moving to the Nissa and Tanea’s part, he went where — and I quote — ‘his imagination took him.’ I really don’t know why I don’t just fire him and find a composer with a more dependable muse…”

Sansa laughed at his complaints.

“You’d fire him if you didn’t know for sure he was the best composer in the country…”

He turned to her, devils jumping in his green eyes.

“Tell me, does it ever tire you — being right all the time? That is,” he corrected, “in moments when you aren’t trying to break your neck?”

She stuck out her tongue at him — her sister would have been proud.

He narrowed his eyes at her:

“What were you saying about not being a child, remind me?”

She dodged this fair point by asking a question of her own.

“Are you going to work on that choreography now?”

“We are, since you are already here anyway.”

She pretended to be aggravated — else she would have given a triumphant cry that might have come out sounding like a squeal.

“Damn! I could have just slackened and let you do all the work? And instead here I am, working overtime!”

He only rolled his eyes at her. They listened to the track again, discussing the initial choreography he had thought of. Over the time they had been rehearsing the ballet, with the encouragement from Jaime and the rest of their group, she had grown the confidence to express her ideas, even to counter him. They were mapping out the movements, dancing out some parts in full, stopping to work out others — arguing, teasing. They now followed the same routine as when they rehearsed with the rest of the group, only it was just them, and something felt different. She felt at ease with him — more so than ever before; and yet, her breath caught in her throat even more often now than previously. Each time she found herself in his arms, it took her some effort to retain her concentration, not to lose herself in his eyes, or worse — give into her longing to card her fingers through the golden hair. She felt the touch of his arms, of his hands with such acuteness, he could as well have been caressing her soul. She had to call for a brief break, because she was out of breath not an hour into practice — her breathing returned to normal suspiciously quickly once his arms had left her, and she wanted to be breathless again. Far too preoccupied with herself, she had not noticed her dancing partner’s tense jaw muscles. In the liminal space of rehearsing, where they were not entirely lost in the abstraction of a balletic performance, where they were themselves without the protection of absorption, touch fed desire, which, not translated into uninterrupted dancing, sizzled in the air. She realized the futility of trying to catch her breath: he would steal it the moment his hands touched her waist again. They decided to go over the dance they had choreographed in full.
It began when the guards brought the murderess to the king, whom the wrath of her jealousy had cheated of a new love. Breaking from the restraints of the soldiers, Nissa tried — one last time — to remind the king of their love, now that the woman who had taken his heart from her no longer stood between them. The king, however, remained grievous and unconsolled by his lover. Nissa’s dance was not about rage or even fighting for love — it was about the wildness of hope born of despair; Azor’s part was in many ways antithetic to that of the female lead, since his incurable despondency killed her hope before pronouncing the sentence his indifference had already spelled for the woman who loved him. The passion that was present in the dance of lovers was offset in this scene by their joined despair, which they felt for such diametrically opposed reasons.

When Sansa and Jaime began dancing, truly dancing, that scene, they seemed to fall away into a world that was not quite their own, a world in which each was for the duration of music someone else. Imagination, melody, their movements took them into a plane where they had been lovers and happy together, once, but where fate had separated them. Nevertheless, the people they were and the feelings they felt as Jaime and Sansa affected their dance as Azor and Nissa. The choreography, the music, and their fervor imparted to the scene the passion and the desperation it required, which would fool any viewer who knew them not as people and saw only the illusion they created as dancers. However, that despair and that passion stemmed not from a love that had ended, as it was for their characters, but from one that was rising: a stormy sea magically entrapped in a wine bottle, waiting to become what it was meant to be. Their gazes locked, their movements as aligned as the beating of their hearts, which seemed to hum a chorus to the music, they danced, becoming free for a moment of the restrictions their minds imposed on their souls when silence reigned and their bodies did not touch.

While they danced, they had not noticed how their friends had silently trickled into the studio; when the music ended, they discovered, with some surprise, that everyone had already assembled. They were not asked which part of the ballet they had been rehearsing — so much was obvious from the choreography that was powerful enough to communicate feelings without words. Tyrion said he liked it, the others expressed their agreement, and they all turned to the scenes that had to be perfected before they could move on to the dance of Nissa and Tanea. Now that their friends had surrounded them, there was more to distract them from each other, and the playful banter of the group served to dilute the tension that could be felt between them. All the same, when Oberyn and Ellaria were coming out of the studio in the evening, he asked his wife:

“Are Jaime and Sansa sleeping together yet?”

“Not yet, as far as I know,” she answered.

“Well, I hope they do soon: they are making it hard to breathe in that studio with all this unresolved sexual tension.”

Ellaria laughed:

“That’s what I keep thinking…”

Chapter End Notes

How do you like it? :)
White Lies

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They are innocent, those white lies…
They say they are as white as snow,
They say nothing but good wishes lie

Behind the sweet deceptions, that they show

The liars care for us.
We love them, those white lies,
For their glitter and the cheap price
They charge for dreams.

To whole wide worlds
White lies give birth,
Enveloping us in sweet words,
Revealing of fears a dearth.

“Sorry I’m so late,” she was saying as Margery took her jacket, “I spent too much time choosing flowers, so I took a cab and got stuck in traffic…”

“It’s quite all right,” Margery assured her, “we’re so happy you could make it! What lovely flowers — worth the wait, I’ll say.” They kissed. “Thank you, dear.”

Sansa followed her friend into the apartment, smiling. From the first time she had been invited to a dinner at Margery and Tyrion’s place, months ago, Sansa had loved coming to their flat. Her friends were wonderful hosts, and their company always made her feel cheerful and happy. She was not the only guest that evening, however. Tyrion and Loras were chatting in the kitchen, while the older man was arranging what she guessed was a second serving of appetizers that accompanied the aperitif; she noticed Jaime and Renly arguing merrily over drinks.

She caught her friend’s elbow.

“Marge,” she asked in some embarrassment, “it’s all family… What am I doing here?”

“What do you mean?” her friend feigned incomprehension.
“It’s you, Tyrion, Tyrion’s brother, your brother, and your brother’s boyfriend. I feel I’m intruding on a family dinner…” she spoke quietly.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Marge cried out, “You are family! I’ve always wanted a sister, but I got Loras instead…” She sighed as she described the humorous misfortune. “Don’t go imagining foolish things!” She hugged her. “I wanted my closest friend to come, and Tyrion was delighted by the idea! I dare say he wasn’t the only one delighted —”

“Marge!” Tyrion’s voice cut in, “where are the green olives?..”

“Coming, love!” she called out, then spoke again to Sansa. “It’s true that it’s family, hon, which makes you being here all the more appropriate!”

She kissed her friend’s cheek again and went into the kitchen; warmed by her words but still uncertain, Sansa trailed after her.

It was a wonderful evening. The Tyrell and Lannister siblings made fun of each other, as they were prone to do; Jaime turned his outstanding mocking abilities onto Renly, who fought back valiantly but in vain, and had to be rescued on several occasions by his boyfriend and his assailant’s brother. To Sansa’s surprise, Jaime did not make fun of her, which made her consider him with curiosity: whenever they were alone or stood even a little apart from others during rehearsals, his taunts were the welcome bane of her existence; but, strangely enough, in company, only his eyes occasionally revealed to her his teasing mind — not his words.

“So, Sansa,” Renly said when they had passed to dessert, “what’s this I hear about you and Theon Greyjoy?”

Sansa, who had never before heard anything about herself and Theon, wanted to dismiss the idiotic suggestion right away and, in her haste, choked on her dessert. Her violent coughing only worsened the blush of annoyance and embarrassment that had appeared on her face. Loras, who was seated next to her, filled her glass with water and held it to her lips. After a few uncomfortable minutes, Sansa was able to breathe properly.

“Well?” Renly pressed.

“I’ve no idea what you mean,” Sansa replied, looking at him in confusion.

“A little bird told me you two were sweethearts,” Renly said, sounding like a mean schoolboy. Tyrion, who was looking at his brother, discerned well-concealed murderousness in Jaime’s eyes.

Sansa guffawed at Renly's words. Her merriment had prevented her from seeing a flash of relief her laughter had produced in green eyes that were of such unrelenting interest to her.

“I've never heard anything more ridiculous,” she answered Renly, “your little bird is one misinformed fowl.”

The company laughed.

“I’ve reason to believe otherwise,” Renly persisted. “Come, Sparkle, you can tell us!”

“There’s nothing to tell. Theon is just another proof that my eldest brother had poor choice in friends when he was younger.”

There was laughter again. Renly opened his mouth to continue pestering her, but was cut off when Jaime spoke, an evil smirk on his lips, which spelled unsparing mockery:

“I thought you had gotten over your obsession with the Greyjoys, Renly,” he said in a tone that made Sansa feel sorry for her tormentor, “but it seems I was wrong…” he concluded with false
commiseration. “You see, minx,” he turned to Sansa as if to furnish her with a weapon, “Renly here had quite a whirlwind romance with Euron Greyjoy a couple of years ago. It was the talk of the city...” he added mercilessly. "But then,” he continued with an expression of feigned tragedy, “Euron broke poor Renly’s heart. Perhaps, this explains your jealous interest in the nephew, Renly…”

“Go to hell, Lannister,” barked the composer.

Jaime chuckled and took a sip of his wine.
“I’ve already been there,” he replied, unfazed, “it’s a dull place, filled with composers who never get their musical creations right the first time around.”

Sansa could not help but giggle, remembering Jaime’s frequent expressions of annoyance with the chief music-maker of the LBC. She thought he looked very pleased by her amusement. Sansa’s laughter also provoked some chuckles from the rest of the group. Renly was red in the face and breathing hard; Loras looked forlorn:

“Oh, Crone, here we go…” he murmured under his breath.

“Tell me, Jaime,” Renly turned onto the LBC director with viciousness, “how’s Cersei doing? She’s not been coming by the LBCB lately — you two haven’t quarreled, have you?”

It seemed that the words had sucked the air out of the cozy dining room. Everyone looked to Jaime; Sansa, Tyrion, and Margery, who knew only too well just how much the two had quarreled, wore particularly concerned expressions.

Mother, please don’t let Jaime kill him, passed in Sansa’s mind.

To their infinite relief, not a muscle moved on Jaime’s face, and his mocking smile did not falter.

“Why would we quarrel?” he answered carelessly, as if he were speaking of a distant relative. “But it’s true that I haven’t seen her in a while… Maybe you should make inquiries: after all, she’s your sister, too. How’s Robert doing, by the way?” he added, taking war into enemy country by bringing up the shame of Baratheon family.

“He’s fine,” gritted out Renly.
“Thank the gods for Stannis,” Jaime commented.

“Speaking of Stannis,” Sansa, who sounded a little nervous, jumped into the conversation before the argument could escalate, “I was recently passing by the LBC classes for young dancers, and I saw Shireen — she was doing so well! How long has she been practicing now, Renly?”

Like any large ballet company, the LBC offered preparatory classes for youngsters, creating a pool from which to scout and train the best recruits.

“A couple of months, I gather,” Renly replied, and the atmosphere immediately lightened.
“And does she like it?”

“She does, my brother’s very pleased. It was a good idea, Tyrion, that you recommended LBC classes for her — I’ve been meaning to thank you…”

Tyrion held up his hands in protest:
“It was our good-fortune to have her come!”

Margery then began speaking of a recent art exhibition, shifting the conversation to less dangerous
topics. As the company relaxed, Sansa dared a glimpse at Jaime and found him looking at her, a teasing half-smile on his lips. She wondered if, notwithstanding his defense of her, he would annoy her by speaking of Theon later on. When they had returned to the living room for digestif, Jaime came to sit next to her. She braced herself for his taunts, but they took a form she had not anticipated:

“What a perfect little lady you are,” he teased. “Tell me, minx, did Mother Stark give you lessons in preventing table conversation from turning into open warfare?”

“No, she didn’t!”

He considered her with obvious pleasure at her pique, his eyes dancing with mirth.

“I’ll take leave to doubt this. I can just imagine — ”

She smacked him lightly on the upper arm.

“You shouldn’t have been so cruel to Renly,” she admonished quietly. “You must know you hurt his feelings.”

He laughed in disbelief.

“That’s the thanks I get for coming to your rescue, lady? What an ungrateful minx!”

“Why did you?” she asked, unable to mute the hopeful curiosity that agitated her.

*You should at least be mine to tease…*

“I told you before, minx, my mother — ”

“…didn’t raise you to leave a damsel in distress.’ I know, Lannister, I’ve heard that one before.”

She would remain a little confounded by him never bringing up Theon Greyjoy in their conversations.

Notwithstanding the rather tense exchange between Jaime and Renly, the evening was a pleasant affair. It was one of many such dinners Margery and Tyrion had organized: the next time, Ellaria and Oberyn had replaced Renly and Loras; after that, it was Bronn and Tyene (who had not yet told her parents of her romance with Tyrion’s bodyguard); then came Brienne and Tormund. What never changed in these dinners was that Tyrion and Margery always invited Jaime and Sansa, and, as per Tyrion’s insistence, diluted the company with another couple — always a couple, however — but pretended it was nothing more than a gathering of friends. Their efforts had the happy consequence of initiating a cycle of invitations: Loras and Renly invited the same company to their place, so did the others; these invitations, as well, had to be returned… Although the LBC had always been a friendly place, the little group at the core of the company’s leadership had never before fallen into a pleasant and regular chain of dinners. It was an innovation that suited them all rather well, making some gatherings larger than others, some more intimate. Ellaria and Oberyn, Tyene and Bronn had consciously joined Margery and Tyrion’s conspiracy, while Brienne and Tormund, Renly and Loras remained somewhat oblivious. Regardless, Jaime and Sansa found themselves thrown into company with their friends at least once a week, sometimes more often.

Now and then, it was just the four of them: Tyrion and Margery, Jaime and Sansa. On such occasions, Sansa felt she had to go deep inside herself, find her heart, and chain it up before it did something stupid — like began singing or jumped out of her body. They were dangerous, these small dinners: they made it so deceptively easy to imagine Jaime and she had not come to Marge and Tyrion’s place each on their own, but together; that this was not a mismatched dinner of a couple, a brother, and a close friend, but one between two sets of lovers. These imaginings may be sweet
while the dinner lasted, but they made returning to her flat alone all the more bitter.

She had walked into the first one of these dinners with the blindness of a wild fox, who had not discerned danger in a steel trap before it had closed on her paw: she did not know it would be such a small dinner party. Since she had been late to the previous dinner, she came a little early. Margery and Tyrion had been sipping drinks, waiting for their guests, when she rang the bell, and Margery ushered her into the living room, where she left Sansa with Tyrion and went to put the flowers Sansa had brought into a suitable vase. It had been roughly two weeks after Jaime discovered his sister’s true colors, and though the three of them — Sansa, Tyrion, and Margery — had all waited, with diverse degrees of apprehension, for Jaime to lose his good humor, he never did. Sansa thought it admirable that he could keep himself together after such a colossal betrayal, never dreaming she was the primary cause of his fortitude and geniality. She was contemplating the possible reasons behind Jaime’s unchanging good spirits, as she often did lately, when Tyrion broke the silence:

“I wanted to thank you, Sansa,” he said in a quiet and serious tone he rarely used.

She looked up at him in some surprise.

“What for?”

“For taking care of Jaime that day… And… For putting in a good word for me.”

She smiled.

“I'm very glad that you and Jaime are all right,” she said, unwilling to take credit for the brothers’ reconciliation.

Tyrion smirked.

“It’s because of you that he listened to me that night,” he insisted. “I am not sure he would have let me speak if you had not pled my case.”

She shook her head, embarrassed.

“No… I’m sure… I had little to do with it. You're brothers — of course, he would hear you out…”

Tyrion put his hand on hers.

“Sansa,” he smiled, “he probably would have forgiven me eventually… But I know, from him, that he only heard me out that night because of you; so, please, accept my gratitude — it is offered very sincerely.”

She smiled at her friend, placing her other hand on top of his.

“I’m very happy if I could help,” she offered.

“Ah, so you finally thanked Sansa!” Margery came in with the vase of flowers and placed it on a small table. “He’s been meaning to do that for days,” she confided to her friend.

“I did,” Tyrion confirmed, smiling. Then, as if he had exhausted Lannister capacity for sentimentality, he wondered in some irritation: “Where the hell’s Jaime?”

“What do you mean?” Sansa inquired.

“Jaime’s also coming for dinner,” Margery clarified, then looked at her warily. “You aren’t going to hyperventilate like when we all forgot to tell you he was your date for the gala?”
“No, of course not,” Sansa assured her friend, but her heart was beating quickly notwithstanding her brave words.

They waited for Jaime a while that evening, prolonging the aperitif in an unseemly manner. Tyrion called his brother, but the latter picked up his phone only to bark angrily, “Not now, Tyrion!” and immediately hung up. Margery and Tyrion decided to start on the entée without waiting for him, much to the chagrin of Sansa, who did not wish to admit Jaime may not come. His arrival was announced by a doorbell just as Margery was about to serve the main course. Tyrion went to open the door, revealing his elder brother, whose foul mood was evident in the frowning set of his face. “Sorry, Tyrion,” he apologized, passing his brother a bottle of wine, “you couldn’t imagine the display of cretinism I was just afforded by Stannis Baratheon!.. The moron — ”

“Good thing I’ve something to cheer you up,” Tyrion interrupted.

“It better be a glass of strong scotch,” Jaime grumbled.

“It’s far superior,” the younger brother grinned, “in fact, I’m quite certain that, by the end of the evening, you won’t even remember you had met with Stannis.”

“I seriously doubt it…” the elder muttered as they entered the dining room. Tyrion noticed how discovering Sansa at the dinner table served to alter Jaime’s features instantaneously as his brother exchanged his frown for a smile:

“Minx? Whatever are you doing here?”

Sansa, who had been nervous as it was, knowing she might see Jaime in this quiet family setting, failed to discern pleased surprise in his intonations, and, taking his words as an indication of his disapproval of her presence, blushed in embarrassment.

“I — ” she began uncertainly, when Margery, noticing her flustered state, intervened to offer an explanation:

“Sansa’s here to divert me when you two inevitably launch into one of your maddeningly boring discussions of administrative business.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” her soon-to-be brother-in-law countered, “the minx’s here to cheer me up because I am the one who’s spent an hour with that moron Stannis Baratheon, explaining to him that a class taught by Ellaria Sand was not going to deprave his little daughter.”

Jaime winked at Sansa, who gave him a small, shy smile, relieved to find that she had misinterpreted his words.

“Whatever gave you this idea?” Margery asked him belligerently, even as she was unable to keep a grin of delight from her face.

“Tyrion,” Jaime threw nonchalantly over his shoulder on his way to the kitchen, from which he soon re-emerged with a glass of white wine, his former preference for scotch forgotten at the sight of Sansa — an instance that his hosts noted with pleasure. No one had ever seen Jaime Lannister drink white wine when he was in a rotten mood. “He says it ruins the fine drink,” Tyrion had once explained to Margery.

Jaime sat in the seat by Sansa, which had been indicated to him by the way Margery had set the table. (Whenever a larger company was invited, she always placed them in front of each other, but, for these small dinners, she decided to seat them next to each other, the men facing one another, the women one in front of other.)
“Tyrion, I need you to help me in the kitchen with the main course,” Margery announced the moment Jaime was seated, and the fiancés disappeared with a swiftness and naturalness that became such highly qualified conspirators.

“You aren’t mad at seeing me here?” Sansa quietly asked Jaime the moment her friends were out of ear-shot.

He looked at her with genuine surprise.
“Why on earth would you think that?”

She gave another small smile.
“No reason,” she said quickly and inquired: “I didn’t know Ellaria taught kids’ classes. What did she do to make Stannis accost you?”

Jaime laughed.

“She doesn’t — she insisted on replacing one of the teachers who’s sprained her ankle, no matter what Oberyn and I said to try to dissuade her. The mad Dornishwoman is determined to degrade one of our studios’ hardwood floors by giving birth on it,” he answered. Seeing Sansa roll her eyes, he added: “Unlike you, summer child, I know that birth is a messy business — certainly worse than what my hardwood floors deserve.”

“I didn’t realize the Lannister family was descended from seahorses…” she giggled.

He fixed her with an annoyed glare, clearly disliking this theory on his ancestry:

“What nonsense are you talking now? I assure you, by way of crazy talk, I’ve had my fair share for the day with my brother-in-law.”

“In seahorses,” she informed him with a self-satisfied grin, “males are the ones giving birth.”

He rolled his eyes at this explanation of her jibe.

“I was present at my children’s birth,” was all he offered by way of clarifying his earlier statement; the finality of his tone indicated he was unwilling to add more, but she did not heed it:
“Why does that seem to surprise you?”

She looked down.

“My dad wasn’t in the room when my siblings and I were born,” she explained, never meaning to provoke a teasing grin from her interlocutor. Jaime was only too glad of the opportunity to taunt her:

“I have to ask: was it caused by Mother Stark’s sensibility or the Northern prudishness of your father?”

She pursed her lips together in indignation, but settled for a civil reply.

“It isn’t customary in the North, that’s all.”

“Or maybe Northmen’s valor isn’t quite suited to stomaching scenes of childbirth? White Walkers and whatnot are much less frightening prospects, I suppose.”

Seeing she was properly enraged, he laughed. She watched him throw his head back as he guffawed.
“I hate you,” she stated in exasperation. She meant for her words to counter the way her heart swelled with love when she watched him laugh, no matter what he laughed at.

“We’ve been over this, minx,” he said when he had stopped laughing. “You don’t hate me.”

Fearing that he might suspect more of her feelings than she would have liked, she narrowed her eyes at him.

“Do you take me for a liar?” she challenged.

She regretted her words the moment she noticed some of the humor leave the green eyes.

“Careful, minx,” he warned her, “I might believe your protestations of hatred.”

She remedied her own words by saying, with a warm smile:

“Don’t believe them... So, why was Stannis upset about Ellaria’s class?” she added hastily, noticing from the gleam in his eyes he had been far too pleased with her statement.

“You’ve been to her master-classes, haven’t you?” Jaime asked, some fatigue from his conversation with his brother-in-law returning to his intonations.

Sansa stared at him.

“But she wouldn’t teach children the same way!” she exclaimed. “Would she?..”

He chuckled.

“I don’t understand your horror — has Ellaria incorporated poll dancing into her masterclasses?”

Sansa shook her head.

“I didn’t think so,” he continued. “Anyway, I can only surmise from the agitation of the Baratheon that the little she did teach them was too much for him — pity he didn’t pass away from stroke right on the spot... Maybe I should have directed Stannis to you, minx, and you two could have deplored Ellaria depraving little children.”

“I’m sure there was a misunderstanding...” she attempted weakly. “I’m sure, even if Ellaria taught them... flexibility the way she taught us, she didn't use the same... metaphors to explain her meaning...”

He chuckled at her efforts.

“No, minx, she didn't. My understanding is that nothing remotely shocking enough to warrant your — or Stannis’, for that matter — indignation had occurred. However,” he added, “if little Shireen Baratheon doesn’t grow up to be scrupulous in her choice of men, believe me, the old man will blame it on Ellaria and me.”

Sansa laughed, thinking it unlikely the timid and well-mannered Shireen would come to be indiscriminate. Margery and Tyrion brought in the main course then, and the four of them began to eat, the dinner conversation shifting between discussions of King’s Landing politics, ballet, and friendly banter. She loved sitting next to Jaime, unable to prevent herself from pretending this was her place.

For him, these dinners, particularly the ones where it was just the four of them, seemed like visits to a dark version of a wonderland. As if looking onto the world through a distorted mirror, Jaime saw
what he wanted bewitchingly close to him even as he became increasingly aware of the chasm that
separated him from his desires. That chasm was filled with Sansa's shy smiles, her innocent blue
eyes, and his own feeling of distance from these qualities. Occasionally, he caught himself
contemplating her, table conversation nothing but a rumble in the distance, and one he barely heard,
absorbed as he was in the waves of her blue eyes and the rays of her smiles. Watching her was a
strange abyss, in which there was no sound, only the beholding of her. The temptation, and the
despair of its fulfillment, which he accepted, transformed, for him, these gatherings into joyous times
lightly tinged with pungency. The sweet dominated the bitter, however: being in her presence had its
own heartwarming magic, and it never failed to affect him. Never before one to seek out social
casual occasions, he now gravitated to the LBC dinners, chasing the image of her happy countenance. He
was unable to resist warming himself by spending evenings looking at her. He loved her. It was no
longer a revelation, but a truth he sought to ignore only occasionally, and, during these evenings, it
did not even weigh too heavily on him.

Sansa discovered that, with Margery and Tyrion, Jaime was more prone to teasing her than in less
intimate company, but, still, it was nothing compared to how unbearably taunting he could be when
it was just the two of them, and, to be fair, he teased Marge and Tyrion as well. She loved the small
dinners, regardless of the chagrin brought to her by the contrast in what they seemed and really were.

During that first small dinner, while they were finishing the main course, Margery began speaking
about an opera she and Tyrion had seen only a few days before; she was speaking with animation,
when Tyrion observed that Sansa, who was usually excited to discuss whatever it was that thrilled
her friend, remained somewhat silent, only punctuating Margery’s speech with “that sounds lovely”
and “how delightful” whenever appropriate.

“Sansa,” Tyrion queried, delicately cutting into Margery’s torrent of words, “have you already been
to King’s Landing Opera House?”

“Ummm… No, not yet,” she answered, in some embarrassment. “I kept wanting to go, but
something always came up…”

In truth, she did not want to go alone or to make herself third when Margery and Tyrion or Ellaria
and Oberyn were going. Consequently, she never went.

Tyrion and Margery both expressed their regrets; Margery in particular was remorseful. They
suggested she should come with them the next time, and she promised she would, though they all
knew she did so out of politeness and would never actually intrude on their evening out. It was on
the tips of both Margery and Tyrion's tongues to suggest Jaime should accompany her to the opera in
the nearest future, but neither dared voice these recommendations. During this interlude, Jaime had
remained silent, his eyes preserving their teasing glow, a hint of a smile hiding in the corners of his
lips. The conversation eventually changed directions, the evening came to an end. When their two
guests had left, the hosts were pleased Jaime drove Sansa home; they were confounded, however, by
his not inviting Sansa to the opera, something they perceived as a rare instance of his ungentlemanly
conduct.

Chapter End Notes

Well, what do you think? :}
The next day, Sansa, freshly out of a long, relaxing bath, with which she had rewarded herself after a particularly grueling rehearsal session, was tucked away comfortably in bed, re-reading one of her favorite medieval love songs collections, when her phone exploded with ringing, tearing apart the quiet power of the verses' images. It was Margery. After a brief exchange of greetings, her friend came straight to business:

“What are you doing right now?” she asked.

_That's out of the blue_, Sansa thought. It was seven in the evening, and even if Margery decided to have a girls’ night out, Sansa was determined to use every excuse in her arsenal to remain in her featherbed.

“I’m just reading,” she answered, “I decided to have an early night today after that intense rehearsal, especially since it’s Friday, and I can practice on the weekend. Why?”

“No reason,” answered Margery and hung up.

Sansa stared at her phone in perplexity a few moments, waiting for her friend to call back, since,
surely, such an abrupt end to such a strange conversation could only be explained by them getting suddenly disconnected. When, in a few minutes, Margery still had not called, Sansa dialed her friend’s number, but the frantic beeping on the other end of the line informed her that Margery was already speaking with someone else. Confused, Sansa decided to let the episode slide: she was just about to start her favorite passage in the entire collection, in which the knight saved the lady from a dragon… She dove back into her reading. It was not long before she was once again disturbed by the ringing of her phone. Convinced that Margery was calling back to explain her strange behavior, Sansa picked up without tearing her eyes away from the book, on the pages of which the lady had fainted in her knight’s arms.

“Hello?”

“Tell me, minx, do you have an evening dress?”

She was so startled by hearing Jaime’s voice that she dropped her book; she had not processed his words in the slightest.

“Jaime?”

“Who else?”

“I thought it was Marge calling… What were you saying?”

“I was asking if you had an evening dress?”

She recovered her wits sufficiently to jeer:

"Why? Do you need to borrow one? Not sure my size will fit you..."

He sighed.

"Just answer the question, minx."

"Yes, of course, I have an evening dress — more than one,” she said, surprise mingling with some indignation at his inquiry: what kind of woman did he think her, if he felt the need to ask about such basic things? Then, curiosity overcoming her, she added: “Why do you ask?"

Instead of answering her question directly, he made a suggestion:

"Why don't you throw one of these on, and I'll pick you up in an hour?"

"What?!!..."

"Don't pretend like you have other plans," he said, his tone brazen and unapologetic, "I have it on strict authority that you aren't doing anything this evening."

Was that why Marge called me?! flashed in her mind.

"Where do you mean to take me?"

"Let's just say I'm concerned by your poor acquaintance with King's Landing high culture and intend to educate you."

"Don't patronize me!"

She could hear the smile in his voice.
"Be ready in an hour, minx, or I'll throw you into my car in the state in which I'll find you," he said with humorous menace.

"I won't open the door, then!" she laughed.

"Just be ready in an hour."

Needless to say, Jaime's impromptu call had occasioned much confusion. Sansa spent forty minutes agonizing over the choice of dress — a task made particularly difficult by her ignorance of their destination. She settled on a long evening dress of green silk. It was a nameday present from Ygritte that had made Catelyn frown, so Sansa had never dared wear it; all the same, she had secretly taken it with her to King's Landing. Ygritte had not only great taste, but an eye for clothes that flattered the recipients of her gifts. When Sansa had tried the dress on a year ago, it had been like wearing a fabric made of water: it clung to the body but never stayed still, the silk folds, like waves, perpetually moving, perpetually revealing and concealing the outlines of the flesh underneath. The emerald color made her red hair look like fire. She slipped into the silk dress, ignoring the sensual caress of the cold fabric, and rushed to do her hair before she had the time to second-guess her choice. She decided to wear her hair down, like she often did now when not going to practice, curling it only slightly with hair irons. As she applied her make-up, she reflected that at least her minimalistic use of beauty products would have gained mother's approval — even if her choice of dress and hairstyle probably would not. Of course, she was not ready in an hour; in fact, she was only more or less prepared to leave her apartment in an hour and twenty minutes. She paused, realizing that, notwithstanding his threats, Jaime still had not arrived — or called. She spent ten minutes pacing her apartment, checking her appearance neurotically, half wondering if the Lannister had not played some cruel joke on her, worrying that his mad driving might have gotten him into an accident. An hour and a half after he had called her, she heard the doorbell ring. She went to open. Sure enough, Jaime Lannister, looking dashing in a white tuxedo and black trousers, stood before her; his smiling eyes acquired an odd intensity when he took in her appearance.

“You told me to be ready in an hour,” she reproached him once she had regained control of her mind after seeing him.

“I did,” he confirmed, and she wondered if the teasing she seemed to discern in his voice was an illusion brought by her habituation to his ever-taunting nature.

“It’s been an hour and a half,” she stressed.

“I know.”

She saw him smirk. This time, she had no doubt the teasing she had sensed was very real. She felt annoyance rise in her.

“Why did you tell me to be ready in an hour if you knew you would not get here until one and a half?!” she exclaimed.

His smirk widened.

“I told you to be ready in an hour to ensure you would be set to go when I actually came,” he answered, looking far too pleased. “And look — ready you are!” He had the temerity to wink at her.

She clenched her teeth, feeling that her rage might otherwise spill from her breast and unleash apocalypse onto the world. He seemed determined to test her limits:

“You are ready, aren’t you?” he inquired with false concern.

She did not trust herself to speak and silently pushed past him out of her apartment, throwing the
door closed behind her. His laughter accompanied her descent down the stairs.

Outside, he beat her to the passenger door, opening it but baring her passage with his body.

“Come, minx,” he said with the smirk that had so annoyed her, “don’t be so indignant. You know you weren’t ready in an hour.”

She pursed her lips, unwilling to acknowledge the truth of his words out loud, and decided trying to bargain with him:

“Where are we going?”

Realizing her intentions, Jaime gave a chuckle.

“That’s blackmail,” he accused her.

“You’re the one to talk…” she mumbled.

He stepped aside, so she could get into the car, which she did; her stubbornness manifested itself the moment he got behind the wheel:

“Where are we going?”

“City-center,” he answered, the half-smile replacing the smirk now that she had ceased the silent treatment.

“We are in the city-center,” she countered.

“I meant the historic center,” he specified.

She waited for him to elaborate and, during the pause, noticed that he was not driving as fast as she knew he usually did, although he was still going far above the speed limit. She smiled a little and decided to try a different tactic. Her tone no longer demanding but kittenish, her voice sweet, playful, she pressed:

“Jaime, where in the historic center are we going?”

He laughed again, and her disappointment at his reticence was evident on her face.

“You’ll see in exactly five minutes,” he told her. “Don’t pout.”

In five minutes, they were in front of the King’s Landing Royal Opera House. A valet had opened her door, and she stood at the high steps of the old and beautiful building, which were being ascended by men and women decked out in their best finery, the elites of the capital greeting each other with pleasant smiles.

_He didn’t say anything yesterday evening when Tyrion and Marge brought up that I’ve never been here_, Sansa thought as she watched Jaime entrust one of the valets with his car keys. She considered him in some awe. _And yet, he’s just brought me here, teasing me all the while... He can never do a good thing without pretending he’s annoying the hell out of whoever he’s doing it for..._ She smiled brightly at him when he came to stand next to her.

“You knew I’ve never been to King’s Landing Opera,” she said softly, “so you decided to bring me __.”

He smirked, cutting short her words of gratitude:

“Like I said, minx, I’m concerned by your distance from Southern high culture,” he taunted, “but, I can assure you, it’s far superior to whatever passes for opera in the North.”
She laughed at his jibe. She was far too happy and touched by his attention to feel ire even at his belittling of her home. He offered her his arm, and her heart did a salto mortale. She took it. Her arm linked through his, they walked up the marble stairs. It seemed that everyone knew him — the two of them could barely take a few steps without someone calling out a greeting, making his or her way through the crowd to shake hands. Everyone wished to know who she was, and Jaime’s “this is Sansa Stark” produced a rush of poorly masked astonishment among his acquaintances. Once their shock wore off, however, they were charming, offered her compliments, declared that she was a true Northern beauty and that they were thrilled to see her and Jaime that evening; they invariably expressed to her companion their admiration for the LBC, inquired after Tyrion and his father. Throughout this avalanche of social exchanges, Sansa kept feeling the warm, half-teasing green eyes on her. She loved walking arm in arm with him.

They were making their way through the lobby, their passage even slower now they were inside, where the concentration of people was higher still than at the entrance. Sansa could not remember the names of all those she had met, though she had seen some familiar faces in the crowd: Varys had given a small bow from afar, and she had glimpsed Davos Seaworth, whom she had met at the Lannister gala months ago. The social excitement provoked by Jaime's presence reminded her of an exaggeration of the way her own family was usually greeted at social functions in the North, which, of course, were not equivalent in scale to the sea of people gathered at the King's Landing Opera House. Finally, the ringing of the second bar bell served to speed up the movement of the theategoers, and she and Jaime were free to walk to their seats. They entered the royal circle, then the box located to the right of the stage. Even after they had been seated, acquaintances continued to greet Jaime from all sides, and he dutifully made the introductions. Once the wave of attention they were receiving ebbed a little, she asked him:

“Do you always sit here?”

“Tyrion and I have long had exclusive rights to this box, yes,” he confirmed.

She laughed softly, unsurprised.

“What about your father?” she asked. “Where does he sit if he comes?”

Jaime gave her a humorous smile.

“Can’t you guess?”

If she had to imagine a place for Tywin Lannister in this royal opera house, she could only think of one place. She looked to the royal box: located on the same level of the dress circle where they were seated, it was situated in its very center, directly opposite the stage. It was from thence that royalty, when it had existed, had watched the performances. She turned back to Jaime:

“The royal box?” she asked, and he smiled.

“The royal box,” he confirmed her guess.

“That’s where we always sat in the Winterfell Theater,” she said with a smile. “I would imagine. Tyrion and I sat there with him when we were young… Then, we decided that we required our own seats,” he told her.

Sansa thought that the brothers' separation from their father in the theater space was likely occasioned by the beginning of the Lannister men’s feud over the LBC, but decided not to ask. Indeed, had she even wanted to, she would not have gotten the chance, for, suddenly, someone called:

“Sansa!”
Surprised at hearing her name called so familiarly in that setting, she turned and discovered, in a mixture of pleasant surprise and some horror, Mr. and Mrs. Maegyr — Talisa’s parents. A year after Robb and Talisa had first gotten together, the Stark clan had been invited to Volantis to meet the family of Robb Stark’s first serious girlfriend (and, they all expected, soon to be his wife). Mr. and Mrs. Maegyr were a charming couple, and Mrs. Maegyr had particularly taken to Sansa. And now, they were smiling at her, Mrs. Maegyr leaning against the ledge of the adjoining box to get a look at her favorite.

“My goodness, Mrs. Maegyr, you’re in King’s Landing!” Sansa exclaimed. “How come I didn’t know?”

“Oh, we’re on our way to the Reach to surprise Tali and Robb,” she explained, “their exams just ended, so we decided to come by, treat them to some nice shopping and dining out!”

“We thought it was a waste not to visit King’s Landing on our way,” added Mr. Maegyr.

Suddenly, Sansa realized that she had been remiss in introducing her companion.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” she exclaimed again. “Allow me to introduce: Mr. and Mrs. Maegyr, this is Jaime Lannister; Jaime, this is Mr. and Mrs. Maegyr, the parents of Talisa, my brother Robb’s girlfriend.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” he said. The men shook hands; Jaime bowed over Mrs. Maegyr’s hand.

“It’s an honor, Mr. Lannister.”

Sansa was only slightly relieved that, coming from Volantis, Mr. and Mrs. Maegyr had no suspicion of her family’s difficult relationship with the Lannisters and hoped that the couple’s ignorance of that bad blood would encourage their forgetfulness. The introductions over, Mrs. Maegyr began questioning Sansa on the best boutiques to visit in the city during their brief stay and demanded she come to have dinner with them — to her delight, their chance meeting had given Mrs. Maegyr the opportunity to invite Sansa in person. Mr. Maegyr began talking to Jaime about the Maegyr Industries and the Lannister & Co., not realizing Tywin’s son had no acting part in his family business. These conversations, like all others, had been interrupted by the third bar bell, which announced the performance was about to begin. They took their seats; the lights soon dimmed, but not before Sansa noticed the tall figure of Tywin Lannister take his seat in the royal box. She knew Jaime had not seen his father and decided not to bring Tywin’s presence to his attention. Just as the stage, with the drop-curtain still lowered, became the only lit part of the theater and the appearance of the conductor was celebrated by applause, Sansa realized something. She leaned toward her companion.

“I forgot to ask you,” she whispered to Jaime’s silhouette in the darkness of the theater box, “which opera have we come to see?”

She heard him chuckle.

“It’s the two-centuries-old adaptation of The Dance of the Dragons,” he answered in a low voice.

“How did you know it was my favorite opera?!”

Jaime laughed softly.

“A lucky guess, minx, a lucky guess.”

"Guess who's just called me?" Margery had asked Tyrion a few hours earlier.

"Olenna?" he speculated without tearing his eyes away from his computer screen: figuring out
optimal ticket prices for the premiere and beyond was a maddening but necessary exercise that he did not trust to anyone else and that demanded his full attention.

"No, it was your brother, actually," Margery clarified, her voice faintly tinged with irritation at not being given Tyrion's full attention. She decided to test her lover's level of abstraction by saying: "We've decided to run away together."

"Hmm... very well," came from her absorbed fiancée, "and how's Olenna doing?"

"Tyrion!" She called loudly, and he snapped out of his mathematics.

"What?"

"It wasn't grandma, it was Jaime."

"And?"

"Apparently, he's much more considerate of Sansa than we've given him credit for yesterday."

"What do you mean?"

"He's just called to ask if I knew whether Sansa's free tonight — I happen to know she is, but I'll check, just in case. He means to take her to the opera this evening."

Tyrion smiled.

"Fantastic."

"Now you can go back to your stupid spreadsheets," she allowed and dialed her friend.

"I think I better call father, or he will be upset with me again," Tyrion answered, throwing away his laptop all to happily.

He dialed, too.

"Father? I've some news that will please you..."

Predictably, after being informed that his eldest son and the young woman, to whom Tywin invariably referred in his mind as "Jaime's girl," were going to the opera that evening, the old lion decided he would attend as well. He arrived much in advance and occupied a strategic position on the inner balcony of the lobby overlooking the entrance hall. He watched his son and Sansa Stark's progress through the gallery, which separated the entrance from the theater's auditorium, thinking that a more handsome couple could not be found. Confirming once again that they looked perfect together, Tywin did not fail to notice that, since the last time he had seen them walk arm in arm at his gala, the way they behaved with each other had changed. Sure, it was clear Jaime still teased her and she fought valiantly against his taunts, but the ease with which they interacted and the genuine, unconcealed affection that was plain to see in the way they looked at each other, alerted the Lannister patriarch to the deepening of the feelings between them that filled him with so many hopes and happy thoughts. Jaime and Sansa looked the way two people soon to become a couple ought to have looked, in Tywin's opinion: as if they had become friends and, somewhere along the way, had fallen in love, friendship and romantic affection nurturing one another. Satisfied, Tywin Lannister went to greet a selected few acquaintances, then made his way to the royal box, secured for him in perpetuity.

*The Dance of the Dragons* was Sansa's undisputedly favorite opera for a simple enough reason: it
originated from an old medieval ballad, a haunting one, which told of the death of two lovers amidst the Doom of Valyria. Originally, the song had been meant to be performed by two voices — male and female. In the Golden Age, six hundred years ago, when the opera had been invented, its creators had expanded some of the famous ballads into hours-long performances by dozens of voices. The Dance of the Dragons was one of them. In the Silver Age, when theater — a welcome mixture of socializing and art consumption — persisted, as it had to this day, as the favorite occupation of elites during their evening hours of leisure, a well-known author of librettos had reworked the Golden Age version of The Dance of the Dragons and created the opera that outshone its earlier form. In this adaptation, two lovers in Old Valyria were prevented from being together because she was a daughter of a noble house and he — nothing more than a combatant in the Fighting Pits, whose swordsmanship had brought him the renown of the most famous gladiator. They had seen each other and fallen in love one day when she had come to watch the fighting. As the city fell apart during the Doom, they found their way to each other — only to die in one another's arms. The music and the singing parts of the opera were as beautiful as the tragic love story they told. When little Sansa had first seen the performance, she had wept with heartbreak but forever fell in love with the spectacle. She had made her parents take her to see it at least a dozen times over the years, much to the chagrin of Arya, who despised the opera that had so captivated her sister. Each time Sansa went to see The Dance of the Dragons, she cried at the end. It never got old.

The first act opened with choruses describing the glory of Old Valyria on the eve of the catastrophe that would destroy the city, and then showed the young noblewoman and the gladiator falling in love. Their arias were beautiful. Sansa had to admit that the performance by the singers of the King's Landing Opera House was superior to that of the Winterfell Theater. Indeed, their voices were of such incredible emotional and melodic power that even the first act had nearly brought tears to her eyes. When the curtain fell and the lights came back on at the end of the first act, she remained dazed for a few moments, slowly returning to reality. Discovering Jaime watching her with a mixture of teasing and wonder in his eyes made her feel, for the first time, that real life was superior to the enchantment of the theatrical performance.

"Well, minx," he said, "I did not realize operas had this effect on you. Will you drown the theater in tears by then end of the third act?"

She did not even attempt to contradict him.

"I probably will."

He chuckled.

"I had no suspicion I had brought this on myself! Come, let's not stay in the box and make ourselves easy targets for all the acquaintances swarming in this theater tonight," he smirked as he rose and offered her his arm. They made their way to the concessions. Then, armed with champagne glasses, they walked along the galleries of the opera building, occasionally pausing to speak with acquaintances.

"Tell me," Sansa asked Jaime when they had been left in peace for a few minutes, "why does your father come to see an opera but never a ballet performance? It's not that one art form had ever been thought superior to the other..."

"Oh, he used to go see ballets as well as operas," Jaime explained. "How else do you imagine Tyrion and I became so entranced with our profession? He stopped attending ballets — and has never come to a single LBC performance — as a way of demonstrating his disapproval of our careers." He sounded cold; she knew he was hurt, even after all these years.

She recalled her own conversation with his father:
“If you were the one to save the LBC, why haven’t you ever come to see a performance?”

“I wasn’t invited.”

"But it's been such a long time,” she spoke softly to Jaime, “have you tried inviting him?"

She was thinking of her own determination to invite Tywin to *The Fountain of Tears*, which she had conceived during their lunch all those weeks ago.

Jaime gave her a sarcastic smile.

"Having our invitation thrown back in our faces would be bad business, minx: the LBC tickets are, fortunately, both expensive and in high demand — no need to waste them."

"I doubt fortune has anything to do with it," she smiled.

He decided to change subjects.

"So, tell me, minx, why is The Dance of the Dragons your favorite opera? It's not the tragic love story, is it?"

She rolled her eyes at him.

"Laugh at me all you want, Lannister!" she spoke audaciously. "It's a beautiful love story! Of course, it's tragic!"

His laughter at her words was more than a little acerbic.

"You know I'm right!" she exclaimed.

"Tell me, minx," he goaded her, "in your view, is tragedy a necessary component of a beautiful love story?"

He noticed something change in her face, as if a shadow had been cast onto her features, and she looked away from him. She surprised him with her long silence; clearly, she was thinking of a specific case. When she looked back to him, mirth had gone out of her face, and she seemed a little sad, but she smiled all the same:

"Tragedy has a way of finding beautiful love stories, Jaime," she said, "and it doesn't make them any less beautiful."

"That's where you're wrong, minx. This opera, our ballet — they are artistic illusions, nothing more. Tragic love stories are tragic because they hide a lot of ugliness."

She gave another sad smile.

"Some — perhaps; but not all."

“*All*, believe me,” he countered with more force than he realized. "I can say that from personal experience."

He had been thinking of Cersei. Singers, had they been given the chance, could have woven a pretty tale out of their affair, hiding the lies, the hideousness that had made it what it was.

"I happen to be speaking from personal experience as well, Jaime," she said a little defiantly; he thought her voice shook slightly, which made him all the more keen to know whom she had in mind,
"and I can tell you that I wouldn't exchange my own tragic love story for anything in this world. It's beautiful, and it isn't at all ugly."

Before he could question her, before he could fully intake the significance of her words and conceive of her, for the first time, as in love with someone and — stranger still, to his eyes — rejected, they had been interrupted.

"Jaime, Lady Sansa," came his father's voice, "what a pleasant coincidence. How are you?"

Jaime had been far too consumed by the notion of Sansa's tragic love story to acknowledge his father; he watched Sansa while she greeted him, as polite as ever, her smile one of genuine pleasure:

"Very well, Lord Lannister, and yourself?"

"I'm very well, my dear. I seem to have interrupted some interesting conversation?"

"Oh," she smiled and waved her hand dismissively, "only a disagreement about the beauty of tragic love stories..."

"Indeed? I'm something of an expert," he said with a benevolent smile, which encouraged Sansa to respond with good humor:

"Your son claims to be one, as well."

"Indeed?"

Tywin, who had noticed Jaime's taciturnity and frowned eyebrows, still looked quite surprised, which belatedly reminded Sansa of the father's unawareness of his twins' relationship.

"Well, I think most of us have experience of heartbreak in one way or another," she said in an attempt to take the discussion to a more general level.

"And yourself?"

This question of Tywin's certainly served to return Jaime's full attention to the conversation. She stole a brief glance at the son, then answered the father:

"Yes, like most people."

The younger and the elder Lannister had interpreted her answer very differently: Jaime, thinking her look but an indication of their former conversation, wondered who had dared break Sansa’s heart and could not but wish it were in his power to destroy the monster; Tywin, by contrast, smiled, realizing that Sansa conceived of Jaime as the protagonist of her tragic love story, which, the Lannister patriarch believed, would in fact be a happy one.

"Well," Tywin spoke in a light tone, more than satisfied with her answer, "what’s a little heartbreak if it allows one to appreciate the fine artistic performances that much better?"

She smiled:

"I couldn’t agree more."

"Have you been to this opera house before?" Tywin inquired then.

"It’s my first time here," Sansa answered. "My family and I used to go to the theater quite often, back in Winterfell, but until tonight I haven’t had the chance to experience the theater life of King’s
Landing outside the Lannister Ballet Company — Jaime was very kind to bring me,” she finished with a smile directed at her companion.

It did not escape Tywin’s notice that his son’s grim countenance brightened at that. “Well, I’m glad Jaime is behaving himself,” he said in a tone ever so faintly imbued with humor, and Sansa could not help a brief giggle that escaped her lips: it never ceased to amaze her that anyone could speak in this way to Jaime Lannister; as at the gala, she found it rather gratifying. “You know,” Tywin continued, with a brief but pointed look toward his son, “there’s a new opera, which was only recently produced and which, I think, you will both enjoy: it’s called The Oragif Marriage, and it’s based on a comic play. I suppose it will not even trigger a debate on tragic love.”

“It sounds wonderful,” Sansa answered. “I don’t remember you having a taste for comedy, father.”

Jaime, finally speaking, was doing so with heavy sarcasm. Tywin considered his eldest son, a little smirk tugging at the old lips:

“Have you ever heard, Jaime, that people change with age?”

The bar bell stole Jaime’s opening for another jibe directed at his father; when its sound had ceased, Tywin spoke:

“Well, it was lovely seeing you both here,” he made to depart, then turned back: “Ah, and Jaime? Be a good lad and make sure lady Sansa gets to see The Oragif Marriage — I’m sure she will enjoy it.”

With that, he took his leave of them. They, too, began making their way back to their seats.

“You should be kinder to your father,” Sansa noted, thinking that Jaime would not dare incinerate her with his gaze in public. Still, he scowled. “I do realize,” she continued, “that you aren’t on the best of terms, but he seems to be trying to make amends.”

He turned to look her in the eye.

“You shouldn’t always look for the best in people, minx,” he said seriously, “or you risk imagining good where none exists.”

She was undeterred by his words. “Many would say this about you, Jaime, but I found that I had not imagined anything when I thought you were a good person.”

In the second entr’acte, Sansa was wise enough to check her phone, wary of disappearing again and then having to lie and deny her way out of family interrogations. Noticing that she had several missed calls from Jon, she regretfully separated herself from Jaime and the pleasant group of acquaintances, who were discussing the art life of King’s Landing, and dialed her brother.

“Sansa,” Jon sounded relived, and she smiled at hearing his gruff voice, “I’m glad you haven’t gone missing like last time.”

“After that catechism, I’ve learned my lesson,” she laughed.

“One would hope. I was just calling to check on you. How’s everything going with the rehearsals?”

“Jon, nothing’s greatly changed since we talked yesterday… We had a long day rehearsing today after the weekend, and the ballet is going very well. We’re just about to start rehearsing that part where it’s Marge and me dancing, and I’m really excited about that.”
“And is Jaime Lannister giving you any trouble?” Jon queried.

Once in a few weeks, Jon invariably asked that question. Having only seen Jaime Lannister once, the younger man remembered the intimidating sight of an irritated lion, and, like everyone in the Stark clan except for Ygritte, Jon did not like the idea of his sister working in close proximity with the man. Ignorant, like all the Starks, of the closeness between Sansa and the Kingslayer, he felt the need to ask if the Lannister was giving her any trouble. Sansa cast a look in Jaime’s direction. Surrounded by the group of his acquaintances, he stood taller than most men and towered over women; he was dashing, elegant, cheerful. Feeling her eyes, he met her glance and gave her one of his taunting smirks and winked at her; she smiled back, her eyes shining. Tearing her gaze away from him with some difficulty, she spoke to her brother:

“Jon… Jaime Lannister isn’t giving me any trouble at all. He’s… You know, I think that… Well, that he’s been misjudged — ”

“I don’t think so, San, and you better be wary of him.” Jon sounded concerned. She did not wish to worry him, so her defense of Jaime must wait another day. She sighed. Her brother continued: “Where are you, San? I’ve just realized there’s a hubbub of voices coming from where you are.”

“Oh, I’m at the King’s Landing Opera House,” she said, thinking it would have been better if she had gone to speak in the women’s bathroom, though that would have meant she couldn’t steal glances at Jaime while she spoke…

“Really? Well, that must please you! Please tell me at least that you aren’t seeing The Dance of the Dragons again?”

She laughed. “I am…”

“Why am I not surprised?” Jon feigned exasperation, but he sounded happy for her; he would not be so happy, she reflected, had he but known on whose arm she had come. As if he had guessed her thoughts, her brother asked: “Who are you with?”

“Oh, no one, I came on my own.”

She knew her voice sounded sour; she hated lying to Jon, of all people; she hated even more that she had to lie without good cause: Jaime was a good man, and it was not fair her family despised him so.

"I'll never, in a million years, believe that you went to the opera alone,” Jon countered, and a pregnant pause fell between them. "Sansa? Who are you with?"

"Umm... Well... It's no one you know..."

"Is it the mysterious Jay again?"

"Yes," she confessed.

"Sansa?" Jon's voice sounded odd; it was simultaneously touched and suspicious, happy and frightened. "Tell me true: are you very much in love with him?"

"What? No! Of course not, wherever did you get such an idea?"

"Don't lie to me. Do you love him very much?"
She could tell from her brother's tone that, after his sudden insight, it was useless to keep up the pretense.

"Yes," she said, glancing at Jaime once again — he was laughing at something one of the men near him had said, and her voice, too, had changed, becoming softer, lower, "very much."

"Then I would like to meet him," Jon suggested gently, and she heard a smile in his voice. Oh, you wouldn't like that at all. Notwithstanding her brother's best intentions, this was impossible, although she could not tell him that. Instead: "He doesn't care for me in the same way, Jon, I'm just a friend to him." Before her brother could voice his doubts on the idea that there were men, who weren't family, mad enough not to admire his sister, she hastened to lie, just a little: "Oh, Jon, there goes the bar bell, I have to rush!" Just as she had spoken these words, the bar bell, unable to resist coming to the aid of so lovely a lady, began ringing with ferocity. "I'll talk to you later, Jon," she said before she hung up.

The fact that the bell had begun ringing after Sansa had said it had sounded was not lost on Jon Stark. He turned to Ygritte. His lover was leaning over the small table in their room, her face focused as she studied for an anatomy exam, her eyes, serious for once, glued to the textbook.

"I think my little sister's in love," Jon said. He sounded bewildered; a little amused; very worried.

Ygritte, who had been too concentrated on her studies to fake surprise, mumbled:

"If I'm a judge of anything, she's been in love for quite a few months now."

"What do you mean?!" Jon's startled exclamation snapped her concentration into splinters.

"Well, I just had suspicions," she said slyly, her low, throaty voice slightly risen, as always when she taunted him; and she taunted him so very, very often.

"And do you know with whom?" the worried brother questioned.

"Why, of course!" she bragged, but realized in time she was supposed to guard her redhead sister's dirty lion secrets — mainly, for the safety of said lion, but also because she did not care to see Jon sent to jail for murder. "It's a guy named Jay, a 'friend' of hers — or so she says — but I know better."

Ygritte, like Sansa, did not consider this a lie. If Jon did not know that Jay was Jaime Lannister's nickname — well, so much the better for both men's sakes.

"Do you know him?" Jon asked, frowning.

"I don't, but my brother does. Tormund says Jay can be an arrogant bastard, but he's never denied he's the good sort. Honestly, Jon, you needn't worry so much! Sansa's a big girl. Give her time, and maybe, if you aren't too much of a pain in her ass, she'll introduce you."

Jon grumbled his wolf-like disapproval with the eloquence of Ghost, who was lying at his feet. On the one hand, Jon wanted Sansa to find true love — the kind that made the heart sing, like when he himself looked at Ygritte. On the other, he most heartily disliked the idea of his little sister having a boyfriend. Sansa was too young for these things. What if she got hurt? He and Robb would kill the bastard, of course, but that would not change his sister's heartbreak, if it came... No, Jon decidedly disliked this new development, even if he told himself it would all turn out well and his sister was too good a girl to fall in love with the wrong man.

The duet of the dying lovers at the end of the third act was, as always, too much for Sansa to bear dry-eyed, and, considering the added power of King's Landing Opera's talent, it was not surprising
that she was weeping quietly by the time the lights had come back at the end of the performance. Jaime might have laughed and teased at the prospect of her crying just from watching an opera centered on a tragic love story, but seeing her tears was a different matter entirely. Rationally, he might realize that she was sobbing for no serious reason, but her crying nevertheless had a disconcerting effect on him.

“Come, minx,” Jaime attempted, “you must be more socially responsible: if all the other women here take after you, I swear, there will not be a single sane man left.”

She smiled apologetically through her tears, but his first entreaty had produced no material difference in her state. They were making their way out of the opera, and something in the intimacy of a woman touched to tears and a man consoling her, his lips smiling but his eyes concerned, had deterred all of the many acquaintances from accosting them.

“Think at least of my reputation!” Jaime taunted, a task that was difficult when small streams flowed down her cheeks, “I’m accounted a villain as it is, but should anyone suspect I’ve made so fair a lady cry, I wouldn’t be surprised if that turned the public opinion against me forever — and more stealthily than before.” Seeing that she smiled but her tears had not quite stopped, he added: “If they find me hanging from a lamppost tomorrow, minx, it’ll be your fault.”

“I’m sorry for being so silly,” she mumbled through her tears and sniffed as if to stop the crying, but a few more tears escaped her eyes. “You must think me very foolish,” she added, not knowing that the sight of her easily touched nature moved Jaime’s heart too powerfully even for him to ignore.

“Frankly, all I think is that I’ll never again take you to an opera that doesn’t have a happy ending,” he threatened, but his half-teasing, half-worried expression lent little credibility to his words. “Moreover, I’m concerned about The Fountain of Tears: will you cry at the end of our own ballet as well? If that’s the case, I’d like to be forewarned, so I don’t slip and fall after you’ve drenched the stage with your tears.”

“I promise to bear Margery’s and my own fictional deaths with as much stealth as I can,” she said, finally regaining control of herself. “Truly, Jaime, it was such a wonderful performance, I’m so glad to have seen it! And I’m sorry I’m such a cry-baby,” she added, looking apologetic.

“I’ll do my best to forgive you — and to pretend I had nothing to do with your crying.”

It was true that, no matter how ridiculous this was, he felt oddly remorseful to have had any connection with her tears, however silly the reason behind them.

The valet had brought his car, and Jaime had opened the door for her. Once they were both seated inside, it occurred to Sansa that she wished very strongly this evening, which had been so lovely, would not end just yet.

“Well,” she said, her tone playful, her expression a little coy, “if you feel very guilty over my tears —”

He decided to play along and declared dramatically:

“I most certainly do.”

“In that case, you could take me dancing to the Baelor Square — I know it would do wonders to dry my tears,” she smiled.

Having made the suggestion that her mother would have doubtlessly considered too forward, she looked at him and was both relieved and pleased to discover a playful smile on his lips.
“I think I can make the sacrifice if you promise to stop this weeping.”

Her eyes had been dry for a while now, but neither pointed it out. He drove them as close as cars were permitted to come to the Baelor Square, and, once he had found a spot to park, they walked to the piazza. The musicians played in one of its corners as they always did. It was familiar, the way Jaime brought her close to him; it was familiar, the way Sansa placed her arm around his shoulder and neck; it was familiar, their dancing there — it seemed now as if they had always danced on this square in the evenings, that it was their habitual diversion. It seemed also that they had always smiled at each other thus — half-smiles that were warmer than full smiles could ever be. All the same, however much they might struggle to elongate time, it remained finite, and the musicians — cold-hearted creatures that they were — deserted them too soon. Jaime and Sansa retraced their way back to his car; this time, they had no more excuses to delay parting.

While the streets flashed past them, Jaime’s mind was occupied with an unusual activity: he was reevaluating the truth of his own statements. When he had spoken about tragic love stories earlier in the evening, Jaime had thought of his sister. Perhaps, this was because that particular love story had ended, and thus receded into the realm of narration; perhaps, it was because in that moment, he had subconsciously refused to admit there could not be a happy one for him and the minx. The latter idea was impressed upon him with renewed force as he drove her to her place — and not, of course, to his. They might sit next to each other at family dinners and among friends, but they remained separated. Another story emerged for his consideration: he might remain in love with Sansa all his life without much hope for happiness, and yet he could not conceive of this prospect as ugly. Perhaps, the minx had been right after all…

Sansa wondered, as she was prone to do, at Jaime’s absorption, wishing time had been caught in a loop at the opera house and they had remained there, walking the galleries, watching the performance, over and over again; or, that life had exchanged its linearity for a never-ending arch when they had reached Baelor Square and she Jaime had remained there, forever dancing — like the figurines on the old clock tower at Winterfell. But time had little care for her wishes, and it brought Jaime’s car to a stop at her building all too quickly.

She was about to reach for the inner door handle of the car, when his voice stopped her.

“I have given thought to what you’ve said about tragic love stories,” he said, and she had not been deceived by the assumed nonchalance and teasing of his tone, “and I’m ready to admit you aren’t wrong: some may well be beautiful.”

She gave him a teasing smile:

“Perhaps you would like to say that I was right?” she inquired.

“Now why would I want to do that?” he taunted, and she laughed.

“Good night, Jaime,” she said by way of answer, “thanks again for the evening.”

“You aren’t letting me walk you to the door, are you?” he asked as she opened the passenger door.

“No. Good night, Jaime,” she repeated softly and smiled before getting out of the car and walking away. She could still hear the aria of the dying lovers echo in her heart.

Chapter End Notes
Well?.. How did you like this chapter? Do let me know! :) And happy Season 7 watching, everybody! We made it! :)

Attention, Attention: A Lady MIA

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

Here’s the newest chapter, and I’m really excited to introduce a feisty new character, of whom, thus far, we have only seen very little… Moreover, I’m glad to give you more of Mrs. Maegyr, a woman who is a force to be reckoned with, much like the other lady who makes her first significant appearance in this chapter! Enjoy! :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I always hate you with a passion,
And I like you only on certain days.
Don’t look for compassion
In my merciless ways,
You’ll find none.
I think you’re stupid, ridiculous —
Until we’re done,
I will repeat this.
I’m your sister,
But you can call me "Pain."
I know I’m sinister:
I like this better than my own name.
But when I hurt,
Fighting for you in the snow,
I know in my heart
That I love you: so-so.

Sansa walked faster as she made her way down the avenue to the restaurant where she was to lunch with Mrs. Maegyr (Mr. Maegyr had to participate in an unplanned business meeting and, regretfully, could not join them). Sansa looked forward to seeing her. Ever since the Stark’s family visit to Volantis, she had been fascinated by Talisa’s mother. Trianna Maegyr, named after one of the legendary triarchs of Volantis, demonstrated in full that her city’s early predilection for gender equality — both sexes had been allowed to vote for centuries in Volantis — produced women who
had to be reckoned with. She was beautiful in the same way that Talisa was beautiful — dark hair, large brown eyes; and yet, in Trianna’s face, a small, thin, slightly hooked nose and thin, yet sensuous, lips created a sense of danger and recklessness that the features of Talisa’s kindly father had erased from the daughter’s face. The impression of danger and recklessness Trianna’s face communicated acquired an even greater impact the moment one heard her speak. Her speech, confident and clear, announced her noble birth but also reflected a brilliant education and a self-assurance acquired over the course of a successful career. The way she spoke — knowing her words would be heard and considered — gave her personality an entrancing power. She was easily excited, yet her eyes never lost the shine of intellect — even her excitement was not allowed to overcome her mind. She was much younger than her husband, but Mr. Maegyr, a handsome man, aged gracefully, and the two made for a couple who caught one’s eye. Sansa had fallen under Trianna Maegyr’s spell in the first minutes of their acquaintance, and something in the Northern girl’s open-hearted admiration and easy devotion had enticed the woman who resembled so little the demure and quiet-spoken girl. Among Starks, Sansa was second only to Robb in Trianna’s eyes. In some respects, she even proved more interesting to the older woman: for when they had met, Sansa had been only sixteen — a young girl on the threshold of beautiful womanhood, who was yet to learn her power and her strength. Trianna had never been like this — timid, hiding her fire — which made her curious as to whether, one day, Sansa Stark would burn through the layer of frost that seemed to envelop her. From what she had seen at the opera house, Trianna believed that, now, Sansa was nothing like the timid girl she had known for two years. She was a young woman — no longer a young girl — who had learned both wanting and daring in her time away from home. And, reflected Trianna Maegyr, away from her mother. She did not like the way Catelyn had raised Sansa, making her too subdued, too ready to oblige, Trianna thought. Arya was more like a girl ought to have been, in Trianna’s eyes; but then, she had to admit that Talisa, her own daughter, although encouraged in every possible way to be louder and more audacious than most boys were, grew up to be both quiet and calm, if undaunted. Trianna sighed. In character, her daughter took after her father.

Sitting on the terrace of the restaurant, nursing a glass of white wine, Trianna caught sight of Sansa walking toward her. Yes, she looked different. A confidence was in the way she moved, a sense of knowing where she belonged and of liking the place — both physical and social — she inhabited. Trianna’s lips pulled into a smile so small it could have been a smirk: Sansa Stark had grown up faster in the past months than she had in the two years the older woman had known her. Trianna wondered if the man — none other than Jaime Lannister himself — with whom she had seen Sansa, had been in any way responsible for a part of this transformation. An older lover certainly could be a better influence than an old-fashioned mother, Trianna reflected.

“I’m so happy to see you,” she cried to Sansa when the young woman came close enough that she was in hearing distance.

Sansa smiled at her and waved, making her way to the terrace.

“So am I!” she exclaimed, taking her place across from Trianna. “It’s been ages since we last talked! I’ve missed you,” she added with a quiet smile. Even the way she smiled had changed, Trianna noted: it was still as gentle as before but carried greater confidence.

“No wonder we haven’t spoken,” Trianna said, “you’ve just started building your career! I’m surprised you have time to meet with me today: when I was working for the first year, I don’t know that I had time to sleep!”

They spent the next hour catching up: talking of friends, their family — for they both conceived of Starks and Maegyrs as one family already — and their jobs. Sansa spoke about The Fountain of Tears with an excitement and a force Trianna had never seen in her before. Herself, Mrs. Maegyr
narrated her latest triumphs in advancing the trading company of which she was CEO. They spoke as old friends, as equals now, since the difference in their ages had been erased by the change in the younger woman, who had come into her own. Eventually, however, Trianna mentioned a subject that was not quite family and not quite work.

“So... Tell me about Jaime Lannister,” she asked Sansa with a conspiratorial smile that bespoke her pride in her favorite's choice, “quite the name and quite the man.”

To the older woman’s surprise, Sansa suddenly reverted to the blushing and uncertain version of herself. That was odd for a young woman who was given the chance to brag about her older, talented, handsome, and rich lover.

“I…” she began, then her blush deepened, anger dominating embarrassment, and her confidence came back, although her skin color remained the shade of a pomegranate. “I am so tired of the assumptions people make about us!” She exclaimed. “Honestly, I had hoped you, at least, would not!”

That was interesting.

“What do you mean?” Trianna questioned, intrigued.

“We aren’t together,” Sansa said more calmly, regaining some of her normal coloring.

“Why not?” asked her interlocutor in a tone that seemed to reproach the younger woman for wasting opportunities.

Sansa only shrugged. Under the questioning that, of course, followed, she revealed enough of her friendship with Jaime Lannister, confessing her own affection for him, to make her older friend understand.

“I think you’ve been very foolish, my dear,” Trianna said when Sansa had finished, “but considering the upbringing you’ve received, this is hardly surprising,” she concluded with a sigh.

Trianna Maegyr was perhaps the only person who could so blatantly criticize Catelyn Stark and yet remain among Sansa’s friends. Nevertheless, Sansa’s countenance was one of frigid civility, which repressed hot words. Trianna would not be deterred by this.

“Your mother, I don’t know why, seems to have made you believe that men must be the ones to pick the women they like, court them, marry them, and carry them off to castles. While being admired, courted, married, and carried off to a castle is quite fun, it’s ridiculous — and harmful — to sit around waiting for this to happen. You want Jaime Lannister? Got and get him! Nothing but your demureness stands in your way.”

Sansa protested by rehearsing — once again — that Jaime Lannister was a man whose heart had only been broken a few weeks ago and who thought of her as a friend. When Mrs. Maegyr callously suggested that wounded lions made for easier prey, Sansa flared with indignation, catching her older friend completely off-guard with her vehement protestations and using Trianna’s stunned silence to reiterate her own objections to her friend’s arguments as well as her own certainty that Jaime was out of her reach.

“Well, my dear,” Mrs. Maegyr had recovered and was ready to fight again, "what if we talked, not of your case, but in more general terms?" Clearly, this had been a rhetorical question, for she continued without giving Sansa a chance to answer: "Let's think like this. Imagine, there are two women. One is close friends with the man she loves, and he no longer has a lover; the other woman is in love with a man who is happily married. Now, tell me, which one of the women has more chances at success?”
"Well?"

"The first," Sansa acknowledged on a sigh and in some irritation.

"Exactly!" Mrs. Maegyer confirmed. "But all depends on their behavior. Imagine that even the second woman has some chances — of that I am the living proof! Indeed, when I met Vhalaso, he was married, but I took him away from his wife. Why shouldn't I have? I loved him better than she, I could make him happier than she ever could — and I did! What I'm trying to tell you, darling, is that your chances of getting that wonderfully handsome, rich, and accomplished man are very great indeed — you must only make a little effort. Show a little more of your feelings than you do now: you can appear a little cold, my dear! I'm not at all suggesting you throw yourself at him: nothing so prevents a man from falling in love, and besides, nothing could be more out of character for you. But be just a little bit more loving with him and push him — as discreetly as possible — to be more loving with you. What do I mean by that? Oh, the simplest things, really. Take his hand when you walk, kiss his cheek when you part, embrace him when you're happy — the simplest things. Don't be afraid to be affectionate, especially since he's been heartbroken. You certainly want to run your hand through his hair, put your arm through his — do so! How do you say? 'What if it's all for nothing?' Well that, my dear, in your case, in unlikely. And even if success were not assured, what do you lose? He's not the kind of man who would hold your feelings against you or use you — he doesn't strike me as a heartless rascal. Even if he doesn't reciprocate your love, he will be touched, I'm sure, and treat you gently. What do you say, 'embarrassing'? Ah, my dear, allow me to tell you this: pride is a poor, bitter consolation when you contemplate a wasted opportunity in the game of love. There's nothing so utterly wretched as looking back onto a wasted opportunity, particularly when it comes to the affairs of the heart. I hope you take my advice, my sweet girl, and you can thank me at your wedding reception. Now, you promise to think what I've told you over, yes?"

Sansa promised, however unwillingly. No one refused promises when they were demanded by Trianna Maegyer. But the younger woman was driven to reflection, once again, that nothing was stranger than for someone like Trianna to have produced a daughter as quiet-spoken and restrained as Talisa, even if those qualities concealed a will of iron and a determination to reach her goals. Though Sansa had protested against Trianna’s assumption about Jaime being her lover, no one’s words had shaken her as much. Unlike Tyene, Ellaria, Margery, and Ygritte, who, Sansa thought, were simply teasing her, she knew that Trianna Maegyer would never voice an assumption she did not believe. It made Sansa curious, inviting her mind to open doors of speculation, from which it shrank back in fear. For days, her conversation with Talisa’s mother would resonate in her ears and make her wonder, if perhaps, she could overpower Cersei Lannister's ghost.

During rehearsals, Sansa would always leave her phone on the same setting as she did at night: the third consecutive call allowed through, otherwise silent. They had begun working on the scene of the confrontation between Nissa and Tanea, in which the jealous lover confronted her rival before killing her. Sansa loved developing a sequence in which she and Margery danced together, even if it was a tragic scene. The girls had met a few times in the evenings to plan out some of their steps, but most of the sequence was emerging when they worked as a group, under Jaime’s directions. Sansa and Margery’s friendship, brought to the fore by this dance and its conception, gave the meetings a new atmosphere — the girls’ jokes, their occasional inability to keep from bursting into laughter imparted to Jaime’s studio an unfamiliarly girlish feeling.

They were mid-movement when Sansa’s phone rang. She looked at Jaime apologetically, half expecting him to snap, but he just gave her a quick nod and called for a break; she went for her phone. It was ringing with the melody reserved for her parents’ calls. She saw her mother’s smiling face lit up her screen and was worried. She went to the hallway and picked up:

"Mom?"
"Oh, Sansa!" Catelyn sounded distressed — distressed and apologetic. "It’s Lady," she said.

Sansa felt relief, on the one hand: at least it was not one of her siblings, her father, or someone else in the family; on the other hand, she felt a cold fear go through her very core. Lady! Her direwolf, who had been her constant companion for five years before she had left for King’s Landing; her pretty, well-groomed wolf, whom she missed terribly…

"What’s wrong with her?" Sansa asked in a small voice.

*Please don’t let her be hurt! Please, not Lady!*

Her mother suddenly turned rather vicious — an unusual state for Catelyn Stark.

"It’s that idiot, Theon!" she barked. "I told your father never to trust a Greyjoy — especially with a Northern direwolf! I told him!" she paused, as if to calm herself and went on: "Well, your uncle is staying over for a couple of days… The children and I went out shopping, and your father and uncle wanted to go skying, but they couldn’t take all the wolves with them, of course, so Ned — I don’t know what he was thinking!.. Well, darling, you see, your dad asked Theon to look after the wolves, and that drowned moron… Oh, sorry, darling, I mean — that fool — that fool of a Greyjoy, he took them out for a walk! Of course, the little weakling couldn’t hold onto all of them when they started running off!" Catelyn sounded near tears in spite — perhaps, because — of her anger. "Thank the gods Jon and Robb at least took Ghost and Grey Wind with them, when they went to school… Darling, you see, we found Shaggydog and Summer, and Nymeria actually managed to find us at the shopping center — and what a commotion that was!.. But, little heart, you see, we’ve been looking for Lady all day yesterday and all night, and she’s nowhere to be found. I didn’t want to tell you, but your father says that you need to know, now that it’s been a whole twenty-four hours… Oh, my dear, we’re all so sorry. Arya nearly killed Theon… She, Ned, and Ben are out searching for Lady right now, and we’ve put up fliers all over town… I’m sure she will turn up," her mother finished, but the uncertainty in her voice made Sansa’s heart drop.

She had been listening to Catelyn with great anxiety, hoping against hope that her mother would tell her that Lady had been found. But Lady had disappeared.

*Oh, she should have taken her direwolf with her when she had gone to King’s Landing, like Jon had told her to!* But she had thought it best not to bring a wolf into the city of lions… She had thought it would inconvenience her roommate… She had thought… Oh, so many things that seemed so insignificant now!..

“‘I’m going to look for her, too,” her mother was saying; she sounded like a general in a hurry to join the battle as he gives the last orders. "Bran is staying with Rickon, so he’ll be answering the home phone in case someone from town brings her over or calls. If so, he’ll call you immediately. Obviously, if any one of us finds her, we’ll call you right away. Please don’t lose hope, darling, I’m sure we’ll find her soon!”

Sure? Why, then, *did she keep saying “if” instead of “when?”*

"I… I’ll be waiting," Sansa said weakly, and her mother disconnected.

She went back to the studio. There must have been something in her face to alert her friends. Jaime’s eyes narrowed immediately upon seeing her, but Margery was the first to speak:

"Gods, Sansa, what’s wrong? You look absolutely crest-fallen!"

"It’s… Lady…" Sansa began and realized she was near tears. Margery came to hug her.
"Oh, darling, I’m so sorry… What — " she began asking.

"What lady?" interrupted Oberyn, gallant and ready to come to the defense of Sansa’s friend.

"My direwolf…" Sansa squeaked and swallowed thickly as she fought against tears.

"A direwolf lady?!" exclaimed Podrick in enthusiasm. "Like a she-werewolf? I thought they were extinct, like the dragons — "

"Not a werewolf, you fool, her pet direwolf, called ‘Lady,’ " Jaime clarified with little sympathy for the young man’s fantasy. Then, he turned to Sansa: "What happened to the wolf, minx?"

"She’s missing… That imbecile, Theon Greyjoy, lost her!" she complained.

"A lady MIA, huh?" guffawed Renly, but his laughter was cut off by menacing glares from Ellaria and Jaime.

"What has been done to recover her?" asked Tyrion, always ready with the most sensible question.

"They are all looking for her, and they’ve put up fliers all over town, but nothing…"

There was a pause. Margery was still hugging her.

"Well, don’t give up hope yet, darling," she said softly, "it’s a grown wolf, not a newborn kitten — she’ll be all right."

Sansa nodded.

"We should continue with the rehearsal," she said with a bravery she did not feel, "it’s not like I can help by keeping us from work."

"That’s the spirit!" commended Tyrion.

They returned to practicing and discussing the steps, but she could not concentrate. Images of her direwolf invaded her mind: Lady jumping; Lady licking her face; Lady sleeping next to her, the wolf’s huge body warm and cuddly; Lady the puppy; grown, proud Lady; Lady barking with joy, wagging her tail… Sansa did not notice Jaime come to stand next to her.

"Don’t worry so much, minx," he said, "if that wolf is anything like her owner, I’m sure the bears of the North are in a great deal of trouble."

He smiled at her, and returned his attention to the movements Margery and Ellaria were discussing.

Bears! Sansa had not thought about Lady venturing outside the city. Oh, gods, the bears!.. Damn you, Jaime! Did you have to say that?!

The rest of the rehearsal went by in a blur, and even that blur seemed hazy to her; she did not notice time pass, her anxiety driving her mind into a strange vacancy, incapable of noticing how day changed to evening. The moment the rehearsal had ended, her phone exploded with calls from Robb and Jon, both brothers promising they would go to Winterfell to help search for Lady if she was not found by the end of the day. It was comforting to hear their voices, their reassurances.

Late evening found Sansa sitting in Tyrion and Margery’s apartment. Her friend had insisted that Sansa not be left alone that night, and since Tyene was as likely to manage staying the night without sneaking off to see Bronn as she was to stop breathing, Marge had dragged Sansa over to her and Tyrion’s place. So now, the Stark girl was sulking as inconspicuously as she could on her friend’s
sofa. Marge and Tyrion, who had refused her offer of help, were cooking dinner, trying to distract her from her misery by their amusing banter, but it was not helping. Sansa’s mood was worsened by disappointment: she had hoped, though now she could not quite see why, that Jaime would tag along, but he had not, and this had gone a long way to increase her misery. If she could have been around him, even for a few hours, in this quiet family setting, she would have borne the anxiety over Lady’s disappearance much more easily… She sulked all the more intensely because she had consistently fought against the burning of unrequited love these past months, and now that her despondency had become unhinged, it enveloped her like a thick blanket.

To her surprise, she heard the front door open. Probably the Martels coming over for dinner, she thought without interest, taking a masochistic satisfaction in her bad mood.

"Marge, couldn’t you have chosen a wine for your risotto that was easier to find?!" came Jaime’s half-irritated, half-teasing voice, and Sansa turned quickly to take him in, her eyes wide, her heart filled with joy. How she had wished for him this evening! And there he was!

"I don’t expect a barbarian like you to understand the subtleties of Reach cuisine," Margery replied without missing a beat.

Jaime, meanwhile, had delivered the wine to the cooks. He stole and ate a slice of salami Tyrion had laid out for aperitif, for which he was rewarded by Margery with a smack on the wrist.

"Don’t steal food, Jaime!" she cried. "What are you, ten?"

"How impolite to ask a man his age!" he protested, stealing several more slices.

"Put them back immediately!" Margery demanded.

"You know, you’re too young to be so much like your grandmother," Jaime remarked, dismissing her order. He walked around her unceremoniously, and extracted a small serving plate from the cupboard, on which he deposited his spoils. Not one to be easily deterred, Margery tried taking the plate from him. He raised it high above his head where she could not reach. "For Sansa," he explained, and she relented.

Sansa, who had been watching him with a smile that expressed her gratitude to whatever force had brought him to Margery and Tyrion’s flat that evening, made space for him on the sofa. Momentarily, she was so happy to see him, she had forgotten even about her lost direwolf.

He came to sit next to her and offered her the plate. She nibbled at the salami.

"Any news about your pet wolf, minx?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Marge is right," he said, "it’s a wolf, not a kitten. She’ll be fine… How did you come to have a pet wolf, anyway?"

"We found them a little over five years ago when we went hiking," she explained. "Their mother had died, so we took them in. There were six of them — just like there were six of us, Stark children…” She smiled at the memory of the puppies.

"Six wolves? In one house?" he asked, incredulous.

"Yes, why?"
"You, Northerners!.. You really are completely mad," he concluded.

"Hey! She’s the best friend I’ve ever had, I’ll have you know!" she protested.

"In that case, minx, you may be even more socially impaired than my siblings and I," he teased.

She rolled her eyes. How much brighter the world was with him in it, no matter what foolish things he said. Ellaria had been right: being around him was so much better than without him. She smiled again.

"Jaime, make yourself useful!" came Margery’s voice from the kitchen, "I can’t open this stupid bottle!"

"Ask Tyrion!" Jaime suggested, laughter in his voice; he was in no hurry to give up his seat next to Sansa.

"Tyrion is actually doing something productive with his time at the moment by making the salad!" his brother informed him.

Groaning theatrically, Jaime got up and joined the two of them in the kitchen. Margery handed him the bottle and a corkscrew.

"It’s not enough that I had to hunt for the damn bottle all over the city, I need to open it as well…" he grumbled.

"Don’t break a sweat," said the merciless Margery.

"Margy, can’t I help, too?" whined Sansa as pitifully as she could.

"You’re the guest — stay seated, or I will glue you to the sofa!" her friend winked at her.

"And what am I?!" exclaimed Jaime in indignation as he pulled out the cork. "Do you take me for a domestic slave, woman?"

"No, just a relative ready for exploitation," Margery sing-sang happily.

Tyrion guffawed, and Jaime could not help but smile warmly at her after this reminder of her position as his sibling’s fiancée.

"It’s only because my brother likes you so much that I tolerate this mistreatment," he announced.

"Oh, go back to Sansa," Margery dismissed Jaime, taking the bottle from him.

But Sansa had taken matters into her own hands: she marched into the kitchen and demanded that she be given plates to set the table, "or I swear, I won’t eat a bite!" Jaime helped her without being asked, rolling his eyes dramatically when she had set the wine and water glasses in the wrong order before he placed them correctly.

"I’m so sorry, your highness!" she mocked, to which he answered:

"It doesn’t take royal blood to know how to set the table properly, though you wouldn’t know that, coming from the North, would you?"

She stuck out her tongue at him to demonstrate just what she thought of his insult. Soon enough, they had taken the aperitif, and Margery served dinner. The salad, the risotto, the desert — a fruit salad — were delicious; and the easy banter that flew across the table like Ping-Pong balls kept her from
drowning in her anxiety. She wondered how much of the teasing was made on account of lifting her spirits.

They returned to the living room for digestif. Again, she found herself on the sofa with Jaime. As she sat there, relaxed and sleepy after dinner, she kept thinking how she wanted to curl into his side and pretend the world did not exist. She had seen Ygritte and Talisa sit this way with her brothers, and she had always envied them a little, wishing she, too, would one day find a man she loved to rest against. But Jaime wasn’t hers… At the same time, she was supposed to be sympathized with tonight. Her Lady was missing, and she should be allowed a little bit more than she usually was. Moreover, she remembered Trianna’s words: Be just a little bit more loving with him… You certainly want to put your arm through his — do so! Don’t be afraid to be affectionate… So Sansa moved closer to him and snuggled herself comfortably under his arm, resting her head against his chest, knowing that if he tried to push her away, at least Tyrion and Margery would tear him to pieces. But he did not.

“Still worrying about your pet?” he asked, his voice low, quiet, infinitely comforting.

She nodded, her cheek gliding across his chest where her head lay.

“I’m sure your stubborn, if too trusting, relatives will find her,” he consoled, “and if not, I promise we’ll get you a puppy direwolf just like Lady.”

“I don’t want another puppy,” Sansa said, feeling the rise of tears that had been strangling her throat since midday. “I want my Lady,” she added in a pitiful whisper and began to cry quietly. She felt his hand caress her head in soothing motions, heard him say quietly, over and over, how he had no doubt Lady would be found soon, and she thanked the gods for giving her the comfort of this man’s arms, for she knew of nothing their strong, gentle hold could not better.

Arya Stark rarely felt cold. Like her father, she liked the strong Northern winds and the prickling feeling of snowflakes on her face. She took pride in her ability to withstand temperatures so low that even Jon and Robb complained. But she was frozen to the bone as she made her way, knee-deep in snow, through the forest some twenty miles from Winterfell. It was getting darker, colder; yet her stubbornly pursed lips would have announced even to the most superficial observer that her determination burned as hot as the springs in the caves beyond the Wall. She was not afraid of a night in the forest — her phone’s GPS, which had assured her mother that she could go off into the woods — was needless: she knew every part of these forests as well as her own room; now, her rifle, which had assured her father she could wander off on her own into the depths of his beloved North, was of much greater utility, and she knew how to use it. Bears were not uncommon here, and they were unusually angry on such cold nights. A mischievous smile animated her thin lips: wouldn’t it be fun to return home with Lady and the skin of a bear? Her hunting knife, snuggled in her belt, would make relatively quick work of the dead animal.

She was getting tired from walking in the deep snow for so long. She stopped, took off her gloves, pulled out her smartphone, and dialed.

“I’m still searching," came the male voice from the other end of the line, "nothing's changed in the past fifteen minutes."

"Well, search harder! She’s been missing almost two days already!” she cried. "It's been hours since I got to this part of the forest, and I can’t find her as easily in the darkness."

"I thought you were thoroughly enjoying yourself," he parried.

"Don’t be an idiot, Gendry!” she barked. "It’s not myself I’m worried about — it’s Lady! She’s as
pampered as my sis, and I bet you, if there’s someone freezing her ass off in these woods, it’s not me!"

"Listen, I just hacked into the Northern satellite system on your command! Show a little patience, m’lady."

"Don’t call me that!" she snapped. She hated it when he reminded her of the differences in their stations, in their lives, in themselves. "Just help me find her," she added more quietly.

"Don’t worry, I’m running a program that analyses the images the satellites are picking up in the area right now. If Lady’s in the neighborhood, I’ll soon be able to give you her coordinates."

"Thanks, Gendry," she said, a rare softness to her voice.

"Anything for m’lady," he declared with humor.

"Oh, shut up!" she said and hung up.

The conversation had given her enough time to rest, and she began walking again, pulling on her gloves.

"Laaaadyyyyy!" rang the dark woods with her youthful, belligerent voice. "Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

Nothing. Not even silence, it seemed. Just the rustle of snow, the barely audible thump of her steps in the cold darkness.

_She’d find that wolf if she had to dig into the seventh hell to do it._

It wasn’t that she particularly liked Lady… Although, like all the wolves, Lady had been trained to protect her owner, the direwolf still seemed too tame to Arya: wolves were not supposed to have immaculately clean and brushed fur, wear pink bows; they were not meant to whine with pleasure when you scratched behind their ears or under their lower jaw, nearly purring as if they were cats. No, wolves — direwolves especially — were supposed to be wild, to bark, to steal food from the table, and to growl at strangers… Like Nymeria. That thought brought her back to reality, and she whistled: three short sounds that were answered by three short barks from a distance. Nymeria, too, was freezing her ass off looking for Lady — and with as little success as her mistress.

Arya kept moving through the snow.

And all because that idiot, Theon, eager as always to demonstrate his inexistent male prowess, decided he could take four fucking direwolves for a leisurely stroll around the neighborhood. She would bet her monthly allowance the sick fucker was looking to score. _Idiot._ And what was dad thinking, anyway? Leaving that crab to look after wolves! She smirked. It was funny, though, the way Nym had burst into the mall: all the primmed ladies screeching and dropping their purses and shopping bags; babies crying and children clinging to their mothers; better yet, the men — the bulky Northern men, who looked down their noses at a short, skinny girl in a rifle shop — even they had been unnerved, some had even paled. She chuckled. _What will they say when they hear that the little, skinny Arya Stark found the missing wolf on her own in the dark Northern forest?_

"Laaaaadyyyyyyyy!" she called again.

Of course, there was one other reason Arya Stark was knee-deep in snow, covered in sweat, yet unable to feel her toes from the cold. That reason was Sansa. Arya would die an endless number of excruciating deaths before admitting she loved her sister, even admired her — in an
uncomprehending sort of way. Sansa was everything Arya had always been told she ought to be but
could not and, what was more, did not really want to become. No matter how much fun she made of
Sansa, or how mercilessly she teased her, a little envious of the praise mother always lavished on her,
Arya cared for her sister deeply, and she knew her well. She knew Sansa was brokenhearted
somewhere in the South, because that fucker Greyjoy had "misplaced" Lady, as he had put it right
before Arya had punched him in the face. (She hoped she had broken his nose, but she had not
stayed to find out.) They were the Stark children; they each had a wolf; and so it would always be —
at least, so long as she had anything to do with it.

"Laaadyyyy!" she called again.

Damn that stupid, pampered wolf! I bet she’s sitting somewhere, whining!

Her phone rang.

"Gendry, I hope it’s to tell me you know where to find this fucking lapdog that you’re calling me!"
she declared.

"I am," he said, and she thought it was so strange to hear a boastful intonation in his voice. Boasting
was what shit-faced morons like Theon did. Gendry never boasted. He was humble and kinda quiet.
That was what she liked about him — that his humility and good sense had prevented him from
becoming condescending, even towards a little skinny girl who wanted to fight, to hunt, and to roam
the wilderness.

"Oh, thank the Stranger!" she exclaimed in relief. The warm bath she would never admit to taking
loomed ever closer to her frozen toes.
"You could begin by thanking me," he japed.

"Thank you, Gendry," she said in a credible imitation of a flirtatious socialite.

He laughed.

"Well, if your GPS hasn’t frozen off, she’s by the stream to your right, you know the one I’m talking
about?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, I do!" Arya declared in a voice of an eager hunter. "I know just the one!"

"Go get her," Gendry said, and she could hear the smile in his voice. She loved him.

"I love you," she said, knowing full well she did not say it nearly as often as she should. She listened
to his momentary pause.

"If you say so, m’lady," he joked. She knew why he would say something like that, and she would
not have it.

"Say it back," she commanded in a childish way that had not yet left her intonations completely
despite her age of sixteen.

"Love you," he said.

She hung up. Now, where was that pampered Lady?

She began making her way to the stream. She whistled — one long sound — and heard the running
gait of Nymeria. In a few moments, her companion joined her.
"Now why didn’t you find her if she’s right here?" she asked her direwolf.
Nymeria looked at her with large eyes that seemed to say: You try sniffing at the snow in this cold, and I’ll watch you!

Arya patted her wolf, who was taller than she was, between the ears and kept moving. Soon, she saw the large rock that had been looming over the stream ominously for centuries, never quite deciding to take a plunge. But Lady was nowhere to be seen. She strained her eyes against the darkness and thought she had noticed movement on the other side.

 Fuck. No wonder Nym couldn’t sniff her out!

She took out her flashlight and shone its strong light across the stream. A strange sight greeted her: on the other shore, Lady, fur ruffled and dirty, her bow gone, was covered in blood; her muzzle, especially, was red. At her feet, lay a half-eaten doe.

"Why, Lady!" Arya exclaimed with pride and laughed loudly, greatly amused by the gruesome sight. "You may not be a lost cause, after all!"

Arya faced a problem, however: between her and Sansa’s direwolf still lay the stream. She knew that, if she called, the wolf would come to her. But she would get really wet, and this would not be good in this cold. On the other hand, Nymeria would have to do the same if they both tried crossing. It was not a large stream, no more than fifteen feet wide and — if she managed to locate the rocks hiding under water — only a foot deep…

Fuck Sansa and her stupid wolf.

"Nymeria, stay," Arya said and went toward the stream.

Her high, impermeable boots would likely keep out the water, assuming she remembered the rocks’ location; but if she slipped in the darkness… The current was not very fast in good summer weather, but, with the water temperature so low it could probably kill even Arya Stark of Winterfell, the stream presented no small danger. She took out her flask and downed some whiskey, not enough to go to her head but enough to at least keep her warm from the inside if she went under. She did not need it for courage, she told herself. She fixed her flashlight on her head and sighed. Her rifle would need so much cleaning… Fuck you Sansa and fuck you Theon. Fuck you Sansa for not taking Lady with you. Fuck you Theon for being the moron that you are. Fuck you both. Using her rifle as a staff, she began to cross. Her memory of underwater rocks served her well, but adrenaline coursed through her veins at high speed all the same while she made her way from one boulder to the other, watching the waters, dark as the Stranger’s smile, waiting for her to slip and fall. She did not, but her feet grew utterly frozen from walking in the water, despite her boots, their fur lining, and her thick woolen socks. She made her way to Lady, who was eyeing her friendlily — the ever odd look of loyalty in a muzzle reddened with blood.

"There you are, you sneaky little bitch," Arya said with a warm smile as her hand closed on the fur of Lady’s withers. The direwolf nuzzled her chest and would have licked her face if she had not pulled away in time: not in this cold! "Come on, time to call your owner and go home. Nymeria, you follow us from there. No, don’t you dare cross! There’s a good girl! Come on!"

She made her way to the little bridge a few miles down; it was the longer way, but what else could she do with two direwolves on two different sides of the stream?..

Text from Arya to Gendry:

Found the little bitch. Heading home. Ttyl.
Sansa had stopped crying, but she was still sniffling a little. Notwithstanding her sorrow over loosing Lady — after more than forty-eight hours, she assumed just that — she was still melting blissfully into the feeling of resting her head against Jaime’s chest, listening to the regular beating of his heart, his arm wrapped around her. No longer the fourth dimension of the universe, time had been reduced to the sound of his heartbeat. Margery and Tyrion spoke quietly of something; occasionally, Jaime would add a few words to their conversation; but Sansa remained silent, almost absent, listening to the soothing thump-thump, thump-thump… In the simplicity of the sound of blood, there were no such complex things as misery and loss.

Suddenly, the quiet, sleepy evening was torn apart by the ringing of Sansa’s phone. Brought out of her trance by the device’s scream, Sansa leapt to pick it up.

“Hello?” she spoke hesitantly. She knew it was Arya, and she was animated by a hope so desperate and wild, she did not dare believe it. If there was anyone — anyone — who could track Lady in the Northern forests, it was her little sister.

“I found your little lapdog,” her sister’s insolent voice rang proud and happy.

“Oh, Arya!” Sansa cried, tears of joy welling up in her eyes. “How did you ever?.. My gods, I’m so glad! Thank you, Arya, darling, thank you! I — ”

“Who cares!” Arya interrupted her. “Did you know Lady could hunt?”

“What?” Sansa asked, uncomprehending.

“I found her next to the half-eaten carcass of a doe! She’s all covered in blood, you should see her! Wait, I’ll send you a pic! Here, Lady, look at me!” Sansa heard the sound of the camera in her sister’s phone go off, and a few seconds later her own phone buzzed with a new message. Lady looked as if she had come out of a horror movie. “Imagine that she tracked and killed a doe!” Arya continued, excited. “Its whole stomach was ripped apart, guts everywhere! I didn’t know Lady could do that! Anyway, if you want Lady to be cleaned up, you better come and wash her yourself, because I’ve had enough just tracking her down the forests! And mother is tired out, too — we’ve all been searching for two fucking days!”

“Arya! Language!”

“Oh, get off my back, septa Sansa!” It was one of Sansa’s most hated nicknames invented by her little sister. “So…” Arya suddenly sounded a lot less excited and a little sad, almost hesitant, though she would deny it if anyone had pointed this out. “Can you come home, San?”

“Oh, yes!” Sansa cried out before she had time to consider. She suddenly wanted to go home more than anything in the world. She wanted to see Arya and smother her in kisses until her little sister swore like a sailor; she wanted to help mother tuck Rickon into bed; she wanted to listen to Bran go on about whatever new profession he had decided to pursue; she wanted mother to kiss her goodnight before turning off the lights in her room; and father! She wanted daddy to sit quietly in his large armchair next to the fire and ask her serious questions about her life; for father to look her over worriedly and say she was too tired, she needed to walk more in fresh air. She had missed them all beyond any human endurance! “Yes!” she repeated, her voice full of deranged glee, “I’m coming home! I’ll fly out tomorrow! I’ll get a plane ticket right now, and I’ll be home by tomorrow afternoon!”

“Good,” said Arya in a stern voice, which was employed to conceal her happiness at her sis coming home, “because I’m not washing your ninny of a wolf!” And she hung up.
Tyrion had been watching his brother carefully during Sansa’s conversation with her sister. He noticed how Jaime’s eyebrows went up at Sansa’s eager talk about going “home,” and he did not fail to discern how his brother’s expression darkened right away. The moment Sansa hung up, an impenetrable mask had come over Jaime’s face. Sansa turned to them:

“Oh, Jaime, Tyrion, can I go? Please? I’ll only go for a few days, just to bring Lady with me — it’s not right for her to stay behind in Winterfell when I’m here. Would that be all right?”

She looked between them, and although Tyrion wanted nothing more than to grant her wish in the easy, off-hand manner he was prone to employ when granting wishes, what he had seen in Jaime’s face made him hesitant. He did not want to go against his bother, not even in this small matter, not after what had happened with Cersei. So instead of granting her wish, he said:

“Jaime’s in charge of the choreography, Sansa. With the premiere coming up… It’s his call.”

She turned from him to his elder brother, blue eyes pleading, hopeful.

Jaime rose from the sofa, downing what remained of his scotch and shooting Tyrion a nasty look.

“I don’t see a problem, minx,” he said, his voice too calm and too devoid of emotion, Tyrion observed. “Go get your wolf… Take the rest of the week off, so you can stay home for the weekend as well,” he added.

“Oh, how wonderful!” was Sansa’s exclamation as she grabbed his hand in her excitement. “I haven’t been home in months!..”

She flew out the next day, taking an afternoon plane, but not before she had received a text from Jaime, asking her to drop by his office or studio — wherever he would be at the time — on her way to the airport. She tried his office first and found the LBC director as she had first seen him in daylight all those months ago: with his tense back to her, looking out the window.

“Something interesting in the street?” she asked, her voice hesitantly teasing. She had sensed his black mood.

He turned, giving her a curt smile to acknowledge her banter, which had provoked no laughter in him, and walked over to his desk.

“I’m glad you were able to drop by. I’ve something for you — something it would be more convenient for you to have with you before you left for the North than to send out later by mail…”

From his desk, he picked up a staunch pack of envelopes of the customary Lannister red.

“These are invitations to The Fountain of Tears,” he said. “The first ones issued,” he added with a small smile. “They are for all the members of your family with a few spare ones for some friends. I did not trust myself to account for all of the Stark clan, so if there’s any mistake — blame Varys.”

She was too stunned to speak, frozen where she stood, so he approached her and extended her the envelopes; as he did, he spoke in a quieter, wistful tone:

“Of course, you know — as all the world does — that our father has never attended a single performance by the LBC…” He smiled another bitter smile. “While I’ve never missed my father at the premieres,” he lied, she knew, “I thought you would want your family here. These,” he gestured to the envelopes that were now clenched in her hands, which, like the rest of her, had gone snow white, “are some of the best seats in the house, and they have the advantage over other good choices of being near each other — I’m told wolf packs don’t like to separate.”
She was still speechless, partly astonished by his generosity in giving her the prized seats that would have been — with much greater profit — sold to donors and the elite that came from all over the world to the Lannister Ballet Company’s performances, especially the premieres; partly wondering why his countenance betrayed such strange melancholy. Looking to do something but unable to voice her feelings, she opened one of the top-most envelopes, which had been left unsealed for her convenience: these were named tickets, signed personally by the directors — as priceless for the seats and the respect they announced as for the autographs of the legendary brothers. By coincidence, the envelope she had opened was addressed to “Lord Eddard Stark,” who was “cordially invited to attend.” She attempted to subdue her tears by releasing a shaky breath: she knew what it meant for Jaime to invite into his theater, to his premiere, the man whose brother had nearly put him behind bars for life to atone for a crime he had not committed and who had succeeded in leaving an invisible mark of branding irons on his life — and that of his family. Always surprisingly aware of her, Jaime broke the silence:

“There’s one for you uncle as well,” he said, avoiding to pronounce Benjamin Stark’s name.

She sniffed, ungracefully, perhaps, but her emotions could not be contained. She raised her eyes to him and wondered at the feelingless mask that covered his face even as she could discern bleakness in his eyes.

“This… This means more than you could ever imagine, Jaime. I’m so grateful…”

She looked down again at the envelopes in her hands. There were at least a dozen, the prized seats to the LBC premiere a small fortune to most inhabitants of the Seven Kingdoms and a lavish luxury even for the international elites.

“The invitations require an RSVP,” Jaime informed her in a casual tone, “it’s my hope your family accepts to come.”

“Jaime…” she began, but when he looked at her, she had lost what words of gratitude she had assembled; having no voice at her disposal, she came to wrap her arms around him, and words came to her, at last: “I know that you don’t want them here and that you are doing this for me… I’m deeply moved and very, oh so very grateful.”

She heard him smile and wondered whether the hand that ran so lightly over her mop of hair was real, or if she had imagined the ghostly touch.

“Go, minx,” he said, his voice more relaxed and even a little playful, “or you’ll miss your flight.”

She smiled, too, leaving him even more unwillingly than usually, and went toward the door. It occurred to her in this moment, when she was leaving King’s Landing — if only for a few days — that, since their meeting, she had never spent as much time away from him as she was about to do now. She was crossing the threshold, when his quiet words, flung after her as an unintentionally voiced afterthought, rooted her to the ground.

“Try not to come back with a renewed hatred of the Lannisters,” he said in a derisive tone that held as much humor as a jape at a funeral.

She turned to see him move to sit behind his desk, probably to go through the administrative paperwork that was accumulating in the time leading up to the premiere; his face was dark. She ran back to embrace him, startling him who had thought she had already left, and said in a light tone,

“You don’t have to worry: I’ll sing the Rains of Castamere all the way to the North and back,” before she kissed him on the cheek and ran out of his office.
Tyrion found his brother standing before the window, looking into the avenue that bustled beneath; he was certain Jaime saw nothing, so grim he looked.

“It’s not the piles of business documents that have gotten you into this terrible mood,” he joked half-heartedly.

Although the brothers had reconciled, Tyrion still feared that something might come between them again, or that Jaime had not entirely forgiven him: the first time he had ever thought in his life that he might lose Jaime’s trust and affection had terrified him into paranoia, and he was constantly assailed by guilt and trepidation. Consequently, Tyrion frequently felt as if he were walking on eggshells around Jaime, particularly when his brother’s mood was foul, which had been surprisingly rare these days. Moreover, he continued to worry about Jaime in the wake of the latter’s separation from Cersei. His brother’s dark mood, which accompanied Sansa’s speedy departure, filled Tyrion with dread, and generally seemed to hang a thundercloud, a silence, over the LBCB.

When Tyrion had spoken, Jaime turned to look at him, the same grim expression on his face, but his eyes were slightly disoriented — as if he had not heard his brother come in, and Tyrion appeared to have materialized before him when his voice had resonated in the room.

“What?” he asked, confirming that he had not registered his bother’s jape.

“I’m saying, ‘it’s not the piles of business documents that have gotten you into this terrible mood,’ ” Tyrion repeated lamely.

Jaime ended his contemplation of the world outside his office’s windows and walked to sit on one of the couches. He sighed deeply.

“No,” he answered in a tone that indicated his unwillingness to continue the discussion.

Tyrion hesitated: before the revelation of what Jaime had considered his betrayal, Tyrion would have spoken up without a second thought; now, however, he was loath to provoke Jaime unnecessarily, even in small matters, aware that his brother’s self-defensive coldness toward him in moments of emotional strain had not dissolved entirely. Still, after a pause, he decided that trust could not be rebuilt with more silence. He sat on the couch facing that on which his brother was seated.

“Jay, what’s the matter?” he asked, his quiet voice betraying his concern for his brother as well as their relationship.

Jaime sighed.

“It’s nothing, Tyrion,” dismissed he the question. “I thought we needed to go through some deliberation of which donors to personally invite to the premiere, so that — ”

“Is it about Sansa?” Tyrion ventured, ignoring his brother’s words completely in his new-found boldness.

Another sigh from Jaime; then, a mirthless smirk.

“Imagine if she comes back the same she had come months ago…” he said in a voice too serious for his own liking, and he quickly recovered, adding in a more humorous tone, “the Lannisters might as well go into hiding!”

Tyrion smiled — a smile that had no teasing or sarcasm, only affection and tenderness.

“I don’t think that’s possible, Jaime,” he said. “She's changed too much to go back to the way she was when she first came… She’s... I don’t think she’s quite the same person — certainly not in the way she thinks of the Lannisters.” Love changes us, he thought, it may not change who we are, but it
changes us, and I know she loves you. Deciding that he had given voice to enough genuineness, Tyrion continued in a teasing tone: “Just look at how she dotes on Tom and Cella… I’m convinced she’s even found a place in her heart for the old lion!” He winked at his brother, earning a smirk a little more humorous than the one before. “Jay — ” he began, but cut himself short, leaving further thoughts on Sansa’s heart to himself. “I think she’ll come back exactly how she left — with one significant difference,” he could not resist teasing.

“And what difference would that be?” Jaime asked in a voice that rang with displeasure.

Tyrion grinned.

“A direwolf!” he laughed heartily. “The beast better like you!”

Jaime scowled.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I hope you enjoyed reading this chapter as much as I did writing it. A significant part of it had been written for months now, and I was so pleasantly surprised when I realized my first direwolves-focused chapter would come right after the episode in which we had seen Arya and Nymeria meet again after such a long time apart! Anyway, do leave comment and kudos -- they make me so happy! :)
Hello, my lovely home, I know
You've waited long, covered in snow.
I come from a place where sun is raw
And love has kept me from you, oh woe.

I recognize your gloomy face,
Of a changed heart I see no trace;
My other life you wish me to erase?
I cannot do this, even for your embrace.

I have been gone so long,
I strangely feel like I belong
In the warm country that I left, headstrong,
To hear the happy sound of your birdsong.

Perhaps, tonight you'll want me gone,
And I will wish I hadn't come.
Tomorrow, you'll remain the only one
Who knows me down to my last bone.

It was so strange to land in Winterfell and see her homeland from the window of a plane, the way strangers did. It was her home, and yet, she was coming back to it, having been somewhere else. There was so much snow here, it seemed a stretch of the imagination to contemplate that anywhere else in the world the air was warm, even hot, and the sun blazed, heating stones until they were almost burning to the touch. She became an anonymous particle of the crowd that exited the plane, making her way through the airport, and her ears were overcome by the sound of Northern speech — so familiar and yet so strange now that she had gotten used to the soft and diverse sounds of the capital. As she neared the exit, she was greeted by the sight of her family waiting for her: her mother
smiling, tears of happiness in her eyes; Arya fighting to pull on a grumpy expression over her own joy; Bran and Rickon, laughing and waving; and her father — the large looming figure of Ned Stark, whose serious mouth was softened by a loving smile and whose ordinarily severe eyes were shining with pleasure at seeing his eldest daughter return home. Sansa forgot for a while that she was an adult, a star in the making, a young woman in love; she was a little girl again, who knew nothing other than these beloved faces and the warmth of being near them. As she ran to embrace her family, kissing everyone she could reach, briefly catching even Arya, who, as a matter of principle, had attempted to escape her caresses, it seemed to Sansa that she had never left at all, and yet the feeling of homecoming after a long time away was powerful in the backroom of her soul.

Father had taken her bag from her, and they walked toward the car; having given her the winter coat she had brought for her from home, mother was running her hand over the locks of her pony tail, her face filled with happiness; Bran was already talking about his determination to become a sword-fighter — a new idea, that one; Rickon Sansa had taken into her arms and was carrying on her hip, kissing his soft cheeks every now and then to give an expression to her joy at holding him again while being surrounded by her family; even Arya kept close to her, although she had regained her self-control enough to affect a decidedly independent and indifferent air. The ride home was filled with laughter and chatter: everyone speaking at the same time for once in that well-mannered family, and no one really understanding — or meaning to understand — all that was being said. They drove through the city, and Sansa felt surprised to discover small changes in it: a new cafe had opened; that old stationery shop had closed. It seemed so odd that things should have happened here while she had been away. They drove out of the city and through several miles of winter landscape until, finally, their family castle came into view. Most of it was simply preserved with care and no one living in the medieval halls, but a part had been renovated a few generations ago to suit a family of modern times, and the Starks of the new age had little by little brought a small wing of the large castle into step with modernity.

When they exited the car, Sansa took her chance of catching Arya in a hug. Perhaps because her relationship with her sister did not encourage frequent communication, like the one she kept up with the rest of the family, and perhaps because she had been the one to find Lady notwithstanding their estrangement, Sansa had realized, now that Arya was before her, that of them all, she had missed her the most, having heard from her the least. In truth, her younger sister had been the only one really absent from her life these months. Arya struggled against her embrace at first, of course, crying out she would not be smothered like this, but Sansa had learned an entirely new persistence in the South and an openness in affection her inadequate notions of pride had swamped before. She had learned that hiding love was no way to love at all. Arya’s struggles could not last, particularly because she, far too proud to give her elder sister a call, had also grown to realize they might have missed out on a closeness that sisterhood was meant to offer. The younger girl’s arms went around her sister’s taller, slenderer frame. It was the first time they did not pretend to hate each other, even under the acknowledged understanding that there was love somewhere deep inside, as there must be between sisters.

“I’ve missed you so much,” Sansa whispered.

Arya, who had been entirely unprepared either for the strangulation or, least of all, for the emotional avalanche that would submerge her, was near tears — something that had never happened to her before from being moved. The younger sister humphed in response, attempting to preserve some of her dignity amidst the overwhelming moment she was living. Sansa, her big sister — that annoying yet strangely admirable being — was hugging her so tightly, Arya realized for the first time her sister's arms had strength. They had lived as rivals, as opposites; in their extreme dissimilarity, they had been like two poles — united by their very opposition — and it was unthinkable they should so suddenly collide. Living together, they had mocked, and argued, and berated, and complained, leaving harmony for another day, when the other would be more bearable, not realizing that they
might part without having known how to smile with each other or told one another that even repeated words meant nothing and hearts everything. Arya, suddenly enraged by the very power of emotions that had made her cling to her sister a moment before, roughly pushed Sansa away, animated by the former feelings of their discord and even more by her exasperation at the sentiments her sister had suddenly burst open in her, and screamed rudely:

“What’s gotten into you?!”

Was that really her elder sister? The demure, condescending, unbearable image of girly perfection? It could not be — for the Sansa she had known would now recoil from her; but this strange, new Sansa laughed at her without malice or condescension and, with a fearlessness of Arya’s notorious bluff of physical brutality the old Sansa had never discounted before, this Sansa pulled her little sister back into the hug, as if knowing that Arya’s screaming and pushing had been the last bout before capitulation.

*Where the hell did San learn to read people so well?!*

“I’ve missed your yelling and brave front,” Sansa’s soft but oddly strong voice said quietly. “I think I’ve learned more about you from being away from you these past months than I’ve ever had before.”

Arya was struck dumb.

Sansa pulled away a little, and held her by the shoulders; her younger sister remained so stupefied that she had kept her own arms around Sansa’s waist.

“I’m sorry I’ve never understood you before,” she said. “I was so silly… So judgmental… But I’ll do better now… We will do better — I promise.” Then, Sansa did that strange thing mother would sometimes do with Arya, although the younger sister was convinced that, in both women, the gesture was unconscious: with the fingers of her right hand, she traced the outline of Arya’s face, from her temple down her cheekbone to her chin, and smiled. “I love you, sis,” she said, in that strange new voice that was quiet, and strong, and soft all at the same time. She hugged her again. Arya, who had lost her voice, was trying to say something, old habit roused the instinct to snap in a mocking way, but her mind was in such confusion that it could push no quips to her tongue. She merely hugged Sansa to herself.

Unlike Bran and Rickon, who had run to play with snow in the inner courtyard, the parents had turned to look back at their girls, and the scene they had discovered was so entirely strange that, at first, they had not dared believe their eyes. Their surprise increased first at Arya’s hesitant acceptance of the hug — the youngest Stark girl was not one for cuddles — but surprise turned to astonishment when they witnessed Sansa’s careless dismissal of Arya’s outburst and her pulling her sister back into the embrace. Something had changed in Sansa, making her more openly loving and unafraid — either of rejection or fits of temper, such as Arya was prone to deliver. It was suddenly clear to both parents that their eldest daughter had acquired the ability to see through her sister’s gruffness and bullying tendencies into her passionate and kind-hearted nature. What or who had taught Sansa this, if years of their encouragements — “you need to give your sister a chance” and “make an effort to understand her” — had gone to naught?

“Well-well, where’s my Tully-looking niece?” came Ben Stark’s voice from the entrance across the courtyard, breaking the parents from the contemplation of their daughters and the sisters from each other. Sansa let go of the bewildered Arya and called:

“Here I am, uncle Ben! The Northern fox is home — better hide all the chickens!”
They all looked at her strangely. Sansa had always disliked her dissimilarity from the rest of her siblings, who favored the Stark look much more than she did. She had certainly never joked about being a fox rather than a wolf before. Sansa had barely joked at all. They had never really known she had a sense of humor.

“Well, don’t look at me like that!” Sansa laughed, inexplicably unperturbed, even amused, by their consternation, where once she would have grown embarrassed and quiet; she winked at Arya — and they had not known before she could wink. “Or else I’ll have to blindfold you all, for your own good — we don’t want any eyes falling out of their sockets, do we?”

She moved past Arya, who stared at her, past her parents, whose stunned eyes followed her, past Bran and Rickon, who seemed to be weighing the possibility of their sister having been replaced by a Faceless Man, and toward uncle Ben, whom she had not embraced yet, and who looked no less surprised than the rest of her family.

“Hey, nuncle,” she hugged him, but there seemed to be something a little regretful in her voice, as if the sight of her uncle had caused her sadness. Most of them had not noticed this, but Catelyn, who had, had ascribed it to Sansa’s having missed him, not guessing that Jaime Lannister’s face — arrogance fighting pain in green eyes — had risen before her daughter’s eyes.

The wolves, having realized something decidedly interesting was happening outside, rushed out — all four of them tearing from the house like a chaotic force of muscle and fur. Lady was the first to reach Sansa, and she fell her mistress into the soft snow, licking her face in adoration. Sansa laughed, her happiness at seeing her pet doubled by the recent fear of her disappearance.

The Stark family entered their home. There was something about seeing all the things Sansa had known since girlhood but had not seen in months that was as strange as looking at the North from the window of a plane: it was odd that she should be returning to the familiar. The old cuckoo clock was where it had always been, its pendulum bouncing time right and left, right and left; the furniture, the carpets, the photographs, the paintings — they were all there, like before; Ice winked at her with its steel from where it hung above the mantelpiece. It was home. And it smelled like home, too, her mother’s cooking perfuming the air. She had not smelled her mother’s dishes in so long, she had almost forgotten they were like childhood she could inhale. Standing in the entryway, between the doors of the kitchen, where mother had disappeared, and of the living room, where father and uncle had gone, the boys following at their heels, in front of the staircase that led to the second level, to her bedroom, Sansa felt her chest constrict, and a few tears ran down her cheeks.

“What’s wrong, San?” asked Arya.

The younger girl had been watching her like a hawk, after she had recovered from the emotional shock Sansa had delivered her, and she had remained next to her elder sister when everyone else had spread around the house. Sansa did her best to swallow her tears, but they still kept falling, quite in spite of her.

“Oh,” she managed in a shaky voice, “it’s just that I haven’t been home in so long… That I… I’ve forgotten what it feels like…”

“So?” asked Arya, whom no number of hugs could cure of her ruthlessness. “Jon and Robb are often gone longer than you’ve been, but you don’t see them cry when they come home…”

Sansa sniffed and wiped her tears.

“You’re right,” she said, unwittingly giving her sister yet another shock, for she had never said these words to Arya before, “I’m being so wretchedly silly! But you know, Arya, I haven’t realized how
much time has passed: it seems only a few weeks ago that I’ve left and — ” she cut herself short.
“Well, so many things have happened since then that I almost feel like a stranger here.”

She did. The feeling had crept up on her the moment her eyes had traced the stairs upward; she knew
that the girl who would sleep in her bed tonight was not the one who had left, and the realization of
her metamorphose brought thoughts of King’s Landing, of Jaime — so far away from her — and her
unrequited love bit into her heart with much greater pain than before within these walls where she
had not known anguish. She had brought some of her heartache with her even here; it grew when
she was faced with the love of her family and could not drown her thoughts and doubts by looking
into the oblivion of teasing green eyes.

Arya was about to say something flippant, particularly driven to do so as a way of compensating for
her earlier emotionality, but having learned to watch her sister’s face, she began discovering
completely new things in its lines.

“Hey…” she called and almost did not recognize her own voice, it was so… soft — like the rustling
snow outside. She frowned: she did not even sound like this with Gendry. “You could never be a
stranger here.” Arya touched her sister’s arm, and Sansa threaded her fingers through her sister’s,
smiling gratefully through her tears.

“I’m being very ridiculous, I know,” Sansa said, “I won’t cry anymore, I — ”

Arya, as had always been her habit, interrupted her:

“Has someone hurt you there? In the South?” she asked, her eyes concerned and belligerent.

Sansa laughed through her momentary melancholy.

“Of course not! No, it’s just your elder sister being a baby over nothing! Come, let’s see if mother
needs any help with dinner.”

Her hand still clutching Arya’s, she went toward the kitchen, dragging her little sister behind her.
Sansa’s misery departed entirely and her laughter was not even tinged with sadness, when she
chuckled at her sister’s struggles:

“No! No! No, I won’t go! I won’t! D’you know how hard it was for me to push the kitchen duties
onto Bran?! Let me go! Since when do you have strength enough to drag me?! Let go!…”

The dinner was so heartwarming: her parents, her siblings, her uncle right in the same room with her;
the wolves dozing before the enormous fireplace. Sansa was surprised to discover that the feeling of
happiness and ease she felt with her family reminded her of the LBC dinners and the people she had
left in King’s Landing. She tried pushing these thoughts away, shrinking from the feeling of
homesickness they brought her. She was meant to have done with homesickness when she had come
home; but she had left another home behind. She had brought her Southern family North with her,
filling Winterfell with ghosts it had never known. The smiling faces of Margery and Tyrion; the
seductive looks exchanged between Ellaria and Oberyn; Tormund’s loud, hotheaded proclamations
and Brienne’s restraining rationality, sweetened by the gentle smile she could not keep from her face
when looking at her fiancé; Tyene’s uproarious laughter at Bronn’s crude jokes and his pleased grin
at her amusement. And Jaime… But Jaime did not feel like a ghost. She felt as if he were right there
with her. Sitting at a family dinner, feeling happy and content, Sansa kept turning to her left, looking
for a joke or a teasing smile from him, and discovering Bran where she had meant to see the
Lannister. Jaime felt like a part of her, which had become invisible to anyone safe herself, and she
could not shake off the very real feeling of his presence next to her. Her eyes looked for him, her
mind unable to understand why he was not near her when she was in such high spirits; her ears
sorted through the sounds of her family, trying to discern his teasing voice, lowered in that way it was when he could not resist taunting her in company and that she found so irresistibly seductive. She had almost given her distraction away at one moment. Bran, agitated like only an eleven-year-old could be, was going around the table, gathering the dirty dishes to carry them to the kitchen while Catelyn served desert, and he went on about his progress with rock-climbing. Bran was particularly proud of the new high levels he could reach. Sansa had gotten so lost in her brother’s excitement that she had turned left, once again, but this time she had spoken:

“Remember how we — ” she cut herself short, realizing that, by force of habit she had acquired over weeks of dinners in King’s Landing, she had expected Jaime to be right there, but, instead, she was now speaking to an empty space; the presence she had felt so keenly dissolved, leaving her to contemplate her family watching her oddly. Bran’s tales about rock-climbing had roused her memories of the Red Keep, and she had meant to remind Jaime of how they had jumped off its tower. Sansa felt her brain stop all activity for a few moments, working slowly to overcome the cognitive dissonance created by her blunder.

“San?”

She turned to her younger sister. Arya was looking at her with the same suspicion that Sansa had already noticed in her eyes when she had been crying in the hallway. She tried to recover:

“Arya, remember how we used to go swimming in the stream some miles from here, and you and Jon and Robb would jump from the rock, but I was always too afraid? I bet if Bran were old enough to have gone with us then, he would have jumped, too.”

“I could still jump!” Bran exclaimed zealously.

“No, you couldn’t, you idiot!” Arya barked at her younger brother, her attention momentarily distracted from her sister and her suspicions. “That stream’s become shallow since then!”

The younger siblings began to argue, and the awkwardness occasioned by Sansa’s mistake was drowned by their bickering — forgotten, she hoped. Ned asked her to tell more about The Fountain of Tears and her life in the South — as if he and Catelyn did not hear Sansa tell them about her days every day. Father looked proud of her as she spoke about the preparation of the ballet and her input, as always taking meticulous care to avoid mentioning the Lannister brothers, particularly the elder one: if occasionally the words “Tyrion Lannister” sounded as she mentioned him in passing, there seemed to be a magic spell on her tongue that prevented her from saying “Jaime Lannister” while speaking with her parents and the rest of her family. As she spoke of her work and her life in King’s Landing, making the Martell-Sand family far less sexually explicit, erasing Bronn from existence, diminishing the amount of time she spent with Tyrion, pretending that she barely ever saw Jaime, spending most of her days with Margery, Brienne, and Tormund, she wondered at the odd picture of alternative reality she was painting before her family’s eyes. It was a life she did not recognize; and telling the tale made her feel not only a liar, but also a coward. She was glad she had done eating by then, or she would have choked — even on her mother’s lemon cakes.

After dinner, the Stark men went to sit before the fire and drink some good Northern scotch. They had not the slightest suspicion that their choice of digestif had filled Sansa with fond recollections of a man, whom they both disliked so keenly, drinking the very same liquor on so many warm Southern evenings. The boys and Arya went to play a board game on the carpet between the large armchairs occupied by their father and uncle, while Sansa followed Catelyn into the kitchen. She had always loved this quiet time with her mother, when she helped Catelyn clean up after dinner. It was their little kingdom of dirty dishes and stolen additional portions of desert. They talked while the water whispered, as if to gossip with them, and the dishes clung, as if laughing at the Stark women’s
private jokes. Sometimes, after each plate, dish, piece of silver wear, glass, etc. had been cleared away, mother and daughter would sit down in the shining kitchen, drink a cup of herbal tea and talk; they could chat for hours.

For the first quarter of an hour, they cleaned in comfortable silence. Then, Catelyn spoke:

“You know, Jon called me a few days ago… He sounded so odd: guilty, worried, confused… At first, I wondered if Ygritte was not with child — wouldn’t that be wonderful?” Catelyn interrupted her own narration with a smile, imagining little grandchildren behaving like true Wildlings — and probably herself, too, hushing them gently with sweets and tales; Sansa smiled and nodded. There was a pause.

“Is Ygritte pregnant?” asked the daughter, curious beyond endurance. If so, how could Jon ever have kept it from her? Her elder brother would make a wonderful father, she had no doubt, even though he was young; it felt a little strange to imagine Ygritte as a mother, but Sansa smirked as scenes of Yg yelling lovable obscenities and well-meaning threats at adorable, red-haired little monsters emerged before her eyes. Something told her, Ygritte would love her and Jon’s children fiercely, but that it would not change her loud-mouthed and savage nature.

“No,” pouted Catelyn, “she’s not. But it’s understandable: they have to finish med-school, after all, and get jobs before thinking about kids… Though, I sometimes wish…” Catelyn chuckled. “I sometimes wish birth control methods weren’t as effective — ”

“Mother!” Sansa exclaimed, shocked; then she laughed in surprise.

“Well, it’s true,” her mother said. “It’s a funny time for me: Rickon is almost grown up now — ”

“Mom! He’s still a baby: only six years old!”

“Well, no, not a baby anymore,” Catelyn said decidedly, then continued, “and I have children who are old enough that they can have kids, but still so young that they won’t… Why are you looking at me like that?”

_Because, if what Tyrion and Marge tell me is to be believed, you and Tywin Lannister have a lot more in common than I thought!_

She giggled at imagining the horror that would fill her mother’s face, if she were to share this observation with her, and decided on a wiser course of action.

“I don’t know,” she replied, “I guess it’s just strange to think of Robb and Jon having kids…”

“And you,” Catelyn pointed out.

Sansa dropped a plate into the sink. It did not break, but it covered her with soap water from head to foot. The splash was just what she needed to erase the image of Tommen Baratheon — or was it his look-alike? — from her bewildered mind.

“No! Mom! I’m… Way, way too young for that!” Sansa stammered; she was shaking.

“Well, that’s what I’m saying,” Catelyn laughed, never dreaming into what a pit she had opened a door for her daughter, “if you wanted to, you could have kids; but you are too young — in the sense of building a career and finding the right man… Although that doesn’t keep me from dreaming, you know. I would so like to be a grandmother soon! I should have even more grand-babies than I had kids!”
“Mother, please, let’s speak of something else!” Sansa wailed in complete agitation. If this talk went any further, she would never be able to face Jaime Lannister again.

“All right, all right,” Catelyn chuckled. “Where was I?” she asked, trying to remember the thread of their conversation. “I know I was going to tell you something important — or maybe to ask you… What were we talking about before?” She inquired, her voice stern with irritation at herself for this rare lapse of memory. Imagining her grandchildren always had a completely hypnotic effect on her otherwise crystal-clear and practical mind. Come to think of it, Catelyn noticed that, even by Sansa’s prim standards, her daughter was unusually red and breathing heavily, her hands noticeably shaking. She wondered briefly why their conversation had had such a strong effect, but her thoughts were cut short:

“You were saying that Jon had called you,” Sansa reminded her.

“Ah, yes!” Catelyn returned to the earlier topic. “Well, he sounded so strange, I kept asking him what was the matter. It was the first time in his life that he would not tell me something right away when I asked him.” She may not have given birth to him, Catelyn reflected, but by virtue of the difference in the eldest Stark boys’ characters, the quiet and affectionate Jon had been her boy in a way the wild and independent Robb would never acquiesce to be. “I had to wear him down for a whole hour, before he confessed it had to do with you. You see, little heart, Jon believes you’re in love, though he didn’t want to betray your confidence, but when he admitted he was worried about you, I told him he had to tell me, because I’m your mother and could help you if anything was the matter, so he — ”

Suddenly arrested by her own words, Catelyn looked at Sansa with doubled interest:

“Oh, Sansa! Is that why you were acting so when I was talking about babies?!” Catelyn laughed happily. “Oh, darling, tell me about him!”

_Damn you, Jon. Damn you and Ghost and everyone you’ve ever met to the Seventh Hell!.._

“No-no-no,” she began, speaking far too quickly to render a good semblance of truthfulness, “Jon misunderstood — ”

“Did he?” Catelyn looked at her with a knowing smile.

“He did!” Her daughter almost shrieked, moved to cry out so by the acutest agony she was suffering. Sansa was reaching her limit for emotional overload. First, the homecoming itself, and trying to reach out to Arya; the odd feeling of looking for Jaime at the dinner table, that awful slip when she had started talking to him like a crazy person; and now this! She could not stand all this without losing it completely and dissolving in an emotional heap on the kitchen floor.

“I think you are lying, lady Sansa,” her mother reproached her with good humor. “Since when do you keep things from me?”

_Since I’ve seen Jaime Lannister fuck his sister and then fell in love with him!

“I’m not keeping anything from you! Jon is just being overprotective… And he’s… imagining things!”

Catelyn faced her daughter, a hand on her hip, a kitchen towel in the other hand, her expression still mostly happy but a little tinged with concern.

“Looking at you now, I really don’t think Jon is imagining anything. Sansa — ”

“I said: I don’t want to talk about this!” her daughter screamed suddenly, anger and major irritation in
her voice. It was the first time Sansa had ever shouted at her mother. Catelyn’s face — far from expressing any displeasure at her daughter’s behavior — was overcome with serious worry for Sansa.

“Darling, has something happened? What — ”

“I don’t want to talk about this! Can you not hear me?!”

Although this time she had not shouted, Sansa’s voice remained angry and loud: rude tones that were common enough to Arya when she was in a bad mood, but that had never been heard from the elder sister before. As Catelyn looked at her daughter in confusion and with concern, Sansa turned onto the dishes with violence. There was silence for a few long moments.

“Just tell me if someone’s hurting you,” Catelyn pleaded in a quiet voice.

Sansa sighed deeply. She had never dreamt that concealment would be so hard; so much harder in person than it was over the phone. She wanted to tell her mother everything, to ask for her advice, to share the feelings that were overpowering her and that Catelyn herself must have known in equal intensity in her own youth. But she could not. Because she knew that the moment she admitted whom she was in love with, she would not only start a storm, but turn her mother’s concern for her into panic and defensive rage. Sansa knew what Catelyn dreamt about: a nice boy of Sansa’s age, with a spotless record and a reputation for being as perfect and blameless as a summer cloud. Her mother had not bargained, in her wish for her daughter’s romance and lovely grandchildren, on a man considered a remorseless killer who was prepared for anything to advance his career and satisfy his greed; a man who would have been bad enough for all that, without the additional family connection to Ned’s former business associate or the rumors of incest uncle Ben had brought up earlier at dinner, making Sansa sick to her stomach (Ned had cut his brother short, saying it was too low and disgusting even for a Lannister, making Sansa sicker still). Oh, the contrast between Catelyn’s happy curiosity and the possible horror she would live, if Sansa opened her heart to her, enraged the daughter to the point of utter, bleak despair. Sansa was exasperated at the unfairness with which the man she loved was judged by her family and her consequent inability to share the joys and sorrows of first love with her mother; to have to lie and hide. She suddenly knew what Jaime must have felt like when he had been with Cersei… Seeing her mother’s worried eyes, she felt shame for her outburst.

“No, mom, no one is hurting me, I promise.” _Except you. And dad. And uncle._ “I’m sorry I yelled,” she spoke quietly now, but her voice sounded bleak, “and for being rude with you. I truly am very sorry, mom. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I… I must be tired from the rehearsals and traveling.”

Catelyn seemed satisfied enough, for the present, with that explanation.

“Why don’t you go to bed, darling?” she asked, her voice gentle but serious, “and I’ll finish up here?”

Sansa could only nod. She kissed her mother goodnight and left the kitchen, grinding her teeth lest she cry while still in Catelyn’s earshot. She was consumed with shame and regret at upsetting her mother and ruining the sweetness of their time together, especially on her first day home. In her distraction, Sansa did not notice Arya’s astonished eyes follow her figure up the stairs. The younger sister had heard every word of Sansa’s altercation with their mother: Arya had braved the possible exploitation in the kitchen for the sake of creeping closer to this strange new sister of hers and been stopped short when she had heard the splash produced by Sansa dropping the plate. The younger Stark girl looked after her sister ascending the stairs; then, she went to her mother.

“What’s with Sansa?” she asked, brazen in her implicit acknowledgement of eavesdropping. Catelyn
was worried and perplexed — so much so, she forgot to reproach Arya for listening to other people’s conversations — and a frown Sansa had never brought to her face before was disturbing the skin of her forehead.

“I don’t know, darling,” she said, her tone indicating that she was thinking of something else. “I don’t know.” Then, she added: “And she won’t tell me.”

“Did I hear Sansa go upstairs?” came Ned’s voice from the entrance to the kitchen.

“Yes,” Catelyn said, “she felt so tired, she decided to go to bed early.”

“What, without saying goodnight?” Ned asked, his gentle voice betraying his surprise and disappointment.

Catelyn only pursed her lips.

“Is everything all right?” asked her husband, concern seeping into his voice.

He was answered by his youngest daughter:

“Everything’s fine,” Arya said, her impudent tone betraying none of her own worry, “the little ninny’s so tired, she didn’t have the strength to drag herself a few extra feet.”

“Little, is she?” Ned spoke with a slightly teasing intonation, which was always at odds with his generally severe demeanor and which came into his voice most often when he spoke to Arya. “Then what are you?”

“Never judge your opponent by her size!” cried the bellicose teenager and launched at her father, giving him a few playful punches in the stomach. Ned laughed at his daughter’s foolery, only too pleased to be the target of her violent attention, but he caught sight of his wife’s troubled face, and his laughter died on his lips.

“Go take your brothers to bed,” he told Arya, who pouted her displeasure at being made the nanny, but did as she was bid by her father, the only person whom she obeyed — somewhat.

As she took her siblings upstairs, she dimly overheard the serious tones of her parents speaking quietly in the kitchen, and as she passed her sister’s door, she wondered how Sansa had managed to change as much as she had, without anyone noticing — without mother or father noticing, and they spoke to her every day. She wished suddenly she and Sansa had the kind of confidential bond that tied each of them to Jon: she wished she knew her sister’s secrets, so she could calm her parents by saying they should not worry over nothing, or so she could come to King’s Landing like an avenging demon, wrecking desolation onto whomever had caused her sister pain; but especially, so that she would be rid of this gnawing feeling in her gut that spread cold whispers of fear through her whole body, little as it was.

Sansa lay in her bed, feeling as though two girls were resting in it, instead of one. It was a ghostly feeling: as if a long mirror had been placed on her bed sideways, and she had been forced to watch her own reflection, but it had suddenly taken a life of its own. Returning to Winterfell had made her aware of just how different she had become from her previous self: the demureness of her manner had dissipated; she had somehow grown so bold that, even next to Arya, she did not feel timid or fragile; and she had picked up a few ghosts on her way. So overcome was she with the realization of her transformation that she wished to run all the way back South, if only to escape from that reflection in the mirror, staring at her with younger, colder eyes — even if it meant running from her family. But it was more than that, her judgmental reflection told her: it was that, when she hung up the phone in King’s Landing, she did not have to face the lies she had told her family. Now that she
was again under the same roof with them, her lies began to fill the air so thickly, they seemed ready to burst the house. She felt a stranger not simply because she had been away for so long: she felt a stranger, because she knew that, due to her lies, they did not really know her and her life as they used to; she felt a stranger, because she had never before fully realized how impossible it would ever be to reconcile her parents to her life in the South. It was not impossible in the sense of being difficult; it was impossible in that she could not envisage any way — however fantastic — in which the Starks could be brought to let go of their prejudice against the Lannisters. Her affection for them — not just Jaime; for Tyrion, for Tommen and Cella, even for Tywin — these people her family despised, made her so considerably different from her relatives, her own blood, she felt they would never know her if she spoke her mind; that not only would she feel a stranger to herself in these walls, but to them as well. Hysteria began to encroach on her, when she heard scratching on the door; she sat up in bed, not realizing fully what was the source of the sound, when she saw the doorknob move, and Lady sneaked into her room. The wolf broke through the thickness of anguish that was engulfing her mistress, chasing away the ghostly reflection of Sansa’s former self as if it were a vile, cowardly rat, and came to rest next to her mistress. Lady, at least, had not changed. Her body was warm and her fur thick and soft. She licked her mistress’ cheek, like she used to do. Sansa had forgotten what it was like to have Lady at her side, the comfort of the enormous beast protecting her small form from all kinds of demons — of her own making and otherwise. She let her fingers drowning in the soft fur. “I’ve changed too much, Lady,” she whispered, and Lady licked away tears from her wet cheeks. “It’s a good thing you recognize me, because I’m not sure anyone else would.”

They had looked oddly at her quite a few times that day already, and they did not even know everything about her life — nothing about her thoughts, even less about her heart. Sansa crept closer to her direwolf. She had never felt more alone in her entire life. Before sleep overtook her, she wondered if Jaime missed her — at least a little bit…

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, it’s a bit of an angsty chapter, this one. Sorry. But do trust me to get this train out of the tunnel as well as into it. :) What do they say? An hour in the morning is worth two in the evening? I’ve always interpreted it to mean that things will be better in the morning than they seem at night! ;P Also, as I know this might interest some of you: yes, we will be spending a few chapters in Winterfell before we return to King's Landing. I do promise some quality Stark time, though, and a lot less angst in the coming chapters! Thank you for reading, and I hope you've enjoyed it! :)
Huntresses

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tell me, tell me,
And I will believe you;
I am not your enemy —
I know you through and through.

Tell me, and my sister's words I'll never doubt,
Even if of madness I discern the sound
In what you tell me. We are bound
Together: by words we said, the love we found.

Whatever future holds,
I know that, in these woods,
I've gained an ally — we've nothing more
To fear from the world's crossbow.

We're huntresses, she-wolves;
We will protect our own.
Don't come near our loves —
We guard them closer than a crown.

Our love is our bond,
From it springs our strength;
Don't mess with our fantasyland —
You'll regret it at length.
Sansa woke up to the sun shining into her room. She had forgotten to draw the curtains when she had gone to bed the night before, and the rays were now smiling at her without a hindrance. Her first feeling was sleepy happiness: she was home, with her mom and her dad, with her siblings; even uncle was at Winterfell. Then, she recalled the misery she had taken to bed with her the previous evening, and some of her good spirits sank. Nevertheless, she rose with a determination to leave thoughts of the South for when she returned there, no matter what inhuman effort of will it took. And when she came back to King’s Landing, she would bask in Jaime’s teasing, smiling eyes, in watching love and happiness radiate off Tyrion and Margery, in hearing Cella and Tommy’s laughs, and know that her parents and uncle were wrong about them, even if she could do nothing to change their minds. She had not seen her family in too long to allow herself to go to pieces because she could not share everything with them. So what, if they did not know — would never know — some truths about her Southern life? What they did not know could not hurt them; it should not hurt her, either. She had two lives, both of them happy; it was twice as much as what most people got. No more whining and self-pity! When it came to her Southern friends, ignorance was bliss for her parents — she should rest happy with that in mind. For now, she would pretend these people she loved were not Lannisters, and when uncle or father said something about that family, she would imagine they had meant someone else. There were too few days for her in Winterfell! She had to spend as many happy hours with her family as she could — without worrying her parents…

Anymore than I’ve already had, that is. Indeed, her mood had to be so happy today as to convince them all that yesterday’s strange behavior was nothing more than the effect of fatigue. Besides, now that she had faced the demons of her realizations and morning had still come, it all did not seem as awful as it had the day before. She had reconciled herself to her secrets. And her newly learned ability to put heartache on the back burner, as Ellaria had once phrased it, proved as useful to her in this instance as it had with unrequited love.

“Come on, Lady! I bet it’s time for breakfast! Who’s a hungry direwolf? You are? You are? Yes, you are!”

There must have been some magic, after all, in sleeping in her own bed for a night, because, during breakfast, she felt peace and belonging as she had before around this table. Yes, she shrugged to herself as she ate her fruits while Arya and the Stark men applied themselves to eggs and bacon, she had secrets from them; that was not so bad, so long as everyone was happy, she added mentally, looking at her mother, who breakfasted on coffee with biscuits.

“Arya, why did I see your hunting boots and rifle laid out near the stairs?” asked Catelyn, her tone informing everyone that she disapproved of that discovery. “You aren’t going to go roving when your sister’s home, are you?”

“Dad!” cried Arya at this, appealing to her father for assistance.

“Sansa’s only home for a few days: why don’t you stay in while she’s here? The forests aren’t going anywhere,” Ned suggested, betraying his favorite’s faith in him.

“But we have no more game left!” she cried, using her last defense.

“The freezers are stuffed with all the birds and animals you’ve dragged home,” Catelyn remarked.

“But we have no fresh ones!” Arya exclaimed.

Noticing that neither of her parents had been impressed by that remark, she declared defiantly:

“I’ll go anyway! Why should I miss out on a good day’s hunting, even if Sansa’s home?!”

“Then why didn’t you leave before sunrise?” asked Ben; she turned to the traitor — for she
considered him just that, even though he had done no more than voice a truth evident to everyone — and noticed that he was smirking a little bit.

“I wanted to get some sleep!” she protested. “And have I ever returned home without game, even if I did not leave early?! I don’t always go hunting before dawn, but I do fine, just so you know!”

It was not quite true. She had not wanted to miss breakfast with the whole family — she had grown used to Robb and even to Jon being away, but Sansa’s homecoming had returned a sense of wholeness to Winterfell; a wholeness Arya had not known she had been missing before yesterday.

“Besides,” Arya added in her most brazen tone, “if she wants to spend time with me, she can always tag along!”

She had not spoken this in seriousness — more as a way to shift the blame onto Sansa, who had never joined her on her hunting or walking, dismissing it with a condescension that had often left Arya feeling cut. And yet… And yet, having noticed the changes in her sister, a hopefulness she refused to recognize as such had pushed Arya to test just how much her sister had really transformed.

“I don’t see why not,” came from Sansa, and Arya dropped her knife and fork, her mouth falling agape, her eyes widening.

*What did she just say?!*

Evidently, Arya was not the only one asking herself that question — the whole family turned to stare at Sansa, who was smiling in a decidedly new way: there were taunting devils in her shining eyes.

“You’ll never be able to keep up!” Arya protested, surprise the dominant emotion in her intonations.

Although her family did not know it, Sansa’s time with Jaime Lannister had made her dangerously incapable of backing down from a challenge. At hearing Arya’s words, she leaned toward her sister across Bran, who had always been seated between them to reduce their quibbling, and who now shrank back into his chair to be able to watch the exchange between his sisters without missing anything.

“I’ll have you know that I can dance for eight hours straight. I bet you, I can withstand whatever walking you throw at me. And, sis? If anyone won’t be able to keep up, it’ll be you, not me: a hunter has nothing on a ballet dancer,” she finished saucily, her voice taunting and happy, her eyes gleaming like those of a gambler. Arya’s eyes acquired a similar glow.

“Fine,” returned she, too happy to hide her pleasure, and a grin broke out on her thin lips, “you can tag along — but if you start whining, I won’t turn back for your sake.”

Sansa gave as good as she got:

“So long as you don’t beg to piggy-back-ride me all the way home when you get too tired.”

Astonished by this strange war of taunts into which she had found herself dragged, Arya decided to win the battle decisively: knowing Sansa had never retaliated in this fashion before, she stuck out her tongue at her elder sister, even as her eyes had kept all of their happy delight. Sansa was not to be left undone, however: she stuck out her tongue at Arya as well as anyone, and then had the temerity to wink at her sister’s dumbfounded expression:

“You look silly,” she remarked.

Arya did look silly: eyes wide with surprise, her stuck-out tongue forgotten as it was. The younger sister replaced her tongue back into her mouth and took a bite of her food, too amazed to do much else. Sansa giggled. The rest of the family were faring not much better than Arya: Catelyn had been
so overcome with shock, she had forgotten to reprimand either of her daughters for their behavior; Ben sat, his coffee cup frozen halfway to his mouth, his eyes going from one girl to the other; Ned, his eyes never leaving Sansa, kept chewing automatically on a piece of eggs and bacon some moments after he had swallowed it; Bran and Rickon just stared. Arya had been able to overpower her surprise long enough to remark:

“If you only eat those fruits, you won’t have enough strength to go for long, and you’ll get hungry quickly,” she observed.

She could only master herself enough to make her voice indifferent — not enough to imbue it with mockery. Consequently, her words came out sounding like good advice. In a sense, it was. Sansa responded by getting up and leaving the table; she headed in the direction of the kitchen, and her family’s eyes followed her form there. She re-emerged with a plate full of eggs and bacon, which she began eating heartily and quietly the moment she had resumed her seat. This time, the whole family just stared. Meanwhile, Sansa, her attention fully dedicated to the rich food she was forcing down her throat, reflected:

*If Jaime could carry Tyrion on his back all the way up that tower, I can swallow this nutrient bomb for Arya. Why is it the Lannister brothers should be so much closer than the Stark sisters? Gods, but that’s the most disgusting stuff I’ve ever had!.. How can they eat it?!..

Once the overwhelmed parents had been satisfied that Sansa had been dressed appropriately for an excursion into the wilderness with her sister, the Stark girls were allowed to go on their way. Ned had offered Sansa his favorite hunting rifle, but she had noticed how Arya’s face had fallen at this. “It’s too heavy for me, dad,” she had lied, “I better take Arya’s from her, and you give her yours. Though I’m sure I won’t need a gun — unless she annoys me too much, of course…”

Arya had beamed so radiantly when she had been entrusted with Ned Stark’s hunting rifle, which had been passed down in the family for generations, that Sansa had known she had read her sister correctly. As they walked quietly toward the forests behind Winterfell, their wolves running ahead of them, Sansa meditated on how she had never been able to figure out Arya’s thoughts and wishes before. Her sister had been a complete mystery to her, her desires and reactions — an irrational, senseless, incomprehensible emotional labyrinth. And yet, now that she took the trouble to simply look at her sister’s face, she could tell what Arya’s feelings were quite well. She was driven to reflect that, after spending so long learning to read friends who had once been strangers, whose cultures she did not know well at all, and particularly the way she hung onto Jaime’s every expression, trying to decipher it, had sharpened her ability to see through people, so that when she faced Arya, with whom she had lived for sixteen years, she found that she could tell her sister’s thoughts with an ease she had never envisioned before. She meditated that she must have hurt her sister by her indifference to her life, much as she herself had been hurt by Arya’s contempt for ballet and her girly ways and appearance. She had to make amends; to reach out and show her belated readiness to accept, to understand, to love. If she could be in love and affectionate with Jaime, a man who could reject her, she had nothing to fear from braving the gruffness of a sister who loved her — for all the angry, stupid things she sometimes said.

Arya, meanwhile, was dominated by a feeling of happy confusion. She had always wanted, she now admitted begrudgingly, for Sansa to come with her. It was one thing to be the only girl roving the woods with her brothers, and father, and uncle, while her mother and sister stayed at home, the way girls were supposed to; it was another thing entirely to be one of two young women who had braved the wilderness to encroach upon the domain of men. The first was a pleasantly rebellious escapade that sill left her feeling an outsider — no matter how welcome she was; the second was filled with a solidarity, a confidence, and a pride unique to women facing the world together. Moreover, since
Robb, and especially Jon, had left for college, Arya had been left to go out hunting more or less alone. Father did not have time to go out as frequently as she herself wanted to; uncle did not even live at Winterfell. Sure, roaming the wilderness in solitude filled her with proud independence; but having only her wolf to talk to could get a little lonely. She had dragged Gendry out a couple of times with her, but people had noticed them together when they were returning from the forests and they had given them such nasty, curious glances that both had decided it was best if they did not venture out together very often.

There was pleasant novelty in having Sansa, of all people, come with her into the woods. It filled Arya with delight and pride, for Arya was an expert in this territory and could finally show her elder sister that her outings had not been a mindless occupation — that they required any number of skills, endurance, and courage. This was not all, however: Arya, no matter what lack of feeling she may have always affected, was moved by her sister choosing to spend the day with her instead of even their mother and taking on the additional challenge of venturing into this harsh kingdom of winter for her sake. It made Arya feel favored and important in her sister’s eyes, and she had almost resigned herself to the notion that Sansa would never appreciate, respect, or show her affection the way she did to their brothers. Arya had always felt she had been an undistinguished nuisance of a sister — an embarrassment to Sansa’s refined tastes and delicate habits of mind. She had sometimes wondered if Sansa would not have preferred to have another brother instead of her, so that she could avoid the shame of having such a “tomboy freak” for a sister. This had always made Arya so angry, her eyes would begin to burn, but she never admitted that what she really felt was profound hurt.

The younger sister knew, however, that she was partially to blame for their estrangement. They had not really gotten along as children, and when they had hit teenage years, their differences had served to alienate them, multiplied as they had been by the girls’ antagonistic rejection of each other’s ways of life, their mockery of each other’s interests. Arya had been vicious in her ridicule of her sister, she knew well, but now that Sansa seemed determined to breach the gulf that had separated them, Arya was not so high and mighty as to reject the peace offering; had she even wished to, Arya’s pleasure at her sister’s interest and attention would have made it impossible for her to spurn Sansa. All these thoughts, all these feelings were overwhelming Arya, who could never long stand silence, unless she was alone in the quiet of empty woods.

“Have you ever even shot from a hunting rifle before — or any other gun, for that matter?” she asked Sansa, and her voice came out sounding accusing and brisk, though she had not meant for it to.

Sansa gave her that focused look, which, these days, always preceded her accurate interpretation of Arya’s unspoken words — the younger sister had noticed the same look several times the previous evening as well as today, when father had offered Sansa his hunting rifle.

“I haven’t, as you know very well,” she smiled, “but I’m sure you’ll be willing to teach me, won’t you?”

Arya humphed.

“Why did you decide to come with me all over sudden?” she demanded, suddenly suspicious, now that they were speaking, of Sansa’s motives. After all, this Sansa seemed so different, Arya felt uncertain she knew her at all anymore.

“I…” Sansa began and paused. They took a few more steps through the deep snow. “I know a pair of brothers, down South, and they are really close, you know? So close, I know they read each other’s thoughts, and they would die for one another…” She stopped, and Arya was forced to turn back to look at her sister. “I know I’d die for you,” Sansa pronounced the odd idea with a perplexing simplicity, “I know that I’d kill for you — like they would for each other; I think you’d do the same
for me.” She was thinking back to her conversation with Jaime about Aerys’ death; it had been the first time in her life she had ever estimated how far she would be willing to go to protect her sister (she had never before conceived of Arya as needing protection), or how far Arya would go to save her. Since that thought experiment, she knew there were no limits to the distance they would travel for each other, however little they understood one another. She continued speaking: “But we don’t really know each other, do we? I know what you like to eat and what you don’t, what you wear and when, but… I’ve never really known your thoughts or understood you; you don’t know me or understand me, either. I don’t know what you dream about — dammit, I don’t even know who you want to be when you grow up! And you don’t know my dreams any more than I yours. But there’s nothing to prevent us from learning…” She chuckled. “Well, safe for our own pride and stubbornness…” She turned serious again. “I’ve learned, though, that pride is the worst thing when it comes to the people we love,” she added, thinking of the pain and arrogance she had seen on Jaime’s face when he had been refusing to listen to her advocacy of his brother. “I want to have a sister, for real, and I’m willing to swallow my pride along without those disgusting eggs and bacon for that.” They both sniggered, this time. “I have grown to appreciate how strong you are and how brave, when I was away; since I left home, I’ve wished many times that I was more like you. And I want us to get to know each other — before it’s too late to catch up.”

Arya was unable to respond to so strange and moving a passage — she could barely believe Sansa had spoken any of these enticing words. As she tried to digest her sister’s brief speech — and, simultaneously, master the powerful emotions it had evoked in her — Arya remained silent and seemed almost grim in her seriousness. There was a long pause. They had started walking again.

“I don’t know,” mumbled Arya.
“Hmmm?”

“Who I want to be,” she clarified. “I don’t know that there’s a place in that larger world for me…”

She disliked admitting so deep an insecurity, and yet an irresistible temptation to share this fear had overpowered her. Having spoken, she hung onto her sister’s reaction, steeling herself for acerbic mockery.

“For someone so brave and fierce?” Sansa questioned with warmth. “I don’t doubt there is. And even if there weren’t, you’d have no trouble using that gun to make space for yourself, would you?” She added with a smile.

Arya looked to her sister, her large grey eyes touched and serious. She knew Sansa had been speaking metaphorically, but she had said the very words Arya had needed to hear, and no one — not even father, or Jon, or Gendry — had known to tell her this when she had disclosed to them her fear of the future.

“How do you know this?” she asked.

“Because I once thought there was not a place for me, either — or rather, that I was not fit for the place I had been given; and someone showed me I only had to reach for it, and it would be mine.”

“Who was that?”

“Someone… Someone who matters very much to me.”

They were quiet again.

“I want us to be sisters, too,” Arya grumbled quietly, “but don’t expect me to dress prettily and such foolish things because of it,” she added, unable to overcome her long-time defensiveness when it
came to her unladylike ways and Sansa’s (as well as mother’s) criticism of her.

“I know better than to expect that now,” Sansa said teasingly and winked, but Arya knew, for once, what her sister had meant: she would respect her freedom; all Arya had to do was return the favor. There was more silence.

“Why did you change so much?” Arya asked, unable to ignore anymore the question that, like a huge balloon, was hanging over them.

“I don’t know… I grew up, I guess. And my friends in the South — they are so different from… Well, from mom and dad. They are — ” She smiled. “They are a lot more like you than anyone else I’ve ever known.” She thought of the way Margery could tease and laugh loudly; of how Tyene and Ellaria could be petrifyingly, murderously obscene in their bold directness; of Jaime’s temper and his and Tyrion’s penchant for wearing a mask over their feelings, particularly their pain.

“Are you calling me a Southerner?” barked Arya.

Sansa laughed.

“It’s a compliment,” she said.

“Not for me,” her younger sister said shortly.

“It’s a compliment for anyone,” Sansa gently insisted. “There are qualities to be admired in Northerners, sure, but Southerners have amazing traits that we lack. And you, my dear, would fit in much better in the South than you have in the North — take my word for it. South is full of women who are bolder than most men, who are fierce and daring — kind of like, Trianna, remember her? — and no one tells them to be different from what they are.”

“I remember Trianna,” Arya said, ignoring, as was her habit, those words for which she had no answer. “But don’t be so silly as to tell anything like that to mother or father,” she advised her elder sister.

“Oh, I won’t,” Sansa said easily — too easily. She seemed habituated to the idea.

“You’ve been hiding stuff from mom and dad, haven’t you?” inquired the younger sister.

“Haven’t you?” Sansa countered.

“Well… Well, yes,” Arya said and was grateful to the cold and the exercise for giving her cheeks the red color they would have acquired now anyway, as, under the influence of Sansa’s perceptive remark, she thought of Gendry in this light. Yes, she was hiding a thing or two from her parents.

“Arya, I’ve never dreamed you could blush!” exclaimed Sansa merrily, and Arya scowled. “Don’t worry, though,” Sansa assured her, “I’ve been teased so mercilessly for my blushes, I won’t do that to you — although I now understand better why he can never resist taunting me about it…” she reflected out loud.

“What ‘he’?” questioned Arya.

“Just… someone.”

“The same ‘someone’ who taught you to believe in yourself?” she interrogated.

“Yes. The same someone.”

This time, Arya’s voice became teasing:
“The same ‘someone’ you are hiding from mom and dad?”

“Shut up!” Sansa cried, but there was more laughter than annoyance in her voice. “Shut up, unless you care to discuss what you are hiding from them!”

They laughed. They walked on. And they left behind some of the misunderstanding that had divided them before, and it withered in the sun-lit snow.

Arya had been surprised by her sister’s endurance. By the time they had reached her favorite hunting grounds, even Arya had gotten a little tired, but Sansa had not complained once, and she wasn’t breathing very heavily, either. Arya was impressed with her sister. Although once, Sansa’s endurance would have annoyed her, now it filled Arya with pride and a sense of kinship with her sister, whose stamina allowed them to enjoy this new companionship. They settled by the trees from the cover of which Arya frequently spied her victims on the plain before it. They waited some time, but, as no game had exposed itself to Arya’s merciless and unfailing aim, the sisters were left to entertain each other.

“Do you want to try shooting?” Arya asked Sansa, instinctively awaiting a rebuff.

“Sure — only don’t make me shoot at living things,” her sister agreed.

“Fine. Let’s have you try hitting that dead tree over there, do you see it?”

“I do, but isn’t it awfully far? For a beginner?”

Arya ginned cheekily, her dimples giving her a coquettish air Sansa found endearing.

“Depends on your teacher,” her sister told her.

Arya proceeded to instruct Sansa in the use of the hunting rifle: how to hold it, where to look in order to aim right, when to pull the trigger. She had been surprised by Sansa’s seriousness as she listened carefully to her instructions without interrupting. This seriousness in Sansa made Arya oddly nervous as to whether she really was a good teacher. Sansa followed her directions carefully and took her sweet time aiming, but Arya refrained from telling her that if she were trying to kill an actual living creature, it would have perished of old age long before she had pulled the trigger.

“Mock me for how bad my aim is, and I’ll kill you — I don’t need to be a sharpshooter for that,” Sansa warned her sister darkly before pulling the trigger. Arya guffawed in happy incredulity: that was something like what she herself could say. Who would ever have thought Sansa could be funny? Arya wondered briefly about the friends whom Sansa credited with her changed attitude: they must be a merry bunch, she reflected.

Sansa did manage to hit the tree on the first try — something Arya considered remarkable. She had turned to share this complimentary thought with her elder sister and was terrified to see that Sansa had tears of pain in her eyes; her teeth were clenched in an effort not to cry or scream. Arya felt herself turn cold from head to foot, as, irrationally, she looked for blood.

“San? What happened?”

Sansa’s hand went to her right shoulder wordlessly; she was still trying to fight the pain, and Arya understood. How could she have forgotten to tell her about recoil?!

“San, on a scale of none to ten, how bad is it?”

“A seven?” croaked out Sansa.
Shit! And they were having such a good time!

“I’m so sorry I’ve forgotten to warn you about that! Do you want us to go home? Do you want me to call dad? He can get here in no time on a snowmobile!”

Sansa laughed through the pain.

“Calm down, Arya, or you’ll have a stroke. It’s just a bruise. I don’t think there’s anything more to it. I’ll live.”

“Right.” That was so unlike Sansa, not making fuss over physical pain. “Sorry again,” Arya mumbled. She was embarrassed, upset that her mistake had resulted in Sansa getting hurt. I bet she’ll never come with me again.

“Don’t worry,” Sansa said gently. “Look how well you’ve taught me, though: I’ve managed to hit that tree!” She added with excitement.

“Beginners’ luck,” Arya said, but her proud voice contradicted her words.

Before Sansa could reply, Arya had noticed a hare, who was running not twenty feet away from them; she aimed quickly and shot. The little mammal was dead in a second, and Nymeria dispatched to fetch the kill. Her elder sister had not changed that much, Arya reflected, as she observed the pity in Sansa’s eyes. Sansa could put on a brave front all she wanted, even complimenting Arya’s aim, but Arya saw clearly that the sight of dead bunnies still wounded her sister’s sensibilities. As they walked to another one of Arya’s favorite spots, Sansa remarked that it was colder than usually this time of year. Arya agreed with that observation, but she noted to herself that shooting animals and withstanding cold was still not something her sister enjoyed. Although Sansa complained of the cold (a little) and her eyes glided to the dead hare in pity every now and then, Arya was for once pleased enough with a compromise, ready to dismiss some of her sister’s “silliness.” She had not had this much fun on her hunts in a while — perhaps, she had never had fun during hunting trips in the way she had had that day, with her sister next to her. Once they had reached the new spot and lay in waiting on the snow, they chatted and were surprised to discover they could easily sustain a conversation that interested them both; sure, they had to explain some things to one another when they did not understand, but their mutual interest now served to overcome their ignorance of one another’s lives, and once they had established a common ground, they could feel curiosity about their differences. They had learned to laugh together — rather than at each other — in those woods, finding that they not only understood but enjoyed each other’s jokes. Perhaps their most revealing discovery had been of their similarities — something they had not suspected they shared before.

Whereas in strangers discovering friendship, trust is expected to emerge in the future, for the Stark sisters, trust had come quickly. Had they been less surprised by each other, or had they envisioned a long, uninterrupted sequence of walks like the one they had taken that day, perhaps they might have had the time to develop and overcome reserve. But the sudden happiness of their new companionship, their realization of its brevity compelled a trust that was of the kind one feels when jumping from great height into another's arms to escape fire, rather than one that comes from years of shared burdens and joys. They took risks to become sisters, revealing secrets, and took pleasure in overcoming the hesitation of making these confessions so rashly it made them feel as though they really were playing with fire, when, in reality, they had allowed the current of solidarity and need for a confidante to sweep them away. Sansa had been the one to start this cycle of secret exchanges the day before, when she had caught her sister in a hug, and gave the wheel of disclosures greater speed by her later acknowledgement that seeing the bond of the Lannister brothers, as well as her new perception of what constituted admirable qualities in young women, which has arisen from contact with her Southern female friends, had pushed her to regret the wasted sisterhood between herself and Arya and attempt to mend things. Sansa was not, however, to remain alone in her confidences.
After Arya had shot another luckless hare, and they were walking to yet another hunting ground, she confessed she was enraged by a situation involving Bran. The second youngest Stark child had long been a source of amusement for the whole family because of his ever-changing choices of profession; each time he decided to become a pilot, a chef, a maester, a musician, he was genuinely serious in his interest, but it lasted no more than a few months. Indeed, the only constant thing in Bran's life was his passion for rock-climbing, which he took as much for granted as a bird does flying. At any rate, now Bran wanted to become a professional sword-fighter. In the empty woods, Arya confessed to her sister that, had she only been a little taller, this would have been her own dearest wish; but no matter how much Arya ate or trained, driving herself to exhaustion in the gym, she remained as petite as nature had — cruelly, in her opinion — designed her. When Bran had expressed a desire to become a sword fighter, a dream that had been so dear and fantastic to Arya, she had never dared voice it, she could not stay silent any longer, but her first formulation of this wish was not to become a fond memory. Bran had first decided to become a sword fighter when a Northern champion of that sport had come to visit Ned Stark, his old friend from college. As soon as Bran had announced, in the presence of that sword fighter, that he, too, wished to become a champion like him, Greatjon Umber had said right away that, once Bran grew a little older, he would be happy to train him. Arya, overcome by the irresistible calling of her long-nurtured dream, had asked, “Would you train me, too?,” and her voice had sounded so full of hope, eagerness, and trepidation that Ned had turned to consider his daughter seriously.

"What did Greatjon say?" asked Sansa, who had been listening to Arya's tale with the full realization of the importance of what her sister was sharing with her.

"He laughed at me and said he didn't know enough about embroidery to teach me," Arya said so quietly, Sansa dearly wished her sister was raging and screaming insults instead. But once Arya's words had sunk in, Sansa was infuriated and gave voice to her acrimony in a manner that was as vehement as Arya's could have been:

"How disgusting! How dishonorable! Arya, you don’t want to be trained by someone like that — and neither should be Bran! I’ll speak to mother about this!.. What a self-important asshole! He doesn't know what he's missing by declining to train you! Bran’s never done any fighting, and I know you’ve been boxing since you were twelve! Not to mention all the Eastern martial arts you've been practicing! The old fool! A misogynist pig, that's what he is, and he’s not worthy of you as his student!"

Sansa was red with indignation, and she almost screamed her anger. Arya looked at her, dumbfounded, having momentarily forgotten about her own pain and humiliation in watching the rare occasion of her sister's storm. She even smiled at Sansa: not even Gendry had reacted this way; the few people who knew about that incident — father, Jon, and her boyfriend — had expressed their regrets, but their acceptance of the situation had filled Arya with a keener sense of injustice than Greatjon's words and prevented her from channeling pain into rage. Although this she was not ready to confess to anyone, not even Sansa (and this was a strange thought — how quickly had her sister made way for herself among Arya's confidantes!), Arya had cried herself to sleep on the night of Greatjon's visit. They were broken, humiliated, boundlessly painful tears that escaped her to her venomous rage and burned her soul from the inside. Meanwhile, Sansa continued to bluster next to her, saying that Greatjon was an underserving remain of a bygone era, an old fool, not deserving to have "great" incorporated into his name, and Arya drank her sister's fury with a thirst of a burned person. This was what no one else had been able to give her — the indignation of another woman and the reassurance that a she could accomplish as much as any he.

"It’s a pity all the more," Sansa exclaimed, "because I know a sword fighter — the best one in the world! — who would surely never mind that you're a girl! And I bet you," she spoke with vehemence and pride, “he could destroy this Not-so-Great-Jon Umber in a matter of seconds!"
This caught Arya's attention.

"Who's that?" she asked.

Suddenly, Sansa's rage was gone, replaced by a guilty and hesitant expression, common to people who realize too late they have said too much. She even stumbled in the snow and would have fallen, if Arya had not caught her arm in time.

"Please, Sansa," Arya's voice was unusually eager and almost pleading, "who is that?"

"Look!" Sansa cried instead, sounding relieved, and pointed to a fox, which was running in some distance. Foxes, because of their prized fur, demanded more care than other animals, and Arya aimed carefully. The hunting had distracted her, and when the fox — whom she had managed to shoot in the eye — was lying dead, Arya was enormously pleased with herself. So pleased, in fact, she was willing to postpone the interrogation of her sister.

"Oh, wait till I tell Ge— " she caught herself a little too late, "till I tell someone: we've only recently made a bet I couldn't shoot a fox in the eye from thirty feet! You will be my key witness, San!"

"Who's this 'Ge-something,' Arya?" asked Sansa, curious as to why her sister would not wish to share a name; Arya had never hidden the few close friends she had from anyone. Sansa's curiosity increased, when she saw her sister redden. Could it be? Was it really possible that her sister — this wild, independent creature, almost sex-less in her former denouncements of romance — had fallen in love?

A sudden thought, not particularly surprising, occurred to Sansa:

"Arya," she asked in the gentlest of tones, "is this a girl?"

"What?"

"The 'Ge-someone,' who's making you blush now, is that a girl?"

She had seen lesbian couples in King's Landing. One of Margery's cousins was gay, and Sansa had met her fiancée when they had visited Marge. Although this was something Sansa had never encountered before, she found Margery's cousin and her girlfriend charming and learned that love was beautiful in whatever combinations it came. They had been so openly happy, their eyes had shone with so much affection, they talked of their life together with so much enthusiasm, Sansa always remembered them with a fond smile. And then there were Loras and Renly, close friends, whom she cared for, and who, she knew, would live happily ever after. No, the thought of her sister having a girlfriend did not seem strange or problematic to Sansa. From the way Arya blushed, she must be happy with her, and this was all that mattered to her elder sister. However, this fact would certainly explain why mother and father knew nothing of her sister's attachment as well as Arya's hesitance to share information.

"No! He's not a girl!" cried Arya, offended. "Why? Because I don't act like a real lady, this makes me gay? Honestly, San, I thought you'd be more... I don't know!.. Why would you assume that?!"

"I didn't mean to stereotype you!" Sansa defended herself. "It was the only explanation I could think of for why mom and dad knew nothing about it and why you didn't want to tell me!"

Arya humphed, somewhat satisfied with this clarification.

"What's his name?" Sansa queried gently, her burning curiosity poorly masked.
"I'd rather not tell you — father wouldn't approve if he knew, so it's better for your own sake if you can honestly say you had no idea. Do you... Do you understand?"

Sansa guffawed.

"Trust me, I know a thing or two about liking someone father wouldn't approve of."

"The 'someone' who taught you to believe in yourself and stuff?" Arya teased pleasedly.

"Yes."

Arya paused in her walking, suddenly enlightened by new deductions:

"The same 'someone' who teases you for blushing?"

"Yes."

"The same sword-fighter you wouldn't say the name of earlier?"

"Yes."

Arya laughed, but without malice and with a lot of love, which made her as powerless to resist teasing Sansa as her anger toward her sister had once made her powerless not to mock her.

"After all those medieval love songs, I'm not surprised you fell in love with a knight!" Exclaimed she gaily. "Is he tall, with broad shoulders, perfect hair, and a pretty face?"

Sansa, who had been prevented by Arya's well-meaning tone from taking angrily to this poking of her wound, began to laugh, too.

"Yes, but he doesn't have a 'pretty' face — he is very handsome," she corrected in a tone of someone giving a vocabulary lesson. But there was more to her voice: there was so much pleasure and affection in her intonation, Arya had noticed it — and was consumed with curiosity. Her active mind, working quickly, pointed to her another clue:

"Sansa, is that the 'Jay' you've disappeared with a couple of weeks ago and everyone was freaking out?"

"Yes."

Again, Arya had sensed a new affinity to her sister's intonations.

"That's not his real name, is it?"

"No. It's a nickname."

Arya wanted to know. She wanted to know whom Sansa had fallen in love with. For all of her elder sister's obsession with romance, Arya knew Sansa had never been in love before. She was living her first love just as Arya was living hers. Of all the things they had shared and learned about each other just in that one day, this was perhaps the most evidently interesting to them both. They could not share their lovers' names with their parents — or their brothers; but they could share them with each other and rest assured their complicity in this best of crimes, as well as the newer feeling of sisterly bond, would bound each to silence. Arya looked at her sister and knew why Sansa was frowning: she was keeping a secret that she wished she did not have to hide. She knew Sansa had been the first to take the plunge into the abyss that had separated them, risking her own pride and feelings to bridge the gap that had divided them. Her courage — and she had not thought of her elder sister as
courageous before, but she did so now with willing admiration — had given Arya a happiness, a
support, and an understanding the like of which she had never known. Perhaps, it was her time to
dive in first; she would not be less brave than Sansa.

"Gendry," she said quickly, as if in a hurry to not lose her courage.

"What?"

"His name's Gendry Waters."

"But Robb and he were in high school together! Although Gendry's a little younger and was never
friends with our crazy brother. He's kind and quiet. I remember, when I was in middle school, he
once helped me pick up my notebooks when I slipped and fell. Why wouldn't father approve?"

Arya chewed on her lip. She had been overwhelmed and elated by Sansa's praise of Gendry, amazed
that neither condescension nor reproach had appeared on her sister's face even momentarily — only
genuine incomprehension was visible in Sansa's features. Arya did not like to think about the reasons
father would not approve of Gendry, partly because she did not enjoy dwelling on any such
differences in herself and her lover, and partly because she felt, rather than admitted, that these
reasons did not speak highly of Ned Stark — and he was the perfect man, was he not? Her father,
the best father in the world, the most beloved man in the North? He could not be always right, yet so
very wrong at the same time? Arya looked to Sansa's smiling face and her eyes — full of sympathy,
offering understanding — and bitter words spilled from her lips.

"He's Robert Baratheon's bastard," she began, her voice stern and frigid. "His mother's an alcoholic.
They're very poor. He's a hacker. He doesn't steal personal information or anything, though, but to
anyone who doesn't know him, he's suspiciously good with computers. He's had to repeat grades in
school because he worked to keep himself and his mother from going hungry. He cannot afford to go
to college, so he works in a gun shop. Uncle Ben — " Arya's face grew suddenly vicious, "I heard
him call Gendry 'no good' the other day... I was so angry!"

Sansa, who had suffered through Ben's references to Jaime, which had been far from flattering, as
well as his spreading of the rumors of the twins' incest, was suddenly overwhelmed with despair and
pain. She had fallen in love with a man father and uncle would kill before they ever let her love him;
but why had Arya to suffer the same? Sansa knew how bitter and hurtful it was to keep such secrets;
to listen to the men she loved cover with dirt another man she loved no less. The realization that her
little sister had lived through the same — and, since she lived at home, lived through it more
frequently — had served to double Sansa's own pain by the assumption of her sister's burden. Tears
of anger and hurt in her eyes, she yanked Arya to her in crushing hug.

"San, what's wrong?" her sister exclaimed, almost as frightened of her few tears as any Northern
man would be.

"I am so, so very sorry you have to live through this, too! I would so much have liked to keep on
being miserable like I am about Jaime, if only you could just be happy with Gendry and have
parents' approval!"

At the word "Jaime," Arya could barely hear the rest of her sister's words. She pushed her away just
even enough to be able to see her face, but kept her hold on Sansa’s shoulders.

"Jaime? Oh gods, San! You don't ever mean Jaime Lannister, do you?"

Realizing her slip of the tongue, Sansa looked to her sister with an expression of a deer caught in the
headlights that told Arya she expected nothing other than accusations from this point on, but the
younger sister, in her complete shock, still could not help herself from giving voice to her disbelief. *Sansa must have meant some other Jaime!*.

"*The* Jaime Lannister? Son of Tywin? The one who killed Aerys? The world champion of sword-fighting for the past decade or more? Whose father got him off the hook and had uncle Ben taken off the investigation? The one who sleeps with his sister? The Kingslayer? *That* Jaime Lannister?!!"

It was the first time Sansa had pushed Arya away, breaking the embrace. She looked agitated, angry, and deeply wounded — like an animal who, having sustained an injury, turns to rage as the last resort of primitive courage.

"When you told me Gendry wasn't a thief, I didn't question your words!" she cried, and Arya heard how her voice rang with betrayal. "I trusted you to know a good man, even if he was born out of wedlock to a drunkard!" The younger sister flinched at these words; but her blood grew cold when Sansa's rage passed, and her elder sister looked at her with tormented eyes and whispered with trembling lips: "Why don't you trust me to know a good man amidst all these rumors?" She regained some self-possession, and, "I shouldn't have said anything to you!" she added in a cold voice and started walking away; her small shoulders, squared with anger and wounded trust, had cut into Arya's heart like none of her words had. She ran to catch up with her elder sister.

"Fine! I don't know anything about him," Arya accepted the strange premise, "then tell me!" she cried, and she would not admit there were tears in her eyes, too. "Tell me," she repeated quietly when Sansa had turned.

Tell me and I will believe you, seemed to have resounded in the snow-filled woods. *Tell me, and I will never doubt my sister's words.*

Sansa looked at her long and hard, as though deciding if she was willing to share more of her soul under potential threat of accusation; she must have seen Arya’s willingness to accept her words, particularly strong now that the younger Stark girl had realized her own reaction to learning the name of her sister’s object of affection was far less gracious and supportive than Sansa’s had been when she had revealed Gendry’s name. Prompted by gratitude for the latter and some embarrassment at the former, Arya was willing to credit her sister’s words of praise — even if she praised Jaime fucking Lannister.

Un-fucking-believable, zipped and looped in Arya’s mind.

Sansa sighed and began speaking about Jaime. Concealing their first two meetings — when she had seen him for the first time in the studio with Cersei as well as the confrontation that followed in the morning — for the sake of keeping Jaime’s secret rather than out of a willingness to deceive her sister, she began by telling of his master’s class and narrated quite faithfully their interactions from then on. She smiled, and her eyes acquired a peculiar softness — a tenderness, Arya thought — as she spoke of the way he supported her in her moments of doubt; she told of the night she had found him drunk and the day that had followed, saying that a woman he loved proved unfaithful — a true enough account, of the other occasions they had spent time together, of the way she felt when they danced. She spoke for the first time about Jaime without holding back, sharing her feelings and her view of him much more earnestly than ever before she had with any of her intimates; for the first time, she enjoyed telling the story of her love and felt free to speak at length, describing with the care of a loving heart the many fine qualities she had discovered in the man to whom it now belonged. Among other things, Sansa had revealed, with necessary omissions, the truth behind the death of Aerys Targaryen.

“He was going to brutalize Jaime’s twin sister,” she explained, “to rape her and hurt her. And Aerys had tortured and killed many prostitutes before, but his family was hushing up those stories.”
Anyway, Jaime snapped and attacked him — but he did not push him off that balcony.”

“That’s too bad,” Arya commented in a dry, dark tone. “If the fucker was a sick maniac, maybe he should have pushed him.”

“I think so, too, Arya, I do. If someone like Aerys threatened you, I would have done all I could to stop him. And just imagine what Jon or Robb would have, what you would have done… That’s… That’s how I’ve been able to understand Jaime.”

As she listened to her elder sister go on, narrating more about her life and the support she had found in the director of the LBC as well as her admiration for him — not just as a ballet dancer, but a man she considered remarkably good — Arya knew Sansa was seriously in love; it was not a girlish crush that could be excused by a young woman’s imagination and a handsome male face, oh no. Without being an expert, Arya recognized serious affection when she looked into her sister’s face; recognized, also, the similarity of Sansa's feelings for Jay Lannister to her own feelings for Gendry Waters. On the one hand, the seriousness of Sansa's affection made the situation all the worse, where their parents were concerned. On the other, there was so much joy in being in love... As she listened to her elder sister, Arya discovered a new Jaime Lannister, a man who sounded honorable, kind, and generous — if infernally teasing and prone to pretending he possessed no qualities of merit. It was very strange to hear Sansa speak and witness the layers of prejudice and assumption fall away from a monster to reveal a man not unworthy of love — even if it was the precious love of her elder sister. Neither of the Stark girls had noticed how many hours they had spent walking, sometimes sitting on the ground in their warm winter clothes, while Sansa poured out the many thoughts and feelings she had been forced to keep bottled up inside her. When she had done speaking, her hoarse voice alerting them to the duration of her monologue, Arya said:

“I don’t know how it’s possible, but he doesn’t sound so bad. He sounds like the kind of man mom and dad should have liked you to have... I hope you aren’t wrong about him... I’m ready to believe, for now, that he’s as good as you say. But if he hurts you, I’ll cut off his balls, and you'll make us matching necklaces.”

They laughed, laughed well. Sansa’s heart felt irrecognizably light, now that she had shared the only big secret she had ever had with a newly-found friend, who knew what it felt like to carry inside this kind of silence, and who had proved an understanding, oddly quiet, and oddly supportive presence during her narration. That she had confessed to her sister, who was quickly, paradoxically quickly, becoming the closest intimate she had ever had, filled her with peace and confidence. Naturally, after she had told Arya about Jaime, Sansa wanted to know about Gendry. It was her sister’s turn to tell her love story.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the interaction of our darling Stark sisters! :)

I hope you enjoyed the interaction of our darling Stark sisters! :)
The first time Arya had ever seen Gendry, she was in elementary school, and he in high school. She was being bullied by boys her own age, who could no more accept a girl dressed and behaving like a boy than the girls could. That time, though, the bullying seemed more like open aggression; Arya was little — both small and young — and despite the fiery temper she displayed amongst her family, the menacing body language and the angry words of those boys had scared her. They pushed her, and she fell, feeling smaller and more afraid than she ever had before. Her usually quick mind was failing her, overwhelmed by fear and misery that the rejection by yet another peer group had triggered. She wished suddenly she had some weapon with her — a miniature Ice, or perhaps a little gun — so that she could counter the greater strength of her offenders by her superior armament. The boys advanced, and she was certain that, with neither Robb nor Jon in sight, she might receive a trashing, when a shadow fell over her, as though shielding her small body, and she watched the snarls of her attackers turn to cowardice. She felt instantaneous relief and looked up across her shoulder to see which of her elder brothers had come to her aid. It was neither. An older boy, who looked to be Robb’s age or a little older, stood behind her, fixing the younger ones with a serious stare.

“You like picking on the little ones, do you?” He asked them calmly. “Maybe, so do I? You look pretty small to me.”

Arya’s offenders did not wait to see where this particular confrontation could go, disappearing from the school yard with the agility of spooked rabbits. The older boy helped Arya to her feet.
“Do you like picking on the little ones?” She asked him right away, thinking that he did not look like the bullying type at all.

“No, I don’t,” he answered in the same quiet, leveled tone he had used with the younger boys, “and I don’t like when others do it, either.” He went to pass her, but she caught his sleeve.

“Wait! What’s your name?” She asked.

“Gendry Waters,” he answered.

“I’m Arya. Arya Stark.”

Something odd passed over his face at this. He nodded in acknowledgement of her words and went away.

He must have told Jon or Robb about that incident, because, since that day, Arya’s brothers never left her alone outside class. Her bullying by the younger boys got her a golden ticket into the company of her elder brothers and their friends, and the formerly mocked Arya Stark became the center of her male classmates’ envy and admiration. They no longer bullied her; instead, they took pains to get on her good side in the hopes of being allowed to join her and the older Stark boys with their friends at lunch break. And once they had stopped bullying Arya, they discovered she made for an amusing and wild companion. From the day Gendry’s shadow had fallen over her, Arya’s experience of school changed entirely for the better — she became the accepted member of the elder boys’ company and the leader of boys her own age. Her new popularity did not change her or made her forget about the one who had come to her rescue. A few times, she tried engaging Gendry in conversation, coming to sit next to him at lunch, but he remained taciturn, so, eventually, she gave up, realizing he did not wish for her company — or anyone else’s. He usually sat alone; if someone sat next to him, he remained as quiet with them as with her. On his face, lay the stamp of worries and concerns that was entirely lacking from her brothers’ — or those of their friends. It was the expression of a burdened adult imprinted on the features of a teenage boy. Although she saw him every now and then, they remained strangers, and, eventually, she did not see him at all.

Arya had been allowed to tag along on hunts with her father, uncle, and brothers since she was ten, but she had not been allowed to have her own hunting rifle until she was fourteen (it had been the same for Robb and Jon, so she did not complain too much). When the long-awaited birthday had come, her father had presented Arya with her first hunting rifle. Since that day, Arya’s theoretical obsession with guns had turned practical. Bullets, cheek risers, slings, shooting sticks — in other words, all kinds of accessories for her new toy — engrossed Arya and swallowed up her monthly allowance every month (to her mother’s horror and father’s amusement). Under these circumstances, it was hardly strange that Arya became a constant presence in the local gun shop. If she were not buying something specific, she was looking around, checking out other rifles. And it was there and then that she saw Gendry for the first time in years.

Unlike the other clerks, he treated her respectfully, with the quiet calmness and dignity that characterized his interactions with the world. Unlike everyone else — from her family to strangers — he did not seem to find it odd or amusing that a girl was interested in guns; he treated the fact with what she thought a peculiar indifference. Intrigued and drawn to his strange tolerance, Arya contrived to visit the gun shop on the days Gendry was there, so that she could enjoy the satisfaction of feeling she stood out not at all from the male customers.

One day, a man who was also looking at the newly released models of hunting rifles had been rude to Arya — but not particularly so, only repeating the same old insult she received every now and then about her size and gender’s unsuitability to her hobbies — and, to her surprise, Gendry stood up for her, reprimanding the older man in no uncertain terms. “She has as much right to be here as you,”
was one of the things he had told him, and which had struck Arya more than anything else. She later found out (but not from Gendry, of course) that this remark had gotten him into trouble with his employer, and that he had known this would be the case before he had spoken.

The incident had reminded Arya about her first meeting with Gendry and reinforced her liking of him: usually, she resented men who stood up for her, capable as she was of fighting her own battles, but there was something in the way Gendry defended her that appealed to Arya. From his bearing and words, it was evident he did not doubt her independence or her spirit, but that his sense of justice — rather than pity or a need to defend a damsel in distress — compelled him to act on her behalf.

The more often she came to the gun shop, the less she knew whether she came to browse gun accessories or to see Gendry. Their conversations, which had at first consisted of questions and answers about the weapons or accessories she considered, grew to include subjects that were not centered on rifles, and, little by little, she got to know him, got to see what he looked like when he smiled. Gendry Waters, his taciturnity notwithstanding, proved to be agreeable and even funny at times, when his life seemed to be going easier than usual. Because he smiled so little, and because, without knowing any particulars, Arya felt his life gave him little cause to be happy, she was all the more determined to make him smile when he was with her — and she succeeded. Indeed, the more time they spent together, the more often he smiled. He was kind — as kind as his intercessions had led her to believe. She liked him. Liked him more than she had ever liked anyone outside her family. Then, one day, she realized that she no longer came to the gun shop for the guns at all — indeed, she had not made a purchase or considered making one in weeks; she would even forget to look around the shop now when she came there, going straight to her friend to greet him, hanging around and chatting hours away, or just sitting in comfortable silence. She began taking her homework and textbooks with her, staying next to him behind the counter, doing her schoolwork while he attended to customers. She spent more time there than at home, never knowing just how often she came or how long her visits lasted. Gendry did not seem to mind her presence, so she never thought of time. Then, one day, she knew the damned gun shop had played quite a trick on her: the very place meant to establish her independence from lady-like ways proved to be the sight of her falling in love.

The realization had come when, once, she turned up at the damned gun shop as usual, but Gendry was nowhere to be found. He had finally graduated from school and now worked full-time — so where the hell was he? The owner, who treated Ned Stark’s daughter with the respect he personally thought the crazy tomboy did not deserve, informed her that Gendry had called in sick. She felt her soul drop somewhere into a blackness, and it did not return into her chest until she was knocking furiously at his door (the address she had extorted from his boss). Her fists pounded on the wood mercilessly, as if she meant to call him back from the dead by her banging, and her heart beat wildly to the rhythm of her knocking. Suddenly, the door swung open, and Arya was faced with a middle-aged woman, whom she had never seen before. The woman's face was terribly swollen, her eyes barely visible, and her skin was of an unhealthy reddish shade. From the little that could be seen of her eyes, Arya discovered a creature of unstable mind. Something in this woman, ugly and insane, had terrified Arya, especially since she had expected to see her sick friend. She stood immobilized.

“What do you think you’re doing, banging on doors like that?!” Yelled the woman rudely, in a coarse voice. Her speech was mangled, as if she had difficulty pronouncing words. “Who the fuck d’you think you’re, you little shit? Fuck off from here before I beat some manners into you!!”

With the first words that had left the woman’s mouth, Arya began backing off. Had she stumbled onto a raging bear in the woods, she could not have been so deeply, so superstitiously terrified. The woman looked like an evil witch, sprung into life from the pages of a bad children’s book into the adult world. Arya was about to turn on her heels and rush down the dirty little staircase away from the flat that had regurgitated the monster, when she was arrested by a familiar voice:
“Arya? What are you doing here?”

She turned and discovered Gendry on the top stair, holding shopping and pharmacy bags in his hands. Relieved far more than she had been on the occasion of their very first meeting all those years ago, she rushed to him and wrapped her arms around him.

“They told me at the shop that you were sick!” She explained, her voice vibrating with the overwhelming mixture of fears she, so unused to fright, had experienced that day. “I came to check on you, and then I... She...” Arya turned from him to look at the woman who was standing in the doorway, smirking in the most disgusting way imaginable.

Gendry sighed in a resigned way.

“That’s my mum,” he said.

Arya looked from the monstrous creature to her friend and then back at her, unable to believe that anything at all could bind them — least of all blood.

“I’m sorry she’s been rude,” Gendry continued. “She’s just drunk.”

The simplicity of this explanation announced that, for his mother, it was a state the blunt description of which no longer carried offense. Arya stared at the woman; her fear was gone — Gendry’s calm had quieted her. She tried discerning in his mother’s face, disfigured by drink, the least resemblance to her friend but could see none. Some things, however, began to make sense to her. She turned back to Gendry, catching a waiting look in his eyes; there was regret, rather than shame, in his open face.

“You aren’t sick,” she said dumbly.

“No.”

“Your mom is sick, though?”

He sighed.

“That’s one way to put it.”

She took some time to digest this, unconsciously fixing her eyes on the dirty floor of the stairway.

“Arya,” he called to her in his quiet, calm voice, which seemed to her to say her name like no one else could, “go home.”

Her hard, brazen eyes returned to his face, fierce stubbornness in them.

“No.”

She took some of the bags from him and walked to the door, fearlessly pushing her way past his mother into the small flat. The drunk woman gurgled an unpleasant laugh and followed her in. Gendry entered last.

She helped him in what little ways she could that day. His mother was ill. The constant drinking was taking a heavy toll on her liver, to say nothing of her general state of health; each inevitable new bout of drunkenness exhorited a higher price — too high for her body to keep paying. Seeing the woman in this state was like watching someone die — slowly, inevitably. How Gendry could have borne this for so many years, Arya could not tell. Although she wished she could do more for him, already, her presence and her stubborn, unrelenting support had given Gendry great comfort.
It was a sad little flat on the bad side of town, but it was meticulously clean, the disarray caused by Gendry’s mother a visible inconstant in the space, which seemed cozy. Although she would never have done so at home, here, Arya cleaned up voluntarily, without a single complaint. As she moved around the little rooms, gathering up trash, folding discarded clothing, throwing some in a “to-wash” pile, Arya’s thin lips were pursed and her face hard. She suddenly envisioned Gendry’s life with brutal clarity, and his setbacks compared to his peers seemed no longer surprising even in a determined, intelligent young man. No, what seemed surprising was his quiet dignity, his well-bred reserve. Where this had come from Arya could not say, but the obscurity of his manners’ origins made them no less admirable in her eyes.

When his mother had fallen asleep, they sat drinking the Northern tea he had offered. It was then that Arya learned even more about Gendry’s life than she had already picked up from coming to his apartment that day. She learned, for instance, that his father was Robert Baratheon, her own father’s close friend. After Robert had refused to take care of his child, Stannis, as always, had “cleaned up” his elder brother’s mess by frightening Gendry’s mother into silence. Ned, who disapproved heartily of the entire situation, and, for once, even of his friend’s behavior, had offered to adopt the boy. When the mother refused, still gambling on getting a return from having Robert’s kid, Ned suggested she should come North, where he would be able to help her and the boy out; although Gendry did not mention this, Arya wondered if, partly, the idea of Gendry and his mother going North was not connected to the remoteness of this location from the capital, where Robert Baratheon was set to start his political career. At any rate, North Gendry’s mother went. Ned found and bought them a nice apartment in a good neighborhood and set them up, even arranging for her to have a well-earning job. Gendry’s childhood was more or less untroubled — if one discounted his mother’s choice of men, which had never been sound. As she aged and her prospects did not improve into the fairytale she had wished for when she had decided to keep the child of a rising young politician, Gendry’s mother found consolation in drink. And thus Gendry’s childhood had come to an end. Between her lost job, the apartment she had mortgaged and never paid off, and her alcoholism, the teenage boy was faced with taking care of the one person who was supposed to take care of him. Ned tried helping, but the rehabs did not lead to an improvement in her condition, and Gendry did not want to take further handouts from the man who had already helped them so much. Moreover, though this he did not share with Arya, he felt slightly uneasy in the presence of Ned Stark: even though he could not help admiring Eddard, Gendry was unable to forgive Robert what he had done (or rather, for what he had not done), and his father’s closest friend was tainted, however unjustly, by the mere association. So, having refused the offers of monetary help, he had asked his benefactor to help him find a job, which Ned did, setting Gendry up in the very gun shop Arya had come to love so well. The small apartment on the shady side of town Gendry had been able to rent with his modest earnings still filled him with contentment: it was in his name; had she wanted to, his mother could not drink it away.

Some, perhaps, might have found Gendry’s situation, if not distasteful, then at least inconvenient; but to Arya, it had not occurred to think of the “what-ifs;” had she even thought of them, it is safe to say she would have shrugged in her usual way and taken things as she had found them. What point was there to dwell on the past she could not change any more than she could foretell the future?

Considering the Stark sisters’ views on love, it was, perhaps, surprising that, out of the two, Arya, who had rejected romance her whole life, had taken to love so much easier than Sansa. Yet the younger sister’s nature consisted in rushing into situations before she could think of disadvantages or complications, before she could envisage pain or defeat; and it was so with love as well. She felt no doubts, was perturbed by no insecurities, and self-analysis did not trouble her sleeping hours. She had not questioned, but accepted the new state of her heart with the simplicity that characterizes the mindless flight of a bird, to whom it does not occur to fear heights. Not long after Arya’s discovery of her feelings, when Gendry and she were once again hanging out in the empty gun shop, she said...
to him, as a matter of course:

“Oh, I keep forgetting to tell you. I love you.”

And though she had been brazen and careless, her heart had been so pumped with adrenaline, its frantic beating had made her hands shake, and only ceased when she had pronounced the words. Gendry did not speak, but even now, even with her, he was so often quiet that she did not question his silence. When, a few days later, he shared his doubts about the appropriateness of Arya’s statement, she turned her stubborn eyes on him and questioned him in the merciless way that came so naturally to her:

“Does that bother you? That I love you?”

“No...”

“You sound unsure. Does it bother you?”

“No.”

There was silence, and she returned to her open textbook, although the text could have been written in High Valyrian, for all the sense it made to her. Her stubbornly set mouth eased into a pleased, happy little grin when he had added in an unusually soft voice:

“It doesn’t bother me.”

Before Arya had loved Gendry, she had been drawn to him for the equality he seemed to perceive between them — and people more generally; although their mutual respect was a fundamental part of their friendship, in love she bullied him. He did not think them well-suited: the daughter of the North’s most prominent family and the bastard of a drunken woman (Gendry’s ignorance of his father’s penchant for alcohol was for the best); moreover, Gendry kept reminding her that he was older than she and had lived a much uglier life... But she bullied him into admitting he loved her and almost, but not quite, into believing there was nothing “unsuitable” about their relationship. He believed her — or, rather, wanted to believe her — enough that he could not resist being with her; but his playful address of “m’lady,” which she hated so much, occasionally served to remind them that he did not think the world would take kindly to their love.

When, much later, he had confessed to her he had fallen in love with her at first sight when she had walked into the gun shop for the first time, before even the recognition of her as the little Arya Stark he had helped out once so long ago had emerged in his mind, she did not fully believe him — she had never thought of herself as “love at first sight material;” but when his serious face did not change under her questioning stare, she laughed and kissed him. She did not share this with him, because he was the only person of whose feelings she had learned to be considerate, but to herself she had thought, who cares how we fell in love?.. What mattered was that she was lying in his arms and they loved each other. There was no tomorrow, or even today. There was only them.

“You’re lovers?” Sansa asked quietly when Arya had finished her story.

“Yeah, but you can’t tell anyone. I’m still sixteen. He kept being silly about it, but I wore him down eventually,” she explained. It had taken two years of nagging. “You aren’t going to react in mom’s style, are you?” She asked with a little apprehension.

“No, of course not.” Sansa shrugged. “It’s just... It seems a little funny you’ve experienced this before me,” Sansa said.

Arya laughed in reply.
“I’ve experienced many things before you,” she teased, then clarified: “I’ve learned how to shoot long before you had ever held a gun; I know how to skin animals — you don’t. So what? You can’t be the eldest sister in everything.” Sansa smiled, pleased with this view of things, and Arya, seeing her sister’s amendability, added: “That being said, if you want any tips for dealing with Jaime Lannister — ” she began, but her sister pushed her into the snow:

“Shut up, Arya!”

Sansa laughed, but her face was red to the tips of her ears. To help her with this overheating situation, Arya sent a well-aimed snowball into Sansa’s face. They laughed together. Laughing still, they became embroiled in a considerable snow battle, and when they were too exhausted by this amusement, they went back to the comparison of their feelings and a lively discussion of their men, which included no small amount of anecdotes these men were fortunate not to have heard them share.

They had been lost in each other’s worlds; so lost, indeed, they would never really leave them — each intertwined in the other’s love story, their first loves permeating the foundation of what had made them truly sisters in that brief time; sisters, who could rival even the Lannister brothers with their openness and trust, if not yet with the degree to which they knew one another, although that did not seem far off, either. Having shared as much as they had that day, having experienced that companionship and solidarity they had never known before, they had learned how to behave with one another and to love being in one another’s presence, for they could share — indeed, they already had in common — more with each other than with their brothers, their parents, or the rest of the world. Such confidence gave birth to a dependency on each other’s society they had not dreamt of before, and they did not wish to separate. They had lost track of time, and darkness had caught them unawares in the woods; with the darkness, came the phone calls from their mother: Catelyn had not wanted to intrude on her daughters’ rare time together, but when they had not returned at night, she grew worried. The girls walked home and noticed, for the first time that day, they were both quite frozen. This fact did not escape their mother, however, and Catelyn put them both into the same hot bathtub, as she had done when they had been little girls, thrusting cups of hot chocolate into their hands. Sansa and Arya had kept talking on their way home, and grown silent around Catelyn; but the moment the bathroom door had closed behind their mother, the daughters returned — albeit, in hushed tones — to the discussion of their beaux, which interested the ballet dancer as much as the huntress. If anyone had told either of the sisters a week ago, or at any time before yesterday, that they would be sitting in a bathtub, their frozen limbs slowly regaining warmth, while they talked about being in love, each sister, in her own way, would have questioned that person’s sanity. Their parents were certainly questioning their own mental health, for they could not believe their eyes when the girls had fallen asleep in one bed, whispering. This was what Catelyn had always dreamt of for her daughters, but she could not comprehend what event or feeling had so suddenly brought them together.

As Sansa lay next to the sleeping Arya, listening to her deep, even breathing, she considered the swift metamorphose that had occurred in her relationship with her sister. Suddenly, their never-ending war had ended. As if a magic spell had wiped blindness from their eyes, they had really seen one another. Her sister, Sansa reflected, would never again be a source of pain or insecurity for herself, nor she for Arya. Instead, she knew that in her, she had found the only person whom she trusted with the tale of her love and whose love story she would protect and cherish. For Sansa, Catelyn had always been the paramount confidante; indeed, “Catelyn” and “confidante” had been previously synonymous in her mind, and she had never thought the day would come when anyone could rival her mother in the degree to which Sansa trusted her and relied on her. Yet Arya had abruptly burst onto the scene, capturing Sansa’s confidence, even in that one matter which she could not confide to her mother. And although it now seemed that, surely, one day, she and Arya would have become true sisters anyway, Sansa discerned the strong hand of chance in this reshaping of
their lives, and strange alternate courses seemed to emerge before her eyes, showing her a world in
which, instead of growing so quickly, so determinedly close, she and her sister had gone separate
ways, distancing from each other further as time progressed. As she considered this, Sansa became
keenly aware that the alteration in her relationship with Arya had started earlier than her
homecoming: it had begun on the day when she left Winterfell for King’s Landing; on the day she
had seen Tyrion — a man, who, despite the affliction of dwarfism, was one of the most prominent
ballet-makers in the world; the first time she had met the Sand Snakes and Oberyn, a family who
cared as little for convention as for the opinion of society; that moment when she had caught a
glimpse of Margery as she first entered her studio, where she found encouragement and self-
confidence of early womanhood; and when she first saw Jaime Lannister, wanting him despite her
better judgement, later discovering behind the mask of a monster the true man. In these and other
interactions with her King’s Landing friends, she had learned something of the beauty that hid in
imperfections and contradictions, in the defiance with which they dared disregard the world, in the
pride with which they suffered, the self-forgetfulness with which they loved, and the laughter with
which they shrugged off rage. They had teased her, made her one of them, and yet, somehow, they
had given her Arya, whom she had never known before — certainly not the way she did now. How
odd it was to think that, in leaving home and her old self behind, she had grown into the kind of
person who was strong enough, good enough to be Arya’s confidante and her friend. Sisters they
had not chosen to be; intimates they had become of their own inclination. Thoughts of secrets she
and her sister had shared brought memories of Jaime to her mind, and Sansa wondered what he was
doing in the South as she herself was falling asleep in the North, and whether, whatever he was
doing, somewhere in the very back of his mind, there lingered a shred of a thought of her. She did
not exactly wonder if he missed her — even now that they were friends, she would not dare presume
this; it was more that she wondered if, in the multitude of seconds that made up his day, one carried
her name.

It was really much worse than Jaime had expected, the way he missed her. He was restless and
downcast — cross, really, if he was honest — and the world looked as though some force had added
grey to every other color. Him missing her was aggravated by the futile anger, even the self-
condemnation, that his awareness of these feelings produced in him. He refused to miss her — and
he could not help it. It was not simply her being gone, and gone far away, into a cold and brutal
place he disliked: it was that she had gone back to her family, of whose opinion on himself he had
little doubts. The last words he had said to her at parting had left his lips without any previous
approval by his mind and, consequently, were a good reflection of what was in his heart; in it, was
the apprehension that, somehow, because he was rather unlucky, the minx, on whose smiles he he
had come to rely as a counteragent to his hardships, would return as cold and distant as she had been
when he had first laid eyes on her in Tyrion’s office. He could not tell why it should produce a
phenomenal difference in the sum total of his life, since to his feelings he saw no happy conclusion
either way; nevertheless, her coldness and her poor opinion of him appeared to Jaime decked out in
the attributes of a cataclysm. It was the contrast between the cold and judgmental doppelgänger of
the minx his forebodings painted before him and the smiling, warm girl he could not help but love
that made his longing for her return and his foreboding of it ever the more acute. He was restless; he
sought quiet in emptiness.

There was no getting away from Tyrion and Margery, or the rest of his friends, however: they
dragged him out to the same dinners that had become routine for them in the past weeks, the dinners
he had liked so well before her departure, but which he now wished to escape. Jaime had never been
one to look for company when in misery, and now he wanted nothing more than solitude. But it was
not to be had: the idiots acted as though they had colluded not to leave him alone, and while he could
not believe it, unable as he was to fathom a rational explanation for such a conspiracy on their part,
he felt strongly that preventing him from taking a single breath in seclusion was their objective. The
one evening he simply decided to ditch them without a warning, the morons showed up on his doorstep in full force: Tyrion led the ruffians, of course, and Jaime, having opened the door without any suspicion of what was afoot, had been forced to watch as his brother, his brother’s fiancée, the Martell-Sand family, Bronn, Tormund, Brienne, Renly, Loras, and even Podrick invaded his apartment with an infuriating sense of entitlement to his space. At least, Bronn had brought scotch, and Marge had had the decency to make her risotto. Those were the only reasons he did not kick them out of the apartment right away. This hostile takeover of his bachelor’s pad was one of the manifestations of his brother’s and friends’ odd tenacity in keeping him company — however little he desired it. Occasionally, he caught Tyrion and Marge looking at him a little oddly, concern and compassion mixing on their features. He could not think of a reason for such looks, and when a small voice in his mind suggested Sansa’s absence could be the reason behind them, he dismissed it on the grounds of utter implausibility. Like many people in similar situations, Jaime Lannister labored under the delusion that, by virtue of telling no one of his feelings, he had managed to keep them from the world. So long as he did not voice them, their reality itself was questionable, their existence concealed. A testament to the complete absurdity of this conviction came at another one of the evenings he spent (forced to do so by the tenacious Tyrion) at his brother’s place in company with him, Margery, Tormund, and Brienne. Needless to say, Jaime did not recognize that incident as indicative of his friends’ growing suspicions of his feelings for Sansa Stark; but then again, he had always imagined that no one, except for Tyrion and, later, Margery and Sansa, knew of his affair with Cersei…

The main course was almost finished, the desert was to be served soon; there was a comfortable, cozy atmosphere around the table, and its very peace made Jaime miss the minx even more than he usually did these days. He had completely fallen out of the conversation, alternatively lost in his recollections of the way Sansa’s blue eyes seemed to sparkle when she laughed and submerged, as he often was now, by a devouring ire at his inability to shake off images of her.

"Ah, Jaime," Tormund said suddenly, "do you miss your red-head?"

Jaime, who had been lost in his own brooding, had not heard Tormund — or the previous conversation — well enough to know what he had meant.

"No, Tormund, I don't miss you," he said absent-mindedly, while Sansa’s ghost kept laughing in front of him, “why would I?"

"I don't mean myself," Tormund clarified with a sly grin, "and besides, I'm already spoken for; I meant your red head — or 'minx,' as you call her."

This was enough to refocus Jaime’s attention fully on his interlocutor. When the reference to Sansa as "his" had sunk in, he remained momentarily at a loss for words under the impact of the shock that had been sprung on him so suddenly. Tormund used his interlocutor’s confusion to continue:

"I've been meaning for a while now to ask you of your intentions — "

"My what?"

"Your intentions. Toward Sansa. My good sister. The 'minx,' ” came the clarification.

The shock was wearing off; his wits braced themselves for battle:

"I have no intentions, as you put it, when it comes to the minx," Jaime answered coldly and abruptly. The white wine appealed to him no more, and he rose from the table to pour himself some Scotch at the bar. Tormund followed him.
"I've seen the way you look at her," that unwise man began, his voice low and a little menacing, "and if you intend to fuck her, break her heart, and then leave her like one of them Southern whores — "

Tormund did not get to finish his sentence: he had been lurched against the wall, his head hit it with a thud, and a hand closed roughly around his throat. If ever he had doubted Jaime Lannister's capacity for murder, he doubted it not now, as bloodthirsty eyes stared him down and the hand that held his throat cut off his breathing entirely.

Tyrion — Margery and Brienne following close behind — sprang into action, the first grabbing Jaime's free hand, the second thrusting herself between the two men, the third attempting to ease the grip that had decidedly constricted her fiancée’s air supply. They had listened with apprehension to Tormund's brief speech but, still, they had not been prepared for the violence of Jaime's reaction to the words.

"Jay, calm down," Tyrion tried, watching with dread the quick rising and falling of his brother’s chest, the wild fury of his eyes. Margery also attempted to quiet the raging lion; she laid a hand on his shoulder and said:

"Jaime, stop this — he meant no offense!"

Brienne, too, contributed:

“Lannister, if you kill my fiancée before our wedding, I will personally draw and quarter you — not even Tywin Lannister and all the sparrows in the world will save your murderous ass!”

The women’s voices, in combination with Tyrion's words — the only ones that had reached him — produced the desired effect of clearing the red fog that had engulfed him; his fury lessened sufficiently to allow him to see something aside from the color of blood. His eyes lost some of their wildness, regained some sense. He fixed Tormund with a deadly glare:

"If I ever again hear something like what you've just spit out in any connection to Sansa, I'll snap your neck as sure as I stand here," he warned, and the words rang unsettlingly true. With that, he released Tormund, who immediately doubled up, coughing. Through that cough, however, came the hoarse sound of the Free Man's laughter:

"I have my answer as sure as I stand here," he chuckled.

"Don't push it," Tyrion advised him, although to all present there, it was clear he was more concerned for Jaime's possible legal troubles than Tormund's well-being. The Wildling only laughed a little more.

The uncontrolled outburst of his fury, which now surprised himself more even than it had those who had witnessed it, had left Jaime even more aggravated than he had been previously. The night that had forever hailed him as Kingslayer rose before his eyes: the red fog of his fury, which seemed to have spilled into the blood on his hands, returned to him now, more real than the world around him. Ever since that night, he had feared his temper and his rage; it seemed that keeping Aerys' photograph had not cured him of these torrents. He was profoundly revolted at himself, and his anger at Tormund had dissipated under the more powerful influence of remorse — and his fear and loathing of himself, accentuated now as never before by some of the words that had provoked him: what brutal irony, indeed, there was in that the cause of his very unworthiness of ever calling the minx "his" should have been demonstrated so powerfully only a few seconds after he had first heard the phrase.
"I'm very sorry, Tormund," he said, his voice hoarse. He kept seeing Aerys' disfigured face, the wild laughter of his mad eyes, as if it were a demon reflected in himself.

The Free Man seemed surprised by the words.

"It's nothing, really," he spoke in good humor, "you haven't even broken any of my bones, hahaha! What's there to apologize for, you crazy Southerner? If it hadn't been for the apology, I might have thought you'd make a decent Free Man! Haha! Listen," he said, coming over to Jaime and putting an arm around his shoulders; he accentuated his next words by tapping with the back of his hand on the other man's chest: "I say something you don't like about your woman — and you want to break some of my bones; well, that's the way it is. Had you called my Brienne there anything like that, I would have broken that pretty nose of yours so quickly, you wouldn't have known it had ever been different! Hahaha! So what if… But where are you going?"

"I must go," was all Jaime said as he extricated himself from Tormund. "I do apologize, though," he added, offering the man his hand. Tormund shook it, still a little surprised by what he considered unnecessary courtesies and superfluous Southern explanations. A moment more, and Jaime had left the apartment, chased and chased by two ghosts: one of a madman; the other of Sansa Stark.

Once Brienne and Tormund had left, which happened not long after Jaime’s departure, Tyrion helped Margery clean up after dinner; then, he picked up his phone and ordered a DragonRide: he knew he would need a drink in addition to what he had already had over dinner for dealing with a disgruntled Jaime, so he left the car keys where they were lying on the shelf and walked into the night once his app had notified him the driver was waiting downstairs. The ride to Jaime’s apartment took some time, and his thoughts engulfed him.

Sansa’s departure reawakened Tyrion’s fears concerning Jaime’s ability to withstand his separation from Cersei. Indeed, with Sansa gone, even for a few days, Tyrion found himself constantly on edge. Like someone hunted, he kept startling at everything with no reason; he read into Jaime’s frowns the possibility of Cersei’s restoration; he kept waiting, terrified, she would spring up from nowhere, looking to catch Jaime when his guard was down under the influence of Sansa’s absence. And this was not all.

His elder brother had taken to roaming the sea alone. Yes, this sounded mad, but Tyrion trusted few people as much as he did Varys, so when the latter had called him and asked if he knew Jaime had bought a speed-boat and spent days on the open water, Tyrion nearly dropped the phone. Tyrion knew his brother’s propensity to self-isolation whenever he was angered or unhappy, or both, and this new hobby concerned the younger Lannister. To counter Jaime’s lonely brooding, Tyrion, with Marge’s help, sought to drag his brother to as many LBC dinners as he could, even invading his apartment one night when the sneaky bastard he had for an elder brother tried ditching them. Despite these efforts, and notwithstanding Margery’s assurances that he was exaggerating Jaime’s volatility and unhappiness, Tyrion remained concerned, feeling as though his brother’s brooding could erupt into a storm at any moment. Jaime seemed too restless, too irate with himself and the world, and Tyrion, having never seen his brother in such a state before, not even on account of Cersei, attempted to brace himself for he knew not what. The episode with Tormund only served to heighten Tyrion’s worries, but it had given him insight into his brother’s mind: Jaime, Tyrion realized, was not only unhappy because Sansa was gone; his irritation stemmed from his own realization of that fact, which is why Tormund’s words had so provoked him. On the one hand, Jaime’s late-coming awareness of his feelings seemed a good thing; on the other, Tyrion kept recalling Margery’s words about Lannister men’s propensity for denial when it came to love, and this hardly made the prospect brighter. He knew Jaime suffered, so Tyrion himself suffered on his brother’s account.

The driver pulled up at Jaime’s apartment building; a nod to the concierge, a brief elevator ride, and
Tyrion was ringing the doorbell. He had to do so multiple times, but to no purpose. Exasperated after five minutes, he knocked and called loudly:

“Jaime, don’t be a bastard, I now you’re in there!”

He thought he heard a groan from within the lion’s lair, and a few moments later Jaime had opened the door.

“For gods’ sake, Tyrion, why the late visit?”

“You left too early,” the younger brother quipped, “I didn’t get enough of your charming company. Are you going to let me in or not?” He added.

Jaime stepped aside with an air of resignation.

“I left early to avoid murdering a guest under your roof — it’s bad luck,” he grumbled.

“Speaking of Tormund — ” Tyrion began, but was immediately cut off:

“If I can promise you one thing, it’s that we will not be speaking of Tormund right now,” Jaime said darkly, “unless you want to exit by way of the freight elevator...”

Tyrion only sighed. Maybe the three of them — himself, Jaime, and father — needed to go to some sort of group therapy: short of this, he saw no way of purging the Lannister bloodline from love-denial. Maybe they should take Tommen along, just in case. Nothing was so effective as preventive measures.

“Fine,” Tyrion mumbled, “I see you are being a stubborn ass. Pour me a drink at least, will you?”

Jaime eyed him skeptically for a few moments, the look of the suspicious elder brother plain on his face.

“Did you drive here?”

“Funny you should ask! I thought of driving but decided to take the DragonRide instead.”

Jaime gave another sigh and poured his brother a glass of whiskey. Himself, he was not drinking. *That bad, huh?* Tyrion reflected. If Jaime was not drinking, this meant his mood was even worse than Tyrion had anticipated.

“If I were a suspicious man,” Tyrion said with humor, “I would think you had decided to poison me.”

“Leave that to our sister,” came the sarcastic answer.

*This was good. At least, Cersei was out of the picture.*

“Care to tell me why you aren’t drinking with me?”

Silence was his answer. It was time for dirty tactics.

“Have you heard from Sansa?”

“I’ve not.”
“You’re too talkative tonight, Jaime.”

There was no reply. His brother was staring out onto the Blackwater Bay through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Tyrion took pride in his undauntedness.

“You got a speed-boat — that’s a new diversion.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jaime immediately dismissed.

But he did know. All too well.

While he missed the minx, Jaime kept recalling the times they had been together. Among the memories that floated constantly before his eyes was the day they had spent together after he had woken up at her place. Her words about dolphins, which still had the power to amuse him, came back to him now under the daunting weight of her absence. Unable as he was of seeking her out, he began searching instead for her dreams. The isolation he had discovered on the water agreed with his frame of mind. The speed it allowed — the unique speed of the race boat, which does not pause for traffic lights — fed his soul’s ever-present thirst for speed. And moreover, when the boat flew across the blue of the water, it seemed to him he had been lost in Sansa’s eyes. His brother cut into his thoughts.

“Are you suggesting Varys is misinformed? Even if you are, we both know he’s never wrong.”

“One day, I know someone will kill that spider. I’ll come to the funeral. To gloat.” Jaime bit out.

“And how will I find out about your hobbies, now that you have grown mute?” Exclaimed Tyrion.

He was rewarded with a small chuckle from his brother.

They spent some more time in silence. Realizing that he was not going to get any information from Jaime on the subjects that he wished to breach, Tyrion took the conversation to more ordinary themes. There was Tommen’s nameday coming up, and, soon after that, father’s. The two events — or rather, the gifts for them — took some planning, especially the latter, for, unlike Tommen, father was not easily pleased. Eventually, as Margery always claimed they inevitably did, the brothers ended up talking about the premiere, and indeed, their conversation proved as useful in discussing their favorite business as it had been useless in giving voice to confidences. Tyrion was still satisfied: at least, he had spent enough time with Jaime to assure himself that his brother’s reaction to Tormund’s words had not led him into too dark a hell. Indeed, though he may not have wanted to open the door, Jaime’s spirits rose during his conversation with his brother. Tyrion had always been able to make him feel, by his very presence, that life was not as monstrous a creature as the costume she wore could lead one to believe. When, fairly late at night, Tyrion got up to leave, Jaime’s demons had lost some of their hold on him.

As he was crossing the threshold on his way out of the apartment, Tyrion paused and looked up into his brother’s face.

“One more thing: I know you don’t want to talk about this, so you don’t have to, but I’ll say something all the same. If Tormund had said the same about Marge as he did about Sansa and I had been tall, or, gods forbid, if he had said something like this about mother, myself and father would have done the same as you.”

Jaime laughed, a little bitterly, Tyrion observed.

“An inadequate comparison, Tyrion,” he said quietly but with resentment.

His brother shrugged with feigned carelessness.
“Maybe. Maybe not. Good night, Jaime.”

*Good night, Jaime.* Even these simple words reminded him of her.
All Starks, Part I. Sisters Break Rules.

Chapter by bayofdragons (jaimeofhouselannister), Catherina1996 (jaimeofhouselannister), jaimeofhouselannister

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year, dear readers! I hope 2018 brings you as much joy as you bring me (i.e. A LOT) ;)

I’m dedicating this chapter to Defiant_furball, who is not only one of my loyal readers and leaves comments that always make me smile, but is also recovering from surgery at the moment. I take this opportunity to wish her well and to ask all of you to think a kind thought about a kind person. I hope you have a speedy recovery, dear, and I’m publishing this chapter ahead of original schedule especially for you. Get better!!! XOXOXO

UPDATE: THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN UPDATED WITH A NEW SEGMENT ADDED. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darling sis, darling sis
This amusement we can't miss.
I feel like breaking rules today,
I know you'll join me in this play.
Let's get wild,
Let's chase dreams.
There's nothing mild
About being queens.
Let's make plans
For when next we'll meet —
Of future being captains
Could not be more sweet.

The Stark sisters were awoken by their wolves. The loyal creatures had faithfully guarded their mistresses’ sleep, but they were not about to let their bladders burst because their owners had been too busy whispering secrets to go to sleep the night before. The Stark girls dressed and, taking Summer and Shaggydog along with their own pets, went for a brief stroll around the grounds of
Winterfell castle.

“So, ummm…” Arya broke the convivial silence, “if you don’t have any other plans today, I was wondering if you wanted to meet Gendry.”

She held her breath a little after she had spoken, and when Sansa turned to her, smiling brightly, her eyes eager and happy, she released it quietly.

“I’d love to!” Her elder sister answered. “Let me take you guys out to lunch!”

“You don’t have to do it,” Arya replied, “I just want you to meet him. I want someone in the family to meet him as my boyfriend, you know?”

Sansa held her hand.

“I know. And no, I don’t have to take you guys out to lunch. I want to.”

They shared a smile. Sansa let go of Arya’s hand and reached into the breast pocket of her jacket.

“What on earth is this ostentatious thing!” The younger sister cried out, and Sansa burst out laughing at this apt characterization of the LBC invitation envelope.

“It’s an invitation to The Fountain of Tears. Thanks to Jaime, I have these for everyone in the family, but I wanted to give this to you when we were alone… I wanted to say that I hope you meet Jaime if you accept to come. And also, she added with a nervous chuckle, “I’m kind of afraid to give these to everyone else — mom and dad especially… So, I guess I wanted to start with someone who might be more… Favorably inclined, I suppose?..” She paused briefly, then looked at her sister pleadingly.

“Will you come? And meet Jaime?”

Arya took the envelope, grinning.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” she said with uncharacteristic warmth. “You know, I didn’t like the other ballets you danced in,” she admitted, “they were so… Well, so trite. But this one… I’ve actually been excited about it ever since you told us you’d be playing the jealous, murderous mistress.” She accentuated the last words with a slightly teasing intonation. “I like the story. And even more,” she elaborated, “I like that you weren’t typecast as the goodie-two-shoes damsel-in-distress like before…” She paused for a moment. “You shouldn’t be afraid to invite the rest of the family — if they don’t want to come, it’s their loss. But you can count on me to be there,” she concluded. “Me, and Jon, and Ygritte,” she added. The mention of their elder brother’s name reminded them both of their former rivalry for Jon’s attention, which had initiated after he and Sansa had become friends when she was ten.

“I know I can count on you guys,” Sansa acknowledged, “it’s mom and dad I’m worried about.”

“Well, mom will definitely come — she was the one who allowed you to go to the LBC, after all. As for dad, he’ll probably tag along just to make sure no viper gets his hand on his wife — little does he know, it’s his precious eldest daughter he has to worry about…” added Arya jokingly, and Sansa rolled her eyes, but her lips smiled. “As for uncle…” Arya sighed. “San, I don’t mean to upset you, but I don’t think he’ll come — ”

“Oh my gods! Uncle!..”

Somehow, for a moment, Sansa had blissfully forgotten about inviting uncle Ben to the ballet production of the man he still wished he could lock up. Now that Arya had reminded her, Sansa was overcome with horror at the prospect of extending the invitation — she, too, had little doubt he
would refuse, and she feared he would make a scene.

“But you don’t have to worry about him,” continued Arya, “if Jaime was the one to give you the tickets, you won’t have an invitation for him, anyway.”

Sansa paused in her tracks, and Arya turned to look back at her. The elder sister looked pained.

“I wish he hadn’t given me one!..” She moaned pitifully. “It would have made my life so much easier... But, Arya, he did!”

This certainly made Arya’s eyes widen.

“What?!” exclaimed she in complete surprise.

“He did give me an invitation for uncle!”

Arya gripped Sansa’s upper arm in surprise, and it lent her next words greater emphasis.

“Let me get this straight,” she demanded, “Jaime Lannister gave you an invitation to his premiere for our uncle, Benjamin Stark? The same Ben Stark who nearly put him behind bars?”

“Yeah.”

Arya looked impressed.

“Wow,” was all she could say at first. “That... That is more than noble,” she judged, “that’s fucking unbelievable. No code of honor — not even dad’s! — would have forced him to do that.”

“That’s just who he is, Arya,” Sansa explained, very pleased at her sister’s characterization of Jaime’s actions.

“Oh no!” laughed Arya, and before Sansa’s indignant gaze could be converted into harsh words, the younger sister raised her hand to stop her. “Don’t misunderstand me: I no longer take issue with Jay Lannister being noble as fuck. I accept weird truths for what they are. But no man, however noble, would go to so much trouble — and possible humiliation, since it mustn’t be pleasant to have one’s invitation thrown back in one’s face — for something so trivial as dignity. Ah, don’t fucking interrupt me all the time!” She snapped when Sansa opened her mouth again to protest on Jaime’s behalf. “No! Remember the tales of mom and dad’s wedding? Remember, there was a cousin — what’s his name? — who was also going after mom when uncle Brandon died, and it got ugly between him and dad? Well, dad didn’t invite him to the wedding, and neither did mom. And he was family. If Jaime Lannister went to the trouble of inscribing uncle’s invitation, he didn’t do it because it was the honorable thing to do. He did it for you. And considering just how much he must have not wanted to ever see Ben Stark again, I think you might be wrong when you think he only cares for you as a friend. There are limits to what we’re willing to do for friends, but there are no limits to what we do for those we really love — those of whom we think as family.”

By the end of this speech, Sansa was shaking her head violently.

“No, I’m sure you’re wrong,” she denied quickly, “I’m sure you misunderstand the whole situation! Jaime —”
“... Is likely in love with you. Or pretty close,” her sister interrupted.

“No!”

“Why the fuck are you getting so defensive?! Didn’t you say yourself every one of your friends back there says so? And that Trianna did as well?”

“This isn’t the point — ”

“You love him! Him loving you back is precisely the point! Why deny the possibility?”

Sansa had started walking ahead, and Arya caught her by the arm and turned her elder sister to face her. Sansa placed her hands on Arya’s shoulders, as if to stable herself and quiet her sister, but Arya went on.

“If so many people think the same thing independently of each other, it may well be true! What’s so bad about me saying he may be in love with you?”

“It’s not that!” Sansa cried, but Arya wouldn’t back down just because their tones were becoming more elevated.

“Then what?”

Sansa shook her by the shoulders.

“I don’t want to give myself false hopes!” She screamed. Then, as if her loud exclamation had expunged her agitation, she whispered: “I couldn’t recover from such a disappointment.”

At this, Arya’s face lost its fierceness and a gentler expression came to her features.

“San, if you don’t hope — then you might as well not love,” she said quietly.

“I hope,” admitted Sansa. “A little. I hope that, maybe, one day, he might love me. But I can’t allow myself to believe he already does. I don’t want to make a broken-hearted fool of myself.”

“And here I thought,” grumbled Arya in some annoyance at her sister’s excessive caution, “that you were ready for almost anything to make him — ”

“Girls!” Their mother’s voice, coming to them from the porch, broke into their discussion. “Time for breakfast!”

“Coming!” They called back in unison and started toward the house.

“I’m ready to take chances, Arya,” continued Sansa, who had been a little hurt by her sister’s last words, “but Jaime’s been in love with another woman for nearly twenty years — it’s hardly plausible to assume he could love me after only a few months... I just want to save myself some pain — and it’s cruel of you to judge me so harshly when your only experience of love is that of love returned. Mine isn’t, and it comes with a lot of pain as it is.”

Moved by Sansa’s appeal and accepting the truth of her words, Arya hugged her sister.

“I’m sorry, San. I’ll try to be less harsh. But you aren’t entirely right. I didn’t know Gendry thought of me as more than a friend when I told him I loved him.” She interrupted herself by chuckling. “I just decided to stake my claim on him by telling him how I felt. It was something along the lines of, ‘you’re mine, boy — better get used to it!’”
She winked at her elder sister, who was laughing at this new narration of that episode.

“What I’m saying is this, San,” added Arya, “sometimes we regret silence more than we do speaking. Gendry, for instance, still can’t get over the fact that I was the first to say I loved him.” She laughed fondly and then, under the influence of some new thought, she added: “Maybe, don’t tell Jaime you love him first — better just kiss him or whatever.”

“Why on earth would you say that now?” Exclaimed Sansa with some apprehension of the reasons that had made Arya alter her earlier position.

“Because,” replied the younger sister in a teasing voice, “Gendry isn’t your typical macho — and he isn’t proud. And still, he can’t get over me saying ‘I love you’ first. And your man... They do say, ‘proud like a Lannister...’ Jay might jump off a cliff under which there isn’t any water if you say the words before him!..” After voicing this intolerable taunt, Arya proceeded to laugh insolently. She had calculated well, however — they had already approached the house, and there was no telling who could overhear Sansa if she tried defending her beloved. The elder Stark girl had to settle for punching Arya on the upper arm. She put in just a little more strength than was strictly necessary into that blow, and her sister’s “Ouch!” gave her some small satisfaction.

They were the last ones to come to breakfast. Between their two empty chairs sat Bran, the living barrier between them since Arya was seven. Sansa took her seat, but Arya stood behind Bran and barked, “Move!” in the bullying and threatening tone, which she accentuated with a light slap on Bran’s upper arm and which made her younger brother quickly relocate to the seat Arya ordinarily occupied. Arya sat next to her sister, an air of satisfaction on her face; Sansa smothered a grin. The rest of the family observed the proceedings with interest and some astonishment. None chose to comment on this alteration of seating arrangements, however. The screaming matches between the sisters had always been such a headache for the whole family that, if they chose to reconcile, none was courageous — or stupid — enough to disturb the fragile equilibrium.

“Well,” spoke Catelyn as they were finishing eating, “what are everyone’s plans for today?”

“Sansa and I are going out to lunch,” Arya spoke up immediately, as though to lay claim on her sister’s time before anyone else did. The rest of the family shared another round of surprised glances. What was going on with the two of them?!

“Very well,” Catelyn blessed the idea wholeheartedly, pleased more than anyone at the new, if sudden, closeness between her daughters. “In that case, perhaps, Sansa and I could go see her teachers from the ballet academy after breakfast? They would be so pleased to see you, darling, and hear everything you’ve been accomplishing! I’ve run into Unella the other day — she was beyond excited when I told her about your role in The Fountain of Tears.”

“That sounds like a great idea, mom! I’d love to see her and the others.”

“Yeah-yeah,” grumbled Arya, “just make sure you’re back by one!”

“What’s with the rush?” Questioned Ned and Arya immediately grew less bold.

“Nothing,” she mumbled. “We just agreed we’d go to lunch…”

Sansa put a reassuring hand on her sister’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Arya — I’ll be back by one.” She smiled and then added, quoting her sister’s words form earlier: “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Arya could not help the warm smile that had overtaken her heart at this from spilling onto her thin lips, but she regained her composure fairly
quickly and muttered almost indifferently:

“Good.”

Catelyn and Sansa drove to the Winterfell Academy of Ballet soon after breakfast. It was odd being back in those halls again, and although she was happy to see her former teachers and younger friends, Sansa knew she no longer belonged here. This place, it meant the past to her. When she thought of ballet, she thought of King’s Landing and the LBC. Nevertheless, she and Catelyn spent hours happily chatting with Unella and her other teachers, who questioned their best student on her work at the LBC. Sansa spoke about it with pride, but she discerned that, although her professors were pleased their student had been admitted into the most prestigious ballet company in the world and had so soon made a place for herself among its leading dancers, they nevertheless could not conceal their overall distaste for the LBC well enough that Sansa would not notice it. They resented, she realized, that the men, who were so despised by the most prominent Northern family, were the undisputed leaders of their art and that they, Northerners, had to bow before the trends they set. When the time came, Sansa was only too glad to leave.

“You’re late!” they were greeted by Arya when Catelyn pulled up in the Winterfell courtyard. The younger Stark girl, already dressed, was standing on the porch; she could hardly contain her annoyance.

They had been meant to return no later than ten past one for the sisters to drive to their favorite café — one of the few preferences they had had in common over the years — but it was already twenty past.

“I know, and I’m so sorry!” cried Sansa as she rushed toward her sister. “Unella just wouldn’t stop asking me all these questions, and — ”

“Whatever, let’s just go now!” Was the reply that cut off her explanations. “Mom, give me the keys!”

“I think,” said Ned, coming from inside the house, “that it’ll be better if Sansa drives. You,” he added to Arya, “are in too great a rush to be behind the wheel.”

Arya had only just received her driving license, and her parents worried that her temper would spill into reckless driving and even road rage.

“Fine! Whatever!” shouted Arya as she stomped to the passenger seat and shut the door behind her with a furious bang. From inside the car, she looked onto a familiar scene. Sansa, even though them being late to meet Gendry was all her fault, made the time to kiss father and mother, who, of course, gave her the keys without a second thought. Watching this had made some of the old resentment stir inside Arya. She believed that, because of her new life in the South, Sansa had become a rebel like she, Arya, had always been, and this made her feel closer than ever before to her elder sister. And yet, looking at her now, Arya was reminded that Sansa had always been the “good girl” of the family — unlike herself.

“I promise, we will get there on time,” Sansa said the moment she sat behind the wheel and started the car.

“There’s no way,” barked Arya, “it’s a twenty-minute drive from here. We’ll be at least ten minutes late.”

“No, we won’t,” answered Sansa with a sly but determined smirk, which, Arya knew, her sister had acquired in King’s Landing.

Sansa pulled out of the courtyard with due care. The moment, however, that the car was out of their
parents’ sight, she did something Arya had never dreamed she would see her elder sister do: stepping onto the gas pedal with determination, Sansa accelerated until they were exceeding the speed limit by forty miles.

“San… What. The. Fuck. Are. You. Doing?!” Cried out Arya. Innumerable promises of never exceeding the speed limit, which were the only way she could extract the car keys from her parents, had oddly inculcated in Arya a religious — if unwilling — compliance with the speed limits. And there was her perfect little sissy, driving as if she were a bat out of hell.

“I,” answered Sansa, her eyes glued to the snow-covered road in concentration, “am adjusting the speed of the car to my driving skills.” She couldn’t help smirking as she quoted Jaime’s words to Arya. “Speed limits are for the dull,” added she another phrase she had picked up from him.

“Where the fuck does that attitude come from?!” Questioned her sister. “Since when do you drive like a crazy woman?”

“I’m driving like an angel,” returned Sansa, completely unperturbed by the accusation. “And if ever you want to see how crazy people drive, find yourself in the passenger seat of Jaime’s car — now, he does drive like a maniac!..”

Their conversation paused as Sansa made a sharp turn without hitting the breaks. Even Arya had been clutching at the door handle a little nervously, and although she had built up a good poker face in the South, Sansa’s blood was flooded with adrenaline. But she would not be late to meeting her sister’s boyfriend. Besides, if Jaime could go five times the speed limit, Sansa reflected, she could certainly exceed it by forty miles?

“The first time I ever was in a car with him,” she continued, partly to distract herself and her sister from her speed, “I thought I was going to die. Seriously, no one — and I mean no one — else could drive like that and not end up in prison. I’m sure there’s something on his plates that prevents the City Watch from stopping him. He doesn’t drive as horribly now when I’m with him, because he knows it freaks me out and I start nagging him, but that first time… Oh. My. God. I’m telling you, I thought he would kill us!..”

“How much we’re talking?” Asked Arya, who had adjusted to the high speed in much less time than it would have taken her sister.

“What? Of years in prison anyone but Jaime Lannister would get for driving like a lunatic?” She joked and was rewarded by Arya’s happy laugh.

“No,” answered she, “I mean, how fast was he going?”

“Two hundred miles. In a freaking city. I kid you not.”

“No?! Two hundred?! Is he completely fucking crazy?”

“Only when it comes to driving.”

They laughed again. The streets flashed by them in a happy blur.

“What about now? How fast does he go when he’s driving you around?”

“Hmm… Maybe a hundred-thirty?”

“And you don’t die from fear?” Mocked Arya.
“Hey! I’m going eighty right now myself!” Protested her sister.

“I bet you’d not do a hundred,” challenged her sister teasingly. Arya still had not quite caught onto the new reality of Sansa’s inability to let such statements stand. The elder sister pressed onto the gas pedal, and the speedometer’s stop arm crawled to a hundred.

“Ha!” Sansa exclaimed victoriously, as her younger sister giggled and hollered.

Their triumph did not last, however. They were within walking distance of their destination, when police sirens tore into their laughter, and Sansa was pulled over.

The moment the police officer approached the car, Sansa’s face metamorphosed. Suddenly, her expression was one of utter terror and embarrassment. Arya, who herself had grown concerned, was even more unsettled by the drastic change in her sister’s countenance.

“Well, miss,” the officer addressed her, “you were going sixty miles over the speed limit. I’m afraid I’ll have to — ”

“Oh ser, I’m so sorry!..” cried Sansa, her voice shrill with fear, shame, and growing tears. “You see, I’ve only just come home from that terrible, terrible South… And I haven’t seen my sister in months!.. We were talking, and I simply didn’t check my speed!..”

What the fuck?!
rang in Arya’s mind, and she turned to look at her sister with suspicion. Sansa continued meanwhile.

“I’ve missed her so much! And we’re going to meet her friend, and I was already so nervous, I…” her sister’s eyes were flooded with tears (but her face didn’t crumple, making her into a lovely picture of female distress). “Oh, if my parents, Lady Catelyn and Ned Stark, find out how fast I was going, they’ll never rest easy!.. And I swear, officer, it was just this one time!.. I’m… I’m so sorry…” And she began to weep in the most pitiful of manners imaginable. Stupefied as she was by what she suspected to be Sansa’s inroad into theater, Arya tore her astonished eyes from her with difficulty and looked to the policeman. The poor man was a picture of distress. Northern men were generally inept at handling female tears, but this unfortunate fellow had also to grapple with the fact that he had made Ned Stark’s daughter — home for a few days after being forced to live in that terrible South — weep.

“There, there, Lady Sansa, please don’t cry. I’m sure it was just a mistake. I’ll let you off with a warning this time.”

Sansa was suddenly all joy.

“Oh, how kind of you! Thank you, good ser, thank you so very much!” She beamed at him. The officer saluted her, and they were on their way. Arya was speechless for the few minutes it took Sansa to pull up in front of the café. Once parked, her sister assessed herself critically in the mirror and wiped her crocodile tears with a handkerchief. When she was satisfied with her appearance, she turned to Arya:

“Well? Ready to go?”
They exited the car.

“What the fuck was that?!” exclaimed the younger sister, finally regaining the power of speech.

“Oh,” dismissed Sansa, who was clearly not at all affected by her recent tears, “just a little female road trick.”
“If you tell me Jaime Lannister taught you that — ” began Arya furiously, but Sansa interrupted, chuckling:

“No!..” She laughed. “Jaime’d petrify the officer into permanent muteness, and I’m just not intimidating enough to do something like that. Besides, like I said, the City Watch gives him a pass. No, I picked this trick up from Margaery. We were once pulled over, and you should have seen the shit-show she pulled!.. Forget the police officer — I was worried about her, and I knew we were going to a spa!.. She had suddenly acquired a grandfather who was that very moment dying in the hospital, and she’d said she wanted to see him one last time…” Sansa chuckled more. “Marge should have been an actress, were she not so good a dancer!”

Just as she was done with her explanation, they entered the café where Gendry was waiting for them. Once they had crossed the threshold, Sansa presented her watch for Arya’s contemplation. It was exactly half past one.

“Told you we’d make it,” grinned she happily. “Now, where’s your man?”

“Ah, yeah, about that,” Arya sounded a little guilty. “I didn’t tell him you were coming with me — ”

“What? Why?”

“Because… He’d get how he gets: he’d start saying how it was probably a bad idea and how you wouldn’t like him dating me, etc, etc… So I pretended it was just me,” finished Arya cheekily.

“Arya! Won’t he be mad?”

“Oh no,” dismissed her sister, “he’s used to me pulling shit like that every now and then.”

“Well, if you say so…”

They walked to a table where a young man was sitting, looking out onto the street in the direction opposite from whence they had come. Sansa recognized Gendry easily.

“There you are!” Arya exclaimed happily, but Sansa thought that she had heard a little nervousness in her sister’s voice.

“Arya!” Called Gendry with gladness, and Sansa liked right away how his face lit up when he had seen her sister.

“Gendry, do you remember my sister, Sansa?” Asked Arya and only then did Gendry notice the other Stark girl.

“I… Arya, what are you doing?” He asked, apprehension in his face when he looked from her to Sansa.

“What do you mean, ‘what am I doing?’” She parried in a careless voice that was brimming with good cheer. “I’m introducing my boyfriend to my sister, of course!”

Seeing how Gendry’s eyes widened at that, Sansa thought it a good time to make clear she was not about to tear him to pieces. She offered her right hand to him.

“It’s nice to see you again, Gendry,” said she with a smile. “I don’t know if you remember, but you helped me once, when I fell.”

“I do remember,” he answered, and his face seemed to relax a bit. He shook her hand. Sansa’s smile grew.
“Arya was telling me so much about you,” she chirped happily as they were seated, “that I’m so glad you found the time to lunch with us!”

Gendry looked at Arya with misgiving.

“Oh, my sis isn’t nearly as bad as I’d thought,” commented his girlfriend. “She’s actually quite fun! You should’ve seen what she just did to a police officer! I swear, I’ve never seen a man more in the right look more in the wrong! And she was going a hundred miles on these snow-covered roads! Can you imagine?”

At these words of Arya’s, Sansa noticed Gendry’s face change a little from the happy countenance it had worn since his girlfriend had entered his field of vision. He looked from the younger sister, who was utterly engrossed in her own narration, to the elder; he looked at her uncomprehendingly, and his expression could not conceal his condemnation. You could have killed the only being on the face of this earth who loves me; the only one I love, he seemed to say. Under the mute disapprobation of a person their own age, rather than the overprotective parents, Sansa was struck by a thought that dinged her overall gaiety at the pleasant occasion of meeting her sister’s boyfriend. I could have killed us both. Her face must have reflected this thought and her contrition, because Gendry gave her a look that acknowledged and approved this last sentiment and devoted his whole attention to Arya, who was saying:

“Oh, and yesterday, I shot a red fox, right in the eye from thirty feet…”

As a consequence of her silent conversation with Gendry, a thought tore into Sansa’s mind as she listened to her sister: What if not everything I’ve learned in King’s Landing, even from Jaime, has changed me entirely for the better? What if idealization is a dangerous occupation? He is, after all, a human being, which, by virtue of this very nature, must make him prone to mistakes, even failings? Just because he seems perfect to me doesn’t mean he has no flaws? Because his driving, after all — Her sister broke into her musings:

“… Sansa saw me shoot that vixen, didn’t you, San?”

Torn from this troubling idea, which she had little desire to explore, Sansa returned her attention entirely to the present:

“I sure did,” she answered and smiled at the excitement and unusual inclination to chatter she was observing in her younger sister, who went on to savor the triumph of proving to her boyfriend she was an even better shot than he thought. Sansa felt happy for Arya, as she watched Gendry’s loving smile while he listened to her sister go on about their time together. She was also delighted that she got to be the member of Arya’s family to whom she could introduce Gendry without fear.

Their conversation started with some small talk on the part of the two newly re-acquainted concerning their lives, but, soon enough, they were both overcome by Arya, who was telling, alternatively, about her time with Sansa to Gendry and telling her sister more about her boyfriend. Gradually, however, the conversation became more balanced, and they shifted into an easy and warm exchange about Gendry and Arya’s lives in the North — the gun shop, the school — and Sansa’s time in King’s Landing. It was a gratifying conversation for all of them, since, among themselves, they could all speak of their lives frankly, without hiding their secrets.

Sansa was very pleased with her sister’s boyfriend. Indeed, even if she were to imagine a perfect match for Arya, she may not have been able to come up with so fine a fellow. Gendry was calm and kind, qualities that balanced well Arya’s aggressiveness and tornado-like ways. Sure, her sister was fierce in the way she loved and had a good, compassionate heart, but brutality remained her modus operandi, and Gendry steadied her madcap nature. Unlike the impulsive Arya, he seemed thoughtful
and prone to weighing his decisions. Despite these dissimilarities, there was an endearing oneness to their thoughts and, watching them laugh together, it was clear to Sansa that the easy banter was nourished by the way their jokes were attuned to one another’s. (She privately thought Arya had downplayed Gendry’s sense of humor, for Sansa thought him quite funny, but in a sweet, harmless way that was nothing like that infernal but infinitely dear manner common to the Lannisters.) More importantly, however, than any of these qualities that made them so well-suited, it was plain to Sansa that they genuinely loved each other. She was surprised that, so early in life, her brash sister proved capable of forming an affection that, to Sansa, seemed capable of lasting Arya her whole life. Contemplating the future, she could see them together easily within twenty years from now, and it made her heart sing with the joy she envisioned for her sister. She was proud of Arya and incandescently happy for her.

Gendry’s lunch break could not, unfortunately, extend into eternity, and, too soon, they were saying goodbyes.

“It was so wonderful to meet you,” Sansa said as she hugged him. “But a fair warning,” she added shaking her index finger at him, “if you hurt my sis, you’ll find out she’s not the only Stark girl who’s handy with a knife.” Gendry and Arya stared at her with round eyes after she had randomly dropped this verbal bomb, and she smiled sheepishly at them, an expression that stood in stark contrast to her words, waved her hands, and laughed, a little embarrassed. “Sorry. I felt duty-bound to say it.”

They all laughed at this.

As they were driving back — Sansa abiding by the speed limits at, strange thing, Arya’s insistence, lest they get pulled over by the same cop — Arya asked her sister:

“Well?.. How do you find Gendry?”

“I find him as wonderful as you described,” was the immediate, immensely gratifying reply. “I think you two will do very well together. When we were sitting back there, I kept thinking I couldn’t have imagined anyone who’d be better for you. And, in and of himself, Gendry is just lovely: kind, funny, sweet, calm — unlike someone else we know,” these last words she pronounced in a teasing manner, and Arya humphed in mock annoyance. “I’m so happy for you,” added Sansa in a touched voice. “So happy.” The sisters shared a warm smile.

Arya’s phone beeped into this sweet silence, and, looking at the screen, the younger sister frowned a little, but she was quick to pull a tight smile on her face.

“What is it?” Asked Sansa.

“It’s a text from Robb,” Arya replied and forced another smile to her lips, this one a bit more genuine — she loved her brothers, after all. “Apparently, he, Talisa, Jon, and Ygritte are all coming home tonight to see you and have an impromptu family get-together.”

“That’s good,” Sansa commented mechanically. “At what time are they gonna come?”

Arya’s thumbs flew across her keyboard. Her phone chirped.

“He says around eight or ten,” she announced. Sansa nodded.

Both sisters were concerned by one thought. They had managed to build up this strange new world in which they were so close; but, though it flourished when it was just the two of them and the little ones — for they both, rightly enough, still conceived of Bran and Rickon as babies — could it
withstand the arrival of their elder siblings, especially Jon?

They drove on in silence for a while.

“Wait, where are you going?!” Cried out Arya when Sansa took the wrong turn, one that led to the highway, rather than the castle.

“I figured,” Sansa said, “that if the house will be overrun with the whole family tonight, you and I can get some time together first.”

“What will mom say?” Arya demanded, half-excited, half-apprehensive.

“If you only knew how these words have haunted me over the past months!..” Sansa exclaimed with a chuckle that may have been a little bitter. “‘I’m going to Tywin’s gala — what will mom say?’ ‘I’m wearing my hair down — what will mom say?’ ‘I’m falling in love with Jaime — what will mom say?’..” She shrugged. “What can she say?..”

She reached into her cute little cross-body bag with an energetic, irate gesture that suited her less than her accessory and pulled out her phone. She dialed.

“Hey mom!” Spoke she sweetly, and the love she held for Catelyn notwithstanding her distancing from her mother’s teachings rang strong in her voice. “Arya and I are going to hang out for a few more hours. Yeah, no, everything’s fine, we just felt like driving out of town. Yes, I did hear they are coming home — that’s so great! We’ll be back in time to help you cook for tonight, so don’t start without us. Yeah. No. Yeah, love you, bye!”

They made it to the highway.

“Where are we going?” Arya asked.


Arya did as her sister asked her, but questioned:

“Why? And who’s this Varys guy?”

“Varys is the spy master of none other than Tywin Lannister. And I want to ask him a favor.”

“What kind of favor?” Arya demanded, consumed with curiosity.

Sansa gave her a sly grin.

“The only kind one can — the supply of information. You’ll see.”

Her phone buzzed.

“What did he say?” Sansa asked and Arya read aloud:

“He says, ‘Here’s Varys phone number,’” she skipped reading over the numbers. Then, she grew silent, absorbed in reading Tyrion’s message. When she had finished, she was wearing an infernal grin, and she read the rest of the text out loud in the most delighted and teasing of tones: “He continues, ‘I hope your time with your family is going well. I also hope, very much, that you aren’t staying in Winterfell long past the weekend — my brother seems to miss you, winking emoji.’ So…”
Arya taunted with pleasure, “it seems a certain Jaime Lannister misses you — must be bad, if Tyrion mentioned anything about it.”

Sansa, whose red cheeks betrayed her feelings on the subject, said:

“I’m sure he’s just teasing. They’ve all been teasing me about Jaime for months! I really wish they wouldn’t do that — it makes me even more uncertain.”

This statement certainly took off the edge from Arya’s own taunting; she grew serious, even affectionate.

“Are you sure that them teasing you isn’t a way of trying to tell you about Jaime? They’ve all known him for longer than you have — maybe they see something you don’t? Or something you won’t?”

Sansa shrugged.

“Why don’t you dial Varys?” She asked to change topics, knowing her sister’s curiosity would get the best of her. She was right. Arya dialed the number and passed the phone to Sansa.

“Lady Sansa?” Came the sophisticated, half-whispering voice from the other end.

“How does he know your number?!” Cried out Arya, and Sansa shrugged with indifference.

“He’s the best spy master in the world: of course, he knows my number. How, I couldn’t say,” answered Sansa. “Sorry, Mr. Varys, that was — ”

“Your sister, I’m guessing,” replied he. “How’s lady Arya doing?”

“She’s well, thank you. Listen, Mr. Varys, I’m calling to ask — do you know of any sword training grounds in the vicinity of Winterfell that allow trainees indiscriminately?”

There was a pause. Then, the spider spoke, and she thought that he, too, seemed a little teasing — or perhaps, she was losing her mind.

“I beg your pardon, lady Sansa, but it seems to me that, knowing the champion of that sport as well as you do, perhaps, I’m not the best man to ask?”

Damn him! What’s with all of them?!

She was not nearly self-confident enough to just dial Jaime Lannister, breaking into his day!.. She resorted to the coldness she had learned from that very man in order to avoid a question she did not wish to answer.

“Mr. Varys, Jaime is hardly likely to know about sword-training grounds in the North, which is why I called you. Moreover, what I require is not so much their location, but information concerning the lack or presence of discrimination in the way they sell memberships, and this seems like a question for you. I fully understand, of course, if you don’t have the time.”

There was a pause. She thought she heard a stifled chuckle.

“In that case, my lady, I’m only too happy to oblige. I will let you know a few options momentarily. But, if I were you, I would still ask Jaime Lannister’s opinion. He is, after all, the best of the best.”

Before Sansa could tell him brusquely she was simply going to drive to the closest one, he hung up.

My gods, after these few days back home, I forgot how insufferable Southerners can be!.. Sansa thought to herself with some irritation. Arya’s silence made her look at her sister. Her sister’s face
was as blank as though it were made of stone.

“What?” Asked Sansa, a little disappointed her sister was not responding with more enthusiasm. Suddenly, Arya’s face crumpled a little and she turned away from Sansa to look out of the window. “Arya? What’s the matter?!” Exclaimed Sansa, concerned. “Don’t you want to go? These stupid Northern swordsmen won’t train you, but you can train yourself! I bet there are videos online that you could watch… Why are you upset?”

“I’m not upset!” Barked Arya in a rude and loud tone.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Sansa mumbled.

Discerning that her elder sister had been a bit hurt by her words, Arya turned to face her, and Sansa was overwhelmed to see a few tears on her sister’s cheeks. She had never seen Arya cry before.

“I’m not upset,” her younger sister repeated in a small voice. “I’m just so fucking touched, you stupid… It means a lot that you’d do that for me — even that you’d remember about this at all.”

Sansa pinched her sister’s cheek lightly and Arya, for once, did not shrug her off. “What are sisters for?” She asked with a smile.

Sansa’s phone buzzed with a message from Varys that contained the promised locations. They set the GPS to the closest one and drove.

Sword-training grounds were more or less the same as gyms. However, because there were, as the name suggested, swords involved, these premises required a background check and an approval by the manager before they granted admission. In the South and in the East, women have long trained there. In the North, however, there was still staunch resistance to such developments. Although, by law, women were allowed anywhere they wished, in practice, most of these places still discriminated against female trainees, finding excuses to deny the few applications they received. Most women, if they really wanted to pursue swordsmanship, moved to the South or to the East.

Once Sansa parked, they entered the premises. No sooner had they stepped foot in the door, than hate-filled glances of male patrons were directed their way. Imperceptibly, both sisters straightened their backs and squared their shoulders. They approached the front desk, and Sansa mentally cursed Varys when she saw behind it a middle-aged, gruff-looking fellow with jet-black hair that he wore in the old fashioned style: low nearly to the shoulder, the front locks tied behind to keep the hair from getting into his face. Ned and Ben Stark wore their hair like this as well.

“My sister would like to join the sword-gym,” said Sansa with a smile that communicated something of condescension — the defense mechanism she had picked up from the Lannister brothers, especially Jaime.

“Hmm…” grumbled the man. “How old is she? Looks little to me.”

“I’m sixteen,” Arya answered him in a manner that imitated her sister’s. They both acted as though it were only natural for them to be here and that the manager should have been grateful that they had chosen his venue. “Here’s my driving license,” she added, placing the document before him.

The man did not fail to notice the last name printed on it.

“Stark?” He asked, and his face softened a little, as Northern faces usually did when pronouncing the name of this family. He considered. “She’s still kinda small…” he added with reservation.

“I understand that you allow twelve-year-old boys to practice here?” Questioned Sansa, who had
busied herself with perusing some of the advertisement brochures.

“That’s right,” confirmed the man.

A this, she lifted her eyes to him, and Arya, who was watching her intently, noticed how unsettling cold they could look in the sweet face of her sister.

“In that case,” Sansa stated calmly, “her height should not be an obstacle. She’s trained in boxing and martial arts. I don’t see why, if she wishes, she cannot practice here.”

To their surprise, the man nodded.

“Fine, m’lady,” said he, “I’ll approve her application. She can start today. How long a membership will you be getting?”

“What’s the longest period?”

“A year.”

“Then I’ll pay for a year. Please charge my credit card in the future to renew her membership as needed.”

With that, Sansa extended her visa. It was red with golden letters: her King’s Landing bank proudly displayed its association with the Lannisters & Co. The man frowned as he took her credit card, and Sansa rolled her eyes; but she bit her tongue, unwilling to sabotage her sister’s dream by defending House Lannister. The man gave Arya the paperwork required, and she began filling it out. Without noticing it, Arya started to hum happily as she outlined the letters. The manager surprised Sansa by smirking quite kindly as he observed this.

“She’s a tomboy, that one,” observed he with gruff cordiality.

“My sister defies stereotypes of femininity, and I couldn’t be more proud of her,” answered Sansa, and Arya’s humming stopped at her words. The younger sister grinned but didn’t say anything. She finished filling out the paper work, and they were allowed access to the gym.

“San,” Arya called when they had walked away from the front desk, “I don’t want you to have to pay for me like that. I’ve a monthly allowance, you know — ”

“Arya, don’t be silly. I am one of the LBC leading dancers — I’m already paid more than Robb or Jon will be when they enter the work force.” Seeing her sister’s round eyes — after all, one of the brothers was going to be an engineer, the other a doctor — Sansa clarified, a little teasingly: “Well, did you really think the Lannister Ballet Company is short on gold? I was paid well enough as just an incoming dancer, but since my casting in the leading role for the Fountain of Tears, I’ve become quite a well-to-do young woman. I can more than afford to pay for your sword-gym membership — and it gives me great pleasure to do it. So,” she added, seeing that her sister wanted to counter her again, “thank your wonderful elder sister and let’s hear no more about it.” Sansa presented her cheek for a kiss. Arya rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t help a cheeky little smile as she kissed her.

“Thanks, San,” said she.

“You’re more than welcome, sis. Now, let’s see what this gym has to offer…”

It was an admittedly male, Northern space. Dark, chromophobic colors dominated; the windows were small and oddly placed. Arya seemed to love it, however — more for what it symbolized than the decor, Sansa hoped. The younger sister went immediately to the swords made available for the
“Whoa, there,” called the voice of the manager. “Let me help you pick a blade,” offered he kindly enough, his voice pleasantly devoid of the despise both girls still expected in that space. “You don’t want to hurt yourself, do you now?”

He looked through the blades until he found a smaller one that she could use best.

“Thank you… I’m sorry, what is your name?” Sansa asked.

“Yoren,” the manager replied.

“Thanks, Yoren,” Sansa said, and Arya nodded her gratitude as well, before going to the nearest dummy, which she clearly meant to reduce to a pile of rubbish with her new blade.

“I’ll be frank with you, lady Sansa,” Yoren said as they both looked onto Arya going at the dummy, “I’m not too fond of having a girl around this place. She could probably cut off the balls of most men here and feed’em to them,” he added by way of replying to Sansa’s angry look, “and I’ll keep an eye on her, but there are still too many men here, some of whom won’t take kindly to her,” he added with seriousness, and Sansa realized it was a warning. “You live in the South, I gather,” he continued, “whom will she come with, when you go back?”

Sansa looked back at her sister, whose concentrated face could not conceal the gleam of her happy eyes.

“I’ll make sure a friend comes here with her,” replied she, thinking of Gendry.

“Yeah, you do that,” agreed Yoren and went back to the front desk.

Arya seemed determined to try out every one of the dummies, so Sansa sat on the side and was scrolling through a fashion magazine on her phone to pass time. Occasionally, she would look up to watch her sister practice. The men who were training that day at first shot them both nasty glances, but after an hour, they went back to their own business, much to the girls’ relief. Nevertheless, the atmosphere remained somewhat tense. Then, two hours or so into Arya’s assault on the dummies, an angry snarl tore through the space:

“What the hell is this? What’s a little girl doing here?”

Sansa looked up immediately from her phone, and her eyes discerned a tall, middle-aged man with a flat face and unkind blue eyes standing next to her sister. She got up and made her way to them right away. Meanwhile, Arya answered him in no uncertain terms:

“Don’t you have eyes? I’m training here, like everybody else.”

“Almost everybody,” added Sansa, who had by then approached them, “except this one right here,” she said, staring the intruder down, “who seems too busy minding other people’s affairs.”

The man gave them an unpleasant, cold smile.

“Why don’t you, ladies, get your cute little asses out of here and go do some embroidery, huh?”

Sansa noticed how the eyelids of Arya’s eyes shifted at this a little, knowing her sister would remember Greatjon Umber’s words, so she moved past her and came to stand the man down, her blue eyes blazing.

“Listen to me, you mannerless excuse for a pig,” barked she, “why don’t you take your old, ugly ass
somewhere where no one has to look at it? Before my sis and I make you into a girl with one of these dull blades?"

Arya smirked at that. **Who would have thought the refined Sansa had that in her?**

The man came uncomfortably close to Sansa at these words, and Arya moved to stand shoulder to shoulder with her.

“I hear you’re that Stark girl who ran away South recently? To the Lannister Ballet company,” mocked the man in a disgusting imitation of an intimate whisper. “Instead of polluting the clean Northern air, why don’t you go back to the capital, you Kingslayer’s whore?”

The moment his words were out of his mouth, the training hall resonated with a dull crack, and he doubled over, his nose bleeding. Arya had put her boxing to good use, but she was not nearly satisfied. The moment the man had doubled over, she delivered a rough knee-kick to his solar plexus. Sansa couldn’t help smirking, but she put a restraining hand on her younger sister’s shoulder and forced her to step back. The man couldn’t breathe, kneeling before them helplessly as he coughed.

“Excuse me, please?” Sansa called in a musical voice, which was so at odds with the ugly scene. “Could someone, please, discard this peace of shit? Thanks so much.”

“I’ll do that,” came Yoren’s voice. “Mr. Alliser Thorne, this was your last warning for insulting other trainees; I’m afraid I’ll have to terminate your membership with us.”

“Are you mad, Yoren?” Hissed — for still, he could not speak normally — Thorne in utter rage, which was fed by the humiliation of having been nearly knocked out by a girl half his height. “That bitch — ”

Yoren gave a light tap on his solar plexus, which was enough to make Alliser Thorne resume his coughing as he was escorted out.

“Good team effort,” Sansa said to Arya when the bastard’s form had disappeared behind the double doors of the gym. Arya, grinning, extended her hand for a high-five; Sansa clapped it with pleasure. “And a nice left hook, too,” she added, smirking. This made Arya laugh.

“What are sisters for?” Answered she.

After this, Arya mutilated a few more dummies, and by the time they were leaving, Yoren had made her a membership card. Arya placed it in her wallet with pride.

“You two ladies are full of surprises,” commented he with a smirk before the sisters left.

“Told ya,” Arya parried pleasedly, “we’re the Stark sisters, after all.”

Their drive home was filled with the easy chatter to which they had grown accustomed over the few days they had spent together. And if they relived the humiliation of Allier Thorne a few too many times without losing any of their enthusiasm — who could blame them for it?

By the time they got back to Winterfell castle, the house was in a cheerful uproar. The maid, who had been asked to come over for this pleasant emergency, was making the beds for the Stark brothers and their girlfriends, while Ned and Catelyn were sorting through the additional grocery shopping they had done while the sisters were away. Ben had been left to watch over Bran and Rickon, who were only too pleased that the hustle in the house had fixed their uncle’s attention entirely on them.

“There you are, girls,” called Ned happily when they entered. “What have you been up to?”
“Oh, nothing much,” answered Sansa without missing a beat, “had lunch, went around window shopping.”

“Did you? For what?”

“Myself — for a cute little sweater; Arya needed a new something for her gun — don’t ask me what it was!”

Ned turned to Arya, who replied without so much as blinking.

“I need a new brass cleaning rod, and there weren’t any in the local shop, so we went in search of it, but I didn’t find one that was good enough for my darling.”

Ned chuckled at this. Catelyn was smiling at her daughters, happy they had spent a day together and were able to reach a compromise for their very different interests. In other words, both parents had been completely fooled by their daughters’ lies, which were as perfectly in sync as the sisters had once been nonconcurrent.

The girls helped their parents with the groceries, after which Ned had been shooed from the kitchen by Catelyn. She had expected Arya to slip out the moment Ned left but was astonished to see her daughter warily take a seat, as though apprehending being dragged into helping with cooking, or worse — setting the table. Catelyn decided not to ask Arya to do anything and settled for observing her daughters’ interactions from the corner of her eye while she and Sansa began working on the dinner. Being the loud mouth that she was, Arya immediately joined their chatter, teasing and bantering. Although this was usual enough, the way Arya teased her elder sister had certainly changed from brutal and rude to warm and loving; Catelyn did not realize this, but her lips wore a happy smile from observing her daughters. Little by little, Sansa managed to draw Arya into helping without the younger sister noticing this: for instance, she would start mixing ingredients and, seemingly mindlessly, leave them next to Arya. Since they were all engrossed in gossip and jokes, Arya would pick up what her sister had started without realizing it. Soon enough, Arya had been drawn into the peculiar harmony of cooking together with her sister and mother.

For all their jokes and the fun they were having, for all the warmth of being, for once, together, all three of them, oddly similar thoughts weighed on the girls’ minds. Each of them remembered that, when they had been children, Sansa had gotten along with neither Jon nor Arya, while the latter two had been close since Arya had been old enough to talk. When, after the Jeyne Poole fiasco, Sansa and Jon had become friends, it had made the sisters’ always problematic relationship even worse, and the rivalry for Jon that time had initiated between them had remained one of the foundational reasons for their mutual animosity. Jon, of course, had tried his best to reconcile them, racking his brains in attempts to invent activities the three of them could do together. In vain. Now that, without his help, the sisters had come together, Arya and Sansa each worried that having Jon back in Winterfell might strike a fatal note of dissonance into their new-found harmony. The questioning glances they threw each other behind their mother’s back seemed to say, *Will you be the same? Or will we change the moment our brothers cross this threshold, reviving our recently-buried memories? Are we stronger than our ghosts?..*

*I don’t want to lose you.*

*Don’t desert me.*

*Sister.*

Chapter End Notes
It has come to my attention that some of my readers have mistakenly assumed that, in this and other chapters, I advocate for reckless driving or posit it as something to be admired. This is not the case. This behavior is reckless, irresponsible, and dangerous, and it is meant to display a side of the heroes’ characters that is at best foolish and certainly very selfish, dangerous, and inconsiderate. I hope you all pause and be critical of them behaving like this. Please, drive safely to make sure you and others reach home without a tragedy on the road.
At some point during their lively cooking time, Sansa sneaked out of the kitchen. To her luck, she found her father alone in his solar. A business call must have taken him away from his brother and sons.

“Sansa, darling, there you are,” her father smiled, his eyes softened by fond memories. “You know, when you were little and had just learned how to move about, you used to constantly crawl into my solar while I was working, and you’d throw the most terrible tantrums if I didn’t pay you enough attention.”

“I always did have a flair for theatrics,” Sansa smiled back, remembering vaguely how she would cry and wail, even when nothing, really, was the matter, to get her way — long after the time Ned was recollecting. “Daddy, I wanted to talk to you about Arya.”

“Is anything the matter?” Questioned the father, worry coming into his face immediately.

“No, daddy, don’t be silly! Nothing’s the matter. I just wanted to talk about her wanting to become a swordswoman.”

“Ah, that…” Ned visibly relaxed, and a fond little grin, the one he always wore when ruminating on his favorite’s peculiar diversions, came to his severe lips.

“I think you should hire her a teacher, a really good teacher,” Sansa shared the thought she had conceived of the moment she had seen Arya train and learned from Yoren, as well as from that nasty episode with Thorne, that her younger sister going to the sword gym was not the perfect solution. Sure, Sansa had texted Gendry to tell him he needed to accompany Arya whenever she drove to the sword-training grounds, and he had promised he would; but the elder Stark girl remained uncomfortable with the whole arrangement just the same.

“Sansa, darling,” her father replied, “I don’t know if it’s the best idea. You know how your sister is. In the things that matter to her, she wants to be the best. It’s not just that she’s a girl — that would be insignificant, in the end, if she were tall and strong. But she’s just so small, and I don’t want her to be humiliated or, worse, hurt in the ring — ”

“I know, dad, and I understand.”
She did, more than he knew. Arya had always been Ned’s baby. From the moment he had first held her in his arms, something had passed between the two pairs of grey eyes, forging a bond that was stronger than that Ned shared with his eldest sons and daughter or the babies of the family. Arya’s tomboy ways he never considered improper or troublesome — they reminded him of his departed sister; although there was in Arya’s unruliness a thing apart from Lyanna’s self-assurance. Lyanna had been free; Arya was wild. Whatever she threw at her family — be it unlady-like ways, the mouth of a sailor, her obsession with guns, or constant fights — the father always smiled in an indulging way, as though it were no more than a harmless, amusing trait in her character. He indulged her always, because, from the first cute little gurgle she gave in his arms, smiling at her dad, Ned had grown utterly incapable of discerning in her faults — or of judging her actions. The just and fair Ned Stark was entirely lacking any ability to restrain his youngest daughter, or even to see that she needed restraining — much to the aggravation of his wife. Arya’s wildness notwithstanding, Ned sought to protect his baby girl as best he could — mostly, from herself. Everyone in the family knew these simple truths.

“Dad,” continued Sansa, “she wants it — more than she’s ever wanted anything. And you know how she is,” returned Sansa his own words, “if she wants something — she gets it, one way or another. A private teacher would just be a better, easier, safer way. What she does, once she learns, is her decision. Just promise me you’ll think about it? Please?”

“I promise, darling,” her father acquiesced easily, since he had only been asked to consider the possibility — an easy enough task, and one that did not bind him to anything, on the surface of it. Sansa smiled. She had asked her father to promise to “think about it,” because she knew that, as he was thinking about it, he would gradually begin to imagine that what he had really promised was to hire the teacher. Ned’s honor, which made him abhor even the shadow of a possibility of not keeping his word, would do the rest. Sansa came to hug her father and then made her way back to the kitchen, where her absence had already been noticed.

“Where did you sneak off to?” Questioned Arya immediately.

Following them growing close, Arya was quickly becoming possessive of her sister’s time and attention — something she was generally prone to do with people of interest to her, a trait that had ruined more than one of her friendships. Indeed, from among those outside her family, the one who had so far best endured this possessiveness was Gendry — and for him, being the object of Arya’s incessant attention had been no great toil.

“I sneaked off to see dad,” Sansa replied.

“For what?”

“To talk about you.”

“About me? What about me?” There was some unease in Arya’s questions, a little edge and a faked carelessness to her voice, as though she half-feared Sansa had betrayed her confidence to their father.

“I told him he should consider hiring a private instructor to teach you swordplay.”

“You did what?!” Exclaimed mother and younger daughter in unison.

“I told dad — ”

“Oh my god, San! Really?! That’s so wonderful!” Shouted Arya.

“What did Ned say?” Questioned Catelyn, worried and unenthusiastic about the prospect of her daughter adding another male activity to the already long list.
Once their mother had asked the question, Arya’s eyes focused on Sansa’s face with intensity.

“He promised he’d think about it.”

Both women knew what that meant. Arya yelped in joy, hollering loud enough to bring the house down. Catelyn shook her head, smiling at her daughter’s happiness, even as her brows frowned in criticism of her husband’s promise. Arya ran to embrace Sansa, who told her:

“Just promise me you won’t pester him about it: you know how dad always needs time to make a decision.”

“I promise! I won’t! Oh, Sansa!.. I could strangle you with hugs right now!..”

“You’re welcome to try, petite one!”

“Argh!.. Just when I was beginning to like you!..”

“Oh, you love me, don’t even pretend otherwise. Come here — I was promised a strangle-hug!..”

While they were preparing the dinner — no insignificant affair, since they were cooking for nearly a dozen hungry people, of whom roughly half were hungry Stark men — the women decided they required the assistance of music to re-energize them in their culinary efforts. Arya, unsurprisingly, appointed herself DJ, and the elder sister and mother had little choice but to accept her musical tyranny. Sansa frowned a little, realizing that, aside from the horrible metal rock tracks Arya had used to terrorize her in the past, she was entirely ignorant of the music her younger sister listened to. To her surprise, Arya’s choices were not at all bad. Some tracks she even knew, others made her want to dance — not ballet, but the kind of sultry, wicked movements she had picked up in Ellaria’s studio. And that this desire made her imagine dancing for Jaime did not help her concentrate on the cooking — or control the blush that invaded her cheeks.

“I know this track so well!” she exclaimed, as a melody she had memorized in Sand’s class began to play.

“No way!” Her sister countered. “Never in my life will I believe you could even make one movement to this one! You’ve never, ever, danced anything but ballet.”

“You, little sister, need to learn that I don’t lose bets,” Sansa replied with humorous condescension.

“Careful, lady Sansa,” her mother joked, “you begin to sound like a Lannister!”

Her daughters, privy to the unintended irony of their mother’s words, laughed like two adorable conspirators. Then, Arya paused the track and rewinded it.

“Go ahead, then,” she challenged her sister, “I’ll play it from the start, and you show me your moves.” Arya finished her challenge with a wink.

“Fine. Play it,” Sansa acquiesced with an ease borne of confidence.

The younger sister turned on the music, and Sansa began dancing the dance Ellaria had taught them to this track. She did not feel like improvising that evening, partly because her desire to impress her sister proved a little stifling to her creativity; partly, because, in her improvisations, she always dreamed of green eyes, and she did not wish to give her daydreams additional power while she was in the North. Moreover, she wanted to show Arya moves that, she knew, were perfect. Although she might have gotten really good at improvising ballet, modern dance was still something that she found challenging — even if she could do it as well as anyone now. As she moved, her movements sure
and reckless, energetic and agile, full of the erotic power she had feared at first but now embraced, she noticed her sister’s and mother’s faces transform in surprise and confusion. Their shock notwithstanding, she knew she held them spellbound. She kept moving, and Jaime’s image rose before her eyes quite regardless of her will. Her movements became completely unrestrained, her body given over to winning a smile from his mirage, or perhaps to making eyes, which were not really watching her now, turn a shade darker. Losing herself in the music, she danced to her heart’s content, and the track seemed to serve at her pleasure. She did not have enough space even in Catelyn Stark’s roomy kitchen, so she danced her way to the entrance hall, and her sister and mother followed her there, watching her as though they had never seen her before, the cooking forgotten altogether. While Sansa danced, the front door opened, and her brothers and their girlfriends came in. At first, they froze on the threshold, because Sansa did not pause for their benefit — she was having too much fun for that — and kept on dancing. Ygritte was the only one who came to her senses quickly: crying out enthusiastically,

“Yeah, girl, I call these moooves!..”

She joined her fellow-redhead. Ygritte’s participation forced Sansa to improvise, and the two began to dance together, much to their mutual advantage. Sansa had seen Ygritte dance before, but at the time, she had still despised modern dance from the heights of her dedication to ballet. Now, however, she could appreciate her friend’s considerable abilities. They made for a good partnership: their friendship and their ease with each other let fun overtake performance, and the redheads moved and laughed together. As the music, left unattended by the bewildered Arya, kept playing, the girls kept on dancing, content with the effect they made on their astonished viewers as well as simply happy at being in the same room again. Eventually, Ygritte dragged a very reluctant, even protesting, Jon to dance with her. Never able to refuse her, Jon joined them, but for all his desire to please his girlfriend, he was no great dancer. It was fortunate that Ygritte saw him through the prism of her love, because, to her, he seemed to dance wonderfully well. Talisa was the next to join the fun, and Robb accepted his girlfriend’s invitation much more willingly than his younger brother. Having been a party animal for most of his life before Talisa had tamed him, Robb had picked up a few moves. Finally, Sansa dragged a physically struggling Arya to the impromptu dance floor, and the Winterfell castle resounded with the footsteps and the pleased hollers of the disco that had been improvised by the younger generation in the middle of its stately entrance hall. Ned, Ben, Bran, and Rickon came to see what was the matter and discovered Catelyn Stark laughing happily as the young people began to dance around her. For all her delight at being literally surrounded by her many children, lady Stark still escaped from the “dance floor” fairly soon and settled for watching her kids from the side next to her husband and brother-in-law. Rickon and Bran were sitting on the stairs behind the grown-ups, giggling at the pleasant madness that had materialized in their ordinarily well-ordered household. Bran, as any eleven-year-old would have done in his place, filmed the entire affair on his phone.

At some point, though, those who were not professional dancers like Sansa grew tired, and they disbanded. Arya turned off the music, and they all laughed. It was time for greetings, the “oh my gods, I missed you so much!,” the “it’s so good to see you again!,” and the “how have you been?” as the Stark clan exchanged hugs and kisses. Then Robb, who was second only to Arya in his proneness to saying whatever was on his mind, cried out, referring to the dancing:

“What was that?!”

He was explained the situation that had prompted Sansa’s dance. When the newly-arrived had heard that Arya had been in the kitchen, “helping out and being DJ,” they exchanged the same bewildered, questioning glances that the rest of the family had outgrown by then. Still, those Starks who had witnessed the sisters become closer could only slightly shrug their shoulders and raise eyebrows to communicate to the elder Stark brothers and their girlfriends that they, too, had no idea what was up between the girls. Once the greetings and the explanations were over, the elder brothers and their
girlfriends — who knew Catelyn would not let them help on the first evening, insisting they were
tired from the road — accompanied the father and uncle into the family room. The little ones trotted
after them. As he was crossing the threshold to the family room, Jon noticed that Arya was nowhere
to be seen. He turned, expecting to find her behind him, grinning, but only caught sight of her back
as she followed Catelyn and Sansa into the kitchen.

What?!

Jon could not even formulate his question.

What in Stranger’s name?!

What’s gotten into Arya?!

What did I miss?!

Huh?..

“Are you coming?” Ygritte’s voice broke into his perplexity.

“Yeah,” was all he could say as he sat in a huge armchair near the fireplace, and she settled in his lap
to her comfort. During the first visits home to which Ygritte had accompanied him in the early days
of their relationship, Jon had tried preserving a semblance of good breeding, insisting that Ygritte
should sit in her own armchair. But she ignored him and sat in his lap like she always did when they
were by themselves or with friends. At first, it caused him bleak embarrassment and unrestrained
happiness in equal measure. Now, he had grown used to it, enjoying the loving familiarity of their
life together uninterrupted by the formality that visits to his family had previously imposed on him.
Moreover, especially after Talisa took after Ygritte in the way she sat with Robb, the behavior had
been normalized within the Stark household. Even Catelyn no longer thought it odd or a bit loose —
much to Jon’s relief.

“Where’s Arya?” Ygritte asked Jon right away upon noticing his sister’s absence. She was equally
fond of the Stark sisters and, notwithstanding the girls’ very different characters, had become good
friends with both. Her genuine care and interest in them got her a long way. That Jon loved her to
distraction also endeared her to his sisters — at least, once Arya had gotten over her sibling jealousy
over someone new occupying a considerable place in her favorite brother’s heart. “Isn’t the little she-
wolf coming?”

“No, she’s helping in the kitchen,” Jon mumbled, unable to believe his own words — or eyes.

Ygritte laughed.

“What interesting developments!..”

That evening, Winterfell castle reverberated with the incessant voices of the large Stark clan. And
once the varied foods could be left to cook on the stove, the three Stark women joined everyone in
the family room, where Robb had built a fire so huge and blazing, it threatened to spill out from the
fireplace. Everyone in the family noticed how Sansa and Arya had sat together and how, at first, they
kept whispering about something, chuckling to their private jokes. Eventually, of course, the girls
joined the general conversation, prompted to do so especially by Jon and Ygritte’s stories about how
they were getting on in med school. Theirs were always the funniest, because Jon, ever so serious,
would try to narrate the “important things,” which, in his opinion, consisted mostly of school work
and specific medical problems he and Ygritte were learning to solve, but his girlfriend sabotaged his
efforts rather shamelessly, telling with enthusiasm and incredible humor all the funny episodes Jon
was leaving out: how Jon “fucked that up completely” because, instead of doing this he had done that (Catelyn, for all her love of Ygritte, always cringed a little at her language, exactly like she did with Arya); how Sam “nearly fucking shat himself, you should have seen his face when Dr. Mormont knifed that dead dude open like a pig;” how Pyp, “I swear to the White Walkers, nearly cut off his own fingers, his hands were shaking so much;” how Grenn “should really have given up and gone to vet school instead;” how Karsi “was the only one who didn’t pale, except for me, when Dr. Mance made each of us hold that brain,” etc. etc. By the time Jon and Ygritte were done, everyone had tears in their eyes from laughing as much as they had. Indeed, once they had finished their story, there was a little quiet in the room, and Arya leant to whisper in Sansa’s ear:

“Do you want to hand out the invitations now?”

Sansa nodded and rose.

“I… I have something for all of you. I’m gonna go get it, so don’t go away,” she finished with a nervous smile.

With that, Sansa went upstairs. She returned with red envelopes that seemed to be burning her fingers. Arya rose and came up to her. Standing on tiptoes to reach her tall sister’s ear, she advised:

“Start with mom. And don’t worry so much.”

Sansa nodded.

“What’s all these secrets?!” Robb demanded with amusement in his voice as he observed the whispering between his sisters. His general inability to take things seriously right away made amusement his main attitude to life.

“Nothing,” Arya replied in a voice that dared her brother to challenge her.

Before the two could begin bickering — something Robb and Arya enjoyed far too much — Sansa spoke:

“These are the invitations to the Fountain of Tears,” she explained in a voice that, despite her efforts, remained as unsteady as her hands. “I have one for each of you.”

Following her sister’s suggestion, she started with Catelyn.

“This one’s for you, mom,” she said as she placed the invitation into her mother’s hands.

“Oh, Sansa! This is lovely…” Catelyn began happily, pride in her whole countenance at this physical evidence of her daughter’s success; then her eyes fell on the signatures. “And with the signatures by both Lannister brothers,” she added in an unenthusiastic tone, which announced that discovering these markings on her invitation had spoiled her pleasure somewhat.

“I hope you’ll come,” Sansa added hastily, rushing to extract from her mother the endorsement without which she dared not extend the invitations to the rest of the family. To Sansa’s pleasure and to her surprise, Catelyn answered without hesitation:

“But of course, I’ll come!” She raised her eyes to her eldest daughter. “You don’t think I’d miss your first grand premiere?” And the mother looked back at the invitation with a somewhat warmer expression.

Encouraged by this response, Sansa began handing out the invitations silently. As she gave out the envelopes, the Starks invariably began examining the extravagant sheets of thick paper. Her father,
Robb and Talisa, Jon and Ygritte, Bran, Rickon… She halted before her uncle and utter fear overtook her. Had someone asked her later, Sansa would not have known how to explain her petrification. But as she came before her uncle with the red envelope shaking slightly between her fingers, it seemed to her that she was standing in front of a bottomless abyss and that she was forcing herself, against the most basic of instincts, to step into its void. She extended the invitation wordlessly.

She was not imagining the dreadful quiet that overtook the room, nor was the feeling that the eyes of all present there had focused on them illusory. After a moment of hesitation, Ben took the envelope from his niece’s hands with a sad smile characteristic of him, and the tension in the room began to ebb. He opened the envelope and dragged out the invitation from its hiding place. The sheet of paper seemed as unwilling to find itself in Ben Stark’s hands as the niece had been to relinquish it.

“‘Mister Benjamin Stark,’” that man began reading aloud, “‘you are cordially invited’ — do you hear that, Ned? I’m cordially invited! — ‘to attend the world premiere of the Fountain of Tears…’” He gave a dark chuckle and seemed to have lost interest in the rest of the text, skipping to contemplate the signatures with cruel distaste. “Signed: Tyrion Lannister and Jaime Lannister.” He pronounced the last two words with particular venom. Another mirthless laugh escaped him. There was a pause.

“Sansa, darling,” he said, walking a few steps from where he stood, “I know that you’ve worked hard… Although I do think you could have found a better use for your talent than in the Lannister pit. I want you to know that I don’t like upsetting you, but I cannot and will not accept this invitation.”

They had been so utterly concentrated on his words, they had not noticed how he had approached the fireplace: it only came to their attention when, having finished speaking, he flung the invitation into the flames. They were rendered speechless by the action. In Sansa’s being, something had snapped, as she watched the fire consume the red envelope, as it ate away at the expensive beige-golden paper. It seemed that it was not the invitation burning away, but the illusion of a pack of wolves that was said never to separate. How peculiar, paradoxical even, that the generosity and honor of Lannisters could display cracks in the magnanimity of the Starks. She discovered the name for the abyss into which she had stepped: schism. Having fallen down it, she found herself strangely unperturbed. After all, she was discovering that, objectively, she had known all the while what she would uncover at its foundation. The deflagration of her hope for the opposite of what had taken place had restored to her the realistic view of the situation.

Arya recovered her power of speech before anyone else. Coming to wrap her arm protectively around Sansa’s waist, she barked at her uncle unceremoniously:

“Did you have to do that?!!”

“You didn’t imagine I’d go?” was the only reply, accompanied by the sad smile they had seen before. There was also disappointment in Ben’s eyes when he contemplated his eldest niece. The youngest was not at all satisfied:

“No, but did you have to be an ass about it?!”

“Arya! Language! It’s your uncle you’re speaking to!” Cried Catelyn.

“So? I call things by their right names!”

As the argument was about to escalate, Ygritte broke in with a question on everyone’s mind:

“Arya, where’s your invitation?”

“It’s in my room, under lock and key,” Arya replied in a brusque tone, which, all knew, was directed
at her uncle and not her brother’s girlfriend. “And I’m going.” The last words she spat out with so much vehemence, they could have been wildfire. Moved by her sister’s support, Sansa put her arm around Arya’s shoulders in gratitude; that she needed the physical support had been noticed only by her sister, who provided it easily and willingly. Empowered by the strength of this physical bond, Sansa found her voice:

“Are the rest of you going to come?”

Seeing how Robb’s eyes darted from his uncle to the fireplace, Talisa spoke up immediately:

“I don’t know about about everyone else,” she said meaningfully, and Robb’s eyes were restored to her right away, “but I will definitely come! I’d never miss such a premiere — and with you performing in it, I’ll be there no matter what!” Upon hearing these words, Robb could only nod his acceptance.

“Thank you, Tali,” Sansa said with feeling. It was obvious that she was grateful not only for her friend’s acceptance but for Talisa’s influence on Robb. “I have a couple of spare invitations, and I was going to mail two to your parents. Maybe they’ll come, too?”

Talisa waved her hand in a gesture of assurance.

“Pffft… Of course, they will!” Then she added in a voice that was subtly laced with a nastiness entirely atypical to her: “Who would refuse a personal invitation from the most renowned ballet-makers in the world?..” The ordinariness of this rhetorical question did a poor job of softening the barb it had aimed at Ben.

Smiling a little at her friend’s support, Sansa turned to look questioningly at Jon and Ygritte. Arya was appraising the couple as well, her expression only slightly less menacing than when she had been staring down Robb. The Free Woman nodded discreetly, but turned to look at Jon, who had been staring at the floor grimly from the moment Ben had burned the invitation. Seeing that Jon had been so deep in some unpleasant thoughts that he did not notice it was his turn to speak, Ygritte nudged him into the side with her elbow:

“Jon!” she admonished in a whisper. The rare quietness of Ygritte’s tonality testified to her own tension from witnessing the drama unfolding in her adopted family. As though waking, Jon raised his eyes in confusion.

“Huh?”

“Are you coming?!” Barked Arya impatiently, her voice full of strain and anger Ben’s action had provoked.

“Oh, of course,” Jon answered easily, distractedly. Ygritte smiled proudly, winking at her fellow redhead. “I wouldn’t miss it, San,” he explained, then added: “It’s just I’m sad to see — ” he interrupted himself and shook his head as though thinking better of voicing that last part. The words he had not spoken, however, hung in the room like thick smoke:

_Sad to see this family start fracturing under so slight a pressure as can be delivered by a small stack of paper._

There was one more RSVP to be voiced, and as Sansa turned to face her father — Ned’s face set in grim lines so markedly similar to Jon’s — she knew that even the support of her sister’s small but strong arms would not cushion the potential blow.

_Daddy?.. was the only plea going through her mind, which had been reduced to the plaintive state of a grieving child._
“Dad!” Barked Arya once again. It was clear from her tone that, notwithstanding her adoration of her father, Ned’s favorite child was willing to accept only one answer — never to forgive the other. Ned looked up at his daughters, contemplated them a second; then his eyes went to his younger brother. Ben was standing with his back to the rest of the family, leaning his arm on the mantelpiece, observing the fire with his black eyes. There was something distinctively stubborn and indescribably Northern about the determined slant of his shoulders. Ned sighed, and Sansa felt the decision he was coming to was not in her favor. She sought to counter this balancing of scales in her father’s mind.

“Daddy…” she began, and her voice almost broke, but Arya gripped her more firmly, and the hard pressure of her small but ruthless fingers steadied her elder sister’s voice. Sansa swallowed against the thickness in her throat and the fear burning at her eyelids. “Daddy, it’s not about Lannisters… It’s about me. It’s my first big premiere… And it’s the only one of its kind… I worked so hard, and that whole ballet… It… Means so much to me.”

I found myself in its pas.

I discovered courage and fearlessness in its flow.

I danced my first love to its music.

“Daddy, please?.. Please?” She could not entirely keep her unspilled tears from her voice. Ned looked back to his daughters. As he opened his mouth to speak, Arya, like earlier Ygritte, exchanging her usually loud intonations for softness, whispered in reproach, “Dad.”

It had halted her father’s speech. Then came another voice, strong and even like it always was. Catelyn’s voice. No whisper in it; only the throaty, low sound they had all come to love before they had learned to love themselves.

“Ned.”

He looked to his wife. She was watching him with the expression that would have proved, had proof been needed, beyond any shade of doubt that Arya was her daughter: warning and reproach mixed in the stubborn Tully-blue eyes. Ned glanced back at his brother one last time. Then he spoke.

“It is a considerate invitation,” he admitted; his family leaned toward him like waves toward a stubborn, unmovable rock in their midst. “And Ben, understandably, cannot accept it…”

“Father.” It was Jon’s voice, this time. Hearing his son join the chorus that urged him, Ned nodded to himself. There was resignation in the movement.

“I will come, Sansa,” he said, and the words were echoed by a collective release of breath that was loud enough to be audible. “But,” he added, “only for you and because you’re my daughter.”

“Thank you, daddy,” Sansa mumbled as she wrapped her arms around her father fiercely. Over her shoulder, Ned was also rewarded for deserting his brother by a pleased grin from his younger daughter.

Over dinner, they all, to the best of their ability, tried to pretend the episode of the burned envelope had never taken place. To their genuine happiness at being all together as a family seemed to have been mixed some artificial gaiety, as though the smoke from the burning of the thick Lannister paper had released a peculiar poison into the air. Not one of them could shake off the feeling that a wolf had left the pack and that the pack seemed to have moved on without him. The words of old, which had been passed down from generations and generations of Starks to their children and their
children’s children, made the spines of this family prickle with fear.

*The lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.*

They all — even Ned, for all that he disliked going to the Lannisters’ theater and blamed Catelyn for letting Sansa go to King’s Landing in the first place — wished they could change Ben’s mind, and knew they could not. So trivial a matter, it seemed on the surface, this burned invitation — surely, the dark words inherited from the past held no sway over a trifling thing like a premiere. Life and death were not decided by accepting or denying invitations. And yet the feeling of discomfort weighed heavily on the seemingly merry dinner party. It was not about death, each thought. It was about the pack remaining together — always, under circumstances grave and light. The apprehension concerned not the episode as such — indeed, most thought that Ben not going to King’s Landing was a good thing. No, the superstitious alarm they felt had to do with the principle: that the survival of the pack depended, in the long run, on its unity.

For similar reasons, they all avoided alluding to Sansa’s life in the South, the LBC, or the Lannister brothers for most of the evening. Toward the end of the dinner, however, Ben brought the topic up of his own volition. Despite his stern refusal to attend *The Fountain of Tears* and his more general disapproval of Sansa living in the South, in constant contact with the Lannisters, Ben felt guilty about upsetting his niece. In a misguided effort to make up for it, which had been largely brought on by his ignorance of the truth about Sansa’s relationship with the Lannister family that she so carefully concealed, the uncle made the following remark:

“I hope you know, Sansa, that even though these Lannisters are your employers, if they ever upset you or act dishonorably with you, you can count on me and your father to interfere.”

Before Sansa could reply to this statement, the first effect of which was to enrage her into utter speechlessness, Robb decided to add his own thoughts:

“Yeah, and you can count on Jon and me, too. I remember you went down South a couple of months ago, Jon,” he added. “Guess you didn’t see that Lannister, or you’d have told him to be careful of what he says and does when it comes to San.”

“I did see him, actually,” Jon replied, “but I didn’t know it was him at the time, so I said nothing. He was angry at something, probably my interrupting his class — ”

“Yeah, well, the man has some serious anger management issues,” Robb remarked with a smirk that was shared by his uncle and father.

“How would you know that?!” snapped Sansa suddenly.

She had reached her breaking point. Her nerves had been strained by the handing out of the invitations, and she had been distraught by her uncle’s gesture. Beneath that pain at his refusal to come to her performance, simmered darker feelings. Among these, was wounded pride. She felt insulted on two counts: the invitation came from her, whom Ben had spurned, and she was angered for this on her own behalf; but she had been no less deeply lacerated on account of Ben rejecting the invitation Jaime had extended with considerable humility and good will. That her uncle had thrown into the fire the olive branch the man she worshipped had extended to him made something almost akin to loathing crawl in the black recesses of her soul.

Sansa had remained quiet during the conversation, made mute by her anger and pain, her breathing growing heavier with each new word. Arya had snaked her hand into her sister’s lap and linked her fingers through hers; she had never dreamed her elder sister’s hand could grip with so much strength — without realizing it, Sansa was actually hurting her. When the angry exclamation had left Sansa’s
lips, Arya pressed her fingers around her sisters’ in warning, trying to recall Sansa to herself before it was too late, but to no avail.

“How would I know what?” Robb asked, meanwhile; he was still smiling, and his surprised, careless expression, which seemed the height of insolence to his sister, made her blood boil.

“How would you know whether or not Jaime has anger management issues? Do you know him? Have you ever met him?”

“No, of course, not,” Robb replied, his amusement and surprise at what seemed to him his sister’s odd behavior evident in every line of his face.

“Then how would you know this — or anything else about him?”

“Sansa —” Robb began, hesitantly, realizing only then that she looked inimical and enraged; the tense and sympathetic way in which Arya regarded her only served to increase his consternation.

“You’ve never met him, all you know about him is through hearsay — how the hell would you know what issues he does or doesn’t have?!” Her voice was shrill with anger; her upper body was agitated by small, irregular bouts of shaking.

“I… Well,” Robb smiled in confusion, “I trust father and uncle’s words,” he answered, still more perplexed by his sister’s behavior than fully aware of the extent of her anger — or its source.

The wrath that had accumulated in Sansa over days of listening to disparaging remarks about the Lannisters and that had been accentuated by Ben’s earlier dismissive and insulting action, had become unhinged, and Robb’s remark about Jaime had made him the accidental target of her violent resentment. When Sansa spoke next, her voice was so filled with venom, one would never have known she was speaking to a beloved brother — or that she was speaking about her father and uncle.

“They have met him — what? Once? Twice? I’ve been working with him for months, so, maybe, instead of listening to idle talk, you should trust me when I tell you that Jaime Lannister has no anger management issues.”

“Now, wait a minute, young lady,” Ben cut into the siblings’ discussion in the tone he normally used when speaking of the Lannisters — despise and personal affront mixing in his intonations, “I know that criminal well enough to know he should be behind bars! I’ll never understand why Ned and Cat let you join his company, but if you were my daughter, you’d never have set foot in King’s Landing!”

By this moment, Sansa’s heavy breathing could not be missed by anyone; she was red in the face, her lips were white, her eyes were wild, and her face was distorted by utter fury.

“Then I sure am happy I’m not your daughter,” she spit out. She could not have said more cutting words, or imbued her tone with greater hatred. Her phrase resonated in the room with the slashing sound of a slap. For a few moments, there was a pause of stunned silence. One word reverberated in Arya’s mind: Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!..

“Sansa!” Exclaimed Catelyn, who came to her senses first under the powerful influence of a mother’s instinct for the education and bettering of her children. “Apologize to your uncle immediately! What has gotten into you?!”

Arya clasped her sister’s hand, mentally pleading with her to back down. She had never dreamed Sansa could stand her ground so; to attack so; to explode so. And even as, superficially, Arya tried
calming the storm, the deeper-running feeling was one of astonished admiration for her elder sister — her courage and her rage; the undauntedness of her spirit. She watched Sansa in breathless expectation. To her surprise, her sister smirked, and, suddenly, an expression she had never before seen in her — or anyone else in the family — came onto her features. Her rage was gone. Her eyes grew cold as arrogance seeped into them, like ice-cold water into a forge-fire, and her lips twisted in a mirthless, crooked smile.

“I’ve been taught not to apologize for the truth, and I shan’t break that rule tonight. Uncle Ben can whistle for my apology.”

With these rude, astounding words, she stood and left the table. They watched her go, dumbly. She paused at the threshold and turned back to look at them.

“You call him a criminal,” she said to them, but it was clear she was addressing herself primarily to Ben; her voice was cold and calm, but her eyes were brutal. “You have neither evidence nor knowledge of circumstances for your groundless accusations — had you either, you would have been able to put him behind bars or retracted your allegations. Jaime Lannister was cleared of all charges years ago. Your words sound like nothing more than the embittered slander by a man who had been dismissed from his position due to his own prejudice and unfitness for it. That’s beneath a Stark.”

And with that, she departed.

They all looked at the empty threshold some long moments; then, animated as though by lightening among a garden of statues, Arya leapt from her chair and ran after her sister. Her last impression of the rest of the family was that of eight frozen people.

Arya found Sansa in her room. A half-empty suitcase lay open on the bed. Sansa was pacing as she attempted to gather her belongings. There was more neurotic energy than efficiency in her movements.

“‘What are you doing, San?’ She asked. “‘Your flight is not until the day after tomorrow.”

“I’ll go to the airport and have them change it,” the elder sister replied. “It’s time for me to leave. I don’t belong here. Not anymore.”

She meant what she said. She felt even more an outsider than on her first day home; only now, under the riveting influence of her anger, she embraced the situation. She did not belong here, so she would return to where she did — the sooner, the better.

Arya saw the situation quite differently. Coming over to her sister, Arya yanked the dress Sansa was trying to pack from her hands and threw it away.

“That’s not even true!” Arya exclaimed with pain and indignation. “Everyone’s coming to your premiere, except uncle Ben. If anyone doesn’t belong here, it’s him, not you — we’re all going to be there for you, except him, and he deserves to be left out.” These were cruel words, indeed, but Arya’s fundamental characteristic was the ability to be mercilessly cruel if she perceived someone as betraying her or her family. In her eyes, Ben was a traitor, who had put his own pride and resentment above the family — and she was not about to forgive him.

“But don’t you see, Arya? It’s all because of me. If I hadn’t come or extended these invitations, all would have been as it was. Maybe,” she added without fully believing her own words, “I should just stay in the South and stop trying to straddle two worlds.”
This had driven Arya so mad, she slapped her sister on the arm — angrily and painfully.

“Don’t you dare ever say anything like that again! I’ve only just got you for a real sister and I’m not about to let you take the easy way out. Besides, don’t try fooling yourself — you could never stay in the South forever, and never come home again: none of us could, not even Robb, for all his careless ways. This is our home, your home — and you should be smart enough to know it’s worth fighting for, even if it means you need to convince some stubborn people of an unlikely truth.”

The slap and the fierceness of Arya’s remark had calmed Sansa’s agitation somewhat. She knew her sister was right. But that did not mean she wanted to stay in Winterfell any longer this visit. The very idea of being under the same roof with her uncle unsettled her: she knew her words had been cutting and hurtful, and her determination not to take them back left her eager to escape. She nodded in acceptance of Arya’s words and went to pick up the dress her sister had thrown earlier. This time, Arya grabbed her hands.

“What are you doing?” Arya demanded.

“I agree with you. This is my home, and I can’t — I won’t — let it go because I found another one in the South,” Sansa said as she extricated herself from her sister’s hold. “But this doesn’t mean I’m staying any longer this time around.”

The younger sister’s anger was replaced by a stubborn expression, in the lines of which hid a timid acknowledgement of hurt.

“It’s your time with me that you’d be cutting short, though,” she mumbled. The low, almost quiet way in which Arya had said these words, and the injury her tone communicated, made Sansa pause and look up from her suitcase to her sister.

“I’m sorry, Arya,” said she. “I’ll make it up to you, I promi — ”

Arya cut her off:

“Don’t go Southern on me! I don’t want you making anything up to me! I want you not to leave before your flight. You don’t even have to go downstairs tonight. We’ll stay here and talk, maybe watch a movie or whatever. Don’t be a chicken, sis. You were born a braver animal than that.”

Sansa looked down at her hands. She so desperately wanted to flee, to avoid witnessing the consequences of her actions, avoid listening to the reproaches that, she knew, would soon be flung at her. She wanted to disappear before they could make her cave in. The words she had spoken seemed to her no less true for the cruel manner in which she had expressed them. She feared that, by making her feel guilty for her cruelty, her family might bend her to rescind the words themselves. And, out of her loyalty to Jaime, she refused to give in. At the same time, Arya’s entreaty roused a call of sisterhood that was proving hard to resist. And when her younger sister came to hold her hands again, Sansa felt herself capitulate. She would have to face the fallout and remain true to her words.

“If you run now,” Arya added, “you’ll make the whole episode seem worse.”

That was undeniable.

“Come on,” Arya urged with a dimpled grin the swaying power of which Sansa was discovering for the first time, “I’ll sneak downstairs and bring you lemon cakes if you stay.”

This made Sansa laugh, and she nodded.

“Fine, I’ll stay. But only for the lemon cakes.”
“‘Oh, I know, I know,’” Arya teased back. “For a ballerina, you have a dangerously active sweet tooth. Remember: if ever you misbehave, I’ll rat you out to Jaime Lannister — I’m sure he’ll fire you on the spot...” Then, Arya gave a devilish grin: “Or, perhaps, he’d make better use of that tactical advantage: you really are ready for anything to get lemon cakes. I bet, he — ”

“Shut up and go downstairs!” Yelped Sansa, and threw an unpacked shoe at her sister’s head. Arya ducked just in time, laughing as she went to the door. “And bring me a double portion!” Sansa called after her. She felt she deserved a serious sugar overdose.

“Maybe I should bring the scales along, so we can watch you gain weight in real time,” laughed her merciless younger sister.

The moment the door closed behind Arya, Sansa wished she had not sent her away — even to bring her lemon cakes. Arya had stood by her side that entire strenuous evening, and Sansa felt unsettled now that her sister had withdrawn. Sansa feared above all that, while Arya was gone, some one of her relatives would come barging in, retorts and accusations hot on their tongues, and she would have to face them alone without feeling next to her the small form of her sister and knowing Arya’s face was set in stubborn, grim lines. She paced the room, the nervous energy she had generated rolling off her in waves; looking for something to do, she began browsing through possible movies she and Arya could watch but could not read a single title past the first syllable. One by one, the reproachful faces of her uncle, parents, and elder brothers rose before her eyes, overtaking her mind. She tried pushing them out of her thoughts, but they seemed to engulf the room, and she strained her ears to catch the echo of the conversation downstairs. Whatever it was, she knew it could not be pleasant. Before she could begin tearing herself apart, Arya returned, carrying lemon cakes.

“How bad is it downstairs?” Sansa asked her immediately.

Arya shook her shoulders with a decidedly indifferent air.

“I don’t even know,” she answered, but her voice sounded strained and disingenuous. “I just sneakied into the kitchen and heard nothing. I bet they are still finishing dinner in shocked silence.”

She did not tell her sister that, downstairs, strained voices of the parents and uncle argued viciously over Catelyn’s decision to let Sansa take up a position at the LBC and the influence this employment had had on the eldest Stark girl. Accusations and concerns were flung with a vehemence unusual for their family. Ben blamed the parents for allowing Sansa to go South. Ned was carefully siding with his brother so as not to antagonize his wife completely. Catelyn stood her ground, defending Sansa’s career, accusing Ben of being inconsiderate of her daughter’s feelings and too ready to judge. It was a full-blown dispute, but Arya was not about to dispirit her sister further by revealing to her this truth.

The girls settled in on Sansa’s bed, and she insisted that Arya chose a movie for them to watch. As the frames zipped past them on the screen, they stared into it blankly, stealing concerned glances at each other and the door. Sansa could not even taste the lemon cakes; Arya chewed on the additional piece of meat pie she had stolen for herself in the kitchen without enthusiasm. Halfway through the movie, the younger sister asked:

“Are you even watching?”

“No.”

Arya paused the film, and they were left without the pretense of distraction. They stayed in silence for what seemed a long while. Then,

“I thought you said the right thing,” Arya grumbled.
There was a pause.

“Do you think mom and dad will forgive me one day?” Sansa asked. “I know uncle won’t.”

“What else can they do? You don’t live here, and they can’t punish you or keep you from going back. Besides, mom is on your side, and dad doesn’t know how to hold grudges against us.”

“I know, but it’s not the same.”

“San,” Arya said, placing her hand on her sister’s shoulder, “it’s going to be all right. Moreover, they’d never stay mad at you when you’re leaving soon.”

Sansa nodded. Feeling the pressure of the family dispute weigh too heavily on them, Arya hit play. The movie continued, and they pretended to watch it.

The film had nearly ended, when a soft knock sounded on the door.

“San? Can I come in?”

It was Jon’s voice. As Arya hit pause once again, she turned to look at Sansa, who had lowered her head and sighed.

“Come in,” the elder sister called, raising her head.

The door opened to reveal Jon. His face expressed surprise at discovering the sisters together — he had simply assumed Arya had taken the first chance she had gotten of leaving the dinner table and avoiding getting mixed up in what she would have previously referred to as a “stupid dispute.” The girls were huddled together in a way that suggested they had drifted closer in an unconscious need of comfort. Jon came to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Uncle’s leaving,” he announced in a grim voice. As neither of the girls responded, he added: “San, you should go down and at least try to make things right.”

His sister swallowed thickly.

“I can’t make it right, Jon,” she said in a low voice.

“It was very cruel what you said to uncle,” the brother answered. “You know he can’t have children of his own, and he’s always thought of us as partly his. He played with us when we were little and was always there for us when we grew older. He’s always cared for your and been kind to you. And you’re ready to cut him into little pieces…” Jon took a deep breath as though to calm himself, but his voice grew harder and accusing all the same when he spoke next, repeating: “You’re ready to cut him into little pieces, and for what? Because you don’t like what he says about your boss?”

At Sansa’s sharp intake of breath, Arya decided to step in:

“Leave her alone, Jon,” she warned.

“You should tell her to go make peace with uncle instead,” Jon reproached her.

“Uncle was a total ass to her, and you know this!”

“He did what he had to do — ”

“He didn’t have to burn the invitation and be all judgmental about it, and you know it! Because of him, dad nearly didn’t go! You know that whatever San said was not unjustified given uncle’s behavior. He doesn’t know anything about Jaime Lan — ”
It was Jon’s turn to interrupt:

“And what do you know about him, huh, Arya? No more than any of us. The man, for all of his success as a dancer, is a shady character.”

“He’s not.” Sansa spoke in a calm voice that sounded tired and sad. “He’s one of the most loyal, honorable people I’ve ever met. He’s kind and he’s good. And him extending the invitation to uncle and father after everything they put him through was just one example of how profoundly — ”

Poorly repressing his irritation, Jon cut her off:

“I’m not here to talk about Jaime Lannister. I’m here because you’ve really upset uncle. Please go talk to him before he leaves.” Noticing her stubborn silence, he added: “San, you’ll regret it if you don’t.”

She felt a tinge of contrition begin eating at her heart at Jon’s words, but then she recalled Jaime's broken, arrogant smile, and her heart guided her mind to an assessment of her actions that she perceived uniquely in the light of their favorability to the man she loved rather than the uncle who loved her.

"I guess one must live with one's choices,” answered she her brother.

*And I choose Jaime.*

But this, she did not say.

Jon sighed at her words. He moved as if to leave, but never ended up rising from the bed.

“What are you two watching?” He asked in a defeated voice. Arya, sensing immediately that Jon was giving up, informed him readily:

“We’ve nearly finished Dragons Rising; we’re about to start the third installment. Wanna join us?”

He nodded, and the girls made space for him on the bed. Arya hit play.

As the scenes blurred past him, Jon reflected that, having voiced the pleas for family peace, he was under no obligation to side with his uncle. While he did not particularly like Jaime Lannister — the little he had seen of him or the stories he had heard from his father — Jon liked family disputes even less. Moreover, like Arya, he condemned uncle’s burning of the invitation, though he was not ready to admit this to the girls. Jon felt that Ben should have been the bigger man and accepted the invitation for Sansa’s sake — like Jon and the rest of the family had done. More importantly still, from among his siblings, Jon was closest with his sisters, and when it came to choosing sides, he — instinctively and inevitably — leaned toward them, even if at first he sought to guide them to the high road. In this particular dispute, he felt especially justified to do take their side, because Catelyn had made her opinion very clear. Jon admired his father; he sought to imitate him to the best of his ability. Whenever a decision presented itself to him, he asked himself, “what would father do in my place?” and acted accordingly. But when Catelyn made decisions, Jon followed her lead before the question about his father’s possible actions could even arise in his mind. And so it was this time.

Ben Stark said his goodbyes grimly and stoically. Neither of his nieces came to send him off. Jon did not reappear for a second handshake. Ben left Winterfell bitterly and hastily. Like a man insulted and betrayed, he did not look back as he drove away.

Catelyn and Ned watched his car merge with the night of winter. Their loyal hearts were heavy over this family discord. More intense even than this feeling, however, was worry about their eldest.
daughter: she acted so oddly ever since she had come home, and while her closeness with Arya brought them great joy, the rest of her behavior — especially her shameful scene at the dinner table — unnerved them. They could not account for this transformation, and as consternation invaded their minds, they were beginning to subconsciously, without admitting or realizing it, suspect their daughter had not been telling the truth.
Hello there, kingdom of summer,

Have you missed me, your runner?

I had gone to the land of winter

But returned to you, my adopted mother.

I have grown cold away from you,

Let me warm myself with your suns.

I have missed the lover I left with you —

Give me back one of your darling sons.

I will love him even better now

That I've recalled the burn of the snow

Give him to me, and before neither fear nor doubt

Will I any trembling show.

It should have come as no surprise, really, that transporting a large direwolf from North to South by air would be a hassle. Nevertheless, Sansa spent considerable time arguing with the staff at the airport about having Lady allowed inside the plane. They refused. Not only would the wolf risk giving passengers a heart attack, they suggested without subtlety, but, practically speaking, the huge beast would not fit anywhere on the plane. Not even Ned Stark’s advocacy of her case could save Lady from being transported in a large cage in the baggage compartment. Naturally, Sansa — and the rest of the family — took this implacable decision by the airport staff as a personal affront. Privately, Ned Stark blamed it on the Southern partners of the Northern firm with which Sansa was flying. The unfortunate consequence of their bickering over the conditions of Lady’s transportation was Sansa missing her early morning flight and having to settle for the one that left several hours later. The consequence of this was her missing the LBC rehearsal that day.

As she sat on the plane, awaiting takeoff, Sansa contemplated the grey asphalt of the airport and its ugly building without interest. Whether in the North or the South, airports always looked dismal, as though leaving was not bad enough on its own. She thought back to the last days she had spent at home. Uncle Ben’s departure had left an emptiness behind that was filled, on the part of all the Starks except the four young women, with resentment to the Lannisters for their mere existence, as well as concern for Sansa, which expressed itself in the worried glances they threw her way. All in all, it was a pretty tense couple of days, all the more taxing because they tried to pretend that everything was fine. For a gathering of people so accustomed to honesty such a regime of pretension had been a difficult exercise.
At least, she had patched things up with Robb. Jon had helped with that peacemaking, naturally. Besides, Robb was not one to hold grudges. His easy-going nature forgave so quickly, his memory did not have time enough to form grudges. That Sansa had attacked Ben much more than her eldest brother, and the shock her words to her uncle had delivered, further served to minimize Robb’s perception of her wrongdoings against him personally. Although Sansa and Robb had never been so close that they would share secrets or dreams, the way she did with Jon and Arya, they had forged an understanding when she had treated his hangovers and he — her problems with math. This understanding was the foundation for a mutual forgiveness that was not based on explanations and verbal communication — as it is with confidantes — but on a willingness to overlook misdeeds, to ignore the past in the belief that it had come about due to reasons that were better left alone. Before Sansa had left, she and Robb had shared enough genuine smiles to know that they had moved past his words about Jaime Lannister and her counter-accusations.

Sansa’s fondest memory from that visit home was her time with Arya. Indeed, her sister was the one person with whom she had not needed to pretend at all during her visit — not even with her King’s Landing friends could she be as open about her life and, more importantly, her feelings. The acutest pain to reverberate in her as the plane separated from the Northern land was caused by being taken away from her sister. Not her mother, or father, or Jon, but Arya. It was all the more painful for being so new.

During the flight, she focused on learning the new music Renly had sent earlier in the week. In a few hours, the jubilant Southern sun tore her attention away from that occupation. She landed in King’s Landing International Airport and, the moment the wheels of the airplane had touched the capital’s hot asphalt, she felt the burdens of the past days fall away from her as she was overwhelmed by a feeling of homecoming. It was true, then; she had two homes now. And as she thought of the friends whom she would soon see, she could hardly tell which was dearest.

Another hassle ensued immediately upon her arrival — before she had even left the airport. Southerners were afraid to come near Lady’s cage in the baggage compartment. It took a while to assure them Lady would not bite their heads off from within the cage. Without much enthusiasm, they allowed Sansa to open the cage (they had been demanding to see her “permit for the importation and keeping of a wild and hazardous animal,” before, in severe irritation, she had threatened them with the Lannister last name). The spectacle of absurdity did not end even when the lady and her canine were on their way: most people they passed paled, jumped, and got out of the way; it was in equal measure funny and embarrassing. As for a taxi, only a tall Dothraki driver agreed to give her a ride but demanded three times the usual fare.

Sansa might have missed the rehearsal, but she arrived in time to drop off her bags at the apartment and then rush to the LBC to catch Rose. After offering the invitations to her own family, Sansa was determined to invite Tywin well in advance. Tyrion had told her that, if she required extra tickets, she could contact Rose. So, with her direwolf in tow, Sansa appeared in Rose’s office just as the secretary was about to leave.

“Hi, Rose, I’m so glad I caught you!..” Sansa called to her, as she entered. She was about to explain the reason for her appearance, when she noticed the woman’s face be distorted by terror. “My gods, Rose, what’s wrong?” Sansa exclaimed, looking around in an attempt to understand why the secretary suddenly appeared so frightened. The poor woman could only point at Lady and mumble her fear incoherently. “Oh, you don’t have to worry about Lady!..” Sansa laughed, waving her hand. “She’s the tamest creature you’ll ever see, I promise. She’s as docile as a horse.”

Rose, who recovered somewhat from her terror, replied tartly:

“It’s of a size of a horse, too. What in gods’ name is this beast?! It’s like a wolf that’s been fed
steroids its whole life!”

“It’s a Northern direwolf,” smiled Sansa sheepishly. Rose’s words made her feel both apologetic and wounded. “I can have her wait outside, if you like,” she offered with chagrin. Rose nodded.

Once Lady was made to sit outside the door, Sansa closed it behind her.

“Rose, I would like to have an additional ticket.”

“Sure. In the same row as your other family and friends?”

“No!”

The last thing Sansa wanted was for Tywin to sit next to her father… Besides, the Lannister patriarch would condescend to sit in only one place in any theater. Ignorant of these considerations, Rose raised her eyebrows at the younger woman’s exclamation. Sansa gave her a strained smile.

“No, actually, Rose,” she continued, “I require a ticket to the middle of the first row of the royal box.”

The carefully shaped eyebrows of the secretary rose higher still. “I’m afraid this isn’t something I can do without consulting Mr. Tyrion, Miss Stark. Is it for a member of your family?”

“Something like this, yes.”

“Well, I must make a phone call. Please wait a few moments.”

With that, Rose dialed.

“Mr. Tyrion?” The younger Lannister hated being referred to as “Mr. Lannister,” and his co-workers found different modes of adapting to this dislike. “I hope I’m not interrupting your evening, sir. Miss Stark has just arrived, and she’d like to have a front-row ticket to the royal box. I explained to her that I couldn’t give her one without consulting you first.” There was a pause, which Sansa disliked: the idea of aggravating Tyrion appealed to her not at all. Rose spoke again, “Yes, I do believe she said it was for a member of her family.”

Because of her ingrained honesty, Sansa’s first instinct was to contradict this lie, which she could endure mouthing to Rose, but which, when passed on to Tyrion, mortified her. However, she knew she had to play the cards she held or give up, so she remained silent. Meanwhile, the phone conversation came to an end:

“Sure, of course, Mr. Tyrion. Have a great day!” Rose hung up and turned to Sansa. “I’ll have the ticket for you in a moment.”

She reached into a safe and extracted the envelope with the invitation.

“It is for the seat you wanted. It includes, as any seat of this calibre, the invitation to the afterparty, and it is signed by the brothers, but you’ll need to write in the name of your guest. I can do this for you, if you pref — ”

“Oh, no!” Sansa interrupted eagerly, as she took the envelope with the ticket from Rose. “You’re very kind, but this won’t be necessary. I’ll write in the name myself. Thank you for all your help. Have a great rest of your day!”

The invitation clutched in her hand, Sansa exited the office quickly, as though she were a thief.
Somehow, because of her deception, she felt like one. Now that the deed was half-done, it occurred to her that she could not predict the degree to which both brothers would be angered by her intrusion into their already complicated relationship with their father. However, she remembered the expertly concealed bitterness in Tywin’s eyes when he had said to her, “I wasn’t invited.” She squared her shoulders, took Lady’s leash, which that well-mannered direwolf offered her, and made her way to Margaery’s empty studio where she added Tywin Lannister’s name to the invitation. Ever since her casting as one of the leads in the *Fountain of Tears*, she and Margaery effectively shared the latter’s studio. It was a comfortable arrangement for two friends who never tired of one another’s company. Then, the signed invitation safely stored in her purse, it was time for Sansa to leave for the Lannister mansion.

Tyrion was in some irritation when he had hung up with Rose. It must have found its manifestation in the way he had discarded his phone, because Margaery looked up from the menu she had been contemplating with concern:

“What’s the matter?”

They were seated at one of the lovely restaurants on the quay in the city center, out for a romantic dinner. Tyrion did not want to spoil the mood. Even if he privately thought that Sansa, for all her outward sweetness, had been utterly heartless in her disregard of Jaime while she had been gone. Always easily bruised on behalf of his brother — unlike on his own account — Tyrion had been accumulating aggravation against Sparkle for days.

It had all started with him having a bad dream the before. It was one of his rare nightmares, from which he, covered with sweat, jumped up in bed, jerking awake. He had dreamt of Sansa’s retreating back and Jaime covered in blood. He had sat in bed shaking, while Margaery, who had been startled from sleep by him, was fumbling for the lamp’s switch. Once Tyrion had regained control of his breathing and gathered his thoughts together, he had interpreted his dream as Sansa breaking Jaime’s heart. A man of superstition deep beneath his rational demeanor, Tyrion had been anxiously awaiting a call from Sansa to Jaime, or a text — anything to counter his nightmare — and was thrown into paranoid despair when neither had come. Under the influence of his bad dream, Tyrion was swayed to regard the Stark girl as a possible threat to his brother.

“Oh, it’s nothing, really,” he dismissed, wishing to enjoy a quiet evening with his fiancée. “What are you thinking of having?”

“The truth — I hear it’s a lovely dish,” parried Margaery.

Tyrion humphed and sought to end the conversation by taking up his own menu.

“Tyrion…” she insisted. “What’s going on?”

Her tone indicated plainly that she would not let the issue go.

“Oh, fine!” He exclaimed, throwing the menu away. “I just spoke with Rose. Apparently, Sansa is back now,” he stressed the word to underline his frustration with Sparkle for having missed the rehearsal earlier in the day, “and she wanted a front-row ticket to the royal box. And not just any! The one in the middle!”

“Just one ticket?” Margaery sought to clarify, confused.
“Yes.”

“For whom?”

“I’ve no idea! A member of her family, apparently, or so she told Rose.”

“But why would she not have them all sit together?”

Tyrion only shrugged his shoulders to indicate his ignorance of this, and his annoyance seeped into his gestures once again.

“Well, did you let her have it?” Asked Margaery.

“Naturally, I did!” Tyrion exclaimed in some affront. “Even if I weren’t trying to set her up with Jaime, she’s still a close friend and one of the main dancers…”

“Then why the irritation?” questioned Margaery with a smile.

“Because! You know I’m not stingy, and neither is Jaime. He’s given her many invitations, all nicely in the same spot… And she has more guests coming than the rest of us together — ”

“Tyrion, this is her first premiere. Just remember how half the theater was filled with grandma’s acquaintances when I made my début!”

“I know, and it isn’t about that! Who cares about one ticket, when all is said and done?.. It’s just that it’s uncharacteristic of Sansa to ask for even more when she’s already been given a lot, do you know what I mean?” Seeing Margaery nod, even if she looked confused by where he was going with this, he continued. “I’m just… Well, I’m just scared… What if she is too good to be true?”

After all, he thought peevishly, she didn’t even call Jaime once... Who knows if, perhaps, she’s not only more beautiful than Cersei but also more duplicitous, for all her apparent naïveté?

Margaery, who had been unable to make her fiancé share the contents of his nightmare with her and who, consequently, was ignorant of his troubled thoughts, rolled her eyes at him.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Tyrion. Your Lannister suspiciousness is getting the best of you — or, rather, the worst of you,” she joked. “Sansa Stark is the sweetest, most open, and selfless person I know. If she asked for that other ticket, I’m sure her motivation is perfectly justified and, perhaps, even disinterested.”

“Unless she wants to impress a boyfriend,” grumbled Tyrion. “What was that octopus Renly had brought up the other night? Veon? Leon? Theon? Deon?”

Margaery burst out laughing. Indeed, she could not stop her guffawing for quite a few moments, even though she perceived that her amusement fueled Tyrion’s ire.

“That might be one of the few stupidest things you’ve ever said,” she commented when she had regained control of her vocal chords. “Sansa said right away it was nothing but silly rumors — not to mention that she loves your brother to distraction.”

Tyrion humphed again.

“Are you seriously jealous on Jaime’s behalf?” Marge could not help teasing, when she observed Tyrion’s offended pout. “You might be taking this whole brothers-best-buddies you’ve got going to a whole new level — an insane level, Tyrion.” She paused a moment, reflecting. “Has Jaime said anything to you?”
“No, he hasn’t,” Tyrion replied briefly, then went on: “But why didn’t she show up today? And with barely any warning — just a group message that she was having difficulties at the airport… She could have at least called Jaime. He didn’t show it, of course, but I know he was upset. He let her have an almost week-long holiday nearly on the eve of the premiere,” and instead of coming back a little earlier, she took yet another day! Not to mention that ticket for gods-know-whom!..”

“You’re taking a turn into Crazy Town there, love,” his fiancée warned him. The premiere was many weeks away; she was sure the extra ticket was nothing nefarious.

“No, I’m not! I just think that she’s being inconsiderate, given how much it affects Jaime when she’s away!”

Margaery chuckled.

“You’re absurd and overprotective. Jaime’s a grown-ass man. One week separation from his lady-love won’t kill him, I promise you that.”

“You’re being cruel!”

“I’m being rational, which is more than I can say for you. And your reproach of Sansa is entirely baseless. How is she supposed to know that Jaime’s unhappy when she’s away? As far as she knows it, they are friends — nothing more. The poor girl probably thinks that, notwithstanding her own feelings, Jaime doesn’t return her affection. So how is she to know her delayed return causes pain? And to more than one Lannister brother, from what I can tell,” she added humorously, trying to dilute her earlier words with this gentle teasing. It did not help.

“She should know! How can she not know?! Exclaimed Tyrion in renewed agitation, which made Margaery contemplate him with concern. “She must know!”

“Sansa is too modest to assume a man whom she holds in such a high regard as your brother cares deeply for her — even, and especially, if she wants it to be the case!”

“Well, if she holds him in such high regard, why doesn’t she — I don’t know! — act more on it?”

“You mean why doesn’t she woo him?” Margaery laughed again. “Tyrion you’re being ridiculous!”

“Well, when you put it like this, yes! But it’s not what I meant — ”

“Sadly, it is,” she interrupted. Margaery’s amusement at Tyrion’s grievances against Sansa was slightly tinged with annoyance when she continued speaking; she did not appreciate such unjustified reproaches against her closest friend. “You know, as well as I do, that Sansa isn’t like me. She wasn’t raised to be forward with men, gods no! Your love for Jaime blinds you to the fact that he needs to get his shit together, get off his ass, and court the girl!”

At these words of hers, Tyrion’s whole countenance was shaken by indignation and resentment.

“What are you ready to order?”

The waiter appeared just in time to save Tyrion from repeating his earlier admonition concerning Margaery’s cruelty in more acrimonious terms. They ordered. The brief reprise in their conversation, which was getting far too heated for a romantic evening out, had given them pause enough to cool down somewhat.

“I think,” Tyrion said quite coldly when the waiter had departed, “that you’re being at the very least unfair to my brother and, at worst, utterly inconsiderate of his feelings.”
Margaery, who had had time to realize she may have been too harsh, answered in a low voice:

“And maybe you’re being a little too careful of them.”

There was silence between the couple. Then, worried by Tyrion’s unusual bad humor and its even stranger manifestation in an antagonism toward Sansa, whom she knew he liked greatly, Margaery spoke again.

“This isn’t at all about the ticket, Tyrion, is it?” inquired she in a gentle voice. She had been sensing that Tyrion had been on edge the past several days, and now that the odd explosion had come, she wanted to know what had caused it.

The next metamorphose in her fiancé distressed her further. Tyrion’s face preserved its irritation and resentment but to these was added mortification.

“Tyrion, what’s happening? I’m beginning to worry!”

He was silent, brooding. She knew that he was looking for the right words, and this, in and of itself, was an alarming sign in him.

“I… I’m just worried… What if we were mistaken? What if she doesn’t really care for him?”

Margaery put her hand over his at these words, seeking to contradict him right away, but before she could, he placed his own hand on top of hers, and whispered: “Or worse — what if she breaks his heart? Oh, Marge! I somehow feel her breaking his heart would be worse than Cersei! What will happen to my brother if she —”

But Margaery cut him off:

“First of all, we weren’t mistaken, she does care for him very, very much.” With a smirk, she added: “Just ask your father!” But this imbued Tyrion’s features with more misery. “Tyrion, my dear,” she resumed in a more serious tone, “you do know you aren’t actually responsible or culpable when it comes to Jaime’s love life? You accuse me of being cruel, but I think I give your brother more credit than you do. Jaime isn’t some fragile teenage girl — he’s a strong and deeply resilient man. If he’s lived with loving Cersei for twenty years, believe me, my darling, he’s going to be fine with Sansa. But you can’t blame her for not running after him — if it weren’t for Catelyn, I actually think Sansa might have done just that, she adores your brother so much. However, Sansa’s been raised the way she’s been raised, and, anyway, I think it’ll be for the better if Jaime does face the fact that he wants her for his own — not just that he loves her… Whatever happens, and I’m sure it’ll be a happy love story, you cannot feel responsible for it. Ultimately, it is out of your hands, my beloved control freak.”

With that, she leaned over the table to kiss him, noticing with pleasure that her kiss had the power to bring a smile to his face even when his mind had been engulfed by a tumult.

“So you think I’m paranoid for no reason?” He asked her when she withdrew.

“Yes.”

He sighed, and she knew there was something else, especially seeing that his earlier mortification grew.

“Tyrion. What did you do?”

“I… umm… Well… I may or may not have asked Varys for the list of Jaime’s incoming and outgoing phone calls and — ”
“You did what?!”

“Yes, well, I did. Just the list, not the transcripts of messages or anything like that — ”

“Really?” She exclaimed sarcastically. “How noble of you!”

“Besides the point,” he grumbled. “The point is that Sansa didn’t call him once. She didn’t even text!”

“Uh-huh,” Marge vocalized sardonically. “And did he call her?”

“No, but — ”

“Yes, but! Don’t try to make everything Sansa’s fault! I cannot believe you called me unfair, when you’re so utterly biased yourself!”

Tyrion appeared remorseful. He seemed to give her words some thought before he spoke next:

“Well… I might have been a tad overprotective…” And given more credit than I should have to my nightmare…

“A tad overprotective? You better hope that, after your trust issues, Jaime doesn’t find out you had Varys pass you his phone calls history!”

Marge had cause to regret her last words: the next forty minutes after uttering them, she would spend pacifying an entirely new paranoia crisis.

Sansa had chosen to walk to the Lannister residence, knowing well that finding a taxi that would drive her and a large direwolf to Tywin Lannister’s threshold was impossible. No one would be suicidal enough to perform such a job. She stopped before the high stairs that led to the mansion’s entrance and took a deep breath. She had last ascended them arm in arm with Jaime. How much time had elapsed since that night. The thought brought a small smile to her face: how much closer they were now; how much better they knew each other. She had missed him enormously while she had been away in the North; less, perhaps, than she would have, if she had not been talking about him so much with Arya. Still, now that she was in the South and had not seen him yet, her heart was starved for the sight of him.

She could not remain motionless at the steps, so she squared her shoulders and began the ascent. Tywin had been consideration itself whenever they had met in the past, so she hoped he would forgive the intrusion. She hardly doubted she would find him home. It was that hour of the evening when men of his conservative schedule had already returned from work but had not yet sat down to or left for dinner.

The large mansion looked so different than when she had last seen it: the house bathed quietly in the gentle sunlight of early evening. The setting sun had tinged the white of its walls with the palest of pinks. With no one but her on the marble steps, which had once been concealed by a crowd of people, the emptiness and the pastels of the evening imparted to the lonely house an air of serene tranquility. The ascent did not prove long, and, soon, she found herself at the threshold. She rang the bell.

The huge door was swiftly opened by the lackey, who seemed surprised to discover a guest rather
than a member of the staff, who dared use the front door instead of the back entrance.

“Lady Sansa?” He inquired in that unpleasant voice she vaguely remembered. “What can I do for you?” Then his eyes found Lady, and he paled; even his lips turned completely white. In fairness, the direwolf was taller than he, but Sansa had begun realizing that if she tried to accommodate everyone’s shock at seeing Lady, she might as well give up ballet and go perform with her wolf at the zoo. Acting as though she did not bring a huge direwolf with her, she said:

“I’m here to see Lord Lannister. Please inform him of my presence, if he can spare me a few minutes. My pet will remain outside,” she added, tying Lady’s leash to one of the balusters. “She’ll need a bowl of cold water, if possible.”

The lackey, regaining control of himself with some difficulty, nodded in acknowledgment of her request, bowed and stepped aside to allow her passage.

“Please wait here, my lady,” he said, motioning with his arm to a small guest room. With that, he withdrew deeper into the house in search of its owner.

Left to her own devices, Sansa was about to follow his directions, when she noticed a door further down the hall that was slightly ajar. She opened her mouth to bring this circumstance to the servant’s attention, but he was already gone. Thinking that, perhaps, she might discover the owner of the house behind the door that had caught her attention and save his lackey the fruitless search, she went toward the room. She knocked lightly on the heavy wood before pushing the door open. The room was empty, but she hardly noticed the circumstance that made her a trespasser, captivated as she was by the room’s contents. They astounded her to the extent that she forgot civility.

It was a small office, the kind that serves for writing personal letters but cannot suffice for the conducting of business of a multi-billion international company. The studiolo’s walls were of dark wood, which could hardly be seen amidst all the photographs that decorated it. Photographs of Tywin’s children. Jaime and Tyrion looked out from the pictures on the walls. These were no official family portraits or even casual photographs. The images captured the big moments of his sons’ careers. Photographs of Jaime performing at the LBC, even photographs of his very first performances on the stage of the Targaryen theater. Tyrion, smiling proudly on the red carpet, holding awards he had received for his role as the LBC stage manager in chief. Both brothers, with copyrighted Lannister grins, carrying their shared awards — countless, yearly honors — for their achievements as directors of the LBC. More photographs of LBC ballets, all of them with Jaime on stage. Pictures of the brothers and their colleagues bowing at the end of premieres. There were even photographs of Cersei from the little time she had spent with the ballet company. Some frames contained excerpts from prestigious journals and newspapers that had reviewed the brothers’ ballets. The history of the LBC, its very being, it seemed, was captured in meticulous detail in this room. On one of the walls, a sizable plasma display showed a paused performance, recorded in high definition. Sansa recognized the scene: it was a ballet from five years ago, which had been a great success even by the high standards of the LBC. Beside the screen stood a shelf with innumerable discs, dated and carrying the names of other ballets. She kept looking around, noticing there were bookshelves in the study, too, bookshelves bearing the weight of the best publications on ballet: overviews of performances, histories, theoretical treatises, biographies, memoirs. She thought back to her lunch with Tywin weeks ago, when his fluency in ballet parlance had surprised her. No wonder he speaks like a connoisseur! In addition to following their careers, he’s educated himself in every nuance of the art form his sons are pursuing. Swept from utter surprise to fascination by this exhaustive documentation of her favorite ballet company in the private study of the man who had once sought to destroy it, Sansa studied with care the photographs and the texts that documented LBC’s rise and flourishing.
All these years, she thought, he had not attended a single performance. And yet, he has followed their every success, has watched— from the privacy of distance — their every ballet. This distance afforded him a salving for his pride, which prevented him from coming without being personally invited, and a refuge from the pain the absence of the invitation must have brought. Oh, wounded lions! How proud in their pain! How obstinate in their arrogance!

Suddenly, voices tore into her thoughts.

“I don’t know where she went, my lord, she was here just a few minutes ago!..” The lackey was saying, his voice agitated, laced with fear.
“If you made lady Sansa wait so long that she left, I suggest you start looking for a new position!” Growled the old lion.

Sansa, realizing to her embarrassment that there was no hiding her despicably impolite intrusion, froze in complete horror at the discourtesy she had demonstrated. Before she could speak up or attempt an escape, she heard energetic footsteps approach the door, and, in a moment, Tywin Lannister was standing in the doorway of the studiolo.

“My lord,” the voice of the terrified lackey complained from behind him, “I assure you, I did not invite the lady to wait for you here: I know how particular you are about not letting anyone into this roo — ”

“Get lost, Bolton,” was all Tywin threw over his shoulder and the servant made himself scarce.

Sansa, who was immobilized by panic, especially following the young man’s words about Tywin prohibiting visitors access to the study, prepared herself for an explosion of anger. Instead, the old lion smiled at her in visible pleasure.

“Ah, lady Sansa,” he said as he came to stand next to her, bowing over her hand with the grace so universal in his family, “I am more delighted than I could ever say at your kindness in paying me a visit.”

At the first pause in his speech, Sansa rushed into an apology.

“I am so sorry for disturbing you and for intruding into your study! I saw the door was half-opened and thought I would find you here, so I went to knock… And then… Well,” she motioned with her hand to the walls, “I saw all this, and I was so surprised!.. I hope you can forgive me. I really am very sorry. I should never have — ”

But Tywin gestured with his hand to stop her torrent of words.

“My dear lady Sansa, please, do not be uneasy. Whenever you come, make yourself at home here. Besides,” he added kindly, “I cannot think of a room in this house better suited to entertain you. Aside, perhaps, from the rose garden on the rooftop, which my wife had arranged many years ago… Oh, well, I am remiss in offering you a seat. Please,” he motioned to the imposing armchairs. “I’ll ring for some tea — or would you rather have coffee?”

“Tea would be lovely, thank you.”

The host rang for tea.

“What a pleasure to see you, dear lady,” he continued when they were seated. “And what brings you here?”

“Ser, please allow me to apologize again for this double intrusion…” she began again, but he waved her words away, in a manner that suggested she had done nothing wrong in his eyes and that he
thought her apologies so unnecessary that the repetition of them was absurd. Sansa sighed in relief and smiled. “Thank you for your kindness. I came to see you, because I have something for you that I wanted to deliver in person.”

He could not hide his surprise. If it were not so difficult to believe, in that moment, the great Tywin Lannister might have been described as exhibiting symptoms of curiosity.

Sansa reached into her purse to extract the red envelope with the invitation, which she proceeded to extend to her interlocutor.

“It’s an invitation to the Fountain of Tears,” she explained while he opened the envelope with interest. It was impossible to miss the pleased, half-hidden smile that graced his lips at her words. He extracted the invitation and considered it with satisfaction.

“This comes from you?” He asked, a little sadness seeping into the usually indifferent eyes, and she knew that he meant to clarify whether his sons had issued the invitation.

“It does,” she confirmed.

There was a pause while the old lion studied the invitation as though he needed to read every word in order to know what it contained. Under the pressure of that silence, in which she was left to contemplate this estranged and cold but secretly, oddly loving father, she spoke again:

“Lord Tywin… Your sons… Well, first of all, they are very stubborn.” She chuckled nervously. “But more importantly, they’ve been so hurt by what they mistakenly believe to be your indifference that they… Well, they’re afraid of your rejection and, even more, of your scorn. This is why they haven’t sent you an invitation themselves. They’re too proud for it not to be accepted. And, I’m afraid, they think too highly of you to expose themselves to your rejection — it would pain them even more than stubbornly continuing this passive altercation.”

Knowing she was daring to say truths few would ever voice to the fearsome patriarch, Sansa had been looking at her hands — and not at him — while she had been speaking. Surprised by his silence, she looked up at him when she had paused. She discovered him looking at her with consternation and regret. The former emotion, she intuited, came from his incredulity at her words; the latter from the realization that she was right.

Indeed, Tywin was stunned by the revelation she had offered him. His sons had not disinvited him, because they still held a grudge against him, as he had heretofore believed; they had never issued an invitation because they did not think he would attend their performance after the conflict they had undergone over their careers. He sighed. Today, somehow, he could not imagine rejecting an invitation from the boys, if they offered it; yet he also recognized that, had they invited him at the time when he was still trying to destroy the LBC, he might not have been as magnanimous. Pride. Sometimes, it was a cross to bear, not a shield. And, of course, it was the little lady Sansa who decided to force an olive branch into his and his sons’ hands. He smiled a little, noticing her eyes fixed on him as she expected an answer.

“Thank you for the invitation, lady Sansa,” he said with genuine gratitude. “And… For the insights you have shared with me.”

She fidgeted in her seat; then:

“Will you attend?” She could not help asking eagerly. “I know this invitation is from me, but, please, do accept! You cannot imagine how much it would mean for your sons if you came to see their work! And, believe me, I would be no less happy to see you in the audience!”
“My dear lady,” he offered her with another smile, “how could I possibly refuse?”

She smiled radiantly, happiness in every aspect of her expression.

“I am so glad to hear this!”

The tea was brought in then, occasioning a brief interruption in their conversation. Tywin resumed it by asking her:

“Am I right to assume my sons are ignorant of this peacemaking you’ve undertaken?” The corners of his lips hid a humorous smirk, and his expression reminded her enormously of Jaime, making her miss him even more.

“Yes?” She responded with a sheepish expression. “I think ignorance may be bliss in their case. They would be anxious if they knew you were coming, and the weeks leading up to the premiere are bound to be quite challenging as it is…” she justified herself. In truth, she was increasingly afraid of the form in which the brothers’ anger would manifest itself, and whereas she felt she could handle one of them when he was upset, the notion that both Lannisters would want her head did something to terrify her.

Tywin interrupted her thoughts:

“You seemed surprised to discover this room,” he said in the most casual of voices, but she could swear he was teasing her a little. Jaime sounded the same, occasionally, when he wanted to disorient her by garbing his taunts in seriousness. In this case, Tywin was mercifully willing to save the girl he considered his future daughter-in-law from combusting with curiosity. Even so, he could not but appreciate with humor the surprise that had been written on her features when he had discovered her here. Besides, he had to admit that his well-hidden interest in his sons’ careers lent the situation a great deal of irony.

“Yes, yes, I was.” Can you blame me?

There was a brief pause, then, encouraged by Tywin breaching the subject on his own accord, Sansa questioned:

“May I ask… How come you have all these photographs? All these video recordings?”

A cunning smirk zipped quickly across his lips, and he answered:

“Well, myself not attending without an invitation did not prevent me from anonymously buying tickets for a camera man and a photographer.”

It was so simple and yet so incredible, given what everyone thought about Tywin Lannister’s views on ballet and his sons’s company, that she laughed at the explanation.

“I cannot believe this! Honestly, even being in this room, I find it hard to imagine!” She sipped the Northern tea with pleasure. Already much later, back in her apartment, she would spend the evening wondering why the man who embodied the South drank Northern tea.

“May I ask why you were re-watching this particular performance?” She questioned with a sugary smile.

“Oh, it’s quite one of my favorites, really. It was a wonderful combination of tradition and innovation, something at which they really excel, I think.”
Her smile grew into a huge grin at his words, almost as though he had been complimenting her (and
she had been still in the Northern Academy of Ballet when this performance had premiered).

“And why are you looking so pleased, pray tell?” He asked, his tone amused.

“I’m so pleased because it makes me happier than I could ever say to know you like their work. That
you even have favorite pieces! Oh, if you would only tell them this! I swear, I’m not exaggerating, it
would completely change their worlds! To know their father — they love and admire you so much,
you cannot even imagine!.. To know their dad approves of them — they’d go crazy with pride and
happiness! All of these awards,” she gestured to the photographs on the walls, “mean nothing to
them compared with the most modest compliment from you!..”

She giggled happily as she shook her head in pleasant bewilderment that she was still trying to
overcome. She sipped at her tea.

“I couldn’t possibly intrude on your prerogative, dear lady Sansa,” Tywin said, and she looked at
him in incomprehension.

“What prerogative?”

“Changing worlds. I fear that this avenue is quite appropriated by your charming self.”

“If I hadn’t been specifically told you ‘don’t get depressed,’ I’d think you were just that,” Gendry
said as he smiled at Arya from the doorway to his room. She had made herself comfortable on his
bed with her phone as she flipped though the selfies and family photographs she and Sansa had taken
over the past week. Her sister had barely been gone a few hours and, already, Arya felt bereft. She
could almost cry from missing her — that is, if she had tear ducts, the existence of which she
adamantly denied. Terrified that the stupid little nuisances may prove her protestation false if she tried
speaking, she only shrugged by way of reply to Gendry. He came to lounge on the bed next to her.

“You should be at home with your brothers and their girlfriends while they are still here. You know
they’ll be leaving soon, and you’ll miss them, too,” he said.

“Don’t you get tired of being right all the time?” She snapped without meaning to. “I think I’d get
constipation from being right even half the time!”

He only laughed at her temper. He knew her too well to be upset by her words when she was
fighting to cover up her emotions.

“Arya, go home and spend some time at least with Jon,” Gendry urged her.

“Fine!” She shouted as she sprung from the bed. “But when they are gone, too, I’ll camp in here for
as long as I like and you will stop being a smartass and will feed me fast-food until I puke,
understand?!”

“Yes, m’lady.”

She threw a shoe at his head.

“How many times do I have to tell you to stop calling me that?! By the Stranger!..”
He chuckled as he heard her stomp to the door and slam it behind her.

Thank the gods she’s so small, he mused, or else these thin walls would crumble each time she crossed the threshold.

“Where had you gone off to?” Ned greeted Arya the moment she walked into the family room, where the Starks had been seating around the fireplace.

No longer was there a person in this room to whom Arya could whisper, without hesitation, I’ve just come from Gendry’s. Instead, she had to lie:

“I was just walking around, nothing special. I had some errands to run after San left. She’s so clingy, I couldn’t do anything useful while she was around,” she grumbled.

“Oh, really? She’s the clingy one?” Ygritte fearlessly challenged her and winked in the most exasperating, teasing way. “Seemed the opposite to me…”

“Shut up!” Arya barked defensively but without malice, making herself comfortable near the fireplace.

Her family resumed the lazy chatter her return had interrupted, and she stared into the flames in silence, not even bothering to listen. She missed her sis. Not in the way she had previously done, when she could pretend with herself she did not exactly miss her and that the little sting she felt in spite of herself was nothing more than the consequence of Sansa being her family. No, she missed her friend, missed Sansa sitting next to her, as they gossiped quietly about their men. She missed the easy confessions and the peaceful self-knowledge that flowed from their conversations. She missed being open about every secret they had ever had from the world. It seemed someone had cut out her tongue or flipped an elegant blade over her vocal chords, stifling her words and her little truths, the sweet nothings she shared with San and no one else.

Jon came to sit next to her on the floor, leaving Ygritte to lounge in the armchair, from which she was assisting Talisa in making gentle fun of Robb.

“You seem particularly cheerful,” Jon commented. She did not answer. Though she could not confide to Jon the changes love and Gendry had brought into her life like she could to Sansa, she still did not need to pretend with him. “It gets easier,” Jon added quietly.

“What are you talking about?”

“Missing San,” he answered. “It gets easier. I know — because I always miss her.”

“It’s different,” Arya replied. You have other people to share secrets with.

“Why do you say that?”

She shrugged — a gesture, which, in her, indicated a refusal to answer.

“Arya…” Jon began and paused, unsure. His tone was a bit odd and his sister turned to look at him carefully. He scratched his beard the way he always did when something puzzled him and he could not begin to understand it.

“What?” She demanded, never able to bear out pauses. “Just spit it out!”

He sighed heavily.

“Why did San defend Jaime Lannister like that?” He asked.

Arya turned to look back at the flames.
“Seems like a question for Sansa and not me,” she answered.

“I just…” Jon was no longer asking, knowing from her tone that his sister would not give him an answer even if she knew it; he was thinking aloud, the way he was prone to do with Arya. “I just don’t understand why she’d behave like that because of a man she says she barely knows?.. I know he’s her boss and that he’s a great dancer and all that… I guess she respects him a lot… But still, it makes no sense for her to react like that to what Robb said… It was fairly harmless… And then to upset uncle like she did… I called him today, and he barely even spoke to me.” Jon scratched his beard again. “I just don’t understand it, I really don’t. And I met, well, more like saw, Jaime Lannister once, and that man did look pretty angry — almost scary. I find it strange that Sansa would interact with him at all, given that she’s… Well, she isn’t much for people who are frightening… And then, the other thing I don’t understand is why she said she’d been working with him for months while she was yelling at Robb, when usually she says she barely sees him? Was it simply for argument’s sake? But it’s so unlike her, to lie spontaneously… And then later, to me, she said he was honorable, and good, and silly things like that, remember? When the three of us were upstairs? It’s like… She knowshim… But how?.. I simply can’t make sense of anything connected to that man!”

“You try thinking any harder, brother, you might break your brain,” Arya mocked him with pleasure. She had been worried, throughout his voiced stream of consciousness, that Jon would stumble onto the truth — or at least come to distinguish when Sansa had been lying and when reality had seeped into her words and actions. Not knowing what she, Arya, would say to cover for her sister, she was relieved to find her brother was still in the dark.

Jon, however, ignored her jibe and, showing a persistence unusual in him, questioned her once again:

“You two seemed to be talking a lot recently. Has she said anything to you?”

“Jon, I honestly think you’re being ridiculous,” Arya did her best to play dumb, “she probably just used the first excuse to snap at uncle because of that invitation, and Robb was simply collateral damage. You know how intense she’s always been about her premieres and shit. And as for Jaime Lannister, I’m pretty sure he’s fine. Dad and uncle do like to exaggerate how bad Southerners are. I’m sure he’s not so bad.”

“Since when do you think there’s anything exaggerated about Southerners’ flaws?!” Jon exclaimed in surprise. “And,” he added, “how would you know Jaime Lannister isn’t so bad? Did San say something to you?”

Arya got up, giving up her preferred seat next to the fireplace.

“She hasn’t said anything to me, okay?” She sounded irritated; Jon attributed this to him pestering her, whereas, in truth, she was annoyed by finding herself forced to lie to him. “And if you have any more questions about Jaime Lannister, ask Sansa. Although I don’t see why you would — like she says, she barely knows the man.”

Having emptied this disgusting bucket of lies onto her favorite brother, Arya was about to join Talisa and Ygritte’s teasing of Robb when her phone rang. She smiled so radiantly and broadly, the entire family noticed her megawatt grin.

“Hey, sis,” she called into the phone in a pleased, playful little voice as she left the room. Had they not witnessed the sound come out of her mouth, her family members would never have recognized the voice as hers. “How’s it being back?..”

Her family watched Arya’s retreating figure in surprise. It was also the first time in her life that Sansa
had called Arya first — and not Catelyn or Jon.

On the other end of the line, hundreds of miles away, Sansa grinned the same loving grin that animated her sister’s lips.

“It’s actually good,” she answered, “I’m warm again, which is a nice feeling. I’ll see Jaime tomorrow — and I feel now like I’ve missed him even more than I thought I did.”

“How did Lady survive the trip? Please tell me she roughened up a Southerner or two!”

Sansa laughed, feeling as though her heart had never been lighter. She was in the South, home again, and yet the comfort of speaking to her sister was still within her reach. Distance had affected them no more than the presence of their brothers had.

“She’s all right, but I doubt she liked it very much… And no, she didn’t maul anyone. But Arya, everyone’s so afraid of her here, I don’t know what I’m going to do! I’ve tried calling dog-walkers, but it seems a dead-end.”

Her younger sister laughed heartily.

“You’re crazy if you think you’ll find anyone in the South to babysit Lady while you’re off rehearsing. It’ll be ‘take your dog to work day’ everyday for you, from where I see it!”

“You’re probably right,” Sansa sighed. “I just hope Jaime and Tyrion won’t mind her. I’m pretty sure Tyrion won’t be a problem, but I worry Jaime could get difficult about it. He’s quite particular about keeping the building in a pristine condition.”

“And here I thought you had Jaime wrapped around your little finger,” commented Arya with good humor.

“Wish I did…” Sansa sighed. She was sitting on the sofa, the fingers of her free hand caressing Lady’s fur. The wolf did not fit on the couch, so she had been confined to the floor with her head in her mistress’ lap. “Lady will have to be on her best behavior tomorrow, if Jaime is not to kick her out. Do you hear me, Lady? On your best behavior!”

“Have you done anything fun since you’ve returned?” Arya asked, bringing her sister’s attention back to her person with some insistence. Sansa had all the time in the world to talk to Lady when she wasn’t on the phone with her, Arya!

“I did…”


“Don’t get like Ygritte!” Sansa interrupted her hurriedly. “It’s enough she teases me about him without end, not to mention the girls at the LBC, I don’t need you to add!”

“Begging your forgiveness, your highness!” Arya mocked without malice.

“Oh, please. I’m not the one with a boyfriend who calls me ‘m’lady,’” Sansa parried sweetly.

“You never did tell me if Jaime has a nickname for you!” Arya exclaimed, animated by the surprising thought. “Spill!”

“Oh, no! No way!”
“Come on! Have you never heard of psychology? We could deduce what he thinks of you from that!”

Sansa sighed. The temptation to have her sister’s insights was irresistible. After all, Arya was already in a happy relationship, so Sansa was willing to credit her with a better understanding of men than she herself possessed. It was one thing growing up with brothers; having a boyfriend, in Sansa’s eyes, placed Arya deep undercover in enemy country.

“Fine. He calls me ‘minx.’ Honestly, he uses that more often than my name. It used to annoy me. Now, I’m used to it.”

Arya giggled.

“I think I know what the word means,” she said, still chuckling, “but let me look it up, just in case — ”

“Arya, don’t you dare use this against me! If you start teasing me with Jaime’s taunts, I swear, I’ll come back North and glue you hair extensions!”

Her sister ignored her threats.

“While I’m looking it up — does he have other nicknames for you?”

“Just one, but he’s only used it very few times for now.”

“And?..”

Sansa sighed. I soooo should not tell her. I know I’ll never hear the end of it.

“‘Northern Princess.’ That’s the other one.”

Her sister did not giggle this time. She outright guffawed.

“I’ve got to say, Kingslayer certainly has insights into your soul!..” She forced out between laughs. “And, you have the nerve to tell me my boyfriend calls me ‘m’lady’ when your guy calls you a princess?! That’s rich!” Her sister resumed her guffawing.

“Fuck you, Arya!” Sansa said in indignation, even though her sister’s amusement was proving contagious.

“That’s Gendry’s job,” Arya answered impudently. “Ah, there it is,” she added and read aloud: “Minx: a pert, impudent, or flirtatious girl. Why, Sansa!.. Between that and ‘Northern Princess…’ I want you to know that I’m swallowing a lot of dirty jokes right now, for your sake — ”

“I do appreciate that, sissy darling,” Sansa replied with heavy sarcasm.

“Seriously, though, San, I think he likes you, I really do.” She paused then resumed in an eager, teasing tone: “Oh, and here’s one dirty joke I cannot contain — ”

“I won’t hear it!..”

“What’s the one thing he thinks is appropriate for you to wear in bed?”

“I’m hanging up right now!..”

“A tiara!” Her sister finished in delight and immediately went on, “all right, all right, just one more: bet you anything the Lannisters have a saying, ‘court the princess, fuck the minxes!’ What? You have to admit it’s funny!”
“Nope. Not a bit.” Sansa said seriously.

“San?” Arya’s voice changed at her sister’s altered intonations. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s just that… With Ygritte and the girls here… And you… I’m afraid you’ll put ideas into my head for fun’s sake and I’ll believe you because I so desperately want to… And then, I’ll make a fool of myself… And… Jaime… He’ll lose any respect he has for me…”

Sansa had not realized she had begun sniffling a little. The alarm in her sister’s voice brought this to her attention, however:

“San? Are you crying? Oh, gods, San, please don’t bawl when you’re so far away that I can’t knock sense into you!”

That made Sansa chuckle through her meager tears. Hearing that change, Arya added in seriousness:

“Listen, San, I actually believe what I said, and I’d never play such cruel jokes on you, and I think Ygritte and your Southern friends wouldn’t either… But I won’t say anything more until I see you two together, when we all come down for the premiere. Now, when I do see you together, I’ll say exactly what I think. And if I think he’s a mean bastard who’s playing my sister for a fool — ”

“Yes, I remember, there’s no need to repea— ”

“… I will cut off his balls — ”

“… And make us matching necklaces! I remember, Arya, there really isn’t any need to repeat that!”

“Does that turn you on, you pervert?”

“ARYA! My gods, no! Shut up!”

Her sister guffawed on the other end of the line. “Well, at least, you aren’t doing any of that nasty sniffling business anymore,” Arya observed with satisfaction. “So, before we’ve gotten side-tracked talking about Jaime’s balls, you were going to tell me about your day? Something you did that you shouldn’t have done?..”

“Oh, don’t say that! I don’t want you to jinx it!”

“Sansa! What have you been up to?”

“I… Well, I may or may not have invited Jaime and Tyrion’s dad to the premiere. Without telling them.”

There was a pause.

“You’ve invited Tywin Lannister to the premiere?” Arya sounded concerned.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Please tell me he isn’t sitting next to dad!” There was panic in the younger sister’s voice. “Because, San, I ain’t breaking that fight up, do you hear me?!”

“No-no-no, he’ll be sitting in a totally different part of the theater. They might see each other at the after-party, but I hope dad can keep it civil — ”

“Dad can keep it civil?” What about the old lion? Aren’t you worried about him?!”
“Honestly, between the two of them, I would be more worried about dad…”

“Nice!..” There was wicked amusement in Arya’s voice; she clearly looked forward to meeting the man who, in Sansa’s opinion, could both get a major rise out of their stoic father and keep his own cool. “So what are you worried about?”

“I’m worried that the brothers will get very mad at me. I mean they don’t have the warmest relationship with their dad — like I told you, he did try to destroy the LBC… But, Arya,” went she on a tangent yet again, “you can’t even imagine what I discovered today when I was in Tywin’s mansion!”

“What?! A room full of dead wives? Like in Nan’s tales? Were they hanging by their throats? Oh, San, don’t spare any details!..”

“Well,” her sister assumed the intonations of a mock fairytale narrator, “it was a secret little room…”

The roses smelled particularly sweet that evening, it seemed to Tywin. He was sitting on a bench among the flowerbeds, watching the late sunset, as had become his custom over the past weeks. In his hands, he held the invitation; as his long fingers played with it distractedly, its golden letters shimmered in the dark purple light as if they had been made of pure magic. Now that the little lady Sansa had left him, he was unsettled. Perhaps, the roses never smelled sweet that they did not mix in the bitter, too.

He had never before been to his sons’ productions, much as he knew the ballets themselves by heart, and the first waves of emotions the invitation had stirred were of a happy nature — he wanted to see the boys’ work first hand, had long tired of the recordings and photographs; he wanted to carefully, slowly claw back for himself a place in their lives, especially now that they were about to settle down with fine women… He was not getting any younger, and solitude, which had never before affected him, began weighing more heavily on him, especially at a time when his sons’ lives were changing in such important, meaningful ways… Although the first response had been pleasant anticipation, a hope for the better, darker waves soon followed. It was not that he was concerned — for no Lannister had ever known fear — that the boys would show him the door; they would not, would they? Besides, no one could freeze entire rooms full of people with disdain and condescension so well as he… They could not ask him to leave but that he would find a way to come out the winner of the situation. It was this assurance that, even if he was shown the door, he could rise above the humiliation and repay it with interest, which made him see, however unwillingly, that the public outcome of his attempt to come see his sons’ work did not concern him. Instead, he was afraid — and he could almost tear himself from the inside out so much the grudging half-acknowledgement of this emotion enraged him — that his sons would not want him there. Sure, little lady Sansa had said otherwise, but who was she to judge men so complicated as Lannisters? The sweet girl saw everything through pink glasses, unable to discern the ugly colors of real life in her fortunate daltonism. With the invitation in his hand, he was torn in two. He was too proud to cower, stay in his mansion; and he was too proud not to be welcomed. Moreover, he could not break a promise to his future daughter-in-law… He sighed and lowered his eyes to contemplate the sheet of paper that was wrecking such havoc in his ordinarily peaceful life. Was this meager card to open him the gates to the knowledge of whether or not his inability to control his pain over Joanna’s death and his damnable pride had pushed the boys away beyond reclamation? He was afraid that he had lost them, and that, once he found it out that evening, he could no longer deny either the fact or his
responsibility for it.

“Ty, my darling,” came words to him from so distant a past, it seemed to have lapidified into history, “whatever your father tells you about fear, only those who conquer it can ever be called truly brave.”

“But Lannisters do not feel fear, mother,” he would counter, “we’re lions, and lions fear nothing.”

“You be careful, my lad,” Jeyne Lannister, born Marbrand, would then say, “else one day you fear something and know not how to conquer it without admitting what it is you feel.” She would tuck his unruly hair behind his ears. His hair had been as long then as Jaime’s was now. “Remember, my love; fear is for everyone; fearlessness is only for those who triumph over themselves. Your father couldn’t. I hope you can.”

“Listen, San,” Arya was saying to her sister, “I think you did the right thing. From what you tell me, he obviously wanted to come and the Lannister bros want him there. I don’t see the problem, frankly.”

“The problem,” Sansa argued, “is that they are proud to the point of being arrogant, especially when they hurt. Even if they are actually happy to see each other there, they might not admit it, act all cold and condescending, and then their dispute will get worse!”

“Well, they do say, ‘proud like a Lannister,’” Arya chuckled.

“Believe me, sister, no one can be as proud as a true-born Lannister. It’s a genetic mutation of no small proportions.”

“So, do you think the old lion might be too proud to come?” Arya asked.

Sansa sighed. He had looked happy when she had offered him the invitation.

“Let’s just hope he’s too wise to stay away,” she said.

“Well, you did tell me he has been trying to get on his sons’ good side recently,” Arya reminded her. “So it seems he’s more likely to come than not. Besides, he clearly makes an effort to be all nice to you, so he won’t waste your invitation after promising he’d come.”

“Unlike someone else we know, who freaking burned it…” Sansa mumbled. She was still smarting from her uncle’s refusal. Her guilt at her harsh words did not help alleviate the negative emotion.

“Well, when you put it like that,” Arya giggled, “I think Tywin will definitely come — for all my love of uncle, he hasn’t got Lannister devious brains!”

Sansa laughed at this.

“You’re becoming awfully indulgent to the Lannisters,” she teased her sister, even though nothing could give her greater pleasure.

“They sound fun,” Arya admitted without hesitation. “All that family drama… Besides, since your aspiration is to bridge our families, sis, I’d rather be welcoming to my future in-laws.”

“Arya! You promised you wouldn’t — ”
“Oh, I couldn’t help it! But fine, we don’t have to talk about that. Did I tell you that Gendry’s shop received the newest model of Valyrian Death?”

“Of what?”

“It’s the best rifle on the market, and they’ve recently updated it with an awesome new telescopic sight scope!”

“A what?”

“Oh, dear gods!.. All right, so, a telescopic sight scope…”

It was dark when Tywin grew conscious of time. The roses had all turned dark blue under the dyeing cover of night, and he sat still among them like a garden statue.

Memories of his mother had brought to his mind his father. He never failed to feel disgust and contempt when thinking of his male parent, his shameful whoring, the disrespect so brazenly thrown into his wife’s face. (It was the similarity between Tytos and Robert Baratheon that had made Tywin protest his daughter’s marriage years ago.) How could a Lannister stoop so low that he looked a shameful commoner whereas a woman from a smaller house seemed a dignified queen next to him? Then again, Tywin’s mother was a woman of strong character and unswerving principles. The nobility her family might have lacked in name compared to the Lannisters, her person made up for to the fullest. Even the disgrace of her husband could not taint her. Yes, Tywin had always admired his mother, and that very admiration made him despise his father all the more.

When she had died, and the swine shaming the family name, which was dearer because Jeyne Marbrand had assumed it, was still alive, it had seemed to Tywin an implacable injustice. He would have given anything to be able to trade his father’s worthless life for that of his beloved mother. From the moment he was old enough to hate one parent and admire the other, Tywin had dreamed that, one day, when his father had drunk and whored himself into an early grave, his mother would assume the leading role she deserved so infinitely more. Alas, Tywin would learn he had been cursed to be abandoned in favor of death by the women he loved.

The day after his mother’s funeral, the twenty-year-old had called a board meeting of the disintegrating Lannisters & Co and ousted his father from the position of CEO. Grimly taking up the reigns after that corporate patricide, Tywin had aged three decades in a single day. Assuming the burden that had descended on his shoulders with an undaunted determination to make his departed mother proud and erase the blot of his father’s existence from family and company history, Tywin Lannister the young CEO had as much in common with a bull as he did the lion. He carried the weight of his bereft life, his family’s half-ruined reputation, and the decrepit company with the determination of the bull; he mauled everyone and everything that came in his way with the heartlessness of the beast on his sigil.

Now, neither family name nor the company were in any danger. He feared that the price for this achievement, which he had paid forth with his heart’s blood, was his ruined relationship with his sons. Recalling his father, however, had brought a new thought to his mind. Tytos’ greatest flaw may had been the absence of pride; but his, Tywin’s, excess of it, which bordered on arrogance, seemed to be wrecking his relationship with his own sons no less. Besides, it seemed there was a commonality between Tytos and himself — an inability to change course. As the unflattering comparison descended on him, Tywin felt again the overpowering urge to be nothing like his own
father had been, which had driven him all of his youth and at least two decades after his father’s
death. Never before had he seen this similarity; now that he had, he was determined to annihilate it,
to obliterate the last remains of his father that he carried within him, even if to do so, he would need
to taste of the quality neither of them had possessed — humility. He sighed and rose from the bench.
It was humiliating to know that some of his father’s traits lingered in him, manifesting themselves in
his own failures. Tywin set to cutting a few roses blindly, without being able to tell their color in the
darkness. His memory was the only guide to the differentiation of the flowers’ hidden hues.

It was typical of Tywin to blame his father for an implosion in his life. His relationship with his sons,
whose birth Tytos did not live to see, he had strained on his own, through no fault of his father’s
ghost. Tywin’s acknowledgment of his responsibility for his own mistakes, nevertheless, began with
the realization that, like his father, like all men and women of the world, he, for all his greatness, was
not exempt from erring.

The gentle specters of his mother and wife, who seemed to float in the night and the sweet smell of
roses, gave him hope that, if he could not escape erring in the past, he could at least set a different
course for the future. He had put the roses in the vase with habitual motions and left the rooftop
garden, closing the door softly behind him. He descended the many flights of stairs to his home
office, where he temporarily placed the flowers on the desk while he personally entered the
premiere’s date into his calendar. Having done so, he picked up the bouquet and carried it into his
bedroom, noticing, in surprise, that it was the most beautiful arrangement he had ever put together.

Wounded lions are no less proud
Than their healthy counterparts;
Their pain to disavow
Is one of their finest arts.
Their arrogance gets in the way
Of them acknowledging their mistakes;
They stubbornly refuse to sway
From the course they’ve set to make.
Fearing nothing, they forget
What’s it like to have regrets.
Only the smell of roses might
Make them see they aren’t right.

Chapter End Notes
Ta-da! A new chapter! I hope you enjoyed it. Jaime and Sansa will be reunited in the very next one, I promise!
Ok, listen! I know I said I would be more regular with updates, but I miscalculated how much procrastinating I would do instead of writing my MA thesis... Plus, I am in summer school, which takes away more time, and altogether I am in a bit of a rush against time now. Therefore, this is going to be the only update in July, but I promise, I will do better come August!

Also, I wanted to remind you: even though my sorry ass has been writing these chapters FOREVER, Jaime and Sansa had actually only been apart around ONE WEEK. Ok, that's all I got. Enjoy! XOXOXO

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_Beware of ladies in love,_

_They have nothing in common with doves._

_If anything, they resemble wolves_

_With their penchant to deprive_

_Those who wronged them of life._

_Once snubbed, they crave strife._

_Caresses are nothing to their rage_

_Craving blood, they seek carnage,_

_That satisfaction without age._

_To their search for retribution,_

_There’s only one solution:_

_Give them love as raw as flesh,_

_Words sweeter than blood that’s fresh,_

_And, perhaps, you will contain_

_Their thirst for your pain._
Jaime Lannister thought he was going to die. Gruesomely and quickly. It was that simple.

He had been walking into the studio, minding his own business, when an oddly heavy shadow jumped on him and fell him to the ground. A moment more, and a wolf the size of a small horse, its paws pushing his chest and legs into the ground, immobilizing him, brought its huge muzzle close to his face, showing colossal sharp teeth and a large pink tongue. Jaime closed his eyes — it was too ugly a death to face — and waited for the feeling of fangs tearing out his throat. It never came. The monstrous creature set to licking his face with a studiousness that suggested it might have confused him with a delectable bowl of milk. He could not move a muscle.

“Lady! What on earth?! Whom did you?.. Oh, my gods!.. Get off him! Get off! Are you mad, playing pet with Jaime Lannister?! Do you want to get us both kicked out?!”

Barely — for most of his view was blocked by the beast — he saw Sansa grab the direwolf’s fur and pull the monster off him.

“You’ll never again jump on Jaime like that, do you hear me? Bad girl!” she lectured her pet.

Jaime was still catching his breath after one of the nearest encounters with death he had ever had (or so he thought). Turning to him, Sansa, who looked truly remorseful, expressed her regrets at Lady’s behavior:

“Oh, Jaime, I’m so sorry! She’s never done it before, except to me when we play!”

He laughed — loudly, happily. The direwolf had not torn him to pieces, and his minx had returned — bright and kind, just as she had left. He felt so happy to see her, especially since he had not the day before due to her delayed arrival, that he almost forgot he had been nearly killed by a huge canine. He got up, surprised that none of his bones had been broken and that the nausea of concussion did not come.

Sansa watched him laugh with some relief. When she had discovered Lady tackling Jaime, she had fully expected him to be enraged; his mirth was a welcome surprise.

“How was your flight?” he asked her, fishing out his handkerchief and wiping his face.

“Comfortable and quick,” she said, though Lady would have probably disagreed with that account, if she could. Sansa smiled radiantly as she spoke, deranged with happiness at being near Jaime again. While she was in the North, he had almost seemed a figment of her imagination; but now, he was real again, and his smile set her heart ablaze with gentle flames. “I gave out the invitations to my family — I think they might all come.” She did not want to spoil his apparently happy mood by mentioning anything about uncle Ben. “Thank you again, Jaime.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m happy for you, that your family is coming, but it’s your responsibility to make sure I don’t end up with any broken bones, or it will ruin my ca— Ah! My gods! What in Seven Hells?!”

Sansa had never dreamed she would ever see Jaime Lannister jump under any other circumstances than when he was executing a graceful pas. She had been wrong. Lady, wiggling her tail like a puppy, had moved to offer her devotion to Jaime once more by licking his hand. Needless to say, after nearly jumping out of his skin, the LBC director did not take the wolf’s overture with the warmth Lady had hoped for.

“Sansa…” he said, and this time his voice held a warning, “did you set your wolf on me?”

“What?! No!” Sansa exclaimed and was quick to shift the responsibility where it belonged — on
Lady’s withers. “I’ve no idea why she’s behaving like that, she’s usually wary of strangers…”

If ever she had been shy, Lady had lost her timidity in King’s Landing, like many had before her. Prevented by Jaime’s quickness from licking his hands, she set to nuzzling against his side, behaving like a cat much more than a canine, let alone a fully grown direwolf. It was plain to see, however, that the object of her doggie affection did not reciprocate her feelings.

“Minx,” Jaime said, his voice a mixture of irritation and half-hearted menace, “get your wolf away from me, or I’ll call pest control! Why did you bring her over, anyway?”

Sansa, it must be said, tried her best to reign in her pet, even though she was barely a third of the beast’s size and no match for her at all in strength.

“I can’t leave her alone in the apartment,” Sansa began explaining in a pitiful tone, “and I can’t get a walker — the moment they ask me what kind of dog I have, and I say, ‘a direwolf,’ they hang up on me!” she complained.

As she spoke, she managed to get Lady away from Jaime, even though the she-wolf continued to watch him with adoring eyes from a distance.

“I can’t imagine why,” Jaime muttered with heavy sarcasm and walked away from them, with the intent of washing his face and then finding Renly to discuss needed alterations in the music before starting the rehearsals, as was his custom.

In truth, he had walked away for yet another reason. He had missed her enough that he began resigning himself to her absence. Though, rationally, he knew she would return, and soon, to his destitute heart it had seemed she had left forever, never to come back. From the beginning, she had seemed a magical creature, an ephemeral dream that, even as he dreamed it, he knew would end in waking. Her being gone, for all that it brought him misery the likes of which he could only find by recalling the most dismal moments of his life, was similar to when one rouses from a delightful sleep to find mundanity even more mundane, life a touch too grey, and feelings strangely perturbed by the spell of the enticing slumber. The dream must have been too good not to wake up, for reality was not meant to be dream-like. That was how he had come to feel. She could not have been real, could she, for that would mean that his very soul was not confused by a splendid delusion but that it was actually missing, having followed her North and gotten lost. If she were reality, then so was him being in love with a girl who seemed more sirenic than palpable.

Actually seeing her, radiant and cheerful, just as she had always been in the past weeks, was overwhelming. He could no more fathom the reality of her return than he could estimate the joy it brought him. A selfish, greedy joy that ruled over his desires, making him want to be near her so much, it reminded him he should not.

As she watched him walk away, Sansa felt her breath catch in that old way she was reacquainting herself with after the week-long absence. Her whole being was so filled with love now that she was contemplating him without the challenging distraction of speaking to him, she felt as though her heart was bleeding out with love, that her brief separation from Jaime had increased her adoration, and that it was overflowing from her soul. Absence did not simply make her heart fonder; upon seeing him anew, love spilled out from the silly organ, nearly choking her with emotions. She could not help feeling disappointed that they would continue rehearsing the dance of Nissa and Tanea, in which the jealous lover killed her rival, and she, Sansa, would have no excuse to dance with Jaime. She was utterly overwhelmed by how she had missed him. Not just seeing him, not just hearing his voice. She had missed the feeling of his hands on her body, the way they lifted her up so easily, so effortlessly when they danced. She had missed being so near him that she would feel love was not a discarnate emotion but an electric, physical thing that seeped from her body into his, from him to her. A thing...
that was made up of his body and hers. A thing that was both of them at the same time.

Margaery and Tyrion were just coming into the studio, and they had missed Lady’s warm greeting of Jaime, but Sansa’s friend noticed her expression as well as the object of her gaze.

“See, how she looks after him?” Margaery called quietly to Tyrion. “And you were having such ridiculous ideas. Just look at her. I’m sure her love-filled eyes can reassure even your paranoid mind.”

Tyrion’s eyes bore into Sansa’s face immediately, frantically and jealously analyzing every aspect of her expression. There could be no denying it, or of interpreting it in a nefarious manner: she loved his brother. Utterly and completely. Cersei had never looked at Jaime this way, not even when they were very young. As Tyrion watched love animate Sansa’s face, her evil doppelgänger he had seen in his nightmare reeled into the ephemeral dimension of forgotten dreams. She, the real, breathing girl, who looked at his brother with devotion, was what mattered. Her evil twin conjured by Tyrion’s anxiety did not. She was good. She loved Jaime. And Jaime loved her. There was no space for suspicion or doubt in that simplicity. Tyrion followed Margaery to greet the recently returned member of the LBC family, and, in the smile he gave her, there was trust enough even for her keeping of his beloved brother’s heart.

For the duration of the practice, Sansa had tied Lady’s leash to the bars in a distant corner. Some of Sansa’s friends — Tyrion had been the first, immediately followed by Margaery and Tyene — had made a point of walking over to the direwolf and making her acquaintance. Lady was a tame, sweet creature, and she looked on happily as her mistress’ friends patted her head and scratched behind her ears. Ellaria, who was visibly pregnant by then, had wished to make the acquaintance of the wolf as well and had moved to follow her daughter, when her husband, who had been unable to restrain Tyene, blocked her way. Only over his dead, mutilated body, Oberyn declared, would his pregnant wife shake hands with a direwolf. The situation initiated one of the entertaining arguments between the Dornish couple, with Ellaria explaining to Oberyn the basics of feminism, while he made what attempts he could at defining “common sense” for her. Jaime called them all to order fairly soon, however, and the rehearsal began.

It must be said that Lady, perhaps conscious of her earlier faux pas with Jaime, behaved very well for the remainder of the day, not even barking once — that is, exactly until her leash had been untied at the end of the rehearsal… The moment Sansa had eased the knot, Lady sprinted and covered the distance separating her from Jaime Lannister within a few seconds. Jaime had been standing with his back to the direwolf, unaware in his altercation with Tormund of the oncoming danger. The only warning he had received was the Wildling’s changed countenance, which had metamorphosed from stubborn challenge to sheer terror in the blink of an eye. Ducking Lady’s sprint at the last moment, Jaime watched — with some satisfaction — as the direwolf brought Tormund to the floor. The wolf’s sprint across the studio and her jump produced a turmoil: Oberyn was shielding his wife with his own body, determined to sacrifice himself for her and their unborn child; Tyene, her mother, Loras, and Margaery were laughing heartily; Renly had paled; Podrick could only blink; Sansa and Brienne ran to Tormund’s aid, while the Lannister brothers watched the scene with matching grins, which Tormund would later describe as ”shit-eating.” Jaime’s grin, however, did not last, because Lady, not to be fooled, realized her mistake and turned to him, preparing to jump once more. The swordsman proved the wolf’s better, however: not only did he manage to escape Lady’s newest attempt at rough-and-tumble play, but he caught her by the snout, his hands closing like a tight muzzle around her upper and lower jaws, holding them shut. She tried to dislodge his hands with her front paws, but Jaime was unyielding. Fool a Lannister once, perhaps, but the second time… Well, there was no second time. Jaime leaned toward the huge direwolf, whom he was holding captive
with difficulty.

“Sit.”

Lady whined but did his bidding. She sat, stopped trying to break his hold, and looked at him expectantly.

*I can play nice,* she seemed to say.

Jaime spoke to Lady without releasing her jaw. His friends and colleagues observed with interest; Tyrion was smirking.

“Now, your empty-headed mistress may be remiss in telling you that this is *my* building; you’ll not be wrecking havoc here.”

She began trying to get out of his grip once again, but he held firm.

“No.”

Once again, Lady whined her complaint at the mistreatment but quieted down.

Realizing perhaps that he could not keep Lady’s jaws closed for the duration of her stay in King’s Landing, Jaime tried easing his grip. Feeling a little freedom, the direwolf moved to jump again, only to have the hand that was letting go of her snout close down again while the other pushed her down.

“No.”

She sat back fully and seemed to have acquiesced to the terms of the surrender. Jaime let go of the wolf once more, hesitantly; she remained seated, watching him and wiggling her tail. He seemed almost surprised.

“There’s a good girl.”

Encouraged by his words but having learned her lesson, Lady got up and pressed for a compromise: she may be prohibited from jumping, but she would have some attention. She nuzzled into his hand. Cursing mentally as he scratched behind the beast’s ear, Jaime swore that if the wolf bit off his hand, he would send her back to the North she had come from, no matter what the minx said in her furry friend’s defense. Lady liked the South much as her mistress did, apparently, because — except for her tail — she did not move while Jaime petted her; but she whined happily.

*If, some months ago, someone had told me I would be taming direwolves in my own studio without meaning to fire anyone over it, I would have called them an idiot,* Jaime reflected, only a little grumpily.

Since that day, two changes occurred at the LBC: one, Tormund looked at Jaime with a strange respect in his eyes; two, Lady had appointed herself the LBC director’s pet. The moment Sansa and she crossed the threshold of the LBCB in the morning, the direwolf sped away in search of Jaime. Notwithstanding his earlier training session, she still tried jumping at him a few more times, but he was dexterous in avoiding her, and his menacing “No!” did wonders to calm her down — she would settle for slipping her head under his hand. At first, Jaime felt adrenaline explode in his body each time he heard the incredibly fast movement of soft paws on his building’s hardwood floors, and mobilized with desperation to avoid the humiliating — and, frankly, terrifying — situation in which he had made Lady’s acquaintance. Soon enough, however, he grew used to the enormous creature racing down his building’s halls and even stopped asking Sansa if she had found a walker, partly because he realized no one would be mad enough to take on the job. Lady became an everyday
presence in the LBCB, and, little by little, the employees grew accustomed to her — even Oberyn Martell, who was the last one to capitulate. Although she turned from a feared monster to everyone’s favorite, thanks to her cute way of wiggling her tail, soft fur, huge eyes, and generally adorable demeanor, Lady’s heart was laid decisively at the feet of Jaime Lannister, whom she shadowed as if she had imprinted on him, rather shameless in her demands for attention and singularly ridiculous in the lengths she would go to amuse him. She chased her tail while moving right in front of him, brought him pointes she had stolen from his company’s dancers, had embezzled Bronn’s sword for him, and topped it all off by developing a habit of falling on her back at his feet, blocking his passage (and nearly the entirety of the LBC’s wide corridors), and demanding to be petted. It was utterly despicable, Sansa thought.

Jaime seemed to have grown quite fond of the direwolf as well, treating her like a huge, amusing, walking ball of fur. Barely a week after Lady’s appearance at the LBC, an incident, which had absolutely enraged Sansa Stark, had demonstrated to her in full that Jaime conceived of Lady as a piece of soft, animated furniture. It happened during a break in the rehearsals, the one toward the end of the day. Sansa was feeding Lady her favorite treats — raisin biscuits — in an attempt to remind the prodigal wolf who was her real mistress, who had raised her and fed her for her entire life. Meanwhile, Jaime sat down on the floor to look through Renly’s music sheets. Sansa did not even pay him much mind, pre-occupied as she was with winning back her direwolf’s loyalty — something she should not have had to do in the first place — when Jaime, without looking up from the music sheets and not noticing Sansa’s efforts to win Lady over, whistled in a distracted, off-hand manner. Lady, however, did not care in what negligent way she was being summoned, and rushed to the call. Jaime motioned to her with his head, and Lady, utterly thrilled, stretched out behind him; the Lannister leaned his back against her side, as if she were a sofa with a remote control. Lady did not even move, except for breathing quietly, while he looked through music sheets, making notations, paying her no attention. The episode had set Sansa’s blood to boiling. She nearly cried with loathing of them both. To put it briefly, the direwolf had completely deserted her mistress, forgetting her proud Stark provenance and whatever served dogs for honor, laying all at the service of the careless and distracted Jaime Lannister.

*What kind of lady would behave like that?!”* Sansa would think, watching her direwolf nearly jump out of her fur, trying to get his attention. *She isn’t a Lady — she’s… She’s… Why, she’s an ordinary strumpet!*

Indeed, Sansa Stark had never used such coarse language as she now did to mentally characterize her deserter direwolf. Among the nicknames Sansa had invented for her formerly beloved pet with uncharacteristic brutality and crudity was “treacherous tramp” and even the entirely indecent but more frequently employed “Lannister’s little bitch.” Sansa was jealous both of her direwolf and of Jaime and felt completely left out when watching her pet and him from a distance. It irked her that, unlike she herself, Lady had not even tried resisting the Lannister’s magnetic pull.

Jaime had gotten so accustomed to think Lady a natural (and harmless) addition to the ballet company that, when Barristan Selmy next brought Myrcella and Tommen to the LBC, he let his children play with her. Sensing she had been vested with the care of her new owner’s offspring, Lady proved herself an irreproachable nanny. Sansa walked into Jaime’s studio after her lunch with Margaery to discover him talking with Tyrion about some business matters, while the Lannister children were riding Lady as if she were a pony — indeed, she was larger than ponies usually were, but far more docile, furry, and entertaining, which delighted the two golden-haired, green-eyed kids. Notwithstanding her affection for the children, Sansa thought she would burst a blood vessel. They jumped off the direwolf and rushed to greet Sansa, while Lady, driving the knife deeper into her mistress’ jealous heart, went to Jaime instead of her.
Left without a dog walker, Sansa was forced to wake up early in the morning to take Lady for a tour of King’s Landing Park — a large and beautiful green space that was the pride of the city-center. Sometimes, her direwolf, who was not taking kindly to being cooked up inside all day (even if it was with Jaime Lannister), would run away from her, scaring runners, walkers, and passersby to near death. That morning, Lady ran away again, chasing a yellow butterfly large as a man’s hand.

“Lady, get back!” Sansa screamed after her. “Get back here right away! Here, girl, come here!” The direwolf did not heed her in the slightest, running after the butterfly and disappearing from view.

"Lady, come here!” she screamed again, but to no avail.

Then, a whistle sounded behind her. She turned.

Jaime.

He had clearly gone out for a run after his early-morning sword practice, and his athletic body was now soaked in sweat. Watching him, Sansa felt butterflies rise in her stomach and send tingles lower down her body, felt her heart do a somersault when he winked at her — but, oh, how she hated him!

As if by magic, Jaime’s whistle had completely diverted Lady's attention from the butterfly she had hounded to the nearby trees. The direwolf ran toward him at top speed and was seated in front of him within moments. Lady, shameless Lady, licked his hands playfully, wiggled her tail, and whined happily as she was told that she was “a good girl.”

Sansa felt a little pain pierce her. Not Lady, too... Her heart, her direwolf… Jaime Lannister was taking everything from her — taking things she had never intended to give him. Thief! It simply was not fair!.. She had reached her tipping point. She stood, watching Jaime and Lady, a perfect image of an owner and his dog, and felt tears well up in her eyes. It was as if she did not exist, as if she had been wiped out from the universe, leaving the two of them quite content without her. Somehow sensing that something was amiss, Jaime turned from Lady to her. Noticing her state, he disregarded the direwolf and approached Sansa.

“What on earth is the matter, minx?” he asked, his voice soft and soothing; he held her forearms gently, as if to steady her. She hated his voice so much for being so greatly loved by herself and his hands for making her crave his nearness that she began to cry in earnest, frightening her companion considerably. “Sansa, what happened?” Lady attempted to whine his attention back to her, but he shushed her unceremoniously and continued talking to Sansa. “Did someone hurt you? Was that why you were calling for Lady? What — ”

But Sansa cut him off, sniffing with violence and shaking off his hands from her forearms.

“It’s my direwolf!” she shouted pitifully through her tears, overcome by her jealousy and a potent feeling of betrayal.

Jaime was fully disoriented.

“What?” he asked, his gentle voice displaying his confusion.

“It’s MY direwolf!” she cried more loudly, angry tears streaming down her cheeks.

Realizing that she was truly saying what his ears had told him she had been saying, Jaime immediately set to assuage her.

“Of course, she’s your direwolf,” he confirmed in a tone devoid of actual meaning or
comprehension, meant only as an echo to pacify her — she recognized in it the way her parents had always soothed her when she would cry from some caprice as a child.

“No!” she wailed. “You don’t understand! She’s my wolf! I’m a Stark, my house’s sigil is a direwolf, and I was meant to have her! Lady is my direwolf! Not yours — mine! You don’t get to steal her!”

“Steal her?” Jaime gave a chuckle of bemusement. “What do you mean?”

His genuine incomprehension made her absolutely furious, and she stalked away from him, wiping at her tears fiercely. Both he and the direwolf caught up with her instantly.

“Minx,” he said, “you’re talking nonsense! I didn’t steal your direwolf — whatever that means — ”

She interrupted again:

“It means that when I call her, she doesn’t come to me, but when you do — oh, she sprints like a deer! When I scream for her to come back, she doesn’t, and you only have to whistle to make her return!”

“Why would you blame me for it?”

“Whom else would I blame?! She’s always been loyal and mine, before you took her away!”

He laughed at her with bewilderment — and a little indignation.

“Just because I don’t set wildlife services on your pet direwolf whenever you bring her to the ballet company, doesn’t mean I stole her! Truly, minx, what nonsense!”

_Easy for you to say_, she thought darkly.

He shook his head in disbelief and went back to his run; Lady had meant to follow him, but one curt “stay” from Jaime forced her to remain at Sansa’s side, which brought her mistress little comfort as she watched him jog away.

_You don’t get to have my heart and my direwolf! It’s just not fair! I should get to keep at least one._

All the same, she looked on in sadness as his form retreated further and further away from her. She could see that she had frustrated him somehow, but she did not know his thoughts. They were:

_And to think I hoped the wolf’s liking of me would ingratiate me with her mistress!..

Over the coming days, Jaime acted in a way that showed he had taken Sansa’s words of reproach to heart. No matter what Lady did, she was curtly told to go back to her mistress. Sansa had never dreamed that a direwolf, being after all an animal, even if a very intelligent one, could sulk. Yet sulk Lady did, her attitude one of complete apathy, her ears droopy; she spent her day lying around in a corner, looking to all the world as the most miserable of canines. It seemed that Sansa was being silently punished for her scene of jealousy: not only did her wolf brood in a demonstrative way, but Jaime had grown somewhat irritable; he did not tease Sansa and simply snapped at everyone else — Renly, Pod, Oberyn, and, of course, Tyrion were the prime targets of his irritation. Once, he even snarled at Margaery when she was giggling with her fiancé when they were meant to begin rehearsing. Tormund, who had never recovered from witnessing Jaime Lannister tame a Northern direwolf, stayed away. In other words, Sansa’s attempt to restore her ownership of Lady had resulted
in a sulking direwolf and an irritated lion.

She did wonder why her words had affected Jaime the way they had — still, under the influence of her jealousy, which grew worse as she watched Lady’s brooding, Sansa did not attempt to consider Jaime’s feelings, telling herself she had done nothing wrong and that she had every reason to protest the Lannister’s encroachment on her pet. Nevertheless, Jaime’s irritable mood and Lady’s sulking served to add misery to her jealousy.

Himself, Jaime was disposed to be irate with everyone except the true cause of his annoyance. He was bitterly disappointed. In the interval between the time Tyrion had so carelessly said to him, referring to Lady, “the beast better like you,” and Sansa’s return, Jaime had wondered what exactly he would do if the wolf shared her adopted family’s attitude to Lannisters. When Lady had turned out to be quite the opposite of the aggressive direwolf he had imagined as a possible threat to his life whenever he was around Sansa, he had been quite pleased. He had certainly never dreamed that the wolf’s excessive affection, rather than her wrath, would provoke Sansa’s animosity toward him. He had grown to genuinely like the amusing creature — more so because he thought of her as an extension of her mistress than any other reason, although he had to admit the wolf was a rare charmer. A sweet disposition and a hankering for being petted was an unexpected characteristic in an animal that was the size of a small horse and armed with teeth large as those of big cats: it made for an amusing contrast. He did not find it entirely surprising that Sansa’s sweet nature should have found a reflection in that of her pet, even if that pet was a Northern forest killer made to rapidly dismember anything that moved. The idea had amused him. Sansa’s bitter grudgingness had not.

“Tell me, Sansa,” Tyrion asked her quietly during one of the rehearsal breaks, “what has gotten into your wolf and my brother?”

The younger Lannister was sitting next to Sansa, and Lady had rested her head, which was bigger than Tyrion’s whole body, in the small man’s lap, as if she were silently complaining to him of her mistress’ cold heart, which had caused her, Lady, to fall out of favor with her new favorite human. Tyrion continued speaking, his fingers stroking the wolf’s fur:

“Jaime and Lady seem to have developed a severe case of sour mood at the same time. Did you take away their steaks or something?”

“No,” Sansa mumbled, unwilling to admit she was the cause of their ill humor.

“You know,” Tyrion spoke, “when we were little, Jaime and I wanted to have a lion of our own. Well, as you know, our sigil is a lion, so, of course, we wanted one for a pet. I also wanted dragons, but seeing as those were extinct, I was prepared to have a lion instead. And indeed, once Jaime had described to me in detail how wonderful it would be if we had a lion, I forgot all about dragons. Of course, father did not even hear us out when we asked for one — and we were ready to settle for a golden retriever, whom we would call ‘Lion.’ But we moved to King’s Landing, and, of course, father would never tolerate dog’s fur on his precious Eastern rugs… That,” he said, turning to look at Lady instead of Sansa, “is why my brother and I like you so much, Lady — you’re the dream we never got, realized in the life of a friend. Though, I daresay you certainly like Jaime more than me… Speaking of that,” he added, restoring his gaze to Sansa, “why is it that Jaime started sending Lady away all the time — I could see he had grown fond of her? Hmmm, Sparkle?”

Sansa humphed. Faced with the perspective of sharing her scene of jealousy with Tyrion, whose mind was as — if not more — well-bent for sarcasm and poignant taunts as his brother’s, Sansa saw the episode in a somewhat different light, one that made it appear less justified than she had
accounted before.

“I… I may have said some things I shouldn’t have to him, so now he’s angry with me and doesn’t pay attention to Lady,” she explained unwillingly, fixing her eyes on the direwolf and decidedly not on her interlocutor.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say he’s angry at you,” Tyrion remarked. “In fact, I think you’re the only person here at whom he hasn’t snapped yet and for whom he has a small smile, even if it is more of a smirk. But what did you say to him?”

The last question had come quickly — like a well-aimed stab.

“I told him Lady was my direwolf, and that he did not get to steal her. I was jealous,” she answered finally.

Tyrion coughed — or perhaps, he had stifled a guffaw, she was uncertain.

“What did you say to him?” he asked, his voice mischief itself.

“Of whom?” Sansa questioned, turning to look at him.

“What do you mean?” Tyrion clarified.

“Jealous of Jaime or of your wolf?” Tyrion clarified.

Damn him.

Caught between a lie and a silence, she settled for the latter. This time, Tyrion did laugh, but it was not a malicious sound — rather, a happy one.

“I’ve never thought you cruel or proprietary,” he teased, still chuckling, “why begrudge someone who has never had a pet a few barks of your direwolf?”

He spoke to her as if she were a favorite but petulant child, and she did not care for it, much as she realized that her infantile behavior had warranted the tone and the words. Before the image of a little green-eyed boy like Tommen being deprived of a golden retriever could tear apart her heart, she pushed back:

“It’s not a few barks,” she complained. “She just likes him better than me, and it’s not fair. What has Jaime ever done for her? And I’ve raised her!”

She pouted, resembling her sulking wolf beyond anything one could describe. Tyrion had only meant for his reminiscence of his and Jaime’s childhood to pull at her heartstrings a little, once he had learned the cause of her ire and his brother’s aggravation. After having seen the two grow closer and closer over the past weeks of dinners and rehearsals, the way Jaime had comforted Sansa when Lady had disappeared, and how his elder brother had missed Sparkle when she had been gone, Tyrion did not want the two to quarrel — even over so fine a prize as a direwolf.

As he watched Sansa, Tyrion was suddenly enlightened. His memory abruptly took him back nearly two decades, to a time when Jaime and Cersei had briefly lived together, having just moved out of father’s mansion, and he himself would frequently sleep over — braving his sister for the sake of seeing his brother. Jaime often went out for morning runs — a routine Tyrion knew he still maintained, in addition to sword practice — and when he returned, he would always have Cersei for breakfast, notwithstanding her protests about how he was dripping with sweat (that breakfast consisted of sex so loud, Tyrion would hurriedly leave the apartment, nauseated by his siblings’ noises). Largely the same was true of the twins’ careless escapades after Jaime’s sword practice. Indeed, the younger brother had noticed early on that intense physical exercise always seemed to affect Jaime quite peculiarly. He smothered an evil grin.

“I think,” he said, barely able to make his voice sound even and not betray his plan by chuckling like
a proverbial villain, “that you’re right.” Sansa turned to him, eyes wide, her mouth forming a little “o” of surprise. Having commanded her attention, the small man went on: “I think it’s unfair that Jaime doesn’t do more for Lady when she likes him so much. I remember you complaining to Marge about having to get up early to walk your wolf — well, why not make Jaime do it? He goes for morning runs anyway after he trains — have him take Lady with him and then return her to you. This way, you get to sleep in and have the satisfaction of knowing my brother’s been useful.”

**And I wonder how long brother dearest will be able to withstand temptation…**

It was a plan so wonderfully conceived, Tyrion thought, but she frustrated his brilliant scheme with a few words:

“I don’t want him walking her, she’ll completely forget me,” Sansa said with a finality that announced her jealousy had overcome her shame at her petty ways and that she had embraced her undignified proprietary behavior.

Tyrion watched Sansa throw a glare first at Jaime, who was in incensed conversation with Renly, and then at Lady. He had never before seen her glare at his brother with serious annoyance; when Jaime teased her, she could glare daggers nearly as well as Ellaria, but, in Sansa’s glares, there had always jumped laughter and affection. Not this time. There was pettiness and hurt in her eyes, and it scared Tyrion.

*I cannot believe all our matchmaking efforts are being ruined by a living Stark sigil!* he thought in some annoyance, though he appreciated the irony of the situation. He sighed. Oh, well, maybe it was time to bring out the big guns of culpabilisation. At this, he was master. He smiled, as if in some greater understanding of Sansa, which she herself had not reached, and:

“You almost remind me of a very young Cersei,” he said kindly, as if lost in a fond memory of his sister when she had been a child — such memories did not exist, but how was Sansa to know that? He had spoken with the full understanding of the impact his words would have.

“I — what?!” Sansa exclaimed, a mixture of shock and horror on her face.

*Hehehe*…

Observing from her expression that his remark had taken effect, Tyrion moved Lady’s head from his lap and rose.

“Oh, no, nothing,” he said carelessly, as if his words had not been presented to her mind like a poisoned gift, but rather had escaped his mouth in a moment of mental distraction. He walked away from her thinking himself rather clever. He knew that, now he had suggested the comparison between Sansa and his sister, Sparkle would not fail to find false similarities between her own behavior regarding Lady and Cersei’s isolation of Tommen and Cella from Jaime; he knew also that Sansa’s good nature (as well as her uneasy conscience) would not fail to make her overreact to the comparison and to drown her in guilt — as well as a wish to make amends to Jaime.

*I can imagine nothing better than a guilt-ridden Sansa making amends to Jaime,* Tyrion reflected in pleasure, savoring his own cunningness. He felt almost remorseful for having drawn so unfair a parallel between Sansa and his sister. Not only were the two women in reality nothing alike, he knew, but Cersei did not seek to keep her children from Jaime as much as she could because she wanted their love — oh no, such tender considerations did not engage her mind. Myrcella and Tommen were simply very effective tools for manipulating their true father, the more so if he rarely saw them. As for Sansa’s jealousy, Tyrion thought it adorable; he could not decide of whom the poor girl was more jealous — Jaime or Lady. It was unfair, how he had nudged her between the ribs in
such true Lannister fashion, he realized. But… All was fair in war and matchmaking.

Although Tyrion was correct in his belief that Sansa would not fail to imagine herself a monster of Cersei Lannister’s calibre, he had not accounted for a certain stubbornness in her nature and a Stark habit of thinking herself as occupying the moral high ground. Consequently, although the nagging idea that she was behaving exactly like the woman she disliked so much had been planted in her mind, she still fought to convince herself that, in reality, no matter what Tyrion Lannister said, she had every right to be jealous of her ungrateful direwolf and the remorseless Lannister wolf-thief. After the rehearsal had come to an end, Sansa tugged her moping direwolf with her without attempting to right her wrongs. It was the end of the work week. Seeing this, Tyrion had wanted to kick himself for not organizing a dinner that evening, at least for the four of them, in order to bring Jaime and Sansa together after their disagreement. Still, he hoped Sparkle would realize that acting on one’s jealousy was bad policy. Shaking his head and sighing, he strolled over to Jaime.

“Well, you’ve been particularly cheerful lately,” Tyrion noticed, as if he did not know already the cause of Jaime’s irritability. As any self-respecting amateur psychologist, Tyrion wondered how his brother would formulate his aggravation with the world.

“What do you want, Tyrion?” Jaime grumbled, proving himself, as always, a difficult patient.

The younger brother did not consider himself a talented student of human nature without good cause.

“I want to know why you’ve been so grumpy the past couple of days.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

_Denial ain’t just a patch of land in the Summer Sea…_

“I also want to know why you’ll have nothing to do with Lady anymore. I think you’ve broken a heart, you cruel monster.”

“It isn’t I who wants nothing to do with the canine,” Jaime snapped, “it’s — ” He caught himself, but not in time.

_Bingo!

“It’s… What, Jaime?”

Jaime sighed, angrily and tiredly. Tyrion always did admire Jaime’s ability to blend the two emotions so well.

“Apparently the minx is not too happy about me spending too much time with her pet,” Jaime grumbled. “Something she pointed out to me in no uncertain terms recently. Honestly, as if it’s through any fault of mine. The wolf nearly cracked my skull open when first we’d met!”

Tyrion smirked — he had since heard the narration of Jaime’s first meeting with Lady on several occasions. It was wonderful every time.

“Anyway,” the elder brother continued, “she seems to hold her wolf’s odd liking against me,” he finished sourly and shook his head in a manner that indicated he thought the entire situation absurd.

“Well,” Tyrion patted his brother on the arm in a reassuring way. “I wouldn’t worry too much, if I were you. I’m sure Sparkle will come around.”
And I’ll make sure to give her as many more pushes in the right direction as I have to — even if I must convince her she’s an emotional terrorist. After all, nobody knows what’s a more serious commitment — matchmaking or the marriage it brings.

The genius of Tyrion Lannister’s remark consisted in its ability to corrode Sansa’s subconsciousness like acid even as she consciously sought to convince herself the Lannister’s words were without ground. The proof of that genius came to her in the late hours of the night. For weeks — perhaps, even longer — the dream in which she heard words that made her heart drop like a dead moth had not visited her. That night, however, she sat up in her bed with a start after hearing Jaime’s voice whisper to her, “You’re not Cersei.”

In the darkness that surrounded her, she waited for her heart to resume its normal rhythm and for her skin to shake off the ghostly burn of his imagined touch. As her breathing grew less ragged and her mind returned from the whirlwind into which it was always sent by that dream, an idea she had formulated while flying through the air from the tower of the Red Keep rang in her ears like a purifying force.

I am not Cersei.

And I don’t want to be, I won't be! I love him. And they aren't lovers anymore. And I love him!

Confused thoughts were these, but their flow left a strong impression on her half-awakened mind. She let sleep reclaim her, but the revelation of that dream and Tyrion’s words had wrought changes in her perception. The entire day that followed, she felt remorseful and greatly ashamed of her jealousy, particularly of the scene she had made. To these feelings, which, after all, were not new, had been added a novel emotion that altered the direction in which remorse and shame were taking her — acceptance. Much as she had accepted Jaime’s unavailability as well as her own love for him months ago, she now accepted that her direwolf was no more hers to keep than her heart had been. Lady’s liking of him was no more Jaime’s fault than Sansa herself falling in love with him had been. Having resigned herself to the fact, Sansa was free to travel the road of remorse to the destination Tyrion had set for her — a strong wish to make amends. She was preoccupied with deciding on the best course for her to take, driving herself to near madness in the process, when her phone rang.

“How are ya, sis?” Came Arya’s happy, ever insolent voice from the other end of the line. “Is Lady still preferring Jaime to you?” Oh, yes. Sansa had whined her heart out to her sister. She had needed some relief! “Honestly,” Arya went on, “I’m just digging the fact that Lady behaves exactly like you when it comes to that man!”

“She behaves nothing like me!” Sansa screamed, some of her indignation returning to her. “I never dreamed of throwing myself at him the way she does! It’s embarrassing to watch!”

Arya laughed merrily at this outburst.

“I’m guessing Lady isn’t responding to the raisin biscuits and other bribes, now is she? Such a devoted wolf… Well, devoted not to you, of course… Hey, do you think she would tear uncle Ben to pieces next time they meet? Because you sure did!”

“Arya!”

“Too soon? Sorry.”
There was a brief pause in their conversation.

“Anything else happen besides your jealousy quietly driving you mad? If not, you can always tell me again how Lady tackled the Lannister and how he then gave her a taming session — I fucking love that story,” Arya diluted the silence, unknowingly reminding Sansa of the scene she had made in the park and intensifying her remorse.

“Ummm… Well, yes, unfortunately, something else did happen.”

Arya went so far in her enjoyment of that admission as to giggle in pleasure.

“Spill!”

Thereupon came the narration by Sansa of the episode from a few days ago, which she had been concealing from Arya for the same reasons she had not wished to disclose it to Tyrion.

“Oh, San,” Arya said in a sympathetic tone of someone who knows only too well what it is like to fuck up and regret it later. “I think you went a bit far — ”

“Oh not you, too!” Sansa burst out. “Like I don’t know it myself! Aren’t you supposed to be on my side? Huh? What was it about cutting off Jaime’s balls? Huh? Where’s that talk gone, because I could use it right about now!”

Her sister laughed.

“That’s our plan for whenever he hurts you, but it seems to me like it might have been the other way around.”

“Ah, come on, Arya! Really? Has no one ever shared with you the wise, age-old maxim, ‘chicks before dicks?’”

Arya exploded into laughter. Sansa should be jealous more often — the girl’s tongue got nasty on such occasions!

“You want me to sharpen my knives, clean my guns, come to King’s Landing, and give Jaime Lannister hell — I’ll do it, whether you’re in the right or not.”

Arya paused, letting her sister appreciate her devotion. (She was not about to admit that while Sansa was jealous of an animal’s attachment to Jaime, she herself was competing with said animal in loyalty to Sansa… And Lady had so lost!.. But that was not the point.)

“And we both know I’m not in the right?” Sansa finished Arya’s train of thought.

“You said it, sister,” the little demon approved.

“Well, I know that,” Sansa responded testily. “What I’m wracking my brains trying to figure out is how I could make amends. I want to make it up to him, but I don’t know how…”

“You just hang on a sec, sister,” Arya commanded, then hollered: “Geeeeendryyyyy! Gendie, come here, my sis needs a male perspective! Come here, Gen, make yourself useful!”

“No, Arya, don’t! Don’t you dare tell your boyfriend — ”

But her sister was not listening to her, and Sansa was forced to overhear Arya narrate the entire affair of her jealousy to Gendry (without, however, revealing that Sansa was in love with the Lannister). Still, Sansa felt she was in hell. But her curiosity was peaked when the couple’s discussion shifted to
the problem at hand.

“Well, now she wants to make amends, but she doesn’t know how. So, say, I did something to upset you — well, just imagine it, be creative, not that it ever happens — what would you want me to do?” Much as Sansa strained her ears, she only heard the muffled sound of Gendry’s voice on the other end of the line. “Really?” Arya said in some surprise. “That easy? Fine, say she does that, what else? My girl’s mind is set on doing something special.” Sansa could hear Gendry say something more without being able to discern the words. “Oh, ok, I guess that makes sense. You can go now, you’ve helped plenty!” Sansa heard her sister deliver her boyfriend a smooch for his efforts, and the elder sister smiled to herself — who would have ever thought that Arya would be so happily bossing around a devoted man before she was even eighteen?!

“All right, listen,” Arya said to her, “fresh from the lips of a live specimen. Gendie says that if I’d upset him — which I never do, mind you — he’d simply want me to admit I was wrong and apologize for it.”

“That seems almost too easy…” Sansa commented.

“That’s what I said!” Arya agreed. “Still, I think it should do the trick. He also said that he would simply be happy if I came to see him, you know, if I’d make an effort to be nice to him, to make sure we did something that makes him happy, something we do together that we like. And the cutie doesn’t even mean sex, which is good for you, since it isn’t an option with Jaime just yet — although… You know, come to think of it, in my experience, kissing always makes everything better — not that I ever upset Gendry, of course. You could — ”

“Arya Stark! Do not finish that sentence, do you hear me? Also: did you just pronounce the word ‘cutie’ without making a vomiting sound? Are you well?”

“It’s not my fault my boyfriend’s a cutie. I just call things by their right names. Anyway, so far, the plan we have is: you go to Jaime’s place, admit you were an ass, and apologize. And, since you can’t just stay over and make it up to the Lannister in the most enjoyable ways, what do you do after you apologize? My man says ‘something you both like doing’ and that ‘makes you happy.’ He also used that sappy term ‘something you connect over,’ but I won’t dignify the expression by repeating it…” While Arya kept on in this fashion, Sansa felt a light bulb go off in her head. She remembered how delighted she had been when Jaime had showed up at her door on the night she had visited the Royal Opera House for the first time.

“Arya! You and Gendry are the best! I know what to do, but I gotta go! I’ll talk to you later! Love you, bye!”

She hung up, and immediately checked the theater’s website, discovering that the opera Tywin had recommended was being performed that evening. Of course, her own happiness at seeing Jaime may have been, due to her being in love with him, greater than his own pleasure at seeing her would be… At the same time, Jaime Lannister really did not strike her as the type of man who did many things he did not like. Then, there were also the words Trianna Maegyr and Arya had spoken to her, and, in this new crisis, these women’s belief in Jaime’s partiality to her filled Sansa with a greater resolve and boldness than she had hitherto experienced. She picked up her phone and dialed.

“Don’t tell me it’s to complain more about my brother that you’re calling me,” came the amused voice of Tyrion Lannister from the other end of the line.

“It is about Jaime,” she admitted, “but I was actually hoping to ask you about something.”

“Fire away.”
She took a deep breath.

“Well, I’ve thought about my own behavior and what you said, and I realized that I’ve been selfish and ungraceful. I want to make it up to him for that foolish scene of mine… I won’t be jealous anymore,” she added hastily, as if Tyrion, too, had to be assured of her determination to reform. “So, I was wondering if you thought going to the opera your dad had recommended to us would be a good way to… Well, to apologize? I was looking at the tickets, wondering —”

But Tyrion cut her off:

“I think you taking Jay to the opera is an excellent idea,” he spoke with happy eagerness to advise her, “and I think you should bring Lady along,” he added. “However,” he continued, “don’t buy the tickets — our box stays empty more than it needs to. Why purchase tickets if it’s already reserved, anyway?”

“Are you sure? Because —”

“I couldn’t be surer.”

“All right, then. I’ll talk to you later, Tyrion.”

“I’m glad your conscience has tormented you into good behavior,” he japed shamelessly before hanging up.

Oh shut up! Sansa mentally grumbled into the silence of her phone.

Margaery, who walked into the living room from the kitchen where she had been making coffee, was greeted by a comic sight: Tyrion Lannister was chuckling with delicious evilness and rubbing his hands together like a mischievous elf with a nasty sense of humor. She nearly dropped the mugs she had been carrying.

“What on earth are you so gleeful about?” she inquired, once her surprise had abated somewhat.

Tyrion’s chuckles turned almost to undignified giggles, and his self-satisfaction was quite evident.

“I told you Sansa was being jealous of Jaime and Lady, right?”

“Sure. Not that anyone needed that pointed out — it was quite evident. Well?”

“I may or may not have suggested to Sparkle that her behavior is kind of the same as Cersei’s when it comes to the kids, and —”

“Tyrion! That’s so unfair! Why on earth would you —” she began indignantly, but he, for once, interrupted her:

“Because now Sansa is so overwrought by how awful she’s been to poor Jaime, she will drag him to the opera with her,” he finished with a grin.

“Oh,” said Margaery, her tone indicating that she could not decide whether the end justified the means in this case; then, her grin announced that she, too, thought that Sansa’s little identity crisis was fully warranted if it led to a reconciliation between her and Jaime. She extended Tyrion his mug of coffee. “As her friend, I think your manipulation absolutely abhorrent,” she said, and he, grinning,
waited for her to continue. She sat down next to him and took a sip of coffee. “But as a matchmaker, I think it quite brilliant.”

He smiled widely, his eyes gleaming with mischief and cunning, and the same expression was now on her face. He drew her closer to him.
“I knew you’d take my side — strictly as a matchmaker, of course,” he said against her lips before he kissed her.

It was early evening, and Sansa was finishing her toilette. She reflected that, at least on this occasion, she had the leisure to take her time dressing and doing her hair and makeup. She had decided to wear a dark blue dress and put her hair up in a loose chignon from which curled locks were artfully allowed to escape, framing her face as if in flames. She knew dark blue looked wonderfully well on her, considering the color of her eyes and that blue was the complementary color to the orange-red of her hair. Since she had been very young, Sansa had delighted in the routine of preparing herself for a night out, the drawn-out, sensuous ritual of transforming herself from ordinary to festive. Even Lady was not left out of her immaculate preparations: the direwolf, her fur perfectly clean and brushed until it shone, was wearing a collar and a leash of the same blue shade as Sansa’s dress as well as a blue bow next to her right ear. In the Stark household, the current joke was that the only one who had more accessories than Sansa was Lady. Indeed, since, at the age of thirteen, Sansa had become the happy owner of a lovely she-direwolf, she had loved having Lady’s accessories be of the same color as her own clothes. She thought it very refined and elegant: a wolf Lady and a human lady, wearing the same colors.

She had readjusted her hair slightly for the final time, reaching perfection at last, when she heard her phone ring. It was Margaery.

“What?” Sansa asked lightly, her voice filled with the smile that played on her lips. She looked beautiful; Trianna’s words reverberated like the refrain of a happy song in her ears, and she felt she could conquer the world that night.

“I demand you turn on RavenTime and show me what you’re wearing!” Margaery sounded like a little girl who requires her doll be given to her, so she can dress her, do her hair, and paint her face with makeup stolen from her mother.

Too happy and giddy with excitement to refuse anyone their wish, Sansa turned on RavenTime and, placing her phone on the small shelf under the mirror, she twirled for Margaery’s benefit.

“Awww! You’re gorgeous, darling!” her friend gushed. “Have you already done your makeup? Bring the phone closer, so I can see!”

“All except the lipstick,” Sansa said, complying with that order.

“Red!” cried out Margaery.

“What?” Sansa asked.

“Red lipstick!”

Sansa paused and sighed. She had never really worn very bright colors on her lips. Catelyn Stark had always believed this a sign of wantonness that may flatter older women but that was not at all appropriate for young girls — an opinion she had impressed on her daughter since a very young age.
“Are you sure?” Sansa asked. “My mother — ” she began, but Marge was adamant: “I don’t want to hear a word about Catelyn Stark at the moment!” she declared decidedly. “You cannot wear a dark blue dress with pale lipstick, or a loose chignon without spicing things up with some playful makeup! As it is, you are very minimal when it comes to doing the eyes, so go and put on red lipstick, and don’t you dare argue!”

Sansa sighed defeatedly. Then, “I don’t even have any red lipstick,” she countered half-heartedly.

Suddenly, Margaery hollered at the top of her lungs: “TYENE!..”

It was loud enough that Tyene had heard her even through the closed door. A few minutes, and Sansa’s other friend popped into the bathroom. “You aren’t wearing one of your pale lipsticks with that dress?” she questioned immediately.

Sansa felt the need to defend herself. “Well, I have that one I always wear with red — ” she began.

“That one doesn’t really do anything, just accentuates a little your already red lips!” Tyene protested, and Margaery nodded. “Oh, come on!” Sansa cried out, but Tyene was already rummaging through her own drawers, which were bursting with makeup products. “That’s the one!” she finally cried in triumph.

“What one is it?” Margaery demanded.

Sansa stayed silent, surrendering to her fate.

“It’s Dornish Delights by Missandei,” Tyene replied, “it’s a gloss, but it stays on forever and under all kinds of… testing!” She giggled at the last.

Margaery laughed, too, then: “I love that brand!” she said. Small wonder she liked it: it was one of the most luxurious and high quality brands of cosmetics in the world. “And I’ve used that color before! I approve!”

Tyene extended the lipstick to Sansa, who sighed and set to applying the gloss to her lips, while her friends chatted of ballet routines.

“There!” she said, when she had finished, and turned to face Tyene, who had taken her phone while speaking to Marge. “Oh!” Was all Tyene could mutter at first. “Wow.” Then, she laughed loudly in excitement and turned the phone, so Margaery, too, could see the effect, adding: “Poor Jaime Lannister — I almost feel sorry for him!”

“Oh!..” Echoed Margaery once she had seen Sansa. “Oh!.. So do I!”

The two of her friends laughed in pleasure, while Sansa rolled her eyes at them, not bothering to repeat, once again, what she thought concerning their jokes about her and Jaime. But, as she glanced at herself in the mirror, she noted how her eyes, already accentuated by the blue of her dress, now
stood out bright as never before in her pale face. The blood-red gloss did something unusual to her features, imparting an arresting aspect to her expression. She no longer looked only beautiful. She was striking; striking in a way that made her feel almost, but not quite, self-conscious at the realization of her own attractiveness. The red of her lips made her look like the women she considered the most fascinating and beautiful, but with whom she had never thought to equate herself before: women like Margaery, Ellaria, Trianna, Tyene… like Cersei Lannister. Women who were beautiful enough to make even the heterosexual representatives of their own sex feel overpowered by the dazzling effect they produced. Sansa had thought herself pretty, like a girl ought to be, and never imagined that she could be astonishingly beautiful in the way grown women confident in themselves and their power to attract were. Stealing one more glance at her reflection, she took in a deep breath. It was time to go. Gendry and Arya better be right about this!

Chapter End Notes

All right, I hope you enjoyed it! We will have plenty more Jaime POV in the next chapter. :)
Thank you all for your patience with me and for your unyielding support! Your comments and your messages have warmed my heart and allowed me to pull through with my writing despite a bit of a chaotic period in my life. I hope to get back into the swing of things now. I usually answer comments on the previous chapter before posting a new one, but I didn't want to delay publishing longer than I had to, so I will catch up to the comments as I go. Please keep telling me what you think, I enjoy so much hearing from you! Sending you love!

Our love terminated,

Let's fight in hatred

Over what remains

Like predators, who, for gains,

Are willing to risk it all.

Sharp claws, the daggers of our teeth

Will serve us better than a pistol —

We'll invite death to our digestif.

We weren't born lions for nothing,

We came into this world to destroy;

The jackals will die of laughing

At how each other's blood we enjoy

In our new-born loathing,

Which knows nothing of loving.

Jaime had known something was wrong the moment he had seen Barristan Selmy’s face when he had opened his front door in the early afternoon. The older man looked like a bad omen. Cella and Tommen were with him, and they ran to embrace Jaime, for a moment distracting their father from his suspicions. But when Barristan spoke, these suspicions returned in full force.

"Mrs. Baratheon," Barristan always referred to Cersei by that official title, although he had no qualms about calling the Lannister brothers by name, "wished me to bring the children to you this afternoon," he said, his grim tone a warning.
No wonder Barristan apprehended problems. Cersei had never before directed that the children be brought to Jaime: instead, Selmy had always smuggled them to see their “uncle,” and she turned a blind eye to it or raged, as the mood struck her. If Cersei suddenly and so drastically changed a policy regarding her children, there had to be reasons behind it — troubling reasons. Jaime nodded his understanding, and Barristan departed. The father spent the afternoon with his children, forgetting in his happiness at being with them — watching them laugh, hearing their stories, answering their questions — about the confrontation that must loom ahead. In the evening came the reckoning with which he was to pay for the rare luxury of spending half a day, not just a few hours, with them; Barristan did not come alone to collect Cella and Tommen: instead, he was accompanied by Cersei. She had correctly calculated that, no matter what their relationship was, Jaime would not make a scene by throwing her out of his apartment in front of their children. She had Barristan take them home, while her own car awaited her downstairs.

"What do you want?" Jaime asked her, once the door had closed behind Barristan, Tommen, and Myrcella. Cersei smiled in a manner that suggested she was generosity herself, throwing him scraps and meaning for him to catch them eagerly.

"I want everything — us — to go back to how we were."

He laughed mirthlessly.

“It’s a bit late for that, darling," he bit out, and the endearment he had never used for her before sounded like the most vile of curse words, “you should have thought of us before fucking half of King’s Landing.”

As far as the world and common sense were concerned, these words seemed justified enough. Let her, too, think that her infidelity was the reason why things would never go back to the way they had been. Himself, he knew it was a lie. After all, he had forgiven Cersei her marriage... Perhaps, discovering just how little faithfulness and love, and even her own body, meant to her would have been enough to break him away from her, but he would never know. The truth was that he no longer loved her. It took him the disgust of watching her fuck another man to realize it: that he loved her no more; that he loved another in a way he never had her; and that the brotherly affection she might have had right to by virtue of their blood had been swept away, disappeared, along with his romantic love for her. If before, not seeing her after their quarrels had made him willing to forgive and forget anything, now separation had affected him not at all.

"I miss you, Jaime," she said, disregarding his earlier crude statement; she spoke with a strange calm, and her eyes gleamed quietly with triumph as if she held the trumping card and was merely waiting for the most effective fashion in which to reveal it. Even though she tried softening her expression for her next words, the steel in her eyes could not be easily concealed. Her very willingness to placate him suggested that her real weapon she considered a devastating one indeed. “Jaime, we’ve been through so much together. We are all we have. We are all we love.”

To him, the words were but a melancholic echo of the past. They fed him memories, mostly painful ones, but the impression they left on him was no more strong than if he had been recollecting a chapter from a book that had long been shelved. I do not love you anymore. For all the steel in her eyes, he knew her rancor and schemes were a manifestation of pain — he guessed it was less because she missed him or regretted her actions than because she suffered from a bruised ego at the prospect of losing someone she counted her possession. She may never have been able to love him in a way that would have given them a fighting chance, he realized now, but he knew she was in pain. Surprisingly, he did not care. That pain’s cause — the loss of her human chattel — she had brought on herself, and he had no desire to give her an excuse for a scene. He wanted her gone more than he wanted to confront her.
“It’s too late for this, Cersei.”

“Of course not!” She countered loudly, angrily, her impatience breaking through her attempt to couch her demands for reconciliation under the guise of peacemaking. “We’ve forgiven greater transgressions than this!”

He did not care to stifle his bitter laughter.

“And what ‘transgressions’ have you had to forgive me?”

“More than I care to discuss now,” she snapped. Cersei never could play nice for long.

He shook his head. She was unbelievable.

“It doesn’t even matter, Cers. We’re over. There’s nothing more to say.”

He could see the steel flicker in her eyes again, but she did not let it through. He wondered why. Did she really think he was capable of forgiving her years of infidelity? Then again, the past must have led her to expect this. For the first time, he saw his willingness to take punches from her as a flaw that gave him little credit, not as an admirable willingness to sacrifice all for love.

“We could never be over, Jaime,” she said, making her voice soft, a softness he did not believe. Not anymore. “We were born together, and we go through life just as we came into it. Holding onto each other. *You* holding onto *me*.”

How he used to believe it! But now, this enormously potent fiction she had cultivated to manipulate him, only made him shake his head and say:

“I’m afraid not. Not anymore.”

His short answers were frustrating her, he could tell. He had hoped that brevity would expedite her departure.

“I know you too well, Jaime,” she claimed. “You could never let go of the woman you love.”

“But I did let go of you,” he said, smirking, amused a little. It now occurred to Jaime that, unlike him, Cersei was not privy to her total loss of his heart. For once, she was blind where he was not. What irony.

“You’re angry, you’re hurt, I understand this. But, Jaime — ”

“You don’t understand.” He interrupted. Perhaps, he should have been clearer. “I’m not angry,” anymore. “I’m not hurt,” not by you, at least. “I. Just. Don’t. Care.”

She smiled in disbelief.

“You do care, how could you not?” Her voice indicated she was inviting him to confess love. He had no more confessions to make to her. Unsettled by his determined pause, she pressed on. “Aren’t I the most beautiful woman in the world? Aren’t I the only one you love? The *only one* you’ll love, now and forever? The only one who makes you happy? The one who fills your life and your dreams? Your every breath?”

*No.*

*You aren’t Sansa.*
He sighed, feeling the conversation had tired and irritated him, not the least because her last questions, by bringing Sansa to his mind, had reminded him that the minx was still mad at him.

“Cersei, listen to me,” he said more sharply than before. He paused, so that his next words could sink into her denying mind. “I do not love you anymore. It’s over.”

The red of anger flushed in the fair skin of her face, and she no longer restrained the steel in her eyes — or her rage. She next spoke not in the tone of a penitent lover, at which she had failed anyway, but of a conqueror, who dictates the terms of her opponent’s ignominious surrender. It was time to reveal her trumping card; she prefaced it with demands.

“Enough of this! I want you back. I want Sansa Stark fired and gone. I want you to come and take over Lannisters & Co. with me — force father dearest into retirement. And I want you never to speak to Tyrion or of Tyrion again.”

Jaime laughed in surprise, as one laughs upon discovering the ridiculous to border on the insane.

“That was amusing, sister-dearest,” he said, realizing to his frustration that speaking with her was useless: she was too narcissistic to believe him. “You remember where the door is, don't you?”

She ignored his words, and her own dropped like kettle bells:

“That, or you’ll never see Tommen and Myrcella again.”

This gave him pause, and for a few moments, he had forgotten how to breathe.

_His children?_ She meant to take away _his_ children — the little time he had with them to be snatched by her evil hands? After taking so much, she wished, for last, to steal the one perfect, innocent result of the affair that now made him feel he would be willingly burned alive if only to incinerate all memories of her? She meant to bereave him of the only reason he truly thought his life had led to the creation of something remarkably beautiful, and good, and pure?

And the children! He knew how little time she devoted to them, he could see it when he was with them in the sadness, the knowledge of neglect that lingered behind the green of their eyes. He was all too familiar with that expression himself, having grown up with a distant parent. He knew that even the little time he and Tyrion spent with Tommen and Myrcella brought the kids joy, made them feel that someone in this dannable world cared for them, that someone would celebrate their successes and their joys, that, if anything happened, someone would fight for them, that they had someone to turn to with sadness. Fuck his own feelings, fuck his own pain — she meant to hurt the children because her whoring left their father with exactly no desire ever to be with her again? She meant to take away what little parental love Myrcella and Tommen had as a revenge against him? He felt fury seize him, and he turned on her, green eyes blazing, dangerous.

For the first time in the entirety of their lives, Cersei felt afraid of her twin — and with good reason.

“Try — and you will regret it,” he growled. “I will make you regret it.”

She smiled despite her unease.

“And how will you do that?” She goaded. “Remember: you are their uncle, and I’m their mother.”

His laugh, mirthless as before, was filled with menace. This was no longer a brother, a lover she could manage, manipulate. This was an enemy; a dangerous enemy, who seemed a stranger.

“Remember that our affair is a double-edged sword. You have once threatened that I would never
see my children again, if ever I was so indiscreet as to make it public. Take them away — and I will
have nothing left to lose, but everything to gain. As for my being their uncle — darling, I know
you’ve never paid much attention in school, but you have heard of DNA testing, I suppose? Whores
gambling on entrapping men are usually quite aware of these details — ”

She raised her hand to slap him: in the past, she had often cut his words short in this way, never
realizing that he let her; but this time, he caught her hand in a grip that showed plainly he could crush
her wrist bones with ease, if he chose.

“What will those DNA tests show, I wonder?” he continued, his eyes cold, his voice mocking and
more cutting than a razor blade. “Surely, no Baratheon genes. At first, they might suspect you of
asexual reproduction, of course — ”

Habit was stronger than conscience, and she tried wringing her hand from his grasp to hit him, but he
held her wrist firmly.

“You would never make it public that the children were born of incest — you know it would ruin
their lives!” she spit with venom.

“I assure you, DNA tests can be quite private,” he answered, unmoved. “I wonder what your great
loaf of a husband will do when the results come in?”

“You’ll never get the children! I’m their mother, and I will say that your raped me, repeatedly —
don’t forget that women in my position are more easily believed than the common whores you and
Tyrion are used to! I’ll send so many lawyers after you, you’ll never see the light of day, let alone
Myrcella or Tommen!”

“Your social position is perhaps your only significant difference from a common whore. And you
will like my private methods even less than you would public turmoil.” He paused, and his silence
frightened her. He continued: “Once he learns the children aren’t his, Robert — or more specifically,
Stannis — will cut you off without a silver stag. Your own trust fund has been depleted years ago, I
know that well — you never were smart about investments. That leaves your stocks and salary at the
Lannisters & Co. Now, what do you think father will do when I explain to him why his darling
eldest son is still unmarried and, as he had previously thought, childless? Do you seriously think he’ll
believe your ravings rather than my story, when he’s so tired of your madness, he’s already
minimizing your role at the company? He will cut you off without a penny, too.” There was another
pause, and he yanked her toward him, his face lowering close to hers — no trace of pain, or love, or
lust in his cold green eyes, no emotion at all; it reminded her of the way father looked when very
angry; it was the way Jaime and Tywin Lannister watched their enemies, the way they examined the
competition they were going to annihilate. She suppressed a shudder with difficulty, but it broke
through her at his next words, delivered in a frigid, quiet voice, a deadly whisper: “You’ll be all
alone, without money or friends. You’ll be cornered. I’ll take from Varys all the documentation he
has on your many escapades, your dependence on wine, and then, I’ll send the High Sparrow after
you, with all his little sparrows.” He yanked her closer still, the cold eyes of a stranger boring into her
with something more dangerous than hatred — an indifference and a drive to reduce her to nothing;
his fingers were digging into her wrist. “Try taking Tommy and Cella from me, and I will destroy
you. By the time I’m done with you, not even The Stranger would dream of entrusting you with two
precious little children. I’ll take Myrcella and Tommen from you, and you’ll never see them again. I
daresay they both will be better off.” With a suddenness that always left Lannister opponents
disoriented, he released her, and his fury was replaced by suavity: “Now, let’s not contemplate such
grim scenarios — I’ll see more of my children from now on, and we’ll have no need to recourse to
these… Less pleasant methods of parenting, will we? Do you underst—”
He was cut off by a doorbell. He ignored it and resumed:

“Do. You. Understand?”

For the first time, she — who had always fancied herself the dominant twin, not realizing that it was his love for her, rather than his character, that had allowed her to always come out on top — only nodded silently, too stunned to speak, let alone to protest.

“Do you understand?” he pressed, merciless and unrelenting.

“Yes,” she forced out, her voice hoarse. She was still trying to apprehend the strange revolution that had shaken her life and replaced a loving brother, an easily succumbing lover with this stranger, whose eyes were so cold and hard.

“Wonderful,” he said and went to open.

Sansa had rung the bell and was waiting nervously for Jaime. Would he be mad at her? She hoped not. She looked to Lady, thinking that, at least, perhaps seeing Lady might assuage his anger, if indeed he was angry. It was not only this apprehension that made her nervous, though. She knew she looked rather provocative this evening, and she wondered, a little desperately, if her appearance would affect him — at least a little. She so wished for him to find her beautiful, desirable, for her to catch his eye if for the most fleeting of moments; to balance, in one sensual second, the way her heart jumped and her blood sang whenever she thought of him or was near him. Her heart in her throat, she contemplated the closed door.

Whoever had rung that door bell, Jaime was grateful for their sudden appearance on his doorstep. He briefly wondered if it was Tyrion. Provoked to play dirty by his sister, Jaime did not enjoy the role into which she had forced him. Before the moment when her threat and his fury had sent his mind into a swift search for retaliation, he had never thought he actually could take the children from her. His partiality to her must have been a truly blinding force, if it had prevented him from seeing that her (not to mention her husband’s) drinking and whoring, if presented just in the right light by a capable lawyer, could give him, a concerned uncle, some chances at success — even without the assumption that the Targaryen laws legitimizing incest had never been struck from the code. It was surprising he had never thought to look into it. Well, he would have one of the sparrows do so, and promptly. It was in his power, he suddenly realized, to isolate Cersei from the finances she would require to sustain a legal battle of the proportions he would bring to her door, and lawyers were peculiar in that the best usually worked for the richest. Now that his indifference to her had reduced his concerns for her welfare to a bare minimum, he found the idea interesting, if undignified. But he was not above using the leverage he had discovered to negotiate for more time with his son and daughter. He wondered now how he could make her leave — short of escaping his own apartment, he could think of nothing to hasten her exit. He sighed as he reached for the doorknob, anticipating a second round of the altercation they had begun the moment he had dealt with whomever had decided to pay him this late call. He flung the door open, and, for a second, thought he was seeing things.

Sansa stood before him. He was struck by her appearance that evening; he took in her sparkling, shining blue eyes, her red lips, the loving way the blue material of her dress hugged her body, and he felt desire rush through him, converting air into wildfire somewhere in his lungs and clearing his mind of the rancor that had drowned him but a second before. Keeping himself under control was generally a fairly difficult task whenever he was around her, especially as he was unused to practicing such restraint in his previous life, but when she looked the way she did now, he thought it might prove impossible not to reach for her. Unaware of the effect she had on him, the minx smiled a
sheepish smile when she saw him.

“Hi,” she said softly, “I…” she began, and her smile grew a little timid, but her eyes, not a trace of
timidity in them, kept shining with happiness. Could it really be happiness at seeing him?

“I came to apologize for saying all that I’ve said to you about Lady. I shouldn’t have said it, and I’m
very sorry I did. I was hoping to make amends. That opera your dad recommended to us is being
performed at the Royal Opera House tonight, and I was hoping Lady and I could convince you to
come with us… If you don’t have any other plans, that is,” she added hastily.

Was she mad, he wondered for a moment; did she really imagine any man could refuse her
invitation? As for himself, he doubted he could refuse her at all — whether she wished him to
accompany her to the opera, or a particular level of the Seven Hells.

“I’d love nothing more,” he answered, and it was true. A dreary evening suddenly promised the bliss
of being near her — and not seeing her pout as he had been forced to do in the past few days.

“Jaime, who’s there?” came his sister’s voice from inside the apartment. He had been looking at
Sansa, and he noticed how she had flinched at the sound, how her face had turned white, how her
eyes had widened.

“I should… I should probably go — ” she began, taking a step back, as if she had seen hells’ doors
open before her.

Oh no, Cersei was not about to drive Sansa away from him!

The last thing he intended was to leave the minx in doubt concerning his sister’s visit that evening,
especially not after Sansa had been the one to hold him together when the revelation of Cersei’s true
colors — and his own feelings — had brought so much anguish into his life. The minx had a right to
his secrets. He stepped aside from the threshold and inside the apartment, making way for her to
enter.

“Cersei was just leaving,” he explained. “She had dropped by to make some idle threats. Why don’t
you come in, and I’ll be ready to go in a few minutes?”

Although he affected nonchalance as he spoke, he watched her face intently. He saw doubt wave
across it, as well as a powerful desire to escape. She glanced inside the apartment, seemingly
ascertaining the level of danger. She appeared suspended in indecision, as if her fight or flight
response was short-circuiting. Then suddenly, something shifted in her face: her features hardened,
her eyes acquired a bellicose glow, and her jaw muscles clenched. She squared her shoulders and
entered the apartment with a swift gait, the speed of which seemed to have been determined by the
doubts chasing her.

Cersei watched as a young woman of remarkable beauty walked into the living room. At first, she
had taken her for a high-end escort, but the elegance of her clothes and the air of innocence, of
untroubled youth that clung to her dissipated this idea. She noticed an enormous wolf, which reached
to the girl’s shoulder, trot in after her. It was the living sigil that allowed her to recognize Sansa Stark
in this late visitor. The girl looked incredibly beautiful — so beautiful, in fact, that, for the first time
since she had learned of Sansa Stark’s existence, Cersei perceived in her a dangerous rival, rather
than a nuisance to be gotten rid of as a mere precaution. Youth, beauty, innocence — few men loved
anything more than the combination of these qualities, and Jaime had long had an odd partiality to
this girl. Cersei had never seen a woman of whom she could conceive as a successful rival,
particularly for Jaime’s affection, but as her eyes took in Sansa’s form — the youthful body, the seductive red of her lips, the deep, tender blue eyes, and the innocent loose curls of her fire-red hair — it seemed to Cersei that she had walked into a nightmare, or rather, that the nightmare had walked into Jaime’s apartment.

“What the hell is she doing here?” Cersei snarled.

“Sansa’s picking me up,” Jaime answered in a casual tone, that was breaking Cersei’s ears as though their insides were made of glass and he were throwing stones instead of words, “we have plans for the evening. I was just explaining that you were on your way out.”

His words set her afire with impotent rage and unbound jealousy.

Sansa may have had courage enough to walk inside the lions’ den, but now that she stood in the middle of the living room, she was completely silent, her eyes fixed on Cersei. She had entered, knowing she would drive herself mad with speculation if she retreated. She had entered, because the words of Trianna Maegyr as well as her own sister had truly wrecked a change in her perception, and she wanted to fight for a happiness that could be so great, it was worth risking everything — fear, humiliation, pain. She hated her rival no longer only because this woman had hurt Jaime, but because Sansa wished to, but did not know if she could, erase her from the horizon of his mind. She wanted to look that living obstacle to her happiness straight in the eye — and then run her gaze over the woman’s clothes, desperately trying to determine the nature of her visit. There was nothing in Cersei’s appearance to suggest Sansa had interrupted a passionate encounter; if anything, the atmosphere in the room was inimical, and the twins looked murderous in a way that had nothing to do with lust.

“We aren’t done talking,” Cersei growled to Jaime. She had recovered from both shocks of that evening — her brother’s transformation and the appearance of his companion for the night — and was determined to bend the evening to her will.

“Oh, yes, we are,” Jaime said in a tone Sansa had never heard from him before. It was unsettling: frigidly cold yet permeated with contempt and mockery that seemed to make it even chiller. That tone was like a whip covered in frost.

“Whatever delusions you labor under, you’ll never get Tommen and Cella, and you know it! Your bluff is as worthless as you!”

Suddenly, Sansa realized what discussion she had interrupted. The twins really had separated, and now they were fighting over the children. Suddenly, the atmosphere, their countenances of mobilized anger — they looked like lions ready to pounce and tear each other’s throats — made sense to Sansa. She felt relief wash over her momentarily, before concern for Jaime, his kids, and their futures overwhelmed her mind.

Jaime laughed at his sister’s last words, and the sound sent a chill down Sansa’s spine. She had never before fully realized just how much warmth and affection there was in his chuckles when he was with herself. She knew it now from witnessing the morbid sound of Jaime’s furious mirth. It sounded even more demonic than that day on the beach — the pain, the self-mockery had gone out of the sound, leaving nothing but loathing and quality Lannister disdain. He spoke quietly, but there was more danger in that quiet voice than in any scream of rage.

“No, you are making a poor attempt at a bluff right now. My words were very real, and you know it. Now, do make yourself scarce — I don’t want for Sansa and me to be late for the opera.”
That remark had the calamitous effect of redirecting Cersei’s attention onto Sansa.

“You little — ” she began advancing on her, but Jaime got between them, cutting his twin’s words short:

“You will not insult her under my roof, Cersei,” he warned.

“Under your roof, I’ll do whatever I damn please!” she shouted in anger.

She might have said more, but screaming at Jaime Lannister in the presence of Lady had been her unfortunate mistake. Lady, who had felt no less keenly than her mistress the suffocating atmosphere in the room, had taken a defensive stance the moment Cersei moved toward Sansa, but when the woman began screaming at her favorite human, Lady decided to take action. Her fur stood on end, her back assumed an offensive bent, she bore her massive fangs and, growls spilling between her teeth, she crept from behind Jaime and advanced onto his offender. The power behind the slow movement of the wolf’s muscles was such that Sansa could not hold onto the leash, and Lady’s advance became unchecked, her defensive ferocity let loose. The wolf was large enough that, even though her enemy was taller than her mistress, should Lady have decided to, she could rip out Cersei’s throat without even jumping. Jaime’s sister paled and rage left her face, replaced by an all-encompassing, animalistic terror. Alarmed by a behavior she had never before seen in Lady — or any of the direwolves, for that matter, not even Nymeria — Sansa made to rush toward the wolf to restrain her, when Jaime’s arm bore her passage. She looked up at him in irritation and confusion, wondering if he had lost his mind, and discovered an infernal smirk on his face; his eyes were fixed on Lady and his sister. Before Sansa could tell him just what she thought of the situation and his dangerously careless attitude, he spoke, genuine amusement in his voice.

“Lady, my guest has forgotten the location of the door. Could you be so kind as to escort her out?”

The direwolf seemed to have understood his meaning perfectly, especially since it aligned so well with her own inclination. Still in the same mode of aggression, she began advancing slowly onto her target, and Cersei retreated, one step at a time, too frightened to let out a sound, her attention entirely centered on the wolf. Lady guided her thus to the door. Although Sansa’s first instinct had been to restrain the direwolf, as she watched her pet and her rival, she suddenly pictured the powerful jaws tearing into Cersei Lannister’s long, beautiful neck and found the image hypnotic. I’d never discover her in Jaime’s apartment again. She’d never ensnare him again. Realizing she was imagining murder, Sansa tried reassuring herself that she would never truly wish death upon another person, but, dark and disgusting, the desire flickered, sprung from a dark recess in her mind of which she had not been previously aware.

I know why Nissa did it, she thought suddenly. I know.

But it won’t make him love you, a voice whispered. The only thing you’d lose would be your own soul, and even that price cannot purchase true love. This is why it is true — it cannot be bought, it cannot be sold, it cannot be brought about by my murder, blood paves it no way.

Sansa looked away from the figure of the retreating woman. She was ashamed.

The second Cersei, still walking backwards, subdued by a fear of longer duration and greater intensity than any she had known heretofore, had crossed the threshold, Jaime — who had been regarding the scene with a grin of merriment and satisfaction — walked swiftly to the door. His amusement indicated clearly that, unlike Sansa, he did not think Lady had presented any real danger to his sister.

“You have a good night, Cers,” he told her before shutting the door in her face.
The moment his twin was out of the apartment and out of his sight, Jaime visibly relaxed. His expression one of affection, hilarity, and gratitude, he turned to Lady, who now looked like her usual self as she watched him adoringly, and, taking the wolf’s huge head in his hands, he said: “You’re one wonderful creature!” His voice was as warm now as Sansa was used to, and the tension, the anger had left him. “You’re such a good, brave girl, coming to my defense like that!”

Lady, enheartened by the praise, licked his face, and he laughed. He patted her head, then walked toward the other end of the flat.

“I’ll be ready in a few minutes, minx,” he called in a cheerful voice.

Sansa had been too stunned by the scene that had played out before her and the revelations it had occasioned to dutifully inform him that he had no business setting Lady on his sister, when the direwolf actually could have killed her. However, she told herself that, after her evening with Jaime came to an end, she could feel penitent about having wished death on Cersei Lannister for as long as her conscience made it necessary — but she would not let it spoil her enjoyment of her time together with him. Her joy at the prospect of being alone with him for an entire evening was strong enough to overpower even reflection on her dangerous wishes. In the past days, she had missed him in spite of her petty jealousy. Liberated of it now, she was free to bask in being near him.

She could not deny, however, that a sense of triumph reverberated in her as she contemplated the closed door — and the woman who had been dismissed by it. She smiled a pleased, selfish little smile, which had something a little unkind about it: victory gleamed in the uplifted corners of her mouth, as she thought that Cersei had just been shown out. When she thought of Jaime, however, the gleeful smirk disappeared, erased from her lips by an expression of desperate, innocent hope and tenderness, which carried neither cruelty nor ascendancy. She turned to look in the direction of the corridor, in which he had disappeared. There could be no doubt about it: he chose to spend the evening with her, Sansa, not with Cersei. The woman who had been, for all intents and purposes, the love of his life, was out in the cold; she, Sansa, was inside. He chose me. True, given the twins’ recent past, he could simply have preferred to spend an evening with a friend, rather than the woman who had betrayed him. But... Trianna’s voice, with its melodic Essosi accent came to Sansa, and so did the words telling that the woman who was friends with a bachelor had chances to become something more. Oh, if only!..

Her musings were interrupted by Jaime’s reappearance. He was ready as quickly as he had said he would be, and she felt only a slight tinge of annoyance that he could look so well in a tux with so little effort — when she had spent hours crafting her look. She saw him reach for his car keys, and observed:

“We can’t take your sports car, unless you mean for Lady to run after us.”

“I’ll take another car, then,” he answered, going back for a different set of keys.

Of course, he would have another car gathering dust in the parking lot. Who was she kidding, though? It was probably kept in supreme condition by the building staff. He returned, promptly, with keys that looked the same to her. Rolling her eyes, she followed him out of the apartment.

“I couldn’t be gladder you decided to show up at my doorstep tonight, minx,” he said to her as they walked down the hallway. He had decided not to bother with the valet service that evening, and they walked to the building’s garage.

Sansa gave an evil little chuckle.

“Seeing how you were only too happy with Lady jeopardizing your sister’s safety, I can easily
believe it."

“What? Oh, that...” He couldn’t help smirking at the memory. Clearly, he still didn’t think Lady a
real threat, as he had gotten so used to her sweet disposition. “True, Lady has certainly proved her
worth as a bodyguard, but it wasn’t what I meant.”

“No?” She asked, trying to prevent the hope that animated her from ringing too clearly in her voice.

“No. I meant I was glad to see you weren’t angry with me anymore, not to mention what a
wonderful idea you had of going to the opera,” he said seriously, then added teasingly: “Besides, it
flatters a man’s vanity when a pretty woman can’t let him spend one evening alone at home.” He
winked at her and was only too pleased, she noticed, to see her blush. She fought against the red in
her cheeks.

“The lack of pretty women,” she emphasized the plural, “certainly isn’t your problem if you require
trained wolves to get rid of them.”

He laughed, but she could see that this reference to his sister had made him uneasy.

“I know my sister has a certain reputation when it comes to looks,” he admitted, “but lately, I see
more of a fury than a beauty.” He paused. “Let’s not spoil the evening by bringing her up,” he asked,
and Sansa nodded. Seeing her willingness to grant his wish restored his good humor sufficiently for
him to continue teasing her:

“And you need to learn to take compliments, minx. After the premiere, you’ll be in a lot of
spotlight.”

“Then you must compliment me more often, Jaime,” she parried, brazen in her pleasure at their
banter, “strictly so that I can practice taking compliments with enough grace for your scrupulous
taste. I wouldn’t want to let the LBC down in the public eye.”

He laughed, and she rejoiced in the happiness that reverberated in the sound.

“I’ll see what sacrifices I can make. So tell me, minx, why did you decide to forgive me all of a
sudden for — how did you put it?— ‘stealing your wolf?’”

She cast her eyes down, feeling the return of the guilt that had abandoned her the moment she had
seen his face brighten upon discovering her at his threshold.

“I’m sorry for what I’ve said,” she admitted, “and I hope you aren’t very mad at me.”

“Do I seem mad?” He asked her good-humorously.

She considered his boyish, happy countenance and felt herself smile in return.

“Fortunately not,” she answered, “but I still want to apologize. I shouldn’t have reacted the way I
did.” She sighed. “It’s just that, before she met you, Lady was rather indifferent to people who
weren’t me,” she confessed. “I suppose I’ve been blindsided by the alteration — not that I’m
surprised,” she finished with a smile.

They had reached the car — unlike the one he usually used, this one had a backseat, but otherwise, it
looked very much the same. Black, expensive, made for speed.

“Well, thank goodness you have a minivan!” Sansa teased and laughed heartily when he grimaced in
indignation.
“How dare you, minx?” He exclaimed, as he opened the door for her.

She only laughed again in answer. Lady hopped into the back seat, where she made herself as comfortable as she could, given the spatial confinement.

Jaime looked at the wolf pitifully.

“Maybe I should get another car and have the separation between the back seats and trunk removed,” he wondered to himself.

The moment he was behind the wheel, Sansa asked:

“Why do you have a car with a backseat?”

There was so much genuine curiosity in her face, and a smile played on her lips from the laughter of a few moments ago. It warmed his heart, even though he did not want to satisfy her inquiry.

“Must you know everything?” He answered with a question as he started the car and took off.

“I’m curious! I’ve never seen you use it before, so why do you have it?”

He sighed. He found it difficult to refuse her, even when it meant owning to certain truths he would have preferred to leave alone in their silent graves. However, just as he wished to conceal them, he felt no right to do so — not when the minx was the one interrogating.

“When Cella was born,” he explained, “I thought at first that she and I would spend more time together. And then Tommen was born as well… They were so little then, I believed it was natural they had to be mostly at home with their mother, and I did not question Cersei’s insistence on this. What the hell could I know of parenting babies? But I hoped that, when they grew a little older, we’d have significantly more time together.” He paused and sighed. “So far, this hasn’t happened — but after our conversation tonight, I think it will,” he finished in a tone that held an echo of the threatening intonations he had used with his sister.

As always, when he shared with Sansa these hidden and distasteful admissions about his life, he avoided looking at her. But having finished speaking and not hearing anything from the minx, he forced himself to face her. She looked at him in a way that reminded him of how she had looked at him after the gala, all those months ago. There was compassion in her eyes, which he no longer mistook for pity, and a warmth that made this dark side of his life a little brighter. Still, the feeling, which had pushed them into the fight that had ended with a hard slap, was not entirely absent. He recognized it for what it was this time — shame. He never wished he were a better man more powerfully than when he let her see just how wretched he was in reality. And never did he feel more shame at the reality than when it was revealed to her.

When she spoke, she did so very quietly.

“You got another car for the kids?”

He nodded.

Sansa felt her eyes burn, and she turned away for a moment, blinking repeatedly to prevent tears from becoming visible. She had been overwhelmed by this wholly unexpected admission. *He never got to use it.* It filled her with a burning sense of injustice and her heart broke for him. So many men would have been only too content to have nothing to do with their kids, letting the mothers raise them however they saw fit. She had seen many such men in the North and beyond. Ned Stark was more exceptional than most knew in the love, time, and attention he had always devoted his many
children. And Jaime... She knew he loved his children, and she noticed that their infrequent visits brought him enormous joy; but this unused car, bought especially for them, brought home to her like never before the deprivation he must have felt from the lack of time with Cella and Tommy.

“Of course, I did,” Jaime answered her, sounding almost indignant, “how the hell do you imagine I would fit one — let alone two — of those awful seats into the front seat of my normal car?”

The rhetorical question, and the affronted tone in which he had pronounced it, made Sansa explode into giggles. The air of a confirmed bachelor always clung to Jaime, and hearing him talk about child seats was too much for her. Observing that he was annoyed by her amusement, she stifled the laughter, especially since she realized, belatedly, that this must be a painful issue.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “Did you ever think about taking them somewhere outside King’s Landing?”

The simple question made a shadow pass over his features.

“I’ve even thought of kidnapping them,” he muttered darkly.

If it weren’t for his dark tone, she would have taken this sentence for a joke.

“What do you mean, ‘kidnapping them?’”

She noticed him steal a glance at her and she smiled, hoping it would let him know that the question was a manifestation of her interest rather than an accusation.

“I don’t know if you remember my mentioning that Robert had once attempted to strike Tommen?” He asked.

“I do remember.”

Only a few sentences after that admission, she had slapped him across the face, but she had not forgotten what he had told her about Tommen and his stepfather.

“Well,” he continued, “ever since that day, I’d think now and then about taking the kids and fleeing somewhere, where it would be difficult to find us. One of the Free Cities, or perhaps Essos. At least, there, they would be safe.”

“You’d have to give up your career, your identity...” Sansa stated the obvious. She wasn’t questioning his commitment to the idea — rather, she was enumerating all that he would give up.

“Do you believe that when I think about that fat miscreant hurting Tommen, or — ” his voice cracked dangerously at the next words in a way that showed rage was but a thin layer covering an unbound, deep-seated fear, “or Cella... Do you really believe my career matters to me?”

He turned to look at her, and she smiled at him.

“No,” she answered simply and with certitude. “I’m sure if that were the only obstacle, you would have done it. So what stopped you?” She asked, holding her breath. If he said Cersei, she felt sure her heart would never be the same again.

“I was afraid that, if we were caught, I’d end up in jail, unable to see them, to protect them, or to help them,” he said instead.

She sighed in relief. He wouldn’t risk their safety.
“I would have thought the same way as you,” she admitted. “I would have wanted to take them far away... But I think you’re right — it’s a dangerous gamble.” Feeling their conversation had become rather depressing, she tried directing it to more pleasant topics: “If you could take them anywhere for a road trip, though, where would you go?”

He chuckled.

“Cella wants to go to Sunspear,” he told her.

“Ah, yes, to see Trystane! I remember her telling me that — or rather, Tommen teasing her about it — he looks just like you when he taunts her.”

“Does he now?”

“He does!”

He smiled, and she could tell that the thought of Tommen resembling him pleased him. Noticing that, she continued:

“You do know that he’s your spitting image?”

“Everything considered, it would be strange if he bore me no resemblance,” he observed with sarcasm.

“He doesn’t just bear your resemblance. He looks just like you. That was how I knew... At the gala, when I saw them in the bright light of the kitchen. Tommen, he looked just like you. That was how I knew.”

She had never told him this before. Indeed, that night was never really brought up by either of them, since they had not exactly parted on amicable terms then. He was silent, so she added:

“What’s funny, though, is that he has your expressions. When he teases Cella, for instance, he looks just like you do when you tease me — mischievous and far too pleased with himself.”

Jaime laughed.

“He must love teasing his sister, then,” he commented, and Sansa smiled. Jaime certainly did love teasing her...”

“All right, then, so you’d take them to Sunspear — anywhere else?”

He thought a moment.

“Casterly,” he answered. “I’ve spent my childhood there, and they’ve still never been to the damn place. It’s our family castle, for crying out loud.”

Sansa dissolved into laughter.

“Do I want to know what amuses you this time?” He asked a little grumpily at being, for once, the consistent object of her amusement. A small smile still lingered in the corners of his lips, though.

“I’m sure your dad’s thoughts on the subject are highly similar to yours!..” Sansa forced out through her giggles.

“What are you implying?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” She taunted fearlessly. “I’m saying that you and Tyrion both, but in different
ways, are remarkably similar to your father.”

Jaime sighed.
“I don’t consider this a compliment, minx,” he pointed out.

“That’s too bad,” she returned, riding high on her bravado, “because it’s intended as such.”

“Since when do you like my father?” He protested. “Only recently, he was quite literally the boogeyman your mother frightened you with when you and your siblings misbehaved!”

“I like him ever since I got to know him. I think you’d like him too, if you did the same.”

“You forget that it isn’t myself or Tyrion who didn’t want to get to know him. He never wanted to get to know us. That is the root of the problem.”

She could hear that he was getting annoyed. Oh Mother! My head will roll when they find out I invited Tywin to the premiere!.. When she spoke next, her voice was gentle and pacifying. She had no desire to enrage a lion.

“Don’t get irate, please. I won’t say anything more, except this: consider that your dad is at least as proud as you are, which means that he may not find it easy to acknowledge his mistakes, but that doesn’t necessarily mean he believes himself entirely in the right.”

Jaime’s voice was very quiet and deadly serious when he spoke next, and he did so very slowly:

“Did he say as much to you?”

“No,” she admitted. “But I could tell.”

At this, Jaime turned to her with a smirk.
“Of course, you could. I’m sure your pink glasses helped, too.”

“How dare you question my judgement, Jaime Lannister!..” She exclaimed, half-joking, half-indignant.

The teasing to which she was subsequently subjected lasted until their arrival to the opera. She was quite certain it was his way of paying her back for suggesting that some responsibility for a reconciliation with Tywin rested on his and Tyrion’s shoulders.

Jaime had been justified in thinking that Cersei’s initial distress at his behavior was the result of a bruising ego — but this was so only because she had been annoyed that his discovery of her varied sex life had caused a setback in her relationship with (and rule over) him, without ever realizing she could actually have lost him. She knew she had on her hands a crisis more serious than any she had previously faced, and (like she had done after her wedding to Robert) she had decided to give Jaime’s temper a few weeks to spend itself. It did not even occur to her that his knowledge of her infidelities could significantly alter his feelings for her. So much was she convinced of his unchanging love for her, she meant to use their disagreement to remind him of her power and to negotiate for things she had long wanted. Since Jaime had always hated when she used their children to get something from him, she determined that, as he was already mad at her, she might as well
make him madder by threatening to take away his time with the kids unless he renounced the dwarf, the Stark bitch, and the ballet company. She fully expected him to rage — and then to succumb to her demands. After all, would he not get herself and their two golden children in return? It had seemed a fair bargain to her. Needless to say, the actual turn of their conversation had shaken Cersei to her very core. Add to that the direwolf, and it was no wonder Cersei Lannister was pushed into a deep turmoil.

She did not stay long to contemplate the closed door of her brother’s apartment, although she did not remember walking to the car that waited for her downstairs. The boundless fear she had been subjected to by the wolf had misshaped her subsequent perception of reality, but she would remember the distinct feeling of a worm coiling inside her as she watched the closed door and, for all that she could not recover her wits from shock and fear, it filled her with a sudden urge to leave, lest the silence coming from inside the apartment be interrupted by noises she knew she would never be able to eviscerate from her memory. So she left, but the walk down the hall to the elevator, the lobby, and the dark street went entirely unregistered by her brain. There was a dulness to her mind, as if she were sleep-walking under the influence of a failing anesthetic.

She came to herself only in the darkness of the car’s backseat. As the driver, isolated from her by the separation between the front and the back of the car, started the engine and the vehicle began to move, Cersei became again aware of her surroundings. The soft, black leather of the seats, the smell of which had mixed with her own perfume, and the darkness around her, offered her a sense of security, which had been so monstrously broken by the growls and the bared teeth of the direwolf. In this comforting seclusion, which was like an enormous womb and in which none could see or hear her, Cersei felt herself shaking and did not realize she was crying until she noticed the sticky feeling of mascara running down the soft skin of her face. Then she realized that the strangled, pitiful noises she had been attributing to the outside world were in actuality emerging from her own throat.

She had not cried since her mother had died. Even when she had given birth to her children, Cersei had screamed her furor and pain with dry eyes. Now, she was weeping, a state so unfamiliar to her, she could not in its first moments understand what was happening to her. If the first cries and tears that escaped her were the natural reaction to the terror of nearly being eaten alive, they paved the way to real weeping.

*I have lost him. I think I have lost him.*

It was not a thought she ever could imagine herself having, and even now, she could not quite believe it. In her mind, it rang more as a ghastly question than a statement.

*Not Jaime?* This was more of a desperate prayer.

She did not even recognize him, as if in the weeks she had left his anger to calm, some stranger had taken possession of her brother’s body. There was something deeply terrifying in looking into his eyes, which she had only ever seen filled with love, or rage, or feigned indifference, and see nothing at all except real, cold disdain — and a little hate.

*I have lost him. I think I have lost him.*

She had always believed there was no measure to the things she could do, and he would remain at her side, unalterable and unchanging, fixed in time and space, loving her more than she had ever loved herself — or anyone else. Except mother. Yes, Jaime loved her, *had* loved her, as much as she had only ever loved mother.

*I have lost him, too.*
Her throat was sore, her face was viscid with running makeup, and she was sick down to her very heart. She had thrown her head back against the seat, her mouth open as she caught unsatisfying gulps of air noisily, and now her head ached, too, sending waves of pain and nausea down her vertebra.

As when her mother had died, she felt herself unjustly, cruelly punished. In the midst of her pain, there lingered the feeling that, surely, this nightmare could not be real; it had to end, because it was too abominable to be happening. And in the very conviction that her woes must be some hideous fiction lay the shudder-inducing suspicion, a nearly superstitious dread, that, for all its maddening abhorrence, the nightmare was true.

Cersei’s utter inability to see her own flaws or even to recognize, let alone acknowledge, her mistakes, made her feel now — when, unlike at her mother’s death, her tragedy was of her own making — that life had dealt her a major blow because of the chaotic cruelty that constantly swirled in the universe like a huge, spheric pack of small fish, biting its victims at random. The twisted perception of reality made her pain and despair at this new shattering of her world no less bitter.

Indeed, she was overcome with a frantic regret of such intensity, it was as if her tears, and gasps, and moans were that regret taking physical shape and escaping her body in the most destructive way. There was no one exit for it to take, as it was with the pain when she had been giving birth; her frantic regret and her utter despondency were being birthed in a way the ugliness of which suited this offspring — they were tearing her apart as they forced their way past the marrow of all her bones, of all her muscles, tearing even through her makeup-dirtied skin.

I have lost him.

Oh, it was so monstrously unfair! She was too selfish and too despondent to dwell on her failings, but whatever they were, no matter how bad any of her acts or she herself had been, she felt it was utterly heinous of life to take away that one person who had ever mattered to her at all. In her own selfish, avaricious, ungrateful way, she had loved him, did love him, loved him even now. Perhaps, as the agony of loss overtook her, she loved him more than she ever had before.

When Jaime and Sansa arrived at the opera house, its steps were crowded with people just like the previous time. The best society of the capital, glittering with jewels, dresses, and fine suits had come to partake of their refined entertainment. Seeing these handsome people and this building, from which light radiated in powerful waves, illuminating the night around it, brought to Sansa the happy memory of her first visit here. She wondered for a second if, perhaps, such evenings could become a habit for her and Jaime.

Oh, wouldn’t it be wonderful!.. Lady jumped out of the backseat with the grace of a cat, landing gently on her feet; she offered Sansa her leash, and her mistress was a little surprised that Lady made this gesture to her and not to Jaime. It seemed everyone was in the mood to make amends that evening.

Having relegated his car to the valet, Jaime joined them, offering Sansa his arm, which she took with a smile that displayed her utter pleasure. She was so happy to be with him again; freed now of her pettiness, she felt lighter than air as she linked her arm through his, feeling the strong muscles lend her a welcome support. As they took their first steps thus, linked together by their arms, looking to all the world like a couple, her heart sang happier than it had in the entire week she had been gone. In this moment, when her arm had come to rest on his — and not before — she felt she had come
home.

“I’m never coming to the opera without Lady again,” Jaime said in amusement.

Sansa, who had been too distracted by her feelings, did not know what had provoked this statement.

“What are you talking about?” She asked, confused, turning to observe he was not far from bursting into laughter.

“Do you really not notice?” He asked, grinning.

And then she did notice. Unlike the last time, when they could barely take a single step without one acquaintance or another blocking their way to offer greetings, now, they walked ahead freely. Indeed, despite the crowd, there was no one within a twenty feet radius. King’s Landing’s elites could not loose face by showing, least of all voicing, their fear, but they observed what they perceived as a Northern monster from a safe distance.

Jaime was not simply entertained by the poorly concealed fear and several annoyed glares that were thrown their way: he was above all selfishly pleased that, because no one dared approach Lady, he could have Sansa all to himself. Their tête-à-tête was not interrupted by salutations of acquaintances. He could, for instance, enjoy without interruption walking arm in arm with her, could savor the feeling of her hand resting close to his heart. It seemed to belong there, for all that it should not have.

The security at the entrance attempted to prevent Lady from attending the opera, but Jaime said:

“If you have an issue with my companion’s pet, you’ll have to take it up with her,” and when the guard turned to Sansa, Jaime added, his tone poorly concealing the laughter that was rising to his lips, “I don’t mean Miss Stark — I mean her direwolf. If you have an issue, feel free to take it up with the wolf.”

Sansa had begun feeling embarrassed the moment they had approached the security, who frowned and whispered, and now she looked up at Jaime in total bewilderment, never dreaming he actually believed this subtle intimidation could work. Jaime was going to add more food for the guards’ thought, however:

“If you do decide to take issue,” he continued, laughter gone from his voice, which became intimidating, threatening, “I’m afraid it will prevent myself and Miss Stark from attending tonight’s event, after which I’ll be informing Mr. Euron Greyjoy, your director, that my brother and I will not only cancel our seats for this and future seasons in addition to selling our interest in the Greyjoy Opera Company for pennies, but we will also be unable to continue the Lannister Ballet Company’s partnership with King’s Landing Opera House. I’ll make sure he knows why this sad disruption in our companies’ relations has occurred.” The guards paled. “Oh,” Jaime added as an afterthought, “and one more thing: my father is quite fond of Miss Stark, and, I assure you, he’ll withdraw his funding when he hears how his favorite has been treated here.”

By the time Jaime had finished, the guards looked a lot less terrified of Lady than they did of their future, should any — gods forbid all — of Jaime’s threats come true. Euron Greyjoy was not only the best singer in Westeros, he was also a madman, for whom the Opera House meant more than the lives of the entire humanity combined. Sansa had often heard the Lannister brothers joke that, compared with Euron, the theater world had it easy with Aerys Targaryen. “The madman is as brutal as he is talented,” Jaime would say. Despite Euron’s madness and talent, however, the Royal Opera House was not nearly as popular as the LBC, and Euron’s theater drew considerable financial and marketing support from the partnership with its more successful counterpart in the ballet world. What Jaime essentially threatened was the total destruction of the Opera House.
“Ser Jaime,” one of the guards began pleadingly, “you must understand us, this is a wild animal — ”

Jaime interrupted. “I make myself personally responsible for any and all damage she may cause,” he said. “I’m sure there’s nothing more to be said.”

There was no more to be said, indeed, and the guards parted before them, allowing the three of them to walk inside without a hindrance.

Sansa released a small laugh. “I suppose if anyone could gain a direwolf admittance to an Opera House, it’s you,” she said.

“Well,” he answered, “if she’s allowed into the LBCB, there’s really no reason she cannot come here, too.”

One of the opera’s staff was passing by, and Jaime motioned for him to come over. When the young man approached, Jaime gave him couple hundred golden dragons, and asked:

“Do me a favor. Clear away all the chairs except for two from my box and bring in as many pillows as can be made available for the direwolf.”

Captivated by the sight of more money than he usually saw inside a week, the young man ran off to do Jaime’s bidding with unmatched zeal.

Sansa had occasion to laugh once more. “There you go again,” she giggled, not without pleasure, “just like when we dance on Baelor Square, acting as if the planet turns entirely and only for you.”

*With you on my arm, it really seems so,* he mused before replying:

“Would you rather have Lady be uncomfortable?”

“No,” she answered. “It’s not like I’m protesting. I’m merely making an observation,” she knew now how to tease him. Then, the image of the boy, whom Jaime had chosen to send on his errand, reappeared in her mind, and she smiled, realizing something else.

“Any particular reason you picked him?” She questioned in an off-hand manner.

He feigned incomprehension.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

She gave him a pointed look, which prompted him to ask:

“What conspiracy theories are going through that suspicious mind of yours?”

“It’s just that he seems to me the youngest and least well-dressed of the staff here, which makes me wonder if he isn’t a young singer trying to make ends meet while he strives to make a career. You could have asked one of the staff closer to our box to do the same, which would have been quicker, and make them richer by a few hundred golden dragons, which, by the way, you did not need to pay them — they all know who you are, they’d do what you asked without financial encouragement. Yet you picked him and probably paid his rent for the next month or two. And I think you did it because you noticed then the same things that have occurred to me only now.”

He sighed. She knew she was right. And she knew he would never admit it.
“Minx,” he said, “you’re spinning fairytales better than Osha, and that says something. Come, let’s make sure we aren’t entirely boorish and greet a few people. We can bet on how many heart attacks Lady will cause,” he added with pleased maliciousness.

Sansa shook her head a little, smiling at his stubborn refusal to own his good deeds, but let it go.

The elites did not take kindly to Lady at first, watching her with suspicion and fear while speaking to Jaime and Sansa. It was clear that most of them would have greatly liked to walk away but could not afford to give offense to a Lannister and a Stark even if they felt their lives were being put at risk. Lady, however, was making fast work of charming most of them. Their acquaintances relaxed especially when they noticed the ease with which Jaime interacted with the direwolf — if the animal did not maul a Lannister, of all people, they had less to fear. All the same, it would take them a while to get used to Lady, Sansa knew. She only hoped that she and Jaime would visit the opera often enough to give Lady a chance to turn herself into everyone’s favorite just as she had done at the LBC. The third bar bell demanded that the opera goers adjourn to their seats, and Jaime and Sansa, accompanied by Lady, made their way to the Lannister brothers’ box.

As the lights were dimmed, leaving them in the semi-darkness mediated by the illumination of the stage, Jaime felt more keenly than at any time previously that his self-control was beginning to snap. Her appearance was seducing him differently than it ever had before, as if by shape-shifting like some mythical creature, she meant to find that look which he could not resist. The red of her lips countered the innocence that usually clung to her, making that very innocence seem both illusive and erotic; yet the soft curls of her hair and the gentle, smiling eyes contradicted the lascivious red of her mouth. In this paradoxical fusing of guilelessness and the inviting, innocence was morphing into enticingness. He was to discover that seductiveness and purity were an intoxicating combination.

He should have suggested they went to dine instead, he now thought. Her lively mind would have offered him some distraction from his desires. When she looked the way she did that evening, sitting close to her in this stirring, intimate darkness, which shimmered with the uncertain lights of the stage, watching her irresistible form be teasingly, sporadically illuminated then concealed played dangerous tricks on his mind. The ease with which he could reach her was tempting him, and fighting this lure weakened him to every next wave of wanting. What was infinitely worse, his desperate craving beguiled him by whispering that, because of her inexperience and because of her kindness as well as their friendship, were he to reach for her, she may, perhaps, not push him away. It was this thought, borne of a longing, a craving, that made lust begin to overtake him. On its heels, came the thought that to take advantage of her kind disposition toward him and her trusting nature would be a monstrous theft. He left the box, rushing into the sobering, bright lights of the theater corridors.

His departure had broken into Sansa’s own daze. She, too, had been affected by being near him again and in this welcoming darkness. Although she had been listening to the jovial music of love that glided toward them from the stage, it had only reached her as a distant accompaniment to her own emotions. Perhaps her week-long separation from him had led her to forget a little the way her heart tended to beat wildly whenever they were alone, she speculated. Yet this did not quite explain the electricity that seemed to surround her with waves deceptively languid, then bite at her nerves, making her heartbeat erratic. The opera did not prove a powerful enough distraction that evening from the exciting closeness of their bodies in the darkness; the formal distance between their seats seemed to tease rather than separate them. Maybe, too, his choice of spending an evening with her while leaving his former lover to fend for herself had given Sansa a hope, which, though she did not dare consciously believe it, was expressing itself in an increasingly powerful yearning. There was also the awareness of her own beauty that she felt for the first time in her life, and it tickled her senses, encouraging her to want him more by letting her imagine with slightly greater certainty than before that she could make him want her in return. She had stolen a few glances at him under her lashes, noticing how still he had become. She could not even see him breathing. Once, when her
family and she had gone for a hiking trip beyond the Wall, she had seen a Northern tiger, white as snow with black stripes that marked his belongingness to the seven hells, lie in waiting as he hunted. The predator had gone as still as Jaime was now, not a muscle moving. When the tiger had jumped, its prey did not stand a chance. As the comparison had taken form in her mind, she stole another sidelong glance at her companion, wishing he would look at her with the same attuned intensity. She was no doe, she did not fear him; she wanted her appearance to bring his attention to her and hold it securely. Their friendship and their recent separation, along with the hope over which she was beginning to lose control as it fed her hungry dreams, was growing the confidence borne of trust and of the desperation of love. His sudden movement, breaking into her thoughts, had made her heart stumble in its turbulent marathon and, for a moment, she had hoped madly that he would move toward her. When, instead, he had left the box, she was confused, disappointed. She sat unmoving for what seemed like a single, if laborious, intake of breath, then followed him out. Lady trotted after her.

There was a distinct advantage to having such long legs as Jaime did, especially when they could be made to move so quickly, Sansa reflected as she looked right and left the length of an empty corridor. She had barely waited before going after him — and already, he was nowhere to be seen. Uncertain of the direction he had taken, she wandered the halls in search of him. She did not know the building well, having only been here once before, so despite her hasty steps, her progress was less quick than she might have wished. As she walked, she cursed her insensitivity. She should have proposed an alternative way to occupy their time after discovering Cersei’s visit. It could not have been pleasant for Jaime to watch an opera centered on a happy love story when he had just been reminded of the way his own affair had ended in more misery than she could imagine. Of course, he had rushed out before the first act was done — it hardly needed an explanation. The comedic, the absurd did not mix well with love when real, tragic endings were on one’s mind. At the same time, Sansa could not help cursing Cersei for showing up when she did and ruining what might have been a pleasant evening for herself and Jaime. Feeling guilty for having unintentionally rubbed salt into his wounds, Sansa was determined to restore his good humor before the night was done — they would go to one of those lovely sea-side restaurants and dine with a view of the dying sunset; they would speak for hours, as they so easily did; he would tease her — and they would laugh together. They could go dancing in Baelor Square afterwards… If only she could find him! If it were any other person, Sansa would have considered the possibility that they had left without her; but with Jaime, she felt certain that, no matter how much he disliked the opera or what weighed on his mind, he would not leave her alone without seeing her safely home. Knowing him to be a man not only of generous heart but also of a rare nobility, she trusted him now with justification where she had previously trusted him merely on instinct.

She finally found him standing on one of the remote balconies of the great hall, staring down onto the passersby in the street, who enjoyed the warm evening in the historical center. His face was set in that impenetrable mask, which she had learned to recognize as a sign that his mind was in turmoil he was striving to conceal. She had occasion then to curse his sister once more.

“Lady, of course, made her presence known first by gliding her head under his hand.

“I must say,” Jaime stated with light mockery as he patted the wolf, “that for a direwolf you’re a shamelessly bad tracker.”

For a second, Sansa thought he had meant herself, then laughed.

“She is called ‘Lady’ for a reason,” the mistress defended her pet.

Coming to stand beside him, Sansa glanced onto the street before turning to him. He was facing her now, the sardonic half-smile as ever present on his lips, but his eyes were a little different than usual:
the irises as though filled with a soft, liquid flame; if wildfire could glow as gently as a candle, it
glowed now in his eyes.

“I’m sorry — ” he began, but she interrupted him by saying:

“You don’t need to apologize.” She paused. “I think I understand.”

For a moment so brief it could almost claim no existence, she saw suspicion and hope flash in his
eyes.

“I doubt you understand,” he finally said, sounding assured and relieved in equal measure. And
before she could insist, he added: “And that is just as well. I’ve no wish to spoil the opera for you —
”

But she broke into his speech yet again:

“Actually I’m glad of the interruption: I’m starving,” she said and found, to her surprise, that it was
no more than the truth. “I forgot to eat,” she confessed, smiling sheepishly. “So if you feel like
grabbing a bite, you might actually be saving my life. Besides, it’s not the last performance of the
opera,” she added almost shyly.

He chuckled.

“Well, I could not leave you to die of starvation, minx,” he said. “And, you know, my mother — ”

“Yes-yes,” she interrupted him for the third time, “your mother didn’t raise you to leave a damsel in
distress, I know. Honestly, I’m loosing track of the number of times you felt compelled to mention
this to me.”

“I’m amazed I could mention anything at all to you, seeing as you hardly allow me to finish a single
sentence,” he rebuked her mockingly and she rolled her eyes, for all that she blushed at this fair
reproach. “And in this case,” Jaime added in vindication, “you guess incorrectly. My mother always
warned me that the most dangerous mammal on the face of this earth is a hungry woman — and I’ve
never had cause to doubt the truth of her words. So let’s get you something to eat before you turn
into a direwolf: I’m not certain that even my influence is sufficient to prevail upon the staff here to
allow two direwolves to roam the opera house.”

She laughed at this, and her laughter turned into a loving smile when he offered her his arm. Thus
paired, they made their way to the exit. They had almost crossed the threshold of the imposing
entrance, when a strong male voice called out:

“Jaime! Why in gods’ name are you leaving so soon?! Is my opera too fine for your coarse taste?”

Even through her fury, Sansa felt Jaime tense and release a frustrated sigh.

“The Crone preserve us,” he muttered quietly before turning to face the intruder. Following his gaze
to the grand stairs, Sansa saw a strongly built man coming quickly toward them. When he neared
sufficiently for her to make out his face, she was immediately convinced she had never seen a human
being so closely resembling a tomcat. Although the man was not corpulent by any means, he
possessed a chubby face, an impression strengthened by the cut of his closely-clipped mustache that
morphed into sideburns, leaving his chin shaven and underlining the roundness of his countenance.
Oddly circular eyes, which were as disconcerting to contemplate as the eyes of a feral cat, were
focused on Jaime, and for all that a broad cheshire smile was plastered on the face, the overall
impression the stranger gave was one of malevolence and nasty humor.

Jaime returned that smile with one so cold and cutting, it seemed to lower the temperature in the
“Euron,” he said in a tone that announced his displeasure for all that he was committed to observe civility, “since when do you watch from the sidelines? Not seeing you on the stage, I assumed you were touring.”

Jaime’s voice implied quite heavily that he would have much preferred if Euron Greyjoy had been lost somewhere in Old Valyria.

“I cannot allow the public to see me every evening,” the man answered without hesitation. “For one thing, they don’t deserve it; for another, the best delicacies are to be tasted in moderation,” he finished on a note of lasciviousness.

Sansa manifestly disliked the man. There was about him an infernally uncomfortable energy. An air of unpleasant unpredictability surrounded him, making her wish dearly they had left before he could catch up with them. As if sensing her unflattering thoughts, Euron Greyjoy became aware of her, it seemed, for the first time:

“But who’s this?” He asked Jaime with a mixture of surprise and displeasure.

Jaime made the introductions. As he did, he placed a hand lightly on Sansa’s back, supporting her at the waist. The gesture did not escape Euron, who made a show of kissing Sansa’s hand — a courtesy that she wished she could have escaped. She did not enjoy the feeling of that whiskers-framed mouth on her skin and withdrew her hand as quickly as she possibly could. The acquaintance made, Euron returned to the subject that interested him:

“But why are you in such a hurry to leave?”

Jaime sighed shortly, annoyance plain in his every movement.

“We’ve had a change of plans, but you needn’t worry: we’ll return, since Sansa has a particular interest in this performance.”

It was as superficially polite as it was in reality scathing: not pledging his own interest, which was so adamantly demanded by the intruder, Jaime pointed out that the opinion that counted was that of the very person whom Euron ignored. The latter began another interpolation, but Jaime interrupted:

“We must be going, Euron, and you have better attend to your other guests. I’m sure there’ll be no lack of them.”

And before his insistent host could protest, Jaime gave a curt bow, which was more dismissive than respectful, and ushered himself and Sansa outside. As they descended the stairs (Jaime congratulating Sansa mockingly upon her finally meeting the worst psychopath of King’s Landing art scene), she turned to look back at Euron Greyjoy — and found on his face an expression of hatred and resentment that she had before seen only in one other face: that of Cersei Lannister. But why he should regard them with such dislike, Sansa in that moment could not tell.

They were glad to find refuge in Jaime’s car and gladder still to sit down at a table on the terrace of a quay restaurant. Their conversation flowed easily, more energetically than usual even, since in talking, they each sought to find a distraction from the desires they felt compelled to subdue. The exquisite food disappeared from their plates in congress with the darkness dining on the sun and the horizon, and the candles were lit on the terrace, the street lights gently soothed the twilight. As if it called to them, the darkness guided their steps to the Sept of Baelor. It seemed they had only taken a light stroll to finish their conversation, but they found themselves on the piazza quite without
realizing they had both walked there. The musicians were playing, the couples dancing, and it
seemed almost a transgression for the two of them not to share a dance — after all, it felt as though
the musicians had come here especially for them, that the stones lay still for their feet to dance on
their smooth surface, and that the night itself had come exclusively to bring them here. Their
conversation had halted when they had realized they had reached Baelor Square, and he extended his
hand to her wordlessly. She took it, noticing the small smile that tugged at the corners of his lips, the
happiness that glimmered like humor in his eyes. Returning his smile with one of her own, she knew
that her eyes glowed with love and pleasure. Her heart skipped a beat as he drew her toward him, his
right hand claiming her waist, his left one engulfing her right. Instead of placing her left hand
gingerly on his shoulder, she let it wander over the hard muscles, traveling from his elbow up his arm
before reaching its resting place where his shoulder met his neck. He had watched the gesture in
silent fascination, his face concealed from hers as he turned to look at her hand gliding up his arm.
When their gazes met anew, the naturally cold colors of their eyes were filled with a warmth that was
part happiness, part hope.

Because they had been rehearsing the dance of Tanea and Nissa, Jaime and Sansa had not danced
together since before she had left for the North. Their senses starved for each other by their
separation and the physical distance the training schedule had imposed on them, in this moment of
their bodies locking for a waltz — an embrace both formal and intimate, walling off the world and
creating one just within the circle of their arms and bodies — the longing that had overtaken them in
the darkness of the theater box was beginning to feed on their dancing pose. As they moved, joined
in elegant synchronization, the familiar feeling of dancing together was made new as an unusual
alertness seeped into the ease of their closeness, as electricity sparked and ebbed in their shared
heartbeat. By tacit agreement, they used this socially acceptable excuse to be in each other's arms
without admitting the truth, pretending as if they danced because they were dancers, and not that they
held each other because they wished they were lovers.

Although they had been lost in their own ephemeral world for a while, in a time that seemed too
instant, the musicians betrayed them yet again, putting a stop to their waltzing. Jaime and Sansa
retraced their steps to the quay, their conversation intermittent, their silences filled with muted hope
on her side, with amused resignation to heartache on his. Amidst her absence and her ridiculous
possessiveness over Lady, Sansa had been deprived of being with Jaime like this, alone and in
harmony, for too long. As time played against her, she felt stubbornly determined to take more of it,
as one may grab a handful of water from a quickly passing stream. She came to sit on one of the
waterfront benches where he joined her.

As they had been dancing in that warm night, the half-imagined, romantic dream of a kiss as a
physical declaration of love, which had risen in her childhood from the medieval romantic tales, had
turned more powerfully than ever before into a wanting that was as real as the man who sparked it.
She loved him, yes, so much so she felt her love was spilling from her heart into her soul because the
former could not contain it all. But she was beginning to want more from him than emotional
reciprocity. She now wished to capture his attention, to make him want her, not only in the hopes of
winning his heart — but because desire had rushed into her body on the heels of her love, making
her every nerve strain, almost shake, with intensity. She loved him. And she wanted him. Her
inexperience was not ignorance, and her enthrallment with him was burning through the timidity and
the restraints of her upbringing, arousing curiosity, arousing her flesh. Feeling her skin burn, grateful
for the shadows, she sought to cool herself and let the thick silk shawl drop from her shoulders. The
night air eagerly caressed and cooled her overheated skin. Although the gesture was not planned, she
noticed that Jaime’s eyes had followed it closely, and her heart halted. For the first time, she had felt
as sure as she could be that he had noticed her — not as a friend or as a dancer — but as a woman.
And her breath caught in gladness. Before she could savor the way his gaze went over her, his eyes
had reached her right shoulder — and narrowed dangerously. Anger was so utterly the last emotion
she had expected from him in that moment, that she watched him in confusion. His fingers brushed her shoulder so gently, her wildly drumming blood nearly drowned out the feeling. For all the gentleness of his touch, he looked as though he was preparing to murder someone.

“Sansa,” his quiet voice was strained and his use of her name indicated his concern. “Please tell me why your shoulder is black with bruises.”

_Oh, that._ She had forgotten about this reminder of her first attempt to fire a gun. She laughed, and, intoxicated with new confidence, she dared bring her hand to his jaw, urging his eyes to hers. Their faces were so close, she could distinguish between the streaks of his irises, she felt their breaths mingle and dance as they themselves had. Smiling, she said:

“It’s nothing. My sister taught me how to shoot a gun. It’s just a bruise from recoil. It’ll fade soon.”

His eyebrows lifted and he looked back to her shoulder, as if to ascertain whether he believed her explanation.

“It’s nothing,” she repeated quietly, her hand still resting on his hard jaw. He looked back to her, and she was keen to lose herself in his eyes, in holding his face so close to hers. What an exhilarating luxury. She wondered that he had not broken free of her hand. As his eyes focused on her face, taking her in, she observed him watching her, entranced by him. The comparison with the Northern tiger returned to her mind as he studied her, and with jubilance she thought that finally his gaze had focused on her with that intensity which she sought. She was fascinated, exhilarated by feeling that she held his attention so completely. For once, she was all he could see — as she always ever saw him. Watching his face at such close range, she found it easier to peer beneath the mask that even now lay on his features. There was in his eyes that glow, that gentle flame of wildfire, which she had seen earlier in the theater, which she had seen again as they danced. He seemed determined but unable to pull away. Without realizing it, she moved closer to him, pulled by the magnetism over which she had no power, no learned control. At her movement, an almost imperceptible change came over his face, and some untempered recklessness entered his eyes. His gaze shifted to her lips slowly, studying her mouth, and Sansa forgot how to breathe. In that moment, she would have given up everything, would have let the whole world burn around them, if only he would kiss her. Time, space had all ceased as she held her breath, her being narrowed to one incoherent prayer as her own eyes shifted between his eyes and his lips.

_Kiss me. I love you. Kiss me._

_**Love me.**_

Suddenly, her phone erupted into ringing, shattering the gentle peacefulness around them, breaking the magic spell, shattering dreams. Sansa thought it strange, now that she was aware of its existence, that the phone should ring at all — she distinctly remembered turning on silent mode when they had reached the opera house. She looked at the screen. Her sister’s face smiled on it. That was strange too, since she had a specific melody for Arya, and this was not it. Although she was tempted to throw her phone into the gently beating surf, she could not.

“Sorry,” she apologized to Jaime, “I’ll take this very quickly. It’s my sister.” She picked up. “Hey, Arya, what’s up?”

“What’s up?!” Her sister shouted on the other end. “I had Gendry hack your phone so that it would ring, that’s what’s up!”

_“That is why it’s behaving so strangely!.. Did you tell him to change the melody too?...”_ Sansa asked distractedly, not having yet caught up to her sister’s agitation.
“I had him make it ring in the loudest way possible!.. You dumbass, have you looked at the clock?!
It’s two fucking am, crazy! And you aren’t picking up your phone for hours — AGAIN! I’ve been
covering for the whole evening for you but it couldn’t last! Seriously, it’s like you want dad to come
down to King’s Landing and wreck havoc!... Jon is looking at plane tickets already, and Robb is
threatening to come, too!”

“Ah come on! Can’t I spend one evening without this persecution?!!”

“I just had my boyfriend break all sorts of laws to save your sorry ass and that’s the thanks I get?!!”

Arya might have said more, but there was shuffling, and suddenly, Sansa heard Gendry’s apologetic
voice. Unlike her sister, he was calm and respectful.

“Sansa, good evening. I’m sorry I hacked your phone. Arya was very insistent. I want to assure you
that absolutely none of your personal data has been in any way compromised — ”

There was more shuffling as Arya regained possession of the phone, grumbling, “Gendry, who
cares! She brought it on herself! And why would you go on about this personal data shit?! It’s not
like my sister would suspect you of identity theft, for Stranger’s sake!” Having schooled her
boyfriend, she turned onto Sansa: “Now, San! Call mom and dad now so that they calm down!”

Frustrated by this untimely interruption, Sansa smiled wickedly — and with a little vindictiveness.

“I’ve a better idea. Tell them all you’ve spoken to me and that I’m fine.”

“San! No! Don’t you dare do this! I don’t want to — ”

“Arya, be nice! I don’t want to have a family discussion right now!”

Suddenly, Arya quieted down.

“Wait, are you still with Jaime?”

“Yeah, I’m still with Jaime.”

Sansa smiled at him as she said it, noticing that he was considerably surprised by her words.

“Oh.” Arya seemed to realize she had ruined a moment. “Well,” she tried making amends, “tell him I
said hi.”

Sansa smiled and turned to Jaime again.

“My sister says hi.”

His face expressed complete bewilderment. Instincts of politeness kicked in, however, and he made
the appropriate reply.

“He says hi back.” Sansa told her sister.

“Did he like the opera?”

“We both liked the opera, Arya.”

“Are you dancing on Baelor Square?”

“We did, but the musicians have long since left. We are sitting by the sea talking, and you are totally
interrupting. So tell mom, dad, Jon, and everyone else that you spoke with me and that I’m fine. Ask Ygritte to help out if you need — she’ll at least smooth Jon over, and I think you can handle mom and dad. Ok? I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Love ya, mean it, bye!..”

With that, she hung up. But there was no turning back time, no bringing his face back so close to hers. He was sitting next to her still, but not leaning over her as before and it felt like a great distance now. She would be left to wonder if she had dreamt the look she thought she had read in his eyes, to question — delirious with hope yet filled with doubt — whether, had Arya only not called, he might have kissed her.

He was the first to break the silence. “So, tell me, how come your sister is supposed to cover for you when you’re out so late with me of all people?” He asked with dry humor, sarcasm twinkling in his eyes. The question really seemed to interest him.

Sansa laughed a little nervously, struggling to adjust to the shattering of this thick cloud of intimacy and anticipation — how had it so paradoxically, so swiftly dissipated, as if torn when their bodies moved away from each other?

“She’s… Well, I told her about you,” she admitted. “Not everything, of course,” she added hastily, not wishing him to think that she had gossiped away his secrets. “I told her you were not at all what people say. How you supported me when we first started working on the ballet, how much it meant to me; how you helped me become a much better dancer… I told her that in all the time we’ve spent together, you’ve always been considerate and kind to me. She knows I’m safe with you, no matter the hour.”

“She knows I’m safe with you, no matter the hour.”

The words rang in Jaime’s ears like accusation, even though he knew she had not meant it as such. He had wanted to answer, “then your sister is an idiot.” He was the last person with whom Sansa was safe. Because he was beginning to lose his mind when with her. Good gods, what had come over him? If the phone had not rung, he could have been mad enough to kiss her. Some spell had overtaken him, eviscerating his will and better judgement as he watched her lips. He did not know when the entrancement had enveloped him so completely that he had lost his grip on sanity — was is when they had sat in the darkness of the theater box, with songs of love drifting to them? Or when they had danced and he had been powerless to resist holding her close to him, wishing he could bring her body closer still to his? Was is when he had watched the silk shawl fall away from her shoulders, revealing tantalizing snow-white skin? Or when he brushed his fingers over her shoulder and felt her hand on his face? But perhaps the true moment when he lost his battle with desire, which suddenly felt like a battle with her, this embodiment of unearthly temptation, was when she had moved nearer to him, the motion a gesture of trust, an invitation to be near her, a seduction without artifice? He was so close to her, he was enveloped in her scent, he could feel her breath on his face. Her lips called to him, caught his eyes, and he was drawn by a force so entirely more powerful than his reason or his conscience. He would have given everything he had, his life besides, to be able to touch his hand to her face, to trace her jaw and her neck, to reach his fingers into the rich, unruly flames of her hair. He would have set the whole world on fire, if the universe’s conflagration would have given him the chance to steal one kiss from her soft, sweet, hypnotizing lips. Oh, he would have so gladly died for one taste of her inebriating mouth, for one drink of her warm breath. And had the phone not rung, he might have been mad enough to do it. He could barely shake the desire even now, because in his mind lingered a hope so cruel in its temptation that he could not let himself examine it, knowing that if it were true, all his best intentions to stay away from her would go straight to hell — and he would follow soon. The cruel hope, the infernal lure, was that he thought he had glimpsed in her eyes, her face, her gestures, her very body that he could win her. For the first
time since their acquaintance, for the first time since he suspected that he loved her, there were
reckless thoughts in his mind; they shattered the darkness in him like bolts of lightning, leaving him
in greater blackness upon their extinction. He considered for the first time that, perhaps, he could
make her his. If she wanted him a little, he could perhaps seduce her; he would lay the world at her
feet — and perhaps, she might not even hate him for daring to dream of her; maybe, in time, she
might come to love him a little — what he would not give for an ounce of her love! If there ever was
a woman capable of momentarily overlooking his past, the sordidness of his life, it was this utterly
good, utterly forgiving girl. But it would be in vain. Sooner or later, she would see him as the world
saw him; he could hardly expect to charm her forever into ignoring reality. And she would regret
ever loving him at all, would resent giving any part of herself to him. He doubted that he could live
even for a moment in the heaven of her making, since he could not imagine that she — who was so
pure and good, for all her mercy — could ever be truly able to forgive him his past. Oh, what a
luckless fool he was! At least, he could still laugh at himself.

Sansa did not know what was it in her words that made him laugh, a slightly disconcerting, cold
sound, before he turned to look at the sea, his profile sharp against the darkness. She did not know
what to make of this sudden change in him. It pained her. Not even beginning to understand what
brought it on, for once knowing she would be unable to guess if she tried, she sought to fill the
silence with her voice, as if the sound she made in echo of the gentle surf could soothe him.

“‘My sister and I were never close before,” she began telling him.
“I don’t remember you mentioning her before,” he agreed. He sounded oddly distant.

“It was because I never knew what to make of her. She’s so different from me. She’s not at all
feminine — she loves guns, and hunts, and knives, and skinning dead animals — all the things that
make my stomach turn. She enjoys pushing her body to the limits as she explores the Northern
forests; she cares little for the discomforts of camping, she loves being outdoors in a primal,
inconvenient state. We used to have so few things in common — at least, I used to think so. But after
seeing the bond between you and Tyrion… I… It pushed me to reach out to Arya, because I realized
that I envied you two a little, that I wanted something like that. And I’m so glad that I did! It turned
out we actually have many things in common, and we can talk for hours at a time. And I… I trust her
in a way I don’t trust my girlfriends or even my brother Jon. Or even my mother. It’s hard to
explain… It’s like she’s — ”

“Your accomplice,” Jaime finished for her, turning to contemplate her with a small smile. “She’ll go
to hell with you, not because she thinks it’s a good idea, but because she must be there for the ride. I
know the feeling — it’s always been this way with Tyrion and me.”

Sansa smiled broadly at him.

“Yes, that’s exactly right. That’s how she might have put it, too.”

Seeing that her talk of Arya and Tyrion had melted whatever coldness had seeped into Jaime, Sansa
went on:

“It’s actually funny,” she said, seeking to find another subject that would distract him from dark
thoughts. “My sister has certain dreams in common with you.”

That seemed to surprise and amuse him.

“Does she now? I confess I never dreamed of skinning dead animals.”

Sansa laughed, feeling the tension drain away from her at the sign of his returning good humor.
Hesitantly, she decided there was no harm in revealing Arya’s aspiration to him, especially since if
anyone could help her it was Jaime.

“She dreams of becoming a sword-fighter,” Sansa said quietly. Jaime certainly had not expected that. His eyes were alight with curiosity. “I got her a membership to a sword-gym, but we had an unpleasant incident there right away.” Noticing his eyes narrow as he suspiciously looked to her shoulder, she giggled. “No, I did not get my bruise there: I know it may be difficult to imagine me with a gun, but I did try to shoot one, and I have the scars to prove it — or at least the bruises. Anyway, I made sure a friend would go with her when she went to train there, but I asked father to find her a teacher, who could train her at home. I hope he does that before she gets into trouble. She has an awfully belligerent temper, my sister.”

Jaime, who had been following her narration with concentration, clearly pondering the best way to help, as she knew he would, commented:

“Sword-gyms aren’t safe for a young woman, not even in the South and certainly not in the North. If Cella ever stepped foot in a place like that, I would have set it on fire and locked her in her room for the rest of her life.”

Sansa exploded into laughter at his absurd announcement, knowing that while he could disintegrate the gym itself, he was thoroughly incapable of depriving his daughter of anything — least of all the freedom to make choices.

“When Cella grows up,” she warned him in great amusement, “I’m afraid you’ll discover that locking young women up is not nearly as easy as it sounds.”

“Short of that, I would have trained her myself or found her a good teacher, one I trusted.”

Now that she believed very well.

“It’s what I hope dad will do,” Sansa said. “Although sometimes he takes so long to make a decision… Especially since he knows mother doesn’t approve of Arya’s penchant for masculine hobbies.”

“What does it matter, so long as she’s happy and reasonably safe?”

Sansa shrugged. She asked herself that, too. She used to accept her mother’s prescription of what was and was not appropriate occupations for young women without question, since it aligned with her own natural inclinations; consequently, she also assumed that Arya’s dislike for these activities was a manifestation of her divergence from good womanhood. Now, however, she saw things differently and she agreed with Jaime. What amused her, however, was the realization that this Southern man was far more supportive of women following their paths than her mother, a Northern woman, was. It suddenly occurred to her that Jaime’s thinking was actually peculiarly close to her father’s — she would not have been surprised at all if Ned Stark had put it in the same words: who cares what she does so long as she’s happy and reasonable safe? Cella was lucky to have a father like Jaime, Sansa reflected. Myrcella did not yet realize it, because she had not yet had cause to draw on his support in that way, but one day, when some man or older woman told the girl there was something she could not do because of her gender, her father would tell her the most important thing she would ever hear: that she could do whatever the hell she wanted, and that he would keep her safe to pursue her dreams. Contemplating Myrcella made Sansa stumble onto a different train of thought. She remembered the discussion between Cersei and Jaime that she had interrupted — and something else from her conversation with him long ago, after Tywin’s gala.

“Do you know what she said? That if I so much as breathed a word of our affair to anyone, she would accuse me of rape, and I would never see my children again.”
Sansa had no doubt that, in the altercation over the kids, Cersei had threatened Jaime with this type of accusation. It was in Sansa’s power, however, to counter those claims. And for all that she hated to bring up this subject, she needed Jaime to know that in her, he had an ally — no matter what was needed.

“Jaime…” she began in a small, serious voice, which made him watch her in anticipation that she was about to breach some unpleasant subject. “I want to tell you something. I’m sure I’ll stumble over the words, but bear with me please. You… I think you need to hear this.” She saw that his face was taut with some unreadable emotion, that tension had gathered in his entire body; but he waited in silence for her to speak. She took a deep breath. “I understand from what little I heard that you and your sister are… arguing over the children.” He looked surprised at the direction of her speech; whatever he had anticipated her to say, this had not made the list. Nevertheless, Sansa persevered. “I imagine that it may all even come to legal disputes and to courts. And you’ve told me that she’s threatened before to accuse you of… Of forcing yourself on her... To keep the children and shift the condemnation of society completely onto you.” The silence hung thick and tense around them. She took another deep breath. “And I want you to know that I will testify on your behalf. I did… I did see you two, all those months back.” She thought she was going to suffocate, but she forced the words out anyway. “And I’ve seen enough to know that…” She swallowed hard, forcing her throat to work. “I’ve seen enough to know that your interactions have been driven by a mutual affection. And I… I’ll tell the entire damn world just that.” Having overcome this most difficult part, she lunged forward, talking rapidly. “My family’s reputation is such that no one will dare question the truth of my words. With my testimony, she will not be able to sustain her outrageous claims. I know I can be of little help otherwise, but I need you to know that, at least, I can help protect you from these distasteful accusations.” Suddenly vehement, enraged, and filled with indignation, she added fiercely: “I won’t let anyone drag your name through the mud again. Not her. Not anyone.”

He looked at her, bewildered, his feelings written plainly on his face. For once, the mask was gone, and she could see deeply into the turmoil of his eyes. There was so much raw emotion in them, feelings so primeval there was no names for them.

She sat next to him, small and loyal and fierce, ready to stake her family reputation and her own good name on him. And for all that he was overcome with the acutest sense that he deserved none of the devotion or the unwavering support she offered, he was overwhelmed with her offering. He may not deserve it, but he craved it with a painful intensity. He had no right to her loyalty but as she gave it, he realized he would kill and die to keep it. Her words had affected him more than he could ever dare say. That was what she did: she moved him with her words, as though she let her fingers dance on the strings of a harp, instead of holding his soul in her hands. Her ability to affect him as strongly as she did both terrified him and drew him inevitably to her.

When she had first started speaking, he had half-expected she would put some distance between them, reminding him he did not and could not have any claim on her. He had not dreamed she would say that she would stand by his side amidst the brutal rage of such a scandal as the one she envisioned. The last time the sea of public hatred and condemnation had engulfed him, there had been only two people who stood by him — Tyrion and their father. The idea that she — a slip of a girl bred on propriety and righteousness — would stay at his side to fend off the whips of public castigation seemed to split his soul in two. How could she have surprised him into loving her more, when he thought there was no more of his heart left to give, that she had taken all of it? And, what was infinitely worse, how was it possible for her to make him wish that she were his when he so adamantly tried telling himself she could not be? He wanted her with a blinding intensity, knowing he had no right to her. The chasm that separated her sweet, pristine soul from his bitter one was too great — but it made him crave her all the more. He could not fathom that someone so honest, so good, so brave as she could be real. She had left him speechless, drowning in an insistent, impossible yearning. He loved her, feeling that more than his heart, that his very soul belonged to her — down
to its total darkness, and that every ray of light that had ever crossed its plane had borne, would always bear, her name. He loved her. Smiling with the tenderest emotion he had ever felt, he took one of her hands gently into his own and brought his lips to the back of her hand. For once, he could not trust himself to speak. He took a deep breath, feeling the scent of her skin fill his lungs — it was like breathing spring. Reluctantly, he let go of her.

“I’ve made many mistakes in my life, Sansa,” he told her quietly, and Sansa was stunned by the softness, the gentleness of his voice. There was a hint of melancholy in his tone and a little smile, as though he was laughing at himself without bitterness. “It occurs to me now that I am going to pay for them the most bittersweet tax known to man.” She did not understand him, wondering why, when speaking of retribution fate had in store for him, he looked at her, who would gladly give him her heart, mind, body, and soul if only he wanted them. He went on. “There is, however, one mistake in particular that makes me feel the fool.” She was confused, waiting for him to clarify his enigmatic words. He did. “The mistake was that, when you had first come to the LBC, and into my life, I did not have the sense to be grateful.” He chuckled softly, his eyes warm and gentle. “I am now. It’s important for anyone, and especially someone like me, to know there is goodness and honor and courage embodied almost abstractly in a handful of unique people. I’ve not met one before you. I’m glad that I have now. Glad and grateful.”

I only wish I had met you sooner. But I could not have met you soon enough for your to save me.

She could have cried at his words. To her, he was the embodiment of someone good, and honorable, and courageous — and it broke her heart that he did not see it.

“I’ve always felt I was destined to come here, South,” she said. “I’ve always felt it was fate for me to dance. And now I know for sure.”

I was meant to come to you, she thought. I was meant to love you. And to learn to dance with my heart — for you.

He smiled at her in a way people hardened by life smile at youthful idealism. It was clear to her he had not guessed her meaning. Perhaps, it was for the better, though now she was not sure.

“Let’s get you home,” he told her. “Lest your sister sends the Northern Guard down upon us,” he added, winking.

They were quiet as he drove her home, settling into one of those inundating silences that vibrate with emotion. As he hit the breaks gently in front of her apartment building, she looked to it and then back to him, smiling. She felt at home, at peace. She only wished she did not have to leave him.

“I’m so glad to be back South,” she told him, because her entire being was animated by that truth.

“Did you miss King’s Landing, then? How un-Northern of you,” he teased her lightly.

She smiled, her eyes shining.

“I did. So much. I missed everyone at the LBC. I... I missed you.” She paused, as confessions of love melted on her tongue, not to be voiced just yet. She leaned toward him and kissed him on the cheek. “Good night, Jaime.”

She left the car and walked into the building. After closing the entrance door behind her, she turned to watch his black sports car tear off as he drove away.

I love you.
Maybe, one day…

And she went upstairs, the thought sweeter for being left unfinished — unspecified like hope itself.

Chapter End Notes

At almost 20K words, this is the longest chapter I have ever published. I hope you enjoyed it!

Also, I will posting a few chapters from a shorter fanfic I couldn't help but start writing. Not to worry, however: I will balance it with Dancing for You with no detriment to either one. It will be called Forgetful Dreamers, and I hope you check it out! XOXOXO

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!