**I Became the Daughter and the Son**

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**I Became the Daughter and the Son**

by **GilraenDernhelm**

Summary

A brand new Arya/Jaime story, separate from 'Be the Lightning in Me,' and an apology to readers offended/pissed off by the ending of 'Field of Fire.' Jaime, still in possession of both his hands, escapes the Starks and rejoins Lord Tywin, who has been amusing himself at Harrenhal for the past four years. There, he meets Father's cupbearer, a girl who would like nothing better than to stick a knife in his back.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

The air at Harrenhal was damp, muggy and rank with the stench of rotting corpses. The closer one drew to Father’s solar, the worse the smell became, and when Jaime pushed open the door and entered the room, the wood groaning beneath his dirty fingers, he smirked at how little the world had changed.

Father was standing at the window; tall, proud and silent as the screams of tortured men rose out of the mist that was pouring into the room like incense. He looked up as Jaime entered, came forward when he approached, but still he did not speak; nothing so small as a flicker of his eyes or an intake of his breath implying that he was surprised or relieved to see his son.

*What did you expect?* Jaime sneered to himself, *that he’d burst into tears, embrace you and praise all the gods that you’re alive?*

*You fool. You never learn.*

Father grasped his shoulder.

‘I am pleased to see you alive, Jaime.’

Jaime grinned.

‘I am equally pleased to see that you haven’t keeled over yet, dear father. Got any wine?’

They stood together in the shadows by the window, goblets clutched in their hands; Jaime relishing the feeling of heat and spice on his tongue as his father remained silent, saying nothing for a long while.

Father hadn’t aged a day. No more lines on his face, no more white in his hair than the previous time Jaime had seen him; and as usual, only his ice-blue eyes seemed alive – well, half-alive – something mighty slumbering in their depths that would awaken only when threatened.

‘We received word of your escape three weeks ago,’ Father ventured, ‘I have had my men searching for you since then.’

‘An excellent idea,’ Jaime conceded, flippantly raising his goblet, ‘I wonder you didn’t think of it before.’

‘Your common sense will answer that question –’

‘Will it?’

‘– and there will be no more discussion on the matter.’

Father’s hand was perfectly steady as he raised his goblet to his lips, but his eyes flickered away from Jaime and outwards into the mist; intently studying the white and the grey that concealed leagues of melted stone and misery beneath them.

*He feels guilty,* Jaime realised, *as he should do, the old bastard. He allowed me to rot away, wrapped in chains and covered in my own shit, for four years. And not so much as a rescue attempt or an offer of ransom.*

*Pride?*
Caution, probably. Caution against recklessness; against doing something rash that would cost too many men.

Bullshit. If Father had been the Starks’ prisoner, I would have sacrificed every last one of my men to get him back, the gods take the consequences. I would not have let six months pass, let alone four years.

Father’s face had softened slightly, and for a moment, Jaime saw the flecks of gold in his eyes burn bright with life; with something like understanding of what his son had thought and felt in that moment; with something like…love.

But then a freezing gust of wind swept mercilessly into the room, restoring the gold to a pale, infernal flame, and Father looked away from him as a servant girl of perhaps four or five-and-ten entered without knocking, a pile of scrolls nested in the crook of her arm, a heap of letters clutched in her hand.

‘What took you so long?’ Father demanded.

‘The stupid steward kept saying he’d only give me your letters in exchange for a kiss,’ the girl replied angrily, ‘when I refused, he squealed so loud that Qyburn had to be called.’

Father glared at her.

‘We have spoken of this, girl. Only peasants settle their disputes by brawling.’

The girl glared back at him.

‘Forgive me, my lord. I’d forgotten that we only resort to rape and murder in this castle.’

As they continued to argue about the steward, Jaime almost laughed aloud in disbelief; both at the girl’s impertinence, and at his Father’s evident unwillingness to punish it with his usual enthusiasm. He could not think why. Her lack of refinement and docility aside, the girl was the most extraordinary-looking creature Jaime had ever seen; her hair cut short like a boy’s, her gangly limbs well-hidden in a nondescript jerkin and breeches; and he sighed at how typical it was of Father to employ his first female servant in forty years and not even be capable of finding a pretty one. You’d think the old bastard would welcome some amusement in his twilight years.

‘Are there any letters of importance?’ Father asked imperiously.

‘Yes, my lord,’ the girl replied, her eyes shifting away from him and falling on Jaime for the first time, ‘there are two from –’

Jaime’s heart was mauled in his chest as the girl’s eyes met his, her face becoming the colour of the mist. Silence rushed into the gap left by her words like a sword amputating a limb, before resonance, vibration and noise returned, vaster and harsher than they had been before. The sound the parchment made as it fell from her arms to the floor was like the sound of a mountain range crumbling to dust, and Jaime gasped aloud as the girl’s gaze impaled and suffocated him, the ashen northern mist of her grey eyes filling his lungs with poison and screaming out at him in pain and hatred and disgust.

She stood like a wild animal in the path of a crossbow; her teeth bared, her muscles taunt; knowing that she should run, realising that it was too late.

And suddenly he was remembering Ned Stark on the day King’s Landing fell; the expression in his eyes identical, his lip curling in just the same way as he beheld the body of the Mad King, and Jaime sitting silent on the Iron Throne, wearing his red cloak. His white cloak. His red.
Winterfell. Of course. Winterfell.

He remembered her being shorter and uglier. But then he hadn’t really being paying attention at the time.

‘Father,’ Jaime said, ‘what in seven hells are you doing with Arya Stark?’
The girl threw herself across the room and knocked him over, ripping a knife from her belt and plunging it downwards to his exposed throat. Jaime blocked the blow with one hand, seized her belt with the other, and slammed her hard to the ground beneath him; his thighs crushing hers, his hands pinning her arms to the floor as she struggled ferociously to free herself. Somewhere in the background, Father was shouting for his guards, and the girl was shrieking like a demon about her little brother and that wretched tower and Cersei, spittle flying into Jaime’s face.

As he heard the guards enter the room, Jaime waited for his usual justification of that particular act (‘the things I do for love’) to settle in on his heart and banish any thought of his being remotely to blame for Bran Stark’s fall; but found, to his dismay, that it did not come. Abandoned by his own memory, he was armourless against her anger, her hatred sharper and more painful than any blow she could have dealt him.

Her eyes were horrifying to look upon. He had never seen anger so powerful, not even in the eyes of grown men; and he had never seen pain so deep, not even in the eyes of dying ones. He tried to tear his gaze away, but he could not. Her eyes were fire, and darkness and silence; a fresco, grey, black, and red, of the unholy, indescribable agony in the chest and throat that precedes the coming of tears.

But the girl had no tears left. He knew that. She had burned them alive and banished them; watching them die in silence while she willfully slaughtered the part of herself that made her feel. He knew that she had done this, because he had done it to himself once, and he had barely been older than her at the time. He had seen that look on his own face innumerable times; in glasses, wine goblets, diamonds, swords, oceans; and he had counted himself lucky because he had done this to himself; this and nothing worse; in order to continue living; in order to stay capable of watching Aerys laughing and pleasuring himself while people burned alive.

_In order to stay sane._

But somehow, seeing it in this tiny, murderous creature, and thinking of the terror and innocence on the Stark boy’s face as his fingers scrabbled frantically against Jaime’s arm, did not make laughter bubble up in his throat or anger claw at his stomach, as they usually did when he thought of that day. Instead, he felt… no. He would not call it guilt. He did not feel guilty. He would do it again without a second thought.

The girl had stopped screaming and was lying limply on the floor beneath him, her face inches from Jaime’s, her eyes searching his as intently as his had been searching hers. He realised, with some embarrassment, that the guards were waiting for him to release her, so he sat up abruptly, dragged the girl to her feet and handed her over. She did not struggle at all, and stood suspended between the two guards like a rag doll, awaiting Father’s instructions. Her sudden silence made Jaime uncomfortable.

‘Lady Arya is tired,’ Father said, sounding bored rather than surprised, ‘find her a suitable cell.’

The girl allowed herself to be led away, the guards already bickering about how to free up a cell for yet another high born captive, and Jaime turned to his father as the door closed, an inexplicable anger rising in his chest.

‘How long have you known?’ Jaime demanded.

Father’s face remained perfectly serene.
‘I have no idea what you mean.’
Chapter 3

The girl shifted on the straw pallet of her cell, then slammed her knuckles into the stone wall beside her. The sound cracked sharply in the half-darkness, and as her hand came away scratched and bleeding, she growled savagely at herself.

_Do not cry. Do NOT cry. You can’t afford to cry now. You have to think._

But no matter how hard she concentrated, breathing deeply, as Syrio as taught her, thinking only made the pain worse. Arya Stark was awake again, and being Arya Stark hurt.

The girl had lived the past four years as two different people who were the same person. At the beginning, the part of Arya Stark where the horrible things lived had gone to war against the part of her that wanted peace; and they had torn at each other like wolves inside her skin, struggling to occupy a place where there was only room for one of them. Two halves of a person that she could no longer be were fighting to tear her in half, and sometimes she had wanted to scream with the pain of it.

But then she had become ‘the girl,’ and though it wasn’t a real name, or even the whole truth of her, it wasn’t a complete lie either. ‘The girl’ was her armour. ‘The girl’ allowed her to think like Arya, talk like Arya and fight like Arya; but protected her from the things that Arya had seen, heard and felt; at least when she was awake.

When she was awake, she didn’t see Bran lying asleep beneath layers and layers of wolf pelts, his hair so thick with perspiration it was almost wet. She didn’t hear Mother crying by his bedside on the morning they left Winterfell. She didn’t feel the wetness of Nymeria’s muzzle in her hand before she struck her with a rock, and watched her lope away and never come back. When she was awake, she didn’t see, hear or feel the howls of the crowd and the cries for death before the Great Sept of Baelor. She didn’t see, hear or feel herself crying and shrieking at Yoren to let her go, or Joffrey shouting out ‘Ser Ilyn! Bring me his head!’ while Sansa screamed at him to stop.

When she was awake, she was safe from the things that Arya Stark had seen, heard and felt. She was safe from the horrible things inside Arya Stark’s head.

But whenever the girl slept, Arya Stark woke up; and hearing, seeing and feeling would force their way under her skin and into her blood, disembowelling her with the noise and the sight and the agony of her own memories, locking her up inside them and refusing to let her out. And she would scream and scream and pound her fists on doors, on walls, on breastplates, even on the merciless iron of the empty air, but there would be no escape and no mercy.

Then when she woke up and became the girl again, Arya, and the things that Arya had seen, heard and felt would go to sleep once more, giving the girl a chance to live.

Of course the fact that Arya was sleeping did not mean that Arya was no longer there. Sometimes – often, even - the girl would feel her or see her; her fingertips tingling in warning, the tiniest threat of flint glowing dormant in her eyes, most of it silent and innocent. But what was left was still dangerous enough to start a fire if the need ever came for something to be burned, and that morning had been the first time that the flint had become flame.

One look at the Kingslayer that had almost killed her little brother just to shut him up; one small, careless enunciation of her true name on his lips, and Arya Stark had woken up; her memories rising up around her like flesh and blood and pulling her into all of them at once. She had been in
Winterfell with Bran and Mother; running helplessly in a dark wood with Nymeria; and trapped once again in the square and the crowd, a stupid mouse who couldn’t save her own father. She could see all of them, hear all of them, feel all of them, and she couldn’t save any of them now. She could only avenge them, and that had been the only coherent thought in her head as the wolf blood and the flint and Arya had howled out together; and she had flung herself across the room to cut Jaime Lannister’s throat, no matter how stupid it might make her look or feel later.

He was quick. Hopelessly quick. When he had flung her to the ground, such a sickening crack had rung out from her bones that she had felt certain he was going to kill her, her memories still rushing into her as she struggled; the sight, the sound and the hurt so powerful that she could barely see what was happening in front of her.

She hadn’t been prepared for the silence that came as he pinned her arms to the floor.

When he looked at her, the sound of her memories had left her so quickly she almost gagged; Mother’s tears, Nymeria’s whimpering, the roar of the crowd before the sept; all of them, gone, though she still saw them, flitting in and out of her line of vision.

The Kingslayer’s face had drawn closer to hers, like he wanted to ask her a question, and she had glared at him to make him look away from her. But his eyes had a hint of gold in them that seemed to burn brighter and brighter the closer he came, and when they had begun to pale slightly, she had seen that gold was only a tiny part of his eyes. They were green, not gold; just as her own were grey and not black. And she realised.

*He is also two people at the same time. He is also running from himself.*

Then the sight of her memories had left her along with the sound, and she had lain on the floor looking up at him – *Arya* had lain on the floor looking up at him – and being Arya hadn’t hurt anymore.

*Being Arya hadn’t hurt anymore.*

It hurt now, of course, lying in this freezing little cell, wondering what was going to happen to her. Nothing pleasant, if she knew Lord Tywin at all. He was attached to her, and she had long ago resigned herself to the fact that she was attached to him, but she didn’t delude herself for an instant that he would let her get away with this.

*He killed the Reynes and the Tarbecks for rebelling against his father. He killed the Targaryen children just to prove a point. When Mother captured the Imp, he set the whole of the Riverlands on fire, killed and raped everything in sight and hasn’t stopped doing it for the past four years. The gods only know what he’ll do to the person who tried to kill his eldest son and heir.*

*Hang me? Behead me?*

*Maybe he’ll let me do it myself. No harm in asking.*

The cell was growing darker, and colder, and sleep was sneaking up on her, calling her into memory again.

*I’m Arya,* she realised, *when I wake up, I’ll still be Arya. I’ll never be the girl again.*

And for the first time in four years, the concept did not frighten her.

*‘Raff the Sweetling,’* she yawned to herself, curling into a ball as the cell grew darker and darker, *‘Dunsen, Chiswyck, the Hound, Ser Gregor, Ser Meryn, King Joffrey, Queen Cersei. Valar*
Morghulis.

She lay in the darkness for a few minutes, warmth tingling beneath her eyelids, then sat up suddenly in a fury, flinging her injured hand so hard against the wall that she cried out in pain.

And as her fingers dug into her palm, pain spasming through her joints and down to her fingertips, she bit her lip so hard it bled.

She’d forgotten to say ‘Jaime Lannister.’
Chapter 4

Lord Tywin leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, his mind punctured by a thousand quivering short swords. He only had to cross the room to the cabinet opposite him to find something for the pain, but he seemed to have lost all feeling in his legs, and the thought of putting his weight on them was…unpleasant.

His headaches always began as a slight tingling above his left eye that no amount of wine could banish or alleviate, and within two days, he would feel like some demon from the deepest of the seven hells was trying to pull his hair out by the roots; each individual strand burning red against his skull. Though he had often suffered such inconveniences as a young man, he thought they had ceased altogether after Joanna – after –

Because of her characteristic astuteness, the girl always saw them coming long before he did; and after the ordeal of the first two occasions, both of which had turned into gladiatorial contests between his pride and her stubbornness, she had ceased to talk of them altogether, obtaining the relevant tonics from Qyburn, and - knowing Tywin would refuse to take them if offered to him directly - leaving them where he could find them easily. She would serve water instead of wine without comment, and would allow no one into his solar unless a battle had been lost or someone of importance had died.

Had she been at her duties that afternoon instead of languishing in a cell in the dungeons, she would certainly not have permitted him to get into such a heated argument with Jaime. The boy wanted to return to King’s Landing rather than remain at Harrenhal – a significant blow to the war effort – and Tywin knew, though Jaime had not breathed a word on the subject, that his eagerness to return to the capital had nothing to do with the Kingsguard and everything to do with Cersei.

Tywin did not give credence to the rumours about his children, and it surprised him that a person of the girl’s intelligence and evident flair for strategy could do so either. But what he did give credence to was Jaime’s enduring inability to do so much as think without his twin sister, a disturbing state of affairs that had annoyed Tywin greatly since the boy’s childhood, and had made him do everything in his power to correct the situation.

He had clearly not done enough. His children were intellectual nonentities, all three of them. He had always hoped that one of them, at least, would have inherited Joanna’s brilliance; a brilliance that had always far outstripped his own. Instead, his daughter had inherited his late wife’s soaring sense of defiance (of questionable value when wedded to Cersei’s vanity and low cunning) and his sons her penchant for driving him to distraction with relentless, irritating wit. Though sometimes Tyrion…no. He would not think of Tyrion.

Tywin placed his hands firmly on the arms of his chair and tried to haul himself to his feet, cursing his own weakness when he failed. Weakness was a far worse hindrance than pain when these storms struck his mind. Pain did not trouble him. He was so accustomed to it that it might have been his best friend. But weakness turned him from iron to glass and made him like ordinary men, giving him their desires and their thoughts rather than his own. So he tried, unsuccessfully, to crush it to powder as he had always done, and wondered what in seven hells he was going to do, both to keep Jaime here and to avoid executing the girl for trying to kill him.

He had known who she was for years. A highborn Northerner posing as a commoner, a father killed by loyalty, a face like Lyanna Stark and a quick letter to Lord Varys, asking for a description of the missing Stark girl. It had hardly been a difficult deduction. He had known who she was, and he had done nothing.
He had planned each campaign against the Starks with her at his elbow as she moved wraithlike about the council table with wine or ink (sometimes both), biting hard on her teeth to keep from laughing if one of his commanders made a suggestion of questionable logic. At the end of each day, he would ask her severely what she had been grinning about so impudently, and she would tell him. If her assessment of the situation was correct (and it usually was), he would accuse her of being too smart for her own good; and she would thank him cheekily before he dismissed her for the night.

Every day he had been aware of the danger of allowing her to remain, but she had proved him wrong again and again. She had never betrayed him, and she had never tried to kill him. He could not tell if that made her loyal, or merely patient. Whichever one it was, it was extraordinary.

But she had tried to kill his first-born son and heir; the impulsive, unthinking little fool; and honour demanded that she die. No one could be allowed to make an attempt on the life of a Lannister without impunity. No one. Failing to act would bring with it the kind of humiliation that House Lannister had not seen since the days of Tywin’s father, and he would not tolerate that under any circumstances.

*The House that puts family first will always defeat the House that puts the whims and wishes of its sons and daughters first.*

Tywin’s blood pulsed harder in his head.

*I don’t want to do it.*

He almost jumped as one of his guards entered to make an announcement.

‘Lord Petyr Baelish begs the honour - ’

‘Get out.’

*Baelish can wait,* he thought, as the guard got out immediately and closed the door behind him.

Tywin was in no mood for intrigue, and to own the truth, he hadn’t the slightest interest in discovering what Baelish was doing here or what he wanted. He had more important things to consider.

The pain in his head was unbearable.

*I don’t want to do it.*

He steeled himself.

*A good man does everything in his power to better his family’s position, regardless of his own selfish desires. Occasionally, that means getting one’s hands dirty.*

*But I don’t want to do it.* I don’t want to do it.

Tywin downed two glasses of wine in quick succession; almost groaned aloud at the towers of flame that surged in his head as a result; told himself to stop thinking like a child; and forced himself to confront the truth.

The girl reminded him of Joanna. She didn’t look or sound the least bit like her. But she had Joanna’s fierceness, her infernal stubbornness, and she was better educated than half the lords in Westeros put together. He loved her. She was like his own child.
Weakness. Weakness and stupidity.

His heart hammering in his chest, a painful counterpoint to the beat that pulsed in his head, Tywin’s fingers moved to his belt and closed around his dagger. He drew the blade, the Valyrian steel rippling dully in the gloom.

Joanna is dead. She is never coming back. And this little barbarian tried to murder your son. You will cut her throat yourself, and you will feel no sorrow when you do so. She is not your child. She is not your blood. Honour demands that she die.

‘Guard!’ he called, needles erupting all over his skull.

‘My lord?’ the guard responded promptly, coming in as swiftly as he had gotten out.

‘Fetch the girl,’ Tywin commanded, and laid the dagger on the table.
‘Will you let me do it myself?’ Arya asked softly, watching Lord Tywin watching her.

His face was whiter and wilder than summer snow, and he looked wordlessly at her as she fingered the dagger on the table in front of her, enjoying the way the Valyrian steel surface seemed to heave and flow in the candlelight. It was a beautiful weapon. The steel had been folded half a thousand times, and each one of them was visible in the grey depths of the blade; each one a story; each one a miracle.

Arya ran her finger down the surface of the dagger and looked up at him again. Beads of sweat were standing out on his forehead and the skin beneath his eyes was darkening. She sighed. He was having one of his headaches, and he’d clearly been drinking wine instead of water. The stubborn old bastard.

He was avoiding her eyes now, only looking at her when she glanced down at the blade, and though the entire chamber was damp, the air swollen with the remnants of the evening mist that the fire in the grate and the candles had not managed to dispel, she could see that his eyes were glowing gold in precisely the same way that the Kingslayer’s had on the previous day; a silent menace erupting out of the ice, fighting it as it called to him.

‘My lord,’ Arya ventured, ‘did something…did something happen to your son when he served the Mad King? Something horrible?’

‘Nothing more horrible than usual,’ Lord Tywin replied, leaning back in his seat with a speedy nonchalance that did not fool Arya for a second, ‘Why?’

She shrugged indifferently.

‘No reason.’

The wind howled into the room through the gap in the wall, smelling of frost and death, and Arya glanced once again at Lord Tywin, who was still refusing to look her in the eye.

_He wants me to close my eyes so he doesn’t have to look at me when he kills me, _she thought, grinding her teeth, _well that’s too bad, my lord. Northerners look death in the eye and tell it to go fuck itself._

She was not afraid of death, and she had always thought that he feared it as little as she did; the great Tywin Lannister who had sown salt into the fields of Castamere. When the guards had come for her, dragging her from her bed without so much as a clout on the head to wake her up, she had expected to be taken out into the woods and raped before being dumped into the Trident with her head cut off. Instead, she had been brought up to the solar, her chains biting painfully into her wrists, and Lord Tywin had told the guards to seat her in the chair before him, take her shackles off, and get out. And then he had sat staring at her and not staring at her, not answering a single question she put to him, and taking an awfully long time to simply get down to the business of killing her.

_Maybe he doesn’t want to…he doesn’t want to…_  

_Don’t be stupid. You stupid, stupid little mouse. Remember who he is. Remember what he is._

Another quarter of an hour passed in silence; Arya playing with the knife, growing bored with playing with the knife, and eventually, thrusting the knife into the surface of the council table,
making Lord Tywin jump, his cheeks colouring as he did so.

‘Seven hells, will you please just kill me and be done?’ Arya snapped as she jumped to her feet, ‘I can’t be brave forever!’

‘Do you like it?’ Lord Tywin asked her.

‘Do I like what?’

‘The dagger.’

Arya frowned at him in annoyance.

‘Do I like the dagger?’ she snarled in disbelief.

‘It’s a simple enough question, girl,’ Tywin replied dismissively.

Arya folded her arms and glowered at him, his face growing paler as she did so.

‘You disappoint me, my lord. You’ve never struck me as being the sort of man who enjoys playing with his prey.’

Lord Tywin did not respond to that. Instead, he leaned forward, plucked the dagger out of the table, and tossed it into her lap.

‘When are you going to kill me?’ Arya persisted, tossing it back at him.

‘I have no intention of killing you, you wretched child,’ Tywin replied, catching it deftly and propelling it tip-first into the table once more, ‘I’m adopting you.’

Arya’s head spun.

‘Adopt – adopting me?’ she spluttered.

‘Yes,’ Tywin said simply.

‘Why?’ Arya demanded.

‘Sit.’

Arya sat.

‘From this day forward, girl, you will not be my cupbearer, but my ward,’ Tywin declared, as though he were doing nothing more important than dictating a list of military supplies, ‘you will be given lodgings more suitable to your station. You will not bear my name and you will not display my colours, but I will settle a certain amount on you, which you will inherit on my death, as will my other children. You will thus be protected under the taboo against kinslaying, as will I, and we will never speak of this again.’

When he finished, he regarded her with no trace of warmth or affection, and Arya tried to respond several times; clamping her mouth shut each time she opened it; the words dancing in her head; the realisation glowing in her chest.

He didn’t want her to bear his name or display his colours because he knew it would make her unhappy. She could no longer be his cupbearer because her identity being known would make it impossible for him to save face with his commanders. He was settling money on her so that no one
would question the seriousness of the arrangement. But it all boiled down to one thing: he didn’t
want to kill her.

He didn’t want to kill her, he didn’t want to kill her…but he didn’t want anyone to know that.
Typical.

And suddenly she was angry again.

‘And once you’ve ‘adopted’ me, my lord, what then?’ Arya spat, waving her arms dramatically
above her head, ‘are you going to ship me off to King’s Landing and lock me up in the Red Keep
with my sister; force me to smile and curtsy at the little shit who cut my father’s head off and pretend
that all I want to do is kiss his royal arse?’

‘That would be most detrimental, both to Joffrey and to you,’ Tywin responded coldly.

‘Why do you even care what happens to me? You’d have cut me in two on the day we met if I’d told
you who I was.’

‘Careful, girl.’

Arya grasped the arms of her chair and leaned back, a mocking smile twisting her lips.

‘You must be getting something out of this,’ Arya said, ‘you’re an intelligent man, and you like
looking after your family’s interests. You wouldn’t do this just because you like my company. That
would require emotion of some sort, and emotion is weakness, isn’t it my lord? So let me guess how
the Lannisters can possibly benefit from this. Ooh – I know! Adopt me, and you hold one of the keys
to the North in your pocket. Of course! Joffrey can control us from King’s Landing and you can
control us from here! Perfect!’

‘From a strategic point of view, it certainly is an excellent scheme,’ Tywin conceded in a self-
congratulatory tone that made Arya want to scream.

‘An excellent scheme?’ Arya echoed scornfully, ‘there’s a gigantic gaping hole in your ‘excellent
scheme’ that a child could see with their eyes closed.’

‘Is there?’

Arya smiled at him with all the impertinence she could muster.

‘You have to consult a septon to adopt someone, my lord,’ she said, ‘and the septon will never
believe that you adopted me before I tried to kill the Kingsl – Ser Jaime.’

‘The septon will believe what I tell him to believe,’ Tywin growled.

“*The septon will believe what I tell him to believe,”* Arya imitated shrilly, ‘you’re so dangerous,
aren’t you? Threatening stupid old men with death and disembowelment if they don’t do what you
want?’

‘Can I take it you decline?’

‘Tell me once and for all what you gain from this stupid plan, and I may just decline politely!’

Tywin seemed to consider that, and gazed thoughtfully up at the ceiling as he prepared his argument.

‘I gain a highborn captive of ancient blood who can assure her brother’s good behavior,’ he said,
‘now that my son is no longer the Starks’ guest.’
‘I’m a hostage,’ Arya responded dully, not even bothering to phrase the sentence like a question.

‘If you’ve considered yourself free for the past four years, then I am sorely disappointed in you,’ Tywin smirked in reply.

Arya folded her arms.

‘Go on.’

‘I gain control of the North should your family meet with a tragic accident - ’

‘What do you mean?’ Arya interrupted, her heart leaping into her throat.

‘They are in open rebellion against the crown, girl,’ Tywin explained, waving his hand impatiently, ‘it’s a miracle that no tragic accidents have yet befallen them. So to sum up: I gain a hostage, I gain the possibility of controlling the North, and I gain the refreshing prospect of having a child who truly is as smart as she thinks she is.’

‘What do I get?’ Arya demanded, ignoring the warmth that was spreading in her chest.

‘You don’t get your throat cut open,’ Tywin replied blandly.

‘It’s not fair.’

‘Life rarely is. You of all people should know that.’

Arya hated herself for the smile ghosting across her lips, and for a moment she was sure that she could hear her father shouting at her from beyond the grave, begging her to stop.

‘I would sooner entrust a child to a pit viper than Tywin Lannister,’ he had once told her mother. A strong choice of words. And her father had never been prone to exaggeration.

‘I already have a father,’ Arya said, raising her chin in defiance, ‘no one will replace him. Not you. Not anyone.’

‘If you try to call me ‘Father,’ girl, then I fear this will end unpleasantly before it has begun. Now give me your answer. I grow tired of bickering with you.’

Arya nodded once, and Tywin nodded back.

‘Good,’ he observed gravely, pulling out a clean sheet of parchment and beginning to write.

‘In the meantime,’ he said, his quill scratching so hard against the paper that Arya thought he was going to tear a hole in it, ‘we shall have to devise some fitting punishment for you.’

‘Punishment?’ Arya repeated slowly.

Tywin snorted.

‘I do not allow attempts to be made on the lives of Lannisters with impunity, even if one of my own children is the one doing the actual attempting.’

‘What…sort of punishment?’ Arya ventured, as calmly as she could.

‘The swords in the armoury have required a good polish for some considerable time,’ he shrugged.
‘You want me to polish…all the swords in the armoury?’ Arya repeated piercingly.

‘Indeed.’

‘But there are thousands of them!’

‘Would you prefer scrubbing out pots in the kitchen?’

‘No.’

‘Then you can begin immediately. Starting with this one.’

He pushed the dagger across the table at her.

‘Take it. It’s yours.’

Arya took it without question, knowing he would be offended if she refused, not entirely wanting to refuse.

‘Thank you, my lord,’ she mumbled.

‘You can go,’ he said sharply.

Arya rose to her feet and walked to the door.

‘And let me make one thing very clear, Lady Arya,’ Tywin declared menacingly when she opened the door to leave, ‘if you try to kill anyone by the name of Lannister again, I will have you hanged. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ Arya replied, and she knew he wasn’t joking.

‘Good. Now fetch me some mulled wine. My skull is about to crack open.’

Arya put her hands on her hips.

‘I will fetch you some water, and nothing else.’

The corner of his mouth turned up slightly, and as Arya walked down to the kitchen, the Valyrian steel blade still clutched in her hand, she could have sworn that Tywin Lannister had smiled at her.
Chapter 6

That night, Jaime dreamed of Cersei.

He felt his anger consume him every day for a month as they journeyed north; so close to her, yet unable to touch her. He saw her bristling at the high table of Winterfell as Robert paraded himself in front of her, his hands down the bodices of two different serving wenches, and she had looked coldly across the room at Jaime, regal and beautiful as the dawn, the hatred in her eyes begging him. He felt himself tear away the clothes that kept her whiteness imprisoned; felt himself fuck her against the cold stone wall, gripping her, hurting her, her lips drawing blood from his, and you're home, he had thought, you're home. But then she was crying out; in alarm, not in ecstasy, and he saw a pale, uncomprehending, wide-eyed face at the window, and he ran, seizing the front of the Stark boy’s jerkin and yanking him away from his own escape.

‘Quite the little climber, aren’t you?’ he said, and relished the look of terror on the boy’s face, growing harder as he realised how high up they were, how easy it would be to silence him and how badly he wanted to prove to Cersei that he would do anything for her.

And then he was staring into his own face.

And nothing but the tips of his feet were balanced on the window sill, and his legs were twitching and spasming, wanting to move, to grip the stone better, but knowing he would fall if he tried. And he almost wept at the hope that he felt at the feeling of his reflection’s hand at the center of his chest; holding him anchored to the world when it was obvious that the time he had left in it was short and dark.

‘How old are you, boy?’ his reflection asked.

‘Ten,’ Jaime answered.

He looked into his own eyes, and he was horrified by what he saw in them. Not cruelty, not coldness, but laughter. Laughter.

‘The things I do for love,’ his reflection said, and shoved him.

The tears were torn out of his eyes by the force of the wind, and his mind felt slower than his body as he fell. But then he felt the air lurch and quicken and die; felt the ground crack against his back; and then, darkness, a darkness so complete that it was chaos, primal, without life, before life.

His breath burned red hot in his lungs as his eyes opened. His heart was roaring like a lunatic inside him, his body was slick with sweat, and the heat of his bed was unbearable as he tore off the covers, crossed the room, and opened the window; where he stood, head bowed, over the basin at its edge, his jaw pulsing violently, like he was about to vomit.

The sweat cooled on his brow, and the night air filled him up with mist, but the nausea did not leave him as he once again saw his own eyes laughing at him; felt his body, so small, so…human, fall backwards into the empty air.

Have you gone soft, you bloody fool? The little shit was spying on us. He would have run straight to his father, who would have run straight to Robert, who would have decorated his personal standard with both our heads. I do not feel guilty. I do not feel guilty.

But his own eyes would smile at him each time he closed them, and the Stark girl would look up at
him, pale and in pain, and he did not sleep again for the rest of the night, cursing himself for a lily-
leaved weaking and a fool. He was in a foul enough mood by sunrise to want to hit something, and 
he wandered aimlessly about the castle in search of a sword, the halls empty even of servants, until 
his happened upon some luckless squire returning from the privy, seized his ear and commanded him 
to show him to the practice yard.

The squire was a stutterer, and Jaime would almost certainly have found some way to mock him had 
he been in a better mood. Today, the boy simply contributed to his rancour.

‘This is the y – y – yard, my lord,’ the squire mumbled, ‘and t – t – the armoury is just t – t – there – ’

‘Speak up, boy!’

‘My l-l-lord - ’

‘Never mind!’ Jaime shouted, crossing the yard to the armoury and hoping against hope that the 
young fool would still be there when he came out so that he could beat the stutter out of him.

The armoury at Harrenhal was a huge, vaulted room in a rather better condition than the rest of the 
castle. Weapons were set out on wire meshes that ran from floor to ceiling, and hung on all four 
walls; and at first glance, one might have been inside a library, with swords, spears, morning stars 
and pikes crammed into the shelves instead of books. Jaime approved heartily, and set off to discover 
the source of the sound of steel striking stone that was emanating from the depths of the room.

About halfway into the armoury he found the Stark girl, who evidently thought that hitting a 
greatsword against the wall was a more effective way of polishing it than making use of the stones 
scattered on the floor around her. Jaime smirked. She really was dreadfully skinny – he’d seen better-
fed tavern girls – and he wondered that she didn’t topple over immediately just by holding the sword 
up. And yet she was only using one hand. Impressive. Though he supposed she might have been too 
angry for the weight to matter much. The enthusiasm with which she was attacking the wall certainly 
suggested that.

‘Not so hard,’ Jaime said, amused, ‘you’ll ruin the steel.’

The girl whirled around and glared at him.

‘What are you doing here?’ she shouted, ‘go away!’

‘You sound just like your mother,’ Jaime observed mockingly.

‘Don’t you talk about my mother!’ the girl snapped.

Jaime folded his arms and leaned against a mesh of swords.

‘Why shouldn’t I? We got to know each other rather well while I was her guest. Her bed was lonely, 
and I was happy to be of service.’

The girl coloured,

‘You’re lying.’

‘On the contrary. She’s become a real she-wolf in her old age. There’s not much fish left in her.’

‘My mother has always been a wolf, not a stupid fish! And if she was ever desperate enough to fuck 
an insect like you, your tiny cock would probably fall off in shock.’
Jaime grinned.

‘It’s not so tiny.’

‘Is that what your sister tells you every time you fuck her?’

Jaime’s grin disappeared.

‘Don’t talk about my sister in that tone, Stark.’

‘Did you keep fucking her after you pushed Bran out of the window like he was some sack of wool at a fleece fair?’ the girl pressed on, ‘did doing it make you hard? Or was she the one who wanted more?’

‘Are you –’

“Oh, Jaime, please fuck me harder, Jaime, there’s nothing more arousing than murder, Jaime,” the girl imitated shrilly, before her face fell into an expression of exquisite, fiery-eyed contempt.

‘You’re…disgusting,’ she spat.

Nausea blinded him and made him want to retch, blood rushing rapidly to his head, then draining out of it. He remembered his own face, and ‘how old are you, boy?’ and ‘the things I do for love’ and the casual, ghastly amusement that he had seen in his own eyes. And he remembered his stomach wrenching and turning in on itself as he fell to earth, down into its jaws, to death, and he remembered what had followed; the darkness, the non-living and the non-dying, the horror of being both of them at once.

Jaime realised that the girl was staring somewhat triumphantly at him, and he grinned widely and hurriedly at her, his lip curling into his favourite sneer.

‘Was that little speech supposed to unman me?’ he purred.

The girl smiled scornfully at him.

‘Yes.’

She walked away from him with the sword still clutched in her hand, her tone suggesting that he had done a miserable job of concealing his discomfort, and he could not recall being angrier with himself in the entire course of his life.

In his own way, he was his own master of whisperers, his own Faceless Man. He was his father’s son. Father hid behind marble and silence and fear, Jaime behind smiles and violence and noise. Father was better at it than strategy; Jaime better at it than swordplay. He wore it like armour, like a second skin, often for years on end, and nothing in this world could pierce it; not after the things it had protected him from. And then some half-starved, foul-mouthed little brat with judging eyes just like her father’s had come along and stripped the skin right off his bones with nothing more than a few short words; and worst of all, she knew it.

*Say something,* he growled at himself, *for fuck’s sake, say something.*

‘Leaving so soon?’ he called after her retreating back.

No reply.

‘If I disgust you so much, you could just ask me to leave,’ he suggested.
‘I’m leaving because your father said he’d hang me if I tried to kill you again,’ she shouted over her shoulder.

Delighted to be so generously awarded a pretext for bursting out laughing, Jaime gleefully launched into gales of laughter, pushing them eagerly out of his throat and up towards the ceiling. The idea of this child doing him any harm was so ridiculous that –

Oh.

Time had lost momentum, before gaining it again like an arrow loosed from a longbow; something cold, grey and metallic had grazed his ear; blood was flowing slowly down his neck; and he was yanking a sword off the rack as the girl stormed back towards him, murder in her eyes.

She’d thrown a knife at him, and it had missed him by inches.

Whistling provocatively, Jaime felt the weight of his sword in his hands, his fingers almost sighing in contentment as they slid into place along the hilt; and the deep, beautiful knell that travelled through them as he deflected the Stark girl’s first blow was glorious, a symphony, perfection. Then the girl slid backwards into a stance that made her seem thinner and more elusive than the air itself, and as his eyes met hers and saw an intelligent, analytical opponent staring out at him, Jaime realised that the girl knew how to fight. And she had not been trained by a Westerosi.

She was never in one place for more than a split second; her body like millions of tiny cracks in the fabric of the air that he could only reach with his eyes half-closed. She handled her weapon as though it were no lighter than a needle, propelling it between her left and right hands and dealing such equally heavy blows with each that it was impossible to tell which was her sword hand. She crouched and she leapt; she reversed the blade effortlessly in her hand to swing the hilt at his face, and she would fool him again and again; her entire body singing out that she would attack from one direction, her blow landing squarely and effortlessly on the opposite side, stinging him savagely as she backed away again, safe from the hulking, hammering power of Jaime’s arm. Her style had the lightness and the devastating weight of Braavosi water dancing; the heavy, iron instinct of Westeros that made men take hold of a blade with both hands and use it to crack skulls…and something else, something undefinable that he had never seen or felt before. She was extraordinary. She was… beautiful.

Jaime would sooner die than admit that he felt out of his depth, but his attempt to bring an entire rack of swords down on her was all the confirmation of the fact that the Stark girl needed. She danced elegantly out of the way as the impact sent clouds of dust surging into the air, then leapt onto the rack itself and came at him again, trying to trip him up. Her face was raw with enjoyment; his own with anger, and his blows grew harder and harder as he succeeded in turning her around and tried to draw her towards the back of the room, where he had earlier perceived a very useful-looking set of nets hanging on the wall.

That impudent smile on her face was incensing him, but the angrier he became, the more mistakes he made. The Stark girl darted into each of them like a magnet drawn to metal, her instinct razor-sharp, flawless, supernatural, but to Jaime she seemed to be focusing on him, and only him; not paying much attention to the direction in which his mistakes were taking her. He took advantage of that by taking care to seem wilder and angrier than he felt; and as they reached the back wall, he glanced just once over her shoulder, contemplating how he could bring the nets down on her.

With an audacity that he would have praised under any other circumstances, the girl suddenly took hold of both his shoulders, spun him around, and slammed him into the very wall he had been trying to drive her into, sending him crashing to the floor with a pile of the bloody nets on top of him, their weight so tremendous, so painful and so humiliating that his eyes screwed up till he saw nothing but
blackness, and his fingers clenched into fists.

When he opened his eyes, the Stark girl was standing over him, looking thoroughly pleased with herself. Her lips were pursed in satisfaction, and her eyes smoldered with the thrill of the chase, brilliant against the fairness of her skin and the blood pulsing in her cheeks.

‘Oh, good,’ she observed casually, ‘you’re alive.’

And she left the room whistling, leaving him tangled up in his own trap.
‘I understand that my son had a slight accident today,’ Lord Tywin mused, ‘you didn’t happen to see it take place, did you?’

‘No, my lord,’ Arya replied, ‘I only arrived in the armoury later.’

‘What a pity. It would have made for a fine coincidence.’

Feeling the force of Lord Tywin’s eyes on her, Arya was seized by the uncomfortable feeling that she was being perused like one of the books on the council table. Clearing her throat, she stared intently at the hole in the wall, pretending to be enjoying the night air.

She felt like such a fool. She had promised Lord Tywin, gravely, absolutely, that she would not attempt to harm anyone by the name of Lannister again. And she’d thrown a knife at the Kingslayer’s head and tried to stick a sword in his guts less than twelve hours later.

*I didn’t, though,* she thought, *I didn’t stick a sword in his guts. That’s got to count for something.*

*Lord Tywin isn’t in the habit of making idle threats, stupid. Haven’t you learnt that? Haven’t you learnt?*

*I’m not afraid of him.*

*You should be.*

And yet she smiled slightly when she thought of that morning, her blood glowing pleasantly in her veins.

Much like the first time they had – was ‘met’ the right word? – she had been struck to the bone by how quick he was, like a tempest, like lightning. The force of his first blow had nearly made her fall over from the impact of such enormous weight trapped in such infinite lightness and speed. It was the might of a missile hitting a castle wall, contained within a space no bigger than an arrow head. And his face had woken up with a joy and exultation so powerful that for a moment she had thought he might weep from it; and life had seemed to surge through his body like magma; his eyes blazing emerald and jade; and the sword he held, any sword he held, was his brother, his love, himself. Extraordinary. Beautiful.

*If I let him get close to me for more than a second, I’m dead,* she had thought as she backed away from him, making a conscious effort to dispel both the anger that had made her attack him and the shameful fear that was making her regret it.

But then she had begun to enjoy herself. It was daytime, she was Arya, and she knew that a light and quick opponent who understood the difference between getting out of the way and running away would always defeat a large man who cared more about hurting his opponent than protecting himself. Most Westerosi, the Kingslayer included, seemed incontinentley incapable of understanding this, and the thought made her sigh, as it always did.

*Men.*

‘Baelish was here today,’ Lord Tywin remarked, tearing Arya’s thoughts away from her exploits, ‘he wanted to - ’
'So that’s why you sent me down to the armoury,’ Arya interrupted, glaring at him, ‘to get me out of the way.’

‘Don’t look at me like that, girl.’

‘He betrayed my father.’

‘He did what needed to be done.’

‘Is that what you tell yourself each time you think of your son trying to murder my brother?’ Arya murmured, a hole opening inside her chest.

‘I will not breathe further life into a malicious lie by discussing it,’ Lord Tywin growled, his face hard and intolerant.

Arya looked at him with sadness, desperation and pity.

‘How can you believe that?’ she asked him softly.

How could somebody so brilliant be so blind?

She was spared further contemplation of the question (together with the no-doubt-unpleasant consequences of the wrathful glare decorating Lord Tywin’s face) by a knock at the door that was immediately followed by the Kingslayer, a fresh wound marking the place where her dagger had struck him.

‘You wanted to see me, my lord father?’ he said cheekily to Lord Tywin, and bowed flamboyantly to Arya, ‘my lady.’

‘What happened to your ear?’ Lord Tywin demanded.

‘I cut myself shaving,’ the Kingslayer shrugged casually.

Arya expected the lie to give her satisfaction; just as fighting him had given her the satisfaction of facing him at his strongest and his most vulnerable, as herself and no one else. Not as a nameless orphan girl or a pale, emotionless mask, but as a Stark, Arya Stark; no hiding, no pretending; Arya as she truly was, fighting the Kingslayer as he truly was. She expected to rejoice that he was pretending it had never happened and was too ashamed to admit that a fifteen-year-old girl had almost sliced his stupid ear off.

Instead, she felt the past and all its phantoms stirring deep within her mind and her castle walls slamming up around her; her protection, her defence. She had thought that they had crumbled to dust along with ‘the girl’, because the Kingslayer had killed the girl and let Arya out. But now numbness had returned to Arya’s face and limbs, straightening them out, setting them in stone, protecting herself from him.

Why? She’d almost killed him, not the other way round.

‘How did you manage to cut yourself on the top of your ear while shaving?’ Lord Tywin insisted.

‘I thought the lice might like a shave as well,’ the Kingslayer declared, pouring out wine for himself, ‘But I presume you didn’t send for me to talk about shaving?’

Lord Tywin leaned back in his chair.

‘No, I did not…where do you think you’re going, girl?’
Arya, already halfway to the door, paused in surprise that he wanted her to stay, and raised her eyebrows in annoyance that she now had to spend the rest of the evening staring into the Kingslayer’s stupid face.

‘I was – I was just – ’

‘Sit.’

Arya sat and waited silently for the conversation to continue, but no discussion was forthcoming; father and son so deathly quiet that they might have been strangers. Arya amused herself by examining the maps and raven scrolls on the council table (a habit retained from the days when she had thought about betraying him) and when the appeal of that wore off, Arya began to look about the room, her eyes falling first on Lord Tywin and then on his son.

He wore a doublet and breeches of black leather that were not unlike those favoured by his father, his golden hair a shock against the dark. Though he sat lazily and complacently in his chair, his face seemed far more lined now than it had been earlier that day. He was steadfastly avoiding Lord Tywin’s eyes; and Arya thought it a very strange thing that his father’s presence should be more distressing to him than losing a fight to a girl. She thought once again of that first blow, and the vibrating steel that had seemed to trap her entire arm in metal and pulverise her bones within her. She could not believe that perfection like that existed – even if it failed to adapt when facing a foreign technique.

She continued to examine him, her face blank, her posture stiff and upright. His index finger was tapping rhythmically on the rim of his wine goblet, his heel balanced jauntily on his knee, and his face smiled at some unknown (and probably non-existent) thing that he seemed to find extremely funny.

I hide discomfort with silence; he hides it with ridiculous posturing, Arya thought, I prefer my method. It’s much less irritating.

The Kingslayer slowly turned his head and looked at her as they sat there, the three of them; Arya, the Kingslayer, the Kingslayer’s father; and suddenly her pulse was crashing within her as his green eyes besieged her, questioned her, challenged her, flickering across her face and her body like leaves. She told him no stories and answered none of his questions; the armour that she had made for herself deflecting him each time; but growing warmer and warmer as fresh blood spilled with each new attack. His gaze was running her through, her skin was starting to burn, and her breath sprained and struggled in her lungs. And with a final blow, her armour fell from her in sheets of steel; and she was Arya again, her face flushing crimson with the ecstasy of freedom and the effort of fighting against it. Then she folded her arms and glared at the Kingslayer once more, her head spinning from a desperate desire to breathe deeply, and an equally-desperate determination not to look it.

He did not smile or mock or say a word, but the attack subsided as his lips parted slightly, his intake of breath like a whisper.

‘So what did Littlefinger want?’ Arya asked abruptly, turning to Lord Tywin, ‘or are you not going to tell me because the rest of the world now knows who I am?’

‘I hardly think that you’re likely to be spying for Stannis Baratheon, girl,’ Lord Tywin retorted.

‘Do you mean he’s finally left that miserable pile of rock in the middle of the sea?’

‘No. Not yet.’
The Kingslayer snorted, and reached across the table for the wine.

‘Surely an uninspired fool like that poses no threat to the capital?’ he laughed.

‘He may be uninspired,’ Lord Tywin agreed, ‘but he is certainly not a fool. And he has some twenty thousand men, now that his brother is dead.’

‘I did not know that,’ the Kingslayer admitted, ‘I’ve been out of touch. Prison, and all its attendant inconveniences. I’m sure you understand.’

‘Do you think he plans to march, my lord?’ Arya asked, ignoring the Kingslayer completely, ‘or to sail?’

‘Both,’ Lord Tywin declared.

Though Arya would have loved nothing better than to see King’s Landing fall, she couldn’t help but despair at the idiocy of some people.

‘So why is Littlefinger here instead of finding sufficient coin to defend the capital?’ she asked.

‘He asks my permission to open negotiations with the Tyrells of the Reach,’ Lord Tywin replied.

Arya grinned.

‘Congratulations, my lord. I’ve heard their eldest daughter is very beautiful.’

Lord Tywin gave her a withered look.

‘Don’t be impertinent, girl.’

‘Indeed,’ the Kingslayer interjected merrily, ‘impertinence is a most unattractive quality in a woman.’

‘How would you know?’ Arya snapped in acidic tones, ‘is studying women something you do in the Kingsguard?’

Lord Tywin folded his arms.

‘Have you two quarreled?’ he queried blandly.

‘A small matter,’ Arya shrugged, grinning spitefully at the Kingslayer’s resulting glare.

They played at staring each other down for a few seconds, before the Kingslayer looked back at his father, Arya bursting with satisfaction that she had won the match.

‘So I take it the plan is to join forces with the Tyrells and bite Stannis in the arse?’ the Kingslayer ventured.

‘Indeed,’ Lord Tywin remarked.

‘Does Lord Tyrion know about this?’ Arya asked.

‘He claims that it was his idea,’ Lord Tywin declared imperiously, ‘though I’m more inclined to think that Baelish –’

‘Tyrion?’ the Kingslayer exclaimed.

‘He’s Acting Hand of the King, stupid!’ Arya snapped, ‘how can you not know that?’
'I don’t think this one likes me very much,’ the Kingslayer observed, smiling knowingly at his father.

‘I can’t imagine why,’ Lord Tywin remarked drily, eyeing the Kingslayer’s nonchalant posture.

‘Tyrion is organising the defense of King’s Landing?’ the Kingslayer repeated.

His surprise seemed to profess delight rather than horror, and the stony frown on Lord Tywin’s face suggested that he did not approve.

‘Your brother is the lesser of two evils,’ he stated candidly, ‘since your sister has proven that she cannot be trusted with any responsibility whatsoever.’

‘Really?’ the Kingslayer interrupted, ‘you surprise me.’

‘Some weeks ago,’ Lord Tywin continued, ‘she was apparently made aware of the existence of two enormous caches of wildfire beneath the Guildhall of the Alchemists and the Great Sept of Baelor. Thinking that the substance might prove useful in the event of a siege, she took it upon herself to immediately commission more, and to send a raven informing me of her discovery. A raven that could have been shot down at any time, by anyone. The girl is an idiot.’

The Kingslayer’s face had gone so white it was almost grey, and Arya looked from him to Lord Tywin to see if the latter had noticed. He hadn’t.

When she looked back at the Kingslayer, he had regained his composure by downing an entire goblet of wine, his eyes closing as life flooded back into his cheeks.

‘I’m sure Cersei only meant to show you how much she has to contribute to your legacy, dear father,’ the Kingslayer said theatrically, ‘and if you were to consider the sheer volume of sensitive information that travels every day by raven –’

‘No ravens will go out to King’s Landing,’ Lord Tywin was saying, ‘and nobody but Littlefinger, and your brother, of course, will know of our proposed alliance with the Tyrells.’

The bitterness with which the Kingslayer pronounced the word ‘legacy,’ and the indifference with which it was attended by his father was not lost on Arya, and she sighed as yet another deathly silence descended.

‘Who’s to say that Stannis’ fire priestess hasn’t already seen your plans in her flames?’ Arya asked, with a deliberate increase in volume that she hoped would change the subject.

‘Her flames,’ Tywin snorted, ‘a pretentious name for guesswork brought on by smoke inhalation.’

‘I’ve heard people saying she was behind Lord Renly’s death,’ Arya persisted, ‘she sent a shadow in the night to kill him.’

‘Where did you hear about this?’

Arya’s breath caught in her throat.

Shit.

‘From…a friend.’

‘Then I suggest you tell your friend that she’s a superstitious little fool,’ Lord Tywin commanded, ‘a fine sharp sword was behind Renly’s death, girl, and nothing else. We are simply uninformed as to whom it belonged. All we do know is that is that your lady mother was somehow involved, though I
doubt she would have had much reason to want Lord Renly dead.’

Suddenly Arya felt very weak. She hadn’t seen her mother in four years. Four years.

She looked at the Kingslayer once more. He had seen her. Quite often, probably. And he had joked about it.

‘I was happy to be of service.’

Arya covered her eyes with her hand. She knew that what he’d said about him and Mother wasn’t true. He’d just been trying to hurt her, and she had got her own back. Her words had offended him too. She could see that they had. The light had sapped from his eyes, the words had fallen out of him, the blood had drained from his body into hers with a rush of warmth and heat and fire and she had seen, for just a moment, that she had hurt him; really hurt him.

Good, Arya thought, I’m glad I hurt him.

She glanced sideways at the Kingslayer, her eyes finding his once again, and in the dwindling candlelight they looked dark as Valyrian steel.

‘If you’ll pardon me, my lord,’ she murmured to Lord Tywin, getting to her feet, ‘I have a terrible headache.’
Tywin’s eyes lingered on the solar door as the girl closed it behind her, doubtful that she truly had a headache. He knew her. She was like him. No matter how abominable the pain might be, she would die rather than admit she was feeling it. She didn’t have a headache. She had wanted some pretext to leave the room.

‘The girl’s eye for strategy is…interesting,’ Jaime observed, ‘where did you pick her up?’

‘I ‘picked her up,’ as you put it, in one of Ser Gregor’s hellholes,’ Tywin answered, sipping delicately at his wine, ‘she was crammed into a pen with dozens of other prisoners, who were watching their fellows being tortured.’

‘How old was she?’ Jaime asked disinterestedly, his eyes on the floor.

Tywin paused, remembering.

‘Eleven.’

‘Seven hells,’ Jaime murmured, his jaw hardening in horror.

He recovered quickly.

‘And why did she stand out as opposed to the rest of the poor bastards that you left behind in Clegane’s custody without a backward glance?’

‘She would not kneel to me – ’

Jaime abruptly dissolved into fits of laughter, and Tywin poured out more wine, feeling resentful.

*Very well. If the story is so very funny, then I shall not tell him the rest of it.*

‘Who would have thought?’ Jaime was purring mockingly, ‘all the great Tywin Lannister wants is to be challenged now and then. I wish I’d known that when I was a boy.’

‘When you were a boy, you knew little else,’ Tywin retaliated calmly, ‘but a challenge is of limited value when supported by a limited intellect.’

‘You’ve kept a young girl like that for four years because of her intellect?’ Jaime implied unblinkingly, his words laden with innuendo.

‘I do not care for your tone, boy,’ Tywin said, disgusted by what his son was implying.

‘Of course,’ Jaime scoffed, ‘my tone. You have spoken to me about it before. Tell me, have you received any word from Cersei? Does she rejoice at this new addition to our family; this kinship between wolf and lion?’

‘I need not account for myself to Cersei.’

‘Of course not. My mistake. What I am curious about is why the Stark girl agreed so readily. Did you threaten her? Or did you win her over with the promise of gold and a title?’

Tywin found this poorly-shrouded curiosity most amusing, and adjusted his facial expression accordingly.
‘I did not realise you were so interested in the Stark girl,’ he remarked lightly.

‘I’m not remotely interested in the Stark girl,’ Jaime declared.

‘Then why are you asking so many questions?’

Tywin noted with satisfaction that Jaime had nothing clever to say on that score. He remained silent and rooted to the spot, and appeared to be engaged in the most uncharacteristic activity of blushing furiously.

_How remarkable._

‘It seems that you are not alone in this strange curiosity, however,’ Tywin continued, once his son had been sufficiently humiliated by the ensuing silence, ‘yesterday; the girl also asked me about you.’

‘Really?’ Jaime scoffed bitterly, ‘what did she want to know, I wonder?’

‘Whether or not anything overly-unpleasant had happened to you during the reign of Mad King,’ Tywin replied, ‘I thought it a most intriguing concern to have moments before what she believed would be her death.’

Once again, Jaime’s jaw hardened. This time, he did not recover quickly.

‘Which one did you pick?’ he growled bitterly, his face white, ‘that charming experiment with Brandon and Rickard Stark, perhaps? Or the unforgettable occasion when Aerys decided to burn everyone who attended his morning levy?’

Tywin ignored the question, and examined his pale, affected son over the rim of his wine glass with a sudden concern that he had not felt since Jaime’s childhood.

The boy had always been supremely adept at hiding his emotions. He had a knack for it. Once as a child, Cersei had dared him to pick up a pike that was too long and too heavy for him. He had fallen over and cut himself almost to the bone in the process, and when the maester had sewn him up, he had not cried once, laughing and joking with his sister as though he had done nothing more serious than cut his finger, though the pain must have been excruciating and the humiliation worse. And it hadn’t been the last time that something like that had happened. Not by any means.

After joining the Kingsguard, of course, he must have spent most of each day in proud and glacial disguise, staring at unthinkable atrocities with a blank face and cold eyes; the only true way; the Lannister way. But he had never allowed anyone to forget his larger and more colourful masks; his smile, his laugh, his capacity for creating exasperation and annoyance each time he opened his mouth. Tywin had never approved of this technique. A mask was meant to be a silent thing.

But perhaps it did not matter at all. Perhaps silence and noise were of equal value, as long as they were able to mask the truth. Jaime talked four times as loud and fifty times as often as Tywin did – and yet most people knew no more about Jaime than they did about his father. Perhaps they knew him even less.

It was evident that Jaime’s genius for detachment from and decoying of emotion remained with him still, the result of a lifetime of discipline and hardness. But tonight, Tywin had seen cracks beginning to appear; small, slight, but noticeable. More than once he had seen his son’s face fall wide open, each instance motivated by nothing more serious than pity or anger and lasting no longer than two minutes. But two minutes of weakness, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, could mean the difference between life and death, between victory and defeat, between honour and shame. Any form of weakness, for any duration of time, was death. He had made sure that all his children
understood that from the earliest age, though their behavior often suggested the contrary.

Tywin disliked this newfound fragility. Perhaps Jaime’s time with the Starks had weakened him more than he had previously imagined. Or perhaps the cracks were appearing because Jaime wanted them to appear. The first would be shameful, but comprehensible. And as for the second…Tywin was not entirely sure what he thought about the second.

Being in a room with his son and the Stark girl was like conducting negotiations between two enemies plagued by a fervent desire for peace, and by a stubborn unwillingness to confront the unknown that peace might bring; war being a thing too comfortable, too easy and far too enjoyable to give up entirely. Because of this, the defenses of both parties had crumbled and rebuilt themselves countless times in the course of a single conversation, and the resulting confusion was overwhelmingly contagious. Tywin could not tell whether he was faced with two enemies fighting a war…or something else.

Their eyes had met multiple times and had lit up multiple times, before ripping away from each other like knives from a wound, each returning only when they could be sure of being unobserved by the other. And when they were unobserved, they detested being so, and the green would summon the grey or the grey the green like a siren call; irresistible and deadly.

And yet each time they had opened their mouths to speak to each other, nothing but strife had emerged from within them; strife built on anger and hatred and fear of what might happen, what could happen, if silence descended again.

Tywin had fought in many wars. He knew battle fury when he saw it. He had slaughtered countless men, women and children. He knew fear when he saw it. And he had once loved. So he knew desire when he saw it.

He would think on this, and do it soon. Every accident was an opportunity.

He sat up with Jaime for hours after the girl had gone, talking of Stannis Baratheon. Riding to the aid of the capital would mean leaving a depleted garrison at Harrenhal and Casterly Rock without most of its army should Robb Stark decide to take advantage of the situation. Jaime seemed to find this last notion extremely funny.

‘Attacking Casterly Rock is the stupidest idea that could possibly enter the boy’s head,’ Jaime insisted, ‘only a fool or a madman would get as far as contemplating it, leave alone trying it.’

‘You have a singular lack of imagination, child,’ Tywin retorted.

Jaime folded his arms in amusement.

‘I turn forty soon, beloved Father. I am no child.’

‘Then kindly desist from thinking like one,’ Tywin declared, ‘Robb Stark is a boy, and he’s never lost a battle. If he gets it into his head to attack Casterly Rock, he will march immediately and without hesitation. He will risk anything at any time. Because he doesn’t know enough to be afraid.’

‘You’ll have to leave the Riverlands at some point,’ Jaime persisted, ‘burning crops and villages, taking the occasional trip up to Ashemark and worrying about the impossible is tremendous fun, I grant you, but I’m sure you’ll agree that defending the capital is more important.’

‘The occasional trip up to Ashemark and worrying about the impossible,” Tywin repeated icily, ‘thank you for such a concise summary of the war effort.’
‘Don’t mention it,’ Jaime replied breezily, ‘but you must agree that we will have to ride to the capital at some point and risk allowing this imaginary attack on Casterly Rock to take place.’

‘Stannis will almost certainly sail within a few weeks,’ Tywin growled, Jaime’s flippancy making him angrier and angrier, ‘but in the meantime, we will remain here – ’

‘Why not march immediately?’ Jaime interrupted.

‘– and the war will continue as normal,’ Tywin finished, ignoring him, ‘I must therefore ask you to reconsider your reckless decision to travel immediately to King’s Landing.’

Tywin expected Jaime to storm and rage and provide him with plenty of brooding and self-berating to do about his son’s unmanly reliance on Cersei. Instead, Jaime was looking blankly at him as though he had no idea what he was talking about.

Tywin’s patience was wearing thin.

‘Did you not refuse to contribute to the war effort so that you could return to King’s Landing immediately?’ he prompted.

Jaime struck his forehead with the palm of his hand.

‘Of course I did,’ he said, ‘but I’ve changed my mind. I’m staying. And I’ll ride with you when the time comes. Didn’t I tell you?’

‘No, you did not,’ Tywin declared, disliking the nonchalance in his son’s voice, ‘when, may I ask, did you come to this happy decision?’

‘This morning,’ Jaime shrugged, and poured out more wine.
Arya floated idly on the surface of a pool in Harrenhal’s godswood, her clothes an untidy, sopping wet pile of rags somewhere on the bank, her muscles aching from falling over and getting up again more times than she could count, only to be knocked over once more, the world turning upside down, and then becoming still again.

After four years of practicing nothing but the sword and dagger, Jaqen had decided that she needed to learn to fight with a spear. She had had her third lesson that morning, and already detested it more than any other weapon she could think of. Who in their right minds would want to fight with an unwieldy, useless and completely boring piece of wood – nothing but a glorified quarterstaff, really – when they could choose a sword instead?

‘A girl is foolish to say such a thing,’ Jaqen had said the first time she had made that particular observation, and he had trained his spear on her before motioning to her to do the same.

She had repeated her words many times that morning while Jaqen effortlessly knocked her down again and again, his advice that ‘a girl must defend’ falling on deaf ears; and it had been that, together with numerous other contributing factors, from ‘forgetting’ to practice to being so stupid as to mention the Red Priestess’ shadow to Lord Tywin, that had eventually led him to poke her smartly in the ribs; the impact throwing her backwards and into the water.

She had surfaced to find him leaning on his spear and regarding her with amusement rather than anger, his eyes twinkling in a way that made her want to throttle him.

‘A girl must defend,’ Jaqen had repeated sunnily for what felt like the hundredth time that morning.

‘Why did you need to push me into the pool to tell me that?’ Arya had sulked in return.

‘A girl is forgetful about the spear and defense. Now she will never forget again.’

Sometimes, Arya wondered why Jaqen bothered with her at all. He could have left Harrenhal ages ago, and he probably should have done, too. Didn’t Faceless Men have more important things to do with their time than brutalise peasants and teach half-wild little girls to fight?

Arya didn’t flatter herself for a moment that he stayed on her account, though she sometimes caught him gazing at her in a rather more serious way than she would have liked. Four years was a long time for a Faceless Man to stay in one place. He had told her this many times. And yet day after day, month after month, year after year, he would reappear without fail in the godswood with a sword or a dagger, and attack her without warning.

And seven hells, but she did love it.

They always trained in the early mornings, in the half-darkness that preceded the sun when it was only just starting to creep up behind the clouds. The world would be grey, then, and sad, and in the beginning Arya had complained because she would have to wait an hour before the greens and reds would start to erupt out of the greyness, creating worlds and layers of worlds on the surface of the pool, and the hush would have a colour to it, like Winterfell. It would have been nice to come to the godswood every morning and find it in colour; find it like home. But ‘a man had patrol duty,’ so they would fight every morning in the greyness, and the world would come alive around them, just as it was doing now, while she learned to deal out death.

Jaqen had left her not five minutes previously, making her promise that she would practice the spear
instead of running off to the sword after twenty or thirty seconds; and when he had gone, she had rapidly pulled off her clothes and shoes, throwing them untidily onto the bank and drawing the dagger that she always kept knotted to her thigh, thinking to throw that too. Some instinct stayed her hand, however, and she had returned the blade to its tiny sheath before pushing out to the center of the pool again, laughing and hooting and splashing just as she had as a small girl at Winterfell; calling up a distant echo of the days when her father had still been alive; when her family had still been whole; when she had lived beneath the gaze of gods that cared for her.

And floating on her back, the water in her ears dulling the sounds around her, she had looked up at the enormous tree above her; its bark so pale in the pre-dawn light that it might have been a weirwood. And gazing up at it, and dreaming of home and the North; the cold invading her bones like an old friend; Arya was suddenly struck by how human the old, almost-weirwood tree looked, its bark pale and fragile as flesh, its red and orange leaves like gashes against it, like blood. And in the moment that she thought of blood, the leaves of the tree rustled a little too loudly from a place beyond her vision, and she knew that he was there. She knew his gaze without seeing it, and she sank back into the pool until only her head and neck were visible, her fingers closing around the hilt of her dagger.

‘Enjoying the view, Kingslayer?’ she called out, paddling to a place where she could reach the shallows easily.

‘Not quite,’ his voice returned immediately, and she whirled around to find that he had been leaning unnoticed against the almost-weirwood tree, watching her for the gods only knew how long.

His hair looked silver in the half-light, and though he looked her blandly in the eyes, he seemed half-afraid of her, his irises a different colour and a different expression every time he blinked.

‘The view is quite superfluous, I’m afraid,’ the Kingslayer continued, ‘in the army, one sees enough naked twelve-year-old boys to last a lifetime. The squires will insist on bathing, though their innocence abandons them soon enough.’

‘I see,’ Arya replied, having been compared to a boy far too many times for the jape to hurt her, ‘so you only fondle people you’re related to as opposed to twelve year old boys?’

His eyes flashed.

‘I have told you not to talk about my sister in that tone, Stark.’

‘And I’ve told you to go fuck both yourself and her, if I recall correctly. Though it would be pleasanter if you could refrain from trying to kill one of my siblings this time. I’m sure you’ll think of some other way to amuse yourselves.’

The Kingslayer’s lip curled into an expression of the deepest contempt.

‘How extraordinary. You open your mouth and our father’s words come out.’

Arya began to tremble, and not from cold; her heart quivering violently in her chest and she bit hard on her lip to prevent herself from showing how much that remark had hurt her.

He’s not my father, and the stupid Kingslayer is not my brother. He’s not. He’s not. I’m not Lord Tywin’s child, and I don’t talk as though I were. I speak like Father and Mother, and Jon, and Aunt Lyanna who died long ago, and everyone I love. I speak like a Northerner; I speak like a Stark, not like some cruel old man who’ll die alone with no pack.

You love that cruel old man with no pack.
Yes. And this motherfucker is pissing all over it.

‘He’s not my father,’ Arya growled, ‘he isn’t.’

‘He is now, little girl,’ the Kingslayer said, ‘he owned you from the moment you agreed to become his ward, just like he owns me, and Cersei and Tyrion; and you’ll never be free, just as we never will be.’

There was bitterness in his voice, and laughter, and youth, but its timbre contained no self-pity and no arrogance, which surprised Arya… pleasantly. But she hated the things that he said. She wanted to cry out and tell him he was wrong; that Tywin wasn’t like that; that she knew Tywin; that she knew him because he was like her. But even though the Kingslayer’s face was lined with anger and resentment, it also bore a kind of serenity that only came with truth. Tywin might have found a way to keep her alive. He might have welcomed her into his family and treated her well. But he had not set her free, and he would not. She knew that.

Tywin might be a cruel old shit, but at heart, he’s… he’s… he isn’t a monster. Not really. He’s just overly-fond of acting like one.

‘He isn’t like that,’ Arya declared, ‘he isn’t.’

The Kingslayer threw back his head and guffawed mercilessly, enraging her further.

‘Try telling yourself that when you realise what an enormous mistake you’ve made,’ he laughed.

‘You’re wrong,’ she declared.

‘If I’m wrong, then why are you getting so angry?’ he asked, his voice laden with mockery.

‘Because you’re wrong!’ Arya shouted.

Suddenly the Kingslayer’s face changed; all good humour and allégresse disappearing so quickly that Arya could scarcely believe how little a time ago they had been consuming his entire being. He was looking at her as though a greater fool than her did not exist, his entire demeanour aggressive and angry, but not in a way that made her feel afraid. There was distress in the way he held himself, an anxiety that had nothing to do with his own interests. He didn’t want to hurt her. He wanted to save her.

I don’t need saving. Least of all by him.

‘You’re wrong,’ Arya repeated, ‘you’re wrong.’

‘But what am I wrong about?’ the Kingslayer spat, ‘tell me! When he found out who you were, did he send you with a full complement of guards to Riverrun? To your family?’

‘No, but he couldn’t have –’

‘Your loyalty to your captor is most touching, Stark.’

‘You don’t understand!’

The Kingslayer folded his arms and regarded her contemptuously.

‘Do you want to spend the rest of your life in a cage?’ he demanded, ‘could you endure that?’

No.
‘What do you think?’ Arya murmured.

There was a long silence, the Kingslayer’s eyes never leaving hers.

‘I think you’d sooner cut your own throat,’ he said.

His voice was fierce, and astoundingly soft, and Arya was overwhelmed by the distressing feeling that she was arguing with someone that she had known all her life. She looked down into the water, the truth stinging her eyes, thinking of Tywin, unable to summon the slightest bad feeling towards him. She had never felt like his prisoner. She had not been a prisoner.

But then she thought of the Valyrian steel dagger. And then she thought of Castamere. And she looked up once more at the Kingslayer, remembering what he had said: ‘I think you’d sooner cut your own throat.’

‘He would have killed me otherwise,’ Arya reasoned softly, ‘he would have killed me.’

The Kingslayer gave her a small smile.

‘Then you should have chosen death,’ he replied, ‘it would have been preferable, believe me.’

_What in seven hells has happened to this man that he cares so little for his own life? It isn’t right. Nobody should feel that way._

_You felt that way for longer than you care to remember. You still do. You simply choose to forget about it._

‘Is death what you would have chosen?’ Arya asked, ‘if you were me?’

The Kingslayer shrugged.

‘Yes. Except I’d have had the guts to stick a sword in his throat first.’

Arya leapt to her feet. Rivulets of water ran from her hair to her breasts and down her thighs and legs, her skin prickling with cold, the blade of her dagger clutched in her hand, the hilt touching the back of her wrist.

She was enraged. For four years she had lived on nothing but her wits; she had seen things, horrible things, things that had made dreaming a nightmare and memory a curse. And waking in the night covered in sweat and choking on the vomit of her own past, she had wanted to die so many times that she could not count them all. But Tywin had made her happy again and Jaqen had made her brave again; she had found freedom in imprisonment; and the power of life and death in a place of prayer. And now, this bitter, irritating old shit had the audacity to stand before her trying take it away from her; thinking that he knew her; thinking that he had a clue what was happening inside her head; calling her a prisoner and a coward. He didn’t understand. He couldn’t understand. She was a prisoner, but she was free as well, and her freedom today would not be the same as her freedom tomorrow, or next week or next year. Freedom was liquid, just as Tywin was liquid gold and Jaqen liquid steel, and no coward could admit that in a million years. The prospect was far too frightening.

_‘I’d have had the guts to stick a sword in his throat first,’ the Kingslayer had said._

_Then let’s see if you’ve got the guts to stick one in mine when I try to kill you._

The blade of the dagger was hard and hot against her hand as she approached him, her eyes flickering over the exposed base of his throat. He remained completely still, leaning casually against
the almost-weirwood, his eyes smarting painfully with something like remorse, or sorrow. When she reached him, she stared at him for a long moment, her breath lost, her thoughts mixed in with the mortar of the dagger in her hand and the green of his eyes; how large they were, how brilliant. Her fingers still clutched around the blade, she swung her fist towards his throat, aiming for its base. But he was far too quick for her, and in one swift movement, he had knocked the blade out of her hand, slammed her against the almost-weirwood tree, and kissed her.

Gazes erupted across Arya’s back as the Kingslayer’s tongue filled her mouth like war. Anger and guilt seemed to tear out of her in one, painful flight as she opened her lips for him, though she could feel her fingers spasming uncontrollably and slaming against his chest like tiny sledgehammers, wanting to push him away, but choosing instead to wind themselves around his neck and pull him so close to her that she could feel his teeth and every movement of his jaw against her lips as he smiled and kissed her again. His erection was jutting so hard against both her and the laces of his breeches that she cried out in surprise, and, scarcely aware of what she was doing, she allowed him to pick her up like a child and press her once again against the wood, her skin screaming in protest as she parted her legs and wrapped them around his waist, relishing the gasp that escaped him before his mouth consumed hers again, the palms of his hands travelling from her thighs to her sides to her breasts, her nipples turning so much harder beneath his cold fingers that she almost screamed aloud.

The godswood was dissolving in a riot of red and green, and that’s strange, Arya thought innocently when he first thrust against her; don’t people have to take their pants off to do that?

But she soon didn’t give a fuck what people did or did not do, because the longing between her legs was unbearable. She moaned and leaned against him, wrapping her arms around his back, covering every square inch of herself in him, forcing him to take her weight as he pushed against her; her skin and his, even separated by layers and layers of clothing, becoming changelings, shape-shifters, nomads that could warp into each other and become each other and know each other, two different things that were actually one thing, two things that became more of one thing each time they came together. Her entire self felt vulnerable and wide open to the entire world, but it didn’t matter, because he was with her, her body crying out a song of him, a song without breath.

He didn’t take her maidenhead, and he didn’t come. Neither did she, and though she had heard that she should be embarrassed about such things, she found that she could not think what there was to be embarrassed about. She felt suspended with him in togetherness, the intensity of joining and being not abating; the pain in her skin indescribable, cold from the icy air and burning from him; and remembering what she had thought at the beginning: ‘he is also two people at the same time. He is also running from himself.’

He’s spent his whole life in disguise, and he doesn’t want that for me. He doesn’t want that for me because he understands it. He knows it. He lives it.

Everything had become very quiet, and they remained wrapped up in each other, not breaking apart, her legs still clasped around the Kingslayer’s waist. His lips were nestled softly in the nape of her neck, her face was buried in his hair, and for a while they breathed quietly together; a part of something, whatever it was, or could be. Then she softly kissed him again, and I am him and he is me, Arya thought, and she chuckled as he nipped gently at her bottom lip, his tenderness making her so wet that she wanted to tell him to take her maidenhead right there and be damned.

You stupid, blushing, innocent little whore, she thought to herself, what the fuck are you doing?

‘Let go of me,’ Arya commanded.

The Kingslayer deposited her on the ground without a word, and she walked to the edge of the pool in search of her clothes and her knife. She pulled on her jerkin and breeches, though they were
wetter than Braavos in summer, and glanced once more at the Kingslayer, who was once again leaning against the weirwood, looking at her with an irritating smile on his face. She walked across the clearing to where he stood, picked up her knife, and set its point against his throat, drawing blood. To Arya’s disappointment, he didn’t even flinch.

‘You touch me again,’ Arya snarled, ‘and I’ll kill you.’
Winterfell again. The tower and the fall. The boy. Jaime’s clothes damp as she stormed away from him, the cut on his throat nothing, a bite barely perceived. The godswood sighed and rustled around him, the red leaves sounding different from the green ones, an empty space in the wood where she had been, and an empty space in his mind that had always been filled up, night and day, by the knowledge that the Stark boy had no one to blame but himself; by the anger he had felt at watching Robert stumble off to Cersei’s bed every night for the duration of that entire, accursed northern trip; of never being with her. The emptiness that howled out of him from the place where the knowledge and the boy and the anger had once been made him sink slowly to the ground where he was, his back against the tree; feeling as though something inside him had collapsed. But when the emptiness filled up again, the something did not rebuild itself, and he could only think, and think; with no shield and no armour.

Cersei had had that look in her eyes that he knew so well; that crushing pressure and inevitability in her voice:

‘He saw us. He saw us.’

Releasing the Stark boy, Jaime had looked back at her expectantly, waiting, and her eyes had told him what needed to be done, just as her voice had. But she hadn’t risen to her feet, gathered her skirts and hurled the boy out of the window herself. He had done that, and she had wanted him to do it. She had changed her mind later, of course, cursing him for a fool and pretending that the entire incident had been an accident of interpretation. But he and Cersei had the same mind. They were the same person. And she still thought she could fool him. She still talked to him like he had no way of knowing that what she was really angry about was the fact that the fall hadn’t killed the boy. What a minx she was; what a lioness.

He had dreamed of the boy again that night, or rather of himself. His boots slipped on the smooth stone of the windowsill with what seemed like leagues and leagues of emptiness beneath him, and his fingers scrabbled desperately at the shirtfront of a reflection; a reflection no longer of himself, but of his father, his blue eyes cold and cruel.

There was no smiling or joking. Father never smiled, and Father never joked. But he did look back at Cersei, a question in his gaze, and her beautiful green eyes had answered him, just as they had once answered Jaime.

And ‘I’m your son!’ Jaime had screamed, ‘I’m your son!’ and then ‘I’m your brother! Cersei! CERSEI!’

And he had fallen once again, the smallness of his body ripping the wind in two like a sword through canvas, and he had felt each individual bone in his back crack before the hurt and the darkness had claimed him. It had been nothing like leaping off the cliffs of Casterly Rock as he had done as a boy, laughing madly as Cersei screeched at him to stop, the feeling of his body as it hit the waves a shock of heat and cold and adventure.

The Stark boy had been nothing but an innocent on his own idea of an adventure. He must have liked to climb, just as Jaime had always liked to fall. And a person who supposedly existed to protect him, and all others like him, from any accidents that might befall him in his innocence, had flung him out of a fucking window and crippled him forever. The boy had done nothing wrong. The boy was blameless.
Lannister, he mockingly told himself, I believe that at present your entire body is submerged in something of a quasi-pre-cum haze, and that when you have poured a barrel of cold water over your head, you will feel differently.

He remembered seeing the rupture between day and night in the Stark girl’s eyes on the morning that they had met; a schism that he saw in himself every day: two different people warring together in one body; two different lives running from the same horror. Paleness, tranquillity and mockery during the day – facing memory and presentness without turning cold – but knowing that each night the mask would dissolve and blow away in shards of glass or dust, and memory would have free reign, rising up from the redness behind his eyes each time he fell asleep. The Stark girl knew what it was like to live that way. He had seen it in her, and he knew that she had seen it in him.

It had never happened to him before. He had never seen it with his fellow soldiers or his brother Kingsguard, or even with Cersei; Cersei to whom he told everything, Cersei who knew every thought that had ever passed through his mind. The very idea that there existed a part of him that Cersei did not understand horrified him, even though he had known it for some time now. He had known it since the night he had decided to stay, and Father had mentioned the ravens…and the wildfire.

If Cersei knew him – if she truly knew every thought that had ever passed through his head – then she would allow Stannis to raze King’s Landing to the ground sooner that even think of using that fucking wildfire.

How could she know what he had done, what the Mad King had done, not just at his death, but for years and years; how could she have sat there with her arms around him as the story of the wildfire plot came tumbling incoherently out of him like a prophecy from the mind of some madman; how could she have done that and felt it with him and known all the horrors that wildfire could perpetrate; and then uncover caches of the bloody stuff that he had told her about, before commissioning more of it, like it was some precious variety of Arbour gold being stockpiled for a royal wedding? What was the matter with her? Had she listened to a word he had said to her? Didn’t she know what happened to people when they burned alive, how they screamed as the skin melted off their bones? Didn’t she understand what he had done, and why?

But something else, only the murmur of a whisper, had also flickered into the back of his mind while Father talked about wildfire, and he had banished it immediately, because he had known that it was true. If Stannis succeeded in taking the city, then Cersei would not hesitate to do what Aerys had failed to do. She would burn the entire city to the ground if it meant she could be queen of the ashes. The shadow of it was in her, though she would never admit to it. He could hardly bear to think of it himself.

He remembered how the Stark girl had looked and felt, why he had kissed her and why he had wanted her. The void that existed in both him and her was reflected in every line and fold of her nakedness, just as he had always seen it reflected in every streak of silver in her grey eyes; and with his mouth and his body and his mind, he told her what he saw.

It was so different from being with Cersei, because he and Cersei were one person, one living being and mind that could not be separated. But being the same person as the Stark girl, being the same person as…Arya…was impossible. They were two halves of some sort of whole… but they were two distinct halves; similar, but never the same. They were two identities, two people. Not one. Never one.

What he had with Cersei was not like that at all. Even the desire he felt for Cersei was different. Fucking Cersei was blood, and violence, and pain. It was its own battle cry. It was born from a
lifetime of anger, anger at having to be quick, and anger at being apart. There was never time for
lying entwined or whispering things in the dark. There was only time for war, for committing a kind
of murder that made him love her desperately, agonisingly and furiously. They were the gods of
torture, Cersei and he: sweet, irresistible, blood-curling torture that both excited and enraged him. To
hurt her was to love her, and he only loved her more each time she hurt him.

The thought of hurting Arya, on the other hand, filled him with nothing but horror. Yes, passion had
erupted between them (a lot of it) and lust (a lot of that too), but also laughter and…refuge and…
gentleness.

_Gentleness? Have you gone soft?_

_Of course I haven’t. It’s why I argue with her each time I see her. It’s why she argues with me.
Words like that are not in our vocabulary. We’ve purged them from us. We’ve had to. And spitting in
each other’s faces and trampling on each other’s dreams makes us forget how fucking vulnerable
we feel each time we see each other, how afraid we are; because we see things in each other that the
rest of the world can’t; things that the rest of the world would never dare to associate with me, or
with her. Because we see through each other’s shields to the fear beneath. And being together, doing
whatever it was that we did, feeling whatever it is that we felt, makes the fear disappear. We make
fear disappear by acknowledging it together._

And he knew, then, that the fall had been his fault; his and Cersei’s, and that he felt…ashamed.

He stood up to leave the godswood; to find that barrel of cold water and to find it quickly. He loved
Cersei, adored her, _he was her_, but each and every time he clapped eyes on this _wretched_
girl from the North, Cersei would be one step further away from him, and he could not tolerate that; the
thought was too wrong, too terrifying. He had spent his entire life being one of two corporeal beings
that occupied the same mental space. He knew nothing about being one side of a coin.

The Stark girl still had hope in her. Of course she pretended otherwise, but he could see it. Jaime had
been exactly like her once, his hope placed in an ideal that no longer existed, and today, he was half-
dead from his own stupidity. But she could still run. She could still escape. She was young, and she
was strong. But instead, she was choosing not to; wasting her time, her hope and her chances at
freedom on Father; putting herself on a straight and appallingly easy path to ending up where Jaime
was: a disappointment to his father and the bearer of an infamous name, however little he may have
deserved either of them. He didn’t give a fuck about himself or his father, but he could not let her
carry on like this. He would not.

By the time he re-entered the castle, it was almost midday, and Harrenhal was in pandemonium.
Weapons were being unloaded, trunks being brought down, corpses being cut down, wagons sent
round to the kitchens, and messengers running everywhere, getting constantly in the way of the
soldiers that swarmed over the mountains of melted stone like bees.

Jaime pulled a soldier aside and asked him what was happening. The man had foul breath and bad
teeth.

‘Stannis is two days from the capital, Ser,’ the soldier said, ‘your lord father has given the order to
march.’
A man finds a girl in her new chambers, packing breeches and shirts that she has not yet worn, and leaving gowns and slippers that she has also not yet worn. A girl’s hair is damp and her face tight. A girl’s scent has changed. A man wonders.

‘A girl does not remain at Harrenhal?’ he asks.

‘No,’ a girl snaps, flinging a pair of boots into her trunk, ‘Lord Tywin’s scared I’ll be raped if I stay.’

‘The Lord of Lannister is correct. Those men that remain here are not suitable company for young girls.’

A girl does not reply, nor does she look at him. A girl’s eyes are pale as twilight, and her face is paler still. A girl is beautiful.

A man speaks once more.

‘A girl is morose for one who has always desired to ride to war and is now able to do as much,’ he says.

‘I’m not riding to war, stupid,’ she snorts, ‘I’m tagging along with a crotchety old man who doesn’t know what else to do with me, and probably won’t let me within fifty miles of an actual battle.’

‘A man is correct in thinking that the Lord of Lannister knows nothing of a girl’s lessons?’

‘A man is. Though I don’t think he’d let me fight in a battle, even if he did know. I’m worth more to him alive, no matter how many men I can kill with my eyes closed.’

A man smiles, remembering a girl with her eyes closed. For weeks and weeks a blindfold in the mornings, and a girl full of fire, hulking and hammering, attacking and not protecting, like all Westerosi barbarians with their heavy painted armour and their boiled leather. Until the day a girl learned quietness and listening. A man still remembers the blow that she landed on his chest. The blow that showed a man that a girl had finally understood.

‘A girl thinks much too highly of battle,’ a man says, ‘a man has said this many times, and a girl has learnt. The gift is a silent and merciful thing that a girl should give in stillness, not surrounded by thousands of other men that wish to give it her in return.’

A girl smiles. A girl is beautiful.

‘What about you, anyway?’ she says, ‘are you staying or going?’

‘A man is going, but not to King’s Landing,’ a man replies.

A girl looks sideways at a man, then turns to face him.

‘What do you mean?’ she demands.

‘A man is going far and away across the Narrow Sea, to Braavos,’ he answers.

A girl turns red.

‘Why?’
He shrugs.

‘A man has duties there.’

‘And word of these duties only reached you today? How very convenient.’

‘A girl is flippant.’

‘You’re leaving.’

‘A man has said.’

‘Are you ever coming back?’

‘That is not for a man to say.’

A girl believes what she hears, but does not wish to. A man sees it in the way she attends his words. With one hand she grasps the strap of her trunk, her knuckles turning white. A girl is angry.

‘Will you – will you have the same face?’ a girl asks, ‘if you ever come back?’

‘This a man doubts,’ he says.

For a moment, a girl is silent.

‘Then how will I know you?’ a girl asks.

‘A girl will not,’ a man replies.

She is saddened. A man sees tears. He wishes them away. A man is compromised by them.

A girl slams her trunk suddenly shut and glares at him.

‘Fine! Run off back to Braavos, get yourself a stupid new face and forget this ever happened!’

He is offended.

‘A man will never forget.’

‘I will! I’ll forget, just like I’ve forgotten a million times before.’

A girl sits. She hangs her head.

‘I’m stupid,’ she says, ‘just a stupid little girl with stupid dreams who never learns.’

‘Why does a girl speak of dreams?’ a man asks.

A girl looks up.

‘Because dreams are where my pack is.’

A man comprehends. A man knows.

‘A man has considered asking a girl to accompany him,’ he says, ‘but a girl will not come. A man knows this.’

‘How do you know that?’ she snaps, ‘are you some kind of stupid seer?’
‘A man is not. But a man knows a girl. And a girl will not leave Westeros while her family remains.’

A girl’s face softens. A girl is beautiful.

‘Here,’ a man says, and pushes the coin into a girl’s hand.

‘What is it?’ a girl asks.

‘A coin of great value,’ he explains.

‘Define ‘great value,’” she smirks.

A man smiles. A girl has spent far too much time among Lannisters.

A man explains.

‘If the day ever comes when you must find me again, just give that coin to any man from Braavos and hail him as a man has taught a girl to do.’

‘Hail him? That’s all?’

‘Valar morghulis is more than a greeting, child. It is a warning.’

A girl understands. She looks down at the coin between her fingers. The iron is the colour of her eyes.

‘We must part,’ a man says.

A girl stands, and embraces a man.

A man hesitates.

A man encircles a girl’s shoulders with one arm only. A girl is warm.

She breaks quickly away. She smiles. Her eyes are wet.

‘Thank you,’ a girl says.

A man’s heart stifles him. A girl is crying. For a moment, he is Someone. He has a ruin to call his own.

A girl ceases to cry and looks at him. And he is No one once again. A girl has understood. A man has taught her well.

‘Farewell, Arya Stark,’ he says, and walks, and leaves her.

A man feels frozen in the darkening hall, frozen both inside and out.
Chapter 12

Arya felt like a person who had lived her entire life in a darkened room, only to emerge one day and see the sky for the first time. She rode up and down the ranks of Lord Tywin’s army, craning her neck to the immensity, the clouds in their multitude of greyness so deep, and the blue of the sky so unimpeded by melted stone that she never wanted to glance down again.

Arya had listened to Lord Tywin give the order ‘burn the villages, burn the farms’ at least once a month for years. But seeing it around her, seeing this; seeing how Lord Tywin had not been content with destroying life, but only with exterminating it; seeing this done here, in the land of her mother’s people; thinking that she had known, for four years, and that she had never envisioned the greyness of the grass or the stark bones of trees that would never flower again; that she had never thought that the smell of burning and corpses would linger on the air miles away from Harrenhal; that she had never contemplated the loneliness and perseverance of the forest that was left, sadder than the wind as it mourned its kin..

The Lannister army stretched across the Riverlands like a plague, their crimson armour red as Arya’s eyes and fragile as her heart.

When the door had closed behind Jaqen, she had sat crying silently, stifling the sobs that she secretly hoped would rip her chest out. He was still standing in the corridor outside her chambers. She could hear him. And she knew that if one sound escaped her lips, he would never leave her. And that would not be fair.

Did Jaqen do any of this? she wondered. Did he sear the earth in flames and turn green to grey? Was he one of the unknown hundreds that would ride out each day to obey Lord Tywin’s orders? Was he one of the nameless whose stupid nicknames she would happily whisper to her pillow at night if she only knew who they were?

You do know who they were, she thought to herself, you know Lord Tywin, which is as good as.

For the first time in years, she felt consumed by anger at herself when she thought of the number of times she could have stolen battle plans and raven scrolls; of the number of times she could have stuck a knife in Lord Tywin’s stupid back and done her family some credit. She could have been gone before anyone knew that the old bastard was dead. All she would have had to do was steal a horse and ride west to Riverrun. How hard could it possibly have been to find a great hulking castle?

Arya glanced around her. The men were marching with obscene precision and paying attention to nothing but maintaining it; Lord Tywin having made it the custom to whip soldiers who fell out of line. The commanders were all attending war council at the head of the army, easily half a mile away, and the nearby forest was dense, sheltered, and –

Don’t be stupid. If you’re caught, Lord Tywin will never let you see the sun again.

She smiled to herself.

So don’t get caught.

And she cantered away from the ranks, spurring her horse into a gallop.

She hadn’t ridden in years, and it was exhilarating. The wind was freezing, and she loved the song of the cold as it entered her blood; the blood of winter that did not fear it. She did, however, fear what she might find if she dared to glance over her shoulder, so she raced on ahead, the sky swirling
above her like a sea of fog as she headed for the shelter of the trees that would show her the west; west that would lead her to her pack.

It was colder in the woods than out on the plain. The trees hid the sky and punctured it, and the air swirled with mist from the ground to the forest roof, though it was after midday. As she watched vapour pour out of her mouth like blood from a wound, Arya slowed her horse to a walk and opened her ears to the sound of the trees, the music of their leaves a rush and a roar in her ears, outdoors, yet indoors too; travelling and staying; like her; like the wind. She closed her eyes, and the music grew louder, and for a moment she believed, she hoped, she dreamed, that when she opened them she would find Father looking at her in disapproval, asking her what she was doing in the godswood and not at her lessons; or catch Jon in the act of sneaking up on her, a snowball clutched in his hand.

Arya felt beads of moisture form in her hair and thought of Bran, his eyes closed, and of Mother, her eyes open, and red. And suddenly something cold and metallic pressed against her throat; both the peace of the wood and the roar of her blood rushing out of her and into its blade, and she opened her eyes to find the tip of the Kingslayer’s dagger nestled neatly at the base of her throat.

‘Lost, Stark?’ he asked nonchalantly.

‘Hopelessly,’ she replied, with equal coolness.

He did not lower the dagger, the blade scraping her skin like the wood that had touched her back while his hands touched her skin; the feeling of his fingertips still ghosting over her thighs and breasts. She remembered the smell of his hair and neck; the taste of his smile and tongue as she pulled them into herself time and time again, and that wrenching, straining longing at the juncture of her thighs and his. But above all she remembered how he had kissed her at the end, and how he had made her laugh.

Stop this. Stop it.

Arya tightened the grip of her legs on the horse’s back, and beat her blood back down to the depths.

He was doing the same, his lips clamping shut and trapping his breath inside him, his eyes turning pale.

‘Let’s go,’ the Kingslayer said, elegantly sheathing his dagger, ‘I’m supposed to be at war council, not entertaining the whims of children.’

‘Of course. I forgot. Killing them is much more fun for you.’

The Kingslayer glared at her.

‘I could always return with a full complement of guards and make sure that my father locks you up for the rest of your life,’ he threatened.

‘Go on, then,’ Arya dared him hoarsely, ‘bring me your full complement of guards and watch me slit all their throats. At least you’ll have some good entertainment before I slit yours.’

He paused, and Arya realised, with satisfaction, that he was remembering the armoury.

Keep on remembering, Lannister. Remember it well. It can happen again anytime I want it to.

Suddenly he was drawing his dagger again, the sound as it left its sheath to find a new one in her throat like nails on glass. Every part of her died immediately except her hand, her arm and her mind, and only when she felt the unmistakable vibration of steel ringing through her body did she realise that she’d somehow gotten her own dagger out in time to meet his; the two blades pressed together,
kissing.

‘Incredible,’ he murmured, so softly that she barely heard him.

Then he sharply sheathed his steel again and watched as she did likewise.

‘Where did you learn to fight?’ he asked quietly, with no condescension or mockery.

‘From…a friend,’ Arya replied, ashamed at how her voice shook and broke, ‘he’s gone now. He’s not dead; he just…went away and isn’t coming back.’

She blinked furiously and bit her lips to stop the tears from coming.

You will not cry. You will not cry.

‘Is he Braavosi? Your friend?’ the Kingslayer continued with something like gentleness.

‘Lorathi,’ she said, in a much fiercer tone than she had intended. She didn’t want to talk about Jaqen. It would only make her cry again.

The Kingslayer seemed to sense this, because he hastily cleared his throat and turned his horse around, his eyes avoiding hers.

‘Let’s go, Stark,’ he said, ‘And if you try to run again, I’ll throw my dagger at your back.’

‘Fine,’ she snapped.

They reached the edge of the wood without speaking, the wind coming for them the moment they emerged from the trees. On the road before them, the army continued to march for the capital; an earthbound serpent, a dragon, not a lion. The soil on which they walked looked stained with blood, their armour glistening like carnage in the sunlight, carnage that had been, and carnage to come.

He was right, Arya thought, I should have chosen death rather than be part of this; however small a part it might be.

The Kingslayer glanced sideways at her, refusing to meet her eyes.

‘You fight well,’ he whispered, and galloped back to the head of the column.
The Kingswood was quiet around Father’s tent, so quiet that even the leaves did not stir; the trees green and dead; soundless and wordless. Jaime did not like silence; and stillness such as this the night before a battle would have troubled him in another time and place. But the argument the Stark girl had put to him shortly after midnight, while they sat watching Father staring at his maps, was so blatantly absurd that he had forgotten almost entirely about the ominous silence. And only a deaf man would deny that the two of them were more than making up for it.

‘I still don’t agree with you!’ Jaime insisted.

‘Then you’re stupid!’ the Stark girl retaliated.

‘What kind of idiot goes into battle without armour?’ he demanded.

‘What kind of idiot doesn’t listen when I’m talking?’ she shouted back at him, ‘I didn’t say that soldiers should dispense with armour altogether, just that wearing so much of it weighs them down and gets in the way. How can you not see that?’

Jaime leaned forward in his chair, his wine glass threatening to break in his fist.

‘Maybe I’m too busy worrying about any idiot in the world suddenly gaining the power to chop my arm off while I’m busy with something else!’

‘Plenty of arms get chopped off in battles when their owners are busy with something else!’

‘Don’t change the subject!’

The Stark girl threw up her hands in exasperation.

‘I’m not!’ she persisted, ‘if you weren’t trapped in layers and layers of boiled leather and plate and steel and the gods only know what else, you’d be so fast that Ser Any Idiot In The World wouldn’t get anywhere near you in the first place!’

‘I’m fast enough with my armour on, thank you very much!’ Jaime snapped.

She snorted.

‘Having seen you how you move with your armour off, I don’t want to know how slowly you move when you’ve got it on!’

‘Stop this at once!’ Father snapped from his traditional place behind his desk, ‘your quarreling sets my teeth on edge.’

‘He started it,’ the Stark girl insisted.

‘Quiet, girl!’ Father barked, and she settled back into her chair, pouting sullenly.

She’d stop doing that soon enough if she realised how funny it makes her look, Jaime thought.

They were a day’s march from King’s Landing, and most of the afternoon and evening had been spent finalising battle plans with the Tyrells; the most spectacularly boring collection of people that Jaime had ever met. The Stark girl had poured wine for the last few hours of war council, Father having reduced his new cupbearer to a fit of hysteria after the boy spilt wine on the same map three
times in a row, and none of the armoured men about the council table had spared her so much as a
glance, even after meeting her as Arya Stark.

Knowing the name of the person pouring your wine doesn’t necessarily make you want to know
them better, Jaime thought, but still. She’s a high born girl. The average lord would be horrified at
such a thing: a noblewoman serving wine like a common servant.

Then it occurred to him how adept the girl had become at making herself invisible; at throwing off
her name and bearing none at all. That sort of thing did not disappear overnight. Nor did the effects
of it.

You haven’t considered that the Tyrells are rather occupied with the salvation of the realm at
present, not to mention with the advancement of their House. You’re only noticing these things
because you look for her and look at her and do a lot of other things to her that you shouldn’t be
doing in the first place.

‘Girl,’ Father said, pulling Jaime away from his thoughts, ‘tell me what you thought of Mace Tyrell.’

‘He’s the dullest person I’ve ever met, my lord,’ the Stark girl responded.

‘And how does his being dull affect his ability to help win battles?’ Father asked testily.

‘Not in the least,’ the girl acknowledged, ‘not this time, anyway, because he isn’t leading the
vanguard. If he were, you’d be in trouble.’

‘Why?’

The girl shrugged.

‘You need a personality to lead a van.’

Father’s lips twitched slightly, a sure sign that he was fighting down a smile.

‘Lord Stannis doesn’t have the tiniest pinch of what you could call a personality,’ Father continued,
‘and yet he has twenty thousand men, and poses the greatest threat to the capital since Robert’s
Rebellion.’

‘He has twenty thousand men in his whole army,’ the girl drawled, ‘not just in the van.’

‘And what of his numbers?’

‘The majority of his so-called numbers are miserable cowards that are only his because the Red
Priestess and her magic were so good as to stick a sword in Lord Renly’s back.’

‘We have spoken of this nonsense, girl.’

She ignored that, and continued.

‘Stannis’ men don’t love him, and they don’t fear him. That will bite him in the arse at some point.’

If Cersei or Tyrion or I had ignored him like that, he would have murdered us. Murdered us.

But Father took a sip of wine and made no comment as the girl opened her mouth to speak again.

‘Did I hear you say that the Red Priestess has not remained at Dragonstone, my lord?’ she asked.
‘You did,’ Father replied, ‘though Littlefinger’s spies, and Varys,’ have reported that she is not with Stannis’ host either.

‘So where is she?’ the girl pondered, not sounding too concerned by the question.

‘Maybe she’s casting spells on a beach somewhere.’ Jaime interjected mockingly.

‘Oh will you shut up, Kingslayer?’ the girl snapped at him.

Jaime watched her glaring at him, her eyes harder than castle-forged steel as she pronounced the name; her lips seeming to revel in every last syllable of the name that wasn’t truly his; her jaw tightening – King – her tongue rolling beautifully off the back of her teeth – slayer – just as it had rolled off the back of his earlier that day, tasting like battle, and fury.

_Shall I take you right here on the carpet and teach you my name till you scream it aloud? _Jaime challenged her silently, _my real name?

He took some small pleasure in the beautiful flush that filled the Stark girl’s cheeks as he felt his thoughts burn into his face. Then she looked up, to a point beyond Jaime’s shoulder, and the red began to drain rapidly out of her; turning her to paleness and greyness as she rose slowly to her feet, her arm seeming to pull through water as it moved to the Valyrian steel dagger at her waist, yanked it from its sheath and threw it with deadly precision. By the time a sharp clang of metal on metal announced that she had missed, the sound of it like a death knell, Jaime had risen from his own seat, turning, feeling as though he were walking through mud, his eyes searching for whatever she was attacking; his gaze falling on it, not comprehending it.

It had no shape, and hardly seemed to have substance; just a shadow spreading across the floor like a cloud of soot erupting from a fireplace and bringing the wind and the cold with it. The Stark girl was turning, and Jaime was moving, and by the time both of them had looked across the room towards his father, the shadow had coiled its way up the old man’s body to his back, where it emerged as an unnatural, faded ghost of a man that roared menacingly as it drove a sword into Father’s back and out through his chest.

As the blood spurted; as the leaves outside began to rustle again; as the Stark girl threw another knife, time returned to its usual shape, and passing. Her dagger was buried up to its hilt in the tent pole, having passed right through a dark thing which now no longer existed; leaving no sign that it had been there at all except the blood on the floor and Father slumping forwards in his chair, falling.

Jaime leapt forward and caught him as he fell, seizing his shoulders and pushing him upright again; the heat of Father’s chest beneath Jaime’s already-bloodied fingers, his ice blue eyes alive…and blazing.

‘He’s still alive,’ Jaime muttered, his heart leaping, ‘he’s still – get a maester!’

But the Stark girl was running for the flap of the tent already, and as he heard her shout for the maester’s tent and bark at the guard to allow no one to enter, Jaime felt his father’s hand seize a fistful of his shirt and pull him closer; his voice as firm as it had ever been, distorted only by the blood spilling out of his mouth and onto his chin.

‘Listen to me,’ Father growled fiercely, ‘you listen to me. Cersei will kill her. She’ll kill her.’

Jaime pressed harder on the wound with his fingers, more blood flowing with every heartbeat, his father’s face pale and perfectly calm as he repeated the words:

‘Cersei will kill her. She’ll kill her.’
‘Father, what – ’

The old man cut across him.

‘Cersei will support a new sibling only as long as I live to command her to. When I no longer do, when I can no longer bring her to heel, she will discredit the girl and kill her without hesitation and we cannot let that happen; you can’t let that happen. Do you understand?’

Jaime shouted over his shoulder for the fucking maester to hurry up as another wave of blood surged over his hands and out of his father’s mouth. The smell of blood had never made his head spin before. Never. Before.

‘The maester’s coming,’ Jaime heard the Stark girl say from right beside him, and she clasped her tiny hands roughly over his as another swell of blood pulsed out of Father’s heart; leaking between Jaime’s fingers and trickling onto the girl’s, painting them the same colour.

_He’s going to die, Jaime realised, even if the maester comes, he’s going to die._

Father looked perturbed and unafraid, as though being stabbed in the chest were the greatest inconvenience in the world, and he glanced once again at Jaime, his eyes commanding him, begging him.

‘Don’t let it happen,’ he repeated, his voice growing weaker, ‘you do not let it happen.’

‘I won’t,’ Jaime replied, his voice perfectly steady as Father’s eyes came to rest on the girl, his eyelids growing heavier, blinking less often.

_He has such long eyelashes, Jaime thought, I’d never noticed before._

Father smiled briefly at the girl.

‘You resemble her,’ he said.

Then his eyes closed once more, not flickering open again, and the thunder of his heartbeat exhaled hoarsely beneath Jaime’s fingers, rasping, coughing, and stopping.

Jaime seemed, then, to be looking at himself from the entrance to the tent as he tried to lower his hands again and again, the girl stopping him each time, her eyes the colour of night.

‘No,’ she said, pressing her hands down harder, ‘no.’

‘Arya – ’

‘No.’

The maester arrived, and still she would not let go, her hands bathed in Lannister crimson; as her mind had been for four years; drowning in it, learning from it, becoming it.

‘Arya,’ Jaime murmured.

She shook her head vehemently, tears pulsing down her cheeks.

‘Arya,’ he repeated gently, ‘let go.’

‘No.’
Jaime slid one bloodstained hand from beneath her palms and covered both her hands in it, trying to coax them away. Her fingers burned worse than all the seven hells put together.

‘Arya,’ he said, ‘he’s – ’

‘No,’ she growled, her fingers clawing painfully into the hand that still remained beneath hers.

_She’s going to break._

‘Guard,’ Jaime called.

‘No…’

‘Guard!’

‘No, Tywin, NO!’ she screamed, screaming louder as she was pulled away, struggling fiercely and feebly, wanting to do damage, too distraught to remember how.

‘Take her out,’ Jaime ordered, his voice shaking as the guard finally achieved a firm grip on her waist, ‘please take her out of here, take her away from here – ’

‘No!’ the Stark girl screamed, _no! Let go of me! Let me go!_’

Her cries were all he heard as men began to enter the tent, men in cloaks and armour the colour of his hands, his dead father looking as concentrated and stern behind his desk as he had looked five minutes ago; the maps of King’s Landing still spread out before him, his wine glass still half-full, the shadow of his lips on the rim.

‘Jaime.’

Uncle Kevan’s face was white as summer snow, his eyes the colour of dust settling in on fallen stone.

Jaime glanced down at his hands and pressed them together. The blood felt an inch thick.

He was being asked what happened. He was being asked who did it. He was being asked where the weapon was. He was being asked what the fuck they were going to do next.

‘Fetch me some water,’ Jaime said, ‘I need to wash my hands.’
Chapter 14

In the moments following his father’s death, the voices of the other commanders had begun to writhe and resonate in the air in front of him, bursting across his vision like siege fires. Every voice suddenly assumed a colour of its own, and not one of them was making the slightest bit of sense.

‘Put my uncle in charge of the right,’ Jaime snapped, his blindness lifting as his voice brought silence to the cacophony, ‘put me in the fucking vanguard. And change nothing else. Unless you want the old bastard haunting you before he gets himself shoved into a marble hole somewhere.’

And blinking feverishly to clear the chaos from his eyes, he left them to do whatever the fuck they wanted.

He ripped open the flap to Arya’s tent; not even bothering to ask himself what he was doing there; expecting to find her screaming in a crumpled heap on the floor. Instead, she stood wordlessly before her washstand, her bloodstained hands poised just above the water; her fingers twitching and tremouring like the limbs of a decapitated man. Her hands were a horror, as his had been; the blood more solid than liquid, and in some places more black than red.

‘It still feels warm,’ she murmured softly as Jaime approached.

She means it still feels alive, he thought, stepping closer and closer to her until his chest touched her back; ashamed of how her whole body loosened in relief as he bent almost double to nestle his chin in the crook of her shoulder and neck; ashamed at the nausea rising in his throat at the sight of her hands and the thought of his father’s blood touching his skin again.

But he laced his fingers through hers anyway and lowered them into the water; Arya’s skin like ice beneath his, no warmth, no light, as together they created a fountain of blood from a simple basin of water.

The water shuddered and quaked as Jaime’s fingers journeyed up and down her hands, tracing the lines of her palms and the delicate skin between each of her fingers; his thumbs rubbing at the hardness of her knuckles and the skin beneath her nails; his fingertips touching the callouses that marked hers. Blood came off everything in hot crimson sheets and granules of red sand, and it rose up out of the water to float on its surface like the bloated bodies of drowned men.

And suddenly she fell, so abruptly that he hardly had time to seize her before she hit the ground; her limbs like liquid as Jaime sank to the floor with her and pulled her into his arms, not caring if she tried to kill him for doing it. She curled up against him like a cat, her eyes grey and red and exhausted; tired of shining, tired of being strong. Her heartbeat collided with his fingers as they travelled gently through her hair, her scalp beneath it damp and warm from her tears.

She trusts me, Jaime thought as her eyes flickered desperately shut; their lids swollen and enflamed as her cheek came to rest against his chest.

Arya’s every breath wrenched hard against his stomach each time the shadow came over her; the memory poisoning her limbs and breaking them until it decided to release her. Then she would breathe quietly, her eyes closed, but unsleeping, until it came for her again.

‘Oh, gods,’ she murmured, trembling and hurting, ‘gods.’

Jaime kissed her hair; her forehead; and eventually, her lips; her mouth tasting of tears; and gentle and beautiful as a child’s breath.
‘Go to sleep,’ he murmured, ‘try to sleep.’

And he watched her try, every part of her holding a part of him.

*Why don’t I feel grief?* Jaime thought, listening to her breathing against him, *why don’t I feel this? Why don’t I feel anything? Shouldn’t I be feeling something, even if its relief, even if it’s happiness that the old bugger’s dead? The girl is distraught. Incapacitated. And he wasn’t even her blood.*

Just thinking of the future made Jaime sigh. There would be a funeral, of course, and there would be mourning. There would be mass hysteria. There would be mass plotting. There would be talk that House Lannister was finished without him. Perhaps it was.

*Cersei will kick up the biggest fuss she can manage. She’ll want to show them that they’re wrong; that she can continue where he left off: a daughter continuing her beloved father’s legacy.*

*So why can’t I imagine his bloody legacy without the absurdly tiny little brat that’s lying in my arms?*

At the crack of dawn, Uncle Kevan appeared fully-armoured at the tent flap, letting in the smell of horses, and the crack of hammers on steel.

‘Jaime – ’

Jaime put a finger to his lips and motioned politely to him to wait outside; Arya still fast asleep, deathly pale and beautiful.

‘Arya,’ he said softly, shaking her.

Her eyes flickered open immediately.

‘It’s time to move,’ he said.

Arya nodded mutely and disentangled herself, getting to her feet and crossing the room to where her trunk lay open. She did not look at him or speak to him.

*There’s no time for deciphering the minds of adolescent girls,* Jaime thought as he got to his feet and left the tent without comment, you have Stannis bloody Baratheon to smash.

Uncle Kevan looked ghastly; his appearance rendered all the more disturbing by the neatness of his armour and his freshly-shaven face.

‘Uncle,’ Jaime said, ‘I’m so sorry about Father.’

‘As am I,’ Uncle Kevan responded, smiling weakly, ‘he was…he…oh, you understand what I mean.’

Jaime nodded, not understanding; trying to smile back, failing miserably.

‘How does the girl do?’ Uncle Kevan asked by way of easing his discomfort, ‘last night she seemed…disturbed.’

‘She’s devastated,’ Jaime replied simply.

He didn’t know what else to say.
Jaime remembered many things about that night.

He remembered night falling, and a green glow in the distance and *I shall never forgive her for this*, he thought.

He remembered the way the malignant radiance caressed Arya’s face as she appeared suddenly beside him, mumbling ‘Stay safe, Lannister,’ not hearing ‘And you, Stark’; riding away too soon.

He remembered the weight of his armour on his limbs and how heavy it felt, heavier than it had ever seemed before, and the clouds burned green and purple and red; bursting with death, not rain; mortality glowing in the surface of every sword that caught and reflected its light.

The enemy was a molten mass of blackness and strangeness, the shadows before the city walls and the shadow on the floor like thousands of tiny eyes creeping so closely together that they became one. He gripped the sword in his hand and felt that it belonged there, the hilt hot against the leather against his palm, the steel crying out for sustenance and begging him for blood. He answered its pleas tenfold, dancing through the black blades of the enemy and ripping them steel from steel and limb from limb, the blood of every man he killed the blood of the Red Priestess, spilling, spattering and showering as his own blood roared and heaved.

He remembered the hundreds of men and horses sent toppling to the ground like supplicants from the force of a colossal cloud of green flame erupting suddenly from the centre of Blackwater Bay; the steel of Jaime’s helmet shrieking loudly and ghastily in his ears as it hit the earth along with him and sang him a song of fire; of the morning when Aerys had fed a mother and her baby to the flames; and Jaime not knowing why, not even asking why, far away, inside, protected by his waking self. The fire out in the bay had the same shape, the same tormenting flames licking both its victims and its lips.

Men were rising up around him as the fire faded into the sky; Jaime’s knees collapsing beneath him each time he put his weight on them; his armour becoming thicker and heavier with every move he made, his head lighter, his vision duller, and one of Stannis’ twenty thousand bearing down on him; his eyes dark and alert, his body enclosed in a shell in plate.

He swore at himself to get the fuck up.

He couldn’t.

The man’s sword was a shining ribbon of green and purple and red that swung down and pierced the air so hard that Jaime screamed aloud; the steel seeming to pass right through him.

*Get up. Get up.*

He felt his legs cracking and his muscles screaming in protest, but he thundered back at them, and urged and goaded and impelled, and he was on his feet again, thank the gods – without a blade in his hand.

Jaime ducked as his enemy swung at him, his head spinning like lunacy (*what the fuck is happening to me?*), and crouching he lunged swiftly for his sword where it lay red on the ground, red… alongside his right hand.

He remembered his skull caving in on itself and taking his mind with it as torn muscle, bone and
flesh suddenly came alive with agony, and his eyelids were flickering and trapping him inside them as he fell.

He remembered torrents of blood exploding from the throat of the man who had crippled him and spilling like rubies across a sword wielded by a deathly pale young girl with no armour on, her hair and clothes wet with blood.

He remembered her pouring wine down his throat, red wine; not stopping as he gagged and choked and dying men screamed around him and voices babbled on and on too loudly far too loudly

‘The safest thing would be to take the whole arm,’ a venerable voice was opinionating, ‘it will very likely be necessary in any case.’

‘You do anything of the sort and I’ll stick a sword in your guts. Losing his arm will kill him.’

‘Keeping his arm may kill him.’

‘You know perfectly well that’s not what I mean.’

Silence, and screaming, more silence; darkness, then light, too much of it, far too much; and bells, why the fuck were they ringing bells, and his head so light so heavy, eyesight an agony, breathing an agony, the world a shattered mirror, and Arya’s face filling his vision, her grey wolf eyes like the rain.

‘Stop pretending you can’t hear me. Just stop. Just open your mouth and make a sound so I know you’re…Jaime. Jaime. JAIME, FOR FUCK’S SAKE, SAY SOMETHING!’

A stone ceiling and the smell of salt and smoke, an emptiness at one end of his right arm, and his head turning in the direction of an open window, the sun shining and the sky colours turned to black and grey and white, and silence, the silence and the smell.

Cersei’s hands caressing his face, her gown Lannister crimson, her eyes dark green with horror, her golden hair beautiful, beautiful.

‘You’re so thin,’ she whispered, her voice hoarse in her throat.

He wanted to hug her. Why wasn’t she hugging him?

‘Who did this to you? Who?’

And he remembered inhaling smoke and ruin and blackened flesh, and saying

‘You did.’

Cersei turning away from him, a door slamming, a jolt in his heart, not meaning it, not believing it. And knowing that she would return; knowing that she would know. She would come to him, because he could not go to her. He hurt too much. Too much.

A stone ceiling. The smell. The flame. Burn them all, he kept saying. Burn them all.

Father dead behind his desk. A shadow on the floor. A girl gasping in ecstasy. And a small boy falling from a window, his spine shattering as he hit the ground.
Chapter 16

The milk of the poppy had filled his head like a vast invisible fog; the events of that day had exhausted and aggrieved him; but Jaime burst out laughing anyway; his entire body aching in response. There was no mirth in the amusement he expressed, but it did, however, achieve the desired effect: making Cersei furious.

‘Be your Hand?’ Jaime scoffed, hoping she would mistake the tears of pain in his eyes for tears of laughter, ‘why your Hand? Has Joffrey done everyone a tremendous favour and died sometime this afternoon?’

‘How can you speak in such a way about your own son?’ his sister snapped.

‘My seed, do you mean?’

Her anger was exquisite to watch, exquisite like the play of the candlelight on the black velvet she wore; waking up a passionate brilliance in her eyes. The way her mouth curved downwards when she was displeased or thwarted; the way she turned golden when she laughed, like sunlight…

But she hadn’t laughed once that entire evening, preferring instead to echo bloody Pycelle’s constant insistence that he stay in bed, and speak a lot of fucking nonsense to him.

‘Will you stop smiling and fooling about for once in your life and listen to me?’ Cersei hissed, her voice more bitter than desperate, ‘Joffrey is –’

‘Why should it matter to me what Joffrey is, sweet sister?’ he grinned in response, trying to ignore how heavy and thick and useless the milk of the poppy made his tongue feel, ‘I’m simply applying your own precepts to the situation. I squirted him into your cunt one night and that was the end of the story. Your words, not mine.’

‘It was for his own safety as well as yours; how many times must I explain it to you?’

‘You’ll explain it to me a thousand times more if that’s what it takes to make me understand why I should care a fuck about him now.’

She wanted to hit him. He could see it. It made the corners of her mouth turn up. Seven hells, he had missed her.

But instead of hitting him, she came to him and knelt in front of him, her nails sinking painfully into his knees, her mouth finding his desperately, her tongue coaxing his lips open, the taste of her like home, like cruelty.

‘I need you,’ Cersei begged, her lips still wounding his as she spoke, ‘I need you. I need you.’

‘I know,’ he whispered back, leaning in to kiss her again.

She shoved him away.

‘There are traitors everywhere,’ Cersei declared, as though nothing had happened, her lovely face looking up at his, ‘treachery everywhere I turn –’

‘Only tyrants use the word ‘treachery,’ sister,’ he pointed out, his head hurting.

‘Don’t try to sound like Father, Jaime,’ she sneered, ‘it doesn’t suit you. Tyrion has – will you stop
laughing?

But he couldn’t help himself. The old bugger was dead. Father was dead, and this was what he left behind. An eldest son who didn’t give a fuck, a younger son who did give a fuck, and a daughter too paranoid to let him give a fuck, convinced that she was their father resurrected, convinced that Jaime Fucking Kingslayer Cripple Lannister would be a perfect Hand of the King. Hilarious. It was fucking hilarious, and he laughed.

Cersei hit him in the face. He moved to stop her and almost cried out in pain and frustration at having raised his right arm to do it; his entire mind hardening and turning red and warping yet again as it remembered that it had been defiled; that it didn’t know what it was anymore.

‘Jaime,’ he heard Arya scream, ‘JAIME FOR FUCK’S SAKE, SAY SOMETHING!’

He couldn’t open his mouth, just as the Stark boy hadn’t opened his as he fell, not once, not even to scream, just a gasp on the edge as he realised what was happening; and the smell of the nape of Arya’s neck and her voice, her thoughts, and her skin beneath his hands, both his hands, one of them, lying on the ground next to a sword.

His twin was plunging on regardless; though she saw his distress, though she knew it; her eyes flickering involuntarily to the stump where his hand had been, her lip curling ever so slightly, and just as involuntarily, not taking no for an answer.

‘Tyrion has been allowed to become too –’

For fuck’s sake, I don’t care, how many more times must I say it?

‘– the lecherous little stump, has threatened Joffrey with death more times than I can count; the Tyrells are –’

Enough.

‘Cersei,’ he declared angrily, trying to raise his voice, not managing it, ‘can you honestly imagine me sitting around a council table for the rest of my life? Listening to Littlefinger making polite enquiries about the locale and proportions of Lord Varys’ balls, while a stronger smell of piss and raven shit lingers about Pycelle every day that the old cunt stays alive? Long hours, a short life, pretending I care about taxes and plotting and whispering? I can barely survive war council; what makes you think I’ll fare any better on the small council? Tyrion was made for that sort of thing, Cersei. Tyrion. Not me.’

‘Tyrion can join the Kingsguard if he likes,’ she scoffed, her eyes alive and beautiful, ‘I don’t want Tyrion. I want you.’

He wanted to kiss her again. He needed to kiss her again.

‘Come here,’ he commanded.

‘I will not,’ Cersei spat in reply, ‘that stump of yours is beginning to reek of death.’

‘That’s life you’re smelling, sweet sister,’ Jaime replied serenely, hoping she hadn’t seen how much that previous remark had hurt him, ‘death smells quite different, as you should know from this morning. Has poor Tommen recovered yet?’

Anger flashed momentarily across her face.
'There was nothing to recover from. The boy is an idiot.'

'I’m starting to think he didn’t inherit his idiocy from Robert,’ Jaime observed, hoping to hurt her, or provoke her at the very least, ‘and for the last time, no. I won’t be Hand of the King; I’d sooner fall on my own sword than be Hand of the King; I am not made for politics; and as you’ve just reminded me, I think I swore to remain in the Kingsguard for life.'

'Barristan Selmy bleated the same nonsense at me,’ Cersei scoffed, her cheeks turning an angry and vengeful red, ‘go and look for him now.'

'I’d rather not risk fucking with that old bastard, if it’s all the same to you,’ Jaime said, once he’d finished chuckling and scribbling a mental note to tell that one to Arya, ‘he’d chop me in two with one hand while taking a piss with the other.’

'Have you taken vows of false modesty too?’

'Not at all. I get beaten rarely enough for me to know when it’s in danger of happening.'

Except the last time. The girl bit you right in the arse, and her eyes were very grey.

‘You’ve changed,’ Cersei observed contemptuously, emeralds and beaten gold, beautiful.

‘Have I?’ Jaime replied breezily.

‘You’ve become weak.’

‘I’ve become prudent.’

‘Prudence and weakness are the same thing, brother.’

‘Now you’re doing a worse job than me of imitating Father.’

Cersei straightened her back, the threat of queenliness rising from her bones to her face; a glorious face that could be flesh or iron.

‘What if I commanded you to be Hand? What then?’ she ventured softly.

‘Command away,’ Jaime replied flippantly, ‘I won’t give up my sword.’

‘Are you planning on handling your sword any time soon?’

'I fail to see why not.'

‘You scarcely survived this morning without collapsing. I hate to think what would happen to you if you ended up on a tourney ground.’

Something in her voice had changed; a spite; a shade; something that had not been there before; that he was sure had not been there before. And yet even from his place in the Great Sept of Baelor that morning, he had heard it as she simpered and snapped at mourners and growled at Tommen to be quiet. He had heard it through the clouds of incense that polluted the air and filled his lungs, through the singing and the chanting and the High Septon’s blathering, through the thinness of his blood and the lightness of his head and his own fucking pathetic being and feeling weakness fucking weakness what am I what am I now what is the point of me. His thoughts waded, blundered and drowned through the deluges of blood that pulsed from his head to the place where his hand had been, his head spinning as it turned left and right in search of Arya, whom he could not find or feel.
'Did the Stark girl attend the funeral today?' Jaime enquired disinterestedly, 'I do not think I saw her.'

Cersei’s face darkened.

‘That girl will not attend anything apart from a tribunal until she swears allegiance to Joffrey.’

‘Good luck with that,’ Jaime said, almost smiling, ‘nevertheless, it was cruel not to let her attend. She cared deeply for our father.’

‘For our father’s purse strings, you mean,’ Cersei laughed.

‘No, sister,’ he replied testily, indignant, ‘that is not what I mean.’

Cersei raised her eyebrows knowingly.

‘At last. A little seriousness.’

Jaime coloured.

‘The girl did save my life, Cersei.’

‘Yes. Before trying to escape, spitting in my face and threatening to kill the king.’

‘She does all three rather often. It’s nothing personal.’

Cersei smirked at his words, and did not reply.

‘But never mind her,’ Jaime remarked, his head beginning to feel very heavy indeed, ‘we were talking, before, of swords. And as soon as I can stand without the risk of falling over, I will pick one up again, and I will not rest till I can fight with it properly. Something you should have had your goldcloaks do instead of telling them to throw pots of fucking wildfire at the enemy.’

‘Careful, brother,’ she said, in a horribly high voice, ‘if Tyrion hears you both misunderstanding and crediting me for his little trick, he’ll get very cross.’

‘A little trick he wouldn’t have been able to perform had you not interfered with those fucking caches,’ Jaime accused.

_Had you not betrayed my trust._

Cersei’s face was glacial with righteous indignation.

‘You would have had me let Stannis raze this city to the ground just to spare your feelings?’

‘I would have thought dying cleanly and honourably preferable to inflicting indescribable pain and suffering on thousands of people.’

‘Oh, indescribable pain and suffering,’ Cersei repeated in a tone of exquisite mockery, ‘our enemy is at the gates, but we mustn’t think of inflicting on him a fate that he would consign us to without a second thought? Fuck your feelings, Jaime. War is war.’

‘What the fuck do you know about war?’

Cersei smiled at him as though he were the most melodramatic creature in existence.
‘I think you need to rest, brother,’ she said sweetly, ‘your wits are gone along with your hand.’
Chapter 17

Somebody – Jaqen, most likely – had once told her that time did not exist in the black cells; that the idea of days, weeks and months was crippled by the darkness. He was wrong. In the dark, time did what it liked and showed her what it liked; the smell of the blood the only thing reminding her that the present existed at all.

Father must have been in here at some point. Sometimes, between the rattle of keys that would bring hard bread and occasionally water, she fancied she could see him sitting next to her, the same sweat pouring down his face; the same thirst torturing his tongue. But she could not talk to him, or touch him. He was trapped in his moment, and she in hers. Time did what it liked in the black cells, broken only, and yet hardly at all, by the rattle of keys.

She remembered a crowd of kingslanders before the Great Sept of Baelor and a crowd of soldiers before the city walls; she remembered crying and shrieking like a stupid, helpless little girl and cutting throat after throat after throat like a killer. *I love this,* she had thought, *I love it.* And the wildfire was rolling up into the clouds and ripping them asunder, and she was falling under the force of it, a soaring pain in her limbs as she got to her feet again. And Jaime was falling and not getting up again - she could see it was him – and bile was rising in her throat as – *oh, gods* –

She had cut the man’s throat. She had painted him red. She had screamed as she did it, and it had felt good, but she might as well have opened her own throat as well for all the good it had done. *This doesn’t make things better,* she thought, *it doesn’t make you any less of a mouse; any less of a little girl that can’t change anything.* Because no matter how many people you kill or how good you are at it; you’re never there when it matters. You couldn’t save Father. You couldn’t save Tywin. You couldn’t save –

Another rattle of keys. Another piece of bread. Another unspoken refusal of allegiance.

The blood of her enemies was still on her. It was sticky in her hair and rank on her clothing; so much of it Jaime’s; so much of it. In the maester’s tent, it had covered everything. Arya’s hands, the maester’s hands, the hands of the men helping him; their clothes; the floor; the bottles of wine and milk of the poppy that they poured into him as he choked; more and more and more of it, floods of it, as the plate and boiled leather were stripped from Jaime’s torso and he was held down, the maester preparing his tools and barking at his boy to pick up a lamp and hold it closer.

As the light had fallen harshly on Jaime’s upper body, Arya had gasped aloud. His skin was stretched tightly over his bones with a sickening tautness; every bone in him, from his shoulders to his ribs looking fragile enough to snap in two and powerful enough to punch right through his skin; thin; brittle; exhausted; too fucking exhausted to be wearing armour and fighting battles.

The guilt had almost driven her to her knees.

She had touched nearly every inch of him at some point; been so close to him that she had been sure her arms would break from the pressure of trying to hold him closer. And she hadn’t noticed a thing. Not once.

But then he had always worn leather, and shirts beneath that, he had always –

*Stop this. Stop it.*

Feeling any guilt at all was absurd, weak, stupid, traitorous. This wasn’t a tragedy. This was justice.
for her brother and her family. Justice. This was what was right.

So she had forced herself to watch. When he had started to scream, she had even told herself she was happy about it; that she had saved his life not as a kindness, but as a punishment.

*I should have let the maester take the entire arm. Bran’s legs are worth far more than one stupid hand, no matter who it belongs to.*

Jaime’s eyes were so pale they were almost grey; not seeing what was in front of him, not able to; his remaining fingers scratching the air like claws as the maester’s assistants held him down; and his fingers seemed so different; *so different* from earlier that day, when they had folded into hers and purged the blood from her hands, turning her face upwards into his.

*Stop this*, she spat at herself, *Stop it.*

*Do you know what you should do, you love-struck little fool? You should run. Run for your life, and be happy this has happened. Because every time he looks at that empty space and feels the twitching of fingers that don’t exist anymore, he’ll think of Bran and what he did and curse you for not letting him bleed to death.*

Another rattle of keys; another unspoken demand for allegiance; another ‘fuck you’ whispered to the darkness as she remembered running while a conflagration of colours poisoned the sky like a plague; the sunlight adding to it, acknowledging it like a brother, and bringing with it gold cloaks, who caught her before she had gone half a mile.

Cersei had been covered in blood, no, in crimson velvet, and wearing some ridiculous ornamental breastplate, pretending that she hadn’t spent the entire battle hiding in some hole at the bottom of Maegor’s. Arya didn’t remember much of what Cersei had said to her. She only remembered spitting in the bitch’s face, and feeling a certain satisfaction at being considered dangerous enough to be thrown into the black cells.

*The appeal has worn off. I’m going to die here.*

She had a dream about a man with no hair, his shaven head covered by a hood, the torch in his hand burning as softly as the tones of voice. Father was having the same dream next to her, and *this is Lord Varys,* she thought, *the Spider with the little birds. Father didn’t like him, or Mother. Or Tywin, for that matter. Something my three unfortunate parents have in common. That’s funny. That’s hilarious.*

She laughed so hard that she almost passed out.

Her laughter bewildered the eunuch; whose lips moved a great deal. And his voice was very soft, and ‘dying here is honourable, if inane,’ he said, and something about revenge that made Father fade away from her, leaving her alone with Varys, his torch and his words; his words that woke her up.

‘The revenge you want will be yours in time.’

*The revenge you want will be yours in time.*

And suddenly Tywin was sitting next to her, looking silently through her, his mouth set in agreement, his eyes ice blue.

*Tywin’s never seen the inside of a black cell in his life,* she thought, *you’re losing your mind. The heat’s driven you mad.*
But the next time she heard the rattling of the keys, she spoke; her voice leathery and hoarse in her throat, and asked that the Queen be informed she was ready to come out.

The sunlight was too bright for her eyes, and Joffrey was too small for his throne. He looked swallowed up by it; a boy playing in the mouth of a monster and not even seeing the danger. The crown sat jauntily at an angle on his head, and his stupid pouty lips were just the same as he listened to her speak the words,

_I, Arya, of the House Stark -_

The crowd around her was silent this time, and far away from her, and would have stayed silent had he once again pronounced the words ‘Ser Ilyn! Bring me his head!’

Her _head, not his._ Remember you’re you, remember you’re not -

‘Your Grace,’ that stupid bitch Cersei was saying, her golden hair coiled around her head _someday I’ll strangle you with it, in the judgment of your small council –_

Joffrey made her say the words again. And again. She heard snickers from the crowd as she stumbled over the words, the light too harsh, her throat too dry; Tywin growling at her to straighten up, Father begging her to live.

She finished. Joffrey was smirking at her. He leaned back in his ugly iron chair and clapped, the sound ringing solitarily to the throne room vault.

‘I think we should make her swear again,’ he said, and the entire court laughed.

She swore again. She swore twice more. And as Joffrey finally bade her stand, her eyes made him a promise.

_Someday, I’m going to put a sword through your eye and out the back of your skull._
‘Cersei!’ Jaime roared, storming past the guards into his sister’s solar, ‘CERSEI!’

The Queen Regent looked palely beautiful behind her desk; her white silk gown glorious against her skin; her face set firmly in a hard, stern and glacial expression that was evidently intended to imitate their father. She looked at him with quiet amusement; a pen clasped in her hand and a number of thick wads of parchment imprisoned beneath her lovely fingers.

‘Gods be good, but you do look pale, sweet brother,’ Cersei observed serenely as he narrowly avoided stumbling down the stairs, ‘shouldn’t you be in bed?’

Jaime slammed his left hand down on her desk, making both the objects strewing its top and his own head lurch violently in response.

‘The next person to tell me I should be in bed is going to come down with a terrible case of sword through bowels!’ he growled.

‘Will this take long?’ Cersei droned impatiently, ‘I have Seven Kingdoms to look after, and three of them are in open rebellion.’

‘The black cells, Cersei?’ Jaime plunged on, ignoring her, ‘Really?’

‘Your naivety is extraordinary, sweet brother,’ she observed, a small, irritating smile marking her lips, ‘what else did you imagine we were going to do with her?’

‘Lock her up in a chamber, Cersei!’

His sister laughed at him as he continued; the morning light spinning strands of molten gold in her hair.

‘You subjected a child,’ Jaime exclaimed, ‘only fifteen years old, to the fucking black cells?’

‘And you threw a ten-year-old boy out of a window,’ Cersei snapped in reply, ‘which of us is more to blame?’

Jaime’s blood swirled in his veins and seemed to rush, maelstrom-like, to one central point – his stump – and suddenly he could barely remember how he had managed to tear through the maze of stairs and corridors leading from his chambers to Cersei’s; let alone how he had summoned the energy to shout at her, to raise his voice. Lightness and weakness, fucking weakness, were overpowering him, and the pain was spreading outwards from his phantom hand like lava, incinerating his mind. He suppressed the groan that was welling up inside him and closed his eyes, determined not to sit down; determined not to utter a single syllable that would show her how bad it was.

‘My, how very soft you’ve become,’ Cersei said, cheerfully ruining his plans, ‘shall I fetch you some milk of the poppy? Grand Maester Pycelle tells me you’re refusing to drink it.’

‘I don’t need any fucking milk of the poppy.’

_Because I’d sooner die than have you think me weak._

Cersei smiled, as though he had spoken the words aloud, and disdainfully returned to the question at
‘Jaime, you speak of the little brat as though she were a total innocent. She threatened the life of my son. The king. I did what I did to protect him, to protect our family.’

‘Cersei,’ Jaime ventured, as jauntily as he could, breathing raggedly as he slowly brought the pain under control and wondered what had happened to her; wondered when she had torn her own words out of herself and put Father’s there instead, ‘I can easily picture Joffrey being stupid enough and frightened enough to lock a fifteen-year-old girl in the black cells. But not you. Never you.’

‘Careful, brother.’

‘And then, not content to risk the girl dying from either thirst or terror brought on by the gods only know the kind of nightmares she would have about her Father and his own delightful sojourn in that particular dungeon, you then allow your little shit of a son to humiliate her in front of the entire court?’

Cersei stared at him for a moment; then threw her head back and laughed. The sound was cold, harsh and mocking.

‘Oh gods,’ she choked merrily, wiping her eyes, ‘this is a historic day.’

‘Why?’ Jaime asked impatiently.

‘You’re in love with her.’ Cersei declared.

‘Not at all,’ Jaime replied after rather too long a pause, ‘I prefer blondes.’

Cersei chuckled and leaned back in her chair, unconvinced.

‘Very droll. But I’m afraid I know you better than that, brother. Why else should you care if the little barbarian has nightmares?’

‘I happen to be an expert,’ Jaime said, struggling to keep his voice level as his blood stirred and prepared to crash once again in a wave of agony and pain no please not now, ‘on what an encumbrance they can be.’

‘Oh; are we talking about wildfire again?’ Cersei inquired dramatically, ‘of our poor, tortured enemies with their poor, tortured skin melting off their bones?’

_Burn them all, he kept saying. Burn them all; burn them in their homes, burn them in their beds. Burn them all. Burn them all._

‘Jaime!’ Cersei was exclaming in alarm, and he was leaning forward and trying to support himself on the table; his phantom fingers clutching at its edge, his stump jolting and jarring it instead; and the shock spreading outwards to the rest of him, and his knees caving in beneath him and his back spasming roughly as he collapsed into a chair, Cersei’s arms on his shoulders she pushed me back to stop me falling and the throbbing white hot pain melting his blood and sending water pouring involuntarily out of his eyes, stinging, _I’m not crying, I am not crying, it’s just too fucking painful, it’s too…_

Cersei’s arms were around him; her hair smelling of lavender, her skin of metal; and for a moment he remembered the day that he had told her what he had done, what Aerys had done, what being a kingslayer truly meant. She had listened, and held him, and told him he was better than the rest of them and always would be, even though knights weren’t supposed to cry; and he had pulled up her
skirts and fucked her and made her cry instead; made her cry out his name even though she was marrying Robert tomorrow and would never be completely his again.

That was the night they made Joffrey.

She had let go of him, and was standing leaning against her desk; no tenderness in her face, clearly thinking the same thing he was.

Then her mind was back with the wretched Stark girl and her allegiance.

‘Locking the girl up has shown the world that Joffrey is not to be crossed,’ Cersei said matter-of-factly, as though no break in the conversation had taken place, ‘and humiliating her in front of the entire court has demonstrated that our family is not to be crossed.’

Jaime wanted to snort or laugh, but both would have hurt too much.

‘I’m no politician, sister,’ he pointed out hoarsely, combing his hair back from his face, ‘but I am a soldier.’

‘So what?’ she snapped.

‘So I understand fear; or the lack of it. And I can assure you that all you’ve shown the world is that a son of House Lannister is afraid of a little girl, and childish enough to want to humiliate her in revenge.’

‘Humiliating her was the least of what Joff wanted to do to her, believe me.’

‘Forgive me for not trembling in my boots,’ Jaime replied with all the sarcasm he could muster, ‘the boy is making a fool of himself. The rules are the same in politics as in warfare, I imagine: once people start laughing at you, you’re finished.’

Cersei’s green eyes flickered suddenly to the floor, and Jaime could see that he had struck a nerve.

‘You need to put an end to this bullshit, Cersei,’ he continued, ‘before it ends in disaster.’

‘Do you think I haven’t tried reigning him in?’ she spat, abruptly and bitterly, ‘he doesn’t listen to me.’

‘Cut one of his ears off,’ Jaime quipped, ‘I’ve heard it helps with hearing.’

There was a frustration in her face; a helplessness; and a stringent, cruel denial that it was there at all. He saw it in the curve of her lips and the uncertain way she looked both at him and away from him.

He understood her desperation. Joffrey had once been hers. All hers. The last time Jaime had seen the boy, he had been tied so tightly to Cersei’s skirts that he was incapable of turning left or right without asking her opinion. Before that fucking mess with Ned Stark, Joffrey had always been firmly in his mother’s pocket.

Just like you.

And now the little shit had clawed his way out, exchanging one kind of foolishness for another.

Cersei pulled her mouth into an ugly expression of profound distaste, and swept regally back to her place behind her desk.

‘I grow so very tired of you,’ she declared, ‘of you and Tyrion both. The entire world a great joke;
neither of you taking it seriously. And with Father dead and you two prize specimens showing no
sign of changing your ways, it falls to me to protect his legacy and his blood, even if you won’t.’

‘My dear, sweet sister. You and I both know that if Father had been present at this mummer’s farce
in the throne room, he would have sent both you and Joffrey packing in front of the entire court
sooner than watch you subject the girl to such humiliation.’

‘Because she’s a so-called Lannister?’ Cersei snorted.

‘Yes,’ Jaime agreed, ‘and because Father loved the little barbarian far more than he ever loved you or
me.’

Cersei went pale for a moment, then plunged on, her mask branding itself into her skin.

‘That’s not true.’

‘Really? Then why didn’t you tell me? Why did you keep it from me?’

‘Make your point, Jaime.’

‘You neglected to tell me about this little stunt because you were frightened that the girl has done to
me whatever she did to Father, and that I would try to stop you.’

Cersei smiled with a kind of cruelty he had never before seen on her face.

‘My poor, sweet Jaime,’’ she crooned, ‘Simple as milk. I didn’t tell you, because I feared that adding
a cripple to the mummer’s farce might be too much comedy in one day.’

Jaime stared at her.

*I don’t know who she is anymore.*

He sat looking at her for a moment; at the face that had once been a reflection of himself; at the child
he had pretended to be and that had pretended to be him; at the person he had donned the white
cloak for, and the person that he would have married, somehow; even if he had to kill a thousand
people to do it; the person that he had been and the person who had been him.

*I would have loved you... forever,* he thought.

But her face and her eyes were closed to him, and she was looking at him as she would at a stranger.

‘When Father was dying,’ Jaime said quietly, breaking the silence, ‘he bade me ensure the Stark
girl’s safety and security. And that’s what I intend to do, Cersei.’

His sister chuckled in amusement.

‘Your little whore is a ward of the crown, brother –’

‘She isn’t a whore and she *certainly* isn’t mine.’

‘– and as such,’ Cersei ploughed on, as though she had not heard him, ‘the crown decides what to do
with her.’

Jaime glared at her.

‘Forgive me if I take Father’s words a little more seriously than Joffrey’s,’ he growled.
Cersei picked up her pen again and pulled her papers towards her once more.

‘You should learn to grow out of that, Jaime,’ she said dismissively, bending her head over her work and not looking at him, ‘Father is dead.’

‘But “never fear, Cersei is here?”’

She looked up at him again, and smiled.

‘Not “never fear”, brother. I’d hate for that to happen.’
Arya spent the first night of her release curled up on the floor of her new chamber, having found it impossible to sleep on a featherbed. She stared for hours into the dark and eventually slipped into an uneasy sleep; dreaming of Tywin, Jaqen, and finally, of the godswood and Jaime; except this time, he took her maidenhead.

His skin felt as thin and frail as the first time she had seen it, but his eyes as they looked into hers were alive, his fingers trailing softly across her cheeks and into her hair; his lips only touching hers with the ghost of a whisper before they began to open and explore and taste; his tongue flickering between her lips, then filling her mouth; his teeth grazing her chin and neck as he slid into her, and seven fucking hells, but she wanted him. She wrapped her legs tighter around him to pull him deeper; her hips pulsing with his; her breath failing with his; her voice crying out with his.

‘Jaime I’m sorry,’ she whispered, her lips brushing his ear as the fingers of both his hands, both of them, laced tighter and tighter into hers, ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘I believe you grow more beautiful every day, Lady Arya,’ Ser Loras Tyrell remarked as they walked, jolting her unpleasantly back into the present.

‘How very unobservant of you,’ Arya replied breezily, her arm resting uncomfortably on his; the skirts imprisoning her legs a bother, a nuisance and an ironic gift from the Queen Regent, who had sent a dressmaker to her that morning with a small wardrobe of ready-made gowns, and instructions to ‘assist the Lady Arya in assembling a new wardrobe by allowing her to choose whatever gowns she likes and to order accordingly with any changes she sees fit.’ Arya had briefly considered refusing, before reminding herself, miserably, that trying to behave like a lady was now essential to her survival. So she had sullenly allowed herself to be measured, poked and prodded like a lady, her throat still throbbing painfully from her time in the black cells; and she had taken an obscene pleasure in the apparently-ladylke activity of observing and rejecting twenty-four different dresses, along with their silk, satin, velvet, lace, embroidery, trains and dagged sleeves, before settling on the one that she wore now; a conservative, severely-cut, high-collared black wool gown that more closely resembled mourning attire than conventional court dress. Despite the dressmaker’s howls of indignation that such things were not fashionable or becoming to a Northern complexion, Arya had ordered a variety of the same in black, grey and dark brown, determined that if she absolutely had to wear gowns, then she would wear gowns that pleased her.

Two courtiers laughed openly as they passed them, eyeing her short hair and simple clothing and no doubt remembering the throne room.

I’d put you both on my list if I knew your stupid names, she thought as their chuckles faded away and Ser Loras did her the great courtesy of pretending not to have heard them. She was grateful for that, though she would never admit it, and she swiftly cast about for something to say.

‘Did your grandmother give any specific reason for wanting to see me?’ Arya asked, her nose wrinkling in distaste as the greenery of the castle gardens grew ever more manicured and ever more absurd around them.

‘I have learned that wise men do not ask too many questions of my grandmother,’ Ser Loras replied flatly.

‘They call her the Queen of Thorns, don’t they?’
‘I wouldn’t say that to her face, my lady.’

‘Whyever not? It’s a worthy title.’

The gardens were crowded with amorous noblemen and women fluttering like radiant butterflies from one airy golden pavilion to another; but instead of depositing her in one of these structures and abandoning her to the sprawling beehive of tedious conversation, Ser Loras led her further and further into the gardens, and eventually, out of the grounds of the Red Keep itself towards the outermost, silvery-blue reaches of Blackwater Bay; where wildfire still smouldered ominously beneath the surface of the water.

Jaime.

‘Ser Loras?’ Arya ventured.

‘My lady?’ he replied.

‘Is there a purpose in taking me this far from the Keep,’ she asked simply, ‘or has the Queen Regent commanded you to assassinate me and dump my body in the river?’

‘I would not obey the Queen Regent if she had, my lady,’ Ser Loras exclaimed shrilly, ‘and I’m sincerely scandalised that you would imagine me capable of such a thing.’

You’re a knight. Knights are capable of anything.

Ser Loras gallantly offered Arya his hand as they began to descend a hill towards a sandy natural outlook, and it occurred to her, as she tried not to trip herself up, that if Cersei had not sent him to kill her, then she had almost certainly not been informed of this little promenade beforehand. But all the glee that she would normally have felt at the prospect was rapidly suppressed by a small stirring of wolf blood in her mind, and she took her eyes off the steps for the first time, looking downwards.

Two women in blue, one wizened, one young, sat completely alone, without handmaidens or retainers, in gilded golden chairs that looked ridiculous out of doors. A third person was on her feet pacing. A girl with red hair...and wolf blood.

She paused as her eyes met Arya’s; her sad, beautiful face like their mother’s, and Arya pulled her skirts up to her knees and hopped down the rest of the stairs, leaping into Sansa’s arms and bursting into tears; her sister’s sobs raking against her stomach; her tears staining her cheeks.

‘I thought you were dead,’ Sansa whispered, weeping, ‘I thought you were dead; for years they all said you were dead, and then that Lord Tywin had found you, and I - I heard about what happened in the throne room and I wanted to –’

‘You weren’t there?’ Arya sobbed in response, the tears stinging her eyes.

‘No,’ Sansa cried, ‘the Queen’s forbidden me to see you, otherwise I would have – your hair,’ she half-squealed, her slender fingers plucking at Arya’s scruffy fringe, ‘what have you done to it?’

Arya started to laugh, her sister still appearing blurry through her tears, and hugged her again; Sansa’s hair shining like copper and tickling Arya’s nose as they held each other tighter; giggling, and crying, and giggling again; not saying anything; not needing to.

A part of Arya, the worst part, had believed for a long time that she would never see her sister again. Sometimes she would think of meeting her by chance one day, after the war, after everyone she hated was dead, and curtsying to her and kissing her cheeks like a proper lady. Today, that hadn’t happened. Today they were just Arya and Sansa, two lonely little girls torn away from their pack;
two wolves in a lion’s den that had finally found each other. Courtesy didn’t matter. They were kin.

‘Arya,’ Sansa said, breaking away from her and sniffing as she turned for the first time to the two women in blue, ‘it is my honour to present the Lady Olenna of House Tyrell, and her granddaughter the Lady Margaery, the future Queen of Westeros.’

The old lady inclined her head; the young woman curtseyed prettily, and Arya bowed low like a cupbearer, making Sansa blush.

‘Oh put away your blushes, Sansa,’ Lady Olenna snapped, ‘the girl has spent four years hiding under Tywin Lannister’s nose. I imagine a disguise that good takes a while to wear off.’

‘Not at all, my lady,’ Arya replied, ‘I just can’t remember how to curtsey.’

‘How very refreshing,’ Lady Olenna replied, ‘now come along, Arya, sit by me while Margaery and Sansa pick me some pansies. The smell drives the Queen Regent quite distracted, so I’m never without a good supply.’

‘But Sansa –’ Arya said, before she could stop herself.

‘She’ll be right here,’ Margaery replied gently, ‘I will not take her out of your sight, I swear it.’

Arya decided that she did not like Margaery. The gentleness in her voice did not match the cruelty of her face, and if she was marrying Joffrey just to cement some stupid alliance between the Houses Lannister and Tyrell, then she must be either weak or deranged. But Arya watched as Sansa retreated halfway up the hill with Margaery, the two of them waving jovially to Ser Loras, who had just reached its crest; before beginning to cast about for flowers; their laughs tinkling musically. Sansa looked back every few seconds, as though to make sure that she was still there. Arya smiled affectionately at her, and even from a great distance, she saw that Sansa was smiling back.

But as she thought about her sister, and about Cersei’s refusal to let them see each other, Arya became Tywin’s child again, and her smile began to fade.

*The Tyrells wouldn’t risk disobeying the Queen just because they like a good reunion between sisters. They want something from me. Or from Sansa.*

Arya looked back at little Lady Olenna, who was settling into her chair and supporting herself on her walking stick, giving every appearance of being the most diminutive individual that Arya had ever seen. Her hands were gnarled and frail-looking; but their knuckles as they clasped the stick were white, strong and fierce. Her face was impossibly wrinkled and fragile; and was framed by wisps of brittle, bone-like white hair, but the hooded eyes were warm, luminous…and oddly ruthless.

*Intelligence, Arya realised, genius, even. A powerful woman. A powerful woman who wants people to think she’s weak.*

‘Come here, child,’ Lady Olenna commanded, ‘I want to talk to you.’

*She definitely wants something from me.*

‘I’m much less boring than other members of my confounded House,’ Lady Olenna began as Arya took her seat, ‘do you know my son? The Lord Oaf of Highgarden?’

‘How could I possibly forget a lord with so illustrious a title?’ Arya re-joined graciously.

‘I am glad you approve of it,’ the old lady remarked, ‘and what did you think of him?’
‘His voice had a rather soporific effect on me, my lady,’ Arya stated, ‘so I’m afraid I can’t recall.’

‘Your directness is dazzling, child,’ Lady Olenna declared, sitting back in her chair and smiling approvingly, ‘you have him exact.’

Arya’s thoughts leapt from Mace Tyrell to the Blackwater to Tywin; Tywin who impossibly, incredibly, wasn’t here anymore. She remembered him at war council on the night the shadow had taken him; how he had sat glaring down at his maps like a thunderstorm that could easily rage for a thousand years; a power and a life in those ice blue eyes that she would always love, but that she could never fully understand. Nothing but a blade had taken that from him; something great and beautiful and immense destroyed by something so simple and so malleable as steel. She couldn’t believe it was that simple – that metal, worked in a certain way, was all it took to extinguish something; to kill and unexist it completely.

And then she remembered the look in Jaime’s eyes as the maester had sewed him up; how dead they had been; how pale; how the light had seemed to bleed out of them like the blood that was spilling all over her hands and clothes, clinging to her like he did, never letting her go.

Steel is all it takes, she realised, a thing of indescribable beauty can be completely destroyed by some idiot who wants to show the world he can hack off a limb. That’s how Joffrey will destroy the Seven Kingdoms.

With one vital difference. He’ll never have the guts to do his own dirty work.

She remembered watching him through bloodshot eyes and imagining the little shit impaling himself on every one of the barbs and spikes that he seemed so comfortable to be surrounded by; she remembered the nameless and the faceless laughing at her; and she remembered the mob screaming for her father’s head; for the death of a person they didn’t even know.

‘My son was present, yesterday, when Margaery’s royal betrothed received your allegiance,’ Lady Olenna ventured cautiously, seeming to read her thoughts.

‘Really?’ Arya replied, trying to appear nonplussed, ‘it must have been quite a spectacle.’

‘It was certainly cheaper than the theatre, with the added advantage of the drama being real,’ Lady Olenna concurred, ‘a monstrous action, on the king’s part.’

Arya almost smiled.

Now we come to it.

‘How much of the ordeal do you remember, child?’ the old lady was saying.

‘Not much beyond a few murderous thoughts and being desperate enough to fuck any man or woman that would bring me a glass of water,’ Arya shrugged.

Lady Olenna chuckled.

‘I would not reply in that way to every person that asks you the question.’

‘I won’t. But if you were interested in hearing a lie, we wouldn’t be sitting here right now.’

Lady Olenna’s pale blue eyes met hers, and Arya felt expressionlessness spreading out across her own face like ripples across a pond as she closed herself up, locking the doors to her soul.
‘What do you want from me?’ Arya asked unconcernedly.

The old lady did a decent job of seeming bowled-over.

‘What in the world makes you think I want something?’ she asked, clutching frantically at her walking stick for support, and Arya could swear that the curve of Lady Olenna’s back had just become more pronounced; her stoop seeming more severe than before.

*This woman is a genius,* Arya thought, and presented her argument.

‘You’ve just had me escorted out of the Red Keep and down to the furthest reaches of Blackwater Bay by a person unlikely to be stopped,’ Arya observed, leaning back in her chair, ‘out here, the chances of being overheard by Varys’ little birds are eliminated entirely, that’s if we don’t take into account lip-reading, which is less likely due to the significantly reduced chances of our being seen. We have the sea at our backs and a hill of considerable size in front of us, both of which make an unseen approach almost impossible. Not that we’d be able to do much hiding if someone arrived in a boat, but that would be rather obvious, don’t you think?’

The old lady smiled wordlessly and gestured for her to continue.

‘So,’ Arya said, ‘once you’ve succeeded in getting me here and reduced the chances of being seen or heard, you then weaken me emotionally by reuniting me with a sister I haven’t seen in four years and that the Queen has expressly forbidden from having any contact with me, thus making me grateful to you and therefore more likely to trust you. So I’ll ask you once again, my lady. What is it that you want?’

Arya was breathless; not knowing whether she had spoken the truth or made a spectacular fool of herself. Her heart had pounded madly while her mind ripped through one layer of inference after the other, concluding and concluding and concluding, and she felt that she was back in Harrenhal again, Tywin asking her what she was laughing about.

*Tywin.*

Lady Olenna’s eyes had not left hers, and if her face had born fewer wrinkles, Arya might even have allowed herself to think that the old lady was impressed.

‘I will tell you what I want from you, child,’ Lady Olenna smiled, and dropped her walking stick into the dirt.
Chapter 20

His bandages smarted painfully as the ghost of his glorious brother appeared at his chamber door, pale and golden and different. Breathing deeply, Tyrion looked calmly at the two bottles of wine clutched in Jaime’s left hand; then at the sling that marked the absence of his right. And suddenly, he was blinking away tears.

_He’ll heal_, he thought, _he will_. He will.

‘You’re very thin,’ Tyrion observed frankly, ‘don’t you believe in eating anymore?’

‘I’ve been sitting in a muddy pen wrapped in chains for the past four years!’ Jaime replied indignantly, kicking the door shut behind him, ‘and Northern cuisine does not appeal to me. Here’s your bottle.’

‘Are we getting drunk?’ Tyrion asked, accepting it with a smile.

‘I thought about doing it alone, until it occurred to me that there might be another person in the castle who feels just as miserable as I do,’ Jaime shrugged, ‘you look gorgeous, if you don’t mind me saying so.’

‘I missed you too, dear brother,’ Tyrion replied, gingerly fingering his bandages as he gestured for him to sit.

Jaime slumped into his chair, as he always did when they were alone, and took a long draught of wine.

‘How did it happen?’ Jaime asked, eyeing Tyrion’s nose.

‘Ser Mandon Moore was kind enough to mistake my face for a whetstone during the battle,’ Tyrion replied, making Jaime choke spectacularly on his wine.

‘Ser Mandon Moore?’ he exclaimed.

‘With a little help from Cersei, no doubt,’ Tyrion hypothesised, taking a swig of wine and watching as Jaime’s face turned paler than it already was; something like hurt or grief rising momentarily in his eyes, before being speedily banished to wherever weakness goes.

‘Cersei tried to kill you?’ Jaime repeated blandly, ‘that was ungenerous of her.’

‘Of course I don’t know for sure,’ Tyrion said speedily, ‘but I doubt Ser Mandon would think the task worthy enough of his time for him to come up with such a scheme on his own. But I suppose it is possible that – ’

_That Cersei had nothing to do with it. That this is all a misunderstanding. That I’m half-mad from pain and bitterness and need someone to blame…_

‘Speak freely, brother,’ Jaime interjected, his voice like a whip, ‘Cersei and I are…Cersei and I aren’t…’

Tyrion listened as Jaime’s words faded into nothingness; then studied him as they sat quietly together. His brother had become…less guarded. That was the term. His smile could still reassert itself in a second, and there was still an astonishing kind of strength and presence about his face and
build. But somewhere along the way, parts of his armour had crumbled. His movements looked excruciating, uncomfortable, off-centre; his hair shining with perspiration and his entire persona seeming to radiate loss; a shadow of something that had once been there. And that loss was Cersei and that loss was his right hand. Fucking and fighting; the only two things that made him feel alive.

The empty space where his hand had been seemed to yawn like an abyss, but Tyrion forced himself to look at it; to show that it did not frighten or disgust him.

‘My dear brother, I am...I am so sorry,’ he said, meaning the hand...and meaning Cersei, in spite of himself.

‘Our sister is not fond of cripples,’ Jaime remarked, choosing to talk about one rather than the other, ‘and she has a talent for killing things quickly.’

‘I take it you’re not referring to the Stark girl.’

‘No. Though I suppose I should be grateful that she threw Arya into the black cells instead of slitting her throat.’

_Arya_

Tyrion settled back in his chair and smiled, enjoying the direction the discussion was taking.

‘I didn’t know you and the girl were on first name terms,’ he said.

‘Is it odd to be on first name terms with one’s own sister?’ Jaime responded unblinkingly.

‘Not at all,’ Tyrion agreed, his eyes twinkling in what he hoped was a suggestive manner, ‘but let us return to our royal sister and her infinite charms. Varys tells me that the adoption of Lady Arya is water-tight – Father saw to that – so even Cersei must realise that killing the girl would be the greatest folly she could commit. Kinslaying would gain her nothing but the further enmity of the people, the wrath of the Faith…and a declaration of war from Uncle Kevan, in all likelihood. He’d do it gladly if it meant ensuring that Father’s wishes were carried out.’

‘The people, the Faith and Uncle Kevan would all have to beat me to her first,’ Jaime growled with a provocative honesty that Tyrion found most uncharacteristic, ‘I don’t need two hands to squeeze the life from Cersei’s pretty white throat.’

‘You have a high regard for Lady Arya, then?’ Tyrion asked, immediately realising that his brother’s previous statement had nothing to do with Cersei and everything to do with the Stark girl, ‘I didn’t realise you were long enough with Father to get to know her that well.’

‘You don’t need to know her well to see that she’s a very interesting girl,’ Jaime nonchalantly replied, his eyes on the floor.

‘Is she?’ Tyrion asked, ‘interesting?’

Jaime did not reply, choosing instead to grunt noncommittally.

‘Interesting and attractive,’ Tyrion observed in as self-satisfied a way as he could manage, ‘a rare combination.’

‘You find her attractive, do you?’ Jaime enquired sharply, his eyes flashing.

‘Her face is quite pleasing,’ Tyrion acknowledged, ‘and her eyes most…bewitching.’
‘How do you know what her face looks like?’ Jaime demanded.

‘One of the advantages of having small, cramped quarters is that they have windows rather than sea views,’ Tyrion smirked in reply.

‘How did you end up in here?’ Jaime asked, apparently relieved by the change in topic.

‘She’s a bit gangly for my taste,’ Tyrion plunged on, *you’re not getting out of this so easily, brother,* ‘but she should grow out of that. It was barely perceptible in her sister at all.’

‘You’ve been paying close attention to Lady Sansa’s growth patterns, have you?’ Jaime suggested smugly.

Tyrion felt his face turning painfully red and he looked down at the floor; his nose and his ego aching unpleasantly.

‘Don’t blush, brother!’ Jaime grinned, ‘it’s never a good idea if you’ve lost a lot of blood.’

*You’re one to talk,* Tyrion thought. *You should be in bed. Your face is shining like a searchlight, and your skin appears to have turned green.*

Jaime, seeming to sense that Tyrion was about to make some comment regarding his health, was now gazing up at the grimy and dirty ceiling that hung low and precarious above their heads.

‘Did I ask you how you ended up in this hellhole?’ he eventually inquired.

‘Yes,’ Tyrion answered, smiling and taking another sip of wine.

‘Did you reply?’

‘No.’

‘So how did you end up in this hellhole?’

‘Our sweet sister has seen fit to release me from my duties as Hand of the King,’ Tyrion sweepingly remarked, ‘and has trundled me off to this dark little cell as a reward for my heroism during the battle. I would like to say that with Father dead, there was no one to discourage her from doing so. But now that it comes to it, I think that he would probably have done the same.’

‘And which paragon of wisdom has she replaced you with?’ Jaime asked.

‘No one, yet. Perhaps she’ll dispense with the office altogether. It’s the sort of thing she would – ’

But Tyrion could see that his brother’s thoughts were wandering already. He had never cared much for politics.

‘Are the rumours true, Jaime?’ Tyrion asked, feeling a tightness in his chest that he couldn’t quite account for.

‘What rumours?’ Jaime said after a moment, clearly still distracted.

‘About…about Father. The shadow with the sword, the Red Priestess…’

Jaime nodded mutely and gravely in a way that indicated a disinclination to discuss the subject further, but Tyrion pressed on, determined to know.
‘Was it –’

‘I don’t know what it was.’

Jaime’s tone angered and frustrated him.

‘Brother,’ Tyrion said testily, ‘he was my father too, in spite of…in spite of everything. And I have every bloody right to know how the old bastard died.’

For a moment, Jaime looked ready to strangle him. Then he began to speak.

‘He didn’t die. Not at first. The sword punched right through his back and out of his chest, but he hung onto life with everything that he had. He didn’t sound afraid, or even weak, though I could feel his heartbeat, his fucking heartbeat, weakening right beneath my hands. There were no deathbed apologies for past crimes; no last minute repentances; nothing that an ordinary person might do. He just grabbed hold of the front of my shirt, still strong as an aurochs, I might add, and he told me…I still can’t…’

‘What did he say?’ Tyrion insisted, knowing that being gentle would only provoke his brother further.

‘He told me,’ Jaime said, ‘to protect Arya from Cersei.’

That was a surprise. Their father had never been a sentimental man. During his youth he had spent far too much time watching sentiment destroy both the realm and his House to believe that it had any place in the life of a good man.

And yet he still can’t – couldn’t – forgive me for being born. For taking our mother from him. The best part of him. At least according to Uncle Kevan.

Perhaps something about the Stark girl had brought out a part of Father that he’d always considered dead.

But it was so unlike him. To devote his last seconds to ensuring the safety of the sister of his enemy and to candidly state that Cersei represented the most imminent danger to her life. Never once had Father roused himself sufficiently to admit that Cersei was capable of damaging so much as a dinner plate.

What in seven hells went on in the old bastard’s head? Tyrion thought, really? Did anyone really know him at all?

‘I thought about telling Father that he was wrong,’ Jaime continued quietly, ‘I thought about telling him that Cersei would never harm a child – ’

Tyrion’s heart sank.

‘Oh, brother – ’

‘Or at the very least that she’d never do something to hurt him…or me,’ Jaime rushed on.

Tyrion disguised his discomfort by cocking one eyebrow quizzically.

‘Is there a ‘but’ in there somewhere, brother?’

Jaime smiled at him.
‘You know there is,’ he said, looking up at the ceiling once again and wrinkling his nose, ‘I’ll speak to Cersei about these horrendous quarters of yours.’

‘That’s kind of you, dear brother,’ Tyrion laughed affectionately, ‘but as you’ve just pointed out, you no longer have any influence with her.’

‘Then she’s just going to have to do without it,’ Jaime snapped abruptly, his face darkening in a way that Tyrion had never seen him use when speaking of her, ‘she may be the Queen Regent and the fucking eldest child, but I’m the eldest son, and when it comes to family, she’ll do what I tell her.’

‘Have you gone…have you gone completely insane?’

Tyrion was flabbergasted. Had he not been entirely certain that he himself had experienced no hatred or sadness as Jaime spoke those words; he would have sworn that he had sounded just like Father.

This isn’t like him, Tyrion thought, this isn’t like him at all. In the past he would never even have dreamed of telling Cersei what to do, or presumed that he could. It was always the other way round. Always.

She’s not going to listen to a word he says. If anything, she’ll laugh in his face. There’ll be civil war in House Lannister before the month is out. And the only kind of war he knows is the sort that’s fought with swords. He knows nothing of the game, or how to play it.

I do, though.

I do.

Jaime was staring down at his stump, his fingers tentatively touching the bandages.

‘What is the purpose of an arm with no hand?’ Jaime murmured, his outburst forgotten.

Tyrion felt helpless. What the fuck was he supposed to say in response to that?

‘At least you’re doing something about it,’ he ventured.

Jaime looked up at him

‘How the fuck do you know that?’

Tyrion’s heart sank again.

‘Varys,’ he admitted.

‘Of course, Varys!’ Jaime stormed, ‘does the whole fucking court know? Is the divine retribution visited upon the Kingslayer a topic of polite table conversation?’

‘He’s told no one but me,’ Tyrion insisted, cursing his own smart mouth, ‘and he has no reason to tell anyone else.’

As he watched his brother fuming, his face red with humiliation, Tyrion remembered himself as a young boy, watching Jaime fight; every passing blow making him more and more convinced that his tall, handsome brother was indestructible.

He had always thought that life had taught him better.

Obviously not. Because you’re still completely convinced that he’ll learn to fight just as well with his
left hand as he did with his right, no matter how stupid you think he is to be training before he’s fully recovered.

‘I know it’s probably too early to say,’ Tyrion said, fully expecting his brother to tell him to fuck off, ‘but when you fight with Ser Ilyn – ’

‘You even know who I’m fighting with?’

‘– does it…is it proving…fruitful?’

Jaime took a long drink from his bottle and belched.

‘It has proved most fruitful,’ he said, ‘I’ve learned more about getting the shit kicked out of me in these past few days than in the entire course of my life.’

‘You shouldn’t be fighting at all until you’re fully recovered,’ Tyrion insisted, the words out of his mouth before he could stop himself.

Jaime stood up and glared at him; his face frustrated, indignant and disappointed.

‘Don’t, Tyrion,’ he growled, ‘don’t.’
Chapter 21

The greatsword at his belt was mocking him; its weight only worsening the thundering, humiliating pain in his body as he politely told Ser Ilyn to fuck off for the night and slowly began to make his way back to his chambers.

Feverish and nauseous, he watched the red stone of the Keep glow like blood in the torchlight. The pain swelled in time with his heartbeat in a way that was almost musical, pulsing from his stump, to the rest of his body, and back again, wave after wave after heartbeat after reminder after fear: it’s not working. It’s not fucking working.

‘You’re not well enough to train,’ Tyrion had told him, ‘if you try to train before you’re strong, you’ll just make yourself worse.’

‘No I won’t,’ Jaime had said, ‘I won’t.’

People looked at him when he passed them in the halls. Some stared openly at his stump and some tried not to stare at it. None of them laughed, which was encouraging, but he could tell that they knew; and that Tyrion had lied to him about Varys keeping his mouth shut.

_You’ve been too long from the capital, Lannister, _he told himself, _you’ve forgotten that secrets don’t exist here._

He was contemplating whether or not he should go to his brother immediately and curse him for a brilliant little liar and a soft little fool, when he heard raised voices nearby. Two, he did not recognise. The third he would have known anywhere.

‘But you let me go in alone the previous night!’ Arya was protesting.

‘That was before you stayed inside for three hours, my lady,’ a much gruffer one replied.

‘Am I a danger to His Grace even when I pray?’ she hissed.

He found her at the entrance to the godswood; arguing with two red cloaks that Cersei must have commanded to follow her everywhere. Her voice was high and commanding, and she was wearing a gown that made her look like a little septa.

He smiled. It suited her.

‘So I’m pious,’ Arya was drawling, ‘what is wrong with that?’

‘The Queen Regent will not accept excessive piety as a reason for our allowing you to spend three hours in the godswood unsupervised, my lady,’ one of her guards replied blandly.

‘Why do you need to be alone anyway?’ the other guard added, ‘if my lady would only agree to visit the sept –’

‘I don’t keep the Seven,’ she exclaimed, exasperated, ‘how many times must I explain it to you?’

‘Should we put her over one shoulder and carry her to the sept?’ one guard suggested.

‘Perhaps it will give her bad dreams,’ the other mused, and both of them burst out laughing.

Jaime chose that moment to step into the light, relishing the way all three of them jumped in surprise.
‘I’ll see that the lady doesn’t run away,’ he declared, ‘go and find a tree to piss on.’

They wanted to refuse. He could see it. But then he began to finger his sword, knowing full well how empty a threat it was; but when both guards immediately went pale, turned around and walked away, he took a bitter, awful kind of pleasure in the fact. The Kingslayer wasn’t dead yet.

Even if I am.

Jaime turned back to Arya.

‘Where the fuck have you been?’ he demanded.

‘Being a lady!’ she replied briskly, ‘learning to smile and sing and please. I have to train at night – in there – with a stick.’

‘Why?’ Jaime asked, surprised.

‘Your stupid sister took my sword and all my knives away,’ Arya angrily observed, ‘and she has my handmaiden search me every morning.’

Jaime almost growled in frustration, furious with Cersei and ashamed of himself for the shock of apprehension that went through him at the thought of having to confront her again. Their discussion about Tyrion’s chambers had been…unpleasant; even though he had won the argument. Eventually.

‘I’ll see to it, Arya,’ he promised.

‘Don’t you mock me,’ she snapped in reply; her grey eyes like lightning on a lake.

‘Do I look like I’m mocking you?’ he demanded, before reasoning that in the light of recent events, he couldn’t really blame her for thinking so.

But he wouldn’t tell her that, so they stood glaring at each other for a few moments more before walking together into the godswood; the sound of the place enveloping them in a rush of quiet and water and cold.

He was surprised by how confidently she walked in the dark; the dark that was the colour of her dress. The gown covered every inch of her except her head and hands, but was oddly provocative in its restraint; suggestive; making one want to see what she was hiding beneath it.

You know what she’s hiding beneath it, Jaime thought, you’ve seen it; you’ve felt it. You’ve felt it with both your hands, with all of you.

He couldn’t tell if she was also thinking about what had happened the last time they’d been alone in a godswood. If she was, she was doing a bloody good job of making him think otherwise. Her hands were clasped neatly at her middle, like a lady’s, and she looked ahead of her rather than at him; away from him and into the dark.

‘Cersei will never let me have my daggers back,’ she said quietly, ‘or the sword I picked up during the battle.’

‘Arya, I’ve told you – ’

She stopped suddenly and turned to him, her hand touching his right forearm. He could feel the heat of her skin through his sleeve.

‘It’s alright,’ she told him, ‘I don’t care about most of them; they’re easily replaced. But there’s one.
A Valyrian steel dagger with a red leather hilt. Your father gave it to me. And I’d sooner not have it end up as a wedding present for Joffrey.’

Jaime knew the dagger she was talking about. Father had never gone anywhere without it.  

*Oh gods. He must have loved her very much.*

‘I…I know it,’ Jaime said simply.

Arya nodded.

‘Then you keep it for me until I can take it back,’ she commanded earnestly, ‘I’d rather it be yours than his.’

‘If you insist,’ he smiled, ‘though I can’t guarantee that I’ll put it to good use.’

Jaime felt her eyes and his travel downwards to the place where her fingers met his arm. They looked very white against the black jerkin he wore, and they were touching his sleeve; all one, two, three, four of them; just above the place where…where…

*Where your fucking hand used to be. Not thinking it won’t make it any less true.*

Sensing his anxiety, Arya tried to let him go; and Jaime laid his left hand firmly on top of hers, her fingers like fire beneath his; so different from the night that he had washed the blood from her hands; when the shadow had killed both his father and all the strength that she carried inside her. She had seemed so small and fragile, then. He might have been a father cradling his own child.

*Well, not quite. Most fathers don’t kiss their daughters in the same way that they kiss their lovers.*

He wanted to kiss her again, to raise his hand to touch her face, but his muscles tensed painfully as they realised, for the hundredth, for the thousandth time, that there was no hand left to touch her with. Just a fucking stump that no one in their right minds would want anywhere near their face.

‘I’m sorry,’ Arya murmured, looking young and beautiful and whole.

And suddenly, he was angry.

‘Are you?’ he snapped in reply, ‘Sorry?’

Arya dropped her hand immediately and took a step away from him.

‘If you have something to say,’ she said testily, ‘tell me what it is and get it over with.’

‘You should be happy, don’t you think?’ Jaime hissed, not needing any further encouragement, ‘this is more than you could have hoped for. If you’d succeeded in killing me on the day that we met, I would have had a clean death and that would have been the end of it. You might have felt that justice had been done. True, you wouldn’t have had very long to appreciate it, but the thought would have driven all fear out of your stubborn little head while Father was having you raped, tortured and executed by Ser Gregor and his gang of hooligans. Except *I* would have been *dead*, and that’s no true kind of revenge at all. This –’ he waved his stump at her – ‘is far better and far worse than anything you could have hoped for. *I* was that hand, and that hand was me. But it’s also the hand I used to kill poor sad Aerys Targaryen; it’s the hand I used to push your infernal little brother out of that tower; and it’s the hand I used to slide between my sister’s legs to make her wet. All of that avenged! In one fell swoop! Aren’t you happy, Lady Stark? Are you not diverted? You get to see me hobbling bruised about the castle like some half-drunk fucking cripple every single fucking day
for the foreseeable future and you get to listen to constant gossip and speculation about whether or not I’ll ever well be able to fight again, knowing all the while that I won’t, because it’s not working, it’s not fucking working! You complain that Cersei has taken your poor little knives away from you; like it’s the end of the world. What are you moaning about? It seems a reasonable price to pay for the spectacular fucking show you’re getting in return!’

‘Oh, now I want to kill you, you miserable bastard!’ the girl seethed, trying to punch him in the arm and almost breaking her fist in the attempt.

‘Please do! You’ll be doing me a favour!’ Jaime shouted in return, drawing his sword and offering it to her as she cradled her fist, ‘Here! Use my own sword while you’re at it – that is if you don’t fall over on your scrawny arse from the weight!’

‘Any decent fighter would fall over from the weight of that bloody monstrosity hanging on your belt!’ Arya spat, making no move to touch the blade.

‘So now I’m a bad fighter!’

‘That thing you Westerosi do on the battlefield or in the stupid lists; that isn’t fighting!’

He would have wondered at her narrow-mindedness, but he was far too angry.

‘What do you mean you Westerosi?’ he demanded theatrically, ‘are you no longer Westerosi?’

‘Not when I fight!’ she bellowed back.

He remembered, then, what fighting her had felt like; how alien it had seemed, and how fucking fast she was; too quick for the air and too beautiful for the earth; playing a magnificent game with her body, her hands and her opponent; the weapon seeming no lighter than a needle as she passed it from her left hand to her right; disguising her sword hand as ruthlessly and as effortlessly as her eyes disguised her next move.

‘Well?’ Arya barked at him, ‘I’m waiting! No more clever remarks for me, Ser?’

‘Arya,’ he stated.

‘What?’

‘You know how to fight left-handed.’
Chapter 22

‘Is it the sort of thing that one can learn to do?’ Jaime asked softly, ‘or are you born with it?’

‘I don’t know,’ Arya replied quietly, ‘I don’t know.’

She could see that he was trying hard not to hope; not to insist; not to look as though it mattered to him. It would have worked had she only been listening to his voice. But watching his face was… horrifying. There was a kind of glow in it that had not been there earlier that evening; a glow that she had felt in his hands and his lips on the night that Tywin had died.

*If I fuck this up, that glow will never come back again. And it will be my fault. Mine.*

‘I’m not doing it,’ Arya declared resolutely.

‘Why not?’ Jaime asked exasperatedly.

‘Because it’s not that simple!’

‘What isn’t that simple?*

Her heart was pounding as frantically and as anxiously as though she’d failed already; as though weeks and months had passed and achieved nothing; with Jaime dying a little more every day as the hope drained out of him, his eyes turning black and hollow.

*That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it? she thought to herself, justice for Bran?*

Arya looked back at Jaime and watched him watching her; his whole being appearing out of joint and off-center; the sword that was still clutched in his hand looking so out of place that it might have been writhing and screaming for him to let go of it.

*If this suffering is your idea of justice, she thought, then you are the worst woman who ever lived.*

‘You can’t spend your entire life fighting and training in the Westerosi style and then just **change** overnight!’ she declared, sensing that gentleness that would only make him think she was patronising him.

‘Why not?’ he insisted, pausing as she abruptly clapped one hand over his heart, its beat gasping and thundering beneath her fingers.

‘Because the way you fight is **in** you,’ Arya vowed, meaning every word, ‘it **is** you.’

His eyes turned pale for a moment; then returned to their customary emerald sheen.

‘It isn’t anymore.’

Arya dropped her hand.

‘Yes it is. You’re just too impatient.’

‘Do you blame me for being bloody impatient?’

‘Do I blame you for drinking too much, eating too little and then expecting to be as you were in one week? Of course I do, stupid! Do you even understand what’s happened to you? What’s happened
As the desire to kill flashed in his eyes; his fingers tightening around his sword, Arya realised that she was the first person who had ever dared to ask him that question.

*Good,* she thought, *he needs to hear it, even if he doesn’t like what he hears.*

‘Say that again,’ Jaime menacingly pronounced, ‘and I’ll nail your tongue to a wagon wheel.’

‘No you won’t,’ Arya declared, ‘you’re much too fond of my tongue to do that.’

‘Don’t flatter yourself, Stark.’

‘I will until you stop blushing.’

‘Don’t change the subject.’

Arya sighed.

‘I can’t believe I have to say this out loud,’ she grumbled, ‘I can’t train you, I don’t know how.’

‘What do you mean, you don’t know how?’ he asked, with an exaggerated placidity that made her blood boil.

*Don’t lose your temper. It’ll just make him fight harder.*

Arya took a deep breath, and tried to explain.

‘I learned Braavosi water dancing for a while,’ she said, ‘with Syrio, he taught me…it doesn’t matter…but then I did nothing but throw sticks and stones and try to smash people’s heads in, for weeks and weeks, or…or maybe months. And then when I met Jaqen, *Jaqen left me too,* ‘and when I started the Faceless – I mean, when I met Jaqen, all of that, everything from, from before, went away; except some of it stayed, because some parts are the same and some aren’t, it really depends on where – ‘

‘You’re blathering, Stark,’ Jaime interrupted.

‘– I wouldn’t know where to *start!*’ Arya exclaimed, throwing up her hands in exasperation, ‘Especially not with you. When you fight you probably don’t even need to think about what to do anymore. Your body just knows.’

‘Knew,’ he replied quietly.

‘Trying to unlearn all that will drive you mad,’ she insisted, determined to ignore that previous comment.

‘How do you know?’ he insisted in his turn, ‘how do you know that it won’t be simpler to learn something completely new instead of re-teaching myself something that I know already - but without the most important part?’

*He has a point.*

Jaime’s eyes were asking her the question, over and over again; the question; one word; that she knew he would never say aloud; that he could never say aloud without completely losing himself – at least in his own estimation. She admired that. She admired him.
He was still standing before her with the greatsword clutched in his hand; a ponderous piece of steel that seemed to melt away from him and to clad her shoulders in its own weight. She remembered the first, the only time that she had fought him and how beautiful he had been; a terrifying metallic kind of beauty that encompassed all of him; but that was also blood and flesh and life; aliveness and light. She could see it stirring in him now, along with hope, and she felt sick with the feeling of that hope on her shoulders.

*If you fuck this up, it’ll kill him,* she thought; and for a moment, she heard Jaqen answering her, his voice like velvet as he spoke the words:

*Valar morghulis.*

‘It’ll be strange,’ Arya said.

‘Fine,’ Jaime answered.

‘And it’ll be erratic,’ she added, ‘I’d be making it up as I go along. I can’t see you chasing cats or standing on one toe for hours.’

‘Standing on one – what?’

‘And you do what I say,’ Arya persisted, ignoring him, ‘you can ask questions, but you do what I say.’

‘Fine.’

That surprised her.

‘It is?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Stop it.’

‘Yes, my lady.’

Arya bit her lip to stop herself from smiling. He was such a shit.

‘Oh, one more thing,’ she quipped suddenly, determined that Jaime would not leave this godswood thinking that she’d agreed for emotional reasons, ‘what’s in it for me?’

If he was hurt, he didn’t show it; grinning widely at her with something like respect.

‘Father taught you well,’ he observed.

‘It’s a rare thing to have a teacher who knows what he’s talking about,’ she breezily replied, ‘and the accusations that you made earlier this evening have made me rather reluctant to help you. So what’s in it for me?’

She felt his eyes burning into hers as he thought; a far pleasanter feeling than the guilt that was burning into her stomach; and she tried to breathe normally through the tiny space between her parted lips as she watched him think, and look at her.
‘I’ll administer your household,’ Jaime suggested.

‘What?’ Arya drawled, unimpressed. Was that the best he could come up with?

‘I’ll administer your household,’ Jaime repeated, ignoring her tone, ‘I’ll ask my brother Tyrion to find you some servants that aren’t spies. He’s the only person left in the family who’s remotely good at that sort of thing. And if any of my bitch sister’s little pawns give you trouble, you have the luxury of sending them to me and of seeing said trouble disappear in time for dinner.’

*Your* bitch sister? *Did I miss something?*

‘You’re taking me under your protection,’ she accused scornfully.

‘In a manner of speaking,’ Jaime shrugged.

‘I don’t need your stupid protection!’ Arya insisted.

‘I can see that,’ Jaime cynically replied, and she could tell he was thinking of the guards.

Arya sighed, surreptitiously eyeing his stance.

*Fine then. Fine.*

‘To begin with,’ she said, ‘you’re going to have to stop standing like that.’

Jaime looked down at his body; then up at her.

‘Like what?’ he demanded.

‘Like that,’ Arya insisted.

‘But I don’t stand like –’

Arya walked towards him.

‘Turn your body side-face,’ she commanded.

‘Side what?’ Jaime asked.

Arya seized one of his shoulders and turned him roughly.

‘Sideways,’ she mumbled.
‘Seven hells,’ Tyrion murmured, bile rising in his throat as the raven scroll crumpled in his hand, ‘both of them?’

‘So it would seem,’ Varys replied, retrieving the scroll and delicately smoothing it out, ‘such a tragedy. And so young, both of them.’

‘And there I was thinking that the Greyjoy boy was good for nothing but burning fishing villages and brutalising peasants,’ Tyrion remarked, ‘and you’re quite sure there’s been no mistake?’

‘Quite sure, my lord,’ Varys purred, ‘my little birds were silent for some time, but now they sing again.’

Tyrion smiled ironically.

‘Immortal, are they?’

‘We all have our qualities.’

‘What else?’

Varys smiled, his eyes twinkling like the satin of his robe. Tyrion rolled his eyes in response, not feeling remotely in the mood.

‘Well I presume you aren’t swimming this close to a drowning man just to tell me about the deaths of two children!’

‘And why should I not?’ Varys enquired, cocking one eyebrow at him, ‘everyone is well aware of your enduring fondness for the Lady Sansa. I assumed you’d rather she hear about the indiscriminate slaughter of her little brothers from you rather than from the King.’

‘You’re too kind,’ Tyrion acidly replied, ‘now what else?’

Varys handed him another raven scroll.

Tyrion took it testily, admiring the eunuch’s penchant for drama, and found, to his own surprise, that he had missed him. Strange.

It isn’t strange at all, Tyrion thought as he started to read, intelligent conversation is difficult to come by.

He ceased to think of intelligent conversation when the contents of the scroll became clear to him.

‘No,’ Tyrion exclaimed, handing the scroll back to Varys, ‘surely not. Robb Stark wouldn’t be that stupid.’

‘I admire your respect for your enemies, my lord,’ Varys said, ‘it is the true province of an intelligent man.’

Tyrion snorted.

‘Theon Greyjoy decides to provide the world with incontrovertible proof that he is the greatest fool in the Seven Kingdoms,’ he said hostilily, ‘all he gets is the enmity of the North and a general desire
for his cretinous ironborn head on a spike. We get a betrayal from House Westerling – I didn’t think they had it in them, the fools – that will inevitably result in an heir to the Starks’ cause, plus a full scale bloody invasion!’

‘Perhaps Robb Stark’s commanders have reminded him of the original purpose of his campaign,’ Varys smirked in reply, ‘he has been dilly-dallying for rather a long while.’

‘I wonder if they bothered to tell him that even Aerys wasn’t mad enough to attack Casterly Rock.’

Varys sat back in his chair.

‘Nevertheless,’ the eunuch said, ‘my spies inform me that that is his intention.’

‘Is the boy simple?’ Tyrion exclaimed, ‘he doesn’t have enough men! He saw to that the minute he allowed his cock to become more important to his cause than Walder bloody Frey!’

‘Perhaps he believes that some way may be found to appease Lord Walder.’

‘I’m delighted to hear it. A man who believes that it snows in Dorne will be easy to defeat.’

‘Your wit is dazzling today, my lord. I take it your strength is returning?’

A sudden jolt of nausea went through Tyrion’s heart.

‘Does Joffrey know about this?’

‘He does,’ Varys replied, ‘His Grace is not pleased at all.’

‘BRONN!’ Tyrion roared.

The sellsword sauntered in from the balcony, looking righteously indignant at being shouted for.

‘I am right here, you know!’ he pointed out, ‘same room. Same space.’

‘Find both Stark girls and bring them here immediately,’ Tyrion commanded, ignoring him.

‘May I ask what you intend to do when you have ‘brought both of them here immediately’?’ Varys simpered, wincing as Bronn banged the door behind him.

‘I don’t know,’ Tyrion snarled, ‘I have no fucking idea.’

‘Calm as still fucking water,’ Jaime growled as Arya faced him, sword in hand, ‘where’s the fun in that?’

‘Feet!’ she barked in return, poking at his toes with her tourney sword for what felt like the hundredth time that morning.

At his first lesson, Jaime had mastered the stance of water dancing in approximately ten seconds; his entire body moulding smoothly to it as though he’d been doing it forever, and the leap of excitement that had jumped from Arya’s heart to her throat had almost choked her. Since then, however, he had soon proved to be such a compulsively perfect executor of the Westerosi stance that he continually
and unfailingly slipped back into it; half the time without thinking about it, the other half of the time just to annoy her. The former was pardonable, if irritating. The latter was encouraging, but rather more irksome.

‘My knees are aching, Stark,’ Jaime was complaining.

‘Grow stronger, then!’ Arya shot back.

‘Of course!’ Jaime snorted, ‘grow stronger! Whom do you suggest I pray to to accomplish that overnight? Your bloody trees, the Warrior, the Stranger, or all three?’

‘Pray to whichever one of them is responsible for banishing bullshit,’ Arya suggested.

That did not please him.

‘Why, you little –’

‘Hurry up and dance with me once more before I leave. I have a harp lesson in ten minutes.’

Jaime burst out laughing.

‘A harp lesson?’

‘Will you just come at me and shut up?’

Each time their blades touched in the slow execution of one of the precise, endless infinity of drills that Syrio had taught her, she could feel his frustration at their slowness groaning right through her body. Speed was trapped screaming inside both him and her; a primal instinct that Jaime glided into each time his heartbeat increased and that she had to battle down in herself just as often as she did in him; telling him over and over and over that racing ahead would only lead to more mistakes; disarming him just as often when he couldn’t get the message into his stupid head.

Often, Arya felt sure that he hated her for that. He would regularly glare at her like he wanted to kill her, just as she had glared at Syrio each time he exclaimed that she wasn’t holding a battle axe, or clouted her on the shoulder to see how she would react (badly, on most days). She would see that desire to harm, to murder and to release blistering out of him every time she stopped him, and she would tell herself to be patient; repeat to herself that he would eventually understand, just as she had, and probably in less time. But she wasn’t made for teaching, especially when her body and mind were drained and numbed and destroyed by the loss of Tywin; and Jaime clearly wasn’t made for learning. She was too angry and too impatient; and he had been too damn good for far too long for him to go back without a fight.

‘You’re going too fast,’ Arya grunted, trying (and failing) to slow him down, ‘you’re going too fast.’

‘Does that frighten you, Lady Stark?’ he grunted in return.

With a thrill of childish satisfaction that she would later feel ashamed of, Arya promptly sent the blade flying out of his hand and slammed her own sword into the back of Jaime’s knees; shoving him over and bringing the tip smartly to his throat when he hit the ground, groaning as he rolled onto his back.

‘Yes, Lannister,’ Arya quipped, the tourney sword prodding the skin beneath his chin, ‘that does frighten me. You’re going too fast and you’re making more mistakes.’

‘Stark,’ Jaime ventured.
'What?' Arya demanded.

‘Look down,’ he said, and something thrillingly cold pressed into the skin above her shoe, calling her eyes downward.

The dagger was poised above her heel with all the elegance and menace of a threat beautifully made; the steel threatening to bite down and tear balance and stillness and escape and swordplay right out of her before staining the godwood floor with a brighter red than its leaves.

The expression on Jaime’s face was infuriating as he grinned openly at her, the perspiration on his face for once not accompanied by a ghastly pallour, but by something resembling...being alive, really. She could see the blood glowing beneath his skin.

But she wouldn’t tell him that. It didn’t change the fact that he was a shit pupil.

‘I still would’ve killed you if this was a real sword!’ she blurted.

She felt the steel grind harder into her heel.

‘You would not,’ Jaime declared softly.

‘Yes, I would,’ Arya insisted.

Jaime made no move to rise and no move to sheathe his dagger; his stare commanding her to take her words back into herself; to unsay them or to not say them at all. The rush of leaves and wind, the godwood sound, disappeared beneath his gaze; as did the pain in her body and the imbalance and the void and the fear that was the absence of Tywin and of everything that Tywin had been. And suddenly she felt naked as her name day, her skin shivering as though exposed to the wind; exposed to the wind, and him.

Suddenly a discordance of red plate and steel tore the silence asunder and overran it with the sound of marching and clattering; first on red stone and then on wet earth. As Jaime rose to his feet, Arya hurriedly clapped the sword into his hand and turned away from him as the clearing was occupied by four red cloaks, their visors down and their armour well-worn.

‘Ser Jaime; my lady,’ their captain greeted with an exaggerated politeness that did not fool Arya for a second, ‘I trust we’re not interrupting anything?’

‘On the contrary, Ser,’ Arya replied with equal candour, ‘Ser Jaime and I were about to engage in improper relations, and you’ve arrived just in time to save my honour. I am eternally in your debt.’

‘Kindly forgive my lady sister’s predilection for making clever remarks,’ Jaime interjected roughly, ‘now what did you four paragons of mediocrity say you wanted?’

‘We have orders to escort Lady Arya to the throne room, Ser,’ the captain replied, not rising to the bait.

‘Why?’ Arya demanded, hoping that her tone would disguise the fear that had ripped through her body at the thought of putting so much as a foot into that hall again.

‘His Grace wishes you and your sister the Lady Sansa to attend him there,’ the captain informed her.

Jaime rolled his eyes.

‘Can’t my little cockroach of a nephew find some puppies to torture instead?’ he coolly enquired,
‘Lady Arya has a harp lesson to attend.’

The urge to hit him (or at the very least to tell him to shut up) deserted Arya completely, and she stood staring at the red cloaks for a moment, wondering what they would do if she ran, or simply refused.

*I can’t run now. I can’t refuse now. I can’t do any of that anymore. I am a lady now, and it is my business to shut up and do what I’m told; and to let people do what they want to me; whenever they want to do it.*

Her jaw hurt her as she bit down on her teeth, and the red was rising up behind her closed eyes as she vowed to herself in the name of all the gods that one day she would kill them all.

But then she remembered the Great Sept and Ser Ilyn and Father; and Joffrey waving almost uncertainly beneath a crown that was too big for him. She felt the heat of the stone beneath her shoes as she clung to the statue of Baelor the Blessed; the dragon who had said that the gods should be merciful. She seemed to fall from the plinth and into the crowd; every last screaming someone a grain of sand of sound of the blade; a thud that she had heard and would never stop hearing; no matter how hard Yoren clutched his dirty hands over her ears and told her not to look.

She remembered her tongue swelling with thirst in the heat and dark of the black cells, and Father sitting silent beside her, unable to see her or talk to her. She remembered how hard the throne room floor had felt beneath her knees; the laughter drowning her in memory; her tongue stumbling over her allegiances as she repeated them again and again and again.

She opened her eyes and looked up at Jaime as she felt his fingers lace through hers and squeeze her hand once; his face calm as still water; his eyes angry like the Rock.

‘Give me your arm, my lady,’ he said, ‘let’s go and see what the little shit wants.’
Chapter 24

Bronn had returned without either of the Stark girls, and as Tyrion rushed to the throne room; cursing both the sellsword at his side and his own stunted legs, he imagined Sansa and Arya weeping while Joffrey gleefully pointed a crossbow at them; His Grace cooing about sending Robb Stark a message while his courtiers looked silently on and wondered where the fuck the small council had got to, or indeed the Queen Regent.

But the scene that awaited him as he strode through the throne room doors was rather different from what he had expected. True, both Stark girls were on their knees before the steps and showed signs of a savage preliminary beating; Sansa weeping quietly as she clutched her stomach, Arya’s face entirely blank despite the bruise that was staining the skin around her eye like ink.

Ser Boros and Ser Meryn, however, had abandoned their traditional places at the foot of the dais for the apparently preferable task of restraining Jaime, whom Tyrion immediately suspected to be the perpetrator of the crimson river pouring out of Ser Meryn’s nose. His brother looked deathly pale and on the point of fainting, and his stump had fallen out of the sling around his neck, suggesting that he had either punched Ser Meryn with it or that Joffrey had commanded the Kingsguard to deliberately injure it. It was this last possibility more than any other that made Tyrion’s blood boil.

I swear by the old gods and the new that I will kill every last one of you sons of bitches.

Nevertheless, Jaime was speaking lucidly and with perfect composure while Joffrey’s face grew redder and redder; the red glow falling on his face from the stained glass windows making him look less like a conqueror and more like a tomato. It was a funny thought, but Tyrion was no longer capable of laughing sincerely at Joffrey – only emptily. The boy was too pathetic, too simple and too cruel to elicit anything apart from that. That…and tears, of course.

‘I’m punishing them!’ Joffrey was shouting at his uncle.

‘For what crimes, you imbecilic little shit?’ Jaime shot back, ‘are you suggesting that Lady Sansa or Lady Arya intend to take up arms and march on Casterly Rock? Their petty coats will be something of an encumbrance when it comes to an actual battle, don’t you think?’

‘You can’t talk to me like that!’ Joffrey shrieked, ‘the King can do as he likes!’

Tyrion rolled his eyes, and interjected.

‘The Mad King did as he liked,’ he said gravely, noting with satisfaction that Joffrey’s face turned somewhat paler when his presence was noted, ‘has your uncle Jaime ever told you what happened to him?’

Jaime grinned at Tyrion and responded without missing a beat.

‘He was quite a bleeder, Your Grace. It took weeks to get the blood out of the marble.’

‘You can’t make threats against my person!’ Joffrey insisted, pounding his fist on the arm of the throne in what he clearly thought was a menacing fashion, ‘I am the king!’

‘I did not threaten Your Grace,’ Jaime interrupted obsequiously, ‘nor do I deny that you are the king. I simply stated that blood is unfailingly difficult to get out of marble.’

Tyrion relished the look of confusion on his idiot nephew’s face, as well as the unmistakable, if
unconscious way that he turned to the chair usually occupied by his mother; seeking, no doubt, to be advised on whether or not he should feel insulted.

_Hm. Apparently he does still give a fuck what Cersei thinks._

‘Do you remember exactly how long it took to get the blood out of the marble, dear brother?’ Tyrion asked cheerfully.

‘Not in the least,’ Jaime replied with a flourish, ‘After the Sack I had thousands of helpless girls to beat and wasn’t paying attention.’

‘We are not helpless!’ Arya exclaimed, her voice piercing the Stark girls’ silence like a crossbow bolt, ‘my brothers were helpless, and that stupid coward Theon killed them anyway! I wonder who gave him the most trouble: the cripple or the eleven-year old!’

‘You two wolves are just as helpless as your brothers were; and if you do not hold your tongue, Lady Stark, you’ll end up just as dead as they are!’ Joffrey cried, squealing like a child playing at kings, ‘I’ll have you and your sister stripped and beaten until you understand that, and until you understand, once and for all, that I am the king!’

Arya’s contempt was exquisite to behold.

‘A man who must say ‘I am the king’ is no true king at all,’ she spat, and _seven hells,_ Tyrion thought, _she sounds just like my father._

Father was banished from Tyrion’s mind as Joffrey leapt to his feet in a rage, barely noticing the blood that began to pour down his hand when he cut himself on one of the barbed spikes of the Iron Throne.

‘Tear off her gown and beat her till she bleeds!’ he shrieked, his voice monstrously high and demonic, ‘let them hear her screams as far as Riverrun, so that Robb Stark will finally understand – ’

‘Touch either of those girls again,’ Jaime growled at Joffrey as Ser Meryn moved to obey him, ‘and Casterly Rock will declare war before the day is done. I’m sure the irony isn’t lost on you.’

‘Bronn, fetch my hill tribesmen,’ Tyrion muttered, ‘and be quick about it.’

‘Is that supposed to threaten me, Uncle?’ Joffrey hooted as the sellsword exited the hall unnoticed, ‘you have no power over what happens at Casterly Rock because you’re not the heir. Kingsguard can’t inherit or marry, no matter how many appendages they lose.’

‘Appendages?’ Tyrion remarked, hating him, ‘a fancy word for a boy with the wits of a goose.’

‘You can’t!’ Joffrey squealed.

‘I can, I am!’ Tyrion roared.

‘You can’t because you’re not the heir to Casterly Rock either! Mother told me all about it; how you can’t be heir because you’re too short, too debauched and too much of a fucking disappointment, and Ser Cripple here is too fucking Kingsguard to be the Lord of Casterly Rock, even if he can’t hold a sword up anymore - ’

‘Very well,’ Jaime interrupted, ‘I resign.’

‘What?’ Joffrey and Tyrion said together.
‘Would His Grace like my resignation in writing?’ Jaime asked with exaggerated deference, ‘or will a declaration of war serve just as well?’

‘Perhaps both of them, dear brother,’ Tyrion responded before Joffrey could open his mouth, ‘the King has demonstrated considerable slowness when it comes to administrative matters.’

‘Seize him!’ Joffrey screamed, ‘seize all of them! Beat them and make them lick their own blood off the floors!’

But the only thing that fell to the floor was Olenna Tyrell, a gasp and a frail-sounding shriek preluding a spectacularly-executed faint; her small body crashing to the floor with an ease that seemed a little too practised; and Lady Margaery was kneeling beside her grandmother, weeping and tearing her hair out like a consummate tragedian in the depths of despair.

‘Oh, Joffrey, help,’ she cried, her beautiful blue eyes bright with tears, ‘help!’

And to Tyrion’s astonishment, the Lord of the Seven Kingdoms entirely forgot about the Stark girls and leapt off his throne like an arrow launched from a bow, rushing immediately to Margaery’s side and making it perfectly clear that the sight of her tears was unbearable to him.

Tyrion’s hill tribesmen chose that moment to burst into the throne room, their mere presence causing utter pandemonium in most of the hall and galleries, but Joffrey was so overwrought at the sight of Margaery crying that he scarcely noticed their presence at all, shouting for a maester and seizing her as she too sank into a dead faint.

Tyrion reminded himself to think on Margaery Tyrell’s considerable manipulative powers, turned his back on them with something like regret, and found himself face-to-face with Bronn, who was eating an apple that he’d speared on the end of his dagger.

‘Where the fuck have you been?’ Tyrion demanded.

‘Shagga was drinking,’ Bronn shrugged.

In his mind, Tyrion wrung an imaginary neck.

‘Help me get the girls out before Joffrey remembers they’re here.’

‘They hurt Arya,’ Sansa cried once they were safely in the antechamber, her hands clasping her sister’s face, ‘he told them to hurt her face and leave mine; he said she was ugly and she didn’t matter ’

‘It doesn’t even hurt,’ Arya scowled, shrugging her sister’s hands away and attempting (unsuccessfully) to disguise the glow of affection in her eyes at Sansa’s concern, ‘you’d think they would teach them how to punch people in the Kingsguard.’

Tyrion’s mouth opened to command her to stop being brave, but the resulting glare from Arya made him clamp it shut again and turn to Sansa.

‘Are you seriously injured, my lady?’ Tyrion enquired politely, trying hard not to stare as Sansa
turned towards him; a breeze moving in from the courtyard and mischievously caressing her hair.

‘Only my stomach, my lord,’ she replied, and smiled softly at him before promptly turning pale again, ‘gods be good, where’s Arya?’

Tyrion cursed his short and stunted legs for the second time that morning as he cast about for the wretched younger Stark girl; Sansa’s face becoming his guide as she looked about her; the fear turning her whiter and whiter; only to be replaced by astonishment as she finally found her sister; Tyrion’s eyes following hers.

Arya was standing with Jaime not three feet away from them; his left hand supporting her head, his stump resting on her shoulder as he asked her, fiercely, again and again, a question that Tyrion assumed had something to do with her health. She nodded repeatedly and seemed to be struggling to speak, and as Tyrion saw tears forming in her eyes and her small hands clutching Jaime’s elbows, he remembered the girl shrugging Sansa’s hands away and boldly declaring that she felt no pain.

*Matters have obviously progressed further than I had thought. Cersei must be thrilled.*

Tyrion scowled to himself that this was all extremely interesting, but that he would prefer the girls to be far away from the throne room by the time it occurred to Joffrey to leave it.

He told Bronn to take Sansa and Arya to Grand Maester Pycelle, and to kill anyone who tried to stop them.

Bronn’s face lit up.

‘Really?’

‘Yes,’ Tyrion said, and he was perfectly serious.

Tyrion watched Jaime kiss Arya’s forehead as he let her go; then approached his brother once again, trying not to show his concern at how utterly ghastly he looked. Jaime was whiter than summer snow and not half as healthy-looking, but nevertheless he seemed angry; angry and alive.

‘Shall we go and tell our sweet sister the good news?’ Tyrion proposed.

Jaime looked down at him and grinned.

‘Why not?’ he said.
‘You threatened him with war in front of half the court?’ Cersei shrieked.

‘He was beating two adolescent girls in front of half the court,’ Jaime replied, ‘I know you well enough to know that that would not have pleased you.’

She was struck by that. He could see it. There was a pause in her; a cessation of hostilities that briefly softened her beauty, making it youthful and brilliant rather than terrible. There was a smile in her, a silent acknowledgment of how well he knew her. But it departed in a second; in less than that; and iron returned to her, and ice, and hatred as she looked at him, and he at her. And suddenly she was no longer beautiful, and once again, he realised that he no longer loved her.

Isn’t that odd. It’s for that precise reason that she stopped loving me.

‘Do you honestly expect me to believe that you did it for me?’ Cersei spat.

‘Not at all, sweet sister,’ Jaime pronounced, ‘if I did it for anyone, I did it for me.’

‘You cut me, brother,’ Tyrion interjected, scowling deeply, ‘I trust you thought of me too. It seems an awful lot of trouble to go to just to entertain yourself. And I did so enjoy it.’

‘I dedicate this event to Tyrion son of Tywin of the House Lannister!’ Jaime roared without hesitation, ‘let all the bards remember it when they commemorate this day in song! They almost certainly will, though I can’t guarantee that their songs will bode well for Joffrey’s reputation.’

‘My dear brother,’ Tyrion replied, ‘that would imply that Joffrey has a reputation left to destroy.’

Jaime and Tyrion burst out laughing as Cersei leapt to her feet in a whirlwind of crimson and gold brilliance, her slender white fist pounding on the table.

‘GET OUT!’ she screamed, ‘both of you; get out!’

‘Why?’ Jaime remarked, ‘because we’re telling the fucking truth?’

Cersei stared him down for a moment, returned to her seat and controlled herself, glowering at him as she would at the most arrogant, selfish man in Westeros; her face contorting unpleasantly as her lip curled.

And suddenly his thoughts were with Arya and wherever she might be; with how blank her face had been as she had knelt before the throne; with how she had gone away inside and shielded herself from the present and the past; her armour back on as though she’d never taken it off.

He remembered her in the anteroom; remembered the mask of indifference that was still adorning her face like marble, and how much, how horribly it had affected him; the swelling around her eye seeming to worsen with every step she took. She had found him almost without looking for him; and forgetting, as he always did, that he was no longer whole, he had raised both his hands to clasp her face. She hadn’t flinched away when his stump had grazed her cheek, and she had closed her eyes with something like relief when the fingers of his left hand had gently clasped the back of her neck and turned her face upwards to his.
‘Are you alright?’ he had demanded, ‘are you alright?’

As tears began to pour down her face, she nodded wordlessly, clearly not trusting herself to speak as he repeated the question; but her face was opening up beneath his gaze; her grey northern eyes like the rain; her breath tickling his face as she once again became Arya Stark, the girl who never wore armour.

Her hands had clutched his elbows, keeping his fingers at her neck and his body inches from hers; and he had kissed her forehead as she was led away to be attended by that grey sunken cunt Pycelle; the blazing warmth of her skin lingering on his lips even now as Cersei sat smirking at him; guessing his thoughts, most likely; and opening her mouth to continue her chastisement of one of the two truly good things that he had ever done while standing in that fucking room.

‘You are Kingsguard,’ Cersei declared, as regally as though she wore a crown on her head, ‘and a Kingsguard serves for life.’

‘Does he?’ Jaime questioned bitterly, ‘the last time we discussed it you called that ‘nonsense.’’

Cersei chuckled.

‘The last time we discussed it, I still had a grain of respect for you. Things have changed considerably since then.’

That statement hurt him, though he did not care to admit it; and when Tyrion shifted in his chair and deprived him of the opportunity to respond to it, his gratitude was inexpressible

‘In my illustrious capacity as former Acting Hand of the King’ his brother stated, his thick fingers drumming on the arm of his chair, ‘I feel it my duty to advise you not to fight him on this, Cersei.’

‘I’m touched by your concern, brother,’ came the acerbic response.

Tyrion smiled.

‘Changing your mind after turning Ser Barristan’s dismissal into such an entertaining farce would not send a very optimistic message about your ability to govern. Nor does it improve your chances of finding a halfway decent Hand. How’s that going, by the way?’

Cersei smiled mockingly in return and chose to change the subject rather than answer the question.

‘Uncle Kevan is the executor of Father’s will,’ she said, ‘as Queen Regent, I have commanded him multiple times to reveal the identity of the new heir to me, as is my right, and he has committed treason just as many times by refusing to do his duty and tell me. He has also refused to be my Hand.’

‘I’m delighted to hear it,’ Tyrion said, ‘the badge looked much better on me than it ever would on him.’

‘True as that may be, dear brother,’ Jaime interjected, ‘I’m sure you don’t mind if I ask Cersei to hurry up and get to the point? I’m getting bored.’

‘Not in the least!’ Tyrion replied with a flourish.

Jaime turned back to his twin.

‘Got any wine, Cersei? This newfound acquaintance between my stump and Ser Meryn’s nose has
made the poor maimed thing hurt like the blazes, and I’d hate to pass out before you’ve actually
gotten to the aforementioned point.’

‘The point,’ Cersei spat, not answering him, ‘is that Father’s will was drawn up before this
preposterous change of heart and that it certainly doesn’t name you as the heir. And it is with great
sorrow that I must inform you that it is the will that will be respected by the Crown and by the Faith,
not your own selfish wishes and desires.’

‘While the Crown and the Faith are both formidable opponents,’ Tyrion observed, smiling as Jaime
ignored her completely, stood up and liberated a nearby table of a pitcher of wine and two glasses,
‘you’ve forgotten one important thing.’

‘And what is that?’ Cersei asked.

‘Wine, dear brother?’ Jaime interrupted, taking his seat again and pouring out Arbour gold, ‘Cersei
has demonstrated no interest in the consumption of alcohol, which means there’s more for us!’

‘Some wine would be welcome after this morning’s excitement!’ Tyrion grinned, bowing as he
accepted a glass with two fingers.

‘And what is that?’ the Queen Regent repeated, seething.

Tyrion took a long sip of wine and belched, making Cersei’s nose wrinkle.

‘That,’ Tyrion stated, ‘is Uncle Kevan. I’m quite sure that when he hears about this little
development, he’ll immediately declare that the will names Jaime the heir and dare anyone to say
otherwise.’

Cersei went white.

‘That is treason and sacrilege.’

Tyrion smiled mirthlessly.

‘He would commit both a thousand times over if it meant ensuring that Father’s wishes were
respected,’ he declared, ‘if you knew him at all, you would realise that.’

‘I know him well enough,’ she replied dismissively.

‘Of course you do,’ Tyrion scoffed, ‘forgive me, I’d forgotten that the only kind of love you know
about is the sort that wells up in your pretty little heart each time you look in a mirror.’

Jaime knew that Tyrion thought no such thing, and that he had only spoken out of bitterness and
anger. He knew that his brother often admired the deep, all-encompassing love that Cersei had for
her children, and often considered it to be her sole redeeming quality. Cersei, however, did not know
that. To know that would require her to understand Tyrion; to recognise him as a human being; to
love him, even. So he felt for her, in spite of himself, as she sat contemplating Tyrion’s words,
enduring them as they hurt and humiliated her, and storing them up for the day that she believed she
would avenge all the offences that Tyrion had committed against her, real or otherwise.

If only she had taken the trouble to love him, Jaime thought, he would have been the greatest ally
that she could ever have wished for...and the truest friend that she could ever have had.

‘I will give you one final chance, Jaime, to take back this folly,’ Cersei declared, a hint of heat
invading the coldness of her tone, ‘apologise to His Grace, promise him that you will remain in the
Kingsguard, and I will ensure that this will all be forgotten.’

Jaime almost laughed aloud.

‘I am supremely confident of your ability to sway His Grace, Cersei,’ Jaime replied acidly, ‘but thank you. I’d sooner tear the little shit’s throat out than apologise to him.’

Cersei glared bitterly at him, her eyes darker than the deepest of the seven hells.

‘Get out of the habit of threatening him in front of me; in front of anyone, for that matter,’ she growled, ‘or it will be the worse for you.’

Jaime glared right back at her, fervently wishing that gaze could spear her and her rotten son through the chest.

‘I couldn’t possibly do that, sweet sister,’ he said, ‘threatening him is far too much fun.’

Chapter End Notes

Valar Morghulis, awesome people! This is a note to say thank you for all the brilliant and awe-inspiring support that you’ve given in helping me spread the love of the weird and wonderful pairing that is Arya and Jaime! This is also to say (and to apologise) in advance that there will be no chapter tomorrow. I need a bit of time to recharge my plot (and my batteries), but I will be back on Thursday once again with more hilarity from the two people in Westeros who most need to get together, as in yesterday. Thanks once again and much love!
When Grand Maester Pycelle’s examination ended in the usual milk of the poppy for the physical pain and essence of nightshade for the emotional trauma, Sansa and Arya sat together in the window seat of the latter’s bedchamber; Sansa watching with concern as her younger sister downed four glasses of Dornish red in quick succession and showed no sign of stopping.

‘I thought you didn’t like the taste of wine,’ Sansa remarked.

‘I’m not drinking it for the taste,’ Arya mumbled in reply, and laid her head against the windowpane, her wine glass balancing precariously on her knee.

Through the window, Sansa saw the sun as it blazed harsh and crimson against the towers of the Red Keep; the heavy glass like a shield, a map, an entire country; a journey from South to North and from heat to cold; to Winterfell; where Bran and Rickon lay dead in the ruins, their bodies so charred that they barely looked human. She naively considered asking her sister if she thought their brothers had suffered for long; if the fire had taken them quickly and painlessly; if they had already been dead when Theon had fed them to the flames. But then she remembered the look that had rippled over Father’s face each time he had entered the throne room; a subtle whisper and a scream that he thought no one could see, and she decided to hold her tongue. Death by fire could not be painless, and she didn’t want to fight with Arya now. So she drained the cup of water in her hand and jumped as a complement of guards marched right past the door, their boots ringing like siege missiles against the flagstone floors, and she expected the Kingsguard to burst through the door at any moment and take her away to be beaten.

‘The Queen Regent has forbidden you to see your sister,’ Ser Boros or Ser Meryn would grunt, ‘come with us. King Joffrey will enjoy this.’

Or ‘Come along, little bird,’ the Hound would say, ‘let’s take you back to your cage before your master sees you’re gone.’

‘I should go,’ Sansa murmured, ‘if they find me here – ’

Arya instantly took her hand, restraining her.

‘Please,’ she begged softly, ‘please.’

As Sansa contemplated Arya’s large and pleading grey eyes; her tear-stained alabaster skin and her boyish, crow’s nest head of thick, dark hair; she realised that at some point during their separation, her sister had become beautiful. And yet she was not a beauty; not in the conventional sense; but there was something in her that drew the eye and made it return to her again and again, just as Father had always said there would be.Sansa had laughed at him each time he had said it, calling her Arya Horseface and screeching when her sister chased after her and tried to pull her hair.

Seeing the truth of Father’s words staring out at her made Sansa feel like he was in the room with them, and when she squeezed Arya’s hand, she imagined squeezing his as well; telling him, wherever he was, that he had been right all along.

‘Thank you,’ Arya murmured, smiling weakly when Sansa nodded her agreement to stay, ‘and seven hells will you please stop worrying about Cersei and her orders. I suspect that her days of giving them are numbered after today, the stupid bitch.’

‘Arya!’ Sansa half-shrieked, dropping her sister’s hand as though it were scalding hot, ‘your
Arya poured herself another glass of wine and swallowed it eagerly, her cheeks flushing a deep Lannister crimson as she once again looked out of the window and into the heat.

‘I’ll get out of the habit of swearing soon enough,’ Arya remarked, ‘so don’t let it trouble you. Every day I wear one of those stupid gowns, I feel myself changing. The way I walk, the way I talk, the way I look at people and think of people. Soon I’ll be pissing lavender.’

‘That is called being a lady, sister,’ Sansa replied, demurely ignoring that previous comment, ‘it’s what your life should be.’

The words tasted wrong as she spoke them, and she expected Arya to shout at her, or at the very least to protest. But her sister did neither, her head resting limply against the window, her wine glass clutched in her hand, and the air around her beginning to smell of alcohol.

‘Maybe it is what my life should be,’ Arya stated blandly, with an unexpected resignation and hopelessness that troubled Sansa deeply, ‘but that doesn’t mean I have to like it. Look at Cersei. Cersei is a lady. The epitome of ladylikeness and courtesies and bullshit, and yet she’s all spite and low cunning and arrogance. Why in seven hells would I want to end up like that?’

‘I wish you wouldn’t call her by her first name, Arya,’ Sansa scolded, prudently choosing not to answer the question, ‘it’s not decent.’

‘And why shouldn’t I call her by her first name?’ Arya spat abruptly, ‘she’s my sweet fucking sister now, after all. Lady Arya and Lady Cersei and their two broken brothers, one big happy family.’

‘You could have said no, Arya,’ Sansa said, remembering the anger and betrayal she had felt when news of the adoption had reached King’s Landing, ‘you could simply have said no.’

‘If I had, I would be dead,’ Arya exclaimed enthusiastically, rolling her eyes and beginning to slur her words, ‘and a couple of very happy fish at the bottom of the Trident would have made a spectacular meal from my corpse. Would you prefer me to be dead?’

‘Of course I wouldn’t prefer you to be dead,’ Sansa sighed disapprovingly, ‘though I would prefer for you not to be drunk.’

Arya shrugged unconcernedly and looked out of the window again.

‘What vicious, cruel, ironic shits the gods are.’

‘For making you one of them?’ Sansa asked.

Arya stared at her, confused.

‘Who? The gods?’

‘The Lannisters, Arya.’

Arya snorted in response and poured herself another glass of wine.

‘I will never be one of them,’ she declared, ‘no matter what it says on a stupid piece of paper. I can’t ever be one of them because they’re not my family, and because they’re my enemies and I want them all dead.’

That last statement seemed to confuse her, and Sansa watched bemusedly as Arya blinked several
times and rubbed her eyes, as though to steady herself.

‘The gods are cruel, and…and stupid…’ she continued, ‘for giving a daughter like Cersei to a man like that; to such a…to someone so…’

Sansa did not much care for all this affectionate talk about Tywin Lannister. He was the one who had torched the Riverlands and murdered all those thousands of people; the one who had kept Robb so busy for such a long time that he hadn’t even come close to avenging their father; her father, Arya’s father; her real father; Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell, not the cruel old man who was destroying their family and their people. Nobody could ever take their Father’s place.

*I only wish I’d realised that before Joffrey cut his head off. I only wish I hadn’t been so beastly to him; that I had told him I loved him more; that I had… I wish…*

Arya’s eyes were shining with suppressed intoxication, and with something like compassion, and Sansa could tell that her sister knew what she was thinking.

‘Tywin wasn’t my father,’ Arya said softly, ‘he could never be my father. Nothing can ever change that, nothing. But he was…extraordinary, and he saved me from…from myself; from the things that I had inside my head. And my heart broke when he died, it broke, it broke. But I didn’t love him, or his stupid House like I love Father. I didn’t.’

‘I’m delighted to hear it, Arya,’ Sansa replied imperiously, not remotely convinced, ‘because Robb is going to destroy Casterly Rock, and when he’s finished doing that, his knights and his troops will rally behind him with all the might of the North, and he’ll march on this city, tear down the walls, and kill every Lannister he can get his hands on.’

‘I don’t care if he does,’ Arya declared ferociously, ‘I hope he does. I’ll help him do it.’

‘Will you?’

‘Yes. Swords straight across their throats, knives in their bellies, anything he wants.’

‘I take it you’d have no objection to killing Ser Jaime, then.’

Sansa watched the words die on Arya’s tongue; just as they had outside the throne room the moment that Arya’s eyes had met his. She remembered how terrified she had been for her sister when she had seen her face up close; and how guilty she had felt at the memory of Joffrey’s orders to the Kingsguard to beat Arya in the face – ‘This one is so ugly,’ he had said, ‘that making her uglier won’t make any difference.’ Arya’s face had felt hot with pain beneath Sansa’s concerned fingers, but Arya had shrugged away from her; just like a Stark and just like a Northman; loudly declaring that it was nothing and that Kingsguard couldn’t punch properly; protecting her stupid older sister from having to worry about her.

But the moment Ser Jaime had found her, Arya’s words had disappeared and the tears had come, and Sansa had been astonished; dumbfounded, even; firstly by their familiarity (she hadn’t even known they were on speaking terms); and secondly by the tenderness with which he had treated her; by the way his fingers had supported her head and the way he had kissed her as he let her go. She no longer believed that knights or soldiers were capable of such things. She had learned her lesson. And yet there it had been right in front of her; present in a man so much taller and larger than Arya that her head barely reached his chest.

‘Every time I look at him, it hurts a little more,’ Arya mumbled, looking thoroughly drunk, but sounding reasonably lucid, ‘it’s like bits of me are left behind inside him every time we meet. All we
ever do is fight, but when we do I can’t think; it’s like thinking doesn’t exist anymore and the only thing happening is a kind of hammering, in here,’ she touched her chest, ‘and all I can feel or see is my own blood doing whatever it wants, like my mind doesn’t exist anymore, like my conscience is gone. I’m so...tired, Sansa. It makes me so tired, just...feeling and feeling and feeling and nothing else, and I can’t hide any of the bad things anymore because he can see them; I don’t know how, but he can. It’s like he’s destroyed what I was; like he’s destroyed the lie; like I can’t lie anymore, because he knows me, he knows everything in me, he is in me, because he knows...he knows...he knows what it means to lose...’

‘To lose what?’ Sansa asked, loathe to interrupt, but curious, ‘do you mean his hand, or is it - ’

‘No,’ Arya interrupted rudely, waving dismissively like a consummate drunk, ‘I mean long before that, a long time ago.’

‘Alright, you’ve had quite enough now,’ Sansa said firmly, confiscating the pitcher of wine.

Arya ignored her completely and continued to speak.

‘It was probably while he served the Mad King...probably then...I know because I can see it. Because I’m...I’m in him, like he’s in me.’

‘Dear gods; you’re in love with him,’ Sansa exclaimed.

‘That’s not true; I am not in love with him,’ Arya snapped, with a determination that was rather frightening.

Arya sat glaring at her for a few minutes; her arms folded in rather a comical fashion; but then her face softened, and suddenly she no longer looked angry, but guilty. She took Sansa’s hand again. Her palm was wet with perspiration.

‘I’m sorry,’ Arya murmured, ‘for complaining about having a friend when you’ve been here on your own for all this time.’

Sansa smiled weakly and stared into her lap.

‘How have you lived?’ Arya continued, ‘like this, every day? Knowing, and...and fearing?’

Sansa considered explaining the crushing fear from day to day; the helplessness; the anger; the frustration; the knowledge that Lord Tyrion could not always be there; the suspicion that Lord Baelish was deceiving her; the irrational, newfound fear of the colour white; the nightmares about Mother and Robb; the memory of Father’s head rolling down the stairs of the Sept; and the memory of the moment that Joffrey’s voice had changed, and her sweet, darling prince had become her tormentor.

‘A lady’s courtesies are her armour,’ Sansa said eventually, ‘and nobody can hurt me when I’ve got my armour on.’

‘I know,’ Arya whispered in return, and Sansa could tell from the way her sister looked intently across at her, her eyes brimming with tears, that Arya did know, and that her armour was in danger of failing her.

‘You do have a friend,’ Sansa comforted softly as tears began to spill down Arya’s cheeks, ‘you have me, and you have Ser Jaime. That’s what’s important.’

Arya nodded furiously, as though trying to convince herself.
‘And if you had any sense at all,’ Sansa continued, ‘you would marry him.’

‘I don’t want to marry him,’ Arya sniffled, staring into her lap.

Sansa almost smiled.

‘Of course you don’t. But consider. If you do…you could end the war.’

Arya looked up at her, then, and the sadness in her eyes was excruciating.

‘You’ve been listening to too many songs, Sansa,’ Arya said, wiping her eyes on her sleeve, ‘no marriage will reconcile Stark and Lannister after what has happened.’

‘How will you know if you don’t try?’ Sansa insisted, choosing not to address the question of songs just yet.

‘I don’t need to,’ Arya declared, ‘things are too bad. Things are too – ’

Arya began to cry in earnest, and Sansa gently put her arms around her, almost jumping in shock at how thin she felt.

‘What about Bran?’ Arya sobbed, ‘how can I possibly – after what he did to Bran? How can I? What does that make me?’

‘It doesn’t make you –’

‘Oh gods!’

Arya pulled away from her with alarming quickness and grasped Sansa’s shoulders.

‘Oh gods, I’m sorry,’ she moaned, still weeping, ‘you don’t know yet, I haven’t told you –’

‘I do know, Arya,’ Sansa said reassuringly, ‘about the tower and Ser Jaime and the Queen –’

‘How do you know?’ Arya demanded, her tears departing as swiftly as they had come, ‘it isn’t common knowledge.’

‘Lord Baelish told me,’ Sansa said simply, colouring slightly.

Arya was not impressed.

‘Why in seven hells are you discussing such things with Lord Baelish?’

Sansa was offended both by her look and by her tone.

‘He’s been very kind to me,’ Sansa insisted, ‘he said he would take me –’

No. No one. You tell no one.

‘Take you where?’ Arya demanded loudly, ‘or on what, if that’s what you mean?’

Sansa’s blush deepened, and she cursed her own stupidity, trying to think of something, anything, to say; silence filling the void…and worsening her sister’s temper.

‘Take you where, Sansa?’ Arya was insisting.

‘Why do you care?’ Sansa replied, hoping that rudeness would dissuade her from discussing this
further.

‘Because he is not to be trusted!’ Arya declared.

‘And who is to be trusted?’ Sansa laughed, ‘the Tyrells?’

‘Don’t you start blathering about the Tyrells!’

‘Why not? What did Lady Olenna say to you when Margaery and I were picking pansies? I’ve always wondered.’

‘Tell me what Lord Baelish said to you first.’

Arya was looking at her in utter desperation; Bran; Rickon; the Lannisters; the Dornish red; all of them gone from her mind, her face and her eyes.

‘Sansa,’ Arya said, with a gravity that was surprising in one who had had so much to drink, ‘whatever Baelish has told you, you cannot trust him. You’re not stupid, you must know that.’

‘Must I?’

‘It doesn’t matter if he’s promised you the world; he certainly doesn’t intend to give it to you. Littlefinger loves Littlefinger and does Littlefinger favours. He’s using you for his own advancement. You’ll never be anything but a pawn to him - ’

‘And how do you know that, Arya? Are you an experienced player yourself?’

Arya smiled sadly at her.

‘No, Sansa. But I had lessons from the very best.’

And suddenly, Sansa felt alone. Alone in a city of half a million people; a city of whispers and deceivers and liars; a city, a court and a game that she had thought she understood.

She remembered the day that Joffrey had set her aside for Margaery Tyrell; and the happiness that had burst out of her chest as her face told a story of sadness and betrayal; of a girl who had lost her one true love.

‘I’ll help get you home,’ Lord Baelish had said, his eyes bewitching the surface of her mask, and ‘King’s Landing is my home now,’ she had replied; hiding the lie with the softness of her voice and the innocent blue of her eyes.

And suddenly it was her sister standing in front of her, smiling at her and pitying her naivety as Joffrey led Margaery out of the hall, glancing knowingly over his shoulder at the bodice of her gown.

‘Look around you,’ Arya said, ‘we’re all liars here. And every one of us is better than you.’
‘What kind of chicken shit idea is this, Stark?’ Jaime asked, the blindfold a shock of velvet night against his golden hair, ‘how am I supposed to fight if I can’t see?’

‘The point is to improve your hearing, stupid,’ Arya snapped in reply, ‘something which you evidently need help with if you’re asking me this again already.’

‘Nobody can fight blindfolded!’

‘I can’t believe I have to say this again; I’m not asking you to fight blindfolded; all you have to do is hit me before I hit you! We can’t keep going, otherwise! Take it or leave it!’

It was far too early for him to have the slightest hope of hitting her yet, and she wished she could tell him that, if only to get him to shut his mouth. But she was determined to carry out the exercise as Jaqen had, and Jaqen had revealed nothing beyond its auditory advantages when she had been the one wearing the blindfold. Beyond that, he had done little but tie it around her head every day, order her to hit him and land blows on every part of her body that he could reach; enduring months of anger, frustration and swearing with almost supernatural patience and serenity.

Until the day that she had finally hit him; the moment that she had understood what ‘calm as still water’ really meant, and she had ripped off the blindfold in excitement to find him smiling at her; his eyes larger and more brilliant than she had ever seen them.

‘A girl understands,’ he had said, and he had looked at her without speaking for just a little too long.

Arya smiled at the memory, her mind holding tightly to Jaqen’s unfailing confidence in her through all those months; to his unshakeable belief, no, his knowledge, that she could, would, was meant to hit him, and that it was only a question of waiting; waiting for something that would inevitably come.

But Arya had no such confidence in her own judgment. Training with a Faceless Man didn’t make her one, and she had no idea of how Jaime’s training would proceed from one day to the next. It was a thought that continually terrified her.

*What if he never manages to hit me? What if he never understands? What if he gives up hope? What if I give up hope?*

*Then he’ll do himself harm, most likely, and I’ll have the justice that I wanted; the justice that I thought he deserved when I watched the maester cut his hand away and told myself that it pleased me.*

*The justice that he still deserves. Damn him.*

*Damn him.*

She felt Bran and Rickon in every movement of every muscle in her body. She felt Tywin and Father, and Jaqen and Syrio and Nymeria; every ghost, living or dead, that she had carried with her since the beginning. They thronged silently and garishly about her; heavy like a cloak of stone around her shoulders as they twisted the ground beneath the feet and made it harder to tread on; the effort aching inside her and forcing moisture from her eyes, making her slow, and clumsy and exhausted.

*Good thing you’re only fighting some irritating old shit in a blindfold, then.*
Quite as a shadow, her ghosts heavy about her shoulders, she crept towards Jaime, and noticed, with delight, that he had absolutely no idea where she was, his entire body turned away from her, and beautifully poised…like a Westerosi.

Her ghosts disappeared.

‘Feet, Lannister!’ she cried, poking him painfully in the toes.

He reacted immediately, his blade disembowelling the air in a way that would have been consummately elegant had she not already returned to her position at his back, silently wondering whether she should poke him in the arse.

Maybe Jaqen drew this process out on purpose, she thought, it’s tremendous fun.

She stepped forwards once more and hit him on the shoulder, her feet silent on the earth as she danced through the gap between his blade and the air; circling him gracefully as he lunged and fought with nothing. He was turning on the spot now, as she had taught him to do (at least he listens to some of the things I tell him) and his hair was falling onto his forehead in thick, glistening strips of perspiration that made her think, strange as it was, that she could see herself in every one of them; herself as she was now, silent as the ghosts that lived with her as she moved in a circle about him; and herself as she had been; sweating and hurting and growling, lashing out violently in the hope that she would hit something.

That reminds me. He’s been on his feet for far too long.

‘Lannister,’ she jeered.

And leaping out of the way as he lunged once again, she hit him hard in the knee and watched with satisfaction as he fell.

It was only when she heard him cry out in pain that she realised he had hit his stump.

‘Seven…hells!’ Jaime roared as he rolled onto his back, his fingers digging into his right forearm as though clawing their way back from death, ‘Fuck!’

Arya’s mind was assaulted by so many thoughts at once that she almost fainted dead away. She was agony and throbbing and dread and numbness; a frenzied negation of thought and being that grew more painful with every groan he suppressed and that made her want to mutilate her own knees and feet if it would only succeed in getting her to move and help him. She was the desire to run and get help, and the desire to do nothing because he wouldn’t want help; the desire to fall down beside him and hold him and feel his skin beneath her fingers and his breath on her lips and tell him to stop this before he hurt himself further; and the desire not to do that either; because he would refuse to live without a sword in his hand, no matter how much it would hurt him. And then she was a scream and a memory and a feeling; she was a boy without legs, and all his pack, and they all had auburn coats and blue eyes, and their jaws were bared against the one that had betrayed them; the one that had forgotten that when the snows fall and white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives. She was guilt and horror and pain, and anger and hatred at what Jaime had done, and why.

He had succeeded in removing the blindfold, and she struck him savagely over the head with her sword; the deepest intensity of joy and fury, and the most awful, debilitating misery and desolation piercing every pore in her skin when the sword came away bloody; and Jaime looked up at her as though she had gone mad.

‘Arya!’ he exclaimed, ‘What the fuck are you doing?’
'Why did you do it?' she said, her heart like a morning star in her chest, ‘Why? Why did you try to kill him? Why did you even think about killing him? Why couldn’t you have let him go and just taken the consequences and…and died? Because you would have died a human being; perhaps even a good man; and I wouldn’t have cared either way! I wouldn’t have cared if you died and I wouldn’t have cared if you lost your stupid hand! Can’t you hear me? I wouldn’t have cared!’

Jaime’s face was the reflection and the knowledge of the inside of her; his face white and fragile as paper; and stained with blood that wasn’t blood at all; but memory and blame and agony, and the certainty that all of it was wholly and entirely deserved.

‘Arya, I’m sorry,’ he said.

No justification escaped his lips; no protests; no jokes. And she knew, then, that she loved him, and that she was very likely damned as well.

‘I don’t forgive you,’ she said, and walked away from him, the smell of his blood still fresh in her nostrils.

As she stormed back to her chambers, determined not to resort to tears or to any other such weakness until she was safely behind a bolted door, she collided head-on with Lord Baelish, the impact sending his letters flying skyward in a hurricane of neatly-folded parchment and raven scrolls. Despite his most stringent objections and enthusiastic calls that it was nothing, she chased his letters from one end of the courtyard to the other and back again until she had retrieved them all, instantly assembling them into a neat pile. She momentarily wondered why she had bothered at all, before concluding that years of sorting Tywin’s mail had made letter-writing assume an almost sacred significance in her estimation, even if the person holding the pen in this instance was a liar and a thief.

The topmost letter in the pile was adorned with a flayed man trapped gruesomely in a bloodbath of red sealing wax, and as she looked up at Littlefinger, confused, he smiled at her in a manner that was clearly meant to be disarming, but only succeeded in irritating her.

‘Your artistry is consummate, Lady Arya,’ Lord Baelish complimented as she smoothed the pile down one last time.

‘We all have our qualities,’ Arya replied coldly, thinking of her sister, and handing the letters over, ‘and speaking of qualities, why in seven hells are you corresponding with Roose Bolton, Lord Baelish? I would have thought him rather dull for your taste.’

Littlefinger’s eyes were serene but fiery as he took in her short hair and conservative dress.

‘I try to know as many people as I can, my lady,’ he purred, bowing slightly, ‘I never know when I might need them.’
Following Tyrion’s advice that he should at least pretend to give a fuck, Jaime had attended court that morning and had found Joffrey merciful and benevolent as ever. The young monarch’s first action had been to command Ser Ilyn to remove the heads of two dozen men who had instigated a spontaneous riot in Flea Bottom; and the tongues of several singers who had revived some ridiculous farce on the death of King Robert with many entertaining, if ineloquent changes to the lyrics that rather lacked in subtlety (‘the lion ripped his balls off and the rose did all the rest’).

The little shit had also led a very public discussion of the news that Robb Stark did indeed intend to continue his invasion of the Westerlands, and was at present dangling his (unmarried) uncle Edmure in front of Walder Frey in exchange for the troops that he would need to continue the war.

Is the boy simple? Jaime had thought, even if Walder Frey does give him the troops he needs, which he probably won’t after that fuck-up at the Crag, Stark will probably lose most of them on the first day of the campaign if he’s stupid enough to attack Casterly Rock. The Starks will wipe themselves out in no time at all; Arya will be heartbroken and she’ll blame me for everything, most likely, because she can’t openly blame anyone else. Maybe they’ll write a song about it – the stupidest idea in the history of warfare.

Jaime had briefly considered composing some lyrics on the spot as an antidote to the pain in his stump and to the crushing boredom that were making standing upright and pretending that he cared a fuck about any of this increasingly difficult. But then Joffrey had commanded his Kingsguard to fetch the two Stark girls to the throne room, chop their little fingers off, and send the severed digits to Robb Stark with a note asking him to guess which finger belonged to which sister.

‘Your Grace,’ Varys had purred, ‘this will speed up the invasion rather than delay it.’

‘A joke,’ Cersei had hastily interjected, ‘Joffrey did not mean it.’

‘Yes, I did!’ Joffrey had insisted, ‘I want those girls sent for and I want their little fingers chopped off!’

‘I appreciate such a touching tribute to my nickname, Your Grace,’ Lord Baelish had added with an ironic smile, ‘but why not send the goldcloaks into the city and have them remove the little fingers of whichever two unfortunates happen to cross their path first? I’m sure these admirable lords and ladies,’ he gestured to the assembled courtiers, ‘can be trusted not to tell.’

‘It’s not intended as a tribute to your stupid nickname!’ Joffrey had screamed as a ripple of polite laughter surged through the crowd, ‘I want them here and I want to see them bleed!’

And as much to his own surprise as to anyone else’s, Jaime had found himself entering the fray.

‘Admirable sentiments, Your Grace,’ he had remarked from his place in the gallery, rather enjoying the way that every head in the hall turned from Joffrey towards him, ‘but perhaps Your Grace could defer acting on them for the moment. Your betrothed is present, as are many other young ladies of gentle birth who would doubtless be distressed by the sight of wolf blood all over the floor.’

‘I don’t care if they’re distressed!’ Joffrey had shrieked in return.

He’s still angry about my resignation from the Kingsguard.

But then the King’s pale blue eyes had moved from Jaime to where Margaery Tyrell stood at the foot
of the throne; her face crestfallen, and a little angry; her look making him turn pale.

*Clever girl. She’ll make a fine queen.*

‘Naturally,’ Jaime had continued, ‘you cannot always worry about ladies being distressed by the sight of blood, especially after some of the more charming things that have occurred in this room across the years. But consider. Once Robb Stark begins his invasion of the Westerlands – and the Crownlands too, if he gets that far – many of these same ladies will be so eager for the amputation of wolf paws that they might even help you do it. At this particular point in time, they would simply faint, and we wouldn’t want that, now, would we?’

And to Jaime’s amazement, Joffrey had seemed to consider this; his eyes squinting into the dense fog between the royal ears as Cersei turned away from her son and looked towards her brother, barely recognising him.

‘Very well,’ Joffrey had magnanimously declared, ‘I shall defer the ‘amputation of wolf paws,’ as you put it, until Robb Stark’s campaign begins. An excellent joke, Uncle. I congratulate you on it.’

Jaime had left the hall soon afterwards, if only to prevent the corners of his mouth turning up at the thought of relating the story to Tyrion. But then he had returned to his chambers, and he had thought of what Joffrey had wanted to do and he had grown very angry, very quickly.

*What in seven hells would have happened if I hadn’t been there?*

He liked to think that Cersei would have stopped the little shit from doing anything so rash. He liked to think that.

And then he had begun to swear under his breath, and his hands had begun to shake, and soon he was fighting a losing battle against his sword, which he couldn’t seem to detach from his fucking belt no matter how hard he tried.

Jaime’s guard knocked politely.

‘What?’ Jaime shouted.

‘Ser Kevan Lannister to see you, Ser Jaime.’

Jaime whirled around in surprise as his uncle entered the room, looking exhausted but tranquil as he silently regarded his nephew, his large green eyes filled with sadness, and an odd kind of fulfilment and relief.

‘My Lord Lannister,’ Uncle Kevan greeted stiffly, and bowed.

When he straightened up again, he was smiling.

‘I will admit that it has taken me an uncommonly long time to finalise the will,’ Uncle Kevan acknowledged, accepting Jaime’s invitation to sit, but declining his offer of wine, ‘it is partly your father’s fault and partly Cersei’s. The wretched girl would not leave me alone for two seconds together. Has she nothing else to do, as ‘Queen Regent?’’

‘She has us believe that she works all day and night and never sleeps,’ Jaime grinned.

Uncle Kevan snorted.
‘That was Tywin’s goal for most of his life and he certainly never accomplished it.’

‘It wasn’t for lack of trying, Uncle.’

Uncle Kevan smiled.

‘No. It wasn’t for lack of trying. I think I’ll take that wine, after all.’

Jaime leaned forward in his seat and picked up the pitcher with his left hand, snarling at his uncle to leave him be when he offered his assistance; and successfully filled a glass without spilling, feeling rather proud of himself.

‘How will I learn to make do if people always insist on helping me?’ Jaime asked, calmly handing the glass to his uncle.

‘You shouldn’t frown on common decency, nephew,’ Uncle Kevan replied, ‘it’s a rare enough quality these days.’

Jaime smiled guiltily as his uncle sampled the wine, declared it excellent, and continued to speak.

‘The principal difficulty in the will,’ Uncle Kevan explained, ‘was that the stubborn old bastard changed it three days before he died –’

‘Three days?’ Jaime exclaimed.

‘Indeed. Does that mean anything to you?’

Jaime cast his mind back, wondering what in seven hells could have occurred in the past three days of Father’s life to make him change his entire will. They had been on the road to King’s Landing for all that time, sitting in war council and getting the wits bored out of them by Mace Tyrell.

Jaime looked past his uncle towards the balcony and the shuddering sea beyond it; phantom pain invading his right hand; and quite suddenly, he realised.

*Harrenhal to King’s Landing is two days’ march, not three.*

They had still been at Harrenhal when it had happened; the three of them; Father, Jaime and Arya together in the solar; the freezing Riverlands mist pouring into the room like the sudden silence that had descended when Father had commanded the girl to remain, and Jaime had looked sideways at her; at the tiny, skinny compendium of blasted fucking insolence that had beaten him earlier that day. She was looking at him with an expressionlessness that was her protection and her shield, and that prevented him from knowing what she was thinking. Was she rejoicing in her victory? Was she mocking him? Or was she simply recognising him?

Take it off, his eyes had commanded, take your armour off.

She had fought relentlessly against his gaze; the armour strong and invisible around her body and her mind; but as he pushed harder and harder, it had begun to crack and fall away. Her breath was coming faster, and her eyes were blazing a rapturous, ecstatic Northern grey, and he had wanted to peel off her clothes as well as her armour and to take her right there on the council table; to feel himself in her body as well as in her mind; to see and touch and know all of her.

As the thought had occurred to him, the last of her armour had fallen away and he looked right inside her, into her darkness and her memory. Her lips had parted slightly as she felt him there; and she had done a tremendously good job of folding her arms, pouting at him and pretending that she
wasn’t half as affected by the experience as he was. She hadn’t fooled him for a second, because she couldn’t fool him anymore.

She had turned to Father, then, and had asked him something trivial about Littlefinger; and Jaime had sat immobile for a moment, his mind still enveloped in hers and grasping at it, not wanting to let it go because he had seen a part of himself there; his own fear, and his own history.

*Father must have noticed something. He must have seen, perceived, suspected, and said nothing. But why in seven hells would that make him change his will? How could he have known for sure that he had seen anything more significant than two people half-crazed with the desire to fuck each other?*

*And we almost did fuck each other. The very next morning, if I remember correctly.*

‘Are you quite well, nephew?’ Uncle Kevan was enquiring with concern.

‘Excuse me, Uncle,’ Jaime replied, wiping the perspiration from his brow, ‘I am…I’m overwhelmed.’

Uncle Kevan leaned forward in his seat.

‘So Tywin’s changing his will three days before his death does mean something to you?’

‘I…I think so,’ Jaime stammered, ‘but I can’t…I have trouble believing…who was the heir before he suffered this sudden change of heart, if you don’t mind me asking?’

Uncle Kevan smiled sadly.

‘That, I cannot tell you,’ he said, ‘Tywin would find some way to return from the grave and kill me.’

‘And why didn’t you tell me any of this earlier?’ Jaime demanded.

‘Your lord father left me with strict instructions to delay the will as long as possible if he died during the battle. At the very least until I could be sure that you wouldn’t withdraw your resignation from the Kingsguard.’

Jaime almost choked on his own amazement.

‘How…how in seven hells did he know I was going to resign from the Kingsguard?’

Uncle Kevan looked disappointed.

‘I had hoped that you would be able to tell me that.’

‘The thought hadn’t even entered my head at that point!’

‘Are you quite sure?’

‘Of course I’m sure!’

Jaime slumped back in his chair, his mind in turmoil and his stump so fucking sore he wanted to scream. He had spent so much of his life hating his father, rebelling against him, fearing him, convincing himself that the old man knew the members of his war council better than he knew his own children.

But this…this meant that Father had known him just a little after all. More than just a little.
He had known him well.

He knew. He knew even then. He knew what would happen before it did. He knew that I would fall in love with her. He was so sure of it that he put his whole glorious fucking legacy on the line for it. He took a gamble. He took a chance. Even if he would never call it either of those things. Even if he would never admit it. He was accustomed to his word being law. And yet.

What in seven hells went on inside the old bastard’s head? Did anyone really know him at all?

‘Shall we move on to the pecuniary details while you think of something appropriately deceptive to tell me?’ Uncle Kevan suggested light-heartedly.

‘If you insist, Uncle,’ Jaime replied.

‘Very well. As the heir, most of the Lannister fortune is naturally in your hands, and your father has left you and each of your siblings very well-provided for in your private capacities. There was one…rather unexpected legacy, though. He left twenty million gold dragons to the Lady Arya.’

Jaime stared at him.

‘He left…he left her how much?’

‘I believe you heard me, Jaime,’ Uncle Kevan said sternly, ‘the sum is five million more than he left to you, ten million more than he left to Cersei and fifteen million more than he left to Tyrion.’

Anger swelled in Jaime’s chest.

‘He only left Tyrion five million?’ he growled.

‘He could not be persuaded otherwise,’ Uncle Kevan replied regretfully, and Jaime could tell from his tone that his regret was genuine.

‘Then my first action as lord will be to sort that out immediately.’

Uncle Kevan nodded in approval.

‘An excellent idea, nephew. And a word of advice up front. Don’t lend any more money to the crown. You’ll never get it back without a miracle.’

Jaime whistled, and chuckled heartily.

‘Twenty million dragons, Uncle?’

‘Twenty million dragons.’

There was silence as Jaime looked at his uncle, remembering his love for his father and how inexplicable he had always found it; how inexplicable he still found it. Yet Uncle Kevan’s face bore an expression similar to the one that tortured Arya’s every day; a kind of exhaustion that went bone-deep, and had nothing to do with sleep.

Jaime smiled.

‘So I suppose we can take it as a foregone conclusion that Cersei’s going to have a stroke?’ he asked.

‘Very likely,’ Uncle Kevan replied, ‘the news that her father has left such a sum to the sister of Joffrey’s enemy will not impact well on a woman who supposedly never sleeps.’
He shifted in his seat.

‘How is the Lady Arya, if I might ask?’ he enquired with genuine concern, ‘the last time I saw her, she was rather out of spirits.’

‘She is as well as may be expected,’ Jaime sighed, ‘I think she’s lost so many people in so little time that she’s no longer sure whom she should be grieving for when. She is taking some time out of her busy schedule of screaming and crying to teach me to fight, though.’

‘Is she?’ Uncle Kevan exclaimed, rushing to continue when Jaime glared at him, ‘of course I had heard of her bravery during the battle, but I must confess that I didn’t expect you to give much consequence to so bizarre a thing as a little girl with a sword.’

‘A little girl she may be,’ Jaime remarked, shrugging with something like resignation, ‘but she’s turned out to be a rather brilliant practitioner of Braavosi water dancing. And of some arcane technique from the Free Cities that she refuses to name. Sometimes I think she’s making it up entirely and that the bloody thing doesn’t really exist.’

‘And how does your training progress?’

‘Badly.’

‘No improvement?’

‘Every day she puts a blindfold over my head and commands me to hit her. We’ve been at it for almost five weeks. No improvement.’

He remembered the pain that had roared through his body like an inferno as he had fallen, and the glorious, awful, vulnerable savagery of her as she had asked him again and again ‘Why did you do it? Why?’ When he had apologised, when he had felt the knowledge spill out of him like darkness turned to liquid, he had seen a change in her; something that she very likely hadn’t noticed herself, and that he couldn’t account for or describe at all. But he had seen it in the curve of her body as she had stormed away from him, and he had seen it when she had returned the next morning, and the morning after that, as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

‘Well,’ Uncle Kevan was saying, getting to his feet, ‘I grow bored of watching you growing bored every time I open my mouth, so I think I’ll go and break the news to Cersei. Would you care to accompany me?’

Jaime smiled affectionately at his uncle and briskly shook his head.

‘No, thank you, Uncle. I think I’ll be able to hear the screaming just fine from here.’
Cersei’s shrieks of indignation were still ringing in Jaime’s ears when the blindfold descended over his eyes the following morning, and he couldn’t help but smile as he remembered how he, and almost the entire castle, had heard every word she had said. Nothing too interesting, really, just tiny tedious variations on ‘Get out’ and ‘I will hurt you for this.’

He could hear Arya sighing in frustration in front of him, her tiny foot stamping on the ground.

‘Hold the tip of the sword – ’

‘- up,’ Jaime groaned in frustration as he complied, wishing that she would shut up about that particular piece of advice. It was the one, merciful, triumphant thing that she hadn’t had to teach him from scratch, though one would never think so from the way she rambled on about it.

Arya’s reaction to her newfound wealth had been quite unlike Cersei’s. She had stood at the window of her bedchamber listening carefully to every word Jaime had said to her, the morning light like dew in her crow’s nest hair, and she had stared silently at him for a good half minute without speaking at all, her arms folded protectively across her chest.

‘Thank you for telling me,’ she had murmured, and she had looked away from him and out of the window, saying no more than that.

Jaime’s vision was black as he felt Arya’s sword strike his chest, and as he struck out at her, he listened hard for anything that might tell him where she was; anything apart from the usual godswood sounds of leaves and water. They were a din in his ears like the waves beneath Casterly Rock; a powerful and thunderous shuddering and shimmering; and suddenly the sound grew louder and louder; so loud that it almost hurt him; his own heartbeat adding to the cacophony that seemed to force its way into his body on waves of sound; and he fought wildly and desperately against it, anger rising in his chest.

But the sound only increased in volume, and so did his hopelessness. Arya hit his wrist, and he lashed out again, his sword connecting with nothing, bloody nothing, and he couldn’t beat down the infernal fucking noise in his head no matter how hard he tried. He could not find the sound of Arya; only the deafening pandemonium of leaves and water that grated on his ears and thundered so painfully in his mind that he wanted to fling his sword down and walk away.

Jaime came to a decision, then, and the decision was very simple.

_Fuck it._

_I don’t give a fuck about improving my hearing or opening my ears or any of the shit that she says I should do to find her. I’ll just ignore it all and do whatever the fuck I want._

The idea seemed ridiculous when it formed in his mind. But then the sound of leaves surged again, and he repeated the maxim under his breath, urging himself to obey it.

_Fuck it. Just fuck it._

So he stopped thinking about the godswood sound, and he stopped fighting with himself. He stopped
trying to beat down the waves and waves of distraction and frustration that were ringing in his ears, and he simply tried to be; to stand still for a moment, without fighting and without thinking. To stand still for a moment, and to be.

And suddenly he heard the sound of Arya drawing breath; loud and beautiful and loud; so loud that he was amazed he hadn’t heard it before. The sound drew a kind of line in the darkness in front of him, a single line of sound that called out to its kin; and then everything that emanated a sound seemed to drift and crowd into his vision; to his lack of vision; in lines constructed from the invisible and the sonorous, the sound moulded into a world of dark and non-dark that he could see and feel; and out of the calm, a godswood appeared before his eyes; a godswood made of sound; where seeing and hearing were the same thing; where the trees reared up above him, their leaves green and red in the air and yellow and darker red on the ground; a symphony woodland of trees in a circle around him; and off to his left, a small, thin figure beneath them, poised in a stance she had taught him, holding the point of the fucking sword up.

He struck without thinking, without even deciding, and the resulting cry and sharp intake of breath made his heart warp in his chest, and he was plunged into darkness and nothingness again; alone with the leaves and the trees.

Keeping his sword upright, he raised his stump and used his forearm to push the blindfold upwards and off the top of his head.

Arya was right in front of him, and the tip of his sword was at her throat, forcing her chin upwards; the curve of her jaw like granite, and snow; her grey eyes damp, and overcome.

‘You understand,’ she rasped, the sword tight against her throat, ‘you understand. You understand.’

The euphoria that he felt as she spoke the words and repeated them like a prayer was indescribable, overpowering, beautiful. He could hear her breath as it travelled deeply and rapidly from the pit of her stomach to her throat and right up the blade into his hand; the pallour of her face transforming as blood returned to her skin and her cheeks and her lips as she muttered, again and again, ‘you understand, you understand,’; and as he lowered the sword and dropped it, she crossed the space between them and leapt into his arms. Her tongue as it thrust into his mouth and found his tasted like battle fury; like the beauty of the roaring of blood; and he opened his lips for her like hope and the fight and her as the fingers of his hand clasped her neck; and he could feel her sighs vibrating through them as she buried her fingers in his hair and yanked hard, as though daring him to cry out. Her small and calloused hands found his chest and the inside of his shirt, her fingertips like candle wax on the hard nubs of bone at his shoulders; and suddenly she was pulling his shirt and doublet over his head; her mouth sinking desperately into his as he kissed her again and pulled her closer to him as her fingers moved to the laces at the side of her gown, ripping through them like tiny knives.

Many things occurred to him as he watched her small, lithe nakedness shrug out of her gown and shift, and many more occurred to him as his fingers tangled with hers at the laces of his breeches; and they laughed against each other’s mouths and teased each other’s fingers as his cock grew harder and harder beneath their touch.

This is wrong.

So why does it feel right?

She’s a child.

She’s a woman.
I’m broken.
I’m mending.

Anyone could see us.

I don’t give a fuck if someone sees us.

This shouldn’t happen.

This was always going to happen.

I can’t let this happen.

I’m going to let this happen.

After this, there’s no going back.

I don’t care. I don’t want to go back.

Then she was beneath him on the godswood floor, and he only had one fucking hand to hold himself up with, but the entire world was a moving map in her skin, whose contours he traced with every pore of his own. Her ribs were pressing hard into him; like her lips that were swallowing his and chafing them raw; like her fingertips and her hands as they drew patterns on every bone in his back and shoulders. Her skin was beautiful, and so was her face, and he loved the way that she frowned as he teased her, his lips aching gloriously as she tried and failed to reach them; and when she looked away from him in annoyance, her chest throbbing madly against his, his tongue flickered suddenly between his lips and touched her breasts; and she moaned and swore and squirmed as each of her nipples grew hard in his mouth, her hips pulsing unconsciously against his. But then his arm began to tremble from the weight of supporting himself, and he felt her muscles tense up immediately.

‘Do you need to – ’

‘No,’ he growled, and she shouted in alarm, then burst out laughing as he wrapped both his arms around the small of her back and yanked her upright into his lap, almost falling over in the process; the laughter still trembling on her lips as she kissed him again; and growing in volume when she felt the corners of his mouth turning up in response.

I didn’t laugh when I fucked Cersei, he thought suddenly, as Arya wrapped herself around him, not once. Not once in my entire life.

And trembling with the wish that every square inch of his skin could be covered with every square inch of her skin, he laid his forehead against hers; a question in the gesture. A nod and an intake of breath answered him, and he kissed her as he slid into her; the thought of how wet she was bursting into his head at the same time that she cried out in pain.

‘No,’ she growled, her legs tightening around his back as he tried to pull out again, ‘don’t.’

As he cursed himself for a fool who had no idea what he was doing, she remained frozen in his arms; her body seeming to shudder through the air itself; and as his fear grew that he had hurt her, he kissed her softly, his fingers trailing through her hair and touching her cheek, which was feverish and hot to the touch. She kissed him once, almost shyly; then again, for a little longer. Then her fingers pressed into his hair and she pulled him so close that he could taste her teeth with his tongue, and her hips pushed once against his, tentatively; then again, harder; and when he responded, his cock straining under the effort of holding himself in, she closed her eyes and leaned into him, sighing
when his lips found her neck and thrusting with him as he moved in her. His mouth breathed in her skin as they found their rhythm together; her entire body seemed to live around him and to live inside him; and he heard nothing and saw nothing but the way that they gasped and moaned and panted together, as they would in a world without sound; nothing but her hips as they thrust faster against his and pulled him deeper into her; and nothing but her voice as she peaked and his cock as he exploded inside her; and neither of them could speak afterwards; a tangle of limbs, and similarity, and difference.

He couldn’t hear the trees, and he couldn’t hear the water. He couldn’t hear the thoughts that he had had, or the doubts, or the utterances and the whisperings in his head that this was wrong, that this couldn’t happen, that she was a child, that he was broken.

I’m not broken, Jaime thought, as her head drooped onto his shoulder, I’m whole.

Chapter End Notes

Candle wax on shoulders image shamelessly stolen from Angela Carter.
The Red Keep was still a haze of blue and green and grey when Kevan Lannister thanked his squire with a curt nod, took the bridle of his horse with one hand, and looked around the forecourt for the last time, dew shimmering beneath his boots like the dreams of the hundreds of people sleeping within the walls around him. Many had attempted, in vain, to make him prolong his stay in the capital, all of them citing the same reasons. Robb Stark could not possibly invade the Westerlands immediately when every gossip in the Seven Kingdoms knew that he had finally settled an accord with Walder Frey and was on his way to the Twins to offer his Uncle Edmure up in sacrifice to some rat-faced Frey girl that he had fornicated his way out of marrying himself. And ‘Casterly Rock is impregnable’ and ‘the campaign is doomed to fail’ and ‘why dignify such nonsense by rushing back immediately?’ Kevan snorted. He had no intention of underestimating his opponent, even if everyone else in this wretched city seemed hell-bent on doing so.

Kevan had hoped to reassure both the populace and the army by returning with the new Lord of Casterly Rock, but though Jaime had insisted, multiple times, that he would lead the defence of the Westerlands himself, he had also insisted on remaining a few days longer in the capital, citing a need to finalise his affairs. Kevan knew full well that the word ‘affairs’ was a synonym for ‘Lady Arya,’ and he smiled to himself despite his indignation; remembering the golden shade that he had noted in his nephew’s eyes when they had spoken of her. He had seen that particular expression before. In Tywin.

Kevan abruptly cleared his throat and forced himself to frown.

Yes, to be sure. And quite right too, from a strategic point of view. It keeps the girl’s money within House Lannister, and it would infuriate the Starks beyond measure.

He heard footsteps behind him in the courtyard, and groaned, inwardly, as he turned and recognised Cersei. His niece looked far too beautiful for such an early hour, though her loveliness was somewhat diminished by the additional presence of two disgruntled Kingsguard who seemed to be asleep behind their visors.

‘Your Grace,’ Kevan greeted, bowing stiffly, ‘how kind of you to see me off.’

‘I could hardly do otherwise, when you are the only person who still appears to have some respect for our family name,’ Cersei replied, not curtseying in return.

Kevan could not help but smirk at the girl’s lack of subtlety.

‘Indeed?’ he ventured, ‘what happened to hurting me, incapacitating me, and having my head on a spike?’

‘Sarcasm does not become you, Uncle,’ Cersei proclaimed regally, impatience flickering across her face like the crack of a whip, ‘and killing you would be foolish. It would imply that you had some influence over the will. An absurd notion, since Father didn’t allow himself to be influenced by anybody.’

‘True,’ Kevan acknowledged, not rising to the bait.

Cersei’s eyes were like jade bought with the blood of a thousand slaves.

‘That little grey-eyed Stark whore seems to be an exception to Father’s rule, however. She must have had a tight cunt indeed to make him forget years of loyalty, both to my mother’s memory and to his
own family.’

Kevan’s temper flared.

‘That is a slanderous statement, Cersei. And if I were you, I would not repeat it.’

‘It isn’t slander if it’s true,’ she smiled smugly.

‘Clever,’ Kevan snapped, ‘where did you learn that, I wonder? From Tyrion?’

‘How do you account for such a generous legacy, then?’ Cersei shot back a little too quickly, ‘Father never had the slightest desire for another woman after my mother’s death, and yet he allowed himself to be seduced by this little – ’

Kevan almost laughed aloud. Tywin had definitely never liked them that young.

‘Cersei,’ he smiled, ‘sweetling. Do you really believe that your Father ‘never had the slightest desire for another woman’ after your lady mother’s death?’

As he watched Cersei’s face turn pale with anger; and confusion mould her lip into a gruesome line, he remembered the first time that Tywin had taken a whore after Joanna’s death. His brother had burst into his chambers, his eyes wild and his hands shaking, and had told him, in a terrifyingly emotionless tone, what he had done, when and with whom. The guilt convulsing his body had been a horrifying contrast to his voice and his face, and though Kevan had sat up all night with him, listening to his brother unburden himself, they had never spoken of it again; though Tywin’s eyes had born a constant, guilty, desolate glow since that day that had never been present before.

Cersei was glaring at him.

‘What do you mean, Uncle?’ she demanded.

‘Nothing at all,’ Kevan replied gravely, ‘forgive me. I spoke in anger.’

Cersei’s lip curled.

‘Is there nothing we can do about this wretched will?’ she asked.

‘No,’ Kevan replied, beating anger down once again, ‘and if there were, I would not permit you to do so.’

‘You would not permit me?’ Cersei repeated in indignation, drawing herself up to her full height, ‘I am the Queen – ’

‘No, I would not permit you,’ Kevan growled, exhausted with grief and war and this wretched girl’s insistence on trampling all over his brother’s final wishes, ‘I will permit no one to besmirch your Father’s memory or to tamper with his legacy, no one, not even the Queen Regent.’

Her features were waging war with themselves, her paleness and her eyes wilfully suppressing the bloodlike crimson of her anger.

Of course, he thought, How obvious. She wants something from me.

‘I need you, Uncle,’ she pleaded.

‘I doubt that very much, Cersei,’ he replied curtly.
‘My brothers have abandoned me,’ she continued, her beautiful green eyes heavy with tears, ‘they have abandoned Joffrey. They devote their lives to defying him, to ensuring that he is an object of nothing but ridicule –’

_They can hardly do otherwise when the little brat clearly has similar ambitions for his own reputation._

‘I have heard tales of these battles of wits in the throne room, Cersei,’ Kevan remarked, ‘and every version I hear seems to cast your brothers in a most favourable light.’

‘A _favourable_ light?’ Cersei shrieked.

‘Is it true that he ordered the _little fingers_ of the Lady Sansa and the Lady Arya to be chopped off and sent to their brother?’ he spat in distaste.

‘A harmless joke, Uncle,’ Cersei said, smiling unconvincingly.

‘Was it?’ Kevan insisted, ‘Jaime tells me that had he not been present, Joffrey would have committed this folly in full view of the court.’

‘Jaime is incapable of thinking rationally when it comes to those girls,’ his niece sneered, bitterness warping the beauty of her face, ‘the youngest has her claws in him.’

‘Good,’ Kevan declared approvingly, ‘I only hope she keeps her claws in him. He’s acting like a man for the first time in his life. Now tell me what you want, Cersei. I am anxious to return home to defend Casterly Rock in the war your son started.’

‘Stay, Uncle,’ she commanded, ‘Stay, and be my Hand.’

_Not this again._

‘No, Cersei.’

‘Why not?’

Kevan ground his teeth, wondering if the girl was illiterate.

‘I’m afraid I’m rather tired of that conversation,’ he said, ‘kindly refer to the fifty or so letters that I sent you before my arrival. I’m fairly sure that every possible reason for my refusal is outlined in them, along with arguments, justifications and examples.’

Cersei was glaring at him with an expression of the deepest, bitterest contempt.

‘What has happened to the men of this family?’ she spat, ‘you’re all miserable, gutless _cowards_ now that Father can no longer tell you to be otherwise –’

‘No, Cersei, we’re tired. Particularly of you and particularly of your son.’

_How dare you –_

‘If you wish to appoint a suitable Hand, and I advise you to do so before _you_ become a laughing stock as well as your son; you would be wise to choose Tyrion.’

_‘Tyrion? Tyrion is a lecherous little stump who thinks with nothing and of nothing but his cock!’_

‘Tyrion is his father’s son.’
‘I am my father’s daughter!’

Kevan smiled ironically at her. She could not have said anything more injurious to her father’s memory.

‘Yes, Cersei, you are your father’s daughter,’ he said, ‘in name and in blood, but in precious little else. You have allowed your little imbecile of a son to do precisely what he wants without a second thought for the damage to the crown, or to the thousands of lives that have been lost, that are still being lost; because of that little bit of theatre on the steps on the Great Sept of Baelor. If you were truly your father’s daughter, you would have stopped it. You would have realised the consequences of such a foolish action, you would have hit the little fool in the face in front of the entire city, and you would have stopped it. You would have saved us. You could have saved us. Instead, you let it happen. You have allowed the past four years to happen. And both of us know, Cersei, that had your father been present in King’s Landing for those four years instead of at Harrenhal, Joffrey would have been so frightened that he wouldn’t have taken so much as a shit without Tywin’s permission.’

Kevan almost jumped in surprise. He didn’t swear often.

‘You say you are your father’s daughter,’ he continued, ‘prove it. Reward intelligence, and encourage it wherever you find it. Don’t toss it into a corner out of sheer spite. Because if you do not provide a mind like Tyrion’s with some distraction, he will find his own.’

‘Return to his drinking and his whores, you mean?’ Cersei laughed bitterly.

Kevan shrugged.

‘In the past, that might have been true. But now that he knows what true power is, drinking and whoring won’t be enough for him. If you keep him under your nose; if you let him believe that it is he who rules in Westeros; you can keep an eye on him; rap him over the knuckles if he gets too rebellious; and profit from his intelligence at the same time. Tyrion has a fine mind for warfare and a fine mind for ruling. Tywin’s mind. Use it.’

Cersei’s face lit up with genuine glee at the idea of deceiving her brother, and as Kevan rode away from her, delighted to put the Red Keep behind him, he resigned himself to the fact that his niece was a complete and irredeemable fool.

If it is this easy to manipulate her, then I shudder to think how amusing it must be to watch her manipulating others.
Arya was furious at the turn that things had taken.

Jaime had come to her chambers mid-afternoon to discuss something or other, but no sooner had the door closed behind him that her tongue was in his mouth and her clothes a pile of sober black on the floor.

By the time they had finished, night had fallen, and her loins were aching from the number of times they had made love; and as Jaime had lain beside her, beautiful and infuriating and naked as his name day; her fingers had softly brushed his face like the memory and the feeling and the warmth of his skin, his mouth and his scent that she still felt in every line and curve of her body; on her neck, on her breasts, on her stomach, on her thighs, on her back, on her eyelids.

Then the stupid fool had asked her to come to Casterly Rock with him the day after tomorrow, and she had hit him squarely in the face before leaping out of bed and facing him down, infuriated both by the question and by his evident lack of surprise at her reaction.

‘Have you lost your mind?’ she yelled shrilly, ashamed by the tears that were beginning to form in her eyes, ‘why in seven hells would I want to leave my sister here alone to come with you to Casterly Rock and watch my brother being annihilated?’

Jaime shrugged with a nonchalance that made her want to decapitate him.

‘I had hoped,’ he remarked patiently, folding his arms across his chest, ‘that you might accept to treat with your brother on my behalf. Preferably before he is annihilated. The exercise would be rather pointless otherwise.’

Arya stared at him.

‘Treat…treat with him?’ she stammered.

Jaime smiled.

‘Treating with someone is when you – ’

‘I know what it means!’ Arya snapped, quivering with rage.

Anger was growling in her stomach, and anxiety and grief eating at her mind; but he was only a few feet away from her, his body golden in the candlelight, and his eyes were like his lips on her skin, and his mind was inside hers, she could feel it, and I love your mind, she thought, I love your face. I love your eyes. I love your throat. I love your skin.

‘Why didn’t you mention this before?’ she demanded, hissing at herself not to be so bloody obvious, and cursing the smug look on Jaime’s face that immediately announced her failure.

‘I intended to mention it to you the moment I arrived,’ Jaime purred, looking her up and down with obvious appreciation, ‘but I forgot about it the moment you stuck your pretty little tongue down my throat and commanded me to take my clothes off. I’m sure you’ll forgive me.’

His eyes were making her skin tingle, like emeralds that were alive and breathing and cold.

‘Stop that,’ she barked.
'What?' he asked.

'Looking at me like that. It’s making me want to forgive you.'

His lips parted, a whisper of breath and warmth between them.

'Come here,' he murmured.

Arya folded her arms, frowned at him and stayed right where she was, determined not to give him the satisfaction of knowing how wet that previous remark had made her.

Jaime sighed and threw his arms up in exasperation.

'I think your brother will be more inclined to pay attention to a negotiator who does not come directly from Joffrey -'

She grudgingly admitted to herself that he had a point there.

'...and I can think of no one more suitable than a woman who is his own sister and the future Lady of Casterly Rock,' Jaime finished, staring into his lap with a coolness that did not fool her for a second.

*Trust a Lannister to slide a marriage proposal into a political argument and expect to get away with it,* she thought, determined not to smile or laugh or bolt across the room and kiss him or show the slightest sign that she was pleased by the idea. She was still angry with him.

'Have I ever told you what an idiot you are?' Arya candidly enquired.

'More times than I can count, since you ask.' Jaime replied promptly.

'Pull a stunt like this and my brother will *kill* you, and *that* only if my mother doesn’t get to you first!'

'Don’t be so melodramatic, Stark."

She put her hands on her hips and gazed flippantly up at the ceiling.

'I wonder if there’s something in the water in King’s Landing that makes people more inclined to believe that marriage can solve any problem that exists,’ she mused mockingly, thinking of Sansa, ‘*that little shit Joffrey cut my father’s head off, Jaime, and he needs to pay for it!* Which part of that don’t you understand? Thousands of lives have been lost on both sides during this war; Stark and Lannister will very likely hate each other for ten generations, not to mention the hordes of bannermen that will raise their children to do the same; and you think the sound of *wedding bells* is going to be enough to make everything fine again?’

Jaime shrugged.

'No. But it may be enough for a truce.’

She stared at him.

‘A truce?’

‘An end to the fighting.’

‘Seven hells, Jaime, *I know what a truce is!'"
He was looking at her earnestly, his eyes pleading with her.

‘A truce is not an alliance, or a peace treaty. It is, however, a start. Stark and Lannister may very well decide to hate each other for ten generations, but this war cannot continue for ten generations. The realm won’t survive it, and…’

She knew what he was going to say before the words escaped his lips.

‘And…winter is coming,’ she finished.

Jaime went pale and shivered, and she could tell that hearing the words from her mouth had affected him.

You are a Stark of Winterfell, Father had once said, you know our words.

‘It might not end the war,’ Arya said.

‘No,’ Jaime admitted.

‘Joffrey may reject any terms we come to.’

‘If that little shit tries to tell me what I may or may not do in my own lands – ’

‘This is about more than just your lands. Recognising that Robb is King in the North will put you in open rebellion against the crown.’

She could tell from the look on his face that he hadn’t considered that at all.

‘There may be a way to work around that,’ he ventured.

‘There won’t be, Jaime!’ she exclaimed in return.

‘All I’m suggesting is that we succeed in getting swords out of people’s hands for long enough to have a civilised conversation,’ he insisted, ‘we can start worrying about technicalities once that’s been accomplished.’

‘Has anyone ever told you that you have no flair for politics at all?’

‘So come with me, damn you! Be my flair for politics!’

‘As ‘Robb Stark’s sister and the future Lady of Casterly Rock?’’ she mocked.

‘Yes,’ Jaime insisted, reddening slightly.

Arya stared at him, her heart pounding like some stupid princess in a song, waiting for him to say more. No further discourse was forthcoming.

‘Are you asking me to marry you, Lannister?’ she demanded.

‘Yes.’

‘Because you’re tired of war?’

He rolled his eyes.

‘Yes, certainly, I’m tired of war. But to own the truth, I don’t care a fuck about the war at this particular moment in time. I don’t care if both our Houses devote themselves to killing each other
until the end of time - ’

‘How very selfish of you.’

- and I certainly don’t care that you, Lady Stark, are far and away the most irritating person I’ve ever met, or that I spend most of my time wanting to cut your little white throat. I don’t give a fuck about any of that. I want you fighting me. I want you with me. I’m in love with you.’

When she slid back into bed and reached for him, he kissed her with an unbearable softness, his lips incredibly warm, like home, and this is going to kill me, she thought as her mouth opened beneath his and the bones of her back were pulverised beneath his arms and her heart ached madly in her chest, if Robb and Mother don’t kill me first.

‘I love you,’ she whispered, her hands trailing through his hair, ‘I love you more than anything. But -’

He kissed yet her again; swallowing her words and taking them into himself, where they became sighs as his tongue danced with hers.

‘I can’t go with you to Casterly Rock and leave Sansa behind,’ she blurted, breathing hard as she broke away from him, ‘Joffrey will - ’

‘Then bring Sansa along, for fuck’s sake!’ Jaime groaned, rolling his eyes.

‘Sansa?’ Arya snorted, ‘on the road? With us? She’s never slept on the floor in her life!’

‘I’ll get her a bloody featherbed, if you absolutely insist!’

‘I – ’

‘For fuck’s sake, Arya, are you going to marry me or not?’

She remembered the first time that she had looked at him, really looked at him; lying beneath him on the floor of Tywin’s solar, her dagger on the ground beside her, his hands pressing her arms to either side of her head.

He is also two people at the same time, she had thought, he is also running from himself.

Beneath his gaze, his fingers bruising her wrists, she had become Arya again, the ability to hide torn out of her. And being Arya hadn’t hurt anymore. She remembered that. Being Arya hadn’t hurt anymore.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘yes, I will.’
Confident as I am, dear nephew, Uncle Kevan had written to him, that you will realise what is afoot the moment your royal sister approaches you, I have been quite unexpectedly seized by a fit of avuncular affection, which I hope you will forgive, that compels me to warn you of what Cersei’s true intentions are.

Tyrion had been as touched by that as he had been amused by Cersei’s blatant transparency in making the offer to him in the first place; but today, he marched into the small council chamber jauntily whistling *The Rains of Castamere* as though his exile had never happened, expecting a cool reception despite its being widely known that Cersei had asked him to return.

It surprised him, therefore, to find the entire council already assembled; Cersei smiling broadly, Littlefinger smirking in satisfaction despite very red eyes (drunkenness? Surely not.) and Joffrey positively bouncing with glee, a disgusting kind of triumph twisting his punchable little vermin face.

‘Killed any puppies today?’ Tyrion asked, taking his seat beside Grand Maester Pycelle and nodding to Varys, who had acknowledged him with a small smile and a reverence.

Joffrey did not seem to hear him.

‘Show him!’ the King giggled at Pycelle, his voice shrill as a septon fucking a catamite, ‘go on, show him!’

Rolling his eyes and already regretting his return, Tyrion took the raven scroll from his foul-smelling neighbour and read it aloud.

‘Roslyn caught a fine fat trout,’ he enunciated, ‘her brothers gave her a pair of wolf pelts for her wedding. Signed Walder Frey.’

Cersei’s smile grew wider and wider and Littlefinger’s ever more enigmatic; and Tyrion looked impatiently at Joffrey, who looked ready to wet himself with joy.

‘Is that bad poetry?’ Tyrion asked in exasperation, ‘or is it supposed to mean something?’

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Jaime could barely hear his brother speaking to him. His voice might have been in the next room, or even in the next wing of the castle. His lips were moving, and his mismatched eyes were dark with worry and anger, but still his voice remained soft; too soft for Jaime to hear him. Nevertheless, sitting half-dressed in his chambers, his elbows on his knees and his hand on his forehead, Jaime understood him.

He understood him when he wished with all his soul that he could not.

*Arya.*

‘It seems that our Father had been planning this devastatingly simple little stunt for months before he died,’ Tyrion said gravely, ‘in secret, of course, with both Walder Frey and Roose Bolton. It’s…it’s brilliant, really. Despicable, but brilliant.’
Jaime laughed mirthlessly. Of course it was brilliant. Everything Father did was always so fucking brilliant.

Tyrion was still explaining.

‘Father finds someone who has reason to be annoyed with the Starks, but is stupid enough to take all the blame and risk bringing eternal disgrace on his House by murdering guests beneath his roof. Bolton turns traitor in exchange for being named Warden of the North, and Father…Father gets no more Starks and no more war. The safety of his House intact.’

‘Why didn’t the plan die with the old bastard, then?’ Jaime spat, Tyrion’s cleverness making him want to cave his dear brother’s head in, if only because it reminded him of Father.

‘They were lazy,’ Tyrion declared.

Arya.

‘They were lazy, they were greedy and they were hungry for blood – ’

‘Really? I would never have thought.’

‘They were, however, intelligent enough not to take it directly to you, me or Cersei.’

‘Cersei had no knowledge of this?’

Tyrion laid a hand on his shoulder.

‘She only found out about it last night –’

Jaime took some comfort in that.

‘– and I suspect she was considered too much of a woman, I too much of a dwarf and you too much of a cripple to be much use in bringing the scheme to fruition.’

_I swear by the old gods and the new that I will crucify them both for this._

_Oh gods. Arya._

‘Who did Frey and Bolton approach with this scheme, then?’ Jaime asked mockingly, coldly thrilled that he still had a sense of humour ‘Uncle Kevan?’

Tyrion smiled sadly at him.

‘Littlefinger.’

Jaime groaned inwardly. Even he could see the sense in that.

‘Baelish arranged all the final details,’ Tyrion continued, ‘and only told Cersei about it when it was too late for her to fuck it up.’

‘They were uncommonly stupid to put their trust in that little eel,’ Jaime remarked, smiling bitterly and beginning to tremble in rage.

‘Not really,’ Tyrion replied, making Jaime want to hit him again, ‘anyone can see that Baelish had too much to gain from the arrangement to betray them. A chance to curry even more favour with the crown, an end to the war, the extinction of the Stark name. And Lady Catelyn, I suspect, though I
suppose his eyes could be red for many other reasons…’

Jaime stood up abruptly, not giving a fuck about Littlefinger’s eyes, and crossed the room to the door, flinging it open so hard that it banged against the wall.

‘Where are you going?’ Tyrion demanded in alarm.

Jaime looked back at him, hoping that the desolation he felt wouldn’t show on his face.

‘I am going to tell my betrothed how we killed her brother and mother.’

Tyrion’s eyes widened.

‘Your betr – Jaime!’

As he thundered through the corridors, his heart nothing but a red gash in his chest and his stump a dull throb instead of a blood storm; a legacy of dancing and living and her; he thought back to the faint, shy, movingly sincere smile that would always form on Arya’s lips each time she mentioned his father. He remembered the Valyrian steel dagger he was holding for her; Father’s favourite; that he had given to her on the day he had decided to adopt her, and he must have loved her very much, Jaime had thought the first time she had mentioned it to him, and he had been so jealous at the thought. He had been so fucking jealous.

How could he have loved her and done this to her? How could he have made her his child; and saved her; and known that I would love her; and told me to protect her, with his last fucking breath; when all the while he was planning this; when he knew that someday he would destroy her?

It’s…inhuman. It’s the cruelest thing he could have done.

And loving her is the cruelest thing that I could have done. It only hurts her more. I’d rather have her hate me than love me, if only she would hurt a little less.

As he pushed open her chamber door without knocking, and found the room empty with the curtains drawn, he realised that he didn’t give a fuck whether or not she still wanted to fucking marry him. He also realised, quite suddenly, that for the first time in his life, he cared for someone else more than he did for himself.

This is not about you.

‘Go away, Jaime,’ a small, disembodied voice said, making him jump, ‘I know you mean well, just…go away.’

He found her curled up on the floor on the other side of her bed. She was hugging her knees tightly to her chest; and her knuckles were bone white.

‘What…what are you doing down there?’ he asked quietly.

Her eyes were tightly closed, her eyelids a shock of white, uncrying tenderness against the restrained black wool of her gown, and the darkness of her hair.

‘I can’t sleep in a featherbed anymore,’ Arya replied, so softly he could barely hear her, ‘I’ve tried to, but I just…can’t.’

Arya.

He crouched tentatively behind her on his haunches, meaning to touch her shoulder, or her hand, or
to do something, *fuck*, to make some insignificant fucking gesture that would supposedly help her forget that her home and her family were ruins, and her life was little better.

Her eyes were still closed, and he knew that she couldn’t bear to look at him. Looking at him would remind her of the hours she had spent dancing, and shouting, and laughing and fucking and loving a person with Tywin Lannister’s blood in his veins; the blood of the man who had done this to her family; who had done this to her.

Jaime’s hand was poised, unseen and trembling, above her shoulder; acrid, boiling agony seeming to radiate from her concealed skin, through her clothes and into him. In that heat he felt her mind; her mind that had become a harrowing slaughterhouse of visions of blood and butchery and guilt; and he knew; he could feel; that if he touched her she would lash out at him, because she could lash out at no one else; and that her guilt, and his, would kill both of them.

Slowly, his fingertips touched her; then his fingers; then his palm; and as he clasped her shoulder, she began to tremble violently in anger, a growl escaping her as his thumb brushed her collarbone. He tightened his grip and waited for her wrath and her cries and her screams, his heart trying to armour itself but only growing wilder and weaker as a dampness arose in his eyes and showered her in silver light.

And suddenly her hand was clasping his, and she was weeping quietly into the dark.
As Jaime sat beside her in the window seat, his eyes enveloping her like an embrace, Arya stared down at her hands and imagined drawing a knife across every line and vein that she saw; if only it would change their shape for half a minute.

‘Every time I look at myself in the mirror;’ she murmured, her voice soft and numb and lifeless, ‘every time I look at my own skin…I want to take something sharp and destroy it. All of it.’

‘Don’t ever say that,’ Jaime commanded softly, his beautiful green eyes like midnight.

‘It’s like he’s moulded every inch of me,’ she said, speaking to her hands and not to him, ‘like I’m clay between his fingers, even now. It’s like he’s taken my flesh and my bones and twisted me, and made me into something I hate; because now; today; even being myself reminds me of him.’

She looked up at Jaime again, and felt him gaze right down to her bones and her blood. Except this time, it hurt. It hurt that he knew her. It hurt that he was who he was. And it hurt that he had been right all along.

‘You warned me about him,’ Arya whispered, remembering, ‘in the armoury, you warned me. You told me that it would have been better to die –’

‘Arya –’

‘– that it would have been better to die rather than be owned by him. I should have listened to you. I should have fucking listened.’

‘That is bullshit,’ Jaime growled in reply, his fierceness making her smile at him.

‘You’re actually admitting to talking bullshit?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ he declared.

Arya felt tears form in her eyes as she looked at Jaime and a bloody hole erupt in her chest as Robb and Mother’s faces faded further and further away from her; their features bloated and disfigured; carved up to be eaten by dogs and crows.

They cut Robb’s head off, like Joffrey cut off Father’s. They cut Grey Wind’s head off, like they cut off Robb’s. They sewed Grey Wind’s head onto Robb’s shoulders and paraded it about like a banner. ‘Behold the Young Wolf!, they shouted.

They slit Mother’s throat and threw her naked into the river; the river that she loved; the river that had been a part of her.

The river that Tywin choked with corpses and blood and filth while I poured his stupid wine and read his stupid letters and did nothing.

‘Let’s go,’ Jaime said, his abruptness making her jump.

‘What?’ she asked, not understanding, her skin tingling as his hand engulfed both of hers.
'Let’s go,’ he repeated, ‘let’s just leave. Let’s get on a boat to the Free Cities and never come back.’

‘What about Casterly Rock?’ she asked, her heart leaping in her chest

‘I don’t give a fuck about Casterly Rock!’ he swore, holding her hands harder, ‘Tyrion can have it, for all I care’

*I want to.*

‘But –’

‘Come on, Stark!’ Jaime exclaimed, ‘let’s go straight down to the harbour, get on a boat and leave. We’ll be halfway to Pentos before anyone notices we’re gone, and when they do notice, they won’t be able to do a fucking thing about it.’

His face was hopeful and childlike and desperate, like she was; and though she knew she could never bring herself to do such a thing; that her ghosts would always hold her back; she allowed herself, for just a moment, to think about it.

*We could go where we wanted and do what we wanted. Fight. Fuck. Forget. Live. And it wouldn’t matter who his father was, and it wouldn’t matter who mine was either, and it wouldn’t matter what anyone had done.*

‘I can’t,’ she stated firmly, pulling her hands out of his and cursing herself for a sentimental little fool, ‘not now, anyway,’ *stupid, weak,* ‘I have to stay for the royal wedding.’

Jaime blinked in surprise, and she could see him entertaining the possibility that he may have misheard her.

‘The royal wedding?’ he echoed in disbelief.

‘I have to stay for it.’

‘Why, for fuck’s sake?’

She hesitated.

‘I want to be there to see the king get married on the first day of the new century,’ Arya declared bitterly, ‘I want to remember the faces of every single smiling, simpering courtier who pretends to be happy that Joffrey’s standing at the altar instead of rotting in a ditch in Flea Bottom. Someday, I want to be able to say that I was there when the world stood by and let a monster like that live.’

Jaime leaned forward and fiercely kissed her forehead.

‘Believe me,’ he countered, ‘you don’t.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ she demanded, impatient and eager to change the subject.

‘I still don’t understand why you need to stay,’ Jaime insisted, refusing to take the hint.

The disarming sincerity of his concern almost made her tell him.

*He might even help you, if you asked him to.*

*You promised not to tell anyone. So keep your foolish little mouth shut.*
The expression on Jaime’s face had turned from worry to suspicion, and she looked down at her hands again, seeing Tywin and blood and butchery in the construction of her very bones, and in the knowledge that she’d soon have to bear it alone.

‘When the wedding’s over,’ she said, corruption filling her lungs, ‘I think I’ll go to Braavos.’

She felt a stirring of apartness and realisation in her mind, and looking back at Jaime, she could tell that he had understood her. His face was like summer snow and spun gold, but there was no blood or life in either of them, no heat; and she could tell as he grew paler and paler that had she touched his face in that moment, it would have been icy cold.

‘Oh gods,’ he said, staring at her, ‘you’re leaving me.’

For one dreadful split second, she thought he was going to beg her. Then his jaw clenched, as she had seen it do a thousand times, and his eyes became dark and beautiful and angry.

‘What’s in Braavos, Stark?’ he demanded, ‘wouldn’t you rather stay here and exact an admittedly-odd revenge on my father - who is dead, and won’t feel a thing - by tormenting me with the sight of you day and night? It’s the sort of thing that would please you.’

You son of a bitch.

‘An excellent idea, Lannister,’ she spat in return, ‘but fortunately for you, I prefer going to Braavos.’

‘What’s in Braavos?’ he growled.

‘Jaqen’s in Braavos,’ she growled back.

He smiled coldly.

‘Of course! Jaqen’s in Braavos! The exotic Lorathi with zero command of grammar! You surprise me, Lady Stark. I thought your taste fell to broken cripples.’

‘I thought yours fell to people you’re related to.’

The hurt in his eyes almost made her take that back.

‘And once you’ve got to Braavos,’ Jaime continued, pretending to ignore her, ‘what then? Will you two fight and fuck and live happily ever after?’

‘I’ll fight and fuck and forget!’ she shouted, shoving him, ‘I’ll forget your fucking father, and my family, and your family, and you; I’ll forget godwoods, I’ll forget Winterfell, I’ll forget the Common Tongue; I’ll forget my own name; I’ll stop living; I’ll stop dreaming; my heart will stop beating and I’ll no longer think about Death; I’ll be Death; and if the day ever comes that I run into your spineless, unfeeling arse again, I won’t even know who you are.’

He was looking at her in an extraordinarily disturbing and heart-breaking way; like he knew everything about her, but didn’t recognise her. His eyes blazed with anger and grief, and he looked at her and away from her, again and again, as though repelled by something despicable that he couldn’t help but gaze upon; and she remembered the sound of his laugh, and what hers sounded like when they laughed together; in tune; right; complete; don’t use that word, you sound like a stupid song. And this isn’t in tune or right or complete. It can’t ever be in tune or right or complete. He’s a Lannister. And you are a Stark of Winterfell.

Jaime’s lip curled as contemptuously as though she had spoken that last thought aloud.
‘You’re a shit liar, Stark,’ he said.

‘I wasn’t lying,’ she declared, steadfast and annoyed by his tone.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I don’t think you were lying about all of it. You’ll remain in this godsforsaken place until the wedding is over, no doubt for some mischievous reason of your own, and you’ll leave me. You’ll even tell yourself you want to. You’ll come up with a lot of bullshit about honour and guilt and respect for the dead, because you’re your Father’s fucking daughter, and being permanently miserable and permanently sore from the permanent stick up your arse makes you happy.’

‘Don’t you talk about my father like that!’ Arya shouted shrilly.

‘But you won’t forget,’ Jaime continued, ignoring her, ‘you’re not the forgetting type. Even if you are the breaker of chains this time round.’

‘Will you forget?’ she asked, wanting to cry from how well he knew her.

‘Do you want me to?’ he replied.

She couldn’t reply. She wouldn’t. Not even to stop him glaring at her like that.

‘I’m curious as to what will happen to Sansa while you’re sailing off into the sunset,’ Jaime remarked nonchalantly, ‘the last time we spoke, you were rather concerned for her welfare.’

‘I don’t care about Sansa,’ Arya replied disdainfully.

_She can run away with stupid Lord Baelish if she wants._

Jaime’s eyes were bright with scorn.

‘You don’t care about your last living sibling?’ he repeated, ‘now you’re just being a selfish little bitch.’

‘I’m being a selfish little bitch?’ Arya shrieked.

‘Are you calling me a bitch, Stark?’ Jaime shouted back in indignation, the veins in his neck threatening to pop.

‘Can’t you just accept what I’ve told you and get out?’ she demanded, wishing that they would.

But he remained gallingly firm despite his anger.

‘I’ll get out when you give me an answer that doesn’t involve crying and screaming like a bloody adolescent!’

‘I am an adolescent!’

‘Oh for fuck’s sake!’

‘And you’re a callous, self-obsessed shit!’

‘Why?’ Jaime bellowed, ‘because I think you’re a miserable fucking coward and a stupid little fool for leaving, and I’m not afraid to tell you that?’

‘How can you expect me to stay with you after everything that’s happened?’ she snapped, wishing he would understand and get out of her room, ‘how can you expect me to be your wife, to bear your
name, to bear your fucking children –’

‘You want children?’ he repeated, making her blush.

‘Don’t flatter yourself!’

‘Don’t flatter yourself!’

Arya knew she was being ridiculous and immature; that she was only fighting with him to conceal how utterly miserable she felt; to keep him there for longer because she might never see him again; and because he was so fucking beautiful when he was angry stupid weak stupid but she kept on screaming anyway, if only to save face.

‘If you’re so concerned about Sansa,’ she shouted, ‘why not marry her instead? Don’t even wait for me to leave! I give you my blessing! You’d be marrying the eldest daughter, you’d have control of the North, and you’d have a dutiful, submissive, obedient little wife who’d agree with every stupid thing you say and who is much, much prettier than I am! I’d even be willing to bet that her cunt tastes better than mine!’

‘I’m sold!’ Jaime bellowed.

‘Fine!’

‘Fine!’

She shoved him.

‘Now get the fuck out of my room!’

‘With pleasure!’

She jumped as he slammed the door behind him, and felt tears well up in her eyes as the visions began again; a whole new parade of spectres to add to her nightmares and her waking dreams.

It’s only right that I leave. I can’t stay with him after this.

It’s even more right that I become Death. I know more about it than life. Than love.

And she curled up in the window seat and let her spectres take her, Jaime’s scent still lingering like armour around her.

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, awesome people! This is yet another note of thanks and appreciation for the amazing reviews and support. You all inspire me and make me dance jigs of happiness that you read my work!

On that happy note, I must also announce that there’ll be no further chapters till Monday, as I have a massive family gathering this weekend and will probably not have much time to write amidst all the chattering and visiting and general craziness. Also from Monday, I’ll no longer be able to honour my chapter-a-day arrangement due to the absolute and completely unexpected exhaustion doing this has caused (I have a full time job and am doing a PhD). I’m DEFINITELY not going to take weeks to do one
chapter, however, and will update every second day instead.
Much love!
Arya awoke on the morning of the royal wedding to find two gifts and a messenger from Cersei waiting at the foot of her bed. The first gift was a gorgeous gown of Lannister crimson brocade and gold silk. The second was the legacy of Cersei’s having shaved the head of some poor Myrish servant girl to make a wig; a clear indication that nothing would distract from or disrespect her son’s big day, not even the crow’s nest hair of a traitor’s daughter. As Arya listened to Cersei’s messenger coo about the Queen Regent’s generosity, and thought about the black wool gown she had wanted to wear in mourning for her House, she considered a number of options that included screaming, cursing and impaling the dress on her sword before remembering, for the hundredth, for the thousandth time, that she needed to be a lady to survive. So she sent a message of appropriately obsequious thanks back to Cersei, pulled on her smallclothes, and tried on the dress.

She looked beautiful in it.

It fit her perfectly; the material hugging her tiny waist and cascading down to the floor in waterfalls of crimson loveliness. The colour was vivid and glorious against her skin and hair, and the stupid sleeves were so long and so magnificent that they dragged on the floor. To her amazement, she found that she liked it; even though she knew why this wasn’t being done to Sansa; even though she was fully aware that she was meant to be a lute that played nothing but The Rains of Castamere; a walking reminder of the Red Wedding. The thought made her smirk.

Cersei and I have the same goal for once, if for vastly different reasons.

She hated the wig. The long, shining, braided locks tumbled over her shoulders, irritated her skin and got in the way each time she moved, but she put it on anyway, determined that she would face this day proudly and fearlessly.

But when the moment came to go down to the wedding breakfast, she realised two things. She couldn’t stand the thought of seeing Joffrey’s smirking face and his stupid pouty lips. And she wanted to shoot something.

Don’t be absurd, she thought, you have to go. You have to. You can’t give that stupid bitch Cersei the satisfaction of thinking that you’re weak.

Then it occurred to her that being thought weak wasn’t necessarily a bad thing under the circumstances, and she lost no time in sending her handmaiden down to announce that the Lady Arya was indisposed with a slight headache, threw herself utterly on good King Joffrey’s mercy and begged his august forgiveness for succumbing to the natural weaknesses of femininity on his wedding morning. No sooner had the girl’s footsteps faded away that Arya wrenched open the door and dashed down to the archery range, which she found conveniently empty of people to laugh at or bother her. Preparing themselves for the wedding, most likely.

She hadn’t held a bow in almost five years, her clothes were a bother and a nuisance, and she didn’t hit the centre of the target once. Nevertheless, the bow felt good in her hands; and for a moment she was back in the yard at Winterfell, watching Robb and Jon chuckle and Mother and Father tut-tut at them as Bran missed again and again; and she felt the cold of the North beneath her eleven-year old fingers as she drew, loosed and struck a spectacular bull’s eye, making Bran chase after her and pelt her with every object that got in his way; Robb’s laughs, Jon’s, Mother’s, Father’s ringing in her ears like home, like death.

Bran could still stand, then. He could still climb. He was still whole. He was still alive.
Jaime.

She blinked tears out of her eyes and took aim once more, the arrow puncturing the target at a shamefully remote distance from its centre.

‘What are you doing?’ a small voice asked.

Arya almost shot herself in surprise, and whirled around to find Princess Myrcella, looking stunning in cloth of gold embroidered with emeralds and standing not two feet away from her. The princess’ eyes were red from crying, but they were also bright with curiosity, and Arya curtseyed clumsily, wondering what in seven hells she could say that would convince the little shit (not that little. She must be twelve or thirteen) not to tell her mother.

‘My princess,’ Arya greeted.

Myrcella smiled with beautiful courtesy and curtseyed gracefully in response.

‘Shouldn’t you be at the wedding breakfast?’ Arya asked.

She won’t tell Cersei if it also gets her into trouble.

‘I am escaping the wedding breakfast,’ Myrcella replied, ‘and it seems I’m not the only one. Your hair is different.’

‘Your royal mother is careful when it comes to propriety…’ Arya responded formally, her words trailing off when the princess began to sniffle and promptly burst into tears.

Arya’s first, ridiculous thought was that something had happened to Jaime or Sansa.

‘What’s happened?’ Arya asked urgently.

Myrcella wiped her lovely green eyes on her sleeve and made a valiant effort to regain her composure.

‘It’s Joffrey,’ she sniffled, ‘isn’t it always Joffrey? He’s such a –’

‘What did he do?’ Arya interrupted, no longer caring if she was being rude.

Myrcella was gazing at the sky and trying, once again, to blink away her tears, her tiny white chest rising and falling in distress.

‘Most of the gifts were predictable,’ she sobbed, ‘swords, daggers, chalices, flattery; Joff strutting about pretending he’s been within a mile of a real battle. Boring, really, but amusing. Then Uncle Tyrion gave Joff a book, my lady. *Lives of Four Kings* by a Grand Maester Kaeth. I had heard of it, but I didn’t expect…it was…it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, my lady. Almost like an illuminated manuscript, but better. So beautifully decorated that even the pages seemed to reflect light.’

Arya was surprised. She had always disliked the princess on principle because she looked so much like her mother. It had never occurred to her that she was so…so…

‘Joff took one look at it,’ Myrcella continued, ‘and decided to try a dance with his new sword.’

Arya stared.

‘I don’t understand –’
‘A dance with the book.’

‘Ah.’

Arya breathed a sigh of relief as the princess explained.

‘He cut it to ribbons,’ Myrcella declared, ‘nothing was left of it. I’ve never seen my poor uncle so hurt. Or so angry. And then…’ she was starting to cry again, ‘then it emerged that only four like it were in existence, that is, in the Grand Maester’s own hand. When they told Joff about it, he said ‘now there are three,’ as though nothing had happened and demanded that my uncle purchase him a new gift.’

_She’s crying about a book?_ Arya thought in disbelief.

_Remember what her life has been, _she told herself. _Remember that she has never known real sorrow._

_Of course she has. She lost her father. Of course he wasn’t really her father, but - _

‘…I rather like books, Lady Arya,’ Myrcella stammered, as though she had read her thoughts.

‘A family trait, I think,’ Arya replied, overwhelmed by a sudden determination to be kind to this child, no matter who her mother was.

‘– I rather like books,’ Myrcella continued hesitantly, the threat of tears looming once more in her eyes ‘and so does my uncle. So did my grandfather, though he was so very frightening, and it – it pains me to see them destroyed so needlessly…’

And she threw her arms around Arya’s neck and broke down completely.

Arya had no idea what to do or say as the child’s tears drenched her shoulder. Eventually, she found herself embracing her and muttering the sort of things that Mother had said to her when she was afraid or hurt; tiny, meaningless incoherencies like ‘sh’ or ‘everything will be better tomorrow;’ things that had comforted her when she had been too little and too happy to need them to mean much.

_I envy her, _Arya thought, _I envy her passion and her feeling and her innocence, and the way she lavishes them so freely on things like books – the way that she can lavish them so freely on things like books. Life…life has never required her to do otherwise._

As Myrcella’s breathing slowed and her tears dried up, Arya came to wonder how the girl had managed to evade the clutches of her handmaidens, or indeed those of any adult that might seek to drag her back to the wedding breakfast.

‘Did nobody come after you?’ Arya asked, gently breaking away from Myrcella, but keeping one hand on her shoulder.

‘Mother will be angry with me,’ Myrcella sniffed, ‘she says princesses aren’t supposed to cry. At least not in public.’

‘Everyone is supposed to cry,’ Arya contradicted, and decided, on the spot, to give her some advice, ‘the next time your royal brother does something bad; or you ever feel like crying, but can’t, you close your eyes and you go away inside. In there, no one can hurt you. No one can ever hurt you if your skin is made of steel.’
Myrcella smiled.

‘That’s what my Uncle Jaime said.’

‘Your Uncle Jaime?’

‘He came after me. Then he heard my mother coming and told me to run.’

Arya’s heart tortured her chest at the thought. If only the child knew how much giving that advice must have saddened him.

Myrcella was eyeing the bow with interest.

‘Do you want to try?’ Arya asked.

The princess hesitated briefly, but did not seem able to stop herself.

‘May I?’ she asked politely.

‘Why not?’ Arya replied, ‘you don’t look like the type to shoot yourself by accident.’

Myrcella seemed very confused by Arya’s demeanour, but she stepped forward nonetheless and took the bow from Arya’s hands.

‘You start by –’

But Myrcella was already drawing, and Arya’s words died in her mouth as the princess took aim and held, glaring fiercely at her intended target across the yard.

‘Have you ever done this before?’ Arya enquired in amazement.

‘No,’ Myrcella replied, ‘am I doing it right?’

Arya stared, not believing it. The girl was a natural. Her position was almost perfect, apart from her elbow being a little too low. She even drew with the correct fingers. It was only when Arya stepped forward to pull her elbow upwards that she felt how much Myrcella was shaking under the pressure.

*How normal she is, in other words.*

‘Can I shoot something?’ Myrcella pleaded, ‘please please can I shoot something?’

*Where in seven hells do Jaime and Cersei’s children get this predilection for shooting things?*

‘You can shoot anything as long as it’s not alive,’ Arya replied.

‘I am not my brother,’ Myrcella snapped, and fired.

Her arrow sailed far above the top of the target, but this did not seem to bother Myrcella at all. If anything, she seemed delighted by it and permitted herself a charming and thoroughly undignified celebratory jig.

‘Did you see that, my lady?’ she squealed.

‘I did,’ Arya replied.

Myrcella’s face fell at that.
‘You don’t seem very happy.’

_Does she expect me to dance too?_

‘That’s because you missed,’ Arya said.

Myrcella looked out at the arrows peppering the target.

‘You’ve been missing _too!_’ she declared imperiously, ‘and more times than me, I might add!’

‘I haven’t held a bow in almost five years!’ Arya exclaimed in indignation.

‘And I’ve never even held one _once!_ I want to try again!’

Arya bowed.

‘Be my guest.’

Arya seated herself and watched Myrcella miss and miss and miss, each failure only increasing the girl’s confidence. Not one of her arrows struck the target, but by the time fifteen minutes had passed, Arya was thoroughly jealous. It had taken her weeks just to learn how to _loose_ and this little shit had picked it up in thirty seconds, and almost entirely without help.

_**Be grateful she isn’t hitting the targets on her first try. If she were, you’d be in serious trouble. There is a genius for fighting in her blood, and once awakened, it cannot be stopped. Such genius would cause a princess nothing but misery.**_

‘I do hope I’m not interrupting,’ a clear voice remarked, making Arya jump out of her skin for the second time that day as she turned and recognised Tyrion Lannister. Myrcella dropped everything immediately and ran to him, throwing herself into his arms. She was taller than he was.

‘Oh, Uncle Tyrion, I’m so sorry about your book,’ she exclaimed, kissing his cheek.

‘Thank you, sweet child,’ he replied with genuine warmth, ‘so I am.’

‘Have you come to take me back?’ Myrcella asked, her nose wrinkling.

‘Not at all,’ Tyrion assured her, ‘I am in the process of escaping myself.’

Myrcella began to dance on the balls of her feet again.

‘Lady Arya is teaching me to shoot!’

Tyrion looked flabbergasted.

‘To shoot? I never knew you cared for weapons, dear niece.’

‘Me neither, but I do now! Watch!’

Myrcella scuttled back to where she’d left the bow and performed yet another spectacular missing of the target, and when Arya joined Tyrion in clapping enthusiastically, she curtseyed prettily before turning her back on them and drawing once again.

‘May I sit, Lady Arya?’ Tyrion asked politely.

‘You may,’ Arya replied with equal politeness, ‘and call me Arya, please. I’m so unladylike that the
Suddenly and quite unexpectedly, the conversation evaporated faster than a pious sermon in a brothel, and Arya found herself in the unusual position of casting about for something to say. She had a lot to say to him and a lot to ask, and she could tell that he had similar intentions, but his face was as embarrassed as hers was red; and for a while, not a word was spoken between them, the silence punctured at intervals by the sound of Myrcella squealing in delight.

‘Is the wedding breakfast over?’ Arya asked suddenly.

‘Far from it,’ Tyrion replied, clearly relieved that she had been the first to speak, ‘they’ve only just brought in the wretched food. I wish I had taken a leaf out of Baelish’s book and gone a-wooing rather than attend this bloody wedding.’

Arya cocked an eyebrow at him.

‘You surprise me. I didn’t think your taste in women ran to batty and half-mad.’

Tyrion laughed.

‘No. It tends to run to pretty and half-clothed.’

‘Is Sansa at the breakfast by herself?’ Arya asked, suddenly worried.

To her surprise, Tyrion rolled his eyes at her.

‘I do wish you would get out of this habit of treating Sansa as though she were made of porcelain,’ he stated candidly, ‘she has survived four years of hell at this court, with precious little help from anyone. That takes spirit, and strength.’

‘She hasn’t been without help,’ Arya contradicted, his modesty setting her teeth on edge, ‘she’s told me how many times you’ve saved her from that little shit Joffrey.’

Tyrion blushed to the roots of his golden hair.

‘She exaggerates, she – ’

‘Come now, Tyrion. My sister is only prone to exaggeration when it comes to the colour of her gowns and the state of her hair. She likes you very much, I think.’

Tyrion was staring firmly at his lap with a childlike hesitancy that was moving to look upon.

‘She…she certainly esteems me very much, Arya,’ he stammered, still avoiding her eyes, ‘though her esteem is ill-placed.’

‘Is it?’ Arya demanded.

Tyrion lifted his eyes to hers, and they were filled with an ancient kind of anguish that only came from the constant bearing of sorrow.

‘Lady Sansa,’ he said firmly, ‘enjoys filling her head with the idea that she will someday meet a handsome knight who’ll tell Joffrey to fuck himself and take her far away from here to a castle by the sea, where they’ll fuck day and night and have hordes of beautiful babies.’
'Sounds horrid,' Arya replied.

Tyrion smiled sadly.

'Nevertheless, it is that that she dreams of, not brutally disfigured dwarves who never keep their mouths shut.'

'An admirable quality, in my book.'

Tyrion snorted.

'But in almost no one else’s, including mine. I am Hand of the King, and when it comes to your sister, I only do what needs to be done; what any decent person would do. Joffrey cannot be seen to be treating a helpless girl and a ward of the crown in such an infamous fashion.'

'So that’s why you’ve helped her?' Arya grinned, 'to save the king’s reputation?'

'Somebody must do so,' Tyrion said off-handedly, 'especially when the little shit clearly has no interest in saving it himself. The laws of succession have never served us so badly as they have in Joffrey’s case.'

'What about the Mad King?'

'Aerys’ reign began with great promise; with intelligence, with enlightenment. Everything was set for the early flowering of a golden age, before that monumental fuck-up at Duskendale. I’d hardly describe Joffrey’s reign as having begun with great promise; would you?'

'Primogeniture’s a terrible thing,' Arya stated gravely.

'It is,' Tyrion agreed, 'particularly when it gives the throne to a person who is less fit to rule than one or two of my hill tribesmen.'

Myrcella whooped as she missed again, and her laugh tinkled beautifully and innocently in the morning air.

'This is the first time I have spoken to her, and I don’t know Prince Tommen at all,’ Arya said, gesturing towards Myrcella, ‘but it seems to me that that young lady would make a far better sovereign at twelve than Joffrey is at twenty.'

Tyrion smiled fondly and regarded his lovely niece as affectionately as he might his own child.

'So she would,’ he agreed softly, ‘she has a good heart and a fine mind. Tommen would be a fine king if one could only separate him from his mother. Myrcella would be a fine queen regardless.'

Arya grinned mischievously and steered the conversation back to Sansa.

'Do you think my sister would have been a good queen?’ she asked.

'Why are you so interested in what I think of your sister?’ Tyrion replied breezily.

Arya shrugged as though the answer were devastatingly simple.

'Because you have the distinction, relatively rare in this city, of appearing to have more than fog between your ears. And since my capture, I haven’t seen as much of her as I would like. Cersei’s been keeping us apart.’
‘Yes,’ Tyrion responded quietly, his face darkening with both anger and sadness, ‘Cersei is very fond of destroying bonds between people.’

‘Don’t change the subject, Tyrion.’

His face was red again, but he did not look into his lap; his expression remaining guarded despite the Lannister crimson of his complexion.

‘I do believe your sister would be a good queen,’ he confessed, ‘she has a talent for courtesy, and an even greater one for elegance, for modesty, for regalness. And perhaps someday, when she learns not to be afraid, she might even have one for intrigue.’

Arya burst out laughing. The thought was too hilarious to countenance.

Tyrion was glaring at her.

‘You did ask for my opinion,’ he remarked disapprovingly.

‘You think much better of her than I do,’ Arya replied.

‘I doubt that very much.’

‘You like her.’

‘She is difficult to dislike.’

‘You know what I mean.’

Tyrion smiled at her with a kind of familiarity that she found she did not mind.

‘Jaime was right about you.’

Arya’s face fell as her heart sunk into her new shoes.

‘What do you mean, ‘Jaime’s right about me’?’ she hissed.

‘He said you were unquestionably the most infuriating person he’d ever met,’ Tyrion grinned in reply.

‘He’s one to talk!’

Her own indignation made her blush. Myrcella was beginning to stamp her foot each time she missed the target. And Arya stared into her lap and thought of her slaughtered pack, and Jaime, and of how happy she would have been, how happy…

‘My brother has told me everything,’ Tyrion said with a gentleness that almost made her weep.

‘Has he?’ she mumbled, still not looking at him.

‘He has. And I am more sorry than I can say.’

‘Are you?’

‘Yes. Even if you’re only fucking him to spite Cersei.’

The tears departed swiftly from her eyes as she leapt to her feet and faced him, anger clawing its way out of her stomach and into her clenched fists.
‘I am doing nothing of the sort, you malicious little shit!’ she exclaimed.

‘Really?’ Tyrion demanded with an inhuman kind of composure that infuriated her, ‘your behaviour makes it difficult for me to think otherwise.’

She hit him in the face, relishing the gasp of surprise that escaped his lips in response.

‘I don’t care a fuck what you think about my behaviour!’ she shouted, ‘if I wanted to spite Cersei, I would find other ways of doing it; I certainly wouldn’t go to all the trouble of opening myself up and…and…giving myself to that arrogant, irritating, immature…self-obsessed old shit, all in the name of fun! Stop…stop grinning at me!’

As he continued to grin cheekily at her, delight dancing in his mismatched eyes, Arya realised that he had been testing her, and she wanted to hit him again. Instead, she sat down beside him and finally started to cry, tears choking up her eyes, her throat and her voice.

‘I’ve fucked everything up,’ she sobbed, ‘everything is so utterly and completely fucked up –’

She felt Tyrion’s hand grasp her shoulder, which only made her cry harder.

‘If you think this is a fuck-up,’ he said kindly, ‘then you clearly haven’t lived at court for very long.’

She looked up at him and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

‘Does he hate me?’ she asked.

Tyrion sighed,

‘He doesn’t understand. He doesn’t understand at all. But he doesn’t hate you.’

He was looking at her with an intensity that commanded attention; that demanded it absolutely, and his mismatched eyes were the same shape as Tywin’s.

‘You haven’t known Jaime as long as I have,’ he said, ‘you don’t know what he was like. Before. He was my tall, handsome, unbreakable brother, and…and he could think for himself, contrary to what my father may have told you – he could. There were many times when he did.’

‘You mean when he killed the Mad King?’ Arya asked.

‘Among other things, yes,’ Tyrion replied, ‘but he was so deep in Cersei’s pockets – and in her cunt, most of the time – that he would commit any kind of insanity to impress her, or just to show her that he cared; and she would hold him to that; more times than I could count. Under her influence, he was as biddable as a lapdog. It’s been like that ever since we were children. It was the one fault I could find with him, the one thing that prevented him…he’s…’

Tyrion looked down into his lap.

‘But he’s not the same since he met you,’ he said, ‘he’s become…he’s become himself.’

Arya leaned forward and embraced him as a fresh flood of tears engulfed her body and her mind, and he returned the embrace awkwardly, patting her back and telling her that everything would be alright. She smiled. He was as bad at this as Jaime was.

The sound of a loud thud and a squeal made them break apart and look back at Myrcella. The princess was jumping up and down in adulation as she gestured wildly, her golden hair flying in the sun, the bow still clutched in her tiny white fist.
‘I did it!’ she shouted, ‘Uncle Tyrion, Lady Arya, I did it!’

Arya and Tyrion stared at her, and then at each other.

She’d managed to hit the target.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Warning: Though they have been heavily adapted for an AU context, the chapters that follow contain book spoilers.

Having jolted his stump against a table first thing in the morning, Jaime spent most of Joffrey’s wedding day quiet as a shadow by Tyrion’s side; his arm smarting just painfully enough for it to be an annoyance; his head heavy with insomnia and anger and memory.

The last time Jaime had been in the Great Sept, his father had been the centre of attention; the iridescent reflections of the High Septon’s crown doing nothing to abate the stench of rotting flesh.

The last time Jaime had been in the Great Sept, he had still had Cersei; the pain in his stump had been fresh and bloody and agonising; and Arya had been across the city trapped in the black cells, covered in blood and worse.

Today, Arya entered the Sept clad in crimson and gold, her sister beside her in cloth of silver, and she looked beautiful in a way that he had never thought she could be; that he had never wanted her to be. She was deathly pale and hollow-eyed, but that only seemed to make the crimson gown become her more.

What a pair we make. Sorrow becomes her, like it does me.

And he was angry that she was wearing crimson, and he was angry that she looked beautiful in it.

She also seemed to have succeeded in growing her hair overnight. Cersei’s work, most likely. Arya would never have thought of wearing a bloody wig, or of changing her garb for a bloody wedding. If left to her own devices, she would probably have arrived in her usual sober black or grey, looking more like a septa or a mourner than a guest, and she wouldn’t have cared a fuck what anyone thought about it. Jaime glared at his sister, who was holding court nearby.

How dare you try to change her? he thought, how dare you try to turn her into you?

Arya was straightening Sansa’s hair net, her efforts only causing more coppery strands to escape their silver and amethyst prison, and as the sisters stood there together, squabbling about Arya’s clumsy fingers; they looked like peace and war; like steel and blood. Arya paused as she sensed Jaime’s eyes on her, and when they met his, bright and saddened and afraid, he felt the absence of weeks and weeks of dancing lessons and her face and her voice. He felt his inability to bring himself to drill alone no matter how hard he tried. And he felt her ridiculous, irrational, infernal loyalty that he hated and despised for the way that it reminded him of her father, and for the way that it made him love her more. He tore his eyes away from hers and fixed them someplace else.

You brought this on yourself, Stark. You can’t complain now.

The wedding ceremony was a farce and a lie, and the feast even more of a farce and a lie; flattery, nonsense, empty words, absurdity; seventy-seven courses when half the country was starving; Tyrion saying little and drinking a lot; Uncle Kevan saying nothing at all and drinking nothing at all;
Joffrey, Cersei, Tommen, Myrcella and half of House Tyrell transforming their table into an obscene, spontaneous tribute to Jaime’s life that laughed constantly and mocked relentlessly.

Each new dish that was placed in front of him only made him feel more nauseous, and each time he pushed it away uneaten, Cersei would glare at him as though he were committing treason. Jaime glared right back at her, hoping she would read his thoughts in his face.

I can’t believe I loved you once. For all that time; for all those years. I can’t believe that I would have killed for you; that I tried to; that I wanted to. And I can’t believe that I wanted to marry you.

Joffrey and Margaery’s insistence on drinking from one cup and feeding each other from their plates did little to abate his nausea; and the seemingly endless parade of singers, all of whom seemed incapable of playing anything but The Rains of fucking Castamere, did little to improve his mood. By the time the tenth course was cleared away, it had been played three times, and he watched Arya down an entire goblet of red wine while Sansa looked on in absolute misery.

Keep it up, my love, Jaime thought bitterly, drink your Dornish red like a good Lannister. Father would be so proud.

That made him wonder what she intended to do with the twenty million dragons Father had left her. She certainly wouldn’t keep them; that went without saying.

Hire a Faceless Man to dispatch my sweet sister. Go on. I’ll even make up the difference if the bastards want more money.

Cersei was making a tremendous show of drying her eyes as the infernal fucking song began again, which naturally compelled the Lannister bannermen to engage in public displays of solemnity and reflection on the life of their beloved liege lord, who had been taken from them all too soon.

‘I’ve never liked this song,’ Uncle Kevan murmured, his face pale and hard like marble, ‘I was there, you know. At Castamere.’

‘I know, Uncle,’ Jaime replied.

‘There was nothing beautiful, or lyrical, or sad about it. We certainly weren’t serenaded by the sound of silence and emptiness and rain. Not even afterwards. Not even when it was over. It was butchery. Absolute, unequivocal butchery. I stopped eventually, because I couldn’t do it anymore. I drank myself into a stupor. And then Tywin came walking out of the Keep so covered in blood that he might as well have bathed in it.’

Jaime shivered, and glanced at Tyrion, who had taken on a healthy shade of pink and seemed to be staring at the elder Stark girl between liberal sips of wine.

I don’t want the bloody Rock, Jaime thought, I never wanted it. Tyrion should have it. He’d put it to better use than me.

Perhaps I should announce it tonight. That should make Cersei have a fit.

Jaime smirked, and he could almost hear Father’s voice growling at him.

‘Do not be a fool. You are the eldest son. What if you should marry?’

Jaime glanced across at Arya, who was talking to her sister and refilling her wine glass.

I shall never marry.
Jaime jumped as the hall doors opened with a crash; and admitted a pig and a dog being enthusiastically ridden by...children?

Jaime’s teeth clenched together so painfully that they hurt him.

No. Dwarves.

Jaime glanced at Joffrey and Cersei, who were already near-dead from laughter, and as the pitiful display commenced, the dwarves shouting a variety of insults at each other and driving the pig and the dog together like horses at a joust (this amidst much theatrical tumbling down and tangling of limbs), he felt Uncle Kevan’s hand on his arm as the hall erupted with laughs, shrieks and applause.

I will kill you for this, you little shit, Jaime thought, watching Joffrey’s face as it reddened from drink and merriment, for this, I will cut your royal throat myself.

He looked to Tyrion, expecting to see anger; and perhaps hoping for it; but his brother’s face revealed nothing but pity...and a tiny, barely perceptible hint of vengeful iron in his eyes.

A roar of applause went up as the dwarves made one final tumble to the ground. Joffrey was demanding an encore, Margaery Tyrell was applauding politely and whispering what Jaime hoped was a discouragement of the idea, Cersei was smirking in silent pleasure, Tommen seemed confused, Myrcella looked enraged and Uncle Kevan’s grip was tightening on his sleeve as Joffrey shouted out for a volunteer.

‘Uncle Tyrion!’ the King cried, ‘you’ll defend the honour of my realm, won’t you? You can ride the pig!’

Jaime sat up in alarm and stared in disbelief as his brother began to climb onto the table.

This should be amusing.

‘Tyrion!’ Uncle Kevan hissed, ‘get down at once!’

‘Your Grace!’ Tyrion proclaimed from his new position on high, ‘I’ll ride the pig...but only if you ride the dog.’

Jaime relished the confusion on Joffrey’s asinine face, and at the table opposite, he could see Arya doing the same.

‘Me?’ Joffrey blinked with a prodigious slowness of wit, ‘I’m no dwarf. Why me?’

Oh gods, Jaime thought.

‘Tyrion!’ Uncle Kevan hissed again.

Too late for that, Uncle.

‘Why, you’re the only man in the hall that I’m certain of defeating!’ Tyrion announced, taking a long drink from his wine glass and making no effort to regain his seat.

The silence was painful and immediate, and for a few seconds, Jaime allowed himself to indulge in both Joffrey’s expression, and in Cersei’s, before bursting out laughing.

This turn of events rendered the Lannister bannermen as eager to laugh with their new liege lord as they had been to weep for their old one; and Uncle Kevan, and the Tyrells, and Tommen, and Myrcella, and Arya, and every other sensible person eager to diffuse the situation and avoid one of
Joffrey’s tantrums joined in, roaring with as much laughter as their lungs would permit them.

When the gales, but not the redness of Joffrey’s face, began to subside, Arya stood up and demurely raised her wine glass.

‘My dear brother,’ she declared, ‘I find I must congratulate you on your wit. It is dazzling.’

Jaime loved her fiercely for that, and joined the rest of the hall in laughing harder as Tyrion hopped to the floor and bowed to her in thanks. Joffrey, who was still on his feet looking at the dwarves, seemed entirely perplexed by the way that all the seriousness in the room seemed to have evaporated, and rather visibly looked in his mother’s direction, pleading for guidance. Cersei’s expression was impossible to misinterpret and declared that he should do nothing. So the king laughed along with his guests; his face and his voice rendered grotesque and twisted by the falseness of his mirth.

Perhaps the boy is not so very simple after all, Jaime thought as the hall began to quieten down again.

‘Yes, your wit is quite dazzling, Uncle,’ Joffrey declared, I’ve changed my mind, he’s an idiot, ‘and since you have such an exquisite sense of humour, you should have no objection to getting on the pig.’

Jaime almost intervened then, but Tyrion was there before him.

‘I regret I am unable to, Your Grace,’ Tyrion said, ‘I’m feeling the most terrible call of nature. We wouldn’t want my tiny dwarf cock to explode and drench the poor pig in piss.’

‘Shall we begin the dancing?’ Margaery suggested charmingly as more laughter followed, ‘I’m quite overcome by the desire for a song! Music!’

The musicians struck up a lively jig immediately, couples began to move onto the floor with something like relief, and as Jaime reflected rapturously on Margaery’s potential to be the most formidable queen since Alysanne, Tyrion took advantage of the brief cessation of hostilities to push out his chair, hop off the dais and head towards the door, leaving Joffrey looking both angry, put out and unsure of what to do.

After a moment’s contemplation, he decided to ignore Margaery’s request for a dance and to follow Tyrion.

Jaime leapt to his feet and dashed after the King, and was rapidly joined by Uncle Kevan, by Margaery and by Olenna Tyrell; Cersei remaining firmly where she was; Arya bristling in her seat and visibly restraining herself; Sansa looking dreadfully pale and on the point of fainting.

‘You can’t walk away from me without permission!’ Joffrey was shouting as he tore after Tyrion, calling Jaime’s attention back to their vicious idiot of a king, ‘dwarf! I have not given you permission to leave! Dwarf! Dwarf!’

Jaime reached Joffrey at last, courteously took his elbow and turned him around, hoping that Tyrion would seize the opportunity to get out of the doors.

‘Stop this at once,’ Jaime growled softly, his fingers digging so hard into Joffrey’s arm that his knuckles went white, ‘you might be the fucking King of the Seven Kingdoms, but you’re also a Lannister despite that revolting stag on your sigil; and you don’t piss all over the Lannister name without asking my permission.’

‘Your permission?’ Joffrey shrieked as the Tyrells reached him, ‘your permission?’
‘Both of you will stop this at once,’ Uncle Kevan commanded, his face the picture of courtesy, his voice like iron, ‘are you children? My brother must be turning in his grave.’

‘Come away, my sweet king,’ Margaery urged pleasantly, gesturing to the musicians to play louder as though nothing in the world was the matter, ‘you haven’t danced with me yet, and I long for the feeling of your arms around me.’

‘I don’t want to dance!’ Joffrey pouted, sounding and looking like a spoilt child as the musicians complied.

‘A song, then?’ Lady Olenna chimed in, ‘perhaps another rendition of The Rains of Castamere? It’s been an hour; I’ve forgotten how it goes.’

‘An excellent suggestion, my lady,’ Jaime complimented.

‘Indeed,’ Uncle Kevan agreed.

Joffrey seemed agonisingly conflicted between engaging in more shrieking and bursting into tears from sheer frustration.

‘I don’t want to – ’

‘If you’ll permit me, Lord Jaime,’ Margaery said courteously, firmly prising Joffrey’s arm from Jaime.

‘Come, Joffrey,’ she commanded.

The King did not look happy.

‘But – ’

‘Joffrey,’ she growled, and the King’s eyes fell to earth immediately with all the crestfallen disappointment of a child that had just has his bottom smacked.

As Margaery led the little shit to the floor and danced with him, Jaime returned to the dais with the Tyrells, filled his wine glass and drank the contents in one gulp, resolved that he would renounce Casterly Rock on the morrow and move somewhere very far away. Asshai sounded about right.

It was then that he noticed that Sansa and Arya’s seats were empty, and he briefly felt the colour drain from his face before his eyes found them approaching the hall doors, Sansa looking whiter than summer snow.

Go, go quickly, for fuck’s sake, just leave before Joffrey sees you.

But Joffrey was watching them from the centre of the floor, his arms still around Margaery.

‘My dear aunt?’ he called mockingly after them.

Arya turned around very slowly and looked at him with murder in her eyes, both her arms supporting Sansa, who looked very ill indeed.

‘May I help you, dear nephew?’ Arya asked in a flat, bored tone that struck Jaime to the core by its haunting resemblance to that of his father.

He is in her whether she likes it or not.
'Where are you going?' Joffrey demanded with frightening politeness.

Arya looked ready to strangle him.

‘My sister is unwell; I am taking her to rest.’

‘Nonsense! No one may leave the hall until the festivities are completed. Come back here.’

‘Your Grace, please, my sister is – ’

‘Come here! Come here and lead a toast to my beloved grandfather’s memory!’

Arya went white.

‘You little shit,’ Jaime growled.

‘Is that truly necessary, Your Grace?’ Uncle Kevan exclaimed at the same time.

Arya gave his uncle a small smile, her grey eyes tearing at Jaime’s insides like teeth.

‘It is indeed necessary, Ser Kevan,’ Margaery said, before Joffrey could pronounce another word, ‘the King has commanded it.’

‘I have!’ Joffrey declared childishly, ‘I command it!’

The dancing and the music had stopped, and people were frozen where they stood, or sat.

‘I doubt that your grandfather would much care for a toast from a traitor’s daughter,’ Arya stated coldly, her voice expressionless and dead, ‘however… it that is your wish, Your Grace – ’

‘It’s not a wish, it’s a command!’ Joffrey pronounced.

Jaime sighed and fought down the urge to bury his face in his hands as Joffrey escorted Margaery back to the dais, and Sansa refused to let Arya assist her in front of the entire court. She regained her seat unaided, and when Arya regained hers, she picked up her cup and raised it without hesitation.

‘To Tywin, son of Tytos, of the House Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West,’ she declared, ‘may he ride forever through the Night Lands.’

Jaime did not understand the expression. Nobody did. But there was something in her voice that made silence fall, something between hate and love that was more terrible than either of them, something…

The hall murmured its assent and drank in silence, and for a moment, no one spoke; nothing but the sounds of the night and the city and the sea rushing in to fill the quiet.

Then Joffrey began to cough.

He didn’t stop. He couldn’t. His face grew redder and redder, and the wine was spilling out of his mouth like blood. The guests began to panic, and run, and trip, and fall over each other in their eagerness to get away; and as pandemonium wrapped the hall in a black shroud, sound was torn from the world. Lady Olenna was shouting madly, and Jaime felt himself rising from his chair and helping Uncle Kevan to rip Joffrey out of his seat and pound him on the back. Uncle Kevan pushed the King onto the floor and continued to pound his back, and every person at the table seemed to stand in unison while Margaery Tyrell sank down beside them, weeping at the sounds that wheezed up from Joffrey’s throat; sounds that Jaime could see in the air in front of him, red and grey and red.
Uncle Kevan was pounding on Joffrey’s chest now, and Cersei had appeared by his side as the boy’s hands clawed at the front of his own doublet; his eyeballs swelling to a monstrous size as he choked. Tommen and Myrcella were crying in each other’s arms, and Cersei’s face was white and terrible, changing at every flicker of Joffrey’s face; her hands moving from his face to his shoulders and back again, her eyes black with tears. When the boy’s face turned the same colour, Uncle Kevan stopped trying, and Cersei shoved him violently away with both her hands and gathered Joffrey up into her arms like a baby, weeping and weeping and screaming.

Jaime’s hearing returned with Cersei’s first scream, and the colour of her scream was red. She spat like a cat at anyone who came near her, defending her revolting son to the very last, and when Uncle Kevan finally convinced her to let him go; she laid him gently on the floor and stroked his hair as though he were sleeping. When her eyes met Jaime’s, he saw the pain in them; and he felt it, for just a moment; her anguish disembowelling him and becoming his. Then he looked down at their son’s body again; and suddenly he felt nothing; not the slightest stirring of feeling or despair or regret.

He stood up, leaving Cersei to her grief and the lords to their pandemonium, and looked across the room at Arya. She was sitting perfectly upright in her seat, her hands folded demurely in her lap; looking gloriously beautiful in her crimson, like a goddess of death. And he knew, somehow, that she had done it. She had killed him. Though he could not say how, or when.

Her head turned very slowly to the empty seat next to her, and she jumped so abruptly that Jaime almost jumped with her. His eyes remained fixed on her as she leapt to her feet; alarm and panic distorting her features; and her eyes were wild as they scanned the hall, and the area behind the dais, growing larger and more despairing with every passing moment.

‘Sansa!’ she shouted, calling to her absent sister, ‘Sansa?!’
Chapter 36

When Arya finally slammed her chamber door behind her, the sound of it echoing through silent sandstone halls at the hour of the wolf, she burst into fits of hysterical, mirthless laughter, and began to cry. Her gown felt like blood and filth on her skin, and she started to tear desperately through the laces, her sobs growing louder and more painful as her fingers became more and more tangled up, and by the time she finally succeeded in getting out of the gown, she was lingering agonisingly on the borders of hysteria. She ripped out great chunks of her own hair in her eagerness to take off her wig, and she flung it into the fire as she crossed the room to the basin of water at the window. She washed her face and hands up to the elbows and half-drenched her shift in water, and she could no longer tell if she was crying or screaming as the sounds scraped at her throat and her chest like knives; the tears clawing through her cheeks like talons of iron and magma.

She had done it. She had killed him. She had watched him die and she had felt happy; whispering ‘Valar morghulis’ to herself as Joffrey’s face turned black; and longing, suddenly, to speak to Jaqen, just for a moment, as the taking of that single, hideous life pulled her into all her deaths at once. She cried and cried and cried as the sound of Ilyn Payne severing muscle and blood and bone resonated through the crowd; Bran and Rickon were screaming with her as their flesh blackened and burned; Robb’s head was ripped from his shoulders as knives punctured his flesh, while Mother’s beautiful red hair was torn from her and her body thrown out like food for crows. And Tywin’s heartbeat was fading away beneath her hands, and his beautiful blue eyes were warm as he smiled at her.

‘You resemble her,’ he said.

And Tywin was the worst, because of what he had done; and her pack, her shades, her phantoms were disappearing around her; the last of them, Sansa, wandering in a darkness of the mind; far away from her and beyond her reach.

As Arya had dashed out of the great hall to look for her sister, she had seen Lord Varys watching her with something like pride; and she remembered the words that he had spoken to her, or that the dream of him had spoken to her, when she had been too thirsty and too delirious to know the difference.

‘The revenge you want will be yours in time.’

But in that moment, she hadn’t cared about revenge, and she had torn all over the Red Keep like a mad thing, shouting Sansa’s name and knowing all the while that it was useless; that only one fate had befallen Sansa, and that its name was Petyr Baelish. A royal wedding that included a regicide was the only event chaotic enough to ensure both an unnoticed escape and an unnoticed, if brief, return from a diplomatic mission, and Arya sobbed harder as she realised that Littlefinger must have known about the plot all along; that he must have had some part to play that Lady Olenna had conveniently forgotten to tell her about while providing her with instructions about the correct way to straighten Sansa’s blood hairnet, so that the ‘black amethyst’ (what a joke) would slip easily from its setting into her palm.

*I’ve killed a king, but I’m still a pawn. I’m still a stupid mouse. I’ve been played. I’ve been played like a fucking high harp. I would never have agreed to it had I known that he was involved.*

*Don’t be stupid. Of course you would have.*
Taking Sansa away straight after Joffrey’s murder was perfect, of course. It was the ideal way to ensure her cooperation. Her flight would be mistaken for complicity and she would have no choice but to stay with him; to exchange one jail for another; one solitude for another.

Arya sank to her knees; refusing to believe that Sansa had gone willingly and had left her behind. She wouldn’t. She wouldn’t.

_They must have lied to her; or perhaps she changed her mind at the last minute, or maybe –_

Arya pushed the washstand over and screamed as the porcelain struck the earth and smashed into choking clouds of powder and dust.

_Everyone always leaves, you little fool, she spat bitterly at herself, don’t you understand that yet? It doesn’t matter what you do or how hard you try. Everyone. Always. Leaves._

She remembered Jaime’s face at the feast; the face of the one person that she had left instead of its being the other way round; how angry he had seemed each time he so much as looked in her direction; how he probably hated her by now; and how much she had loved him when he had rushed to help his brother; like the stupid, loyal, honourable fool that he was.

She wished he were here with her. She wanted him here.

And she felt no relief that Joffrey was dead. She felt no joy, or fulfilment. She felt nothing but the desire to cry.

_If this is what revenge feels like, then it’s pretty fucking disappointing._

She cradled her head in her hands, growling at herself to stop weeping like a weakling, and wondering what the fuck she was going to do about Sansa. Her absence would be noted soon enough, and then Arya would have to say something, anything, to ensure that her sister wasn’t blamed for Joffrey’s death.

_Why couldn’t my stupid sister just leave the game to those who actually know how to play it? What am I going to do? What am I going to say?_

_I’m definitely not going to confess. They’d just chop my head off and go after her anyway._

She jumped violently as the door crashed open to admit Ser Boros and Ser Meryn, their eyes travelling from the smashed basin of water to where she sat cowering against the wall in her shift, crying like a child.

‘Arya Stark!’ Ser Meryn roared, ‘come with us! The Queen Regent wants to see you.’

Arya got to her feet and wiped her hands on her shift.

‘Mind if I get dressed first?’

When Arya entered the solar wearing her habitual conservative black; she found Cersei behind her desk in a glorious black velvet gown that she might have chosen for its fetching colour as well as for its symbolic attributes.
'Lady Stark,' Cersei greeted coldly and indifferently in a manner that did not seem at all natural to her, 'you may sit.'

**Seven hells, Arya realised, she’s trying to sound like her father.**

‘Your sister,’ Cersei continued matter-of-factly, as though commenting on the price of wool, ‘is not to be found this evening.’

‘Yes, Your Grace,’ Arya replied, too tired to congratulate Cersei on her quick work, ‘I have spent most of the evening looking for her myself.’

The Queen Regent smirked triumphantly.

‘Her disappearance naturally makes her an obvious suspect in Joffrey’s murder.’

Arya did her best to look surprised.

‘Murder, Your Grace?’

‘Yes, murder; are you deaf? Twenty-year-old boys do not habitually drop dead at their own weddings!’

**Ah. Not so very matter-of-fact after all.**

‘Your Grace,’ Arya interjected hurriedly, ‘men may…men may choke at any age.’

‘Is every Northerner in the world hard of hearing, Lady Stark?’ Cersei spat impatiently, ‘your lord father had the same problem. If I say my son was murdered, then murdered he was!’

Arya swallowed her desire to tear Cersei’s pretty white throat out and shouted at herself not to lose her temper. She couldn’t help Sansa if she was locked up.

‘Your Grace,’ Arya insisted, without a trace of gentleness or tenderness, ‘he choked. King Joffrey choked, it was an accident.’

Cersei vehemently slammed her palm onto the table.

‘Then how do you account for your sister’s conveniently sudden disappearance?’

‘I can’t account for it and I don’t account for it! But Sansa wouldn’t do this. She had reason enough, but she certainly wouldn’t –’

Cersei sat back, her long white fingers grasping the arms of her chair.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘your sister certainly had reason enough. My son has inflicted every possible kind of misery on her without ever actually getting round to spreading her pretty little legs. I would have killed him long ago for less than that; were I in her position. But then I am a lioness; not a spoilt little wolf cub.’

‘My sister may very well have desired your son’s death,’ Arya agreed, ignoring that previous remark and deciding to try flattery, ‘but such a spectacle as today – the great occasion; the overwhelming possibility of King Joffrey’s death being put down to choking on his wine or on some piece of food lodged in his throat; the panic that his passing will create – this is the sort of plot that would emerge from an intelligent and enlightened mind. I must grudgingly acknowledge Your Grace to be in possession of such a mind –’
‘Careful, Lady Stark,’ Cersei cautioned regally.

‘ – but I cannot say the same for Sansa. I love my sister dearly, truly, I do, but the poor girl is simple as milk. If she wished King Joffrey dead, she would very likely put her trust in some idiotic knight with a handsome face; or poison the King herself and expect everybody to believe that a young man in the very best of health died in his sleep. But the sort of thing that we saw today…that must have taken months of planning, the likes of which are far beyond Sansa’s capacities. Surely Your Grace must see that.’

Arya watched Cersei consider that with more than a little thought, and she optimistically wondered if, by some miracle, she had convinced her.

Surely not. That would be far too easy.

She stared intently at the hardness of Cersei’s face; at the low cunning and spite that seemed to mar every line and contour of her beauty; and she found her thoughts wandering to Jaime; and to how much he must have loved Cersei for all those years. Enough to have children with her when he must have known the risks; enough to push a ten-year-old boy out of a window for her; enough to renounce his own birth right for her.

‘He was so deep in Cersei’s pockets,’ Tyrion had said, ‘and in her cunt, most of the time – that he would commit any kind of insanity to impress her, or just to show her that he cared; and she would hold him to that; more times than I could count. Under her influence, he was as biddable as a lapdog.’

Arya closed her eyes, and briefly allowed herself the comfort of thinking that it had all been Cersei’s fault; that she had trapped him and corrupted him and turned him into something that he wasn’t; that she had made him do it.

But that was a lie too, and she knew it.

We always have a choice. Always.

The thought of lying to herself briefly made her consider telling Cersei the truth about Sansa and Littlefinger. Finding them would be much easier with the assistance of the Crown, and more importantly, with the help of Varys’ spies.

Yes, very clever. She’ll use Varys’ spies to find them, then take both their heads without a second thought. That would be unfortunate.

Arya did not much care what happened to Littlefinger’s head, but she didn’t want to be responsible for the premature removal of Sansa’s.

I could always approach Varys privately…

No. That was no good either. He had no reason to help her, and he’d probably run straight to Cersei in any case. She would need the help of someone that she trusted implicitly, and she trusted no one implicitly…except herself.

I’ll have to leave King’s Landing and look for them myself, she realised, it’s the only way. Find a way to sneak out of the Keep, steal a horse, stay off the Kingsroad, decide where I’m going, at some point…

Arya almost laughed aloud, ridiculing her own stupidity and her own fear. Sneak out of one of the most heavily-guarded castles in the kingdoms…and then what? Wander from town to town and ask
every person she met? She’d be picked up within hours if she did that.

Arya’s eyes met Cersei’s, and she saw cruelty there, and grief, and hunger for blood, and she was suddenly seized by a horrible, agonising certainty that she hadn’t convinced her of Sansa’s innocence, and that she never would. Because Cersei was no longer comforted by the truth. She was a mother who had lost her child, and she wanted a scapegoat. She wanted blood to cleanse her grief. And she wanted revenge on the world that seemed to have already forgotten her son; on the stars that hadn’t stopped in the sky; and on the moon that hovered brilliant and silver over the sea as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened on the first day of the new century.

Get used to it, my sweet, accursed enemy of a sister, Arya thought, this is what happens when you lose someone you love. Your world ends…and nobody else gives a fuck.

‘I will have your sister hunted down like a dog,’ Cersei growled, ‘I will have her raped while you watch. And then I will have her head.’

Arya stood up very slowly; anger incinerating her chest.

‘Jaime will strangle you himself before he lets that happen,’ she snarled in reply, ‘and that’s only if I don’t get to you first.’

Cersei’s face went very, very white, and she became like a caged animal as she considered a multitude of actions and orders, Jaime seeming to stand in the way of every single one of them; Jaime as he was now; the twin that Cersei could not forgive for changing; that she could not forgive for becoming himself; for closing his mind to her and making it his own. Her power over him had gone, and with it her power over everything. Jaime had taken it from her. Jaime and Tyrion.

And me, Arya thought, I took it from you when I killed your rotten son.

‘Get. Out.’ Cersei whispered hoarsely, the words like horror on her lips.

When Arya left the room and closed the door behind her, she lingered in the passage for a few moments more, listening to the muffled sound of the Queen Regent sobbing as it pulsed and resonated through the door.

Arya loved the sound of Cersei crying. It was like music.
Finding her way out of the maze of tunnels beneath the dragon skulls was no easier than it had been when she was a child, and when Arya finally emerged from the mouth of a foul-smelling sewer after hours of running, crawling and splashing underground, she was exhausted, covered in filth and on the verge of tears.

She immediately dove into the Blackwater Rush; the bodily secretions of half King Joffrey’s court coming off her clothes and hair in foul-smelling clouds of brown and green; and it was only when she clambered onto the bank again; smelling considerably better than she had ten minutes previously; that she considered what she should do next, the Red Keep twinkling like some obscene eyesore in the distance.

Sansa would be with Littlefinger, Littlefinger would be with Lysa Arryn, and Lysa Arryn would be at the Eyrie. Arya didn’t have the dimmest notion of how to get to the Eyrie beyond its being someplace in the East, but that didn’t much concern her. The solution to the problem was exactly the same as that of her admittedly brief attempt to escape to Riverrun – how hard could it possibly be to find a great hulking castle?

But as she began to walk towards the shadow of the Kingswood that loomed menacing and wraithlike in the distance, she began to doubt herself, and her thoughts ran away with her.

She had nothing resembling a plan. She had not had the time to think of one. After her interview with Cersei, she had only lingered in her own chambers long enough to change into a doublet and breeches before running down to the dragon skulls as though the entire Lannister army were already at her heels. She didn’t have a horse, or a map, or even a morsel of bread. She had acted entirely on impulse.

None of that scares me, she growled to herself, brushing her doubts aside, I couldn’t have gotten a stupid horse out of the castle grounds without being seen, and even if I did, it would have been stolen. The Kingswood is probably crawling with poachers looking to have some fun before a new king is crowned. All I need to do is find one party of idiots, and I can have my pick of horses and maps and bread.

She walked parallel to the Kingsroad in the dark; far enough away from it to dive into the bushes if someone approached; but close enough to it to steal a horse if the opportunity presented itself. The dimness of the moon made her feel more peaceful than sad, and the dark blue cold of the night seemed to find her clothes inexplicably compelling, but she didn’t even shiver. She loved the cold. It reminded her of home.

The Kingsroad snaked like a river of ice in the moonlight, and she remembered everything that she had seen and felt on that road; the torture and the rape and the blood and the screaming; the fear from day to day and moment to moment that she would be next. She had died on that road. It had taken her name, her dignity and even her gender from her. It was the road that had led her to Tywin.

I’d give anything never to have met him, she thought, the memory of him so powerful that it caught her up in a storm of brilliant ice blue eyes and white hair, and that face: a face that could topple empires with a single glance.

‘You resemble her,’ he had said, smiling weakly at her, ‘you resemble her.’

Tywin never smiled. And she had never asked him why.
She was ripped suddenly from the memory like an arrow from flesh by the sound of a rider approaching at speed...from *behind* her; and she froze in panic, not believing that she hadn’t heard him; *that they’d found her already*; that they *cared* enough about her to watch her that closely.

She tried to move. She couldn’t.

This *was an* extremely *stupid idea*, she considered detachedly as her mind screamed frantically at her limbs to move, *you would never have done this if you weren’t exhausted and emotional; if you were thinking clearly. If you *are* with your trouble when fighting happens, more trouble for you.*

*But trouble is also the perfect time for training.*

As she drew her sword and spun elegantly round into her water dancer’s stance, she heard the rider dismount. He showed no interest in fighting her, however, and she barely had time to notice that he was tall and wore a hood before he barrelled straight into her and sent both of them crashing to the ground. Arya kneed him hard in the balls, noted the resulting grunt of pain with pleasure, and tried to push him off her. But even when she succeeded in shoving him away and clambering on top of him, her dagger glowing at his throat and her knees pinning him to the ground, he would not let go of her; his fingers clutching hard at the front of her doublet.

Arya stared. She could not see his face – it was concealed by his hood – but his throat was very white against the steel of her dagger; white... and oddly beautiful. She knew that throat. She’d felt the shape of it on her lips a hundred times. And she’d considered slitting it on twice as many occasions.

She ripped the rider’s hood off and scowled as Jaime gave her his most irritating grin, his hair standing comically on end.

‘Going somewhere, Stark?’ he enquired pleasantly.

‘What are you *doing* here?’ she shouted, attempting to stand up and move into a less compromising position, ‘go away!’

‘Please,’ Jaime smiled suggestively, his hand stroking her hip and lower back, ‘there’s no hurry at all.’

Arya smacked his hand away and stood up immediately, furious that she’d actually been aroused by that.

‘Have you been *following* me?’ she demanded angrily.

‘Of course not,’ Jaime responded, gracefully getting to his feet and dusting off his breeches, ‘that would imply that I care whether you live or die.’

‘*Go away!*’ Arya shouted, both at him and at the preposterously hurtful effect that that previous remark had had on her, ‘*go!*’

‘Nothing would make me happier, Stark,’ he chuckled, ‘but at present I’m far too curious to do so.’

‘I don’t care if you’re curious!’

Jaime folded his arms and tut-tutted at her as though she were a petulant child.

‘One Stark has already disappeared from the capital tonight,’ he said, ‘don’t you find two accusations of murder in the same family on the same night rather excessive?’
‘I’ve got more important things to worry about than seeming excessive!’

‘I’m sure you do.’

He was regarding her with something like admiration, and his eyes were godswood green.

‘How did you do it?’ he asked softly.

*How does he know?*

‘Do what?’ she asked in response, with an innocence that a child could have seen through.

He stepped towards her. She didn’t want him to step towards her. That would make her want him to step closer; and he would; and if he did that, she would forget about her family, and his family, and only want him; like some reckless little whore with no loyalty; with no respect for her ghosts.

He knew what she was thinking. She could see it. And he was stepping closer to her anyway.

She didn’t step back.

‘Come now, Stark,’ he purred, ‘won’t you even give me a hint? As one kingslayer to another?’

She almost smiled at him, as she would smile at the other side of her own mind; but she pouted instead, in annoyance and exasperation, because the only thoughts in her head at present were of such a shockingly impure nature that her septa would probably die of a heart attack if she confessed them.

She pushed them away from her by thinking of Sansa.

‘Sansa’s gone off with Littlefinger,’ she blurted.

The amusement disappeared from Jaime’s face immediately.

‘Where?’ he demanded.

‘I don’t know.’

Jaime looked overcome with confusion, both at her words and at her appearance.

‘And what…what are you…may I ask what you are doing?’

The condescension in his tone made her angry.

‘If Cersei finds out where she’s gone, she’ll go after her and kill her!’ she snapped.

‘And if you find her?’ Jaime snapped back, staring at her like she was mad.

Arya shrugged.

‘I’ll think of something.’

‘You’ll think of something. I see. Remind me how you plan on getting her away from Littlefinger?’ ‘I don’t know.’

The disbelief on Jaime’s face was indescribable, and he was incredibly pale; the moonlight turning his hair to molten Targaryen silver.
‘And once Littlefinger has graciously consented to release her,’ he remarked, ‘Baelish being the soul of courtesy where daughters of Catelyn Stark are concerned, how exactly do you plan on stopping Cersei from killing her then?’

‘I don’t know!’ Arya shouted, ready to scream in frustration.

It was alright if she called herself stupid, but hearing it from him was unbearable. She hated it when he was right.

Jaime was laughing uproariously at her.

‘Well, I shouldn’t have come at all!’ he declared with enthusiasm, ‘this is a brilliant plan! How long did it take you to come up with it? Five minutes? Two?’

‘Don’t you talk to me like I’m stupid!’ Arya exclaimed, the words sounding childish in her mouth.

‘I can talk to reckless idiots any way I like!’ he shouted, clearly agreeing with that assessment, ‘it’s one of the benefits of being the Lord of bloody Casterly Rock!’

She shoved him.

‘Oh, and I suppose you’ve never been reckless in your entire life, Ser ‘Lord of Casterly Rock’!’

The way he looked at her as she spoke the words tore her heart out, and made the anger die in her throat. It resembled despair, but was worse, somehow; as though he were seeing something that he could have prevented, but hadn’t done a thing to stop.

‘Of course I’ve been reckless,’ he murmured, so softly that she could hardly hear him, ‘of course I have.

He’s so much older than me, Arya realised, he’s lived for so much longer than me. He knows the world, and he knows me, and there are things in the world that he’s seen and done that he doesn’t want me to see or do. He doesn’t want me to make his mistakes.

Too late, she thought, thinking of Joffrey.

She didn’t think of Joffrey as a mistake, though. She wondered if he felt the same way about Aerys.

And looking at him now, she couldn’t believe that she had never given the difference in age between them the slightest consideration beyond the occasional snide remark at dancing lessons. It seemed incredible to her that she hadn’t thought about it before – because it was extremely important.

He was five and twenty when I was born, she realised, five and twenty. He’d already killed a King. He’d already seen battle. And he’d already seen things. Horrible things. He had horrible things in his head when I didn’t even know what a head was.

Shit. Perhaps he does know more than me after all.

‘Do you even know where you’re going?’ Jaime asked her, his eyes unbearably soft.

Don’t look at me like that, please don’t look at me like that –

‘I’ll think of something the minute you go away!’ she shot back, her heart sinking into her boots at how utterly immature and unconvincing she sounded.

But Jaime was chuckling at her again and not looking remotely put-out.
‘Have you packed food?’ he asked matter-of-factly.

‘No,’ she replied grudgingly.

‘Have you got a horse?’

‘No.’

He grinned.

‘Isn’t that convenient. I’ve got both. Let’s go.’

And he started to walk away from her as though utterly convinced that she would follow him.

*The bloody… cheek of it!*

‘Hey!’ she shouted after his retreating back, ‘Hey! Who the fuck do you think you are?’

Jaime continued to walk and did not even condescend to turn around.

‘I’m the person who’s saving your scrawny Northern arse from being chucked into a black cell by this time tomorrow!’ he called, with an enjoyment that enraged her.

‘I’m – you’re - you are not coming with me!’ she exclaimed, striding after him and furious at herself for doing so.

‘Stop acting like you have a choice in the matter,’ he replied jovially, still not turning around.

‘I do have a choice in the matter!’ Arya insisted shrilly, catching up to him and tugging on the back of his cloak.

He turned around so abruptly that she jumped.

‘Will you shut up for once in your life and listen to me?’

She opened her mouth to insult him in return, but when the fingers of his left hand touched her cheek, her breath erupted out of her throat and did not return to her; calling up her heartbeat from the depths of herself and making her choke on it.

‘A young girl travelling alone,’ Jaime hissed, ‘might as well paint a giant red target on her head for all the outlaws and rapers and renegade knights and the gods only know what else that are both on the Kingsroad and off it; and I’m not going to let you run around unprotected from them, even if you’re hell bent on being the greatest, most idiotically stubborn little fool that ever lived.’

She couldn’t bear to look at his face, so she looked at his stump instead as it rested on her right shoulder; his eyes a constant threat above her, his lips even more so.

‘Jaime,’ she whispered, ‘you only have one hand.’

*You’d be as useful in a fight as nipples on a breastplate* was what she meant, and she could tell that he knew it.

‘I have no choice,’ she heard him murmur.

‘We both know it doesn’t work like that,’ she mumbled back, ‘and I’m in no mood for protecting both you and me.’
When he pressed his forehead against hers, she felt ashamed of the sigh that escaped her. She’d missed him. She still missed him. And she hated herself for leaving him, and she hated herself for hating herself. His face was just two inches from hers now. That was as far as she’d have to move to blow her family’s memory to the seven hells. Two inches. His breath was hot on her face, and the feeling of it was beautiful.

She wanted him to come with her. She did. But she also wanted him to turn around and walk away and say he wouldn’t come with her, because she knew what would happen if he did.

And she realised with shame that her eyes were closed and her lips were open; her breathing was shallow and harsh in her chest; and the guilt struck her once more as she thought about her life, and what her life had made her.

What sort of… creature falls in love with the head of the family that slaughtered hers? Who does that? How could anyone do that?

They weren’t dead when it happened.

That makes absolutely no difference.

‘Jaime, don’t,’ she whispered, listening to him breathing and keeping her eyes closed so she wouldn’t have to look at him, ‘please, don’t.’

He didn’t move. She could still taste his breath and feel his skin.

He isn’t leaving, she realised.

She sighed.

Fuck it.

She straightened up abruptly.

‘Nothing changes,’ she declared firmly, ‘as of this point, you are my brother, or my cousin, or… something. Understand?’

To her surprise, Jaime rolled his eyes and briskly kissed her forehead.

‘I’ll tell people you’re my daughter, if that’s what you want.’

That offended her considerably.

‘Your daughter?’ she repeated shrilly.

‘Yes, my daughter,’ he grinned, delighted by her anger, ‘you’re certainly young enough for it.’

She blushed, and said nothing more until they reached the horses, no – the horse – of which he had spoken. Arya put her hands on her hips.

‘Where’s my horse?’ she demanded.

‘There’s just the one,’ Jaime observed with telling wickedness.

‘You did this on purpose, didn’t you?’
‘Not at all. I’ve left a note telling Cersei I’m going hunting. I couldn’t take two horses for that.’

‘And you honestly think Cersei will believe that the Lord of Casterly Rock, *who is still recovering from having his hand chopped off*, went hunting without a single squire or retainer?’

Jaime shrugged.

‘Cersei has spent most of her life watching me do stupid things.’

Arya folded her arms.

‘Has anyone ever told you that you’re the *worst* plotter in history?’

‘Both you and Tyrion. It hasn’t stopped me trying.’

Arya glared at him, unconvinced. Not only would one horse take longer, but it was a thoroughly stupid idea.

‘I want to ride up front,’ she declared.

Jaime glared right back at her and mounted up.

‘Not a chance, Stark. Are you getting on before summer’s over?’

She glared at him for a few moments, then clambered onto the back of the horse, her hands clasping the back of the saddle rather than his waist.

Jaime seemed to find that extremely funny, and he chuckled to himself as he spurred the horse to a brisk trot.

But before long, his nose was wrinkling and his chuckling was a thing of the past.

‘Did you bring a change of clothes, Stark?’ he asked, ‘you smell awful.’
As they drew nearer to the Kingswood and the dawn began to rise in the sky; the tiny, grey, relentlessly untouching smallness in the saddle behind Jaime grew quieter and quieter; and by the time they reached the first trees of the Kingswood, the dampness of the air falling like rain on his skin, Arya had fallen asleep.

In her sleep she didn’t care about loyalty or the wishes of the dead, and she nestled her head against his back and gently slid her arms around his waist; the opposite and the same of when she was awake.

She did not stir till nightfall, and as he sat facing her in the half-darkness, a tiny wisp of a fire glowing weakly between them for warmth, he watched her beautiful grey eyes move intently from the bread she was refusing to eat, to his face, and quickly away again; and he was once again seized by the absolute certainty that she was the one that had murdered Joffrey. There was a kind of relief in her that had not been there before; a relief that was also a tautness and a new emptiness; and he thought about her idiocy in leaving the Red Keep with no food or water or protection, and how utterly unlike her it was; how impulsive, how unthinking…and it frightened him. Arya was neither of those things when it came to a good plan. She was Father’s fucking child.

‘After the Battle of the Blackwater,’ she said softly, not waiting for him to ask, ‘Olenna Tyrell made me an offer. She had a weapon – she just needed someone to use it.’

Jaime was surprised.

‘Why didn’t she –’

‘Nobody would know it was me,’ Arya continued emotionlessly, disregarding his words as an uncharacteristic anxiety tainted her voice, ‘nobody would even know he had been poisoned. It would be construed as an accident, and Margaery could then raise Tommen to do her will without the risk of being beaten or brutalised should the dog decide to bite its master. But if anything went wrong – if it was recognised as the murder that it was and a Tyrell stood accused, which would be extremely likely, knowing Cersei – I would confess my guilt immediately and take the fall alone.’

Anger incinerated the pit of Jaime’s stomach, and horror tightened around his throat with fingers of blood and bile.

‘You allowed her to risk your life like that,’ he repeated, ‘just to get her granddaughter out of a marriage?’

‘I allowed myself to risk my life for a chance at seeing that little shit Joffrey die by the hand of a Stark,’ she replied, a little too nonchalantly.

‘She used you!’ Jaime insisted.

Arya shrugged.

‘I used her too.’

Jaime stared openly at her. Her fearlessness was glorious, and her voice, and her horrendous stupidity and her brilliance; and he had no idea if he should reach out across the space between them and clout her on the head for being such a reckless, irrational little fool, or kiss her till she moaned for being so fucking beautiful.
And he wondered, once again, what the matter was with him; what had been the matter with him when he had stood up, in silence and indifference, and had left Cersei screaming alone over their son’s body while he felt nothing at all...nothing.

‘How did you do it?’ Jaime asked, ‘how did you kill him?’

‘One of the black amethysts in Sansa’s hairnet wasn’t really a black amethyst,’ Arya answered simply, and Jaime remembered Joffrey’s clawing fingers, and his eyes threatening to pop out of his skull, and Uncle Kevan pounding on his back, and Cersei screaming as her son’s face turned black and his last breath twisting out of him as he choked choked on nothing.

Ah.

‘The Strangler?’ Jaime ventured.

Arya smiled bitterly in a way that he did not like.

‘I popped it into good King Joff’s drink while I was helping my sister to the door. You were all too busy shouting to notice, and the rest of the hall was too busy watching you to pay much attention to a damsel in distress. The whole scheme would have been a giant success if my stupid sister hadn’t decided to run away with stupid Lord Baelish. It would have been called a tragic accident and no one would have known.’

The question of Sansa’s having both the guts to run away with Littlefinger and the coldness of heart to leave her last living sibling behind had been bothering Jaime all day, and he said so. Arya’s reply was both immediate and dismissive.

‘She’s been planning something with that silver-tongued shit for months –’

‘You knew about this?’ Jaime interrupted, shocked and a little angry.

‘It slipped out when Bran and Rickon died,’ she growled in reply, ‘and all I could get out of her was that he’d promised to take her somewhere because he’d been so very kind to her.’

Jaime did not care to interpret that previous phrase too profoundly.

‘Ever since then,’ Arya went on, ‘she’s been so bloody buttoned-up I haven’t been able to get a word out of her.’

‘That still doesn’t mean she went willingly, Stark,’ Jaime insisted, gentleness slipping into his voice despite his best intentions.

‘Stop trying to protect me from the truth,’ Arya snapped, and her reaction hurt him, even though he had expected it.

‘So when you told me that you didn’t know where Sansa and Littlefinger were going,’ he remarked, glaring intently at her and daring her to glare back at him, ‘you weren’t lying?’

To his surprise, she smiled at him, and even coloured a little.

‘I was lying through my teeth, Lannister,’ she admitted, wincing theatrically.

‘You didn’t trust me,’ he stated accusingly.

‘I didn’t want you following me,’ she corrected, and he remembered how little – or how much – it had taken to get her to change her mind about that. He smiled back at her, and she looked away from
You want me here, you strange little wolf, he thought, you can avoid my eyes all you like, and you can talk to me like you hate me, but you want me here.

And yet she was angrier and more on edge than he had ever seen her. True, she was always angry about something (him, usually), but this wasn’t her usual, endearing anger. This was something else.

‘Do you think your sister’s at the Eyrie?’ Jaime enquired with mock indifference, not lowering his gaze.

‘I can’t see where else he would take her,’ Arya replied, steadfastly avoiding his eyes, ‘he’s still trying to convince my aunt Lysa to marry him. I’ve heard she haggles worse than half the fishwives in Lannisport.’

That made him laugh.

‘Do not speak disrespectfully of the fishwives of Lannisport, Stark,’ Jaime insisted playfully, ‘I can’t guarantee that they won’t hunt you down wherever you are and demand an apology.’

Arya ignored him completely and continued to speak as dully as a Hand at a small council meeting.

‘Aunt Lysa seems to think that drawing the process out like this makes her very flirtatious. And I imagine that trapping Littlefinger at the Eyrie makes doing it a lot easier.’

‘If they are at the Eyrie,’ Jaime said, ‘then tomorrow we’ll need to turn around.’

‘Why?’ Arya demanded in a worryingly irrational way.

‘We’re going the wrong way,’ Jaime replied.

‘We are not,’ Arya insisted.

‘We’ll end up in the Reach at this rate, Stark!’

‘We’re just taking a detour.’

‘A detour?’

Arya angrily threw a stick onto their pitiful excuse for a fire, where it erupted into flames.

‘Lannister,’ she stated testily, seeming less and less sure of herself by the minute, ‘you can’t hide an ant in the country around King’s Landing; it’s too flat. Everywhere except the Kingswood. Heading here was just…a good idea till the fuss died down.’

‘You think the fuss will only last one day?’ Jaime scoffed, incredulous of her stupidity, ‘are you mad?’

She was standing up in a fury.

‘I don’t think anything; I didn’t think anything! I was in a hurry, and I needed a plan!’

‘Of course, a plan! And now that you’ve had a chance to think, what do you want to do next? Just pop our heads out of the woods tomorrow, head east and hope no one sees us?’

‘I don’t know!’ she screamed.
Jaime backed down immediately as Arya buried her face in her hands and turned her back, shadows licking at the edges of her body like flames as she took a few steps away from him, and did not look in his direction again.

*This must be because of Joffrey,* he thought, *because of what she’s done. She’s killed another human being and she can’t handle it.*

He knew full well that a first kill had the potential to completely discombobulate a person; however brilliant and however well-trained. He’d seen it a hundred times with squires.

*Of course I can’t be entirely sure that this is her first kill,* he thought, *the gods only know what she had to do to survive before Father found her.*

*Before Father found her and ruined her life.*

She was still standing with her back to him, and the sound of her breathing was like a symphony of stained glass in the darkness. Her hands had moved to her hips, and she was gazing at the forest roof as though calling to the air above the canopy of the trees, willing it to fill her lungs up with something pure and good.

He understood why the Kingswood was the first thing that would occur to a desperately emotional young girl who was regretting a rash decision (however little she might like to admit it), but they couldn’t stay here. They would need to come out eventually, and accept that they were now the hunted. But she was right about the country around King’s Landing. It’d be like fighting their way through an army, even if they did stay off the Kingsroad. They needed another way.

‘We can go through the Westerlands,’ he said.

Arya turned around at once.

‘The Westerlands?’ she repeated, the disdain in her voice not quite masking her distress.

He tried to overcome his natural instinct to fight with her as he began to speak again.

‘It will take longer –’

‘A lot longer!’

‘– but it *is* Lannister territory –’

‘Is that meant to reassure me?’

‘– and *unlike* the bloody Crownlands, it’s actually possible to hide there with some measure of success. Lots of hills, mountains, interesting nooks and crannies with mines in them. It’s where all the gold in my father’s shit came from.’

Arya was still glaring at him, probably for mentioning Father, but she generously refrained from interrupting him again.

‘And,’ Jaime continued, taking her silence as an invitation to continue, ‘I can guarantee you that most of the smallfolk are still so terrified of the old bastard that they won’t breathe a word of our existence to anyone, and that’s only if they see us.’

‘Not even to red cloaks?’ Arya asked.

Jaime smiled sadly. She really was discombobulated.
‘Tywin Lannister,’ he said, ‘frightens them more than red cloaks.’

‘Even dead?’

‘Especially dead.’

He watched her think about it as the night grew darker around them; her skin a shock of snowfall against the nighttime of her hair.

‘Alright,’ she agreed quietly, ‘we’ll go through the Westerlands. Though could we…’

Arya’s words dissolved into the silver mist that poured from her mouth and she wrapped her arms tighter around herself.

‘What?’ Jaime pressed, ‘could we what?’

‘Could we try and avoid going past Riverrun?’ she murmured.

Of course. He hadn’t even thought of that. Approaching the Vale from that direction would put Riverrun right in their path…a reminder in stone and water that she did not want to see or feel or touch.

Oh, my love.

‘Please?’ Arya pleaded softly; her eyes a torment, and Jaime rushed to reply, dismayed that she had interpreted his silence as an objection.

‘Of course we can, I didn’t mean – ’

‘Good, that’s fine, then, thank you.’

‘Arya –’

‘Did you follow me? Last night?’ she questioned with baffling and disconcerting abruptness, rapidly returning to the fire and sitting down with a great deal of noise and unnecessary fiddling with the firewood and her still-untouched bread, ‘did you? How did you know where I would go?’

She doesn’t want to talk about it.

Of course she doesn’t, you bloody fool. Why would she?

‘I…I just did,’ he stammered; his haste to appear unaffected making him ineloquent, ‘know where you would go, I mean.’

‘Does everyone know about that passage?’ Arya rushed to ask, clearly with similar intentions in mind, ‘when I was a child, I liked to think I was the only one, and there weren’t any guards – ’

Her hands were shaking.

‘No,’ Jaime replied, wanting to reach out and take them, knowing she would hit him if he did, ‘it isn’t common knowledge; I only know about it because once I was…I was…I was in rather a hurry to get rid of some bodies.’

That seemed to interest her, and she took a bite of bread for the first time; the very mention of death seeming to bring her back to life.
How can she seem to live on death like a leaf lives on sunlight, Jaime thought, and yet fall apart like some green boy when she finally kills the one person in the world that she’s wanted dead with all her soul?

‘You needed to get rid of some bodies?’ Arya was repeating with disarming interest, ‘really? Do tell.’

She was looking him in the eye for the first time that day, but suddenly, unexpectedly, he found that he could not hold her gaze.

‘Not today, Stark’ Jaime murmured, the screams of Aerys’ remaining pyromancers still ringing in his ears, even after all this time, ‘not today.’
Chapter 39

She dreamed she was hunting in a dark wood with Summer and Shaggy Dog. It was a good dream. Together they overcame a monstrous stag with antlers of black bone and lion eyes; and as her teeth sunk into its throat she felt a wild rush in her body that made her bite down harder; and the stag’s blood filled her mouth like strength and life, and spilled onto her fur in strips of black and crimson, and it was delicious, so delicious.

*This is what revenge is supposed to feel like,* she thought, *the taste of an enemy’s blood on your tongue and the euphoric knowledge that you’re the one draining it out of them. Not a lot of crying and whimpering and doubting and feeling that you’ve accomplished nothing; no knowledge that the kill hasn’t taken your grief away, but has only left you alone with it.*

And her mind seemed to become more and more human as the blood frenzy abated, and she realised that she couldn’t be hunting with Summer and Shaggy Dog because they were shades; shades taken by the sea when it had come rolling across open country to Winterfell like a great wave. And yet there they were before her, stripping the carcass raw; their muzzles dark with blood, as hers was; and she loped sadly away from them because she did not care for dreams within dreams and hopes within hopes. Dreaming was for children, and so was hope.

Her nose smelled a whiff of blackened wood and fire on the air; so faint that she might never have noticed it had she not been trying to wake up; had her humanity not insisted on invading her wolfishness so spitefully. She went further and further into the wood; the soil and the leaves cool beneath her paws; the wind rustling in her fur and in the trees, and soon she came upon two shapes; two sleeping human beings on either side of a fire so small that it gave off no warmth at all; only smoke. And she wanted to wake up, because they were her pack too: Jaime and herself; him and her human self, not her wolf self, and *why can’t I wake up?* she thought, *I want to wake up; why can’t I?*

Jaime was muttering to himself in his sleep, his words no more than the ghost of a breath on his lips, and yet she could hear them as she watched the crease between his eyes grow deeper and deeper, and his jaw clench harder and harder.

‘Your Grace, please,’ he murmured, ‘you can do nothing now but surrender, *please,* surrender.’

She pushed her muzzle against his nose, trying to wake him up, but the fingers of his hand were clenched right into the soil beneath him; his knuckles the colour of bone; his fingertips swallowed by the earth just as his mind was swallowed up by sleep and refused to release him from its grasp.

‘My father will…you have no choice…*we* have no choice…you *must*…yes, I *am* telling you that you must…’

His voice became louder and angrier, and his face was a horror of whiteness and revulsion, and she was trying to move his head by bumping her nose against it, but he wasn’t waking up, and she opened her mouth and screamed in the desire to be human and awake and alive and with him; and in a flash she was awake and throwing herself across the space between them and shaking him violently by both shoulders as he shouted out that awful cry:

‘Surrender.’

When she shook him, he did not stir quietly into the waking world, but tore into it like a blade; bolting upright so abruptly that he almost knocked her over; his hand seizing the front of her shirt and yanking her up as she lost her balance.
His eyes were damp, and beautiful, and close. Her hands were convulsing on his shoulders with the
tremours in his body and he breathed rawly like a drowned man; nightmare still dissolving from his
face like a veil that only he could see. Arya felt her fingertips ghost from his shoulders to his face, her
thumbs tracing lines on his parted lips, and

*What am I doing?* Arya thought as her fingers grew damp from his breath and shivering from his

She kissed him, and his mouth as it answered hers felt drunk, and soft and childlike; the fingers of his
left hand tearing swathes of fire along her jaw and down her neck. His lips felt like a caress or a
murmur or an echo of a forgotten song, and on them she could taste the ghost of tears.

‘It was just a dream,’ she murmured as his head nestled weakly into her shoulder; his entire body
quivering like an ice storm against her own, ‘it was just a dream.’

He said nothing for a while; the feeling of his breath on her shoulder, and the sound of it, making the
hairs on her neck stand on end, but his heartbeat did not abate; his chest pulverising hers with every
last crash of his heart.

‘Arya.’

‘Yes.’

‘I have to tell you something.’

As Jaime spoke she travelled with him to the throne room on the day King’s Landing fell. The smell
of smoke and blood and rape was rank in her nostrils, and the monstrous skulls of the Targaryen
dragons leered down at her with an indifference that was almost obscene. Blood was pouring down
the Mad King’s arms from the number of times he had cut himself on the throne that day, and he
looked like a demon from one of Old Nan’s stories. He had shaggy, bone-dry white hair that might
have belonged to a man of seventy, uncut nails that hung grotesquely from his fingers like ringlets,
and a face that was all the more horrible for bearing the signs of what must once have been great
beauty and nobility of form. A pyromancer stood at his side like a sentinel, but the Mad King was
not looking at him.

*‘Bring me your father’s head,’* he was screaming into the empty hall, *‘bring me your father’s head
and I might not have yours in payment for what he has done!*’

Disgust pierced her, and for the first time she looked to her side at Jaime. She could see horror
coursing through his body like poison, but his face was oddly calm and detached, as though he were
observing the scene through a slit in the wall; or with a legion of troops at his back; and with a shock
she noticed how young he was: eighteen or nineteen at most. His hair was so blond that it looked like
innocence and light, and his face was the face of a boy, effortlessly carrying the unmarred splendour
of youth.

*He is far more beautiful now than he was then,* Arya thought, *Life has made him beautiful.*

‘Let Robert be king over charred bones and cooked meat!’ the Mad King was screaming at his
pyromancer, ‘let him be the king of ashes! Burn them all! Burn them in their homes! Burn them in
their beds!’
The threat of all that wildfire beneath her feet seemed to roar up at them from the depths of the earth like a monster from the deepest of the seven hells, and as she watched Jaime walk slowly and purposefully towards the Iron Throne; the threat of wildfire seemed to join with the command for Tywin’s head in choking up her heart and filling it with more contagion than she could take.

Stop him, she thought, please stop him.

She felt coldness and calm as they overcame Jaime’s body. She felt him becoming an adult and no longer being a boy; and the knowledge that he was here alone at the edge of an apocalypse didn’t frighten her, just as it didn’t frighten him, because he was doing the only thing that could be done.

As the Mad King’s blood spread across the floor and pooled gruesomely with that of the pyromancer, dragon blood no less red than common blood, she saw Jaime seat himself on the Iron Throne, and almost smiled as he slumped back in it, exhausted but clearly enjoying the view.

Then she heard the creak of ancient wood and the groaning of her heart in her chest as the throne room doors opened to admit her father, alive and breathing and with a head. He was tall and strong and alert, and Arya saw, with a sob, that the grey eyes she’d inherited from him bore a seriousness and a grief that were too old for such a young face. She saw herself in them, and wept.

Father’s armour was stained with blood, with too much of it, and his expression was granite and iron, and she cried harder because she knew that look, and had allowed herself to forget what it had looked like. Father was walking slowly towards Jaime and the corpses of the Mad King and the pyromancer; his mere presence commanding that entire hall in a way that would make Lord Tywin envious; and she could feel hatred radiating off both of them; hatred for Lannister arrogance that could mean more blood and more war; hatred for Stark judgment and unrelenting honour before words were spoken. The existence of such hatred between two people that she loved was like death to her, like death inside, and she waited for Jaime to speak; to tell Father that he had saved half a million people from burning alive; that he had done the only thing that could be done. But he did nothing of the sort, hopping off the throne with an impudence that angered her and blathering some nonsense about its being a very uncomfortable chair. Why wasn’t he telling him?

Arya felt the weight of all the lives that Jaime had saved and the knowledge of the dishonour and the insults he had endured squat grotesquely over her chest like a hobgoblin. And she remembered seeing this day in him on the day that they had met; she remembered how she had felt the legacy of the gaping horror of what she had just witnessed as acutely as though it were happening in her, not him. And she had asked Lord Tywin if something horrible had happened to Jaime during the reign of the Mad King, and Tywin had not even looked up as he responded: ‘nothing more horrible than usual.’

She knew that every word of the story Jaime told her was an act of love; and she had wanted to turn away from him for every minute of it to stop herself from loving his face and his body and him, as he was inside. But she was so, so angry with him; because telling no one of what he had done was so stupid and so stubborn, and so utterly typical of him.

‘You’ve been a fool,’ Arya murmured, still close to him.

He looked at her with an openess of expression that she could not bear.

‘Why have I been a fool?’ Jaime growled; every line in his face defiled by the memory of Aerys, and by blinding hatred of her father.

‘Because my father would have believed you,’ she stated with all the earnestness that she possessed.
‘Do you really think?’ he drawled with horrible bitterness, his lip curling like his sister’s; his face clearly showing that he felt betrayed by her reaction.

‘All you had to do to change that was open your big Lannister mouth and tell him!’ Arya snapped, furious at the way he was talking about her father.

‘I’d never thought of you as being stupid,’ Jaime spat patronisingly.

‘I’ve been stupid?’ Arya retorted, ‘you’re the one who’s put yourself through twenty years of having every man, woman and child in the kingdoms believing you have shit for honour, and all because some immature part of your deranged, fucked-up brain thinks that keeping quiet and dragging your own name through the mud somehow pays the world back for miraculously failing to guess that they owe you their miserable fucking lives. Why didn’t you tell him, Jaime? Why didn’t you tell him?’

He replied with such hatred that he could only speak through gritted teeth.

‘Do you really think the honourable Ned Stark would condescend to listen to a man who would profane his blade with the blood of the king he had sworn to defend?’ Jaime sneered, ‘his stiff Northern arse judged me guilty from the moment he laid eyes on me.’

‘Aaaw,’ Arya mocked mercilessly, “I’m a poor little rich man and nobody loves me.’ You’re an arse, Jaime. An absolute, unadulterated arse. All that time and all that whispering behind your back; all that talk and mockery about the ‘Kingslayer,’ all that hell...what exactly did you think you were achieving by keeping quiet? It’s so stupid! Why in seven hells did you do it? How could you stand it?’

‘I thank you for your high opinion of me, my lady,’ he spat contemptuously, ‘I had thought that you might understand, but you’re clearly just as high and mighty as your bloody father.’

‘Oh, I understand you!’ she shouted, ‘you’re like a petulant child! You’ve willingly suffered twenty years of insults from every idiot in the world who believes himself to have a scrap of stupid honour, when all the while not one of them is fit to lick the shit off your boots! You could have told anyone, at any time, to make it end, but no! Being miserable is more fun! Vanity! Vanity, arrogance and bullshit!’

‘Bullshit?!’ Jaime repeated.

‘Yes, bullshit! Bullshit and childish stupidity!’ Arya insisted, ‘so you’re getting no sympathy from me, you bloody idiot. You’ve brought this all on yourself.’

Jaime was glaring her with a fury that she found both frightening and rousing.

‘I don’t want your bloody sympathy,’ he growled, and she scarcely had time to notice the new brightness in his eyes or the way that the anger in his voice had changed before his fingers closed around the front of her breeches and yanked her against him. His mouth was hot and wild and relentless as it bit down on hers; his tongue forcing her lips open like iron and filling her up with the taste and touch of him; making her his, and him hers. She dug her fingers hard into the skin at the back of his neck and felt him shuddering and moaning into her; her mouth feeling like one wet and amateurish half of a dance that was a mess; but a beautiful one. She felt her pack standing around her, judging her and casting her away from them, and she sobbed as Jaime kissed her till her lips were raw and her tongue was aching in her mouth, and seven hells, but I do love his tongue, I love it, I love it.

‘Jaime, stop,’ she murmured against his lips, showing no sign of stopping herself; her pack still
around her, watching her, ‘stop this; stop it, please.’

She could feel his smile on her mouth, ironic and insolent and right, and as she stepped back from him, she hated him for that smile. She hated him for not stopping, and for not making her stop when she asked him to. She hated him wildly for that.

‘Alright, Stark, I’ll stop,’ Jaime replied, smiling insolently, ‘I’ll stop when you do. Agreed?’

And the selfish, arrogant bastard folded his arms and waited for her to come to him.
‘Alright, Stark, I’ll stop,’ Jaime said, ‘I’ll stop when you stop. Agreed?’

After a moment’s contemplation of the consequences, Arya walked rapidly across the space between them and kissed him so deeply that she drew blood, her tongue ensnaring his and possessing it greedily as she let him taste her again and again. When his fingers gripped the back of her neck, she moaned freely into his mouth and snarled at him as his lips pressed harder against hers and made her gasp for breath, her teeth grazing his chin.

Jaime’s eyes were momentarily blinded by black leather and then by white linen as she brought his doublet and shirt over his head so that the fingertips of her hands could trickle icily over his chest and shoulders and back like rain; and her lips and teeth kissed and bit and gasped hungrily against his throat and chest and stomach as though she sought to draw his strength out through his skin. Her fingers made no attempt to unfasten his breeches, but stroked his cock with such want and rapidity and inexperience that he was soon harder than the trees around them and straining unbearably as she disrobed her own torso and stepped back into his arms, her skin freezing like the first time, like the godswood in Harrenhal another lifetime ago. He found her mouth again, and when he tasted his own blood there, he followed the taste along her tongue, teeth and gums; marking her lips with his, filling her mouth up with the taste of him and feeling her groan into him and buck her hips against his cock as her fingers closed over his heart and felt it hammer.

Her skin became a fire and a heartbeat as he trailed his mouth and teeth down her throat and to her breasts, her nipples swelling and growing hard between his lips as her voice cried out and her fingers tugged hard on his hair, hurting him and making him bite harder. As he straightened up and fastened his lips around her neck, which was thrown back in ecstasy as though begging the gods for more air, he slid one hand across the fragile hardness of her stomach and down into her smallclothes. She was incredibly wet, and when his fingers found her nub and began to work there, her lips and the feeling of her moans in his mouth were as sore and crimson and alive as his were in hers before she brought her lips to his throat, her favourite part of his body, and sighed with unconcealed enjoyment as her tongue slowly tasted the skin there and savoured it like wine as her hips thrust against his clumsy, left-handed fingers and felt the warmth spread from her cunt to the rest of her body.

‘Harder, please, gods, harder,’ she whispered, whimpering and shuddering when he complied.

She had never been this bold before, or this rough, and though it was unlike anything that they had ever done, he found that he liked it. She was holding herself as hard against him as nature would allow, she was biting down on his neck like a cat or wolf, and when he responded by simply fucking her harder with his hand, her teeth only seemed to grow sharper. The strain in his cock was insupportable, and grew even more so as her hips thrust harder and harder against him; her gasps growing deeper and her eyelids beginning to flutter, and soon he was plunging his tongue into her mouth to dampen the sound of her release as she cried and moaned and cursed, and rubbed him so hard that he followed within minutes, shivering and groaning and swearing into her mouth; his body thrashing wildly against hers.

‘Gods, Stark,’ he gasped, ‘fuck.’

He remembered very little of what happened afterwards – only inches of it. He remembered falling to the floor at some point and seeing her beside him, watching him; the fingers of his hand moving gently from her face to her shoulders to her arms; enjoying the gooseflesh that he saw springing up there and the smile that accompanied it. He remembered her face directly above him, and her eyes, and the feeling of her body stretched out across his as she rained tiny, dizzying kisses on his lips for
what felt like hours. He remembered his bare skin puckering with cold as the Kingswood grew freezing around them, and he remembered not caring a fuck about the cold because she was here again, his again. And he remembered her head on his chest and his arms locked around her back, holding her there as she murmured, with agonising softness, that she loved him.

But above all he remembered waking up the next morning to find her sleeping on the other side of the fire again, wide awake and watching him, her gaze stating quite clearly that the events of the previous night were to be forgotten and never spoken of again.

Twenty years ago, he would have found this sort of thing vastly amusing. Six months ago, he would have laughed and purred that ‘some boys like a challenge.’ He would have thrown himself with enthusiasm into the game of cat and mouse, and he would have enjoyed it immensely. But all of that blowing hot and cold bullshit of refusing to speak to him one moment and fucking him the next; summoning him like a bed slave but scarcely deigning to acknowledge his presence in public: that was a game that he had played for most of his life, and one that he had come to despise. He was tired of it. He was too old for it. He had grown out of it. It was Cersei’s game, and he would never allow anyone to play it with him again. No one. Not even Arya.

_We didn’t make love last night, he thought, we fucked. You wanted to and I needed to, so we fucked, and it was bloody fantastic. But I’m never doing that with you again. Either you want me or you don’t. It’s very simple. And I’m not prepared to wait around for years like some cunt-obsessed fool while you make your mind up about it._

‘You remind me of Cersei when you act this way,’ he said flatly, staring across the fire at Arya and watching her face change. Her beautiful grey eyes were like flint and Valyrian steel, and he was suddenly seized by a dull, paralytic and consuming anger. He did not understand her. He did not understand at all. He despised the memory of Eddard Stark, and would probably spit on his tomb if circumstance ever required him to visit it. He had seen that man’s face in countless waking dreams and nightmares, and when he had been a young man, the judgment in that stare had both angered and tortured him.

_Hating your father doesn’t stop me loving you, he thought, and it certainly doesn’t make me contemplate leaving you. I don’t hate you because of your name. Why can’t you pay me the same fucking courtesy?_

Arya was glaring at him now, and he could see that the comparison with Cersei had both angered and wounded her. Her face was contorted in wrath, her mouth was a grim slash of red, and yet she did not sit up as she stared unflinchingly at him and shot back her response:

‘Don’t you ever say that to me again.’
Tyrion had always prided himself on his sense of humour, but as he watched Cersei scream and claw the air like a madwoman while Varys and Pycelle looked silently and politely on, his mirth deserted him completely, and in a flash, he was no longer the only Lannister in the capital who still knew how to smile. Tyrion’s heart sank. The transition had been coming for a while.

In the weeks after the Red Wedding, Jaime had been as sociable as a rabid squirrel despite Tyrion’s best efforts to calm him down, and though Tyrion was grateful and relieved that his brother was finally out of Cersei’s clutches, he was also a little exasperated that Jaime had chosen to free himself by putting his whole heart in the hands of a child who was too young and inexperienced to know what to do with it.

If only she had been a little older, Tyrion thought, it would have been so much easier for both of them.

And then the royal wedding and all its incumbent inconveniences and humiliations had taken place, and the very thought that he had endured a ridiculous bloody farce of a wedding ceremony, seventy-seven fucking courses, twice as many glasses of wine, ten renditions of the bloody Rains of Castamere, Jaime and Uncle Kevan being as morbid as gods of death and dwarves jousting on bloody pigs only to walk out five minutes before that little shit Joffrey choked on his own sour breath, still made Tyrion grind his teeth in anger. And then Sansa – the foolish, brave, idiotic girl – had vanished and been accused, and Tyrion had spent the first night of her disappearance out of his mind with worry and blissfully unaware of the infinitely more serious worries that were to come.

Cersei, of course, had insisted on being even more dramatic and ridiculous than usual. She had lost no time in ordering that Sansa be ‘hunted down like a dog,’ raped, tortured and executed; and when Arya and Jaime were missed, her anger had been so acute and so frighteningly reminiscent of insanity that it had taken every inch of Tyrion’s cunning to prevent an all-out declaration of war against Casterly Rock. He had then devoted most of his waking hours to pleading, rationalising, shouting and presenting countless different arguments to his sweet sister that all boiled down to the same thing: Sansa was incapable of killing anyone, and had probably chosen the day of the wedding to disappear because of the distraction it would provide; Arya had very likely gone to look for her sister because she didn’t want to lose her last living sibling; Jaime had probably gone after Arya because he was in love with her, not because he had killed the king; ‘and for fuck’s sake,’ Tyrion had eventually shouted, ‘instead of ordering the decapitation of every guard who was on duty that night and wasting precious resources on tracking down two hostages to a cause that is already lost, we should be focussing on the somewhat glaring question of how they got out of the Red Keep in the first place!’

He knew that he was acting with a want of ruthlessness and political-mindedness that would have made his father turn in his grave, but he didn’t particularly care. He was protective of Sansa (and of Arya too, now that Jaime had made it Tyrion’s business to be), so while Cersei ordered the engagement of huge numbers of troops specifically to hunt for them, Tyrion quietly routed those orders; maintaining a large garrison at King’s Landing to defend the capital and significantly reinforcing the Lannister armies still dealing with Stark loyalists in the Riverlands. When it came to the actual tracking-down of three people who could have gone anywhere, he sent a small number of soldiers with the collective intelligence of a village drunk and ensured that the orders he gave them were as vague and confusing as possible. That should make it easy for Jaime to talk his way out of any trouble they encountered, and to do so before Arya took it into her head to start cutting people.
This strategy had worked well for about a week, until it had occurred to Cersei to look into the execution of her orders instead of just giving them, and now, Tyrion sat facing her across the council table, his ears ringing as she ranted, raved and called him a variety of charming things from a traitor to a lily-livered fool.

‘When I order all the troops to be engaged,’ Cersei was shrieking, ‘I expect all the troops to be engaged! I am the Queen Regent!’

‘That is all very well, my dear sweet elder sister,’ Tyrion drawled obsequiously, ‘but if the capital should be attacked in the course of this heroic search, who exactly is going to defend it? I’m sure that you would look very fetching in armour, but even as formidable a woman as the Queen Regent cannot hope to take on an entire army by herself.’

Tyrion cast a sidelong glance at Varys, and saw that he was choking down laughter.

Maybe I’m not so very far gone after all.

‘How can you sit there smiling and joking like an idiot?’ Cersei hissed, ‘my son, your nephew, the King, is dead, and you would have me do nothing?’

‘Of course not,’ Tyrion sighed, ‘but I would have you act constructively, Cersei. The boy choked, and we cannot waste good soldiers on a fruitless search that is bound to fail anyway.’

‘How dare you?’

‘- and that you have only ordered because you want someone to blame!’

‘The search is only bound to fail,’ she growled, the pallor of her face ghastly against the rich black and gold of her mourning gown, ‘because you have made it so by disobeying my orders!’

‘I seriously doubt it, Cersei,’ Tyrion replied in as infuriating a tone as he could muster, ‘wherever the Lady Sansa is, she has come to be there without the notice of our spies. And as for the Lady Arya and our brother, well – I have told you that you haven’t a hope of finding them. Both are experienced in fighting, and in covering their tracks.’

Cersei slammed her fist onto the table, upsetting an inkwell into Pycelle’s lap and completely ignoring his whimpers of indignation and attempts to clean himself up.

‘Do not presume to tell me that that little bitch is Jaime’s equal in fighting experience! The notion is absurd!’

‘True. But she did train with a Faceless Man for four years. That is a unique kind of experience, wouldn’t you say?’

Tyrion smiled to himself. Of course he did not know this for sure – he had only made the connection through what Jaime had told him about Arya’s life – but the statement served its purpose of frightening Cersei well enough, for she promptly cleared her throat and changed the subject.

‘Our spies have failed us somewhat spectacularly, Lord Varys,’ Cersei seethed, her eyes bright like the wildfire still smouldering in the depths of Blackwater Bay, ‘you command more spies than the rest of the world combined, can you really tell me you have no idea where any of these traitors are?’

‘We are trying, Your Grace,’ Varys tittered reassuringly.

‘Try harder!’ Cersei snapped, and Tyrion felt his stomach clench at the obvious pleasure his sister
took in the way that Varys obediently inclined his head.

Pathetic.

Cersei turned her attention to Tyrion again.

‘As for you, brother,’ she commanded, ‘you will pull troops out of the capital and the Riverlands and put them to searching for our three fugitives. We cannot allow the King to die and do nothing.’

Tyrion found himself growing angry at her stupidity; at her willingness to compromise the safety of the capital, and of their new King in the name of this…trivia. His sister’s eyes were red, her face was ghastly, and he was sure that her mind was suffering from lack of sleep. Nevertheless, he found himself incapable of being gentle with her. Tommen had been crowned two days ago, and the poor, innocent lad was already an unknowing pawn in a tug-of-war between his mother and Margaery Tyrell as to which of them should exercise the most control over him. To add insult to injury, Cersei seemed determined to weaken her cause as much as possible by continually humiliating and upbraiding the boy in public, and making comparisons with Joffrey that bordered on the fantastical. At this point, the poor boy’s self-esteem would be in ruins within weeks, and though Tyrion appreciated the political advantages of alienating Tommen from his mother, he did not much like the idea of mourning one child by destroying another. There were far too many people already seeking to manipulate the boy’s youth and inexperience. Tommen needed a Hand who sought to protect rather than manipulate him, and Tyrion was not prepared to sacrifice that duty by leaving King’s Landing undefended.

‘I will send no troops, either from King’s Landing or the Riverlands,’ Tyrion declared, ‘we cannot spare them for this nonsense.’

‘I gave you an order!’ Cersei half-proclaimed, half-shrieked.

‘My duty is to the King above all else!’ Tyrion roared, ‘and the King is an eleven-year-old boy who likes to play with kittens! He needs to be protected, both by me and by you, and I will not place his safety in jeopardy simply because Jaime no longer finds that hole between your legs attractive!’

Cersei leapt to her feet.

‘Out! All of you out!’ she shouted, her face contorting horribly as Varys and Pycelle cleared the room with prodigious speed and left Cersei and Tyrion alone.

Cersei breathed raggedly as she bent over the table, clearly trying to maintain some vestige of self-control.

‘I allow you to impose your vulgarities on me in private for the sake of the mother that bore us,’ she spat, ‘but if you ever speak to me in such a way before the council again, I’ll have your tongue cut out.’

Tyrion folded his arms and glared at her, unimpressed and unafraid.

‘Forgive me, sweet sister,’ he said simply, ‘I become so very vulgar when I’m telling the truth.’

Tyrion studied Cersei as she slumped back into her chair, grief and betrayal and desperation branding her face like fire. The transition from Joffrey’s reign to Tommen’s had been astoundingly smooth. At the funeral, there had been no outpouring of grief beyond the traditional courtesies. Even Joffrey’s siblings had been hauntingly quiet; Tommen visibly trying to choke down his tears and not disappoint his mother; Myrcella staring straight ahead of her and snapping at anyone that spoke to her, her jaw tightening just as Jaime’s did each time he was overcome with emotion. But apart from
that, there had been no sign that anyone mourned the little shit at all.

Tyrion could not imagine the loneliness and isolation that Cersei must feel: to have lost her son; to have lost someone that meant everything to her and to have the rest of the world delighted by, or worse, indifferent to, her loss. The anguish of it must be crippling. And yet he could not pity her. He was past that.

He could tell by the look on her face that his insults had made her think of Jaime. Her expression always bore a certain contentment or reassurance whenever her twin was in her thoughts, even if she was angry with him. He remembered how close his siblings had been as children; and how estranged they were now, but he could not pity her that loss either. It had all been her own doing.

Cersei was smirking dreamily into the distance, and her face was triumphant.

‘I cannot believe that I once loved that wretch,’ she said, in a tone of detached wonder.

Tyrion snorted contemptuously.

‘Oh be serious, Cersei. You did a great many things to Jaime across a great number of years, but loving him was not one of them.’

Cersei glared ferociously at him, and Tyrion almost laughed aloud at her presumption. She still couldn’t admit it. Not even to herself.

‘Have you suffered a loss of memory at some point in your life, sweet sister?’ Tyrion demanded coldly, ‘have you forgotten the tedious games that you would play with your silly little friends; all the squabbling they would do about ‘I’m going to marry Jaime! No, me!’, as though he were a horse at auction, while you’d sit there dreaming so very vocally about Rhaegar Targaryen and how beautiful your children would be; lion and dragon, silver and gold, united forever?’

‘I’m sure you’ll make your point eventually,’ Cersei snapped.

‘You always had other options and possibilities in your pretty little head,’ Tyrion snarled, enunciating every syllable in as cruel as manner as he could, ‘but Jaime never did. He wanted nothing but you. He couldn’t countenance being with anyone but you. And you loved that, of course. But don’t you insult both him and me by telling me that you loved him. You loved having a killing machine that you could send off to murder whoever you wanted dead, you loved fucking him because it was the closest thing to fucking yourself that existed, and you loved fucking Robert over every time Jaime looked at you, because it reminded you that all your children were his. And then when our brother needed you the most; when his entire life was destroyed in one night; you cast him off like some filthy dog for doing nothing more terrible than changing; nothing more awful than having the audacity to want to make his own decisions. So don’t you dare tell me that you loved him. You’ve never loved anyone but yourself.’

Cersei’s eyes were tightly closed; two semi-circles of red in a ghastly, icy-white face; and her fingers were gripping the table hard as her nails dug into the wood. She looked broken and half-alive; the loss of Joffrey howling out of every pore in her skin; and for just a moment, Tyrion saw a mother desolately mourning her child rather than a woman he had hated for most of his life. He felt that he ought to say something to comfort or calm her, if only in the interests of minimising her interference in state affairs (nothing else), but when he opened his mouth and spoke her name, her eyes flickered open and their vivid emerald green was brimming over with hate.

‘Get…out,’ she rasped.
Tyrion slid off his chair and approached the double doors, pausing as a strangled sob tore out of his sister’s chest and into the silence. Despite his better judgment, he turned once again to face her; to say something, anything; but her voice cracked sharply like a horse whip and the hatred in it was like poison.

‘Get…out.’
As they entered the Westerlands, the terrain became mountainous; and with the mountains came the rain. It shimmered and crashed down to earth in veils of silk and iron; turning the peaks into towers of deep green and blue while the mist swirled comfortingly around them; their iron becoming freezing warmth.

The weather did not provide much opportunity for conversation, and Arya was glad of it; not because she feared arguing, but because she feared the absence of bitterness and anger that had come to define the way Jaime spoke to her. She deserved bitterness and anger. Perhaps she wanted them.

The morning after they had…tears still came to her eyes just thinking about what she had done…she had stared across the fire at Jaime and watched his face change in understanding of their apartness. The heat of his mouth and the scent of his body still throbbed like fire all over hers; she could still feel herself gasping and crying out as his fingers fucked her harder; and she had been trying to think of something else; anything else; when Jaime had said, quite clearly, ‘you remind me of Cersei when you act like this.’

She remembered glaring at him for what had felt like an eternity while horror clawed its way through her chest and up into her throat, and she had snapped something at him…or perhaps she hadn’t. But then she had heard the unmistakable sounds of a hunting party nearby, and she had darted off into the trees to steal a horse; almost glad of the opportunity to run away from him for just a little while.

They did not speak of what they had done, or of what he had said, again, but the worst thing, the absolute worst thing, was the way that Jaime treated her after that night: not bitterly, not angrily, but kindly. He treated her like a knight escorting some stupid lady to a tournament: with perfect grace, courtesy, solicitousness, sincere kindness…and distance. It was like he had reverted to something that he’d been taught in his childhood; something that he’d been taught so well that he no longer thought about it: his courtesies. ‘A lady’s courtesies are her armour,’ Sansa had said. Well. Arya didn’t care if lords used stupid courtesies for the same purpose; Jaime was the most discourteous person she’d ever had the misfortune to meet, and listening to him engaging in small talk instead of his usual insults was both tedious and devastating. She would have felt infinitely better if he had simply called her a whore and a bitch instead of pretending that he felt otherwise. True, comparing her to Cersei was the next best thing, but why act as though he had never said it; as though he hadn’t meant it; as though she didn’t deserve it? Each time he turned towards her, she could see the bite marks on his throat from where she had kissed him a little too enthusiastically, and looking at them made her feel horrible. She had branded him like a possession.

The worst thing about this courteous treatment of her, another worst thing in a butchery of worst things, was that he didn’t seem to realise he was doing it. When it had first started to rain, he had insisted that she wear his spare cloak; a glorious, all-encompassing blanket of black wool and warmth that was far too big for her, and though she had mumbled something about the average day
in Harrenhal being much colder than this, he had draped it over her shoulders in a thoroughly avuncular manner, and told her not to be foolish. On the rare occasions that the rain wasn’t sheeting down in floods, he would ask her polite questions about Winterfell, her life in the North, her preferences when it came to horses and books and music; and he always wanted to know if she was warm enough or if she felt poorly. He even called her ‘Lady Arya’ instead of ‘Stark.’ She hated it. She hated all of it. It was the worst punishment that he could have come up with. It was like talking to a mask.

And then there was the question of the cold. On their first night in the Westerlands, they had narrowly escaped freezing to death. Nevertheless, it was only when Arya had awoken the next morning with icicles in her hair and the beginnings of frostbite in her right hand that they had made a largely-unspoken accord to sleep huddled close together for warmth; something that they would always initiate in as chaste a manner as possible, but that would inevitably end with Arya awakening the next morning to the feeling of Jaime’s nose buried deep in her hair and his cock grinding into her buttocks. The first time it had happened she had gotten up immediately and run into the woods to make water. Each time it had happened after that she would simply close her eyes again and wait for Jaime to wake up first; taking comfort in the fact that the real Jaime was still in there somewhere.

She grew to be afraid of her own mind, and of her memories, because she could not hide from them when he was with her; even like this. They resembled a slipstream lurking just below her consciousness that would pull her into it and drown her each time she failed to concentrate on the here and now. But she could not concentrate on the here and now, because she was so much in her mind that she could no longer countenance why she had a body at all. Her head would become unbearably heavy, and it was only the thought of Jaime once again asking her if she felt poorly that prevented her from leaning forward and sleeping against her horse’s neck. Her eyes and throat burned constantly from the threat of tears, and they would spill silently over onto her face each time the slipstream pulled her down into its depths: Tywin smiling softly and murmuring ‘you resemble her,’ a nightmare vision of thousands of black rats tearing flesh from Mother, Robb and Sansa’s bodies while Arya slipped in the blood on the floor and screamed and couldn’t help them, Jaime kneeling beside her on her chamber floor, cradling her prostrate form against his chest and murmuring ‘I am so sorry, my love,’ Bran and Rickon screaming as their beautiful young flesh burned and charred like firewood, the sound, that sound of the blade coming down before the Great Sept of Baelor, a sound that she would never forget as long as she lived, and Yoren’s fingers digging painfully into her skin as she bellowed at him to let her go and Joffrey, that little fuck, clawing at the front of his doublet and choking on his own vomit, and ‘the revenge you want will be yours in time,’ and then…nothing. Nothing had changed. She had had her revenge and it hadn’t changed a fucking thing, it hadn’t made her feel better; why hadn’t it, how couldn’t it, how long could it go on, how long can it go on, do I have to die myself before it will end?

Jaqen had taught her every weak spot in the human body. All she would need to do was open a vein one night and let her life bleed out of her. Her slaughtered pack would leave her in peace, then, and so would guilt, and love, or was it the same thing; Father and Jaime facing each other across the throne room while the Mad King lay dead in a pool of his blood, hating each other, not knowing each other, not knowing that one day, she would exist, and love each of them for reasons that the other could not see.

Why didn’t Jaime tell anyone? she thought, why didn’t he?

On the sixth day, the country began to flatten again, and by the seventh, they were staring out across the plains beneath Casterly Rock. It was the most colossal thing that Arya had ever seen; greater even than Harrenhal because it was alive, especially by night; every blazing window seeming to pierce the dark sea below as the smell of salt filled her mouth; raw, and delicious.
‘I still think this is a bad idea,’ Arya remarked coldly, the night as dark as her stupid borrowed cloak.

‘My uncle will almost certainly have news from the capital,’ Jaime replied with equal aloofness.

Arya glared at him.

‘We can get that same news just as easily at the local tavern, and at a far lesser risk.’

Jaime did not glare back at her.

‘There is little or no danger. I’ve told him to use the Lord’s solar.’

Arya rolled her eyes. She’d already taken a considerable risk by riding round to the servant’s entrance earlier that day with a message for Ser Kevan; and choosing one meeting place over another did not convince her that another such risk was at all justified.

‘Does the Lord’s solar have some magical ability to escape being spied upon?’ Arya snorted provocatively.

‘Yes, in a way,’ Jaime replied breezily, still not rising to the bait, ‘the rooms above it, below it and on either side of it, are filled with sand.’

‘Clever. Whose idea was that?’

‘My father’s.’

Of course it was.

‘I still don’t think this is safe,’ she insisted.

‘You are welcome, of course, to remain here,’ he replied, inclining his head respectfully, ‘I’ll be back as soon as I can.’

Arya watched him go, tempted to throw a knife at his back. But he hadn’t galloped ten yards before she followed him, grinding her teeth and growling to herself.

‘You’re a stupid little fool.’

‘I hope you two realise what an incredibly stupid thing you’ve done in coming here,’ Kevan declared, taking in the sight of the two travelers standing side by side on the hearth rug.

He knew Jaime well enough to believe him capable of any kind of recklessness, but he was disappointed in Lady Arya. He had never met the girl himself, but Tywin had always assured him that she was made of more sensible stuff than most people. His first instinct, therefore, was to glare at her in disapproval, but he found his glare softening somewhat as he took in the undisguised misery and dejectedness of her demeanour.

The girl swiftly sensed his gaze, and glared fearlessly back at him.

‘Don’t look at me, Ser,’ she said blandly, glancing sideways at Jaime, ‘there was absolutely nothing I could do.’
‘You’d better sit down, then,’ Kevan invited, warily observing the stubborn determination on Jaime’s face as they all took their seats.

‘What news from the capital, Uncle?’ Jaime asked.

‘Tell me you didn’t take such an enormous risk just to ask me that?’ Kevan inquired in disbelief, once again looking instinctively at Lady Arya for confirmation of this insanity.

When the girl simply shrugged in reply, he almost smiled at how well she knew his nephew’s stubbornness.

Then he remembered that he was meant to be answering a question.

‘I’ve been in almost daily correspondence with your brother,’ Kevan said, ‘and the things he tells me are quite alarming. Cersei is constantly engaging vastly unrealistic numbers of troops to search both for you and for the Lady Sansa, whom she persists in blaming for Joffrey’s death. Tyrion is stalling her as best he can, but he might not be able to do so forever. The other day he had to talk her out of declaring war on Casterly Rock.’

Jaime snorted.

‘I only wish she would declare war.’

‘Don’t be such a child, Jaime,’ Kevan snapped in reply, ‘the last thing we need is more war.’

His nephew had the good grace to look ashamed of himself before continuing.

‘I don’t suppose my sweet sister has the slightest idea where Sansa is?’

‘No. Wherever the girl is, she has covered her tracks uncommonly well.’

Jaime shifted slightly in his chair, glanced sideways at Lady Arya, who stubbornly persisted in examining the opposite wall, and cleared his throat.

‘We’re going –’

‘Do not– tell me where you are going,’ Kevan interjected crossly, ‘I do not wish to know.’

‘Of course not, Uncle, forgive me,’ Jaime replied, looking both harassed and annoyed, ‘sneaking around like a common foot soldier is relatively new to me. Is there any other news that we ought to know about?’

Kevan noted, with some concern, that Lady Arya was leaning heavily on the arm of her chair; her eyes tightly closed and her fingers digging into her hair. He also remembered that his wife sometimes did the same when she was about to burst into tears, and he began to feel worried.

‘Tyrion,’ Kevan said, trying to turn his mind back to the discussion at hand, ‘has deployed increasingly large numbers of troops to deal with the siege of Riverrun, which seems to have descended into absolute chaos despite Cousin Daven’s best efforts. The Frey troops and the Stark loyalists seem to be engaged in some sort of competition as to who can make the biggest fools of themselves. The scores are far from even.’

The poor child really does look quite awful, Kevan thought, once again glancing at Lady Arya, her body is here, but her mind is elsewhere.

Jaime was attempting to remedy the girl’s detachment by making idiotic and characteristically vague
observations about the family tree.

‘Ser Daven Lannister is my cousin, Lady Arya,’ his nephew said unhelpfully.

‘I know who he is…Ser Jaime,’ she remarked in return, her voice clipped and hollow.

Kevan stared at them in bewilderment.

_Lady Arya? Ser Jaime? What in seven hells is going on?_

Kevan already knew, thanks to Tyrion, that the girl had broken off their engagement some time ago (for obvious reasons), but he had thought that chasing off together after Lady Sansa represented at least some renewal of their understanding. When they had entered the room and taken their seats, he had _still_ thought it, because everything about their demeanour suggested it. Each looked first to the other before moving at all; each seeming to act as anchor to the other. But then Jaime had begun to speak, and Kevan had begun to speak, and the girl had persisted in saying nothing; and Kevan had observed the looking at each other and the not looking at each other, the brightness and the sadness, the reaching out and the pushing away. And even then he had not been _overly_ concerned. Lovers fought. It was a fact of life, _and_ it was in the family. Jaime was his mother’s son in a great many ways, and Kevan had never known Joanna to be capable of having anything resembling a conversation with Tywin without transforming it into an argument of some sort.

But then that unnatural difference of address occurred; the almost cruelly-enunciated ‘Lady Arya’ and ‘Ser Jaime,’ and Kevan knew that something had happened; something infinitely more serious than a bad fight. His nephew was hiding behind a wall of courtesy, and Lady Arya was hiding behind anything that she could pull in front of her.

_Don’t interfere, old man. This is none of your business._

‘I’d recommend that you give Riverrun a wide berth if you want to avoid getting into trouble,’ Kevan told Jaime, breaking the silence in as obviously jovial a tone as he could, ‘as Warden of the West you’ll almost certainly be roped into the dispute and that’s only if you don’t get arrested.’

‘Who commands the Tully armies at Riverrun?’ Jaime asked, with equal obviousness.

‘The Blackfish is their commander,’ Kevan replied, ‘apparently it’s become a daily ritual for him to stand laughing on the walls while we half-heartedly threaten to speed up Edmure Tully’s departure from this world.’

‘How very disobliging of him,’ Jaime laughed coldly.

‘I only met Uncle Edmure once,’ Lady Arya added blandly, ‘and even I understand the impulse. He’s fearfully dull.’

‘Lady Stark,’ Kevan chided, ‘please do not speak ill of your own blood; it makes me so very low.’

The girl shrugged with an admirable lack of emotion and took to examining the ceiling with far more interest than it deserved; her fingers gripping the arms of her chair, and the position of her head not quite succeeding in hiding the fact that she was fighting back tears. Kevan noted that his nephew was taking special care not to look at her, and decided to intervene immediately.

‘Jaime,’ Kevan remarked, ‘the men have just completed work on your lord father’s sarcophagus in the Hall of Heroes.’

Jaime looked at him blankly.
‘Perhaps you would care to pay your respects while I have a word with Lady Stark?’ Kevan continued.

‘Why in seven hells would I want to see the old bastard’s sarcophagus at this time of night?’ Jaime demanded.

‘Get out, Jaime.’

‘Yes, Uncle.’

Kevan smiled fondly as Jaime grudgingly left the room and banged the door behind him.

‘I trust that you are well, my lady,’ he began tentatively.

‘Perfectly well, I thank you, Ser Kevan,’ she replied with admirable composure and politeness, even making a concerted effort to look him in the eye, ‘how are you?’

No sooner had she met his eyes that she looked desperately down into her lap again; her hands clasping cruelly together like iron.

‘My dear,’ Kevan said kindly, trying hard not to sound patronising, ‘please do not take this the wrong way, but you look so...unhappy.’

The girl looked up at him, the grief in her large grey eyes unbearable to look upon. She tried to speak several times; opening her mouth and closing it again with obvious difficulty, but no words came out, and for a while there was silence between them as Kevan watched her try to formulate a response, or decide whether she wanted to give one at all.

She burst into tears instead of doing either.

It happened so abruptly and with such fervour that Kevan felt himself jump in surprise, but the shock left him as he watched her bend almost double and cry and cry and cry without trying to stop herself; and when he crossed the room and put a tentative arm around her, she only cried harder, sobbing against his chest as though she would never stop again. The feeling of her tears was horrific; like shaking sickness, only worse, because she was so miserable and so horribly thin that the mere act of holding her made him want to sob. The pain that came tearing out of her young voice was indescribable; unholy, unnatural, un-right; not right for a person so young. Her sobs soon became cries, then wails, then howls; and soon she was screaming her heart out as she cried, while Kevan shushed her and rocked her and did not even bother asking what the matter was, because the answer was so obvious it was painful.

Then she began to talk, rapidly and painfully, and he held her as she babbled; trying to say as little as possible.

‘It hurts,’ Arya sobbed, ‘it hurts, it hurts, it hurts so much; I can see them, I can see them standing around me and judging me and hating me, and –’

‘Whom do you mean, child?’ Kevan interrupted.

‘My pack, my pack...’ she cried, and descended into another fit of crying while Kevan thought of Tywin and cursed him to the seven hells for causing this.

‘Every time I close my eyes, I see them,’ Arya wept, ‘I see them hating me and wanting me dead, and sometimes I want to be dead myself if it would just –’
‘My dear, they are your family,’ Kevan interjected as gently as he could, shocked that she could think such a thing, ‘they would never hate you or wish you dead –’

‘Oh yes they would; oh yes they bloody would; because that’s what I would do if I was dead in the ground with them, if I had a daughter like me; someone who could just forget them and move on because of…what? Of course they hate me! They hate me because the North remembers, the North remembers.’

Kevan was horrified by the depth of the hatred that pulsed through her voice, by the depth of her hatred of herself; and by the way she spoke of the Starks as though they were alive and beside her; beside her and tormenting her rather than comforting her.

‘I tried to stop it,’ Arya was sobbing, holding him so tightly that she hurt him, ‘I tried to fix it, I did; I did; I sent him away because I couldn’t stay with him after that; I couldn’t after all that death, I…I saw no one but Tywin each time I looked at him; or even at myself, you do believe me, don’t you?’

‘Of course I do,’ Kevan said reassuringly.

Seven hells she is a child; what is Jaime thinking of?

‘– but then I allowed him to come with me,’ she continued, her voice becoming muffled as she pressed her face into his doublet, ‘I allowed him to come with me anyway when I shouldn’t have; I shouldn’t have because he can’t fight with his hand and because of everything. But he was so bloody stubborn – he is bloody stubborn, don’t you think?’

‘I certainly do.’

‘ - but I thought that it would work, that I could deal with it, that I was strong, that I could go away inside, that my family would make me strong if I wasn’t, and do you know what happened? I fucked Jaime before twenty-four hours had passed, and I let him fuck me when I knew that it was wrong, and I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it…’

‘Of course you did, my dear,’ Kevan whispered, holding her tighter, ‘you love him.’

Once again her sobs became like screams against his chest, and he felt her nodding desperately and mumbling something inaudible about Cersei as her anguish seemed to pierce every inch of her from the inside out; each needle of it growing sharper and more painful in its desire to escape, and making her cry harder and more desperately as years and years of sadness came tearing out of her and turning her red as blood; like the voice of every friendless orphan created by this miserable war.

Kevan could not tell how long they sat there, but eventually, minute by shivering minute, he felt her quietening down and growing still as the numbness took over; the detachment; the disbelief that always came after tears.

‘I hate him,’ she whispered.

‘Jaime?’

‘Tywin.’

Kevan sighed in relief; his chest aching as he once again remembered that his brother was gone.

‘I am incapable of blaming you for that, child,’ he said.

The girl’s voice was hoarse as she continued to speak.
'How could he do...how could he let...how could he be everything...how could he give me so much...and then take everything away?'

'Tywin spent most of his life doing awful things to the people he loved,' Kevan murmured.

_I miss him._

‘That’s...horrible,’ the girl mumbled.

‘The best part of him died when Joanna did,’ Kevan replied, ‘after that, he had no one to tell him no; no one to tell him enough.’

He felt her tense up in anger.

‘I am in no way attempting to justify the horror he has inflicted on your House, my dear,’ Kevan said calmly, trying to soothe her wrath before it emerged, ‘only to tell you that in spite of what he has done, his regard for you was no act.’

‘Wasn’t it?’

_There is hope in her voice, _Kevan realised, _if I ever meet Tywin in the afterlife, I’ll kill him again for this._

‘It certainly wasn’t,’ he continued, ‘if anything, it was rather infuriating. ‘The girl says this, the girl says the other, the girl is rather bright, you know.’”

She gave a small laugh, which he took as an invitation to continue.

‘I know that telling you this will be scant comfort now,’ Kevan said, ‘I only do so because I know, I really do know, that in time, the knowledge will lessen the agony of what you feel.’

She gave a strangled sob.

‘I can’t feel...anything...anymore.’

‘On the contrary; you feel too much. It is very easy to confuse the two.’

Arya sniffled slightly, and pulled gently away from him, wiping her eyes and colouring in embarrassment.

‘I’m sorry for this,’ she mumbled, ‘for being so stupid; I don’t even know you - ’

‘I have four children, my dear,’ Kevan replied breezily, ‘my youngest is six. I’m used to it.’

The girl gave him a small smile that was vastly appealing by virtue of its obvious rarity.

_I can see what Jaime sees in her._

‘On that note,’ Kevan continued gravely, carefully enunciating each of his words so that she wouldn’t forget them, ‘I can tell you that no parent on earth is capable of despising their own child, or of wishing unhappiness or death upon them. Ever. Not under any circumstances. Parents want their children to be happy. When you have children of your own, you’ll understand.’

‘Ser Kevan, I’m not going to have children,’ Arya sniffled.

‘Of course not,’ Kevan agreed, trying hard not to smile, ‘my mistake. But please take a moment to
think about what I have told you. Because neither Jaime, nor yourself, had any part to play in the Red Wedding, or in the fall of your House. Neither of you is guilty of anything.’

‘But –’

‘The Red Wedding; the fate of your House…both these things are testaments: testaments to the fact that we live in a ghastly world. Do you not agree?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Then you’ll also agree that being happy in spite of the general ghastliness of things is a rare and prodigious achievement.’

‘Yes, but –’

‘Good. Now listen to me. No parent, alive or dead, would wish such happiness away from their own child because of an unfortunate accident of birth.’

The girl was regarding him with a respectful kind of ridicule.

‘That’s all very pretty, Ser Kevan,’ she said, ‘I didn’t know it was possible to be a Lannister and an idealist. Thousands of parents hurt their children every day. Parents beat their children. They sell them. They rape them. Sometimes they eat them.’

‘Did your parents commit any such atrocities?’

‘No. But being happy doesn’t make me any less of a traitor to…to the memory of my family and the memory my House.’

‘That would only be true if you were in love with Tywin, my dear. Which I sincerely hope was not the case. I won’t deny that the old bastard was still uncommonly attractive for his age, but –’

‘Ser Kevan!’

The girl was smiling at him now, but he could tell that he had not convinced her.

*Give it time. Give her time to think.*

‘Will you be alright?’ he asked, with genuine concern.

‘Yes,’ she nodded, her head bobbing up and down, ‘and thank you…thanks for…’

Kevan took her hand and squeezed it.

‘Don’t mention it, child,’ he said matter-of-factly, suddenly embarrassed, ‘now. I advise that you fetch my nephew from the Hall of Heroes and get as far away from here as possible. Varys’ little birds will not sleep forever.’

She stood up and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

‘How do I get there?’

‘Straight to the bottom of the grand staircase and through the intimidating-looking door.’

‘Right…thank you,’
She paused for a moment more, then walked to the door and opened it. Every step she took looked like an agony.

‘Arya.’

She stopped, and turned to face him.

‘Yes?’

‘You said you fucked Jaime when you knew that it was wrong.’

She blushed, but didn’t reply.

He continued.

‘Fucking is only wrong where there is no love.’

She looked at him for a long moment…and closed the door behind her.

The Hall of Heroes was immense, rising up from marble floors to a distant stone ceiling painted with scenes that were impossible to identify with the dark and the space in the way. Arya could not see where the Hall ended, the rows and rows of tombs seeming to stretch out forever and disappear into the black, and though the room did not remotely resemble the humidity and the cold of the crypts beneath Winterfell, its opposite-ness was comforting. All that space above her, all that air: it made her feel tiny and insignificant as the dust beneath her feet, and the sensation was very pleasing. There was comfort in being so small: it made one’s own fears and griefs seem miniscule and unimportant; diminutive in the face of all that space and air; that freedom.

She found Jaime sitting on his haunches in front of a sarcophagus as rigid and austere as its occupant. It stood like an insult among the elaborately-carved sepulchers that surrounded it: a simple block of pristine white marble, unmarked and undecorated.

*Only jesters and singers require applause.*

Jaime did not move, or turn around as she approached him from behind, and when she laid a reluctant hand on his shoulder, he jumped, as though he hadn’t heard her at all.

‘Sorry,’ Arya mumbled.

He didn’t shrug her hand away.

‘I don’t feel anything, Stark,’ Jaime said, ‘is that normal?’

The joy she felt at his words was preposterous. He had called her Stark.

Her hand slipped off his shoulder as he rose to his feet and faced her, the bones of his face sharp and beautiful in the half-light.

‘You’ve been crying,’ he observed softly.

‘Just a bit,’ she responded, trying to sound as unaffected as possible.
There was silence, but it was comfortable rather than awkward. He was looking at her plainly and without pretense, as though the past week of smoke, mirrors and knightly masks had never taken place. She was terrified to move, or even to speak, in case her words made him lock himself up again.

Jaime gestured faintly to the tomb behind him.

‘Do you want to –’

‘No.’

_Someday, maybe. But no. I can’t now._

She couldn’t look at his face, so she looked at his throat instead, her eyes falling on the place where she had bitten him in her passion.

Guilt twisted her stomach as she reached out and touched him there.

‘I’m sorry I marked you like I owned you.’

Jaime stared at her.

‘You’re sorry for what?’

 Arya’s stomach churned. Was he being stupid on purpose?

‘I’m sorry for acting like I owned you,’ she repeated, prodding the bite marks with her index finger.

‘Are you apologising for biting me?’ Jaime asked, looking thoroughly amused.

‘Yes,’ Arya persisted, hating him, ‘and for being like – ’

Jaime folded his arms and cut her off.

‘I don’t think I can accept your apology, Stark,’ he muttered gravely.

Her heart sank horribly.

‘Oh.’

‘Not when I enjoyed it so much.’

She stared at him, and watched in fury as he bit on his lip to keep from smiling.

‘You bastard!’ she exclaimed, punching him in one shoulder, and then in the other when he responded by bursting out laughing.

She stood pouting and glowering at him as he guffawed, cursing how disarmingly and ethereally beautiful the smug, irritating son of a bitch could be when he put his mind to it, and she thought of the past week, and the armour and the mask and _I’ve missed him I’ve missed him I’ve missed him so much._

‘I missed you too, Stark,’ Jaime said nonchalantly, ‘may all the gods help me. Now let’s go before we wake up Varys’ little birds. I find that being home does not appeal to me.’

He took hold of her shoulder, spun her around and pushed her, and as they walked away into the
dark, bickering every step of the way, Arya realised that she hadn’t once said ‘I missed you’ out loud.

He’d known that she was thinking it.
‘I still don’t think we’re lost, Stark,’ Jaime said, gazing up into the branches of the oak.

‘I’m not the one who forgot to bring a map!’ came the characteristically testy reply from above.

Jaime didn’t think that that was entirely fair.

‘You could also have brought a map!’

‘I wasn’t thinking about stupid maps!’

‘Neither was I,’ Jaime grumbled, stalking away from the bloody tree and leaving her to waste time in it for as long as she wanted.

_Teenagers._

They were loitering on the edge of a river that stood a reasonably good chance of turning out to be the Trident, but the thrice-damned thing was so dangerously in flood from all the rain that he couldn’t be entirely sure. The uncertainty of this caused Jaime very little concern. They had left the Westerlands days ago, which meant that unless they had somehow managed to ride an extra thousand leagues without noticing, they were deep into the Riverlands and only had to pick a river and follow it east. But Arya was having none of it, and he was beginning to feel annoyed.

‘For fuck’s sake, Stark, it’s the bloody Red Fork; would you please come down so we can move?’

‘It is not the Red Fork!’ Arya shouted back, and made no move to come down.

Jaime rolled his eyes and flopped down on the river bank; stretching his long legs out in front of him and staring detachedly at his stump. Sometimes in the past, he had been unable to tell what was irritating him more: it or Arya. Today, however, he had no such problem. The little wolf’s sudden obsession with the idea that they were lost had made her even less amenable than usual, and something told him that if he hadn’t insisted on going to Casterly Rock, ostensibly to ask Uncle Kevan for ‘news,’ she would have been more inclined to trust his judgment in the matter.

The impulse to return to the Rock had seized Jaime shortly after telling Arya ‘you remind me of Cersei when you act like this.’

When those words had come tearing out of him, he had meant every one of them. He had wanted to hurt her and to see her in agony; he had wanted to cause her pain because of the pain that she was causing him; and when he had observed the resulting suffering on her face he had determined, then and there, that he would do more than just distance himself for the rest of the journey: he would not speak to her at all. It would hurt him, but it would hurt her more. _That_ had been his first instinct. It had always been his first instinct…with Cersei.
But his silence hadn’t lasted very long, of course, because he didn’t really want to hurt her. He never had. But he kept to the distance that he had promised himself. He couldn’t pretend to be her friend, or her brother. The idea was absurd to him; an impossibility.

*Either we can be everything to each other or nothing at all. Anything in between would be a lie - and I am done with lies.*

He was done with lies, but he was evidently not done with secrets, because in the place deep inside him where he kept Ned Stark glaring wordlessly at him while the Mad King lay dead; where he kept Queen Rhaella’s screams as her husband ravaged her; where he kept the look on Tyrion’s face as Father commanded him to bend over and rape his own wife…it was there that Jaime knew and denied and forbade and refused to accept that he was afraid; horribly afraid. All that he had ever known of love had been Cersei; Cersei…and slavery. So when he and Arya had set out again; silent, awkward, and unspeaking, Jaime’s courtesies had come pouring out of him instead of his real voice, because they were the only means by which he could speak to her, without hurting her and without being afraid of himself.

Because the events of that night…they had frightened him. Even now, he would swear that he had not intended to lay a finger on her. He wouldn’t have touched her at all if the bloody Mad King hadn’t decided to put in a rather more vivid appearance than usual. But as Arya had sat facing him while the words came wrenching out of his mouth like knives from a wound, he had watched the sadness, and then the depth of the anger on her face, and he had seen himself. He had seen his every thought about the day he became the Kingslayer as it crashed right through her; every thought that he had ever acknowledged and every thought that he had ever denied; every dream; every nightmare; every memory. Her grey eyes had come alive with it; and as she had sat there chastising him and calling him a bloody fool, her body had come alive with it too. And even as he had reached for her and yanked her roughly against him, a subtle, infinitesimal part of him had been afraid by the depth of what he had felt; by the wildness and the longing and the despair with which he had wanted every part of her; every part of her body that was a different, intangible trace of *her*; of her her-ness, her Arya-ness; of the entity he loved that had no form at all, only mind and heart and colour…and red. If Arya were a colour, she’d be red.

*What nonsense,* he thought, burying his face in his hands, *what absolute nonsense.*

But nonsensical as it was, it was what he felt and what he believed…and what he feared would once again make him a slave and a murderer of himself. Yes, Arya had treated him like a slave that night, but only because she was so fucking young. She had so little experience that the thought probably hadn’t even entered her stubborn little head.

He did not think that Arya would want or demand unquestioning and slavish devotion from him. But he did fear that he would demand it of himself. He had already done it once before. The tendency and the weakness were in him, and knowing it did not make him fear it less. Then for some reason that he still failed to understand, the realisation had made him want to go home.

Jaime had never been overly-attached to Casterly Rock – Father had made sure of that – but he had nevertheless felt a kind of reassurance in the idea of being within its walls; a feeling that going there would reveal to him what he was meant to do, both for himself and for this miserable fucking situation that he was voluntarily trapped in.

At first, nothing much of import had happened at all. Seeing his uncle had been pleasant enough, as had the sound of the waves crashing against the cliffs below the Rock. But then he had gone to the Hall of Heroes, and he had felt nothing at all. He had sat on his haunches before his father’s tomb, surrounded by the glorious dead of his House, and he had seen nothing more significant than a block
of marble among other blocks of marble. The desolation of that emptiness had been excruciating. How could it exist in one part of him, when all the others were groaning in agony under the weight of countless emotions, most of which he could not even name?

But when Arya had put her hand on his shoulder, the void had been filled up with hatred for his father, and for the merciless cruelty of his last will and testament: the will that had predicted that Jaime would leave the Kingsguard; that had made him the Lord of Casterly Rock, and Arya a Lannister heiress. And the will, the iron will, that had planned the slaughter of the Starks while loving one of them like a daughter; doing the best for his fucking House no matter what he felt. Jaime still wondered how his father could have done it.

To realise something that we did not yet realise ourselves, to take such a risk on a whim, to bring us together like that…and then to take everything away. How could he have done it?

So when Arya had touched his shoulder, Jaime had risen to his feet fully intending to ask her whether she wanted to make love right on top of the old bastard’s sarcophagus and send him a hearty ‘fuck you’ from the world of the living. Then he had seen her face, and the impulse had left him as quickly as it had come.

If we somehow survive this mess, and decide not to be parted; if we marry and have a family and decide to fight like lunatics until the day that we eventually do kill each other…we’ll decide it for ourselves. Not because some bitter old man thought it was a good idea. Not because he made it easy for us.

A light flumpf on the grass behind him announced Arya’s exit from the branches of the tree. Jaime looked up at her, and was not at all surprised to see irritation written all over her face.

‘I’ve got no idea where we’re going,’ she declared, ‘we should follow the river.’

Jaime bit on his tongue to keep from barking ‘I told you so.’ He then got to his feet and walked back towards the tree.

‘What are you doing?’ Arya demanded.

‘Taking a piss!’ he called cheerfully over his shoulder, ‘would you like to help unlace me?’

A considerable amount of swearing and calls for patience from the old gods and the new followed his statement, and then a lot of splashing as Arya washed her hands and face in the shallows.

‘Don’t go too far out!’ Jaime called in as irritating a tone as possible as he began to unlace himself.

A strangled yell and a splash answered him; and when he quickly turned to face her, fear gripping his chest and panic curdling his blood, Arya was nowhere to be seen.

The skin of Arya’s hands screamed out in pain as every branch and weed and leaf she tried to cling to tore itself out by the roots, casting her away from dry land and hurling her right out into the heart of the swollen, crashing river. She screamed for Jaime once before the force of the current began to pull her viciously along by the feet, and as she choked and spluttered and sank she felt like a prisoner being dragged behind a war horse in punishment for something she had done.
My dear, they are your family, Kevan had said, they would never –

They would never hate you. They would never want you dead. They’re your family. They’re your family.

She had allowed the thought to consume her mind until it had become a single, insistent, infectious flame in a room torn up by the winds of winter. She had called on that warmth to fill her up, and the warmth had heard her. It had persisted. It had lived. But the water tearing at Arya’s clothes and filling up her pockets with the desire to sink killed it again so quickly that she would have sobbed at her loss had she had the breath left to do it.

The comforting flame had died, because it was impossible to build a fire without air, and as the water crashed over her head and forced her under, she found that the loss of the tiny yet resilient flame that Kevan had created did not trouble her. Had her pack still lived, they would have cast her away from them no matter what Kevan said, and that loss would have been far worse than drowning.

The noise beneath the surface of the water was terrific; worse even, than the noise above it. She could feel her breath writhing in her chest as it gasped and cried and fought, and she wondered why her breath was doing all of those things while she remained perfectly still and made no move to gasp or cry or fight. She couldn’t fight, because her limbs weren’t moving, and she wondered for a moment if she could blame the cold for that…or if she wasn’t moving because she didn’t want to. Because she didn’t want to live. Because she wanted to drown.

Arya felt her breath dwindle down to a wheeze inside her, and she looked up at the surface of the water, willing the gods, or even her ghosts, to tell her what she should do. She didn’t know. Maybe she didn’t care.

Her mouth opened, and it was beautiful. The water was like life and light; the water in her mouth and the water above her. She closed her eyes, and she was home. Father was staring across the godswood at her as he polished his greatsword Ice. The leaves were rustling in the wind, and he didn’t say anything, but he did smile at her. He smiled at her. Then out of the leaves came myriad multitudes of memories that had taken place in that godswood, and they piled one on top of the other so that she could remember them all in the same moment: Sansa screeching like a maniac as Arya tried to pack wet earth inside the collar of her new gown; the day Rickon had thrown a tiny wooden sword at Bran and almost taken his eye out; Jon mussing her hair and calling her ‘little sister’ while Robb stole the loaf of bread she’d only just managed to steal herself, and Mother coming upon her more times than she could count and scolding her, her beautiful auburn hair hanging to her waist, and ‘the entire castle is looking for you, young lady!’ Then the colours of the North went out of the leaves, and Arya was sopping wet and scowling at Jaqen for pushing her into the godswood pool at Harrenhal: ‘a girl is forgetful about the spear and defence,’ he purred, his eyes twinkling at her, ‘now she will never forget again.’ Her fingers were slamming hard against Jaime’s chest, then winding around his neck as he kissed her for the first time; then the godswood air became choked and filthy with the smell of King’s Landing, and Jaime was looking at her in the moonlight and saying with a breathlessness that he could not conceal: ‘Arya. You know how to fight lefthanded.’ And she remembered the day that he had understood: how they had fought and kissed and made love without stopping; but above all how they had laughed while they were doing it; how she had known, on that day, that she would never love anyone else like that again; how she wanted to live for that and be alive for that; how she didn’t want to die. As she tried to kick, or swim, her eyes darkened, and as they began to burn from tears; even with the Stranger whispering soothingly that he hadn’t expected her so soon, she felt two arms fasten tightly around her waist from behind; two arms…and one hand.
She went to the darkness, and everything was black. She was pulled to the air, then plunged once again into nothingness; and the arms around her waist were trying to tear her in half, yanking her and shaking her and hurting her; and as water began to pour from her mouth she went to the darkness again; and saw the Stranger smiling at her.

Then she felt her stomach slam hard into the earth and her whole body being yanked upwards once again, and she spat out the Trident and all its dead like vomit; sheets of it pouring from her mouth and drenching the earth; and she was collapsing forwards and being flipped over; the coughs and the water still raking her throat, and Jaime was grasping her face hard, his hand on one side, his stump on the other, and talking to her; his green eyes like wildfire and death.

‘Stark!’ he shouted, his voice breaking, ‘Stark!’
Arya’s limbs were water and dust as she felt Jaime’s heart beat wildly and painfully against her chest. His arms laced across her back like cross-stitches as her head rested limply on his neck, and she could feel his breath brush her cheeks as he murmured something soft and inaudible. She strained to listen, her heart beginning to shout and beat and race as it responded to his.

‘You’re here,’ he was whispering, the threat of her death still heavy in his voice, ‘you’re here.’

She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist, and she wished that she could melt into him and become him. Because he was warm, even though he was freezing and trembling, and she knew that his warmth would never change.

Arya opened her eyes for the first time since Jaime had picked her up to hold her, and she blinked water from them as the world over his shoulder came into sharp and painful relief. Far away downstream, she saw an island of stone in a sea of water that flowed into oceans of blood and steel. Riverrun.

‘Jaime, look,’ she murmured.

From this distance, the siege looked a horror. The Lannister army was a great, swarming host of blood and dragon bone before the walls; one monster rather than thousands of men. Riverrun was drowning, but not at all in the same way that Arya had been, because it was drowning in its own future; in its own lack of a future.

*That is the best that the Tully armies can hope for, Arya thought, there can be no victory for them, not even if they win.*

If, by some miracle, the men holding Riverrun managed to break the siege, they would have nowhere to go; not with the rest of the Riverlands in the hands of the Lannisters. Did they intend to spend the rest of their lives trying to defeat every fresh wave of reinforcements from the capital; to keep fighting until they all dropped down dead? They were acting like fools. Brave and noble fools, but fools nonetheless. Why not surrender, and take revenge later on in whatever way they could? Why cling to this brutal, cruel, idiotic life of torture and unhappiness and war?

Arya’s breath caught in her throat, and she coughed up a good two flagons of river water as she finally realised the truth.

*If these men are idiots, then I’m an idiot too.*

*I’m fighting for something…holding onto something…that doesn’t exist anymore. I’ve been mourning for my pack, and crying for them, and imagining that they condemn me because…because it makes them a little less dead, somehow.*

She began to fight back tears.

*I’ve clung to the same brutal, cruel and useless life of torture and unhappiness and war as the men behind the walls of Riverrun, and I’ve been doing it for absolutely nothing. Why continue…why weaken myself and make myself miserable and incapable of doing anything…when I can still honour my House; when I can take revenge in my own time and manner; when I can hunt down and...*
spill the blood of every person that had a hand in slaughtering my pack; when I can do all that and still...and still marry Jaime.

Arya’s neck cracked painfully as she rapidly turned her head and looked straight at Jaime. His eyes were wide and beautiful and intelligent, he was still looking at her as though afraid she might die, and her heart almost wrenched out of her as she realised that he’d seen her thoughts in her face, and that she wasn’t sorry he had.

‘I’m sorry,’ she burst out before he could speak, ‘I’m sorry, I’m so sorry – ’

‘Stark, stop.’ Jaime interrupted, looking distressed, and kind, why was he being so kind ‘you don’t have to –’

‘I love you,’ Arya blurted clumsily, rushing ahead before she could change her mind and act like a stupid idiot again, ‘I’m in love with you; I don’t ever want to be far away from you again; I couldn’t stand it if I was; please don’t ever leave, please don’t ever let me leave, please don’t –’

Jaime swallowed her words and kissed her softly, like he always did when she was sad, and his lips were freezing as her fingertips brushed his face and he pulled her closer to him, so that she could feel the smile forming on his mouth. To Arya’s acute embarrassment, she responded by jerking away from him and coughing up another gallon of river water; her lungs burning in pain and her face burning in humiliation.

Arya felt the fingers of Jaime’s left hand touch her cheek and bring her face upwards to look at him. His thumb softly brushed the wetness from her lips; and she wanted to smile and cry as he did so, because she had been an idiot, and he was still here. His hair was plastered to his face, and his lips were turning blue from cold, but his face and his eyes were warm and alive, like he was…like he had made her.

‘I have no intention of leaving,’ Jaime said, ‘and I have no intention of letting you leave. That would be stupid, and very likely fatal. Because I love you, little wolf. I love you.’

Chapter End Notes

Valar morghulis, awesome people! Once again a huge thank you for reviews and readings and follows and favourites and support in this entirely crazy endeavour! It all means the world to me, and I thank you all for being so sweet, enthusiastic and honest! And once again (regrettably) an announcement of a little break. Arya and Jaime have been through one hell of an emotional time this week, which has naturally been exhausting to write, so I’m taking some time out to recharge my batteries and to flesh out precisely what’s going to happen next. The next chapter will therefore be up on Friday, and I hope you’ll enjoy it!

Much love!
The Mountains of the Moon were kingdoms of greyness and snow and ice that stretched miles and miles above the rest of the world, making Jaime feel a stranger and a child. The earth, the sky, the very stones seemed a contradiction of natural law and basic common sense; traps to keep the unwanted out and to make them turn away. Every step that he and Arya took brought them to higher ground – he knew it – it made sense – but no part of the colossal circle of white, wild, terrible beauty that they navigated together ever seemed to suggest it; the fog and Jaime’s uncertainty turning the mountains themselves into a stone anteroom: an anteroom to another world.

One particularly grey morning, they came to the edge of a lake so swallowed-up by mist that the other side was invisible. Leagues and leagues of water stretched on to dark eternity, great tendrils of mist forming a monstrous mouth in the air that might have been a gateway to the Night Lands. Arya stood staring grimly into the mist; her short hair curling from the humidity, her face deathly pale, and Jaime’s heart sank for the first time in days as he was reminded of how cold she had been when he had pulled her out of the Trident; her body limp and bedraggled; her breath, when it had started to return, heavy with words of welcome from the Stranger; and how he had felt a sacrificial knife hover over his entire life as he had watched her go to the darkness, and return, and go, and return.

But she had returned; and as he stood on the edge of that immense body of water at the edge of the Vale of Arryn, thinking of what might have been her death and his, the lake before him turned a deep cobalt blue with the sun, the mountains on the other side rose green and white from the mist, and Arya’s alabaster skin flushed red and beautiful as she watched the sun come out and clouds race playfully over the surface of the lake. She looked at him, then, without the slightest trace of guilt or awkwardness, and the corners of her mouth turned up.

‘I’m sorry for being so stupid,’ she said.

‘You’re forgiven,’ he replied, ‘now come here.’

As her slender fingers laced through his and pulled herself closer to him, Jaime remembered watching her face change as Riverrun tore itself apart in the distance; and how he had suddenly seen, in her eyes and her lips and in every curve and line of her face, that it was over; that her love for him was stronger than memory, as his was for her, and that the struggle between them was done.

Of course that didn’t mean that the day-to-day bickering and fighting of their togetherness was done. Those returned with a vengeance – and with relief.

Jaime had lived most of his life at Casterly Rock and at King’s Landing; in seaside humidity and blazing sun. He was old enough to have known cold, of course – the capital and the Westerlands were bloody freezing in both autumn and winter – but neither of them had been this bloody freezing, this bloody high up or this bloody fucking uncomfortable.

The cold and the altitude of the Mountains of the Moon annoyed Jaime to the point of his taking their very existence as a personal insult. They didn’t, however, annoy him half so much as the way that his betrothed seemed to adore both the cold and the altitude as though they were family or old friends. She waxed lyrical about them to the point of tediousness, and she soon got into the habit of laughing like a maniac and pelting him with snowballs whenever they came across one of the crops of snow that seemed to fall overnight on one patch of mountain while completely ignoring its immediate neighbours. Jaime only wished Arya would pay him the same courtesy.

‘If you throw another bloody snowball at me, I’m throwing you into the next ravine that we come
Arya had never been playful before – except when making love – and though Jaime found her constant obsession with the fucking snow madly irritating, he also loved the rawness and the heat of this new (and, he suspected, old) part of her as it bubbled wildly out of her, like a spring that had been stopped up for centuries.

_The snow reminds her of home,_ he thought, _it brings back some of who she was before._

But just as the thought occurred to him, Arya came running to him; her clothes and hair sopping wet; her cheeks flaming red like life, and she whispered to him quite earnestly:

‘Wherever you are is my home. It doesn’t matter if there’s any stupid snow.’

Jaime knew that she wasn’t the sort who usually made grand declarations or speeches. He wasn’t the sort either. Silence was always better, because the best things didn’t need saying every day. So he touched her cheek and said nothing in return; letting her see, in his face, that he was glad it was one of those days.

Jaime knew that she wondered and worried constantly about Sansa, and about what they were going to do when they reached the Eyrie. He did too, though he never breached the topic. Almost from the moment that they had left King’s Landing, their journey had become a race after themselves rather than after a missing girl; Sansa fading from their minds and becoming lost along the way as they had hurt each other, pushed each other away and crashed together again in a circle of despair and misery. But the circle was over now, and so was the hurt; and Sansa had once again taken her rightful place at the centre of their journey. The next step would be admitting that neither of them had the slightest notion of what to do when they found her, but neither of them was ready to take it yet.

One day shortly after noon, they entered a wood to shelter from a vicious eastern wind that was stinging and slicing into exposed and unexposed skin with such Valyrian efficiency that remaining in the open air would have been both unwise and impossible. They found snow fighting a beautiful war with the sun and the trees; sparkling whiteness dripping off the branches of the elms like diamonds and covering the ground in lakes of ice while the sun exploded inside them; making the ground slippery to walk on and Jaime regretful for the loss of the horses. Arya was enjoying herself tremendously; sprinting ahead of him until she was just out of sight, agile as the grey northern wolf that she was, before reappearing and jogging rapidly back to him again; never requiring him to come to her.

The deeper they went into the wood, the thicker the labyrinth of leaves above them became. An emerald darkness began to smother the sun, and eventually, Arya was running to and fro across a forest floor of hard, brown earth; the seconds between her disappearances and reappearances growing ever more numerous, and to Jaime, ever more worrying.

‘Stark!’ he called out during the last of these breathless pauses, ‘could you stop fooling around for two seconds together? You’re making me nervous!’

Jaime expected to hear a testy reply, or at best a laugh at his ‘nervousness.’ What he heard instead was a tremendous, primal roar and the sound of swords being drawn. The air around him evaporated so quickly that he gagged on it, and his heart surged poison instead of blood as he tore across the space between them; the din of it almost drowning out the sounds of the blades clashing viciously together just beyond his vision.
‘Arya!’ Jaime shouted, drawing his weapon as he ran, ‘Arya!’

An inhuman scream answered him, and an equally inhuman silence and

_Oh gods. If something’s happened to her, if something’s happened…_

‘Does anybody else want to die?’ he heard Arya roar out into the trees, his heart soaring as he heard her voice, ‘I’m right here! Are you afraid of a little girl?’

He came upon her moments later, unharmed and in a state of indescribable anger; standing, sword bloodied, over the bodies of two Hill tribesmen that she appeared to have chopped in half. She ran to him before he could speak, her hands clutching his elbows hard.

‘There are more of them; run back and hide!’ she commanded ruthlessly.

‘Like hell!’ he hissed, his blood roaring in indignation.

‘You can’t fight yet, stupid, you’re not ready!’

‘Tyrion says talking to them helps.’

‘We’re past talking, now will you please go!’

‘I will _not_!’

There was a sudden, manmade rustling from the trees all around them, making Arya whirl around and draw her sword again, but still their enemies did not appear, and they remained alone among the sighing trees. Jaime held the tip of the sword up, and slid backwards into his water dancer’s stance.

‘They’re playing with us,’ he murmured, Arya bristling with anger and wolf blood beside him, and she spat onto the bodies of the tribesmen she had slain and whispered to him with genuine fear in her voice.

_Jaime. Please. Go._

_I. Will. Not._

No sooner were the words out of his mouth that fierce, fur-clad warriors, some of them taller than Gregor Clegane, began to melt rapidly out of the mist; their steel raw and diseased and their armour just as bad; ten of them, fifteen, twenty; far too many to defeat; but as they charged, Arya was chuckling under her breath, just as Jaime would have done at her age. She stood rigidly still and watched them come, and when she struck her first blow, sending a man’s head flying clean off his shoulders and into the dirt, Jaime could tell that she clearly intended to take the whole lot on by herself.

_She must be mad._

Jaime gripped his sword in his left hand and sent blood showering and gurgling and gasping as he impaled his first kill since the loss of his hand. He danced through the fierceness and the strength and the clumsiness of the enemy as the sounds their feet made against the earth and their steel against the air were painted onto their living forms before his eyes, showing him what to do and where to strike; and his mind was as wide and gloriously open as it had been on the day that he had finally disarmed Arya; his blade against her throat, and her words in his mouth, and the heat of her body on his. He concentrated madly as he killed, on the shapes and the words and the rightness of the sword in his left hand, his _left_; and for a while the rightness was there like a song in his blood as he maimed and
killed and knew that he was good at it. But then the void began to open up; the void where his right hand had been; and he called desperately on the words and the thoughts that Arya had taught him and that he had taught himself; calling on them to fill up the thing that was wrong as it howled louder and louder with each new man he killed.

A mass of contradictory signals began to pass through his mind and choke it up. The dance of Westeros invaded his instincts and spread to his body like a plague; his muscles singing one song and his mind singing another until moving and thinking and fighting became such an excruciating conflict that he wanted to fall to his knees and vomit from the nausea. As he struck a clumsy blow that glanced off a man’s helmet, he felt his body turning to face his opponent and his knees beginning to straighten, and ‘Side face!’ he heard Arya scream; every muscle in his left arm unravelling and weakening; each blow he struck as painful as hitting a hot iron with his bare hands.

He heard Arya cry out again, this time in pain, and as he turned and took his eyes off his own opponent, knowing all the while that it would probably mean his death, he saw her disarmed by a formidable-looking warrior who twisted her wrist to the point of snapping it in half. He jerked her upwards to face him; his fingers fastening around her neck as he drew his dagger and as Jaime felt the wind knocked out of his body; his attacker’s weight crushing all remaining breath from him as he hit the ground. A wild-eyed face appeared mere inches from his, and a knife, ragged-bladed and recently-bloodied, plunged so rapidly towards his throat that he swore he could hear the air being torn asunder.

The man’s eyes were the colour of moss, and had something of the inevitable in them that made Jaime think he might have been staring into the eyes of the Stranger. But then the tribesman’s body was knocked from his in a riot of grey fur and gnashing teeth and blood, and his enemy was screaming horribly and gurgling like a stuck pig as Jaime slowly turned his head, afraid of what he might see, but curious nonetheless.

It was a wolf.

A bloody wolf, grey and beautiful and wild…and making a veritable feast of tearing the tribesman’s throat out.

Jaime sat up slowly and warily, the beast not paying him the slightest attention; and, unconvinced that this lack of interest would be lasting, he felt panic rise in his chest as he looked about him and saw that the entire thrice-damned wood was full of wolves, knocking men over like dolls and carving them up for supper; their muzzles red and their eyes bright.

‘What in seven fucking hells – ’

Jaime scanned the woods for Arya; his heart leaping as his eyes found her alive and sitting upright against a tree trunk; her arms clutching her knees to her chest and the wolves ignoring her for the time being. Jaime leapt to his feet and tore across the forest floor towards her; intending to take her and run before the beasts got it into their brutal lupine heads that they were still hungry.

Arya gave no sign that she saw him coming, though he must have been in her view all the time, and as Jaime flung himself onto the ground in front of her and took hold of her shoulders to shake her, he cried out in horror; his voice warping and shattering inside him as he looked into her eyes.

They had turned white.
Jaime watched the haunting grey of the North explode back into Arya’s eyes, and with it came the sight of her fear as well as his own.

He had sat facing her for ten minutes, shaking her and speaking to her and pleading with her, but she had not responded to any of it. It had been like talking to a corpse; frightening in a truly unspeakable way; and Jaime remembered how he had mercilessly mocked that idiot bastard Snow with stories about the grumpkins and white walkers and wargs beyond the Wall; the stories of the blood of the First Men. Then Jaime had begun to think, and eventually to pray, that he, not Snow, had been the true idiot all along and that the little wolf would wake up. But then she had opened her eyes and stared silently at him, looking frightened and doubtful and not a word of explanation escaping her lips, and suddenly he was angry with both her and himself.

‘What the fuck was that?’ Jaime demanded, almost clapping his hand over his mouth at the way that his distress made his voice warp and crack.

But Arya was looking fixedly over his shoulder now, with the terror and wonder of a child, and as Jaime stood and turned to follow her gaze, he observed a monstrous wolf, greater even than Robb Stark’s direwolf and almost the same height as Arya herself, loping slowly across the forest floor towards them, its fur a deep grey and its golden eyes alive with the taste of blood.

Arya had leapt to her feet before he could tell her to run, and she was slowly approaching the beast like a blade drawn to a whetstone, the sound of her footsteps like missiles on castle walls. Jaime seized her arm in as hard and forceful a grip as he could manage, whispering or shouting at her that they needed to run are you mad have you lost your mind have you gone completely insane we need to run you need to run. But she wasn’t running, and he wouldn’t run without her, and his limbs were like mortar; preventing him from taking her in his arms and carrying her.

She was looking into his eyes and talking to him with her eyes; her eyes that were grey and that made her again, not whatever she had been when the snow had arisen in them and buried her, and suddenly she was speaking aloud in a tone of such exquisite gentleness that he felt tears form in his eyes, though he couldn’t fathom why.

‘It will be alright,’ Arya said.

The direwolf was coming, and growling all the while, and the growls became fiercer and more terrible as Arya approached; and Jaime’s heart was choking up with fear and with anger at himself that he hadn’t convinced her to run and that he wasn’t intervening now. He was transfixed. His feet couldn’t move, no matter how hard he screamed at them to. He drew his dagger and prepared to throw it at the first sign of trouble, and Arya was holding her fucking hand out as she drew nearer to the direwolf; its growls like thunder on the walls of Winterfell; its eyes full of anger and savagery. Jaime gripped the dagger harder, Arya’s hand was mere inches from the direwolf now, and he feared that if she touched the beast, she would not just lose her hand, but her life.

Arya touched the direwolf’s snout, and there was a horrible pause.

‘Nymeria?’ she said.

The direwolf whimpered in response, and began to lick Arya’s outstretched hand.

Arya gave a strangled sob, and a laugh, and another sob, and as she put her arms around the
direwolf’s neck, burying her face in its fur, the beast moved its head and began to lick her face with such enthusiasm that both girl and wolf were knocked to the ground in a tangle of limbs and fur.

Jaime’s heart lurched as he darted forward, dagger still at the ready, but Arya was curling up in the direwolf’s fur and snuggling in it, pulling the beast’s ears and laughing softly, and crying, as it continued to mercilessly lick at her face, and at her tears.

Jaime was mesmerised and mystified by the sight; feeling like an intruder on the edge of something that he should not be witnessing. Then Arya sat up, the direwolf’s head in her lap, and asked him in a thoroughly childlike way:

‘Do you want to pet her?’

They had an instant disagreement on the question of petting the beast. Jaime refused on account of the number of times that Robb Stark’s direwolf had enjoyed growling at the bars of his prison (and sometimes within it); Arya told him not to be stupid and declared ‘it’s almost the same thing as petting me’; Jaime protested vociferously and insisted that it was not remotely the same thing as petting her; Arya blushed and stated stiffly that she had not meant that; Jaime kissed her fiercely and offered to prove his case; Arya shoved him away and called him a miserable coward; and eventually, Jaime stretched out his hand, prayed that the gods didn’t intend to make him lose his left hand too, and gave the beast a tentative stroke.

It licked his hand and started to sniff him. Its nose was very wet.

‘She likes you.’

‘What would have happened if she didn’t?’

Arya snorted with a derision that she only reserved for one person.

‘Ask Joffrey.’

It was only the degree of emotion and bitterness with which Arya began to speak of the incident on the Kingsroad five years ago that made details of it come flooding back to Jaime’s mind. He had paid so little attention at the time (he had still been fuming about Bran Stark, most likely) that he remembered almost nothing of it beyond feeling a momentary amusement at Joffrey’s defeat by a little girl, and at the way that Renly Baratheon had to be led guffawing from the hall at the very thought. Above all else he remembered Cersei’s anger at not getting a nice wolf pelt for her bed. But the rest of the business: the bite, the butcher’s boy, Arya’s flight into the woods, the slaughtering of one wolf in the place of another; he remembered almost nothing of those. At the time, it had not been important.

But as he watched Arya’s tiny hands with their long fingers disappear again and again into the direwolf’s deep grey fur, the beast growling pleasantly in enjoyment, he realised that what had been less important than a grain of salt in the passage of his life had been of paramount importance in hers. He wondered if he would have felt differently had he spoken more than two words to her during the royal visit to Winterfell.

Would things have been different? If we had met before?
'Everyone said that she ran away after she bit Joffrey,’ Arya scoffed, stroking the direwolf protectively, ‘but she never did; she was too brave for all of them. I chased her away. I hit her with a rock and told her to leave because I knew they would kill her, and then Cersei, that bitch, made them kill Lady instead when she didn’t do anything, and me and Sansa fought so much that by the time they killed Father, we still hadn’t had anything resembling a proper conversation.’

The direwolf growled fiercely, making Jaime jump, and he momentarily remembered the fear he had felt only minutes before at the snowstorm in Arya’s eyes and on the surface of her skin.

‘What happened to your eyes just now, Stark?’

She stared at him in confusion.

‘My eyes?’

‘They turned white.’

‘What?’

‘While you were – what exactly happened to you?’

She was shaking her head with genuine bewilderment.

‘I don’t know, I –’

‘Do we have you, or this wolf of yours –’

‘Nymeria!’

‘– Nymeria – to thank for this?’

And he looked around the wood at the bodies of the Hill tribesmen; the sprawling pack of wolves still feasting on those that they had not reduced to food for crows, and as he looked back at Arya, he saw the stirring of something primal in her eyes; a half-remembered regret that she was not feasting with them. And he knew, then, that while the pack may have come at Nymeria’s command; Nymeria had come at Arya’s.

The notion frightened him to the marrow of his bones.

Seven fucking hells. What if she hadn’t come back at all?

‘Have you ever done something like this before?’ he asked.

He watched Arya struggle to find the words; wanting to help her; not knowing how.

‘I…I’ve dreamed about it,’ she stammered, ‘but I never thought it was real.’

‘You never thought what was real?’ he insisted.

‘I don’t know!’ Arya exclaimed, shushing Nymeria as she growled once again and fixed Jaime with a resentful glare, ‘I – I always used to dream about it –’

‘But about what?’ Jaime pressed.

‘Being with them, being…being a wolf. I’ve dreamed about it for a long time. Hunting, and having a pack, and being fr – it doesn’t matter…’
She stared at her hands.

‘I dream a lot. I’ve even had one or two dreams on this journey. I was having one the night we…the night you dreamed about the Mad King. But when I…when I almost died, after I fell into the river, the dreams started getting more…alive…and I knew that Nymeria was here, somewhere, even when I was awake, and then today… then today I saw you knocked over and I thought you were going to die, and…and it was like my head was torn wide open, and I went to the wolf dream and screamed for her, and she came and brought help because I couldn’t help you myself and I thought you would _–_

He leaned in and kissed her softly; her lips feverishly warm and salty from her tears.

‘The next time you decide to call Nymeria,’ he growled in indignation, ‘you help yourself first. Not me.’

She smiled, and playfully nipped his bottom lip a little harder than was necessary.

‘Don’t tell me what to do, Lannister,’ she said.

Her smile vanished as the earth and air rang out with the sound of horses approaching; Nymeria began to growl and bark and whine; and in a flash all the wolves were streaming silently and elegantly out of sight; leaving the corpses as they went. Jaime rose to his feet, followed closely by Arya, and the direwolf did not leave them, sitting proudly on her haunches at Arya’s side as a company of knights bearing the moon and falcon of House Arryn burst smartly out of the trees and enclosed them in a prison of armour and steel. Jaime reached out and laid a hand on Arya’s arm to stop her from drawing her sword as a richly-armoured and cloaked knight of perhaps four or five-and-thirty, proud and arrogant-looking, with a weak chin and beady eyes, drew his horse to a halt before them. The knight tried hard to disdainfully ignore both Nymeria and the way that Arya took an evident pleasure in not restraining her, but his skittish and nervous horse refused to let him. Nevertheless, he did a reasonably good job of appearing both courteous and intimidating as he stiffly inclined his head and began to speak.

‘Welcome to the Vale, Lord Jaime; Lady Arya,’ the knight said formally, ‘if you wouldn’t mind coming with us.’

‘I would mind!’ Arya replied loudly, ‘we’ve done nothing wrong!’

‘That remains to be seen, little girl,’ the knight drawled in a mocking tone that made Jaime want to clobber him.

‘The little girl,’ Jaime growled in reply, ‘is the future Lady of Casterly Rock and a ward of Tywin Lannister, Ser. I would advise you to speak to her with more respect if you don’t want to come down with a terrible case of sword through bowels.’

‘I’ll thank you not to threaten me, my lord,’ the knight sneered.

Nymeria growled, the knight jumped (and scowled) and Jaime grinned impudently; thinking that he might grow to like the wolf after all.

‘To whom do I have the misfortune of speaking?’ Jaime enquired with sweeping courtesy.

‘Ser Denys Egen,’ the knight replied, choosing to ignore the insult, ‘Captain of Lady Lysa’s household guard.’

‘Indeed?’ Jaime purred, cocking one eyebrow at him, ‘any relation to the late Ser Vardis?’
Ser Denys bristled, but did not reply. Jaime’s grin widened.

‘I trust we are not responsible for tearing you from the fair lady’s side,’ Jaime said.

‘Lady Lysa merely feared for your safety, my lord,’ Ser Denys replied, casting his eyes over the corpses of the tribesmen, ‘the hills are not safe for travellers.’

They’re here to kill us.

‘Casterly Rock thanks Lady Lysa for her kindness,’ Jaime declared formally, ‘may I inquire if Lord Baelish shares the lady’s touching concern for my wellbeing?’

‘He does indeed, my lord,’ Ser Denys drawled, ‘ever since their marriage –’

‘Oh, a marriage!’ Jaime interjected, ‘how charming! I’m delighted to hear that they survived the ceremony. This year’s wedding season has not much encouraged long life, I fear.’

Ser Denys proved himself to be entirely without a sense of humour by refusing to acknowledge the joke.

‘Since Lord Baelish’s marriage to the Lady Lysa,’ Ser Denys continued drily, ‘he has come to share her enduring concern for the well-being of her son, the Lord Robert. He has taken it upon himself to ensure that nothing is done to provoke the wrath of the crown, including allowing the Lord of Casterly Rock to die while crossing our lands. My orders are to find you and –’

‘Lull us into a false sense of security, kill us and send Cersei our heads?’

‘– to ensure your safety by escorting you to the Eyrie, my lord, and to treat you with the courtesy and respect that befits your rank.’

Arya laughed mirthlessly.

‘Shall I introduce him to Nymeria, Jaime?’ she asked, scratching the direwolf behind the ears, ‘she doesn’t like liars.’

‘In a moment, my love,’ Jaime replied, ‘we may yet encourage Ser Denys to be reasonable.’

Jaime cast his eyes over Ser Denys again and noted, as he had only moments previously, that the knight wore uncommonly fine armour and a beautifully-embroidered cloak. But as Jaime stepped closer to his horse; his eyes flickering meticulously over every inch of Ser Denys’ attire; he saw that although the armour was indeed beautifully-made, it bore the unmistakable signs of excessive repair by an admittedly-talented smith who evidently knew it very well. The cloak was in a similar condition: superior craftsmanship maintained by superior craftsmanship. A man who preferred repair to replacement, or simply had no choice in the matter; a raging sentimentalist…or a knight with no money.

‘Would you do me the courtesy of dismounting, Ser Denys?’ Jaime requested, ‘my neck is craning terribly, and I fear I’m not as young as I once was.’

Ser Denys regarded him testily, but dismounted all the same; his feet touching the ground with an arrogance that seemed to govern all his movements and decorate his face with a haughty sneer that Joffrey might have envied had he not been too dead to appreciate it.

‘These…orders,’ Jaime began, ‘do they come from Lord Baelish, Lady Lysa, or from an authority higher than either of them?’
The sneer disappeared; the weakness of Ser Denys’ face growing whiter and whiter as Jaime drew ever closer to him and spoke to him in a voice no louder than a whisper.

‘You appear to me to be an intelligent man, Ser Denys,’ Jaime observed, ‘I like to believe that I am too; as hard as my betrothed tries to convince me of the contrary. And both of us – you and I – know perfectly well that Lysa Arryn doesn’t give a fuck about anything that happens outside the Eyrie’s walls.’

Ser Denys tried to take a step back. Nymeria growled at him. Jaime continued.

‘Lady Lysa has kept the Vale in a state of total isolation from both the Crown and the world since the death of Jon Arryn. She wouldn’t send her entire household guard out to ‘protect’ two fugitives. Or even to murder them. She has nothing to gain from either. Baelish does, however. And that only because he cares for the coin my sister will reward him with – not for Lysa Arryn’s little brat.’

As he watched Ser Denys turn a pale shade of pink, and try (and fail) to divert his eyes, Jaime suddenly understood why Father had so enjoyed intimidating people. It was such tremendous fun.

He took a moment more to consider how that slimy little eel Baelish knew that he and Arya were in the Vale, then continued; wondering if he’d succeed in turning Ser Denys white again by the end of the conversation.

‘I don’t know if your orders come from Baelish or Cersei,’ Jaime remarked, ‘I don’t care, quite frankly. It amounts to the same thing. You merely seem to be a poor knight out to make a bit of cash…in which case you have my sympathies.’

Jaime watched Ser Denys’ face light up at the mention of cash, and plunged on; his voice grating deliciously against the back of his throat.

‘Since my father’s death, my sister’s power has dwindled by the day. You must know this – even with as uninterested a liege as Lysa Arryn. Cersei sees traitors everywhere. She punishes good advisors and rewards the incompetent ones. She is an object of ridicule rather than fear, or love. The Game is eating her alive. Her days as Queen Regent are numbered. And if her days of power are numbered, then Baelish’s days of powers are numbered…as are the days of either of them being able to provide money to those that serve them. As Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West, however, I have no such difficulties, particularly when it comes to rewarding those who serve House Lannister well. Provided, of course, that I live, which I very much intend to do, with your esteemed assistance.’

Ser Denys’ mouth was a grim line.

I have him.

‘How much?’ Ser Denys asked flatly.

‘I’ll give you your weight in gold every day for the rest of your life, if you like,’ Jaime shrugged, ‘all I require is that you and your men see us as far as the Eyrie, and do us the courtesy of not cutting our throats before we arrive. Killing us means gold for a while until Cersei falls. Not killing us means gold forever. Choose.’

Ser Denys pretended to think about it; folding his arms and posturing pompously.

‘A generous offer, my lord,’ he remarked nonchalantly, ‘what will you do if I refuse it?’

Jaime felt his blood rising as he leaned forward and whispered in Ser Denys’ ear.
‘If you refuse, well…I do not need two hands to annihilate you before I die.’

Ser Denys blanched and stuttered visibly, before inflicting his frustration on his squire, calling the boy a clotpole and a fool when he failed to reach the front of the ranks immediately.

‘Find horses for Lord Jaime and his lady!’ Ser Denys roared at his poor squire, ‘they will travel to the Eyrie as our guests. Quick about it!’

Jaime exhaled internally, his blood singing gloriously inside him as Ser Denys’ squire ran to find horses. When he turned to look at Arya, she was sitting on her haunches next to Nymeria. And turning her head slightly; she smiled…and winked at him.
Chapter 47

There was very little wind that day, and the massive oaken bucket that hauled them from the waycastle of Snow up to the Eyrie hardly swayed at all. The little that it did sway, however, was just enough to make Arya feel sick, and she soon stepped away from the side to sit down next to Nymeria and bury her face in the direwolf’s fur.

‘Scared, Stark?’ Jaime jested.

Arya glared at him, and did not reply.

Earlier that day, they had been received at the Gates of the Moon by Lady Myranda Royce; a consummately stupid and irritating person who seemed to be the queen of absurd decisions; refusing to admit Nymeria to her solar; insisting, multiple times, that they call her ‘Randa’ (why in seven hells would somebody want to be called that?) and not appearing to have the slightest interest in arresting them despite their being two of the three most wanted people in Westeros.

‘Randa’ had also earned Arya’s instant dislike by turning a bright shade of pink the moment she caught sight of Jaime; flirting outrageously as she offered to feast him, house him and bathe him, and to cover Arya in stinky perfumes and fashionable dresses. Jaime, of course, had been delighted to have his ego so unexpectedly stroked, and had flirted right back at her with equal blatancy; employing sweeping courtesy, subtle obsequiousness and a great deal of innuendo to send the lady into transports of blushes and giggles in exchange for immediate passage up to the Eyrie. Arya had stood aghast, annoyed, and growing angrier with her betrothed with every passing second; a part of her (the reasonable part) knowing that he was only playing the Game (and playing it well); the rest of her seething with a wolf blood desire to set Nymeria on both of them; and the uncomfortable thought that she might possibly probably perhaps just maybe be insanely and unreasonably jealous.

I am not jealous. I am not. Only stupid people get jealous.

It was in attempting to convince herself that she was not jealous that she had tried to shut out the sound of Jaime and Lady Myranda’s flirting, and to listen instead to the sounds of the guards, soldiers and lords who were marching in the corridors, practicing out in the yard, drinking ale and wine, shouting to each other…and ignoring the two runaways sitting snug and warm in their lady’s solar.

She and Jaime had spent the past few weeks travelling across fields and forests; steadfastly avoiding any roads that they encountered; freezing to death every night because they could not risk a proper fire; behaving, in short, like the fugitives they were. And yet when they had arrived at the Gates of the Moon, nobody had given them so much as a second glance: not the lords they had encountered on the way to Lady Myranda’s solar (who had greeted Jaime with coldness and Arya with indifference); not the officers of the garrison who had seen them arrive; not the soldiers of lower rank in search of knighthoods and coin. Not even ‘Randa Royce’ (seven hells, what a name), who Arya grudgingly admitted must possess some degree of intelligence if her father, the Steward of the Vale, trusted her to hold the Gates of the Moon in his name. Good as Jaime’s looks were, they certainly wouldn’t be enough to make Myranda disregard a royal decree; and while it was true that Lysa Arryn no longer paid attention to such things, the people serving her would certainly not share her indifference. Lysa didn’t want interference from Cersei; the men serving Lysa didn’t want war with Cersei; and the only way to avoid either would be to seize Arya and Jaime and to send them back to King’s Landing in chains.

And yet here we are, Arya had thought, right in the middle of what should be a lion’s den, and
nothing happening at all. Is this some kind of elaborate trap?

She found herself wondering what Tywin would have done; before turning away from the thought, ashamed.

‘Thank you so much for visiting, Ser Jaime,’ Lady Myranda had crooned when the time had come for them to leave, ‘I do so hope you come again soon.’

‘My lady,’ Jaime had purred in reply, kissing her plump hand and earning himself a giggle of thanks, ‘had I only known the sort of beauty that awaited me here, I would certainly have come sooner.’

Arya had stamped out of the room and not spoken another word to him, and when they had been introduced to Mya Stone, the girl who would take them up to the Eyrie, Arya had stood silent and fuming while Jaime introduced both himself and her; chuckling gently to himself each time he caught sight of the look on her face.

As they mounted the mules that would convey them part of the way, Arya had found that she liked Mya. The girl was tall and muscled like a boy, she wore breeches instead of dresses, and she had climbed the Giant’s Lance more times than she could count; both in daylight and at night. Arya had found the latter so wondrously incredible that the two were soon animatedly discussing the subject like old friends as they climbed; Arya taking special care to turn and glare at Jaime each time he so much as looked in their direction; Mya looking confusedly at her and saying:

‘You say you two are getting married?’

‘Yes.’

‘So why are you acting like you hate him?’

‘Ask him about Randa!’

But Jaime had only laughed some more, making Mya laugh too, and Arya had felt betrayed by both of them; stubbornly refusing to admit to herself that she could feel the corners of her own mouth turning up.

Because she was happy. Happier than she had ever been in her entire life. She still felt her losses and her ghosts aching in every bone in her body, but for once they did not carry guilt with them; and each time she looked at Jaime, knowing that she could allow herself to look at him, her heart leapt in a glorious kind of disbelief that he was still here. Their journey through the Mountains of the Moon had been a long, never-ending, breathless kind of delirium; not just because of the snow that she had not seen or touched or smelt in four years; but because she could look behind her or beside her and see him; life burning in his cheeks from the cold and his golden hair a riot in the sun; the song of him in all of her like a beautiful thing; not a torment or a weapon that she used to hurt herself.

At night she would lie in his arms as the wolf dreams became more and more powerful; her memory of the Stranger’s whispers turning her and Nymeria into two creatures; not one; and when Jaime had almost died, the blood-stained blade red at his throat; her mind had torn open instead of falling apart, because falling apart was what would happen if he died, and she had gone to the place where Nymeria was and screamed for her, and Nymeria had saved him.

Thank the gods.

Arya felt Jaime sit on his haunches behind her and put his head on her shoulder.

‘Are you alright, little wolf?’ he asked.
‘Shouldn’t you be asking the buxom Randa Royce how she is?’ Arya snapped.

She could feel Jaime’s face changing as he frowned.

‘Stark. Much as I appreciate your candour, don’t you think you’re being just a tad ridiculous?’

‘Ridiculous?’

‘You know perfectly well that I only flirted with that unbearable woman to buy us passage to the Eyrie.’

Now she could feel him smiling.

‘No, I don’t know that,’ Arya growled, Nymeria growling with her, ‘you seemed to be enjoying yourself tremendously.’

‘It was rather amusing,’ he observed nonchalantly.

‘Of course it was!’ Arya replied testily, shrugging him off, ‘very amusing! Speculating on the proportions of some other woman’s cunt while your betrothed is standing right there! What a good joke! They’ll be telling that one for years!’

‘Are you jealous, Stark?’ Jaime asked with delight as he sat down next to her.

‘I am not jealous!’ Arya insisted, cursing her face for turning red, ‘so don’t flatter yourself!’

‘I will if it’s true!’

‘I am warning you, Lannister! And so is Nymeria.’

The direwolf bared her teeth. Jaime cocked an eyebrow at both of them and folded his arms.

‘Are you planning on threatening me with Nymeria each time we argue in future?’

Arya opened her mouth to reply, but clamped it shut again and found herself beginning to smile. She tried to stop – she’d lose the argument if she didn’t – but she couldn’t, and soon she was laughing and reaching for him and kissing him softly; sighing contentedly as she felt his mouth open and his tongue flicker gently between her lips as it searched for hers.

‘Are you jealous?’ Jaime whispered, breathing hard as he pulled abruptly away.

‘Insanely,’ Arya whispered back, and kissed him again.

They couldn’t tell exactly how high up they were, or how far they were from the top of the Giant’s Lance; not with both of them sitting on the floor, and Arya wondered for a moment if they were ever going to arrive; or if they would stay suspended in the air forever and never get to Sansa. It was a small uncertainty that soon bled into the greater doubt that pulsed and swarmed in Arya’s mind, and she knew that he felt it too.

‘Jaime,’ she said, ‘this has been too easy.’

Jaime looked at her gravely, his eyes like the Jade Sea.

‘I know.’

Arya stroked Nymeria; the direwolf’s tail beginning to wag with such enthusiasm that it almost
batted Jaime in the face.

‘What if Littlefinger has us killed when we arrive?’ she asked.

‘I don’t think he will,’ Jaime replied, sitting slightly back as Nymeria turned to put her head in his lap, ‘Baelish is a ruthless, clever man, and a formidable enemy, but he is still a complete child. Sending Ser Denys to kill us was an excellent idea; but in doing so; he deprived himself of the opportunity to gloat. Now that a second chance has come his way, I don’t think he’ll deny himself does she have to do that?’

Nymeria had nipped one of Jaime’s fingers and left a scratch so small it was barely visible.

‘Nymeria, don’t bite Jaime,’ Arya drawled, rolling her eyes.

The direwolf whined in complaint and nestled her head more comfortably in his lap. Jaime sighed and scratched the fur between Nymeria’s ears, earning himself a lick of approval.

‘Then there are the circumstances of our almost-assassination,’ Jaime continued, ‘I must admit that I find them rather troubling.’

‘I should hope so,’ Arya smiled.

Jaime waved his hand at her with playful dismissiveness.

‘Not just for the conventional reasons, Stark,’ he observed, ‘Baelish was sent here to bring the Vale back into the fold. Sending his household guard to murder two people; one known to be the Lord of Casterly Rock; the other a ward of Tywin Lannister doesn’t really sound like bringing the Vale back into the fold, does it?’

‘No,’ Arya agreed, ‘it sounds like looking for war. Perhaps Littlefinger conceived the idea by himself, then convinced Cersei that she had thought of it – ’

‘ – and my sweet sister jumped at the chance; not thinking for one second that the entire small council would force her to declare war the moment the deed was done,’ Jaime finished, ‘it would not surprise me if it turned out to be true. What I really want to know is why Baelish would want to start a war in the first place.’

Arya’s head was starting to spin.

‘We can worry about that later,’ she declared, ‘how are we going to get him to give Sansa back? Or even to admit that he has her at all?’

‘I can think of a number of creative ways,’ Jaime smiled, making Arya laugh, ‘but it might not come to that. I could simply ask him what Cersei paid him and double it.’

Arya smiled sadly at him.

‘It won’t be that simple,’ she remarked gravely, ‘my sister is the heir to Winterfell. That will mean more to him than gold.’

Jaime grinned cheekily at her.

‘Very well. Creativity it is.’

Arya punched him in the shoulder.
'There’ll be guards, Jaime,’ she declared.

‘You think I would resort to physical force?’ Jaime asked innocently, ‘you wound me, my lady.’

‘I’ll wound you as much as I like if that’s what it takes to stop you wounding Lord Baelish too grievously,’ Arya insisted.

‘You care about Lord Baelish being grievously wounded?’

‘No, but I do like the possibility of getting out alive at some point.’

‘Of course. I hadn’t thought of that.’

*And if we don’t get out alive…Valar morghulis.*

An abrupt darkness and an uncomfortable shuddering announced their arrival at the Eyrie, and suddenly Arya’s heart was in her throat and dread was choking up the humid, stony air she breathed. They were in a dungeon.

Arya could not even bring herself to wonder how such a thing was possible. She could smell the black cells in King’s Landing and see their darkness waiting for her; Father and Tywin trapped in blind tenebrous kingdoms beside her, no comfort in their presence; only heartbreak.

She shouted at herself not to act like a stupid little girl who was afraid of the dark; imperiously telling herself that all they had to do was wait until the guard came, set Nymeria on him, and get out of the way. But the low ceiling and the black stone walls looked as though they were moving, and the room was becoming smaller and smaller, and ‘Arya!’ Jaime exclaimed in alarm, and she found herself crawling into his lap and putting her arms around his neck; his scent and his warmth like her own; his hand and his stump on her back, and his nose in the nape of her neck. He held her tight, then kissed her forehead; the fingers of his hand running through her hair.

‘This is the only castle in Westeros where the entrance is in the dungeon,’ he said, knowing her, ‘that’s all it is. I promise.’

She stared at him; his voice like fresh air on her face. And she looked above her, and beside her, and saw that the walls weren’t moving at all.

*I’m a stupid little girl, still. Afraid of dungeons and darkness.*

Arya jumped as a chorus of high-pitched yells greeted Nymeria’s attempt to see outside the bucket.

‘Nymeria!’ she commanded, ‘stay!’

The direwolf restrained herself with grudging obedience as Arya and Jaime got to their feet and were helped out of the bucket by members of yet another complement of guards with no inclination to arrest them. Their captain was a short and stocky man with mousy brown hair that peeped rebelliously out from beneath his helmet. He kept glancing sideways at Nymeria with a great deal of trepidation, but in all other respects seemed delighted to have something to do.

‘You are welcome to the Eyrie, Lord Jaime, Lady Arya,’ he greeted cheerfully, ‘Lady Lysa asks your forgiveness that she did not come to receive you herself. She is detained in the High Hall with Lord Baelish and Lady Alayne, and said I was to bring you straight in.’

Arya’s heart began to pound unpleasantly as Jaime thanked the captain and reassuringly took her hand; but as they climbed the dungeon stairs; leaving the darkness behind as they entered the Eyrie.
itself; her sense of malaise only increased.

It was the quietest castle she had ever been in; its silence, emptiness, pristine white stone, and vaulted ceilings ensuring that the place more closely resembled a mausoleum than a residence. Their footsteps rang uncomfortably against the floors like boisterous children; heroically choosing to laugh despite the knowledge that they would later be punished for it.

Arya gripped Jaime’s hand harder as yet another wave of irrational, uncharacteristic fear swept over her, and as they neared the High Hall, she noted with shame that she was beginning to tremble.

*Seven hells, will you get a hold on yourself? You have seen and done worse things than walk through a stupid castle!*  

‘I don’t think I know the Lady Alayne of which you spoke, Ser,’ Jaime said to the captain; his voice breaking the silence like golden light, ‘is she some distant relative of Lady Lysa’s?’

‘She is Lord Baelish’s natural daughter, my lord,’ the captain replied politely.

‘His what?’ Jaime responded in amazement, and Arya’s fear reached a crescendo; her hand sweaty in Jaime’s; her heart suffocating in her chest as she felt nausea erupt all over her body.

*Something’s wrong. Something’s terribly wrong.*

‘Are you alright?’ Jaime murmured, turning her to face him, ‘you look –’

‘Yes, I’m fine,’ Arya murmured in return, ‘really, I’m fine, I just –’

But they had reached the High Hall, and its enormous wooden doors were thrown impressively open by the two guards that flanked them as the captain stepped forward and announced in a voice so booming that it must have been heard in King’s Landing:

‘Ser Jaime Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West; the Lady Arya Stark of Winterfell!’

There was no one in the hall…except a girl.

She stood alone at the edge of the Moon Door; the tremendous, circular hole in the floor that held the distinction of being the only thing about the Eyrie that Arya could remember from her lessons. The wind tore at the girl’s clothes like a lover as she stared down into oblivion; her dark hair, black like misfortune, blowing violently into her face and hiding it from view. Sensing their presence, the girl turned to look at them, and as Arya recognised her sister; her sister with hair that was black like misfortune something’s wrong, something’s terribly wrong, Sansa fixed them with a regal stare and spoke aloud to the captain.

‘Leave us,’ she commanded.

The captain bowed, as though obeying her orders were something that he did every day, and smartly left the Hall with his men; his command that the doors be closed behind them shattering the silence; the sound of creaking wood and metal bolts falling into place destroying what remained of it.

Arya ran across the hall to her sister; her footsteps ringing loudly on the marble, and Jaime was shouting at her to be careful, and sprinting after her; restraining her before she could reach Sansa.

‘Don’t worry,’ Sansa mumbled, looking at them, ‘I’ve no intention of throwing myself out too. What an anti-climax that would be.’
As Jaime let her go, Arya stared out of the Moon Door to the leagues of emptiness below… then back at her sister.

‘Sansa – where are Lord Baelish and Aunt Lysa?’

Sansa turned back to her contemplation of the void; as though nothing existed for her but that abyss. Then she elegantly raised one arm and pointed out of the Moon Door, as though preparing herself for a dance.
Chapter 48

The Moon Door closed, and Sansa no longer felt the call of the blue, or the beautiful roughness of the wind that had stung her face like freedom. She stared at the stone where the valley floor had been; the stone beneath which both Petyr and Lady Lysa had fallen to their deaths; and she wanted it to open up again. She wanted to feel that strength once more; to see the outside of this place, and to feel the cold of it creeping into her bones like home.

She felt Arya take her arm and lead her to one of the stone benches that lined the hall. Her sister’s hands were cold and trembling, but comforting, and Sansa wanted to reach out and embrace her and cry and murmur ‘you came for me; you came,’ until her tears ran dry. But she had her armour on, and it hid both her face and her tears; both of them faint imaginings on the edge of the comforting void inside herself that draped silver veils and golden wine over everything that she had done that day.

Lord Jaime had closed the Moon Door; and as he approached them, clad in black from top to toe, he looked in worry towards the Hall doors; as though expecting an army to burst through them at any moment. Sansa smiled bitterly, knowing that nothing of the kind would happen. Alayne Stone had made herself amenable; the poor, sweet bastard girl with the virtuous blue eyes who was loved and trusted by all; even though her very existence was a lie.

The direwolf was sniffing at her hands, and beginning to lick them, and though she knew in her heart that somehow, somewhere, Arya had found Nymeria again – Nymeria – she closed her eyes tightly and pretended, for just a moment, that she had also found Lady; and that Lady had grown to be a wolf rather than a shade. As she took comfort in the thought, she began to speak; and her voice was dead, armoured, protected: a voice that was not her own.

‘There was snow on the ground this morning,’ Sansa said, ‘more than I have ever seen here. I went out to play in it and built a snow castle; and then Father – Lord Baelish – came out and kissed me.’

Arya and Lord Jaime were both looking intently at her with an anxiety that she was not accustomed to seeing in relation to herself – except with Lord Tyrion, of course, Tyrion – and as she watched them, she saw that their fingers were clutched fiercely together and that neither of them seemed to know it; and how beautiful, she thought, how right; before Petyr smiled at her again; smiled at her right through her memory and her freedom; and she forced herself to keep talking: flatly, emotionlessly.

‘I pushed him away,’ Sansa continued, ‘I almost hit him. I shouted at him that he ought to be kissing Lady Lysa instead of me, because she was his wife – ’

‘Does Lady Lysa know your true identity, my lady?’ Lord Jaime enquired.

‘Yes,’ Sansa mumbled, fingering her black hair, ‘this was her idea.’

Nymeria began to sniff at the dyed hair with disdainful disapproval, and Sansa thought of how she had hated it the first time she applied the stuff to her copper red hair; how it had made her neither Stark nor Tully, but no one.

‘Later, Lady Lysa called me here to the High Hall. She’d seen everything. She was so angry she was almost mad. Sometimes she called me by our mother’s name, sometimes not. She called me a number of charming things, of which temptress and seductress were the least interesting. The more I denied that I was anything of the sort, the worse she became. Then she – she put her hand around the back
of my neck, her fingers clutching deep in my hair, like this –’ she demonstrated, taking a fistful of raven hair, ‘and…and tried to throw me out of the Moon Door.’

Arya looked at her in horror, and Sansa wondered once again why she was speaking this way; with such coldness and bitterness and indifference; why she was speaking like Petyr and nothing like herself; nothing like what she had felt as she had stood half-dangling on the edge of that void; death (and Lady Lysa) screaming at her with a kind of cheerfulness as her feet scrabbled on the edge of the stone; and she had tried not to look down, she had tried to, but she hadn’t been able to stop herself, she had to see how far she would fall; and wonder how long it would take her to hit the ground, oh gods –

‘Petyr arrived,’ Sansa growled, pushing the fear away and trying to forget that it existed, embracing and loving the cold and the bitterness of her own voice, ‘Petyr arrived and managed to talk her out of it. Of course Petyr talked her out of it. He’s such a good talker. He spoke to her as any husband trying to give the appearance of affection would. The insincerity of it made me sick, even though I should have been thinking about…not dying, I suppose, but his insincerity served its purpose well enough. She listened to him and let me go…and when she let me go, I almost fell anyway. The wind was like a magnet trying to pull me out of the Door. I held onto a pillar and closed my eyes. The world was swirling around me like a maelstrom. I think I was crying, I can’t remember, but whatever happened, she let me go – and she collapsed into his arms like some ridiculous princess in a song and began to mumble about their marriage and how long she had waited for him. But while she was blathering about how much she loved him, she also found the time to mention that Jon Arryn dropped dead because she added an over-zealous quantity of the Tears of Lys to his soup. On Petyr’s suggestion, of course. I opened my eyes, then, and I could see that his were angry. He did a good job of quieting her down – even though I had already heard everything – and managed to get her talking about when they were young; pretending that he agreed with her when she talked about how they were meant to be, even then. That almost made her weep from happiness. It was pitiful to watch. Then…then he smiled at her, and said that he’d never loved any woman but our mother…and pushed her. It was a tiny push. Gentle, even, and she didn’t even scream. Nothing. I watched her disappearing down to the valley floor, until she had faded to nothing…then I looked up again, and saw Petyr smiling at me…and I knew that he would never let me go.’

Sansa almost gasped as she felt her true voice returning; the void inside her sealing up and dying. She took Arya’s hand and held it hard, and she could feel moisture beading up in her eyes.

‘I didn’t want to come with him,’ Sansa almost growled, ‘after Bran and Rickon, when he had left to come here, I wrote to him. I told him that I didn’t want to go now that you were here; that I wouldn’t go under any circumstances. I received no reply from him, and I thought no more of it. Then on Joffrey’s wedding day, his messenger arrived anyway, saying that he was waiting for me in the godswood.’

‘Is that why you were so ill?’ Arya asked, squeezing her hand.

‘I was pretending to be ill,’ Sansa replied, warmth and sadness beginning to colour her voice, ‘or half-pretending. I was flustered that he had still sent a messenger; I needed an excuse to get away, and though I was not entirely worried, I nevertheless…I told myself that the letter might have been lost. Such things happen when people travel, but I could not quite shake the feeling –’

She remembered how quiet the halls of the Red Keep had been; the sound of her shoes like sledgehammers against the red sandstone; as though she were walking on blood.

‘I went to the godswood,’ she blurted, beginning to speak faster and faster, ‘I met him there, and I told him that I would not come with him. He took me by force. He had one of his men hit me with
the hilt of his sword so that I passed out, and when I woke up, I was on a ship and Joffrey was dead. I realised then… I realised that I’d been stupid… so stupid… and that by taking me on the day of Joffrey’s death he was forcing me to stay with him, because everyone would think it was me if I disappeared, and everyone would think I killed him. I felt like such a stupid little girl –’

‘Sansa, don’t talk that way!’ Arya interrupted.

‘- but that was no reason for me to continue being stupid,’ Sansa plunged on, ‘I’d gotten myself into this mess, and now I had to survive, I had to, and I suppose I still thought, then, that somebody might come after us. So I went up on deck and… and apologised to him for getting cold feet, and I… I thanked him for taking me anyway, when I would have regretted staying behind. I didn’t think that he’d believe me… but he did.’

‘You did well,’ Lord Jaime said, ‘you did well.’

Sansa felt a rush of gratitude to him for saying that.

‘He spoke to me a great deal as we travelled,’ she continued, her words tumbling over each other, ‘about finding me a husband that would retake Winterfell in my name and free it from the Boltons; I just had to pretend to be a bastard for a little while until everything was settled, and a part of me believed him, I believed him, because I wanted to go home, and I wanted us to go home, for the North to be ours again, even though I knew he was… he was…’

Sansa almost growled at herself, and at the looks of pity of Arya and Lord Jaime’s faces, and she felt iron plunge deep into her very soul; just as it had when Aunt Lysa had fallen, and when she had stood staring at Petyr; knowing, just as she had known all along, that with him, she would never be free.

‘But when I saw him standing there by the Moon Door smiling at me,’ she muttered grimly, ‘as though I were something beautiful to be sampled at a pleasure house in Lys, I knew. I knew that he had planned the whole thing. With Lady Lysa dead, he would marry me. He would take Winterfell in my name, and use me, and our home, for himself; to control both the East and the North; and I remembered how he betrayed Father, and how he stood at Cersei’s elbow when Joffrey promised me he would be merciful and I believed him; when I was still young and so stupid, and I… I realised, as I looked at him, that I would never be free as long as he lived, and that nobody would ever come to save me.’

In that moment, the wind had still torn at her like a magnet; the blue calling to her with such sweetness that it might have been a song. She had looked down into the abyss, and the blue had called and called and howled and howled a song of her loneliness and hope and isolation… but the song had held no comfort for her, and no attraction, and as she had stood looking into it and feeling it on her face; she had realised that there was no reason to fear it, and no need to be saved from it; because all she had to do was step back from the edge, walk a few feet, and save herself.

‘I walked to him and embraced him, and thanked him for teaching me this lesson. ‘Don’t mention it, sweetling,’ he said. Then I pushed him out and watched him fall. He didn’t scream. I so wanted him to scream. I wanted him to.’

And she had stood on the edge of the blue till the Hall doors had opened; her strength its own seduction; her realisation its own form of beauty. She had contemplated freedom, and escape, and then help had come, at the very instant that she had forgotten it.

Arya took both her hands, and her sister’s fingers felt familiar between hers; long like their mother’s, but calloused from years and years of holding a sword. Arya’s eyes were bright and grey with
understanding – with some of it. Sansa could see them seeking out the call of the blue as they gazed into hers. She saw her own fear in them; the fear that she had felt as Petyr smiled at her; and she saw her own strength there too, and her will, and she loved Arya for it. She loved her.

*We are all that’s left*, she thought, *our pack have gone to the darkness. Both of us have seen it, but neither of us will go there yet. She has protected me from it this time. And someday, I will repay her. I swear it by the old gods and the new.*

Lord Jaime was pacing; his mind already on escape.

‘The captain who brought us here,’ he said, ‘why did he leave the Hall when he clearly saw that you were alone on the edge of the Moon Door?’

‘It’s a favourite pastime of Lord Robert’s,’ Sansa replied, the mere thought making her smile in exasperation, ‘even when there’s nobody to throw out of it; the accursed thing is opened twenty times a day. As to my being alone, well – the man is a servant. It’s not his place to ask why a room is empty.’

Sansa watched Lord Jaime look intently at Arya.

‘We need to leave,’ he declared, ‘right now.’

Arya was shaking her head as she put an arm around Sansa.

‘If we rush off and take Sansa with us,’ she protested, ‘we’ll be implicated in this mess too. We can’t run from the whole of Westeros.’

‘No, you cannot,’ Sansa agreed, ‘but you can tell the whole of Westeros that Petyr tried to save me from Lady Lysa and was pulled out of the Moon Door in the process. I thought it over quite carefully before you arrived.’

Arya was looking at her with disturbed admiration.

‘Tyrion was right about you.’

Sansa blushed and stared intently at her lap.

‘Why, what did he say?’

‘He said that you would have a gift for intrigue when you learned not to be afraid.’

Sansa smiled broadly to disguise the tears she felt forming in her eyes. Nymeria licked her hand, and laid her head in her lap, and Sansa scratched behind the direwolf’s ears; the fur soft and beautiful.

‘You know you shouldn’t always tell people what Tyrion thinks of them,’ she sniffled, ‘he’s far too fond of irony for both their good and his.’

‘I cannot argue with that,’ Lord Jaime concurred, smiling weakly at her before turning to Arya, ‘I take it this little anecdote means you think your lady sister’s plan a good one, Stark?’

‘Yes,’ Arya said simply.

Lord Jaime audibly sighed with relief, making Arya glare at him.

‘We should tell the guards what’s happened,’ he said, ‘and send a raven down to the Gates of the Moon —’
‘Do we say who Sansa really is?’ Arya interrupted.

‘I don’t see why not,’ Lord Jaime shrugged, ‘I doubt they’ll want to keep her. If they do, I’ll simply remind them that she’s a ward of the Crown. Cersei is unlikely to declare war for her, but the Lords of the Vale don’t know that, and we can’t exclude the possibility that Cersei’s spies will wake up eventually – ’

Sansa almost laughed aloud at that.

‘Of course the Lords of the Vale know, Lord Jaime,’ she interrupted, as politely as she could, ‘the whole of Westeros knows it. News of such import does eventually reach the Vale despite Lady Lysa’s fondness for isolation.’

The silence that followed her words descended so swiftly and so abruptly that Sansa was rendered rather uncomfortable by it. She looked from Lord Jaime, to her sister, and back again, and saw that both were regarding her with perfectly sincere amazement; as though they had no idea what she was talking about.

No. I cannot believe it.

‘Do you mean to say… you’ve not heard?’ Sansa asked.

‘Not heard what, Sansa?’ Arya said, her grey eyes wary and apprehensive.

Of course they don’t know. They’ve probably been avoiding the road. In all likelihood they haven’t spoken to another human being since they left King’s Landing.

Sansa looked at Lord Jaime, and tried to speak as gently as she could.

‘Cersei is being held in the Great Sept of Baelor as a prisoner of the Faith,’ Sansa told them, ‘she has no spies and no power left.’
‘A trial by combat?’ Tyrion exclaimed.

‘So it would seem, my Lord Hand,’ Varys tittered in reply.

‘Has the High Septon approved this folly?’ Tyrion demanded.

‘He has, my lord,’ the eunuch confirmed, ‘he has utmost faith in the will of the gods.’

Tyrion slumped back in his chair, not much caring that by doing so, he seriously compromised his ability to see Varys’ face over the mountains of paperwork, books, raven scrolls and empty wine glasses that scattered the surface of his desk. He sighed deeply, and poured himself another glass of Dornish red.

_We pull ourselves out of a mess Cersei made and are immediately plunged into another. The gods must be shitting themselves laughing._

‘A trial by combat,’ Tyrion repeated, ‘a trial for treason and regicide decided by a trial by combat. And yet, a year ago, I might not have thought it so strange.’

‘A year ago, we were not six million gold dragons in debt to the Faith,’ Varys ventured smoothly, ‘and a year ago, the Queen Regent would not have dared to refuse the repayment of a twentieth part of that amount.’

_Because my father was still alive. Because Joffrey was still alive._

Tyrion drained his wine glass. Since the death of her eldest child, Cersei had been so wild, so impulsive and so changeable that Tyrion’s entire life had been reduced to an elaborate dance involving the constant putting-out of fires and employment of legions of spies to ensure that any spur-of-the-moment scheming was crushed before it became anything more than that. It had been excruciatingly difficult and exhausting; the small council had worsened the situation by flatly refused to relieve Cersei of her duties as Regent despite her obvious ineptitude; and to Tyrion’s shame, his own habitual scheming had only accomplished so much.

_There is only so much you can do to manipulate or control a person who changes her mind every five minutes._

‘A trial by combat,’ Tyrion muttered to himself once again, not quite able to shake the absurdity of it, ‘perhaps we ought to consider the possibility that my sister has gone mad.’

‘A question for the maesters, I think,’ Varys smiled.

Tyrion stared morosely out of the window into the darkness of the night.

‘She’s certainly _appeared_ mad for weeks,’ he muttered, ‘perhaps the realisation that she was entirely alone in believing in Lady Sansa’s guilt had a worse effect on her that I had imagined.’

Lord Varys inclined his head obsequiously.

‘No doubt the Queen Regent has some terrible worries.’

_Cersei does indeed have some terrible worries_, Tyrion thought.
The trial had lasted just over three weeks, and had plumbed new depths of absurdity, horror and outrage for every day of its duration. A significant contributing factor to the general farcicality of the situation was Tommen’s being required to attend by law and Cersei’s milking the fact for all it was worth; weeping constantly into a handkerchief embroidered in gold silk and trying to present the appearance of an innocent woman and devoted mother who had been deeply, deeply wronged. Tommen, who had woken up on his twelfth name day to the news that his mother had killed his father, had sat staring constantly at Cersei; the crown looking absurdly heavy on his head; his large green eyes innocent and anguished and disbelieving; his bottom lip covered in scabs from where he had bitten himself to prevent himself from crying; his mother trying, all the while, to make him cry as much as possible.

But King Tommen Baratheon, the First of his Name, the boy that people mocked for his love of kittens, hadn’t cried once; and as Tyrion had sat beside the boy through day after day of theatrical crying and pleading and hissing and spitting from Cersei, he had felt desperately sorry for him, desperately proud of him, and in a way, desperately sorry for Cersei too.

*Since Tommen became king, you have done nothing but punish and ridicule him for crying, sweet sister,* Tyrion had thought, *and now that he is mastering the art, you hurt the boy further by trying to undo your own handiwork.*

Tommens’s resilience in keeping his eyes dry had been remarkable in one so young, but by the end of the first week of the trial, his bottom lip had begun to resemble something that wouldn’t look out of place in a butcher’s window. Tyrion had taken the vast gamble, then, of allowing the boy to bring one of his kittens to the trial every day; on condition that no talking, kissing, chasing or feeding would take place.

*If people become accustomed to seeing the bloody kittens, perhaps they won’t talk of them so much.*

The look of contempt on Cersei’s face the first time it had happened had been fearsome. The courtiers had sniggered disdainfully behind their hands and the smallfolk outside had been generous with their guffaws, but to Tyrion’s relief, and Tommen’s, the gamble had paid off.

Day after day, as Tommen had sat listening to witness after witness calling his mother a whore, a thief, a cretin, a murderer and a pathological seditionist (Cersei all the while making use of her handkerchief and her tears), the little king had gradually stopped biting himself in his moments of sorrow and had begun to stroke his kitten instead; his face becoming smoother and more unmoved by the day; his anguish retreating into himself and away from public view; Tommen the King and Tommen the Boy becoming two different people, and those infernal kittens becoming as inseparable a part of his image as king as the crown he wore on his head. People began to place bets on which cat Tommen would bring to the trial on which day, and when the boy rode from the Great Sept back to the Red Keep in the evenings, it was not unusual for the smallfolk to bring their children for a glimpse of the mysterious felines, and occasionally, a chance to stroke them, if His Grace happened to be in a playful mood. Tyrion remembered his words to Arya – ‘Tommens would be a fine king if one could only get him away from his mother’ – and smiled. If he could convince the boy to trade the stroking of kittens for the distribution of bread by the time he was fourteen…

*I do so love to be right, even under frankly awful circumstances.*

Cersei’s attempts to present the image of innocence continued despite Tommen’s progress, but they were not, however, sufficient to make people forget that not a single witness could be found to testify in her favour and that all her former agents had deserted her. The evidence presented by a large number of unlikely sources, including Tyrion’s idiot cousin Lancel, had eventually led her to be condemned to death for her role in the death of King Robert, and to be found guilty of a large
number of other offences that included trying to frame Margaery Tyrell and two of her cousins for treason and licentiousness. That trial had taken place directly before Cersei’s and had been even more of a farce; serving no purpose but to increase the Tyrells’ power at court: the exact opposite of what Cersei had envisioned.

As Tyrion looked at Varys, he remembered, as though waking from a dream, that Cersei had only been condemned yesterday; and that years seemed to have passed between then and now. When the sentence had been pronounced, she had not said a word; allowing herself to be led back to the dungeon and spitting at the feet of every person who had testified against her; adding to her already-prodigious list of enemies and ensuring that even more people would now take to singing *The Whore That Killed King Robert* instead of *The Boar*. Cersei had begun her trial without a friend in the world, and she had foolishly devoted the entirety of the proceedings to ensuring that it stayed that way.

‘Nobody will fight for her,’ Tyrion observed quietly, ‘no one. The execution will be so well-attended that we might even have to sell tickets.’

‘Oh, surely somebody could be found, my lord,’ Varys tut-tutted, ‘even were it merely for the sake of defending House Lannister’s honour.’

‘What do you know, Varys?’ Tyrion asked bluntly.

Varys’ face as he replied was the picture of solicitousness and graceful behaviour.

‘I went to visit Her Grace this morning,’ the eunuch said, ‘merely to condone with her in this difficult time, of course.’

‘Of course,’ Tyrion smirked.

Varys smirked back at him and continued.

‘She informed me, amongst her other communications, that she intends to ask Ser Jaime – that is, Lord Jaime – to stand as her champion. The raven will be sent today.’

The sudden anger that scalded Tyrion’s chest made him choke on his wine and glare mutinously at the entirely blameless Varys.

‘Now we know for certain that she’s lost her mind,’ he spat.

‘It is certainly an impractical choice,’ Varys replied coolly, ‘particularly when one considers Lord Jaime’s maiming –’

‘Forget his maiming!’ Tyrion growled, suddenly wanting to smash every fragile object in the room, ‘she has absolutely no right to ask him!’

Varys cocked one eyebrow at him, and Tyrion coloured; ashamed by his own candour.

‘Jaime…Jaime will certainly not agree to such a thing,’ he stammered, ‘they’ve been estranged for –’

‘Estrangements tend to disappear when imminent death is involved,’ Varys interrupted courteously.

Tyrion snorted in response, still enraged by his sister’s nerve.

‘Imminent death will play no role in repairing this estrangement, Lord Varys,’ he growled, ‘my sweet sister has not made herself very pleasant over the past few months, particularly as regards my
unfortunate brother. She will die, I fear, with no one to defend her, and I don’t intend to lose sleep convincing my brother to do it.’

‘Am I to understand that you desire her death, my lord?’ Varys asked, a hint of shock colouring his simpering voice.

Tyrion looked at Varys, and then away from him; unable to answer; not knowing his own mind. He had hated Cersei for so long – and she him. Sometimes as a child, he had desired her death. He had prayed for it – when he still believed in the mercy of the gods. But now, after hating her and devoting his life to thwarting her every action with every inch of cunning that he possessed...he could not tell if he wanted her dead. She was his blood. The fact made him sick to his stomach, but...

Varys was looking in pity across the silence at him; his robes the colour of the candlelight. Tyrion thought they should have been the colour of the shadows instead.

‘May I enquire,’ Lord Varys asked, ‘if Lord Jaime intends to return to King’s Landing soon?’

Tyrion had absolutely no idea.

Arya had written to him about a week previously, telling him the circumstances of their discovery of Lady Sansa’s whereabouts. The letter had been extremely long, consuming almost an entire roll of parchment, but some instinct had made his eyes ghost across the paper to the very end, where ten words were written in an elegant and shaky hand that was entirely different from the masculine-looking clarity of the writing that covered the rest of the parchment.

*My lord.*

*I am well. Really, I am.*

*Lady Sansa.*

He had rushed back to the beginning of the parchment at that, his heart roaring in ears, to learn why the fuck she felt the need to tell him she was well and only make him worry more by saying it.

Sansa, it seemed, had been seized by a sudden illness after the trauma of watching her Aunt Lysa and Lord Baelish die. Her departure from the Eyrie with Jaime and Arya had therefore been delayed at the invitation of Lady Myranda Royce, who had also thought it prudent that little Lord Robert, who had become quite attached to Sansa during her stay, be given the chance to grow accustomed to the idea of being without her. This particular aspect of the visit had not gone well, and before too long, the little lord had made a lifelong enemy of his cousin Arya, screaming and crying each time he saw her and descending into fits of hysteria at the very sight of her wolf.

The situation had then been rendered all the worse by the return of Lord Nestor Royce, who had charged back to the Gates of the Moon along with most of the Lords of the Vale when the news of Lady Lysa’s passing had reached them. Though it seemed that Lady Sansa, in the guise of Alayne Stone, had made herself so well-liked during her stay in the Vale that few of the Lords liked to doubt her word; Lord Nestor had been seized by the perhaps understandable suspicion that Jaime and Arya had somehow been responsible for his lady’s death rather than Littlefinger. While he had not dared to have them arrested; the consequences of such an action being too ghastly to imagine; he had spent a great deal of time composing polite but infinite variations and implications on his favourite expression (‘Lannisters lie’); questioning both Jaime and Arya in excruciating detail; and, when no fault could be found in the stories of either, calling Jaime a charlatan that sought to use an innocent young girl for political gain and Arya a harlot and a traitor to her House. It was at this point that
Jaime, after what Arya described as a ‘frankly petrifying’ pronouncement of the words ‘How dare you speak to her like that?’, had asked to speak to Lord Nestor alone, and all that Arya or Tyrion or Varys’ little birds had been able to learn of what had been said in that private interview had been its consequence: a profuse apology from Lord Nestor and an overly-long visit to the privy after making it. Lady Sansa had been pronounced fit to travel after a week, and Lord Nestor had very graciously decided to redeem himself by sending them as far as Casterly Rock with an escort of a hundred knights. Tyrion had not yet received word of their arrival, though he expected it to be any day now.

‘My lord?’ Varys said breezily, ‘will he?’

Tyrion looked at him.

‘Will who do what?’

‘Will Lord Jaime soon return to the capital?’ Varys repeated.

‘Ah, yes,’ Tyrion replied, ‘do forgive me. The news of Cersei’s execution will reach my brother soon enough. As will this confounded fucking raven scroll that she plans to send. I fear he’ll have to return to the capital then. Even if merely to be present at the execution. It’ll be expected of him.’

Varys smiled enigmatically.

‘I could always have the ravel scroll intercepted, my lord,’ the eunuch purred, ‘it is rather unfortunate that the Lord of Casterly Rock has spent so little time at Casterly Rock since the beginning of his tenure, and King Tommen could very easily be persuaded of his lord uncle’s loyalty.’

Tyrion pursed his lips, considering it.

‘No,’ he said firmly, ‘let Cersei send it. My brother has the right to decide for himself.’

Varys bowed his head.

‘Is there anything else to discuss before tomorrow’s small council meeting?’ Tyrion yawned, his own head beginning to ache from the wine and from the lateness of the hour.

‘The Regency, my lord,’ Varys responded brightly, ‘I met today with Mace Tyrell, as you commanded.’

Tyrion groaned and poured himself another cup of wine, not caring if he’d regret it in the morning.

‘Is the fool still insisting that we give the Regency to him?’ Tyrion sighed.

‘Yes indeed, my lord,’ Varys confirmed, sighing in return.

‘And has Lord Tyrell been informed that it will snow in Dorne before we let that happen?’

‘He has, my lord. Except this time it has occurred to him to threaten to break the alliance with House Lannister should we not do what he wishes.’

Tyrion sat back in his chair and smiled sweetly at Varys.

‘That’s a rather clever course of action to have invented on his own,’ he mused.

‘Lady Olenna has once again forgotten her walking stick, I fear,’ Varys agreed.

‘Of course she has,’ Tyrion groaned, ‘Tommen is a naïve and perfectly sweet boy; though after this
trial it remains to be seen if he will stay that way. He needs to be surrounded by people with his best interests at heart; and though Mace is not clever enough to be much of a threat, Margaery is, and will almost certainly find a way to rule through him should Tommen not prove amenable after their marriage.’

‘And why should the dear sweet child not prove amenable?’

‘I have high hopes for the boy at present, but until he is wise enough to take care of himself, I will not have Margaery doing anything more significant than speaking prettily and fucking regularly. The lady certainly has talent – she may very well have been born to rule – but I will not risk her using her talent until Tommen is more mature. As to the Regency, I wish to recall my Uncle Kevan from Casterly Rock, on condition that he leaves his wife behind. I don’t want her turning Tommen into another Lancel.’

‘You are cruel, my lord,’ Varys observed.

‘I am. Or perhaps I am simply drunk. But someone is responsible for the way the wretched boy turned out, and it certainly wasn’t my uncle. As to bloody Mace Tyrell, we can make him Master of Laws, or some such thing. That should placate him for a while.’

Tyrion yawned and got to his feet to retire for the night, but Varys was still speaking.

‘We should think on this further, my lord,’ the eunuch insisted politely, ‘we do need the Tyrells; as Lady Olenna is rather fond of reminding us.’

‘True,’ Tyrion agreed, ‘but perhaps someone should remind Lady Olenna that the Tyrells also need us.’

He looked at Varys, the last true remaining master of intrigue in King’s Landing, and suddenly felt sorry for him.

‘Lord Varys,’ he said, ‘I suddenly feel rather selfish. I’ve been so busy seeing to the removal of Cersei’s head that I haven’t thought to ask you about Littlefinger’s death. You were friends of a sort, were you not?’

Lord Varys seemed to think about it.

‘I did rather enjoy him,’ the eunuch agreed, ‘but I must confess to feeling a certain relief that he is no longer with us. Does that make me wicked?’

‘I’m not so sure, Lord Varys,’ Tyrion smiled weakly, ‘something tells me that he’d say the same about you.’
Chapter 50

Kevan walked silently along the walls of Casterly Rock at dawn, and thought about what he had said to Lady Arya almost a month ago as she had sniffled and mumbled an apology for crying in front of him.

‘I have four children, my dear. I’m used to it.’

The words had haunted him since; as they did every time that he spoke them; every time he allowed himself to be deceived by the rightness of the idea and the comfort of it; every time he deluded himself that the falseness in those words didn’t seem to laugh at him or whisper to him or torment him at every hour of the day and night. Because he didn’t have four children anymore. He had three.

Willem had died four years ago today; killed in his sleep at Riverrun by Lord Rickard Karstark, in vengeance for Jaime’s having murdered his son during an escape attempt.

Willem had died a boy of five and ten.

Kevan remembered sitting in Tywin’s solar at Harrenhal and staring at words on a raven scroll; words from a stranger telling him his son was dead. And he had wanted to ride to Riverrun and bury a sword so deeply into Lord Karstark’s skull that they’d have to bury him with it.

Tywin had glared at him and told him not to be ridiculous; vowing that Karstark, his liege lord and all their loved ones would pay for their crime in the coin of fear and blood. He hadn’t been wrong about that, certainly. But the news…the news that Willem’s twin Martyn was still alive, but a hostage; the news that Robb Stark had publicly beheaded Lord Rickard in retribution for his butchery of innocent boys; and then, years later, the news of the Red Wedding…none of it altered the facts; the chasm; the abomination against the law of life.

*I had four children. I have three children.*

Kevan hadn’t gone back to Casterly Rock immediately after Willem’s death. Tywin hadn’t commanded him to remain at Harrenhal, but he had remained nonetheless. There had been Robb Stark to consider, and Ashemark, and the Crag, and the Brotherhood Without Banners, and the honour of the family and the good of the realm; and when Kevan had finally returned home after almost a year, so deeply ashamed that he would gladly have suffered being called a dog to his face, his wife had kissed him and embraced him and burst into tears and refused to hear him speak a word against his conduct; and his two-year-old daughter Janei; her eyes pale green flecked with gold, like Tywin’s; had stared curiously up at him and asked him who he was. Kevan had wept at that.

It was Janei rather than a desire for introspection that brought Kevan to the walls this morning. The young lady, now six years old, had developed the unpleasant habit of reading books in the oddest locales that could be imagined; filling her mind with tales of Ser Aemon the Dragonknight and Jonquil and Florian while sitting in the wine cellar, or the Hall of Heroes, or the laundry room, or the armoury, while the rest of Casterly Rock frantically searched for her and imagined her dead.

Kevan knew that the girl was far too young to understand the worry that she caused – she had hardly known the brother she had lost; indeed, she had been born far too long after her siblings to know much about any of them beyond their names – but Kevan found that the blame for her regular disappearances lay with him as well as her. With Martyn squiring at Hornvale and Lancel in the capital (*I should be there with him now. I should be*), the girl had become the light of his life; so breathlessly young and sweet and innocent, exactly as Cersei had been at that age. Exactly as Lancel
had been.

He burned with shame to think of Lancel now; rotting in prison and waiting for Tyrion to decide what to do with him; though Kevan wasn’t sure if he should be more ashamed of Lancel’s conspiring with Cersei to murder King Robert, fucking Cersei after murdering King Robert or having an attack of holiness about fucking Cersei and murdering King Robert that had caused this whole thrice-damned mess in the first place.

In the past he would have come to me or his mother with such a confession. Not the bloody High Septon.

Kevan knew full well that Lancel’s interest in religion had deepened after his injuries at the Blackwater, and for a while, he had approved. Kevan was a man of Faith, and he had married a woman of Faith whom he deeply respected and loved absolutely. And yet, he could not help but wonder if his son would have been less inclined to take such a self-abasing, self-effacing, self-destroying refuge in religion had he grown up with a mother who did not insist on praying seven times a day, even when ill.

Don’t blame Dorna, he thought to himself, blame someone who deserves to be blamed. Blame Cersei.

Kevan felt his jaw tighten.

When I lost Willem; when I lost my child; I suppressed my grief and all thoughts of vengeance; I abandoned my wife and children to do my duty to my House and my brother and the realm. Cersei has also lost a child…and has settled for nothing less than destroying the Seven Kingdoms in retribution for her grief. So I will blame someone who deserves to be blamed. I will blame Cersei.

Kevan found Janei sitting on the western wall with her book spread out in front of her; the wind leading her pale blonde curls in a merry dance about her head and nipping mischievously at the crimson brocade gown she wore.

‘And where have you been, young lady?’ Kevan demanded with mock anger.

Janei gave no sign that she was surprised by his presence and frowned sullenly.

‘Father, have you come to take me away already?’ she asked miserably.

‘I fear I have,’ Kevan replied, with great solemnity.

The little lady folded her arms and pouted.

‘Well, I decline!’

Kevan cocked one eyebrow at her, and smiled as she leapt to her feet, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

‘I can’t read about a battle if I’m stuck in a poky old solar!’ she insisted.

‘Why?’ Kevan insisted in return, ‘were you not born with an imagination, little lady?’

‘Of course I were!’ Janei replied, trying (and failing) to sound like a grown up.

‘Of course I was,’ Kevan corrected, his huge hand engulfing her tiny one as he helped her to hop off the wall, ‘now come inside. The servants have told me that your lady mother is frantic and on the
warpath. She doesn’t want you falling and breaking your neck.’

As they began to walk back the way Kevan had come; Janei bounced on the balls of her feet with every step she took and playfully swung her father’s hand in hers.

‘Is Mother very angry with me?’ she asked.

‘Of course not,’ Kevan replied, ‘she merely fears for your safety.’

Janei frowned, unconvincéd.

‘Everybody’s been so cross lately,’ she observed.

‘That tends to happen when mischievous little girls insist on disappearing,’ Kevan replied.

‘It’s about Cousin Cersei, isn’t it?’ Janei asked in a rush.

‘Never you mind about Cousin Cersei,’ Kevan said, in a tone that he hoped would announce the closure of the subject.

‘She’s in trouble, isn’t she?’ Janei pressed on.

Kevan folded his arms and frowned down at his daughter.

‘Have you been listening at doors again?’

Janei coloured.

‘Only when I – oh Father, look! Riders!’

Kevan quickly seized hold of her as she once again leapt onto the walls; her tiny index finger pointing so enthusiastically that it seemed to cut the plains beneath the Rock in two. Kevan strained his eyes slightly.

‘Janei,’ he said, ‘time to see if you remember your lessons.’

Janei grinned and giggled. She loved being asked about her lessons.

‘A moon and falcon on a sky blue background,’ Kevan announced, ‘go.’

‘House Arryn,’ she replied without hesitation.

Kevan smiled in admiration as he helped her off the wall.

‘Exactly,’ he affirmed, ‘House Arryn.’

Kevan narrowly avoided a head-on collision with his wife as he accompanied Janei down the flight of stairs to the forecourt. Looking tired and profoundly flustered, Dorna glared at both of them as she would at a pair of mischief-makers; but Kevan noted with pleasure that despite her obvious exasperation and worry, she was impeccably dressed; not a lock of her rich dark hair was out of place; and she was also wearing the ring, delicately crafted in the shape of a seven-pointed star, that
he had given her earlier that month for her name day.

‘There you are!’ Dorna exclaimed in annoyance, ‘I’ve been all over for you two!’

‘Calm yourself, my lady,’ Kevan replied, ‘I have been just as ‘all over’ as you have, and have managed to come out of it with my composure intact.’

‘Don’t patronise me, Kevan; it doesn’t suit you,’ Dorna remarked, making a concerted effort to appear serious that didn’t quite succeed.

Kevan cocked his head towards the gates.

‘Is it Jaime?’

‘Yes, him and the two Stark girls,’ Dorna answered, her expression changing as she glanced down at Janei, ‘did you find her on the walls?’

Kevan sighed and tried hard to keep the affection from his voice.

‘The little lady was reading a battle scene,’ he said.

Dorna looked down at Janei and folded her arms in disapproval.

‘You,’ she declared severely, ‘are the naughtiest child in existence.’

‘Yes, Mother,’ Janei mumbled with genuine consternation, staring intently at her shoes.

‘Come now, little lady, don’t be so affected,’ Kevan told his daughter, ‘we can postpone your punishment for later.’

Janei’s courage returned immediately.

‘My punishment?’ she squeaked indignantly.

‘Yes, your punishment,’ Kevan repeated, winking at her, ‘now come down and see your Cousin Jaime. You probably don’t remember him at all.’

‘I do remember him,’ Janei insisted sullenly, beginning to hop down the stairs, ‘he brought me toys when I was small. And he didn’t mind playing cyvasse with me when everyone else said I was too young.’

As Kevan took Dorna’s hand and descended the stairs with her, he witnessed his wife fighting back a smile.

‘You’re ruining her,’ she told him.

‘Perhaps I am,’ Kevan replied, his heart leaping into his throat with every step Janei took, ‘do you disapprove?’

She replied by kissing his cheek.

‘I can’t say that I do. Not entirely. But since you mention disapproval, I must confess that it does play a role in how I view Jaime’s choice of bride. An excellent match politically, but the girl is vulnerable, and alone, and five-and-twenty years younger than him to boot.’

‘You’re twenty years younger than me!’ Kevan protested.
‘But you have always been a good man,’ Dorna replied, ‘can you say the same for your nephew?’

Kevan snorted in reply, and won himself a glare in response.

When they reached the forecourt, Kevan’s steward was directing a very large number of knights to the stables and visibly praying that they would honour their arrangement of only staying one night; while Jaime and the two Stark girls were beginning to dismount with a general air of solemnity and tension that Kevan found most troubling. His nephew looked grave; Arya even more so; and Lady Sansa was dreadfully pale, though that could simply have been the ill look of her fair skin and dyed hair.

*Please, gods, do not tell me that they’ve broken off their engagement* again.

But as Jaime helped Arya off her horse, he fondly kissed her forehead before moving to help Lady Sansa. Kevan’s spirits rose only slightly as the Stark girl smiled in return, and he realised that the cause of their general moroseness was no doubt the same as his.

As Kevan looked about for the wolf that Tyrion had mentioned, thinking that a good-sized wolf would do little to improve the mood; the gloomy atmosphere was instantly dispelled by Janei, who ran to her cousin and squealed ‘Jaime!’ before leaping into his arms and kissing him on both cheeks. Jaime smiled, planted Janei firmly on his hip and began to speak animatedly to her as he approached Kevan and Dorna; motioning to Arya and Sansa to follow him and appearing quite oblivious to the looks of undisguised astonishment on their faces.

Kevan almost rolled his eyes. His nephew had always been disconcertingly good with children when he could be persuaded to abide their company for more than five minutes.

‘This cannot be little Janei,’ Jaime was insisting, ‘I refuse to believe it.’

‘Of course I’m me!’ the girl declared, pulling his ears, ‘did you bring me a present?’

Jaime cocked an eyebrow at her.

‘I brought myself. Doesn’t that count?’

‘No,’ Janei said firmly, as though the idea was ludicrous, ‘what happened to your hand?’

‘I gambled it away one night and never got it back,’ Jaime replied without missing a beat.

The girl frowned at him.

‘That was very silly of you.’

‘It certainly was.’

Janei pat-patted her hands on Jaime’s shoulders, enjoying the sound of her fingers on the leather.

‘Is it true you’re getting married?’ she asked.

‘It is,’ Jaime smiled, turning around to face Arya and Sansa, ‘the lady is right here.’

‘Which one?’ Janei enquired.

‘The short one,’ Jaime replied, smirking at Arya, who rose to the bait immediately.

‘The what?’
‘Give Janei to me, Jaime,’ Kevan intervened, ‘before she causes any more trouble.’

Scowling, Janei was duly handed over and passed to her mother as introductions were made on both sides. Kevan watched Jaime’s face as Dorna made enquiries of their journey and expressed her condolences for Arya and Sansa’s losses, as well as her delight that they were soon to become family. His nephew was clearly troubled and out of sorts, but each time that he looked at Arya, he seemed…fulfilled, somehow; and Kevan found himself thinking of Dorna’s words to him only a moment ago: ‘you have always been a good man. Can you say the same for your nephew?’

*When I see him looking at another human being like that, I can.*

As Dorna smartly trundled the girls off for baths, tea and lemon cakes, Arya’s eyes met Jaime’s, a question in them; and when Jaime rolled his eyes in reply and nodded, Arya scowled deeply and submitted herself for what she evidently regarded as a punishment; clutching her sword and dagger as she went.

*What an interesting girl,* Kevan thought.

Jaime’s eyes followed Arya until she was out of sight, then grew sombre again as he was left alone with Kevan.

‘Where is this wolf that I’ve heard so much about, nephew?’ Kevan asked.

‘Hunting,’ Jaime replied promptly, ‘she’s developed a taste for stag that we can’t seem to break her out of.’

‘We cannot claim to have a shortage of those,’ Kevan agreed.

Jaime smiled, and looked pointedly at him.

‘What news from the capital, Uncle?’

Kevan grasped his shoulder.

‘Come to my solar.’

Jaime sat alone in the window seat for what felt like hours. When he had first begun to read the raven scroll, he was relatively sure that he had heard Uncle Kevan speaking to him at length; his massive form lingering like a sandstone pillar on the corner of Jaime’s vision before disappearing; presumably to leave him alone to think.

And then the rain started again; that same miserable fucking rain that had followed him and Arya across the length and breadth of the Westerlands; and Jaime sat staring out at it; watching as it departed abruptly and returned just as quickly; a changeable thing, like his sister…though his sister was nothing like the rain.

The news of Cersei’s imprisonment and trial, together with the incidental news that she had been fucking Lancel as a reward for killing Robert (and an antidote for boredom, most likely), had affected Jaime in a way that could only be described as…interesting. The subject emptied him out and numbed him, but not in a way that caused him pain. It did not make him angry and it did not
make him happy; it did not grieve him and it did not enrage him. He was not plagued by visions of
Cersei’s fine white wrists being scarred by chains, or her eyes shining with righteous tears. Neither
was he possessed by the frantic desire to drop everything and go charging back to King’s Landing at
a moment’s notice. He felt absolutely nothing. And yet despite the indifference, the coldness, the
nonexistence of his emotions; the trial weighed constantly on his mind in the same way that his
father’s death had, probably because the question was still the same:

Why don’t I feel anything?

And then…this. Her words, her voice, her writing on a raven scroll; telling him that she had been
sentenced to die. A few words on a piece of paper… and a feeling.

A knock on the door tore him from his thoughts, and he felt his left hand crumpling the parchment as
Arya entered dressed like a lady; the sight of her filling him with the same strange indignation that he
had felt at Joffrey’s wedding; indignation at how beautiful she looked when out of her breeches and
rough spun wools.

She wore a gown of turquoise blue silk that was slightly too big for her, leaving her shoulders
unintentionally and very flatteringly exposed; and her dark hair had been washed and brushed till it
shone, the tangles so masterfully combed out of it that he realised for the first time that it was almost
down to her shoulders now and brushed them slightly, like kisses.

Her expression was one of utter indignation and fury, and Jaime couldn’t help but smile.

‘You look…uh…different,’ he ventured.

Arya thanked him in truly ladylike fashion by rolling her eyes and kicking the door closed behind
her.

‘Your aunt made me take a bath,’ Arya complained, crossing the room and plonking herself down
next to him, ‘in rose water –’

‘Gods forbid that one should be compelled to bath more than once a year,’ Jaime mocked.

Arya ignored him and continued to rant.

‘Then one of her maids put even more…stuff all over me until I smelled like a flower shop,’ she
growled, ‘then they tore most of the castle apart looking for a gown that would fit me when I told
them I would wear my breeches; and then, when we met in Lady Dorna’s solar; it turned out that
Sansa, while having her bath, was so overcome by the joy of having noblewomen to gossip with that
she accidentally let slip to one of Lady Dorna’s handmaidens that you and I have been ‘living in
sin.’’

‘Living in sin?’ Jaime repeated in indignation.

‘Lady Dorna’s words, not Sansa’s,’ Arya clarified, her grey eyes twinkling in both anger and
amusement, and growing warm as Jaime’s fingertips traced patterns on her shoulder and collarbone,
‘though I don’t see what it’s got to do with either of them!’

‘Did you manage to ask Sansa how she knows that we’ve been…‘living in sin’?’ Jaime smiled, ‘gods
be good, you’re blushing!’

‘I am not,’ Arya insisted.

‘Answer the question, Stark,’ Jaime insisted back.
Arya cleared her throat, and blushed further.

‘The night that you, um – did that thing with your mouth – ’

‘Yes?’ Jaime prompted.

‘Apparently…I was being rather… noisy?’

‘You were.’

Arya punched him in the shoulder.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ she exclaimed.

‘I am not in the habit of downplaying any testament to my skills, Stark,’ he replied.

She punched him in the other shoulder, shrugged his hand off and folded her arms in annoyance as she continued her story.

‘Needless to say,’ Arya complained, ‘Lady Dorna was absolutely scandalised by the discovery, and was about to drag me off to the sept for a thorough prayer session at the Maiden’s altar when you sent for me.’

‘I didn’t send for you,’ Jaime corrected, ‘I asked you to come.’

A kind of sadness returned to her face, even though she was smiling at him. She’d been out of sorts ever since the news of Cersei’s trial – they both had – but they had also had that interview with that fool Royce, and it had somehow made things worse; even though they both knew that it had been a nonsensical farce. But looking at Arya now, and seeing how large and careful and fearful her eyes were as they fell on the raven scroll crumpled in his hand; Jaime knew that she knew; that she had known from the moment she entered the room, that he had nothing pleasant to discuss with her.

‘What is it?’ Arya asked quietly.

Jaime handed the scroll to her.

‘Read it.’

Her fingers were long and calloused and beautiful as she smoothed the paper out, and her face, as she saw who the sender was, turned pale.

“Come at once,” Arya read aloud, trying (and failing) to keep the disdain from her voice, “Help me. Save me. I need you now as I have never needed you before. I love you. I love you. I love you. Come at once. Cersei.”

She tore her eyes from the scroll and looked up at him again.

‘A trial by combat?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ he replied.

He watched the news spread over her entire face until only her eyes were alive, but even then, they were illegible; making it impossible to tell what she was thinking; and suddenly he could feel her mind as it moved into the very act of slipping away from him.

She was shutting him out. She was protecting herself.
Oh gods. She really fears that I will do it.

Jaime took her hand and told her to look at him; and her face was cautious and still as his father’s.

‘I won’t fight for her,’ Jaime said gravely, looking into her eyes and shouting the truth with his own, ‘never mind the fact that I can’t. I have no wish to.’

But her face did not change, and Jaime’s mind reeled in confusion.

Doesn’t she understand what I’m saying to her? Aren’t I making myself clear?

‘The real question, therefore,’ Jaime continued, ‘is whether or not I should go to King’s Landing for the execution.’

Arya’s face opened up and searched his intently, and he could feel her eyes looking upon and understanding what he could only call his fear; his fear of the utter unknown of what seeing Cersei die would make him feel. Or do.

Cersei was as good as his enemy now, but she was still his twin; his blood; his lover of more than twenty years…and his master of even longer duration. Such bonds did not disappear, even if love and regard and obsession turned to hatred and neglect and indifference. He wasn’t afraid of feeling pain, but he was afraid of himself. Of what he might feel. Of what he might do if he had to watch her die.

‘Tell me what you think I should do,’ Jaime asked her.

‘No,’ Arya responded flatly.

That surprised him. She usually didn’t need prompting when it came to giving out orders.

‘Even from a political perspective – ’

‘No, Jaime.’

Her lips were tightly shut, her face was unyielding, and suddenly, Jaime wanted to strangle her. What was the matter with her? He’d said he wouldn’t fight for Cersei; so why was she making such a fuss about a bloody execution?

‘Why do you refuse to answer each question I put to you, Stark?’ Jaime demanded, fast losing patience, ‘do you doubt me?’

‘No,’ Arya snapped in reply, ‘I love you.’

As she spoke the words, Jaime stared at her, and understood the reason for her silence.

She wants the decision to be mine alone. Mine…for once in my life.

Jaime looked at Arya as though seeing her for the first time; and every tiny, minute aspect of her face; the way her eyelashes curled up slightly at the corners; the cleft in her chin; the lines already forming at the edges of her mouth; every part of her; told him why Cersei’s imprisonment and Cersei’s trial had held no feeling for him since hearing of them; and why, in going to King’s Landing and in watching her die; he need no longer be afraid of himself no matter how harrowing…and how easy…the experience might be.

I am not Cersei’s anymore. I am not anyone’s. I am me.
‘I’ll have to make a show of loyalty to the Crown,’ he said, ‘and to do that, I’ll have to be there. I’ll have to go. I…I should like you to come with me…but I will not ask you to.’

‘Of course I’ll come with you,’ Arya said in a small voice, ‘but are you…are you absolutely sure you want to go?’

Jaime pulled her to him and embraced her.

‘Yes.’

Arya’s arms grasped his back and held him tightly as she rested her head on his shoulder; her hair tickling his face and the silk of her dress feeling course and unnatural beneath his fingertips.

‘When do you want to leave?’ she asked, not breaking away from him.

‘I don’t really care, Stark,’ Jaime admitted softly, ‘there is far too much to consider first.’

‘Is there?’ she asked, sounding surprised.

Still not releasing her, Jaime’s fingers travelled along her arm to her hand and eased the crumpled message from her fist.

‘First,’ he said, ‘I want to get rid of this raven scroll.’

And he dropped it, quite deliberately, to the floor.

‘Next, I want to stay sitting like this for a really long time,’ Jaime continued, burying his nose in her hair and loving the way that he could feel her heart racing right through her clothes, ‘then once we’ve finished doing that, I want to take you down to the sept, drape a cloak around your shoulders, and marry you.’

‘On the way to your sister’s execution?’ Arya replied.

Jaime gently disentangled himself and looked into her face, and though he saw absolute belief in his sincerity, he also saw doubt: doubt that he recognised and understood.

_What in seven hells is the matter with her? Has this experience with bloody Aunt Dorna…and that fool Royce, of course; this throwing about of words like ‘sin’ and ‘charlatan’ and ‘harlot’; made her think I’m in a rush to make our relationship respectable, now that I’m home among my own people?_

He couldn’t believe that Arya would think him capable of giving a fuck about something like respectability. But then she was still a child in so many ways; a child who thought next to nothing of herself…who thought next to nothing of herself, when she was everything.

Arya’s beautiful grey eyes were flickering upwards to his and away from them, and as he reached out to touch her cheek; he felt her hold his gaze and his blood rush wildly and angrily inside him.

‘Aunt Dorna can flatter herself that I care a fuck what she thinks,’ Jaime declared, ‘so can Lord Royce and the rest of the world, and so can any fool who thinks I would do this to distance myself from Cersei before we return to the capital. But the truth is, I want you for my wife, Stark. And I’m tired of circumstance and history and idiocy telling me I can’t have you.’

Arya didn’t say a word. She was trying not to cry, and not quite getting it right, and her mouth opened and closed several times as she tried and failed to speak. Eventually, she simply embraced him again, and held him as close as she could manage.
‘Was it like this that you wanted to sit for a really long time?’ she murmured.

‘Yes,’ Jaime told her, holding her tighter and smiling, ‘just like that.’
Arya had never been to a wedding before. She had never had occasion to – and she would probably have refused to if she had – but on the basis of what she had picked up here and there during her years at Harrenhal, she had come to think of such things as ritualistic masterpieces of precision that celebrated the bride’s becoming one man’s property instead of another’s by trussing her up like a pig for slaughter. While Arya certainly didn’t consider herself a pig for slaughter at her own wedding – not anymore – she did consider herself a newcomer to anything beyond fighting, running and serving wine, and fully expected to blunder her way through the entire ceremony while Jaime moved from one ritual to the next with that infuriating natural grace that characterised his every move. She was pleasantly surprised, then, when the draping of the cloak and the binding of the hands presented no problems at all; Jaime’s fingers warm against hers as they folded into the silk of the cloth that bound their hands together; seeming to making it stronger and harder, like Valyrian steel.

Arya had not kept the Seven since her father’s death, and as the septon droned tediously and interminably on about the seven gods that she did not believe in, she glanced repeatedly at Jaime out of the corner of her eye and wished she were alone in a godswood with him, being wed by no one but themselves. He sensed her gaze, and winked at her, and she realised that she was being ridiculous. Had they not happened to be at Casterly Rock on that particular day, she would gladly have married Jaime in a ditch on the side of the road; though Sansa would not have permitted it, and neither, she suspected, would Lady Dorna. The two seemed to have become fast friends in an infuriatingly short space of time, and had made Arya and Jaime wait three hours so that they could personally decorate the sept with flowers and candles and other silly things while Janei ran about waving ribbons and getting in everybody’s way. All three of them stood side by side now, with Kevan, congratulating themselves on their handiwork as the time came for the exchange of the wedding promises; and suddenly Jaime was looking blankly at Arya and Arya was looking blankly at Jaime, and the sept was utterly silent as they simultaneously realised that they didn’t know the fucking words.

‘Do you know them?’ Arya hissed.

‘No,’ Jaime hissed back in amusement, tall and glorious and hers, ‘do you?’

Arya rolled her eyes and earned herself a glare from the septon.

‘Why in seven hells do you imagine I’d know wedding vows by heart?’ she asked with genuine interest.

Jaime shrugged.

‘It seems a normal thing where women are concerned,’ he replied with mirth in his voice, and Arya wanted to laugh with him, and fight with him, and punch him in the shoulder for being such a shit.

Eventually, the septon made them repeat the words after him; and when Jaime kissed her as her husband; it was all the vow she needed.

Arya was insistent that they leave for King’s Landing the day after the wedding; thinking that Jaime would be too proud to openly state that he wanted to get both the journey and the execution over and done with. She was deeply moved, therefore, when he completely failed to take the hint – a deep, golden glow in his eyes telling her that his obtuseness was deliberate – and told her that they should stay at least a few days at Casterly Rock before returning to what he eloquently called ‘that cesspool of shit they call a capital.’
Arya loved Casterly Rock. It was not as old as Winterfell, but it was old enough to have that whispering from the stones and walls that was the mark of true age; and a rawness and a roughness in the halls carved directly from the Rock that reminded her of home. There were caves beneath the castle that echoed constantly with the sound of thunder; thunder that was really the sea crashing on the rocks below; and she had lain flat on her stomach and put her ear to the ground – knowing, and not caring, that Lady Dorna would scold her for ruining her gown – and listened intently to that storm; feeling it in her bones. It was the roar of a savage monster that could not reach her; the rock like a shield from the chaos outside; and she gasped as she felt Jaime’s lips on the back of her neck, and his hand undoing the laces at the back of her gown; gently, clumsily, one at a time; his lips brushing every inch of skin that was slowly and gradually exposed; until her gown fell from her body and she turned, and shuddered, as Jaime’s mouth found hers.

As the time for their departure drew nearer and nearer, Arya learned that Lady Dorna had been making use of their time at Casterly Rock to have a gown of appropriate expense and crimsonness made for Arya, just for their entry into King’s Landing. Grateful as she was for her new aunt’s concern (and suspicious as she was of Sansa’s complicity in the matter), the idea made Arya feel… rather cross.

Jaime, on the other hand, was furious.

‘My dear aunt,’ he thundered, upon learning of it, ‘I’ll thank you not to take it upon yourself to make decisions on my lady wife’s choice of wardrobe!’

‘The dear child’s wardrobe is of little concern to me,’ Lady Dorna had replied with perfect calm and sweetness, ‘but I’m sure you’ll agree that the first Lady of Casterly Rock in thirty years cannot make her first appearance in the capital wearing second-hand gowns or breeches,’ she gave Arya a withered look, ‘especially when Cersei has brought House Lannister’s reputation so low. The smallfolk need to be kept loyal.’

‘And how will wearing a dress accomplish this?’ Jaime protested.

‘Jaime,’ Arya interjected sullenly, ‘leave it. Your aunt is right.’

‘Thank you, Arya, dear,’ Dorna said, looking sincerely moved as Jaime continued to glare at her, ‘I shall also have the official jewels of the Lady of Casterly Rock brought up from the strong room. They have been cleaned quite regularly despite their not being worn for so long, and putting on something noticeable may spare you a great deal of trouble down the line.’

Dresses? Jewels? Trouble down the line?

‘You don’t need to put up with any of this bullshit,’ Jaime told her when Lady Dorna left them; his eyes very large and sincere and angry.

‘Yes, I do,’ Arya smiled sadly.

But I love you for pretending that I don’t.

So when they reached King’s Landing with Sansa, Kevan and Janei; Kevan having accepted to enter into talks with Tyron about becoming Regent; Janei having convinced her mother to spare her for one week; Jaime wore crimson instead of his habitual black, and Arya wore crimson instead of hers.

The gown she wore was made of an immensely delicate fabric that she had never seen before. Tiny strands of gold seemed to shimmer and erupt out of the red each time she stood in the sun; her hair was dressed and braided; and she had chosen the least ostentatious of the jewels (the Lannisters’ idea
of unostentatious being a thickly-wound necklace of spun gold that ended in a ruby pendant the size of a pigeon’s egg) to complete the process of looking as little like herself as possible. She did, however, enter the capital riding astride and with Nymeria beside her; and she didn’t really care what people thought of either.

She watched Jaime’s face constantly for signs of worry or distress, but he gave no sign that Cersei was in his thoughts at all; making his usual blistering comments on the rank smell of King’s Landing and comically wondering why Tyrion didn’t make use of his obvious talent for unplugging drains and cisterns to make the place a little less fragrant.

They expected the forecourt of the Red Keep to be as dusty, noisy and busy as it would be on a normal day. To their surprise, however, they found Tommen waiting on the steps with his entire retinue and without his crown; a fragile blade of ivory trapped in a garden of daggers.

The boy king was grave, and solemn, and pale to the point of gauntness, and he had lost an alarmingly large amount of weight far too quickly; the former roundness of his face supplanted by sharp cheekbones and the angular jaw of a much older man. Arya stared at him in anxiety, thinking that he looked closer to a hundred and twenty than twelve, and as she dismounted, she could see that Jaime, Kevan and Sansa were staring too.

‘Your Grace,’ Jaime greeted formally; rapidly burying his fingers in Nymeria’s fur and holding her back when she began to lope forwards with the firm intention of sniffing out the entire Kingsguard.

‘You are welcome back to King’s Landing, Uncle,’ Tommen replied with equal ceremoniousness, courteously ignoring Nymeria’s growl as she returned to Arya’s side, ‘and may I wish you and Lady Arya joy of your marriage.’

‘Thank you, Your Grace,’ Jaime said.

Tommen was still looking at Nymeria.

‘Lady Arya, is that a direwolf?’ he asked in disbelief, a hint of childhood in his voice.

‘It is, Your Grace,’ Arya answered, smiling, ‘she’s my…pet.’

Nymeria growled, offended.

‘Then we shall have to come to some sort of arrangement, my lady,’ the boy king remarked, smiling back at her with great sweetness and politeness, ‘the palace has rather a large population of kittens. We wouldn’t want one of them to be mistaken for breakfast.’

Nymeria growled again. Arya glared at her. The growling stopped. And Tommen continued his courtesies.

‘Ser Kevan –’ Tommen greeted.

‘He called him ‘Ser Uncle’ before,’ Jaime whispered to Arya, a hint of sadness in his voice.

‘ – I’m delighted that you have accepted to come to the capital to discuss the Regency. I very much hope we can persuade you to remain here with us. We are in dire need of help after my royal mother’s follies.’

The poor, poor boy, Arya thought as Kevan bowed low, clearly having similar thoughts.

‘I find that I might very comfortably be able to serve a King who comes into his own forecourt to
receive guests, Your Grace,’ Kevan observed approvingly, ‘I have never heard of any king, Westerosi or otherwise, acting with such graciousness, and I must say that I approve.’

Tommen smiled despondently, touched by the compliment despite his evident misery.

‘Uncle Tyrion and I have had many interesting discussions on how a king should act,’ he told Kevan, ‘but sometimes I do not agree with him. He sends his apologies that he is not here to greet you – he is holed up doing battle with Lord Tyrell. Again. He did, however, express the wish that I send you, Uncle Jaime and Lady Arya up to him immediately. He wishes you to be fully appraised of which stories are rumour and which are fact.’

As Kevan politely declined the invitation on the grounds that he had to get Janei settled, Arya glanced sideways at Sansa, and noted that her sister looked noticeably crestfallen at the fact that Tyrion hadn’t sent for her too. Arya grinned in spite of herself, and when she looked at Jaime, she saw that he was grinning too. King Tommen had just been introduced to his cousin Janei and was blushing worse than a maiden passing a brothel at midnight.

‘Why don’t you wear a crown, Cousin Tommen?’ Janei was asking, ‘aren’t kings meant to wear crowns?’

‘The crown gives me a headache,’ Tommen replied, not seeming remotely offended by Janei’s omitting to address him as ‘Your Grace’, ‘I’ll have to wait for my skull to get thicker. I’m told that most men don’t even notice when it’s happening.’

‘Tommen is sounding just like Tyrion,’ Arya remarked to Jaime as they approached the Hand’s solar.

‘He is,’ Jaime agreed, his expression conflicted; ‘he’s far too impressionable for a boy his age. Cersei saw to that.’

‘Who can you trust if not your own mother?’ Arya replied.

Jaime snorted as they reached Tyrion’s solar.

‘Whatever Tommen thought of Cersei, I think I’ll speak to Tyrion about it anyway. The boy must be allowed to become himself at some point, though I must admit that he’s –’

Jaime was cut off as Tyrion’s door flew abruptly and noisely open to reveal a furious Lord Tyrell; his boots jarring on the flagstone floors as he swept past them and muttered indignantly to himself about impertinent imps and demon monkeys.

Arya and Jaime grinned at each other and entered the solar, where they found Tyrion attempting to drink an entire flagon of wine in one gulp.

‘Wine so early in the day?’ Jaime remarked as Tyrion signalled to them to wait until he had finished. When the wine ran out, he clonked the flagon down on the table and came to them; looking paler than Tommen and so exhausted that he could hardly stand. Jaime sat on his haunches and embraced him, and Tyrion quietly returned the gesture without making the slightest effort to joke or laugh.
It was that embrace more than anything else that made Arya understand the gravity of what had happened while she and Jaime had been away. She did not know Tyrion well, but she knew that he liked to laugh, about everything, even when he was miserable. Jaime was exactly the same. And yet here Tyrion was, not laughing and not smiling. Not even to himself.

Tyrion kissed Arya’s cheek and welcomed her to the family in as warm a way as he could manage in his present condition, and he waved to her and Jaime to sit while he tottered about looking for more wine.

‘You look drunk, brother,’ Jaime observed.

‘I’m not drunk, I’m exhausted,’ Tyrion replied, returning to his seat with a pitcher of wine, ‘the Iron Bank of Braavos is pestering me daily with calls for Cersei’s head on a spike – though they’d rather have the money that is owed to them; and Mace dull-as-paint Tyrell is pestering me hourly in his attempts to convince me that he’d make a better Regent than Uncle Kevan. Each time he comes to see me, I sit there looking into his face and thinking that if I had to have a Tyrell for Regent; it would be Margaery rather than him. Impossible, I know, but the thought amuses me. We wouldn’t even have to have Ser Ilyn see to Cersei. We’d simply have to give her the news.’

He did not smile when he said it, and his mismatched eyes grew darker and darker.

‘How is Cersei?’ Arya asked, knowing that Jaime would sooner die than ask the question in front of her.

Tyrion did not reply immediately; his face an agony of conflict and strife and terrible, uncontrollable thought; his sister’s name like a curse that made his armour crumble to dust. He undid the top clasp of his doublet and took a long draught of wine; the alcohol only seeming to turn him whiter.

‘Cersei,’ Tyrion said eventually, with a sudden flippancy that instantly put Arya on her guard, ‘is being treated uncommonly well for a person with such an impressive list of crimes to her name. She isn’t in the black cells, but she might as well be for the way she carries on. Perhaps I should put her in a rabbit hutch and see if she takes to it –’

He’s blathering.

‘What is it, brother?’ Jaime asked, his face a mirror of Arya’s own realisation.

Tyrion’s face was like ash, and his eyes were delirious and spent.

‘Please forgive me for not keeping this from you,’ he pleaded numbly, as though every word caused him pain.

‘I forgive you; now what is it?’ Jaime insisted.

Arya knew the answer before it came.

‘She wants to see you,’ Tyrion told Jaime, as though every word caused him pain, ‘it is all she talks of, and all she will hear talk of. She wants to see you before she dies.’
‘I hope m’lord don’t think it impertinent of me to ask, but is it true Lady Arya’s got a wolf?’ the gaoler enthusiastically enquired as he led Jaime down to the second level of the dungeons.

‘Nobody can truly own a wolf,’ Jaime replied distractedly as the world grew darker and narrower around him, ‘but yes, she does have one. She’s rather large.’

‘Lady Arya?’ the gaoler asked, confused.

‘The wolf,’ Jaime growled, exasperated.

‘I heard she can kill twenty men without blinking.’

‘I’ve seen her do it. She’s especially intolerant of people who talk too much.’

The gaoler fell silent, not asking if he meant Lady Arya or the wolf.

In the week that had passed since their arrival at court, Arya had expressed no opinion on the subject of Cersei’s final request. Jaime hadn’t either. But on every single one of the seven days that they had broken their fast and sparred in the godswood and attended court and argued and shouted and loved each other, he had seen a flash of coal in Arya’s eyes that told him she was thinking of Cersei, even if she would not speak of her. It would begin with a glow of hatred made darker by disdain, then transform itself into the same expression that she wore when thinking of the dead she had never said goodbye to. Every time that look crossed Arya’s face, Jaime became surer and surer that he really ought to go; and today, when he had told her of his intentions, she had smiled at him, but said nothing.

The beheading was to take place tomorrow, and though Jaime was no longer afraid of himself, a shadow and a whisper took hold of him with cold fingers and crushed him as the infernal flame of the gaoler’s lantern led him deeper and deeper into the harrowing moisture of the darkness beneath the Red Keep. A shadow and a whisper and a certainty: the knowledge that Cersei was his twin; and his blood no matter what she had done, to others or to him.

He did not blame her for the worst of what had been called her crimes. Even now, he thought that any woman with the slightest sense of self-regard or pride would wish to assassinate a husband who treated her with the shameful want of decency and respect that had come to define Robert’s marriage to his sister. It enraged him even now; the thought of all those countless hours of guard duty listening to Robert fuck one whore after the other; the smell of wine clinging to him (and them) like a sickness.

But what had Cersei’s behaviour to Tommen during the trial been, if not a shameful want of decency and respect; of love? How could she claim to love her son when she was capable of doing that to him?

A gust of wind, from the gods only knew where, came howling out of the gloom to snuff out the gaoler’s lantern; and as Jaime listened to the man swearing and searching his pockets for a light, he was suddenly and inexplicably confronted by a vision of Sansa Stark standing at the edge of the Moon Door, telling them of how Lysa Arryn had conspired with Littlefinger to kill Jon Arryn.

Jaime had rejoiced in the old fool’s death when it had happened, and he didn’t much care about him now. But all the same, he couldn’t help but wonder if Cersei had also…
No, he thought firmly, she would have told me.

The lantern burst into flame once more; and as they reached Cersei’s cell, the gaoler bowed to him; the keys rattling in the lock as the door was pulled open, and Jaime was allowed to enter the room.

It was large, gloomy, hot and bare; the stone walls streaming with humidity; the stale air smelling of moisture and death. Jaime’s eyes took in the table with no chair, the fireplace with no fire, and the simple straw pallet where Cersei sat in full court dress; her green eyes, now red, falling on Jaime and staring at him; her golden hair undressed and cascading down to her waist.

‘Get out,’ she commanded.

For a moment, he assumed that she was talking to him. Then he saw Cersei’s handmaiden; a girl hidden so deeply in the shadows that he hadn’t even noticed her. She laid down her work and bolted; knocking rapidly on the door to be let out, and slamming it behind her when her request was granted.

Cersei did not rise to greet him, sitting on her pallet as she might have sat the Iron Throne. She was wearing a gown of very pale blue that only seemed to make her face seem more ghastly, and there were new lines gathering cruelly around her eyes and chin like knife wounds; a woman made old by her own folly.

‘Come to say goodbye, sweet brother?’ Cersei purred spitefully, ‘I believe it’s my last night in this world.’

* I shouldn’t have come, * Jaime thought.

‘They tell me you’ve been at court for a week,’ Cersei continued, ‘I’m surprised you didn’t come sooner.’

‘You are?’ Jaime enquired blandly.

‘I am,’ Cersei insisted, ‘though perhaps I shouldn’t have been. You did not answer my raven scroll. In the past, you would have killed the person who treated me with such cruelty and disrespect.’

‘I’d just gotten married, Cersei,’ Jaime stated, trying hard to keep the indignation from his voice, ‘I had better things to do than waste time and effort answering nonsense.’

‘Fucking your little Northern whore, were you?’ she sneered in reply.

‘However I choose to spend my leisure time, I must confess that I didn’t think it appropriate to demean the Queen Regent of Westeros by allowing her to name a cripple as her champion,’ Jaime observed.

‘Perhaps you’re right,’ Cersei agreed, dismissively tossing her golden head, ‘ *look at you. * Wearing that awful stump in a sling around your neck, as though it were a thing you should be proud of.’

‘Avert your eyes if you are offended,’ he suggested coldly.

Cersei smiled cruelly at him.

‘If Father had been alive he would have taken steps to make you hide it long before now. But then Father would never have let Joffrey die, or allowed me to be humiliated in this way, or failed me, as you have.’

‘Good thing Father’s dead, then,’ Jaime smiled back at her, ‘and as for Joffrey, well…I couldn’t help
but notice that King’s Landing seems rather caught up in routine for a city that has just lost its beloved ruler. Where is the throng of wailing women outside the Sept of Baelor? Where is the fear in the streets at the prospect of a war of succession? Where are the highborns in mourning garb; the manses draped in black; the two penny portraits at every shop front? You must be proud, to have raised a son capable of making such an impression.’

He expected her to snipe back at him, or to scream, or to throw him out. Instead, she let out a strangled sob and covered her hand with her mouth, and he saw Joffrey in each divided plain of her face as she began to weep; her tears tearing lines in her beauty like ink across a sheet of silvery white parchment; and Jaime felt his anger collapse as pity was born in its place.

In the past, her tears would have made him half-mad with anger, and he would instantly have set out to murder or maim whoever had caused them; knowing that when he returned, her flesh and her cunt and her cries would be his as he wound her golden hair around his hands like rope and fucked her like the hurt and the pain and the torture of what they were; of what they loved to be.

But he didn’t love like that anymore, and as she sat there in front of him, weeping for herself and her loneliness and her fear and her child, he was not seized by the slightest desire to charge off into battle against those that she believed had wronged her, or to fuck her into feeling better. She was desperate, and pathetic, and alone…and his sister.

He sat down next to her on the straw pallet and touched her shoulder. It felt like metal beneath his fingertips. She turned to him almost immediately, put both her arms around his neck and pulled him hard against her; sobbing pitifully into his shoulder and shivering despite the heat. In that gesture she took more than he wanted to give, but he did not pull away.

He remembered the first time she had cried like this; when they were children at Casterly Rock, and Jaime had thrown himself from the top of the cliffs; whooping in joy as his body tore through the air and crashed into the waves; and he had looked about for Cersei under the water; expecting her to join him at any moment; to follow him; to do what he had done. He had surfaced to find her staring down at him from the top of the cliffs and weeping uncontrollably; and when he had run up to her and found her again, she had pulled him against her, not caring that he was sopping wet, and he had stood there and held her for a small eternity while she wept, and cried that she had believed him dead. He had looked her fear absurd and ridiculous, but she was his sister, and he had felt deeply, deeply sorry for her, and Father had berated him later for being such an idiot; ‘We’re Lannisters,’ he had said, ‘Lannisters don’t act like fools.’

Today was the same, apart from one thing. Cersei had acted like a fool this time.

‘How is Tommen?’ she was weeping, ‘how is my little king? Does he hate me?’

‘Of course he doesn’t hate you,’ Jaime replied, her arms around his neck like the bars of a prison.

‘Tyrion will find some way to kill him,’ Cersei babbled desperately, holding him tighter, her hands hard and cruel, ‘I know he will; I see it each time he looks at me, or at my sweet, darling boy; you must protect Tommen, Jaime; promise me, promise me.’

‘Tyrion would never seek to harm the boy,’ Jaime assured her, with more kindness that he had ever shown her on the subject; ‘Tommen is his own blood. He loves him. You may set your mind at rest on that score.’

Cersei shoved him away from her; anger blazing from the redness of her eyes.

‘How can I set my mind at rest?’ she screeched, hysteria deforming her voice, ‘he devoted his life to
destroying Joffrey and he will do the same to Tommen; he will stop at nothing until he had seized power! I know it and Father knew it too; it is why he –'

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Cersei!’ Jaime interrupted, fast losing patience, ‘Tyrion is the only man who can save these benighted kingdoms from the fucking mess you’ve made; and he will teach Tommen to be the same, and better. With both Tyrion and Uncle Kevan by his side, your son will be the greatest ruler in half a century – though I’m afraid that’s not saying much.’

Cersei’s eyes filled with tears, and a sudden hurt so deep it shocked him.

‘Our son,’ she insisted softly, the whisper hoarse in her throat, ‘Tommen is our son.’

Jaime looked at her pointedly.

‘No,’ he insisted, ‘your son. Just as you’ve so often told me. Do you now claim to regret that?’

‘Sweet brother –’

‘Don’t ‘sweet brother’ me, Cersei! When he was a baby you wouldn’t even let me hold him. It’s a little too late – and a little too convenient – to change your mind about it now. The boy is your son, not mine. And the idea of your head ending up at the bottom of a bucket certainly isn’t enough to convince me otherwise.’

She slapped him hard across the face.

As Jaime felt his cheek stinging, he saw her eyes flicker upwards to his and her lips part with a sigh that he knew well. Jaime stared bemusedly back at her and down at her hand as it travelled slowly up his leg, coming to rest firmly on his cock.

She did not attempt to kiss him, or undress him. She didn’t even try to undo his laces. But her breathing grew heavier; her eyes began to burn with a hard, torturous flame; and suddenly she was staring fixedly, desperately and absolutely at him with the same raw, yearning, near-inhuman gaze that had once been sufficient to drive him half-mad with desire for her. He continued to stare at her, curious.

She started to stroke him; gently at first, then harder when his cock failed to respond. Her confidence was as towering and imperious and lustful as her gaze, and as powerful as her blatant and uncompromising certainty that he would cast everything away from him; cast Arya away from him; and come to her like a dog, as he always had. And suddenly, his bemusement turned to disdain for a master too stupid to realise that she’d reclaimed her slave too late, and disgust at the twenty-five years of his life that he’d wasted.

‘You can stop that now, Cersei,’ he said, rising, ‘at this rate I won’t come before I’m eighty.’

‘Going so soon?’ she drawled, her expression instantly replaced by one of extreme boredom and sound, well-worn spite.

‘Your company grows more unbearable by the minute,’ Jaime replied.

‘You may find it so, brother,’ she sneered, ‘but I doubt the High Septon will think so when I see him tomorrow morning.’

‘Unburdening yourself before you die?’ he spat.

Cersei smiled and looked up at him with disconcerting sweetness.
'I’ve already unburdened myself of a great many sins, sweet brother,’ she said, ‘they’ve been flaunted before the realm in all their glorious colour and ugliness. But you, and our children, the best of my crimes – or the worst, now that I know that you have nothing in your veins but milk – you I will spare for last. And the old fool will weep at the purity of my soul before I die, blissfully unaware that no matter what meaningless words he speaks, you and I will be seeing Father soon: in hell.’

Jaime’s blood curdled and turned black as he watched her smiling at him; her emerald green eyes; his eyes; dark and alive with the brutal thrill of cruelty.

‘You fucking bitch.’

Cersei was still smiling; widely and obscenely.

‘We came into this world together, sweet brother,’ she said, ‘we will leave it the same way. Tomorrow – or not.’
Chapter 53

Jaime felt Arya clutch his hand as they stared out at the crowd that had come to watch Cersei die. They had been standing on the steps of the Red Keep with the rest of the royal party for almost twenty minutes; Tommen pale but calm as he held his kitten; Tyrion highly agitated and annoyed; Uncle Kevan sorrowful and disbelieving; and Sansa and Myrcella not present at all. Sansa had let it be known for almost a week that she would not be attending; but as a princess of the realm who needed to distance herself from her mother in order to survive, Myrcella had little choice in the matter. The princess, however, had not been seen since breakfast, and had proved such a genius at evading both her handmaidens and the gold cloaks that the entire execution had had to be delayed until Myrcella was found.

The delay – and the implications of Cersei’s having refused to see the High Septon earlier that morning – made Jaime want to vomit in anxiety, but as he watched Arya standing silent, constant and fearless as a sentinel by his side, and felt the tenseness in her fingers as they held onto his; he felt his heart sink further into his chest as he contemplated the effect that a scene like this must have on her; and the memories it must evoke.

When she sensed his gaze and looked back at him, her grey eyes like the wolfswood, he opened his mouth for the first time in an hour, and spoke to her.

‘Are you alright, Stark?’ Jaime asked.

‘Yes,’ Arya lied, ‘are you?’

‘Yes,’ he lied back, his voice shaking from the falsehood.

Arya squeezed his hand again and looked out at the crowd once more, leaving him no choice but to contemplate the shit storm that he had endured the previous evening, and to feel anger, fear and the beginnings of panic as they clouded up the breath in his lungs and turned his blood to wolfsbane.

After seeing Cersei, Jaime had walked rapidly out of the dungeons; turned back again with every intention of strangling her with her chains; changed his mind and walked away; thought seriously about returning later that evening to cut her throat; and eventually ended up in Tyrion’s chambers, knowing that his brother would counsel him well without doing him the dishonour of suggesting that he decide to stand as Cersei’s champion after all.

To Jaime’s extreme chagrin, Tyrion’s initial reaction had been to swear violently, drain his wine goblet and throw it hard against the wall; sending the crystal shattering and splintering like a thousand iridescent stars in the candlelight. But then he had calmed himself, poured himself more wine and had begun to think. And thinking was what Tyrion did best.

‘Even if she does decide to tell the truth,’ Tyrion had reasoned, ‘nobody will believe a word she says, least of all the bloody High Septon. Her refusal to honour the Crown’s debts to the Faith has crippled whatever trust he might have had in her.’

‘This is not just about the High Septon,’ Jaime snapped, ‘what about Stannis Baratheon and his fucking letter?’

‘She cannot possibly think to use that against you,’ Tyrion assured him, ‘she has publicly denounced the document on numerous occasions, and many still consider it to be little more than petty sedition.’

‘Many more people don’t!’ Jaime insisted.
‘Will you calm down?’ Tyrion hissed in desperation, ‘you can’t –’

‘I can’t?’ Jaime shouted, ‘I can’t what? Once this conversation is over, I will have to go back upstairs and tell my wife that she may be a widow before the week is out! How can I calm down?’

‘Unless you want every little bird in the castle to hear you, then I suggest that you find a way!’ Tyrion growled back at him, his mismatched eyes glaring at Jaime in a thoroughly frightening way… before softening wordlessly, and smiling at him like candles.

Jaime forced himself to take several deep breaths, and poured himself a glass of wine while his brother glanced out of each of the windows, closed them, and opened the door to tell Bronn to impale any lurkers on a spike. He then returned to where Jaime stood, and continued to speak to him with carefully-calculated calm.

‘Trials require proof to be successful,’ Tyrion told him, ‘and there is no proof of Joffrey, Tommen and Myrcella’s true parentage. Joffrey slaughtered all the proof when he had the gold cloaks murder Robert’s bastards – and Robert’s bastards were scant proof to begin with. If someone had pointed that out to Jon Arryn or Ned Stark, they would both still be alive –’

‘What are you saying, brother?’ Jaime interrupted.

‘I’m saying that Cersei’s playing with you,’ Tyrion declared simply.

Jaime shook his head.

‘She isn’t.’

Tyrion glared impatiently at him.

‘How do you know?’

‘I just do.’

‘How? Has she told you of some new evidence that she’s magically acquired from the darkness of her prison cell?’

It took every ounce of self-restraint that Jaime possessed not to reach out and hit him.

‘I want to go back down there and kill her,’ he growled between gritted teeth.

‘A kinslayer as well as a kingslayer?’ Tyrion shot back, amused, ‘a rare distinction, brother.’

‘I don’t care a fuck if I end up in the deepest of the seven hells for this!’ Jaime spat, growing angrier by the second, ‘for the first time in my life I’m hap – that is, I don’t care a fuck what she does to me, but I will not let her do this to Arya, or…or to Tommen, or Myrcella. I want her dead before she causes any more damage; I want her dead!’

‘Don’t be a child, Jaime,’ Tyrion said harshly, a hint of contempt in his voice, ‘everyone would know it was you.’

‘So I do nothing?’ Jaime concluded in disbelief, ‘you would have me do nothing?’

‘Yes, because Cersei will also do nothing!’ Tyrion insisted, furious, ‘nobody will believe her, she cannot provide convincing proof, and she cannot make such a confession without endangering Tommen and Myrcella. She has too much to lose by talking.’
Jaime almost screamed in frustration.

‘She doesn’t care about endangering Tommen and Myrcella, can’t you understand?’

‘Brother, please –’

‘She believes she’s lost everything, including her children! She’s so convinced that you’ll slit their throats in the night that she probably sees condemning them to die with both her and me as mercy!’

Tyrion stared.

‘Who said anything about condemning them to die?’ he asked.

‘Cersei did,’ Jaime replied, staring back as Tyrion snorted in disgust.

‘Then Cersei is a bigger fool than I thought her,’ he said, ‘I will not suffer two children to be executed for no greater crime than being born. I’ll change the fucking law if I have to. But let us imagine, for argument’s sake, that Cersei does stage this grand confession of which you speak, and you are tried, somehow found guilty and then condemned to die. Yes, you will certainly lose your head and that may very well please her, but Tommen and Myrcella will be dishonoured, attainted and stripped of all rank and titles; and I do not think our sweet sister would do such a thing to her own children just to get at you. She loves them. She sees her own power as living on through them.’

Jaime looked intently into Tyrion’s face and prayed desperately, to the old gods and the new, that Tyrion would believe him.

‘Our sister is half-mad with hatred and desperation and paranoia,’ he said, ‘she will do anything at any time; can’t you see? It is the dying serpent that bites deepest.’

‘You’re beginning to talk like Father,’ Tyrion observed.

‘Have you ever known Father to be wrong where dying serpents are concerned?’ Jaime insisted; praying that his words would be enough, and seeing, in Tyrion’s eyes, that they weren’t.

Why doesn’t he understand? Jaime fumed as Tyrion stood looking silently at him as he would at a fool that he was only humouring, why does nobody understand the way her twisted fucking mind works? Is the whole world blind as well as stupid?

No. The whole world doesn’t know her like I do. Gods help me.

Tyrion was speaking to him once more.

‘Brother,’ he asked softly, ‘do you trust my judgment? Do you trust me?’

‘Do I trust you even when I know you’re wrong?’ Jaime scoffed bitterly.

Tyrion did not reply, and Jaime could see that he’d hurt him.

But he did trust him. More than he would ever admit.

‘I trust you,’ Jaime said gravely.

‘Then do as I say,’ Tyrion replied in relief, ‘go back to your chambers. Get some sleep. Say nothing of this to Arya. And by this time tomorrow, our sweet sister’s head will be decorating a spike on the dry moat, and this whole mess will be behind us. I promise you.’
Jaime had returned to his chambers furious, exhausted and unconvinced, but he had done as Tyrion had said. Because infuriating as the clever little shit was, Tyrion tended to be right.

The arrival of an officer of the city watch, and the subsequent roar of acknowledgment from the crowd, brought Jaime back to the stairs of the Red Keep and the feeling of Arya’s hand in his as the officer stopped in front of Tommen and bowed, his gold cloak shining like a signal beacon.

‘Has my royal sister been found?’ Tommen asked.

‘No sign, Your Grace, I’m afraid,’ the officer replied.

Jaime watched as Tommen had a whispered word with Tyrion. A kitten in the boy king’s arms squirmed in discomfort as Nymeria growled hungrily and was immediately shushed by Arya, who buried her hand in the direwolf’s fur to keep her firmly by their side. Tommen grew paler as his conversation with Tyrion came to a close, and he turned regally back to the officer in gold; his fingers gliding through the kitten’s fur.

‘We shall proceed without Princess Myrcella,’ Tommen declared, ‘you may bring out the prisoner.’

‘Your Grace,’ the officer responded, before raising his hand above his head and moving to rejoin his company as the doors to the Keep began to open.

Arya did not turn her head as Cersei was lead out of the doors behind them, and down the stairs to the scaffolding that had been erected in the square. She could feel every move the woman made without seeing her; the legacy of what Jaqen, and memory, had taught her.

For years she had been dreaming of seeing Cersei Lannister die; sweet dreams in which she held the knife or swung the sword while Cersei wept and screamed and tore at her own flesh. Arya had always wanted it to be that way. Nevertheless, she had to admit that seeing the stupid bitch beheaded in the square before the Red Keep with a screaming mob in attendance did have a certain…appeal, and she even found herself to be capable of forgiving Ilyn Payne for claiming her father’s greatsword, Ice – for one day only. Because Cersei would die by a Stark blade, and that was the way it should be.

Arya felt Jaime’s fingers tighten through hers, and felt herself crushed by shame; a feeling that had hung constantly and menacingly about her shoulders in the course of the past week. She had wanted to talk to Jaime about Cersei…so many times, it had been right on the tip of her tongue…but each time she had held back, because talking would reveal the fierce joy that she felt at the prospect of seeing Cersei die; and that would hurt Jaime no matter how much he pleaded the contrary.

Arya was not ashamed of what she felt, nor did she blame Jaime for not sharing it. She was ashamed that silence was the only comfort she could offer him. But anything else would be a lie, and he would know if she lied to him.

Arya’s eyes flickered across to the scaffolding, where Cersei stood with one shoulder to the crowd and the other to the stairs of the Keep; her eyes fixed on Tommen, and clearly searching for Myrcella, as the High Septon read out the list of her crimes; his voice drowned out by the baying and the howling and the cheering of the mob as they screamed out ‘whore’ and ‘traitor,’ and Arya
shuddered as identical cries and screams, and the sound of a blade falling, were called up from the darkness of her eleven-year-old self, and she held Jaime’s hand tighter as she looked out over the crowd.

*Jaime needs your help today, not the other way round. So stop being stupid, and grow up.*

‘Stark.’

Arya turned her head to look at her husband. His face was haggard and pinched, and his golden hair was slick with sweat, but his eyes were gentle as he softly kissed her forehead and asked her, once again, if she was alright.

‘Yes,’ Arya repeated, feeling a rush of affection and guilt, ‘are you?’

And suddenly Jaime’s face changed, haunted by a voice that only he could hear, and the expression in his eyes was slaughtered by denial and disbelief and horror as he gazed suddenly and intently away from her and towards the scaffold; his face growing harsher and paler as he did so.

Cersei’s eyes had left her son, and had come to settle on her brother. She was gazing at him with an unsettling calm and radiance; the glorious, unholy beauty of her face seeming to pull every scream and cry and jeer of the crowd into her gaze; so that her emerald eyes roared silently and vengefully in the face of death, and her stupid pouty lips, like Joffrey’s, began to turn up at the corners and smile. Several feet away, Arya saw Tyrion turning pale, his fingers balling into fists, and when Arya looked back at Cersei, she was still leering at them with that grotesque smile of fear and blood; and Jaime was holding her hand so tightly it hurt.

‘Jaime,’ she uttered, ashamed of how small her voice sounded, ‘what haven’t you told me?’

Jaime’s eyes were wild as they met hers.

‘How can you ask me that question?’

‘Why aren’t you answering it?’

Arya tore her eyes away from Jaime’s as the High Septon finished his list and roared out over the crowd; his voice a harsh chorus of drums and funeral horns.

‘Does the accused have anything to say?’ he thundered.

Jaime’s hand was shaking in Arya’s; Tyrion’s face was marble and stone and grief, like Tywin’s; Kevan’s was perplexed but panic-stricken, and Tommen was stroking his kitten; the boy king’s eyes a horror as he looked upon his mother’s cruelly smiling face. Nausea begin to rise in Arya’s chest along with dread and fear, and Nymeria was growling beside her as the crowd fell silent and Cersei’s eyes burned pale with the threat of wildfire.

*Burn them all.*

‘I am Cersei Lannister of Casterly Rock,’ she proclaimed, the sun catching the crimson of her gown like a heartbeat, ‘the eldest child and only daughter of Tywin Lannister; and Queen Regent of the Seven Kingdoms. I come before you to confess my treason. In the sight of gods and –’

Arya cried out as a scream of pain and fear and shock tore from Cersei’s throat; her proud words rent from her as a cloudburst of blood gushed from her mouth; her white hands closing slowly and disbelievingly around the arrow protruding from her stomach. The crowd grew very silent, then transformed itself into a colossal, roaring monster that burst apart and tore itself limb from limb; each
appendage stampeding away from the others and hollering in terror as Cersei fell to her knees under the impact of more arrows; from heaven, it seemed, from nowhere; that savagely pierced her chest, throat, stomach and arms; dragging the life from her as she collapsed onto the scaffolding, dead.

Arya felt the breath crushed from her lungs as Jaime seized hold of her and shielded her body between his and those of the red cloaks behind them; roaring at her not to be stupid as she hopped on the balls of her feet to see over his shoulder. Tyrion was shouting orders, Kevan was rushing to obey them, the Kingsguard were leaping in front of Tommen and pulling him back to the Keep, the High Septon was running for cover, and Ilyn Payne was staring stupidly at Cersei’s body as though wondering what he should do with it. The gold cloaks were charging into the square to deal with the pandemonium, and Jaime was ordering the red cloaks to take Arya back into the Keep while he remained to help Tyrion.

She protested and scratched and shouted and did everything in her power to prevent them from obeying him, until Jaime barked in a briskly impatient and military voice that she had never heard him use before:

‘Captain, you will restrain Lady Lannister and escort her back to our chambers. You will keep her there, under guard, until I return for her. You will chain her up if she refuses to comply, and you will not under any circumstances allow her to get near anything at all that may be used as a weapon. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, my lord!’ the captain barked in return.

‘I will kill you for this, Lannister!’ Arya shouted as Jaime turned his back on her to rejoin Tyrion. She seethed with rage as the red cloaks took hold of her arms, formed a tight press around her and marched her back into the Keep.

Tears of rage welled up violently in Arya’s eyes as she thought of Jaime out there in the square, standing with his brother at the mercy of an archer sitting triumphantly on a rooftop somewhere with little or nothing to stop him from dispatching all of Tywin Lannister’s children in one morning; an archer silently contemplating the justice that he had administered…and the justice that he had stolen. She thought of the arrows piercing Cersei’s body; the arrows that had given her grace and wholeness of form in death instead of the grotesque mutilation and spectacle of a head with long blonde hair being held up for the pleasure of a screaming mob. She thought of the morning of Joffrey’s wedding, and the heaviness and the agony in her heart as she had loosed one arrow after another into the morning air; each shot speaking to her of Jaime and the harrowing absence of him. And she thought of the girl who had stood beside her, young and beautiful in cloth of gold; who had danced and laughed like a child, hitting the target after ten minutes of holding a bow.
'When I was a child, I saw a man decapitated in a mêlée. And there was blood. When it happened... when I saw...I bent over in the royal box and threw up all over my dress, and Mother dragged me back to my chambers and screamed at me: 'you're a princess,' she said, 'princesses don't vomit in public.' I've dreamed about that day almost every night since then. I've dreamed…'

Myrcella’s voice was as empty as the eyes of a dead man; and her face was as smooth and calm as granite; and as Tyrion glanced around him at the dolls and books and prettiness scattered about her chamber; he could scarcely believe that these twinkling and smiling and laughing objects belonged to the dazed and emotionless young woman sitting on the bed by his side, the covers embroidered with water lilies.

‘I’ve tried to put it from my mind,’ Myrcella continued, corpse-like in her indifference, ‘I’ve seen worse in almost every tourney since then, but still, I’ve dreamed…and for weeks now I’ve dreamed that it was Mother getting her head chopped off; for weeks and weeks now, I’ve dreamed.’

The calm with which she spoke was terrifying; like the cold, instinctive serenity of a lioness waiting to spring; but as her thoughts turned to the dreams in which her mother died a traitor’s death, Tyrion saw the realisation of what she had done rising in her green eyes; menacing and inevitable as a sunset; and cracks were beginning to form across the granite of her face and voice; making her shake and fall.

‘In my dreams I saw her hair drenched in gobs and rivers of blood,’ Myrcella whimpered, her voice trembling, ‘her mouth was still open from where she had been screaming, and there was a smell and a mark on the back of her dress from where she had soiled herself, and the crowd was screaming too as Ser Ilyn held her head up for them to see and – oh, Uncle Tyrion –’

Tyrion felt his heart twisted and maimed as the granite crumbled to dust; and when she began to cry; the sobs raking deeply and miserably at her chest and stomach, just as the arrows had raked at Cersei’s; Myrcella was once again a sweet, innocent child who would not harm any living thing. When Tyrion took her in his arms and held her, she huddled against him like a child as she wept; and even though she was taller than him, she felt very, very small.

‘I thought that they would strangle her,’ Myrcella sobbed pitifully, ‘or poison her, something… quiet.…and dignified; something that would make it look as though she were sleeping –’

Tyrion shushed her, moved by her innocence in thinking that poison or strangulation would make it look as though Cersei were sleeping.

‘But then when Mother was condemned and they said they would chop her head off, I saw the look on her face when they said it; the way she was looking; at me and at everyone; and it was exactly the same way she looked when I threw up all over my clothes and when Tommen ran away at Grandfather Tywin’s funeral, exactly the same, and…oh gods…’

Myrcella’s green eyes were crimson with tears, and her mind was crimson with grief; she broke suddenly away from Tyrion as though she could not bear the touch of another human being; and she cried into no one but herself; the words tumbling rapidly and incoherently out of her like a stream running red with blood.

‘I couldn’t bear it, Uncle Tyrion; I couldn’t bear it, and I knew that she wouldn’t be able to bear it either, because it would humiliate her so much; the dishonour of dying that way and having that done
to her and what it would do to the family; worse than the dishonour of the sentence because people remember the execution; not the sentence –'

‘Calm yourself, sweet child, you do not need to tell me all this now –’

‘I couldn’t, I couldn’t, and it hurt so terribly because I knew what getting her head chopped off would be like; I knew it from my dream; I couldn’t bear the thought of it and I knew that she couldn’t bear it either, and that she’d want to die some other way; any other way, so I…I wanted to send her poison in…in some wine because she’d see that the gift was from me and she would know, and….she would know that I loved her like she loved me; and that I was helping her like she helped me when Uncle Stannis came –’

‘What do you mean?’ Tyrion interrupted, an awful suspicion clawing at his chest, and a fear that having said this much, she would refuse to tell him more.

But Myrcella was plunging on regardless.

‘Before Grandfather Tywin arrived,’ she babbled, ‘when we all thought we were going to die, Mother locked me in my chambers and gave me a little vial of clear liquid. ‘Don’t let yourself be taken,’ she said…and she took Tommen and left me there. I stared at that little bottle all night, listening to the sounds of the battle; telling myself it was water. I knew it wasn’t water.’

Tyrion felt sick.

‘When the city was saved,’ Myrcella raced on, ‘I gave it back to her, and she looked at me like she was proud of me, and she said, ‘someday, child, you may have to do the same for me,’ and when she was condemned to death I knew that I had to help her the way she tried to help me; because she would do the same for me; she deserved…she deserved to die like a queen, with dignity, with her body whole, not mutilated and…chopped up like meat, I…I didn’t know that arrows caused so much blood, I swear I didn’t, otherwise…but…but I knew that I couldn’t put poison in a bottle of wine and send it to her, because everyone would know that it was me, but I didn’t want to give up; I had to help her; I didn’t care if the gods would curse me forever as a kinslayer because it wouldn’t matter if I was doing it for love; you do agree with me, Uncle?’

Tyrion nodded gravely, his heart black.

‘Then last night on my way to sept, I passed your window and I heard you and Uncle Jaime shouting – and I heard, I heard – ’

Oh…fucking…gods.

Tyrion stared at her, hardly daring to do so for fear of discovering what he already knew. Myrcella’s face was white with grief…and betrayal…and something worse than either of them: disgust. Her eyes seemed to holler at both Tyrion and herself from somewhere deep down in hell, her mouth was set in a grim line, and every inch of her was shaking; as though her soul were screaming to be released from a body it detested.

She heard, Tyrion thought, she heard everything. She heard it said coldly and matter-of-factly by two people that she trusts implicitly. She heard everything we said before I closed the fucking window. She heard…everything.

Tyrion looked into Myrcella’s eyes, and the horror that he saw there made him choke with tears.

‘I’m an abomination,’ she whispered in a ghastly voice.
‘No,’ Tyrion interrupted firmly.

‘Tommen and me both –’

‘That is nonsense, Myrcella.’

Her trembling had worsened, and her eyes and her face had changed; the cracks in the granite filled up and blasted still further by molten, crimson anger.

‘How could they?’ she rasped, her jaw so tight that Tyrion feared it might break; ‘how could they? How could they… do it? How could Mother do it? How could she betray Father like that? How could she do that with her brother, her own brother, and then…and then let us be born; let Joffrey be born? How could they have grown up surrounded by Targaryens; how could Uncle Jaime have served the Mad King, then betrayed his white cloak and killed the Mad King; and not have known what might happen if they let us be born? How could they?’

She was beginning to frighten him now, spittle flying from her mouth as she spat out every last word with a terrifying disdain and hatred and disgust, and she was trembling so badly that he feared she might have a fit. Tyrion grasped her shoulders, persisting when she tried to shrug his hands off, and forced her to look at him, praying that she would listen.

‘Joffrey was a monster,’ he said clearly and quietly, ‘I will not insult you by saying otherwise. But you and Tommen… you are good, sweet, decent children, both of you.’

Myrcella stared at him for a long moment.

Then her trembling disappeared as quickly as it had come; and left her with nothing but her words.

‘I’d rather be dead.’

Tyrion felt tears spill over his cheeks, and he tried to speak to her with as much love and gravity as he could.

‘Don’t ever say that, my sweet, darling child. It isn’t true.’

Myrcella stared back at him, unmoved.

‘I’d rather. Be. Dead.’

Her eyes were hard and glacial, and as Tyrion released her shoulders, she continued her story; not looking at him; scarcely able to look at any part of herself.

‘Before you closed the windows, I heard Uncle Jaime saying… saying that Mother was going to tell the High Septon what she and Uncle Jaime had… so that Uncle Jaime would be executed too; and I knew that Tommen would be dishonoured and couldn’t be king anymore, and that I would be dishonoured too, and that the entire, miserable war would start all over again and that Uncle Stannis would come back; and Tommen, he’s – it isn’t his fault –’

‘It isn’t your fault either, Myrcella,’ Tyrion interrupted gently

She gave him a small smile, but he could tell that nothing would convince her of the fact. It was too late. Too fucking late.

‘My dear niece,’ Tyrion continued, ‘did you go and speak to your mother about this?’

‘I didn’t want to see her,’ Myrcella growled, with an aggression so sudden that Tyrion jumped, ‘but I
still didn’t know what to do. This very morning I didn’t know what to do… how to stop her, how
to…how to save her…”

She began to cry again, and Tyrion’s heart broke for her as she buried her fingers in her golden hair
and yanked hard; as though pain would drive the tears away. She stayed like that for several
moments, her fingers clutching her hair; her eyes tightly closed; and when she spoke again, it was
with anger rather than sadness.

‘I knew that if I talked to her she would definitely tell the High Septon, and everything would be lost.
I thought about the poisoned wine again, but it was too late for that; and then…and then she refused
to see the High Septon; her handmaiden says she threw a chamber pot at him when he entered her
cell anyway, and I thought…I thought that she had changed her mind, and that Tommen and I were
more important than…I…I thought that. Like a stupid little girl.’

She spat the words with disdain and venom.

‘Then I stopped being stupid, and I knew. I knew that she was going to confess it in front of the
entire city and start another war; and I didn’t want her head chopped off and I couldn’t let her tell
everyone what she’d done; and I didn’t think the gods could curse me more after allowing me to
*come into existence*, so I took the biggest bow I could find and I…”

She began to cry again, and the sound of it was terrible.

‘She’s my mother, Uncle Tyrion. She’s my mother.’

This time, Myrcella allowed Tyrion to hold her, and as she cried miserably and horribly; her very
form seeming to shimmer with self-loathing and disgust at its own existence; Tyrion’s chest ached
with grief, and his mind almost groaned aloud with helplessness.

He knew that the child’s intentions had been noble and honourable; that she had acted in defence of
her brother and the realm, and out of love for her mother…but the entire affair *did* reek a little too
much of revenge for his liking. The timing of the killing was…prodigious. Why hadn’t she shot
Cersei the moment she appeared? Why wait until she began to speak?

Second thoughts? It was possible. And hope. Hope was possible too.

And as for removing an enormous bow from the armoury, and summoning the nerve to use it in front
of several thousand people, any of whom could have seen her simply by looking up: the recklessness
of it; the daring; the hot-headedness of it…it was Jaime, through and through.

What if she gets it into her head that Jaime needs to die too; that Tommen does; that I do?

*If she truly believed that, she would have killed us while we were searching the square. She had
ample opportunity.*

*But what if she gets it into her head that she needs to die, and destroys herself? What if this…
episode…translates into madness when she’s older? What if it translates into madness before then?
What if –*

‘Why didn’t you tell me, Uncle Tyrion?’ Myrcella sobbed, ‘why didn’t you tell me?’

Tyrion shushed her and could not reply; the uncertainty splitting his head in two.

*What the fuck am I going to do?*
Worry seethed in Arya’s blood like bile as she listened to the sound of the chamber door being unlocked, and when Jaime appeared in the gap; pale and exhausted, but alive, she leapt to her feet, walked rapidly across the room and punched him hard in the shoulder. He looked back at her without a word, his eyes pale with anger, and she was tempted to punch him again as she thought of the hours and hours that she had spent locked up in this stupid room, imagining that Myrcella had killed Jaime too.

‘Stark,’ Jaime pronounced, fiercely but quietly, ‘don’t you ever do that to me again.’

‘What?’ Arya demanded, stepping back and folding her arms, ‘punch you?’

‘Deliberately place yourself in danger in such a situation,’ he clarified, ‘don’t ever do that again. Ever.’

Her testy response was interrupted by the sound of a throaty whimper, and Arya looked downwards to find Nymeria sniffing at Jaime’s side in a thoroughly guilt-ridden manner.

‘Traitor,’ she accused, taking pride in the resulting yowl.

‘Not at all,’ Jaime interjected as Arya deliberately looked away from them both, ‘it seems the wolf has a better idea of what’s best for you than you do yourself. Are you listening to me?’

‘Of course I am, my lord husband,’ Arya spat in fury, ‘I only exist to listen to you, and to obey your words if you command me.’

Jaime slammed the door shut, stalked into the room and began to take his doublet off.

‘Now you’re being ridiculous.’

‘I have every right to be!’ Arya shouted, ‘who gave you the right to order the guards to just bundle me back into the castle like some stupid lady who’s never held a sword in her life?’

‘I didn’t much like the idea of you taking an arrow to the throat because some lunatic on a rooftop decides he wants some human target practice!’ Jaime shouted in reply, looking at her as he would at a stupid child; his expression serving little purpose but to make her angrier.

‘If I’d had a sword,’ Arya snarled, ‘I could have beaten more than half those idiots that you ordered to restrain me!’

‘Oh, really?’ Jaime mocked.

‘Yes, really!’ she insisted, ‘you’ve seen me face worse opponents and win; I even beat you once! Or have you forgotten already?’

She was delighted to see that it was the wrong thing to say; his face colouring in wrath as his doublet fell open at the throat.

‘I was exhausted and malnourished, you pig-headed little shit!’ he roared, ‘I was thinner than you!’

‘Ah! You were thinner than me!’ she repeated mockingly, ‘is that what you like to tell yourself when you need a confidence booster?’
‘Why, you –’

‘And don’t even get me started on Cersei! When exactly did you plan to tell me that your sweet sister was in the mood for grand declarations? After she’d told the entire city that you’d been fucking her for twenty-five years? Or were you hoping that I’d look up at the sky and miss it?’

‘Stark –’

‘How could you keep something like that from me?’

‘I did it for your own good, you stupid little fool!’

‘For my own good?’

Jaime let out a growl of annoyance and rage; the whiteness of his knuckles announcing a contradictory desire to calm himself and to strangle her. He began to pace distractedly; his height and his anger and his beauty so powerful and so devastatingly violent that they seemed to devour the room and make it smaller around him.

‘Tyrion was certain,’ Jaime explained through gritted teeth, ‘that Cersei would say nothing on account of Tommen and Myrcella. Nor did we want to cause you unnecessary –’

‘You told Tyrion and not me?’ Arya screeched in disbelief.

‘- after speaking to him,’ Jaime continued, the lowness of his voice enraging her, ‘I knew that it was by no means certain that Cersei would talk. I was, however, certain that if she did, I’d be the only one in danger of ending up dead as opposed to dishonoured, so yes, I said nothing!’

Arya couldn’t believe it. How could he – how could he be – how could he imagine –

‘You knew this – last night,’ she enunciated, disbelief warring with anger and turning her voice softer and harder, ‘we could have – we could have run, stupid; we could have gotten well away from here and –’

‘And done what?’ Jaime snapped, his eyes roaring with golden flame and his throat pulsing exquisitely in his fury, ‘spent the rest of our lives on the run; looking over our shoulders; raising our children to look over theirs? You really think that I would do that to you?’

‘And you really think that I’d – that I could –’

‘What?’ Jaime snapped as her words stopped in their tracks, ‘I’m waiting!’

‘- that I could go on if you died!’

It was out of her mouth before her pride and her nature could stop her, and she watched in embarrassment as the anger fled from his eyes like darkness; his face softening as she coloured and began to stare at her shoes.

‘You – stupid arse,’ she added unconvincingly as she watched his boots approaching her; dusty and red from the dirt of King’s Landing.

She closed her eyes as his lips touched her forehead and her nose and her cheek; coaxing her head upwards again while his arms fastened around her waist and his left hand came to rest in the small of her back. His lips fell feverishly and heatedly on hers, and she could feel him smiling as she conveniently forgot that they were supposed to be fighting, opened her mouth and let him kiss her.
Her fingers tangled in his hair as his tongue ached desperately and shuddered against her own; and she groaned into his mouth as he felt his cock grinding into her; the heat at the juncture of her thighs unbearable; and wanting him. She moved her hips slowly against his, relishing the moan that escaped him in response, but when she moved to undress him, he wouldn’t let her; his fingers intertwining with hers and bringing her hand to his cheek; his breath warm as it mingled with hers.

‘I will die before you,’ he whispered, his skin scalding her fingers, ‘probably quite a while before you, as much as it pains me to say it. I do so like living. But when it happens –’

‘No,’ she whispered back, shaking her head, ‘not you. You’re not like other men. You don’t live like them; you can’t die like them –’

He cut her off by kissing her again; the force of his body backing her into the wall; and she rested the back of her head on the sandstone as she felt Jaime’s lips on her neck and his hand moving slowly from her face, to her breasts, to the laces of her gown.

But then Nymeria whimpered with something like indignation, and Arya was reminded of the day that she had spent in the confines of this room and of her own imagination; her mind tortured and brutalised by thoughts of Jaime dying in the same way that Cersei had; of Myrcella’s wanting him dead too. And she tensed up, and he felt it, and embraced her without a word; understanding, and knowing, and staring at her, waiting for her to speak.

Arya could not imagine the princess killing Cersei in the name of pure mercy. While mercy would certainly have played a large role in her decision, there was something destructive, condemnatory… vengeful about murdering her own mother seconds before her execution. There was an element of self-loathing and self-destruction buried deep in the very act that was far too powerful to be merciful. It created the beginning of suffering when Myrcella should have been seeking the end.

She knows the secret of her parentage. I don’t know how, but she does. And she did this thing for revenge as well as mercy. That much I do know. I know it.

Jaime had not moved away from her, his arms still warm on her back and waist, his face still inches from hers, and she touched his shoulder, briefly, as though making sure that he was real.

‘Did it occur to you,’ Arya asked softly, ‘did you think for one second that I might also be worried about you? Would it have killed you to send word once in a while?’

That seemed to please him.

‘I was perfectly safe, little wolf,’ Jaime replied affectionately; his fingers warm against her cheek, ‘Nymeria was with me.’

‘Yes, but you don’t know that you were safe,’ Arya insisted, ‘you don’t –’

The flow of Arya’s words stopped as she watched Jaime’s face transform from quiet amusement to suspicion and worry; and as she stared at him she was once again reminded that she couldn’t lie to him anymore.

But she didn’t yet know if she could tell him that Myrcella was the one who had snatched justice from the countless people that Cersei had wronged by sending her to hell in her own way. Jaime needed to know, he deserved to know; but in spite of everything; in spite of his constant insistence that Myrcella was nothing more than his seed, his words could not change the fact that he was her father; the father of a girl who had killed her own mother, out of mercy…and revenge. The architecture of the act was despicable, but so heart-breaking that even Arya, a woman with no blood
ties to the girl at all, could not think of it without being moved. But Jaime did have a blood tie to her; whether he wanted to admit or not; and he was a compassionate and emotional man; whether he wanted to admit that or not; and if she told him what Myrcella had –

‘You know who did it,’ Jaime said simply.

Arya stared at him in an agony of indecision; her lips parting in silence as the words remained within her; unspoken and unhurting.

‘Tell me, Stark,’ Jaime commanded softly, his fingers brushing flagrant strands of hair from her forehead, ‘tell me.’

She looked into his eyes and saw herself reflected in them; saw the stubbornness and the grief and the humanity; and when she reached out and cupped his face with both her hands, his skin was icy cold, and he might have known already.

‘I am so sorry, my love.’

Tyrion’s meeting with Myrcella had ended almost as badly as it had begun: with his niece intermittently declaring herself an abomination and crying bitterly and hysterically in his arms while he fervently struggled to hide the fact that he was crying too; crying at the madness and the pointlessness and the senseless grief and hurt that this miserable mess of a trial had left in its wake.

Having assured himself that Myrcella had been given essence of nightshade to help her sleep, Tyrion began the walk back to his solar and found his sadness transforming into blinding, excruciating anger: anger at Cersei for what she had done, and anger at himself for being unable to condemn Jaime for his equal part in causing the girl’s misery. True, he could not blame his brother for the spectacle Cersei had made of the trial, but he could blame him for not being able to keep his cock out of his own sister; a fact that was partly responsible for Myrcella’s misery and entirely responsible for her newfound disgust at her own existence. Tyrion could blame Jaime for that – he was certain that he should blame Jaime for that – but he couldn’t and he didn’t, and he wondered if that made him the monster everyone believed him to be.

His mood worsened when he reached his solar and found two extra guards outside his door.

*If it’s Mace Tyrell come to see me again about the bloody Regency, I swear by the Seven I’ll have him –*

‘Lady Sansa is within, if it please my lord,’ one of his own guards informed him, ‘she insisted on waiting for you.’

Tyrion grunted in response, and pushed open the solar door to find Sansa rising from a chair by the fire; her hair falling about her shoulders like liquid copper; every line and curve of her form lovely, as she always was.

‘Lady Sansa,’ he greeted, bowing low and gesturing to her to take her seat again.

‘Lord Tyrion,’ she responded, her voice nervous and…was it compassionate?…as she complied.

Since her return from the Vale, he hadn’t spoken to her once. He’d seen her, of course, and recited
his courtesies like a good politician; but he hadn’t had the time, or, quite frankly, the inclination for anything more. There was Tommen to worry about, and Myrcella, and Cersei, and Lancel (I really should decide what to do about Lancel) and madness and weakness and greed and grubbing all around him. He couldn’t speak to her, or think of her, when everything was such a mess. He needed to keep his wits about him, and he couldn’t keep his wits about him if he thought of her. Thinking of her would be to think of himself, and he had no interest in thinking of himself.

And suddenly it all became too much. He couldn’t see her now. He couldn’t prattle off courtesies and talk of the weather and let her look at him with her devastating, sad blue eyes and say how sorry she was, because her compassion would make him break, and he could not let himself break.

‘How may I be of assistance?’ he asked coldly, crossing the room and standing in front of her rather than sitting, hoping it would convince her to leave.

‘I – I merely wanted to see if you were alright after this morning,’ she stammered, her cheeks colouring beautifully, so beautifully, and he needed her to leave; he wanted her to leave; she was a smart girl, couldn’t she see just by looking at him that he wanted her to leave? ‘I heard about what happened, and I wanted to see if you were alright.’

And suddenly Tyrion was angry.

Alright? She wanted to see if he was alright? Was the girl simple? Didn’t she have eyes – or a brain – in her pretty little head? What the fuck did she think?

‘I am perfectly alright,’ Tyrion replied in a tone that she couldn’t possibly misinterpret, ‘I spent three weeks watching my sweet fucking sister torture and destroy her own son just to save her own worthless hide; today I saw the fucking bitch killed by arrows when decapitation was what she fucking deserved; I spend every hour the gods give pleading with the Iron Bank of Braavos to forgive Cersei’s follies, hammering into Mace Tyrell’s impossibly thick skull that he will be Regent over my dead body, and trying to turn an innocent young boy into a ruler that would make Tywin Lannister quake in his boots. Myrcella is hysterical and very likely suicidal; Tommen hasn’t said a word since this morning so I imagine that he’s in a similar condition; I haven’t slept in six weeks, and I imagine I won’t sleep for the next six either; and to confess the truth I want nothing more in this moment than to drink myself into a stupor, stumble down to Chataya’s and fuck four whores at once before my little drunk cock shrivels up from lack of exercise; so yes, I’m alright, I’m perfectly alright, there is nothing the matter with me.’

Sansa hit him hard across the face; the sound cracking like a whip in the air as pain blazed across his right cheek and anger woke up in her eyes.

‘You miserable little cunt,’ she growled.

Tyrion stared at her, dumbfounded.

She never swore. Never. For a time he had been convinced that she didn’t even know what swearing was. But then Jaime and Arya entered his head; and he considered that any extended period of time spent with those two, especially together, would be nothing if not an education in the art of vulgarity.

She was glaring at him with a kind of fury that reminded him of the dying embers of a fire; scalding hot, but dying, and he continued to stare at her, transfixed, as she spoke to him.

‘Every day that I was with Littlefinger,’ she said, ‘every single day – I thought about – I thought that we – ’
That we what? Tyrion wanted to say to her in spite of himself, that we what?

But she had already checked herself, and as he watched her eyes travel over his face; trying to meet his eyes, drawing them up to hers, calling them, singing to them; he knew that she was thinking of his silence; of the way that he hadn’t been able to look at her or speak to her beyond a greeting in the throne room or a hallway; nothing like the comforting silence of previous years that had always existed between them. This was deafening, and empty, and agonising: a shield that was also a sword.

The siren song of her eyes was too strong for him, and when he looked up at her, he saw the years that they had known each other; the years that she had been Joffrey’s, and then no one’s; the prisoner and hostage and ward of the Crown that everyone took for a weakling and an idiot; and that he had loved wildly and deeply for all of that time, because she was nothing of the kind. Nobody at court saw her. And nobody at court saw him either – no one except her. And Varys, of course; though he certainly didn’t love Varys.

‘You can’t answer me even now,’ she said, and he didn’t reply. He couldn’t.

And she was looking down her nose at him and getting up to leave, in the very moment in which he realised that he didn’t want her to leave ever again.

‘Thank you for seeing me, my lord,’ she said with iron courtesy, ‘and please accept my best wishes for the health and happiness of your little drunk cock. I’m sure you’ll be very happy together.’

As she swept across the room, flung the door open and slammed it behind her; Tyrion felt his fingers balling into fists; his nails biting into his palms like talons, and hurting him just as badly.

Seven fucking hells. I am the Kingdoms’ greatest fool.

Tommen stroked the soft and delicate fur between Ser Pounce’s ears and smiled softly as the kitten began to purr; a tiny, sweet and fragile thing for Tommen to take care of, instead of its being the other way round.

It always seemed to be the other way round.

Uncle Tyrion, Uncle Jaime and Uncle Kevan had spent most of the day leading the gold cloaks and the red cloaks in a city-wide search for the archer that had killed Mother. Word had been sent to him almost an hour ago that the hunt had been called off for the night, and though Tommen imagined that the collected Lannister stubbornness of his three uncles would cause it to start again at the crack of dawn, he didn’t have much hope of their finding anything. Mother was always going to die today – what difference did the manner of it make? She had been condemned to die and she had died. That was enough.

Mother hadn’t stopped crying during her trial. Uncle Tyrion had asked her to, but she hadn’t. She had stared at Tommen day after day and wept, and sometimes it had felt as though his heart were eating him alive. But today she hadn’t cried. Today, they had led her out to the scaffold, and she had looked at him, and for a while, Tommen had smiled; trying to comfort her; trying to show her that he still loved her, even though he wasn’t crying…but then she had looked away from him and had started to smile at something else that he couldn’t see; a horrible smile, like the one Joffy used to wear whenever he hurt Sansa. After that, she hadn’t looked at him again. Not once.
Ser Pounce shifted in his lap as the guard knocked noisily; giving every impression of wanting to batter the door down.

‘The Lady Janei Lannister, Your Grace!’ he roared through the door.

‘Send her in,’ Tommen said quietly to his manservant, continuing to stroke Ser Pounce and embarrassedly watching his hands turn pink as the door was duly opened and his cousin bounded into the room; curtsying with comical rapidity. She was very small and very pretty, and her pristine lilac gown looked lovely on her; a sharp contrast to the shock of impossibly tangled and rebelling golden curls that some dutiful and no doubt long-suffering servant had attempted to restrain into two braids. Tommen ground his teeth at how deeply he was blushing; quite aware that he was twelve and she was six and he was supposed to be marrying Lady Margaery and that if Uncle Tyrion were here, he’d be telling him not to be a pervert.

But I’m not being a pervert; I don’t want to kiss her or…or do anything to her; I…I just think it would be nice to talk to her, or maybe hold her hand.

The very thought made him blush further, and he prayed that his cousin was too young to notice the way his complexion changed every time he saw her.

‘Won’t your lord father be wondering where you are, cousin?’ Tommen asked formally, not getting up on account of Ser Pounce, ‘I pray you will excuse me for not rising.’

‘My lord father is always wondering where I am,’ Janei replied, staring first at him and then at her shoes; before shuffling to where he sat at the window.

‘To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?’ Tommen continued as she came to a stop in front of him and began to stroke Ser Pounce.

When she did not reply immediately, he bit on his tongue and sighed inwardly. He was talking to her in his king voice. He didn’t want to do that.

‘Father told me what happened to Cousin Cersei today,’ Janei said quietly, her eyes flickering upwards to meet his, ‘it must have been a terrible thing for you.’

‘My mother was a traitor,’ Tommen replied in a steady voice, ‘it isn’t a terrible thing to watch a traitor die.’

The flecks of gold in her pale green eyes ignited in shock; then faded away to nothing as a kind of understanding seemed to grip her. She reached out with one tiny hand and touched his shoulder in a gesture of such sweetness and innocent commiseration that he closed his eyes immediately; fighting the tears as they came; knowing that he had to fight them; that kings didn’t cry; that kings couldn’t cry. But when the first strangled sob burst out of him, he couldn’t stop the others from coming, and soon Ser Pounce was leaping out of his lap as he bent over and gripped the arms of the chair and howled; hating Mother and hating himself and hating everybody in this hateful city that had come to laugh at her and see her die. The tears were blurring his vision and turning the world to raindrops and lava, and when he looked up at Janei through that tear-stained veil, her face looked like his mother’s, and he didn’t know if he should love or hate her for it; for reminding him of what he felt, and why.

‘I could have saved her,’ Tommen whimpered, trying to stem the flood of tears but only succeeding in making himself cry harder, ‘if I’d been born earlier and been older then I could have been her champion and saved her, and she’d still be alive now; if I’d grown up sooner and been as good with a sword as my Uncle Jaime, then I could have beaten whoever was going to fight against her and she would still be here –’
Janei stepped closer to him, threw her minuscule, waif-like arms around his neck and embraced him. Her curly hair tickled his nose as his head came to rest limply on her shoulder and his arms wound tentatively around her back; and when she gave him a tiny, very wet kiss on the cheek and held him tighter, he felt safe and warm for the first time in weeks.
Chapter 56

She dreamed she was standing in the great hall at the Twins, at the very heart of the Red Wedding. Her mother was screaming and cursing and wailing in the demonic language of grief as blood spilled from Robb’s mouth like the light that was spilling from his eyes. And then blood was spilling from Mother too, more and more and more of it as the soldier behind her, a man without a face, sawed hard at her throat with his dagger and cursed when her head wouldn’t come off. But he let her body drop and crumple to the floor, and he ran to join the mob of men surrounding Robb as a group of soldiers brought them Grey Wind’s corpse impaled on a spear. They formed a laughing, chanting circle around the bodies of her brother and his wolf, and though Arya could not see through their ranks, she knew what they were doing. She recognised the sound of flesh tearing and blood spilling and cruel men laughing; and she wanted to run away from them; she wanted to run for her life and her sanity; but her feet were leading her towards them anyway; her boots were squelching in the blood that stained the floor like mud; and bile was rising higher and higher in her throat. She wanted to stop; she didn’t want to look; she wanted to run; but she had reached them and pushed through them and looked down at what they were doing; and she screamed as she saw that the corpses on the floor at the centre of the circle were Jaime and Nymeria; their lifeless mouths opening and shrieking in agony as the soldiers set to work with needle and thread.

Arya jerked awake with the feeling of vomit in her mouth and poison in her lungs, positive that her screams must have been tearing out of her throat in red, raw, glistening slivers of flesh. But when she opened her eyes, she found Jaime lying fast asleep beside her; his arms wrapped tightly around her back and his lips nestled in her hair. The smell of him, and the feeling of his naked skin, was so familiar and so like home, that for a while she allowed herself to sink into him and to breathe him; hoping that her reality would become her dream. But then another wave of powerful nausea hit her; her half-dreams began to pull her back into the darkened blood-stained hall; and she was suddenly seized by a bursting and impatient need to be out of the Red Keep, and in the open air.

It was very early in the morning; the borders of the moon and the beginnings of the sun turning the world grey and cold like rain; and when she gently disentangled herself and sat up, Jaime groaned audibly and muttered something about her being mad.

‘What is it, Stark?’ he mumbled, his words fading into a sigh and a breath as his dreams began to reclaim him almost immediately.

‘Nothing,’ Arya whispered, softly kissing his forehead and stroking his hair, ‘go back to sleep.’

Within moments, he was asleep again, and Arya was glad of it.

Since learning of Myrcella’s role in Cersei’s death, Jaime had barely slept at all; darkness claiming the skin beneath his eyes as his thoughts and feelings tore at him without mercy. Arya had begged him to talk to her; saying to him countless times that he didn’t need to feign indifference for her sake…but he had refused to discuss Myrcella each time Arya mentioned her.

She didn’t know if she appreciated that, or resented it.

Arya padded naked to the window, pulled her smallclothes on, and began to dress; shrugging into her simple black gown and deftly tying her laces, before buttoning the dress up to the neck. She pulled her boots on, took hold of her sword belt with one hand, and left the room as quietly as she could, though she doubted that Jaime would have heard her had she stomped to the door and slammed it.
‘Stay here,’ Arya told the guards who moved to follow her, ‘and please make sure that Lord Jaime is not disturbed before I return.’

‘Yes, my lady,’ the guards chorused.

Arya glided demurely away from them in a thoroughly ladylike manner, broke into a run the moment she turned the corner, and raced to take the fastest route out of the Keep; the fastest route out of the place where propriety required her to act like a frightened deer and not like the wolf that she truly was.

After the Battle of the Blackwater, Arya had had to act like a lady in order to survive. She had forced herself to wear the gowns and she had forced herself to wear the shoes; she had folded her hands and kept her shoulders upright and said her courtesies and remained blank-faced when people sniggered behind their hands at the conservative way she dressed, or at the memory of the day that Joffrey had made her swear allegiance to him again and again and again. She had hated it, but she had done it; because being a lady was the only thing that kept her from being exposed to more punishment and censure than those she had endured already. Being a lady was the only thing that kept her from trying to recklessly murder both Joffrey and Cersei each time she saw them. Being a lady was being Tywin’s child; the child of a father she hated, but who was in her, no matter how hard she tried to forget him.

Being a lady was a mask, and she was good with masks.

Her time on the road with Jaime, however – the distance that they had travelled after deciding to marry again – had almost completely obliterated whatever progress she had made in the painting of that particular mask, because people who were free didn’t need to wear masks. She had worn breeches again and she had cursed again; she had climbed trees and she had slept on the floor; she had raised her voice and worn her sword at her hip; and when she and Jaime had lain together without being married, she had gasped and cried and moaned his name without giving a fuck who heard her. Adjusting to life at court after such freedom had been difficult; much more difficult than the first time, even though the same people who had spat at her feet and laughed at her were now clamouring to kiss her arse because ‘Lady of Casterly Rock’ had been slapped onto the end of her name.

Arya snorted and quickened her pace, buckling her sword belt as she went; and she smilingly found her thoughts drifting to the morning after Cersei’s execution; the morning that she had first appeared at the breakfast table, dressed for court and armed to the teeth.

Jaime had grinned at her in amusement.

‘Going to war, Stark?’ he had asked, ‘can I come? I’m in need of a proper battle.’

‘No,’ Arya had replied with exaggerated ire, ‘I’m making sure that if you ever order our stupid guards to restrain me again, I’ll be able to take them down before I jump on you.’

Jaime had laughed uproariously, before leaning over and deftly kissing her forehead.

‘I love you, little wolf.’

‘And I love you.’

She had worn the belt for the whole of that day, and for the whole of the next day, and for the whole of the next. She had worn it in the godwood, and in the gardens, and to court, and to several tedious interviews involving tea, apple cakes, gossip, and Lady Margaery and her ladies that Lady Arya
Stark of Winterfell could very well have refused to attend but that Lady Arya Lannister of Casterly Rock could not. And to her amazement (and delight, though she would never admit it), it had only been a few days before a triumphantly significant number of the highborn ladies of the court had also begun to wear sword belts over their gowns; usefully equipped with ornamental daggers in elaborately-crafted sheaths. Arya swallowed as she felt nausea grinding in her throat again. 

_They treat weapons as though they were toys. Perhaps I should challenge one of them to a duel._

The air was cool around her as she left the Red Keep by the front entrance; taking no small pleasure in being able to ignore the obsequious greetings of every gold cloak, red cloak or Kingsguard she passed without fear of retribution, and she walked slowly around the perimeter of the castle to the edge of the Blackwater Rush; the sun beginning to peep over the clouds and promising another blistering hot day. It was ideal weather for falling asleep in court...though Arya doubted that anybody would be falling asleep today.

Today was to be the first time that Tommen held court entirely alone. Tyrion would be at his side, of course, as would the entire small council, but the boy king would announce the appointment of his uncle Kevan as Lord Regent, hear requests and petitions, and grant them or deny them entirely alone, with no help from any of them.

_Tyrion is training him brilliantly, Arya thought, and he will be a great king. But Myrcella is the true ruler out of the two. It should be Myrcella rather than Tommen._

Thinking of Myrcella made her think of Jaime again, and as she beheld the sandy river bank on which she walked, and the walls of the Red Keep that towered above her in all their blood-stained sandstone magnificence, she was seized by a feeling, no, a certainty, that it had been here, at this spot, where Jaime had lost his hand.

She looked about her, trying to remember, and her nausea was getting worse at the very memory of how unspeakable and devastating and unjust it had been; how she had seen him fall and fall again because his armour was too fucking heavy for him; how he had gotten to his feet and tried to keep fighting, not realising what had happened to him; and how she had almost screamed aloud when the maester’s assistants had removed the armour and boiled leather from his body, and she had seen how thin he was; emaciated, starved; in no condition to be fighting a war but fighting one anyway because of his own bloody stubbornness. And then she remembered everything else that had happened in the maester’s tent; how so much blood had come running and gushing and bursting out of him that it had reminded her of paint, and the smell of it, in her and on her; and how she had convinced herself, when the maester had sewed him up, that this was happiness for her; that this was justice for her family and her ghosts _oh gods._

Arya bent over and vomited spectacularly; her head spinning as her legs and arms turned to dust, and soon she was on her knees and retching, and staring down at her own sick wondering what the fuck she had eaten; and when a gentle hand came to rest on her shoulder; she whirled around in alarm and breathed a sigh of relief, to see that it was only Myrcella.

‘Are you injured, my lady?’ the princess squealed in concern.

‘Last night’s fish pie did taste a little strange –’

Arya turned rapidly away from Myrcella and vomited again, sheets of the bloody stuff landing with an obscene splat on the ground.

‘You need a maester!’ Myrcella insisted.
Arya stubbornly shook her head, forced herself to stand up, and tottered to a spot several yards away. She sat down in the sand, exhausted, and looked up to see that Myrcella had followed her and was still staring at her in worry.

‘I don’t need a maester,’ Arya assured her, not quite willing to admit how touched she was by the princess’ concern, ‘if the problem does lie in the contents of my stomach, then I think we can safely assume that I’ve got rid of most of them.’

Myrcella was still staring at her, her green eyes bright and analytical.

‘I also had fish pie last night, my lady,’ she said simply.

‘I am delighted for you, my princess,’ Arya replied, puzzled.

‘And yet here I stand, alive and well.’

‘Yes, indeed you do.’

Myrcella rolled her eyes at her and put her hands on her hips.

‘When was the last time you bled, my lady?’

Arya almost choked at the uncharacteristic impertinence of the question.

‘The last time I…’

And suddenly she was casting her mind back over week after frenetic week of confusion and grief and emotion and joy and trying to remember and finding that she couldn’t remember and realising what that meant, what it had to mean; and she was abruptly and incoherently panicking and rejoicing and starting to smile and starting to cry and starting to laugh, and wanting to tear back into the castle and tell Jaime, and shivering and laughing and doubting and thinking that she’d lost her mind, and I’m too young for this, I’m too clumsy for this, I’m not right for this, I’ll probably drop the wretched child on its head before it’s a week old and I don’t think Jaime could do much better; we can’t even take care of ourselves properly, the gods only know what will happen if we have a child to take care of too, but it’ll be Jaime’s and it’ll be mine and it’ll have me and him and it’ll be ours; and seven hells does this happen inside me; will it actually grow inside me…

And her fingers were ghosting over her stomach, and she knew that she wouldn’t be able to feel the child now; even she knew that; and she thought about Jaime that morning as he had fallen back into sleep like a dead man, and how her heart had been heavy and light and glorious in her chest; as it was every time that she looked at him, or heard him, or touched him. What she felt was nameless, and beautiful, and euphoric, and terrifying, and she did not try to find the words because they would be inadequate when they came; and her thoughts must have shown in her face, because Myrcella was sitting down opposite her; her eyes sleepless and green like his, and asking her in a tone that brooked no argument:

‘Did you know about Uncle Jaime and Mother?’

Arya looked at the earnestness and innocence on Myrcella’s face, and seriously considered lying.

‘Yes. I did know.’

‘How long have you known?’

‘Approximately four years.’
Arya waited, expecting anger and condemnation and childish cries of ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ Instead, Myrcella demurely folded her arms, nodded politely in acknowledgment and gave every appearance of being grateful for her honesty.

‘How could you marry Uncle Jaime if you knew?’ the princess asked, with a disbelief that was heart-breaking in its sincerity, ‘and…and Bran, didn’t he try to kill Bran?’

‘How do you know about that?’ Arya asked in reply; surprised that Cersei would have permitted word of such things to reach her children.

‘Joffrey brought Uncle Stannis’ letter to the supper table one night –’ Myrcella observed, shrugging. 
*That little shit.*

‘– and after that, though everyone had heard the rumours and knew about them, I did my mother the courtesy of refusing to believing that they were true.’

Arya nodded in approval, but said nothing.

‘Did Uncle Jaime try to kill Bran?’ Myrcella insisted.

‘Yes,’ Arya responded candidly, some instinct telling her that Myrcella shared Jaime’s distaste for excessive gentleness in the bearing of bad news, ‘Bran saw him and your royal mother together, and Jaime flung him out of a window to shut him up.’

The loveliness of Myrcella’s face was contorted in horror and disgust, and her hands were clutching at each other as she stared at Arya in disbelief.

‘How could you bear to be his wife, knowing all that?’ she rasped.

Arya stared at Myrcella and fleetingly wondered how she could answer such a question in such a short space of time; and her thoughts went from the beautiful child in front of her to the beautiful child inside her to the man who had fathered both of them, and she somehow knew what she should say, and why.

‘On…on the day that I first met your uncle Jaime,’ she stammered, ‘really met him, I mean – mumbling ‘Ser Jaime’ to him at Winterfell and never speaking to him again doesn’t really count – it was just after his arrival at Harrenhal earlier this year. He’d been on the run for three weeks after escaping my brother, and I didn’t know that he would be there. No one did. So I walked into Lord Tywin’s solar, carrying his letters to him as I would on a normal morning. And I saw Jaime standing there, alive and whole after everything that he had done – and I tried to kill him. I knocked him to the floor, climbed on top of him, and ripped my dagger out of its sheath with every intention of cutting his throat. I didn’t care if Lord Tywin had me tortured, raped and murdered afterwards. I didn’t care what he did to me or what happened to me. I only knew that I would be avenging my brother. And my father. And my family.’

Arya glanced at Myrcella, but the girl showed no sign of wanting to interrupt, staring at her and listening intently as Arya continued.

‘It took Jaime about half a second to knock the dagger out of my hand. He was so quick. He still is. And I screamed, and struggled, and tried to claw his eyes out with my nails. But he seized the front of my breeches and slammed me to the ground like a sack of potatoes that weighed nothing at all, and he held me hard around the wrists and pinned my arms to the ground, and I struggled and I screamed…and he looked at me.’
Myrcella was still staring, and still saying nothing.

‘I’d…I’d been in hiding for four years,’ Arya said, staring down at her hands, which were drawing patterns in the sand, ‘I’d been in hiding from…from myself, really, far more than from your royal mother’s spies. I’d been hiding from the things that I had inside my head; the things that I’d seen, they…they hurt me so much, you see? I’d hidden myself along with them, I’d…I’d stopped being Arya so I wouldn’t have to think about them or feel them. It was a terrible way to exist, but it was still better than the alternative. The alternative would have turned me into a madman…but then when Jaime flung me to the floor and looked at me…his face was very close to mine; this close,’ she gestured with her hand, ‘I looked into his eyes…Jaime…and I saw that he was the same as me. I still don’t know how I knew, it was more of…an instinct, than anything else…but I could tell just by looking at him, really looking at him, that he was running like I was…running from himself. And when I saw that, I…it was like all those horrible things went out of me at once, and my mask went out of me too, and suddenly I was Arya again and I knew who I was…and it didn’t hurt anymore…because he was with me. This tall, beautiful, infuriating shit of a man who was old enough to be my father; that I didn’t know at all; but that I hated. I think…I think I might have loved him even then. Even though I didn’t know him, and hated him, and wished that he would die.’

Arya stopped herself, surprised and slightly disturbed at how open she was being with this sad, extraordinary child that she’d only spoken to once. Myrcella’s elbow was resting on her knee, and her hand was cradling her chin, and she was still staring, entranced.

‘Did Uncle Jaime feel the same way?’ the princess asked, like a child begging her mother to continue a bedtime story.

‘I haven’t asked him,’ Arya replied, smiling, ‘but I doubt it.’

‘Why?’ Myrcella demanded.

Arya shifted uncomfortably, remembering.

‘Let’s just say that in the days and weeks that followed our first meeting, I took special care to make myself as disagreeable as possible. I insulted your mother a great deal, and it infuriated him beyond measure. He loved her very much; even though he’d never admit that to me now.’

‘But…but if that’s true,’ Myrcella interrupted, angry at that last sentence, but clearly not angry enough to stop asking questions, ‘if…if Uncle Jaime had been…conducting himself inappropriately with my mother for so many years, then…then how is it that he married you? Did he…stop loving her because he met you?]

Arya’s head spun as she rapidly tried to formulate a version of events that wouldn’t paint Cersei as a callous, manipulating bitch. Myrcella didn’t need more fuel for her nightmares. She didn’t deserve that.

‘When…when your Uncle Jaime’s hand was struck off during the Battle of the Blackwater,’ Arya stated, ‘it changed him. He was no longer the same person as before. It drove him and your mother apart.’

‘And that drove you closer?’ Myrcella enquired.

‘Yes…and no,’ Arya replied.

‘But what does that mean, my lady?’ Myrcella insisted.

Arya sighed, beginning to feel uncomfortable.
‘We were already close before Jaime lost his hand,’ she said, ‘and I like to think that we would have grown closer, even if he hadn’t lost it.’

‘I thought you said you hated each other.’

‘We did.’

‘But then how…you’re very strange.’

Myrcella was wrinkling her nose in confusion, and Arya smiled slightly as silence fell and Myrcella began to stare sullenly at the ground; her frustration and bewilderment glowing like embers in the vivid Lannister emerald of her eyes.

The silence didn’t last long, however, and the princess was soon looking up in anger rather than curiosity and demanding more answers to more questions in a considerably more acrimonious tone than before; her anger at Jaime, and at her mother, lingering on the surface of her voice like fire.

‘Has he ever expressed the slightest bit of shame?’ Myrcella demanded; her voice heavy with contempt, ‘has he ever said he’s sorry for violating his own sister and getting children on her?’

Arya bit on her tongue and did not respond; hoping that the princess would interpret her silence as the disinclination to continue that it was. Because Jaime had never once said that he regretted fucking his sister, only that he regretted fucking Cersei. It was a subtle difference, but one that Arya kept hidden at the bottom of her soul with her nightmares and her ghosts; one that she knew she would never mention to Jaime, and that Jaime would never mention to her; and one that filled with her the certainty (or the almost-certainty) that the wrongness, or the un-wrongness of incest had had absolutely nothing to do with Jaime and Cersei’s estrangement. And she could not bear the thought of that at all. Myrcella, on the other hand, seemed perfectly happy to bear the thought of it, and was glaring impatiently at Arya as she waited for an answer.

If I tell her the truth, she will hate both herself and Jaime for the rest of her life. There will be no redemption for her, no comfort, only disgust and agony.

If I lie, and say that he is ashamed; that he does realise that incest is wrong…then she may just have a chance at…what?

But I’d be lying to her. Shamelessly.

Fine. Tell her the truth and destroy her. Go on.

‘He has expressed shame as regards his violation of your mother,’ Arya told her, ‘he recognises that for the insult to the gods that it is, and he prays every day for deliverance.’

‘You’re joking,’ Myrcella scoffed.

‘Do I look like I’m joking?’ Arya snapped in reply.

Myrcella fell silent.

‘But as to you and Tommen and Joffrey,’ Arya continued, trying to purge the severity from her tone ‘as to the three of you being born, and being his…he has never expressed the slightest regret on that score, and I would think much less of him if he did.’

‘Then you have a kinder heart than me,’
The princess’ words faded into the silence, and she seemed to look down into herself and far out to sea; where the clouds were banishing the sun from their depths and forcing it upwards into the sky. Whatever she saw there only angered her further.

‘But how could you marry him?’ Myrcella insisted, ‘after he pushed Bran out of a window –’

‘He isn’t the same man that he was when he pushed Bran out of a window,’ Arya replied testily, trying to stay calm.

‘And you changed him, did you?’ Myrcella spat; alarming Arya with her sudden desire for confrontation, ‘you did that all by yourself?’

*Have I done something to offend her?

‘Where in seven hells did you hear such nonsense?’ Arya shot back.

‘Uncle Kevan told me!’ Myrcella exclaimed, her voice warped with ridicule and disbelief, ‘he says Uncle Jaime has changed since he met you; that you’ve turned him into a good man; a better man than he ever was –’

‘Jaime was always a good man!’ Arya interrupted, ‘he was just –’

‘And my mother’s influence made him wicked; is that what you’re trying to tell me?’ Myrcella demanded.

‘I did not say that!’ Arya shouted.

‘You meant it!’ Myrcella shouted back at her.

*I shouldn’t have held back when it came to painting Cersei as a callous, manipulating bitch.

Arya took a breath and attempted to calm herself.

‘Your mother…your mother did play a role in his…badness,’ she said, her fingers digging into the sand from the desire to scream and shout and tell Myrcella everything and be done with it, ‘she did…she did put him on the wrong path, yes. But he didn’t have to take it. That was no one’s choice but his. And he’ll have to live with it for the rest of his days.’

Myrcella’s body, and her lips, were trembling as she bent over and placed her palms flat on the sand; groaning loudly and deeply beneath the weight, the ghastly weight, of everyone and everything. When she looked up at Arya again, her eyes were shining with tears, but her pride, and her mother’s memory, did not permit a single one of them to fall.

‘I hate him,’ she declared, steadfast.

‘You have every right to hate him,’ Arya said gravely, ‘but he is a good man, Myrcella, not a monster. You’ve known him for years; you must know that.’

Myrcella glared at her and scoffed; her lip curling in rage just like her mother’s; but there was a glow at the heart of her anger, a beauty and a conviction, that had never been present during Cersei’s fits of rage.

It was the fact that her anger was justified.

‘He violated his own sister and tried to kill a ten-year-old boy for being unfortunate enough to see
him doing it,’ Myrcella snarled, ‘he risked bringing monsters like Joffrey into the world, not once, but three times; each time knowing the risks; each time knowing what might happen. He guarded my father and smiled into his face and called him ‘Your Grace’ while insulting and betraying him and dishonouring him behind his back in the worst way possible. And before that, he stuck his sword into the back of the king he had sworn to defend. The man really does have shit for honour. So do not talk to me of Uncle Jaime’s being a good man.’

Arya’s heart sank as she stared out across Blackwater Bay; at the river that had burned alive with green flame and turned the skies to ash; the shadow of the dream of a king gone mad; and the shadow of the nightmare of a boy in white armour, who had done the only thing that could be done.

‘Myrcella… do you know why the capital of the Seven Kingdoms is still King’s Landing, and not Lannisport, or Storm’s End?’

The disdain in Myrcella’s eyes deepened.

‘Your question is a rather pitiful attempt to change the subject, my lady,’ she declared haughtily, ‘but before I attempt to answer it…could you tell me what you mean by ‘still’?’

Her heart hammering, and tears forming in her eyes, Arya rested her hand on her stomach, and told her.
Chapter 57

Myrcella said nothing for some minutes after Arya finished speaking; her iron green eyes staring fixedly at the ground; her hands quivering in shock; and her jaw tightening in emotion as silence fell. And there was no sound but that of the Blackwater; of the river that remembered, like the North.

And then Myrcella had looked up at Arya as though nothing had happened; a thoroughly girlish smile on her face; and had offered her the immediate use of her septa to make sure that she was indeed with child, ‘before you tell Uncle Jaime.’ And Arya had known, as she had gratefully accepted, that that was the only reply that she could expect.

Myrcella’s septa had turned out to be a crotchety old crone of eighty who asked Arya a thousand penetrating and seemingly irrelevant questions before poking her, prodding her, and somehow inflicting worse bruises on her than she had ever received at the hands of Jaqen or Syrio; and by the time Arya had finally managed to get an answer out of the tough old bag (‘Yes, my lady, my lady is indeed with child’), the sun was high in the sky, Tommen’s unmissable first day of holding court alone was starting in fifteen minutes, and Jaime hadn’t yet heard the news.

Arya pushed past the guard who moved to open the door for her; excitement and annoyance and gut-wrenching nervousness pounding in her chest as she opened up and slammed shut the doors to the breakfast room, the solar and the privy respectively; before finding him in the bedchamber; fully dressed and sitting in a chair by the window; his face lined with worry, and his eyes smouldering with the only hurt that he chose to bear alone; the lingering, unmistakeable, ghost-like ache of Myrcella; the girl who was and was not his daughter.

‘Where in seven hells have you been?’ Jaime demanded impatiently.

‘Trapped in the clutches of a septa,’ Arya shrugged, closing the chamber door behind her, ‘I told her I’d sooner face a thousand swords than speak to her, but she pretended not to hear me.’

Jaime’s face darkened.

‘I thought,’ he growled, ‘that I’d told every single one of those shrivelled-up shits that I would complain to the High Septon if they did not cease their ludicrous attempts to convert you –’

‘I’m with child, Jaime.’

There was a silence and an audible gasp as Jaime’s breath caught in his throat; and Arya had barely remarked the change in his face and the brightening of his eyes before he had broken down completely; sobs crushing his chest and tears coursing down his face in rivers; turning him red with shame.

Arya ran to him and embraced him, crestfallen and panic-stricken because she’d never seen him cry before; and because she hadn’t expected him to cry, not about this of all things. But as his breath on her neck turned to warmth and then to heat; his fingertips moving gently up and down her back as though calling her closer; she realised that what he felt was everything; everything that was too much. She kissed his hair, and his forehead, and his cheeks; his tears salty on her lips; and she felt his hand move from her back to her face; his fingers touching her cheek.

‘Are you?’ Jaime whispered, ‘really?’

‘Yes,’ Arya nodded.
Jaime laughed, and cried, and kissed her forehead; his lips still trembling, but trembling in the shape of a smile.

‘Oh my beautiful, stubborn, maddening, glorious love, my wife – it’s – ’

‘– nothing to cry about, stupid,’ Arya finished, laughing with him as his words disappeared; his hand still clasping her cheek; his stump resting on her shoulder as his sobs began to heave in her own chest and the laughs began to fade from him; to be replaced by memory that ached and burned like molten gold in his gaze.

‘You’re distressed,’ Arya said, her anxiety returning as her hands came to rest on his shoulders, ‘you were distressed when I walked in.’

‘Yes,’ Jaime murmured; his eyes intently meeting hers; and he softly kissed her lips before continuing.

‘When I awoke to find you gone,’ he told her, ‘the guards told me – well, they told me they suspected – that you’d gone for a walk by the river –’

‘I did,’ Arya replied, kissing his fingers as they brushed her lips.

‘I know that you like to go there,’ Jaime whispered, trying to smile, not managing it, ‘so your whereabouts did not concern me – much. But then while I dressed…I began to think about that day at Riverrun…when you were washed away downstream…when you sank into the water and let it take you…when you sank when you could swim…’

Horror gripped Arya’s soul in a strangle hold.

*How the fuck does he know about that?*

*I don’t want him to know about that.*

I don’t want him to know.

‘I did *not* let it take me,’ she insisted stubbornly, the lie sounding feeble on her tongue; and when she saw that Jaime did not even intend to contradict her; that he knew…that he had known all along, what she had tried to do…she began to cry in earnest.

‘I sank, but I wanted to come up again,’ she sobbed, ‘when I sank, when I got to the bottom; I knew that I was wrong, and that I wanted to live; because there was so much living still ahead, *with you*; I wanted to sink, *I wanted to*, but when I did, I wanted to come up again; I wanted to, *I wanted to –’*

He kissed her softly, and she kissed him back; both of them trembling and crying like idiots; and when Jaime broke away from her once again, still sobbing, his eyes were a horror.

‘I know what you wanted to do that day,’ he told her, ‘and I’m happy; I’m so happy…that you’re still here; that you’re still in the world; that you’re not –’

Arya stepped back into his arms and held him tighter; and when Jaime wrapped one arm around her waist and another around her shoulder, pulling them so close together that they could feel each other’s blood; she felt the sobs that wracked both of them beginning to abate as relief was born in their place.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jaime mumbled into her shoulder, ‘I’ve been so buttoned-up and so fucking miserable.’
‘Yes,’ Arya mumbled back, ‘you have.’

He disentangled himself just far enough for him to be able to look at her, and his eyes were very green.

‘Every time I think of Myrcella,’ Jaime said, ‘every time I see her; I see that look in her eyes…and I think…‘I did that.’

No.

‘Jaime –’

‘How will we live if I someday see the same look in the eyes of our child?’ he insisted brutally, not allowing her to interrupt, ‘what will I do if that happens? What if I see him – or her – looking at me in that way, and know that I did that? That I destroyed my own blood, in that way? What will I do if that happens?’

Arya felt her fingers balling into fists on his shoulders.

‘It won’t happen,’ she contradicted fiercely, ‘the Jaime Lannister I know wouldn’t let that happen.’

‘I’ve already let it happen.’

‘Aren’t you listening to me? I know you. And I know that you will not let it happen.’

Jaime’s lips parted as he stared at her, and Arya kissed them; smiling as they moulded to hers; and his hand fastened around the back of her neck and pulled her closer and closer; a heat rising in her mind and her body that was further and better and richer than desire.

‘Do you have… any idea…how much I love you?’ Arya whispered; the words like a prayer against his lips.

Jaime paused, and thought, and smiled wickedly at her, and she could tell that she had reached him, and that everything would be alright.

‘No,’ he declared.

Arya grinned at him.

‘Remind me to show you after court,’ she said.

And she briskly kissed his forehead, skipped out of his arms and ran to get dressed; her departure heralded by the sound of Jaime cursing and wringing an imaginary neck.

‘After court?’
Jaime had never seen the throne room so packed with people since the days of the Mad King. Every square inch of floor and gallery was occupied by noblemen and rich commoners alike, clamouring for a glance at the loss of poor little King Tommen’s political innocence, but when the boy entered from the back of the hall, he looked as much a king as it was possible to be at the age of twelve. The crown was striking and magnificent against his golden hair, his fine leather doublet was the colour of red wine, and his kitten was small, white and purring in his arms; a newly-proclaimed symbol of the oath that he had taken to protect those that could not protect themselves (Tyrion’s idea, most likely. There was no end to his cleverness). In contrast, the small council that accompanied the king looked much as it always did: Varys golden, perfumed and bald; Pycelle shrivelled-up and obsequious; and Tyrion towering over them all in presence rather than stature; his face pale with exhaustion, but his eyes burning with intelligence, and protectiveness of the young king.

As Jaime joined the rest of the hall in bowing his respect for the king’s Grace, Arya’s hand seeming to grow warmer and stronger in his as she curtseyed beside him, euphoria and fear and determination blazed feverishly within him as he looked at her, and thought of her, and thought of them and thought of their child, and how right it felt; how right: a child that would really be his child; a child that could and would call him Father…but above all a child that he would have with her; with Arya; with everything she was, and could be; his flesh and hers made one; made something…someone…new, and different, and alive.

And yet she is so young, still, Jaime thought, looking sideways at her, little more than a girl, really, despite the sadness she has known. We should have waited a few years.

I should have thought. She should have thought. But then neither of us is really the thinking kind. More like the reckless, impatient, hot-headed kind. Not that one could tell, looking at the little wolf today.

Arya’s high-cut gown was made from fine velvet so deeply crimson it was almost black; and she wore no jewels at all save the sword and dagger that hung gleaming and powerful at her waist. Thus attired she looked both lady and warrior, and as Jaime glanced about him at the crowds of noblewomen wearing sword belts and daggers, his chest swelled with pride at its being the latter quality that they had chosen to imitate. The latter was who she truly was. The latter was why he loved her.

Arya was looking at him with a soft piercing wrought iron silver gaze; the gaze of a person who carried a secret, and he smiled, bent over and softly brushed her lips with his; smiling as she did likewise with absolutely no thought for the seven hundred other people in the room. As kisses went, it was hardly scandalous – a peck on the lips and a peck in return – but when a chorus of titters and tut-tuts erupted around them, Jaime glared at the lot of them and was only prevented from rolling his eyes by the sure and certain knowledge that the Lord of Casterly Rock could not be seen to be rolling his eyes, in company or out of it, if he was to be taken seriously.

‘Can’t I even kiss my own wife in public?’ he growled, his lips brushing Arya’s ear.

She grinned at the feeling, then hurriedly shushed him as Tommen spoke for the first time; his voice steady and dignified, but ringing, as he bade his uncle Kevan approach the throne from his place in the second row.

‘I, Tommen of the House Baratheon, First of My Name, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, do hereby declare my uncle, Ser Kevan Lannister, Lord Regent and Protector, until
such time as I do legally come of age.’

When Uncle Kevan reached the foot of the stairs, he bowed simply and unassumingly, before looking up at Tommen and smiling at him; affectionate, but dignified.

‘Thank you, Your Grace.’

‘You may approach, Ser Kevan.’

Uncle Kevan climbed the stairs and took his seat beside Tyrion, the Kingsguard moved to their traditional places before the stairs, and Tommen gave the signal for court to begin.

The most important matters were discussed first, and Tommen addressed them with a precision and enlightenment that gave every promise of early brilliance – or of an excessive amount of time spent discussing each of them beforehand with his uncle Tyrion. A representative from the Iron Bank of Braavos begged permission to put himself at King Tommen’s disposal for the promised satisfaction of certain debts incurred by the late Queen Regent (granted); a messenger from Ser Daven Lannister asked that more troops be deployed to the siege of Riverrun (refused), and some or other bannerman of Roose Bolton’s (Arya would know him, no doubt – and try to kill him, if she got the chance) beseeched King Tommen for coin to help fortify the Dreadfort against those who would seek to punish Lord Bolton for his part in the Red Wedding.

‘I imagine the whole of the North wants him dead after the Red Wedding,’ Arya whispered, ‘shouldn’t he have thought about that before getting involved?’

‘That would imply that Lord Bolton has an honourable bone in his body,’ Jaime replied, thoroughly enjoying her smile when Tommen professed himself to be of similar opinion, and declared that Lord Bolton had been rewarded quite adequately already for his services to the Crown.

Jaime’s lightness of spirit promptly disappeared when a discreet clattering of armour announced the late arrival of Princess Myrcella and her guards. She looked glorious, if pale; the alabaster of her skin a beautiful shock against the vivid emerald green of her gown and the shining coronet of her golden hair.

‘I beg pardon, Your Grace,’ she intoned, curtseying to Tommen.

‘It is given,’ Tommen replied; making a reverence and bidding her take her place.

Myrcella swept to a place in the gallery only a few feet away from where Jaime and Arya were standing, and when her eyes met Jaime’s, they bore that look again; that inner death; that anger and desolation. When she looked rapidly away from him, her jaw began to tighten in emotion, just like mine does, and Jaime fixed his eyes firmly on the throne and determined not to look at her again; his destruction of her, and Cersei’s, still raw and terrible in his eyes and in his heart; still clawing at him each time he looked at her.

The importance of those matters being brought before King Tommen seemed to have dwindled considerably during Jaime’s introspection, for Ser Meryn was now dragging forward a painfully-thin singer with a broken nose and a blood-stained harp, flinging him to his knees, and declaring to the court that the song he played might be of interest to His Grace. Tommen cocked an eyebrow in amusement at Ser Meryn’s candour, before signalling to the singer to begin. He sighed audibly when the song turned out to be The Whore That Killed King Robert.

The courtiers began to bristle in anxiety, excitement, anticipation and memory at the screaming and ripping-out of tongues that Joffrey had commanded the last time a singer was caught playing the
song’s illustrious predecessor. The unfortunate musician obviously had this in mind too, for his voice shook and warbled in a manner so pitiful that it was almost impossible to hear the words; turning Jaime’s amusement to anger.

*Kill the poor bastard and be done. Why torture him?*

The entire hall clearly expected Tommen to imitate his brother by forcing the singer to perform the entire bloody song before passing sentence. There was a universal groan of disappointment, therefore, when the boy king did not even allow him to finish the first verse.

‘Ser Meryn, explain yourself!’ Tommen barked, making every head in the room turn towards him, ‘why are you wasting my time with this nonsense?’

Ser Meryn, resplendent in his white cloak and armour, looked taken aback.

‘Your Grace, this song has been banned by royal decree of your late brother King Joffrey, blessed be his memory,’ he declared, bowing, ‘since Queen Cersei’s…death, however, it has been sung with impunity all over the city. The gold cloaks have made several attempts to capture those caught singing it, but have each time been thwarted by the efforts of other citizens to protect the singer in question. Last night I was passing a tavern while returning from some…necessary business, and I was shocked to hear this filth being roared at a most obscene volume within the establishment itself. I entered the tavern, and was able to apprehend the singer before he escaped, in the expectation that an example might be made of him, and thus prevent such things from being spread any further.’

Tommens’s lip curled disdainfully.

‘You were returning home from a brothel and sought to curry favour with the Crown, do you mean?’ he enquired pleasantly.

‘Your Grace,’ Ser Meryn stammered, gaping like a fish out of water, ‘I assure you –’

‘What is your name, singer?’ Tommen asked, ignoring the knight completely as he turned his attention to the thin man in front of him.

The singer stared at the ground and did not dare meet his eyes.

‘Robert, if it please your Grace,’ he mumbled.

Tommens smiled sadly, and stroked his kitten.

‘Rise, Robert,’ he said, his high voice echoing gently across the hall.

The singer pulled himself up, hugged his harp to his chest and shuffled his feet, looking terrified.

‘You have a fine voice, Robert,’ Tommen complimented.

‘Th – thank you, Your Grace,’ Robert stuttered.

‘Th is a pity that you should put it to waste playing such things,’ Tommen continued, ‘I’m sure you would do very well if you applied yourself to more canonical material.’

Robert looked blankly at the boy king.

‘To more – Your Grace?’

‘Ballads, art songs, Valyrian love lyrics, that sort of thing,’ Tommen explained patiently, ‘they’re
much prettier than songs about whores, don’t you think?’

‘They is, Your Grace,’ Robert agreed, ‘but they doesn’t bring in as much money.’

The courtiers roared and howled with laughter, until Tommen began to stare them down with such spectacular disdain that their guffaws faded to silence in a matter of seconds, and when Tommen looked down at the singer once again, Jaime’s eyes fell on Tyrion. His brother was leaning forward, gripping the arms of his chair, and observing the scene with a degree of intensity that was most unusual in a Westerosi court.  

*This must be the moment when he sees what he has created,* Jaime thought, *let us hope that it pleases him.*

‘Do you have a family, Robert?’ Tommen was asking.

‘Yes, Your Grace,’ the unfortunate singer replied, now looking more confused than terrified, ‘a wife, and…and five little ones. I brought ’em to see the kittens one afternoon, but we couldn’t get anywhere near you.’

Tommen laughed, sweetly and boyishly, and when the court laughed with him; their mirth bore no trace of the malice that they had shown only moments earlier.

*These people make me sick,* Jaime thought, *the sooner we can return to Casterly Rock, the better.*

‘Are your wife and children in good health, Robert?’ Tommen enquired, as though he were one man addressing another while queuing up for turnips.

‘Yes, Your Grace,’ Robert answered, still confused by the king’s interest in him, ‘the little ones get sick very easy, is all.’

‘And when was the last time you had a square meal?’ Tommen continued.

Silence erupted across the hall, the singer gazed at the ground without replying, and as Jaime once again took in the appalling thinness of the man; the singer’s emaciation rendered all the more terrible by the injuries that Ser Meryn had inflicted on him; he saw, he knew, that the provenance of the singer’s silence was shame…or a genuine inability to remember the last time he had eaten.

*It’s probably both,* Jaime thought, *gazing at Tommen, come now, boy, you must be able to see it; anyone with eyes could see it –*

‘Your Grace,’ Robert stammered, still staring at the floor and evidently struggling to contain himself, ‘with five children, I – I aren’t always able to –’

‘That is quite enough, Robert,’ Tommen said quietly, ‘I understand completely.’

He looked away from the singer and out towards the courtiers.

‘Is there a steward present?’

A large man in Baratheon livery stepped forward and bowed wordlessly.

‘Take this man to the kitchens and feed him,’ Tommen commanded, ‘afterwards, give him a bushel of apples and a sack of potatoes and arrange for him to be escorted home. We don’t want the potatoes disappearing the moment he leaves the Keep.’

As the steward bowed and approached to show Robert the way, the entire court began to jabber
away with an indignation so violent that it unquestionably called for adult intervention of some kind.

‘Such kindness!’

‘Such weakness!’

‘What a soft little fool!’

‘A proper battle will be the death of him!’

And yet despite all this, Tyrion said nothing; staring at his nephew and transfixed by the scene as though his life depended on it.

*What is he waiting for?* Jaime thought.

‘And Robert,’ Tommen added grimly.

*Ah.*

Silence fell as the singer paused in his tracks and once again looked towards the throne. Tommen was frowning at him with iron in his eyes; his earlier kindness only just visible.

‘The next person caught singing that song will be hanged,’ Tommen declared, ‘please be so good as to spread the word.’

Robert bowed shakily.

‘Yes, Your Grace. Th-thank you, Y - your Grace.’

The singer was led from the hall, the side door clanked loudly in his wake, and Tyrion sat back in his chair as though he’d been winded.

By the time he’d straightened up again, he was calling for wine, and smiling.

Arya was trying (and failing) not to bounce on the balls of her feet in excitement; her face and eyes like light as she watched the boy on the Iron Throne.

‘He is –’

‘Magnificent,’ Jaime finished, and when Arya grinned widely at him in response, he knew that the word had been both his choice and hers.

‘Who is next?’ Tommen asked, sweeping on with the proceedings as though nothing had happened.

‘Your Grace,’ a familiar voice rumbled from within the crowd.

‘Come forward, my lord,’ Tommen beckoned, making a reverence as the herald stood at attention and announced:

‘The Lord Mace of House Tyrell.’

As Lord Tyrell made his way to the foot of the stairs before the throne, a sudden instinct caused Jaime to glance once again at his brother. Tyron’s face had fallen and reddened slightly, and a sudden anger was glowing menacingly in his mismatched eyes. Arya had also tensed up in her place at his side; her fingers painfully clutching his; and as Jaime watched her glaring at Margaery, Olenna and Loras Tyrell with enough venom to wilt an entire summer’s worth of harvests; he could only
imagine that Lord Tyrell was about to do something incredibly stupid.

‘What is it?’ Jaime whispered.

‘The Tyrells would never make a request of the Crown without discussing it with the small council first,’ Arya whispered back, her left hand clutching the hilt of her dagger, ‘they’re too well-connected to the Crown to have to do that. Why bring a petition to the throne room when you can do it in the small council chamber?’

‘So I take it from the look on Tyrion’s face that no such discussion has taken place?’

‘Tyrell must be trying to take advantage of Tommen’s youth and inexperience in order to get what he wants.’

Lord Tyrell had reached the foot of the stairs, and Tyrion’s eyes had turned from coal to steel.

‘You don’t think he wants to protest Uncle Kevan’s being named Lord Regent?’ Jaime murmured.

‘What else can it be?’ Arya replied.

Jaime looked at her in amazement.

‘He’s a fool if he does that.’

‘You’ve sat at war council with him,’ Arya whispered, ‘has he ever appeared particularly intelligent to you?’

‘Your Grace,’ Lord Tyrell loudly declared, causing Jaime and Arya to look towards the throne once more, ‘my House has served the realm long and faithfully.’

‘Indeed you have, my lord,’ Tommen agreed, the soul of courtesy despite the questionable truth of the boast, ‘were it not for Highgarden’s generous and invaluable assistance, half this city would be dead of famine; and the other half would be rotting at the bottom of the Blackwater. Not to mention the fact that the spikes on the dry moat would be decorated with an unprecedented number of blond heads.’

Tyrell concealed any confusion he might have felt with a deep bow.

‘We did no more than was our due, Your Grace, and we remain deeply honoured at Your Grace’s decision to take our daughter Margaery to wife after the death of the late King Joffrey, blessed be his memory.’

‘It is the Lady Margaery who honours me with her hand, my lord,’ Tommen interjected, ‘no man who was not out of his wits could refuse such an accomplished and dignified bride.’

_The poor boy sounds a hundred years old_, Jaime thought, growing bored with the endless exchange of compliments.

‘House Tyrell is most anxious,’ Lord Mace plunged on, ‘to continue to serve Your Grace in whichever way we can—’

‘Indeed?’ Tommen interrupted, ‘why then did you decline my offer to serve as master of laws on the small council? This very morning, my uncle Tyrion was quite despairing of finding anybody to compare with you.’

Lord Tyrell smiled in a manner that he clearly thought enigmatic.
‘Your Grace’s offer honoured me beyond words,’ he sweepingly said, ‘I only declined it because I, in my eagerness, had already conceived a way in which my House might better serve Your Grace and the realm; one that would not require so simple a man as myself to burden the small council with his ignorance.’

The court laughed politely. Neither Tommen, nor Tyrion, laughed with them.

‘You underestimate your talents, my lord,’ Tommen remarked, ‘but by all means let me hear this plan of which you speak.’

Lord Tyrell cleared his throat theatrically.

‘My son Willas remains at Highgarden, Your Grace,’ he declared, ‘he may be a cripple, but he has a fine mind for warfare and for politics; and he will inherit Highgarden after I die; regardless of his condition. He remains unmarried, however, and would be hard pressed to continue my line unless certain changes were made to his situation.’

‘My lord,’ Tommen replied testily, raising his voice slightly as the crowd laughed again, ‘if I understand you correctly – and I think that I do – then you are on the point of proposing that my royal sister Myrcella –’

‘Not at all, Your Grace,’ Lord Tyrell interrupted hurriedly, ‘I would not be so vain as to expect a royal match for both Margaery and Willas. No, Your Grace. What I meant to propose – what I wished to propose – is that my son Willas be wed to the Lady Sansa Stark of Winterfell: that he rule over the North in both her name and yours; and in so doing, pledge us further to Your Grace’s service, and to the service of the realm.’
Chapter 59

The smile on Lord Tyrell’s face was a far worse assault on the senses than the noise that followed his pronouncement; the deafening din; the bedlam pandemonium of scandalised gasps, extravagant intakes of breath, lurid suggestions from the more vulgar courtiers present, and of course, talk: talk that gabbled and shouted and roared from floor to ceiling and wall to wall; amusement and disbelief holding disdainful sway in a place where fury should have reigned.

Jaime leapt forward and seized Arya from behind as she flew from his side like a quarrel launched from a crossbow, drew her dagger and gave every appearance of wanting to attack Mace Tyrell where he stood. His arms fastened tightly around her waist; crushing hers beneath them in case she tried to elbow him in the balls; and when all attempts to free herself failed, she looked angrily up at him, her dagger clutched uselessly in her hand.

‘Let me go, Lannister!’ Arya exclaimed.

‘Wait,’ Jaime growled; tightening his grip on her as she tensed up and growled right back at him.

‘Let me go –’

‘If they allow this insanity to proceed,’ Jaime interrupted, trying hard not to meet her anger with anger, as he always did, ‘then I’ll let you attack him. Agreed?’

‘But I want to attack him now!’ Arya insisted.

‘Good luck,’ Jaime shrugged, and did not let her go.

Her two hands twisted beneath his one hand, and the bones in her shoulders and back seemed to crush and carve at his chest. Her body felt twisted and gnarled and frantic against his; and when he bent over and soothingly kissed her hair without giving a fuck what anyone thought about it, he felt her breathing slow, and heighten again as wolf blood pulsed in her veins, and hurt, and anger, and wrongness at the injustice of having her homeland passed about from one person to another as though it were a whore being wagered at dice rather than a thing that thought and breathed; a thing that loved, and murmured, and remembered; and punished its invaders with nothing more than cold; a thing that could not be ruled, not even by its own children.

As the thought occurred to him, Jaime looked up for the first time, and began to search for his brother….and his good-sister.

Sansa was standing in the gallery opposite them, looking as livid as it was possible to be without attempting murder; and Tyrion was sitting straight and rigid beside Tommen, doing a halfway decent job of appearing unmoved. Uncle Kevan was whispering to Varys, Tommen was looking desperately at Tyrion for guidance, and Tyrion was looking desperately back at him, saying nothing.

His hands are tied, Jaime realised, his regard for Sansa is as well known as Littlefinger’s was for Lady Catelyn. Any attempt he makes to stop this will look like jealousy and covetousness.

And a strange, unaccountable desire for punishment, from the sound of things.

Two days after Cersei’s death, Jaime had had supper with his little brother; and, having spent the
duration of the meal watching him wallow in sullen silence and misery, had demanded to know what or who was responsible for this shameless disappearance of Tyrion’s sense of humour. Their subsequent conversation, (and a considerable amount of deductive reasoning on Jaime’s part, thanks to Tyrion’s drunkenness), had led him to surmise that Tyrion’s last discussion with Sansa had had the potential to end in a proposal, but had instead turned into a heated exchange over the size and sobriety of his cock that had not been re-entered into since. Tyrion had then cleared his throat, examined the gold filigree on his wine glass with more attention that it deserved, and had tentatively asked what he should do. Jaime had responded ‘get down on your knees and beg for mercy,’ and had promptly found himself booted out into the corridor. He could not think why.

Jaime looked at Lord Tyrell for the first time in some moments and observed that a smile of some smugness had now taken up permanent residence on the fool’s face.

He certainly didn’t think of this on his own. It was the old woman, probably – or possibly even Margaery. A rather desperate way of doing things, but clever nonetheless. The Tyrells must know that the Crown would seek to appease them after denying them the Regency…but a seat on the council probably seemed a poor thing in comparison to ruling in all but name. They wanted more power and influence than Tyrion was willing to give them, so they decided to commit the extreme impropriety of proposing a marriage to Sansa in front of the entire court; knowing full well that Tommen would be unable to refuse in front of so many people without giving the impression of some discord existing between Highgarden and the Iron Throne.

Jaime smirked as Tommen signalled for silence. The boy king’s face was grim, but unreadable, Arya’s heart was beating so quickly that Jaime could feel it in his own chest, and Lord Tyrell was still smiling; delighted by his own cleverness.

It is certainly clever, Jaime thought, but it reeks of desperation nonetheless.

‘I am moved by the depth of House Tyrell’s loyalty,’ Tommen declared smartly, inclining his head, ‘and I thank you, Lord Mace, for having chosen such a sweepingly public forum in which to express it. Such earnestness does you credit.’

Lord Tyrell bowed.

‘However,’ Tommen continued pleasantly, ‘had you chosen to approach the question through the usual channels, my lord, you might have spared yourself a great deal of trouble and energy. For the Lady Sansa has these three weeks been promised to my uncle, the Lord Tyrion Lannister of Casterly Rock. Is that not so, Lady Sansa?’

Tyrion stared at Tommen in disbelief; Uncle Kevan started audibly; Jaime’s jaw dropped; Arya whispered ‘what the fuck?’; and soon the entire hall was gazing intently and unabashedly at Sansa, who allowed one look of utter confusion to flash across her tomato-red face before regally straightening up and flawlessly giving every impression of Tommen’s nothaving made the entire story up.

By now, Tyrion was glaring at Tommen as though he wanted to put him over his knee; Tommen was gazing sweetly and innocently back at him as though nothing in the world was the matter; and Tyrion’s gaze was moving swiftly and sharply away from his nephew to where Sansa stood in the gallery, still silent, and still not having answered the question.

Tyrion and Sansa’s eyes met, and there was a fleeting silence.

‘It is indeed so, Your Grace,’ Sansa declared, and she looked down at her feet and up again, glancing at Tyrion and away from him, and when her eyes finally came to rest on him and stayed
there, she smiled; smiling brighter when he grinned back at her.

*Seven hells, will they get this over with before I throw up on myself?* Jaime thought.

‘A king must keep his word,’ Tommen proclaimed, ‘and I must therefore decline your generous offer, Lord Tyrell. But I thank you deeply for making it.’

The din returned to the hall like needles to a magnet. Lord Tyrell turned red with anger, swiftly rejoined the other members of his House, and scowled at the laughs and jeers that dogged his every step. Jaime released his hold on Arya, and smiled when she nestled into the crook of his arm; sheathing her dagger and continuing to glare at the Tyrells. Sansa seemed dazed, as though unsure of what had just happened to her; Tyrion was in a similar state of bewilderment and stupefaction, and when Sansa stepped back from her place and hurriedly left the hall, her mask of courtly composure breaking down with every step she took, Tommen abruptly pinched Tyrion, ignored his yelp of indignation, and declared in a thoroughly childlike voice:

‘Don’t just sit there, nuncle, go!’

Chapter End Notes

Please note that the next chapter will be the final one in this story. I’ll do my best to make it a good one!
Jaime was woken in the middle of the night by the sound of Arya taking a futile but considerate amount of trouble to enter their bedchamber quiet as a shadow; only to have her efforts thwarted by Nymeria, who bolted straight through the gap between door and wall and leapt noisily and longingly into her habitual place at the foot of the bed.

‘Shut up!’ Arya hissed, and Jaime almost groaned aloud at the thought that six months ago, the nocturnal movements of both girl and wolf would not have disturbed his sleep at all. But now he lived in a world of shadows and footsteps and invisible lines; of violent sounds and slipstreams of thought; of swiftness and soaring and lightness. He lived in the world of a water dancer, and ‘quiet as a shadow’ was no longer quiet to him.

Arya tiptoed across the dark room, undid the latch on the window and opened it wide, so that moonlight crept softly into the place where she stood; and Jaime watched, fascinated in his half-waking state, as she removed her sword belt, gown, shift and smallclothes. Moonlight fell across her form like droplets of water; touching and caressing and trailing open-mouthed kisses across her skin; just as Jaime had done earlier that day in the godswood, when he had succeeded in disarming her for the second time; the second time since the beginning. Her reaction had been both different and the same; and her mouth had been both different and the same; and every inch of her had been covered in him; and every inch of him had been covered in her; and their limbs had been wrapped around each other, not wanting to exist apart; and as they moved with each other and in each other; their bodies a dance and a praise song; Arya had whispered ‘very soon you’ll be better than me,’ and he had thrust deeper and she had thrust harder, and the world had contracted dizzyingly into the place where they were joined so that release came within moments; his voice leaving red lines in the leaves; her nails leaving red lines on his back. He could feel them even now. He could see them.

Arya was groping about in the dark for her sleeping shift. When she found it and pulled it over her head, her hand came to rest on her stomach; and Jaime watched as she paused for a moment, thinking.

‘It’s a girl.’

Jaime blinked at her.

‘How do you know?’

‘I had a dream about her last night. She was riding a direwolf the size of a horse – a white one. She had golden hair.’

He smiled at her.

‘A warrior.’

It was not a question.

‘Yes.’

Arya came to him and slid into bed; closing her eyes as Jaime’s fingers moved automatically to tease the braids from her hair; the last shreds of her mask unraveling for him in coiled ribbons of thick
brown hair and coming away even more rebellious than before; framing the lines of her face in raw, wild curls. Her scalp was icy cold, and he shifted to make room for her as she curled up against him and sighed deeply.

‘Where have you been, Stark?’ he asked; his fingers remaining tangled in her hair.

‘With Uncle Kevan,’ she replied softly, ‘I had heard…that is, he confirmed for me…that the small council – except Tyrion, of course, who thinks it’s a stupid idea – have somehow gotten it into their heads that the South needs to start making amends for the Red Wedding –’

‘How the fuck does one make amends for something like that?’ Jaime interjected disbelievingly.

‘The way they always do in the South,’ Arya smirked in reply, ‘with wedding bells. They want to present Tyrion and Sansa’s marriage as the first step towards some sort of…reconciliation between North and South; and then to curry favour with the Northern lords by stripping Roose Bolton of his Wardenship and giving it to Tyrion instead.’

‘And what exactly makes the small council think that the Northern lords won’t just chop Tyrion’s head off and declare war again?’ Jaime remarked, ‘they’ll never accept a Warden of the North who isn’t one of their own; even if he does have a Stark wife.’

Arya’s face transformed suddenly and brilliantly into a smile like the moon coming out, and Jaime felt his heart beat faster.

‘Remember that they know nothing of the North,’ she whispered, her fingers playing with the collar of his shift, ‘Southerners think that marriage solves everything. It’s all about appearances for them…the surface of things…why are you smiling?’

‘Because you didn’t say ‘you Southerners,’ Jaime replied, his grin widening, ‘am I no longer a Southerner in your eyes?’

‘No,’ Arya observed matter-of-factly, kissing his lips, ‘and yes.’

And her smile died just as suddenly as it had come; the grey ruins of Winterfell replacing the summer mist in her eyes, and Jaime laced his fingers through hers as she nestled closer to him.

‘I heard about it from Sansa, and I went to see Uncle Kevan directly afterwards to tell him what you’ve just told me. Putting a Southerner, and worse, a Lannister, into a position that has been occupied by a Stark for the past three hundred years will make things worse than they are already, and that’s before we even begin to contemplate the effect Sansa’s being his wife will have on them. They’ll never believe she’s married Tyrion of her own free will, and even if they do eventually believe that, it’ll achieve nothing save convincing them that she’s a traitor…and that the Crown seeks to rub defeat in their faces. So I told Uncle Kevan that he needed more; that…that for even the tiniest step towards reconciliation to take place, there would need to be an enormous gesture of goodwill far more lasting than a marriage; something…something symbolic enough to be touching, but concrete and definite enough to prove beyond any doubt that reconciliation is something that the South, and the Crown, takes seriously: that it’s not merely…the surface of things…that interests them.’

Jaime watched her, listened to her, trusted her, as her body tensed up with an unbearable kind of certainty, and inevitability, and fear as she continued.

‘So I told him to have Tyrion rebuild Winterfell,’ she said in a rush, ‘exactly as it was, with no changes, and done in clear remembrance of the sons and daughters that House Stark, and its bannermen, has lost.’
‘An excellent idea, Stark,’ Jaime remarked, a hint of mockery creeping into his voice despite his best intentions, ‘and…whose gold is going to pay for all this?’

‘Mine is,’ Arya responded promptly, ‘I still have your father’s twenty million dragons lying in the bank, and I certainly don’t want them for myself.’

_You are idealistic, my love._

‘I…I am very happy for you,’ Jaime stammered incredulously, ‘but…can you really believe that rebuilding a castle will be enough to convince the North to let bygones be bygones?’

‘No,’ Arya replied, ‘that would be ridiculous.’

‘I’m delighted to hear you say so,’ Jaime remarked.

‘But I do think that rebuilding the ancestral home of the Starks, just as it was, and with Tywin Lannister’s money, is unusual enough, respectful enough and expensive enough to make even the biggest idiot in the world realise that the South means business when it comes to paving the way for this ‘reconciliation’ that everyone keeps blabbing out. Because that’s all that anyone can expect for a good long while yet. No reconciliation, just…steps towards it.’

_That’s better_, Jaime thought; and as he looked at her, he understood for the thousandth time why a cold-hearted bastard like Father had loved her. She could see beyond her own lifetime. She understood legacy.

Arya’s eyes were stubborn, and dark, and anguished; and Jaime was once again gripped by the same sickening disbelief that he had felt on the morning that Tyrion had told him of the Red Wedding: disbelief that Father could have done such a thing to a person he loved. Yet with his disbelief came an awful kind of certainty that Arya still loved his father in spite of what he had done. Because telling Uncle Kevan to rebuild Winterfell in restitution for the Red Wedding instead of demanding that he dishonour and attaint Tywin Lannister was not the action of a person blinded by hatred. It was the action of a person who wanted to forget.

He watched her remember countless days and nights around a council table as mist poured through a hole in the wall. He watched her remember the lighting of candles and the heating of wine on the nights when his father did not sleep. He watched her remember grinning cheekily when she was asked the question ‘and what were you smiling about so impertinently today?’ And he watched her remember the blood bubbling over his hands and hers, and the smile on Father’s face as he died: ‘you resemble her.’

‘Stark…’ Jaime hazarded softly, ‘you may not want to hear this…I know you don’t want to hear this…but in spite of… you must know that he loved you very much.’

‘If he loved me so very much, then why did he do what he did?’ Arya spat.

‘He did it,’ Jaime murmured, ‘because he spent his life hurting the people he loved the most.’

Arya smiled sadly, as though remembering something, and said to him:

‘That’s sick.’

And Jaime thought of Father, and remembered him, and agreed with her:

‘It was.’
And suddenly he was moving away from her; opening the cabinet beside the bed and taking out the
dagger with the red leather hilt; and he could tell, from her eyes, that she remembered it.

In her eyes he saw the day she was adopted; saw his father doing everything in his power not to kill
her, before casually tossing the weapon into her lap and calling it hers; an affectionate gesture from
an unaffectionate man. He saw her fling that same dagger into nothingness as the Kingswood
shuddered and groaned around them; the shadow roaring as it drained his father’s life from him. He
saw her remember him after the Battle of the Blackwater, and he remembered himself: the pain that
had pierced his body, and the fever, and the weakness, and the incompleteness. He saw her
remember walking boldly and silently with him, in the godswood in the middle of the night; asking
him to take the knife from Cersei and to keep it until she could reclaim it; because she would rather it
be his than his sister’s. But then the Red Wedding had happened, and she had left him, and she
hadn’t reclaimed it; and then they had journeyed, and married, and she still hadn’t reclaimed it; and
though he could not blame her for having no desire to look upon the bloody dagger ever again, he
knew; and he could see that she knew; that unless Arya Stark could take that first step towards peace;
then rebuilding Winterfell would achieve nothing at all. If she could not take that first step, then the
North would follow her to failure.

Her face was desolate, and her breath was ragged in her throat, and when Jaime offered the knife to
her hilt-first, she seemed terrified that it would shatter at her touch and blind her.

‘It's yours, Stark.’

‘I don’t forgive him. I never will.’

‘I know.’

Her eyes darkened, but with prophecy rather than memory; with the centuries of war and hatred that
were still to come; that could still come; that might still come.

And she reached out and banished them as she took hold of the red leather hilt; the Valyrian steel
glowing gently in the darkness.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘it’s mine.’

Chapter End Notes

Valar morghulis, awesome people, and first of all, thank you.

Thank you so much to all the people who have read, and followed, and favourited, and
commented. When I started, I never imagined that Arya and Jaime would turn out to be
this popular, or that the writing of this story would turn into such an epic undertaking in
my life. The support has been absolutely inspirational, and I know that no longer
waking up at 2 in the morning to check my reviews is going to be a serious hole in my
life J

Speaking of serious holes in my life, I’ve been asked by many people if I plan to write a
sequel to I Became the Daughter and the Son. The answer is ‘yes, but not immediately’
– 1. I know that there are many conversations that still need to be had, and I have some
ideas about what could happen, but they’re all hellishly complicated and they need time to grow. 2. There is another Arya/Jaime story in my head that is positively screaming at me to be fleshed out and written, so that is definitely what I’ll be doing next. 3. I need a decent rest! I would like to recharge some batteries, read some books and eat some chocolates.

That being said, this ship is awesome and it would be helluva nice to sit back, relax and read some Arya/Jaime fics instead of just writing them, so please please please will somebody write one? Or two? It’s kinda lonely being the only one in months and months.

Once again thank you for the support and the love! You are all awesome!

Gilraen

End Notes

Reviews help me spread the love of Arya and Jaime, so please be so kind as to leave them!

Title is from 'Becomes the Colour' by Emily Wells, a haunting Arya Stark anthem.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!